

Reggie

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the
Writer

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Chapter One

The fly-screen door snapped shut with a bang which made me jump. I opened one eye and there was someone standing in the doorway, just a dark silhouette against the bright sunshine outside.

“Hello,” I said, opening the other eye as well and smiling. “Welcome.”

“Hi,” said a woman's voice. She sounded faintly uneasy.

“Come on in,” I said cheerfully. “There's no admission charge.”

“So this is the museum, is it?” she asked. “Only there's no sign outside.”

“The Museum of Tail Feathers, yes,” I said. “There's a sign on the wall outside, by the door.”

Her silhouette backed out and the fly-screen slammed shut again. The closing spring was temperamental and some days slammed the door shut with a vengeance as if to make up for the days it didn't work at all. Yesterday it had closed the door very slowly with a squeal like a tortured soul in purgatory which had been disconcerting to say the least.

“No there isn't,” she said, re-appearing. This time the fly-screen stayed open.

“How strange,” I said. I thought for a few moments and decided that I was approximately 75% certain the sign had been there when I had arrived. I got up, my knee aching a little from a combination of early arthritis, excess weight and mowing the lawn before I came in. We didn't open until 11.

“Excuse me,” I said, going over to the door as the woman was still in the doorway. She shifted out of the way and the screen slammed into my face. She must have had her foot on the frame to stop it slamming.

“Sorry,” she said, opening the screen again for me.

"No harm done," I reported, rubbing my nose.

I quickly glanced at my fingers to see if there was any blood but there wasn't although I had a feeling I was going to have a headache later. The fly-screen itself was stretched over a metal lattice and one of the cross-pieces had caught me. I stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine then turned to look back at the sign. Sure enough it wasn't there. There was just a large patch with six holes where it had been attached.

"Bugger," I said and looked around in case it had fallen off or something.

"Told you," she said with an air of satisfaction.

"Indeed you did," I admitted, looking at her properly for the first time. She was a little on the stout side, middle aged and fairly casually dressed in slacks and a drab shirt of some sort. There was something about her that suggested she wasn't the usual tourist type that visited the Museum but I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

"Someone stole it, did they?" she asked.

"They must have," I said, peering closely at the screw holes. "These look like it was unscrewed rather than wrenched off although who'd want the Museum sign? All it had was our name and our opening hours."

"Right," she said. "Could have been kids, I suppose."

"I suppose," I said and sighed. "Still, it's a damned nuisance. I suppose I'll have to get another sign made."

I went back inside and she followed me, letting the screen slam noisily behind her.

"Maybe get the screen fixed as well," she said, looking around. "It's a liability. Are signs expensive?"

"About seven hundred dollars," I said, "although that was how much

the last one cost four years ago. Inflation will have put it up. Not to worry, that's my problem, not yours." More to the point I'd have to pay for it myself as there was a \$5000 dollar excess on the insurance.

I went back to the desk which served as the Gift Shop and got a pad of Post-It notes from one of the drawers to write a reminder to myself about the sign. I'd just stuck it on the top of my briefcase when I realised the woman had followed me over and was standing beside the desk, clearly not browsing the books and other gift items for sale. For some reason she had her hands in her trouser pockets which gave her a bit of a slouch.

"Can I help you?" I asked, slightly surprised.

"Are you the manager here?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, standing up straight again. "Is there a problem?"

"I was wondering if you were needing any volunteers," she said.

"Ahhh, right," I said. "Is this for you or someone else?"

"For me," she said. "Only Centrelink said I could do my Mutual Obligations through voluntary work."

"OK," I said. "That's not a problem as several here are volunteers and Faye, who usually does weekends, left a few weeks ago. Umm, are you sure Centrelink is happy with this? Only, if you don't mind me saying, you don't look old enough."

"Neither do you," she said, "but you're here."

"Ahh, yes," I said, "but I'm not doing this through Centrelink. I set up this museum. Usually Centrelink only lets people do voluntary work if they're over 60 otherwise you're expected to be looking for paid work. How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"47," she said, "but there are other reasons for voluntary work than age."

"I dare say," I said. "I confess I haven't studied Centrelink's rules and regulations. I just fill out the forms to say who's here and the hours they do. Just a sec. I'll get another chair and we can have a chat."

She gave a half smile which I took to be agreement so I went out to the back verandah where there was a spare chair. I wheeled it in and gestured for her to sit down.

"I'm Reggie, by the way," I said, sitting down myself. "You are?"

"Steph," she said, putting her shoulder bag on her lap.

"Excellent," I said. "So are you interested in birds?"

She just looked at me blankly.

"This is the Museum of Tail Feathers," I said. "You know, those things that stick out of the back of birds?"

"Oh right," she said, nodding. "I did wonder 'cos it's a bit of a funny name. Umm, do I need to be?"

"Well, it would help," I said. "We don't get many visitors but sometimes they have questions."

"Yeah, I suppose they do," she said. "So, you're saying you need someone who's fanatic about birds then?"

"Not really," I said, "but some interest would be useful. Umm, perhaps the Op Shop might be better for you?"

"Nah," she said. "Went there yesterday but I can't do the fiddly stuff like labelling or tying things."

"Oh," I said, taken aback. "Why's that then?"

She looked at me for a few moments then, with a defiant air, pulled her right arm out from behind her shoulder bag.

"I'm on disability," she said. "Not total so I'm expected to do some

work but there's very few jobs I can do without my hand."

"Ahh," I said, staring at the stump which ended at her wrist.

I realised I was staring and forced myself to look her in the face. She gave me a wry smile and tucked her arm back behind her shoulder bag.

"Still waiting for a new one," she said. "Probably only be another year or so."

"You mean a transplant?" I asked, feeling embarrassed. For some reason people with a disability always made me uncomfortable. Perhaps it was a reminder of my own mortality.

She gave a short barking laugh. "Nah, a falsie. Plastic."

"Oh, right," I said. "Umm, I don't know what to say."

"Not a lot you can say," she said. "So, working here's out of the question?"

"I don't see any particular reason why," I said slowly, thinking it through. "I do any labelling that's required since that's specialised. Umm, do you have a mobile phone?"

"Sure," she said. "Do you want my number?"

"Eventually," I said, "but I was really asking if you're able to use one. The only manual task here is using the swipe machine when someone wants to buy something and if you can use a phone you'll be able to use the machine. Other than that it's mostly talking to people."

"So you're saying I can work here?" she asked, watching me closely.

"If you're sure you want to," I said. "It's fairly dull as we don't get many visitors and you'll be on your own most of the time but it's a good opportunity to read or study or whatever."

"I thought you said you were here," she said.

"I am," I said, "but only at the weekends. I have paid work during the week so I usually only drop in at the end of the day to check everything's fine. What days were you thinking of?"

"I don't mind," she said. "So long as I get my fifteen hours for Centrelink."

"Well, weekends would be good," I said, "especially to begin with since you don't know anything. Faye was here since we started but she turned 67 a few weeks ago and left."

"How many volunteers do you have?" she asked.

"Umm, three at the moment," I said. "Debbie does Tuesdays and Fridays, Min does Wednesdays and Trevor does Thursdays."

"Are they all with Centrelink?" she asked.

"No," I said, "Debbie is and so is Min although she also works in a pub a couple of nights a week. She does a day here to make up her hours. Trevor is retired but he likes it here as he's a member of the Brisbane Exotic Bird Society but his wife won't let him keep any himself."

"That's a shame," said Steph. "She's a bit mean not to let him have his hobby."

"Well, yes and no," I said. "They live in an apartment and birds take up a lot of space. Umm, so what have you been doing up until now? I mean work-wise."

"I'm not long moved up from Victoria," she said. "I only lost my hand ten months ago and I needed a complete change."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to pry. I was just wondering if you had any skills that would come in useful."

"You mean like sign-writing?" she asked and laughed her strange barking laugh.

“Well, that would be very useful,” I said, smiling. “I was thinking maybe marketing or something like that as word about us isn't spreading very fast.”

“Sorry, no,” she said. “I used to be a tram driver in Melbourne.”

“Is that how you ...” and I vaguely gestured towards her arm with my hand.

“Oh no,” she said. “I wish I had. I'd have been on Workers' Compensation for life.”

I waited for a few moments in case she was going to expand on how she lost her hand but she didn't.

“Right then,” I said briskly. “So, you want to work as a volunteer here?” By nature I like to get things crystal clear. Innuendo and implication have never been my strong points.

“Yes,” she said. “If that's all right.”

“We'll need to do a Working With Children check,” I said, “since we get kiddies coming in but that won't be a problem, will it?”

“No, that's fine,” said Steph. “Umm, who pays for that? I'm a bit short at the moment.”

“I do,” I said, “although you pay your travelling expenses to get here.”

“Oh that's fine,” she said. “I can walk. It isn't far.”

“Good,” I said. “Right then, we've got a couple of forms to fill in, one is your contact details for the Museum and the other is for Centrelink. We're registered with them so there shouldn't be any problems. I'll just go and get them then I'll show you around.”

“Great,” she said, looking more cheerful. “Umm, is there a toilet?”

“At the end of the corridor, on the left,” I said. “It's got a shower as well if you ever need to use one.”

She looked at me strangely.

“This used to be an ordinary house,” I said. “I approached the Council about setting up a museum and they agreed provided I found suitable accommodation. This place was up for sale so I bought it with their approval and they gave me an allowance to convert it and an annual amount for its upkeep. I didn't see any point in remodelling the bathroom beyond taking out the bath for more storage space and fitting a disabled handrail for the toilet.”

“So you actually own this place?” she asked in surprise.

“More or less,” I said. “I'll need to get the Council's permission to sell it, of course, and they'll get a proportion of the proceeds. Let's get the paperwork done.”

I went off to find the forms and she went off to do whatever she needed to do in the toilet. We met back at the Gift desk and I gave her the forms to fill in and a pen.

“So are you left handed?” I asked, watching her writing.

“I am now,” she said drily, looking up.

“It's just that you seem to write very well with your left hand,” I said, feeling uncomfortable.

“Practice,” she said, turning her attention to the form again. “So what are the hours here?”

“Eleven to five,” I said, “but put down nine thirty to five.”

She looked up at me again, this time with a raised eyebrow.

“It's pointless doing an extra half day just to make up your fifteen hours for Centrelink,” I said. “If they ever ask I'll say you're on call during the week as well.”

“They're happy with that?” she asked.

"I imagine so," I said. "They've never asked anything beyond checking whoever it is actually does work here."

"OK," she said.

"Great," I said when she was done and gave me the forms. I glanced over them to check every box was completed then handed back the Centrelink one. "You give that to Centrelink."

"Oh, OK," she said. "Is that all?"

"No," I said. "There's still the Blue Card application but you'll have to do that online. Do you have Internet?"

"On my phone," she said.

"Make sure you check the box that says 'Paid by organisation'," I said, giving her the Post-It note with the URL I'd copied from my little book of useful addresses. "That's my phone number as well in case you run into any problems."

"This all seems too easy," she said.

"This is one of those rare occasions when the bureaucrats don't really want to know," I said. "Once they've decided you can do voluntary work and they don't need to hassle you to get a job they lose interest. Do you want a coffee or something?"

"Actually some water would be nice," she said. "I'm a bit dry."

"There's plenty in the store room," I said, standing up. She stood up as well and put her arm in her pocket without thinking. "Incidentally, this is the main room of the Museum. It's home to the tail feathers of Australasian birds."

"So this really is all just feathers?" she asked.

"Tail feathers," I said with a smile. "We don't do wing feathers or body feathers."

“So what's so special about tail feathers?” she asked, moving over to look at a display of feathers under glass.

“They're often the most interesting feathers on a bird,” I said. “The wing feathers are needed for lift and gliding, of course, and there are feathers that cover the body. However, the tail feathers are partly there to give directional stability but often really more for display.”

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, the wing feathers have to be precisely designed to lift the bird and help power its flight,” I said. “That means that beyond colouring there isn't a lot of scope for variation as they have to adhere to the laws of physics. Much the same applies to the body feathers in that they can't get in the way when the bird is flying or walking along the ground. It would be absurd if, for example, some of the body feathers were so large and complex that the bird can't actually use its wings.”

“Well, yes, I suppose so,” she said, moving over to another cabinet. “I hadn't really thought about it. Tail feathers though?”

“Tail feathers are where life gets interesting,” I said. “There are some aerodynamic principles that must be adhered to otherwise the bird would spiral or always go to the left or something but since the feathers protrude backwards from the tail end of the bird there is effectively no limit to the size or scope of them. Umm, take these for example,” and I went over to one of the cabinets on the far side of the room.

“These are a pair of tail feathers from the Eastern Rosella,” I said. “Apart from their colouring which is relatively dull, notice that the rachis is quite sharply curved.”

“The what?” she asked, bending over to get a closer look at the feathers.

“The rachis,” I said. “Umm, the central spine. With wing and body feathers they are generally straight or with a gentle curve but these are curved quite strongly. Aerodynamically they act as an air brake when needed but look at the colouring. Most of the feather is pale blue but

when the two of them are brought together the black patch on each form what could be seen as a large eye or an open mouth.”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “So that’s to make it look big and fierce from behind?”

“Exactly,” I said. “Or it could simply be something to do with mating. When we get to the European and Asian Rooms there are many spectacular examples of tail feathers which have evolved primarily for eye-catching mating displays but you wanted some water. The store room’s through here. It used to be the kitchen and this is where we make coffee and so on and there’s a fridge and microwave but most of the cupboards are used for storage. Here.”

I opened the fridge, took out a bottle of water and unscrewed the top before offering it to her.

“I’m not helpless, you know,” she snapped.

“Ah, sorry,” I said, feeling deeply embarrassed and, if truth be known, a little insulted that my small effort to help had been rejected.

She sighed and shook her head. She took the bottle then put it on the counter so she could put her hand on my arm.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude,” she said quietly. “You were only trying to help. Thank you.”

“Umm,” I said, not knowing what to say next.

“Just treat me like anyone else,” she said in the same quiet voice. “If I can’t do something I’ll say but until then assume I can, OK?”

“OK,” I said, blinking several times. I still had no idea what to say. “Umm, well, through here are the other rooms.”

“What’s that one with the Asian woman in it?” she asked.

“Asian woman?” I said. “You mean we have a visitor?”

“I don't know,” said Steph. “I only caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye as I went past from the toilet but she looked to be almost naked.”

Chapter Two

I blinked several times while I stared at her as my brain is slow to change to a new track.

“Oh, you mean Charlotte,” I said after several, probably uncomfortable, seconds. Uncomfortable for her I mean, as me staring for no apparent reason is, I’m told, a little confronting. Someone once told me it was ‘creepy’ and I make an effort not to but I sometimes forget. “She’s not Asian though. Come on, I’ll introduce you. She’s in the Cultural Room.”

Steph frowned and pushed her arm a little deeper into her pocket.

“OK,” she said.

“It’s just down the corridor,” I said, walking that way, “but then you know that since it’s next to the toilet. Of course, Charlotte isn’t her real name. She’s actually Mistinguett,” I stumbled over that name as I always do since I’m appalling at languages. “I find that awkward to say though so I call her Charlotte.”

“You mean Mis-tan-jou-eh-te?” asked Steph, following me. “She’s French?”

“Yes,” I said, going into the Culture Room. “Do you speak French?”

“I spent a few months in France as an exchange student when I was at school,” said Steph. “Oh! It’s a waxwork!”

“Yes,” I said happily. “I’m really rather proud of her.”

The figure was of a slim, dark haired pretty woman very scantily dressed in an extremely tight outfit that resembled a one piece bathing suit with a narrow belt with some feathers around her hips. She had her back almost facing the door but was looking coquettishly over her shoulder at whoever came in with the first finger of her left hand touching her lips.

“So, who is Mistinguett?” asked Steph, studying her.

“Actually her real name was Jeanne Florentine Bourgeois,” I said, stepping out of the way. “She was a star of the French Music Halls at the end of the 19th century. In fact I’m told she was the highest paid female entertainer in the world in her prime. She died in 1956 at the age of 82.”

“She looks more Asian than French though,” said Steph coming back round to look at Charlotte’s face again. “She’s got slanty eyes.”

“Yes, that’s rather unfortunate,” I said. “She was made at the Musée des Cires Théâtrales in the Rue de Trévis which was just down the road from the Folies Bergère music hall although the waxwork itself was based on her time at the Moulin Rouge. The Museum was partially destroyed in the Second World War and many of the works were lost but she somehow managed to survive that unscathed. She was sold to a collector of music hall memorabilia in the late 1940s and a few years ago his grandson sold off the lot since he wasn’t interested and needed the money. I heard about it and bought her.”

“Was she expensive?” asked Steph. “Can I touch her?” She lifted her hand rather tentatively towards Charlotte.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” I said, pointing to the DO NOT TOUCH sign. “She’s rather fragile.”

Steph dropped her hand guiltily and moved to the side to look at Charlotte’s profile.

“Thanks,” I said. “No, she wasn’t expensive to buy, only a couple of thousand dollars and I congratulated myself for finding such a bargain, at least until I found out how much it cost to ship her over to Australia. That was expensive and that’s how she had her accident.”

“What do you mean?” asked Steph, looking at me.

“She was packed inside a refrigerated shipping container, along with some other things that needed to be kept cold,” I said sadly. “Unfortunately an over-enthusiastic customs official in Port Said insisted on her crate being opened. It was only open for a few minutes but the heat got in and softened the surface wax a little and her

forehead and face drooped slightly. That's what gives her a slightly Asian look. Not that I'm saying Asians look as though they've melted, of course, it's just that her eyes are more oval now. If you look at old photographs of her you'll see she had quite round eyes."

"Poor thing," said Steph sympathetically. "So is that why it's so cold in here?"

"Yes," I said. "Ideally waxworks have to be kept between 12 and 22 degrees so we've got the air con in here set to 20 degrees. I'd prefer colder but Queenslanders find it too cold."

"Well, I'm from Victoria," said Steph, "so I quite like it. It's about 35 degrees outside and humid. So what's Mistinguett doing here? Or should I call her Charlotte as well?"

"Oh, you can call her by her stage name," I said, "since you say it properly. When you say her name it sounds beautiful but when I say it it sounds more like a tractor attachment, Miss Tin Gooet. No, she's here because this is a feather museum."

"I don't get you," said Steph, frowning.

"Look at her backside," I said, gesturing at the belt. "She's got a complete set of tail feathers from a Long Tailed Widowbird which is only found in parts of South Africa and isolated spots in Kenya. It's quite a rare bird and these are the only tail feathers we have from one."

"I'm missing something here," said Steph. "If the bird is African shouldn't its feathers be in the African Room, not on a waxwork of a French actress?"

"Not at all," I said enthusiastically. "No, the feathers were the reason I bought her and created the Culture Room. The other rooms are about the birds themselves whereas this room is about human culture, about how we perceive and use the feathers. The male Long Tailed Widowbird uses its tail feathers for display to attract a mate and studies have found that the male with the longest tail feathers attracts the most females. This shows a remarkable cultural transposition here

with Charlotte wearing the exact same feathers as a display of her sexuality, professionally speaking of course. I'm sure the lady didn't indulge in any impropriety as such. What is interesting, of course, is that very few, if any, of the French men who came to see her perform would have been aware of the sexual display inherent in the tail feathers. In fact, Charlotte herself probably didn't either but the underlying biological imperative still remains. Without the feathers she would have been just another pretty woman in a bathing suit but with them she was the star of the day. Fascinating, isn't it."

"Oh! You mean they were part of her outfit?" asked Steph in surprise. "I thought you'd just stuck the feathers there for some reason."

"Oh dear me no!" I said, a little horrified at the thought. "Charlotte herself is simply a wax creation but her bathing suit and the belt with the feathers are, according to the provenance that came with her, the original outfit she wore at the Moulin Rouge. This is, apart from her eyes, exactly how she would have appeared on stage. What I don't know is whether or not the feathers were her own idea or that of someone else, perhaps whoever designed her costumes. Nor do I know if the tail feathers of the Long Tailed Widowbird were chosen specifically and imported from Africa or if they were a chance find in some local Parisian market. I doubt we'll ever know but I think you'll agree the pairing of the woman and the feathers is quite fortuitous."

"Well, I suppose," said Steph, eyeing Charlotte. "I have to admit she doesn't do a whole lot for me."

"It would be interesting to see what the effect would be on a female Long Tailed Widowbird," I said, looking fondly at the tail feathers. "And there is a certain irony here that the male bird uses the display to attract females but, once transposed to human culture, the male's feathers are added to a female to attract human males. It's a curious aspect of human sexuality, is it not?"

"I suppose," said Steph dubiously. She looked around. "So this room's all about human culture, is it? What's that?"

"That?" I asked, tearing my eyes away from Charlotte. "Oh, that's a Voodoo Fan."

“You mean Black Magic?” asked Steph, moving over to look at it more closely.

“Yes,” I said. “That one's from Haiti and would have been seen as extremely powerful since it has an eye from a peahen feather surrounded by tail feathers from a hawk, all bound to a human rib. It would have been used to put a curse on whoever the eye looked at. That one beside it, however, was more likely used in ritual dances or perhaps to waft cleansing smoke from a fire.”

“Wow,” said Steph, staring at the Haitian fan. “Does it work?”

“I've not tried it myself,” I said cautiously, “but doubtless amongst those who believe in the power of Voodoo it would have some effect. Whether it would work effectively on an Australian I couldn't say.”

“Might be fun to try,” said Steph giving me a grin. “I've a list if you ever decide ...”

“I think not,” I said. “The insurance here is high enough already. Of course, there are many other ways in which feathers are used by humans. These are ear cuffs.”

“Ear cuffs?” said Steph. “What, you mean they're like ear-rings?”

“In a way,” I said. “This carved piece of wood fits around the ear and the feathers stick up and backwards, like this.” I picked up one of the ear cuffs and slipped it over my ear. “Native American Indians used them to display status. Of course the tribal chief wore a full headdress but lesser mortals showed their status with these cut down versions. The precise number of feathers was important as each feather represented a successful outcome in battle.”

“So you're saying whoever wore this killed eight people?” asked Steph, intrigued.

“Actually fifteen,” I said, “since there are seven on the one that goes on the other ear.”

“Wow,” she said, touching the tips of the feathers of the other one with

her finger tips. "They were a bloodthirsty lot."

"The defining feature of the human race," I said, taking off the one I was wearing and replacing it in the cabinet. "Just about every living thing kills in one way or another for food but only humans keep trophies to celebrate their victories."

"I suppose," said Steph. "What's that? It looks like an ordinary chicken feather to me."

"It is," I said, "but just because chickens are common, although that's from a Blue Andalusian, that's no reason why they should be excluded from this Museum. This one, however, has a rather unusual provenance which is why it's in the Culture Room."

"Oh yeah?" said Steph, bending over to read the label. "Ahh, right." She stood upright again rather quickly.

"Indeed," I said. "Although why a prostitute would keep a selection of feathers to stimulate her clients I wouldn't know."

"There were more than one?" asked Steph.

"So I believe," I said. "They were confiscated by the New Orleans police in 1899 although rumour has it the judge kept most of her collection. I can't imagine why."

"Perhaps he was one of her clients," said Steph and barked a laugh again.

"Perhaps," I said, uninterested. "Over here we have another aspect of the use of feathers in human culture and one which has had far more long reaching implications. These two are swan tail feathers that were used as quill pens although more usually it was the wing feathers that were used. This one, on the other hand, a Red Tailed Hawk incidentally, was used to tattoo the skin. There is some anecdotal evidence that these tattoo feathers may also have been used on occasion to insert drugs directly under the skin as a primitive form of syringe."

“What, you mean hallucinogenic drugs?” asked Steph.

“Probably not,” I said, “as they would more usually be eaten or smoked. The gentleman I got this specimen from said that he’d had the tip tested and they found a derivative of curare so more likely it was used to kill. I imagine the victim would have felt little more than a minor sting. On the other hand he may have just made it up as he was unable to produce the analyst’s report. Shall we have a look in the other rooms?”

“I hadn’t realised this would be so fascinating,” said Steph as we went into the Asian and American Room. “How many feathers have you got?”

“We’ve got about two thousand on display at the moment,” I said, “but we’ve got around eighteen thousand all told. The rest are in storage or at my home. Every few months we cycle them so visitors don’t get bored with the same ones all the time. You’ll be involved in that if you decide to stay. Quite a few volunteers don’t last more than a week or two.”

“That’s a lot of feathers,” she said. She thought for a moment. “Is that because they find it boring?”

“Probably,” I said. “I don’t enquire.”

“Yeah, I would think that’s it,” she said with a beam. “I thought it would too but now I think it’s going to be fascinating. There’s just one thing though.”

“Oh yes?” I asked.

“I don’t know anything about feathers,” she said. “What do I do if people ask questions?”

“Most won’t,” I said, “or if they do they’ll be simple obvious ones like ‘why are they called tail feathers?’. Very occasionally we get an enthusiast and they tend to ask questions even I can’t answer so just point them in the direction of the books on the Gift Table. Anyway, if you’re doing weekends I’ll be here as well.”

“Doesn't your wife mind?” she asked. “You work all week then spend your weekends here.”

“Oh, I'm not married,” I said, offhandedly. “Never have been. What do you think of these? They're from the Greater Racket-Tailed Drongo of the Himalayas. Six of its tail feathers are fairly ordinary but look at those two elongated ones with the tufts at the end. Spectacular, aren't they. When it flies it looks as though it's being chased by two large bees.”

“Are these all about mating as well?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “That's what makes the tail feathers so much more interesting. I've been collecting them since I was, ohh, five or six.”

“Did you collect all these yourself?” she asked. “All eighteen thousand?”

“Oh God, no,” I said. “I've only once been outside Australia. No, I've collected perhaps two thousand myself. Most of the rest have been given to me by other collectors around the world in exchange for Australian feathers and quite a few I've bought. Setting up the Museum was a major step forward since maybe ten thousand have come in since it opened. Just as well really as I was running out of space at home. The biggest problem is time, though.”

“Time? What do you mean?” she asked.

“I get packets of feathers almost every day,” I said. “Sometimes just two or three, sometimes a box full but I have to clean and disinfect each one before I handle it then they have to be identified, catalogued on the computer and photographed in case there's a fire or something.”

“Disinfect them? Seriously?” she asked. “I thought birds were pretty clean creatures.”

“God no,” I said. “All wild birds are infested with mites and bacteria and many have diseases that transfer to humans like bird flu. The last thing I want is someone infected with some foul tropical disease from

a dirty feather I've brought in.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“Don't worry,” I said with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “You won't be handling any of the feathers except when we do a change around and we have plenty of hand sanitiser. It's a lot safer here than working in a hospital.”

* * *

After Steph left, promising to return the following Saturday and clutching a copy of Noah Strycker's *The Thing with Feathers: The Surprising Lives of Birds and What They Reveal about Being Human*, I locked up and went home. Aside from a backlog of feathers to clean, which I did using a soft paintbrush and spray disinfectant, I had a new CD to listen to. It was the newly released compilation of the entrants to the 2023 World Band Festival in Luzern, Switzerland and I was anxious to hear how the winners, the Brass Band 13 Étoiles, had performed since I was expecting either the Brass Band Friborg or the Brass Band Berner Oberland to win. I can't play any instruments myself but I do like a nice brass band. I have a TV in my one bedroom apartment but only ever watch the News or the occasional documentary. Most TV shows I just find raucous and the endless advertisements annoy me.

I woke at my usual time on Monday morning, had breakfast and checked my schedule for the day. It was fairly light. I had a 10 o'clock appointment with a possible new client then the afternoon with Lachlan Picture Framing. I'd been doing their bookkeeping since they started fifteen years previously and had watched them go from being a small one man outfit working from a large garden shed to twelve employees in a small factory. I did an afternoon there every week, in fact, a far cry from the hour once a quarter in the beginning. Actually they were getting close to the point of employing their own part-time bookkeeper. I had pointed out several times that it would be cheaper than having me in as a consultant at \$250 an hour but I got on tolerably well with Lachlan Stewart, the owner, and he didn't really like change so it looked like I'd still have him as a client for a while longer.

The possible new client didn't work out. The gentleman, I won't reveal his name, was setting up his own financial services business and when I asked why he needed a bookkeeper, as someone in the financial world should be perfectly able to do their own bookkeeping, he became very evasive. I formed a suspicion that he wanted someone as a legitimate 'front' for a second set of accounts and I don't get involved with that sort of thing. For me money is a tool to do what I want, specifically to channel into the Museum which is my consuming passion, and not an end in itself. I declined his opportunity as politely as I could and, on the drive to Logan Picture Framing, debated whether or not I should alert the police. I decided on balance not too since I had no real evidence. Still, I was unsettled and a little anxious when I arrived and made several stupid mistakes in doing the weekly bank reconciliation meaning that I had to abandon it and start all over from scratch. For those who care, the bank reconciliation has to be done before anything else because errors in the money flow affect everything else.

As a result I was kept there an hour or so longer than usual and, because the delay was my fault, I couldn't charge for the extra time. Still, at 5.30 or thereabouts I finished explaining the current state of the business to Mick and he authorised the filing of a couple of government returns that needed lodging. I declined a final cup of coffee and we exchanged pleasantries about the downpour that had just started. I ran over to my Toyota Corolla in the car park, unlocking it as I ran. Successful bookkeepers normally drove bottom-end BMWs or, if they're flashy, a second hand Porsche although few flashy people become bookkeepers. I drive a cheap Toyota because I had better things to do with my money. I pulled out of the small car park with the wipers on the middle setting.

Almost immediately the rain started to ease so just before I turned onto Logan Street, heading for the freeway to central Brisbane, I turned the wipers down to low. The traffic was fairly light as most people in that area leave for home around four. Still, there was a moderate amount of traffic. Strangely enough, although perhaps not so strange as I am a conservative driver and tend to hang back rather than rush forward, the lights at the junction of Logan Street with Fryer Road turned red as the car in front went past so I slowed and stopped. I noticed someone running along Fryer Road, on the

opposite side to where I was, but didn't pay any attention. After all, it was still raining and this was Eagleby, a pretty rough area on the edge of Logan which was itself a rather rough area. People often ran there and not only because of the rain. I leaned over to push the 'next' button on the CD player as one of my least favourite tracks was just starting. As I glanced back at the lights the passenger door was wrenched open and someone jumped in.

“Fucking drive or I'll kill ya,” he snarled, pointing a gun under his jacket at me.

Chapter Three

Not being a man of action I sat there and gawped in astonishment. One moment I was quietly driving home and the next I was in the middle of an episode of The Sopranos. My brain simply does not react that quickly.

“Excuse me?” I said, gripping the steering wheel. “What did you say?”

“I said drive or I'll fucking kill you!” shrieked the man. He looked around wildly then rammed his elbow into my shoulder. “Now!”

My brain latched onto the idea that there was a violent stranger shouting at me and I started to panic. He rammed his elbow into me again and my foot slipped off the clutch pedal. The car jerked forward and stalled.

“You fucking asshole!” he shouted just as the car behind beeped rather offensively.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” I yelled, groping for the keys. I found them but for some reason the key wouldn't turn.

The car behind beeped again, this time for longer. The man twisted round and leaned out the door to shout “fuck off!” and make a rude gesture. I suddenly remembered you had to turn the key all the way back before trying to restart the engine so I did and the engine started.

“Move! Move!” shouted the man, turning back to me.

I pushed down too hard on the accelerator in panic and lifted the clutch pedal just as he rammed me again with his elbow. That caused me to jerk the steering wheel sideways just as the front wheels started to spin on the wet road. The engine screaming, the car suddenly lurched forward and sideways as the tyres caught and the front wing cannoned into the post holding up the traffic lights. The post scraped noisily all down the side of the car then the car careered off into the oncoming lane.

My heart thumping faster than the engine I instinctively yanked the steering wheel over to the left while stamping on the brakes and the back end of the car skidded round and smashed into the traffic light post on the other side of the junction then the engine stalled.

“Shiiiiittttt!” screamed the man, clamping both arms over his head and drawing up his knees.

“Ooops,” I said although it came out in three very short breaths as I was beginning to hyperventilate.

The car behind drove slowly forward and pulled up beside me. He called something through his window but I was too flustered to make any sense of it. Besides, the man next to me had uncurled himself and was shouting at me again.

“Oh shut up! Both of you!” I shouted and lashed out in a left handed slap, catching the man just where his hoodie hung over his eyebrow. He jerked sideways and hit his head against the window. The man in the other car said something else which I ignored as I was trying to start the engine again, acutely aware that traffic was now trying to get past from Fryer Road. The engine caught, I’m very conscientious about having the car serviced at the correct intervals, and I took advantage of the momentary break in the traffic as the lights changed again to do a U turn and continue up Logan Street. The car that had pulled up followed then quickly overtook me, the driver making several hand signals and mouthing something, probably obscenities.

A few hundred metres up there was a service road so I turned into it and pulled over. I felt exhausted and weak and my heart was still thumping.

“What the fuck you doing?” shouted the man and tried to hit me again.

“Shut up!” I said loudly, my hands still welded to the steering wheel. I could feel the sweat on my face even though I was icy cold and I desperately wanted to pee. “Just shut up! I can’t think properly with you screaming at me!”

Incredibly he shut up. I think he started looking round, probably for another car with a better driver to hijack, but I was staring fixedly ahead while I tried to come to terms with this.

“Sorry,” he said quietly.

“What?” I shouted, turning to stare at him with unseeing eyes. “What?”

“I said I’m fucking sorry,” he said again. “Umm, don’t you think you should let go of the fucking steering wheel before you fucking break it?”

I looked at the steering wheel and my knuckles were white. I made a concentrated effort and slowly prised my fingers loose. There were deep indentations in the foam surround of the steering wheel where my fingers had been.

Someone tapped on the passenger side window and my unwelcome passenger wound it down a little.

“Ere, you making a movie?” said the kid. “Go on, do that again!”

“Fuck off,” snarled my passenger and wound the window back up. The kid stuck his middle finger up and sauntered off.

I leaned my head back against the head rest and covered my face with my hands. I groaned experimentally and it seemed to help so I groaned again.

“We need to fucking go,” he said in a conversational tone. “The fucking cops’ll be here any fucking minute.”

“Good,” I said, not uncovering my face. “I hope they arrest you.”

“You were fucking driving,” he said. “I was just sitting here quietly, minding my own business.”

“And what about the gun?” I asked sarcastically. “You think they won’t find that?”

“What gun?” he said. “I don't have a fucking gun.”

I took a deep breath and dropped my hands.

“The one under your ...” I started to say as I turned to look at him. He pushed his hood back and opened the front of his jacket to show there was no gun. “Jesus! You're a girl!”

“Yeah,” she said. “Umm, can we go now? The fucking cops ...”

As always it took me a few seconds to come to terms with the changed circumstances then I had to think through the logic of the situation. The car that had been behind had probably been a witness to this girl jumping in my car but, this being Logan, the occupants would undoubtedly be very reluctant to come forward. Moreover, the girl did not have a gun and the police would be very unlikely to believe me, this being Australia where most people do not carry weapons. Also she seemed to be perfectly calm whereas I was still very stressed and I've heard that the police tend to believe people who are calm more than people who are making hysterical and wild accusations. All she had to do was say she was hitching a lift and I'd picked her up and gone funny. Plus, as she had pointed out, I was driving and, as far as I could remember, I'd damaged two sets of traffic lights and quite possibly some other things. Very likely there were skid marks to substantiate that. The bookkeeper in me concluded there were more entries on the liability side of waiting for the police than the asset side.

“OK,” I said, starting the engine. “Let's go. Where?”

“Perth,” she said and I started to laugh. Slightly hysterically.

“What?” she said, frowning at me.

I caught myself mid-laugh and forced myself to breath deeply. I still felt weak and a little shivery.

“I can't think,” I said. “This is so far outside my comfort zone and I need to pee.”

“There's a fucking Macca's up the road a bit,” she said. “You can piss there. You want me to drive?”

“Can you?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said, screwing up her face in disgust. “It's only a fucking Toyota.”

“OK,” I said, too mentally exhausted to think about it.

She opened the passenger door and jumped out while I slid across to the passenger seat. She went round the front of the car and studied the side before jumping in the driver's seat.

“How bad is it?” I asked, fastening my seat belt.

“Just a fucking scratch, that's all,” she said and slid the seat forward.

She deftly dropped the car into first gear and rapidly accelerated up the service road then slowed very slightly to let a car on Logan Street go past then pulled out behind it, only to accelerate again to overtake. I glanced at the speedometer and she was at least thirty kilometres an hour over the speed limit.

“You should wear your seat belt,” I said, “and slow down or you'll lose your licence.”

“Ain't got no fucking licence,” she said, turning off onto the slip road up to the Pacific Highway. She slipped in between two cars then into the outside lane and accelerated to around 140kph. I groaned and shut my eyes, praying that this would all end very soon and I'd still be alive.

“What's this fucking crap on the radio?” she suddenly asked. “It's a load of shit.”

“It's the Third Carrickfergus Silver Band,” I said weakly, not opening my eyes. “They're a brass band from Ireland.”

“Turd Fungus, more like,” she said and I felt the car career over to the

left as she turned the CD player off then it careered back to the right again. I refused to open my eyes and just clung to the seat belt. I didn't know my Corolla was capable of these speeds.

Suddenly the car lurched to the left and slowed down dramatically. Cautiously I opened one eye. We were now in a car park. She found a vacant bay and reversed expertly into it then jumped out.

“Come on,” she said. “Ain't got all fucking day.”

My hand was shaking and it took a couple of attempts to undo my seat belt. I got out and found my knees were still weak and my thigh muscles trembled a little. Still, I could walk although I felt I'd aged about twenty five years. A walking frame would have come in handy.

“Where's ...? I asked and she pointed behind me then clicked the locks and slipped the keys inside the pocket of her hoodie.

I made my way to McDonald's, hoping I'd have the strength to push the heavy door open. Fortunately two teenagers beat me to it and I was able to squeeze through before it closed. The girl threw the door open again like she was throwing confetti and strode past me to join the queue at the counter. I looked around and found a sign to the toilets and made my way there.

There were no visible signs of my ordeal in the mirror. Apart from my hair being a little ruffled and my tie being a little askew I looked much as I normally do which was strange since I felt like I'd been beaten up. I took off my jacket and put my tie in the pocket then washed my face and hands in cold water. It felt very refreshing.

“This is not a typical Monday,” I muttered as I dried my hands in a machine that just had a slot but which pumped warm air at high speed. I'd never seen one like that before but it seemed to work. “I wonder if she's gone?”

I cautiously opened the toilet door and peered out. I could see part of the queue and she wasn't in it.

“Excellent,” I thought and made a beeline for the nearest door to the

car park. I could see my car and I hurried over to it, fumbling in my pocket for the keys. I couldn't find them.

"Damn!" I said out loud as I remembered the girl had pocketed them. I sighed and slowly walked back into McDonald's wondering how to handle this. Nothing immediately came to mind other than simply asking for the keys but what if she refused to give them to me?

"Over 'ere!" shouted someone above the general background noise and I looked up. There she was, waving happily as though I was a friend or relative looking for her. I walked over.

"Can I have my ...?" I started but she interrupted me.

"Needs fucking paying for," she said, flapping a hand at the girl serving.

"\$61.30," said the girl. She pushed a card swipe machine an inch towards me.

"Wonderful," I muttered and pulled out my wallet. I waved my card at the machine and it spat a receipt at me. The serving girl smiled and pulled a tray from under the counter and started collecting assorted packets and putting them on the tray.

"Got you a coffee," said my girl. "You look like you fucking need one."

"Do you swear all the time?" I asked.

"What you mean?" she said with a puzzled frown. "I ain't swearing."

"Yes you are," I said, watching the girl filling the tray. "Every second word you say is 'fucking'."

"Oh," she said, sneaking a chip from the tray. She bit it in half thoughtfully. "So what am I fucking supposed to say?"

"I was brought up to only use swear words for special emphasis," I said.

"There you go," said the serving girl. "Have a nice day!"

"You too," I said automatically. I always say that even when the person saying 'have a nice day' says it in a way that shows they really couldn't give a damn if you did or not. At least this girl looked as though she meant it. Perhaps she was new there.

"There's a table over there, in the corner," said my girl, pulling my sleeve.

I let her lead the way and we sat down.

"So what you friggin' mean, 'special emphasis'?" she said, putting a paper cup of coffee, a boxed burger and a bag of chips in front of me. The rest she piled in front of herself.

"Where's the sugar?" I asked since I detest coffee without sugar.

"There's three in it," she said. "You look like a fucking sugar person."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking at her properly for the first time. She was slim and had an alert face with shoulder length lank blonde hair with pink streaks. She looked to be about 14 although her blue eyes could have been those of a forty year old.

"You're fat," she said in that casually cruel way thin people sometimes have. I winced but was still grateful for the sugar.

"Umm, well suppose you're having a bad day," I said, prising the lid off the coffee and thinking of my own experience. "You could say you're having a bad day. Or you could make it stronger and say you're having a really bad day. Or you could make it even stronger and say it's been a terrible day. You see? Each time you're adding more and more emphasis on how bad a day it is. Then, if you think it needs even more emphasis you could then bring in a swear word and say you've had a fucking terrible day. That way the person you're talking to has a good idea of the strength of your feelings about the day. Do you see that?"

"Yeah," she said, a half eaten burger in front of her mouth. "So

fucking what?"

"Exactly my point," I said. "By putting a swear word in every time no one knows whether you don't really care or if you're having a dreadful time. You're unable to match the sentence to your level of feelings. It's all a matter of expressing yourself well and by swearing all the time you're unable to do that. It's like only having on or off and nothing in between. Take the car for example, you can't drive properly if the accelerator only has fully off or fully on. To drive well you need what's in between as well."

She chewed thoughtfully, watching me with those old blue eyes. I found it a little disconcerting so I lifted the top bun off my burger to see what was inside. I'd never had a McDonald's before. It didn't look overly appetising but then half melted cheese never does.

"What's your name?" she said suddenly.

"Reggie," I said. "What's yours?"

She stuffed the rest of that burger in her mouth and chewed. A police car went past on the Pacific Highway, its siren audible even inside McDonald's, and her eyes shifted to watch it go then they shifted back to me.

"Wasp," she said, reaching for one of her bags of chips.

"Where?" I said, ducking instinctively.

"What where?" she said, frowning.

"Where's the wasp?" I said, flapping my hands around my head.

"You a nutter or something?" she asked.

"You said there's a wasp," I said, feeling irritated.

She burst out laughing.

"I'm Wasp," she said. "It's me name."

“Oh,” I said. I glanced around one more time just to make sure there weren't any wasps flying around then tasted my coffee. It was actually quite nice even if a little sweet. “That's a ... an unusual name.”

“Just unusual or fucking unusual?” she asked.

“Just ordinarily unusual,” I said. “Plenty of things are called wasp. Wasps, for example.” I was intrigued that not only had she taken my point but was now making jokes about it.

“What else is called wasps?” she asked, reaching for her milkshake.

“Well, it's also an acronym,” I said. “It stands for White Anglo Saxon Protestant although it's a bit derogatory.”

“What's derogatory?” she asked.

“A put down,” I said.

“Oh,” she said and took a long slurp.

“So, umm, Wasp,” I said, cupping my hands around my coffee. “Did I hear you correctly? You have no driver's licence?”

“S'right,” she said. “Lost it, didn't I.”

“Speeding?” I asked, taking a not-so-wild guess.

“Yeah,” she said.

“So how old are you?” I asked.

“20,” she said. “How old are you?”

“51,” I said, thinking she wasn't old enough to have a full licence so she must have had her provisional one suspended. She was a pretty good driver for a 'P' plater.

“Fuck,” she said. “That's old.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You will be 51 yourself one day.”

“Hope not,” she said.

I was tempted to point out that the way she drove she probably wouldn't make it that far but decided not to. It seemed rather pointless.

“So where did you learn to drive?” I asked. “You can't have been driving long.”

“Been driving since me legs were long enough to reach the pedals,” she said, grabbing another burger. “Me brother taught me.”

“So, what, 11, 12?” I asked.

“Something like that,” she said and took another bite.

“I confess I'm curious, ah, Wasp,” I said, since I was. “Why would your brother teach you to drive at 12?”

“So I could help him nick cars,” she said and stuffed several chips in her mouth.

“Right,” I said. “So you're from Logan?” It's an area well known for car thefts, amongst a wide assortment of other things.

“Nah,” she said. “I'm from Melbourne. Came up here with me dad.”

“Ahh, I see,” I said. “So why do you want to go to Perth?”

“Wanna find me mum,” she said, her eyes boring challengingly into mine. “Fucking hate me dad.”

“Right,” I said slowly. I had a suspicion that things were not well in her world but, to be honest, I wasn't that keen to get involved. “Well, I wish you every success in your endeavour. If you'll just give me my car keys back I'll be off.”

“Sure,” she said, balling up the wrapper from the second burger.

I waited for a few moments while she polished off her second bag of chips then unwrapped her third burger. I wondered how she could eat all that junk food yet stay so slim. Perhaps she had a fast metabolism.

“Ahh, my keys,” I said, holding out my hand.

“No probs,” she said. “You can have 'em back when we get to Perth.”

Chapter Four

“But I’m not going to Perth,” I said, not unreasonably I thought. “You are.”

She just smiled and bit into her burger.

“My keys, please,” I said, holding out my hand and trying to sound as authoritative as I could. It sounded a little limp even to me.

She picked up several chips and stuffed them in her mouth. I’m not the most emotionally sensitive of people but there seemed to be amusement in her eyes. I clicked my fingers twice to show I wasn’t joking and she put two chips in my hand.

“Keys,” I said, trying to be firm. I dropped the chips on the table and she picked them up and ate them.

“When we get to Perth,” she said.

I looked around. The place was packed but no one seemed to be taking any notice, not that I was thinking of actually doing anything physical. I’d generally come last in any sporting events at school and hadn’t done any at all since I’d left.

“Perth is 5,000 kilometres away,” I said, hoping she had a streak of reasonableness in her. “It’ll take days to get there.”

“There’s no rush,” she said and took another bite out of the burger.

“I have work to do,” I said.

“So take a sickie,” she said. “You haven’t had your coffee.”

I frowned at her then picked up my coffee. She had the upper hand, of course. Apart from having my keys, and therefore my car, if I called the police she’d just make up some story and I’d be in worse trouble than I was now. After all, an unmarried middle-aged man and a young woman? Who are they likely to believe?

"I'm going to call the police," I said, trying to call her bluff. I took out my phone and switched it on.

"OK," she said and looked at me as she drank some of her milkshake.

I sighed and put down my phone. Clearly I was having absolutely no impact at trying to intimidate her which was understandable. A girl who'd jump into a car at traffic lights threatening to kill the driver is unlikely to be overly impressed by anything less than the sort of powerful weapons you see in American movies. Assault rifles, I think they're called, not that I watch many of those sorts of movies.

"The number's triple 0," she said helpfully.

I just stared at her, thinking. If I got up and walked away she'd still have my car and heaven only knows what she'd use it for. As the registered owner I would naturally get the blame. I could report it stolen but the circumstances were, frankly, unbelievable and it would take months to sort out anyway. Plus the insurance company almost certainly wouldn't replace the Toyota. On the other hand, if I stayed with her there might be an opportunity to lose her and make my escape with the car and even if I did end up having to take her all the way to Perth I'd still have it. If I just walked away and left the car behind I'd have to get another and that would be a lot more expensive than the fuel. Out of habit I did a quick calculation; 10,000km at 15km per litre at, say, \$2.75 per litre on average would mean \$1800 or thereabouts. It was a fairly safe bet she wouldn't be reimbursing me for travelling expenses nor could I justifiably claim them against tax since this wasn't a business trip.

"How about I take you to Brisbane Airport and buy you a plane ticket to Perth?" I said, temporising.

"Fuck no," she said emphatically. "They'll be looking for me there."

"Who will?" I asked, perking up slightly. If she was wanted by the police they might be more willing to believe me.

"People," she said. "Anyway, I ain't got no photo ID."

Well, that was a fair point. Even for domestic flights you needed photo ID.

"How about the train then?" I said. "I've heard it's a scenic trip."

"Nah," she said. "Be nicer in a car, besides ..."

She chomped on the last of her third burger and didn't finish the sentence.

"Besides?" I prompted.

She swallowed the burger then finished her milkshake and tossed the empty cardboard container on the table. Some thick pale milk oozed greasily out of the straw.

"You're trapped on a plane or a train," she said. "With a car you've got options. Come on, let's go."

She got up and marched off, jangling my keys as an incentive. Ponderously I got up to follow but my phone pinged to say I had a message. I glanced at my phone and saw it was from Steph.

"Probably to say she's not volunteering after all," I thought, hurrying after Wasp.

"Good God!" I exclaimed when I saw my car. I stared at it for a while. "I thought you said it was only a scratch."

The scrape started just behind the front wheel and ran all along the body to where it got lost in the crumpled mess of the rear wing.

"It is," she said. "It's only the bodywork. Doesn't affect manoeuvrability."

"Do the tail lights still work?" I asked, going round the back end. They still looked intact but that didn't mean they weren't damaged.

"Dunno," she said offhandedly and climbed into the driver's seat.

“Better check,” I said, my innate sense of responsibility making it almost impossible for me to be in a car with faulty tail lights. “We don't want to be pulled over for a broken indicator, do we.”

I was being a little sarcastic when I said that but she took me seriously and made me check all the lights were working. Sadly they were. If I'd been a little quicker thinking I'd have lied and she'd have probably stolen another car and left me behind but I didn't think of that for at least ten kilometres.

“So which way's Perth?” she asked, pausing at the exit of McDonald's.

“West,” I said.

“Right,” she said, looking both ways even though we could only head North, towards Brisbane. “Which way's West?”

“Didn't they teach you anything at school?” I asked.

“Not really,” she said. “Nothing useful anyway. Which way?”

“You've got to go left,” I said. “We can't cross the freeway here. When you can, follow the signs to Ipswich.”

She nodded and waited for a gap in the traffic then made the tyres squeal as she accelerated. Within a few seconds we were in the outside lane, overtaking everything else.

“You might like to actually use the indicators,” I said, holding onto the seat belt, “Now you know they're working.”

She turned to look at me and the car drifted towards the barrier in the central reservation. She glanced back and corrected the drift.

“You scared of my driving?” she asked.

“A little,” I admitted as a cold sweat broke out on my face.

“Sorry,” she said and slowed down perhaps three kilometres an hour. “Is that better?”

"I'm just going to mention this," I said, fishing out a hankie from my jacket pocket, "but cars use less fuel when driven slowly."

"Is that a fact?" she said disinterestedly. "We want Ipswich?"

"Yes," I said as a big sign pointing to Ipswich whizzed past. She swerved into the centre lane then belatedly used the indicator before swerving into the slow lane and started to tailgate the car in front. "At some point we're going to have to cross the Nullarbor Plain and fuel stations will be few and far between. If you stay at these speeds we'll run out of petrol and be stranded."

"How far away is the Nullarbor?" she asked, following the car in front onto the highway to Ipswich.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but it's some way yet."

"That's all right then," she said and the car lurched to the right as she swung out to overtake. A car in the outside lane blared its horn angrily and flashed its lights a few times. She ignored it.

"You do realise you're just drawing attention to yourself," I said. "Someone will report you soon for dangerous driving, if they haven't already. It would be better to just blend in with the other traffic."

She didn't react for a while then, when she was forced to slow down by a car that was only going a little over the speed limit, she slowed down a lot and dropped into the left lane.

"Jesus. this is slow," she remarked.

"But safe," I said, relaxing my grip on my seatbelt. "And more economical."

"So where's this Nullarbor place?" she asked after a while.

"Down South," I said. "After Ipswich we'll have to start heading South West towards Adelaide then cross over the desert into Western Australia."

“So Perth's not in Queensland then?” she asked.

“Lord, no,” I said. “It's in Western Australia. All the way over on the other side of the country. It's almost three times as far away as Melbourne.”

“5000 kilometres,” she mused. “That's going to take a few hours.”

“About fifty,” I said, “assuming we don't stop at all. If we stop for food and sleep we're looking at at least three days, perhaps four. Longer if we get lost or sidetracked.”

“Oh,” she said, and pursed her lips with a small frown on her face.

We drove on in silence for a while then I remembered the text message from Steph. It seemed she'd been reading the book I'd lent her and wanted to spend some time in the Museum the next day or Wednesday getting familiar with the place. I texted back to let her know that was fine and then texted Debbie and Min to let them know a new volunteer called Steph might be dropping in. Wasp took no notice so she clearly wasn't worried I was contacting the police.

When the signs said we were on the edge of Ipswich I broke the silence.

“We'd better fill up with petrol in Ipswich,” I said. “I'm not sure where the next petrol station will be.” I had a half hope I'd be able to escape with the car while she was filling the tank.

“OK,” she said.

We continued in silence then she took the turning to Central Ipswich and found a petrol station.

“You fill up,” she said, turning off the ignition. She pressed the side of her knee against the keys as well, not that I was likely to make a grab for it. Even if I managed to get the key she'd still be in the driving seat and I had a suspicion she was stronger than me. Despite being quite small she had a wiry look about her. Disappointed, I got out of the car and filled up.

“Get something to eat as well,” she called through the open window as I went in to pay for the fuel.

I grabbed a few packets of rather unappetising sandwiches and some bottles of water while keeping an eye on the car through the petrol station window. She didn't drive away and I was in two minds about how to feel about that. On the one hand I wasn't stranded but on the other hand I didn't have my car back.

“What are you smiling at?” she demanded as I dumped my purchases on the back seat and got in the passenger seat.

“Oh, I just had a thought,” I said.

“What thought?” she said as we drove off the forecourt.

“I've thought of a way I can call this a business trip,” I said happily. “That way I can claim the costs against tax.”

“You what?” she said, driving sedately with the flow of traffic. I was quite impressed that I seemed to be having some influence over her. Swearing and now driving, this was definitely a positive.

“I run a museum in Brisbane as well as my day to day work,” I said. “Once we get to Perth I can look around for a few exhibits to purchase. That way I can claim this as a business trip.”

“Where to now?” she asked.

“Head for Toowoomba,” I said. “After that I think we'll have to head South. I'll check on the map in a bit.”

“K,” she said. “So what sort of museum?”

“Birds' tail feathers,” I said, looking over at her. Generally when I say that people go glassy eyed.

“OK,” she said, turning right to follow the signs to Toowoomba. “I had a bird once. A parakeet. His name was Mr Grumpy. He had lovely tail feathers.”

"That's an unusual name for a bird," I said a little surprised. Wasp didn't seem the type to have a pet.

"I called him that because he didn't talk," she said. "I was only little and I didn't know parakeets don't talk."

"Ahh, right," I said. "Well, not many birds do and, of course, they don't know what they're saying. They're just mimicking whoever they're with."

"Is that a fact?" she asked. "So why do they do that?"

"I'm not entirely sure," I said, "but it'll be some sort of evolved survival mechanism."

"Oh yeah?" she said, taking another turn to get onto the highway to Toowoomba. "So how do you know they don't know what they're saying?"

"Actually that's a good question," I said, thinking about it. "We don't know for certain, of course, but mimicking birds generally mimic whatever sounds they hear and only by chance use the right sounds in the right situations."

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"Umm, well, if you teach a bird to say, umm, 'how are you', for example, it will keep saying that even after it's already asked you and you've answered," I said. "If it knew what it was saying it wouldn't keep saying it."

"Yeah, makes sense," she said. "So I guess it wouldn't be able to have a conversation."

"Well, not a meaningful one," I said. "How did you come to have a pet parakeet?"

"We found it," said Wasp. "Me and me mum. We were out walking and found it on the ground under a nest. There weren't no others so mum said I could keep it."

"That was kind of her," I said, "and you, of course. I daresay the mother had been attacked and yours fell out of the nest."

"Yeah, that's what mum said," said Wasp. "I was all excited too. I thought it would talk to me, you see."

"Umm, what did you do when you found it didn't?" I asked cautiously, hoping Mr Grumpy hadn't just been tossed out.

"I kept it," she said. "I was sad he wouldn't talk to me but since no one else would it wasn't a biggie."

"What do you mean, no one else would?" I asked, looking at her.

"We lived in this place with a bunch of other people," said Wasp. "Mum was a junkie, see. Well they all were, I guess. Anyway, I was only little and no one took any notice of me, 'cept mum and Mr Grumpy."

"I see," I said. I thought about this for a while and, even though I'd grown up pretty much alone as well, I could see this was different. After all, my mother had been a hard working single parent, not a junkie. "So, umm, your mother's in Perth now?"

"Yeah," she said. "Least she was last time I heard from her."

"When was that?" I asked.

"Ohh, three or four years ago," said Wasp. I could see she was itching to overtake the truck in front but was restraining herself.

"Three or four years ago," I repeated.

"Yeah, she sent me a postcard," said Wasp. "It was a picture of Freemantle Docks and the postmark was Perth so it stands to reason she was there, doesn't it."

"That would seem a fair deduction," I said. "Umm, so did she give you an address?"

“Fuck no,” said Wasp with a laugh. “Mum'd just be with some guy. Said she still loved me though and missed me, which was nice.”

“Well, yes,” I said nonplussed. “So, umm, when did you last see your mother? I mean actually see her. In the flesh.”

“Oh that's easy,” said Wasp, finally giving in to the urge to overtake the truck. “It was me seventh birthday. She gave me a big packet of bird seed.”

“Thirteen years ago,” I thought. “She hasn't seen her mother for thirteen years and hasn't heard from her for at least three years. What the hell is going on here?”

“So, you've been with your dad ever since?” I asked.

“Ain't got no dad,” said Wasp, moving back into the left lane with the truck some way behind. “I mean, I know I must have since there's no way me mum had an immaculate conception but he could have been anyone. For sure mum didn't know who or if she did she never told me.”

“I see,” I said. “Umm, so who looked after you when your mum went away?”

“Oh, people,” said Wasp. “Then the cops came and took me away and put me in a foster home.”

“This was in Logan?” I asked.

“Nah, down in Melbourne,” she said. “I ran away from there.”

“All the way to Queensland?” I asked in surprise. Quite a feat for a seven year old.

“Nah, I didn't come to Queensland 'til five or six years ago,” she said.

“That's right, I remember you saying that earlier,” I said, a little confused. “I thought you were staying with your dad?”

“Well, something like that,” said Wasp with a snort. “Only he weren't me dad, like.”

“So who was he?” I asked.

“Oh, just some guy,” she said dismissively.

I sat and pondered this in silence but it smacked of worlds I knew very little about. I'd grown up in a very safe secure environment and I'd worked hard as an adult to keep that environment safe and secure for my mother as well as myself until she'd finally succumbed to dementia and got too much for me to cope with alone. Having a junkie for a mother and being passed from foster home to foster home to god knows what was far outside my experience.

After a while I took out my phone as we were climbing the steep hill into Toowoomba and Wasp would be needing directions.

“I don't have a signal,” I said as Google Maps failed to understand where we were. “Do you have a phone?”

“Nah,” said Wasp, “I lost it. 'Sides, I didn't have no credit.”

I wound down the window and held my phone out in case it would pick up a signal outside the car but it didn't.

“That's a nuisance,” I said. “I don't know where to go from here. Pull over up there.”

Wasp glanced at me then pulled over in the car park to a rather rundown looking fish and chip shop that was closed. I got out of the car and wandered around a little holding my phone up as though being a few centimetres closer to the satellite would make any difference.

“Still no signal?” asked Wasp coming over to join me.

“No,” I said. I dropped my hand and held it loosely at my side. “Look, um, Wasp. I've got to ask you something and I want a serious answer.”

“What?” she asked, backing away a step.

“What are we doing here?” I said, holding my arms out. “We’re on the way to Perth where you think your mother was three or four years ago but even then you don’t know where in Perth she was. She could easily have moved somewhere else. She could even be in a different state by now.”

“I’ll find her,” said Wasp, looking defensive.

“Seriously?” I said. “There’s a couple of million people in Perth and she may not even be there. How do you think you’re going to find her? She never gave you an address so you think she’ll have left forwarding addresses all over the place?”

“Umm,” said Wasp, kicking the gravel of the car park with the toe of her dirty trainer.

“And I don’t mean to be cruel,” I added quietly, “but what makes you think she wants you there?”

Wasp just stared at me.

“Is going to Perth really such a good idea?” I said trying to be as gentle as I could. “Really?”

Slowly Wasp shook her head then she shrugged.

“I’ve got no place else to go,” she said, her voice emotionless. “What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

Chapter Five

To be honest I had no idea what to do. This situation had been thrust upon me and I was ill equipped to cope with it. I stood there helplessly, looking at her, then looked around then back at her. In the fading light outside the deserted and unlit fish and chip shop she just stared at her feet, her hands deep in the pockets of her hoodie and her shoulders slumped. She looked more like a scared and lost fifteen year old than the brash twenty year old who'd kidnapped me.

"So what's this really all about, Wasp?" I asked.

"I wanna see me mum," she said in a low voice.

"I'm sure you do," I said. "But what about your dad? Isn't he back in Logan? Won't he be worried?"

"Nah," she said. "He buggered off a couple of years before I was born. Fuck knows where he is."

It took a couple of seconds for that to sink in then I almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

"I don't think you're being entirely honest with me," I said, turning off my phone and putting it in my pocket. "If your dad left two years before you were born he couldn't possibly be your father."

Her upper lip curled as she realised what she had said.

"What the fuck's it to you then, anyway?" she snarled, her face contorting. "What the bleeding hell do you care? Piss off you fat bastard! Leave me alone!"

I jerked backwards in surprise at her sudden aggression.

"Excuse me?" I said nervously.

"You haven't got a bleeding clue, have you?" she shouted and hurled my keys at me. They hit my upper arm and landed somewhere on the ground behind me. She stared balefully at me for a few moments then

turned and half ran away towards the road.

I stared after her speechless for a couple of heartbeats then stepped forward anxiously.

“Wasp!” I called. “Wait. What's going on here? Where are you going?”

“I don't fucking need you anyway, loser,” she shouted back at me, half turning. She stuck a finger up at me then ran around the corner.

“She's mad,” I thought to myself, staring after her. “Maybe she's on drugs as well.”

I stood there for several seconds then turned and spotted my keys lying on the ground. I went over and picked them up.

“Well, that seems to be that, then,” I said to myself and jangled the keys. I looked back at the corner but she was nowhere in sight. With a sigh I slowly walked back to my car and ruefully looked at the damage all along the side. It was a problem but there was nothing I could do about it now. Tomorrow would be fine. I got inside and shifted the seat back then checked the mirrors. They didn't need adjusting as Wasp hadn't bothered to actually use the mirrors. I looked at my watch and found it was only a quarter to eight.

“I should be home in a couple of hours,” I muttered to myself as I started the engine. “What a day it's been!”

I pulled out of the car park and headed off the road, looking for a spot where I could do a U turn and head back to Brisbane. Perhaps half a kilometre ahead were some traffic lights and I could see a small hooded figure standing there waiting beside them.

“I hope she'll be all right,” I thought. “She seems to have problems though. And a fearful temper.”

I was perhaps a hundred metres away when Wasp suddenly leapt into the road and pulled at the door handle of the waiting car just as the lights turned green. The door didn't open and she kicked the car as it drove off rather quickly.

“Oh dear,” I sighed, slowing down.

Logically I suppose I should have speeded up and driven past but I couldn't just abandon her. She was a young woman on her own and in a very dangerous situation. After all, what if she jumped into a car with two or three men who decided to take advantage of the situation? Granted it would be a problem of her own making but if she was badly hurt or killed I would have it on my conscience. I wound down the passenger side window and pulled up beside her.

“Wasp,” I called, leaning over. “Get in.”

“Fuck off,” she said just as the lights turned red again.

“This is a very dangerous situation,” I said. “You have no idea whose car you'll be getting into next.”

“I can look after meself,” she said defiantly. “I ain't worried.”

“With a pretend gun under your jacket?” I said. “That won't be much help if you're attacked. Get in.”

“So you can fucking attack me?” she snarled. “I ain't that bleeding stupid, sicko.”

I sighed and checked the rear view mirror. There were a couple of cars queued up behind me and the lights would turn green any moment.

“Get in and I'll take you to Perth,” I said. “This is ridiculous.”

“For real?” she said, her face lighting up.

“For real,” I said, knowing I was being stupid but what else could I do?

The lights changed and a moment later the car behind beeped rather loudly. Wasp jerked her finger at the driver contemptuously a few times then nonchalantly opened the car door and got inside.

“Put your seatbelt on,” I said, driving off.

“Yes, Reggie,” she said meekly and put it on.

I blinked a few times in surprise but didn't say anything. She sat there for a few moments then twisted her foot onto her knee and pulled her trainer off. She wasn't wearing any socks. I glanced over and she must have noticed.

“Hurt me foot, didn't I,” she said massaging her toes.

“Badly?” I asked.

“Nah, I'll live,” she said.

She massaged her toes a little longer then tossed her trainer onto the back seat before pulling off the other and tossing that back as well.

“Can I put the radio on?” she asked.

“If you like,” I said, marvelling at how complete and fast her mood change had been.

She turned on the car stereo and brass band music started to play. She screwed up her nose and leaned over to see how to turn it to the radio. That done she scanned the channels until she found some raucous noise that she approved of and settled back in the seat.

“Turn it down, please,” I shouted.

She curled her lip but turned the noise down a fair way.

“That's better,” I said. “I can hear myself think now. What sort of music is that?”

Actually I didn't think it could reasonably be called music but there seemed to be some sort of rhythm behind the chanted incomprehensible words.

“It's rap,” she said. “Cool, innit.”

“Not really,” I said. “Could you turn it down some more?”

“OK,” she said happily and turned it down some more.

“Thanks,” I said and studied her out of the corner of my eye. It was almost impossible to believe that this was the same girl. She was looking out of the window and nodding her head to the so-called music as though we were heading for the shops. I looked back at the road just in time to see the car in front slow down to make a left turn and braked sharply.

“You want me to drive?” she asked, looking at me. “Getting tired?”

“No, I’ll drive for a while,” I said. “Best you don’t drive in towns since you don’t have a licence.”

“Oh yeah,” she said and giggled.

I became aware of a faint but discernable foot odour and turned on the fan then got my phone out of my pocket.

“Here,” I said, holding it out to her. “See if there’s a signal.”

“Three bars,” she said a moment later.

“Good,” I said. “Go into maps and see if you can get directions.”

“OK, Reggie,” she said.

“What’s your real name?” I asked. “I’m sure your mother didn’t name you Wasp when you were born.”

“She was a fruitcake,” said Wasp, busying herself with my phone. “She could just as easily have called me Reggie.”

“OK,” I said, “except I wasn’t named Reggie. I was named Reginald. Reggie is just a nickname and I imagine Wasp is just a nickname as well.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Says here we need to head for somewhere called Milmerran.”

“Milmerran?” I said. “I’ve never heard of that. Is it a big place?”

“Umm, how do you know?” she asked.

“Well, is there an outline for the place or is it just a dot on the map?” I asked. “Try zooming in.”

“Looks to be just a couple of roads,” she said.

We came up to a large sign at a big intersection that gave directions to various places but Milmerran wasn’t mentioned so I went straight on.

“Is there anywhere fairly large after Milmerran?” I asked.

“Umm,” said Wasp scrolling. “Goondiwindi?”

“Damn,” I said. “Goondiwindi was off to the left back there.”

“Take the next left,” said Wasp, studying the phone, “then the first left after that.”

“OK,” I said. “That’ll take us to Goondiwindi?”

“Uh huh,” she said, looking out the window.

I took the next left then the first left after that and Wasp assured me that we were back on the road to Goondiwindi. I had a vague recollection that Goondiwindi was on the border between Queensland and New South Wales although I’d never been there.

“We need to find a supermarket,” I said.

“What for?” asked Wasp, looking up from my phone. She’d abandoned the map and was going through my messages but I let that ride. I didn’t really want her to have another turn inside the car while moving.

“I was thinking if we take turns with the driving we could be in Perth late on Wednesday or early Thursday,” I said, “but that basically means driving non stop. We’re going to need some food and water as

well as toilet paper, soap and so on. If we stop at motels on the way it'll take a lot longer and cost a fortune. It would probably be a good idea for both of us to have a change of clothes as well. Underwear, if nothing else, since I doubt we'll find a laundry on the Nullarbor and it'll probably get quite hot."

"Oh," she said and grinned. "Cool. New clothes. You my sugar daddy now, then? You going to dress me up?"

"Absolutely not," I said hurriedly. "Just some things that are cheap and hard wearing. It's going to be a long drive."

"Bummer," she said and giggled. "Who's Steph? Your wife?"

"I don't have a wife," I said. "Steph is one of the volunteers at the museum."

"Oh right," she said dismissively. "That feather thing. There's a supermarket up there."

"Where?" I said, unable to see one.

"Up that side road back there," she said. "I saw it as we went past. You're down to 22%."

"Keep an eye out for another one," I said, reluctant to turn back. "There's a charger in my briefcase on the back seat. It plugs into the USB on the stereo."

"K," she said and wriggled around in her seatbelt so she could lean over the seat to retrieve it. "Hey, cool, a laptop. Got any games?"

"Don't play with that," I said urgently. "There's a lot of financial data on that. Put it back."

She pouted but slid the laptop back inside my briefcase.

"So what's all this then?" she asked pulling out a file of papers.

"More financial data," I said firmly. "Put it back."

“Lachlan Picture Framing,” she said, opening the file. “So you work for them?”

“They’re one of my clients,” I said. “Put that back. It’s confidential.”

“Looks like they’re doing OK,” she said, studying their most recent quarterly Profit and Loss Statement. “What’s this? Extraordinary Costs Incurred, \$16,000, see note 4? Where’s note 4?” She flicked the page to see if the notes were on the next page.

“Absolutely none of your business,” I said, pulling over and grabbing the file quickly.

“All right, keep you hair on,” she said grinning.

“And give me that as well,” I said, taking the briefcase. I stuffed the Lachlan file back inside then turned off the ignition so I could lock the briefcase.

“The charger,” she said.

I sighed and unlocked the briefcase to retrieve the charger then locked it again. I handed her the charger and slid the briefcase behind the driver’s seat.

“So what you got to hide?” she asked, plugging the end of the charger into the USB slot of the stereo.

“I’ve nothing to hide,” I said, “but my clients’ financial records are confidential.”

“Tax fiddle, is it?” she asked. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

She plugged the other end of the charger into the phone as I started the engine.

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said. “Everything is legitimate and above board but that’s no reason for you to read things that don’t concern you.”

"You're no fun," she said.

"That's right," I said, pulling away from the kerb. "I'm a bookkeeper. We're not supposed to have fun."

"Poor sod," she said. She yawned and inspected the phone. "It's not charging," she reported.

"You have to put the stereo to USB," I said. "It won't charge while it's on radio."

"Bummer," she said and fiddled with the stereo. The dreadful rap noise suddenly stopped. "It's charging now." She tossed the phone on top of the dashboard and sniffed.

"Thank you," I said.

"There's another one," she said a few moments later.

"I see it," I said and, at the next set of lights, turned right into the supermarket car park.

She wriggled round in the seat belt again and retrieved her trainers and I realised the odour came from them.

"Do supermarkets sell shoes?" I asked as I got out of the car.

"Dunno," she said, pulling her trainers on without undoing the laces. "Why?"

"You need some new ones," I said.

"Nah," she said. "These are comfy."

"And a bit smelly," I said. "How long have you had them?"

She got out and stared at me over the roof of the car, her face lit by an overhead light not far away. "You saying I smell then?"

"No," I said warily. "but your trainers do."

Her eyes narrowed and her lips tensed. I braced myself for some verbal abuse.

“OK then,” she said, her face relaxing suddenly. I breathed a sigh of relief. “So what food are we getting?”

“Get whatever you like,” I said, “but don't get anything that needs cooking. We don't have a cooker.”

“K,” she said. “Can I push the trolley?”

“If you want,” I said in surprise.

“Cool,” she said and skipped happily over to where there was a line of trolleys. She pulled the end one out then pushed it hard and jumped on it so she was free-wheeling towards the entrance. As it slowed she jumped off and turned to look at me before bursting out laughing. I couldn't help but smile.

She disappeared while I was in the Fruit section choosing some bananas and peaches. I wandered off to get some bread and cheese slices and she didn't reappear until I was browsing the packets of ham and salami. The trolley was now laden with assorted packets of potato chips, Cheerios, Pringles and the like. I raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything since I was no advertisement for healthy eating.

“Chocolate,” she said by way of greeting. “You want some chocolate?”

“Probably not a good idea,” I said. “It'll melt.”

“Oh yeah,” she said and disappeared again, leaving me with the trolley. She was back moments later with a carton of 30 cans of Coke.

“Going fishing?” asked the boy at the checkout eyeing our bottles of water, wet wipes and other odds and sods.

“What's it to you, shithead?” snarled Wasp, baring her teeth at him.

“Umm,” he said and nervously scanned the rest of the items. They hadn't stocked any clothing unfortunately.

“And a couple of extra plastic bags,” I said, wondering if I should apologise for Wasp.

He put a couple of extra bags on top of our purchases while staying clear of her. I swiped my bank card and Wasp watched him with narrowed eyes.

“Why did you do that?” I asked as I pushed the trolley back to the car.

“Do what?” she asked, pulling a packet of Honey Soy chips out of one of the bags.

“Be rude to that lad,” I said. “He was only being polite.”

“I wasn’t rude,” she said and ripped the bag open with her teeth.

“Yes you were,” I said. “You were aggressive and you called him a shithead.”

“Well, he was a shithead,” she said. “None of his effing business what I’m doing.” She stuffed a handful of chips in her mouth and chomped happily on them.

“OK,” I said, opening the boot. “Take your trainers off.”

“What for?” she asked, her hand inside the Honey Soy packet.

“I’m putting them inside one of these bags,” I said, holding one out. “I can’t put up with them all the way to Perth. You can have them back whenever we stop somewhere but the rest of the time they stay in the boot.”

Chapter Six

A sudden jolt woke me and I groaned and tried to roll over to go back to sleep but something was tying me down.

“You awake then?” said a strange voice.

I groaned again and half opened my eyes. It was dark but there seemed to be things moving. My brain slowly moved into gear, a fairly low one, and decided things weren't normal. This wasn't my bedroom. This wasn't even my bed. For some reason I was sitting. Well, slouching really.

“You OK?” asked the voice.

My eyes jerked open and I looked around with a mild feeling of panic then my brain switched gears again, this time to a slightly higher one, and the events of yesterday came flooding back. I looked over and yes, the dark outline definitely looked like that girl who'd kidnapped me. Bea or something.

“Yes,” I said since my brain couldn't think of anything else appropriate to say.

“Got you a coffee,” she said. “Be cold now though.”

“Thanks,” I said. I felt around the base of the car seat and found the lever to make the back more upright. “So where are we?”

“About 20k before Cobar,” she said. “We'll be there in a few minutes.”

“Right,” I said, easing the ache in my neck and shoulders. I looked down and there was a cardboard cup in the cup holder by my knee so I picked it up. It was cold as she'd said but I took a sip anyway since my mouth was dry and a little furry.

Wasp! That was her name, or her nickname at any rate. I had a vague recollection she wouldn't tell me her real name when I'd asked but that didn't really matter. One name's as good as another.

"I got it when we stopped for petrol," said Wasp. "Couple of hundred k back.

"Where are we again?" I asked, looking at the road illuminated by the headlights.

"About 15k before Cobar," she said and took a handful of something flat and crunchy from the bag between her legs.

"Where's Cobar?" I asked, drinking more coffee. It was incredibly sweet.

"Dunno," she said. "But we're, like, nearly a 1000k from Toowoomba."

My brain shifted into a higher gear again as I like numbers. I always have. They're solid and reassuringly precise, unlike people, and once you've established the right number for the right situation you can rely on it since it won't change unless the situation changes.

"We've come a long way," I said approvingly. "I didn't think I'd been asleep that long."

I looked at my watch and it was coming up to 5am. Wasp had taken over driving after we left Toowoomba around 9pm and I'd fallen asleep quite quickly since it had been a stressful day. That mean I must have slept for, ohhh, seven and a half hours or so. It wasn't quite long enough and it hadn't been a nice deep sleep but I was moderately awake now.

"Just a minute," I said, scowling. "A thousand k in under eight hours? That's averaging about 125 kilometres an hour non stop."

I looked over at the speedometer and it was sitting at a steady 140kph.

"There ain't no traffic," she said laconically, munching another handful.

"But that's not the point," I said. "The speed limit's 100 kilometres an hour. If you get caught you'll lose your licence." Even as I said it I remembered she'd already lost her licence and, perhaps more

importantly, it was my car so I might lose my licence.

“Nah,” she said. “Hundred ten, we’re in New South Wales now and there ain’t no cops out.”

“Ever heard of speed cameras?” I asked, trying to be sarcastic. Sarcasm isn’t in my nature and it came out much the way I normally spoke.

“I took the rego plates off,” she said, glancing over at me.

“You what?” I exclaimed, visions of police road blocks on the street of Cobar flashing before my eyes. I peered nervously out of the windscreen to see if I could see a helicopter overhead tracking us. I’d seen this sort of thing in films on the TV. They probably had snipers out as well.

“Hah, gotcha!” exclaimed Wasp, chortling.

“Did you take the plates off?” I asked sternly.

“Course not,” she said. “And if I did I’d put someone else’s on.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and tried not to think about driving with another car’s registration plates.

“Just a minute,” I said as the headlights briefly illuminated a sign welcoming us to Cobar and thanking us for driving carefully. “A thousand kilometres? When did you stop for petrol?”

“At Moree and someplace else,” she said, slowing down to 90 as she passed a 60 sign. “Murry something. I got receipts. They’re in your wallet.”

She slowed down to about 70 as I fished out my wallet. We were now in the centre of Cobar and the speed limit was 50. Sure enough there were two receipts in it, one from Moree and one from Murrawombie.

“How did you pay for these?” I asked suspiciously.

“Your credit card,” she said and came to a stop at a junction. She took my phone off the dashboard and studied it for a few moments then turned right.

I felt quite indignant at the thought she'd picked my pocket twice while I was asleep but as the sugar in my blood hit my brain I realised that I was paying for the fuel anyway and she'd been courteous enough to not wake me. She'd even put my wallet back, twice, and got receipts. And coffee, I noticed as I looked at the one from Murrawombie, as well as a couple of pies and some chocolate.

“Are there any of the pies left?” I asked.

“Nah,” she said. “Ate 'em both and the choccie. Want some chips? They're chicken flavour.” She belched and a waft of chicken flavouring made me feel faintly sick.

“No thanks,” I said, finishing the last of my coffee.

“We need to fuel up,” she said, glancing over at me again. “This Corolla's only got a titchy little tank. Can probably get you a pie, or a sausage roll. Ain't seen one open though. I'll go back into town.”

“OK,” I said. “I wouldn't mind some more coffee.”

She slowed down and waited for a big two trailer truck coming the other way to pass before doing a U turn.

“No probs,” she said, following the slow moving truck with admirable restraint.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, looking at her in the light from the passing street lamps. “You've been driving for a long time.” She looked tired and drawn and her face was quite pasty although that could have been the quality of the light.

“I'm good,” she said, tersely.

It occurred to me that she probably saw an admission of tiredness as a sign of weakness and I had a funny feeling she felt she couldn't show

any weakness. Why I couldn't say but I do occasionally get vague flashes of insight into other people.

"I'll take over the driving from here," I said. "That way you can get some sleep. Have we enough fuel to get to the next town?"

"Maybe," she said as we passed the junction where she'd turned right. The truck started to speed up but Wasp didn't. "Don't wanna risk it though."

"What is the next town?" I asked.

"Wilcan something," she said. "Three hundred k."

I leaned over to look at the fuel indicator and it showed the tank was slightly over half full. Perhaps with me driving more slowly and economically we'd get there but it was iffy.

"There's one," she said suddenly as we went round a bend.

She pulled in. The shop had its lights on which showed it was open. She pulled up at one of the pumps and jumped out. I got out as well and walked up and down a little to ease my joints.

"Wallet," she said, snapping her fingers at me as she put the nozzle back in the pump.

Startled, I pulled out my wallet and handed it to her.

"Just coffee?" she asked.

"Not as sweet this time," I said, "and maybe a pie if they have any."

"K," she said and stalked off to the shop.

I walked around the car once more then opened the door to get my empty coffee cup and noticed the back seat. It was littered with empty chip packets, Pringles tubes and three or four chocolate bar wrappers. She must have been nibbling non stop for the last thousand kilometres!

"How on Earth does she stay so slim?" I wondered as I gathered them all up. There were four empty Coke cans as well, plus another two in the driver's side door. I dumped the lot in the forecourt garbage bin then headed off to where a small sign pointed to 'Toilets'. I had a much needed pee and a good wash then combed my hair with my fingers before going back to the car. There was a pie on the driver's seat and a coffee container in the cup holder but Wasp was nowhere to be seen.

I picked up the pie and leaned against the side of the car. The sky was beginning to brighten so dawn couldn't be far away. The pie wasn't particularly hot so I bit into it and discovered it was still slightly frozen in the middle. I grimaced but carried on eating it anyway.

"Hey, you're still here," said Wasp behind me.

I turned to see her walking over from the toilets with a big grin on her face. In the overhead lights of the forecourt she didn't look as pale as she had.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I asked, puzzled.

"Ohh, thought you might have scarpered without me," she said, leaning on the roof of the car. "How's the pie?"

I stared at her in confusion for a few moments, the half eaten pie in my hand, then I realised that this was the first time, other than our contretemps in Toowoomba, that I'd been alone with the car since Logan. Clearly she'd been wondering if I'd drive off without her while she was in the toilet.

"Ahh," I said, holding up the pie for some reason. "I said I'd take you to Perth and I will. If I was going to abandon you I'd have done that in Toowoomba."

For a brief moment I thought she was going to cry but instead she just thumped the roof of the car with her hand then rummaged in the back for another can of Coke and some more chips.

"Come on then, Reggie," she said, getting in the passenger seat.

I stuffed the last of the pie in my mouth then got in as well. She flicked my jacket open and slipped my wallet in the inside pocket.

"Receipt's in there," she said and popped the ring pull of the can. "Reggie's a naff name. How about I call you Logan Fats, OK?"

"I'd rather you didn't," I said, feeling a little hurt. "It's a bit rude."

"Oh," she said. "Yeah, I guess so. Logan's a shithole. How 'bout Brisbane Fats?"

"It's the Fats that's rude," I said, starting the car. "Not the location."

"Yeah?" she said, looking at me. "But you are fat."

"I know," I said, pulling off the forecourt, "but it's not nice to say that to people."

"Oh," she said flatly. "But Reggie's boring. It's an old people's name."

"Agreed," I said, accelerating up to the legal 110, "but it's my name and I'm used to it."

"Right," she said and drank half the can. She put it in the cup holder then ripped open the packet of chips.

The sky was definitely brighter so I debated the matter then let the speed drift up to 117. My strong innate caution wouldn't let it go all the way to 120.

"Me real name's Sharlet," said Wasp some twenty kilometres later when the can and the chips were finished and had been tossed in the back. "I fucking hate it."

"Why?" I asked. "Charlotte's a lovely name."

"Not when it ain't spelled right," she said and put her bare feet on the dashboard. "S-H-A-R-L-E-T, see. Everyone at school used to laugh at me about it which is why I didn't go much, well, that and the rest."

“That wasn't very nice of them,” I said. “There's nothing wrong with spelling Charlotte a different way. Did they laugh at you because yours is spelt like 'shallot'?”

“What's that?” she asked, looking over at me suspiciously.

“A type of onion,” I said.

“Nah,” she said doubtfully. “Least I don't think so.”

“And the rest?” I asked.

“You what?” she said, looking out of the window.

“You said 'and the rest',” I said, “after saying you didn't go to school much.”

“Ohh,” she said and leaned forward to open the glove box. I was impressed she could do that with her feet still on the dashboard. I hadn't even been able to touch my toes since leaving school. She pulled out a few CDs and glanced through them with a mild expression of distaste then shoved them back and pulled out the Toyota's Owner's Manual and started flicking through it.

“Me effing stupid name,” she said suddenly, studying one of the pages. “Ain't just Sharlet. It's the rest of it an' all.”

“So what's your full name?” I asked, my curiosity roused.

“Sharlet April Dee,” she said enunciating each word clearly then she curled her lip in disgust. “Fucking awful, ain't it.”

“Actually it's quite a nice name,” I said, meaning it. “Sharlet and April are nice and there's nothing wrong with Dee. Lots of people have the surname Dee. Mine's Reginald Edward Dorfmann which is a lot worse.”

“Oh yeah?” she said. “That spells RED and there ain't nothing wrong with red. What does mine spell?”

"Ahh," I said, realising. "Yes, I see."

"And if that ain't bad enough," said Wasp with hatred in her voice, "what happened every time they did the register at school?"

"Umm, I don't know," I said, wondering how any parents could lack the foresight to see that their proposed child's initials were SAD.

"Every effing teacher would call out 'sadee'," said Wasp, the hatred developing into venom, "and the whole bleeding class would laugh at me every frigging time."

"Well, yes, I can see why you didn't like going to school," I said, "although I did know some people many years ago who were going to name their son Miles."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Wasp, "other than it being a crap name?"

"Their surname was Long," I said. "It was a while before they realised their son would be Miles Long."

"But at least they did realise," said Wasp, turning a page and nearly tearing it. "I got saddled with mine. Hey, did you know your tank's only 40 frigging litres?"

"Actually I did," I said, "although I never let it get empty. So why Wasp?"

"Cos she's a superhero," said Wasp, shutting the Owner's Manual with a snap. "Ain't you ever heard of her?"

"I'm sorry, no," I said. "What kind of superhero? Like Spiderman?"

"Pah," exclaimed Wasp. "Bloody man, he is. Wasp's a woman, Janet van Dyne, and her superpower is she can get bigger or smaller when she wants to. I mean, like as small as that ..." and she held up her finger and thumb a couple of centimetres apart, "... and as big as, oh I don't know, one of them skyscrapers and the bigger she gets the stronger she gets. Oh and when she's, like, really small she has wings

like a wasp and she can control her body's natural bio-electric energy so she can sting like a wasp too. She's, like, number 31 in the 50 Most Important Superheroes and she's one of the 15 Most Powerful Female Avengers! She was one of the founders of the Avengers for crying out loud!"

"That's probably why I haven't heard of her," I said. "I've heard of Batman and Superman, of course but I don't follow comic book heroes."

"Comic books?" exclaimed Wasp. "Comic books? Don't you ever go to the movies?" She shoved the Owner's Manual back in the glove box and slammed it shut. "She was in Ultimate Avengers, Ultimate Avengers 2, Avengers: Endgame, umm, Ant-Man and the Wasp and whatsit, umm, Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania." She ticked them off on her fingers which I thought was rather sweet although I didn't say so.

"Ahh, I must have missed those," I said. "I, umm, don't go to the cinema much." In fact it had been so long since I'd been to the cinema that I couldn't remember what the film had been.

"Not just movies," said Wasp enthusiastically. "She's been in loads of computer games as well."

"Sorry, I don't play computer games," I said. "Well, perhaps Minesweeper every now and then but that's all."

Wasp stared at me as though I was an alien from outer space and I started to feel uncomfortable.

"So, um, how did Janet get her superpowers?" I asked.

"From Pym, of course," said Wasp, barely concealing her contempt at my ignorance. "She used to be his wife and he implanted her with Pym Particles which is how she can change size whenever she wants to."

"What are Pym Particles?" I asked, curious. If nothing else it helped pass the time.

"I dunno," said Wasp with a trace of embarrassment. "They're sub-atomic though and they're part of her cellular structure."

"Well, that makes sense," I said. "Although I don't quite see how she can change size. I'm guessing her body mass stays the same so when she shrinks she'll become proportionally very dense and when she gets very big she'll be so thin I'd think the wind would blow her away."

"That's 'cos you don't know nothing," said Wasp triumphantly. "When she gets small her extra mass is moved to the Kosmos dimension and when she gets huge she gets extra mass send over from Kosmos."

"Of course!" I said, slapping the steering wheel. "How else could it be possible? I should have thought of that."

Wasp stared at me.

"You really are a dick," she said, flaring her nostrils and curling her upper lip. "I'm going to sleep."

Chapter Seven

Wasp curled up in the passenger seat for an hour or so then sleepily wormed her way over to the rear seat where she stretched out for perhaps five minutes then curled up into a ball again. It was almost ten hours before she woke up. Every few minutes a leg would jerk out and kick the door. I put it down to all the additives she'd eaten.

Feeling rather daring I nudged the cruise control up to 120kph after a while but it felt wrong so I dropped back to 117. Why 3kph made such a difference to me I don't know. I speculated that it might be because 117 was a prime number but it turned out it wasn't – it's 3x3x13 in fact. Anyway, I was content at 117 so I left it there. After all, as I discovered after doing the calculations in my head, the extra 3kph would mean getting to Perth an hour or so sooner which was neither here nor there.

Around nine-ish, allowing for the time difference between South Australia and Queensland, I started texting my clients for the rest of the week to let them know I had been called away unexpectedly and would reschedule their appointments early next week. I didn't see any need to invent any further explanations and no one asked for any. Bookkeepers private lives are rarely a matter of interest to anyone else. My only real concern was with Creative Outdoor Enclosures, a small company in western Brisbane that manufactured garden sheds, arbours, summer houses and tree houses to their customers' requirements. Roy had set the business up some four years previously and a month ago I had installed their first computer accounting system using MYOB. I was anxious to visit them to check that they were following the procedures I had established and bring them back into line if they were not. Old habits die hard and people used to doing things manually often revert to doing things manually when the computer does something they don't understand. It was important that I checked and sooner rather than later.

Another client had some business returns due on Friday but I assured them it wouldn't be a problem if they were submitted the following Monday. If I wasn't back by then, and I assumed I would be, then I'd find a library somewhere and use their computers to make estimated returns and correct the figures the following quarter. I also texted

Debbie at the Museum to say I wouldn't be in to lock-up this evening and to ask her to leave a note for the others to lock-up without me for the rest of the week. She texted back asking if I was on a feather hunting expedition so I replied 'yes' as it seemed easier than saying I'd been hi-jacked by a runaway teenager. I thought it would be more believable too even though I normally tell the volunteers well in advance when I'm planning an expedition.

We were on the outskirts of Port Augusta when Wasp woke up. It was mid-afternoon and there was a fair amount of traffic. She snorted a couple of times then climbed over the passenger seat and flopped down. She sighed then zipped up her hoodie and flipped the hood over her head again.

"Seat belt," I said, noticing she was sitting on it. She hadn't bothered to undo it when she went into the back seat, just wormed her way through it.

She just looked blankly at me for a few moments then put her heels on the seat and lifted herself up to wriggle back under the belt without bothering to undo the buckle. It seemed an unnecessarily complicated manoeuvre but I didn't say anything.

"Sleep well?" I asked.

"Uh huh," she said.

"You must have been tired," I said. "You've been asleep for almost ten hours."

"Where are we?" she asked, peering out from under her hoodie.

"Port Augusta," I said. "Nearly halfway to Perth."

I expected some sort of reaction but I didn't get one. She just sat there, legs tucked under her on the seat and huddled in the wrinkled grey hoodie like a small toad.

"I need to pee," she said after a while.

“We're almost in the town centre,” I said. “There'll be some public toilets.”

“K,” she muttered and reached behind to grab something from the food bag. She'd pushed it off the back seat onto the floor when she'd gone for her sleep. It was a banana and she looked at it distastefully then slowly peeled it. She stared at it for a good half minute then wrapped the peel back around it.

“You want a banana?” she asked, holding it out.

I didn't particularly as I'd had several already but waste not, want not.

“Thanks,” I said and took it.

She twisted round and rummaged until she found a Coke then sat there with it unopened in her lap.

“Where's Adelaide?” she asked.

“About three hundred k back that way,” I said, jerking my thumb backwards.

“Oh,” she said. “I still need to pee.”

“There's a shopping mall up ahead,” I said. “There'll be toilets in there.”

“K,” she said and popped the ring pull. A little froth fizzed up and she licked it off before taking a long swig.

I pulled into the car park and found a spot near the entrance. Inside, a sign pointed down a narrow corridor to the toilets. We went in the appropriate entrances and I noticed myself in the mirror. I was a mess, frankly. My suit was all crumpled and my shirt was limp and had some indecipherable stains down the front.

“Inevitable,” I muttered and made use of the facilities.

“I'm going into K-Mart,” I said when Wasp reappeared. “I can't go all

the way to Perth in this suit and you need some more trainers. Come on.”

“OK Red,” she said cheerfully. “Can I have some more clothes as well?”

“If you like,” I said, reflecting that she'd need more than a hoodie, t-shirt, torn jeans and smelly trainers when we got to Perth since she didn't have any luggage.

I sent Wasp off to the Women's section while I browsed the Men's section for something suitable for driving across the Nullarbor. I found some cheap safari-type shorts in a nice subdued tan colour and a couple of pale blue polo-neck shirts. I grabbed a five-pack of undies as well then went to browse the books for something to read while Wasp was having her turn at driving.

“There you are,” exclaimed Wasp a few minutes later. “Can I have these?”

“Sure,” I said, not bothering to look. I wasn't overly interested in clothes at the best of times and I was sure Wasp could make her own choices.

“What're these?” she asked, fingering my safari shorts.

“Shorts,” I said, putting down the book I'd been looking at. It didn't seem particularly interesting.

“Brown?” she said. “Unreal. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” I asked, following her.

“Get you something half decent,” she said, dumping her bundle of things on top of a rack of shorts. “Those are kak. What size are you, 3XL?” She started rifling through them then pulled a pair out.

“Just ordinary XL,” I said with a sigh. “I am not wearing those!”

“What wrong with them?” she asked, looking at the bright yellow and

red board shorts she was holding up.

“They’re far too loud,” I said. “I prefer more subdued colours.”

“Loser,” she said and put them back. “What about these?”

They were lurid green and had white palm trees.

“No,” I said. “I’m happy with these safari shorts.”

“Only old people wear those,” she said, holding the lurid shorts against my legs.

“I am old,” I said, pushing them away.

“At least get some decent shirts not those naff blue things,” she said, turning to look at a rack of what could only charitably be described as Hawaiian shirts. She pulled one out and look admiringly at it.

“If I get one will you stop going on about clothes?” I asked. Ultimately I didn’t really care since they’d be going in the bin when I got home.

“Only if you get this one,” she said, pulling out another one with bright pink flamingos on it.

“That one,” I said, grabbing a dark blue one with small white surf boards on it.

“OK,” she said, snatching my blue polo necks. She tossed them away without bothering to look where they landed.

“Are we done here?” I asked.

“Ooooh,” she exclaimed, her attention caught by the racks of shoes. She hurried over and I picked up her bundle of clothes.

“What do you want work boots for?” I asked.

“They’ve got steel caps,” she cooed and sat on the floor to try them on.

"You'll need some socks as well," I said, noticing she was still in bare feet. They could use a wash as well.

"What ya reckon?" she asked, sticking her feet out so she could admire them.

"They're fine, I suppose," I said. "They'll last a long time at least."

"Yeah," she said happily. She got to her feet and jumped up and down a couple of times then kicked a pillar, presumably to check the steel toe caps worked.

"Socks," I said.

She chose some with penguins on and we went to the checkout to pay for it all. I paused on the way at the toiletries section to get a couple of toothbrushes and some toothpaste.

"Seriously?" I asked at the self-service checkout. I held up a pair of camouflage trousers that looked almost big enough for me to wear.

"They're way cool," she said, snatching them back.

"And this?" I said, holding up a black t-shirt with white zombies on it.

"What are you, my dad?" she demanded crossly, snatching that as well. "You said I could have new stuff!"

"Indeed I did," I said, starting to scan the things through and putting them into a large 35c plastic bag. "If that's what you want." Ultimately what she wore wasn't my concern.

She grabbed the bag as I waved my bank card at the scanner and headed for the exit. I collected the receipt and followed her.

"I suggest we ..." I started just as someone on a skateboard swooped past and shoved Wasp roughly, snatching the bag from her hand at the same time. She stumbled back and crashed into a large metal garbage bin before landing heavily on her backside.

“FUCKING SHIT!” she screamed at the top of her voice and leapt up while I stood there blinking in surprise. She hurtled off after the skateboarder as people stopped to see what was happening.

The skateboarder also looked back and saw her. He touched a foot down and skidded the board sideways before propelling himself towards the escalators to the upper level. Wasp almost caught him as he jumped off the board at the bottom of the Up escalator and flipped it into his hand but she missed and crashed into someone just stepping off the Down escalator. The lad glanced at her in panic, as he clearly hadn't been expecting retaliation, then tried to run up the Up escalator but part way he was blocked by a very large woman with a double pram. Wasp pushed the man she'd crashed into out of the way and ran up the Down escalator before launching herself head first at the lad. He tried to hit her with the skateboard but our bag of clothing, weighted down by Wasp's steel capped boots, got in the way. She cannoned into him and he fell backwards against the large lady's ample backside.

“Ere!” she screamed, half turning and backhanding him viciously, catching him on the side of his head.

Stunned he dropped our bag and his skateboard and tried to run back down the Up escalator. Wasp grabbed him and pinned him against the rail, her forearm under his chin, then she kned him between his legs. He doubled up just as the large lady shouted “You go girl!” and started applauding. The escalator reached the top and the large lady stumbled backwards and nearly fell on top of her pram. Wasp grabbed our bag and vaulted over the rail to the Down escalator and hurried back to where I was gawping in astonishment. I still hadn't even begun to move.

“Got it,” she said happily, holding up the bag. “Can we get some pizza?”

“Waaaay,” shouted another teenager who'd been filming the action with his phone from the far side of the escalators. He waved his hand at Wasp with the thumb, first and little fingers extended. Wasp stuck her middle finger up at him and he looked shocked and turned away. Someone else picked up the skateboard that had rolled down the Up

escalator and neatly propped it against the wall beside the Emergency Cut-Off button.

“What?” I managed to say.

“Pizza,” she said. “There’s a take-away over there.”

“What?” I said again, struggling to come to terms with the speed of what had happened. Spreadsheets aren’t like this.

“Come on,” said Wasp and grabbed my hand. I followed meekly, struggling to process what had happened.

“So what happened back there?” I asked when we got to the pizza shop.

“Some loser tried to nick our stuff,” said Wasp absently as she scanned the overhead menu. “You want Hawaiian or Meat Lovers?”

“But, but ...” I stuttered then gave up. “What are you having?”

“Pepperoni with extra pepperoni, olives and cheese,” she said to the bored girl behind the counter. Her name tag, which was upside-down, said Stacy. “Family size. He’ll have Hawaiian with extra pineapple.”

“Family size as well?” asked Stacy.

“Yeah,” said Wasp.

“Garlic bread?” asked Stacy.

Wasp looked at me so I nodded. She was clearly quite in control of the situation whereas I was badly adrift.

“Two,” she said.

“\$48,” said Stacy. “Yer dad paying?”

“Yeah,” said Wasp. They both looked at me so I got out my wallet.

“Security’s outside,” said Stacy, looking out the window as I swiped my card. “Wonder what they’re after?”

“Oh yeah,” said Wasp, looking where Stacy was looking. “Shoplifters maybe?”

“Yeah, probably,” said Stacy. “Be fifteen minutes, OK.”

“OK,” said Wasp.

She went over and sat on the bench so I followed and sat beside her.

“Do you often do that?” I asked.

“Do what?” she asked.

“Attack people,” I said.

“I didn’t attack him,” she said, looking puzzled. “I just got our stuff back. Didn’t see you doing much.”

“Well, true,” I said. “I, uh, don’t have your reflexes.”

I sat back and thought about this for a while then twisted to look out the window. There were two security guards unhurriedly discussing the skateboard that was propped beside the escalators. It occurred to me that if we’d done the ‘proper thing’ we’d still be looking for Security while the lad was half way to Adelaide with our shopping.

“I’m going to get changed,” I said deciding not to think about this anymore.

“OK,” said Wasp.

I got my new shirt and shorts out of the shopping bag and headed off to the toilets. I managed to avoid looking at myself in the mirror as I left and quickly popped back into K-Mart to get a cheap pair of sandals as my plain brown brogues would undoubtedly not fit with my new ensemble. Wasp was still sitting on the bench when I got back to the pizza shop. She had two large cardboard boxes on her lap and was

munching on a slice of pizza.

“Way cool,” she said admiringly when she saw me. She gave me a grin and a thumbs up then waved the slice of pizza. “Want some?” Stacy, I noticed, looked me up and down then sniffed and turned away.

“Later,” I said, stuffing my rolled up old clothes in the shopping bag. “Is there anything else we need or can we get back on the road?” I felt very self conscious in my Hawaiian shirt and safari shorts. They really weren’t my style at all and I felt as though everyone was staring at me and laughing at this fat old fool trying to look like a teenager.

“Just fuel,” she said, grabbing the tin foil wrapped garlic breads beside her. “Guess I’d better get changed as well. Ahh, whatever. I can do it in the car. Let’s go.”

“Umm, it’s probably better if you change in the toilets here,” I said hesitantly as I followed her back to the car park.

“What for?” she said without stopping. “I ain’t got nothing you ain’t seen before.”

“Umm,” I said, feeling embarrassed.

She glanced back at me and laughed. “That was fun, wasn’t it.”

“What was fun?” I asked.

“With that guy,” she said. “Reckon he wasn’t expecting it, like.”

“No, probably not,” I said, wondering why she would think it was ‘fun’.

“Umm, you probably hurt him though.”

“He shouldn’t have tried it on then, should he,” she said. “Tough shit. He’ll get over it. So where’s next?”

“Umm,” I said, struggling to keep up with the rapid changes of subject. “Oh, ah, Ceduna. It’s about 400k and it’s the last place before the Nullarbor.”

“OK, cool,” she said as we got to the car. I unlocked it and put the shopping bag in the boot. Wasp dumped the pizzas on the back seat then opened the boot again to get her new clothes out.

“Right,” I said and got in the driving seat. “Umm, maybe not a good idea to change until we’re out of Port Augusta at least.”

“Yeah, I s’pose,” she said, disinterestedly. “So why’s it called the Nullarbor? Is it abo?”

“Seat belt,” I said, hoping that would discourage her from getting changed, at least until we got to some toilets in Ceduna. “Actually no, it’s Latin for ‘no trees’. Apparently there aren’t any trees on the Nullarbor.”

“What’s Latin?” she asked, doing up her seat belt.

“Oh, it’s an old language spoken by the ancient Romans,” I said. “A long long time ago.”

“Romans?” she said as I drove out of the car park. “Them’s Italians, aren’t they.”

“Yes,” I said.

“So why’re Italians naming things in Australia?” she asked. “It’s our bleeding country not theirs.”

Chapter Eight

Wasp thumped me on the shoulder, hard.

“What?” I mumbled, rubbing my shoulder.

“Wake up,” she said. “We’re buggered.”

I blearily opened my eyes to find lights.

“Where are we?” I asked, blinking. “What time is it?”

“Bout eleven,” she said. “We’re at a Roadhouse thing.”

“Eleven?” I groaned. I’d only been asleep an hour or so. I wiped my hands over my face and shook my head to clear it. “So what’s the problem? A puncture?”

“Nah,” she said with a touch of derision. “I can swap a wheel. No frigging petrol.”

“So get some petrol,” I said, pointing to the petrol pump beside the car. “There’s a pump just there.”

“They’re closed,” she said. “Pumps went off at ten,”

“Ahh,” I said.

I brought the back of the seat upright and looked around. We were beside a row of pumps and the lights were still on in the shop but the display of the pump next to us was blank. It hadn’t occurred to me that the petrol stations on the Nullarbor would close overnight. Some way away was the Roadhouse itself. It was lit up and there were a number of cars parked outside. Beyond the Roadhouse there was a row of big trucks, each with two or three trailers. I could hear their compressors rumbling.

“Have we any fuel at all or is the tank empty?” I asked.

“Less than a quarter left,” she said, turning the ignition back on to

show me. "Probably not enough to get to Eucla."

"Best not to risk it," I said and yawned. "Don't want to get stranded." I shook my head to clear the cobwebs and yawned again. "I suppose we'd better get a couple of rooms for the night."

Wasp screwed up her face. "I ain't tired," she said. "I wanna keep going."

"Well, I'm tired," I said, "and we can't go anywhere else so we don't have a lot of choice."

"S'pose," she said grumpily. She started the car and slowly drove round the pumps and parked outside the Roadhouse.

The place looked rather tatty but I daresay, with the lack of competition, there was no incentive to beautify the place. It occurred to me that they probably deliberately shut down the pumps in the evening to encourage people to take a room rather than drive another hour or two to get to the town of Eucla.

I got out of the car and made my way over to the restaurant. Wasp locked the car and followed me. There were half a dozen people sitting on stools at a bar just off the restaurant, drinking beer, but the restaurant itself was deserted apart from a small, wiry woman of indeterminate age who was wiping a table. Wasp wandered over to inspect a pokie machine.

"Restaurant's closed," she said tersely.

"Ahh," I said. "Actually we'd like a couple of rooms for the night."

"Sorry," she said. "Only got one left."

"Oh dear," I said. "Umm, would that be with twin singles?"

"Double bed," she said and went back to wiping the table. "Take it or leave it."

"Just a minute," I said, looking round for Wasp. "I need to consult."

The woman didn't appear to react, beyond moving to another table, so I turned around and went into the bar.

"Can I have some money for the pokies?" asked Wasp.

"There's a bit of a problem," I said, ignoring her. "There's only one room left and it has a double bed."

"So what's the problem?" she asked, pushing buttons on the machine. Nothing much seemed to happen.

"We really can't share a double bed," I said, lowering my voice so the people at the bar couldn't hear. One of the men looked assessingly at Wasp then at me then turned back to his companion. He said something and they both laughed and looked over again.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because it wouldn't be appropriate," I said, a little surprised at her attitude. "I'm old enough to be your father."

"So what?" she said. "Gimme some money."

I looked at the men watching us then took out my wallet and found I only had a fifty and a five.

"Here's five," I said, proffering it. "I'll be in the car when you've gambled it all away. Give me the keys."

She snatched the note with a broad grin and handed me the keys then went off to the bar, presumably to get change. I watched her for a few moments then went back into the restaurant. The woman had gone too I went back out to the car.

"She's a strange girl," I thought to myself, getting in the passenger seat, "or perhaps it's her generation."

I'm no expert on women but surely most women would be reluctant to share a bed with a virtual stranger? Especially one more than twice her age?

“Oh well, I dare say she doesn't see me as any sort of threat,” I thought and settled myself comfortably. Well, as comfortably as I could. I was too big to stretch out on the back seat the way Wasp did. “I hope she'll be all right alone in that bar with all those men.”

I nearly got out of the car again to go and get her but decided she was well able to take care of herself. Besides it was a public place.

“And she'll be out in a few minutes,” I muttered sleepily. “Five dollars won't last long.”

I woke several hours later to the sound of someone banging on the roof of the car.

“Got you a coffee and a toasted bacon and egg sandwich,” said Wasp, opening the driver's door. “Where's your wallet?”

“In the glove box,” I said, blinking in the brightness of the dawn sun. It felt hot already. “What do you want it for?”

She knelt on the driver's seat to reach the glove box.

“To pay for the coffees, of course, Red,” she said, withdrawing.

With a whoosh of air brakes one of the big rumbling diesel trucks started to move. I sat up and watched it grind its way across the gravel, slowly building speed.

“Coffee,” I thought, my brain slowly latching onto what was important. I got slowly out of the car, feeling my age in every joint, and stretched. The sun was just over the horizon and already had a bite to it. I adjusted my shorts as they'd got a little twisted and were cutting in then did up the buttons of my shirt. Turning, I saw her walking back with two mugs of coffee and two plates with toasted sandwiches. She put them on the roof of the car.

“Admirable girl,” I muttered, thinking fond thoughts of Wasp. I slowly walked around the car and picked up one of the coffees. The livid scar running down the side of the car was barely visible under a thick layer of dust although the crumpling around the rear wing was still obvious.

“Got you something,” said Wasp, holding out my wallet.

“Oh yes?” I said. I put the wallet in the pocket of my shorts.

She pulled a boomerang and a strip of something like paper from under her Zombie t-shirt and held them out.

“Souvenirs,” she said, looking at me a little warily.

The boomerang had “Nullarbor” painted on it in garish colours with some palm trees at one end, a little incongruously since there are no trees on the Nullarbor, and a green kangaroo at the other end. The paper strip was a bumper sticker saying “We Crossed The Nullarbor!”

“Thank you,” I said in surprise. “That’s very kind of you.”

She looked me in the eyes then looked away quickly as though embarrassed and took the other coffee off the roof of the car.

“So where did you sleep last night?” I asked.

“I didn’t,” she said, taking one of the sandwiches. “After playing the pokies I went for a walk over there and sat looking at the stars.” She gestured to where the desert took over from the cleared area around the Roadhouse. “I’ve never seen so many stars before!”

“Ahh, well, that’s because there’s virtually no light around here,” I said. “You can hardly see the stars in the cities because of all the light pollution.”

“So they’re the same in Brissy ‘cept we can’t see them?” she asked, looking up at the sky.

“That’s right,” I said. “They’re there now but the sun is far too bright and drowns them out.”

“Bummer,” she said, sticking out her bottom lip. “I thought they was special for here.”

“Sorry,” I said, picking up the other sandwich. “So did you win

anything on the pokies?"

"Two bucks," she said with a shrug. "Lost that an' all."

"Gambling's a mug's game," I said. "In the long term you can never win."

"What do you mean?" she asked, a thin trickle of egg yolk running down the side of her chin.

"Well, think about it," I said. "Do you suppose pubs and clubs and places like this put in pokie machines so they can lose money?"

She thought about it for a moment then shook her head. "Nah, guess not."

"No, of course not," I said. "They install these machines to make more profit and that profit comes from people playing the machines and losing. Oh someone might win a little now and then but over time they have to lose so that the machine makes money for the company that made it and the club that's installed it. It's the same with casinos and horse racing and so on. The only reason they exist is to make profit for the casino or the bookies, never the punter."

She nodded thoughtfully just as the screen door clattered again. I looked over to see a fat, unshaven man in overalls walking slowly over to the petrol pumps.

"Reckon he's gonna start up the pumps?" asked Wasp as several other people came out. They went over to their cars.

"Probably," I said, "but we'll wait a bit. There's going to be a queue in a minute."

I finished my sandwich and put the coffee mug back on the roof of the car.

"You've got egg yolk on your chin," I said.

"Saving it for later," said Wasp although she tried to wipe it off with

the base of her thumb and only succeeded in smearing it over her cheek.

“Stand still,” I said and dabbed at the yolk with a little spit on my paper napkin. She stood there docilely.

A man coming out of the Roadhouse gave me a strange look but didn't say anything.

“That's better,” I said, giving her cheek a final wipe. “I'll be back in a minute,” and went off to the toilets.

When I came back Wasp was in the passenger seat and the mugs and plates had been tossed on the ground behind the car. I picked them up and took them back inside the restaurant. On the way back through the gift shop the small woman from the night before stopped me with a sour expression on her face.

“That girl with you?” she demanded.

“Which girl?” I replied.

“That one in the black t and camo daks,” she said.

“Yes, she's with me,” I said. “Why?”

“She didn't pay for the boomerang or sticker,” she said. “That's \$22.”

“An unfortunate oversight,” I said with a sigh and pulled out my wallet. “Can I have two of those ice creams as well?”

* * *

“We're coming up to the WA border,” I said a couple of hours later.

“Oh yeah?” she said, not lowering the binoculars she'd found in the glove box. I kept them there for those odd occasions when I spotted an interesting bird on my travels between various clients.

She was sitting with her backside rammed into where the back of the

seat hinged to the seat itself with her head and shoulders against the dashboard and her feet wrapped around the seat's headrest, munching her way through a box of 12 yoghurt coated muesli bars. I was beginning to suspect she stayed so slim through permanent nervous tension. Periodically she would study the landscape with the binoculars but more often than not she'd watch the car a hundred metres or so behind that had been following us since the Roadhouse.

"Just thought you might be interested," I said. "We'll be in Perth late tonight. Only 1500k or so to go."

"Cool," she said, disinterestedly. She rattled the muesli bar box to see if any were left then tossed it onto the back seat.

"Looks like there's some sort of road block up ahead," I said.

She twisted her head round to look then rotated her entire body to a more normal seating position.

"So what's that all about?" she asked with a frown.

"It must be a fruit inspection point," I said. "There've been signs for the last few k about not bringing fruit into the state."

"I didn't see any," she said.

"You've been looking the other way," I pointed out.

Up ahead someone in a uniform came out of the hut beside the road and stood beside the boom gate watching us. I slowed down and came to a stop. The car behind pulled up as well.

"Morning," she said with a smile as I rolled down the window. "Got any fresh fruit or fruit products?" Her eyes probed around the inside of the car.

"No, we haven't," I said.

"Is that so," she said drily, her smile fading. "So what's that, then?"

I twisted to see where she was pointing and saw a banana skin on the shelf behind the rear seats.

“Oh that's an old banana skin,” I said. “I ate the banana yesterday.”

“Please pull over into that parking bay,” she said, pointing to a patch of the Nullarbor that had been cleared of undergrowth.

“Is there a problem?” I asked. I half sensed a rising tension in Wasp so I held out my left hand towards her with the forefinger raised.

“I'll need to search your vehicle,” she said. “Please move your vehicle over there.”

“OK,” I said and edged over. She went to talk to the people in the car behind. They must have been decent law abiding citizens as she quickly went back to the boom gate and waved them through. I could see them watching us with 'serve you right' expressions as they went past.

“Stay calm,” I muttered to Wasp. “This will only take a moment.”

“OK,” she said, sounding fairly calm.

I got out as the woman walked back to us.

“You do know that the importation of fruit and fruit products into Western Australia is prohibited,” she said.

“I didn't,” I replied, “at least not until I saw the signs. We're not importing fruit though.”

“You have a banana skin in your vehicle,” she said, pompously. “I must check your vehicle.”

“That's not fruit,” I said. “That's just the skin but feel free to look around the car.”

“The skin can carry fruit flies and diseases as well,” she said then bent to peer through the open driver's door. “If you would kindly

vacate the vehicle, madam.”

“She means you,” I said when Wasp didn't move.

Wasp just stared at her insolently for several seconds then very slowly got out of the car.

“Thank you,” said the woman. She then proceeded to go through everything, including the plastic bag with Wasp's smelly trainers in the boot, and uncovered another banana, still intact, that I'd missed. Holding the intact banana and the peel as though they were bags of heroin or something she stalked over to a large bin and threw them in. I reflected that it must be very dull stuck out here in the middle of nowhere all alone with perhaps one vehicle an hour coming through. Finding a banana must be the highlight of her day.

“Oi,” said Wasp loudly. “That's Red's banana!”

“Let it go,” I muttered out of the corner of my mouth.

“Attempting to import fresh fruit or fruit products into Western Australia carries a significant fine,” said the woman stalking back.

“Ahh,’ I said, my heart sinking, “and, umm, how much would that be?”

“But in view of the small quantities involved here,” she said, glaring at Wasp as though it was her fault even though Wasp would sooner die than touch a piece of fruit, “I shall let it pass.” She paused then added, “this time,” in a firm voice.

“Thank you,” I said as Wasp glared back at her. I pushed Wasp over to the car. “Can we go now?”

“By all means,” said the woman smiling again. “Welcome to Western Australia!”

She opened the boom gate and I hurried to get back in the car.

“Slag!” shouted Wasp through her window as we drove past.

"That was unnecessary," I said, watching the woman in the rear view mirror as she watched us drive away. "There wasn't a problem."

"But she had it coming," said Wasp. "Bitch. That was your banana!"

"She was just doing her job," I said, then realised the inadequacy of that statement. After all, a hangman was just doing his job but knowing that wouldn't make being hanged any easier or make you feel less imposed upon. The one being hanged would always feel a touch of resentment. "Anyway, I'm sure there's a good reason for banning fruit imports. If I'd known I'd have eaten it before we got here. Still, there's an important lesson here for you."

"Oh yeah?" said Wasp, twisting round so her feet were around the headrest again. "What's that then?"

"There's a difference between abusing someone when they've caught you and after they've let you go," I said. "OK, that woman didn't do anything but another time she or someone else might well decide to take things further, perhaps even prosecute. It's an unnecessary risk for such as trivial satisfaction as calling someone names."

"You mean they can do that?" she asked, looking at me with a serious face.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but why risk it? Besides, it may not be someone in authority such as a police officer or a border control person. It might just be someone with a shotgun. Calling them names as you're leaving could end up with you being shot. Why bother? We were leaving so in effect we'd won."

She scratched the top of her foot on the side of the head rest and thought about this for a few moments.

"Yeah, OK," she said then leaned her head back on the dashboard with her eyes shut.

"Red," she said, about three kilometres later. She didn't open her eyes.

"Yes?" I said.

“I like you,” she said, her voice very quiet.

Chapter Nine

“Umm, well thank you,” I said in surprise. I was completely taken aback and didn't know what to say so I said the first thing that came into my head. “I like you too.”

“Do you really?” she asked, opening her eyes and looking intently at me.

As always my brain took a few moments to catch up and this was also something I needed to think about as I was brought up to always tell the truth. Also I'm not overly given to introspection. Intriguingly I concluded that I did quite like her, although not in any romantic way, of course. Despite her ... strange ways ... there was a refreshing honesty about her. If she didn't like a situation she immediately reacted to it regardless of the consequences rather than hide behind some superficial pretence. Admittedly her responses weren't always appropriate but you were left in no doubt about her feelings.

“Actually I do,” I said, after a lengthy pause and feeling a little embarrassed.

“Took your bloody time making up your mind though,” she said drily and closed her eyes again.

“I'm sorry,” I said, wondering if she thought I was lying. “It's just that I'm, well, not used to dealing with people and I didn't want to lie to you so I had to think about it.”

“You what?” she said, opening one eye. “You don't know if you like someone or not?” She snorted a little derisively.

“Pretty much,” I said. “Umm, well, I suppose I'm something of a recluse, you see. I don't particularly like people on the whole. Oh, I get on well enough with the people I work with but I wouldn't say I particularly liked any of them. Actually I don't like people much generally.”

“Is that why you ain't married then?” she asked, opening the other eye as well.

“Yes,” I said. “Well, that and other, umm, circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” she asked. “You queer?”

I laughed and shook my head. “No, not at all. Umm, well, let me see. How can I explain this?”

She glanced out of the window as the tiny town of Eucla whizzed past then we started the steep descent down to the plain just outside of town.

“Well, my father died when I was fifteen,” I said, concentrating on the turns as talking about my personal life made me feel uncomfortable. “He was the Deputy Principal at a school in North Brisbane. He was only 43.”

“What'd he die of?” asked Wasp, twisting round so she was sitting cross-legged on the seat with her back against the door so she could watch me.

“A heart attack,” I said. “He also taught Science as he was a trained chemist and apparently he collapsed and died in the Science Lab.”

“Were you there?” she asked, intrigued.

“No, I was in my Maths class in another building,” I said. “The first I knew of it was when the Principal called me into her office. My mother was already there. It seems no one thought to tell me until after she arrived.”

“Bummer,” said Wasp. “So what happened after?”

“You mean at the hospital or in my life?” I asked.

“Your life,” she said. “I figured he got buried an' all. They wouldn't just leave him in the lab.”

“Well, no, that's true,” I said. “Science classes were suspended for the rest of the day but school life went back to normal very quickly.”

I expected her to say something but she didn't. She just sat there watching me, which didn't make me feel any more comfortable.

"So, um, well, mum was a part time veterinary receptionist," I said as the curves of the descent smoothed out and the road stretched apparently endlessly ahead. "There was a payout from Dad's super, of course, but it wasn't enough so she went full time which allowed us to live and pay the mortgage but made it impossible for me to go to University. I was very good at Maths, you see, top of my class so I was planning to continue with Maths and get a degree. Perhaps even go higher if I was up to it."

"I was good at Maths as well," said Wasp. "Only thing I liked at school."

"Is that because it's absolute?" I asked.

"You what?" she said, screwing up her nose in puzzlement.

"Umm, you know, either right or wrong," I said. "Assuming you did the calculations right then the answer must be right. It can't be part right or only a little right."

"Oh yeah, gotcha," she said. "Yeah, I liked that. Not like English where we'd all have to say what we thought of some poem or shit and the teacher would say mine was crap."

"Yes, that used to annoy me as well," I said. "For some reason when it came to opinions I always seemed to have the wrong opinion. I much prefer things to be straightforward. Black and white."

"So what you do then?" she asked. "Since you couldn't go to that place."

"Oh, I left school when I was 16," I said. "I managed to find a job at a local supermarket stacking shelves and working on the checkouts. It wasn't much of a job but it brought in some money and after a year or so I enrolled in an online bookkeeping course with the TAFE. When the supermarket manager found out he promoted me to Assistant Manager and made me responsible for checking the till balances,

stock levels, cash handling and so on.”

“Cool,” she said. “Then what?”

“Well, the course took two years since I was working full time and had to study in the evenings,” I said. “I’d always been a bit of a loner at school and because I was, well, overweight back then as well I wasn’t good at sports so I was never involved in any of the cliques.”

“What’s ‘cliques?’” asked Wasp.

“Groups of friends who exclude others who don’t fit in,” I said.

“You mean like a gang?” she asked.

“In a way,” I said. I thought about it for a few moments. “Well, yes. Gangs and cliques have a lot in common although the word ‘gang’ has something of a criminal association to it. Most of the cliques at my school were either members of one of the many sports teams or the girls who liked to be with the sports people.”

“K,” said Wasp.

“Well, anyway, there you have it,” I said. “I wasn’t much of a socialiser at school and once I’d left I was working most of the time so what little socialising I’d done went by the board.”

“What board?” asked Wasp. “You mean like a Community Notice Board at the supermarket or something?”

“No, no, I meant it disappeared completely,” I said. “I worked during the day, studied during the evening and slept during the night. There was no time to go out and, to be honest, no one to go out with. Not that I actually wanted to. When I needed a break I’d go out on my own bird watching.”

“So you didn’t go out with any girls?” she asked.

“Especially not girls,” I said, shrugging. “I always found them scary and a fat boy who’s into Maths and is bad at sport? No, none of them

were interested in me and, to tell the truth, I preferred being home with mum and my books. After I qualified as a bookkeeper I stayed on at the supermarket for a couple more years then started to look for my own clients. That went quite well, actually. For once my size and personality worked in my favour.”

“How'd you mean?” asked Wasp.

“My size made me look older and I am by nature fairly placid,” I said. “I think they found that reassuring despite my relative youth. I daresay they saw me as trustworthy and, of course, the responsibility I'd had at the supermarket helped as well. I resigned from the supermarket on my 21st birthday and became a bookkeeper full time.”

“You seem to be doing all right,” said Wasp. “So, what, you live with your mum?”

“I suppose I am,” I said. “That's because there's very little I spend my money on. No, mum died four years ago.”

“Bugger,” said Wasp. “She have a heart attack as well?”

“No, she died of pneumonia after a fall,” I said. “She was getting on and she broke her hip then caught pneumonia and died. It was very sad but inevitable I suppose.”

“How old was she?” asked Wasp.

“She was 78,” I said. “Still, she didn't have much of a life towards the end so in some ways it was a release.”

“Oh,” said Wasp. She thought about this for a few moments. “Release from what? Prison?”

“Oh lord, no,” I said. “No, she had Alzheimer's. She started forgetting things and making mistakes and one day the vet's said enough was enough and sacked her. Understandable really since you don't want sick animals getting sicker because mistakes are being made but it was still a blow. She got very depressed and I took her to the doctor. After some tests and so on they decided she had dementia. It was all very

sad.”

“So that’s when she fell and died?” asked Wasp.

“No, that was some years later,” I said. “Umm, the diagnosis came through when I was 36 so mum would have been, umm, 63. I looked after her as best I could but eventually it got too much for me, I’m ashamed to say, so she moved into a care home, not that she ever really knew she was in a home.” I paused for a few moments to squash the memories of that day I left her behind. “That’s where she had her fall. Six weeks later she was dead.”

Wasp didn’t say anything. When I glanced over she seemed lost in her own thoughts so we drove on in silence for a while.

“So there you have it,” I said after a while. “I’ve spent most of my life working, studying, building my client base and looking after my sick mother. I’ve had no time for a social life and, to be honest, even if things had worked out differently I probably would have stayed a loner.”

“So you didn’t want things to be different?” she asked.

“That’s a very perceptive question,” I said. “Are there any of those yoghurt bars left?”

“There’s another box in the back,” said Wasp. “You want some?”

“Please,” I said. She leaned over the back of the seat and re-emerged with three. She gave one to me and kept the other two.

“I don’t think I did,” I said, peeling my bar. “If I’d wanted to socialise I would have found a way. After all, plenty of people work and study and still get married and raise a family. Given the choice between going out and staying home with my bird feathers I always chose the feathers.”

“Safer, huh?” asked Wasp around a mouthful of yoghurt muesli.

“Much safer,” I said. “Feathers will never tell you to eat less.” I

laughed and waggled my muesli bar.

“Yeah,” she said, picking at the wrapper of her second bar. “That’s why I like you.”

“How so?” I asked. “I keep telling you not to do things.”

“No you don’t,” she said. She looked at the bar then casually tossed it onto the dashboard so it could fry in the sun. “You explain things, like with the swearing and stuff. You don’t just shout or belt me one. You explain it so it makes sense then leave it to me to decide.”

“Excuse me?” I said, blinking in shock. “People beat you?”

“Yeah,” she said disinterestedly. “It don’t matter. Forget it.”

“Of course it matters,” I said, my heart going out to her. “Child abuse is a crime and even if it wasn’t it’s still wrong. Who hit you?”

“It don’t matter, OK,” she said, her voice hardening. She held up her hands. “Drop it, OK.”

“Umm, well, OK,” I said. I wanted to press the matter but in the final analysis there wasn’t much, if anything, I could do about it.

“You want this yoghurt bar?” she asked, retrieving it from the dashboard.

“I haven’t finished this one,” I said. “You have it.”

She grinned and ripped the wrapper off as though she hadn’t eaten for a week.

“So tell me something about you,” I said after I’d eaten mine. “I know you’re from Victoria and your mother was a drug addict. How did you come to be in a foster home?”

“Who said I was in a foster home?” she snapped, scowling at me.

“You did,” I said mildly, “or was that a lie as well?”

“You what?” she said, staring at me, the half eaten bar forgotten. “I ain’t lied.”

“You also told me your father disappeared two years before you were born,” I said. “If that’s true then he couldn’t be your father, could he.”

“Well, no, guess not,” she said. She relaxed again and grinned before polishing off the bar.

“And you also said you came up to Queensland with your dad,” I said, “but another time you said you came up with another man who, you implied, wasn’t your dad.”

“You fucking checking up on me?” she demanded, the grin gone.

“Not at all,” I said. “If you don’t want to tell me that’s fine by me. I just thought, as we’re starting to like each other and perhaps even becoming friends you might want to tell me a little about yourself. Like why you were running away and why you hijacked my car in Logan.”

“I weren’t running,” she growled, looking at me from under her eyebrows.

“Ahh, I’ll give you that,” I said, “but you must admit you were walking very fast.”

“Fuck you,” she shouted. “Stop the fucking car! I’m out of here!”

Surprised I braked without checking the rear view mirror. Fortunately we were in the middle of the outback and the car behind was probably still a hundred kilometres away. Before I’d come to a stop she had the door open and was trying to jump out. I reached over and grabbed the back of her hoodie.

“Whoa, hold on there,” I said, pulling her back in. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“Shove it up your arse,” she shouted, trying to pull my hand away while her feet scrambled to find purchase on the moving bitumen. It

didn't help that I had a handful of her hair caught up in my handful of hoodie and her head was being yanked back, probably painfully. "Let me fucking go, shithead!"

"Only if you promise to sit still," I said, surprising myself with my quick thinking. Perhaps I was getting used to her and had subconsciously expected some sort of reaction.

"Fuck you, sicko!" she shouted and tried to push herself out of the car again. It had stopped by this point.

"OK," I said and let go. She tumbled forward and landed on her hands and knees. The door swung back and hit her on the side of the head.

"Owwww!" she exclaimed and started rubbing it. She twisted round and glared at me. "That hurt."

"I'm sorry," I said, turning off the engine. It occurred to me she might attack me and my foot could slip off the clutch.

"Like hell you're fucking sorry," she growled, getting to her feet. "You did that deliberately!"

"Oh Wasp, Wasp," I said gently, shaking my head from side to side. "You think I pushed you out of the car? Would I have slowed down if I had?"

"How would I know," she said, more calmly, inspecting her hand for blood. "You're some kind of weirdo. You tell me."

"Are you bleeding?" I asked. I fished out the packet of wet wipes from the door pocket and held one out.

"Nah," she said but took it anyway and wiped her hands.

"Here's an idea," I said. "Why not get back in the car? Perth's still a thousand k away. That's a long walk even in your new boots and you're not wearing them."

She looked along the road which stretched all the way to the horizon then looked back towards Eucla, out of sight since it was now at least a hundred k away. I just sat there and didn't say anything. I was beginning to learn that it was best to let her get whatever it was out of her system.

“OK, Red,” she said brightly and got in the car as though nothing had happened. She shut the door fairly quietly and sat there looking through the windscreen.

“Seat belt,” I said automatically as I started the engine.

“Sure, Red,” she said and put it on without looking at me.

“So we're all good?” I asked, my adrenaline beginning to flow as it usually does after the event, not during. My hand was shaking as I slipped the car into gear.

“We're all good,” she said, still not looking at me.

“OK,” I said and slowly pulled away, half afraid she'd try to jump out again. She didn't. She just sat there demurely while I slowly accelerated.

Thirty or so kilometres later my adrenaline rush had subsided and my hands had stopped shaking. More to the point, Wasp hadn't moved. She just sat there, staring ahead.

“When me mum disappeared,” she suddenly said fifteen or so k later, “I stayed in the rental all on me own 'til the cops came to evict me 'cos I wasn't paying the rent.”

She still wasn't looking at me so I stayed quiet.

“They threw a hissy 'cos I was only thirteen and on me own, like,” she continued, “and got in social services who sent me to a foster home but I got chucked out of there when I turned 18, like, so I dosses on the streets for a bit then hitched my way up to Brissy where me granddad was. He's in Logan.”

She glanced at me so I nodded. I wondered why she hadn't told the social services about her granddad at the beginning but I was a bit too scared to ask.

“That's who I was running away from,” she said, looking back out the windscreen. “He started trying to feel me up an' all so I did a runner.”

Chapter Ten

As the kilometres sped past and Wasp slept curled up on the back seat I wondered if she was mentally unstable. It was apparent that she had a loose regard for the truth but that could simply be a self-protection thing rather than anything pathological. After all, even if the latest story about a grandfather wasn't true, something had happened that made her abruptly leave where she had been in Logan with no possessions whatsoever, no money, phone or change of clothes, and take the extreme risk of trying to hijack a passing vehicle. It was sheer chance that she'd happened upon me and hadn't ended up in an even worse situation.

On the other hand, given what I'd seen of Wasp's behaviour on the trip it could just as easily have been something incredibly trivial that had set her off and made her run. She was by no means stupid even if she wasn't highly educated and her brain seemed to be permanently on a knife edge. As long as everything went well she was sociable and genial, far more so than I was, but that could change in an instant. Did that indicate mental issues or was it simply a heightened sense of survival, brought about from living in a dangerous environment? It couldn't have been easy growing up with a drug addicted mother and a likely absentee father and there may well have been abuse in any or all of its many forms. It occurred to me that Wasp had never mentioned any brothers or sisters apart from the one reference to a brother who'd taught her to steal cars. It was as though she lived in a social vacuum with no strong ties, although I couldn't fault her for that. I was the same.

Granted she was violent, unlike me, but it was obvious that she only went as far as was necessary. That lad in Port Augusta, for example. Yes she'd effectively beaten him up but she only did what was necessary to get the shopping bag back and then dismissed him. Also she'd never shown any violence towards me, apart from at the very beginning when she tried to pretend she had a gun. When she had got angry with me she'd run off. Also, I had noticed, and which I thought was a significant point, she had been more careful when driving when there were kangaroos about. Someone with a predisposition towards violence for its own sake would, I suspected, have tried to run the roos over rather than avoid them. It wouldn't surprise me that things in her

childhood had taught her these methods of dealing with confrontation rather than any deep seated mental illness. In other respects she seemed, in my limited experience, like a fairly normal young person.

As we got closer to Perth my mind began to dwell on other matters. Back in Queensland it had been a simple matter to say 'I'll take you to Perth' as Perth was an objective far removed. Now, however, it was only a few k along the road. My quandary was now what to do when we got there.

Wasp woke up when I stopped for fuel at Coolgardie and we got burgers and chips at a cafe and ate them at a picnic table in a little park on the edge of town as the sun went down. There was a tap there, beside a battered electric barbecue, so I washed my hands and face then walked around a little to ease the stiffness that had been growing in my hips and between my shoulders. Wasp, I noticed, fed bits of bread and chips to the birds and seemed to enjoy their attentions. She managed to entice one within reach and stroked its back with a finger while it licked tomato sauce off the end of a chip.

"Is this a cockatoo?" she asked, noticing me going back towards the car.

"Yes, it's a Pink Cockatoo," I said, retrieving my phone. "Otherwise known as Major Mitchell Cockatoo or Leadbeater's Cockatoo. They're fairly common in central and western Australia."

"That's a funny name," she said, watching it watching her.

"Which one?" I asked, sitting down at the far end of one of the benches so as not to alarm the bird.

"Leadbeater's," she said. "Did they use them to beat lead or something?"

I had to smile.

"No, it's named after Benjamin Leadbeater who discovered it," I said. "Umm, back in 1831 I think it was."

“Oh,” she said and watched as the cockie investigated the froth from my cappuccino in my discarded spoon. “So who’s Major Mitchell then?”

“He was an explorer who described the bird in great detail in his books about his explorations,” I said. “He called it the red topped cockatoo, though. The official name for it is the Pink Cockatoo.”

“Who says so?” asked Wasp, trying to entice the bird back with another chip. It regarded her with its head cocked for a few moments then jumped off the table and flew away.

“The International Ornithological Congress,” I said. “They decide all the official names even though there are loads of unofficial names for birds.”

“Like Mitchell and Leadbeater?” she asked. “The people who discovered it?”

“Not just them,” I said. “Some names go back centuries with the local peoples. That one is called Jak-kul-yak-kul by the Swan River Aborigines and all the tribes will have their own names. Off the top of my head I don’t remember any others.”

“Oh,” she said, mouthing ‘Jak-kul-yak-kul’ but not saying it out loud. “How’d you know all this stuff?”

“Birds are my hobby,” I said. “I’ve been watching them and reading about them for, ohh, over forty years now.”

“Is that why you set up your museum?” she asked.

“Actually, no,” I said. “A long time ago someone came round to visit my mother and called our house a bird museum because of all the feathers I had all over the place. Mum didn’t mind but I thought it was rather rude so I had the idea of setting up a proper museum for them. It took a long time but the Museum opened four years ago.”

“Oh, right,” she said then looked around at the growing darkness. “You want me to drive?”

"If you like," I said. "Take it easy though. We've only about 500k to go so if you drive at your usual speed we'll get there in the middle of the night. Slow it down and let's aim to get there in daylight."

"OK," she said and stretched her arms out in front of her with her fingers interlocked. I glanced at the insides of her elbows while the sleeves of her t-shirt were pulled back and was relieved to see there were no marks. I was fairly sure she wasn't a drug user herself, three days alone in a car with someone would, I felt, highlight that problem, but it was good to see there weren't needle marks or anything like that. Not that I'd be able to tell the difference between old hypodermic marks and, say, freckles or mosquito bites but there weren't any of those either. In fact the insides of her elbows were unblemished if somewhat pale.

"So have you any plans for when we get there?" I asked.

"Find me mum," she said and flopped over the table like a rag doll so her head was cradled on her arm and she could see me.

"Ahh, yes," I said, "but more precisely? Have you somewhere to go or do you want me to drop you somewhere?"

"Nah," she said. "Don't know Perth. Never been there. So you going back to Brissy or what?"

"I have to," I said. "I know I said I'd take you to Perth but we're almost there and I've got my home, my work and the Museum in Brisbane. I'm happy to drop you where you want but I do need to go back."

"Oh," she said and twisted her head so the back was towards me.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

"Dunno," she said, not turning back. "Guess I'll just wander round asking people."

"You do know Perth's a big place?" I said in surprise. "I think there's over 2 million people there."

“Yeah?” she said, turning her head back to face me. She grinned. “Could take a while then, eh?”

I just stared at her, her face difficult to see in the gloom.

“You know,” I said in a matter of fact voice, “if you ask one person every second if they know your mother and you do that for 12 hours every day seven days a week it’ll take 23 years to ask them all.”

“Is that a fact?” she said. “But I don’t need to ask them all, do I. Just until I find someone who does and if ten people know her then it should only take a tenth of the time.”

“Well, perhaps,” I said, impressed with her reasoning skills. “Although it could take 23 years to find those ten.”

“And they could be the first ten I ask,” she said and hoisted herself back upright.

“True,’ I said, “but the odds are against it.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh and flopped back on the table. “Ain’t got a lot of choice though, have I.”

“Umm I do have a suggestion,” I said, a little nervously.

“What’s that then?” she asked.

“There are people whose job it is to find people,” I said, circumspectly.

“You mean like a private investigator?” she said. “I seen them in movies. Cost money though, don’t they.”

“Yes, private investigators do charge,” I said, “and I don’t expect they’ll be cheap. No, I was thinking of the police.”

“You what?” she said loudly and jerked upright again. “Effing police? You want me to go to the effing cops?”

“Yes,” I said having thought about it in the car. “If you report your

mother as a missing person they'll try to find her for you. At the very least they'll be able to tell you where she was last heard of. After all, unless she managed to break her addiction she is very likely still an addict and may well be known to the police. It's a distinct possibility that they'll type her name into the computer and her current address will pop out."

"You must be fucking mad," said Wasp. "Me go to the cops? No bleeding way."

Actually I was quite pleased. I'd expected her to not warm to the idea immediately but she wasn't taking it as badly as I'd feared. I also had an argument prepared.

"I have a client," I said. "He moved to Brisbane from Perth a little under two years ago and set up a business."

"Well, fucking wonderful for him," said Wasp sarcastically.

"He told me something interesting," I said, ignoring her remark. "He said he had 10 demerits on his driver's licence in WA but when he got his Queensland licence it was clean."

"Lucky for him then," growled Wasp, putting her heels on the bench and wrapping her arms round her knees.

"You miss the point," I said. "The reason he had no demerits on his new licence is because WA and Queensland haven't linked their computer systems yet. I believe it's planned but there are technical difficulties. It's the same with Victoria and New South Wales. They're all interconnected in the East but the West hasn't caught up yet."

I could feel Wasp glowering at me even though all I could now see of her was her shape silhouetted in the dark by a distant street light.

"So," I continued, "I've no idea what your relationship with the police was in Victoria or Queensland but it's a fairly safe bet that the WA police won't be able to connect you, someone who is reporting a missing person in WA, with your past in Queensland or Victoria."

“Wanna bet?” she growled.

“Actually, yes, I do,” I said. “What I don't want to do is just drop you in the middle of Perth with no money, no friends and nowhere to go. I was thinking about this while you were asleep and what I want to do is go to the first decent sized police station we come across in Perth and I'll report your mother as missing. I'll hang around for a day or two and see if they come up with anything. If they do I'll take you to where she is.”

“And if they don't?” asked Wasp.

“Then we're no worse off than we are now,” I said, “and we'll know she won't be easy to find so we can re-evaluate the situation and decide what to do in the light of that. If push comes to shove I am willing to invest a couple of thousand dollars on hiring a private investigator. They may be able to check electoral rolls or tenancy listings or something.”

“You serious?” asked Wasp, her voice suddenly tense. “You'd do that for me?”

“Well, yes,” I said, feeling embarrassed. There was an emotional tension in the air and I dislike emotions.

“Fuck!” said Wasp, very quietly.

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say actually. I had, however, given it a lot of thought while she was asleep and, having driven all the way from Brisbane to Perth I couldn't square it with my conscience to just abandon her now, a young woman alone in a big city. It was just plain wrong. I've never had any children, nor wanted any, but I would be furious and disgusted if someone did that to my daughter. Besides, I had a decent income and I lived a quiet life so my living expenses were very low. Most of my money went on the Museum and, frankly, we had enough feathers for the time being. I could easily defer purchasing more for a year or two.

Unusually Wasp was slow to make up her mind. Ordinarily she seemed to make decisions at warp speed but this time she sat there for

well over thirty seconds before saying “OK” and jumping up.

“OK what?” I asked, still sitting there as it's rare for me to make a decision in under a minute and ideally with a spreadsheet in support. It had taken a good fifteen minutes for me to even decide to broach the idea with Wasp.

“We'll go to the cops,” said Wasp, going over to the car. “Come on.”

“Oh, right,” I said, getting up. “Umm, you're driving, yes?”

“Yes,” she said, “but we'll go to the supermarket first. We're out of Coke.”

* * *

“Well, this isn't the best side of Perth,” I remarked as we came to Midland, the eastern most of Perth suburbs. “It's pretty industrial.” I'd taken back the driving about 50k previously as it was asking for trouble for Wasp to drive in Perth without a licence.

“It's OK,” said Wasp. “You been here before then?”

“A few times,” I said. The streets of Midland looked hot and desiccated even though it was barely 7 in the morning. “I know some people here, in fact. One chap lives in Fremantle which is nice. I'll take you there if we've time. It's the old port and it's full of nice buildings and cafes and things. There's also a pretty good nautical museum there as well as a real submarine you can tour. Fremantle has a nice atmosphere as well. Midland, well, Midland looks more industrial. It's probably a lot newer as well. They probably only built it as Perth expanded eastwards.”

“I'd like to go inside the submarine,” said Wasp, looking around. “That'll be so cool!”

“Then we shall make a point of it,” I said. “It's only Thursday and I doubt the police will do much over the weekend.”

Wasp glanced at me and seemed to shrink a little inside. Perhaps she'd

been caught stealing cars although I had a vague recollection juveniles didn't go to prison for things like that. Then again perhaps she'd been caught after she turned 18. Perhaps she'd even been in prison.

"Ahh," I said and pointed. "There's a police station. It looks a decent size. Not one of those one man stations they have in outback towns. This one looks big enough to be part of the state computer network."

Wasp didn't say anything so I shut up. No point in adding to her stress.

"And there's a hotel," I said a couple of minutes later.

The big sign out the front proclaimed it had rooms from \$99 which didn't auger too well for quality but apparently each room was air conditioned and had a TV. They also had a pool although I had no intention of trying it. I don't have the body for swimming pools. More to the point they had their own car park.

"Good morning," I said cheerfully to the receptionist.

He looked up, clearly surprised to see new guests at 7am. He gave Wasp a long look and me a longer one and his eyes narrowed when he didn't see any luggage.

"We only rent by the night," he said, "not by the hour."

"Excuse me?" I said, puzzled. Wasp giggled but didn't say anything.

"I said we only rent by the night," said the man, a little louder.

"Excellent," I said. "That's what we want. Two rooms for at least three nights, perhaps a little longer."

"Is that one each?" he asked, "or are more joining you later?"

"Yes, that's one each," I said, feeling confused. "Myself and my daughter. Why would you think anyone else is joining us?"

"Just asking," he said. "Twin singles or doubles?"

"I don't mind," I said. I glanced over at Wasp. "What would you like?"

She just shrugged.

"Whatever's available," I said to the man.

He turned to his computer and I gave him our details, with Wasp as Charlotte Dorfmann to be consistent.

"121 and 123," he said handing me two plastic cards. "These are your room keys. The main door is locked at eleven so take the keys with you if you're going to be out later. The rooms are down there to the right."

"Thanks," I said. "Is there a laundry here?"

"There's a laundromat in Keanes Road," he said, pointing to the entrance. "Turn left and it's the second on the right on the other side of the Highway."

"Excellent," I said. "And is there a shopping mall near here?"

If I was going to be here for a few days I felt I needed something more than my old suit and the safari shorts I was wearing. Pyjamas if nothing else and doubtless Wasp would need a few things as well. Sleeping in my clothes while driving cross country was one thing but we were now back in civilisation.

He looked at me as though I was an alien from outer space.

"Across the road," he said, raising an eyebrow. "Midland Gate Shopping Mall. You can't miss it."

Obviously I had but never mind.

"Thanks," I said.

"I wonder why he said that about the rooms for an hour," I said, opening the door to 121.

“He thinks I’m a hooker,” said Wasp, pushing past me. “Ohhh, nice here, innit!”

“A hooker?” I exclaimed, standing blinking in the doorway.

“Yeah,” she said, jumping on the double bed in her steel capped hiking boots. She bounced up and down a few times laughing before letting herself fall onto her back. “Oooh! TV! Hope they got Netflix.” She scrambled off the bed and grabbed the remote before jumping back on the bed.

“So this’ll be your room,” I said, putting the plastic card on top of the TV. “I’ll be next door.”

“K,” she said, switching channels happily. “Hey, Disney+ as well. Awesome!”

Chapter Eleven

I had the most delightfully long hot shower and made full use of the little soap and bottle of combined shampoo and conditioner. We'd done the drive from Brisbane to Perth in a little over 60 hours and, while by no means a record, it was still a grimy process. I stepped out of the shower refreshed, invigorated and smelling faintly of wildflowers. With great reluctance I put on the safari shorts and Hawaiian shirt. They felt grimy and now had a mild aroma of their own but hopefully the wildflowers would counter that until they could be washed.

I paused at Wasp's door and could hear the sounds of voices and gunshots so I decided not to interrupt her. We'd agreed I'd go to the police alone and I needed to do a little shopping first so there was no need to interrupt her TV viewing.

As the man on Reception had said, although there was no one there when I left the hotel, Midland Gate Shopping Centre was almost directly opposite, on the other side of the highway. The first menswear shop I tried didn't have suits in my size, and seemed overtly fashionable as well, which is not my style. I prefer muted and understated to ostentatious although on special occasions I do put a folded hanky in the breast pocket and have been known to wear a flower in the lapel, but I feel self conscious when I do that. Regardless, the third menswear shop I tried had a nice dark grey two-piece with a subdued cut and was reasonably priced so I bought it, together with two shirts, one white and one pale blue. Some ties caught my eye, in particular one that was a silver grey with thin red flashes, so I got that as well.

I found a nice pair of pyjamas in Target and a folding carry-bag for the suit. They also had a smart little Men's Grooming Kit in a black zip-up folder with two hair brushes, a comb and a razor on special as it was discontinued stock so I got that as well. Feeling very pleased with myself I headed back to the hotel and, out of the corner of my eye, spotted a small mobile phone kiosk wedged in between a shop selling noodles, already open even though it was barely 9am, and a ladies fashion boutique. I had a vague feeling I wanted to get Wasp a present to celebrate our arrival in Perth and suppressed my innate

wariness of giving unwanted gifts. I justified the purchase of a phone on the grounds that, as a stranger to the city, Wasp would need a map to find her way around and would undoubtedly need to make some phone calls.

Back at the hotel I had another shower then shaved carefully, using the soap provided by the hotel as I'd forgotten to get any shaving cream, and used my hair brushes. Feeling much my old self, I changed into my new suit and left my old clothes, including my old suit, neatly folded on the end of the bed. They could be washed at the laundromat this afternoon.

"Welcome back Reggie," I said cheerfully to my reflection in the mirror. Gone was the ruffian with 3 days stubble and lairy shirt, replaced by the neat, respectable bookkeeper. It was a relief, to be honest. I checked I still had some business cards in my wallet then slipped it into the inside pocket of my jacket. It felt natural there, unlike the side pocket of the safari shorts.

Again I paused outside Wasp's door and the gunshots had been replaced by some whooshing sound effects. Clearly she was enjoying catching up on her viewing so I left her to it. I opened the car door, intending to drive to the police station and encountered the mess of crumbs that covered both front seats and the litter of cans and wrappers that adorned the back seat. I stood there for several seconds then went back to my hotel room to dump as many of the cans and wrappers as I could carry into the bin and fetch the spare towel so my suit didn't get befouled.

The police station was where I'd see it earlier, unsurprisingly, so I found somewhere to park. Wasp and I had agreed that I would approach the police as a bookkeeper concerned about a missing client so that Wasp and her unknown background in Victoria and Queensland would not get involved. Granted the relative of a missing person might receive a better reception but, in my view at least, the police were obligated to investigate all missing persons regardless of that person's relationship to the one reporting their absence. That said, they may be reluctant to give out details of that person's location to someone who wasn't a relative, but we could always bring Wasp in at that point. The police, or so I reasoned, would be less likely to

investigate Wasp's background once her mother was found than at the beginning of the enquiry.

In any event I had to pause and breathe deeply several times before I pushed open the door. After all, it was not in my nature to lie, particularly not to the police, and my claim that Wasp's mother was a client of mine would be an outright lie. In point of fact, I also don't lie on behalf of my clients. I prepare their books and business returns as accurately as possible and if a client chooses to give me false information that is their business. However, once it transpired, as it had two or three times in the past, that the data was incorrect it was my professional duty, as well as my nature, to make that known to the relevant authorities and fully cooperate with any subsequent enquiries.

To my surprise the police station, or at least that part accessible to the general public, was deserted. There were a handful of drab chairs lined up along one wall opposite a counter with toughened glass descending from the ceiling. There was a door in the wall behind the glass, with a frosted glass panel, and another at the far end of the row of seats with a sign saying 'Authorised Access Only'. The room was drably decorated and there were several tatty posters giving details of missing people the police were looking for.

"Be with you in a moment," called a voice from behind the door behind the glass. I looked over and saw a faint shadow moving round behind the frosted glass.

I stood there for at least a minute then wandered over to look at the Missing Person posters. They all had photographs, of varying quality, and I wondered what they'd do in this case since Wasp didn't have a photo of her mother. One lady, I noticed, had been missing since 2007 which wasn't encouraging since presumably she still hadn't been found after 16 years. On the other hand, the fact that there were only six posters was encouraging as it implied that all but these six had been found.

The door slammed and a voice said "Can I help you?" in that bored, supercilious yet superficially polite tone the police affect when dealing with the general public. I was not so naive as to think they used the same tone when dealing with a criminal.

“Ahh, good morning,” I said, rapidly walking over to the counter. He was a youngish lad, late twenties perhaps, and looked as though he played rugby. “I’d like to report a missing person.”

He half sighed as though I was yet another in a long line of people reporting missing persons that morning.

“I see, sir,” he said. “In our experience most missing people turn up safe and sound after a day or two.”

“I can imagine,” I said although I couldn’t really as I had no experience of missing people. “But the lady in question has been missing for three years.”

There was a small spark of interest in the lad’s eyes although whether it was from the three years or because she was a woman I couldn’t say.

“Right then,” he said and briskly pulled over a pad of pre-printed forms. He searched through a drawer under the counter until he found a pen that worked. “If I can take your details first. Your name, address and contact number.”

I slid one of my business cards under the glass while I gave him my details.

“You’re in Brisbane?” he asked in surprise. “Why not report this to the Brisbane police?”

“Because the lady was last known to be in Perth,” I said, “and I have some business here so I thought I’d report her missing while I was over. I imagine it’ll save a fair amount of bureaucratic wrangling between the two police forces as well.”

He very nearly laughed at that but managed to stifle it.

“I see,” he said. “And the missing person?”

“Sandra Sullivan, nee Dee,” I said. “I’m afraid I don’t know her middle name or even if she had one.”

“And her last known address?” he asked, writing that down.

“I don't know,” I said. “All I know is Perth.”

“And before she moved to Perth?” he asked.

“Melbourne,” I said and gave him the address Wasp thought they'd lived at although she'd only been seven at the time.

“I see,” said the lad thoughtfully, tapping the form with the end of his pen. He stared at the form no doubt wondering if three police forces were now going to be involved. I didn't see any need to mention that Wasp thought she might have gone to New South Wales for a while as well.

“And your relationship with Sandra Sullivan?” he asked.

“She was, is, a client of mine,” I said, “although I haven't seen her for a number of years.”

“So you're not a relative then?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “It is merely that some important business has cropped up and I need to trace her whereabouts now.”

“What sort of business?” he asked.

“I'm afraid that is subject to client confidentiality,” I said, repeating the words I'd been rehearsing so they'd sound natural. “However, if the nature of that business becomes significant to the investigation of Ms Sullivan's whereabouts then I will be happy to provide more details subject, of course, to a court order.”

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief that I'd managed to get all that out without any mistakes. Naturally I was hoping they wouldn't see any need to get a court order as I'd be buggered if they did. Fortunately the lad just raised his eyebrows and left it at that.

“Why have none of Sandra Sullivan's relatives reported her missing?” he asked.

"She has no relatives," I said. "At least as far as I know."

"How old is she then?" he asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," I said as Wasp wasn't sure how old her mother was. "Late thirties, I think or possibly 40."

"So she was in her mid thirties when she went missing?" asked the lad. He frowned. "She had no partner, children or parents?"

I shrugged.

"I'm just her accountant," I said. "Sorry."

He looked at me suspiciously but the possibility existed, however remote, that there were recluses in their late thirties in Australia who were known only to their accountants. Just because someone was a thirty something woman didn't mean she had to have a partner or children.

"I don't expect you have a photograph of her then," he remarked.

"I'm sorry, no," I said.

"Can you give me a description?" he asked.

"Blonde, average height, average build," I said. "She also had a small mole just in front of her left ear."

That was pretty much all Wasp could remember of what she looked like although I didn't think the fact that Wasp thought she was quite pretty and liked to wear dark pink nail polish would help. I felt reasonably certain if she'd been very tall or short or fat Wasp would have remembered that so saying 'average' wouldn't be far off.

"Well, that narrows it down a bit," said the lad ironically. "Is she an Australian citizen?"

"Yes," I said, "although she was originally British. I believe she came to Australia as a teenager."

For some reason Wasp was certain of this and it did make sense as some of her expressions, such as 'bleeding', were more British expressions than Australian. However, it was possible Wasp was conflating her mother with the foster parents she'd had as they were former Britons as well. Still, I was fairly certain if the police did find a woman called Sandra Sullivan who'd been born Dee and who was the right sort of age it wouldn't really matter if she was originally British or not. The real test would be whether Wasp recognised her or if she admitted Wasp was her daughter. What we'd do if they found her and she denied all knowledge of Wasp was something I hoped we'd never have to deal with.

The police officer tapped his teeth with the pen this time as he stared down at the woefully incomplete form.

"And why do you think she's in Perth?" he asked suddenly as someone else came into the station.

"She left a message saying that on my answering machine some three years ago," I said, having anticipated this question. "Sadly she did not leave an address."

"Hmmm," said the lad. He glanced at whoever had come in then looked back down at his form. Then he picked up my business card and studied it. "This is your best contact number?"

"Yes," I said.

"Where are you staying in Perth?" he asked.

"At the Budget Hotel down the road," I said. "Room 123."

He noted this down as well then asked how long I was planning to stay there.

"Until Sunday at least," I said. "I'll probably start driving back to Brisbane then."

"Driving?" he exclaimed, giving me a hard look. "You drove all this way just to report a missing person?"

“No,” I said, glad that I'd rehearsed this. “I drove here on business of my own. The reporting of Sandra Sullivan's absence is just a coincidence.”

“And what is your business here in Perth?” he asked. “I don't imagine many Perth businesses get their books done in Brisbane.

“I'd be astonished if any did,” I said fishing out another business card. “I'm also the Director of the Museum of Tail Feathers and I'm here in that capacity.”

He took the business card and studied it before turning it over. The reverse held the details of the Museum itself, address, URL and so forth.

“I see,” he said dubiously. “Was Sandra Sullivan to do with your bookkeeping or the Museum?”

“A bookkeeping client,” I said.

“Even though you're in Brisbane and she was in Victoria?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said wishing I'd thought up something more plausible. I wondered if I ought to repeat 'client confidentiality'.

“Well, that's a start,” he said, signing and dating the form. “I'll pass this on and an investigating officer will be in touch.” He ripped off the top two sheets and handed me the copy. “The investigating officer will give you their contact details in due course but in the meantime you can call this station if you think of any further details that may aid us with our enquiries. The phone number's at the top, here,” and he pointed out the phone number.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I ought to warn you,” he said, putting the top copy in a wire basket behind him, “that people who've been missing for an extended period are generally not found. She may even have gone back to Britain.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, “but we have to try at least, don't we.”

“We’ll be in touch,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said. “Umm, goodbye.”

He nodded and turned his attention to the other person who was quietly waiting. I went out into the sunshine and breathed a sigh of relief. I’d found the whole thing nerve racking. It was just as well I wasn’t a career criminal. It would have been a very short career.

I knocked on Wasp’s door when I got back to the hotel but she didn’t answer. There was no sound from the TV so I guessed she’d gone out although where she’d gone I couldn’t imagine. She had no money after all. I opened my own door and no note had been pushed under which wasn’t surprising. Wasp wasn’t the type to think of leaving reassuring messages.

I made myself a cup of coffee using the hotel facilities, trying hard to ignore something I’d read in a newspaper online only the year before. Apparently it is common practice for hotel and motel guests to boil their underwear in the room’s kettle, doubtless as it is fast and convenient. Hopefully the various occupants of this room preceding me hadn’t been so fastidious over clean underwear and, if they had, the boiling water had sterilised the kettle.

I hung my jacket over the back of the one chair in the room then got out my laptop. I spent a very pleasant and relaxing half hour itemising the various receipts for fuel, food and so forth on a spreadsheet then worked out various statistics such as the overall cost of the trip so far, the average daily cost, the cost per kilometre and so forth. It made me feel I had some measure of control although, as I well knew, I didn’t really. I saved the spreadsheet then sat back and thought about it.

Since I’d made the decision way back in Toowoomba to take Wasp to Perth I’d made various suggestions but it was Wasp who made the decisions. On the other hand, beyond demanding to go to Perth, Wasp hadn’t actually come up with any suggestions herself which suggested she wasn’t controlling the situation either. She seemed to be responding to events as much as I was. Could it be we were both being carried along by some greater power, some undefined destiny? This was an uncomfortable topic as I like things to be clearly defined

and catalogued so I sighed and went online using the hotel's internet facility to check my bank balances and those of the Museum. Fortunately both were quite healthy and I was pleased to see that a long outstanding invoice to a client had now been paid by bank transfer. The solicitor's letter I'd had sent appeared to have worked. On the other hand he'd sent me an email terminating my services which was good as it saved me the embarrassment and anxiety of having to terminate our relationship myself. I sent a quick reply thanking him for the payment and confirming the cessation of our relationship.

I hadn't heard anything from the room next door so I went and knocked again. There was still no answer.

"Where on Earth's she got to?" I wondered and briefly debated asking Reception to unlock her room for me. I wanted to go to the laundromat to wash my dirty clothes and it seemed an opportunity to wash hers as well. A spell in a washing machine would do her old trainers the world of good although her jeans had so many rips in them they'd probably fall apart.

I decided not to since it was entirely possible she was asleep. I went back to my room and looked up my list of contacts. I had over twenty in Perth, people I'd corresponded with from the Perth Ornithological Society, the Western Australia Bird Fanciers Association and so forth as well as a Professor of Biology at Edith Cowan University but only two I'd met personally. I emailed them both saying I was in Perth for the weekend and asking if either would be available for a get together. With a bit of luck one or other would have some interesting feathers for me which would allow me to offset the costs of the trip against tax. I also sent emails to the clients I'd been unable to see this week and those I was due to see in the first few days of next week explaining that due to unavoidable circumstances I was having to rearrange my schedule.

I started to feel hungry around 4ish so I Googled to see if there were any decent restaurants in Midland. There were a couple that had fairly consistent positive reviews so I went to knock on Wasp's door again. There was still no answer.

“Where can she be?” I said to the firmly shut door. I was beginning to feel a little worried to be honest.

I turned to go back to my room, wondering how long I should wait and whether or not to go to dinner without her then the fire door at the end of the corridor banged open.

“Yo Red,” called Wasp loudly. “I’ve got your car fixed!”

Chapter Twelve

“Oh hello,” I said. greatly relieved. “Where’ve you been?”

“Out looking for someone to fix your car,” she said, coming along the corridor. She stopped at her door and rattled the handle. “C’mon, let me in.”

“Don’t you have your key?” I asked, stepping backwards out of the way.

“I ain’t got no bleeding key,” she said and bent to inspect the lock. “Sides this ain’t a proper lock.”

“It’s electronic,” I said. “You need a card like this.” I held up the plastic card for my room and waggled it.

She grabbed my card, shoved it in the slot and tried to force the door open. Inevitably the door didn’t open and she swore and kicked it.

“Uh, uh, uh,” I said quickly, grabbing the handle in case she managed to break it. “We’ll just go to Reception and ask for another. I’m sure it happens all the time.”

She made a face then turned and marched off down the corridor and held the fire door open, waiting for me. With a small sigh I followed.

“New suit?” she asked, looking me up and down as I walked.

“Yes,” I said, holding my hands out as people always do when showing their new clothes. I have no idea why. “Do you like it?”

“Not really,” she said. “It’s boring.”

“Ah well,” I said, pausing at the fire door. “I am boring so it suits me.”

“No you ain’t,” she said. “You just dress boring.”

“I dress appropriately,” I said. “No one wants their bookkeeper to turn up in camouflage trousers and a zombie t-shirt. That reminds me. I

want to go to the laundromat so I'll need your clothes as well."

"OK," she said and pulled off her t-shirt, letting the door swing shut. "Here."

"Good God!" I exclaimed as she wasn't wearing anything underneath. I averted my eyes hastily. "Put that back on immediately!"

"Make up your bloody mind," she said, dangling the limp t-shirt in her hand. "Do you want me clothes or not?"

"Not now!" I hissed. "Later, when you're back in your room."

"OK," she said and nonchalantly pulled the t-shirt over her head.

"That's better," I said, taking a quick peek to check she was clothed again. Fortunately there had been no one else in the corridor and the door had shut so whoever was on Reception wouldn't have seen her either.

"And don't do that again," I said, giving her a stern look. "We'll probably both be arrested next time."

"Yes Red," she said and giggled.

I closed my eyes for a few moments to recover my equilibrium then opened the fire door.

"Hello," I said to the man on Reception. It was the same man who'd been there when we arrived. He looked up and focused his eyes on Wasp. "I'm afraid my daughter has locked her key in her room."

"No, I didn't," said Wasp. "You never gave me any key."

"I left it on top of the TV," I said. "Didn't you see?"

"Which room?" interrupted the man. He seemed to be studying Wasp rather intently.

"121," I said and only then noticed a small monitor beside his desk. I

leaned forward so I could see it better and groaned silently. The monitor was displaying an empty corridor and, judging by his behaviour, it was probably the corridor to our rooms.

He smiled at Wasp who, incidentally, was ignoring him as she flicked through a 'What's On In Midland' booklet she'd taken from a small pile on the counter.

"121," he repeated, looking at me suspiciously. "She is your daughter, right?"

"Yes," I said coldly. "Is there a problem?"

He looked back at Wasp for a few moments then reluctantly said "no, no problem". He fiddled with his computer for a few moments then handed over another plastic card.

"Enjoy your stay," he said and winked.

I frowned at him as I took the card and pointedly did not say "thank you".

"Why did he wink at you?" asked Wasp as we went back through the fire door.

"I rather think he has formed the wrong impression about us," I said, looking up and down for a security camera. I spotted one above the fire door, mounted just below the ceiling. "I'm fairly certain he saw you take your t-shirt off in that camera there and I'm afraid he may no longer believe you're my daughter."

"Nah, he still thinks I'm a hooker," said Wasp, looking at the camera. "Dirty little fuckwit." She suddenly pulled the front of her t-shirt up and waved her chest at the camera then ran off up the corridor giggling loudly.

"Please don't do that," I said anxiously hurrying after her. "He may call the police."

"No way," said Wasp, still giggling. "He'll just be glued to his camera

all the time now in case I do it again.” She made what I could only assume was a rude gesture at the camera.

I hurriedly unlocked the door to Wasp's room and pushed her inside.

“Please don't do that again,” I said, leaning back against the door.

“OK, Red, whatever you say,” she said and threw herself headlong on the bed. “No sweat, OK.”

“No sweat,” I said, although I was sweating a little in embarrassment. I fumbled in my pocket for a handkerchief then remembered I didn't have one.

“You want my clothes now?” she asked, sitting up and looking at me with her hands gripping the bottom of her t-shirt.

“No,” I said firmly. “Stay put and don't move.”

She jumped off the bed and started scrabbling on the floor.

“Now what are you doing?” I asked, a little impatiently.

“Looking for the remote,” she said. “I think it went under the bed.”

I blinked a few times then gave up and went into the bathroom. I wiped my face on one of the towels then grabbed one of the thin, cheap looking bath robes that hung on the back of the bathroom door.

Wasp emerged from under the bed as I came back out, beaming triumphantly, then pointed the remote at the TV.

“Turn it down!” I exclaimed, holding my hands to my ears.

She fiddled with the remote and the volume dropped appreciably.

“That's better,” I said. “Now, take this bath robe into the bathroom and get changed. I'll take all our clothes to the laundromat then when I get back we'll go to dinner.”

“Cool,” she said. “Can we have pizza?”

“Do you want pizza?” I asked, thinking that neither of the restaurants I’d chosen seemed likely to do pizza.

“Yeah,” she said enthusiastically. “I love pizza.”

“Very well then,” I said. “We’ll have pizza.”

“Yea!” she exclaimed and hurried off to the bathroom.

I was tempted to suggest she have a shower as well but decided it wasn’t my place. She was more than old enough to make these decisions for herself. Instead I picked up the plastic bag with her trainers, old jeans and sweatshirt that she’d thrown into a corner of the room and sat down in the chair with it on my knee. She was out again in a few moments, fortunately wearing the bath robe.

“Thanks,” I said stuffing her clothes into the plastic bag. “By the way, I’ve spoken to the police.”

Wasp abruptly turned away and started inspecting the wallpaper.

“Oh yeah?” she said, casually. She used her thumb nail to prise the edge of a strip off the wall.

“And, umm, well, they’re looking for your mother,” I said, feeling a little confused. I’d expected her to ask how it went and if they’d thought they’d be able to find her mother but she didn’t. It also didn’t help that I felt I ought to reassure her but I didn’t really know how.

She tore a thin strip of the wallpaper off and started to shred it.

“Umm, I really don’t think you should do that,” I said quietly so she stopped and let the pieces fall to the floor.

Utterly bewildered I sat there, my fingers picking at the plastic of the bag on my knees while Wasp silently faced the wall. I almost wished she’d attack it or something to break the tension.

“Umm, what did you mean about my car?” I asked, hoping to get back to solid ground.

“Hmm?” she said, flopping on the bed and picking up the remote.

“You said you'd found someone to fix my car,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, flicking through the channels. “There's a wreckers on the other side of town. They'll swap the damaged panels and wings.”

“Excellent,” I said, “but I'll need the insurer's approval first. It could be quite expensive.”

“Nah,” she said, arranging the pillows behind her back. “Don't worry about it. Just got to wait until they get in the parts.”

“What do you mean, don't worry about it?” I said.

“What I said,” said Wasp, looking over at me. “It's all taken care of, like. You just bring the car round and they'll swap the panels.”

“I don't understand,” I said. “You mean they'll do it for nothing?”

“They're a wrecker,” she said, grinning at me. “They'll keep the old panels, do 'em up and flog 'em.”

“Surely not,” I said. “New panels will be a lot more expensive than re-worked panels and there's the labour and overheads as well. I imagine it'll cost several thousands of dollars.”

“Not your problem,” she said. “It's Matt's business not yours.”

“Who's Matt?” I asked.

“Matt's Auto Wreckers,” she said. “Matt owns it, see. That's why it's called Matt's.”

“I see,” I said, thinking about it. Clearly Wasp had got the wrong end of the stick but it was nice of her to find a repairer. I could also simply pay for the repairs and present the bill to my insurance

company as a fait accompli. If I explained the damage had been done on the Nullarbor and that I didn't want to drive the car back to Brisbane with the wings hanging off I felt fairly certain they'd understand and reimburse me although they might try to negotiate only a partial reimbursal. I could counter that by threatening to take my business to another insurer. After all, I'd only made one prior claim in 33 years of driving. Also, getting the car repaired in Western Australia meant it was less likely to be associated with the damage done to the traffic lights in Logan.

"So when do I take the car round?" I asked, standing up.

"Dunno," she said. "Gotta wait for the parts. Maybe tomorrow, maybe Saturday."

"He works over the weekend?" I asked, surprised.

"Twenty four seven," she said. "He does towing as well."

"Well, hopefully the parts will come in before I go back to Brisbane," I said. "Enjoy your movie. I should be back in a couple of hours then we'll go for pizza."

"Sweet," she said, her attention fully on the TV.

"Ohh," I said, remembering. "I got you something earlier. I'll just go get it."

Stupidly I let the door close behind me but fortunately I still had Wasp's room key so I was able to get back in. She was still lying on the bed watching TV but she now had a can of Coke from the room's mini-bar.

"There you go," I said, putting the phone on the bed.

"What's that?" she asked, her eyes locked on the TV.

"I got you a phone," I said. "You'll be needing one."

"For real?" she asked, tearing her eyes away from the TV. She picked

up the box and ripped it open. "Awesome!"

"I had to put it in my name," I said, "as you don't have any ID and it's a 'pay as you go' not one on a plan. I've put a hundred dollars of credit on it which will last 28 days. After that you'll need to recharge it yourself."

"Way cool," she said, switching it on. "What's the code to unlock it?"

"0807" I said then added for no particular reason, "it's my birthday."

"8th July's your birthday?" she asked keying it in.

"7th August," I said. "I did the month first. Best you change the code straight away to something you'll remember more easily."

"Nah," she said. "I'll remember your birthday, no worries. Mine's 5th June. What the phone number?"

"Great," I said and gave her the phone's number.

"What's yours?" she asked. "You can be my first contact."

"Umm, I've already added mine as a contact," I said, feeling a little awkward as I felt I'd invaded her privacy in some way.

"Cool," she said then burst out laughing. "Reginald Dorfmann? I don't think so."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "That's my name."

"I changed it to Red," she said, her fingers moving rapidly over the screen. "Am I in yours?"

"Yes," I said, hoping she wouldn't want to confirm it. I'd put her in as Wasp rather than Sharlet Dee since that was how I thought of her. I'd given her her own ringtone as well so if she rang me she wouldn't get confused with my clients or the Museum staff but she didn't need to know that.

“Coolies,” she said.

Moments later my phone pinged to say I had a message. I took it out of my pocket and saw I had a message from Wasp.

“It works,” I said and opened it expecting some sort of thank you message. Instead it said quite simply 'large hawhyan'. It took me a moment or two to work out what she meant then silently texted back 'Actually it's Hawaiian'.

“Oh,” she said when she read the message. Then she texted 'get bottle coke 2'.

“OK,” I said. “Anything else?”

“Nah,” she said and started to play with the ring tones.

“Right, I'll be off,” I said.

“What do you think of this one?” she asked as the phone played some sort of jumpy tune.

“It's your phone,” I said. “You choose. Umm, and I'll leave your room key on the TV. Beside the other one.”

“Yeah yeah,” she said absently, hunched over the phone. I picked up the old key pointedly and handed it in to Reception on my way past.

* * *

I was due to meet Beverly Hunscliffe at 11.30 at a café in Applecross so after a leisurely breakfast at a café near the hotel I went back and had a long shower before putting on my suit. I hadn't bothered to ask if Wasp had wanted to join me as I'd briefly woken around 3am and heard her TV so she was probably still asleep.

Beverly had been, when I first met her, President of the West Australia Bird and Koala Society. She was now in her early seventies and had stepped down as President but we still corresponded by email occasionally and I always visited when I was in WA. We had a very

pleasant lunch and afterwards, when we'd ordered more coffee, she gave me an envelope containing, she said, the tail feathers of a wedge tail eagle. I thanked her profusely and didn't have the heart to tell her I already had several specimens of the eagle's tail feathers.

"Go on, open it," she said, prodding the envelope.

I blinked a couple of times then opened the envelope. To my surprise the feathers were a deep chocolate brown rather than the usual black of the wedge tail.

"Good lord," I said, feeling a little excitement rise as I examined them. "These must be *aquila audax fleayi*, not *aquila audax audax*."

"That's right," she said with a pleased smile. "One of our members found them on a recent trip to Tasmania and I had a feeling you didn't have any of the *aquila audax fleayi* in your collection. When he offered them for sale in the Society Newsletter I decided to buy them for you. I was going to post them over but then I got your email."

"Thank you very much," I said, reaching for my wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," she said, putting her hand on my arm. "Consider it a donation."

"That's extremely kind of you," I said, putting my wallet back. "Shall I note on the display card that they were donated by you personally or the Society?"

"Oh they're from me," she said with a tinkling laugh. "Beryl the Treasurer would never allow anything to be donated."

"Even better," I said, tucking the feathers neatly back in their envelope. "Personal donations are much nicer than corporate ones and I've been particularly wanting some feathers from the *fleayi* subspecies. As you know they're only found in Tasmania and there is some doubt as to whether they are a genuine subspecies of *aquila audax* or not."

"I maintain they are," said Beverly. "What's your opinion?"

"I have been keeping an open mind," I said, tapping the edge of the envelope with my thumb nail, "but now I've actually seen one it is quite apparent that it is a wedge tail eagle but larger and with different colouring."

"Indeed," said Beverly, "and Mark, who found the feathers, tells me the entire bird is bigger and has particularly outsized talons."

"Is that so?" I asked. "I confess I don't know the exact ground on which the subspecies is disputed but given that the bird is common in Tasmania and unknown on the mainland I'd think it has a common ancestry with the *aquila audax audax* but has evolved independently due to its isolation."

We spent a pleasant hour or so discussing evolutionary mechanisms and just how significant the Tasman Sea might be in isolating colonies of birds then Beverly had to excuse herself as she had another engagement.

I got back to the hotel a little after four and knocked on Wasp's door. Unsurprisingly she wasn't there so I went to my room and made some coffee. I noted on the envelope that the feathers were donated by Beverly Hunscliffe and dated it as that was how my mind worked. I like everything to be neat and orderly. Then I went to Reception and asked the woman who was on duty today if she had any cardboard I could use to stiffen the envelope so it didn't get bent on the drive home. Sadly the only cardboard she had was the base of an A4 pad which wasn't big enough. She did suggest going to the supermarket to see if they had any spare boxes which seemed a good idea. I walked over to the supermarket and asked one of the staff who rang someone else who appeared a few moments later with a huge box that had once held rolls of toilet paper. On the way back to the hotel my phone rang with the tune of *The Flight Of The Bumble Bee* which I had linked to Wasp's number.

"Hello Wasp," I said, answering the phone. A truck drove past on the highway and nearly knocked the cardboard box out of my hand.

“Get your car over to Matt's,” she said. “Now,” and hung up.

“Who?” I asked but the screen said the call had been disconnected.

I was about to ring back when I remembered that Matt was probably Matt's Auto Wreckers so I hurried across the road and waved the box at the lady on Reception. She smiled and went back to whatever she was doing on her computer. Back in my room I checked where Matt's Auto Wreckers was on Google Maps then drove over.

Wasp was leaning against the rickety door of a large wooden structure seemingly bolted onto the side of a huge metal shed in a sea of car and truck bodies. I parked and went over.

“What's the rush?” I asked.

“The other one's got to be stripped tonight,” she said. “I'll tell Matt you're here.”

She disappeared inside the wooden structure while I pondered just why 'the other one's got to be stripped tonight'. Other one what? And why tonight?

“This 'im?” asked a burly man with a beard to his waist and a long ragged pony tail. His overalls were filthy and his hands matched.

“Yeah,” said Wasp. “That's the car there.”

“Keys,” said the burly man, holding out his hand.

“Are you Matt?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said gruffly. “Keys,” and he clicked his fingers impatiently. Meekly I handed them over and he turned towards my car.

“Roughly how much is this going to cost?” I asked.

“You what?” he exclaimed in surprise, turning back.

“Umm, roughly how much is this going to cost?” I repeated, feeling

intimidated.

He gave me a strange look then he laughed and looked at Wasp. "Ain't you fucking told 'im then?"

He didn't wait for a reply. He just jumped in my car and drove it inside the gloom of the metal shed. I wondered if I'd ever see it again.

Chapter Thirteen

A strange feeling came over me as I stood there. A mixture perhaps of a deep lethargy and a sense of inevitability.

“What haven't you told me?” I asked, looking at Wasp. I noticed she was carrying an overnight bag slung over her shoulder which she hadn't had before. It looked to be a fairly good one as well.

“Let's go back to the hotel,” she said. “It's a fair old walk and I'm knackered.”

“But it's more than three kilometres,” I protested. “Wouldn't a taxi be easier?”

“Bit of exercise will do you good,” she said with a laugh and slapped my belly.

I gave her a cold look which she didn't see as she was walking away but I now saw the overnight bag was emblazoned with 'Lufthansa'. I sighed then phoned for a taxi. The disembodied and foreign sounding voice said it would be at least an hour if not more as it was Friday afternoon. I looked around at the piles of car bodies, truck cabs, rusty exhaust pipes and tyres and decided a walk was preferable. I cancelled the taxi and headed towards Wasp who was now standing watching me through the chain link fence.

“It's a stolen car, isn't it,” I said quietly after we'd walked fifty metres or so.

“What is?” she asked, trailing her fingers along the chain links.

“The car that's being used to fix mine,” I said.

“Dunno,” she said. “Could be.”

We walked on in silence for perhaps another fifty metres.

“Did you steal it?” I asked.

She didn't answer.

"Did you?" I asked again.

"Might have," she said. "So what?"

"Oh Wasp, Wasp," I said, shaking my head sorrowfully. "What are we going to do with you?"

"I got your car fixed, didn't I?" she said, aggressively. "For free, like, an' all."

"But that's not the point," I said. "Stealing cars is wrong."

"Nah, not really," she said, kicking a stone. "Nice car like that, it'll be insured."

"My car was insured," I pointed out. "The insurance would have paid for the repairs. Probably."

"But they'd want to know the ins and outs of how it got damaged," she said. "Cars get stolen all the time so they won't be asking any bloody questions about that. 'Sides, I owe you one."

"Owe me one what?" I asked, confused.

"It was me what caused you to smash into them lights," she said. "Back in Logan."

"Well, true enough," I said, "but it wasn't worth stealing another car. Oh lord, I hope you didn't take it from around here. I'll be going back to see the police in a day or two and if they see I'm driving the same car as one that's just been reported stolen they might ask questions. Especially if they noticed that damage when I was there yesterday that won't be there when I go back."

"Nah, you're all good," she said. "I hitched a ride to the airport."

"You mean Perth airport?" I asked. "I didn't know it was around here."

“Yeah, about ten, fifteen k over there somewhere,” she said, waving her arm. “Matt told me.”

“So this was Matt's idea?” I asked. There was no way I was going to report it to the police but I was curious. I live a fairly sheltered life and, to my shame, I found this a little thrilling ... so long as I wasn't too deeply involved.

“What was?” asked Wasp, looking at me.

“Taking a car to replace the panels on mine,” I said.

“Shit no,” she said. “I asked around for a wrecker then went and asked him if he'd fix your car if I gave him another car. I ain't got no tools, see. He said OK so long as he could keep the rest for parts.”

“So that's why it's being done overnight, is it?” I asked. “The stolen car's being stripped down so it won't be found?”

“Yeah,” she said. “He has to be quick, like, in case the cops do a surprise visit. It was a bloody bugger though. There's loads of frigging Toyota Corollas but why the fuck you had to get one in Silver Pearl I'll never know. Couldn't find one in the Domestic car park so I had to go to the International, didn't I. Took me bleeding forever. Why couldn't you get a red one like everyone else? You got a fetish for grey or something?”

“Just a minute,” I said, stopping walking. Wasp walked on a pace then stopped and looked back at me. “Don't cars have identifying numbers on them? Can any of the panels and wings be traced back?”

“Nah,” she said. “They don't put 'em on most parts, just the engine block and chassis. 'Sides, Matt'll grind 'em off. This won't his first.”

“OK,” I said, walking on.

I reflected that I probably ought to give Wasp some sort of lecture on the ethics of stealing but, to be honest, once I'd gone back to Brisbane she'd either be all alone in Perth or with her mother and I didn't hold out any hopes that the mother would be a particularly inspiring

influence. She would either still be a junkie or be an ex junkie and God knows who she'd be associating with. I also didn't see any real hope of Wasp getting a job and she probably wouldn't be able to get unemployment benefit either as she had no form of ID. She'd literally run away from Logan in just the clothes she'd been wearing. Even though theft was illegal, selling a stolen car or two might be her only means of survival in the short term. It was a problem and, I confess, it worried me. I'd grown quite fond of the girl.

"So where did you get that bag?" I asked after a while. We must have walked a kilometre by then and my knees were beginning to make themselves known.

"I found it," she said. "Do you like taking photos?"

"Actually, yes," I said, surprised at the change of subject. "I used to do quite a lot when I was bird watching."

"Cool," she said. "You can have it then," and unslung the Lufthansa bag.

"Excuse me?" I said, stopping again. It must be said that I stopped more to have a short rest than for any other reason.

"It's a camera," she said. "Looks a bit fancy. I was going to sell it but you can have it if you want."

I frowned then took the bag and opened it. Inside was a Canon 6D camera with a 24 to 105mm zoom lens.

"Jesus!" I said and quickly closed the bag in case anyone saw. Fortunately the road was deserted as there was nothing out this way except the wreckers, the local TAFE and a sports ground.

"What's the matter?" she asked, quite innocently. "Is it a good one?"

"Yes, it's a good one," I said, holding the bag as though it was an unexploded bomb. "New I'd say it would be \$5000, maybe a little more."

“Way cool,” she said happily. “I don't know nothing about cameras. There were some dirty clothes in there as well but they were too big for me and too small for you so I chucked 'em.”

“You stole this as well, didn't you,” I said, not letting myself get sidetracked by the clothes.

“Nah!” she exclaimed outraged. “Found it, didn't I.”

“Where did you find it?” I asked. “People don't leave cameras like this lying around.”

“It was in the back of the car,” she said. “I didn't steal it.”

“But you stole the car,” I said, “which means you stole this as well since it was with the car.”

“But I didn't know it was there 'til after,” she said. “How could I have stolen it if I didn't know it was there?”

“That's a specious argument,” I said. “By that logic you could argue that all you took was the steering wheel of the car and the rest of the car just happened to go with it.”

“Don't be stupid,” she said. “Why would anyone take just the steering wheel?”

“I have no idea,” I said, “but when you take a car the law says that you've taken everything inside it as well, including cameras and whatever else was inside. Please tell me there were no babies or pets in the car as well?”

“Course there bloody wasn't,” she said. “You think I'm an idiot?”

“Thank god for that,” I said. “If there was a child inside you could be charged with kidnapping as well.”

“Who'd leave a kiddie in a car in an airport car park?” she asked.

“Possibly someone meeting an arriving flight,” I said. “You never

know. People do strange things. You read about these things in the papers.”

“Nah, it was the long term car park,” she said. “They’ll be gone for weeks. So you want it or not?”

“I need to think about that,” I said, knowing I probably would since it was a very good camera and mine was getting quite old. Besides, short of handing it in to the police, which would doubtless cause more problems if the car and the camera had been reported stolen, there was no way of returning it to its rightful owner. “How were you going to sell it?”

“Someone down the pub’ll buy it,” she said quite casually. “Someone always does.”

“Then I’ll buy it from you,” I said. It occurred to me that this would be a good way to leave her with some money so she’d not be penniless.

“Nah, no way,” she said. “It’s a pressie.”

“Don’t rush into that decision,” I said, not wanting to argue about it in the street. Besides, it was hot and I was sweating. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“Okies,” she said.

A police car drove slowly past and I felt my guilt emblazoned all over my face. Surprisingly they didn’t stop and strip search us. Wasp didn’t appear to notice although I had a nasty suspicion she might actually track every policeman in her vicinity.

“So how do you steal a car?” I asked when the police car was long gone. “I thought they all had pretty strong security systems.”

“Piece of cake,” she said. “Especially Toyotas. The model before yours had a little lever down on the floor beside the driver’s seat to pop the boot. Only thing is they also had a drain plug in the chassis beside it so all you had to do was take out the rubber bung from underneath and shove a stick or a screwdriver up inside so the carpet lifts the

boot lever. Then you just put down the back seats and climb in.”

“You are joking!” I exclaimed horrified. I’d had one of the previous generation of Toyota Corollas and the boot lever had been exactly where she said it was. “What about the newer ones?”

“Almost as easy,” she said. “They’re designed so whoever’s inside can open the doors even when it’s locked so you just push a coat hanger in and snag the door catch.”

“How do you get the coat hanger inside?” I asked, deeply curious. “Aren’t the doors snugly fitting?”

“Yeah,” she said, “but there’s always some give. Just push something between the door and the body where the rubber seal is and lever it. You only need enough of a gap to get a coat hanger through.”

“Is that what you did at the airport?” I asked. She nodded. “What did you use to lever the door?”

“There was a wooden door wedge in the hotel room,” she said. “Dunno what for, maybe to wedge the door open. Anyway, I took it and one of the coat hangers when I went out.”

“So it’s really as easy as that?” I found it both hard to believe and easy to believe at the same time. Cars seem very solid and secure yet they are constantly being stolen. That said, it occurred to me that the manufacturers could probably make them totally secure but it would have to be at the cost of convenience and people don’t buy cars that aren’t convenient. Also, being realistic, if cars get stolen then they have to be replaced which means more car sales.

“Yeah,” she said. “Piece of piss. Bikes are even easier.”

“Motor bikes or push bikes?” I asked, wiping my forehead with my sleeve.

“Push bikes are a joke,” she said, clearly enjoying the conversation. “Just carry some bolt cutters.”

“And motor bikes?” I asked.

“Two strong guys and a van,” she said. “When you find a nice bike just pick it up and shove it in the back of the van. I’m not strong enough unless it’s a moped or something.”

“Good God!” I said suddenly realising just how easy it actually was. Ultimately I supposed all you needed was a strong nerve and you could steal almost anything. It occurred to me that it was even easier to become an accessory. After all, if Wasp had a job I wouldn’t have questioned where she got the camera from. When someone gives you a present you don’t ask if they stole it. It would be rude.

“So can we have pizza again?” asked Wasp.

“I was thinking perhaps a Chinese takeaway,” I said. “I found one online earlier.”

“Or pizza,” she said. “I like pizza.”

“Don’t you like Chinese?” I asked. “I thought everyone liked Chinese.”

“Yeah, I like Chinese,” she said. “I like pizza too.”

“OK, we’ll have pizza,” I said, all this walking making me too hot and tired to argue. I was also developing a slight limp from the ache in my knee. I daresay it would help if I lost a little weight but that wasn’t going to happen in the next twenty minutes and I’d be back in the hotel by then.

“We can have Chinese if you’d rather,” she said.

“I’m happy with pizza,” I said, a little shortly. The thought of all that tasteless cheese and the greasy pizza base not really appealing.

“Tell you what,” she said. “I think I’d rather have Chinese now so you have pizza and I’ll have Chinese. OK?”

“Then let’s both have Chinese,” I said.

“Or a kebab,” she said. “Is there a kebab place in town?” She pulled out her phone and started looking for a kebab shop. “Ooooh, there’s one in Mackie Street!”

“Then we’ll have kebabs,” I said, “only we’ll go back to the hotel first then you can get them.”

“But what about your pizza?” she asked.

“I don’t want a damned pizza,” I snapped in a rare flash of irritation.

Wasp stopped and stared at me.

“You angry with me?” she asked.

“No, I’m not angry with you,” I said. “It’s just that I’m not used to walking long distances and my leg is hurting.”

“Is it ‘cos I stole a car?” she asked, not moving.

“No,” I said. “I was shocked at first but I’ve got over it. I understand your motivations or at least I think I do. Tell me, have you ever thought of getting a job?”

“Yeah, had one once,” she said. “Down in Melbourne. You want me to give you a piggy back?”

“God no,” I said. “I’m far too heavy. Besides, it would look ridiculous. I’ve got to be pushing three times your size.”

“How much do you weigh?” she asked.

“About 130kg,” I said, knocking a few kilos off for vanity’s sake. “I doubt you’re more than 50kg. What job did you have?”

“It was a kennels,” she said, following me as I started walking again. “I thought it would be cool, playing with all the dogs and stuff but it wasn’t.”

“You like dogs, do you?” I asked.

“Yeah, and cats,” she said. “Most animals, really, I guess.”

“So what didn't you like about the job?” I asked.

“The owner was a bastard,” she said. “He was always shouting at the staff and being nasty and he didn't treat the dogs right.”

“Ahh, that's not good,” I said, trying to ignore the ache in my knee. I could see the hotel not too far away which encouraged me. “What did he do?”

“Well there was only me and two others,” she said, “and they were both shit scared of him. He wouldn't let the owners go to the actual kennels, see. They had to stay at the office and he'd send one of us to get their doggie. He said it was so the other dogs didn't get disturbed but it was really 'cos he never cleaned the kennels. They was full of crap and he'd have two or three dogs in the cages as well so there were fights and stuff and he'd kick the dogs and beat them when he was in a bad mood which was most of the time and not feed them properly even though some of the owners were paying extra for special foods, like. I was only there for three weeks then he shouted at me and I, umm, well I threatened him, like, and he sacked me.”

“Weren't there any complaints from the owners?” I asked. I found it hard to believe that anyone running a business would run it so badly since it was the dogs' welfare that kept the customers returning but this sort of thing happens all the time, sadly.

“All the bloody time,” said Wasp, “and he'd give them some of their money back then take it out of our wages.”

“Jesus,” I said. “Why didn't any of the staff complain?”

“Like I said, they were shit scared of him,” said Wasp. She looked at me. “I got him closed down though.”

“Good for you,” I said. “I just wish more people did that when they know of some injustice. What did you do?”

“I reported him to the RSPCA,” she said. “They came in and shut him

down. I heard later he got banned from running a kennels for five years. Bastard. Reckon they should have sent him down for life. So where's this Chinese then?"

"I thought we were having kebabs," I said, leaning against the wall of the hotel.

"Up to you, Red," she said with a grin. "You're paying."

Chapter Fourteen

Food is a wonderful pick-me-up. I had a long hot shower when we got back to the hotel while Wasp went out to get dinner and she surprised me by getting a cooked supermarket chicken, a large tub of their potato salad and a loaf of sourdough bread. It suggested that she had some dormant sense of diplomacy since we hadn't been able to agree on anything else on our walk back. She also scrupulously gave me the receipt and the correct change which amused me. I was careful to show my respect by immediately adding the receipt to my trip costs spreadsheet and filing it with the others. She reciprocated by asking what all the numbers were and nodded thoughtfully in all the right places. We ate the food in my room with our fingers, scooping up mouthfuls of potato salad with torn off pieces of bread. Wasp sat cross legged on the bed and I sat in the chair watching the news on TV. She seemed to find the news uninteresting although she perked up when Taylor Swift appeared.

“Do you like Taylor Swift?” I asked. I had a vague notion she was a pop singer of some sort but that was all. Certainly she'd never sung with a brass band to my knowledge.

“Aargh,” she said screwing up her face. “She's a bit wet. Always going on about breakups with guys an' all.”

“Is that so?” I asked, intrigued. The news reader had said she was the most popular entertainer in the world so that suggested her breakups resonated with her audience. “Well, perhaps that might change now she has a new boyfriend. He's a football player by all accounts.”

“American not footy,” she said dismissively just as the news presenter said that Taylor Swift was being denounced as a psyop front for a covert political agenda. “What's a psyop?”

“I'm not entirely sure,” I said as I'd been wondering that myself. “Why don't you look it up on your phone?”

The news item had been about a new theory that the Democrats in America had fixed the football matches so the team of Taylor Swift's new boyfriend would play in the Superbowl. Apparently this would

give Taylor Swift the opportunity to endorse Biden, the Democratic nominee, and, presumably, convince her multitude of followers to vote for him. I didn't quite follow the logic of this as I imagined it would be considerably easier for her to simply endorse Biden through Social Media or her concerts rather than fix football matches. On the other hand, as she was a 'global superstar' no doubt a large number of her followers were in Europe, Japan and elsewhere so they wouldn't be eligible to vote in America. Judging from the very brief footage of one of her concerts I had a suspicion only a few would be old enough to vote anyway.

"Says here it's a covert operation to psychologically manipulate people's minds," said Wasp and laughed loudly, spitting a few crumbs of bread and chicken on my bed covers. "Them shrinks don't know nothing."

"Why do you say that?" I asked, looking over.

"They's all a bunch of tossers, like," said Wasp. "Wankers."

"Oh, I don't know that that's entirely true," I said as the news changed to the latest on some West Australian politician I'd never heard of. "I believe they do a lot of good work with people with mental health issues."

"Fuck that," said Wasp, ripping a wing off the chicken unnecessarily viciously. "I got sent to see a shrink once and he totally fucked it up, didn't he."

"You've had to see a psychiatrist?" I asked cautiously. Wasp didn't like talking about her background and I'd learned to step carefully. I was deeply intrigued, however.

"Yeah," she said and tossed the bones of the wing onto the table. "Depressed, weren't I. Me foster pigs took me to the doc who sent me to a psych who said I was being bullied at school. Tosser." She snorted derisively.

I confess I found it hard to believe she had been bullied at school but then again that was perhaps how she'd learnt her strategy of instant

attack. My way of coping had been to take refuge in solitude and eating.

“So you weren't bullied at school?” I asked.

“What you think?” she asked, giving me a pained look.

“I would doubt it,” I said, “but you must have been depressed for a reason.”

“It was them shits I was living with,” she said. “Evil fucking bastards they were. Ohh they was all lovey dovey when the social came round, making out how wonderful they was even though I was incogible but soon as the social was gone they'd be straight back to their old selves.”

“Incogible?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, “you know, like out of control.”

“Ohh, you mean incorrigible,” I said. “Umm, so did they mistreat you?”

“Don't worry about it,” she said. “It's all history, now, OK.”

“Umm, so were you out of control?” I asked.

“Course I bleeding was,” said Wasp with a laugh. “I weren't gonna let them shits control me, was I.”

I munched on a chicken leg thoughtfully, letting the sports news wash over me. This was a tricky one. If, as Wasp said, they were treating her badly then she was quite right to fight back but it was also entirely possible that Wasp had been badly behaved and simply viewed their attempts to instil some measure of discipline as abuse. I'd never had any children, of course, but I seemed to be able to get along quite well with Wasp. She seemed quite amenable if you took the trouble to explain things but then again she was older now and her hormones had presumably settled down. My inclination was to side with her, on the grounds that I got on well with her and you do read horror stories every now and then about things that have happened with foster

homes and social care. In fact, now I was thinking about it, I vaguely recollected reading of a girl who'd been sexually abused from the age of five by the natural son of her foster parents and I daresay it was not unknown for the foster parents themselves to sexually abuse their charges.

“Umm, did they have any children of their own?” I asked, a little circumspectly.

“Who?” asked Wasp, taking the other wing a lot less dramatically.

“Your foster parents,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “A little shit called Simon. He was always dobbling me in 'til I threatened to rip his balls off.”

This seemed more like the Wasp I knew.

“Was he older than you?” I asked.

“Nah, two years younger,” she said. “So what's it to you anyway?”

“Oh nothing,” I said. “I'm just trying to get to know you a little better.”

“What for?” she asked. “You're bugging off in a day or two. What do you care?”

“I have no idea why,” I said without thinking. “But I do.”

She stopped eating and stared at me.

“Sorry,” I said. “I know you don't like people caring about you.”

I meant it as a joke but since I am by nature a serious person – my mother frequently said I was born old – people never seem to notice.

“It ain't that,” said Wasp, still staring at me. “Just ain't used to it, like. People are always trying to get one over on me, make me do things. Guys 'specially.”

“Ahh, that's more than likely because you're a girl,” I said. “Despite the changes since the sixties we still live in a very sexist society, unfortunately.”

“You ain't like that,” said Wasp, scooping up some more potato salad with a crust of sourdough.

“I hope I'm not,” I said, “but I'm sure some aspects of our society have rubbed off on me. Still, I do have a fair number of female clients.”

“Nah, you're all right,” said Wasp with a dismissive wave of her hand. I noticed her fingers were liberally smeared with mayonnaise. “You're cool.”

“Thank you,” I said with a little bow of my head. It suddenly occurred to me that I'd never heard her say 'thank you' to me or anyone else. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

She froze in mid bite and eyed me suspiciously.

“Why do you never say 'thank you'?” I asked, bracing myself for an intense reaction of some sort.

“Just empty words, innit,” she said, relaxing. “What's the point?”

“Well, it's polite,” I said. “People like other people to show some sort of appreciation when they've done them a kindness.”

“You mean like driving them to Perth?” she asked, a smile hovering on her lips.

“Well, yes, I suppose so,” I said, surprised once again by her perceptiveness. “But in that case you've amply demonstrated your gratitude and appreciation in other ways.”

“You what?” she asked, frowning.

“You stole a car to repair mine,” I said. “At no little risk to yourself, I might add.”

She snorted in a way which I took to mean she didn't see any particular risk in what she'd done.

"How did you get the car out of the airport car park?" I asked. "Surely it's ticketed?"

"Just waited for another car to leave then followed it out the gate," she said. "Piece of piss really."

"But aren't there cameras there to stop that sort of thing?" I asked.

"So what they gonna do?" she asked, shrugging. "Send a fine in the post? Car's just a load of parts now so they'll never find it and the owners will report it stolen when they get back."

"But the camera might have recorded your face," I said.

"Nah," she said. "That's why I wear this," and she flipped the hood of her hoodie down and pulled the sides around so only the tip of her nose and a faint glint from her eyes showed.

"I'm impressed" I said, meaning it. She'd obviously thought things through in the past and didn't operate solely on impulse. "They can't fine the owner, by the way."

"How'd you mean?" she asked.

"Only the police and certain government bodies such as the Tax Office can issue fines," I said, eyeing the large packet of assorted biscuits Wasp had bought as well. "Car park operators are private corporations and don't have the authority. They can send a bill for the parking fee and administrative costs but have little power to enforce it beyond passing it to a debt collector."

"For real?" she asked interestedly.

"For real," I echoed, wondering if I had inadvertently suggested she specialise in stealing cars from car parks in future. I squashed the thought almost immediately as I doubted she'd care if the owner got fined or not and stealing a car from the street or a supermarket car

park would be just as easy and wouldn't incur a penalty for avoiding parking fees anyway.

"Sweet," she said and grabbed the biscuits while I was still making up my mind. My indecision wasn't about having the biscuits, that was an inevitability. It was about whether or not to make a cup of coffee first to dunk them in. Coffee won out so I got up to make a cup.

"I don't know what your plans for the evening are," I said as the kettle boiled, "but if you're planning on watching any of your dreadful shows would you mind watching in your own room?"

"Don't you like the Marvel Universe then, Red?" she asked.

"I find it incomprehensible," I admitted. "All these people run around doing strange things while warding off totally implausible criminals and then when they get trapped in a situation they can't possibly escape from it turns out that they have these superpowers perfectly tailored to fit that situation. And how is it, if these criminals are so powerful and beyond the planet's authorities to deal with them, that they haven't already overwhelmed the world?"

"That's because they're master criminals of great evil," said Wasp enthusiastically. "The people of Earth have managed to keep them at bay but only just and their resources are shrinking. The Avengers and the others are all that's left."

"And another thing," I said, pouring water into my cup. "If they are master criminals why do they make so many stupid mistakes?"

"How'd you mean?" asked Wasp.

"Well, take Spiderman or Ant-man, for example," I said. "Why doesn't the Joker or whoever just spray them with a big bottle of insect killer?"

"Because there'd be no movies if he did," said Wasp. "A movie opens with Spiderman climbing up the side of a big building and in through a window. The Joker sprays him with Mortein and Spiderman dies horribly, writhing on the floor. Movie ends after 30 seconds. Who'd pay to see that?"

“Well fair point,” I said, sitting down again and reaching for the biscuits. “If you put it that way it makes sense, especially for people who need little more from a movie than fast action.”

“Did you see that old movie *Alien*?” asked Wasp.

“Ahh, now that was a good movie,” I said. “It was logically thought out, given the base premise of an alien getting on board the space craft.”

“You think?” said Wasp. “Wouldn't it have made a lot more sense, right at the beginning, when the crew discover they have an alien on board, for them to get in their space suits and open all the air locks? That way the alien would have been sucked out into space and killed.”

I scowled and tried to remember the film. I'd seen it a long time ago and the details now escaped me.

“I'm sure they had a good reason not to do that,” I said. “Perhaps they didn't have enough reserves of air to refill the ship?”

“Oh come on,” said Wasp. “They're on that ship for years. Of course they're going to have a way of replenishing their air. Anyway, once they've figured out where the alien is they could probably have sealed off sections of the ship and just opened an air lock near by.”

“You're probably right,” I said, “but I still can't make sense of your Marvel movies.”

“It's 'cos you're old,” she said callously, “not 'cos they're bad.”

“Well, very likely,” I said. “Films are made with a target demographic in mind and I'd be surprised if that demographic included people like me.”

“You what?” she said, squinting at me.

“Oh, um, demographic, umm, a group of people with shared characteristics,” I said.

“Whatevs,” she said which I took to be a shortening of ‘whatever’ but it may not have been. “Nah, I’m going out tonight.”

“Oh really?” I asked, astonished. “Where?”

“Dunno,” she said, “but it’s Friday night and there’s bound to be some action going on somewhere.”

“What sort of action?” I asked, my mind instantly turning, uncharitably, to bank robberies and the like.

“Dunno,” she said. “Gotta be some pubs or clubs around here.”

“Ahhh, right,” I said, mightily relieved. After all, it was only natural that she’d seek the company of other young people. She’d only had me for the last week or so and I wasn’t the best company, even for people my own age. “Excellent. Perhaps you’ll make some friends.” I got out my wallet and found a \$50 note. “Here, take this and enjoy yourself.”

“Nah, it’s all good,” she said, taking a handful of biscuits instead.

“Go on, take it,” I said. “I know the boys will be queuing up to buy you drinks but you might need to take a taxi back to the hotel or if some emergency crops up. A little cash is always useful.” I slid the note under a corner of the biscuit packet beside her and took a few for myself.

She looked at it for a few moments then looked at the TV.

“So did you have a boyfriend in Brisbane?” I asked, the thought only just occurring to me. I knew she’d run away from a bad situation at home but it hadn’t occurred to me that she may have left someone important behind.

“Shit, no,” she said with a laugh. “Guys are just trouble.”

“Ahhh,” I said. “I apologise. I just assumed you liked boys. That was silly of me in this day and age.”

“You think I’m a lezzie?” she demanded, staring at me again although

this time with a biscuit halfway to her mouth.

"I have no idea," I said honestly. "And if you are it's no business of mine."

"Would it bother you if I was?" she asked and popped the biscuit in her mouth.

"Not at all," I said. "Each to their own and I did vote in favour of gay marriage a few years ago." I paused. "I'm fairly anti-social, you see, a bit of a recluse, but I don't discriminate. I avoid everyone." I laughed, trying to relieve the tension that had suddenly appeared although it could just have been on my side. How did we get from *Alien* to this so quickly?

"You're weird," she said. "Don't you like fucking?"

"You mean the swear word?" I asked, suddenly feeling embarrassed and defensive.

"Nah," she said. "I know you don't like swearing. I meant fucking, you know, what people do in bed and shit."

"Ahh," I said, feeling uncomfortable as well as embarrassed. "Listen, you really should take that fifty, just to be safe." I reached over and slid the note closer to her. Relieved of the protection of the biscuit packet the money got caught by the breeze from the air conditioner and fluttered to the floor. Wasp ignored it.

"C'mon," she said, her voice level. "Do you or don't you?"

"Does it matter?" I asked.

"Nah, not really," she said and bent to pick up the money. "Listen, I don't have to go out, not if you don't want me to."

"No, no, you go out," I said quickly. "You should be with people your own age. Have some fun, make friends, enjoy yourself."

"You sure?" she asked, looking at me intently.

“Sure I’m sure,” I said, avoiding her gaze.

“OK,” she said. She looked at the fifty then rolled it up like a cigarette before standing. “See you later, then, Red.”

I followed her to the door, mainly, I think, so I could lock it behind her and retreat into the safety of my seclusion.

“Oh Red,” she called as the door was almost shut.

“Yes?” I asked, half opening it again.

She looked down the corridor then looked the other way.

“Thanks,” she said quietly and suddenly kissed me on the cheek. “For everything.”

Chapter Fifteen

It was raining when I woke up. That kind of rain you get in Perth that comes down heavily for a while and creates swirls and eddies in the gutters but doesn't last more than an hour or two. Then the sun comes back out and everything sparkles for a while before looking dry and acrid again. As I drank my coffee little snatches of a dream I'd had kept coming back to me. Wasp had been running around somewhere I didn't recognise but which was a city or a large town and was being hunted by the police. Even though they were on foot, in their cars and flying overhead in helicopters they couldn't see her because she was wearing her hoodie of invisibility. I could see her though, either from one of the helicopters or flying on my own, and she was running all over the place laughing and making fun of the police. I had a very clear recollection of one scene where she stood on the roof of a police car with one foot on the bar with the flashing lights jeering and taunting them as they milled around, unable to see her.

I didn't ascribe any special meaning to the dream however. Dreams are simply the brain cells using the downtime to clear away their waste products. I had a vague recollection that at some point in the night I'd half woken to the sound of a police siren going past the hotel so my brain had probably conflated that into the dream as well. Perhaps the siren had been what triggered the dream. I could also hear faint snoring coming from the room next door, the other side to Wasp's, so someone must have arrived late in the night.

"What to do about the car?" I wondered, toying with my mug and looking at the rain. "Should I ring to see if it's ready or walk round?"

I didn't fancy walking the three kilometres in the rain and I was reluctant to ring. For some reason I didn't want my phone number to be logged contacting Matt's Wreckers, or even worse, the call being recorded. It was illogical as if the police had the place under surveillance then they'd know my car was there but logic doesn't always dispel anxieties. After giving myself a talking to I got their phone number from the internet and rang. Matt solved my dilemma by not answering so there was no conversation to record.

It was, however, still raining and I didn't know if the car had been repaired so I decided to wait until the rain stopped and Wasp was awake. If nothing else she would have a better idea of the protocol. In a happier mood I made another coffee then turned on the TV and flicked through all the channels before flicking it off again. Daytime television is dire at the best of times but on a Saturday morning in an unfamiliar city it is downright depressing.

I was rinsing my coffee mug when my phone rang. By the time I'd dried my hands and picked up the phone whoever was ringing had hung up. The display reported that the call was from an unknown number so I stood there for a few moments, phone in hand, in case they left a message. Nothing was forthcoming so I slipped the phone in my pocket and went out onto the small verandah to see how the rain was progressing. There was a man leaning on the verandah rail of the room next door, smoking a cigarette. He was completely naked apart from a pair of underpants so I quickly turned and went back inside in case he saw me and wanted to strike up a conversation. Still, the rain had almost stopped so I decided to go and wake Wasp, take her to breakfast and discuss what to do about the car.

She either wasn't there or was sound asleep so I sent a text to tell her I'd gone to a café in the Shopping Mall. I'd just ordered a couple of toasted bacon and egg sandwiches and a cappuccino when my phone rang again.

"Hello, Reggie Dorfmann," I said, making my way towards a vacant table.

"Good morning Mr Dorfmann," said an unfamiliar but brisk female voice. "Constable Joanne Waverly, Midland Police."

My heart skipped a beat and I half lurched into a chair beside the table. How had they found out about the stolen car so quickly?

"Ahh, yes, good morning," I said, hoping the phone technology would hide the guilt in my voice.

"You reported a missing person," said Joanne Waverly. She paused and I heard a rustle of papers. "Ahh, Sandra Sullivan. Is that correct?"

“Yes, indeed,” I said as relief flooded through me. “Have you found her?”

“Would it be convenient for you to come to the Station?” she asked. “I have a few questions.”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “When would be convenient?”

“Shall we say at 12 noon?” suggested Joanne.

“Fine by me,” I said. “Shall I ask for you?”

“Yes, Constable Joanne Waverly,” she said. “Thank you.”

She hung up abruptly and I stared at my phone wondering what questions she had and whether or not it would be an idea to take Wasp this time. It was a little before ten so there was plenty of time to finish breakfast and get the car. If, however, it wasn't ready or had mysteriously vanished there was also time to get a taxi. Good. Now things were organised I could enjoy my breakfast. I looked around then got up and fetched a copy of the West Australian paper to read.

“Hey, hey,” said Wasp quietly slipping into the spare chair as I read an article on wool prices. She was back in her torn jeans and old sweatshirt but she wasn't wearing her hoodie.

“Hello,” I said. “How are you? Did you have a good time last night?”

“Yeah, OK,” she said, looking pointedly at my second toasted sandwich.

“Take it,” I said. “I'll get some more.”

“Got yer car back,” she said when I returned to the table.

“No, not yet,” I said. “I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Nah,” she said. “It's at the hotel. I just fetched it.”

“Ahh, sorry,” I said. “I misunderstood. That was very kind of you.

Thank you. Did you get wet?"

"Someone gave me a lift," she said.

"Ahh, right," I said. I wondered if she'd met someone the previous night and gone home with them. She was, after all, a healthy young woman and in need of friends. Regardless, it was none of my business.

"I, um, had a call from the police a little while ago," I said. "They have some questions they want to ask."

Wasp finished the rest of my coffee then started to dribble coffee foam on the table and draw patterns in it with the spoon.

"Oh yeah," she said, her face expressionless.

"I was thinking it might be a good idea if you came with me," I said. "After all, I've told them all I know so I don't expect I'll have any answers."

"About me mum?" she asked.

"Yes," I said and she tensed a fraction.

"Nah," she said. "I ain't going to no police station."

"You may end up having to," I pointed out. "It's entirely possible that when they do find her they'll refuse to give me her contact details as I'm not a relative. They may even think I'm some sort of debt collector and she might be at risk."

"We'll worry about that when it happens," said Wasp.

"OK," I said then thanked the waitress as she put two more toasted sandwiches and a milkshake on the table. "So how's the car?"

"Looks good," she said, "although most of it's filthy and the driver's side is clean. I'll take it to a car wash later."

"There isn't much point," I said. "It'll get filthy again when I'm driving

back. Might as well wait until I'm in Brisbane before washing it. It'll need a service as well. It's done a lot of driving recently."

She shrugged and chewed on her bacon and egg sandwich.

"So have you given any more thought about what to do now you're here?" I asked.

"Nah," she said. "See what happens. When you going back?"

"I've been thinking about that," I said. "Obviously I need to see the police this afternoon but I really don't think I'll be able to answer their questions. It also seems to me that if they're only asking the questions now then they are probably only getting ready to start their enquiries. It's entirely possible that this could take a long time. After all, I'm sure they have a lot of other things to do."

Wasp screwed up her face but continued munching.

"Also the lady who rang is just a Constable," I said, "which suggests that they don't consider this case to be worth someone of higher rank. Unless they turn up something very quickly I'm rather afraid they'll stop looking quickly as well."

"So what you saying?" asked Wasp.

"I'm not entirely sure," I said slowly. "But I do have clients and a Museum to run back in Brisbane. I can't stay here indefinitely."

"Oh," said Wasp flatly.

"How about this?" I said, making up my mind. "I'll see the police this afternoon and ask when they anticipate starting to make enquiries. It's even possible they'll start this weekend so I'm thinking I might leave on Monday. That way I can be back in Brisbane some time on Thursday."

Wasp just stared at me although I thought I could see sadness in her eyes. It could just as easily have been wishful thinking on my part though.

"I did, however, make you a promise," I said, wondering why I wanted Wasp to feel sad about my departure. "So we'll give the police until Monday lunchtime then we'll go to see a private investigator."

"You reckon it's worth it?" asked Wasp.

"I have no experience of these things," I said, "apart from a few old movies but a private investigator will almost certainly be faster than the police. It is a shame we don't have a photograph of her though."

"Yeah, I should have made her go do a photo shoot before she buggered off," said Wasp drily. "My bad."

"Oh don't blame yourself," I said. "I've just had a thought. Did your mother ever get arrested in Melbourne?"

"Yeah," said Wasp. "Why?"

"Then the Melbourne Police will probably have a photograph of her," I said, tapping my finger on the table thoughtfully. "I'll mention it to this Constable Waverly when I see her and ask for a copy."

"You going to eat that?" asked Wasp, pointing to the remaining toasted sandwich.

I smiled and pushed the plate over, wishing I had her metabolism.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

"I'll manage," she said. "It's no biggie."

I sighed and gazed thoughtfully out of the window. I had a big decision to make and I wasn't convinced it would be the right thing. If I decided to do it, that is.

"You were right last night," said Wasp, studying the cooling congealing sandwich in her hand.

"What about?" I asked, looking back at her. She kept her gaze on the sandwich and didn't look at me.

"I should thank people more," she said. "Specially you, Red. You've been very good to me."

"That's OK," I said, starting to feel embarrassed. I always do when things get emotional.

"Just that people are usually out to do me in one way or another," she said, putting the sandwich down untasted. "Ain't never had nobody help me for no reason."

She lifted her eyes to look at me then quickly looked away, as did I.

"Ahh," I said, not having a clue what to say. I must have been absent the day they covered this sort of situation on my bookkeeping course.

"Yeah," she said. "Too bloody heavy, eh."

I only realised at that moment that she was probably as embarrassed as I was and that she hid her feelings very deeply.

"Yes," I said. "Far too heavy. Let's leave it at that, OK? There's something else I want to talk to you about."

"Oh shit," she said and her face fell. "What'd I do wrong now?"

"Absolutely nothing," I said, my decision made. "It's just that, well, I do have to go back to Brisbane but that won't stop me worrying about you."

"I'll be OK," she said. "No worries."

"I'm sure you will," I said briskly, managing to transfer this situation to the business part of my brain, "but it doesn't hurt to have some additional resources. What I propose is that on Monday morning we open a bank account in your name and arrange for you to have a cash card. I am not a wealthy man and I have to fund the Museum in large part as well but I will arrange for, say, \$200 dollars to be put into your account each week. It's not much but at least you'll always be able to eat."

"You what?" she demanded, staring at me.

"I'll give you \$200 a week subsistence," I said. "I can't afford more but it's better than nothing. I'd prefer to do this through a bank account as it's not wise to carry large sums of cash and it'll make the transfers easier."

She just stared at me.

"I'm sorry it's not more," I said, starting to squirm.

"Fuck," breathed Wasp. Her face had gone pale.

"What's the matter?" I asked, aware that a woman at the next table was watching. I could feel my face starting to go red and I wished I was back safe in my home in Brisbane.

"See you," exclaimed Wasp suddenly, jumping up. She hurried out of the café and disappeared. I stared after her, blinking.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," said the woman at the next table, at look of distaste on her face. "You're old enough to be her father!"

"Oh go to hell," I exclaimed and jumped up myself. She drew back as though afraid I was going to hit her but I hurried outside the café instead, merely wishing I had.

There was no sign of Wasp anywhere in the Shopping Centre so I made my way back to the hotel. I banged on her door, fully expecting her not to be there. Instead she opened it.

"Hello," she said. "Come in."

"What happened back there?" I asked. Her face looked a little wet but maybe she'd just had a wash.

"I couldn't handle it," she said, turning away. "You freaked me out. Sorry."

"I'm a little freaked out as well," I said. "Umm, let's just forget this happened, OK. I didn't mean anything by it."

"What you mean?" asked Wasp retreating into her room.

"Umm, well the woman at the next table said something," I said, going red again. "Umm, I hope you didn't take it that way as well."

"What did she say?" asked Wasp so I told her and she burst out laughing. "Stupid old bitch!"

"So you didn't take my offer that way?" I asked, desperately wanting clarification as I was completely out of my depth.

"Shit no," said Wasp. "I know you ain't like that but I can't let you do it. You've already done so much for me."

"OK," I said, more than happy to bring the sorry business to an end. "But I didn't know what else to do."

"Not a lot you can do," she said. "No hoppers like me ain't going nowhere."

"You're not a no hoper," I said. "Granted it may seem that way at the moment but things can change."

"Yeah, right," she said, flopping on the bed. "This time next year I'll be a bloody millionaire! What time you seeing the cops?"

"Twelve," I said and looked at my watch out of habit. "Ahh, I'd best be going."

"You still want me to come with you?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You wouldn't feel comfortable." Actually in truth it would be me who wouldn't feel comfortable as I had a nagging suspicion I'd made a fool of myself. How I had no idea but that's the way it goes. I'm not good with people.

"Here's your keys," she said handing them to me.

“Thanks,” I said, taking them. “Umm, well, I don't expect I'll be long.”

* * *

Despite having an appointment Constable Joanne Waverly didn't appear until almost half past twelve. She took me into a small drab interview room with three hard chairs and a small table. She had a file with her which, I was intrigued to notice, already had quite a few sheets of paper in it.

“Take a seat Mr Dorfmann,” she said. “Thank you for coming in at such short notice.”

“Thank you,” I said and sat. The chair was harder than it looked and I wondered if it was designed that way to encourage people to make confessions. More likely though it was just cheap. “I am rather anxious to resolve this matter.”

“I'm sure you are,” she said, opening the file. “How well do you know Sandra Sullivan?”

“Not well at all,” I said. “I was merely her bookkeeper.”

“So you wouldn't know if she took drugs then?” asked Joanne, watching me while spreading some papers.

“You know, I rather think she may have,” I said. “Not that I have any evidence for that, of course. Why? Is it of significance?”

“A routine check of our records is made whenever a person is reported missing,” said Joanne. “After all, it simplifies things if we already have knowledge of that person. They may simply be in prison, for example, and not told anyone.”

“Does that happen often?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “but it does from time to time.”

“So is Sandra in prison?” I asked.

“No,” said Joanne. “We do, however, have records for a Sandra Sullivan, nee Dee, a naturalised Australian born in London and of the right age group. It is unclear though if this is the same Sandra Sullivan.”

“Well, it’ll be easy enough to find out,” I said. “Why not ask her?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple Mr Dorfmann,” said Joanne, putting both her hands flat on the table. “I’m afraid she’s dead.”

Chapter Sixteen

The door to Wasp's room was wedged open when I got back to the hotel and the TV was on but muted. I knocked then pushed the door further open and looked in. I couldn't see her but the bathroom door was closed and her clothes were strewn all over the floor. I made my way over then pressed my ear against the bathroom door. I couldn't hear anything but that didn't mean much. I tweaked the bedspread reasonably smooth again then picked up Wasp's clothes one by one and folded them. I left them in a neat pile on the bed and sat down in the chair to wait.

It wasn't long before the door opened and she came out, wearing one of the complimentary bath robes. She had the phone's earpieces in and was studying its screen. She must have caught sight of me out of the corner of her eye as she jumped and let out a little gasp.

"Hey, hey," she said with a half smile then her face fell. "What?"

"Did you have a nice bath?" I asked, as the bathroom was half full of steam.

"What's happened?" she said, her face intent.

"Umm, I'm afraid I have some bad news," I said as Wasp stared at me, the phone forgotten. "The police have, ahh, found your mother."

Wasp didn't say anything. She just stared at me, her face blank.

"Umm," I said, adjusting my collar nervously. I wished there was any easy way to break bad news but there isn't. "I'm afraid your mother is dead."

"Oh," said Wasp. She pulled the ear buds out of her ears and coiled the wire around her phone. She glanced at the bed. "Did you do that?" She pointed at her clothes.

"Yes," I said. "Umm, I'm sorry."

She picked up the pile of clothes and looked around for somewhere to

put them. She half moved towards the table where I was sitting then just dropped the clothes on the floor and slumped onto the bed.

“When?” she asked, not looking at me.

“Almost two years ago,” I said. I didn't know what to do or say so I ploughed on. “The police said they had an anonymous phone call and went to a unit in Northbridge. Umm, they found her there, collapsed on the floor. Apparently she'd had a heart attack.”

I decided not to tell Wasp her mother had been severely underweight and had sores on her legs. She didn't really need to know that. Just as I was sure the police had only told me selected highlights.

“Heart attack, huh,” said Wasp. She held up her phone and looked at it without seeing it then gave a strangled little laugh. “OD was it?”

“Umm,” I said then decided to admit it. “Yes. The autopsy concluded she'd died from a heart attack brought on by an overdose of crystal methamphetamine. Umm, that's ice.”

“I know,” said Wasp emotionlessly. “Fucking stupid bitch.” She pushed herself backwards up the bed then sat cross-legged, staring at the silent TV.

“I'm sorry,” I said again.

Wasp shrugged then slowly pulled the bedspread around herself and started rocking backwards and forwards. I felt completely helpless so I got up and stood beside the bed, looking down at her.

“I'm sure it was quick,” I said quietly, putting my hand on her shoulder.

“What the fuck do you know about it?” she shouted and lashed out with her hand. The phone caught me on my wrist. “Get your fucking hands off me, you stupid fat bastard! It's all your fucking fault!”

I jerked back in hurt surprise and she threw her phone at me. It caught me on my cheek.

“Fuck off and leave me alone, shithead!” she shouted before throwing her head into the pillows. “Go back to fucking Brisbane! Get out of here! Go on!” She subsided and started to cry, trying to pull the bedspread over her head as well but it was caught by a pillow.

Stunned, I stood there rubbing my wrist and watching her. I had absolutely no idea what to do. Did she really want me to go away and leave her alone? I looked over at the door, wondering whether I should leave then bent to pick up her phone. I could hear faint music coming from the ear buds so I turned it off and put it on the table.

“Umm, well, I’d best ... um, I’ll be in my room,” I said hesitantly.

Wasp ignored me and tried once again to pull the bedspread over her head. I stepped over and gently put it over her head for her.

“Fuck you!” she snarled and wrenched the bedspread out of my hand.

“Umm, I’ll be next door if you need me,” I said quietly and she tried to kick me but her foot got caught in the bedspread.

I backed away slowly then headed for the door. It was wedged open by the wedge she’d used to break into the car at the airport. I unwedged the door and was about to leave when I distinctly heard Wasp say “Oh mum, mum”.

Her voice was so plaintive and full of pain that I hesitated, my heart going out to her. I couldn’t leave her like this so I slowly walked back to the bed and sat on the edge. Wasp ignored me. She probably thought I’d gone as the door had shut itself with a pronounced click when I’d let go of it. Cautiously I reached out and put my hand on where I thought her shoulder was.

“I’m so dreadfully sorry, Sharlet,” I said quietly. “I remember when my mother died. It was like the world had come to an end.”

Slowly a hand emerged from the bedspread and found mine. I gripped it and patted it with my other hand. Then Wasp slowly emerged from the bedspread and curled up, half on my lap, without letting go of my hand. I put my other arm around her and held her tightly while she let

out her grief. We stayed like that for what seemed an eternity as I gently rocked her backwards and forwards and whispered whatever soothing things I could think of. I couldn't think of many but perhaps they helped. I couldn't imagine how she felt but I was surprised to feel very protective of her.

"Come on, dry your eyes," I whispered when her crying eased. I reached for the corner of the pillow and gave it to her. She automatically wiped her eyes then looked to see what she was using then sat up, hugging the pillow.

"Would you like some tea or coffee?" I asked. "Something to eat?"

She shook her head but didn't say anything.

"I can go out and get some pizza," I offered. She snorted and smiled wanly at me.

"I'm good," she said.

"Do you mind if I make some?" I asked.

She shook her head so I got off the bed and hobbled to the kitchenette. My leg had gone to sleep.

"I had this crazy idea she'd quit the drugs," said Wasp quietly, watching me. "I was convinced I'd find her and everything would be all right again. Like before, when I was a little kid and it was just me and her. Fucking stupid me, huh, Red? Should have bloody figured she'd go and OD. Two years ago, yeah?"

"That's what the police said," I said. "Umm, they said they searched for relatives but there was only you and her former husband who was in prison and didn't want to know. They tried to locate you but couldn't."

"Yeah, no," said Wasp, screwing up her face. "That was probably after I'd run away from me foster pigs and gone to Queensland."

"So was her former husband your father?" I asked.

“Fuck no,” said Wasp. “Me dad’s dead. Eddie was just some tosser.”

“Ahh,” I said. “So this man in prison, umm, Eddie, was your step father?”

“Yeah,” said Wasp. “So what did the cops do with mum?”

“She had no money apparently,” I said, “and very few possessions and no traceable relatives so the state had her cremated. There’s an urn and a plaque in Karrakatta Cemetery which is somewhere in Perth.” I hesitated. “Would you like to visit her there?”

“Nah,” said Wasp. “I ain’t seen her for years and no plaque’s gonna make any difference. She’s dead and that’s bloody that, ain’t it.”

“Well, yes,” I said. I took a slurp of hot coffee, steeling my nerves for what I was about to say.

“You called me Sharlet,” said Wasp unexpectedly.

“Umm, yes I did,” I said, confused by the sudden change of subject.

“That was nice,” she said. “I liked how you said ‘Sharlet’. People used to call me Shaz and I hated that.”

“Well, Sharlet is a nice name,” I said.

“Yeah but you say it different like,” she said. “All posh or something. It’s nice.”

“I’m glad you like it,” I said. “Would you like me to call you Sharlet from now on? Instead of Wasp?”

“What you mean, from now on?” she said, staring at me with a little frown. “You’re going back to Brisbane. I ain’t gonna see you again.”

“Ah, yes,” I said. “Umm, correct me if I’m wrong but with your mother now gone there’s nothing for you here in Perth? No friends or relatives?”

She just shrugged.

“So when you feel up to it,” I said, taking that as agreement, “pack your things. We’ll leave this afternoon.”

“What?” she exclaimed, her face puzzled.

“I’m taking you back to Brisbane,” I said. “You’re all alone here and I’m not prepared to just dump you and drive away.”

“I ain’t going back to bloody Logan,” she snarled aggressively and braced herself as if I was about to wrench her bodily from the bed and toss her in my car.

“No, I don’t think that would be a good idea,” I said. “You’ll only run away again and put some other poor unfortunate through all this. Where’s that Lufthansa bag?”

“So where you taking me?” she demanded.

“Spring Hill,” I said, getting up. “You can stay with me for a week or so while you sort out what you want to do for the rest of your life.”

To my relief she smiled and relaxed, just as my phone started ringing. She jumped off the bed and retrieved the Lufthansa bag from behind the TV. She must have tossed it away and it had landed there or possibly she’d thrown it at something that had offended her on the TV. Fortunately the camera was in my room.

“Hello, Steph,” I said in surprise, answering the phone. For some reason I was feeling very positive and cheerful.

“Good afternoon, Reggie,” said Steph. “I hope you’re having a lovely time on your trip. I’m sorry to bother you.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “I should have been at the Museum today anyway. I’ll be back in a few days. How can I help you?”

“Hello Steph!” shouted Wasp, or rather Sharlet, loudly. She started to giggle and pulled off her bathrobe. I turned away in embarrassment

and stared fixedly out of the window.

“Who was that?” asked Steph.

“Just a friend of mine,” I said, my embarrassment deepening.

“What's her name?” she asked.

“Sharlet,” I said.

“Hello Sharlet!” bellowed Steph, nearly deafening me.

“Did you hear that?” I asked, turning round. Fortunately Sharlet had her jeans on and most of her upper body covered with her sweat shirt.

“See you in a few days!” shouted Sharlet.

“Shhh!” I exclaimed, putting my hand over the phone's mouthpiece.

“Looking forward to it,” shouted back Steph.

“Would you like to talk to Sharlet directly?” I asked, trying to be sarcastic and failing. “Only you're deafening me.”

“Sorry,” said Steph in a much quieter voice. “So is Sharlet your special friend, Reggie?”

“Not at all,” I said, wishing I hadn't answered the phone. I noticed Sharlet stuffing the bath robe in the Lufthansa bag as well so I waved my hand at her but she ignored me. “What did you ring me about?”

“Ahh, yes, I nearly forgot,” she said. “I'm here at the Museum all alone today and someone has pointed out a mistake on one of the labels and I don't know how to handle it.”

“This happens from time to time,” I said, noticing Sharlet come back from the bathroom with the other bath robe and all the little bottles of shampoo and body wash. I didn't bother to wave my hand this time. “Is that person still with you or have they gone?”

“He's in the Asian and Americas Room,” she said. “I told him I'd ring you so he's probably waiting to see what you say.”

“Right,” I said. “Probably best if I speak with him directly. Could you find him for me?”

I put my hand over the phone as Sharlet started to empty the contents of the mini-bar into her bag.

“Don't do that,” I hissed. “Put them back.”

She looked at me then reluctantly started to put the bottles back. I could hear indistinct voices at the other end of the phone.

“Hello?” said a male voice suddenly.

“Ahh, hello,” I said. “My name's Reggie Dorfmann, I'm the Director of the Museum. Steph tells me you think an item is mislabelled.”

“Sure do,” he said. He sounded American. “You have a feather in the Australian Room labelled as a Murray Mallee striated grasswren feather but it looks more like a Mukarrthippi grasswren feather.”

“Ahh, yes, I know the one you mean,” I said, relieved he hadn't spotted the Eclectus Parrot feather which actually was mislabelled. It was on my list of things to do which I hadn't got around to yet. “The feather you're referring to actually is a Murray Mallee grasswren. I found it myself. The Mukarrthippi is very similar but the white dorsal striations are slightly narrower.”

“You don't say,” said the man. He sounded as though he didn't believe me. “How can you be sure it isn't a Mukarrthippi with a wider than normal dorsal striation?”

“By the location,” I said, shaking my hand at Sharlet as she took the batteries out of the remote. “The two species are allopatric. The Murray Mallee is found only along the Victoria South Australia border, which is why it's known as the Murray Mallee grasswren and that is where I found the feather. The Mukarrthippi on the other hand is only found on a single sandhill on the western side of Yathong

Nature Reserve in Central New South Wales, several hundred kilometres away. It's actually the rarest bird in Australia with only about fifteen known individuals and it's protected. I haven't been able to visit there yet to search for any feathers."

I noticed Sharlet slide the battery cover of the remote back in place. She started going through all the drawers in the bedside cabinets.

"Well, you don't say," said the man. "I didn't know that." He sounded disappointed.

"But thank you," I said. "Mistakes do happen and we rely on the eagle eyes of our visitors to spot them. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Mighty fine place you've got here," he said. "Be better if you had a snack bar though."

"Well, there is a café a few doors down," I said, "and we do have a gift shop. Thank you once again for being so attentive. Could you put Steph back on the line?"

"Surely," he said as Sharlet rifled through a bible then tossed it back in the drawer.

"Hello?" said Steph.

"Hi, Steph," I said. "Could you give that gentleman a fridge magnet and thank him once again for me?"

"Sure," she said. "Anything else?"

"No, that's all," I said. "Thanks for ringing. Did he look convinced?"

"Not really," she said, "but I'm sure you are far more of an expert than he is."

"Oh, I wouldn't be too sure of that," I said with a laugh. "We get some very knowledgeable sorts visiting. I'll see you in a few days."

We exchanged farewells then hung up.

“Did you put the batteries back, Sharlet?” I asked, looking at her.

She shrugged and took the batteries out of her bag.

“We don't need them,” I said. “Leave them for the next guest in this room.”

“OK,” she said, fitting them back into the remote, “but you've paid for the booze. Why can't we take that?”

“No we haven't,” I said. “When they check the room they'll add whatever's been taken from the mini-bar to the bill and it's damned expensive. If you want some alcohol we'll go to a bottle shop.”

“Oh,” she said, and took several miniature bottles of scotch out of her bag.

“I'm not sure of the exact prices,” I said, taking them off her and putting them back in the mini-bar, “but we could probably get a full size bottle for three or four of these.”

“I didn't know that, Red,” she said ruefully. She retrieved three mini-cans of lager and held them out to me.

“Do you drink?” I asked, curious. She'd shown no sign of wanting anything alcoholic to drink but you never know.

“Only beer,” she said. She zipped up her bag with a happy flourish and picked up her steel capped boots. “C'mon, let's go!”

Chapter Seventeen

I breathed a sigh of relief when I opened my front door on Monday evening. Aside from the possibility that it had been burgled or vandalised in my absence, which it hadn't, it was my home, my sanctuary. A safe place where I could be away from the obligations and aggravations of life. Whilst my unplanned trip to Perth had been an adventure of sorts I am not the adventurous type and just the sight of my books and CDs neatly organised on their respective bookcases brought a calming wash over me.

"Nice place," said Sharlet, bouncing in behind me. "Let's burn it down for the insurance!"

"Don't your dare," I said as firmly as I could and giving her a cold hard stare. Just the thought of it alarmed me. "Don't even joke about it."

"Who said I was joking?" she said, giving me a wide-eyed innocent look. Then she looked around properly and whistled. "Wow! It's so clean!"

"And I'd like to keep it that way," I said, putting my bag and briefcase on the table.

"OK, OK, stay cool," she said. She hesitated then put her bag and work boots on the table as well then slipped off her trainers. "Happy now?"

"Ecstatic," I said, "but you don't need to go barefoot. The parquet floor is easily cleaned. Now, first things first. Coffee. Do you want some?"

"I'll do it," she said, heading for the open-plan kitchen at the far end of the lounge. "You just chill."

"Thanks," I said. "I think I'll have a shower. I feel all grimy."

She grinned and started opening cupboards and drawers in the kitchen to find things. Actually, I was feeling quite tired as well since

we'd driven back without stopping, except for fuel and even that wasn't frequent as I'd bought a couple of ten litre fuel cans. Perth to Brisbane in fifty one hours, only made possible by Sharlet doing most of the driving as she went considerably faster than I did. It was the car that I was most impressed by. It had done some nine thousand kilometres in eight days. Well, four and a half really since we did very little driving while actually in Perth. Sharlet had insisted that we check the oil and tyres before leaving Midland and discovered that the Toyota was low on oil. Another litre had fixed that and that had been the only issue; that and a filthy windscreen from all the dead bugs.

I went into my bedroom and stripped off the safari shorts and Hawaiian shirt I'd put back on for the return trip and put on my favourite bath robe. It was comfortably fluffy in dark grey and had a large eagle on the back. I'd bought it in America on my one and only trip overseas. I peered round the door into the kitchen to see how Sharlet was getting on then went into the bathroom.

"Milk's off," said Sharlet, walking in just as I stepped into the shower cubicle.

"Out!" I exclaimed, scrabbling desperately for the towel while cowering behind the frosted shower door.

"OK, OK," she said, holding up her hands. "Just saying, like."

She left and I put the robe back on and went into the lounge.

"We really need to have a talk about privacy," I said. "Please don't go into the bathroom when I'm in there."

"So lock the door," she said, going back behind the counter. "Is there anywhere round here where I can get some more milk?"

I sighed. I was so used to being alone in the apartment that it hadn't occurred to me.

"There's a litre carton in the freezer," I said. "Microwave it on defrost for four minutes."

“OK,” she said, pulling open the brushed steel lower door of the fridge/freezer.

“And if you wouldn't mind checking everything else in the fridge, I'd appreciate it,” I added. “Throw out everything that's out of date or looks mouldy in any way.”

“Sure,” she said, studying the microwave. She pushed a few buttons experimentally but seemed to know what she was doing so I left her to it. “What's today's date?”

“Actually I'm not sure,” I said. “Check your phone.”

“What's the difference between 'use by' and 'best before'?” she asked when I came out from my shower. I'd made a point of locking the door which was just as well as I'd heard the handle rattle just before I turned on the water.

“Hmm?” I asked as I stuffed my bundled up shorts and shirt in the garbage bin. I had no intention of ever wearing them again. “Oh, they mean exactly what they say. Use whatever it is before the 'use by' date as it could go bad after that. Eggs and milk in particular.”

“OK,” she said. “And 'best before'?”

“That just means the flavour might not be as good but it'll still be quite safe,” I said. “Like coffee and honey.”

“Don't they go bad as well?” she asked, dropping a few eggs into the garbage bin. She put the jar of honey back in the fridge.

“They do but it takes years,” I said. “Now, I'd like to get something absolutely straight with you.”

“Am I in trouble?” she asked, backing away slightly and bracing herself.

“Not at all,” I said. “It's just that this is my home and if you're going to be here for a while we need to be clear on boundaries.”

“You mean like where the walls are?” she asked, clearly puzzled.

“No, I mean personal boundaries,” I said. “Come with me.”

She dutifully followed me to the alcove in the lounge wall where the doors to the bathroom and two bedrooms were.

“Now,” I said, opening all of them. “This is my bedroom, this is the bathroom and this will be your room. These are ...”

“Way cool!” she exclaimed, pushing past me to go into her bedroom. “What’s in all those boxes?” She threw herself on the bare mattress and rolled over.

“Stop!” I said firmly. “You’re getting distracted. I need you to understand this.”

She pulled a face but rolled back and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Yes, Red,” she said and smiled happily.

“This apartment is open plan and only has four doors,” I said as being pedantic comes naturally to me, “apart from the wardrobes and cupboards, of course. There is the front door and these three. If any of these three are closed, I want you to promise you won’t just barge in, OK? Knock and wait outside.” I closed the bathroom door and my bedroom door to illustrate the point.

“What, out in the corridor?” she asked, puzzled.

“No,” I said patiently. “In this area here, where these doors are.

“Oh right,” she said. “So, what? You do naughty things you don’t want me to see then, do you?”

“Not at all,” I said, a trifle huffily. “It’s just that I might be getting changed or naked.”

“You’re going to be naked in my room?” she asked with that wide eyed look again. “Ooooooh!”

“Of course I'm not going to be naked in your room!” I said testily. “I'm referring to these two doors. Obviously I'll knock and wait before going into your room.”

“But not when I'm in the bathroom?” she asked, sucking in her cheeks.

“Especially when you're in the bathroom,” I said frowning. “What did you think I meant?”

“Chill, Red, just chill, OK,” she said with a laugh. “I get you, no worries, OK.”

“And there is a lock on the bathroom door,” I said. “I expect you to use it.”

“The bathroom, the door or the lock?” she asked, displaying a level of pedantry I hadn't expected.

“All three,” I said. “Are we clear on this?”

“Crystal,” she said. “Except ...”

“Except what?” I asked, beginning to wonder if Sharlet staying here was such a good idea after all.

“Except some crystals you can't see through,” she said, “so why do people say 'as clear as crystal'?”

I stared at her while my tired brain fought to catch up.

“I think they're referring to the kinds of crystals used for chandeliers and so on,” I said after a discernable pause, “but that's beside the point. The point here is that you understand that each of us must have some privacy.”

“Okies,” she said, jumping up to open one of the boxes. “So what's in the boxes?”

“Feathers,” I said. “Would you do me a kindness and stack them in my bedroom while I organise bedding for you? We can move my desk

tomorrow.”

“No sweat,” she said and carried the top box to my bedroom door. She knocked on it and waited, looking sideways at me with amusement in her eyes.

“Come in,” I said and she laughed.

She shifted all the boxes, they were very light after all, before I'd finished making her bed and she kindly helped me put a cover on the doona.

“So why've you got two bedrooms when you live alone?” she asked after admiring the freshly made bed. “Get a lot of visitors, do you?”

“Actually you're my first,” I said, going back into the lounge. “I bought this place when my mother went into a nursing home expecting that she'd be able to come and stay every now and then but she never did. I mostly use it as an office and store room.”

“Oh yeah,” said Sharlet. “I remember you said.” I sat in my favourite armchair and she carefully carried the two coffees over before sitting in the other one. “When did she die?”

“Oh, a little over two years ago,” I said. “But she was in the home for three years before that.”

“So where'd you live before?” she asked.

“With my mother,” I said, taking a sip of coffee. It was nice to have my old familiar brand again.

“That must have been nice,” she said, a little distantly. I reflected that we were both opposite extremes. I'd lived with my mother until I was in my mid-forties and she'd been taken from, or rejected by, hers when she was very young.

“That reminds me,” I said. “You need a key.”

I heaved myself out of my armchair and went to the kitchen drawer

where all the little bits of junk accumulate. I rummaged around and found the plastic sandwich bag where I kept all the miscellaneous keys. I upended it and found the key labelled 'spare front'.

"This is the key to the front door," I said, handing it to her. "It also opens the main door to the building and the door to the basement car park."

"Hey, cool," she said, taking it. She examined it then tossed it from one hand to the other. "You must trust me, hey."

"Yes, I do," I said, returning to my chair. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"Aren't you worried I'll nick all your stuff and run off?" she asked. "I got a rep for that."

"A what?" I asked.

"Reputation," she said. "That's what I do. Nick things."

"Ohh," I said. "Well there isn't a lot worth stealing here. The TV was a cheap one as I don't watch TV much. Everything else is getting pretty old. The stereo was expensive but I've had it, ohh, ten years or so now."

"So that's why you trust me?" she asked. "Nothing's worth nicking?"

"No, not at all," I said in surprise. "No, I was just saying that, well, I don't really know what I was saying but I do trust you. I'd be very surprised if you took anything from me."

She nodded thoughtfully and stuffed the key inside her jeans pocket.

"Well, I'm going to bed," I said, finishing my coffee. "I'm very tired."

"Night," she said, getting up as well.

"Oh yes," I said, going over to the linen closet. "You'll need a towel as well. There's soap and shampoo in the bathroom although you've got

plenty of those already.” I could have kicked myself for saying that as it was a reference to what she'd taken from the hotel in Perth and could have been interpreted as some sort of jibe about her stealing things.

“Yeah,” she said with a half laugh, either not picking up on the unintended jibe or dismissing it.

“One other thing,” I said. “If you hear noises in the night don't worry. The lift runs up and down just outside your bedroom wall and even though it's ultra quiet it still makes a bit of a noise. You might hear a voice or two as well.”

“So how many people live here?” she asked.

“Just me,” I said. “Oh, you mean in the entire building?” She nodded. “I don't know exactly but there are ten floors and eight of them are residential with two apartments on each floor so I imagine anywhere between sixteen and perhaps thirty five. The ground floor has a café, a Buddhist Meditation centre and a nail parlour and there are some offices on the second floor.”

“Which floor are we on?” she asked.

“The fifth,” I said, “which is why there's very little traffic noise. Sleep well.”

* * *

I woke in the morning to the smell of bacon and eggs which was a delightful way to wake. The smell brought back pleasant memories of the days before my mother forgot what bacon and eggs were or how to cook them. I put on my eagle robe and used the bathroom before venturing in search of the source of the smell. I noticed that the wrapped soaps and shampoo bottles from the hotel were neatly arranged on the shelf above the washbasin.

“Made you bacon and eggs on toast,” said Sharlet looking up from buttering some toast.

“How delightful,” I said, meaning it. “You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” she said. “Your cooker’s fucked so I used that electric fry pan under the sink.”

“Ahh,” I said, sitting on a stool at the counter. They came with the apartment and I didn’t recall ever having sat on one before. “I use that for drying and disinfecting feathers.”

“Fuck,” exclaimed Sharlet, looking at the bacon and eggs in dismay. “You think they’ll be all right?”

“I was teasing you,” I said, “although I do use the pan for drying feathers. I use a spray disinfectant to disinfect them. They’ll be fine. What’s wrong with the cooker?”

“Ain’t heating,” she said. “Turns on OK and them little lights come on and flash and shit but none of the rings heats up.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Have you ever used an induction hob before?”

“What’s that when it’s at home?” she asked.

“It’s a fairly new type of cooker,” I said. “Electric but as fast as gas and the hob doesn’t get hot. At least not much. I’ll show you how to use it later.”

She looked suspiciously at the cooker then plonked the pieces of toast onto plates. She swept the crumbs off the counter onto the floor with her hand then caught me watching her.

“What?” she said, a little aggressively.

“I like the place to be clean,” I said. “There’s a dustpan and brush under the sink.”

She gave me a withering look which I ignored then found the dustpan and brush and swept up the crumbs. I half heard a muttered ‘fucking slaver’ but ignored that as well. She emptied the dustpan into the bin then put them back under the sink and shut the cupboard door loudly.

“Anything else you want cleaned, mien fuhrer?” she said, a challenging look in her eye.

“Not for the moment,” I said, wondering where she'd picked up that reference to Hitler from. Probably a war movie I decided. “Unless you've made another mess somewhere else.” I'm fairly easy going but it was my apartment and I hate mess. It seemed best to me to make that clear from the outset.

She managed to get the bacon and eggs from the fry pan onto the toast reasonably successfully given that the fry pan had high sides and she was using a straight wooden spoon. She pushed one of the plates over towards me and fished some knives and forks from a drawer.

“Thank you,” I said, picking up the knife and fork. “This looks delicious.”

“So why's salt got a 'use by' date?” she asked, pushing over the container of supermarket salt. “It's been sitting in the ground for millions of years so it ain't going to go off quick, is it.”

“I didn't know it had,” I said, picking up the container. Sure enough it had a 'use by' date although it was several years in the future. “How very strange. You're right of course. Perhaps it's something to do with the chemicals they use to clean and purify it.”

She snatched the container back and studied the label.

“Says here it's pure salt from the Himalayas,” she said. “Where's the Himalayas?”

Once again I was intrigued by the gaps in her knowledge. How could she know that salt was mined and yet not know where, even roughly, the biggest range of mountains in the world was?

“It's a mountain range at the top of India,” I said, cutting off a chunk of toast with some bacon and egg. A little egg yolk oozed out but it looked fine. I ate the forkful under the watchful eye of Sharlet.

“Delightful,” I said, even though the bacon wasn't crispy and there was

a slight undertone of burnt toast. "You're an excellent cook."

"No I ain't," she said. "Bacon and eggs is all I can do, that and cereal. And toast."

"Oh well," I said. "There's a café on the ground floor if you get desperate."

"That what you do?" she asked, eating her own plateful quite happily.

"Sometimes," I said, "when I'm too tired to bother cooking but mostly I cook for myself."

"OK," she said.

We ate in silence for a while.

"Do you have any plans for today?" I asked, "only I'm going to be quite busy. I've got a fair amount of rescheduling to do and I really ought to drop by the Museum and see how things went while I was away."

"Oh," she said and thought about it. "Might go for a wander and check out the area."

"That's a good idea," I said. "There's a very nice park down the road a bit. Roma Street Parklands. There's a delightful ornamental garden there."

"Oh yeah?" she said, pushing her empty plate away. She didn't look particularly enthralled at the idea.

I finished mine then picked up my coffee, readying myself.

"And I'd like to have a chat with you after dinner," I said. I hadn't mentioned anything about her long term thoughts on the drive back as I felt she needed time to think but now she was here we needed to talk and settle a few things.

"Oh yeah?" she said, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. "What about?"

“The rest of your life,” I said. “You need to give that a little thought. After all, you can stay here as long as you like but you can’t stay forever. You need to make your own life.”

Chapter Eighteen

Sharlet helped me shift my desk from her room into mine after breakfast. I rarely used it as I did most of my feather work in my chair in the lounge and it gave her more space. Then I settled myself in the lounge with my laptop and my phone and started to re-arrange my schedule to make up for the lost days. Sharlet, meanwhile, worked her way slowly through my entire apartment, going through every cupboard, closet and drawer, opening things, inspecting them then putting them carefully back the way she'd found them. Quite why I don't know but she reminded me of something. It was only a little while later that I realised what it was. When I was a child we'd had a cat and whenever Fluffy was introduced to a new environment she'd explore everything thoroughly. Perhaps Sharlet was doing the same, although she didn't sniff anything, apart from an old box of cigars I'd been given by a client, or wee to mark her territory. I also noticed she didn't go into my bedroom, even though the door was open. Her bedroom door was firmly closed.

It took me most of the morning to contact everyone I needed to contact and reschedule. Bookkeeping is a cyclic process, largely based on quarterly and yearly cycles, and fortunately the last week or so had been towards the end of a quarter and relatively quiet. I would be able to squeeze in a couple of extra visits this week and make up the rest over the following two weeks. Roy, owner of Creative Outdoor Enclosures, the client whose procedures I needed to review as they were changing from a manual to computerised system, had, with some reluctance, agreed to let me visit for the entirety of Tuesday of the following week although if all was well I'd only need half of that time.

It was with some satisfaction that I reviewed my schedule then closed my calendar. I was back in my comfortable world of normality and everything was proceeding nicely. It was only then that I realised that I was alone. The little noises of Sharlet opening and closing things and clicking her way through my DVDs and CDs had stopped.

“Interesting,” I muttered to myself as I looked around.

I'd expected her presence to be more of a distraction as I was used to living alone but I'd got sufficiently accustomed to her presence that I

hadn't even noticed when she'd left. Of course, she was doubtless on her best behaviour and her presence would be more apparent when she felt more relaxed and played some of that dreadful rap music but I'd cross that bridge when we came to it. Perhaps I could get her some headphones or a small stereo for her room if it looked like she'd be staying a while.

What was also interesting was that a book, *The Code Book* by Simon Singh, which I'd picked up in an Op Shop for \$2 thinking it might be interesting – it wasn't – was sitting on the arm of the other armchair. It was open on page 44, at the end of the chapter on *The Cipher of Mary Queen of Scots*, and I was quite impressed Sharlet had managed to get that far. I'd only got to around page xi of the Introduction. I hadn't suspected she had any interest in either History or Codes but it was entirely possible that the book was why she'd gone out to find something more interesting to do. After all, most of my books were about birds and those that weren't were a scattering of crime thrillers and other odds and ends I'd picked up. I took a bookmark with a 3D picture of a possum on it from my box of bookmarks and marked her place. Even though the book was from an Op Shop I saw no point in ruining its spine.

I made a couple of cheese and chilli sauce sandwiches and another coffee for lunch and ate them while flicking through *The Code Book*. The last chapter, *A Quantum Leap into the Future*, seemed to be about how developments in quantum computing would make unbreakable codes breakable. I wondered briefly if Sharlet was reading the book with a view to possibly extending her car appropriation skills into the world of computer cryptography but squashed the thought as uncharitable.

Around 1pm I went down to the basement car park half expecting Sharlet to have taken my car for an exploratory drive around the neighbourhood. Granted my keys were where I'd left them but she now knew where all the spare keys were kept. My car was in its space, looking a little sad and lonely with its thick coating of dirt and bugs. I sat in the driver's seat and briefly wondered why I was being so suspicious of Sharlet. After all, the car she'd stolen in Perth had been for my benefit, not hers, and almost everyone takes things from hotels. In fact, despite her handling my wallet several times on our trip, no

money had gone missing and she'd given me receipts for everything. I didn't have any immediate explanation for my new-found suspicions.

I stopped at a car wash on my way to the Museum and gave the car a thorough clean, inside and out, and got rid of all the food wrappers, Coke cans and disposable coffee mugs. There was a stain on the back seat, most likely coffee, but it came out with a little squirt from the car wash's detergent and some scrubbing. All shiny and sparkling, the car looked a lot happier and I felt happier as well. My world was re-asserting itself. Even the replacement panels were a close enough colour match and you'd only notice a difference if you knew they'd been replaced.

When I got to the Museum I noticed the sign was still missing and berated myself for forgetting to do anything about it. I sent myself a text message as a reminder then went in to see Debbie who did Tuesdays and Thursdays. She was a slightly strange woman in her early sixties, much given to brightly coloured clothing which invariably clashed with her metallic red hair with grey roots but our visitors seemed to like her and she sold more books on birds than any of the other volunteers. Unsurprisingly no one had gone to the bank in my absence, as that was my role, so after a chat with Debbie about how things had been and a tour of inspection to reassure myself, I printed out the till reports and counted the cash. There was the usual small discrepancy as mistakes are inevitable but this time the cash was \$2.25 over so I put that in the jar in the kitchen where we keep such surpluses. At Christmas I use the money in the jar to buy small gifts for the volunteers. Deficits I just make up out of my own pocket.

There was a bicycle outside my apartment when I got back from the bank. It was propped against the wall at the far end of the corridor. It wasn't new but it had an expensive look about it as it had dropped handlebars, twelve gears, a water bottle in a clip on the down tube of the frame and two neat little black cloth bags bolted on either side of the rear wheel.

"I wonder if Mrs Murchison has a visitor," I muttered to myself, knowing full well that Mrs Murchison, who lived in the apartment next door, only ever had visitors who were as elderly as she was and who were unlikely to ride fancy bicycles. Many of her visitors, and she had

several each day, used walking frames, as did Mrs Murchison herself, and one or two used invalid carriages. Still, it was possible that one of them had brought a grandchild, or even great grandchild, to visit.

“Hey, hey,” said Sharlet when I went in my apartment.

She looked up from *The Code Book* and used the remote to turn the music down on the stereo. Sadly she'd found a radio station that broadcast her kind of music.

“Good afternoon,” I said. “Have you had a good day?”

“Yeah,” she said. “That's a pretty cool park down there.”

“Roma Street Parklands?” I asked. “I haven't been there for a while but, yes it is nice. It's best in the Autumn. Umm, is that your bicycle outside?”

“Hey, yeah,” she said enthusiastically. “Effing cool, ain't it. Is it OK to leave it in the corridor or should I bring it inside?”

“It should be all right out there,” I said. “Umm, where did you get it?”

“I found it at the park,” she said. “It was abandoned.”

“Oh right,” I said, putting my briefcase on the table. I took off my jacket and hung it over the back of one of the chairs. “It looks a little too good to be abandoned. Was it in the bushes?”

“Nah, it was propped up in a bike rack,” she said, putting the bookmark in the book. “It had an abandoned look about it though.”

“Well, yes,” I said, sitting down. “If a bicycle doesn't have a security chain then it's probably abandoned. It didn't have a security chain, did it?”

“It wasn't a chain,” said Sharlet coming over to sit in the other upright chair at the table.

“Well, then,” I said. “It was clearly abandoned.”

"It was one of them combination things on some wire," she said.

"That was fortunate," I said, "since you didn't have any bolt cutters."

She grinned, clearly happy I wasn't angry with her. In point of fact I rarely get angry and Sharlet had been doing this sort of thing for years. It was unreasonable to expect her to change overnight.

"You don't want me driving your car in the city," she said, "and I don't want to walk everywhere."

"Quite," I said, "although you will be careful cycling on the roads around here, won't you. There are some rash drivers, particularly during the rush hour."

"All good," she said. "How was your day?"

"Very satisfactory," I said, "although I have yet to reconcile the Museum's bank account. How did you get the wire off without bolt cutters?"

"Easy as piss," she said. "Wanna see?"

She didn't wait for an answer, just ran out into the corridor and returned with the combination lock.

"Just pull it tight," she said, looping it over one of the knobs on the top of the chair. "Then slowly rotate the dial furthest away. You can feel when it's the right number as it sort of clicks. Then you do the same with the next one." With perfect timing the lock opened and the wire dangled in her hand. "You try it."

She inserted the loose end inside the combination part and twirled the dials so the wire was locked then held it out to me. Intrigued I stood up and looped it over my chair and pulled it tight.

"This one?" I asked, touching the dial furthest away.

"Yeah," she said. "Twist it slowly."

I did and sure enough I felt a slight click when the 6 lined up with the little ridge.

“Now the next one,” said Sharlet.

It took me less than a minute to open the lock and get the combination for future use. With some practice I'd undoubtedly reduce that time considerably, not that I was going to practice.

“You are shattering my illusions about the world,” I said, handing back the lock and sitting down.

“You what?” she said, looking worried.

“I'd always thought locks were secure,” I said. “You make it all seem so easy. Is there any point in having locks?”

“Sure there is,” she said, sitting down and toying with the lock. “That's why I kept this one for the bike. Most people'll see the lock and figure the bike's secure.”

“Right,” I said, thinking about it. “So you're saying that locks are deterrents only for those who don't know how to crack one.” That made sense as I knew that computer accounting systems were only secure against those who didn't know how to bypass them. As an agent for MYOB and QuickBooks I knew the backdoors that were put in for people like myself to help our clients when they lost their passwords.

“Sure,” she said. “And even really fancy impossible locks aren't a lot of use. All they do is tell you there's something worth nicking behind.”

“How do you mean?” I asked, frowning.

“Well, take a house,” she said. “People put all sorts of fancy security on the doors and windows but never think of the roofs.”

“Why would you put security on the roof?” I asked, intrigued again. This was a world I knew nothing about.

"If it's a tin roof," she said, "just climb up a drainpipe with a screwdriver. The roof panels are screwed down so you just unscrew one and climb in. Tiles are even easier. All you need to do is lift them off. It just takes longer."

"But aren't there panels and things under the roof?" I asked. "Insulation and so on?"

"Just smash through," she said. "No one hardly goes up in the roof so they won't notice for years unless you don't put the roof back and it leaks. Waste of time picking locks."

"Good lord," I said, mulling this over. It actually made sense as houses were being burgled all the time and doubtless most had locks on the doors. It occurred to me that crime and insurance were a self-reinforcing little financial ecosystem. If things didn't get replaced after they were stolen sooner or later the thieves would run out of things to steal. At the same time, the insurance companies made a tidy little profit on the premiums.

"So, um, do you, er ...?" I asked, reluctant to accuse Sharlet of house breaking.

"Nah," she said. "Just know some who do."

"Right," I said. "And what about computer systems?" and I tapped the top of my laptop.

"Too tech," she said. "I just know how to play 'puter games. 'Sides, hacking is for guys who can't get girls. Girls're not geeky enough, you know that."

"Actually I don't," I said. "I know very few girls."

"Ain't you never had a girlfriend then?" asked Sharlet, sitting back and watching me.

"No," I said, sitting back and watching her watch me. "I don't get on well with people as you know."

“You get on OK with me,” she said.

“Yes, I do, don't I,” I said, sitting upright again and leaning on my elbows. “Which is rather strange. I wonder why.”

“It's cos I'm fucking awesome!” said Sharlet, beaming at me.

“Very possibly,” I said. “Certainly I've never met anyone quite like you before.”

“You think I'm pretty?” she asked, pulling a face which I think might have been meant to look coy. I don't know about these things but sometimes women pull faces like that in movies and men seem to get excited. I never have but that's by the by.

“I think so,” I said, trying to be diplomatic as these things seem to be important to women. “Certainly your face is symmetrical and has no blemishes. I don't imagine you need to wear any makeup.” An image came into my mind of Debbie at the Museum who appeared to wear vast quantities of makeup.

Sharlet stared at me for several seconds then burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?” I asked.

“Sounds like I don't need no lock on the fucking door,” she said and hooted with mirth again.

“Of course not,” I said, feeling a little affronted. “You're quite safe with me.”

“I know, Red,” she said, suddenly stopping laughing. She reached out and touched the back of my hand very gently. “I know that.”

“Good,” I said, feeling lost and confused again. I had a funny feeling something of great significance had just happened but for the life of me, as is so often the case, I had no idea what.

“So you want me to do some tucker?” she asked.

“Umm, well bacon and eggs for dinner isn't ideal,” I said. “Especially as we had it for breakfast. I, um, got some pork out of the freezer this morning. I thought I'd do you my favourite meal. Do you like pork?”

“I'll eat anything, me,” she said. “No worries.”

“What I do is chop the pork into thin strips and coat them with stuffing mix and fry them,” I said. “It's a quick easy meal and very nice with rice, onions, mushrooms and so on. I'll show you how to cook it so you can do more than just bacon and eggs. Come on.”

“Cool,” she said, jumping up. “Can we have pizza tomorrow?”

* * *

“So what did you think?” I asked as we finished eating. We ate from trays on our laps as I hadn't had a meal at the table since my mother went into care and I suspected Sharlet had never had a table meal.

“Nice,” she said. “What was wrong with the rice? It was a bit chewy and looked funny.”

“Nothing,” I said. “It was brown rice and that's what brown rice is like.”

“Ohhh,” she said. “Brown rice. OK.”

“You'll get to like it,” I said, getting up and taking her tray. “It's better for you than white rice as well.”

“OK, Red,” she said. “You want me to do the washing up?”

“I've a dish washer,” I said. “You just sit there and we'll have our chat when I've finished loading it.”

“What chat?” she asked, looking worried.

“The one about your future,” I said, going into the kitchen.

“Ohh, that chat,” she said. She still looked worried.

She folded herself up in the armchair so she was sitting cross legged with her elbows on her knees and her chin propped on her hands. It looked like she was staring at a bookcase.

“Would you like some Baileys?” I asked.

“What's that?” she asked.

“It's a cream liqueur,” I said. “I like to have one in the evenings after dinner.”

“OK,” she said.

I got out two glasses and poured in some Baileys from the bottle in the fridge. I added an ice cube to each then went back into the lounge.

“There you go,” I said, handing her a glass.

“Ooooooh,” she said, taking a sip. “That's nice!” She tipped her head back and poured the entire glassful into her mouth.

“You're suppose to sip it,” I said, sitting down.

She tipped her head forward and let the Baileys run back into the glass. A dribble ran down her chin which she wiped away.

“Oh,” she said and took a delicate little sip.

“Just savour it,” I said. “That's what liqueurs are for. They're for savouring not hard drinking.”

“Sweet,” she said. “It's nicer than lager.”

“I have to agree with you there,” I said. “I dislike beers in general and lager in particular. Now, your future.”

She sat there silently with the glass in her lap.

“Have you any thoughts?” I asked.

“Nah,” she said.

“OK,” I said slowly. “Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but for whatever reason you have run away from whatever past you had in Victoria and Logan and don't want to go back to either?”

“Nah,” she said and took another sip of Baileys.

“That's fine,” I said. “Not everyone has had an enjoyable past and all credit to you for wanting to change things. Again, correct me if I'm wrong, but you are 20 and you have nothing, yes?”

“Nah,” she said. “I got a bike.”

“Indeed,” I said. “And a very nice bike it is too. Anything else?”

“Nah,” she said after giving it a little thought.

“OK,” I said. “Well, I'm going to have to be honest with you here. I'm happy for you to stay as long as you want but you can't stay here forever. After all, you're only twenty and I'm in my fifties. You need to make friends your own age and settle down, even start a family. In the meantime you really need to have some sort of income and find your own place in the world.”

She just stared at the glass in her hand and I wondered how many talking-tos she'd had in the past.

“You can't get by forever by taking whatever you need,” I said, trying not to be cruel. “Sooner or later you'll get caught and end up in prison and from what I read that's not a particularly nice place.”

She lifted her eyes and looked at me. I had a feeling there was a deep sadness lurking behind but I'm not the most sensitive of people.

“Do you want that?” I asked, quietly. “Do you want to go to prison? Be a career criminal?”

“Nah,” she said, matching my quietness.

“Good,” I said, feeling we'd agreed on a positive, however small it was.
“So what would you like to do for the rest of your life?”

She toyed with her glass for a few moments, staring at the floor.

“Promise you won't laugh at me?” she said in a small voice.

“I promise I won't laugh at you,” I said. “This is a very serious matter we're discussing here.”

“You sure?” she asked.

“I'm sure,” I said. “Tell me.”

“I wanna be a racing car driver,” she said.

Chapter Nineteen

I stared at her for a while, my brain, as always, slow to catch up.

“Racing car driver,” I said neutrally. “I see. A racing car driver.”

It occurred to me later that I should really have anticipated this as it was completely in character for Sharlet but I hadn't.

“Yeah,” she said and took another sip of Baileys.

“Well, I said, thinking through the options. “It's good that you have some ambitions at least. Umm, do you actually know what's involved?”

“I know how to drive fast,” she said with a touch of aggression. “Just need to get a job with a race team.”

“You mean like a Grand Prix team or one of those Supercars teams at Bathurst?” I asked, desperately trying to remember some other areas of motor sport.

“Yeah,” she said. “They run the Aussie Grand Prix in Melbourne and I'd love to do the Bathurst 500. It looks like fun! I seen it on TV.”

“I don't think it's quite as simple as them putting an advertisement in the local paper and you applying,” I said. “I don't know much about motor sport but I think you have to start off small with your own car in a local club and gradually work your way up through different categories until you've made a name for yourself then someone might think you are good enough to join their team. For certain you won't get paid until you reach the top most levels. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if you have to provide your own car to begin with and you'll need money for that.”

“I can get a car,” she said stubbornly.

“Perhaps to begin with,” I said, “although you will more than likely have to prove ownership before you can enter a race, but what are you going to do when you need high performance cars? Ones that can't be driven on the roads? You'll need superchargers and special fuels and

tyres and things as well as mechanics to do repairs during the races and some way of transporting everything to all the race tracks.”

She scowled and stared at her glass again.

“I’m not saying it’s not a worthy ambition,” I said hastily, “but it’s going to need a lot of capital and you don’t really have any, nor do you have any sponsors.”

“What’s capital?” she asked, looking sideways at me.

“Money in the bank,” I said, “land, property, investments, things like that.”

“Oh,” she said. She stared some more at her glass, turning it round and round between her fingers. “How do I get sponsors?”

“You’d have to find some very wealthy people or businesses and ask them for money,” I said, “and I’d be very surprised if any would give money to a complete unknown. After all, they sponsor racing and other sports in order to attract more business for themselves and someone just starting out simply wouldn’t attract enough people to make it worthwhile for them. And before you ask, I can’t afford it myself. My spare money is tied up with the Museum and I’d be very surprised if even entry level motor racing is affordable on what a bookkeeper earns.”

“Oh,” she said and shrugged. “Well, that’s that then.”

I watched her, wondering how many other setbacks she’d had in her life. There was an air about her that suggested this was by no means the first time.

“But it’s not an impossible dream,” I said, trying to cheer her up. “All you need is a plan.”

“What sort of plan?” she asked.

“Well, if your goal is truly to be a top level racing car driver,” I said, “then identify all the obstacles on the way to achieving that then think

of ways to overcome them. Money is probably the biggest obstacle at the moment so what do you think you could do about that?"

I suspected her being a girl would be a significant obstacle as well but that wouldn't rear its ugly head for quite a while. In the meantime I was happy I'd managed to bring the conversation around to my main objective which was persuading Sharlet to find a job and become independent.

"So you're saying I need to get a job?" she asked and I sighed in relief.

"Yes," I said. "What jobs have you had in the past?"

"Only that one at the kennels," she said. "I told you about that."

"Is that all?" I asked, surprised. "You're twenty and you've only had one job which lasted three weeks?"

"Yeah," she said scowling defensively. "Ain't got no skills or qualifications, have I."

"OK," I said. "So what have you done for money?"

She just looked at me and didn't say anything so I dropped that line of enquiry.

"What about Centrelink?" I asked. "Have you claimed unemployment benefit before?"

"Nah," she said.

"OK," I said. "That seems to me to be the first step of the plan. I suggest tomorrow you go down to Centrelink and make a claim for benefits. That way you'll start getting some money and you can start looking for a job. Centrelink will help with that as well. It would probably be a good idea to go to the TAFE and see if there are any training courses you can take which will help with a job as well."

"Can't," she said. "Ain't got no ID."

“What do you mean, you've got no ID?” I asked in surprise then mentally kicked myself. “Of course, you ran away from wherever you lived in Logan with nothing. That shouldn't be a problem. After I've finished tomorrow we can both go there and pick up all your things.”

“I ain't going back there,” she said harshly and slammed her hand on her knee. “Not never!”

“Not even with me with you?” I asked starting to feel a little anxious as I always do when strong emotions are expressed.

“Nah,” she said forcefully. “Sides, I left everything back in Melbourne. Ain't got nothing up here.”

“Right,” I said. “This could be a bit of a problem then.”

I thought for a few moments.

“Do you know the phone number of your foster parents?” I asked. “You could ring them and ask for your birth certificate and other documents to be sent up here.”

I could see by the look in her eyes that this was not an acceptable option so I dropped it.

“Well, there have to be ways around it,” I mused. “After all, people do lose everything in floods and bush fires and so on. I'm sure replacement documents can be easily issued. Let me just get my laptop.”

I did some searching on Google and discovered that a replacement birth certificate could easily be obtained. All I had to do was specify the correct birth certificate, fill in a few details and pay a small fee to cover postage. It was surprisingly easy considering that government bureaucrats were involved.

“Your birthday's 5th June, isn't it,” I asked, starting to fill in the form, “and you're twenty so that's 2003. Hmm, that's strange. You're middle name is April, isn't it?”

"Yeah," she said, finishing her drink. She took the glass into the kitchen and put it in the dishwasher then leaned on the counter watching me.

"It can't find you," I said. "Apparently no one of that name was born on that date in Victoria. You were born in Victoria, weren't you?"

"Yeah," she said. "Cranbourne."

"Oh lord," I said suddenly. "Your birth was registered, wasn't it?"

"Dunno," said Sharlet. "I was only a baby."

"No, it must have been," I said, thinking about it. "You couldn't have gone to school without even a birth certificate and the police in Perth knew your mother had a daughter and they wouldn't have known that if she hadn't registered you. It looks like we'll have to post off an application for a full search. That shouldn't be a problem. It'll just take a little longer. Give me a moment and I'll get the right form. Ahh."

"Wassup?" asked Sharlet.

"You have to send evidence of your identity with the form," I said. "I wonder why they didn't need that online? Actually they probably did but I just didn't get that far. Umm, do you have a driver's licence or passport?"

"Nah," said Sharlet.

"OK," I said. "How about a forklift licence? Working With Children licence? Anything with a photo on it?"

"Nah," said Sharlet shaking her head.

"No marriage licence?" I asked. "Medicare card, firearms licence?"

"Uh ah," said Sharlet.

"OK, then this could be a problem," I said. "Ahh, this might help. Can you provide at least two items evidencing your involvement in the

community?”

“You what?” she asked, going back to the arm chair.

“Something to show you exist,” I said. “Umm, utility bills, rental agreements, tax file number. Ahh, tax file number. You must have a tax file number. You’ll have needed it for your job at the kennels.”

“Dunno,” she said, frowning. “I don’t remember one.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” I said. “We can get it off the Tax Office. What’s your log in for MyGov?”

“Ain’t got one,” she said.

“Are you serious?” I asked. “How do you lodge your tax returns?”

As soon as I said it I realised how stupid it was. Sharlet had very likely never lodged a tax return.

“Not a problem,” I said, going to the MyGov site. “We can create an account for you now and link the Tax Office then ... ” and I groaned and pushed my laptop away.

“What’s up?” asked Sharlet.

“You need ID to create a MyGov account,” I said. “And you’ll need your Tax File Number to link your tax account to your MyGov account. This is getting ridiculous.”

“Told you,” said Sharlet and grinned happily.

“I dare say we could contact the Child Support Services in Victoria,” I said slowly, thinking out loud. “They must have all your records.”

“Wouldn’t they have given me birth certificate to me foster pigs?” asked Sharlet.

“Very likely,” I said. “Are you sure you won’t get on touch with them?”

“No fucking way,” she said grimly.

“Not even to be a racing car driver?” I asked.

“Fuck that,” said Sharlet emphatically.

“Hmm,” I said. “Well there has to be some way. I don't suppose you have a library card, do you?”

Sharlet didn't bother to answer.

“Actually, there is something I can do,” I said, pulling my laptop back. “As the Director of The Museum of Tail Feathers I can certify you've been a volunteer with the Museum. That'll show evidence of your involvement in the community.”

“Don't you need two?” she asked.

“Just a minute,” I said, busily typing a letter. I had no qualms about saying Sharlet had been with the Museum for three years as I was getting annoyed by all the bureaucracy and if there were few records of Sharlet's existence then they'd have difficulty proving she hadn't been with the Museum. I fetched a sheet of headed paper from my desk and printed it.

“There you go,” I said, handing it to her. “Proof you exist!”

“Nice pic,” she said, touching the Museum's logo.

“Yes,” I said, “I designed it myself. Now, we need something else.”

“Yeah,” said Sharlet.

We both sat and stared at each other for a while but nothing came to mind. I toyed with asking one of my clients if they'd be willing to put her on their payroll temporarily but decided that might lead to legal problems. After all, a common scam used in the underworld is to have non existent people on payrolls and my clients could well balk at that.

After a while Sharlet gave up and turned on the TV.

"I wonder," I said some time later.

"What?" she asked.

"The form says a rental agreement can be used for evidence of involvement in the community," I said. "I know the building manager here quite well. He might be willing to let you rent an empty apartment if there is one."

"You want me to move out?" asked Sharlet, turning off the TV and looking at me anxiously.

"Well that wasn't the idea," I said, "although it would be good if you had a place of your own. What I was actually thinking was simply to get you on a rental agreement since you won't be able to afford anywhere to rent until you have a job. I can't afford to rent one of these apartments on top of the mortgage for this one and the Museum building."

"Why can't you rent this apartment to me?" asked Sharlet, "or at least print out an agreement? We can tear it up after I've got me birth certificate."

"Not a good idea," I said after thinking about it. "That would mean both documents about your involvement in the community would be signed by me and that would be suspicious. They may think I was doing something fraudulent."

"Oh," said Sharlet. "Would I have to live there then?"

"Wouldn't you like a place of your own?" I asked.

"I like being here with you," she said.

"That's very nice of you," I said. "Thank you. However, when you start to make friends you'll want to bring some of them back here and I confess I don't think I could cope with several young people in my apartment. You're my first and only visitor. Well, overnight anyway."

"I suppose," said Sharlet sadly.

"Besides, you could play the music you like and watch all the movies you want," I said, a little confused by her reaction.

"Yeah," she said, not cheering up. "That big band stuff ain't so bad."

"Brass band," I said. "Big bands are completely different."

"OK," she said and sighed. "I'm going to bed."

* * *

"Come in," called Shaun when I knocked on his door the following morning. He had a pokey little office tucked away behind the leased offices that occupied the second floor of the building. "Ahh, Mr Dorfmann. How are you?"

"Good morning," I said, closing the door behind me. "I'm well, thank you. How are you?"

"I'm here, aren't I," he said in his dour way. "So, toilet leaking again?"

"Actually no," I said, sitting on the spare chair squeezed in beside his filing cabinets. "I actually wanted to ask you a favour."

"Oh yeah?" he said.

"It's a bit strange," I said. "Umm, would you be willing to put a friend of mine on a rental agreement? Just for a week or two?"

He looked at me suspiciously.

"This some kind of scam?" he asked.

"Not at all," I said. "I just need some paperwork with her name on it, that's all."

"No can do, Mr Dorfmann," he said. "Only tenants names can be on tenancy agreements."

"Ahh, I was afraid of that," I said. "Umm, what if I made it worth your while?"

"I'd lose me job," he said. "You gonna pay me until I retire?"

I grimaced and he laughed.

"So why not just rent an apartment?" he asked. "I've got one on the seventh floor coming up. Current tenants'll be moving out in six weeks."

"They're quite nice, aren't they," I said, remembering looking at one on the seventh floor when I was looking for somewhere to buy. "How much is the rent?"

"\$650 a week," he said.

"You are joking, Shaun," I said in disbelief. Those apartments that weren't owner occupied had been going for between \$350 and \$400 a week only two years previously.

"Rents are going through the roof," he said. "What you want to rent for anyway? You've got a nice place on the fifth."

"Oh it's not for me," I said. "It's for, umm, my daughter. She's staying with me at the moment and we both think it's a good idea if she had her own place. The problem is \$650 a week is way out of her price range."

"Always get somewhere cheap in Logan or round there," he said grinning maliciously.

"Yes but it's not a suitable area," I said. "Oh well. Thanks anyway."

"So she wants a two bed apartment does she?" he asked.

"Not necessarily," I said. "She's, umm, a student so pretty much anywhere will be fine so long as it's reasonably quiet."

I didn't like lying but I really wasn't willing to let Shaun know I had a

twenty year old woman not related to me living in my apartment as he was guaranteed to get the wrong idea but I had to stay plausible.

"There's always the studios," he said, tapping his pen against his upper teeth. "I got one of them being vacated at the weekend but I can't find anyone wanting it."

"Studios?" I asked. "I didn't know we had any studio apartments in this building."

"Yeah," he said. "Four of 'em on the top floor, with a single shared bathroom."

"So why doesn't anyone want them?" I asked. "How expensive are they?"

"\$200 a week," he said. "Gotta be that price 'cos of the area but no one wants a single room for \$200 a week."

"So why not drop the price?" I asked.

"Owner won't," he said. "He'd rather keep it at \$200 a week empty so as to keep its sales value up."

"Interesting," I said, thinking about it.

I could afford to subsidise Sharlet to the tune of \$200 a week until such time as she had an income of her own and she could still visit me whenever she wanted but it would be a place for her to listen to her music and entertain guests without disturbing me. It sounded like a very reasonable solution, especially as it would enable her to get a copy of her birth certificate and, once she had a birth certificate, other forms of ID would be more readily forthcoming.

"I think that might be a reasonable option," I said. "I'll talk to her about it. When can we see it?"

"Anytime you want, Mr Dorfmann," said Shaun. "She can move in this weekend if she wants, so long as the paperwork's done."

“What paperwork?” I asked, never having rented in my life.

“Two forms of ID, one with a photo,” he said. “A copy of her last twelve months bank statements and two references from former landlords.”

My heart fell.

“Are you serious?” I asked. “She’s only twenty and doesn’t even have a bank account, let alone previous landlords. Umm, she’s been living with her mother.”

Shaun leaned back in his chair and regarded me thoughtfully.

“Tell you what, My Dorfmann,” he said. “Seeing as how I know you and you own one of the apartments here, if you’ll be her guarantor, I’ll waive the paperwork.”

“That’s very kind of you, Shaun,” I said. I breathed a sigh of relief and stood up. “I’m just on my way to work and I have a busy day ahead of me. Would tomorrow morning be convenient for us to look at the studio room?”

“No problemo,” he said, beaming. “Be nice to meet your wife. Never even knew you’d been married.”

“My wife?” I exclaimed, my hand on the door handle. “What do you mean, meet my wife?”

“I’ll need her as guarantor as well,” he said. “Both parents. Young kids are nothing but trouble as tenants, you see. Loud music, partying all night and drugs and all. See you tomorrow.”

Chapter Twenty

I paused outside Shaun's office and berated myself for being a fool. This was one of the reasons I rarely lied – my brain simply didn't work quickly enough. Deep in thought I took the lift down to the car park and it was only as I opened the car door that it occurred to me that all I needed to have said was that Sharlet's mother was dead, which would have had the added benefit of being true. I slapped my forehead and was tempted to use one of Sharlet's expletives.

It wasn't until I was some way down Leichhardt Street that I realised that wouldn't have worked. I'd told Shaun that Sharlet had been living with her mother so she couldn't be dead. Or had I merely implied it? I couldn't quite remember. Either way, I still had a problem as I'd never been married so I didn't have a wife, current or former, living or dead, to bring along and be a guarantor. The obvious thing to do was to phone Shaun and cancel the inspection. Of course, as I realised as I negotiated the traffic in Fortitude Valley, what I really should have said was that Sharlet's mother had just recently died which was why Sharlet was now with me and needed a place of her own. A natural liar would have processed all this in micro seconds rather than the ten minutes it took me and would probably have bypassed the whole guarantor issue by offering six months rental in advance, or possibly even a year's, as a token of good faith. This last option didn't occur to me until after lunch.

Of course, if I cancelled then Sharlet and I would still be in the same situation and she would be no further forward with getting her birth certificate. As I headed towards Newstead for my first client of the day I considered various options such as telling Shaun the truth. Unfortunately I had a nasty suspicion, based primarily on a movie I'd once seen on the TV, that he'd assume that I was setting up a 'love nest', whatever that was, and wouldn't allow it. The fact that I would be changing my story would not help the situation in the slightest. It would probably only make things worse. Mind you, I was a bachelor living alone so why would I need a 'love nest' up on the tenth floor in the first place? The situation was getting far too complicated.

I arrived at Ranjani's Asian Mega Mart a few minutes early and loitered on the doorstep until someone opened the doors. I didn't

recognise the girl but Ranjani had a fairly high staff turnover as he didn't pay well so that didn't surprise me. After a short chat about how the business was faring, I settled down to reconciling the Mega Mart's bank accounts hoping that the routine would settle my mind but for some reason my thoughts kept returning to Shaun and the next day's appointment. It seemed to me, stripping the problem down to its essentials, that I had three options:

- a) Abandon the idea and find some other way to assist Sharlet.
- b) Tell Shaun the truth and wear the consequences which would have a high probability of reverting to option a).
- c) Find a substitute ex wife.

This last option was the least desirable but, from a strictly logical point of view, had the highest chance of success. It also seemed the most difficult to implement. After all, there were no women in my life other than a few female clients and Debbie, Min and Steph at the Museum. It occurred to me that possibly I could hire an actress for an hour or two and even went so far as to search the Internet for Theatrical Agencies in Brisbane while I had a coffee break but ended up dismissing the idea. While doubtless the lady concerned would be a highly skilled actor, my acting abilities were non-existent and it would be immediately apparent to everyone that I had never seen her before let alone been married to her and raised a 20 year old daughter. On the other hand, even if I could think of a female client who might be willing, and none came to mind, it would leave me in an awkward position if one day that person wanted me to do something questionable with their accounts.

Debbie at the Museum, however, would think the whole thing was hilarious and would leap at the opportunity. Unfortunately she was in her mid sixties and it would be implausible that she'd have a 20 year old daughter or, if truth be said, would ever have married someone like me. She had been, in her earlier years, a magician's assistant and later one of a cabaret trio and had a reputation for partying hard. I, on the other hand, never got invited to parties and wouldn't have gone if I had. Min would flatly refuse and would probably have anxiety attacks for several days. She was of a nervous disposition and loved the Museum because there were so few visitors on her day to interrupt her dusting and tidying. She lived alone with four cats and

would sometimes bring in tail feathers left by the cats in case the feathers were of interest.

Steph I hardly knew. I'd only met her the once, when she came in to volunteer for the Museum and we'd spoken once on the phone but at least she wouldn't be a complete stranger. She was in her mid forties, which would be plausible, and seemed an affable pragmatic lady. There was also a distinct possibility that as a former tram driver who'd lost her hand in an accident that she might be sympathetic to Sharlet's predicament. I resolved to approach her then changed my mind about fifteen times as the day progressed.

Ordinarily I would go home after finishing at the Mega Mart but, in order to catch up with my missed appointments, I had re-scheduled Manly Dry Cleaners for mid-afternoon. A benefit of this was that they were only a few streets away from the Museum so I could drop in when I'd finished their books. I remembered as I was driving towards Manly that Steph had said she lived within walking distance of the Museum so with no little anxiety and trepidation I pulled over into a McDonald's car park and rang her, hoping she'd be out or something.

"Hello Reggie," she said after two rings. "This is an unexpected pleasure. How's your trip?"

"Ahh, um, hello Steph," I said. "Umm, oh I'm back in Brisbane."

"Great," she said then, after a lengthy pause in which neither of us said anything, "ahh, do you need me at the Museum tomorrow?"

"Oh no, no, Trevor will be in," I said, wishing I hadn't phoned. It seemed an absurd proposal now.

"Oh yes," she said. "How can I help you then?"

"Oh God," I muttered, feeling decidedly anxious and unsettled. "Umm, I was wondering if you are going to be busy tomorrow morning."

"I doubt it," she said. "I'm never busy these days. Why?"

It suddenly occurred to me that if she took exception to my request

that she might well leave the Museum, leaving me a volunteer short.

“Hello?” she said, “are you still there, Reggie?”

“Sorry,” I said, “my phone went dead there for a moment.” It was crunch time and a light sweat broke out on my forehead. “Umm, I was wondering if you would be willing to do me a very special favour tomorrow morning. It’ll only take half an hour or so.”

“Well I’m happy to help in any way I can,” she said, “although I’m not much use when it comes to lifting and carrying.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, confused. Why was she talking about lifting things?

“My hand,” she said. “I can’t lift and carry things so if you’re wanting help changing the displays around I’m afraid I won’t be a great deal of use.”

“Oh no, nothing like that,” I said hurriedly. “I, um, just need someone to, um, pretend to be my wife.” There, it was said and in the hands of the gods now. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that,” she said. Even I could hear the frown in her voice.

“I said I need someone to pretend to be my wife,” I said, holding my hand over my eyes so no one could see me even though I was in a car park.

“Is this illegal?” she asked after a short pause.

“Not at all,” I said quickly then, perhaps foolishly, added “at least I don’t think so.”

“I think this is going to need some explaining,” she said after another pause. “Where are you now?”

“I’m on my way to Manly,” I said. “I have a client.”

“When do you expect to finish with your client?” she asked.

"I should be through by 5:30, perhaps 6," I said.

"Then shall we meet at the café just down from the Museum at 6 or so?" she asked. "You can explain what this is all about."

"Um, yes, excellent," I said. "6 o'clock it is then. Thank you."

"I'm making no promises, mind," she said quite firmly.

"I quite understand," I said weakly. "Umm, see you later."

She hung up without another word and I sat in the car looking at my phone wondering if the worst was over or yet to come.

"At least she didn't say no," I muttered, "but what a strange conversation. It was almost like she's done this before."

I pondered the conversation for a few minutes then continued to Manly Dry Cleaning. As well as doing their books I also had several shirts and two suits to pick up as well as dropping off some more clothes for cleaning. I got to the café about 10 past 6. Steph was already there, sitting at a table near the entrance. There was no one else sitting in the café although there were several people waiting to collect their takeaways. Steph, I noticed, was sitting with her injured arm inside her jacket pocket.

"Hello," she said with a welcoming smile as I went in. "I got you a coffee. I hope you like lattes"

"Thanks," I said even though I don't like lattes much. They're too milky. I hesitated, feeling very out of control of the situation and uncomfortably lost even though I frequented the café at the weekends. None of the weekend staff were there, however, which added to my feelings of unease.

"So what's this all about?" she asked as I tipped three sachets of sugar into my latte. "Why do you need a pretend wife?"

I'd thought of two or three convincing ways to explain while at the Dry Cleaners but they'd vanished from my head.

"I have a friend who needs somewhere to live," I blurted, "but she doesn't have any references and the building manager wants me and my wife to act as guarantors."

Steph raised an eyebrow.

"Is this your friend that you took on your trip?" she asked. "Charlotte, wasn't it?"

"Umm, yes," I said, feeling embarrassed, "although it's Sharlet not Charlotte but it's not what you think it is."

"I can imagine what you think I think it is," said Steph, looking perhaps a trifle stern. "So your wife doesn't approve of this?"

"I'm not married," I said, "and never have been."

"I see," said Steph. She took a packet of cigarettes out of her pocket and started tapping it with her fingertips. She pursed her lips. "So let me see if I have this straight so far. You are a bachelor who went on a trip with a young woman and you now want to set her up in an apartment with someone you barely know pretending to be your wife and acting as guarantor. Is that right?"

"Umm, well I suppose so," I said miserably. "Look, I know it seems bad but it really isn't."

"So tell me how it really is," said Steph.

"Oh lord," I said. "Umm, well Sharlet ran away from a bad situation with foster parents in Melbourne and ended up here in Brisbane. I don't know the details but she got involved with someone unpleasant here as well and hijacked my car when I was ..."

"What do you mean she hijacked your car?" interrupted Steph. She leaned forward a little, pressing her bad arm against the edge of the table.

"Exactly that," I said. "She jumped in my car while I was at some traffic lights and demanded I took her to Perth at gunpoint so ..."

“Gunpoint?” exclaimed Steph, stiffening. “Why didn't you contact the police?”

“Well she didn't really have a gun,” I said, “she just had her fingers inside her jacket but I thought it was a gun but when she ran off again in Toowoomba ...”

“Toowoomba? I thought you were in Brisbane,” interjected Steph again.

“I was taking her to Perth,” I said. “At least, I wasn't planning to. I was going to leave her somewhere at the first opportunity but she was all alone and I felt sorry for her.”

“So you took her all the way to Perth?” said Steph, looking at me quizzically. “So why did you bring her back?” She leaned back in her chair again.

“Her mother is dead,” I said. “We found that out in Perth.”

“So you were taking her to Perth to be with her mother?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. It all sounded rather absurd now.

“And you felt sorry for her again in Perth so you brought her all the way back?” asked Steph.

“Well, umm, yes,” I said.

“And now you want to find her somewhere to live?” asked Steph.

“Yes,” I said. “She doesn't know anyone in Brisbane except whoever it was she ran away from in the first place so I, well, um ...”

“Felt sorry for her?” she asked.

I shrugged. I was beginning to feel sorry for myself now. Steph must think I was a big time loser.

“So why can't this Sharlet find a place herself?” she asked, her fingers

still tapping on the cigarette packet, although more slowly. There was a thoughtful frown on her face.

"She's got no job and no ID," I said, "so she can't even get benefits from Centrelink. We're trying to get a copy of her birth certificate but you need ID for that but they will accept two pieces of evidence showing her involvement in the community. I thought having a rental agreement would do that."

"I see," said Steph. "Well, that would certainly count. I take it you've found somewhere but they won't accept her as a tenant as she stands?"

"That's right," I said. "I, um, well rather let the building manager think she is my daughter so he didn't think she was a prostitute or something."

"Which I imagine is why you now need a wife," said Steph. She grimaced. "I need a cigarette. Let's go outside."

She got up and led the way to one of the tables outside and lit a cigarette, blithely ignoring the No Smoking Within 5 Metres sign.

"It's so absurd it's very likely true," she said, exhaling a cloud of smoke. I coughed and she flicked her hand a couple of times in a pretence at waving the smoke away.

"So you believe me?" I asked.

"This Sharlet," said Steph, staring at the tip of the cigarette. "She's definitely not a romantic liaison?" Her eyes flicked towards me and locked on.

"Definitely not," I said.

"And she's not your illegitimate daughter?" she asked, her gaze unmoving.

"Definitely not," I said again. "She's just a girl with troubles who stumbled on me by chance and I want to help her."

“And an incredibly lucky girl as well, by the sound of it,” said Steph. “What are the chances of her getting into a car with a man who’ll drive her all the way to Perth and back and not rape her?”

“Well, I couldn’t really say,” I said, taken aback by that remark, “but I think you are doing men generally an injustice. Granted there might be a few who would try something like that but I’m sure most men wouldn’t.”

“Well, perhaps,” said Steph, flicking ash on the ground. “That might make an interesting conversation for another day. So what is it you want me to do?”

“Shaun, the building manager, said he’d be willing to accept Sharlet as a tenant provided both her parents act as guarantors,” I said, “and since she doesn’t have any parents that’ll be me and, umm, well, you.”

“Guarantor in what way?” asked Steph, her eyes narrowing.

“Presumably for the rent,” I said.

“But she doesn’t have a job or benefits,” said Steph, “so how can she pay the rent?”

“I’ll be paying it,” I said. “At least until such time as she can pay it herself.”

“Can you afford it?” she asked, looking dubiously at me with smoke trickling out of her nose.

“Oh yes,” I said. “It’s only \$200 a week.”

“You’ve found a rental at \$200 a week?” she asked. “Where? I’m paying \$385.”

“In Spring Hill,” I said. “The same apartment block where I live.”

“OK, this is a scam,” said Steph abruptly. She flicked her cigarette butt into the gutter. “Sorry. I want nothing to do with it. There’s nothing to rent in Spring Hill under \$500.” She slurped the rest of her

coffee and stood up.

“Wait,” I said urgently. She looked down at me for a second or two then sat down again.

“Well?” she said. “I’m listening.”

“The apartments in my building are \$650 a week,” I said, “although I own mine so I don’t pay rent but there are four studio apartments with a shared bathroom on the top floor which are \$200 a week. If you come round for the inspection tomorrow you can talk to the building manager yourself.”

“You realise this would be illegal,” she said. “You’d be obtaining a benefit fraudulently.”

“You sound like a lawyer,” I said. “I thought you were a tram driver.”

“Sorry,” she said quickly. “Just years of fending for myself and then this,” and she held up her forearm for a moment before pushing it back in her pocket. “Umm, well I daresay it’s in a good cause. I’m afraid I can’t afford \$200 a week though.”

“There’s no question of that,” I said. “I’ll be paying the rent anyway so Sharlet won’t default and when she is able to pay it I’ll cover any defaults. Anyway, I think Shaun wants her mother there more for guaranteeing her behaviour rather than the rent. He’s worried about partying and drugs.”

“She takes drugs?” asked Steph, her eyes locking onto me again.

“Definitely not,” I said. “She doesn’t even smoke.”

“There are other ways,” said Steph, watching me.

“You mean injecting?” I asked. “I don’t know much about these things but I have noticed there are no marks on the insides of her elbows.”

“Hmmm,” said Steph.

“Meet her for yourself if you're worried about drugs,” I said. “I wouldn't want you to be a guarantor for her behaviour if you don't think she'll behave.”

Steph looked thoughtfully at me for a few moments then took out another cigarette.

“OK,” she said. “Why me?”

“I'm a solitary sort of bloke,” I said, “and I don't know any women apart from a few clients, Debbie, Min and you. Can you imagine Debbie or Min pretending to be Sharlet's mother?”

Steph burst out laughing then lit her cigarette.

“OK,” she said. “When do I meet Sharlet? We need to get our stories straight.”

Chapter Twenty One

“That’ll be her now,” I said when the buzzer to the building’s main door went. It was a couple of minutes before 8.30 in the morning which was good as I had my first client appointment at 10. We were seeing the apartment at 9 which I didn’t think would take more than fifteen minutes and there were no untoward traffic reports so I should be able to get there in time.

“Shall I put the kettle on?” asked Sharlet as I pressed the button to open the main door.

“Umm, yes, good idea,” I said. If the kettle had already boiled by the time Steph said she wanted a drink it would be quicker.

I opened the door to my apartment while Sharlet busied herself in the kitchen. It was only a minute or so before the lift door opened and Steph emerged.

Hello,” I said. “Come on in. Thanks again for doing this.”

Steph smiled and went in to the apartment.

“Sharlet,” I said, shutting the door. “Come and meet Steph.”

Sharlet turned from the cupboard with a couple of mugs in her hands and a welcoming smile on her face.

“Fuck,” she exclaimed and scowled. “You never said she was a fucking cop!”

“Sharlet!” I exclaimed. “That’s no way to talk to a guest who is doing you a kindness.”

Sharlet just looked at me then banged the cups down on the counter overly hard.

“Hello,” she said with a smile so fake I felt embarrassed. “Nice to meet you.” Her eyes were like ice chips and she stayed behind the protection of the counter.

“Hello, Sharlet,” said Steph. “Um, why do you think I’m a police officer?”

“It’s fucking written all over you,” said Sharlet staring intently at Steph. “Is this a fucking set up or what?”

“I told you, Steph is a volunteer at the museum,” I said. “She’s very kindly agreed to be a guarantor for you, for the studio apartment.”

“Oh yeah,” said Sharlet, not taking her eyes off Steph. She was quivering slightly with tension.

“Yes,” I said firmly. “And before that she was a tram driver in Melbourne.”

“No fucking way,” said Sharlet. “She’s a fucking cop.” The kettle clicked off and made her jump.

“I’m sorry,” I said, turning to Steph. “I really must apologise for Sharlet. I don’t know what’s got into her.”

“Actually it’s me who should apologise,” said Steph. “I’ve never driven a tram in my life. I, umm, lied about that.”

Sharlet curled her lip at Steph while I stood there trying to come to terms with the rapidly changing circumstances.

“Perhaps it would be a good idea if we all sat down,” said Steph, sitting in my armchair. “It seems an explanation is called for.”

“Um, yes,” I said.

I looked at my watch without registering the time then sat in the other armchair. Sharlet stayed where she was behind the counter.

“Come and join us,” I said.

“No fucking way,” said Sharlet grimly

“It’s all right,” said Steph. “I used to be a police woman but I’m retired

now so there's no need to be afraid.”

“Oh yeah?” said Sharlet aggressively. “Prove it.”

Steph sighed then lifted her right arm from its hiding place behind her shoulder bag.

“There's no place in Victoria Police for a disabled officer,” she said quietly.

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Sharlet, leaning over the counter so she could see Steph's stump more closely. “How the fuck you do that then?”

“I was a Senior Sergeant with Victoria Police,” said Steph, glancing at me. “Drug squad. I led a raid on a shipment of containers that had arrived at Melbourne docks and, well, to cut a long story short, one of the alleged perpetrators slammed a container door shut. My hand was in the way.”

“Did you find the drugs?” I asked, my brain beginning to catch up. Sharlet came out from behind the counter and slowly walked over to Steph.

“Yes,” said Steph, looking at me. “Approximately 200 kilograms packed inside a shipment of computer cases.”

I wanted to ask if she felt the cost had been worth it but decided not to. It was a bit too personal for my liking.

“Does it hurt?” asked Sharlet, peering at Steph's wrist.

“Not any more,” said Steph.

“Can I touch it?” she asked.

I saw Steph's jaw clench but she calmly said, “if you like”.

Sharlet reached out and ran her finger over the scar.

“Cool,” she said. “Can you still drive?”

“Yes,” said Steph. “My car's an automatic and I'm permitted to have a knob on the steering wheel.”

Sharlet nodded. “So you ain't a cop no more, then?”

“No,” said Steph. “I'm on a disability pension.”

“K,” said Sharlet and backed away to lean against the wall behind me.

“Am I allowed to smoke in here?” asked Steph, hiding her wrist behind her bag again.

“Of course,” I said, without thinking and got up to fetch one of the mugs to use as an ash tray. “Umm, why did you say you were a tram driver?”

“People get scared when they know I was a cop,” said Steph, shaking a cigarette from a packet. She put it between her lips then lit it with a lighter. “It's easier to say something else and a tram driver fits well with my hand, or so I thought.”

“But didn't everyone who knew you in Victoria know you were a police officer?” I asked, putting the mug on the arm of the chair for her.

“That was the problem,” said Steph, flicking a little ash into it. “All my friends were in the police and once I was invalided out everything changed. They were still in the force, you see, and I wasn't and after a while I found that, well, shall we say disabled civilians and serving officers don't really have a lot in common. That's why I moved to Queensland, to get away from that old life and make new friends. I learnt very quickly not to say I was with the police.”

“So that's why you volunteered at the Museum?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Steph a little sadly. She snorted. “Time can sit a little heavily when you've nothing to do.”

“I can imagine,” I said, never having been in a situation where I had

nothing to do. "Umm, well, it's quarter to. Umm, are we still looking at this studio apartment?"

"I think that's up to Sharlet," said Steph. "She may not want me to pretend to be her mother any more."

"Couldn't give a fuck," said Sharlet grumpily. "I don't want the fucking place anyway."

Steph frowned and looked at me as if to ask why she was there.

"Come on now, Sharlet," I said, trying to be lighthearted, which didn't come naturally to me. "We've been through all this. It isn't really appropriate for a young woman like you to live with an old man like me. You need a place of your own and friends of your own age. And besides, it'll make it easier to get your birth certificate."

"S'pose," said Sharlet scowling. She didn't look up from her feet.

"You don't need to call me 'mum'," said Steph. "Lot's of people call their parents by their first names so just call me Steph. When's your birthday?"

I twisted round to look at Sharlet when she didn't reply but she just kept staring at her feet.

"5th June," I said. "Why?"

"It'll seem strange if I don't know when her birthday is," said Steph. "Do you have a middle name?"

Again Sharlet didn't answer so I said "April".

"Will you be using her own surname?" asked Steph, not bothering to address Sharlet this time, "or yours?"

"Good question," I said. "I hadn't thought of that. Umm, Sharlet's surname is Dee."

"Which doesn't fit with either of us," said Steph. "The agent will

almost certainly want some ID from each of us and I have nothing with your surname, I suggest Sharlet uses yours, Reggie. I'll say I reverted to my maiden name of Marotta after our divorce. What is your surname, incidentally? It'll look funny if I don't know."

"Dorfmann," I said. "Reginald Edward Dorfmann."

"So is this happening?" asked Steph.

"Yes," I said and twisted to look at Sharlet. "It is, isn't it, Sharlet?"

Sharlet shrugged.

"So was that a yes?" asked Steph.

"Yes," I said although I wasn't entirely sure. Sharlet was in a strange mood.

"Sharlet," said Steph.

Sharlet ignored her.

"Sharlet, look at me," said Steph.

Sharlet slowly lifted her head and stared belligerently at Steph.

"What?" she demanded.

"Sharlet!" I exclaimed, horrified at her attitude.

"It's all right," said Steph, holding up her good hand. "Sharlet, depending on how this goes, I may say something about curtains or furnishings or something so just agree with me, OK? It'll only be to do with impressing the agent so don't feel you have to go along with it, OK."

"If you say so," said Sharlet. "It's all fucking shit anyway."

"I'm sorry," I said to Steph apologetically. "Sharlet's not usually like this."

“That's OK,” said Steph. “It actually adds a touch of realism. I've no children of my own but I've noticed they're usually pretty surly and rude to their parents. Over politeness would be suspicious here. Shall we go?”

* * *

“Well, that went surprisingly well,” I said, feeling very positive as the lift descended from the top floor. “Looks like you've a place of your own now, Sharlet.”

“Wow, great,” she said sarcastically, breaking the silence she'd enforced all the time we were looking at the studio.

The lift stopped and the door opened. Sharlet jumped out instantly and hurried up the corridor. I got out more sedately.

“Aren't you going to say thank you to Steph?” I asked.

Sharlet glowered at Steph but managed a strangled “thank you”. Steph laughed.

“Well, thank you very much from me at least,” I said. “Sharlet will appreciate it in time.”

“I'm sure she will,” said Steph, holding the lift door open as it tried to close. “Umm, I'd best be going home now. I'm sure you have things to do.”

“Actually I have a client in about forty minutes,” I said, glancing at my watch. “Will you be at the Museum on Saturday?”

“I'm sure I will,” said Steph as the door tried to close again.

“Excellent,” I said. “I'll see you there, then.”

“Yes,” said Steph. “Umm, Reggie, would you like to come to dinner sometime?” She sounded a little nervous and I just stared at her in surprise. “And Sharlet as well, of course,” she added as an afterthought.

“That's very kind of you,” I said, wondering how I could get out of it without seeming rude. It wasn't that I didn't like Steph, I just wasn't a sociable sort of person. I had a feeling Sharlet wouldn't particularly want to go either given that Steph was a former police woman. “Umm, I am in a bit of a rush at the moment, though.”

“Of course you are,” said Steph. “We can sort out the details on Saturday.” She smiled and patted me on my sleeve. In the process she let go of the lift door and it closed.

“Oh dear,” I muttered to myself.

I stared at the closed lift door for a few moments then turned. Sharlet was standing beside the apartment door glaring at me.

“Forgot your key, did you?” I asked, hurrying up the corridor.

“And Sharlet as well, of course,” said Sharlet in a sneering, sarcastic sort of way. “Fucking cow. She your bitch, then?”

“Excuse me?” I said in surprise, my key still in the lock although the door was swinging slightly open. “My what?”

“Your bitch,” exclaimed Sharlet forcefully as she pushed past me to get through the door.

“What are you talking about?” I exclaimed, totally lost. I had a vague idea that 'bitch' was a word that occurred quite often in some of the music she listened to but I had no real idea what it meant.

“You gonna shag her after dinner?” shouted Sharlet, her face twisted with anger. “You fucking shit!”

“Of course not,” I exclaimed. “I don't even want to have dinner with her.”

“You fucking bastards are all the fucking same,” shouted Sharlet. She picked up a couple of bird books that were sitting on the table and threw them at me. “That's why you want me to fucking get out of here! So that fucking bitch can move in!”

Fortunately the books were ill aimed and missed as I was too stunned to even think of dodging them.

“Sharlet?” I said, feeling upset and hurt even though I didn't know why. “Sharlet, what's the matter? Is it because she used to be a police officer? She isn't going to arrest you. You know that, surely?”

“Oh go fuck yourself, you shit,” she shouted and ran into her room. “I fucking trusted you!” She slammed the door so hard my bedroom door opposite flew open and banged into the wall.

“Sharlet, what's the matter?” I said, twisting the door handle to open it.

She kicked the door shut, jarring my wrist a little.

“Fuck off, shithead!” came through the door as loudly as if she was standing right beside me. “Fuck off to work, you fat fucking bastard. Leave me alone!”

I stepped back in alarm, not knowing what to do. I'd never been in a situation like this before and I was confused, befuddled and disorientated. The word 'work', however, slowly filtered through. It had a certain calming normality about it.

“Umm, Sharlet?” I said, knocking very carefully on the door. “Sharlet, are you there?”

The absurdity of that question almost made me chuckle. Where else would she be? She didn't answer, however, not even to swear at me.

“Umm, Sharlet,” I said again. “I really do have to go to work now but we can discuss this tonight, if you like.”

Still no answer.

“Umm,” I continued then had a brainwave. “Umm, I'll leave some money on the counter so you can get yourself some pizza for lunch. Would you like that?”

“Fuck you,” she shouted and something hit the door.

I jerked back then listened for a few moments. There were some faint noises from the other side but I couldn't make out what they were.

“Umm, I'm going now,” I said, pulling out my wallet. “I'm, umm, putting \$50 on the counter, OK?”

No response.

“We'll talk tonight,” I said, listening intently. “Is that OK?”

No response.

“Right then,” I said, giving myself a little shake to try and pull myself together. “I should be back not long after 5. Umm, I'll see you then, OK?”

She didn't reply so I went into the lounge and put a fifty dollar note on the counter, weighting it down with Steph's ashtray cup then checked my watch. I was very probably going to be late and my client abhorred unpunctuality. He was a former military man who ran courses in IT security with military precision.

I looked back at Sharlet's bedroom door uncertainly then picked up my briefcase and left. On the drive over I ran through the situation with Sharlet as best I could remember, but came up with no answers. I still had no idea what a 'bitch' was, other than the term for a female dog or a derogatory term for women in general and neither of those seemed to apply. Perhaps it had a different meaning in the world of rap but I knew no one who liked rap music, other than Sharlet, so I couldn't ask. Certainly former Chief Petty Officer Gareth Hughes, my client, wouldn't know and we didn't have a particularly chatty relationship either.

I did wonder if perhaps Sharlet had somehow got the idea that Steph had been there to arrest her for some misdemeanour in the past but surely the fact that Steph was no longer in the force and, a strong point in her favour I felt, had lied on Sharlet's behalf would have reassured the girl. And anyway, if she was scared of being arrested

wouldn't the outburst have been at the beginning rather than the end when everything was settled and Steph was on her way home? And what on Earth had Sharlet meant by saying she'd trusted me? Did that mean she didn't trust me anymore? And if not, why didn't she trust me anymore? Hadn't I just found her an apartment of her own?

Bemused wasn't the word for it.

* * *

"Oh good," I thought when I got home around quarter to six to find Sharlet's bike wasn't in the hallway. "She's come out of her room. I hope she's calmed down." Actually my experiences with Sharlet suggested she probably had as her fits of temper never seemed to last long

I unlocked the door and went in. I pushed the door shut behind me and put my briefcase neatly on the table. I loosened my tie and undid my collar button then wandered into the kitchen to put the kettle on. I noticed the \$50 note was gone from under the mug on the counter.

"Excellent," I said out loud. "I hope she enjoyed the pizza."

I emptied the dog end and ash into the bin then rinsed the cup. There was still a faint smell of cigarette smoke lingering in the air from Steph's cigarette and I wondered if her home reeked of tobacco.

"Oh lord," I exclaimed as I remembered her dinner invitation. "How am I going to get out of that?"

On those rare moments when I wasn't concentrating on Gareth Hughes' book work my mind had dwelt on Sharlet and I'd almost forgotten about the invitation. A woman had invited me to dinner once before but as far as I could remember I'd used my mother's ill health as an excuse and she hadn't asked again.

I pondered the invitation while I made some coffee but nothing came to me. I opened the fridge and started to ponder what to have for dinner.

“Sharlet?” I called, shutting the fridge and looking in the freezer. “Do you want lamb chops or fish fillets for dinner?”

There was no reply then I remembered her bike was gone which raised a fresh problem. Should I wait for her or start dinner without her?

“Lamb chops,” I decided and re-opened the fridge to take them out.

I left them on the counter while I went to get changed. I paused outside her bedroom door and listened. All was quiet within. I knocked gently.

“Are you in there?” I called. After all, it was just possible she was doing something to the bike in her room, adjusting the chain or whatever.

There was no answer so I gently opened the door and peered in. She wasn't there. I pulled the door shut and was about to open my door when I realised there was something odd about her room so I opened the door again. The bed was a mess but it always was then it struck me, all her clothes were gone.

“Oh,” I said in surprise and checked the wardrobe, just in case she'd had a brainstorm and actually tidied away her clothes. She hadn't. Apart from a few boxes of feathers we hadn't transferred the wardrobe was empty.

“How very strange,” I said, looking around in puzzlement. “Pah, of course! She's moved all her stuff up to her studio! Shaun did say she could move in anytime although I haven't paid the deposit or the first month's rent yet. Still, he won't mind. I'll go up in a bit and see how she's settling in.”

I pulled off my tie and opened the door to my room then stood there, blankly taking in the scene. All my suits had been shredded and thrown around the room and one of my kitchen knives was lying on the floor.

Chapter Twenty Two

I'm not an excitable sort of man but I couldn't help feeling, I don't know, disappointed perhaps? The clothes didn't matter in the least. I have neither the body nor the temperament for fashion in any form and the suits were fairly old anyway but clearly Sharlet had been upset about something and hadn't been able to talk to me about whatever it was. I bent down and picked up the knife. To my relief it was as clean as a whistle so she hadn't cut herself. I put it back in the kitchen then collected up the remains of my suits and went back towards the kitchen to get a plastic garbage bag to put them in.

I didn't make it. Instead I slumped in the other armchair and held the pieces of cloth on my lap wondering if I should have stayed to talk with Sharlet rather than gone off to work. I had no idea what the issue was but perhaps if I'd stopped to talk things might have become clearer. I suspected not, as other people's emotions are something of a closed book to me, but perhaps the mere act of talking would have helped Sharlet even if I didn't understand.

"I hope she's all right," I muttered. "I wonder where she's gone?"

Heavily I got up and found a garbage bag for the clothes and dumped it beside the front door then went back to my armchair. I didn't know what to do. Should I ring her and check she was OK? Should I go up to the studio apartment and see if she was there? Perhaps she would see either of those as being intrusive and she'd become more angry with me. Perhaps she'd gone to stay with a friend and everything was now fine. It was a quandary.

I got up again and put the lamb chops back in the fridge as I wasn't feeling hungry anymore then wandered aimlessly over to pick up the garbage bag and take it to the rubbish chute beside the lift.

"It wouldn't do any harm," I muttered, looking at the up and down buttons for the lift. "If she's there I can just go away quietly but at least I'll know."

I pushed the up button then abruptly turned away but the lift appeared almost instantly and the door opened with a ping. I

hesitated then got in and went up to the tenth floor. There was a narrow glass strip beside the door to the studio apartment so I peered through rather than ring the doorbell. It was obvious there was no one there. The studio was essentially just a single room and, unless she'd dumped her things up against the corridor wall, I could see it was completely bare.

Back in my apartment I picked up my phone, telling myself that even if she was angry with me for ringing I'd at least know she was safe but the phone rang out and went to voicemail.

"Umm, hello Sharlet," I said hesitantly, hoping I was doing the right thing. "Umm, I'm just ringing to see if you're OK. Umm, call me back when you have a moment. Umm, oh, it's Reggie, umm, Reggie Dorfmann, yes."

I hung up feeling a little empty inside and put the phone on the table. Beyond ringing, what more could I do? She was, after all, a free agent and a twenty year old adult entitled to go her own way. She was under no obligations to me just as I was under no obligations to her. Well, that wasn't strictly true as I'd undertaken to pay her rent and so forth until such time as she was able to support herself but if she chose to walk away from the studio apartment that was her choice. That, however, raised another issue. Should I go ahead with the deposit and first month's rent or should I tell Shaun that Sharlet didn't want the apartment? What if Sharlet reappeared later, or perhaps tomorrow?

"I'll deal with that on Monday," I said firmly to myself. "If she's not back by then she's probably never coming back."

I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on to make some more coffee. I also got the lamb chops out of the fridge again as starving myself wasn't going to solve anything, not that there was anything really to solve. My house guest had left and that was that. Granted she had nowhere to go but that wasn't really my problem as I was providing somewhere if she chose to use it. It wasn't impossible either, I realised, as I arranged the chops on the grill pan, that she'd lied to me and did have somewhere to go. After all, she seemed to lie quite a lot.

My phone suddenly rang and I leapt for it but it wasn't Sharlet. It was a client wanting some advice on some trivial matter to do with GST which could have easily waited until our next appointment in a couple of weeks. I went back to my cooking and ate, as was my custom, a solitary meal. It just felt different.

Sharlet didn't ring on Friday either. I rationalised not ringing her again on the grounds that she wasn't ringing me because she'd either lost her phone or she didn't want to talk to me. Either way my ringing her would be pointless. Strangely though I did make an error doing a client's accounts reconciliation and found I had a discrepancy of \$243,000 which was patently absurd. I had to start over again from scratch and wasted an hour and a half in the process which annoyed both the client and me. The client was annoyed because he didn't want to pay for my time in resolving my error and I was annoyed because I so rarely make arithmetical errors. I waived the extra time which pleased the client but I couldn't waive my own ineptness. She wasn't back at my apartment either when I eventually got home and the studio apartment was still empty.

* * *

"Hello, Reggie," said Steph brightly on Saturday morning.

The screen door to the Museum was having one of its bad days and slammed shut behind her with a sound like a pistol shot.

"I'll just wedge it," she said, pushing it back open. "We don't want any visitors getting hurt." She pushed the wedge we kept for just these occasions under the door then gave it a little pull to check it was secure.

"It was fine when I arrived," I said. "We must be in for rain."

"Forecast was for some rain tomorrow," she said, dumping her bag on the floor beside the desk. "So how's things? Sharlet settled in all right?"

"Umm, I don't really know," I said. It honestly hadn't occurred to me that Steph would be interested enough to ask.

“What's happened?” demanded Steph, studying my face.

“Oh, nothing really,” I said, discomfited.

“Don't be absurd, Reggie,” she said. “You couldn't possibly not know. Tell me what's happened. I am her surrogate mother, after all.”

I sighed. I much prefer dealing with spreadsheets to other people.

“Would you like some coffee?” I asked, temporising.

“That bad, huh?” she said. “I'll make us both some then you can tell me everything.”

She gave me a searching look then headed off to the kitchen while I wondered how much to tell her. I supposed in a way she did have a point as she'd signed the rental form as joint guarantor.

She came back a few minutes later with a tray balanced on her forearm and held in place with her one hand. She slid it onto the desk and plonked one of the mugs in front of me then sat down.

“So, let's have it,” she said.

“Have what?” I asked.

“Why you don't know if Sharlet's settled in or not,” she said.

“Is this a police interrogation?” I asked.

“I'd hope not,” she said with a friendly smile. At least I hoped it was a friendly smile. “Do we really need a good cop, bad cop routine here?”

“No, I suppose not,” I said wearily. I hadn't slept as well as normal for the last two nights.

“OK, then,” she said after a few moments. “Let's take this in small steps. Where is Sharlet now? Still in your apartment?”

“No,” I said, leaning back and folding my hands defensively over my

belly. "Umm, she's gone."

"Gone? Gone where?" asked Steph, frowning.

"I don't know," I said.

"Oh God, what did you do?" she asked.

"I didn't do anything!" I protested, leaning forward again. "Sharlet just got upset about something after you left and just disappeared."

"Just disappeared, eh?" said Steph. "You mean in a puff of smoke?"

"No," I said. "I meant while I was with a client. When I got back home she'd gone."

"Well, she wasn't in the best of moods as I recall," said Steph. "You're sure she didn't just go up to her new apartment?"

"No, I checked there," I said. "All her things had gone and, well, yes, her things had gone and so I checked the studio straight away but she wasn't there."

"And what?" asked Steph.

"What do you mean 'and what'?" I asked.

"You said 'all her things had gone and' then repeated yourself," said Steph. "You were going to add something else. What?"

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Of course I'm sure," said Steph. "It's easier when the interview is being taped but yes, I know what you said."

"Oh," I said, starting to feel a little nervous. "So this is an interview, is it?"

"Sorry," said Steph. She grimaced then patted my arm. "Old habits die hard. No, we're just chatting. Sorry."

"She shredded my suits," I blurted.

Steph froze momentarily then relaxed again.

"I see," she said quietly. "Let me see if I have this straight. We arrange accommodation for Sharlet, then you two return to your apartment, she shreds your suits then runs away. Is that correct?"

"More or less," I said, "although that happened after I left."

"I see," said Steph. "Perhaps you'd better tell me what happened between my leaving and your leaving in a little more detail."

"I don't really remember," I said. "Umm, she said something I didn't understand about you being my bitch or something like that then she stormed into her room so I left some money for her lunch then went to work. I thought we'd talk about it when I got home but she'd gone by then."

"She said that just after I left or some time after I left?" asked Steph. She looked thoughtful.

"Umm, almost immediately I think," I said, leaning back and crossing my arms. "I left only a couple of minutes after you. I have no idea whatsoever what prompted it. Oh and she also said something about how she trusted me which doesn't make sense. If she trusted me why did she run away?"

"Are you sleeping with her?" asked Steph bluntly. She was watching me closely.

"Good God, no!" I exclaimed, jerking forward again. "There was absolutely nothing like that going on at all!"

"It does happen," said Steph mildly. "Older man, pretty young woman, unbalanced power dynamic."

"Is that really what you think of me?" I asked, appalled.

"Actually no," said Steph. "I didn't see anything like that in your

relationship at all. Was she blackmailing you?"

I stared at her, trying to get my brain functioning.

"This is getting out of hand," I said after a few moments. "All it was is that I was trying to help her get back on her feet. Nothing more."

"I see," said Steph. "It's just that there's an interesting coincidence of events here."

"To you perhaps," I said gruffly. "Not to me."

"Really?" she asked. "You don't think it's an interesting coincidence that Sharlet does this right after I asked you to dinner?"

I stared at her dumbfounded. My mouth may have hung open as well but there wasn't a mirror nearby so I couldn't be sure.

"You do remember me asking you to dinner, don't you?" she asked, one eyebrow a little higher than the other.

"Well, um, yes, of course," I said, remembering it now even though I had forgotten in my worrying about Sharlet. "Do you think that's important?"

"You do know how to charm a woman, don't you, Reggie," she said with a half laugh.

"I don't understand," I said because I had no idea what was going on now.

"No, perhaps you don't," she said slowly. "And that may explain everything."

I frowned then sat back in my chair. Saying things hadn't helped so perhaps staying silent might work better. Unfortunately Steph was an experienced former police officer and vastly more adept at strategic silences than I was so we sat there in silence for some time.

"Don't forget your coffee," she said. "I'm going out for a cigarette."

“Do you have any idea what this is all about?” I asked, reaching for my coffee because she’d told me to.

“I have some suspicions,” she said, getting her cigarettes out of her bag. “But I’m keeping them to myself for the time being.”

“Well that’s not very helpful,” I said irritably, spilling a little coffee on the desk. I fished out a hankie and mopped it up quickly before the spill reached any of the books for sale.

“No,” she conceded, “but neither is going off half cocked without all the relevant facts. So you don’t know where Sharlet is now?”

“No,” I said. “I rang her and left a message but she never rang back.”

“When was that?” asked Steph, shaking a cigarette out of the packet. “Hello, welcome to the Museum of Tail Feathers.” I looked around in surprise and saw that a middle aged couple had come in without my noticing. “Feel free to look around and if you have any questions the Director of the Museum is here to answer them.”

“Absolutely,” I said, smiling at the couple even though I was fairly sure if they asked anything my mind would be blank.

“Is there a café here?” asked the woman.

“There’s a very nice café three doors down,” said Steph, standing up and pointing with her cigarette.

“Thanks,” said the woman. “We’ll just have a look round then we’ll go there.”

“Enjoy,” said Steph. She waited until the couple moved away to look at a display of Galah feathers on the other side of the room then looked down at me. “When did you ring her?”

“Umm, Thursday evening,” I said.

“And you haven’t heard from her since?” she asked.

"No," I said.

"You're worried about her, aren't you," said Steph.

"Yes," I admitted. "She was involved with some bad people and I'm afraid she might have gone back there."

"I daresay it's possible," said Steph, "but if she has it was her own choice."

"So why did she leave?" I asked, looking up at Steph. "You know, don't you."

"No, I don't know," she said. "All I have are suspicions. I'm going for a smoke."

She smiled and walked out of the door. I contemplated going after her but decided not to. It was all too difficult to think about so I opened one of the books on birds for sale and sat there, looking at the pictures. The middle aged couple wandered off to the African and European Room.

Steph came back a few minutes later and sat down. I looked up from the bird book wondering what was coming next.

"So Sharlet shredded all your suits, did she?" she asked, dropping her lighter into her bag.

"Yes," I said, shutting the book. "This is the only one I have left."

"Better get some more, then," she said. "Why don't you go out now? There's a couple of shopping centres round here."

"Oh, there's no rush," I said. "I'm reading this book."

"Go," she said. "The activity will do you good. Stop you brooding for a while and you'll have to get some new ones sooner or later."

"But what about the Museum?" I asked.

"I can hold the fort until you get back," she said. "After all, I did last weekend while you were away. Maybe get a blue suit rather than your usual grey. It'll go with your eyes better. And some new ties. That one's a bit garish."

"Perhaps you should come and choose them yourself," I said, trying to be a little sarcastic.

"I'd love to," she said, "but I've got things to do. Go."

I hesitated, fiddling with the book I still had in front of me, but clearly today was going to be one of the quiet days at the Museum. The middle aged couple had been the only visitors so far. I also had to concede Steph was right. I was going to have to get some new suits. I couldn't wear this one indefinitely.

"OK," I said, standing up. "If you're sure you can cope?"

Steph looked around ostentatiously and smiled.

"Right then," I said, patting my pockets to make sure I had my wallet and keys. "I'll be off then."

She just nodded and watched me so after hesitating a little longer I walked out.

I got back a couple of hours later, having bought half a dozen new suits, to find a tall, thin bespectacled man in cycling shorts standing at the desk and tapping his fingers impatiently on the selection of books for sale.

"Hello," I said, marching over. "Can I help you?"

"I want to buy this book," he said, clearly irritated, "but there's been no one here."

"I do apologise," I said, relieved he hadn't just walked out with a copy since it was \$124.95.

"I'm going to complain to the manager," he said grimly. "You can't just

leave places like this unattended.”

“I totally agree,” I said and fished out one of my business cards. “I’m the Director of the Museum and there will be an inquiry. Heads will roll.”

He seemed mollified by this so I swiped his credit card and put the book in a bag. He took it and stuffed it roughly into a small satchel lashed to the back of his bicycle. I noticed Steph’s bag wasn’t under the desk and the second chair was missing.

“Ahh, there you are,” I said, opening the kitchen door.

Steph looked up from where she was sitting. She looked to be scribbling on the back of a small pile of our leaflets.

“Hold it, Becs,” she said. “Someone’s come in.”

“What’s going on?” I asked, noticing her phone was beside the leaflets. She must have had it on speaker as she couldn’t hold the phone and write at the same time.

“I’ll be with you in a few minutes, Reggie,” she said. “I’m just on the phone at the moment.”

“Right,” I said, “only there was a customer waiting to buy ...” I trailed off as I noticed her phone was attached to a charger which was plugged into the wall socket beside the kettle. Clearly this wasn’t a quick call.

“I’ll be with you shortly, Reggie,” said Steph in what I can only assume was her Senior Sergeant to Junior Constable voice. “This is a confidential call.”

“Oh right,” I said mystified. This was a Museum of Tail Feathers and we didn’t go in for confidential calls.

“If you could shut the door behind you,” she said pointedly.

I did the only thing I could think of. I backed out and shut the door

behind me.

It was another twenty minutes before she came out of the kitchen, dragging the chair behind her with her bag over her shoulder.

“Sorry about that,” she said, putting the chair beside the desk. She put her bag on the floor then sat down. “Hope you weren’t gagging for a coffee.”

“You shouldn’t really leave the desk unattended,” I said. “Someone could have stolen one of the books or gifts.”

“I’m sorry about that,” she said, trying to look contrite. “Only I phoned a friend of mine to ask a favour except it turned out she was at work. Apparently she was catching up on a backlog.”

“Wouldn’t that make it a short call rather than a long one?” I asked.

“Ordinarily yes, I suppose,” she said, “only this friend of mine works in, umm, well, the Victorian Courts Archives and I wanted her to look up Sharlet’s records.”

“Are you serious?” I exclaimed. “Is that legal?”

“Best not to ask questions like that, Reggie,” she said. “I, umm, had to call in one or two favours. Let’s just say that what information I have couldn’t be faxed or emailed which is why the call took longer than expected. Umm, do you want to know what I’ve found out?”

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling weak all of a sudden. “Do I?”

“Probably not,” she said, pulling a sheaf of leaflets from her bag, “but I think you ought to.”

Chapter Twenty Three

I blinked several times then heaved myself to my feet and made my way to each of the Museum's rooms in turn checking to see if there were any visitors. I wasn't too happy about this prying into Sharlet's private life and there was absolutely no need for strangers to overhear any of what was to come. Judging by Steph's notes there was a fair amount. I found a couple with a young child, tourists judging by their clothes, in the Culture Room so I went back and told Steph to wait. We sat in silence, me with my head on my hand gazing through the open door and Steph leafing through her notes.

The couple came out eventually and paused at the Gift Table to buy some postcards of kookaburras and cockatoos. The woman made a few comments about the displays but my mind was too wrapped up in speculation about Sharlet to be much more than civil. I just wanted them to go, frankly. Actually that's not true. I wanted them to stay so I didn't have to hear what Steph had to say but at the same time leave me alone. Ideally they'd stay within earshot in the Australasian Room indefinitely and talk to each other, not me. They did leave, however, and no one else came in. It was late afternoon and they would almost certainly be the last visitors.

"First, and probably most importantly," said Steph ominously, "Sharlet's been lying to us both."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said. "I've caught her out in a few porkies myself. What's this one?"

"She's only 17," said Steph. "She was born on 5th June 2006."

"OK," I said a little surprised at how trivial that point was. I'd been expecting much worse. "So why's that a problem?"

"Oh Reggie," she said with a sigh. "Don't you see? You're a middle aged bachelor who's been taking an underage girl inter-state, giving her money and keeping her in your apartment. You could get into serious trouble for that."

"But I was just helping her," I exclaimed, feeling a bubble of anxiety

starting to form in my stomach. "There was nothing untoward about it. Nothing at all!" For some reason the memory of Sharlet lifting up her top in the hotel corridor in Perth came to my mind. What if that had been recorded? What if the hotel gave it to the police?

"I know that," said Steph. "I've seen the two of you together but what if she makes an accusation against you? I'd be astonished if any investigating officers didn't jump to conclusions and it would be almost impossible to convince a jury of your innocence as well."

"Oh lord," I said, putting my hands to my head and closing my eyes. "All I was doing was trying to help!"

"I don't, however, think it'll come to that," said Steph. "Yes, she is angry with you at the moment but based on what I've seen and what's in here," she tapped her notes, "I would be surprised if she went to the police. Very surprised indeed. In fact I don't think she'd even go to the police if she found herself in real trouble let alone to make a false accusation against you."

"Why do you say that?" I asked, keeping my face covered.

"You saw how she reacted when she found out I was a former police officer," said Steph, "and you've probably seen other similar instances. Sharlet doubtless sees the police in particular and the legal system in general as her biggest enemy."

Actually this was a good point. Sharlet refused to go to the police in Perth with me, even though it was to find her mother.

"OK," I said heavily and uncovered my face. "Tell me the rest."

"Right," said Steph, going back to the start of her notes. "Umm, a lot of this isn't relevant of course. Police enquiries, legal arguments and so on so I'll just give you the highlights, as it were. Sharlet was born on 5th June 2006, as I said, to Damian Sullivan, a minor con artist and petty thief, and Sandra Sullivan, an occasional recreational drug user, in Melbourne. When she was three her father, Damian, was arrested and convicted for operating a mobile phone scam and he went to prison for three years. Sandra sought a divorce while he was in prison

and on his release Damian moved to Sydney.”

“So Sharlet was no longer under his influence, then?” I asked.

“No but it might have been better if she had been,” said Steph. “According to a Social Services report to the Family Court Damian was a caring husband and father who, for reasons that don't concern us, preferred crime to steady employment. More to the point, however, once the divorce was granted Sandra started to get involved with bad elements and her drug use increased and moved to harder drugs. When Sharlet was five or so, a rather unpleasant gentleman by the name of Eddie 'Dog Breath' Maskel became involved with Sandra.”

“What do you mean 'rather unpleasant'?” I asked.

“I actually had a number of dealings with Eddie,” said Steph. “I joined the Drug Squad as a Senior Constable and interviewed him on several occasions but we were unable to pin anything on him directly for quite a while. He is, or was at any rate, an enforcer with the Black Uhlans and heavily involved in the manufacture and distribution of crystal methamphetamine.”

“Ahh,” I said, “so that's how she got started then. Who or what are the Black Uhlans?”

“Who? Sharlet?” asked Steph, looking at me intently. “She's a drug addict?”

“No, no,” I said quickly. “No, her mother. The police in Perth told me Sandra had been found dead from an ice overdose a couple of years ago.”

“I see,” said Steph. “And you've seen no sign of any form of drug abuse in Sharlet?”

“Only if you include pizza,” I said, trying to make a joke to relieve my tension.

“Pizza?” said Steph, frowning. “That's one I've not heard of before. Is it a derivative or something new on the market? Can you identify any

of her suppliers?”

“No, no, I mean that stuff made of dough with tomato sauce and pepperoni on top,” I said, realising my attempt at humour had fallen flat as it invariably did. “You know, pizza, from a pizza shop.”

“Ah, my mistake,” said Steph crossing out the ‘pizza’ she’d scribbled at the bottom of a leaflet. “Where was I?”

“Her mother had got involved with someone with bad breath,” I said. I wondered if that was because of the drugs or had he always had bad breath?

“Indeed,” said Steph, skipping a couple of pages. “Let me see, ah yes. Eddie moved in with Sandra and Sharlet and, by all accounts, he was quite violent towards her. There were a number of complaints to the police by neighbours about alleged domestic violence but Sandra always denied them and refused to make any formal complaint herself.”

“Was he violent towards Sharlet?” I asked worriedly.

“Apparently not,” said Steph, looking at her notes. “According to Sandra, Eddie by and large completely ignored Sharlet and she was shut out of sight in her bedroom whenever he was around.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, I suppose that’s something then. It couldn’t have been much fun for her though.”

“I imagine not,” said Steph. “That’s not the worst of it, however.”

“Go on,” I said, wishing I could go home and hide.

“When Sharlet was eight,” continued Steph, “she tried to intervene to protect her mother during one of Eddie’s periodic assaults. It seems she got a knife from the kitchen and stabbed Eddie in his upper thigh whereupon Eddie threw her through a window.”

“You’re joking!” I exclaimed, horrified. “Sharlet was thrown through a window?”

“Yes,” said Steph. “Fortunately this happened on the ground floor but she sustained a broken collar bone and numerous minor lacerations from the glass.”

“Oh the poor poor girl,” I whispered, burying my head in my hands again. I’m not a particularly imaginative person but even I could see beyond Steph’s dry recitation to the anger and screaming, the blood and pain. It must have been hell on Earth for Sharlet.

“A neighbour called the police and all three were taken to hospital,” continued Steph remorselessly. “Sandra was in quite a bad way as well as Eddie had vented his anger on her after disposing of Sharlet.”

“Was he arrested?” I asked.

“Actually that was about the only positive outcome,” said Steph. “I was on leave at the time so I wasn’t directly involved but the premises were searched and significant quantities of crystal methamphetamine were found along with various items used in its manufacture. Eddie was convicted and went to prison. He’s still in prison, in fact. He’s applied for parole twice and each time been turned down. It’ll be a good few years before he’s out again.”

“Well, that’s something,” I said. “What happened to Sharlet and her mother?”

Steph sucked her teeth for a moment before continuing.

“Sandra, it turned out, had extensive bruising but after tests confirmed no internal damage she was released the next day. The hospital also made arrangements for her to join a drug rehabilitation program but she never turned up. Enquiries were made but she couldn’t be found. Interestingly there is a note on her file of a rumour that she’d been taken in by the Bandidos but I confess I find that hard to believe.”

“Bandidos?” I said. “Black Turbans? What is all this?”

“Black Uhlans,” corrected Steph. “They’re criminal motorcycle gangs, much like the Hell’s Angels.”

"Ahh, now I've heard of them," I said, holding up a finger. "So why don't you think she joined the Bandidos?"

"Well, she wouldn't have joined anyway," said Steph. "They're all men only but the Black Uhlands and the Bandidos are enemies and I find it hard to believe that any of the Bandidos would accept Black Uhlan property. That would probably be enough to start a turf war."

"Property? What do you mean property?" I asked. "This is Sharlet's mother we're talking about, not a motorcycle."

"Women are regarded as property within these groups," said Steph unemotionally. "Anyway, that's beside the point. From this time on Sandra is more or less out of the picture."

"You mean she disappeared without taking Sharlet with her?" I asked. Actually I already knew that since Sharlet and I had gone looking for her but for some reason I'd assumed it happened much later. Not when Sharlet was only eight and in hospital with a broken collar bone.

"That's right," said Steph. "When it came time for Sharlet to be released from hospital it transpired she had nowhere to go so arrangements were made for her to be taken into care by Social Services. She was put into a children's home for some four months then transferred to the care of foster parents."

"Who treated her badly," I said sourly. "What a system!"

"Did she tell you that?" asked Steph.

"In a way," I said. "She hasn't told me any details but she's referred to them several times as 'foster pigs' not foster parents."

"Interesting," said Steph, scanning her notes. "By all accounts she was reasonably happy there. She did well at school, coming top of her class in both Science and Maths and doing well in all her other subjects."

"How strange," I said, thinking about it, "although that could explain why she sometimes seems like two different people."

“What do you mean?” asked Steph, looking up.

“Well, sometimes she talks in a very intelligent way,” I said, “yet at other times she talks like a rough street kid.”

“That could be a survival strategy she learned later,” said Steph.

“Perhaps,” I said. “So, umm, if she was happy there why did she run away?”

“She didn't,” said Steph. “She was with those foster parents until she was 11, umm, no 12. She was moved just after her 12th birthday. Her foster father had an accident at work and the family struggled to cope so Sharlet was moved to another family.”

“Ahhh, perhaps they were the foster pigs,” I said.

“Quite possibly,” said Steph, “as she didn't stay with them for long. In fact, from the ages of 12 to, umm,” and she scanned through a few pages, “ah yes, 15, she was with four foster families and spend two periods in a psychiatric institution. Her school attendance became erratic then declined to less than 10 percent.”

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed. “Psychiatric Inst ... what on Earth for?”

“Half a minute,” said Steph, flicking backwards and forwards through her notes. “Ahh, here it is. When she was nearly 13 the then foster parents took her to a doctor for depression. The doctor felt it was acute depression and made arrangements for her to spend two weeks under observation at a psychiatric unit.”

“Actually, I think Sharlet said something about that,” I said, trying to remember. “Did it help?”

“I suspect not,” said Steph. “Apparently the unit diagnosed her with mild autism and recommended a course of treatment with a psychologist.”

“Ahh,” I said. “So she's autistic? That doesn't sound right.”

"We'll never know," said Steph. "She ran away from her foster parents three days after returning from the psychiatric unit. She was found by the police living on the streets eighteen days later and returned to Social Services who assigned her to another set of foster parents."

"So did she get the treatment?" I asked.

"Not according to the Court assessment when she was fifteen," said Steph, skipping forward three pages. "Apparently the original psychiatric assessment didn't catch up with her due to her frequent moves between foster carers."

"Original?" I blurted. "You mean there were more?"

"Oh yes," said Steph, going back two pages, "but we're getting ahead of ourselves here. From the age of 13, and as far as I can tell after her return from the original psychiatric unit, she had a total of seventeen Court hearings for minor offences including graffiti spraying, vandalism of school property, umm, shoplifting, public swearing, umm, one for attempted theft of a police car and one for threatening behaviour although that charge was dropped when the complainant failed to attend Court."

"Good God Almighty!" I exclaimed.

"Oh don't take any notice of those," said Steph. "They were all minor, apart from the threatening behaviour which, incidentally, didn't escalate into actual bodily harm, and she was let off with warnings. Trust me, as juvenile offenders go she was barely scratching the surface. No, the important thing here is that at her last Court appearance, the Magistrate ordered a psychiatric assessment by a Court appointed psychiatrist who diagnosed her with anti-social personality disorder."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "I know Sharlet has one or two issues but she's by no means anti-social."

"I'd agree with you," said Steph. She flipped to another page. "I wouldn't put a lot of store in it myself either. Apparently she was with this shrink for two hours during which she refused to say a word and

stared at the floor the whole time.”

“That sounds more like Sharlet,” I said, “but that doesn't mean she's anti-social.”

“I've had dealings with some Court appointed psychiatrists,” said Steph. “I daresay they mean well but they're overworked and in a difficult situation anyway, unlike their colleagues in private practice. If they officially declare someone sane and harmless who later kills several people or whatever it can ruin their reputations so it's in their interests to find something wrong. And let's face it, most people are anti-social sometimes and being forced to be assessed by a psychiatrist isn't the best way to make someone feel safe and happy, especially a fifteen year old. Unfortunately the Courts rely on these people.”

“So what happened?” I asked with some trepidation.

“The Court ordered Sharlet to be more formally assessed by the same psychiatric unit where she'd been sent for depression,” said Steph. “She was there for three months and this time they concluded she had pronounced psychopathic tendencies and possible borderline schizophrenia.”

I just stared at her, speechless.

“Yeah,” said Steph. “I know how you feel. Still, that was the end of it.”

“What do you mean that was the end of it?” I asked. “They changed their minds?”

“Oh no,” said Steph. “Shrinks never change their minds except to decide on something worse. No, after her release from the psychiatric unit she was taken in by yet another set of foster carers since she was only a week past 16. She disappeared that night and hasn't been seen since, at least not by anyone official. I imagine she made her way to Queensland and went to ground somewhere before popping up in your car.”

“And that didn't go well either,” I said. “Poor girl. She's had a pretty rough life.”

“Oh not really,” said Steph. “According to, umm, my friend, there’s never been any suggestion of sexual abuse and she had to have a medical exam before her second stay at the psychiatric unit and the medical report says, amongst other things, that she was a virgin and there were no obvious signs of any physical abuse, other than the broken collarbone, of course. Her cholesterol level was a bit high apparently but that’s about it.”

“That’ll be because she eats a lot of fast foods,” I said. “Schizophrenia? Psychopathic tendencies?”

“That’s what they said,” said Steph. “Fancy a coffee?”

“I think I need one,” I said, getting up. “I’ll make them. Do you think she’s dangerous?”

“Depends what you mean by dangerous,” said Steph, following me into the kitchen with her leaflets. “Everyone is dangerous given the right circumstances.”

“I suppose,” I said. “Umm, do you think I was at risk taking her to Perth?”

“Of course you were,” said Steph. “Letting a stranger into your car is a foolish thing to do. Would you mind ripping these leaflets up? It’s a bit awkward for me.”

“Sure,” I said, flicking the kettle on. “No, I meant with the mental health issues and so on.”

“Has she ever displayed any threatening behaviour towards you?” asked Steph. She gathered up the ripped leaflets and put them in the sink. “Thanks.”

“Actually no,” I said. “In fact she’s always quietened down when I’ve said anything. Well, except for Thursday.”

“Well then,” said Steph. “So what’s the problem?”

“There isn’t one, I suppose,” I said, watching her set fire to the

leaflets. We both stood there watching until they were just ashes then she turned the tap on and washed them down the plug hole.

"You didn't see me destroying evidence," she remarked. "Did you."

"What evidence?" I asked, getting her point unusually quickly. "All I saw was you putting some water in the kettle."

"Good man," she said. "When you've made the coffees I want to have a word with you. I've a feeling you might have the wrong idea about Sharlet."

"Oh no," I said grimacing. "What else is there?"

"Don't stress," said Steph. "It's nothing bad. You just need to see all that in context," and she waved her hand at the sink.

"So you're saying she isn't a bad girl really?" I asked, pouring the water into the coffee mugs.

"Exactly," she said. "Once officialdom gets its teeth into things they often look worse than they really are."

"OK," I said. "I confess I have my doubts about what you've told me. Only some of it fits with the Sharlet I know."

My phone started to ring as I carried the coffees back into the Australasian Room.

"You want me to get that?" asked Steph.

"No it's OK," I said, putting down the coffees and picking up my phone. "Good God! It's Wasp!"

"Who?" asked Steph.

I flapped my hand at her as I answered the phone.

"Sharlet! Thank God," I exclaimed. "Where are you?"

“I take it you know the owner of this phone, sir,” said a wholly unfamiliar female voice.

“Of course I do,” I said puzzled. “Who are you?”

“Constable Kylie Douglas, Noosa Police,” she said. “There's been an accident.”

Chapter Twenty Four

“What do you mean, there's been an accident?” I said, confused. “This is Sharlet's phone. Who are you?” I groped for my chair and sat down then stood up again in agitation. “What's going on?”

“What's happened?” ask Steph, staring at me. I flapped my hand at her as I was trying to listen to whoever was on the phone.

“Constable Kylie Douglas, Noosa Police,” said the voice. “Can I have your name, please, sir?”

“Who is it?” hissed Steph urgently.

“It's the police,” I said. “I think there's been some sort of accident or something.”

“Give me that,” said Steph snatching the phone out of my hand. “This is Senior Sergeant Stephanie Marotta, Victoria Police. Identify yourself please.”

There was a brief pause then she barked “Give me a sitrep, Constable.”

I stared helplessly at her then, as my knees started to feel weak and trembly, I let myself down into my chair again.

“Sharlet April Dee,” said Steph, focussed on the phone. “Yes, this is her phone number. Approximately 1m55, 50kg, shoulder length blonde hair, mole on left side of face below the ear.”

“Oh God, it's Sharlet,” I thought. “She's been killed.” My hands started to shake. “It's all my fault. If only I'd stayed to talk to her she'd still be alive.”

“Reginald Dorfmann,” said Steph and gave whoever it was my address. “Which hospital? Right, one moment please.” She held the phone against her waist and looked at me. “Do you want to go to Noosa Heads to see her?”

“What?” I said, my brain still not fully grasping the situation.

“Never mind,” she said and lifted the phone to her ear again. “We’ll be there in approximately two hours. Thank you Constable.”

She hung up and looked at me.

“That was the Police at Noosa Heads,” she said. “Apparently Sharlet was hit by a car on the esplanade about 20 minutes ago. She has some injuries including a probable broken leg and is being taken to Noosa hospital by ambulance. She had no ID on her and there was only your number in her phone so they rang here.”

“But she’s still alive?” I asked anxiously, looking up at Steph.

“Definitely,” said Steph, “although apparently the bicycle is a write-off. The driver of the vehicle failed a breath test and has been taken to the station.”

“They’re putting him on a train?” I exclaimed, jumping to my feet. “Shouldn’t they be arresting him or something?”

“The police station,” said Steph with a wry smile, “not the train station.”

“Ohh,” I said, sitting down heavily again. I stared blankly at Steph for a few moments then the situation percolated through to my brain. “Sharlet’s been hit by a car?” I exclaimed, jumping up again. “Is she hurt? Where is she? I’ve got to help her!”

“Stop!” said Steph firmly, holding up her bad arm. “She has suffered some injuries but she’s on her way to hospital. I’ve told the police we’ll be there in about two hours. I’m assuming you’re willing to shut the Museum early?”

“The Museum?” I said as an unfamiliar sense of urgency started to take hold of me. “Oh yes, yes, of course. Yes, lock everything up, we have to go. Come on, hurry!”

A few minutes later we were in my car. Fortunately it was Saturday so

the late afternoon traffic was fairly light, allowing me to go a little faster than my usual speed.

“Ahh, I must apologise,” said Steph as I headed for the M4 out of Manly in order to join the M1 heading North. “I assumed you wanted me to come with you. If you'd rather I didn't, drop me somewhere along here and I can walk back.”

“What on Earth is she doing in Noosa Heads?” I asked, not really hearing her. “That's hundreds of kilometres away! How'd she even get there?”

“It's only about a hundred and fifty kilometres,” said Steph. She must have sensed my need to talk as she didn't say anything more about being dropped off. She lit a cigarette instead and opened the window a little so the interior didn't get fumigated. “She's a healthy enough girl. She could have cycled there in a day, certainly two.”

“But why Noosa Heads?” I asked. “And why did she leave anyway?”

“Just be glad she didn't go back to Logan,” said Steph. She took a long drag from her cigarette and let it out slowly while gazing out the window. “Umm, although I've a pretty good idea now why she left.”

“What?” I said, jerking my head around to look at her. My foot slipped off the accelerator and we started to slow down. I hurriedly put my foot back before the car behind got excited and hooted. “Why?”

“Me,” she said, blowing a long stream of smoke towards the gap in the window.

“Oh don't be absurd,” I said. “Why would she be upset with you? She barely knows you and all you've done is help.”

“Oh no, she isn't upset with me,” said Steph. “She's upset with you but it's about me.”

“You're talking in riddles,” I said. “I've no idea why she's upset with me but it couldn't possibly be because of you.”

“Well, think about it,” said Steph. “I had a suspicion but after getting all that background information I’m pretty well certain. How would you summarise her life so far?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, her dad went to prison when she was very young,” said Steph. “Her step father was an evil bastard who hurt her mother and ended up throwing her through a window. Then she had a succession of foster carers who, by and large, didn’t treat her well since she kept running away from them. I’d say it’s a fair bet she hasn’t had good experiences with men and who knows what happened to her when she got to Queensland. It couldn’t have been good otherwise she wouldn’t have run away yet again.”

“Well, yes, true,” I said. “But that’s men. Why’s she got a problem with you? You’re not a man.”

“No, but you are, Reggie,” said Steph. “It wouldn’t surprise me if you were the first man in her life who treated her well and with respect. You’re kind and reliable and you don’t raise your voice or act aggressively which is why she came back to Brisbane with you. That’s why she trusted you.”

“I suppose that’s possible,” I said, frowning. I pulled off onto the slip road to join the M1 heading North to Noosa. “Certainly she said she trusted me but why would she run away and what’s it to do with you?”

“Tell me,” said Steph, stubbing her cigarette out in the ashtray under the radio. “When Sharlet said that did she say ‘I trust you’ or did she say ‘I trusted you’?”

“I don’t really remember,” I said. “What difference does it make?”

“It makes a world of difference,” said Steph. “‘I trusted you’ is in the past tense and actually means she doesn’t trust you any more. You do see that, don’t you?”

“Ahh,” I said after thinking about it. “You may have a point there. But isn’t that because I was pushing her to have a place of her own?”

Where do you come into it?"

"Oh Reggie," said Steph, awkwardly patting my knee with her left hand. "Do you really know so little about women?"

"I know nothing about women," I admitted. "I've never been married or had a girlfriend. Never really seen the need."

"Ahh," said Steph. "Right." She sat silently for a few moments. "Well, that's a different conversation for another time. Let's focus on Sharlet for now."

"You've lost me," I said bemused. "What's another conversation?"

"Doesn't matter," said Steph. "Let's get back to Sharlet."

"OK," I said, my bemusement not really going away.

"I rather think that Sharlet felt safe and secure with you," said Steph, "and then I came along and I think she felt threatened by me."

"Why on Earth would she feel threatened by you?" I asked. "You were only trying to help."

"Yes, but what with?" asked Steph. "From her point of view I was helping to force her to move out. I wouldn't be surprised if my inviting you to dinner actually made things worse. She probably saw it as me trying to take you away from her, the only man she's ever really trusted. It wouldn't have helped that I was a cop as well."

"Oh that's absurd," I said. "How could she possibly think that? Is it because she's schizophrenic?"

Steph burst out laughing.

"Oh Reggie, Reggie," she said, shaking her head. "It's got nothing to do with mental illness. It's a woman thing and anyway, Sharlet isn't schizophrenic. Nowhere near."

"Well, psychopathic then," I said. "That's what the psychological

report said.”

“Sharlet isn't a psychopath either,” said Steph. “I spent 22 years in the police and I've come across more than a few psychopaths and schizos in my time. Trust me, Sharlet isn't even close. You can see that in her eyes. She's just a scared kid who's had a bit of a hard time, that's all.”

“Then why did they diagnose her with that?” I asked. “They're professionals. Surely they know what they're doing.”

“That's a tricky one to answer,” said Steph. She fished her cigarette packet out of the door compartment and thoughtfully shook one out. “Have you ever heard of the Rosenhan Experiment¹?”

“No,” I said.

“OK,” said Steph. “It was back in the 1970s. A psychologist called Rosenhan had himself and a number of his students admitted to various psychiatric hospitals to see what would happen if people without any form of mental illness were admitted. They faked a few symptoms in order to get in but once inside they behaved perfectly normally. What do you think happened?”

“I would imagine they were all released fairly quickly,” I said. “There was nothing wrong with them.”

“Then you'd be wrong,” said Steph. “Every single one of them was diagnosed with a mental illness. In fact I think most were diagnosed as psychopaths and even after Rosenhan admitted the experiment the hospital psychiatrists still kept recommending they continued to get treatment.”

“Are you serious?” I asked. “Why would they do that if there was nothing wrong with the people?”

“Well, that's the nub of it, isn't it,” said Steph. “Rosenhan thought it was because of a fundamental assumption by the psychiatrists that if someone has been admitted to a psychiatric unit then they must, by

1 Rosenhan, David (19 January 1973). "On being sane in insane places". *Science*. 179 (4070): 250–258.

definition, have a mental illness otherwise they would not have been admitted. It's a bit like being sent to the Principal at school since it's a fair assumption no one is sent just to discuss the weather. Anyway, once the presumption of a mental issue is made then, of course, any behaviour that would be seen as normal suddenly gets seen as abnormal. Like your interest in birds and feathers. If you were sent by a Court for psychiatric assessment tomorrow they'd probably see that as indicating you have a mental illness."

"Well they'd probably be right," I said. "I know I'm not like other people and never have been. A few years ago, after my mother died, I poked around on Google and I'm pretty sure I have Asperger's."

"That's absolutely fatal," said Steph. "You should never use Google to decide things about yourself. Stupid thing to do. You can convince yourself of anything that way."

"I suppose," I said, "but I do have a number of the characteristics of Asperger's. I don't really understand emotions, for example, and it would be fair to say I have a very narrow but obsessive range of interests. Bird feathers and brass bands, that's about it really. Anyway, we're talking about Sharlet. Surely stabbing her step-father and going on a crime spree is indicative of something unbalanced?"

"You think?" asked Steph. "What would you have done if someone was beating up your mother? You'd have wanted to try to stop it, wouldn't you?"

"Well, true," I said. "But what about all the other things?"

"Well, juvenile crime has always been a bit of a problem," said Steph, "but I read a very interesting report a few years ago. It was funded by the Criminology Research Advisory Council² on the causes of juvenile delinquency. Basically what they concluded was that when kids grow up in a disadvantaged environment they generally learn to do things that give a quick reward rather than something that is longer term and has less of a perceived benefit which makes sense. If your family is

2 Understanding delinquency during the teenage years: Developmental pathways of antisocial decision making among disadvantaged youth, Kathryn L. Modecki, Bep Uink. Report to the Criminology Research Advisory Council, Grant: CRG 13/14-15, July 2018.

struggling to put food on the table it's quicker and easier to steal some food than it is to get training for a job that might never come along."

"But is that necessarily true of Sharlet?" I asked. "She had foster carers. I imagine they provided for her."

"Well, we don't know," said Steph. "All we know is that she was having problems and started skipping school. Very likely she got into a vicious circle and couldn't find a way out of it. I'd certainly be very reluctant to condemn her as a psychopath as a result."

"Well I hope you're right," I said. "I don't much like the idea of living with a psychopath."

"So you'll take her back if she wants to?" asked Steph quickly, looking over at me.

"Well, yes, I suppose so," I said, realising what I'd said. "I quite like her and I thought she liked me."

"I'd say that was a certainty," said Steph, "although we'll find out soon enough. We'll be in Noosa soon so I'll find out where the hospital is. Umm, you realise she may not be allowed to stay with you?"

"What do you mean?" I asked as Steph got her phone from her bag.

"She's now on the police radar," said Steph. "It won't be long before the local cops realise she's a runaway so they'll probably send her back to Social Services in Victoria."

"Are you serious?" I exclaimed, horrified. "She'd hate that!"

"Yes," said Steph, looking up Google Maps. "She's still only seventeen."

Chapter Twenty Five

It didn't take long to find Noosa Hospital but it took a while to discover where Sharlet was as their admissions records still showed her as an unidentified road traffic victim. We were sent to the Emergency Department only to find Sharlet wasn't there. She was, apparently, down in Orthopaedics having her leg, the left one, put in a plaster cast. Once Steph explained to the duty nurse that I was her guardian and she was a police officer investigating the incident the nurse became all smiles and insisted I give her all the details she needed for her computer. Then she said we could wait beside Sharlet's bed until she returned and sent a junior nurse to make us some tea.

"You seem to be able to lie quite well for a police officer," I remarked, as we walked through Emergency to Cubicle 7 which had been assigned to Sharlet.

"Merely facilitating," said Steph, sounding very officious. "You are, in effect, Sharlet's guardian, if only for the moment and unofficially and I'm not long out of the force. It's easier than trying to explain the details."

"Well, it's a useful knack," I said, "and one I don't have. Oh lord, would you look at these?"

Sharlet's camouflage trousers, zombie t-shirt and hoodie were in a pile on a chair beside the bed. They were filthy and thick with sand and one of the legs had been ripped. Her work boots were randomly dumped under the chair and they had scuffs and scrapes on them. Her Lufthansa bag sat limply on the floor beside the chair.

"Interesting," said Steph, studying a piece of paper on the bedside table. She put it back down.

"What's that?" I asked, folding Sharlet's clothes neatly. I looked around for somewhere to put them then laid them on the floor beside the bag. I straightened her boots while I was there.

"It's a penalty notice," said Steph. "Sharlet's been fined \$154 for failing to wear a helmet."

“Ahh, better give that to me,” I said. “She hasn't any money and there's no point in adding non-payment to her list of crimes.” I took the notice, folded it and put it in my wallet. “I wonder how she is?”

“Probably feeling very sorry for herself,” said Steph sitting on the bed. “By the sound of it she isn't too badly hurt though. A broken leg should heal quite quickly.”

“I suppose,” I said. I felt empty inside and I still had the feeling this was somehow my fault. Obviously Sharlet had made her own decision to leave but it was undoubtedly my lack of social skills that had precipitated it. Sharlet deserved better, given all she'd been through in her life, and I'd let her down. I should have been more, I don't know, perceptive perhaps although how I couldn't imagine. I'm just not a people person and never have been.

“Don't blame yourself,” said Steph, reading my thoughts. It occurred to me that as a successful police officer she must have a fairly good grasp of what went on inside people's heads.

“Well who else is there?” I asked. “If what you said in the car is true then I should have seen it and been more something or other.”

“Oh you're a factor, undeniably,” said Steph. “As am I but neither of us is the cause. If you must blame anything, blame society for creating the situation, or at least not remedying it years ago.”

“That's a bit too abstract for my taste,” I said as a nurse, seemingly no older than Sharlet, bustled in with a tray with three mismatched mugs on it.

“Hello,” she said cheerfully. “She's still not back then? I made her a cuppa as well.” She plonked the tray on the table where the penalty notice had been.

“Oh, thank you,” I said. “Umm, can you tell me if Sharlet had any injuries other than her broken leg?”

“Is that her name?” asked the nurse. “We've been wondering. Have you given her details to the front desk?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Awesome,” said the nurse. “I’ll just get her file.”

She bustled out again and came back a minute or two later with a thin cardboard file and a sheaf of printed sticky labels.

“Now let me see,” she said putting a label on the front of the file. She started perusing the documents and putting a label on each as she did. “Right. Clean fracture of the left tibia and fibula, that’s the lower leg, extensive abrasions to the head, both hands and the right shoulder and multiple contusions, again to the head, hands and shoulder as well as the left leg. She was also quite badly dehydrated.”

“Oh,” I said, wondering why Sharlet was dehydrated. “So she’s going to be OK?”

“Bit early to tell,” said the nurse. She put a label on the topmost document. “There is some concern about the blow to her head. Bicycle accident, wasn’t it?”

“That’s right,” I said. “Apparently a car hit her.”

“She was probably thrown off and hit her head,” said the nurse and clicked her tongue in annoyance. “She really should have been wearing a helmet.”

“But it’s not a serious head injury?” I asked, getting anxious all over again.

“Probably not,” said the nurse, “but she’s scheduled for a CT scan in the morning so we won’t know for certain until then.”

“Oh God,” I said despondently.

“More than likely just a graze,” said the nurse cheerfully. “We get them all the time with people who weren’t wearing helmets. Don’t let your tea get cold.”

She picked up the clipboard hanging on the rail of Sharlet’s bed and

stuck several labels on the various documents there as well.

“Is she in pain?” I asked.

“Bound to be,” said the nurse, “but we’ve given her painkillers and we’ll be monitoring her throughout the night. Don’t worry, we’ll take good care of her.”

“I’m sure you will,” I said. “Umm, will she be able to go home tomorrow?”

“That depends on the results of the CT Scan,” she said. “If it’s clear then I would expect so. Are you local?”

“Local?” I said, as always confused by the sudden change of subject. “Um, no, we’re from Brisbane.”

“Well, if you’re planning on coming in to visit Sharlet tomorrow, make it after lunch,” she said, tweaking the curtains of the cubicle so they hung in the approved manner. “There’s the scan in the morning and it’ll be a while for the results to come through. She shouldn’t be too long in Orthopaedics. It’s still early and fairly quiet.”

She flashed another reassuring smile then disappeared.

“Have some tea,” said Steph, handing me one of the mugs.

“What did she mean, ‘it’s still early’?” I asked.

“Pubs don’t shut for a few hours yet,” said Steph, “and it’s Saturday night. I imagine they’ll get quite busy later, most hospitals do.”

“Oh, right,” I said and pondered this while taking a sip. The tea was weak, milky and sweet but I drank it anyway. At least it was warm.

A few minutes later the curtain was pulled back and a porter pushed Sharlet in in a wheelchair. Her leg was in plaster, her hands were both bandaged and her head was wrapped in bandages as well, although most of her face was free. Her eyes were shut and she looked very pale and drawn. She also looked very small, sad and scared in her ill fitting

hospital gown with little tufts of hair sticking up through the bandages.

“Hello Wasp,” I said quietly, reaching out to touch her wrist above the bandage. “How do you feel?”

Her eyes snapped open and she stared disbelievingly at me.

“Red!” she screamed and fought to get out of the wheelchair. “Red! You're fucking here!”

The porter tried to push her back into the wheelchair just as two nurses came running to see what the screaming was all about. Sharlet punched the porter's hand away, using her bandaged hand like a boxing glove, pushed herself up onto her one good leg and fell forward as the wheelchair rolled backwards. I caught her and she threw her arms around me, her head pressed tightly against my belly. Steph came round the end of the bed and did some sort of intercept with the porter and nurses. I didn't see what as I was hugging Sharlet, trying to keep upright and not crush her head.

“Oh Red,” she said several times, her voice muffled. “You're here! You're fucking here!”

“Yes I'm here, Wasp,” I said quietly. “Where else would I be?”

One of the nurses managed to get past Steph and between us we lifted Sharlet onto the bed but she wouldn't let go of me. We ended up with me awkwardly bent over the bed with Sharlet even more awkwardly twisted with her broken leg underneath her, half on and half off the bed.

“Will you let go for just one minute while we sort you out!” exclaimed the nurse irritably.

“Fuck off bitch!” shouted Sharlet, her voice still muffled.

“I'll get Sister,” said the other nurse turning to go. Steph intercepted her and started talking, quietly and fast.

“Now then, Sharlet,” I said, trying to prise her arms away. “Be nice. They're only trying to help.”

“OK, Red,” she said and reluctantly let go. I was surprise to see she was crying. “Poor thing must be in pain,” I thought sadly.

The nurse scowled and hoisted Sharlet back against the pillows and got her leg arranged to her satisfaction.

“Do not let her move,” said the nurse very firmly. “She needs to lie quietly and rest. Don't let her get excited.” She glared at me for a moment. “Or shall I get a sedative?”

“I won't,” I promised. “And there's no need for a sedative. She was just surprised to see me, that's all.”

The nurse gave me a hard look then sniffed disapprovingly although why I've no idea as Sharlet was sitting there quietly. Her face was now alive and she no longer looked drawn or scared. The nurse clipped some sort of gadget to her finger and pushed a tube into the needle that was strapped to Sharlet's wrist, just above the bandages.

“What's that for?” I asked.

“She's dehydrated,” said the nurse. “It's to rehydrate her. Don't let her pull it out.”

“Ahh,” I said.

The nurse sniffed again then left, leaving the curtain open.

“I'm just going to find a toilet,” said Steph, “and a cafeteria, if there is one.” She disappeared as well. Sharlet didn't seem to notice her. She just kept staring at me.

“Well, this is a bit of a bugger,” I said.

“I never thought I'd see you again,” said Sharlet. She beamed at me and I felt embarrassed.

“The police found your phone,” I said awkwardly. “Umm, they phoned me to find out who you are.”

“But you came here,” said Sharlet. “You fucking came to get me.”

“Well, yes,” I said. “As soon as the police rang and told me where you were. Umm, I’ve been worried about you.”

“Were you?” she said, staring intently at me. “Were you really?”

“Yes,” I said. “Umm, could you let go now?”

She gave a sort of apologetic half laugh and let go of my arm.

“Thanks,” I said, sitting down again. I rubbed my arm and some feeling started to come back into my hand. “Umm, you didn’t have to leave, you know. We could have talked about things.”

“I didn’t think you wanted me there,” she said very quietly. “Oh Red, I’m so glad to see you,” and she lurched forward, trying to put her arms around me again.

“Whoa, hold on,” I said in alarm, getting up again. “You’ll have that nurse back in a minute.” I sat on the side of the bed so Sharlet could get her arms around me. I held her too.

“I was so scared,” she whispered, “so scared,” and she started to sob.

“Umm, yes, well, um I can understand that,” I said, not knowing what else to say. I wanted to stroke her head but I was afraid to.

“But you came to get me,” she whispered. “You fucking came to get me.”

“Yes,” I said quietly. “I came to get you.” I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the police would probably be extraditing her back to Victoria to serve the rest of her sentence in foster care.

We stayed like that for quite a long time then, when I felt her grip on me start to slacken, I let go of her and pushed her gently back onto

her pillows. I checked her intravenous drip was still in place then shifted over to the chair.

“Feeling better now?” I asked.

“My leg hurts,” she said. “So does my head.”

“Shall I get a nurse for some painkillers?” I asked.

“Nah,” she said, gingerly shaking her head.

“Do you remember what happened” I asked.

“Kind of,” she said. “I slept on the beach but I didn't have any food or anything to drink so I headed into town to find something then woke up in an ambulance.”

“A drunk driver ran into you,” I said. “Your bike's a write off apparently.”

“Ohh,” she said. She nodded a few times.

“So why Noosa?” I asked. “It's a hell of a long way.”

“Dunno,” she said with a shrug. “I just needed to get away and no way was I going back to fucking Logan.”

“But a bicycle?” I said. “You cycled all that way in this heat? No wonder you were dehydrated.”

“You said not to steal no more cars,” she said. “Didn't have a lot of choice, did I.”

“Excuse me,” said yet another nurse. “We'll be moving Sharlet to a ward very soon as we'll be needing the bed here.”

“Do you want us to leave?” I asked, spotting Steph hovering behind her.

“Well, there's restricted visiting hours on the ward,” said the nurse

diplomatically.

“Oh, right,” I said. “I suppose we'd better go then.”

“We?” asked Sharlet.

“Steph's here too,” I said as the nurse disappeared and Steph joined us.

“Oh,” said Sharlet, her face falling.

“Hello Sharlet,” said Steph, cheerfully. “How'd you feel?”

“OK,” said Sharlet tersely, not looking at Steph.

“Ah, right,” said Steph. “Umm Reggie, would you mind taking a walk for a few minutes? I want to have a word with Sharlet alone.”

“What about?” I asked, afraid she'd tell Sharlet about being on the police radar now.”

“Oh, just girl talk,” said Steph. “Just need to clear the air, that's all. Go.”

“Is that OK, Sharlet?” I asked.

“S'pose,” she said, looking sullen. “Fucking trapped here, aren't I.”

I blinked several times then decided that Steph probably knew what she was doing. For certain I didn't.

“I'll be back in a few minutes,” I said as reassuringly as I could, patting Sharlet on her good leg. “And don't worry. We'll stay in a hotel or something and visit you tomorrow.”

“Separate rooms,” said Steph quickly, watching Sharlet.

“Of course,” I said. “Umm, did you find a cafeteria?”

“If you go out of the doors at that end,” said Seph, pointing to the

other end of the Emergency Ward to which we'd come in, "and just follow the signs."

"Right," I said. "Do you want anything to eat, Sharlet?"

She shook her head, not looking at either of us, just stared sullenly at her foot.

"I'll be back then," I said. "Umm, yes."

I headed off and, on the way, asked a nurse if it was OK for Sharlet to have anything to eat. She ummed and erred then took me to the duty nurse who checked Sharlet's notes and said it would be fine. I very nearly got some fruit in the cafeteria but realised I'd never seen Sharlet eat fruit so I got two pies, two large bags of potato chips and two bars of chocolate. I ate one of the pies and one of the bars then decided I'd been gone long enough and headed back. To my surprise Sharlet and Steph were talking quietly and Sharlet looked almost relaxed. Her sullen expression now animated.

"Talk of the devil," said Steph as I went in the cubicle.

"I got you something to eat, Sharlet," I said, putting the pie, bags of chips and the chocolate on her table.

"Thanks," she said.

"So, umm, how're things?" I asked.

"Oh quite good, I think," said Steph. "What do you think, Sharlet?"

"Yeah," said Sharlet, eyeing the pie. "All good."

"Excellent," I said. "Umm, I suppose we'd better be off then. I saw a porter with a wheelchair at the front desk so they're probably just about to move you to a ward."

"Are you coming back?" asked Sharlet, suddenly looking worried. "You ain't just leaving me here, are you?"

“Of course we’re coming back,” I said, squeezing her arm above her bandage. “You’re going for a scan in the morning so we can probably take you home in the afternoon.”

“That’s back to Reggie’s apartment,” said Steph. “Not anywhere else.”

“Yeah?” asked Sharlet, her eyes lighting up. “For real?”

“Definitely,” I said. “And I’ll tell Shaun we won’t be needing that studio apartment after all. I, umm, hadn’t realised how strongly you felt about it, that’s all, Sharlet.”

“Awesome!” she said. “Umm, can I have a hug before you go?”

Chapter Twenty Six

Steph wouldn't tell me what she and Sharlet had talked about, saying only that it wasn't really any of my business but she did concede that Sharlet and she had reached a clear understanding and that she didn't think Sharlet would resent her anymore. I accepted that as I had a nasty suspicion that my insisting on knowing would have led me into a dreadfully embarrassing and emotional situation. The important thing was that Sharlet didn't try to run away from the hospital overnight and Steph assured me she wouldn't.

On Sunday afternoon, after washing Sharlet's clothes at a laundromat and doing a little sightseeing as Steph had never been to Noosa Heads before, Steph retrieved Sharlet's mobile phone from the Noosa Police. We then went to the hospital and found out the bad news. The CT scan hadn't found any hairline fractures in Sharlet's skull but there was a little swelling of her brain around the area where she'd landed on her head. Apparently there was a tiny possibility of brain damage and they were very unwilling to let Sharlet leave the hospital until the swelling had gone down. Another CT scan was scheduled for Tuesday morning.

After some discussion, Sharlet agreed it was sensible for me to go back to Brisbane as I had clients but I'd phone her to see how she was on Monday and, if the CT scan on Tuesday reported the swelling had gone down enough, I'd come up on Tuesday afternoon to fetch her. Perhaps more importantly Steph broached an idea she'd had with me and we discussed it at length on the drive back to Brisbane. I thought it was an excellent idea although I had my doubts about whether it would be possible. Still, I cancelled my Monday morning client to see a lawyer I'd used to handle the conveyancing of my apartment and the house used for the Museum and who'd represented me once when a (former) client tried to sue me. On Tuesday, just after lunch, I had an excited phone call from Sharlet to say the scan had gone well and she was being released that afternoon. I collected Steph and we drove up.

"I'm ready!" called Sharlet excitedly as soon as she saw me. She was sitting on the bed holding a thin A5 sized booklet with some difficulty and her bag was packed. The leg of her camouflage trousers had been slit to accommodate the plaster cast and protective boot. There was a

pair of crutches propped against the wall beside her bed.

"I'm afraid you can't go yet," said the nurse who was filling in a form. "Even though you've got crutches you have to be taken to the exit in a wheelchair."

"You fucking serious?" demanded Sharlet, scowling at her.

"It's hospital policy," said the nurse primly. "A porter has been requested."

"I'm sure it'll only be a few minutes," I said. "What are you reading?"

To my surprise Sharlet's face, or what could be seen of it under her head bandages, went pink. The nurse finished her form and marched off along the ward to attend to another patient who was also in civvies.

"Oh, umm, yeah," she muttered. "I, um, wanted to talk to you about that."

"Oh yes?" I said, dragging a chair from the next bed over so Steph could sit down.

"I was practising," she said, gesturing with a hand to her crutches, "on me crutches."

"How are they?" I asked.

"Me hands are still a bit sore," she said, "but I can manage. Umm, I found a room down the corridor with books and games and stuff in."

"It's probably a recreation room for long term patients," said Steph. "Did you find something worth reading?"

"Yeah," said Sharlet. "Umm, this," and she thrust the booklet at me. It was folded open so I looked at the page then flipped to the cover to see what it was. It was the course brochure for Noosa TAFE.

"So you want to do a TAFE course?" I asked, flipping back to the page

she'd left it at.

"Yeah," she said, "seeing as how, well, ... umm, you reckon I'm up to it?"

I carefully read through the course outline as I always read through documents carefully. It's my nature.

"I don't see why not," I said. "You're more than intelligent enough to do a Cert 3 in Animal Care Services. Why Animal Care though? Why not Business Administration or something along those lines?"

"I been lying here thinking," she said, her eyes looking at the floor, "and, well, maybe, umm, if I can, like, well ..."

"Yes?" I said encouragingly.

"Umm, well, am I going to be staying with you again?" she said quickly as though embarrassed. "Cos if I am, well, I was kinda thinking, like, maybe I should, well, you know, umm, get my act together. Umm, yeah." She paused and glanced at me. "See down the bottom there? Says the course is good for people who want to be a veterinary nurse or run a kennels and stuff. I'd like to do that."

"Which?" I asked, wondering how to explain to her about the amount of capital needed to set up a kennels.

"I'd like to run me own kennels one day," she said, "but I thought, once I finished the course, I could maybe set up a mobile dog wash or something like that. Just to get started, like."

"That's an excellent idea," I said, noting the course ran for a year. That would give her plenty of time to think up how to buy a vehicle and all the equipment. "I'm sure you'd be very good at that."

"For real?" she asked, watching my face intently.

"Absolutely," I said. "And I'd be happy to do your bookkeeping for free."

“Sweet,” she said. “I just hope there's the same course in a TAFE in Brisbane.”

“Oh there's bound to be,” I said. “Umm ...”

“What?” she demanded, still watching my face. “What's wrong?”

“Well, umm, there could be a little bit of a problem there,” I said. I glanced at Steph for approval and she nodded.

“What?” demanded Sharlet again.

“Well, umm, you're only 17,” I said.

“How'd you find out?” asked Sharlet, tensing up.

“Steph made some enquiries,” I said, holding up my hands placatingly. “It's not a problem except, well, ...”

“Except?” said Sharlet looking from me to Steph then back at me.

“Except the police here know you ran away from foster care in Victoria,” I said.

“I ain't fucking going back!” exclaimed Sharlet, her face showing her panic. “No fucking way!”

“Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about,” I said. “I talked to a lawyer yesterday and she talked to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing in Victoria. It took her a while to find someone who was able to make a decision in your case but she did eventually.”

“What fucking decision?” snarled Sharlet. She looked at me suspiciously. It struck me that there had probably been very few times in her life when she'd been given good news so her reaction was understandable.

“Well, the basic proposition was that, since you are 17 and you'll be 18 in a little over four months,” I said, “I, that is we, Steph and me, since it was her idea ...”

“Oh get on with it,” said Steph impatiently. “You have a client in the morning, remember.”

“Umm, yes,” I said. “Sorry. Umm, my lawyer asked if they'd be willing, just for the remaining four months and to avoid the cost of any court hearings and so on if they'd be willing to make me your foster carer.”

“You for real?” demanded Sharlet, her face a complex mixture of hope and trepidation. “Far out! What'd they say?”

“They said absolutely not,” I said. “A single middle aged man fostering a teenage girl in another state would break just about every single one of their guidelines.”

Sharlet just stared at me in horror.

“You do have a hitherto unsuspected cruel streak,” said Steph wryly. “It's good to know that so soon.”

“What the fuck?” exclaimed Sharlet, her eyes shifting to Steph.

“He hasn't told you the whole story,” said Steph smiling. “God knows why. Get on with it Reggie. Can't you see you're stressing the poor girl?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I never was any good at telling stories. I always get caught up in the details.”

“Reggie!” said Steph warningly.

“Yes,” I said. “Um, so Steph, who went to see the lawyer with me, told her to put forward another proposition as it seemed that the only significant obstacle was my being single, my age and location being fairly minor.”

“Get to the point Reggie,” said Steph.

“Right you are,” I said, starting to feel harried and pressured. “Anyway, the upshot was that DFFH agreed and they faxed through the documents this morning.”

“You what?” asked Sharlet, looking helplessly from me to Steph and back again. “Agreed to what? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“They were quite happy to sign Reggie off as your foster carer,” said Steph, “so long as he and I are in a de facto relationship, me being a former Senior Sergeant with the Victoria Police and eminently respectable, not that him being a Queensland bookkeeper isn't respectable of course.”

“What?” asked Sharlet. Her face was all screwed up with anxiety and her good leg was twitching nervously. “I don't get it. What's this all about?”

“We can both be your foster carers,” I said. “If you want, of course. Steph's already signed the documents, including a legal declaration that we are in a de facto relationship, but I won't sign anything unless you tell me you'd like that. I'm not trying to force anything on you.”

“What?” asked Sharlet again, her face contorted with confusion. She leaned forward. “So you're saying you'll be my foster dad?”

“Only for four months,” I said. “Until you're 18. And Steph will be your foster mother, of course.”

“Fuck,” said Sharlet in disbelief. She paused for a moment then bent double with her arms over her head. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“And only if you want me to be,” I said, confused by her swearing. “I, erm, I've got the faxed documents here if you want to read them. You probably know a lot more about this than I do.”

I pulled the manilla folder the lawyer had given me out of my briefcase and pushed it towards her.

“Umm, do you want me to sign them or not?” I asked. “It's entirely up to you.”

She emerged from under her arms to stare at me then looked at the folder then stared at me some more.

“Umm?” I asked, not knowing what to do.

“Fuck,” said Sharlet, starting to cry.

“Do you want me to or not?” I said, thoroughly bemused.

“You gonna be me dad?” she asked, tears streaming down her face.

“Well, yes, I suppose so,” I said, wondering what the problem was. She seemed upset at the idea for some reason.

“Just sign them, Reggie,” said Steph. “Can't you see the poor kid's too emotional to speak?”

“But I don't know if she wants me to,” I said, a little irritably if truth be known. “She actually seems rather upset about the idea to me. Perhaps it would be better if I didn't.”

“Oh for God's sake, Reggie!” said Steph forcefully. “Sharlet, tell him to sign the fucking things!”

Sharlet looked at Steph then at me and managed to stop crying for a few moments.

“Sign the fucking things, Red,” she said weakly. “Umm, I mean, Dad.”

Then she hugged me tightly and, after several moments, hesitantly reached out a bandaged hand to include Steph.