

## CHAPTER ONE

"Will you marry me?"

"Don't be daft, Mr Archer, I'm old enough to be ..."

"My older sister?"

The managing director's personal assistant tucked a stray curl of iron-grey hair behind the arm of her glasses and smiled. "Get away with you. I happen to know I'm older than your mother and you well know I've been married for thirty-seven years. Mind you, if I didn't have that useless sod at home watching Top Gear reruns, I might consider it."

"Dump him," Sean said. "I'll marry you tomorrow."

She shook her head. "No, I've almost got Harry properly trained. I know You only love me for my shorthand, and I'm sure a handsome young lad like you with your Australian tan and accent has all our English girls' hearts flutter. Harry'll be expecting his dinner, so I'd better get on."

"You have made my report a thing of beauty, but not as lovely as you, Mrs Spooner. Bloody hell. It's seven thirty. I didn't mean to keep you back."

She turned to the screen and her fingers flew from keyboard to mouse and back while she spoke. "Oh, I'm happy to help and I know how important this is for you. You'll want it to have proper formatting." She tutted and gave him a despairing look over her glasses, "and correct grammar."

"I'm really grateful. You're a gem."

"Thanks for saying so, Mr Archer. It's nice to know that someone appreciates me around here." She frowned at the screen. "That is definitely not how you spell mineralisation. Is there no spellcheck on your computer?"

"I hope you feel appreciated, Mrs Spooner. You know my dad thinks the world of you."

She paused with one hand on the mouse and turned to Sean with a smile. "I know. He doesn't say much. Especially not when anyone's around. He shows it in other ways. I'm well aware that I'm paid more than most of the general managers."

"And you earn every penny."

She chuckled again. "I'm happy to be the dragon."

"No one says that!" Sean lied.

"It's my job. And I think the world of your father too. He's a brilliant businessman and a caring person. That's a very rare combination, at least in London. Perhaps all Australians are like your dad."

Sean shook his head. "Oh no. I could tell you a few stories there."

"Then I'm lucky with my employer. And I might say that you've been awfully good for him since you've come to England and joined the office. He's been more relaxed. He's very happy you're here."

"I'm glad to be here, too, Mrs Spooner." He leaned towards her. Raised an eyebrow. "Do we have time for a hug?"

"Certainly not. That would definitely breach the Archer Iron People Policy. Away with you while I do this."

Sean retreated to the visitor couch and pulled out his phone. He could check the news while Mrs Spooner worked her magic. Apparently, only promotions for reality TV shows interested the reporters. No sports news worth the mention. He switched to Gmail. Four new messages, and second in line after an Amazon advert came a bulletin from his best mate, Tim. The username alone brought images of Elizabeth River in the southwest of Western Australia. The surf on Yarracup Beach.

Footy for the Elizabeth River Hawks. Sean sighed. He missed the camaraderie more than anything. He clicked to open Tim's email.

*Hey Bluey. Loved your email. LOL. Can't believe you're following South West Sunday League footy scores from the old dart, mate. All good here in sunny Western Australia. The surf's been booming. Ha ha. Not really. Just trying to make you homesick. Val's been flat out getting her book finished by the publisher's deadline, when she's not on the phone to Stella. Only two months to the wedding. Can't believe it. Still haven't booked the tickets to New York. You're coming, aren't you? Looking forward to catching up with you for a beer!*

Sean stared at the screen. Filled his chest and let the air out through his nose. Stella Scoulas. Five feet of pure Big Apple perkiness and sass. Just the mention of her name in a four-line email raised his heart rate. The one that got away. Not that they'd had much more than a near miss in Elizabeth River. Second bananas in the Tim and Val love story. But the man Stella had crushed on since her teenage years had proposed from afar at exactly the wrong moment. Just when he'd plucked up the courage to make his move. Too late.

"Is something wrong, Mr Archer? Bad news?"

Mrs Spooner had stopped typing. Stared at him, brow furrowed.

"Nothing to lose sleep over. No use crying over spilt milk, is it?"

#

Stella roared into Yanni's Hell's Kitchen restaurant like a tiny tornado. She marched to the counter and slapped down her notebook. "Where is he?"

The young girl in the Yanni's tee shirt checking orders jumped to attention.

"I need a decision on the table settings and I need it now!" Stella tapped the notebook. "Mike's been avoiding this for a week. He can't escape me any longer!"

She smiled. Tried to anyway. She'd frightened poor Gisella out of her life. Standing there with her jaw on her chest and her eyes like dinner plates. Of course, Gisella'd only been on the staff for a week or two. She could hardly be expected to be used to the owner's daughter storming in with her daggers out looking for someone to spike.

Stella strived for patience. Finalising seating arrangements for the reception could wait another week or two. Maybe. Except they needed to decide soon so they could send out the last few invitations. But it wasn't the table settings that had her teeth on edge every time she spoke to her fiance. Not in itself. He just didn't seem interested in anything to do with the wedding. Sure, guys didn't worry over all the details like the bride, but did all of them roll their eyes and shrug their shoulders every time the subject came up? She needed Val to come back from Australia to calm her down, but that wasn't about to happen.

And where the hell had Mike got to? She peeked through the serving hatch into the kitchen, past Gisella. Damien the cook waved. Hanif the kitchenhand nodded. A quick look round the diner. Booths. Half a dozen lunchers. The horrible fading murals of the Acropolis. She really had to talk to Papa about those. Again.

No tall handsome restaurant manager lurking.

Or Raelene, the lazy, useless thirty-eight double-D tart. Goofing off again. Why did Mike refuse to fire her? Okay, the points in her favour were obvious really. Two of them. Both under the tee-shirt.

She turned back to Gisella. "So where's Mike gone?"

Gisella's eyes opened even wider. So wide they threatened to pop right out of her skull and bounce on the counter. Why did a simple question about the boss turn her into a Bambi in the headlights?

Stella huffed. "And where's Raelene? Shouldn't Raelene be here? She's on the roster every Tuesday, isn't she?"

Gisella's eyes flicked to the cool room door then flashed back to Stella. She bit her lip.

"Gisella, what's ...?"

And then it hit her, like a lance sinking into her ribs. Humiliation in its rawest form. Mike. And Raelene. Not Raelene. Raelene would be the worst. Dread steamed instantly to red mist. "Where is he?" Stella snarled.

The doe-eyed girl jumped again. "I ... I don't know," she said, but her eyes flicked back in the direction of the cool room door.

"Damn it!" Stella stomped, stiff-legged around the counter, sprung the catch, released a waft of chill air and confirmed her worst fears.

Mike had his back to her, pants around his ankles, shirttail bouncing around his hairy buttocks.

Raelene lay on her back across cartons of cheap Retsina. Ankles in the air. Her Yanni's tee-shirt and bra on the floor at Mike's feet. Her over-sized breasts pointed at the ceiling like mammary pyramids. Ha! Stella knew they couldn't be real.

"Hey, I said ..." Mike turned, hesitated, blinked once, then smirked.

The bastard smirked!

"Stella, baby, didn't expect you."

"So I can see. You foul, disgusting, stinking, vile ..."

"Hey, don't sweat it, babe. What's the big deal? I said we should do a threesome. This is your chance." His eyebrows waggled.

With a roar that brought audible gasps of shock from the customers in the restaurant, Stella grabbed the nearest weapon and shoved a four-pound packet of frozen french fries into Mike's stupid, cheating face.

#

Stella curled in her father's favourite armchair. The hint of Old Spice and cigars that drifted into her nostrils every time she moved reminded her of cuddling on his lap while he read her stories. She felt about five years old. She dialled again. Got voicemail for the third time. "Call me, Val. Please. Soon. I need to hear your voice." The words caught on a sob. "Turn your phone on," she told Val's contact details on her cell phone screen. Two o'clock in the morning in Western Australia. "Wake up, Val!"

The apartment door flew open and her mother bustled in.

"Thank goodness, there you are." She deposited her handbag on the side table while she hung her coat. "Your Uncle Yanni called me. Said there was a kerfuffle at the restaurant."

Stella straightened in her father's armchair. Sniffed. Wiped tears off her cheeks with her forearm. A kerfuffle?

"Have you and Mike had a row?" Melina Scoulas had her head down, looking for something in her purse. "Or should I say another row. You really need to give that guy a break from your tantrums." With a frustrated huff, she abandoned her search and turned on Stella. "Well? Are you going to tell your mother?"

"It's off, Mom. The wedding's cancelled. He ..."

Melina rolled her eyes. Crossed her arms. "You're so dramatic, Stella. Everything has to be the end of the world. So, you had a few cross words. You're planning a wedding, Stella. It happens!"

"Mom!" Stella threw her arms wide. "He was screwing Raelene. The useless waitress. Right there in the cool room."

"No, it can't be. Not Mike. Are you sure you didn't misunderstand?"

Stella stood and slammed her phone behind her into the armchair. "How do I misunderstand Mike's bare butt and that slut's legs in the air? How, Mom? Tell me how!"

"Oh goodness." Melina shook her head, lips scrunched into a thin line of denial. "Don't be vulgar Stella. There's no need to be crass. Or violent. Yanni said you threw things at Mike. Made a scene. Startled the customers. You can't do that, love. You'll have to apologise. Mike's upset. Yanni told me."

"Mike's upset!"

"Sure he is. He's a sensitive guy. Much more sensitive than you think."

"I've dumped him. The two-timing, cheating, whoring scumbag. The wedding's off."

"You're being hysterical. You can't dump Mike. Not two months out from the wedding. He's the only son of your father's business partner. We've known him since he was born. He's virtually family." Melina reached for her daughter.

Stella shied away.

The apartment door bumped open again. "Hi, I'm home."

"Ari," Melina called, "get in here. Stella's hysterical. Talk to your daughter."

Stella's father kissed his wife on the cheek, peered at his daughter under bunched eyebrows, a grey bewildered mouse in the face of his wife's wrath. "Yanni sent me a text, something at the restaurant. Mike and Stella?"

"Yeah," Melina confirmed. "They had a row. Stella's saying the wedding's off."

"Oh no," Ari shook his head. "It's okay Stella. Whatever it is. Mike won't dump you over some stupid tiff."

"I. Dumped. Him." Stella stamped her foot with each word. "Couldn't they get it into their brains? "And it's not a stupid tiff, I found him in the refrigerator at the restaurant with that stupid waitress Raelene bent over a carton of Retsina."

"Are you sure it's what you think it was?" her papa asked.

"Damned sure!"

"I dunno', in his text, Yanni said..."

"Yanni wasn't there, Papa. I was!"

"Well," Ari looked to his wife for support, "guys have their quirks, you know."

"I don't think we can dismiss him screwing the help as a quirk!"

"No, no, I guess not," Ari looked from his wife to his daughter. Opened his palms.

Melina held her hand to her chest, bit on her lip.

"Spit it out, Mom! Whatever you're thinking, spit it out."

"Well, I don't like to say," she grimaced at her husband, who nodded encouragement, "but, well, guys have needs."

"Needs!"

"Yes, strong needs. And if their needs aren't met, well sometimes, things overcome them."

Stella's jaw dropped.

Melina blinked rapidly. "Stella, have you been meeting Mike's needs?"

"I am not going to discuss my sex life with you, Mom, and Papa's right there! This is not about me, Mom!"

"Yes, yes," Ari wrung his hands together. "Let's all relax. We can sort this out." He raised a finger, smiled. "Hey, I forgot, I have some good news. Margot's home. Her ship tied up at Norfolk a few hours ago. She's flying in tonight."

#

Stella had to get out of the apartment. She couldn't take any more from her mother.

She hit the street and walked, left along the sidewalk, then right at the corner, barely missing a lamp post that leapt out of nowhere.

How could it be her fault Mike Petrakis was a two-timing douche bag? How many times had Val told her Mike was no good? And she'd been right, but Stella had been too infatuated with the teenage god she remembered to see through him, and it hurt. Like she'd been punched in the gut. By Connor McGregor. All her dreams had come true when Mike Petrakis asked her to marry him. He'd called from New York when she'd been in Australia. He said he missed her so much while she'd been gone, and finally realised how much she meant to him. Which had been the whole point of going to Australia, of course. To get the guy she'd mooned over since high school, or get over him.

She couldn't remember a time when Mike Petrakis hadn't been part of her life in and out of the restaurants their families co-owned. The Petrakis and Scoulas families worked together and played together. She's always yearned for Mike. The cool, hot, confident guy eight years her senior who'd filled her every teenage fantasy.

Her phone rang. Her heart leapt. Val? No. Wrong ring tone. 'You are the sunshine of my life'. Mom.

She swiped the call away with a sigh loud enough to make an old man walking his dog pause and stare.

She looked around. She'd walked four blocks. Somehow crossed 8th Avenue.

Stella had to do something, but what? She couldn't bury her head under her pillow and cry herself to sleep for at least another eight hours. Not that she had anywhere to sleep because she would not go home. Especially if Margot turned up. The thought of her sister put her teeth on edge. She could imagine the scorn she'd pour on her when she heard Stella had called off the wedding. Margot could be a supercilious cow, especially where Stella and Mike were concerned.

And she couldn't go to work. They'd want to know why she'd come in on her day off. Stella sniffed. A salty drip ran down her throat. Holy cow, she'd cried so much her tears had started spilling out of her sinuses.

A big woman with a stroller the size of a moving van, so loaded with grocery bags Stella could hardly see the baby, bumped Stella with her elbow. "Any chance you could move your ass, honey?"

"Sorry." She stumbled out of the woman's way and caught a glimpse of the street sign, 54th Street. A single block from Four Leaf Clover. Karma. Fate had drawn her to a sanctuary that served hard liquor. The bar everyone from Yanni's Hell's Kitchen used. She chose to ignore the fact that she had walked almost all the way back to Yanni's Hell's Kitchen a few doors up from 9th Avenue on 55th.

And if Mike and the crew were in the bar, they could leave. If she ran into Mike, it would be bad luck for him. She imagined his gorgeous tanned face with an iPhone jammed up his nose. Yeah, that would work.

Four Leaf Clover it would be.

Stella marched around the corner to 55th, all the way to the neon clover and bumped open the double doors like a western gunslinger. She scanned the room. Only four booths were taken. She'd never seen it so empty. Of course, she'd never been to Four Leaf Clover mid-afternoon before. No one from Yanni's. Kinda disappointing. Building herself up for a confrontation had made her feel better.

"Hey, gorgeous!" Terrence, her favourite barman, waved.

A huge weight lifted from her shoulders and Stella found a grin for the first time since she'd found Mike and Raelene ... well, the less she thought about that the better. It really had been karma that she'd gravitated to Four Leaf Clover, Terrence always made her smile.

"Get that cute ass onto my stool and let me get you a drink. What are you doin' here? It's still work time, girl."

She plonked her handbag onto the bar and climbed onto the stool.

"Chardonnay?" Terrence reached for a wine glass.

"No, Jack. Straight. A double."

"Stella?" He quirked an eyebrow, rested both elbows on the bar and leaned in close. "Bad day? Oh, my god, you've been crying, baby." He whisked out a pearly white handkerchief, dipped it in the drinking water jug and dabbed at her cheeks.

"There. That looks better."

Stella sniffed back a new wave of tears. Tears of gratitude this time.

"Oh, no," Terrence grabbed her left hand. "Where's your ring? What happened to that sparkler? You lost your ring?"

"No. I threw it at him." She grinned at the memory. "I missed. I can't throw lefty for shit." She demonstrated. "It's somewhere in the cool room."

"Oh, wow. Stay right there." He held up a palm, spun, reached into the well for the cheap spirits, shook his head, scanned the top shelf and brought down the twenty-year-old reserve Jack Daniels. He slammed a shot glass on the bar and slopped in finest Kentucky whiskey like it was tap water. "What happened?"

Dave, the bar owner, stirred from the little back room and stood on the threshold of his office with arms crossed and ears flapping. You could hear a pin drop in Four Leaf Clover. Every eye was on her.

Did she care? No. "The bastard ..." it caught in her throat but she forced it out. "I caught the bastard screwing one of the waitresses."

"What the hell! Is the guy crazy?" Terrence roared. "The man's engaged to you. Stella. The perkiest, hottest, scrummiest piece of ass this side of Hoboken and he's giving it to some slut ..."

"And my mom still wants me to marry him."

"You what!" Terrence roared.

"You caught him at it?" Dave smirked.

"Hey, Dave, the girl's in pain!"

"Sorry. So, which one was it? Not the little one with the big eyes and the ..."

Dave leered and pumped his hips.

"Dave!"

Stella snarled. She bunched her fist and scrunched up her nose. "Raelene. Do you know Raelene? Thirty-eight double-Ds. Skirt size bigger than her IQ?"

"Which is saying something coz there's not much cloth in those little swishers." Terrence waved his hands in a mocking flip flop gesture.

Dave grunted approval.

"And there's no way those puppies are real!" Terrence added.

"No?" Dave asked. He turned to Stella. "So it was Raelene?" He cupped his hands in front of his chest. "Not Angie?"

Stella took a slug of the whiskey. Coughed as it burned down her throat. "Angie? Who's Angie?"

"We're talking about Mike, right? Mike from the restaurant? He's here every Tuesday night with Angie. I thought for sure it'd be her you caught him with."

Stella took another slug, held up the glass. Almost empty. Her neck and shoulders were all tingly. "Damn, that feels good. I don't know any Angie. Tuesday nights? He goes to business school Tuesday nights."

"Well I don't know what business she teaches him, but it ain't the tax code, know what I mean?" Dave had his hands cupped again.

Stella shook her head. It felt a little heavier than usual. She waved her glass at the bartender. "Hey, Terrence, why didn't you tell me about Angie?"

"I didn't know, girlfriend! I don't work Tuesdays."

"Could it be his instructor?" Stella asked. "From business classes. His instructor is some woman. Maybe they had a drink after class." Did she just defend Mike, like her mom? What the hell? It must be a family genetic defect.

"Hey, if she's the professor I'm going back to school."

Stella frowned. Could Mike have been boffing two other women? And bringing them to their favourite bar? It didn't seem real. Had she known him at all?

"Dave, isn't there something you need to do in that office?" Terrence waved him away. "Write some checks? Emails? Count something?"

The bar manager grunted. "Okay. And hey, you guys are engaged or something right?"

Stella waved her ringless left hand.

"Yeah, well, when you see that sucker, Mike," Dave pointed at her. "You tell him he's barred 'til he pays off his tab. Alright?" He turned back to the office, called back over his shoulder. "I'm a barkeep, not a loan shark! Don't mind a guy charging up a few, but when it gets over a grand I lose my sense of humour."

"Mike has a thousand dollar bar tab?" What bar gave a thousand dollars credit?

"Yeah," Dave's indignation made his cheeks red, "remember Gwen?" He pantomimed a Mohawk hairdo.

What would Dave's gesture be for her? Stella shrugged the thought away. "Gwen with the skin ink?"

"Yeah. Do you notice she's not around anymore? She was giving the guy credit. I fired her as soon as I found out. Mike must have some pull with the girls."

"Tell me about it."

"Here, let me give you some more of that whiskey." Terrence topped off her glass. "Now tell uncle Terrence all about it, baby." He stroked her forearm and leaned in close.

Stella admired his coal black skin. Details seemed to be especially clear when she'd gone all fuzzy between her eyes. Odd that. She squeezed the back of his hand. "Why can't I have a fiance like you, Terrence?" Or a mother like Terrence come to that. Her bottom lip slipped over the top one.

Terrence chortled. "I don't know what Ravel would say about that. But hey, you know I love you don't you? And if you need a place to crash, you got it."

"Thanks, Terrence. What's that noise?" An annoying tinkly sound. Like a kid's piano.

"I think that's your phone's playing. What is that?" He grimaced.

"My phone?" Stella ripped her hand free, dived for her purse. "It's Waltzing Matilda! It's Val!"

She spun on her stool, Terrence forgotten. Punched the little green telephone.

"Val! Val!"

"Hey, Stella. What's up?" Sleepy.

"Hi, Stella." Faint in the background of the call. A growly Australian accent.

"Tim says hi. What's happening? It's five o'clock in the morning here."

"Val. It's Mike ..."

A rustle over the airwaves. Val sitting up in bed. "Oh, my God. What's happened?"

"I caught him screwing Raelene in the cool room. I dumped his ass. The wedding's off!"

## CHAPTER TWO

Sean sat in the corner of a plush conference room on the top floor of the Archer Iron offices. He could see the dome and spire of St Paul's Cathedral. If he turned and looked West he could see Lord Nelson on the top of his column in Trafalgar Square. A sunny day. A big room with a state of the art projection system, a Jarrah-topped table - one small homage to the company's roots - brightly painted walls, but the atmosphere of a torture chamber. The hairs on Sean's neck tickled from the tension.

The Yankees sat facing the view. Meeting on Archer Iron's turf gave them some sort of perceived edge. He'd learned that on a negotiation course. Fair enough, Archer Iron had the work to contract out. Butler Heavy Haul wanted it. Who wouldn't? It would be one of the biggest earth-moving contracts awarded that year, anywhere in the world.

'Buck' Butler himself sat in the middle of his four guys. His belly bulged his open-necked shirt over his grey pants. His team wore expensive lawyer suits. As did the Archer Iron negotiators, led by Travis Leach, with his silver mane swept off his brow and back to his collar. Hair like a lion, the heavy-shouldered build of a big cat, a South African who moved like a prowling carnivore hungry for prey.

Sean had his seat in the corner of the room and a notebook. Travis welcomed him onto the contract team like a lost brother when Derek Archer made the suggestion for the next leg of Sean's orientation. But he dismissed him with sneering disdain when Sean's father wasn't around. Travis Leach's particular brand of hyper-aggressive political manoeuvring fascinated him. He'd write a thesis on it if he ever went back to university and did his doctorate. Sean could take that with a smile after six months in London. Being parachuted into the top management level of a major international company had obvious advantages but it hardly made you popular with the incumbents.

Leach pushed one file away and took another, drew his jacket back from his wrists so his gold cufflinks glinted in the downlight. "Let's go back to the maintenance schedules. Again."

Buck shrugged, sending a ripple through his double chin. "Sure, if that's what you want."

Sean pressed his lips together to smother a grin. A Mississippi valley drawl versus a guttural Johannesburg growl that made everything sound like an accusation, in the London office of an Australian minerals giant. The epitome of the global economy.

"But." The American leaned forward. "We all know y'all ain't here to talk about servicing D10 'dozers. You wanna squeeze us on the rates, right? Do you wanna get right to that and cut all the other crap? These guys can talk about that other shit, right?" He waved to indicate his minions in their thousand-dollar suits.

The Archer Iron lead negotiator hesitated a moment, then shut the file with a decisive slap. "Okay, Buck. Let's talk turkey. You bid in at four dollars a tonne ..."

"Which is a damn good price and you know it. We're sitting here across your table because ours was the best price in any of the tenders."

Travis inclined his forehead to acknowledge the point. "So now we need your best price. The Squaw Creek project has great potential but the returns are marginal in the first ten years. We want to do business with you. We've worked with you before. We know you're reliable, efficient, good guys to do business with, but ..."

"You got our best price, Travis. Four dollars a tonne."

Buck leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. A good show of defiance but Sean detected something in the set of his jaw and his hooded eyes. The Louisiana-based logistics conglomerate needed the work. Maybe they needed it more than he'd realised.

The triumphant glint in Travis' baby blues indicated that he'd sensed weakness, too. He leaned in for the kill. "You can do better, Buck. I know you can, and I really want to give you guys the business, but I need a bit more. The Board won't sign off at four dollars. Three ninety they could do. Come on, Buck. Ten cents a tonne for a hundred million dollar contract."

Silent chuckles rippled the big American's chest. He shook his head. Eyes on the table. "Nice try, Travis. Ten cents a tonne on twenty million tonnes a year is two mill. If that's chump change for us, it's surely chump change for you. Why don't you guys take the hit?" He held out an open palm. "No? Well, if it ain't chump change to Archer Iron why'n the hell d'ya think it's chump change to Butler Heavy Haulage?"

#

Sean took a detour up The Strand on his way to work the next morning. He had an idea he wanted to try and the longer route took him past Buck Butler's hotel. He paused in the foyer to take a breath and steady his nerves before he went to the

reception desk to call up to the American's room. The maitre'd of the breakfast salon caught his eye, and Sean spotted the unmistakable rear view of Buck Butler at a table.

He waved aside the greeter's offer of a menu and made straight to the table where the owner and chief executive of Archer Iron's potential service provider stared at a stack of pancakes topped with cream and maple syrup.

"Mr Butler."

He turned his head slowly. "Derek Archer's kid. Sorry son, forgot your name."

"Sean."

"Well howdy, Sean. Travis Leach send ya' for something?"

"No," Sean drew back the chair facing Butler but waited for an invitation to sit.

"I hoped we could have a private word."

Butler's eyebrows scrunched into a frown. "Oh yeah? Do ya think that's a good idea, son?"

"Possibly not." Sean sat. "Nice breakfast?" He nodded at the plate.

"No, actually. Limeys can't cook pancakes for shit. How hard can it be? Bit of flower, milk. You want some breakfast? I'll call the waiter."

"I'm good thanks. I'll take a coffee if you're offering."

Butler waved and a waiter hurried over.

"I didn't feel we got far in the negotiations yesterday," Sean began.

Butler grimaced. Maybe from the taste of the pancake he was chewing. Sean didn't think so.

"Sean, my friend, that was two hours of my life I'll never have again."

"And I don't think it's going to go any better today."

"Travis Leach is a hard ass." Butler shrugged. "He's just doin' his job."

"He is. But I think he's got it wrong."

"Oh, really?" Sean had succeeded in making Butler smile if nothing else.

"Yes. He believes he can squeeze you on the rate. I know he can't. You have to get four dollars a tonne, or Butler Heavy Haulage is going to go under."

Butler rose in his chair colour filling his cheeks.

Sean raised a palm. "It's public record. The dam burst in Senegal. Your first big international contract, so I'm betting you were a little stretched. Then the government seized everything on site. Including your equipment. Illegally, but what can you do? Five months with no revenue and lease payments stacking up. No work for that equipment since. I spent a bit of time last night. Did a few calculations."

Butler's mouth had clenched to a thin straight line. He sat back hard and waved the waiter over to take his pancakes. He looked up to the ceiling for a moment then back at Sean. "One engineer. A Danish engineer. We told him ... But did he fucking listen? Do you know, when I started I had two trucks? Now we're one of the biggest mining contractors in the USA and one damned incompetent asshole in a pissant country ... What do you want, Sean?"

"I want you to get the contract. You're the best people for the job. I like you. Dad likes you. Hell, I think even Travis likes you. And I want Archer Iron to make a quid."

"So what is it?"

"It's not the rate that's the problem. It's the bank guarantee. Because of the risk from the catastrophe Senegal, we're asking for a hundred million dollar guarantee. You've used up all the cash you had on hand paying the leases, so you're having to borrow to pay your expenses plus the guarantee and we won't pay for ninety days after the first earth moves. So that'll be another year ..."

"We've got finance, son."

"Sure. From Laurie Cervantes ... right?"

Butler winced.

Sean drew a breath in through his teeth. His guess had hit the mark. "Last resort Laurie." Bloody hell. It's worse than I thought."

Butler crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "You're right, dammit. You've got us over a barrel. Where did you get all this shit, has someone ..?"

"Leaked? No. The internet mostly. I looked up your public filings."

"So what do we do, son?"

"I want Archer Iron to give you an advance."

"A what?"

"I think it should work like this. Immediately we sign the contract, Butler Heavy haulage sends an invoice to Archer Iron for the first six months haulage, at anticipated tonnes. We pay in full. You don't have to borrow a cent. And, on my calculations, you'll save so much on Laurie Cervantes usurous interest rates that you'll be able to give Travis his ten cents a tonne and still make a profit, based on the costings in your tender. We meet our investment hurdle. You live to fight another day."

The big American stared at him across the table, mouth slightly open.

"Of course there'd be a quid pro quo."

He sighed. "I knew it. What?"

"We'd need a guarantee. Not a cash guarantee. I'd think a lien on your equipment. If Butler Haulage goes under, we have the absolute right to take over the lease on your equipment and operate it ourselves."

#

Leach ran his fingers through his hair and took in the men huddled around the meeting room table.

"Okay, big day today. Anyone got any ideas they want to share?"

Sean had got used to the chief negotiator's style. Someone had told Travis at some time that leaders drew on the people around them and encouraged their ideas. The Archer Iron chief negotiator went through the motions, but he never listened to the dross from his inferiors. He always knew better, but he always asked. "I've got a bit of an idea," Sean said.

The other suits crammed around the table turned as one. Leach smiled.

"Okay, Sean, let's hear it."

"I did some calculation last night based on Butler's public filings. With the interest on what they've had to borrow while their equipment's been idle and our bank guarantee and operating costs until they get our first payment, they'll lose money at three-ninety-five." Three dollars ninety-five a tonne was Archer Iron's target cost. "But if we advanced them say the first six months' invoices ..."

"Jesus wept! Do you hear this boys?" Leach shook his head. "We have an untapped business genius among us. You are not your father's son, are you Sean? Listen to yourself. These guys are on the bones of their ass. They need this work so bad they'll do it at any price. I guess you think you know how to operate a multi-billion dollar business after running your daddy's vineyard for a few months, but when you're in the big leagues, my friend, there's more to it than discounting the Chardonnay. We've got our foot on their neck. When you've got your foot on their neck you press down, Sean."

#

Back in the conference room three hours later, Travis Leach had his head in his hands. "I don't understand this, Buck. We keep going round and round the same arguments. You need this work. We know you do. We want Butler Heavy Haulage because you're the best ..."

"So pay what we're worth, Travis." Butler slapped the table. "You asked for my best price yesterday. We gave it to you. It's still the best price."

Sean sighed. Too loud, everyone in the room glanced his way. He stared down into his notebook. All he'd written were a list of swear words. His dad would ask how the conversation had gone, he might need notes.

Butler's eyes stayed on Sean the longest. He blew air out of the corner of his mouth, pulled his chair up closer to the table sending wafts of sweat from the substantial damp patches in his armpits, despite the arctic level air-conditioning. "Look, Travis. There's an elephant in this room the size of Madison Square Garden. Let's talk about it. Senegal. The dam ..."

Travis threw a glance at Sean's corner, his mouth curled into a snarl. "Okay, Buck. Look. I'm gonna suggest something here that's way off the table. Right out of the box. Archer's never done it before, the Board will have a fit, but I believe it's quite common with alliance contracts." His eyes flicked to Sean's corner again. "Think about this ... what if we made a gesture of goodwill. A huge gesture. A mighty gesture. I'm thinking three months' contract revenue up front on signing."

#

As Sean pulled up his zipper and turned away from the urinal, the toilet flushed in the nearest stall.

A bulky figure pulled up beside him at the wash basins and Buck Butler's grin met his in the mirror.

"Thanks for that, young Archer. I think you made the deal for us, boy."

"My pleasure, Buck. It's gonna be good doing business with you guys."

"So how about that, coming to hit me up at breakfast, n'all? Where did that come from?"

"Dad sent me on a negotiation course. They had a section in it about how the deal is often done over a social chat." He chuckled. "Ironic actually. They had a video where the guys stood next to each other in the dunny and reached an agreement while they peed. There was a girl on the course who asked how the hell she was supposed to negotiate with her pecker in her hand. The course kinda went downhill a bit after that.

Butler wiped his hands and slapped Sean on the back.

"Well, thank the lord that Derek Archer had at least one son then. Man if you ever want anything, I mean it, you just have to ask."

### CHAPTER THREE

Stella woke up next morning in her own room at home, not quite sure how she'd got there. She grabbed her phone off the bedside table and called Val.

"Hey, Val."

"Hey, Stella. How ya' feeling this morning, kid."

"Better, Val. So much better for talking to you last night. Except for my head. That's not feeling too good."

"You've got a headache?"

"Hangover. I was in Four Leaf Clover when you called and Terrence was giving me bourbon. I think he must have put something in it."

"Yeah, fine Tennessee whiskey! How many did you have?"

"I'm not sure. It's a bit of a haze." Stella's hand went to her mouth. "Oh crap. I didn't pay! I ran straight out when you called and then we talked for an hour and I never went back."

Val's laughter tinkled over the airwaves from the Australian evening.

"No. This is no joke. The owner says Mike has a bar tab of a thousand bucks. He'll think ..."

"A thousand bucks! Who runs up a bar tab of a thousand bucks?"

"Well, Mike did apparently."

"I mean I knew Mike Petrakis was a scumbag, but I didn't take him for a welching scumbag."

Stella sighed. "Or a cheating scumbag. He always had loads of girls. I mean, why not, he's hot and cool ..."

Val made a barfing sound.

"Hey! Don't talk like that. I know you never liked Mike, but ..."

"But you caught him doing the horizontal bop with miss thirty-six double-dee, and ..."

"Yeah. The bastard! I can't believe I'm defending him. I guess I've been making excuses for him since I was about thirteen. It's a hard habit to break." Stella sunk back onto her pillows.

"Oh, I know. But he fooled us all. Even I thought he'd changed. Going to business school and the gym. I'll tell you one person you cannot blame under any circumstances, Stella. You. You cannot blame yourself. Now, how are you going to make today a good day, just to shove it right to Mike Petrakis where it hurts?"

"Well, first, I'm going to go to the Four Leaf Clover and pay my tab."

"Aaah. Charge them to Mike's tab."

Stella grinned. "Yeah, I should. Terrence would too. After that, I'm going in to work. I had the day off for wedding planning," another lurch of grief made Stella hold her stomach, but she blinked her eyes, gritted her teeth and plunged on before it turned into a sob. "There's a new shipment coming in. You know the gipsy Rose Lee stuff I found in Detroit? Huge seller. This is their winter line. I'm dying to see if it's as good as the samples they showed me last month. Oh, and Margot's coming home on

leave." She glanced at her bedside clock. Minion Two said it was seven fifteen.

"She's due here any minute."

"Big sister Margot? The star of the seventh fleet?"

"Yeah. Can't wait to catch up. She's been away six months. We were in Australia when she went to sea."

"Sounds like a plan. Good on ya', girl!"

"Hah! Love those Australian sayings."

"Me too. I've been practicing."

"Is Tim there? Give him a big hug and a kiss for me."

"No. He's at footy training. Allegedly. Bit odd seeing as it's summer. I think they just go to the clubhouse and drink beer."

"We had good fun in Australia, didn't we?"

"We sure did, when we weren't fighting crime to save Tim and Sean."

A silly grin worked itself into Stella's lips. "Remember that morning when Tim and Sean tried to teach us how to surf?"

"I'll never forget. You were so good!"

"I shouldn't have come back, Val."

"Don't say that. None of us knew this would happen, and at least your crush on Mike is over once for all."

"You bet! Have you heard from Tim'a pal, Sean? He went to London didn't he?"

"Tim had an email the other day, but you know what guys are like, they only talk about contact sports."

The door of the apartment crashed open and Stella's mother whooped.

"Margot's here. Gonna go. Love you, Val."

"Love ya back. I'll call you when I get up tomorrow."

Stella clambered out of her bed and lurched down the hall into the living room.

Margot had barely made it past the door, crushed in a bear hug between their mom and dad. Her officer's cap had been bumped askew. When she saw Stella, she tossed it off and wriggled free of her parents. "Squidge! I haven't seen you for months."

Stella eased her pyjamas up against Margot's full dress uniform and found herself swung off her feet. "I've missed you so much, sis," Margot said. "You've got to tell me everything about the wedding. I can't wait to see the bridesmaids dresses!"

The pips on Margot's shoulder gouged into Stella's cheek.

Mom coughed. Dad cleared his throat. "Ah, Margot, there's been some developments there." They both stared at Stella, eyes hooded.

Stella slid out of her sister's arms and stepped back, flooded with guilt. She shook herself. What did she have to feel guilty about?

"Mike dumped Stella," her mom said.

"What!" Margot roared. "The bastard! The wedding's only six weeks away. How could he?" She held out her arms and Stella ran back for another hug, so grateful and relieved to finally have someone from her family on her side.

"It's fine." Mom had both hands flapping in the air like a wobbly-head doll. "We'll sort it out, Margot. It's a tiff."

Stella whipped her head around. "It is not a tiff! And I dumped him, Mom. He did not dump me!"

Her father shrugged, rubbed his hands together. "There was some sort of fight at the restaurant."

Stella pushed herself off Margot. Rubbed her stomach. Uniform buttons really cut in. "Papa. Mom. Mike was screwing a waitress in the cool room. That is not a tiff!"

"Screwing a waitress?" Margot smirked. "In the cool room? Hah."

Stella's jaw dropped open. She looked from her sister, shaking her head, to her mother and father nodding with their lips pursed, judging, yet again. Didn't anyone understand? How hard was it? Her fiancé had cheated on her in his workplace. One of the family's restaurants. Humiliated her. Didn't they care?

Margot snorted. "Hell, Squidge. Mike was always a jerk. You knew he was a jerk, didn't you?"

"I did not!" She'd loved him for God's sake. Ten empty years from unrequited distance and six months of ecstasy. Well, three months, after they'd started wedding arrangements he'd goofed off more and more, but she'd believed in him. "And he changed ..."

"Yeah," Papa put in. "He's been going to business school. Won an award."

"Did he?" Margot nodded, impressed.

"Anyway, now you're here, everything will be fine." Mom beamed.

"Me?" Margot asked.

"Margot?" Stella asked.

"Yeah, you'll talk to Mike. He'll listen to you, Margot." Ari assured her.

"That's it, Margot, you can knock their heads together. Get them thinking straight. Like a counselling session."

Margot reached for her uniform cap. "Okay. If that's what you want. All Fleet Officers are trained in conflict resolution, so I can ..."

"Hey." Stella raised her hand. "Anyone remember me? The wronged party. Does anyone care what I think?"

**I care what *you* think. Please let me know via the contact forms on the website,  
especially if you'd like to get a copy of the book when it's published!**