

# **A Family Affair**

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## **Books by this author:**

A Family Affair

A Family Affair - First Born

A Family Affair - Next of Kin

The Faithful Watcher

Lottie's Patch

Stray

## **Note to Reader**

Please note that this book is written in Australian English.

## **Chapter One**

Tom Bradley did not usually visit the twelfth floor, as his own office was on the thirty-sixth. However, the Sales and Marketing teams were located there and Bruce Buxton, Head of Sales had asked him to attend a special team meeting that day. Sales of Satinol's new Glide lipstick range were selling three times faster than recent projections had anticipated, leading to frantic analysis by Bruce's teams to determine the cause.

Tom believed that recognising the success and hard work of his staff was an important part of being CEO. If he were honest with himself, he would admit that it was also one of the nicer parts of the job. So Tom made sure to shake as many hands as possible during the thirty minutes he spent in the sales meeting.

On the way out, Tom buried his head in a copy of the daily business review as he walked down the long corridor towards the lifts. Just as he was about to press the button, some boisterous laughter caught his attention, distracting him completely from the article he had been reading. The noise was coming from one of the studios, and his curiosity stirred him enough to investigate. Tom had almost forgotten about the four studios on this floor. Satinol produced its own TV advertisements and photo shoots occasionally, to avoid paying the extravagant fees that external agencies were known to charge.

Tom rounded the corner and stopped still. From the moment he first saw her, he would never be the same again. But who she was, he did not know. Had his heart stopped beating? Had the world stopped turning? Tom reminded himself to breathe. He felt as if he knew her

already, even though he could not place her. The girl seemed just so familiar. Had he known her in a previous life? Nonsense, he told himself.

The girl had long dark hair and an olive complexion. She was in Studio Four, talking and giggling with the makeup artist who was slowly applying a deep red to her shapely lips.

Maybe he had seen her before on television, Tom told himself as he continued to watch from behind a partly-opened door. The ladies in the room continued laughing at something that he did not understand. Her smile made him smile, and he blushed.

Tom knew that this sort of physical reaction to someone was very unusual for him. In fact, he could not recall a time when any woman had held his attention for so long. Still, he found comfort in remaining unseen by her, while continuing to watch from his vantage point. Her features seemed so familiar, and she was soft and vulnerable. He did not believe in love at first sight, but if that was not the case, then what was happening to him? Why was he captivated by her like this?

After a while he realised her age. He tried to calm his heart so he could think clearly. The girl was young, far too young for him. She could not be more than eighteen years old in any case. In fact, the models working in this business were usually younger than they looked. This awareness made him turn around, briefly ashamed of his feelings. He couldn't help but ask himself the question - what would she want with an old man like you?

Tom had recently celebrated his thirty-eighth birthday. It was a rather sombre occasion, with both of his parents at their favourite Italian restaurant in the city. Unfortunately, his mother had used the opportunity to raise her concerns once again about his marital status. Tom had become resigned to the fact that he might never marry, but this option was fast becoming more and more unacceptable to his mother. She was constantly seeking the "right" sort of woman for him to meet. Tom knew that arguing with her was pointless, and it only left both of them feeling hurt. So he usually went along with her plans, meeting some of the women to whom she introduced him, but refusing to meet others. However, none of the women his mother had chosen held his attention or interest for very long.

Up until this point in his life, his only real passion was to ensure the ongoing success of the company he had created as a young man. It had been tough in the early days, but Tom had a natural instinct for the world of business, and his company had soon begun to prosper. Today, Tom Bradley was the CEO and owner of a multinational company producing cosmetics that were now recognised around the world. His work kept him busy, so busy that most of the time he did not acknowledge his own loneliness. He told himself that dating was difficult to conduct because of the intense media scrutiny and speculation that surrounded him. Relationships and engagements were often announced in the papers after only a few dates with the same woman. However, the real truth behind his bachelor status was that he had never met a woman that impressed him like the one he was looking at in Studio Four. Tom's day was definitely not turning out to be ordinary.

## **Chapter Two**

### *Two Days Earlier*

It was a cold and wet Monday morning in Melbourne, and Ellen Jackson wondered why on earth she had left the warmth and comfort of her bed. Some days the wet weather did not bother her, but today there was no shelter from the heavy wind and rain that lashed her face. Ellen shivered and cursed the tram for being late.

Getting out of bed earlier that morning had been more difficult than usual. There never seemed to be enough hours of sleep at night. But somehow she had managed to pull herself out of her warm bed, dress, grab a bite to eat, and rush out the door.

Living in Coburg meant that Ellen relied on the tram network to get to work. There was a stop quite close to her home, which was helpful on mornings like this.

When the tram finally arrived, she took a seat about half way along where there were few people sitting. Through the gaps in her steamed-up window, Ellen could just make out the bright colours of people's umbrellas in the streets. Rain pelted down on the tram roof, drowning out the conversations of people around her. She preferred the silence to hearing their talking, and especially their mobile phone use. It was the heaviest rainstorm she had experienced for some years. In the country it hadn't rained like that for years. The drought years had seemed endless, broken only now and again by periods of rain that were invariably less than people needed.

The tram stopped regularly and unhappy-looking, wet people boarded at every stop. The locals from home had informed her that even though the city was full of people, it could seem like the loneliest place on earth. However, she did not feel lonely in a city that had colour and noise and personality like this. It made her smile to see passengers shake off the water.

It was not until the third time that Ellen made eye contact with the gentleman opposite her that she started to feel uncomfortable. Her feeling that he was watching her was intense and undeniable. Thankfully, the tram ride was almost over.

Ellen wondered how she was going to get from the tram stop to the Windsor Hotel without ruining her makeup and hair. She looked at her watch and sighed. It was almost nine o'clock. Her waitressing shift started in ten minutes, and there would be little time to freshen up.

Ellen often worried about getting fired. This was her first job since leaving the rural town of Mansfield where she had lived her whole life. The desperation she felt to make it on her own without having to ask her parents for money was a strong driving force, controlling many of her daily thoughts. Her parents had been disappointed in her decision to delay university and work for a gap year in Melbourne. They had even offered to pay her tuition fees if she agreed to go straight to university, but Ellen didn't want more study this year. She wanted to see the world, earn her own money, and meet new people. With her best friend Chloe she had made the move, and they were now flatmates. Their home was basic at best, having only second-hand furniture, and a few cupboards. Boxes of clothes, books and pictures littered the floor space as the unit did not have adequate storage. But both were now employed at the same hotel and were starting to save a little money. They hoped to improve the unit every fortnight with their wages until it was homely and welcoming.

The tram slowed. Ellen recognised the familiar coffee shop and bakery on the corner. The doors opened and the smell of freshly-baked bread filled the air, reminding her of her mother's kitchen back home, where there was always something cooking. She stepped out of the tram and onto the street. The cold wind slapped her face and for a moment, she could hardly catch her breath. Then she remembered the time, and hurriedly blinked the rain out of her eyes and dashed for the cover of the shops. Other people on the street moved quickly for protection too.

A cheerful voice from behind her said, "At least winter only lasts for a few months."

Ellen turned around to see the man from the tram. He had obviously followed her to the footpath. He was an older man, perhaps in his early fifties with curly blond hair, a stylish business suit and a long, woollen black jacket. He certainly looked warm to Ellen. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, but what most struck Ellen were his eyes as they enthusiastically looked her up and down. He had a wide friendly smile on his face that made her reciprocate back, even though she felt silly for doing so.

The man gave a chuckle and moved towards her. "I'm a senior executive with Satinol Cosmetics," he said, almost as if he was boasting.

Unfortunately for the man, Ellen had never heard of Satinol Cosmetics and was unimpressed by this.

"Here's my card," he said, watching Ellen intently as she hesitated to take it. "Yes, you can take that, sweetheart," he said, and thrust it into her hand. "So tell me who your agent is and I'll write it down on this piece of paper." The man pulled out a pen and notebook from inside his jacket.

Ellen reluctantly turned the card over in her hands. It said *Satinol Cosmetics* and *Jake Scott – Senior Executive*. There was an address and a lot of different phone numbers. No one from Mansfield had ever spoken to her like this on the street before. Her parents had warned her numerous times about the type of people she would meet in the city. People who would try and take advantage of her naivety.

He repeated his question. "Who represents you? One would assume that you are a model. You must be." The man looked her up and down again. "Hmmm".

Ellen was reluctant to speak, so remained silent for a little while longer before tentatively responding, "I'm not sure what you're on about, to be honest."

"I don't understand. You don't know what I'm talking about?" he asked slowly, looking confused.

Ellen continued to stare at him, dumbfounded.

"Really? Oh well, pardon me then. I'm sorry. Let me introduce myself properly. My name is Jake Scott, and your name is?"

Ellen didn't see any immediate harm in telling the man her name. "Ellen," she replied hesitantly. "Ellen Jackson."

"Ellen Jackson," he repeated. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Ellen. As I mentioned, I work for Satinol Cosmetics, and we are always looking for a fresh face to represent Belle – that's Satinol's range of cosmetics and skin care for the youth market. What am I saying? I'm sure you've heard of Belle!" he said hopefully.

Ellen thought of her favourite light pink lipstick at home on her dresser. "Yes, I have a Belle lipstick, I think," she replied.

"Well, never mind all the details. I think I'd like you to come into the studio. You have a very interesting look, a sort of wild natural beauty." He paused and studied her for a moment, with a curious look on his face. The girl was not dressed for this weather at all. "But look at you now. You must be freezing. Where's your jacket and umbrella?"

Ellen looked down at herself and felt slightly embarrassed. "I," she said, hesitating again. "I haven't bought any winter stuff yet." She was in fact, saving money to pay next month's rent, and after that was paid, hoping that there would be some money to go shopping for new clothes.

"Why don't you come with me and I'll buy you a coffee and you can give me your details. That will allow you to warm up anyway."

Ellen was very puzzled by this man. Surely he wasn't serious. Her parents had always told her that she was pretty in her own way, but no one had ever said she had wild beauty before. Maybe this man was trying to scam her for money. He didn't look as though he needed money however. She wasn't sure what to think. In any case, she was definitely going to be late now.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Scott. I'm late for work. I have to go." And with that, Ellen took off across the street, willing her long legs to move as fast as they could towards the hotel.

"Wait! What?" The man called out. He continued to yell after her, but Ellen could not hear his words because the rain was pelting furiously. The man obviously did not want to lose

her, because he gave chase, easily catching her by the shoulder and spinning her around to face him.

At this point Ellen felt a rush of anger causing her hackles to rise. What was going on? Of course he could not really think she was a model. "Now listen here, Mr Scott. I am only going to say this once. I am not a model, and whatever you really want from me, whatever your intention is, I am not interested."

Jake seemed to be quite shocked by her reaction, which made Ellen feel that maybe she had reacted too quickly without giving him a fair chance.

"I'm sorry. Listen, Ellen. My apologies for startling you. I really am who I said. Is this where you work?" He motioned to the Windsor Hotel in front of them.

She nodded.

"How about I come here for lunch today and I'll bring another colleague to meet you. We can organise something from there."

Ellen's long hair was starting to come undone. The rain had drenched her shirt completely and she could not argue anymore. She shrugged. "Whatever you like. I can't stop you from eating here at lunchtime but I really have to go now." Without looking back, Ellen went inside quickly to dry off and start her shift.

Chloe had started work earlier that morning for the breakfast shift. She was in the kitchen doing dishes and nodded a friendly hello to Ellen. Chloe had been her best friend since she could remember. They had grown up together in Mansfield and had shared their most treasured secrets. They had been planning their escape to the city for over two years, and Chloe seemed to be loving every minute of it. They had both met many new people already, but only Chloe had brought a number of them home late on Friday nights. It wasn't that Ellen disapproved of this kind of behaviour exactly; it just wasn't the sort of thing she was ready to try herself. Well not yet anyhow.

Time always passed quickly at work for Ellen as the hotel was generally booked out weeks in advance. So, it wasn't until five hours had passed that Ellen noted that Jake had not returned for lunch as he had promised. She looked at her watch. It was two o'clock. She stared mutely at the entrance to the restaurant. It had been a busy meal shift as always. But the atmosphere had quietened now, with only a handful of people remaining to enjoy a leisurely lunch with friends or work colleagues. The buzz created by hundreds of people eating and drinking together was replaced by the softer sounds of music, interrupted only now and again by the sound of laughter and talking.

Whirling past, Chloe exclaimed, "Didn't they show up?"

Ellen shook her head. Chloe had a weird way of knowing what Ellen was thinking about. "Bastards! Don't worry sweetie – I think you're beautiful."

Ellen shrugged and sighed, not wanting to show any disappointment. Secretly, she was hoping for something exciting to happen for her and Chloe now that they were living in the city. She lowered her head, as she no longer expected anything more from the day.

Chloe saw her expression and came over and give her a quick hug. "They don't know what they've missed. We'll go out tonight and have some fun, okay?"

As they were talking, two men in suits entered the restaurant and waited to be seated. Ellen recognised Jake instantly and wondered who the second man was.

"That's them. They did come, Chloe," said Ellen, unable to hide her interest in this new development.

"Where?"

Ellen indicated towards the men, who were now being seated. "The suits."

"Ah," Chloe said. "They're a bit late for lunch though. Are you going to go talk to them?"

Jake and his colleague ordered some drinks from their waitress. Suddenly, the waitress pointed towards her and Jake turned his head and beckoned to her to come over.

"I guess so, Chloe. This should be interesting."

"Tell me all about it afterwards. I want you to remember every word, okay."

Jake watched as Ellen approached the table, her heart pounding nervously. He leaned over towards his colleague, whispering something inaudible. Jake stood up as she finally approached the table.

"Ellen, this is Colin McLeod. Colin, this is Ellen," Jake announced proudly. "Colin is from 'Marketing and Sales'."

Ellen's focus shifted to Colin. He was a plain-looking man with slightly grey hair. He was probably in his forties, although the intensity of his expression made him appear older than this. Ellen felt a little clumsy and shy in his presence.

He studied her face intently for a long period of time, and then said, "Yes, yes, I think I see what you mean,"

"What did I tell you?" Jake seemed happy with himself.

Ellen noticed Colin's eyes starting to wander up and down her body, lingering on certain parts and then moving on. His eyes moved once again to her face and then slowly downwards, until they were firmly fixed on Ellen's breasts.

"Is everything real, Ellen?" he asked in a serious tone.

Ellen started to feel her face turning red hot. She could hardly believe he had asked such a question. Perhaps her parents had been right about city people.

Jake seemed to read the embarrassed look on her face. "Colin," he said disapprovingly. "That's enough." He seemed annoyed at his companion, but also gave Ellen a quick wink, causing Colin to mutter something under his breath.

"Ellen," Jake said. "Are you free on Wednesday morning? I'd like you to come down to the studio." He handed her another business card after writing something on the back.

Ellen turned the card over. It said *nine o'clock* and *level twelve*. Ellen recognised the street address in the inner city.

Jake gave her a broad smile. "I've explained to Colin that you don't have any representation, but that's not really a problem for us. It's unusual but not a problem. So, how about it then?"

"I... um... I don't know, Jake," Ellen muttered, while putting the card into her back pocket to think about later.

Jake responded quickly. "The company will pay you for your time, of course. You will receive two hundred and fifty dollars, just for a morning's work. Does that sound all right?"

Ellen was momentarily silent. That sort of money certainly did help convince her. She started to think about all the groceries her and Chloe could buy for two hundred and fifty dollars, and was suddenly feeling more interested in the idea.

Jake continued, "I could talk to your boss while I'm here if you like. To make sure you can have the morning off."

"No, it's okay. I don't work Wednesdays," Ellen replied, not wanting Jake to say anything to her supervisor.

"That's great news."

Ellen moved awkwardly from one foot to the other, before asking, "So even if the pictures are all terrible, I still get the money?"

"That's right," he replied. "But I really don't think the pictures could be terrible. You are a beautiful girl."

Colin nodded in agreement.

"And I'm not going to take my clothes off!" Ellen added firmly.

"I'm glad to hear that," Jake replied, laughing a little. "We're not that sort of place." He then stood up and put out his hand for Ellen to shake.

Ellen looked over to Colin. He was now busy studying the coffee that was arriving, and did not look too pleased.

"Sugar please, miss," he barked.

"Okay then. I guess I will come on Wednesday to this address", she said, pulling the card out of her back pocket and examining it.

Jake was looking very pleased with the turn of events, and he sipped from his latte happily. Ellen smiled at the waitress awkwardly. It was generally frowned upon to spend too much time talking to customers like this. Ellen looked around for her supervisor, but breathed a little more easily on noting the latter's absence from the main dining room. However she then decided that it was in her interest to leave the men to their discussion.

In any case, they drank their coffees, paid, and left promptly after Jake received a phone call.

### **Chapter Three**

It was just another bad Monday for Colleen Watson. Her life had been filled with bad Mondays. In fact, there had been many bad days, probably not just Mondays, the more Colleen thought about it.

The real estate agent had called first thing in the morning, demanding that the last two months of rental payments be made immediately. She had been on the phone with him for over ten minutes and did not seem to be getting anywhere. Their argument had also woken her boyfriend Ted, and he had made his way from the bedroom to the couch, looking less than pleased. The man on the phone was refusing to listen to reason. No one could possibly afford to pay two months of rent with only one day's notice, she explained carefully to him. They were good for the money, perhaps not today, but possibly later in the week when their unemployment payments arrived. But the more Colleen tried to negotiate, the more insistent the man became that the money must be paid, in full, within the next twenty-four hours.

There had just been too many expenses that month, and the rent money had been diverted into more pressing needs. Colleen started to suggest a part-payment system, but the agent would not listen and was starting to threaten her with eviction if the money wasn't paid that day.

It was just then that a knock on the door was heard. Colleen peered through the curtains and saw two policemen standing at the door.

"Oh shit," she exclaimed in horror, and then hung up on the agent quickly without another word. Alarmed, although not surprised, Colleen informed her boyfriend, "Ted, the pigs are here for you."

Ted was now lying on the couch watching highlights from one of the football games on the weekend. He did not seem overly-concerned by her statement. "How do you know that they aren't here for you this time?" he cheekily retorted from the couch, stretching out and yawning loudly.

"Two reasons," she responded. "The first is because I've been keeping myself clean and out of trouble. Just like you promised to do." Colleen took the phone back to its holder and then moved towards the couch where she could face Ted. "And the second reason is 'cause you probably robbed some servo last night with Steve to pay for your slab of beers."

Ted was well and truly irritated by her air of superiority, and flashed back at her, "Oh, great, love! Why don't you just go down to the station with the pigs and write up my confession for me?" He looked towards the front door despondently. "That would really be helpful and would probably save a lot of time in the long run," he added sarcastically.

Surprised by his obvious annoyance, Colleen said more quietly, "They didn't hear me, you know, Teddy".

The police outside knocked again. Colleen looked towards the door and then to Ted, "They're gunna kick us out of here if we don't pay the rent soon, babe."

Without blinking an eyelid, Ted responded calmly, "Come 'ere and listen up good." Colleen rushed to his side.

"My half of the cash is at Steve's mother's house buried under the clothesline out the back. You know where that is, right? The pigs will never find it there."

Colleen shook her head at Ted, disappointed to hear that he had indeed committed another robbery last night. She walked slowly towards the front door, opening it to the police.

"Good morning, officers. How can we help you today?" Colleen said. She realised years ago that it was smarter to co-operate with the cops when they were asking questions. She also recognised one of the policemen. He had been the arresting officer last time Ted was caught with stolen goods.

"Senior Constable Barry Jones," the officer said, holding up his identification. "I'm here to take Ted down to the station again, Colleen," the copper emphasized the word 'again', which annoyed Colleen.

"So, Barry - what is he being falsely accused of today?" Colleen demanded of them. She straightened up and continued in a quieter voice, "I hope you realise that police harassment of members of the public is an offence too. We know our rights as citizens."

She tried to say something more, but the police cut her off. "Last night there was a robbery at the BP station, about four hundred metres down the street from here."

Colleen shook her head, "But officers, I can vouch for Ted. He's cleaning up his act. He was with me all night long."

One of the officers let out a deep sigh, as if he was disappointed with her last statement, "Colleen, the video camera at the servo caught the whole thing. There's no point lying to us this time. Your boys didn't even try to disguise themselves. It's as if they wanted to get caught. We've already got..." The officer looked down at his paperwork, "Steven Smith in custody. The only thing we haven't got is the cash that was stolen. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that now, would you?"

"No." Colleen tried to look as innocent as possible.

"Now, here is our warrant." One of the officers produced some hand cuffs and motioned towards Ted. "You'll have to come with us now, Ted," he said firmly.

Ted nodded and got up from the couch.

The officer continued, "And we are going to search the premises. Colleen, I should let you know that if we find the cash here, you will be charged with conspiring to steal, and also with providing false information to an officer of the law. So," the officer sternly asked while looking her straight in the eye. "Do you want me to ask you that question again?"

"Nope, you can look all you like, but you won't find anything here," Colleen confidently asserted.

The constable nodded. "Fine."

On the way out, the same man leaned in towards Ted, "You really scared that kid last night, Ted," he explained.

"Little punk should have just handed over the money when I told him too," he replied. Ted was now cuffed and being led out the front door.

Suddenly alarmed for the first time at the prospect of being alone, Colleen cried out towards Ted, "Teddy, what am I going to do without you?"

"Can I give her a quick hug?" Ted asked the officers, trying to sound as concerned as he could.

One of the police officers nodded to Colleen. "Make it quick."

Colleen ran towards Ted and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight. Tears started to roll down her cheeks. “Teddy, I really need you to stay out of jail after this. Please. Make this the last time.” She looked into Ted's eyes. “For me, okay? Don't forget your promise to me...”

“Shhh.” Ted sharply cut her off. He whispered into her ear, “Listen carefully, babe. Go to Steve's mum's house for us and get all the dough. Pay the rent and hide the rest somewhere safe. You'll be right till I get out of jail in a few weeks.”

“Okay, Teddy.” Colleen was suddenly very excited by the prospect of picking up the money. She wondered how much was actually in there, as Ted had not mentioned it. “Can I buy myself something nice with what's left over?” she asked him.

“No,” he hissed, showing immediate disapproval. “I know exactly how much is in there. I'm gunna count it as soon as I'm out. So don't do anything stupid, okay?”

Colleen nodded in agreement.

“All right. That's enough for the two of you.” The officer interrupted their embrace and pulled Ted towards the door. “We've got to take him now.”

Ted was taken to the divvy van and put in the back. Colleen watched the whole process as if it was in slow motion. There were some neighbours gathering on the nature strip to see what all the commotion was about.

Colleen decided to give them something to really talk about. She screamed out, “What are you all looking at? This isn't a show. That's an innocent man been taken away by the coppers.”

Poor Teddy, Colleen thought to herself. They didn't need to cuff him. He's a good man, and would have gone with them without any trouble.

Although Colleen didn't know it, that would be the last time she would ever see Ted.

## **Chapter Four**

Two days later after her chance meeting with Jake Scott, Ellen found herself standing outside the headquarters of Satinol Cosmetics. It was a tall building in the heart of the city, probably one of the largest on the block. Ellen felt very small standing there by herself. There were people rushing in and out of the large rotating glass doors located on the ground floor.

Ellen found a public bench outside and sat down to settle her nerves. After a few deep breaths, she stood up and took a couple of steps towards the door. Then numerous doubts started to fill her mind. What if they didn't believe she was a model? What if Jake wasn't there today? What would she say to explain her being there? Ellen quickly turned around and sat down again. She could feel her heart beating very fast, and her chest tightening. Her breathing was far faster than normal. Suddenly the taste of something thick and sweet filled her mouth, and Ellen realised she had bitten her bottom lip. So for another five minutes she sat there, with a cut lip, without the nerve to go inside. Still more people moved in and out of the building. It seemed to be a very busy place indeed.

Ellen tried to imagine the best and worst outcomes that could arise from going inside. The best result would be getting paid two hundred and fifty dollars as Jake had promised. The money would cover her bills for the week and allow her and Chloe to have a night out somewhere together. Being paid simply to be photographed, wear nice makeup and new clothes. The thought made Ellen smile happily and she immediately felt more relaxed. The worst outcome, she thought to herself would be if they laughed her out of the building, and she ended up in tears. But that really wasn't so bad. She had certainly been laughed at before. Ellen stood up, held her head high, and told herself she was ready for anything as she marched inside.

She moved through the large rotating glass doors of Satinol Cosmetics and then gasped in awe. In front of her was a grand foyer like nothing she had ever seen before. Gold plated mirrors and portraits adorned the walls while marble floors stretched to a grand staircase in the centre of the foyer. A rich, sweet fragrance filled the air saturating her senses.

Ellen soon spotted the reception desk and found herself face to face with a friendly and polite young woman at the counter.

“Good morning. How can I help you today?” the young woman asked pleasantly.

Ellen noticed that the girl’s hair was sleekly pulled back into a bun, and her skin appeared to be completely flawless. She wondered how long the young girl had spent getting ready for work that morning, and held back the desire to ask her about this. “I’m here to see Jake Scott,” Ellen finally replied, trying not to stare at the girl.

“Who may I say is here to see him?” she asked.

“It’s Ellen”, she said, and then hesitantly added, “from the tram”. Ellen kicked herself. How could she have said ‘from the tram.’ How embarrassing!

“Oh, wait a moment.” The girl put down the phone, and thought for a moment. Ellen Jackson, is it?” she enquired.

Ellen nodded.

The girl continued, “Mr Scott has actually left some instructions”. She seemed pleased with herself and then fumbled around in her drawer for a moment. “Where did I put that note?” she asked herself. “Hmmm. Oh, here it is.” She looked up at Ellen briefly and then continued, “You are to see Tina in Studio Four on the twelfth floor. She will look after you this morning, and hopefully Mr Scott will catch up with you after that.”

Ellen was surprised that Jake would not be meeting her on arrival. He knew that she was nervous about the day.

“The lifts are just over there.” The girl pointed her towards a hallway to the right. “Have a great day now.” The girl’s phone starting ringing. “Satinol Cosmetics. Good morning, this is Julie”, Ellen heard as she walked away.

Ellen moved away from the reception desk remembering the fear she had felt only minutes ago, and smiled to herself. Her heart was still pounding, but the apprehension had been completely replaced by a feeling of excitement and possibility. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Everything was going to be okay. They are expecting me, she thought.

A few minutes later, Ellen found herself in an elevator surrounded by well-dressed people in fancy business suits. She could detect the low murmur of people’s conversation behind her. Ellen looked down at her own freshly ironed plain black pants and favourite green t-shirt. She felt out of place standing next to these people. Perhaps, they are too busy to even notice me, she thought happily.

“Level twelve”, the elevator indicated. This was it.

The doors opened to reveal a quiet area with a reception desk facing the lifts. Ellen noticed a sign which read ‘Studios One to Four’ pointing right and a long corridor to the left. A girl at the reception desk with long black hair and thick glasses beckoned to her.

“Hi, are you Ellen?” the girl enquired.

Ellen nodded.

“Nice to meet you. Julie, from reception, just called to say you were on the way up. You can take a seat there.” The girl motioned towards a red couch behind Ellen. “Are you looking forward to your session today? I’m Alex by the way.”

“Hi. I am looking forward to it, kind of,” Ellen said unconvincingly.

The girl hesitated slightly, “I heard that you haven’t done any modelling before. Is that right?”

Ellen nodded. “I’m so not a model. Really not sure what I’m doing here.”

Alex laughed quietly at her statement. “Well, it's always fun when you try something new for the first time, right?”

Ellen was going to explain that she wasn't sure exactly what her session would involve, but then thought better of it. “I really hope that I don't stuff up, and waste everyone's time,” she said.

“It will be fine, so don't worry too much. Now, there is a form here for you to fill out. It's just contact details mostly.” Alex handed Ellen a clipboard with a single sheet of paper. It did not take long to complete, and Ellen handed it back after about five minutes. Alex seemed pleased. “Great. Have a seat again and I'll call Tina to let her know you are ready.”

“Okay” replied Ellen, sitting down again.

Alex dialled an extension while Ellen looked around the room nervously. Butterflies were starting to make their presence felt in her stomach.

Alex was obviously listening intently to someone, “Yep, okay, yes,” she said. She pressed a button which ended the call. “Come with me, Ellen.” Alex stood up and moved to the front of the counter. She had a phone headpiece clipped onto her right ear, which obviously allowed her to move freely around the floor while monitoring any calls.

Ellen was led from the reception area into Studio Four. There was a large white screen from floor to ceiling, three large floodlights, and numerous props. It all looked quite alien and intimidating. She couldn't imagine what some of the props would be for. There was a smaller room off to one side which they entered. It was a narrow space with a long mirror running along an entire wall. There was a lady there to greet them as they entered the room. She looked up with interest.

“Hi Tina, this is Ellen Jackson,” said the receptionist. “Her session is scheduled for eleven o'clock, so you've got plenty of time here.”

Tina was gorgeous and well dressed, like every other woman working in the building, thought Ellen. She was older than the receptionist, perhaps in her late forties with short, stylish hair and trendy dark-coloured clothing.

“Thanks Alex,” Tina said. “So, come on in, Ellen. Make yourself at home. I hope you have a good joke for me, 'cause I only do good makeup in exchange for a good joke.” Tina pulled a chair out and motioned for her to sit down.

Alex laughed briefly and said to Ellen, “Tina loves a good joke, and you'd better think of a good one, because I once saw this model who refused to tell any jokes, and well, believe me, she was not a pretty picture when Tina was finished with her.” The two of them laughed heartily, obviously remembering a shared experience.

Alex started heading towards the door, but called out encouragingly, “Catch ya later Ellen and good luck.”

“Thanks,” Ellen replied, not sure if Alex had heard.

“What sort of music do you like?” Tina asked, turning her stereo on.

“Lots of different stuff”. This was true. Ellen had never been able to identify one type of music that she preferred over all the others. Tina's music was fast and electronic. “This is good.”

Tina nodded to Ellen's reply. “I'm really into the local scene at the moment. There are a lot of great home-grown bands in Melbourne.”

Ellen nodded, even though she didn't know much about the local music scene.

Tina moved so that she was standing in front of Ellen. “Wait a moment. First things first. I will need you to change out of your top, and put a buttoned shirt on.”

“Oh.”

Tina continued, “Always wear clothes that can be buttoned off when you come to a session like this.”

Ellen looked down at her top. It was her favourite tight green t-shirt, which definitely had to come off over the head. "Oh right. Sorry."

"It's okay," Tina said in a friendly tone. "Go behind the screen there." She pointed towards the large screen behind her. "There are some buttoned shirts hanging up. Be quick, then come back."

Ellen ripped her t-shirt off and quickly buttoned a simple blue shirt before returning to her comfy seat in front of the mirror with Tina. A large tray had been wheeled over to the bench near her seat.

Bit by bit Tina started to apply various products to Ellen's face and neck. It felt nice. Tina obviously knows what she's doing, Ellen thought, and watched the mirror carefully as her face was slowly transformed.

"Did you still want to hear a joke?"

"Yes, go ahead," said Tina seriously. She was obviously concentrating quite hard.

Feeling comfortable and happy, Ellen looked up at Tina's face which was very close to hers at the moment. "So this is my favourite joke in the world," she said quietly. "You've probably heard it. But it's the only joke I can ever remember, and unfortunately it's not really that funny, but I love it because my dad loves it. This joke made him laugh really hard when I told it to him."

"Let's hear it then," Tina said patiently. She was a fun person to be around and had already made Ellen feel completely relaxed.

"How do you keep an idiot in suspense?" Ellen asked.

"How?"

"I'll tell you later". Ellen smiled and watched Tina's face in the mirror, waiting for her to get it.

Tina laughed. "That's a good one". Both of them chuckled at each other. "I'll have to tell that one to my boyfriend. Very appropriate humour if you know what I mean."

It was then that Ellen noticed in the mirror a figure standing behind the door peering in. The two of them were being watched by someone. Ellen turned her head to see who it was, and found an older man looking at her with the most amazing brown eyes she had ever seen.

After noticing Ellen's gaze, Tina also looked over. She seemed more surprised than Ellen by the man's presence, whoever he was. Tina hesitated briefly before exclaiming, "Mr Bradley, hello".

## **Chapter Five**

Colleen waited till dark before driving to Steve's mother's house to retrieve the stolen cash. She knew exactly where to go because the boys had hidden many goods in this backyard over the years.

Steven's mother was over eighty years old and becoming senile. The old lady probably did not know what day it was. She had recently started calling Steve "Stevie" again, the name he was called as a toddler, which annoyed him intensely. Steve had informed them that his mother spent the majority of each day in the front living room staring at the walls. Steve knew that she belonged in a nursing home, but the old lady still had enough determination to resist this idea, and would start to scream and yell every time the words "nursing home" were mentioned.

Colleen arrived at the property at around ten o'clock. The night was pitch dark because there was no moonlight. Only passing traffic and a cat fight could be heard in the distance. Colleen had brought a flashlight and turned it on as she made her way from the car through the front gate and past the old lady's front porch. She had also brought a small shovel as the cash was probably buried at least a foot underground, to prevent Steve's mother from

accidentally discovering it. Colleen found herself singing aloud the tune she had just been listening to on the radio, and then realised that she was not being particularly quiet. Oh, well, she thought. There is not really any reason to be quiet. The old lady will be fast asleep and not likely to stir.

Colleen walked past the old pear tree that didn't fruit any longer, past the outside toilet that hadn't been used in fifteen years, and past the incinerator in which the old lady liked to dispose of things on a sunny Saturday afternoon. The weekend smoke was the cause of much annoyance for the neighbours, but nobody had to heart to call the council because of her age.

Colleen stood in front of the clothesline. It consisted of five pieces of wire held up by two large posts spanning a distance of about eight metres. She would have to search carefully for signs of recent activity. Colleen pointed the torch at the ground and moved it around in a circular motion. Ah ha, she had found some loose dirt and began digging with her spade.

All of a sudden, the backyard was flooded with a bright light, causing Colleen to squint and almost lose her balance.

"It's his wife Colleen," a man's voice was heard, somewhere above her and to the left of where she was standing.

Colleen looked up into the tree near her, trying to identify where the voice was coming from. A brief moment passed before she realised what was happening. Bugger.

"Colleen Watson, you are under arrest," boomed a voice from behind.

Colleen turned around and found the same copper that had arrested Ted earlier that day.

"You have the right to remain silent," he continued.

The copper continued to read her rights, but Colleen didn't hear a word of it. She was amazed at how many police were actually in the backyard. The yard was full of them. How had she not heard them? They were like bugs, crawling out of every crevice. A tough-looking female copper cuffed her and escorted her roughly to the front yard where they waited for a car to pull up.

The senior constable stayed close to Colleen throughout all this and watched her every move. "You see, Colleen, I suspected that you were in on the whole thing when I spoke to you this morning. But what you didn't know was that old Mrs Smith saw the boys digging in her backyard last night and went to investigate their hole once they had left. She watched her own son try and hide the stolen money in her backyard. Can you imagine what that would have been like?" He did not wait for a response. "You cannot blame her. The old girl decided that she had had enough of her no good lying excuse for a son. So she called us, and we retrieved the money. But you see, it was my idea to stake out the property for a couple of nights and try and catch any accomplices that were hiding in the woodworks." The officer sounded so smug. "I should finally get that promotion they have been promising me," he told her quietly, so nobody else could hear.

Colleen was barely listening to his words, but they were slowly starting to make sense. She needed time to recover from the shock of her failed plan, and was starting to feel angry at Ted for letting her down again. Useless pig, she thought to herself. I am going to have to take this money-earning business into my own hands when I get out of jail this time.

## **Chapter Six**

"Mr Bradley, hello", Tina repeated, as if she was unsure he had heard her the first time. "It's an honour to have you visit the studio today. If you like, I can give you a quick tour."

Tina seemed to recognise this man standing in the doorway. She was obviously excited to see him, because she had stopped applying makeup and moved awkwardly towards the doorway with her hand outstretched.

Ellen wondered who he could be. But more importantly, why he was staring at her and not even acknowledging that Tina was talking to him. He was dressed in a business suit and had a newspaper folded in his left hand. His shortish brown hair was neatly combed into place and Ellen noticed that his eyes were warm and friendly. Ellen thought him very handsome and interesting-looking. However, clearly he looked hesitant to come in and say hello.

Suddenly the man came to life. He shook Tina's hand awkwardly, straightened his rose-coloured silk tie, and walked confidently into the room. Trying to sound like he was in control of the situation, he explained, "Sorry to interrupt, ladies. Every now and then, I like to visit one of the departments to meet the staff. Just to observe everyone and see what is going on. I hope you don't mind."

Tina looked a little surprised, but responded eagerly, "Oh, of course not. Come in."

"Thank you."

"I don't think we've met before, Mr Bradley." Tina sounded a little nervous around the man. "My name's Tina Brown and I have been working in this department for over two years now." Tina then noticed that Tom's eyes were fixed firmly on Ellen. He did not seem to be listening to her at all.

Ellen had also noticed that the man had been staring at her the entire time he was in the room. His absorbed expression made her feel comfortable, so she tried to hold his gaze. After a moment had passed, she decided to try speaking to their visitor. "And my name is Ellen Jackson. Jake Scott asked me to come in today and have some test shots taken, even though I've never modelled before."

Mr Bradley's smile changed quickly into a frown. "Oh, Jake organised this, did he?" He did not seem so pleased with that news.

"Ellen, this is Mr Tom Bradley," Tina said to Ellen. "He is the chief executive officer and owner of Satinol."

Ellen nodded. "Hi".

"Sorry, Ellen," Tom responded, reaching his hand out to her. "I should have introduced myself to you properly." Tom seemed embarrassed as they shook hands gently. "I might stick around to watch things here, if that's okay with you?"

Tina's face quickly changed into a surprised expression. Tom didn't seem to notice.

Ellen guessed that this request was a little unusual. She nodded and looked towards Tina. "It's fine with me."

Tina quickly agreed. "Oh course, Mr Bradley. Would you like a chair?" Tina asked, indicating towards a seat in the corner of the room.

"Thank you, yes."

Tina later explained that Tom was known throughout the business to be an extremely busy and private man. He was rarely seen outside the offices on the top floor and was considered relatively unapproachable by many people. He was always flanked by either board members or bodyguards in public. She thought it was quite strange that he would want to watch Ellen's session.

However, Tom was true to his word and spent the next two hours in their company. He watched the rest of Ellen's makeup and hair session, adding comments of his own to their conversation now and again as he saw appropriate. At one point, someone brought in a rack of dresses, and Tom personally helped to select three of them for Ellen to try on.

Ellen started to think of him as a wonderfully funny and generous man, and felt very comfortable around him, despite their age gap. They talked between sessions while she changed behind a screen with the help of Tina. He had watched each of her three sessions in front of the camera, and seemed happy that the photographer was pleased with her work.

After two hours, Ellen was hot under the lights and tiring of the attention of a small group of people who had come in to watch. Tom continued to study her carefully, smiling often and watching the action closely.

“Okay, sweetie, that's all for today. You're done.” The photographer smiled and started to exit the room.

Ellen breathed a sigh of relief.

“I'll get these into print straight away, Mr. Bradley.”

“Thank you, Nick,” Tom responded. “I will be eagerly waiting to see the results of your work.” He looked towards Ellen who had stood up from the table and was starting to stretch a little. “I think Ellen might have a promising future with...” Tom did not finish his sentence because Jake Scott had walked into the room.

“Hello there, Ellen,” Jake said, breezing into the room. Suddenly his eyes caught sight of Tom in the corner, and he seemed surprised because he stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes not moving further from Tom. “Tom, I had no idea you took an interest in this area. He seemed nervous, but continued on, “I think Ellen here has some great qualities that may be suitable...”

“Jake”, Tom said, interrupting him with a dismissive hand motion. “Let's talk in the hall for a moment.”

Jake then seemed to notice that the session had finished. “Ellen, I'm sorry that I didn't meet you myself earlier on. Something came up, but I trust you found your way around okay.”

“Yep, just fine,” she called to Jake as he left the room with Tom.

Tina touched Ellen's shoulder, “You can change now.” She motioned towards the change rooms. “And take all that gluck off of your face now.”

“I kind of like it actually. Might take this face home and see if my flatmate Chloe recognises me.”

Tina laughed at this idea. As the two of them walked past Tom and Jake in the hallway, Ellen noticed that they seemed to be talking about a matter of some seriousness because Jake's eyes were on the ground and Tom appeared to be doing most of the talking.

“I wonder what's going on there,” Tina said to Ellen slyly.

“I'm not sure.”

“Well, I'll tell you one thing. I have never seen Tom take any interest in a shoot before, and we do tens of these shoots every week. He probably hasn't even visited this floor for years.”

“I wonder why he was here today,” Ellen said, puzzled. Of course, it wasn't because of me, Ellen thought to herself. However, a part of her did secretly hope that she was a part of the reason that he stayed so long.

“Oh well, I guess when you own the place, you can do whatever you like on a daily basis.”

“Hmmm, I hope Jake is not getting into trouble because he asked me to come in today.”

“Na, don't worry about that. Your shots will look great. I think you are a natural.”

It was twelve o'clock by the time Ellen found herself changed, finished and ready to leave. “Bye, Tina. Thanks for everything,” she called out.

“No worries. Oh, by the way, here is your envelope”. Tina pulled a thick green envelope out from one of the drawers and rushed it over to Ellen. “Don't leave without this.”

“What is it?” Ellen asked, genuinely forgetting about the money Jake had agreed to give her for coming in.

“It's your cash for today, of course.”

“Oh yeah. Thanks. I can't believe I am getting paid for doing something which was actually kind of fun.”

Tina nodded, cleaning and putting away all the items from her bench.

“When do you think I will hear something back?” Ellen asked enthusiastically.

“Shouldn't be too long.”

“All right, bye. Thanks again”.

Ellen walked out of the changing room and found Tom standing against one of the hallway walls. He looked as though he had been pacing, and Ellen wondered if he was waiting for her. The thought was scary but also exciting.

“Ellen”. Tom moved away from the wall to face her. “I wanted to thank you for coming in today.” He paused, but continued to stare into her eyes, almost longingly, she thought.

Ellen wasn't sure what he was going to say next. The moment was awkward and Ellen felt her heart pounding in her chest.

“I was wondering,” he started and then stopped.

Ellen could feel her face starting to go hot and red.

“I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me tonight?”

The suggestion confused her momentarily. “Dinner?” she echoed and then felt silly for not saying anything else.

He smiled reassuringly. “Sure, you know. I pick you up, fancy restaurant, you tell me all about yourself, some red wine, more questions from me etc etc. You know, that sort of thing.”

Ellen felt uneasy with the suggestion of a fancy restaurant. She would most likely use the wrong cutlery or wear the wrong outfit. Tom looked like a man who would normally take out sophisticated and stylish women. She didn't know what to say, and so just looked at him in silence.

Tom suddenly looked uncomfortable. “You don't have to, of course. Your work here is not dependent on your having dinner with me, or anything like that. And of course, I'm far too old for you as well,” Tom said unconvincingly.

Ellen smiled at that statement. Of course, she wanted to have dinner with him.

Tom obviously noticed. “Can I take that as a yes then?”

“Sorry. Yes, I'd love to. Thanks. You still look young enough to be dating.”

“Well, thanks.”

They grinned at each other for a moment in silence.

“Well, what sort of food do you like?” Tom asked enthusiastically.

Ellen hesitated for a moment, and then said, “I like pizza, I guess,” and then felt silly again. Why couldn't she have said something more sophisticated?

He didn't seem to think it was silly. “Yeah, me too,” Tom smiled. “You know I can make a pretty mean pepperoni pizza, if you want to risk my cooking for you.”

That idea sounded more relaxed than a fancy restaurant. “Well, if it doesn't kill you, it's supposed to make you stronger.” Ellen found herself grinning at Tom again. Conversation with Tom was really very easy. He seemed like a really nice guy, a very good-looking guy too.

“Should I pick you up at around seven then?” Tom asked.

Ellen nodded. “Thank you, okay.”

“What's your address?” Tom pulled out a pen and business card from a pocket deep within his jacket. He wrote her address down carefully, and then asked slowly, “So do you live alone, Ellen?”

“Alone? No.”

“Ah, so is there any chance that your parents will answer the door tonight? That is the sort of thing I need to know in advance.”

“Oh I see.”

“It will take me a while to prepare an explanation of why an old man like me is dating their young daughter.”

Ellen smiled. “No, I don't live with my parents. But, I'd go crazy by myself. I live with my best friend Chloe.”

“Phew. That's a relief.”

“She might give you the third degree though. Better prepare for that.”

“Thanks for the warning. And yes, I think I know what you mean about the going crazy stuff.” Tom's mobile started to ring. Tom checked his phone. “I'm sorry. I have to take this. But I will definitely see you tonight.”

“Okay”.

“Bye, Elle,” Tom called out confidently while walking back down the hallway. Before he reached the elevator, he turned and gave a cheeky smile back to Ellen.

Ellen watched him walk away from her, surprised at the turn of events. She had never felt more happy and alive. The risk she had taken in coming here today had paid off, and now there was a date to look forward to for the rest of the day.

“Wow, what a day”, she whispered to herself and hurriedly left the building to work out what she was going to wear that night.

## Chapter Seven

“Tom”, a curious and mature voice called out. “Tommy, are you home? It's your mother.”

Tom Bradley's mother used her spare key to enter his house, as she normally would on any given night of the week. But tonight was a little different, as she was accompanied by a young, nervous-looking lady who followed her closely. The young lady was wearing her best silk shirt and matching skirt, and had especially styled her hair for the occasion.

Margaret Bradley was used to Tom arriving home anytime between seven and eight o'clock. Margaret looked at her watch. It was ten minutes past eight o'clock and so she had no doubt that he would be home already. She knew Tom would most likely be found in his library at this time of the night, looking over business papers from the day.

“Tom, I have a surprise for you,” Margaret called out. “Helen Logan's daughter, Mary, you remember Mary don't you, from the country club. The two of you once had a short drink together. Anyway she has recently moved back to Melbourne and wasn't doing anything tonight and so I've asked her to join us for dinner.”

Margaret gave Mary a smile. She had been trying to get the two of them together for weeks now.

“I really think the two of you will have a lot in common,” she said to Mary firmly, while nudging her gently. “You will probably forget that I am even here after a while.”

Margaret entered the library entrance and to her dismay, found Tom's desk empty. “I wonder where he could be?” she asked Mary.

Mary shrugged in response.

“I hope he hasn't eaten dinner early. Perhaps I should have called.”

Margaret paused for a moment and pondered that thought. It would be unusual for Tom to have eaten dinner at this hour, and calling really wasn't necessary, as her son was a man who enjoyed a strict daily routine.

“Let's try the kitchen, Mary. Tom's housekeeper Estella, even though she is Spanish, will often cook a spicy Thai dish on Monday night, and perhaps he is chatting to her in the kitchen while she prepares it.” Margaret and her female companion headed towards the kitchen.

Margaret liked to stay involved with Tom's life. She liked to hear every little detail about his day, and would often ask about the people, although more often the women, he had met

that day. Although fiercely protective of Tom, Margaret longed for him to meet the right sort of woman to complete his life. Alas, Tom was choosy with women and many of the fine ladies to whom she had introduced him were not in the picture for very long.

Margaret thought Mary to be a suitable match for Tom because the Logans were a respectable and very wealthy family with a reputation for strong family values. Margaret had known Mrs Logan for years through her association with the Riverview Golf Club. The two mothers had talked Mary into this dinner engagement, and were only a few steps away from talking about the expected nuptials. Tom and Mary had met many years ago briefly, and Margaret remembered Tom saying back then that she was a lovely young woman.

“Estella, there you are!” Tom's maid scuttled past them with a broom and sponge.  
“Where would my son be tonight please?”

“Oh, Mrs Bradley! I see you have brought a companion for dinner again.” Estella paused for a moment, looking over at Mary with apprehension. She phrased her next sentence slowly and carefully. “I think Tom has dinner plans already...”

“Estella,” said Margaret firmly, cutting the housekeeper off, “we are here to see Tom, and see Tom is exactly what we are going to do. I'm sure Tom would like to talk to Mary again after all these years.” Margaret nodded towards Mary proudly. “Now is Tom in the kitchen?” she asked firmly, using the most intimidating tone of voice she could muster.

“Yes ma'am”, replied Estella, defeated.

Margaret marched towards the kitchen with Mary in toe, looking more apprehensive than before.

“I'm on my way to the kitchen too, Mrs Bradley,” Estella continued. “The two of them have made quite a mess in there.”

Just as Margaret was wondering what Estella's last sentence was all about, a young girl came stumbling out of the kitchen screaming and laughing. She was completely covered in flour. Her hair was sticky and she fell against the hallway wall laughing and clutching her stomach.

“Oh my lord! What is going on here?” Margaret was shocked and was very confused by the young woman. This was not the sort of behaviour to be tolerated in Tom's house. The staff were usually much better behaved.

The young girl stopped laughing almost immediately when their eyes met.

“Mum, is that you?” Tom called out from the kitchen in a friendly tone. He came out of the kitchen smiling and laughing at the girl covered in food. Tom's face and shirt was also covered in flour, but not nearly as much.

He then looked up and noticed his mother's female companion, and his mood changed instantly. His smile disappeared and his face hardened. “Oh, for goodness sake. Now Mother, how many times have I asked you not to set me up on blind dates?” Tom erupted. “And blind dates that you don't even tell me about, this is a new low. And come to think of it, I have also asked you to call before you come over.” Tom then enunciated slowly and angrily, “You need to give me some bloody space Mother!” Tom's face was starting to turn red from anger and embarrassment.

“Well I don't know what is going on here with this grubby young child who is looking such a mess but,” and her tone softened, “this is not a blind date at all. You have met Helen Logan's daughter before, do you remember?” Margaret was surprised by her son's outburst, but not put off. “The two of you have a lot in common,” she added determinably.

Margaret noticed that the young girl against the wall, who was still covered in food, started to look uncomfortable, and shifted from foot to foot. Margaret wondered who she was, and what she was hired to do exactly.

“No Mother, I do not remember meeting..” Tom shouted, then hesitated, and Margaret realised that he indeed could not remember Mary's name.

“Her name is Mary!” his mother filled in the blank, suddenly feeling very embarrassed by her son's attitude towards Mary. “And I have just finished telling Mary about what a gentleman my son is. Please take a moment to compose yourself Tom, and let's start again, shall we?”

Tom looked at his mother angrily and then cast a glance at Mary. “I'm sorry,” Tom said in a quieter tone to her. “My mother has wasted your time tonight because she did not tell me that you would be coming over. And as you can see, I already have a dinner guest.”

Margaret looked horrified. “You have what? Who is this girl, Tom?”

Tom ignored the question and went on, “It's nothing personal, Mary. I hope you understand.”

Mary nodded, but looked altogether uncomfortable with the situation. “Of course,” she said softly. “I'm very sorry. I would never have come over if your mother had not been so insistent.”

“Tom”, Ellen asked quietly from behind. “Should I leave?”

Tom turned around to face the girl next to the wall. “No. Please don't, Elle.”

Margaret saw their eye contact and felt very confused. “Well, who is this, Tommy?” Margaret questioned her son. “Have you hired a new girl for the kitchen? Because if you have, I think you should fire her right now. She obviously can't cook. I mean she has spilt food everywhere.”

“You don't know what you are talking about,” he replied fiercely.

Margaret felt her own anger rising. “Well then, please enlighten us! Why are you cavorting around covered in food with this young child?” Margaret suddenly started to suspect that the young woman might be her son's date for the evening, and was shocked. She felt betrayed that her son was keeping this new relationship from her, although she would never have approved of a woman so young, even if she had been properly consulted.

“I'll tell you what is going on here, Mother,” Tom replied indignantly. “I am a grown man and do not require your parental supervision in my own home. So I am going to walk both of you to the door and bid you goodnight. Let's go.”

He turned to Ellen and said in a softer tone, “I'll be back in a sec, okay?”

As soon as Mary was out of the front door and out of earshot, Margaret reached for her son. “Tommy, please. Please don't treat your mother like this.”

“Mother”, Tom replied. “I am not a young boy anymore that needs to ask for your permission. I will see whomever I choose. Do you understand?”

“But that girl is too young for you!” Margaret exclaimed. “And we don't know anything about her family.”

“You have thoroughly embarrassed me tonight, Mother. So, I'm only going to say this to you once, so please listen. If you come around uninvited once more, I will have the locks changed.”

“Tommy, please, don't be ridiculous.” Margaret thought for a moment. “Just think about what you're doing, that's all I'm asking.” Margaret kissed her son on the cheek. “I will call you tomorrow son”.

Tom seemed to be glad that she was leaving without more of a fight. “Goodnight, Mother. Goodnight, Mary.”

## **Chapter Eight**

Ellen stood up slowly as Tom marched the two women out of the room without looking back at her. She was confused and surprised by his outburst. All night long, Tom had been good-natured and funny, a complete gentleman in every way. His nature reminded her of her father back home because he was cool, calm and in control of every situation. But the

presence of his mother had completely shaken him up. He had lost his temper and seemed like a completely different person to Ellen. Tom's mother did not seem like a particularly easy woman to get along with, but Ellen could not help wondering if this was part of Tom's real personality. Perhaps he had just been on his best behaviour so far.

Ellen did not want anything to do with a man who could not control his temper. She turned around and surveyed the room for a potential escape route. Would he be mad at her for leaving without saying goodbye? She could not be concerned with that at the moment. The house appeared larger than it had minutes ago, and Ellen knew there was a reasonable chance that she would get lost running from room to room to find a back door. Her mind ticked over the various options for ending the evening. Feeling alarmed and uneasy, she was about to head down the main hallway, when Estella walked in with a damp cloth.

“You can use this to clean up your face,” she said in a friendly voice, offering it to her.

Ellen clutched onto Estella's hand. “Estella, how do I get out of here? I'd like to go now. Is there a back door?” she asked urgently.

“What's wrong? Are you not feeling well?”

Ellen did not respond.

Estella seemed surprised by her concerned expression. “Mr Bradley is a good man”, she continued. “He will drive you home if you are ready to go.” Estella paused for a moment, carefully considering her next words. “He is usually very patient with his mother, not like tonight. More patient than I could be,” she added.

“I didn't like all the yelling,” Ellen said timidly, looking into Estella's eyes for reassurance.

Estella's gentle and motherly nature calmed Ellen instantly. “Don't leave. Let Tom explain, yes? Mrs Bradley is very difficult woman. Mr Bradley's very patient normally.”

Ellen hesitated. Perhaps she was over-reacting to the situation. Perhaps everything would be all right. “Okay”, she said, taking the cloth and starting to wash her face.

“I'll make you a cup of tea while you clean up. Mr Bradley had a very good time tonight before his mother arrived. I have not heard him laugh like that before. Everything will be okay. You'll see.”

Estella led her into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

Earlier that evening, Tom had taught Ellen how to make a pizza dough from scratch with real yeast. After the dough had risen, they had rolled it flat and added various toppings before sliding it into a hot oven. The food fight had started just after the pizza went into the oven, when Tom had accidentally touched her face with his flour covered hands. Ellen remembered the moment with a smile. The pizza was obviously cooked, as the smell now wafted through the whole kitchen, making her hungry.

It wasn't long before Tom returned from seeing the two ladies out. He walked through the kitchen doors, paused and looked at Ellen thoughtfully. Estella immediately excused herself, saying something about tidying the laundry.

Tom started to clean the flour and other pieces of pizza topping off his face as he moved towards Ellen. Now that they were alone again, he tried to explain, “I'm sorry that you had to see me so angry on our first date.” His voice was calmer, and he sat down on a stool beside her, leaning in gently. “My mum has been introducing me to various women of a certain breed for as long as I can remember. And tonight and in front of you, of all nights, I just snapped. I'm sorry.” Tom reached for her hand.

His touch sent a sharp sensation down Ellen's body.

Tom continued, “I usually go along with my mother's plans just to keep her happy. I should have put a stop to it a long time ago. I know that we've only just met, Ellen, and I don't want to scare you off, but being with you makes me happy, happier than I've been for quite a while. So please forgive me.”

Although slightly overwhelmed, Ellen was starting to feel calm in Tom's presence again. She tried to explain her feelings, without upsetting him further. "The thing is, I don't want to be with someone that yells at me," she explained. "Someone that I'm afraid of."

"No," Tom replied quickly, looking alarmed. "I'm not like that at all. I would never yell at you or want you to feel afraid of me." He took both of her hands in his. "Please, Elle, give me another chance. I can't remember the last time I had an outburst like that."

"Your mum did look a bit surprised."

Tom chuckled. "You see! I'm normally much more agreeable. But I think it was necessary to use some firmness with her this time, in order to put a stop to the surprise visits."

Ellen saw his sincerity, and knew instantly that she had indeed over-reacted. She felt completely at ease again. "I believe you, I really do," she replied.

He seemed to relax once she had said that.

"And I'm sorry," said Ellen. "I shouldn't have questioned your character like that. I was actually trying to escape before you came back."

Tom looked surprised.

It seemed silly to Ellen now. She should have had more faith in what she already knew about Tom.

"I should give you a proper tour, so you will know how to get out the back door next time," Tom added roguishly.

Ellen smiled and wondered what it was that he saw in her. His attention was almost overwhelming and she was unsure how to respond to his eager touch. She looked down at her hands being held by him so tenderly, his eyes watching her every move. Maybe they had been lovers in a past life, or were soul mates destined for each other.

"I think you're going to cut off the circulation soon," Ellen said jovially, trying to lighten the mood.

Tom let go. "Sorry", he said, but did not move his body or eyes away from her.

The night so far had certainly been intense. Tom had brought her the largest bunch of flowers that she had ever seen when he arrived to pick her up. He had recommended to her and Chloe that the flowers be put into a vase, and Chloe had taken the flowers nodding, even though they both knew there were no vases to be found. Tom had glanced around their sparsely furnished apartment with a slight look of horror, but thankfully, he hadn't said anything.

Soon after, Tom whisked Ellen away in his black sports car, which was easily the fastest car she had ever been in. His property was amazing. It was the sort of home Ellen had only ever seen in magazines. Large iron gates guarded the entrance and old oak trees lined a winding driveway through perfectly manicured lawns and gardens to a three storey stone mansion. He obviously had a number of staff who worked there, and Ellen had been intimidated by Tom's evident wealth.

She looked at him now, wanting to return to the evening's light-hearted moments, as when they had jokingly thrown flour and sauce at each other after making dinner. "You know, I'm getting kind of hungry. I think our pizza is probably ready by now".

Tom remembered the pizza. "Oh no! I hope we haven't burnt it." He raced over to the oven, grabbing some large blue oven mitts from the counter. "Smells good," he said and lifted the hot pizza out. "And yes, it looks good too."

"What can I do?" Ellen asked, standing up.

"Why don't you grab some plates and glasses?" Tom pointed towards one of the drawers in the island bench. "And the wine glasses are behind you. I've got the cutlery and a nice bottle of wine here. Why don't we take our wine and pizza out to the balcony and enjoy the view?" Tom was already cutting the pizza into neat rectangle-shaped slices.

Ellen found three different plate sets in the drawer and chose two plates from a plain, stone coloured set. She chose short stemmed sturdy wine glasses from the shelf. "Okay, I'm ready to go here," she announced.

"Follow me then," Tom said as he led her out through the double kitchen doors, down a long hallway, through a lounge room and onto a large covered timber deck.

"Wow," Ellen said as she took the view in. The city lights shone brightly through the misty rain and appeared to stretch for miles.

"I bought this place over ten years ago because of the view, and I still love it."

"You don't get lonely living in this big house all by yourself?" Ellen asked.

"I keep busy. You know, working lots, spending time with my parents. Actually, Estella lives in the guest house that we passed on the way in, and she has a young child about eight years old. And I just adore him, I really do. Estella has worked here for nearly five years, and she and her son are almost like family to me now." Tom paused and seemed thoughtful. "I guess I am lonely though, a little anyway."

Ellen looked at him tenderly. He was very brave to admit something like that. Suddenly she shivered slightly.

Tom must have noticed, "Sorry, Ellen, let me put the gas heater on." Tom stood up and fumbled around under the coffee table to retrieve a set of matches. "Watch this". He walked over to the wall, and lit a pilot light. Suddenly, two large heaters ignited above them, lighting up the ceiling. "Give it a minute, and we'll be warm."

Ellen felt warmer almost immediately as they started on their pizza. There was an awkward silence and Ellen smiled at Tom in response to it. "I don't think I'm a very good date," she joked. "I don't seem to have much to talk about. I cause trouble with your mum." Just as Ellen was talking, she dropped a large piece of tomato and cheese onto the timber decking. "And I drop food onto your deck," she added, disappointed in herself for not displaying more lady-like qualities.

Tom winked at Ellen. "Well, I know something we should probably talk about at some point or another." He chuckled, but waited a moment before continuing, "So.. exactly how old are you? I'm not doing something illegal here, am I?"

Ellen giggled. "I turn nineteen in about a month. What about you?"

Tom looked relieved. "Who me?" he asked incredulously, surprised that she had turned the question around onto him so quickly.

"Yeah you," Ellen insisted, watching him intently.

He started to look a little uneasy. "Would you believe," Tom said and paused briefly, "That I'm thirty years old?"

Ellen shook her head. "No", she replied at once.

"Really?" Tom questioned her earnestly.

"No!" Ellen found herself giggling again.

"Well, then, how about thirty-five?"

"Yeah, I guess I'd believe that." Ellen tried to sound as serious as she could before continuing, "Is that the truth? Because honesty is really important to me in a relationship!"

Tom picked up his glass of red and took a long sip. "Hmmm, honesty hey?" He seemed to be deep in thought for a moment. "Okay, well then, in all honesty, I'm thirty-eight, but on the inside, I don't feel a day over thirty-seven and a half," he said jovially. "And that's what's really important!"

Ellen decided to change the subject because their age difference wasn't really of any great concern to her. "This pizza is really good," she informed Tom, and went on, "Really good pizza in front of a really good view." She took a sip of wine and sighed happily.

"And lucky me, I have a really good woman here to share it with," Tom added with a cheeky grin.

Ellen looked embarrassed and replied cautiously, “You don't even know me, Tom. We only met earlier today you know. I don't understand how you can keep saying such nice things about me already.”

Amused by her statement, Tom continued eating and said, “I know that we only met this morning, and I promised myself, that I wouldn't say anything to scare you off. I guess I'm not doing too well on that count.”

Ellen didn't necessarily want him to stop saying such nice things, and tried to clarify a little. “It's just that I haven't met anyone like you before. I guess, the whole night has been surprising.”

“Surprising in a good way?”

“Yes, a very good way.”

“I knew there was something special about you the moment I first saw you. I don't know exactly what it is, but I know that I want you in my life. I feel as if I already know you. You definitely remind me of someone but I can't quite put my finger on who that is. Jake felt the same way when he saw you the other day.”

“He did?”

“Uh huh.”

“And while we're talking about Jake,” Ellen said. “Are you mad at him for bringing me into Satinol?”

“Of course not! Why would you think that?”

“It's just that you didn't look too happy with him this afternoon... in the studio.”

“Oh, right.” Tom realised what she was talking about and scratched his chin as he continued, “Well, the situation with Jake is that he has a habit of bringing pretty young things into the studio. And Satinol has a contract with one of the city agencies to source models for our promotional work. So, there is no need for Jake to approach girls on the street. And well, I think in the past, Jake may have been doing things like this for the wrong reason.”

“Oh, I see,” replied Ellen, sounding alarmed. She did not like the idea of being the object of Jake's affection.

“But with you, it's a bit different.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, Jake has assured me of that. He saw something in you, something familiar, but at the same time fresh and new.”

Tom reached out and tenderly tucked a stray strand of Ellen's hair behind her ear. He continued, “Did Jake tell you what his job actually is at Satinol?”

Ellen thought back, shook her head. She had assumed it was a role with the models.

“He's the travel manager for Satinol.”

“Oh. I can see why you would be concerned. And so you and Jake are on friendly terms again?”

“Well, friendly probably isn't the right word. I have a lot of colleagues at Satinol, but only one close male friend to be honest, not counting family.” Tom paused thoughtfully. “That actually sounds a bit sad. Anyway, Hayden Joseph is the company's head of legal. The two of us have been friends for a long time. We go way back. He is my right hand man at Satinol. You'll meet him sooner or later, I imagine. The two of us went through school together and have been friends for many years. In fact, I don't really remember a time without him and I couldn't imagine running the company if he left.”

Ellen was listening intently. This was the most Tom had said about himself all evening.

“And with regard to Jake, well this is not something that you need to worry about, but I've asked him to make sure it doesn't happen again. An official warning, if you like.”

“I'm really glad to hear that he didn't get fired, because of me,” said Ellen, feeling relieved.

“Fired? No. Not yet anyhow. And although I didn't want to admit it to him,” Tom continued, “Jake has actually brought the right girl in this time. I think your photos are going to be amazing.”

Ellen pretended not to hear that last comment. “My friend Chloe and I have been friends for years too.”

“She seems like a lovely girl.”

“She is,” Ellen said as she finished her second piece of pizza. “We're also working together at a hotel in the city.”

“Jake mentioned something about the Windsor. Are you enjoying working there?”

“It's fine. I mean, I'm enjoying earning my own money and, you know, being independent from my parents, but the actual work is kind of boring. I will probably go to university next year.”

“I'm glad to hear that. You know, this modelling contract will be anything but boring, I would imagine.”

“Really?” asked Ellen hopefully. She wanted to know more about working for the company but didn't want to sound presumptuous. All evening she had tried to find the right words to ask about it.

“There'll be shopping and fittings, hair appointments, makeup sessions, photos, travel to new and exciting cities. Do you want me to go on?” asked Tom.

Ellen beamed with excitement. “Yes please. Tell me more, Tom.”

“Well, you'll get to wear designer dresses and diamonds, and stay in expensive hotels, and of course you will need your own assistant to help you with your appointments. I guess you would need a masseur as well.”

“Are you just messing with me now?” asked Ellen.

Tom chuckled. “A little,” he admitted. “From what I know, being a model is hard work. It takes a lot of time and energy and many young girls fail to realise what they are getting themselves into. Having said that, I will do everything in my power to ensure you have a positive experience working for us during the period of the contract.”

“I appreciate your saying that, Tom,” Ellen said in a serious tone, “but we haven't even seen the test shots yet.”

“The photos will be fantastic. Have some faith in yourself.”

There was a moment of silence again.

“Ellen, do you think I'm too old for you?” Tom asked. This was obviously something that was on his mind.

“How did we get back onto this subject?” Ellen asked, puzzled.

“I don't think we covered it thoroughly enough.”

“This is only our first date, Tom. I don't think we need to be so concerned with these sorts of details yet.”

“I know what you're saying, but the reason it's important is because if the media get a whiff of the fact that we are dating, it will be in the papers and gossip columns.”

Ellen smiled contentedly to herself, realising that he was talking about them as a future couple.

Tom was thoughtful as he poured more wine into their glasses. “And then for instance, your parents might hear about it before you've had a chance to tell them about me, to explain how it came to be that you are dating someone a little older.”

“My parents won't mind my dating someone older. My mum is about twelve years older than my dad.”

“Really? That's unusual,” Tom stated. “I mean for a woman to be older than her husband.” Tom paused thoughtfully. “Not that it's a bad thing. They still might be worried about me though. Maybe I should meet them sooner rather than later.”

“If you like. But they live in Mansfield, so news from the gossip columns in Melbourne will take a while to reach them in any case.”

“Well, let me know if they hear something and are concerned about me. I’m happy to drive up there whenever we need to.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, assuming you ask me out again.”

“I will.”

Ellen felt a wave of happiness sweep over her to hear that. “I think you will like my father.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, he is only,” Ellen did the maths in her head. “He is only eight years older than you.”

“Oh, that does make me feel old.”

Ellen giggled. “And he has a very good sense of humour.”

“Well, I look forward to meeting him. Do you have brothers and sisters?” Tom asked, trying to change the subject now.

“No, it’s just little me.”

The rest of the dinner was light and fun for Ellen. After the meal, Tom suggested the two of them retire to the library for coffee. He left her momentarily to prepare the drinks and Ellen took time to wander around the library studying some of the artefacts and pictures surrounding her. There was a bronze statue of a young boy which caught Ellen’s attention because of the sad expression on his face. It was cold to touch and heavy when Ellen tried to lift it. The boy stood on one corner of a large wooden desk. This must be where Tom works at night, Ellen thought. There was a large leather chair at Tom’s desk and Ellen pulled it out and slid into it. This is the most comfortable chair in the world, she thought to herself. Everything in the room was amazing and yet also overwhelming. Books lined the walls in shelves that reached to the ceiling. Why would he have so many books? So many rooms? Tom was a puzzle, a very intriguing puzzle. He obviously likes to joke around and have fun, she thought. He does not seem like the sort of man that would enjoy sitting in this large, stuffy room by himself for hours at night. He is a man that does not match his surroundings, she concluded, and decided right there and then to take Tom out of the house on their next date. Somewhere different and fun for both of them.

“All right then.” Tom returned to the room carrying a silver tray with various items. He laid out coffee, tea, cream, sugar and milk on the coffee table in front of the brown leather sofa. “What can I make you?” he asked, sitting down.

“I think I might just have a cup of tea if that’s okay. Got to go to work early tomorrow morning.” Ellen sat down besides him on the sofa.

“No problem,” Tom said as he poured a cup of tea for Ellen and a black coffee for himself.

“So, thanks for dinner tonight,” Ellen said. “I had an interesting time.”

Tom looked up, a concerned expression on his face.

“I mean, a good time,” she corrected herself while smiling at him wickedly.

Tom turned in his seat to face her. “I had a good time being with you too. I like you a lot, Ellen.” Tom tried to kiss her lips but Ellen turned her head to the right. He kissed her cheek instead. “You don’t want me to kiss you?” he asked awkwardly.

“Sorry,” she told him. Ellen had never met anyone that talked to her the way he did. She was starting to feel like a little girl, out of her depth here. The truth was, that she had no experience kissing. There were a few boys back home who had shown interest, but it had not been reciprocated. Tom was just moving too fast. But she regretted not letting him kiss her as soon as she turned her head.

“No, I’m sorry, Elle. I shouldn’t have done that. We can slow things down if you like.”

“It's just that I haven't really had a serious boyfriend before,” Ellen explained. “You surprised me, that’s all. I wasn't ready for it.” Ellen wanted him to try again, but didn't know how to express that.

“Oh I see,” Tom said, sounding a little put off. With a completely straight face, he added, “I just assumed that you would want to stay the night.”

Ellen was shocked by his suggestion and suddenly realised that seeing an older man possibly wasn't such a good idea after all. She definitely wasn't ready for all of this.

Tom watched her expression change and quickly poked her in the ribs, “Hey, I'm just joking. I don't expect anything like that.”

Ellen sighed in relief.

“I mean, if you wanted to stay, I certainly wouldn't be arguing with you,” Tom said as he observed her expression tensing again. “But I can see that you would prefer to go home tonight. I'm happy to take things slowly if that's what you need.”

“I would appreciate if we could go slowly, yes.”

“So how about I drive you home now so that you don't look so concerned anymore.”

“Okay,” Ellen said quietly, feeling a little disappointed as she grabbed her hand bag and stood up to leave.

Her cup of tea was unfinished and it looked awkwardly out of place on the coffee table as she stood up.

Tom reached for her hand. “I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable. Let's get out of here.”

The two of them chatted happily during the car ride back to Ellen's apartment and before she knew it, they pulled up outside her place. Tom leapt out of the car and dashed around to her side of the car. He is such a gentleman, Ellen thought as he gallantly opened her door and bowed for show.

“There you are, my lady”, he said as he smiled.

“Thank you, kind sir. Will you see me to my door?” Ellen asked.

“Of course, my lady.” Tom grabbed her hand and led them up the garden path and stairs to her front door.

“So,” Tom said staring into Ellen's eyes. “I could be slick and wait three days before I call you again, or I could risk showing you how keen I am and call you tomorrow. What do you think I should do?” he asked cheekily.

Ellen was amused by this question. “You know,” she said. “Women generally like men who are decisive and know what they want.”

Tom realised that he was being teased. “All right then, tomorrow it is,” he responded. To demonstrate his confidence even further, Tom leant down and quickly pecked Ellen on the lips taking her by surprise again. However, this time she didn't have time to turn her head away.

Ellen felt a little disappointed because the kiss had been too quick, and she had not had time to register it properly. She decided to do something bold, and took a step towards Tom. She gently turned her head and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Tom looked delighted and when she pulled away he reacted quickly, kissing her again, this time harder and longer. Ellen gave into his kiss and allowed herself to be completely consumed by it. Her eyelids became heavy, a dizziness swept over her and her heart started to beat like a drum. Kissing was better than she had imagined.

“Well, I had a lovely night,” he finally said, stepping back.

Ellen realised she still had her eyes closed and quickly opened them. “I did too,” she said.

“I'll call you tomorrow,” Tom said as he turned around and briskly walked away from her.

“Good night,” Ellen said still feeling light-headed, but happier than she could remember feeling in a long time.

## Chapter Nine

Two days after their first meeting, Ellen once again found herself inside Satinol Cosmetics, this time to discuss the results of her first photo shoot. Tom had called briefly the day before, as he had promised, and thanked her for the wonderful dinner date. It would be nice to see him again.

Ellen was led into a large boardroom where Tom and a couple of other men that Ellen did not recognise were looking over numerous prints from her photo shoot.

“Here she is, the lady in question”, Tom announced as Ellen smiled and walked towards them.

Tom briefly introduced each of the men to her, and explained their role in the company. Ellen slid around the table to view some of the pictures of herself.

Wow! She was blown away. It is amazing what lights and makeup can achieve, she thought. Some of the pictures hardly looked like her at all. Not wanting to look too pleased, she hesitantly asked, “Are you happy with them?”

“What do you think?” Tom asked, handing her a couple of prints that he had been holding. He moved behind her and rested one hand on her shoulder.

One of the men seemed to notice this, but did not say anything.

“That's my favourite,” he said gently pointing to the first image. “I think you are going to be a star.”

Seeing her image everywhere and receiving compliments from the men soon made Ellen feel embarrassed, and her face reddened as if she were outside on a hot day.

“Well Ellen,” Tom happily announced, taking a seat next to her. “Based on these amazing first shots, we would like to offer you a contract, before someone else does! So, what do you say?”

Ellen paused and look around the room at the men's faces, waiting for her response.

“Um, yes, of course. Working here sounds really exciting.”

“Well, we're the ones who are excited to have you. I'll have the paperwork drawn up this week. Now..”

Tom was interrupted by an intercom and Ellen recognised the voice of Tom's assistant, “Tom, Hayden has just arrived back from Hong Kong. Should I ask him to join you?”

“Yes, Elizabeth. Ask him to come in straight away,” exclaimed Tom. Turning to Ellen, he continued, “Wonderful. I'm glad that the two of you can meet today. Now, there are a few things, perks if you like, that come with the job. If you are interested, we can provide some accommodation for you closer to work. And before you ask, of course you can bring Chloe.”

“Really? You mean like an apartment in the city?” Ellen asked incredulously.

“Yes, Satinol owns a number of apartments, which are used by our overseas guests mostly. I believe we have a fully-furnished, twentieth-storey apartment with some amazing views free at the moment.”

“And I get to live there?”

“Yes, I have reserved one for twelve months at this stage.”

“Oh, my God. I can't believe it. Thank you.”

“Well, you will need to be close to the building. Before you get too excited, you should know that there will be early mornings, late nights, a lot of travel and long working hours. We are not offering you an ordinary modelling job that lasts for half a day. You will be the face of Satinol for our summer range, and I'm told this will involve a lot of hard work.”

Just as Tom was talking, the board room doors opened and in walked a tall man with dark hair and a serious expression. He was an aggressive-looking man with a loosened tie, ruffled hair and a couple of days of facial hair growth.

Ellen took a seat, thinking to herself how important he must be, to be allowed to dress in that manner. Every other man in the board room was impeccably presented.

“Well, I'm back,” he announced loudly, sounding a little relieved as he put his bag down and walked towards the group. “Hong Kong was a rat race as always, but we managed to close the deal with the Chinese, so it was a successful trip.”

The man suddenly noticed Ellen seated next to Tom and stared at her for an uncomfortable period of time, as if she was the last person he was expecting to see. The man's forehead began to tighten and he squinted as if his vision was blurring.

“Hayden, are you okay?” Tom asked, standing up and moving towards him.

“Five business meetings, seven stiff drinks, a delayed flight and twenty-four hours without sleep. Um, no, not really.” He did not shift his eyes from Ellen.

Ellen thought the man looked quite irritable. He must not have been a pleasant person to deal with on the plane.

“My head is really throbbing, that's all,” he explained, turning back to Tom.

“Hayden, I'm sorry you are not feeling well, but I'm glad you're back. There is someone I'd like you to meet,” Tom announced, waving him over. “We have decided to feature one face for the summer campaign this year. This is Ellen and she has been chosen as that face. Have a look at some of these,” Tom said with pride in his voice as he offered the images to Hayden.

Hayden accepted the photographs, but did not look at any of them. Instead, his eyes returned to Ellen.

Ellen blushed awkwardly under his stare and felt her heart beating strangely.

“I don't know,” said Hayden softly as he suddenly turned his attention to Tom. “Has anything been signed yet? I'm really not sure about this decision.”

“I'm sorry, Hayden,” said Tom sternly. “That surprises me. You know I don't usually get involved so closely with these matters, but we all agree on this one. Granted, it's a new direction for Satinol, but the decision has been made and the matter is not up for debate.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, and I thought you'd be happy to meet Ellen.”

“Did you?”

Tom seemed more surprised than anything else. “And you don't usually have any views on marketing matters, come to think of it. So, I'm not sure I understand your hesitation on this one.”

“And come to think of it, you don't usually know the names of the models,” Hayden retorted.

The room became silent.

Hayden narrowed his eyes on Tom and asked in an accusing tone, “How do you know this girl?”

The answer to Hayden's question seemed to have everyone interested. Ellen wished that she was anywhere in the world other than here.

“Hayden,” Tom said sternly. “You really look tired! How about we catch up tomorrow to discuss this issue further?”

Ellen wasn't sure if Hayden thought she was unattractive, or whether he was just angry at being left out of the decision-making process. In any case, she thought it best to keep quiet.

Obviously uncomfortable in her presence, Hayden put the photos back on the table and retreated to the door. Before leaving, he paused and turned to face Tom and the other men. “I

half suspect that one of you is sleeping with her,” he stated. “And I hope it isn't you, Tom. That would be very unprofessional.”

With that final accusation, Hayden marched out of the room, leaving everyone momentarily stunned.

Once the door had slammed, Ellen looked towards Tom and concluded, “I don't think he likes me!”

“Oh Ellen,” exclaimed Tom. “I have no idea what that was about,” he said, walking back towards her. “I think you are perfect for the campaign. He's just tired. I'll talk to him tomorrow.” He rubbed her shoulders gently for a moment before abruptly stopping when his colleagues' eyes focussed on them again.

Ellen remained seated, expecting him to retract his earlier offer any minute.

Instead, Tom reached into his pocket and produced a set of keys. “I picked these up before. I think we need something to cheer us up. How about the two of us pick up Chloe and inspect your new apartment?”

Ellen smiled at Tom, feeling relieved to hear his confidence in her had not been completely dismantled by Hayden's lack of enthusiasm. “That sounds great,” she replied, turning her chair to face him.

Half an hour later, Ellen and Tom had picked up Chloe and were on their way to the new apartment. Ellen was amazed at the way Tom made her feel like the most important person in his life. Surely, he had more important business matters to attend to, but if that was the case, he did not show any signs of wanting or needing to be anywhere else.

“Chloe,” said Tom in a loud voice, for the first time directing the conversation towards her in the back seat. “How is your job at the hotel going?”

Ellen realised that she and Tom had been leaving Chloe out of the conversation a little, but it had not been on purpose. Even though she and Tom had only just met, they just seemed to have so many things to talk about.

Chloe was happy to join in. “It won't be as good without Ellen there, that's for sure,” she responded, leaning forward to give her friend a soft punch on the shoulder. “The other staff are mostly older you know, and it's not as much fun working with them,” she added.

Tom was thoughtful for a moment. “You know, Chloe, I think Ellen might be more comfortable at Satinol if she has a friend around, and I'm just wondering if I can find a job opportunity for you.”

“Really?” asked Chloe, sounding very surprised.

Ellen was not expecting Tom to offer anything like that either, but was happy with the suggestion.

“You can do that?” asked Chloe.

Tom laughed. “Of course I can. I own the damn company, you know.”

“Oh, okay,” said Chloe hesitantly, looking towards Ellen. Ellen saw in Chloe's eyes that her friend had just realised how wealthy Tom must be, and she gave Ellen a knowing look.

The car pulled off the road into an underground car park beneath a high rise apartment block. The three of them walked towards the pair of elevators.

“Now girls, we have you on the twentieth floor,” Tom said with a grin, pushing the number twenty on the wall, once everyone was inside. “Here are your key sets.” Ellen and Chloe were both handed two keys on a small black Satinol key ring.

It was a very fast elevator, because in no time, they had arrived, and Tom led them into their new apartment.

“Wow, oh my God!” exclaimed Chloe. “Are you freaking for real?” She ran through the lounge room to see the bedroom. “Wow!” she screamed out from a distant room.

Ellen could not believe her eyes either. The apartment was large, fully-decorated and furnished, and more amazing than she could have imagined. Neither she nor Chloe had grown up in wealthy homes and it was staggering to imagine the two of them living here.

"I've had one of the girls from the office go and buy some groceries for the two of you, so there should be lots of food to keep you going for a while," Tom announced as he poked around the kitchen. Tom looked over to Ellen who appeared a little stunned. "I hope you like it, Ellen," he said moving closer to her.

"It's all perfect of course, Tom," Ellen said, looking into his eyes. "I just can't believe that I get to live here for a while. Me, the girl from nowhere, living here."

Tom looked amazed and happy to see Ellen's reaction, and gave her a quick kiss on the lips. "You will soon be the girl from all those Satinol ads," he said laughing.

Tom's mobile rang just as Chloe ran back into the room, and he answered it quickly and quietly, turning away from the girls.

"Wow, Ellen, you have to see our bathroom," she said in amazement, trying to drag her friend away.

"Is it good?"

"Oh, my God, yes."

"Did you notice all the food we've got in here too?" added Ellen pointing to the kitchen.

They were interrupted by Tom, who was finished on his call. "Okay, girls, I have to love you and leave you. Something in the office needs my attention." He started to head for the door, "So anyway, Ellen, someone will give you a call later today and organise a schedule with you, and Chloe, have you had enough time to consider my offer? Would you like to come and work for us too?"

"Uh huh," she said quickly and eagerly. "I'll do anything. Make coffees, photocopy, anything."

"Fine," he laughed. "I'll see what I can organise."

"Thank you, Tom," added Chloe.

"I'll let you girls settle in now and you can have your things brought over in your own time. I've left the company's removalist details here on the counter. Give them a call, and quote the number at the top, which I've circled." Tom pulled out a pen from his suit jacket and highlighted something on the paper. "See you both later."

"Thank you and bye," said Ellen thoughtfully, appreciating how Tom seemed to have considered everything she needed before she had even thought of it herself.

"Bye, Tom," squealed Chloe, a little too enthusiastically thought Ellen.

"Bye."

Once the front door had closed, Chloe exclaimed, "Wow, Ellen! I cannot believe the man you have scored."

Ellen stared at her friend. "I wouldn't say that I have scored him exactly," explained Ellen, not too happy with the way Chloe used the term.

Not listening, Chloe went on, "I mean he dresses well, drives a nice car, owns a large company, owns apartments like this one and is obviously the richest man we have ever met. And for some strange reason, he couldn't take his eyes off you the whole time he was here. I can see why you like him," said Chloe, her words racing over each other.

"That's not why I like him," said Ellen defensively as she sat down at their new large dining table, feeling slightly annoyed at her friend's mounting assumptions.

"Come on, it's me, Ellen," pleaded Chloe. "Tell the truth."

Ellen was thoughtful and then tried to explain her new relationship. "On the first day I met him, it was like, I already knew him. I felt at ease around him, and well, the truth is, we have a connection. I feel it, he feels it. It's really not any more complicated than that at the moment."

## Chapter Ten

It was one week later on a cold but sunny Saturday morning in Melbourne. The sun streamed through Tom's windows, and Ellen lay on the couch enjoying every ray. Her work with Satinol had been moving fast and every day of the last week had been busy. Luckily, there was time this morning for a quiet breakfast with Tom and relaxation afterwards on the couch.

Ellen couldn't resist browsing Internet pages which mentioned Tom's love life. The media had taken eight whole days to work out that Tom Bradley had a new love in his life. Ellen and Tom had been photographed leaving a restaurant together holding hands on Thursday night, and a number of the papers ran stories about Tom's date with a younger woman.

"You shouldn't look at that stuff, Elle," Tom warned her, while not taking his eyes off the paper. "I learned to ignore it all years ago."

"This site calls you a millionaire playboy," Ellen teased. "And it says you have dated hundreds of women, including models and actresses."

"Don't believe a word of it. Although come to think of it, technically you are a model now."

"Uh huh," said Ellen, believing the stories more likely to be true than not.

"It's incredible how much they just make up. Really."

"I just looked at this one page which had a photo of us from Thursday night inside the restaurant. How would they have taken that shot?"

"They're sneaky jerks, those photographers. That's how."

The past week had brought Tom and Ellen closer together. Ellen felt content as she looked over at Tom, and sighed happily. Right now, he seemed to be the perfect man.

They had eaten dinner together every night, mostly at Tom's house, apart from the one night when they were photographed out. Each night, Tom had driven her home and kissed her on the doorstep.

Ellen put the laptop down. "I probably need to get going soon. What's the time?" she asked, sitting up, checking her own watch.

Tom was surprised. "I was thinking we might go for a drive this afternoon. Somewhere down the Peninsula. We could rug up, find an empty beach and go walking hand in hand..."

"Oh really?" Ellen was touched that he had planned a day out for them. "Did I forget to mention that I have to work today?"

"Yes, you did." Tom put the paper down, looking a little disappointed. "What's happening today?"

"I'm due at the office by eleven o'clock for a wardrobe fitting. On Monday, I'm scheduled to go out with Leo, the photographer, to do some scouting for a location along Beach Road. We'll be shooting on Tuesday and Wednesday. So, today's session is apparently quite important."

"That's a shame, but it sounds like you have to go in."

Ellen decided to change the topic. "By the way, thanks for finding Chloe a job. She is really looking forward to starting on Monday."

"My personal assistant Elizabeth tells me she needs an assistant herself. What can I say? We'll give Chloe a trial. This could be a whole new career for her."

"Well," Ellen said, grabbing her bag and starting to kiss Tom on the forehead. "I'll see you later if you're free."

Tom obviously wasn't happy with the kiss about to land on his forehead, and grabbed Ellen around the waist, pulling her on top of him. He kissed her passionately, before letting her go. "That's how you say goodbye," he instructed.

"Not fair. Now I want to stay, Tom."

He laughed. "Give me a call when you are finished, and I'll pick you up in the car. Ask Robert downstairs to drive you into the office as well."

Robert was Tom's butler, although no one said the word 'butler' out loud. He managed the home and staff, and drove Tom's car when required.

"Okay, bye then."

Ellen found Robert in the front garden giving instructions to two of the gardeners. It was a large garden, and there were a lot of staff working that day.

"Ms Jackson," Robert said, seeing her there waiting, when he turned around. "I beg your pardon. I did not see you there."

"Good morning, Robert. I'm sorry to bother you, when you seem to be busy, but would you mind driving me into the Satinol office. I'm expected at eleven o'clock."

"It's no bother at all. I'd be pleased to drive you in. Give me a moment and I'll bring the car around."

It was a short drive to the office from Tom's house. The building was shut on Saturdays and Ellen had to use a security pass recently allocated to her in order to enter the building at ground level.

Ellen recognised the wardrobe ladies from a distance, as she had seen them in the office last week. They were waiting near the lifts, with coffees in their hands, and designer handbags across their shoulders. Ellen found them rather comical; they were all so impeccably presented and colour-coordinated.

"Ellen, hi," the tall one called out. The other two ladies looked at Ellen in unison, perhaps somewhat less impressed. Ellen tried to remember their names unsuccessfully. She had been told the other day.

"Hi," Ellen said dumbly, meeting them half way.

"Come with us, Ellen. We've been waiting for you. We're are going to have a lot of fun, even though we're at work on a Saturday."

One of the ladies looped her arm around Ellen's and pulled her along, the three of them continuing their lively chatter.

The next five hours were not what Ellen would have described as fun. The time was spent dressing and undressing her, dressing and undressing again. Every time they found an outfit that all three liked on her, a polaroid was taken, and pinned up. Ellen felt a little embarrassed the first time she was naked in front of them, but they didn't even seem to notice. It was like she was their own personal full-size Barbie.

There were some slightly hurtful comments along the way as well. "She looks hideous in this colour" and "No, no. She looks awful. Absolutely awful!" But these comments were balanced by some compliments as well. They were having a great time working together. At least, they were enjoying their job here, Ellen thought.

The ladies were snacking along the way on food they had brought in, but no one offered her anything. Ellen wished she had eaten more breakfast. By four o'clock, she was very hungry, and there was a pin board covered in polaroids, plus a white board filled with ideas. She had tried hundreds of outfits on, including designer dresses and jackets. An assortment of expensive looking jewellery and handbags which had been used as accessories for some of the outfits were now strewn across the floor.

"So ladies, we need to whittle this board down to ten styles for Tuesday. What does everyone think?"

"Let's go have a cigarette and come back for the final decision."

One of the ladies turned to Ellen. "My dear, you are finished here. Thanks for all your patience."

Thank goodness. Ellen smiled, and felt a little embarrassed. "Um, do you know where my clothes are?"

The ladies looked around the room. "Over there - in the corner. Let me get them for you."

The old clothes seemed so much plainer now after all the expensive outfits of the past three hours.

"Oh, wait a sec. I almost forgot," shrieked one of the ladies, just as Ellen was starting to change.

"Oh yeah," said another. "I forgot too."

"What is it?" asked Ellen, who was almost dressed in her old clothes.

One of the ladies collected a large box from behind the door. "This arrived for you about an hour ago."

Ellen looked surprised. She hadn't noticed its unannounced arrival. The box was large, white, and surrounded by a big pink bow. The ladies left Ellen alone with her box, and she slipped the bow off, and it fell to the floor. Lifting the lid revealed a note from Tom.

*I have a surprise planned for you tonight, but you'll need something nice to wear. Put this on, give me a call, and I'll meet you out the front.*

Ellen pulled back the layers of tissue paper gently, revealing a creamy coloured silk material. Ellen lifted it out, letting the material unravel onto the floor. It was the most delicate and beautiful evening dress she had ever seen. She quickly checked the tag to see if it was her size.

"Oh, he is good," Ellen whispered to herself.

There were even matching shoes underneath all the tissue paper. Ellen discarded her own clothes into a bag and slipped into the dress and shoes. Checking her hair and makeup in the mirror on the way out, Ellen realised she had never before looked quite so nice.

Before pressing the lift button in the hallway, she reached for her mobile, dialling Tom.

He answered straight away. "All finished?" he asked.

"Yes, um.. thanks for the dress. It's stunning and beautiful, and so soft. I can't believe you bought it for me."

"Are you happy to come out tonight?"

There was nothing Ellen would rather be doing than spending time with Tom. "I'd love to. Do you think we can get something to eat though. I'm really hungry."

"Yes, I've organised something nice for dinner. Don't worry."

Ellen giggled. "Thanks, Tom. So, what have you planned for us?"

"Ah, well you will have to wait and see. I'll meet you downstairs out at the front of the building in five minutes."

"See you soon," Ellen said excitedly.

She was expecting to exit the building, find a seat and wait five to ten minutes for Tom to arrive. However, as soon as she left the security door, she saw Tom's distinctive black sports car. He was standing outside the car, waiting for her. She could just make out Robert in the driver's seat.

"Wow, you look amazing, Ellen," a voice said from behind her. Ellen turned her head. It was one of the wardrobe ladies. They were gathered together, still smoking and chatting.

Ellen smiled. "Thanks."

"Is that Tom Bradley waiting for her?" one of the ladies asked quietly.

"Yeah, I heard they were dating."

"Shit."

Ellen decided to ignore their chatter and hurried quickly towards Tom, with a bag full of clothes.

Tom's jaw dropped when Ellen came into range. She realised that he was seeing her in the dress, and obviously liking it.

He gave her a smile and wave. "Let me take those," Tom said, opening the boot, while grabbing Ellen's bags. He turned around after closing the boot. "Hi, hello. Sorry, I should have said that first."

"Hi, Tom," Ellen said softly. "Thank you for the beautiful dress."

"Wow! My God! You look too good to be real. I'm blown away, really."

"It's just the dress."

"No, sorry. I don't think so. It's all you."

Ellen blushed under his admiring gaze.

Tom looked back towards the wardrobe ladies who were now intent on staring at them.

"Let's get out of here, Elle. Somewhere more out of sight I think," Tom said, while opening the door to the backseat for her to sit down. He quickly scurried around to the other side, and Robert sped them away without any instruction from Tom.

"How was the wardrobe fitting anyway?" Tom asked.

"Fine, all right," Ellen responded, without too much enthusiasm.

"Modelling is probably seeming harder and more boring than you'd imagined by about now."

"Hmmm."

"Poor, Elle."

"No, it was fine, really," insisted Ellen.

"Better tell me all about it."

"It's just that I felt like their own personal Barbie doll. They made me change clothes, like, hundreds of times. No kidding," Ellen said, laughing at herself.

"That does sound dull. I'm sure you did fine in any case."

Just at that moment, Ellen realised that she wasn't sounding very grateful. "I'm still really thankful for the opportunity though. Please don't misunderstand me."

Tom laughed a little, leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. Changing the topic, he whispered into her ear, "I bought a little something for you today."

"You did?" Ellen wondered what more there was left to give her. Tom was the most generous man.

He reached into his jacket pocket to remove a small red velvet box.

Ellen's eyes bulged at the sight of it.

"I know what you're thinking," Tom said reassuringly. "So, don't worry. I won't propose marriage until we've known each other a little longer."

Ellen breathed deeply and tried to pretend that she wasn't thinking it was a ring. "Oh, I didn't think..."

Her sentence was interrupted by Tom opening the box, revealing a ruby ring, surrounded by small diamonds.

Tom spoke slowly and carefully, "I do want you to know that I care about you, however. So, this is a friendship ring from me to you. Please tell me you like it?"

It was the most beautiful ring that Ellen had ever seen. "I love it," she whispered to him, wiping away the happy tears that were forming.

Tom placed the ring on the third finger of her right hand. "Look at that. It even fits properly. Amazing!"

Just at that moment, the car pulled into the Port Melbourne marina. Ellen looked out the window in surprise. She hadn't been paying attention to where they were going.

"What are we doing here, Tom?"

He didn't answer straight away, instead looking secretive. "It's a surprise. Can you wait a little longer please?"

Robert drove through the parking lot to a locked gate. He spoke briefly to the security guard, and the gates opened. The car drove forward, parking in front of a black helicopter.

"Tom?"

"Just a step along the way to somewhere nice for dinner," he said reassuringly.

Ellen didn't feel reassured. Tom squeezed her hand. She had never been inside a helicopter before, and looked at it in awe.

"Wow," she said quietly while stepping out of the car. She wasn't scared exactly, just a little overwhelmed. Her new ring sparkled in the sunlight. It was then that Ellen heard her handbag buzz. She checked to see who was calling. It was Chloe.

Tom looked over, seeing her phone. "It's okay, answer your phone. I have to talk to the pilot anyway."

Ellen nodded. "Hey, Chloe," Ellen said, answering quickly and taking a step backwards.

"Hi. Just checking how you went with the fitting."

"Yeah, it was all right. Thanks. Tiring though."

"Coming home for dinner? I thought we might cook together tonight. I feel like I haven't seen you for ages."

"No, sorry. You wouldn't believe where I am though."

Chloe paused. "Where?"

"Well, we are at some marina in front of a helicopter, and Tom just gave me a ring."

"He did what?" Chloe screamed into the phone.

Ellen realised how that must have sounded as soon as the words left her mouth. "Sorry, I mean he gave me a friendship ring. He didn't propose or anything. But you should see it. It is so beautiful."

"Shit. I mean, well, he seems to be spending a lot of money on you, Elle."

"It's not a money thing, Chloe. I mean, why do you have to look at it like that?"

"Men don't give rings for no reason. What does he want from you? I mean, of course you've slept with him already?"

"No, we've agreed to take things slowly."

"He must want something."

"Why do you say things like that? Can't you just be happy for me?"

"I don't understand why all this is happening to you, that's all."

Ellen looked over to Tom, and saw that he was waiting on her now. "I've got to go, Chloe. We can talk tomorrow okay?" As she hung up, Ellen realised that her friend was starting to feel more and more distant every day.

Ellen boarded the helicopter, holding Tom's hand. He led her to her seat, and showed her how to buckle her seat belt. This was clearly not his first time flying. The helicopter was loud and rougher than she'd expected it to be. It was fast though. Ellen was given a headset, and could push a button to talk to Tom and the pilot.

The two men spoke continuously to her through the flight, pointing out various landmarks as they left Melbourne, flying across the bay towards land on the other side.

Ellen recognised the heads and the town of Sorrento. They seemed to be heading for the Point Nepean National Park, located at the tip of the Mornington Peninsula.

The light was starting to fade outside, but Ellen could make out a small patch of light through the window. The helicopter landed, and Tom beamed at her, looking excited. "Looks like everything is ready here," he said.

"What's ready?"

"Come on, come and see."

Ellen exited the helicopter to see an amazing sight. On the edge of the cliff, about twenty metres from where the helicopter had landed, was a candle-lit table for two. There must have been hundreds of candles, lining the path and surrounding the table, which was laden with food.

The bay below was still visible in the fading light and the city lights were starting to twinkle across the bay. It was a still night and pleasantly warm in the outside air.

The table and candles were the most spectacular sight Ellen had ever seen. "How did you organise this, Tom?" she said almost breathlessly. "It's absolutely beautiful."

"I did have to pull a few strings, ask a couple of favours." Tom was still grinning. "The pilot will wait for us. Let's have some dinner."

Tom held her hand, leading her down the path to the centrally-lit table. Ellen's eye's widened in awe when she saw the gourmet food specially prepared for the night. There were prawns, caviar, sushi, lobster, wine, chocolate-dipped strawberries, a fruit and cheese platter, and fresh crusty bread.

"Wow!" exclaimed Ellen.

Tom pulled a chair out from the table for her to sit down. "I wanted everything just perfect tonight," Tom said, sitting opposite her.

"It is," confirmed Ellen, still amazed at the array of food.

Tom helped serve a number of the dishes onto Ellen's plate and they both helped themselves to a little bit of everything until they were both full.

"This is such a magical night," said Ellen looking around. "Look at the stars."

Tom looked up briefly, but returned his eyes to Ellen quickly. "I'd rather look at you."

Ellen threw a strawberry at him playfully and he took a bite, making her laugh.

"I want to tell you something tonight, Ellen."

Ellen stopped giggling and moved her chair closer to him.

"Well, the thing is, I love you. I think this is it for me. I think you're the one." Tom reached across the table to hold Ellen's hand. "I'd do anything to make you happy. I've never felt like this for someone before. You know, I thought there was something wrong with me. Being my age and all, and not having fallen in love. But now, I know. I was just waiting for you to come along." He paused for a moment to catch his breath, "I'm so happy, I really am."

Ellen was overwhelmed and happy to hear how he felt. She felt the same way too, but was momentarily stunned into silence.

Tom continued, "Please tell me if you feel the same way, even if just a little."

"Sorry, I do. I absolutely feel the same way. Oh Tom," Ellen said happily. "I think I love you too. I mean, it's too early to be saying things like that to each other, but, I mean, I am thinking them yes."

Tom looked relieved, and rushed to her side to kiss passionately, pulling her onto his lap in the process.

"Will you stay tonight, at my house?" Tom asked, while kissing her neck.

Ellen pushed him away slightly, but it was enough for him to notice. He carefully held her face in his hands to read her expression.

Ellen tried to explain, "I thought we talked about that already. I just need more time to get to know you before that. I, um, I hope you understand that it's not you or anything. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry, Elle. Please don't apologise to me. I just keep forgetting how young you are. There is no rush here. I have waited half a lifetime for you to come along. I can certainly wait until you are ready."

"Really? Are you sure that's how you feel?"

"Yes, of course. I always want you to tell me how you are feeling as well. And please never apologise for feeling something different to me."

“I'm just a bit confused. Chloe said something about you wanting something from me, and then with what you just said...”

“Listen, when you are ready, that is the right time.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

“But, you will tell me when you are ready?”

Ellen smiled. “You'll be the first to know.”

A cool breeze wafted through, and Tom shivered slightly. “Let's get back to Melbourne before it gets too cold out here. Have you had enough to eat?”

“Yes, thank you. I don't know what to say about tonight. It was the best night of my life,” Ellen said sincerely.

“I'm glad to hear that.” Tom took Ellen by the arm, and they slowly walked back to the helicopter. Ellen was full of food and happiness and basking in the glow of Tom's love being so openly declared.

## Chapter Eleven

The following two weeks cemented the relationship between Tom and Ellen, as they spent as much of their time together as possible. When the first interstate modelling assignment was announced, Tom happily agreed to accompany Ellen on her week in Sydney.

It was an unusually cold evening as Ellen and Tom left the Sydney airport terminal after catching a late Thursday night flight. Tom planned to work from the smaller Sydney office of Satinol during the week. A chauffeur met them on arrival, and before long they were whisked out of the airport and on their way to a hotel located in the heart of the city.

Although there was plenty of room in the back seat, Tom moved into the middle seat belt and snuggled into Ellen's new full length woollen jacket, a protective arm pulling her close. He looked happy and alive, Ellen thought, while listening to him whisper silly things into her ear. She giggled as he occasionally kissed her forehead or stole a kiss from her lips.

Suddenly he seemed a little more serious. “Mother wanted to fly to Sydney to spend some time with us, you know,” said Tom warmly. “I think she would like to get to know you better.”

“Oh, I didn't realise,” said Ellen, trying not to show any disrespect in her voice.

Tom looked over to Ellen, trying to read her expression. “She is coming around I think. She told me you were a lovely girl, with a beautiful smile.”

“Oh, she did?” asked Ellen sarcastically. “She told me that I needed some elocution lessons, and that the art of good conversation must be practised daily until one has achieved it.” Ellen tried to imitate Tom's mother, and he smiled at her attempt.

“When did she say that?”

Ellen recalled the time with Tom's mother from last week clearly. “When we were all having dinner together last week,” she told him. “When you went to the bathroom.”

Tom laughed. “Sorry, Elle.”

Ellen continued, “She wants to enrol me in some sort of ladies' college where they teach you to walk straight with books on your head, and how to use a knife and fork.”

Tom laughed heartily.

“It's not funny, Tom.”

“I'll talk to her. It's not you, you know. It is just that she is still slightly uncomfortable with the age gap between us, that's all. She hasn't accepted the seriousness of our relationship yet. But you know, Mother saw some of the pictures from last week's shoot in the studio, and was blown away.”

“Really?”

“Yes. So, regardless of what she might think about us as a couple, she is very impressed with the work you are doing.”

“I'm happy to hear that, and I hope she warms to us soon. I don't want to be at war with your mother for much longer.”

“She's a good person. She will come around soon when she realises how happy you make me.”

“And in the mean time, what do I say to her if she enrolls me in the ladies' college?”

“Don't worry, I'll talk to her.” Tom put his hand on Ellen's leg and shook it gently. “It is good of you to humour her for me.”

“Yes, I'm a very good girlfriend,” said Ellen jokingly. “So, why did she want to come to Sydney with us?”

“Mother does know Sydney very well and has some ideas about where we should be shooting for the American campaign.”

Ellen thought back to a recent conversation with one of the photographers. “Wasn't that all decided a couple of months ago?”

“Apparently, yes,” Tom confirmed with a murmur.

Ellen was confused. “So, why isn't she here then?”

“The old man isn't feeling well, so she stayed home to look after him.”

“Oh, I'm sorry. It's nothing serious I hope.”

“No, just the flu I think.”

“That's good. By the way, did you see today's paper?” asked Ellen.

“No, why? Do they have another photo of us?”

“Yep, page eight. The paper called you a playboy today and said I was your newest toy. They photographed us kissing at that Italian restaurant last week, by the look of it.”

“Have you spoken to your parents yet?”

“I have. I just told them the basics. That I was dating a very nice man, who happens to be a little older than me. Straight away they asked how much older of course, but I think they are fine about it.”

“Did you tell them my name?”

“Of course, but they haven't heard of you, so it didn't matter.”

“They haven't heard of me?” Tom repeated, pretending to be shocked by the idea. “Oh well, I hope your parents don't see the article from today. I didn't even see a photographer that night, did you?”

“No.”

“So, do they want to meet me yet?”

“They said if we're still seeing each other in three months, they will travel to the city to meet you. That's a big thing you know. My folks hate the city.”

“Maybe we could take a trip to visit them instead.”

“Sure, we could do that. We're kind of preoccupied for the next few weeks though.”

They arrived at Sydney's Hilton Hotel shortly after, and were met by a porter who collected their luggage from the chauffeur. The porter informed them, “Your bags will be upstairs shortly, Mr Bradley.”

Tom nodded thanks. Inside, they were met by the concierge in the foyer.

“Tom Bradley and Ellen Jackson,” Tom said to the man.

“Yes, sir. Come with me please.”

Ellen nudged Tom, “Don't we have to check in?” she said, while looking towards reception, where there was a line of people.

“No,” Tom said. “Elizabeth will have taken care of all the minor details for us.”

Ellen was continually amazed by the pace of her life with Tom. Things just seemed to happen so easily.

Tom had booked one of the penthouse suites which had multiple bedrooms and a large balcony looking over the city. Tom thanked the concierge, and returned to her side.

“I know you’ve got an early morning. How about we order some room service and eat in?”

“Sounds good to me. I would appreciate an early night.”

Ellen was in town along with a crew from Satinol, shooting two commercials for the North American market. The close-up video was being done on Friday and Saturday, and the location shots Monday to Wednesday.

An intensive week was planned, but Ellen was looking forward to it with excitement and enthusiasm.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Colleen walked free from the Easternvale Women's detention centre on an overcast Wednesday morning in late September. Her personal belongings had been packed into the one small bag she had taken into prison. On departure, the prison provided her with five hundred dollars in cash and a weekly train ticket to see her through the first week on the outside.

The past fifty-two days in jail had not been easy and yet Colleen paused at the prison gates, not quite ready to leave. She looked back, and although it did not make any sense, felt a reluctance to move on. It was a tough city to survive in without money and friends. Colleen let out a deep, frustrated breath, and thought to herself. Where am I going to sleep tonight? The feeling of helplessness seemed to increase with every breath. Think, Colleen, think, she told herself.

She and Ted had only lived in Melbourne for a short period of time as they had tended to move around quite a bit in the past five years. There were no friends or family there who would take her in, that was for sure.

Colleen needed to find out for how much longer Ted would be locked up. Her court-appointed lawyer had refused to find out. The young girl in her smart suit and fancy high heels had said she wanted to concentrate on her case, and not Ted's. Fat lot of good she had done anyway, thought Colleen, having lost the case, causing me to get locked up for something I didn't even do.

There was really only one choice left. Colleen had contemplated this option numerous times before, but had never gone through with it. There was a man from her past who lived in Melbourne. It was a past so distant that it felt like a dream. However, as she stood there, the realisation struck, that there really were no other places to go. Colleen made her mind up right there and then to go. She would try her luck today.

Once the decision was made, calmness swept over her body, and she moved away more confidently from the prison gates towards the nearby train station. The train would take her into the city where she would find him, and he would help her. She had no doubt. It was time to speak to Tom Bradley again.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

Ellen's week in Sydney seemed to pass very quickly and before she knew it, the work was finished, and Tom and her were returning to Melbourne, closer than ever.

Since moving into their new apartment one month ago, Ellen and Chloe had happily started a new routine of making coffee together in the mornings. The apartment had a built-in coffee machine, which even ground the beans by itself.

Ellen had noticed that Chloe's moods had been more positive since she had started working in Tom's office. Chloe was dressed very well this morning, having maxed out two different credit cards to buy a range of expensive office wear.

"You look happy this morning Chloe," Ellen said, while biting into a piece of toast.

"I really love this job, Elle," Chloe said.

"Tom told me that you are doing well."

"Did he?" asked Chloe excitedly. "What did he say exactly? Tell me word for word."

"Well, he said that Elizabeth was happy with the pace of your learning, and if Elizabeth is happy, then he is happy."

"Elizabeth can be a total bitch, let me tell you. She is so bossy sometimes. Everything has to be done exactly as she says. But Tom is just so nice to work with. The other day, he complimented my outfit, and said how nice I look in blue. You know how I like to coordinate clothes and makeup with my eye colour sometimes. Anyway, I think he noticed the colour of my eyes too, because he looked into them for quite a while."

Ellen felt slightly uncomfortable with the way Chloe was starting to talk about Tom. "You do look good in blue, Chloe."

"And Tom is really thoughtful at work. The other day, he gave me twenty dollars to buy him a coffee. And he said I could buy myself one too. Wasn't that nice?"

"Yes, very nice."

"And I thought to myself, he probably won't want the change, seeing as though he is no rich, so I kept it, just to see if he would ask for it back."

"Tell me you're joking, Chloe."

There was silence from her friend at first. "Well, Ellen the thing is, he probably doesn't even know how much two coffees cost."

"Of course he knows how much coffee costs. He's not stupid."

"He didn't say anything."

"He probably didn't want to embarrass you. You should go to him and say you forgot, and give it back."

"Hmm. Maybe. Maybe not. I'll think about it. I mean, he wouldn't have wanted the money back from you."

Ellen continued to sip her coffee and eat her toast, quite annoyed at Chloe, but not wanting to have a fight. This was the first time that Ellen realised that Chloe might be feeling a little jealous of the increasing closeness between Tom and herself. The two girls had been friends for so many years, having grown up in each other's pockets. They knew each other's families intimately as well, and Chloe was truly entrenched in her current life in Melbourne. There would be no easy way to end the friendship, even if Ellen decided on that course of action. Chloe's home and job were now tied to Tom soundly. It was best to bite her tongue and go along with Chloe's sometimes bizarre behaviour.

Ellen reasoned that everything around her had changed so dramatically over the past month. It was unfair to expect Chloe to stay exactly the same.

"Well," Chloe said. "I'm off to work. Are you still staying home today, then?"

"Yes, I've got a clear day for a change. So, I'm going running, then I've booked a facial for this morning. Maybe a nap this afternoon," joked Ellen.

"Hmm, okay then, beauty queen. Have a good day."

"Bye, Chloe. See you tonight."

## Chapter Fourteen

Desperately hoping for a friendly reception, Colleen entered the revolving glass doors of Satinol Cosmetics. She moved slowly, supporting a sore left arm which ached with every

step. Back at the train station, she had foolishly made a mad dash to board the train as its doors were closing. As a result, she had been temporarily caught, her arm squashed by the heavy doors. This had amused a group of young boys who sniggered as she pushed her way inside, cursing at the train in a loud voice and nursing her sore arm.

Feeling uncomfortable and out of place in the foyer of Satinol, Colleen spotted a large directory for the building and quickly shuffled over to it, dragging her bag on the ground behind her.

She had barely begun to scan the large notice board when all of a sudden, there was a hand on her shoulder and a fierce, deep voice from behind, "Ma'am, can I help you?"

Colleen spun around to face a very tall and fair-skinned security officer. He kept his hand firmly on her shoulder and Colleen realised that he was probably not here to help her, after all. "No, I do not need help, thank you," she replied.

The security guard was not deterred, and went on, "Ma'am, I'm going to have to escort you from the building. Please come with me."

Annoyed by his aggressive tone, Colleen unsuccessfully tried to push his hand off her shoulder and fiercely erupted, "Let me go! Let me go right now, Mister!"

The guard was not put off, and signalled to a nearby officer for assistance. "Over here," he called out. Colleen's arm was casually twisted behind her back causing her to shriek in pain from the injury.

Somehow she managed to call out through the pain, "I am here to see Tom Bradley. He is an old friend who would be very upset if he knew that I was being man-handled in this way."

The guard let go her shoulder and looked her up and down slowly, suddenly a little unsure of what to do.

"What is your name?" Colleen demanded.

The guard was now uncertain as to whether or not Colleen was telling the truth. "Ma'am. Do you have an appointment with Mr Bradley?"

"Well, um, no," explained Colleen tentatively. "I thought that I would surprise him."

Suspicious again, but also wary of upsetting a friend of the CEO, the guard looked towards the reception and back to Colleen. "Okay, come over to the desk and we'll see if this is true. If it's not, you're out of here."

The guard requested the young lady at reception to make a call to the CEO's office.

"What's your name?" the receptionist asked roughly, looking up only briefly.

"Colleen Watson," she replied while thinking to herself. What if he doesn't want to see me after all this time? God help me if he won't help me out.

The receptionist mentioned her name to someone upstairs and was then momentarily silent. While still holding the phone and looking Colleen up and down, the girl said in a quieter voice, "Really? Is he sure?" The phone call was ended, and the receptionist nodded to the security guard.

The guard turned to Colleen. "Well, Ma'am," he said incredulously. "He has agreed to see you. I cannot believe it. That man never sees anybody without an appointment. Come with me please." The guard was obviously surprised by the fact that Tom knew this woman. He walked her over to an elevator, swiped a card and pressed Level thirty-six. Once Colleen was inside, he said in a friendlier voice, "Have a nice day, Ma'am. Sorry about the mix up earlier on."

Colleen breathed a sigh of relief once the doors were closed, and tried to compose herself after catching a glimpse of her image in one of the large gold mirrors in the foyer. It was no wonder the guard had asked her to leave. Her hair was dishevelled and her clothing very plain. Ideally, she would have put some lipstick on before meeting Tom again after all these years. But the situation could not be helped today.

The doors slid open and there he was, standing there, obviously waiting for her. They had not seen each other for many years, and yet it was unmistakably him. Those eyes had not aged one day. Colleen moved forward, but stood there without saying a word, hoping that Tom would break the silence.

It was as if he was initially stunned into silence by her very presence, but then he gradually noticed her greying hair, the lines on her face, her drooping sore shoulder, her overfilled small bag and her dishevelled clothes. The two of them could not have aged more differently.

“Colleen, my God. I didn't believe it when Elizabeth said you were here. I always wondered if we would meet again.” Tom moved forward to embrace her.

Tom's cologne was a woody, musky scent and his arms were warm as they held her tight. Suddenly, Colleen realised how overwhelmed she was feeling. Besieged by his kindness, and those eyes that she once knew so well, the tears started to well. The barrier she presented to the world was ready to give way, and unleash her feelings at any minute. This was not something that she had expected.

“So, tell me, Colleen, how have you been?” asked Tom, now holding both of her hands in his.

Colleen took a deep breath, and fought back the tears. “It's been tough,” she replied, thinking about how rough the past ten years had been.

Tom looked a little taken back by her words.

“Would you rather I said that everything has been fine or would you like the truth?”

“Hmmm, I think maybe we had better go into my office and have a cup of tea.” He led her along a corridor finely decorated with pictures, plants and expensive-looking ornaments. “Elizabeth, we'll have some tea and coffee please,” Tom instructed a young lady who sat outside his door, as he led Colleen into his office, shutting the door firmly behind them.

Colleen noticed the young woman's disapproving glance as she walked in.

“Please take a seat, Colleen,” Tom said in a kind voice as he pulled her chair out and brought another chair over to sit next to her. “Now, tell me,” he continued. “What has been happening in your life that is so bad?”

“Well, where do I begin?” Colleen asked herself loudly. He seemed to be genuinely interested. “I just can't get a break these days, Tom. Do you know what I mean?” Colleen looked at Tom and then realised that he probably didn't know what she meant, but continued anyway. “Whenever I find a guy who says he'll look after me, something always goes wrong and he goes to jail or gets beaten up or loses his job.”

Colleen proceeded to describe her previous two failed marriages, how Ted ended up in jail, her evictions, her money problems, recent time in jail and other various circumstances that came to mind.

The more she spoke, the more uncomfortable Tom started to look.

The two of them drank cups of tea while Colleen continued to explain the details of her troubled life. “So I guess the real reason that I'm here is to ask for help,” she finally concluded.

“Help,” Tom echoed. “Okay, then. What sort of help do you have in mind?”

“Maybe five to ten thousand dollars' worth of help.” Colleen paused briefly to study his expression, but she could not read anything from his blank stare. “I promise this is a once-only type of deal. I just need some cash to get back on my feet. Find somewhere to live, that sort of thing. This last jail sentence really took a lot out of me.”

Tom was quiet. He stood up and paced slowly around the office, before turning back to face Colleen. “I must say Colleen, this is not the reason I thought you were here today. I thought you might want to talk to me and hear how I'm going. But you haven't asked anything about me. I also thought you might like to discuss 'her',” Tom said pausing.

“No,” Colleen fiercely spat back. It hurt her that he would say that. Couldn’t Tom see how tough things were for her? It hadn’t even crossed Colleen’s mind that the two of them would speak about ‘her’. Colleen tried to explain, “You know that I don’t know what happened to her, and I think it’s best for the past to stay in the past.”

Tom looked thoughtful. “Well, regardless of the past, I don’t feel comfortable just giving you money. I’m sorry Colleen, but I don’t think that I owe you anything. I’m sorry to hear that you think I do.”

“I didn’t say you owed me anything.” Colleen took a deep breath and tried not to look angry. He was unlikely to give her anything if they had a fight. “It’s just that I know you are so rich and, well, I was hoping you could share the dough with a friend.”

“What I could do is offer you a job, and you could earn your own money. How does that sound?”

Colleen stared at him blankly.

“What sort of skills do you have?” Tom said, continuing down this path.

Raising her voice and feeling more and more irritated by his manner, Colleen finally snapped. “I don’t want a job from you. I’m not here for a job interview. I haven’t asked you for a job, have I?” Colleen stared at Tom for a couple of seconds and then continued, “Working in a building like this is not for me. I would think someone as smart as you could plainly see that.”

“Colleen, please!” Tom was shocked by the tone of voice she was using with him. She seemed so angry and he wasn’t sure why. “I just don’t think it’s fair that you come here, after all this time, and demand money from me.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s fair that you have a big home, a fancy job and a young girlfriend that’s half your age I might add, while I could be sleeping in the streets tonight.”

Tom was unsure what to do or say, and let out a deep sigh to show his exasperation.

Colleen went on, “I’m right about your pretty young girlfriend, aren’t I. I saw it in a magazine in jail. You wouldn’t want her to find out about our little secret now, would you?”

“Colleen, you’re blackmailing me now?” Tom said, in a shocked and frustrated tone.

“I’ll tell her, I will,” she screamed.

“How do you know that I haven’t already told her?”

Colleen was thoughtful. Could he have done that? It hadn’t even occurred to her that he could have been honest with his girlfriend about the past. Colleen wasn’t sure if he was bluffing. “Well, have you told her?”

Tom looked away. “Actually, to be honest, no. I have been meaning to tell Ellen about the baby you gave birth to all those years ago. Our baby. I just haven’t found the right moment.”

Tom seemed so hurt and fragile to Colleen all of a sudden and she nearly told him that she didn’t mean it, that she was sorry. But she didn’t.

“I can’t believe that you would come into my office like this and try, and try to blackmail me. I really thought that our shared past gave us a special connection in some way. But I can see that you have changed beyond recognition. You are nothing like the girl I remember so fondly.”

“I’m the same person, but Ted and I really need a break, that’s all. It’s not easy living on the streets. I’ve had to fight for everything I have.”

“I know who you are, Colleen. And this woman in front of me, this is not you.” Tom’s voice was stern. “I will give you the money, but not because of what you have threatened, but because I want to see you return to who you once were. Can you do that for me?”

The tears were finally showing in Colleen’s eyes and she felt a huge weight lift off her shoulders. “Thank you, Tom, a million thank yous. I’ll be anyone you want me to be for ten thousand dollars.”

Tom opened his wallet and counted the notes in there. "Here is five hundred dollars, that's all I have on me at the moment."

Colleen's eyes bulged at the sight of so much cash.

"I will arrange for you to pick up the rest of the money from my bank in the next couple of days. Take this card." Tom had written some details on the back. "I'll have someone I trust take care of this matter tomorrow. How will he contact you?"

Colleen wrote her mobile phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Tom. She took Tom's five hundred, folded it into her bra and stood up to leave. She had one more question though. "Tom, what do you know about our girl?"

"Not much. Only that she is healthy and happy with her adoptive family. I'm not sure where she is living at the moment."

"How do you know all this?"

"I had an associate of mine look her up some years back and find out if they ever told her she was adopted. Her adoptive parents obviously thought it was best not to tell her. We gave up our rights a long time ago, so I thought it was best to keep my distance and leave well enough alone."

"I'm glad to hear that." Colleen had often wondered about the girl's looks. "Do you know what she looks like?"

"No, I've never even seen a picture."

Colleen nodded. It didn't really matter. She had her life to worry about right now. "Well, thanks again, Tom." Colleen scurried out quickly before he could change his mind about the cash. For the first time in months, Colleen was excited about her future again.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Hello, I would like to speak to prisoner Ted Blake," Colleen requested calmly, using her mobile phone while walking down the street.

"Who is calling please?" the officer enquired.

"Colleen Watson."

"Colleen, please be aware that your call will be monitored by a correctional officer and terminated if that officer deems it appropriate. The maximum call time allowable is ten minutes. Do you understand these instructions clearly?" The officer spoke quickly, as if she had repeated that statement many times that day.

"Yes," Colleen responded. She knew the drill well enough as this was certainly not Ted's first stay in jail.

"Please hold the line. It will take between three to five minutes before this call can be connected," stated the officer dryly.

It was just past two o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Phone calls to prisoners being held at the Lindifern Correctional Institution were allowed on Tuesdays and Fridays between two o'clock and four o'clock. Colleen had not spoken to Ted since he was arrested, and she was anxious to let him know about the money from Tom.

"Hello." Ted sounded very despondent as he picked up the phone.

"Teddy, it's me," replied Colleen eagerly.

Ted was silent. Then he said, "Well, if it's not my fuckin' girlfriend! Where the fuck have you been?" His tone of voice was very cold. "The other guys in here get brought ciggies and food by their wives, but not me."

"Baby!" Colleen was hurt and surprised by his words. She tried to explain quickly, "They had me in jail until two days ago and I couldn't call until today cause of all their rules. But I wanted to. I thought about you every day."

"What happened?"

“They caught me collecting the cash.”

“Shit. So it's all gone then. Oh, well, hmmm. I didn't think they could touch you on this one,” Ted replied, sounding a little sorry for his harsh words, but not quite ready to apologise.

“So, how long are you in for Teddy? No one will tell me anything.”

“Eighty-eight days left. Then I'll come find ya.”

Colleen snorted, but then remembered her good news. “Now Teddy, I've got some excellent news that should cheer you up.”

Sounding suspicious and concerned, Ted raised his voice, “Wait, you know that they are recording all of this. Everything we say...”

Not put off by his cautious demeanour, Colleen snapped, “Yes, of course I know but..”

“So don't say anything stupid, okay,” he said, cutting her off and groaning at the same time.

“It's nothing illegal, relax. A friend of mine has given us some money, that's all,” explained Colleen.

“What's the catch?” Ted asked cautiously.

“No catch!”

“Then, whose the friend with all this spare money?”

“You remember I told you that I used to date this rich guy. Well, he wasn't rich back then of course, but anyway it was years ago that I knew him.”

“Er, maybe. Keep going.”

Colleen continued, “I'm sure you've heard of him - Tom Bradley - the makeup guy from that big company in the city. Well, anyway, as it happens, he is super rich now and, as it happens, he could spare a few dollars for little ol' us.”

“Really?” asked Ted. “And why would he give us money?”

“Cause I asked nicely, that's why.”

Ted was silent for a few moments as he processed this news. “So, how much could he spare exactly?” he asked, sounding a little more interested.

“I'm on the street now, walking to the bank to pick it up. I'm not sure exactly how much, but I reckon it will be something worth seeing, Teddy.”

As she was talking, Colleen walked past a magazine stand. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a picture of Tom with his new girlfriend. Colleen recognised the young woman because she had seen her picture in numerous magazines over the past two days. The picture was a close-up of the two of them kissing in a park somewhere. Colleen stopped walking to take a closer look. She sure was pretty.

Suddenly the world froze still. Colleen could not hear what Teddy was saying and she found herself not breathing for a moment. “Oh, my God!” cried Colleen.

“Are you listening to what I'm saying?” Ted asked feeling annoyed.

“Oh, my God,” repeated Colleen. This time her voice was louder and more desperate.

“What is it girl?” asked Ted. A warning sounded over their call. The ten minutes was nearly up.

“Ted, it's my daughter!” shrieked Colleen. “Tom is dating his own daughter!” Colleen was panicky and breathing erratically.

“What are you talking about?”

“The baby I gave up for adoption years ago. It's her, in the picture with Tom.”

Ted was obviously trying to piece Colleen's words together. “That was Tom's baby was it? Tom was the baby's daddy?”

“Uh huh,” Colleen replied weakly.

“Hmmm. Very interesting. You haven't mentioned this little piece of information to me before. No wonder he gave you the cash! You must have blackmailed him.”

“Maybe a little.”

“Maybe you aren’t so silly after all.”

“Focus, Teddy. Don't you understand? It's her!”

“Come on, Col,” Ted said, trying to reassure her. “You haven't seen your daughter since you gave birth to her. It's probably not her.”

“Ted, she's got a birth mark on her neck. I could never forget my baby's mark. Shaped like a crown on the left side of her neck. My God! How could this happen?”

“It's okay,” Ted started to say, but the line went dead. She would not be able to talk to him again for another four days.

“Shit,” Colleen exploded, as the situation started to sink in and the sweat dripped down her forehead. It wasn't a particularly hot day, but all of a sudden, Colleen was overheating in her jacket and skirt. She found a park bench and sat down to gather her thoughts. He must know, she thought. But what if he doesn't know? It struck Colleen that Tom hadn't actually seen the baby when she was born. Maybe she hadn't described the birth mark. She racked her brain trying to remember, and wondered if she should call him straight away. Would he even believe her? The questions buzzed around her mind relentlessly like flies.

Colleen sat there thinking for what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes, before deciding on a course of action. She would have to go visit him again. Or maybe a phone call would suffice. In any case, it was probably best to call him after she had collected the cash, just in case he thought she was trying to cause trouble. She hurried along the street as fast as her weary legs would allow, and minutes later, Colleen found herself at the City Bank Tom had instructed her to visit. She was to collect the contents of safety deposit box number 181EQ that had been arranged for her.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Colleen thought she recognised the same man she had seen two blocks back. He was tall with a black jacket and black hat. Is he following me? Colleen thought. She remembered the man because he had tipped his hat and said a polite “Good afternoon, Ma’am,” as he walked past. Colleen had found this very unusual and thought the man strange. Seeing him again caused the hairs on the back of her neck to prickle. It couldn't be a coincidence.

Although suspicious of the man in black and feeling alarmed by his lingering presence, Colleen was driven by a desire to see the contents of her safety deposit box. She moved through the queue of people until she was face to face with a short, balding bank clerk with black rimmed glasses. The man requested Colleen's identification and box number then returned with a key and led her into a long rectangular room filled with many boxes.

“Your box is here, Ma’am. Have a nice day,” he announced as he turned and headed towards the exit.”

“Thanks,” replied Colleen, a childish excitement apparent in her voice. But the man was already gone and probably had not noticed.

For a few moments she forgot about the situation with her daughter and the man in black outside. Colleen slid her key into the lock and pulled the long box out of the wall. There were five stacks of notes bound together, more money than Colleen had ever seen. The notes were all fifties, by the look of it.

“Tommy, if you were here right now, I'd give you a big fat kiss,” she squealed with pure delight as she carelessly threw the cash into her empty backpack.

The next few minutes moved very quickly for Colleen. She left the security area feeling slightly paranoid. People in the bank seemed to be watching her. Calm down, she told herself. Nobody is watching. It is just your imagination.

Not looking where she was going and in her haste towards the exit, Colleen bumped into an elderly lady.

“Watch where you're going,” the old lady remarked grumpily as she struggled to stay upright.

“Sorry,” quickly exclaimed Colleen, not stopping to say anything more.

The old lady continued to mumble something after her, but Colleen was already out of earshot.

The doors of the bank were in sight and Colleen was about to breathe a sigh of relief when the man in black stepped in front of her. He was here and waiting for her.

“What do you want?” she stammered, now feeling afraid for the first time.

But the man didn't respond to this question. He quickly pulled a ski mask out of his jacket and placed it over his face. He abruptly pushed Colleen to the ground and roared, “This is a hold-up! Everyone on the ground!”

Almost instantaneously, large metallic shutters slid down from the ceiling along each counter, effectively blocking access to the bank's money. People screamed in fear and huddled together in groups against the walls. The man in black had a gun and began shooting at the shutters in a crazed fashion.

“Open ‘em, or I'll shoot someone,” he demanded in anger and frustration.

Colleen was face down on the floor with her hands over her head. She held her backpack with a strong grip and kept it close to her body. Just do as he says, and we'll get out of this alive, she told herself.

The man in black was still yelling all sorts of crazy things. Strangely though, he had not moved away from her.

Suddenly, there was a sharp pain in her right shoulder and shortly afterwards another pain somewhere else. It was difficult to work out where the second pain was coming from. Everything blurred from that point on. The last thing Colleen felt was her hand being unclenched and the backpack being ripped from her clasp.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

Some weeks later, Ellen was enjoying a morning coffee with one of her new office friends Ryan. They had worked together on a project a few weeks earlier and quickly become friends. Ryan was studying the new summer range of Satinol lipsticks that had just arrived. He was young and funny and very gay. He called her “sweetie”, which she liked, and he made her laugh with the way he talked, and the stories he told about the people working at Satinol.

A knock was heard on Ryan's office door.

“Come in,” said Ellen, giggling at Ryan who was applying lipstick to himself. He was puckering his lips and pretending to be a woman.

“I have your mail, Ellen,” said a shy young man who entered her office. “I heard you might be in here.” The same young man had delivered Ellen's mail for the past two weeks, and Ellen suddenly felt guilty and silly for not remembering his name.

He seemed amused by Ryan's antics too.

“I'm so sorry,” Ellen told the man. “What's your name again?” she asked tentatively.

“Cameron,” the man replied, handing her a neat pile of letters.

“Sorry, Cam. There are just so many people here. I find it so hard to remember all the names.”

“It's okay, don't worry about it. Looks like more fan mail today,” he said pointing to the letters.

“Thanks, Cam, see you later,” Ellen called out as he left the room, writing the words “Cam” and “mail” neatly on her writing pad. “That ought to help,” she told Ryan.

“All right my sweetheart! I'm off too for a meeting.” Ryan wiped his face clean and handed Ellen a neat pack of the new lipsticks to take home.

“Bye, Ryan,” she told him light-heartedly.

Ellen looked over the new lipsticks. This was one of the best perks of her job. She and Chloe had now accumulated a large collection of makeup at home and it was getting better every week.

Soon after he had left, Ellen left for the central lounge area to skim through the letters. They were generally short and friendly notes from young girls, however one of the letters looked a little different from the rest. It was addressed to 'Tom Bradley's young girlfriend, Satinol Cosmetics', and appeared to have been hand-delivered. It looked a little creepy to Ellen, but she read it first, anyway.

*Dear girl*

*I am planning to slip this note to one of the boys getting out soon, as it would never get through them nannies who reads our mail. Anyway, I hope it finds you.*

*You don't know me as we have never met but I have a piece of information that you need to know. The only other person who knew this information was killed – killed because she knew too much. I was speaking to her before she was killed, so I could be next. I hope not.*

*You were adopted as Col was too young to be a mother. This is understandable. The makeup guy, Tom someone is your father. Col says you are dating him. She wasn't happy about this!!! She thought it was disgusting. You should respect your mother's view. In fact, I think it is disgusting too. You should hook up with someone who is not your father - I will look you up when I get out. You can get to know me better. Your mother's name was Colleen Watson. We hear about all the murders in here. The makeup guy probably did it. When I get out of jail, I will kill him, maybe. Don't show this letter to the coppers.*

*A friend*

Ellen sat looking at the note in her hands for quite a while, trying to work out what to do with it. She wanted to take it straight to Tom and have him tell her that it was just a sick joke. Of course she wasn't adopted. Of course Tom wasn't her father. Of course Tom didn't kill anyone. None of it made any sense. Ellen decided to show it to Chloe first, to see what she thought.

Ellen made a frantic call to Chloe's desk which promptly brought her friend to her side within minutes.

"Sweetie, are you okay?" asked Chloe, as she walked towards Ellen. "You sounded a bit frantic on the phone."

"I'm not okay, Chloe. I received this in the mail today," Ellen said, thrusting the note firmly into Chloe's hand.

After quickly scanning through the note, an expression of amusement came onto Chloe's face. "Well, Elle, this person is obviously crazed. I think we should frame it for kicks. It makes absolutely no sense," laughed Chloe as she screwed the note up and threw it into the nearby trash can. "Why aren't you laughing too?" she asked realising that Ellen still looked shaken up.

"Why would someone send me something like this? I mean, I'm not even adopted!" said Ellen, thinking through the facts, and retrieving the note.

"People are completely nuts in the city. The man is obviously in jail right? So let's just hope that he stays there."

"What happens if he tries to hurt Tom?" said Ellen weakly, not liking the thought of anyone being hurt, especially Tom. "Do you think that we should give this note to Tom's security, or maybe even to the police?"

“Hmmm.” Chloe thought about it briefly. “Yes, I think we will need to give the note to security, but first, I think we should find out if there is any truth in this matter.”

“What do you mean, truth?” asked Ellen tentatively. “There's no truth to find, is there?”

“Well, first thing is first. Let's ask your parents if you're adopted.”

“I'm not adopted, Chloe! You know my parents, remember,” Ellen insisted.

“Ah huh, but remember how we always used to joke about your being adopted when we were little?”

Ellen did remember of course.

Chloe went on, “Because both your parents have red hair and freckly skin, and you have dark hair and olive skin.”

Ellen must have looked very concerned because Chloe came over and gave her a quick hug. “Look, Elle, I don't think you're adopted okay, really I don't. I'm sorry for upsetting you. But you've been saying for ages that it's about time we went back home to visit the folks. Let's do it this weekend. If there's no truth to this part of the crazy letter, then there's no truth to the rest of it, and we can just forget the damn thing ever arrived. And we don't want to bother Tom unless we have to. He's really busy at the moment, and it just wouldn't be appropriate.”

“I think Tom would be very interested in this letter,” said Ellen, annoyed at her friend for thinking otherwise. “Because he cares about me.”

“He just has a lot of important meetings today, and I don't think that we should be bothering him with crank fan letters.”

Ellen was thoughtful for a moment. It did make sense. “Okay. I guess the folks might get a laugh out of the letter too. They might know what we should do with it too.”

“It's decided then!” exclaimed Chloe. “Now I have to get back to my desk in case Tom needs anything. But I'll see you tonight okay. We should hire a movie and order pizza like we used to. Bit of a “girls' night in”. What do you think?”

“I can't. I have plans with Tom tonight.”

“Oh, you do?” Chloe sounded a little disappointed but smiled in any case. “I don't feel as if we get to spend very much time together anymore.”

“I'm sorry,” said Ellen. “But we'll hang out this weekend, okay?”

“Ellen, what will happen to your job here if the two of you break up?”

It was a ridiculous question. “Why would you ask that?” Ellen found herself feeling a little defensive.

“Because I'm concerned about you, that's why I would ask,” responded Chloe sternly. “Relationships don't last forever. Tom knows a lot of women, a lot of models. I know because I updated his address book yesterday.”

“Listen, you don't need to worry. Everything is going perfectly between us, except for this letter and all.”

“I'll try not to worry, okay. I just don't want to see Tom get hurt.”

Ellen looked at Chloe, surprised by where her loyalty apparently lay.

“I mean, I don't want either of you to get hurt, of course.”

“Sure.”

Chloe was already standing up, ready to leave. “Listen, I have to get back to Tom, in case he needs something. I probably shouldn't have left my desk like this,” Chloe said, trying to sound cheerful as she quickly left the room.

## Chapter Seventeen

Tom Bradley sat at his desk quietly thinking over the past couple of months with Ellen. She had breathed new life into his world. He woke each morning with a renewed sense of excitement and possibility.

Suddenly, there was a knock on his door, which dragged him back into the reality of his business world. "Come in," he said, surprised at himself for having daydreamed during a work day.

Hayden entered the room. "Good news, Tom," he said. "The Clidewell account from Germany has just been confirmed." He sat down on the couch in Tom's office, looking very pleased with himself.

"That's excellent news, Hayden. Well done." He paused briefly. "I'm glad you're here. I want to talk to you about that little financial matter you took care of recently."

"Which matter would that be now?" asked Hayden evasively.

"The Colleen Watson matter, of course."

"Oh yes," said Hayden, looking a little uncomfortable. "Tom, I have to tell you, I was surprised that you agreed to give her a sum of money of that size, of any size, frankly."

Tom tried to explain, "When I knew Colleen all those years ago, she was just a girl. She was bright, happy, funny and sweet. This woman that came to visit me was nothing like that girl I once knew. I had to do something, Hayden. She needed help from someone."

"But why did it have to be you?"

Tom scratched his chin thoughtfully. "It was just the right thing to do. I mean, I have plenty of money to spare, let's be honest. I don't want to argue about this one. What's done is done. I assume the transfer of funds was successful?"

Hayden seemed surprised by the question, and looked at Tom oddly. "Um, well I just assumed that you saw the news or read it in the newspaper, Tom."

Tom furrowed his brow in confusion. "I don't follow you," he said.

Hayden was obviously hesitant to continue because he stood up and began to pace the room. He was also careful to avoid eye contact with Tom. "I don't know how to tell you this," murmured Hayden. "There was a robbery at the bank, and Colleen was shot."

"My God! No!" Tom leapt to his feet, irritated that he had not been informed of this matter earlier. The prospect of leaving work that instant to go to the hospital left him feeling flustered. He walked in circles for a few moments, grabbing a jacket off the coat rack in the corner.

"Tom, what are you doing?"

"Which hospital is she at?" Tom demanded. "Have you sent flowers? Where are my car keys?" He rapidly felt through each of his pockets, trying to remember where his keys were.

"Tom, Tom, hold on a second," implored Hayden. "She didn't make it."

"What?"

"She's dead, Tom."

Tom dropped his pen onto the carpet. "Hayden, please." He was shaken up by the words themselves. "What are you saying? Tell me that isn't true."

"I'm sorry, my friend. It is true. We got the money back though. So that's one good thing."

"The money? This is what concerns you? The money doesn't matter, Hayden." Tom felt his insides collapse. He felt completely unable to deal with the news of Colleen's apparent murder.

Hayden moved towards the coffee table, intending to pour Tom a glass of water, rather than comfort his friend directly. "I really didn't think that you would react this way. I would have mentioned it otherwise. I mean, the bitch got what was coming to her."

Tom was surprised by Hayden's matter of fact tone, and he rose slowly to his feet. It was obvious to Tom that Hayden was not saddened by Colleen's murder, and perhaps he was even happy about it. "What do you mean, Hayden?" asked Tom.

"Like you said, coming here, trying to blackmail you! Trying to destroy your relationship with Ellen!" said Hayden in anger. "Someone did us a favour," he said, while watching Tom carefully.

"Hayden, this is terrible news. I admit that Colleen had changed a lot since high school, but she wouldn't have told Ellen about the child."

"Well, in any case," stated Hayden, in a manner Tom found to be a little cold and heartless. "It's kind of irrelevant now whether or not the bitch was going to go through with her threat, don't you think?"

"Do me a favour - please don't call her that. Colleen was once very important to me, a long time ago."

Hayden laughed to himself and shook his head. "I have a meeting now, Tom. I'll send you the name of the investigating police officer this afternoon. You can give him a call if you want more information." Hayden started moving towards the door.

Tom looked at his friend, unable to comprehend this news. "Wait! Hayden. How could this happen? I mean, the two of us organised for Colleen to go to that bank. I don't understand."

"It's just one of those things," he replied. "A coincidence."

"Hayden, ask one of the girls to come in, will you?" Tom called out as his friend left the room.

Hayden was gone for a short period before returning. "Tom! Chloe's not at her desk, but Elizabeth will be in when she's off the phone," he called back.

Tom was left at his desk feeling a strange emptiness that he could not understand or explain.

It wasn't long before Elizabeth entered the room. "Did you need something, Tom?"

"Elizabeth, I am not feeling well, of a sudden. I think I might take the rest of the day off. I'll go home and lie down."

Elizabeth looked worried. "Tom, er... your diary is quite full today. Can I get you some aspirin instead?"

"No, I need to go home."

"Would you like to dial into your meetings from home?"

"No. Please delegate everything that you can to the relevant directors, and send my apologies."

Elizabeth realised that his mind was made up. "I will."

"Do you know if Ellen is in the building today?"

"I think I saw her downstairs before. Would you like me to let her know?"

"Actually, send her up, will you?"

"Certainly. Anything else?"

"That's all. Thanks Liz."

It wasn't long before Ellen arrived. She was as beautiful and radiant as always, although Tom noted that she was looking a little more flushed than usual.

"Hi Elle. How are you? Is everything okay?" he asked, trying to determine why she looked like that.

Ellen nodded. "I'm fine. It's good to see you."

Tom could tell there was something more going on, but he was feeling so overwhelmed with the news of Colleen's death that he decided not to press her. "Listen Ellen. I've just found out that someone important to me has died."

"Tom, I'm sorry. Is it someone I know?"

“Um, no. I’ll tell you about it another time.”

“Okay.”

He breathed deeply. “I’m going to go home and, well, take the day off. You don’t mind if I have a little space tonight? I don’t think I will be very good company, in any case.”

Ellen shook her head graciously. “Of course not. Let me know if you want to talk later on.”

“I’ll make it up to you on the weekend,” Tom offered.

“Actually, Chloe and I were thinking of going back home this weekend. I wanted to check with you first, to make sure we didn’t have anything planned. But if you are upset, and would rather I stayed, then I will, of course.”

“No, it’s okay, you go.” Tom checked his BlackBerry quickly. “I don’t think we have anything planned, no.”

“And you don’t mind that I go home without you? I know we were intending to visit them together. There is something important I want to talk to my parents about.”

Tom felt a little relieved to hear that he might have the weekend to himself. He needed some time to process the news of Colleen’s death, and he wanted to speak to the investigating police officer too. “Of course I don’t mind. I would like to meet your parents soon, of course. But I’m probably not in the right frame of mind this weekend. Maybe another weekend soon?”

“Of course. There is no rush though.”

“This weekend will be a good opportunity for you and Chloe to spend some time together. I know I’ve been monopolising your time ever since I met you. She probably feels like she doesn’t see you anymore.”

Ellen smiled.

Tom deduced from her expression that Chloe had obviously been saying a similar thing. He continued, “This weekend will provide some time for me to digest the news I received today. I’m not sure why it’s affecting me the way it is,” Tom said thoughtfully.

“Take as much time as you need,” offered Ellen.

Tom kissed Ellen on the forehead, before leaving the office. “Have fun with Chloe. I love you.”

“Love you too, Tom.”

## **Chapter Eighteen**

Ellen and Chloe arrived at Mansfield at twelve o’clock that Saturday, just in time for lunch. The smells and sounds of Mrs Jackson’s cooking wafted through the front door and into the garden, greeting the girls on arrival.

“Mum, Dad, we’re here,” Ellen called out.

Mrs Jackson was highly-praised for her cooking skills. She was able to put together tasty three-course meals with little notice, as had been the case this weekend. The girls were greeted by the normal array of kisses and welcoming by both parents. Chloe did not escape any of the affection either.

Mrs Jackson had prepared arancini balls for starters and offered the girls one from a large silver serving plate.

Once everyone was seated at the dining table, Mrs Jackson served a pumpkin soup for entree, and a variety of dishes for the main course - including vegetable cous cous, roast chicken, homemade pesto and roast vegetables. Ellen’s parents had numerous questions about Tom, her job and experiences at Satinol. They were amazed to hear of the girls’ free accommodation arrangement, as provided by the company. Chloe nudged Ellen a few times, but Ellen wanted to give her parents the opportunity to ask all of their questions first.

After the dishes from main course were taken away, Ellen passed around a selection of photos from her past photo-shoots, and both Mr and Mrs Jackson declared how beautiful their daughter was. Ellen felt proud and happy to receive their praise. It made the question she wanted to ask even harder though.

Just as the four of them were starting on dessert, Ellen finally found the courage to ask the question she came to ask. Part of her didn't want to know if it was true, but she took a deep breath and gave a knowing look to Chloe. It was time. "Have either of you ever noticed how I don't seem to look like anyone in our family?"

Both parents stopped chewing and stared blankly at her.

Mrs Jackson spoke first, "I wouldn't say that darling."

Mr Jackson cleared his throat, "So Chloe, how are you liking your role at this cosmetics company? What is it exactly that you do there?"

The girls exchanged frustrated glances.

"Mum, Dad," Ellen said, not to be distracted. "Was I adopted?" She paused briefly, and thought how crazy that question sounded out loud. Of course she wasn't. It was ludicrous. "I know it's a strange question, and I'm sorry to ask, but I need to know the truth."

"What makes you ask that?" Mrs Jackson enquired without any emotion in her tone.

Ellen noticed that she did not deny it.

"It's a yes or no question, Mrs Jackson," Chloe stated blankly. Obviously she had noticed it too.

"Remember whose house you are visiting, Chloe," said Mr Jackson. He did not look happy with her determined attitude.

"Well, Ellen," said Mrs Jackson.

"Beth, I'll handle this," interrupted Mr Jackson. "Ellen, you are our daughter. We love you. End of story. Enough of this nonsense," he firmly declared. "Your mother has cooked a lovely family meal. We haven't seen you in a long time, and we should all be appreciating each other's company, and not asking ridiculous questions like this."

The room fell silent as everyone took another mouthful of their dessert.

The lemon tart suddenly tasted a little sour to Ellen, and she wasn't sure why her father had reacted the way that he had. She thought it through a little more. He probably reacted that way because it was such a silly question. Ellen decided to believe her father, and felt a wave of relief rush over her body. Of course they would have told her if she was adopted. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry, Mum," she said.

Mrs Jackson looked over and smiled. "That's okay, Ellie."

"And I really appreciate the lunch you have cooked for us, Mum." Ellen felt the need to explain a little further. "The only reason I asked such a silly question is because I got this weird letter during the week, and it got me thinking. I'm sorry. I should have just thrown it away."

"What was in the letter, darling?" asked Mrs Jackson.

Her husband gave her a stern look.

Ellen noticed the looks exchanged between her parents with surprise, and tried to explain as quickly as possible. "Um, it said that I was adopted and that my biological mother's name was Colleen Watson. It said that Colleen's boyfriend was Tom when she got pregnant, and hence that I am probably dating my own biological father. Something along those lines." Ellen was trying to laugh it off, but noticed how still the room had become.

Chloe obviously noticed too. "They're not laughing, Elle," she stated, putting her spoon down.

"What?" asked Ellen. "Mum? Dad?"

Mr Jackson looked towards his wife. "Beth, I think I might go outside and get some fresh air. The dessert is lovely, but I think I have lost my appetite."

“Of course, dear,” Mrs Jackson responded.

Once her father had left the room, Ellen turned to her mother, “Mum, what's going on? Did I say something wrong? Why did Dad just walk out like that? I was just trying to explain why I asked the silly question before.”

Mrs Jackson sat with her eyes down for some time, not answering.

Ellen continued, uncertain what to do next. “Should I go and apologise, Mum?”

Mrs Jackson finally looked up, tears starting to show in her eyes. “It's the name, darling. Colleen Watson. Your father and I decided not to tell you when you were just a baby. We didn't want you to feel anything other than one hundred per cent our daughter. You have to understand that our decision was made with the right intention behind it.”

“What are you saying? What decision? Am I not your daughter?”

“You are our daughter, in every way that counts.”

“But not biologically?” clarified Chloe, who did not seem affected by the emotion in the room.

Mrs Jackson shook her head. “No, not biologically.”

Ellen was shocked. How could it be true? How could they have lied to her all these years? Keeping the truth hidden was the same as lying. And if one part of the letter was true, then all of it could be true. “Is Tom Bradley my father?” asked Ellen, sickened by the thought.

Mrs Jackson shook her head in an uncertain way. “I don't know. Your birth certificate only listed the name of your mother - Colleen Watson.”

Ellen looked towards Chloe. “Tom could be my father. Shit.”

“Yes, and it could be anyone else as well,” said Chloe, trying to be reassuring but failing terribly.

“Why would the letter be right about Colleen being my mother and wrong about Tom being my father?”

Mrs Jackson was thoughtful before suggesting, “Perhaps we could try and find Colleen, and ask her who the father is.”

“The letter said that she, um, recently passed away,” Chloe informed Mrs Jackson.

“Oh, I see,” said Mrs Jackson.

Ellen thought through the repercussions of this. She would never have the opportunity to meet her real mother. But there was something more that just didn't make sense. She and Tom couldn't have secrets from each other. She knew him to be an open and honest person. “Tom would have told me if he had fathered a child that was given up for adoption. We don't keep secrets from each other. I can't be his, I just can't.”

“Maybe he was getting around to telling you that one, Elle,” offered Chloe. “It is big, and he might have been worried about your reaction.”

Ellen thought that through silently. It was possible.

Mrs Jackson looked very distressed. As it appeared that everyone had finished eating, she started to clear the half-eaten tart slices from the table. Only Chloe had completely finished her plate. “I'm sorry, Ellie. We should have told you sooner,” she started saying, while sobbing over the dishes.

Ellen realised how upset her mother must be feeling, and went to comfort her. “Mum, I'm not upset with either of you. Maybe I should be, but I'm not. I think you should have told me when I was old enough to understand, but otherwise, I wouldn't change a thing about my upbringing. I still think you are the best mother in the world.”

The two women hugged, while Chloe looked on. When they stopped hugging, Mrs Jackson dried her tears with her apron, and said, “I'd better go and talk to your father. And perhaps you should consider breaking up with this Tom character, until the truth is clear and apparent.”

Ellen nodded. "I should have showed him the letter before I left." She looked to Chloe. "We didn't think there was any truth to it. And Tom was upset about something, so I didn't want to trouble him, but I will Mum, I will."

## Chapter Nineteen

Chloe drove the car home from Mansfield, while Ellen sobbed quietly beside her. It was incredible news, quite hard to digest. Tom and Ellen perhaps being related, perhaps not. What were the chances of that happening in a city the size of Melbourne? It would explain why the two of them were initially so drawn to each other, of course.

The afternoon had proven tedious to Chloe. Both of Ellen's parents had wallowed in their regret and sorrow for hours after lunch. Mr Jackson had seemed particularly heart-broken, or maybe he was ashamed to be discovered a liar after all these years. Chloe had never seen a grown man cry. She found it particularly distasteful really, and quite inappropriate to carry on so much in front of a guest.

Ellen had spent much of the afternoon crying too. The three of them had been at it for hours. Chloe had never smoked so many cigarettes, but being outside in the cold had been infinitely preferable to being inside with the wailing. Thank goodness she and Ellen had finally left the town, hopefully not to return for some time.

"Chloe," Ellen said, looking up, her eyes red and puffy.

"Yeah, Elle."

"Thanks for coming with me today."

"No problem." The afternoon had actually been a problem, a huge awkward situation, but Chloe couldn't really speak her mind without offending Ellen.

"I need to know for sure about Tom and me. I need to find out before I show him the letter. I mean, if I tell him everything, and then find out it isn't true, well, it might ruin things anyway. He might never look at me the same way again."

"That makes sense."

"How can we find out, one way or another?"

Chloe thought for a moment, and then remembered something she had seen recently. "DNA test of course. We just need to get a sample of his DNA. Maybe some hairs from a brush or something."

"How can we get a DNA test done?" Ellen sounded a little unconvinced.

"I saw a service advertised on late night TV the other night."

"Really?"

"Yeah, there is a company that is called DaddyID or something like that. All you need to do is download the form, and send two samples in separate sealed bags. It's quick too I think. You get the results within forty-eight hours of it being received. You have to logon to some site. Probably costs a few hundred bucks though."

"Money really isn't the problem here, Chloe."

Chloe rolled her eyes. Ellen sounded particularly stuck up when she said that. "Right. Sorry, I forgot how much you are being paid just to get your picture taken."

"There's a bit more to it than that, Chloe. What I mean is, that being related to my boyfriend is the problem. I'll pay anything to know the truth."

"Right." Chloe didn't feel like debating how overpaid Ellen was, so kept quiet until she realised something much more interesting. "Shit," she exclaimed.

"What?" asked Ellen, confused.

"I just realised something. If you are Tom's daughter, you are going to inherit a bloody fortune."

“Chloe, if I'm Tom's daughter, I will never, ever be able to look at him again. I will have to move interstate and begin an intensive counselling program. I mean, I would have kissed my dad.”

Chloe laughed at that. “I guess, yeah gross. I wouldn't kiss my dad.”

“No kidding.”

“But you will still inherit a whole pile of money, and the controlling interest in a large cosmetics company.”

Ellen didn't respond, and instead stared out the window at the endless dry paddocks passing by.

Chloe realised that Ellen didn't seem to care about money at all, which was impossible to understand. Ellen really was quite a dull friend at times. If she wasn't providing such great free accommodation and perks, Chloe would have moved out with more interesting people by now. Ellen was so strange at times too. She probably hadn't even slept with Tom yet! Although Chloe had to concede, that under the circumstances, this probably was for the best.

Ellen suddenly perked up. “Tom opened one of our spare toothbrushes the other night and left it at our place. Do you think that it will be suitable for the test?”

“A toothbrush is perfect. Nice thinking. This means we can send it off tonight.”

Ellen looked somewhat relieved, and put some music on for the remainder of the trip home.

When the girls arrived home at their apartment, Chloe downloaded the form from the Internet and completed the required information. Meanwhile, Ellen sealed her toothbrush and Tom's toothbrush in separate sealed bags.

“I'm going to have a shower now, Chloe,” Ellen said. “Thanks for your help with this. Will you go and post it all tonight?”

“Will do, Elle. You've had a tough day. Why don't you take it easy tonight?”

Chloe was finished with the paperwork, and was just about to seal the envelope when she started thinking. A small idea had been growing in the back of her mind all afternoon. She thought about the pain that this knowledge would cause to Tom. It would be unbearable for him. Tom Bradley, the kindest, sweetest, richest, most amazing man that Chloe had ever met. She would do anything to protect him. Anything to ensure his happiness continued.

Chloe looked over her shoulder. The shower from Ellen's ensuite was already running. Without another thought, Chloe grabbed a fresh sealed bag and walked into her own bathroom. She put her own toothbrush into the bag and inserted it into the envelope. She took Ellen's toothbrush out and walked it back into the kitchen, and put it at the bottom of the kitchen bin. Perhaps the rubbish should go out tonight. Yes, an excellent idea, Chloe thought to herself. The DNA of these two samples would be unrelated. Tom would be kept in the dark. He wouldn't need to know about any of this. The chance of Tom and Ellen being related seemed very remote anyhow. He could continue to care about Ellen, continue to believe that there was something special about her. More importantly, he would remain happy and unaware. Wasn't the true nature of love sacrifice, after all?

Chloe realised then that she loved Tom. More than Ellen ever could. She would forsake her own possible relationship with him, to spare him the pain and shame of what this DNA test might show.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Since getting out of jail, Ted had made much progress. A successful robbery had put enough money in his pocket to last a few months. He had found a new place to rent and was already working on the plan. Initially he had wanted to shoot the makeup man. Not to kill him - the prison term for killing someone was just too long. But he wanted to shoot him

somewhere – maybe in the knees. If the makeup man had to limp for the rest of his life, he would be sorry for hurting Colleen.

However, watching Ellen had caused the plan to change unexpectedly. He had spent four days as a quiet observer, noting her daily movements and patterns. Watching her had quickly become his number one priority. After a while, he thought about how nice it would be to have her at home with him. She looked a little like Colleen, but was younger and fresher. She probably wouldn't nag him as much, either.

Her daily routine was pretty simple. She went jogging in the morning, went to the office at around nine o'clock, and went to the makeup man's house for dinner, returning home by about ten o'clock most nights. There were plenty of opportunities to take her, but Ted had decided that during the jog would be the easiest.

He checked his watch. It was almost half past seven. Any moment, Ellen should leave her building and run straight past his car.

One of the boys from prison had provided some helpful advice about a chemical called halothane, a modern-day chloroform-like substance. Inhalation would result in Ellen passing out quickly, for a period of four to eight hours. Ted had a soaked rag ready in his hand, and his fingers tensed and flexed in anticipation. He had seen it done in the movies many times. It should be pretty easy, as long as nobody was watching.

The door opened. There she was, heading in his direction as expected. People were so predictable. Ted looked in the rear view mirror and around the street. No one was around.

He stepped out of the car into her path. "Excuse me, miss." Ted held a map in one hand, pretending to be lost. "I'm looking for Hardware Lane. Do you have a moment to help?" She came towards him, so trusting, so soft.

The moment her eyes lowered to the map, Ted rolled his left hand into view and quickly covered her mouth with the rag. His right hand dropped the map to put pressure on her head from behind, ensuring she breathed in deeply. The chemical worked very quickly. The girl didn't have time to register what was happening. The whole process was very smooth, very quiet.

Her legs wobbled, after a few seconds, and Ted realised he had done it. He supported her body as it went limp and carefully placed her into the back seat face down. His eyes darted up and down the laneway. Still nobody in sight. He chuckled to himself. It had gone more easily than he'd thought possible.

He sped away to the suburban unit he had rented since getting out of jail. Luckily it had a garage connected to the back door, so none of the neighbours would notice him carrying an unconscious girl inside. He carefully lifted Ellen up and brought her inside onto his spare bed, cuffing her wrist firmly to the bed post. She was beautiful, even like that.

"There's no escape for you now, missy," he told her. Ellen was breathing, but still very much unconscious. "I didn't get to say goodbye to Col because of your Tom, so I guess you're the closest thing I can find."

Ted knelt down beside the bed and put his lips to Ellen's. He kissed her softly then more roughly. It felt a little different than he'd imagined. Actually, he didn't like it particularly, and stopped right there.

"Well, what shall I do with you, now that I have you?" Ted asked himself out loud. He decided to search her pockets for money. There was a set of keys in one pocket and a mobile phone in the other. No money. Perhaps the mobile was the best way to punish Tom. Ted checked the contact list. Only eight contacts were present in Ellen's phone, and one of them was Tom.

Ted starting creating his first message:

*Tom, it's me. I have found out who you are. You are a liar. I know you got Colleen pregnant. It's over between us. What other secrets are you keeping? You are also 20 old for me. I could be your daughter.*

Ted hit “send” and laughed. This would definitely ruin his day. Ellen's phone started ringing almost immediately. The caller ID said 'Tom'. He let it ring until her message service picked up. Ted listened to the message, which was just Tom asking Ellen to call him. Saying they should talk things through.

Ted starting creating a new text message:

*I've gone away for a while. Don't call me. I'm upset to talk to u. I hate u now old man.*

Ted laughed at his second 'old man' jibe, while hitting “send”. A text message came back quickly in reply.

*Elle, I love you. Please I'll do anything to make it up to you. Where r u? Please, please call me. I love u*

He was definitely starting to hurt now. Revenge was sweet indeed. Ted started creating a new message.

*You are not listening gramps. It's over between us. I quit the job. I hate u. Go to hell pedo. ITS OVER. STOP TEXTING AND CALLING.*

Ted turned off the phone and threw it into the corner of the room. He was bored playing with Tom already. He didn't know what to do with Ellen now, but knew he had to hold her for a little while, to ensure his messages had the desired effect. Maybe a sandwich would clear his mind.

A few hours and a few beers later, Ted heard some rumblings coming from the bedroom. He grabbed the black ski mask that he had bought for this moment. Best not to be too visible to Ellen, since the eventual plan was to let her go. Colleen would not be happy on the other side if Ellen was hurt, so the girl could not be too damaged.

Ellen looked groggy and confused, but was clearly awake. She looked quite afraid when Ted walked into the room, and started to scream.

He rushed over to her to cover her mouth. “You'll stop screaming now, or I'll gag you with masking tape, Ellen.”

She stopped screaming with that threat, but looked fearfully into his eyes.

He continued, “Now, I'm gunna take my hands off. You be good and I'll be good to you.”

She nodded.

Ted removed his hands from her mouth. “Good girl, Ellen. Right decision.”

She looked terrified, her eyes darting around the room, while she pulled unsuccessfully against her handcuffs.

“Now, there is no need to scream. I'm not going to hurt you.” Ted paused, watching her mood carefully. “I am going to keep you for a while though. There is nothing you can do about that. It will be you and me hanging out here for about a week, I reckon.”

“Why?” she tentatively asked. “Who are you? What do you want with me? How do you know my name?”

“We can get to know each other later. First, I want some answers from you, Ellen. You got that?”

Ellen nodded obediently.

“Well, first things first I guess. I told you who Tom is. Yet you are still with him. Why?”

“Are you the one who sent me that letter?”

Ted nodded.

“Your letter was part right, and part wrong. He's not my father. I did a DNA test. It came back negative.”

“Bullshit. Col said he was the father.”

“You mean my mother - Colleen said that?”

“Yeah, and she would know, wouldn't she?”

“There must have been another man, because the test was negative.”

The girl didn't seem to listen. Ted was starting to feel angry towards her. “I said that's bullshit,” Ted roared. “How many times do I have to say it? Tom is your father. Col would have said if there was another guy. And guess what? She didn't say, so it's settled. Tom is your daddy. And Col wasn't happy with you sleeping with your daddy, let me tell you.”

The two of them stared at each other a while. The girl stayed silent.

Ted was unsure how to argue the point any further. It seemed settled to him. “So you agree now or what?”

Ellen nodded. “I agree.”

“Good.” Maybe she wasn't so stupid after all.

Ellen hesitated a little and then timidly said, “I guess I should say thanks for the letter. My parents never told me I was adopted. The truth came out when I confronted them.”

“Uh huh.” He looked at her awkwardly. “So do you want to kiss a little bit or what?”

A look of horror came over her face, and she shook her head quickly from side to side.

“Fine. Have it your way. Col probably wouldn't like it anyhow. Don't want to get haunted by some angry ghost. She was angry enough in real life.”

“Did you know my mother well?”

“You might say that.”

“What sort of woman was she?”

“A good woman. She could nag, don't get me wrong, but I miss her.”

“Your letter said that Tom killed her. What did you mean by that?”

“What do you think I mean, dummy?” Ted angrily snapped. “I mean, he **KILLED** her.”

“But why do you think that?”

“Listen, Tom pretended that he was going to give her some money. She was at the bank picking it up when it happened. I guess he changed his mind about giving her the cash after all.”

“What happened at the bank?”

Ted raised his voice again. “Your boyfriend killed your ma, that's what happened. I already told you this. You need to start listening. He made it look like a bank robbery, except the gunman shot Col but never tried to get into the bank's safe. What kind of robber leaves without money?”

Ellen looked stunned by his tone and theories, and said quietly, “I don't know.”

“A fake robber, that's who.”

“Tom wouldn't have organised a shooting. He is the gentlest man I've ever met.”

“Bullshit! He had the means and the motive. Your mum wouldn't want you dating her killer, even if he's not your dad, which he is. We've already covered this shit.”

Ellen was silent, as she continued to look around the room. “So, you're not going to hurt me?” she asked.

“No,” replied Ted gruffly. “I suppose not.”

“Why don't you let me go now then? I don't know what you look like. You can blindfold me and let me go on a street somewhere and drive off. I won't be able to tell the cops anything.”

“No, sorry. I'm keeping ya for a week.”

“A week? Why?”

“Well, if you must know, Miss Nosy, I sent some messages to Tom on your phone, breaking up, you know. So we need some time to let them take effect.”

“What did you text?”

“I got him up to speed on the situation, and I said you’ve gone away.”

“Please, please. Let me call him. He'll be so upset.”

“He killed your ma. Which part of that are you not understanding?”

“You don't have any proof that Tom was involved.”

“You don't need proof when you just know something. I mean, maybe you don't know him as well as you think. Like, you didn't know that he had a kid. That he paid Col cash to keep her quiet. Well, did you?”

Ellen shook her head. “No, he didn't tell me.”

“So, end of story. You've broken up with him. You can leave in a week's time. There's a bucket there,” Ted said, pointing to a bucket next to the bed. “Obviously I have to keep you tied up, so you can use that if you need to go. I'll feed and water you if you do your part. But if there's any screaming from ya, I'll gag you and stop the feeding. Got it?”

Ellen nodded.

“But if you're good, then I'll bring you something nice, maybe some pizza. Do you like pizza?”

Ellen didn't respond, and Ted noticed that she was still looking at the bucket.

“Do you want water or beer?”

“Water,” said Ellen weakly.

“You'll be right here. Maybe I will drag the TV in later so you can watch something.”

Ellen didn't respond to that offer, which Ted thought rather generous. Instead, her eyes wondered around the room again. Maybe he wouldn't bring the TV in, if she was going to act like that.

## **Chapter Twenty-one**

Tom was in the office when he received Ellen's angry text messages ending their relationship. She had somehow found out about his daughter with Colleen, and now didn't want anything to do with him.

Things with Ellen had seemed a little strained after she'd first returned from visiting her parents. But Tom had given her some space, and their relationship had returned to normal soon after.

He should have been honest from the start. That was obvious now. Ellen was taking the news harder than he had imagined she would. He felt so stupid for deceiving her this way.

Ellen had sent three messages and then nothing. She must have turned her phone off after that, because his calls went straight to voicemail. Tom left five voice messages, begging her to forgive him.

Elizabeth came into his office to collect him for a meeting. She was looking a little concerned, “Tom, you are five minutes late for the teleconference.”

He shook his head. “I'm heading home, Liz. Please cancel my day.”

“Is everything okay? Anything I can do?”

“That will be all, thank you.”

Elizabeth left quickly, and Tom started to feel a dreadful weight in the pit of his stomach. He had lost Ellen's trust. It hurt like a forceful blow. On the way out, he stopped by Chloe's desk, and saw that she was busy typing an email.

“Chloe, how did she find out?”

She looked surprised and confused. "Sorry, Tom. Who? Find out what? Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?"

She didn't seem to know anything. "Never mind. I'm going to go home early, so don't..." He didn't finish the sentence, and just walked off quickly and erratically.

"Maybe I should walk you out, Tom." Without a word to Elizabeth, Chloe grabbed her bag and raced after Tom, catching him in the lift. "What's wrong, Tom? You can tell me anything, you know."

"It's Elle. She broke up with me." The lift closed. The two of them were alone.

"She did?" asked Chloe, in a surprised tone.

Tom wondered why Ellen hadn't told Chloe anything, her supposed best friend.

"You said something about Elle finding something out. What did you mean by that?" Chloe asked.

"It's a long story."

They arrived at the basement level. Tom was moving fast but was visibly shaking and breathing erratically. He could hardly see because of his tears, which were quickly forming, despite his best efforts to hold them at bay.

Chloe must have noticed. "Tom, how about I drive? You don't look like you should be behind the wheel right now."

Tom stopped and turned to Chloe. He looked a little uncertain.

"I don't mind," Chloe reassured him.

"Um, yeah. Okay. Thank you, Chloe. I appreciate it."

Chloe drove Tom's black sports car carefully and slowly out of the basement, taking particular care around corners. She listened to his directions and before long, she pulled into his driveway, and parked at the front entrance.

Tom noticed that Chloe's eyes were wide and her mouth open as she surveyed the house and grounds. "Um, thanks for driving, Chloe. You can leave the car here. There is Robert coming towards us now." Tom pointed towards the sandy haired man approaching them from the garden. "He will drive you back to work and put the car away. Thank you again."

"What are you going to do, Tom?"

"Me? I am going to find some scotch."

Tom headed inside quickly without looking back. He ran up the stairs and into his office. He had a well-stocked bar in the corner, and quickly poured a double shot of scotch into a tumbler, without adding any ice, as was his normal habit. Tom drank quickly and put his head down on the bar, hoping that the pain would pass quickly. Of course he was too old for Ellen. He knew it. And now she knew it too. Why had Ellen called him 'gramps'? He had never seen any kind of mean spirit in her before today. But of course, she was just upset at him for keeping such a huge secret. It was all his fault. He knew he should have been truthful about his daughter with Colleen. He poured a second glass and drank that quickly too.

Once the third glass was poured, he noticed Chloe sitting on the couch. "What are you doing in here?" he growled at her. "Please leave, Chloe."

"I don't think Ellen would like me to leave you alone right now."

"I don't think Ellen particularly cares if I am alone at the moment, Chloe." Tom quickly sculled the third drink and poured a fourth without thinking.

The alcohol was already starting to numb the ache. He took the fourth glass and sat on the couch with Chloe. Maybe she could make sense of what was happening. "I don't understand, Chloe. She told me she loves me. She found out something. I don't know how. And suddenly, that's it. She doesn't love me anymore. Bam! Just like that."

"What did she find out, Tom?" Chloe asked slowly.

“I mean, how can someone love you one moment, and not love you the next?” Tom started crying a little and leant on Chloe’s shoulder. “I will always love her no matter what mistakes she makes.”

“Tom, please tell me what Ellen found out.” Chloe asked again.

“It’s only a small thing. But I wasn’t completely honest about it with her.”

“Keep going.”

“When I was younger, I did something stupid, and got my teenage girlfriend pregnant.”

“You did?” Chloe seemed surprised and maybe a little shocked.

Tom noted that Ellen had obviously not said anything about it. “My girlfriend gave the baby up for adoption. It was a girl but I never even got to see her.”

“What was your girlfriend’s name Tom?”

“I don’t understand how Elle could have found out. You must know, Chloe. How did she find out?”

“Tom, this is important, what was your girlfriend’s name?”

“Colleen.”

Chloe sank back into her seat.

Tom kept trying to explain, “Col threatened to tell Elle, but Hayden said she died at the bank, so she couldn’t have told anyone. But how did Ellen find out then?” The alcohol was really kicking in now. Tom’s vision blurred and he sank back into the couch too, sipping his drink now. The pain and the light were both starting to fade. Tom’s eyes were closing, and at last the drink provided its numbing comfort.

“I would never break up with you, if you were my boyfriend,” Chloe said quietly, watching him.

Tom didn’t register her words properly. “How could she do this? How could she leave me?” he whispered back.

Chloe slid closer to him on the couch and Tom felt her warm arms around his middle. She smelled nice, and it felt good to have someone there. He rested his hands on her shoulder, and felt the glass being slowly extracted from his hands.

Suddenly, Tom felt lips pressed against his. Young sweet lips. It must be Ellen. She’d returned. Ellen kissed him vigorously, parting his lips with her tongue.

“I want you, Tom,” she whispered. “I’ve wanted you for so long.”

Tom had dreamed about this moment, and here she was, finally ready at last. Tom felt his shirt being unbuttoned and his belt being removed. He picked her up, and groggily carried her to his bedroom. She kissed him the whole time.

He laid her down, noting that she was removing her own clothing quicker than he. His vision was still blurry, and his body very heavy. Ellen, who was now naked and soft, was removing his pants and kissing his chest. She pulled him down on top of her and wriggled underneath him, directing him with her hips and her fingers until he was finally within her.

“Oh Ellen, I love you,” Tom murmured in between her passionate and blinding kisses. “I love you so much.”

Ellen didn’t respond verbally but kissed him harder until it was finished. Tom rolled off her and onto the other side of the bed. His mind was so heavy. It felt so good to just lay there with his eyes closed, exhausted but happy.

At some point later that afternoon, Tom started to stir. Light from the fading afternoon sun started to penetrate his eyelids, and he opened one eye to look around. The light burned and he quickly shut it again. Was Ellen gone? He searched his memory, trying to remember what had happened. His head was throbbing loudly and his throat was dry.

With all the force he could muster, Tom pulled himself into an upright position in bed. He opened his eyes. The room was spinning and he felt groggy, but was finally able to see. Chloe was here. What the hell? He looked down, and realised he was naked. He pulled the

sheet over his nakedness. “Chloe, what the hell are you doing in my bedroom? Where did Ellen go?”

She looked over, with a disappointed but knowing sort of look. “You knew it was me, Tom. Let’s not pretend any different.”

Tom lay back down in bed, and remembered. “Oh, fuck.”

## Chapter Twenty-two

It was one week to the day when the man announced that it was finally time to leave.

Ellen looked up and gasped to see his face uncovered for the first time. He was unshaven and scruffy with wispy hair sticking in all directions. There were dark rings under both eyes and a large contusion on his forehead. The man must have gotten into a fight recently.

He swore, realising that Ellen had seen him and quickly returned with the balaclava on. “If you go to the coppers, I’ll come and find ya again. You got that.”

“I won’t talk,” promised Ellen, knowingly telling a lie. She intended to go straight home and then to the police station soon after. Luckily the man seemed to trust her.

It had been the longest week of her life. She hadn’t showered the whole time; the bucket and a bottle of water had been her only bathroom. The man had emptied it once a day, but the smell had built up anyway. She knew that he would be as glad to see her gone as she was to leave.

“So,” he said. “We’re going to give your idea a go.”

“Which idea was that?”

“The blindfold thing, remember.” He was trying to make things seem like her idea. “You keep the blindfold on until the car stops and then you get out. You can count to one hundred and then take it off. Got it?”

Ellen nodded. “Got it.” It wasn’t worth angering him at this final stage of the process.

“Here,” he said, passing her phone back to her. “Don’t use it until I’m gone. I wouldn’t want you to be stuck in the middle of nowhere without a phone.”

“Thanks,” Ellen said, trying to sound grateful and sincere.

He blindfolded her and led her to the back seat of his car, instructing her to lie face down. “Any trouble out of ya, and I bring the car back for another week.”

“I understand,” confirmed Ellen, although she knew he was unlikely to want that either. From her dark cold place on the back seat, she tried to provide him with assurance, “There won’t be any trouble.”

The car took off, sending excited shivers down her body. She would soon be free, and able to get something decent to eat. He had fed her mostly pizza, and other food that could be home delivered. She would soon be able to see Tom again, and even Chloe would be a sight for sore eyes. They must have been so worried about her.

She felt tension building in the front seat, and Ellen guessed that the man was annoyed about something. “So, I suppose you are going to see Tom again, even though you know everything about him,” he said grumpily.

Ellen thought about the DNA test again. She knew that she and Tom were not related, but didn’t want to upset the kidnapper unnecessarily. She tried to sound convincing, “Of course I’m not. That would be disgusting.”

He made a relieved grunt, and didn’t say anything further. The car sped up, which caused Ellen to slide forward a little in the back seat. She adjusted her position quickly, so he wouldn’t notice and stop the car. Finally, the car pulled over a few minutes later.

“This will do. There’s nobody around. Keep the blindfold on and get out slowly.”

Ellen obliged. Feeling her way around the backseat, she found the door, then the handle. The door opened easily and sweet fresh air hit her face. She stood up and closed the door

behind her. She thought he would feel more comfortable seeing her back, so she turned her back on the car and took a couple of hesitant steps in the opposite direction.

He obligingly drove away as quickly as he could. Ellen listened to the tyres skidding and slowly counted to five, before ripping off the blindfold. The car was still close enough to note some of the characters of his number plate – JQT 4 something. If he had noticed her staring after the car, he didn't stop or turn around.

Ellen ran as fast as she could up a nearby bank for safety. She crossed the bank onto a quiet suburban street and walked until she was standing at the intersection of two roads. Ellen was surprised and relieved to see a taxi passing, and hailed it quickly. Once inside, she explained that her wallet was at home and that she would pay him a bonus for getting her there safely. He appeared to have some sympathy towards her dishevelled appearance, and thankfully agreed to drive her.

Once the taxi was moving, Ellen pulled her phone out. There were twenty-five messages showing. She dialled Tom's mobile.

He answered almost immediately. "Elle. You're calling me. Does that mean you've forgiven me?"

"Tom, please listen. I've been kidnapped for the past week. I know we have a lot of talking to do. But I'm free, and on the way home. I think I'm in the west somewhere. The driver in the cab has agreed to take me home, even though I don't have any money on me."

"What?" Tom bellowed. "What do you mean you were kidnapped? By whom? What about all those messages you sent me?"

"They weren't from me. They were from him. The guy who took me."

"What guy?"

"I don't know who he was. But I saw his face this morning, and I'll be able to describe him to the police."

"Did he hurt you?"

"I'm just hungry and tired, and sore from the handcuffs. I'll be okay though."

"He kept you handcuffed? Elle..." Tom sounded horrified.

"Tom, I'm pretty tough, and I'm free now. Don't be upset."

He took a moment to breathe before asking another question. "I'm confused. Why did he send those text messages to me, from your phone?"

"Listen, it is all a bit hard to understand. I haven't had a chance to read any of the messages yet. But he told me that you killed someone he knows."

"What? I haven't killed anyone. That's crazy!"

"I know. He doesn't even know you. I know you wouldn't kill anyone."

"I don't understand, Elle. Whom did he think I killed?"

"Her name was Colleen Watson."

"Oh."

"He sent those messages to punish you I guess. He wrote to me before he took me. I should have showed you the letter." Ellen suddenly realised that Tom said 'oh' in a knowing sort of way. "What did you mean then, when you said 'oh'?"

"I heard that Colleen was killed recently."

"Did you know her?"

"Yes, but it's a long story."

"It's okay, Tom. There is a lot to talk about. There is something I haven't told you too. Something I found out when I went home recently. It's connected to the letter from this man. But I love you. That is what is important."

Tom breathed a sigh of relief. "There are a couple of things I need to tell you today, if possible. One of them involves Chloe, and one of them is related to the text messages that the

man sent me. Promise me that you won't read them, until we can talk in person. Can we meet somewhere now? Not at your place though."

"Um, sure. But I really need to have a shower and get something to eat. Then I should go to the police station and report what has happened. Maybe we could catch up after that?"

"I'd like to be there at the police station with you, for support."

"Thank you. That would be good. Listen, the cab is nearly home. I'll call you back soon. Let me clean up first. I don't want you to see me like this."

"Okay, I'll head home and be ready for your call."

"Talk to you soon."

"Elle."

"Yes."

"I thought I'd lost you. I love you so much. I love you more than I can tell you. I thought it was over, and I was devastated. I can't live without you."

"It will never be over between us. I love you too."

"Once this police business is over, let's go away together for a while."

"Anywhere you want."

"Bye."

"Bye."

## Chapter Twenty-three

"Chloe," Ellen called out, as she entered the apartment. What a wonderful apartment! It was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. There was no response. Everything looked the same as she remembered. It was as if she hadn't been gone for a week.

Ellen hurriedly found her wallet, and dashed back downstairs to pay the driver his fee plus a generous tip. Once she returned, Ellen locked the front door behind her, and kicked off her stinky, week-old running clothes and put them in the bin.

She looked in the fridge, and found Chinese takeaway. It looked fresh, perhaps from Chloe's dinner last night. It smelled amazing even though it was cold. Ellen's mouth started to water just looking at it. She grabbed a fork, and shovelled a large amount into her mouth, while still naked. She decided to take the food into the bathroom, and continued to eat while turning the hot water on. Food had never tasted so good.

The shower was incredible too, and before long she was clean again and no longer hungry. She brushed her teeth and got dressed, ready to head to the police station, when the front door opened.

"Ellen," Chloe shrieked. "Is that you?"

Ellen came into her view.

"Where the hell have you been?" Chloe asked loudly. "I've been so worried. I, I was about to report you as missing at the police station."

Ellen ran to Chloe and gave her a giant bear hug. "It's a long story. I'm just heading to the police station now. Will you come with me? Tom will meet us there too."

"Um, listen. There is something I need to tell you first."

"Can it wait?"

"Um, no. It's important."

"Well," said Ellen, looking at her watch. "I guess I can give you five minutes, then I've really got to report what happened."

"Let's sit on the couch," suggested Chloe. When they were both seated, she continued, "Elle, I'm pregnant."

"What?" That was the last thing Ellen expected Chloe to say. "Since when?"

“Well, I think I'm only a week pregnant. Too early for the test to show of course. But I missed my period, and my nipples are already starting to hurt. And my cousin VJ says that is a sure sign.”

“Chloe, that's great news,” said Ellen, trying unsuccessfully to read Chloe's expression, which was a mixture of cautiousness and restrained joy. “Isn't it?”

“I'm very happy, yes.”

“Well, what's the problem then?”

“I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to come out and say it.”

“Okay.”

“It's Tom's baby.”

Ellen's world stopped still. Dead still. Chloe stood at the end of a long tunnel in Ellen's mind. The rest of the world was suddenly blocked from her focus. She shook it off. “Sorry, what?” Ellen asked. “What do you mean? You think my Tom is the father of your baby?”

“Yes,” confirmed Chloe, no longer smiling.

Ellen shook her head. Chloe really had lost all sense. “It's not possible. Tom is not the father of your baby.”

“Yes, he is.”

“How could that be?”

“We became close while you were away.”

“You became close?” Ellen yelled in disbelief. “Sorry, what? You're telling me that while I was being kidnapped, you shacked up with my boyfriend? And now you're pregnant, even though I was only gone for a week. Is that what you're telling me?”

“You were kidnapped? Why didn't you say?”

“Well, I was trying to, when you started all this nonsense about Tom and you.”

“I'm sorry, Elle, but it's not nonsense. I know you like him too, but I love him. We are going to be very happy together, I just know.”

“Sorry, what?”

“I know it isn't easy to hear.”

“I was just talking to him. He told me that he loves me. That he wants us to go away together.”

“He doesn't know that I'm pregnant yet,” Chloe admitted. “I wanted to be sure before I told him.”

“But you are sure enough to tell me?” Ellen said.

“Yes. Tom will do the right thing by me when he finds out.”

“And that is?”

“He will marry me. And we will raise our child together.”

“Chloe, you are delusional.”

“Am I? Why did he make love to me, if you mean so much to him?”

Ellen looked down. There was no answer to that question obviously. Maybe that was what Tom was going to tell her. It couldn't be. How could he do this to her?

Chloe continued, “There's more Elle. You need to let him go. I'm doing you a favour here.”

Ellen's mind was spinning. How could there be any more? “How's that?”

“He is your father.”

The kidnapper and Chloe seemed to have developed the same mindset while she was away. “No, he's not. We did a DNA test, remember?” How could Chloe have forgotten the test results, which she organised herself.

“I, um, I need to tell you something about the test. I... did something to the DNA test before sending it in.”

“What?” asked Ellen slowly. She stood over Chloe, feeling the rage of betrayal flow through every vein in her body. “Tell me exactly what you did to the DNA test?”

“I sent them my tooth brush instead of yours.”

Ellen was stunned. Her DNA was never tested against Tom’s. This means she was back to square one, and could be related to Tom. In a quiet, defeated voice, Ellen asked, “Why did you do that, Chloe?”

“I had my reasons. But it doesn't matter now. I know the truth in any case. He is your father.”

“No. It’s not a guaranteed thing,” Ellen said. But then she remembered her conversation with Tom from before. He had said ‘oh’ in a funny voice. He had known Colleen Watson, her mother.

“Tom told me that he fathered a child, with his teenage girlfriend Colleen. That’s the name of your biological mother. And think about it, the dates all line up. That baby was you, Elle.”

Ellen's world was rocketing out of control, and she sank down onto the carpet.

Chloe continued harshly, “So, you can't love him that way. It's not right. And now that I'm pregnant, everything is falling into place. He won't be too upset because, he has me now, to look after him. And he is going to be so happy to hear about the baby.”

From her position on the floor, Ellen sobbed roughly and painfully. “I can't believe that he slept with you. That you slept with him. I can't believe you meddled with the DNA test, Chloe. You must really hate me to hurt me so much.”

“Try to look at the bright side. I mean, this is working out for both of us. I am going to become Tom’s wife but you are going to inherit a fortune, Elle, being Tom's daughter. Of course, you will need to split it with our future child,” Chloe said happily, patting her stomach. “I just realised. I am going to be your stepmother. How weird is that?”

Ellen looked at Chloe with new eyes. How could they have ever been friends? “I hate you. I hate you completely and I never want to look at you again. You are a mental case, Chloe.”

“Elle, I'm sorry this is hard on you. But you've got to snap out of it. I fell in love with Tom. We fell in love with each other, that's all.”

“He doesn't love you.”

Chloe hesitated. “Maybe not now, but eventually he will when he hears about the baby.”

“It doesn't work that way.” Ellen was starting to pull herself together and didn’t want to listen to anymore. “Listen, screw this, Chloe. Screw you too. I need to go to the police station. I can't think about all this right now.”

Ellen couldn't think about Tom being her father instead of her future lover. She stood up, pushed past Chloe and ran out of the apartment to the lift, slamming the door behind her. She intended to run all the way to the police station which was about four blocks away, but collapsed crying in a seat in front of the building. She was exhausted from her long week and from the fight with Chloe. She had never been so confused and hurt in her entire life.

## **Chapter Twenty-four**

Chloe watched the door slam, smiled a little, and went back to sit on the couch. She patted her stomach gently, and whispered, “Hello, little baby. I know you are in there.”

Suddenly there was a footstep in the hallway. A footstep where there should only be quiet. Chloe whipped her head around urgently. She recognised the man instantly. “Hayden,” she said, shocked. “What are you doing here?” Chloe tried to contain her panic. Why was he here? It didn't make any sense. How much had he heard? How did he get in? The questions were unending, and were being fired one after the other into her mind.

He walked confidently into view, acting as if he owned the apartment.

Chloe's eyes raced downwards from his face to his hands. What the hell? Her eyes bulged. "Why are you wearing plastic gloves, Hayden?"

He smiled darkly. "So I don't leave finger prints, Chloe. I don't want anyone knowing that I was here now, do I?"

"Why are you here? And how did you get in?" Chloe's anger started to kick in. She breathed deeply and relaxed a little. After all, it was just Hayden from the office. "Does Tom know that you like to break into Ellen's apartment?"

"If you must know, Chloe, I came here looking for evidence of where Ellen could be, when she came in. Tom has been a mess all week and, well, someone has to do something. I didn't buy the break-up story like everyone else did. I didn't want to startle her when she came in, so I stayed in the back bedroom. And then you came home too, and you said all those nasty things to her. Even though she has spent the last week who-knows-where after being kidnapped. You didn't care. You just sat her down and tried to break her heart by telling lies about you and Tom. She sounded pretty upset, wouldn't you say?"

"I didn't tell her any lies. And come to think of it, it's actually none of your business, Hayden."

"You'd be surprised."

"What does that mean? You know what? Save the explanation. I'd like you to leave now. Right now!" Chloe raised her voice, hoping that her tone would cause him to leave quickly. She had never noticed this in the office, but Hayden was actually quite creepy.

"Unfortunately, Chloe. You and I have some business to sort out." Hayden opened his jacket to reveal a gun. Chloe froze as he pointed the gun at her.

"What do you think you are doing? Are you crazy?"

Hayden walked towards the balcony and opened the sliding door. "Actually no, Chloe. I'm quite a rational person and therefore will present you with two choices for how this can end." His voice was cold and unemotional. Hayden removed another object from his jacket. It looked like a silencer, and he started to screw it onto the end of his gun. He did this without looking at the gun, like he had done it a hundred times before. He kept his dark eyes on her the entire time.

"And they are?" asked Chloe, starting to feel terrified by his every movement.

"You can jump off the balcony, or you can stay on the couch and I'll shoot you. It's completely up to you."

"Hayden," Chloe said, nervously laughing. "Don't be ridiculous. You've made your point. I'll be nicer to Ellen. I'll move out. Whatever you want."

"I'm not laughing, Chloe. I hired someone to take care of Colleen for me of course. But seeing that I'm here and you are here, I must as well take care of you myself."

"You killed Colleen?" Chloe asked, feeling shocked and stunned. She had assumed Ted's letter to Ellen was mistaken in regard to the murder accusation. "Please. Why are you doing this?" Chloe was starting to feel more panicky every moment the gun remained pointed at her.

Hayden rolled his eyes, as if bored. "The thing about Tom is that he can generate money like nobody else on this planet. And if Tom is making money, then I am making money."

"I can give you money," Chloe offered, in a weaker voice.

Hayden continued talking, ignoring her offer. "He doesn't know that I'm here of course. But being here and taking care of you is an important part of the job description. I remove the problems from his life. I keep him focussed on the task at hand. And right now, you are the biggest problem."

Chloe shook her head, unable to think of anything to say.

"So, enough talk, Chloe. Make your choice. Which one is it?"

“Please, Hayden. I don't want to die. I'm pregnant with Tom's baby.”

“I doubt that.”

“I really am. Okay, I admit that he thought it was Ellen at the time. But Tom is not going to want his unborn child to die. I really am pregnant.”

“You shouldn't be.”

“Why are you on her side? They are father and daughter. They shouldn't be together. It's wrong. He belongs with me.”

“Get up, Chloe. Move to the balcony. I'm going to count to ten.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

Ellen's breathing was returning to normal. She needed to put Chloe and Tom out of her mind, and focus on getting to the police station. One step at a time, one problem at a time. Ellen stood up and started to walk when she heard a scream, and then an explosion. It was close by. The horror unfolded about twenty metres from where she was sitting. A body had fallen from one of the windows onto the footpath in front of her apartment building.

Ellen rushed over, but was instantly repelled by the sight. The body was terribly mangled, but she was sure that it was Chloe. And she was sure that Chloe was dead.

A car on the street skidded to a halt, and a woman walking nearby started to scream uncontrollably. It was lucky the body didn't land on her as she was only about five metres away.

Ellen returned to the seat, and collapsed. She realised she was hyperventilating, and tried to slow down her breathing. What was going through Chloe's mind to make her jump to her death? She had seemed almost pleased with the pregnancy. Had Ellen read it all wrong? Perhaps Chloe had been ashamed and devastated with guilt? Perhaps Ellen should have stayed with Chloe, and said that everything would work out in the end.

Suddenly, Hayden from the office, Tom's best friend, was walking towards her.

“Ellen, you're alive!” he said. “Everyone has been so worried about you.”

Ellen stared at him with a blank confusion. What was Hayden doing here?

“Ellen, it's Hayden from work. Are you okay?”

Ellen nodded slowly.

“I was passing by and heard the commotion. Are you okay?”

Ellen couldn't answer as her breathing was still quite erratic. She pointed towards the body on the footpath. He didn't seem to have even noticed. Ellen put her head down and tried to focus on breathing normally.

“Does someone have a bag?” Hayden cried out, looking towards the small crowd of people gathering on the footpath. He took off quickly, but returned before long, with a small paper bag. “Breathe into the bag, Ellen. Try and slow your breathing. In and out.”

Ellen tried to do as he instructed and before long, the tingle in her hands and toes started to fade, and her breathing returned to normal.

“Good girl. That's good. Keep breathing slowly. You'll be okay shortly.”

Ellen was finally able to speak. “Thanks, Hayden. It's lucky you were here.”

“You were in shock I think. Why don't I get you out of here?”

Ellen let him put his arm around her, but she refused to move from the spot. “It's Chloe, Hayden. The jumper. It's Chloe, my flatmate.” Ellen pointed towards the body again, which could no longer be seen because of the crowd of onlookers. She could see someone on a phone, talking to the police, and giving directions.

“Oh dear,” said Hayden sympathetically. He finally seemed to notice the body.

“I can't believe she jumped,” Ellen said.

“She was a good friend of yours, wasn’t she? Well, I’m sorry for your pain. I’m sure Tom will be sorry to hear of this too.”

Ellen sat silently, as new tears were welling up in her eyes.

Hayden continued, “Well, I’m happy to see that you’re alive though. I know poor Tom has been suffering without you. Everyone at work has been worried too. Your sudden disappearance was very strange. I thought it was very, how should I say it... uncharacteristic, from what I know of you. I’m sure you have a good explanation for leaving, and for the text messages you sent Tom. You mean everything to him, and well, that makes you important to me too.”

“I’m not sure how much I mean to Tom actually, Hayden.”

Hayden turned to her with a bewildered expression on his face. “What makes you say that?”

Ellen shook her head. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got time to listen.”

Ellen briefly explained her whereabouts over the last week, and noticed a deep anger building in Hayden’s eyes, when she talked about the masked man. “I was on my way to the police station, but Chloe and I had a terrible fight, and then she jumped to her death. Everything is just so crazy. I don’t know what is going on in the world.”

“The important thing is that you are safe now, and that you and Tom can work everything out together.”

Ellen shook her head again, and started crying harder. This time her tears were for Tom; for the love she could never feel again.

“Tom is my father, Hayden. I just found this out from Chloe. We did a DNA test but Chloe now says that she switched the samples. He apparently admitted that he fathered a child with Colleen Watson, who is my biological mother.” Hayden tightened his grip around her shoulder, and she stared into his eyes.

“He is not your father, Ellen,” Hayden said.

Ellen squinted at him, through her tears. His eyes seemed so familiar, up close. She wiped her face dry, ready to listen. Hayden obviously knew something about the matter.

“I am.”

The words were shocking. How could that be? Neither of them spoke for a moment. Somehow this new information made sense to Ellen, although she couldn’t fathom how at this point.

“Listen,” he continued. “You’ve had a rough week. Why don’t we leave all the details til you’ve had a chance to recover a little.”

“No,” Ellen said firmly. “I need to know everything now. I can handle it.”

Hayden’s eyes assessed her carefully before continuing, “Well then, okay. But where to start?” Hayden rubbed his chin before continuing, “Tom and Colleen were a couple back at school. But he went away for a month. Colleen had too much to drink one night, and I took advantage of the situation. It’s not something that I’m proud of. Colleen obviously didn’t remember it the next morning because she never mentioned it to me. The next thing I know, Tom says he has gotten her pregnant. Well, I knew the child could be mine or his.”

“And? What happened next?”

“When you were five, Tom asked me to visit you, and see if your adoptive parents needed anything, financially speaking. Well, I knew you were mine right away. I mean we have the same skin and eyes for starters. My goodness, you look exactly like my younger sister did when she was your age. There is no way you are Tom’s kid.”

Ellen looked at Hayden with fresh eyes. A number of her features were indeed present in his face. It could be true. “Why did you hate me when I turned up at Satinol that day?”

“I was just surprised, that's all. Modelling is not the career path I would have led you towards, if I'd had the chance to raise you.”

“Oh.”

“Now, listen to me. I don't want Tom to know the fine details here - about my sleeping with Colleen, I mean.”

“I'm sorry, Hayden, but no. There can't be any more secrets in my life.”

“It's just going to upset him unnecessarily.”

“I was about to tell him about Colleen being my mother, so he is going to think he is the dad as a result.”

“Fine, but go and get a DNA test. Go together. It will be negative, and Tom will realise that Colleen tricked him all those years ago.”

“He is going to ask a lot of questions *if* the test is negative.”

“Of course it will be negative. Let him ask questions, but there is no need to tell him about my being your father.”

Ellen thought it through. “I suppose not.”

“Good girl.”

“There is something else that Chloe told me something before she jumped. She said that Tom and her made love.”

Hayden made a face as though the thought sickened him. “I find that hard to believe. Listen, go and talk to him. All I can tell you is that when he thought it was over with you, he was devastated. I've never seen him so low.”

“Well, before I can think through any of this, I need to be sure that he isn't my father. I love him you know. I want him to be my husband one day, more than I've ever wanted anything before.”

Hayden stared into Ellen eyes. “I guarantee the test will be negative. I guarantee you that I am your father. But the thing is, I really don't want to be. I never wanted to be a father. I'd like us to pretend that nothing has changed. You have parents that love you back home. I want that to be enough for you.”

“Oh, it is.” Although Ellen was glad to know who her biological father was, she had felt a coldness coming from Hayden since he sat down, and was happy to hear that he didn't want to develop some sort of later life father / daughter relationship.

Everything was starting to fall into place. Police were arriving and a team of men dressed head to foot in white. The police ushered them from the area, as they set up a visual barricade around Chloe's body.

“Well, I really should be off to the police station now, Hayden,” said Ellen.

Hayden nodded in agreement, and then left her without another word. It was as if he was cementing his decision not to be a father to her in any manner.

Ellen's phone rang from her pocket. It was Tom. Ellen happily answered the phone, content in the knowledge of who she was, and what she wanted for her future. There were a number of matters to discuss in due course, but Ellen felt Tom's love as she spoke to him. They agreed to meet in ten minutes, and Ellen hurried to make it in time.

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

Ellen saw Tom waiting for her outside the rendered grey facade of the city's main police station. It was obvious that he had taken precautions against being recognised - he was wearing one of his baseball caps pulled low and dark sunglasses. The disguise looked out of place with his business attire and was also unsuitable for this overcast, grey weather. However, it was working, and Ellen realised that nobody but her would recognise the man as Tom Bradley. It was his frenzied pacing which gave him away. He was obviously feeling the

same desperate urgency that she was, having been separated for so long. Ellen quickened her steps towards him.

Relief washed over Tom's face when he saw Ellen, and his arms swept her up into a tight embrace. "Elle, I missed you so much. I've been going crazy without you." He covered her face and lips in small kisses.

"I missed you too. You're all I thought about."

"If I'd known you were being held against your will, I would have done anything to find you. I would have been searching for you myself. I thought... I thought you didn't want to see me."

"I would never want that."

They kissed with more passion than Ellen could remember feeling before. It was so easy to push all the doubt and negativity away. Tom loved her, and no one else. She felt his longing and need for her. Chloe had been confused and mistaken.

Suddenly, a voice of reason pushed its way into Ellen's consciousness. There were a number of issues to be addressed, and this was not the time for enjoying the overwhelming feelings that kissing Tom was providing. The voice gave her strength, and she pulled herself out of Tom's arms. There was also a DNA test to organise before they should kiss again. "I'm sorry, Tom. I just need to deal with a few issues first, before I can think about us."

"No, I'm sorry. You're right. We need to deal with this matter, before we celebrate being together again. Forgive me."

"We will celebrate when this is over. I promise."

Tom held Ellen's hand as they entered the police station, whereby Ellen identified herself.

A look of recognition clicked in the officer's face, and he quickly led them into an interview room, away from the public entrance. After a few minutes, another officer entered the room, introduced himself, and informed Tom and Ellen that a recording device was now active. Ellen nodded, and recapped the details of her ordeal.

Suddenly, the officer asked a question which caught Ellen off guard. "Do you think this man targeted you for any particular reason?"

Ellen realised, too late, that she should have spoken to Tom before making a statement. The last thing she wanted was to implicate him in this matter, or to shock him with details he was unprepared for.

Tom seemed to understand. "It's okay, Ellen," he said. "Just answer the question honestly."

Ellen nodded. "The man never told me his name, but he said he was a friend of my biological mother, Colleen Watson. I wrote down some of his number plate."

Both sets of eyes facing Ellen suddenly widened in shock and surprise. Ellen could tell what Tom was thinking, and wanted to tell him that everything would be okay.

The officer spoke first. "You don't mean... are you talking about the victim killed in the recent bank robbery?"

"Yes."

"Let me get this straight," he continued. "Your mother was murdered recently, and a friend of your mothers decides to kidnap you afterwards."

"Yes."

"For what purpose would he do that? Why would he want to target you because of your connection to Colleen?"

"He wanted to hurt Tom." Ellen saw Tom's eyes widen. "He tried to convince me to break up with Tom while I was held captive. He blames Tom for Colleen's death."

"Why is that?" The officer looked suspiciously at Tom.

“Apparently Colleen was at the bank collecting money that Tom had agreed to give her, when it happened.”

“You mean the murder.”

“Yes.”

The officer looked towards Tom again, whose colour had drained out of his face. Tom suddenly came to, and shook his head a little. “I contacted the police when I heard about the shooting,” he said. “My statement should be on the file.” Tom turned towards Ellen. “I don’t understand. You told me that your parents live in Mansfield.”

“I recently found out that I was adopted.”

“This can’t be.” Tom shook his head, and touched his lips.

Ellen knew he was thinking about their kiss.

“What’s going on?” asked the officer, confused by their conversation.

Ellen ignored the officer’s question, and focussed on Tom’s obvious horror. “Tom, I’m not your daughter, if that’s what you are thinking.”

“Did Colleen have another child?”

“No. I believe she was mistaken about my paternity.” Ellen turned to the police officer to try and explain. “The man who took me believed that Tom was my biological father because this is what Colleen had told him. They were both concerned about the nature of our relationship,” Ellen said, indicating towards Tom and herself.

“I see.” The officer looked between the two of them, confused and worried about where the conversation had gone. “And that’s because the two of you are together, I presume.”

Tom remained silent.

“Yes,” Ellen answered.

“Go on.”

“Wait,” Tom said. “If I’m not your father, then who is?”

This was the question Ellen didn’t want to be asked. There should be no more lies between them, but Hayden wanted his role in her life to remain unspoken. “I… I don’t know,” she mumbled.

“How do you know that I’m not your father then?”

The officer made a weird face, before stating, “Listen. Let’s just finish dealing with the matter of the kidnapping, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. I’m sorry, officer,” Tom said, apologetically.

“Is there anything else you can tell us about the man in question?” the officer asked.

“No,” said Ellen. “But I saw his face without a mask for a couple of seconds, so I could work with someone to come up with a sketch.”

“Yes, that might be handy. Well, I think we have enough for the moment. Why don’t the two of you stay here for a few more minutes and talk?”

Ellen nodded. There was so much to talk though. “Thank you.”

“I’m going to turn the recording device off as well,” the officer said, turning a switch on the wall, as he walked out, shutting the door behind him.

“Elle, it seems that we have both kept some secrets from each other.”

Ellen looked at him – her eyes pleading to be forgiven.

Instead, he apologised. “I should have told you about the daughter Colleen and I gave up all those years ago. I was only a teenager, you see. It seems like a lifetime ago.”

“And she came to visit you recently?”

“Yes.” Tom looked up with sadness in his eyes. “I should have told you about that too. How did you know?”

“He told me.”

“Of course.”

“He told me that you paid her to stay quiet about your past.”

“It wasn’t like that. I offered Colleen some money to help her out of the desperate situation she was in. She had become someone quite different to the girl I remembered. When I heard about the shooting, I was devastated. Please believe that, Elle. The only reason she was at the bank was to pick up the money I was giving her, but I didn’t have anything to do with her death. You have to believe that.”

“I do. Of course, I do.”

“Why are you so sure that I’m not your father?”

“The kidnapper, the friend of Colleen, wrote me a letter, in which he claimed that I was the daughter of Colleen. He named you as my biological father too. When my parents confirmed that I was adopted, Chloe and I did a DNA test... we used the toothbrush you left at our apartment...”

“I see.”

“And it showed that the two of us aren’t related.”

“You should have told me this.”

“I know. I’m sorry about that.”

“Well, that’s good news, about the result. It means Colleen lied to me though. All these years I thought I had a daughter, and I’ve felt so guilty for not knowing her.”

“But...”

“What?”

“Well, Chloe told me this morning that she interfered with it.”

“With what?”

“With the DNA test.”

“What does that mean? Why would she do that?”

Ellen shook her head. Chloe’s actions still didn’t make any sense to her. “I don’t understand why, but she switched one of the samples.”

Tom sat up straight. “Wait. If she switched one of the samples, doesn’t that mean that we could still be related? I just can’t believe that I’m your father. I refuse to even think about it.”

“I don’t think we are related.”

“You seem so sure.”

“Well, the world wouldn’t make sense if we were. I don’t love you as a father.”

“I know.”

“And we don’t look anything alike.”

“That’s true. You know, I never noticed before, but you do have some of Colleen’s features.”

Ellen sighed. Part of her felt desperately sad that she didn’t get to meet her mother before the shooting.

“What does all this mean for us, Elle?”

“It means that we should go and have a new DNA test performed together, and with a physician that you trust.”

“I still don’t understand why Chloe would have interfered with the test.”

“She seemed to have some sort of feelings towards you.”

Tom lowered his eyes in shame. “There is something else I need to tell you. There was a time when you were away, on the day I received the text messages... I had too much to drink, and I thought it was you.”

Relief rushed through Ellen’s body. He didn’t love Chloe at all. Chloe had been there, and taken advantage of his state.

Tom continued, “I need to tell you what happened, Elle, and ask your forgiveness.”

“I already know what happened between the two of you.”

“You do?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“After I spoke to you this morning in the cab, I went home, and had a shower, you know. Chloe came home and...”

“She told you.”

“Yes. She said she was pregnant with your baby!”

“Oh my God! She says she’s pregnant.”

“After she told me about her missed period, I ran out. I was upset. Maybe, I should have stayed with her. I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

“After I left, she jumped off the balcony, Tom. She must have felt so guilty, or something. I don’t know what she was feeling. She seemed to be gloating at the time. I must have read her wrong. I don’t know.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She’s dead. She killed herself.”

“What?”

Ellen could tell how fast Tom’s head was spinning. She looked towards the door. “I’ll probably need to talk to the police about Chloe too, come to think of it.”

“It might be my fault, Elle. Ever since the incident at my place, I have refused to talk to her. She had been phoning every night, and I just ignored her messages. I even moved her to another office so she wasn’t near me during the day.”

“I don’t understand at all. She seemed kind of confident that you two would be together.”

“That’s ridiculous. Even if she was pregnant, it wouldn’t have happened. Even if you never forgave me, it wouldn’t have happened.”

“I know.”

“I’ll never be able to make it up to you. What I’ve done is unforgivable.”

“We will forgive each other. We’ll find a way.”

“I could only ever love you, Elle. Please know that.”

“I do. Everything will work out.”

There was a rap on the door, and the officer returned, with another policeman in toe.

“Ms Jackson, Mr Bradley, this is Sergeant Barry Jones. He is familiar with the Watson case, and thought he might be able to assist with this matter.

The policeman looked at Ellen for a good moment, before opening his laptop. “I also knew Ms Watson, prior to the events of July 14.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry for staring, but you remind me of her so much.”

Ellen nodded, and wondered how her mother had known a police sergeant.

“I have a photo database of Colleen’s known associates.”

“Was she some sort of criminal?”

He paused for a moment. “You might say that.”

“Oh,” said Tom, looking just as surprised.

The sergeant brought up six mug shots, and Ellen made an unusual sound of anguish, recognising the man straight away. “That’s him. Top right.” She pointed to the man’s photo.

“Are you sure, Ellen?” the sergeant asked.

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Ms Jackson. That’s all we need for now.”

“Wait. Who is he?”

“His name is Ted Blake. He recently served time for armed robbery, but was let out for good behaviour. This charge ought to keep him off the streets a little longer.”

“Do you think you will find him, sergeant?”

“Yes. I guarantee you that.”

With the sergeant's assurance, Ellen felt relief sweep through her body. The saga was nearly over.

Tom and her left soon after, driving directly to the office of his personal physician.

## **Epilogue**

Three days later, Tom was thinking about the DNA test results. They were due today. His physician had promised to call Tom's mobile as soon as the results were known.

As if his thoughts had prompted the phone to ring, it suddenly chirped. Tom answered it immediately. "Tom Bradley."

"Tom, this is Dr Walsh. I have the results of the DNA test."

"I'm ready, doctor."

"Actually, I'd rather you came in and discussed the results in person."

"Please, doc. Please tell me over the phone. I need to know now."

Dr Walsh breathed in and out while thinking. "Alright. Just promise me that you won't do anything rash for at least ten minutes."

"Agreed."

"It's bad news, I'm sorry."

Tom's heart sank. Of course Ellen would be in his life going forward, one way or another. But he didn't want her as a daughter. They had done things which could not be undone. He wanted her as a wife.

Dr Walsh continued. "There is a ninety-seven per cent probability that Ms Jackson is not your biological daughter. I'm sorry, Tom."

Tom's heart leapt high into the air. The doctor had assumed he was trying to confirm his paternity to Ellen. "Is there any chance that the result is wrong, doc?"

"I know you are disappointed, but there is no other way to interpret the results. Ninety-seven per cent is very high. She is not your daughter, and not related to you in any way, I would say."

"Thank you, Dr Walsh. I appreciate you rushing through the lab work and phoning me with the result. "

"I'll see you soon, Tom. Take care."

"Goodbye."

Tom smiled as he ended the phone call. It was time for Ellen and him to get away – somewhere far from this city. They would spend quality time together, with no work holding them apart. Their love and commitment was going to be formalised, and one day soon, Ellen would become his wife.

The end

## **Note from the Author**

If you enjoyed my book, please support my writing by leaving a review or purchasing the sequel. Thank you.

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