



Jenny poked her head around the Fraud Squad door.

Detective Sergeant Sally Brooking, elbow-deep in witness statements, scanned the other desks, all empty. She sighed. “What is it, Jen?”

“There’s another one. I know you’re busy, Sergeant, but it’s really sad. Can you see him?”

“How much?”

“A hundred and thirty thousand dollars.”

“Bloody hell.” Sally searched for her notebook. “Send him around. I’ll be in Interview One.”

An elderly gentleman limped into the glass-walled meeting room. He wore a smart suit, a little too big for him as if he’d shrunk, and he used a crutch to take the weight off his left leg. “I’m Brian Wilkinson,” he said, as he struggled to get into the visitor chair without falling over. “At least I think I am, if you know what I mean.” A sad smile played on his lips. “My identity’s been stolen. A lot of money disappeared out of my accounts. The bank says the withdrawals were all authorised. Only they weren’t.”

A story Sally had heard at least half a dozen times in the past month. Never yet a tale with a happy ending. She sighed. “I’m sorry, Mr Wilkinson. The people who do this are parasites. I hate them. They take advantage of —”

“Old people?” Mr Wilkinson raised his eyebrows but smiled to show he took no offence.

“The vulnerable,” Sally said. “Often seniors.”

“Is there any chance we’ll get the money back? It’s my life savings and since ...” He gestured to his leg.

Sally cursed inside. Why did the poor guy have to be so damned nice, so brave in the face of a life-ruining disaster? Why couldn’t she shove all that aside and treat his case with the detachment her colleagues found so easy. Sally would pull every investigatory trick she could, and she knew a few, but how did she tell this man there were three chances he’d see his life savings again — yours, mine and Buckley’s?

Better to duck the question. “Give me all the details,” she said. “And thank you for coming in. It’s embarrassing to admit you’ve been scammed, but we need all the information we can get to stop these vermin.”

Phil Mendoza from the Electronic Crimes Section called Sally less than forty-eight hours later.

He had a prime corner desk with a wonderful view of the Swan River that he knew nothing about because his eyes never left his computer screens.

“Hey, Phil,” she said. “What’ve you got that’s so important I had to drag my ass up four floors?”

“Hi, Sally.” He peered through his glasses and clicked his mouse to the screen he wanted. “Here it is. Your Brian Wilkinson. We’ve found the grifters who got his money.” He pointed to the details of the receiving account.

Sally shook her head. “The Rural Bank of Abuja. I take it that’s Abuja, the capital of Nigeria? Poor old Brian.”

Phil clicked again, swept the window away. “But that’s not what I wanted to show you. Have a look at this.”

By the time they called Mr Wilkinson back the following Wednesday, Sally’s mood had shifted somewhat. Adrenaline positively thrummed in her veins. “Good news!” she called as he bumped his way into the interview room.

“Really?” Mr Wilkinson’s face lit up. “You’re a wonder! I’d given up hope.”

“This is Detective Sims,” Sally nodded to a young man in the corner by the door. “We’ve tracked down the rotten so-and-sos who stole your identity.”

“Fabulous, I’m so relieved.” He bumped a chair out from the desk, positioned his crutch and sat down with a grunt of pain.

“The bad news is we won’t be able to get your money back.”

“Oh,” Mr Wilkinson slumped like a burst balloon. “That’s devastating. Were you trying to be funny?”

“No. Sorry.” She took a photo from the top of a pile. “Do you know this man? He’s Maduka Alampasu. I hope I got his name right.”

Mr Wilkinson squinted at the picture. “No, I don’t think so.”

“He’s the one who stole your money. Our techno geeks traced the cash that went from your account. Maduka is Nigerian. He’s a gang leader. His minions got your bank account details and used them to find your social media accounts and get background information. To cut a long story short, they contacted your bank, posed as you, changed your identification questions to get control of your account and bingo.”

“But how?” Mr Wilkinson asked. “I’ve never given those details to anyone.”

Sally smiled. Leaned across the table. “I believe you. That’s what was so interesting. Our boys noticed large sums of money transferred *into* your account from another account.” She pulled a bank statement out of the file. A couple of dozen lines were highlighted in yellow and pink.

“The Nigerians are sneaky clever. They got details of this account, the one that transfers money to you, from messages on Facebook. You have to be so careful. Who’d be so stupid as to put bank details in a Facebook message?”

Mr Wilkinson grimaced. “Who indeed?”

Sally tapped her pen on a yellow highlight. “This is how Maduka’s boys found their way to your nest egg. Look, It shows which account each transfer goes to — yours. So they had your bank account information and bingo. Wow, check out that one, ten thousand dollars, from this account into yours. You’re lucky. I wish someone would shift ten thousand dollars into mine. All these yellow transactions are transfers to your account.”

Mr Wilkinson fumbled for his glasses and peered at the statement.

“Do you see? Every so often, someone puts money in. It’s a different someone every time.” Sally tapped separate pink highlighted transactions. “Then a couple of days later, the money’s shipped out of this account to yours, which leaves no money in this account and got the Nigerians interested in yours. We wondered who could be so generous as to send you all that cash. The Electronic Crimes lads are sneaky clever as well. They pretended they were Nigerian. They used the details of this account to find the social media for the account holder.”

Sally took a second photo off her pile. A girl in a bikini. “The person who keeps sending you money is a Malaysian student. Constance Yam. She studies at Curtin, according to Facebook.”

Sally held up a second photo beside the pretty Malaysian. “This is Harry McBride from Deniliquin, New South Wales. Do you know Harry?”

“Oh, God.” Mr Wilkinson glanced at the door and reached for his crutch.

Detective Sims stirred.

“We won’t keep you much longer, Brian,” she told Mr Wilkinson. “The lovely Miss Yam gave her bank details to Mr McBride. He sent her money. She transferred it to you. We subpoenaed Miss Yam’s email. Wow!” Sally fanned her cheeks with the photo. “It seems Constance has a thing for older men — rich ones. Who can blame her for that, eh? You wouldn’t believe what she’d like to do to lucky old Harry McBride. I bet he had steam coming out of his ears when he read her messages. She wanted to meet him, desperately, to do the things she talked about — I’m blushing just thinking about it — but she needed two thousand bucks to buy tickets to get to Victoria. When Harry said yes ...”

Mr Wilkinson’s mouth dropped open.

“You don’t know Miss Yam, do you?” Sally asked.

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Of course you don’t.” Sally waved the idea away. “How well do we really know ourselves?”

Mr Wilkinson scrambled to his feet. “I’d like to leave now.”

Detective Sims blocked the door.

“Poor Constance.” Sally shook her head. “She has a lot of travel issues.” She spread out the rest of the photos on the table like a winning bridge hand. “These gentlemen all sent money to her. More than eighty thousand dollars all told.”

Mr Wilkinson’s jaw clenched so tight she could see his teeth.

Sally stared into his watery eyes. “Constance sent it all to you, Brian. You’re Constance Yam, aren’t you? You posed as a gorgeous Malaysian tart — we traced these photos to a brothel website — and talked these lonely old men into sending you their hard-earned cash. They want it back, Brian. And there are thirty-seven more victims we’ve still to contact.”

Mr Wilkinson sat down with a thud.

“I’ve met some con men in my life,” Sally said, “but you take the cake. I bet you just about died when you realised the Nigerians scammed you. How embarrassing was that? An old con beaten at his own game, but you had the

balls to come in here and try to hustle us into getting your money back. I've got to hand it to you."

Brian sighed, looked at the table for a moment, then came up with a mischievous grin. "Worth a try, wasn't it? It really is my life savings those buggers stole."

Sally returned his smile.

The old devil. It made it all the sweeter to put him away. "Brian Trevor Wilkinson, you are under arrest for fraud, obtaining money by deception, and being a dirty rotten scumbag who preys on sad, lonely men."

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