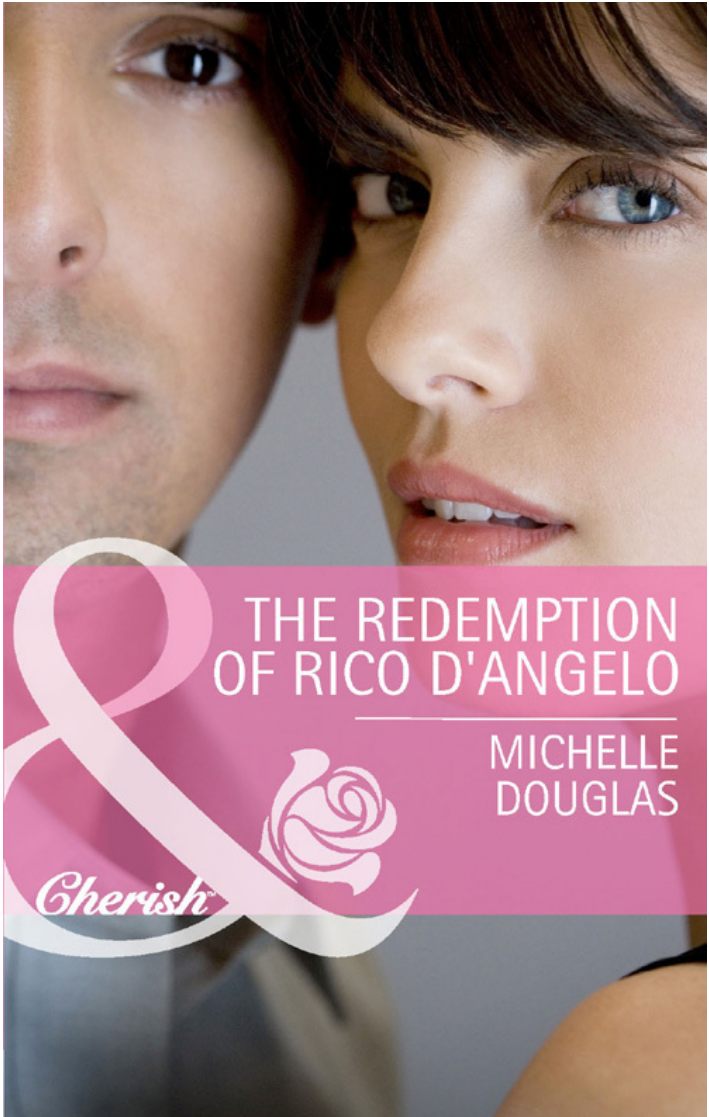
THE REDEMPTION OF RICO D'ANGELO
MICHELLE DOUGLAS
Cherish

Мишель Дуглас
The Redemption of Rico D'Angelo

Аннотация

Opening his charity café should be enough for gorgeous Rico D’Angelo to finally put the regrets of his childhood behind him… but it’s not. Until Neen Cuthbert walks through the door and brings an unexpected blast of sunshine!Can he finally let go of his past and take this chance at happiness?

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The man behind the Italian good looks…

Gorgeous Rico D'Angelo is single-handedly saving the world, one disadvantaged teen at a time. The opening of his charity café should be enough for him to finally put the regrets of his childhood behind him…but even as the ribbon is cut on opening day it's not enough.

Until new hire Neen Cuthbert walks through the door and offers an unexpected blast of sunshine! She's had her fill of misguided do-gooders, but something tells her Rico is different. Neen won't let him push her away—especially now she's discovering that Rico might just need her most of all.…

Neen reached out to trace the pattern on her teacup. “Why does this project mean so much to you?”

Rico blew out a breath. “As soon as the café is up and running and I have the figures to prove its success, I can start canvassing for funds for additional cafés in other parts of the city.”

“You want to run a chain of charity cafés?”

“Why not?”

She couldn’t think of a single reason. Except… “Don’t you ever stop for fun?”

He didn’t answer that.

Praise for Michelle Douglas

“Readers will enjoy a modern spin on this friends-to-lovers tale.”

—RT Book Reviews on FIRST COMES BABY

“Douglas’s story is romantic, humorous and paced just right.”

—RT Book Reviews on BELLA’S IMPOSSIBLE BOSS

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stunning Michelle Douglas romance that's going straight onto my keeper shelf!"

—CataRomance on THE MAN WHO SAW HER BEAUTY

The Redemption of Rico D'Angelo

Michelle Douglas

www.millsandboon.co.uk

At the age of eight **MICHELLE DOUGLAS** was asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. She answered, "A writer." Years later she read an article about romance writing and thought, *Ooh, that'll be fun*. She was right. When she's not writing she can usually be found with her nose buried in a book. She is currently enrolled in an English Masters programme for the sole purpose of indulging her reading and writing habits further. She lives in a leafy suburb of Newcastle, on Australia's east coast, with her own romantic hero…husband Greg, who is the inspiration behind all her happy endings.

Michelle would love you to visit her at her website:

www.michelle-douglas.com.

To my wonderful niece, Abbey,
who loves books as much as I do.

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CHAPTER ONE

RICO STARED AT the application in front of him—again—before blowing out a breath and slumping in his chair. He'd had such high hopes for this project—hopes of finding someone as fantastically enthusiastic about it as he was.

His lips twisted. Hopes of finding someone not only fantastically enthusiastic but with first-rate qualifications and solid experience to bring to the table as well. A day and a half into the interviews, however, and he'd found he could kiss that notion goodbye.

He straightened. Punching a button on his intercom, he barked, 'Is Janeen Cuthbert here yet, Lisle?'

'Not yet, but there's still ten minutes until her appointment.'

'Thanks.'

Wasn't it an unspoken rule to arrive ten minutes early for a job interview? He scowled at the wall opposite. Restaurant managers, it seemed, worked to their own schedules. Not that Hobart's restaurant managers were beating a path to his door for the opportunity to run a charity café.

He slammed Janeen Cuthbert's file shut.

Pressing thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, he tried to breathe through the pounding at his temples, tried to push it back and concentrate. He'd thought he'd be able to find one community-inspired restaurant manager with a few street smarts in this rotten city.

He wasn't greedy. He only wanted the one. How hard could that be?

He'd had community-inspired people, all right. He'd had sunny, bright and earnest applicants without a scrap of experience between them. Nice people. But he could see the likely outcome all too vividly. The boys would walk all over them, would dishearten and disillusion them. There'd be tears and tantrums. And then they'd be gone, leaving him in the lurch. This project was too important to risk that.

He glanced at his watch. Five minutes to two. If Janeen Cuthbert wasn't here at two on the dot then she could just turn

around again and march straight back home. She might at least have worked in a café, but he needed someone who would take this job seriously. He needed someone fully committed to making this café work.

For the next five minutes he drummed his fingers against his desk. He didn't turn to look out of his window at the busy Hobart thoroughfare below. His wasn't one of the offices that afforded a glimpse of the harbour. As he was rarely in his office, however, he didn't much care. As a project manager, he didn't even have his own secretary. He had to share Lisle with two other governmental project officers. He didn't much care about that either. He'd long since come to the conclusion that if you wanted a job done, you did it yourself.

He glanced at his watch. Two p.m.

He went to push the button on the intercom, but Lisle beat him to it. 'Janeen Cuthbert is here for her two o'clock appointment, Rico.'

He gritted his teeth and swallowed. 'Send her in.'

He counted to three. A soft knock sounded on his door. He swore under his breath. That knock was too soft. It was the kind of knock that lacked backbone. His hands fisted. Darn it! He'd had enough of sweet and nice and inefficient to last him a lifetime.

He tried to uncurl his lip. 'Come in.'

When he clapped eyes on his penultimate interviewee, however, he immediately reassessed his prior judgement. Ms

Cuthbert didn't look as if she lacked a backbone. In fact, she looked boiling mad, as if she were about to explode. She hid it well, but he'd spent too many hours working with troubled youths not to recognise the signs—the glitter in her eyes, the colour high on her cheekbones and the flared nostrils. Even if it was all tucked away beneath a polite smile.

He stared at her and his shoulders unhitched a fraction. She might be a lot of things, but he was suddenly certain the one thing she wasn't was meek and mild.

'Mr D'Angelo?'

He kicked himself forward from behind his desk. 'Yes.'

'Pleased to meet you. I'm Neen Cuthbert.'

She strode across to him, hand extended. It was bright red, as if it had recently been scrubbed to within an inch of its life. He briefly clasped it and then stepped back. She wasn't wearing pantyhose and her knees were bright red too.

It wasn't her hands or her knees that held his attention, though. Her dove-grey suit sported four equidistant pawprints—two on her thighs and two just above her breasts. No amount of scrubbing could hide those. For the first time in two days he found himself biting back a smile.

When his gaze returned to her face, her chin went up a notch, as if daring him to say one word about those pawprints.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Neen.' He kept his voice even and some of the glitter eased from her eyes. He pursed his lips and then shook his head. 'I suspect your afternoon has been as

stressful as mine.'

A flash of humour lit up her face. 'It's that obvious, huh?' She glanced down at the pawprints, her lips twisting. 'It has been something of a trial,' she allowed.

'Please, take a seat.' He motioned to a chair. Moving back around his desk, he stabbed a finger to his intercom. 'I know it's going above and beyond, Lisle, but could we possibly have coffee in here?'

'Coming right up,' she shot back cheerfully.

To his mind, the other two project managers took thorough advantage of their shared secretary. Rico didn't see coffee making as part of Lisle's duties. In this instance, though, he was prepared to make an exception.

'That was kind of you.' Neen's glance was direct. 'Truly, though, you didn't have to do that on my account.'

He waved that away. 'You may not thank me once you've tasted it.' It wouldn't be café standard by any means. 'But, to be perfectly frank, I could do with a hit of caffeine.'

'I take it your interviews aren't going well?'

He stiffened at her question, realising how unprofessional he must appear. He shifted on his chair, fighting a frown. He'd let his guard down. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

He shook his head. He needed a holiday.

He shook it again. He didn't have time for a holiday.

'It's hardly surprising, though, is it?' she said, obviously

misinterpreting the shaking of his head. 'You want a highly qualified and experienced restaurant manager, but the wage you're offering is hardly attractive.'

'And yet you applied.'

She pointed to her file on his desk. 'As you'll have no doubt ascertained from my résumé, I'm not what you'd call highly experienced.'

'And yet you still applied?'

'And you decided to interview me.'

Okay, she definitely had backbone. She might not be cheerful and earnest, but she definitely had backbone, and that trumped cheerful and earnest any day. At least for this particular job.

Lisle came in with two steaming coffees. After she'd left he asked, 'What happened?' He gestured to the pawprints.

He made it a vague gesture, because he didn't want her to think he was checking out her chest. He hadn't been going to ask, but her criticism of the wage he was offering made him dispense with the niceties. Besides, he held those pawprints entirely responsible for his momentary lapse. If he found the answer to their mystery, he could then concentrate on getting this interview, and himself, firmly back on track.

She'd started to lift her mug, but at his words she set it back down with a thump. She didn't spill a single drop, though. 'Nothing today is going as planned. I came in here prepared with a pretty speech about why I'm the best applicant for your job. Instead I make snarky comments about the remuneration

package and...'

Just for a moment her shoulders sagged. In the next instant, however, she straightened them again. Her eyes suddenly danced and she seized her coffee and sipped it.

'I mean to enjoy this,' she raised her mug in his direction, 'because I'm guessing it doesn't much matter what I say from here on. And after the day I've had I'm not going to beat myself up about it.'

She was mistaken if she thought she was out of the running. Not that he had any intention of telling her so. Yet. 'Well?' He raised an eyebrow.

She cradled her mug in her hands and crossed her legs. One of those red knees peeped out at him. 'My flaky neighbour has landed me with her dog—gifted him to me, would you believe?—while she jets off to Italy for some indefinite amount of time on multiple modelling contracts.'

He gestured. Again, vaguely. 'So the dog...?'

'Montgomery.'

'Did that?'

'He did a whole lot more than that. You should see the state of my navy suit and my pantyhose.'

She lifted the mug to her lips and took a sip. He watched, fascinated, as she closed her eyes in what he guessed was bliss. He reached for his own mug and took a sip too. It was good. He let out a breath he hadn't even been aware of holding. The tightness in his shoulders eased a fraction more.

'It's hardly Monty's fault, though. Audra's never trained him, and at fourteen months he's not much more than a puppy still.'

He stared at those pawprints. 'What kind of puppy?'

'A Great Dane.' She shook her head in disgust. 'No pretty little Chihuahua or toy poodle for Audra. Oh, no. She thought that a cliché. She wanted to be the model with the Great Dane. She thought the photo opportunities would be fabulous.'

'But?'

She suddenly grinned. It changed her entire bearing. Backbone: tick. Sense of humour: tick. Whoever won the position would need both of those in spades.

'Oh, the photo opportunities were there, but unfortunately they weren't to Audra's advantage.'

A chuckle broke free from his throat. The images Neen's quick sketch evoked were alive in his mind. 'Why did you agree to take him?'

'Ah, well, that would be because she snuck him into my apartment while I was in the shower, left a note explaining it all and then hightailed it for the airport.'

The act of someone who knew Neen couldn't be taken advantage of. 'What are you going to do with Monty?'

He shifted on his chair. Would she call the pound? He could hardly blame her. But...

'I guess I'll have to find a home for him.' She sent him a smile of such extraordinary sweetness it momentarily stole his breath. 'Mr D'Angelo,' she purred. 'You look exactly like a man in need

of a dog.'

He stared. He floundered. Finally common sense reasserted itself. 'I'm not home often enough. It wouldn't be fair to the dog.' Inside him, a grin built. The minx!

All of her sweetness vanished. 'If only everyone who decided to get a dog had half as much foresight,' she muttered, and the grin inside him grew. 'There should be some kind of dog-ownership test that people have to pass before they're allowed to get a dog.'

'The same could be said for having kids.'

She stared at him for a moment. 'Your troubled youth, huh?'

'Disadvantaged,' he corrected.

'Semantics,' she shot back.

'I'm not saying they don't have issues. But all they need is a chance.' Which was where he came in. 'The purpose of the café is to train underprivileged youths in basic waiting and kitchen-hand skills, with a view to finding them permanent employment in the hospitality industry.'

She drained her mug, set it on the desk and then leaned towards him, her eyes suddenly earnest. 'Mr D'Angelo, I wish you every luck in your endeavour. I also thank you for the brief respite and the coffee.'

'Neen, you're not out of the running.'

She'd started to rise, but at his words she fell back into her chair. She gaped at him. 'I'm not?'

'No.'

Her eyes suddenly narrowed. 'Why not?'

He laughed. It was sudden and sharp and took him completely by surprise. But...a healthy dose of suspicion wouldn't go astray in the job either, and Neen was ticking all his boxes. 'Not all the applicants have been a total waste of time,' he assured her. 'There's a couple who have potential.'

'But?'

'I'm questioning their commitment.'

She sat back and folded her arms. 'Why aren't you questioning mine?'

He didn't even need to think about it. 'You're honest, and I need that in an employee. You also have grit and a sense of humour, and I suspect both of those traits will be necessary in this particular job.'

She unfolded her arms. 'So you're not going to sugarcoat the position and tell me it's the job of a lifetime?'

'It'll be a challenge, but a rewarding one.'

'Hmm.' She didn't look convinced on that last point.

'And you're a dog-lover.' That made a difference. Dog-lovers generally got on well with kids, and—

'No, I'm not.'

He blinked.

'I loathe dogs. I can't stand them. They're noisy, smelly, stupid creatures. I'd much rather have a cat.'

It was his turn to gape. 'But you're still trying to find Monty a home. You haven't given him up to the pound.'

'It's not the dumb dog's fault his owner has abandoned him.'

He leaned towards her. 'That means, then, Neen Cuthbert, that you're a person of integrity. And that definitely ticks my boxes.' The day suddenly seemed much much brighter.

'What about my lack of experience?'

Her lack of experience was an issue, but... He pulled her résumé towards him. 'You've been working in the hospitality industry in one shape or another since you finished high school eight years ago.'

She nodded. 'I've been a waitress, a short-order cook, and I've worked for two big-name catering firms.'

None of her positions, however, had carried the title of restaurant manager. 'I see you recently completed a small business course?'

'My long-term goal is to open my own café.'

'That's ambitious.'

'I think one should dream big, don't you?'

He did.

'What do you think you can bring to the advertised role, Neen?'

Her eyes danced again. 'Besides honesty, grit, a sense of humour and integrity, you mean?'

She was right. He opened his mouth. With a superhuman effort he snapped it shut again. He still had one more applicant to interview. And he wasn't given to impulsive gestures or decisions.

She sobered. 'I'll work hard, Mr D'Angelo. That's what I have

to offer you.'

The way she said it made it sound like the most valuable thing in the world. And it occurred to him that perhaps it was.

'I've been acting manager on numerous occasions at most of the establishments I've worked for, but it has never been part of my job description. I want the experience your job will provide me. In return for that I will work hard. And I won't let you down.'

He believed her. There was just one final question. No, two. 'Why are you currently unemployed?'

She hesitated. 'There are personal reasons.'

He leaned back and waited to see if she would tell him.

She stared at him as if assessing him, as if weighing whether he needed to know the truth and if she could trust him with it. Eventually she lifted one shoulder. 'Earlier in the year I was left an inheritance. I planned to put the dream of my own café into action at once.' She smoothed her hair back behind her ears. 'The will, however, is being contested.'

She didn't need to tell him what a blow that had been. He could see that all too clearly. 'I'm sorry.'

She lifted her chin. Her cool blue eyes were veiled. 'These things happen. Until it's sorted out it seemed wise to find another job.'

She obviously wasn't the kind to sit back and wring her hands. He had the distinct impression that, like him, in times of stress she liked to keep busy.

He picked up his pen and tapped it against her file. 'One final

question. Would you be prepared to sign a two-year contract?'

'No.' She spoke without hesitation.

The weight slammed back to his shoulders. The day went dank and grey.

'I would be prepared to sign a twelve-month contract.'

It was something, he supposed. But it wasn't enough. It was a shame, because on every other point Neen Cuthbert had been perfect.

* * *

The next morning Rico sifted through his shortlist of three applicants. He rang the nominated referees for his first two choices.

He discounted the most experienced after speaking to the man's former employer. 'Talented pastry chef with five years' worth of managerial experience' did not make up for 'hot-headed and temperamental'. Hot-headed and temperamental were the last things this project needed. He needed a manager who would create a nurturing environment.

Nurturing and no-nonsense. Which immediately brought Neen Cuthbert to mind.

He thrust her out again and checked the references for his other shortlisted candidate. They were impeccable.

On impulse he seized Neen's file and rang her referees too. Their testimonials were glowing. If he didn't give her the job they'd take her back in an instant. 'I want the experience.'

Rico chewed the end of his pen. He paced the length of his

office. This job was too important for him not to get it right. He strode back to his desk and set Neen and the other applicant's résumés side by side. Neen's rival had a fraction more experience, but...

Why on earth was he dithering? Helen Clarkson was prepared to sign a two-year contract. Commitment!

He swept the applications up and shoved them back into his folder, then strode out into the outer office. 'Lisle, can you phone Helen Clarkson and offer her the position? If she accepts she'll —'

'I just got off the phone to Helen. She's accepted a position in Launceston.'

She'd what? What about all her talk of commitment?

Lies. All lies!

Neen hadn't lied.

'Fine!' he snapped. 'Offer the position to Neen Cuthbert. Tell her she'll need to come in and sign the contract one day this week.'

'Roger, Rico.'

He slammed back into his office. He had a mountain of paperwork to get through and grant acquittals to write. Not to mention grant applications. Securing funding for his projects was an ongoing challenge and not something with which he could afford to fall behind.

An hour later he threw down his pen. Too much of this bureaucratic red tape always set his teeth on edge. He strode to

the door and flung it open. 'Did you get onto Neen Cuthbert?' he barked at Lisle.

'She was delighted to accept.'

'Excellent.' He glanced at his watch. 'She lives in Bellerive, doesn't she?'

Lisle flicked through her files. He could have told her not to bother—he'd practically memorised Neen's file down to the last detail.

Lisle held up the file. 'Yes, she does.'

He took it. 'I have a lunch appointment with the manager of Eastlands Shopping Centre.' He was trying to convince the man—so far unsuccessfully—to sponsor a programme to provide traineeships for unemployed youth in the area. 'While I'm on that side of the harbour I'll drop the contract off to Ms Cuthbert.'

Lisle handed him a copy of the contract without a word. She'd grown accustomed to his bull-in-a-china-shop approach long ago. 'You know Harley's job is going to be advertised next week, don't you? You should think about applying, Rico.'

'I'm more use on the ground, Lisle.'

'You're wasting your talents.'

'I'm happy where I am.'

He was making a difference. A real difference. And happiness didn't come into it.

* * *

'Oh, for pity's sake, Monty, give it a rest,' Neen muttered under her breath. She reached over and ramped up the volume

on the radio in the hope of drowning out the dog's great booming bark.

She'd get complaints from the neighbours if this kept up, but...

Her hand tightened around the red pepper she'd started to dice. She just needed half an hour to get the worst of tonight's dinner prepared and then she'd let him back inside. Without her full attention he'd wreck her apartment. Knowing she was inside, however, he was obviously intent on barking...and barking...and barking until she did.

She knew he was lonely. She knew he missed Audra. She knew he simply craved some company. Poor dumb dog. If he could be trusted just to sit at her feet and chew a bone...

She glanced around at her chewed-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life furniture and shook her head. She opened the kitchen window instead. It looked out over the courtyard. 'Hey, Monty!'

He came charging up. Barking, barking, barking.

'If you keep up with that kind of nonsense,' she chided, 'how will you ever hear what I have to say?'

He quietened for a moment. The radio blared. She dragged in a breath. For good or ill, she had a way with dogs. 'What we need to work out is the kind of home that would be best for you. Do you have any thoughts on the subject? I'm thinking no small children, as you'll only knock them down, and—'

He started barking his head off again. She continued to slice the onions, cabbage and red peppers for this evening's stir-fry.

'What I was thinking was a lovely big property where you

could run about to your heart's content, and...'

He didn't stop barking. He no longer looked at her, just barked and barked. Her chopping slowed. She glanced at him again. In fact, he seemed to be barking at a point behind her and—

Her nape prickled. In the reflection of the window, something moved.

Whirling around, she held the knife out in front of her, every muscle tensed and readied.

A broad male figure loomed in the kitchen doorway. Adrenaline flooded her. Her heart clawed up into her throat. She gripped the knife harder.

The figure raised his hands very slowly in a gesture of non-aggression and then he backed all the way down the hallway and out of her house until he stood on the other side of her screen door. Only then did her pounding brain recognise who it was that stood on the other side. Rico D'Angelo. Her new boss.

Her heart didn't stop hammering. Her hands didn't unclench.

Rico raised a hand and knocked. She didn't hear it. Undoing her fist enough to reach out, she turned off the radio. 'Quiet, Monty!'

Amazingly, the animal obeyed her.

'Neen, I'm sorry I frightened you.'

She suddenly realised she was still holding the knife. With burning eyes she threw it into the sink. She gripped her hands together at her waist and tried to stop their shaking, tried to swallow the lump lodged in her throat. The lump dislodged itself

to settle in her chest.

'Mr D'Angelo.' The shaking wouldn't stop. 'I...uh...come in.'

He shook his head. 'I don't think that's a good idea. I just wanted to drop this off.' He held up a sheaf of papers.

Monty promptly started barking again and her head throbbed in time with each booming sound. God, how to explain? She pressed her shaking fingers to her temples.

'How about a walk? I take it that's Monty, there? It sounds as if he could do with one.'

Gradually, little by little, her heart rate started to slow. 'I'm sure you're busy.'

'I dropped by so we could discuss a few things and to get your signature on the contract.'

The normality of their conversation after her over-the-top reaction finally returned her pulse to normal.

'I know I should've rung first, but I had an appointment in the area so I thought I'd drop by on the off-chance you'd be home.'

She needed to get out of the house. She needed to find a sense of equilibrium again. 'If you're sure you have the time?'

'I have the time.'

'I'll just get Monty's leash.'

She clipped the lead to Monty's collar, led him through the house and locked her front door. She averted her gaze from the carport opposite and her car, with its four slashed tyres. She hoped her enigmatic employer hadn't noticed them. She bit back an oath, her hand tightening on Monty's lead. Mr D'Angelo must

think he'd employed an utter fruitcake!

'I'm pleased you accepted the position of café manager, Neen. I have great hopes for the café and I know you're the perfect person to head this up.'

His smile was too kind, too compassionate...too knowing. His tone too well modulated. She bit back a sigh. 'You saw the tyres, didn't you?'

Monty chose that moment to try and yank her arm out of its socket. Without a word, Rico reached across and took the lead from her. He smelled of cold air and peppermint.

'It happened today?'

She folded her arms and nodded. 'Which begs the question, why was I so careless as to leave the front door unlocked, doesn't it?'

'Monty?'

She bit back a sigh. 'It was all I could do to stay on my feet when I returned from the supermarket. Monty is always so...so delighted to see me.' She could have sworn that she'd locked the screen door, but she mustn't have. So foolish.

She closed her eyes and hauled in a breath. Ever since she'd received the news that Grandad's will was being contested, her head had been in turmoil. Not to mention her heart. Her concentration was shot to pieces. It had to stop! She had to start paying attention again. She had to.

'Have you reported the incident to the police?'

'Yes.' She swallowed and risked glancing up at him. 'Mr

D'Angelo, I'm very sorry for...um...' Her stomach churned. What if she had stabbed him? 'I'm a bit jumpy at the moment.'

She made him stop when they reached the end of the block.

'Monty, sit.' The dog stared up at her with his big dopey eyes. She made a hand signal. 'Sit.' He continued to stare at her. She folded her arms and looked away. Eventually he sat. 'Good boy.'

She fondled his ears and then nodded to Rico. They set off across the road and then turned right towards the park and Bellerive beach.

'He's improving,' she murmured, more for something to say than anything else.

'Look, Neen, I'm the one who should apologise. I shouldn't have come in like I did and I'm sorry I startled you.'

His eyes were dark, almost black. She didn't doubt his sincerity for a moment.

'I knocked and knocked, and I could see you at the end of the hallway. I called out...'

'But between Monty and the radio—' and her own too-busy thoughts '—I couldn't hear you. It's not your fault, Mr D'Angelo. You don't need to apologise.'

'Rico,' he ordered.

The name suited him in one respect, with his dark Italian good looks, but Rico sounded breezy and carefree. She wasn't sure she'd ever meet anyone less carefree in her life. He was a man on a mission—an important mission. And, like most do-gooding types with a quest to save the world, he carried that world around

on his shoulders.

They might be broad shoulders, but nobody could carry around that kind of weight forever.

He suddenly stopped and swung to her. Monty strained on the lead. It could pull her completely off balance, but it barely seemed to register with Rico.

'Look, I couldn't help noticing that yours were the only tyres slashed. Is something up, Neen? Is there something I ought to know?'

A weight pressed down on her chest when she realised she'd have to tell him—in the interests of his staff's safety. It grew heavier when it occurred to her that in their interests he might in fact retract his job offer.

For a moment she could hardly speak. The sun that glinted off the expanse of water in front of them dimmed. Finally she gestured to the remaining distance between them and the beach. 'Let's go down there and let Monty tire himself out.'

When they reached the sand Rico's hand hovered uncertainly on the lead's catch. 'Are you sure he won't run away?'

No, but... 'He'll stay on the beach,' she promised. She'd learned that much.

Without further ado he released Monty and the giant dog charged helter-skelter straight into the water, spraying it in all directions.

Rico shook his head. 'You're going to have sand everywhere when you get home.'

'Sand is something I can vacuum up. And it's preferable to him chewing the furniture. An hour of this and he'll be a relative lamb for the rest of the afternoon.'

He turned to her, hands on hips. She shrugged. There didn't seem much point in delaying the inevitable conversation.

'The slashed tyres aren't an isolated incident. The police are aware of the situation but there's not much they can do.' She pulled in a breath. 'Four months ago I broke up with a man who, it appears, can't take no for an answer.'

'And he's persecuting you? Threatening you?'

She lifted one shoulder. 'I have no proof that today's tyres are his handiwork.' But she knew in her gut it was. 'I've taken a restraining order out on him.'

And she still couldn't believe she'd left her front door unlocked!

CHAPTER TWO

'NEEN?'

Rico touched her arm and Neen started. He immediately backed up, his eyes darkening. She wanted to reach out and tell him it wasn't him, but...

But what? Was she going to let Chris turn her into a timid mouse? Was she going to let his behaviour rule her life?

She leaned across and clasped Rico's arm. 'I'm sorry. I was a million miles away.'

Beneath the crisp cotton of his business shirt, his arm was firm and warm, vibrant, and her fingers were curiously reluctant

to release him. For a few precious seconds the solid feel of him reminded her there was more in this world than her worries and troubles.

And while she continued to focus so closely on her troubles she was missing out on a lot of those other things—on laughter and friendship and...and simply being young. She'd applied to manage Rico's café hoping it would provide her with some much-needed distraction. Eventually Chris would get bored and give up. She crossed her fingers.

In the meantime she would not sit around and spin her wheels while she waited to see what the outcome of Grandad's will would be. She'd get experience, she'd become even better at her job and...

She swallowed. And she wouldn't focus on her sense of betrayal. That was what.

Rico watched her through narrowed eyes that saw too much. She tried to find a smile. 'It's been a while since there's been an...incident. I've obviously become careless.' She frowned. 'But...'

'But?'

In the spring sunshine his hair gleamed dark, but she could pick out the deep auburn highlights that threaded through it. While he'd shrugged out of his business jacket, his tie was still perfectly knotted at his throat. She shoved her hands into her pockets to stop herself from reaching out and loosening it.

'Let's walk for a bit,' she suggested, because standing there

staring at him seemed suddenly absurd. Besides, the sand was packed tight from the outgoing tide. He shouldn't get too much sand in his beautifully polished leather shoes.

He fell into step beside her. 'What were you going to say?'

She shrugged, trying to replay that moment when she'd returned home from the supermarket. She'd unlocked the door...Monty had barrelled into her...she'd pulled the screen door shut so he couldn't escape and...

'It's just that I'm pretty certain I did lock the screen door.' It was an action that had become second nature.

'How certain?'

'Ninety per cent.'

A second passed. Rico's hands clenched. 'You think someone picked the lock?'

Her mouth dried. 'I'm probably being paranoid, that's all.' She pressed her hands together and prayed that was all it was. 'About a week after Chris and I broke up I came home after work one night to find my entire apartment open—front door, back door and every single window. He must've still had a key. That was the first time I moved. The second time was after I woke one morning to find the house I'd rented splattered with red paint. I don't want to run like that again.'

She would not be turned into a fugitive.

Rico's right hand formed a hard, tight fist. She stared at it for a moment before glancing back out at the water.

'I have deadbolts on all the doors and windows, but not the

screen door. Normally I don't leave the doors open, but it was so lovely and sunny today, and I...' For heaven's sake—it had been the middle of the day and broad daylight!

'You should be able to leave your front door open without fear of reprisals.'

He spoke fiercely and a lump lodged in her throat. She closed her eyes, counted to three and then shoved her shoulders back before turning to face him.

'I have been distracted today, though. I was offered the job.' She flashed him a smile that was meant to reassure him, but it didn't seem to do the trick. 'And I have a dinner this evening that I'm really stressing about. I need it to go well.' If it didn't... Her gut clenched. 'It's why I banished Monty to the courtyard. I just needed thirty minutes to get the dinner preparations sorted. I was trying to work quickly and I was focused on chopping and quietening the dumb dog.'

'And after the slashing of the tyres you were understandably jumpy.'

He didn't make reference to her over-the-top reaction. He didn't have to. It hung in the silence between them. But for several terrified seconds this afternoon she'd thought she'd have to fight for her life. Her mouth dried all over again at the memory. She hadn't realised how spooked she'd become.

She clenched her hands. She would not allow Chris to do this to her. She might not be able to control his actions, but she could control her own. She had no intention of letting her guard down

again, but she'd allowed her life to shrink. That had to stop.

There was just one last thing...

'The incidents had become fewer and fewer. I thought perhaps Chris had finally given up. And, honestly, it's illegal for him to come within twenty metres of me. The moment he does I can throw the book at him, and I doubt very much he'd risk that. However, as he obviously hasn't given up would you prefer it if I stood down as your café manager?'

He halted and planted his hands on his hips. 'Why would I do that?'

She didn't say anything, just let him come to the same conclusion she had.

He frowned. 'You think he might start targeting your place of work?'

'I don't pretend to know what goes through his mind. It's a possibility, though, isn't it?'

'I'm not letting some sociopathic freak of a bully determine who I will or won't employ!'

Just for a moment she glimpsed something in him beyond the self-possessed, preoccupied executive. Something dark and dangerous that should have had her backing away but actually had her wanting to edge closer.

'I know you're the right person for this job.'

She stared at him, at the fire in his eyes, and the weight of his expectation slammed down on her shoulders, making them sag.

'But for heaven's sake, Neen, what possessed you to go out

with a jerk like that in the first place?'

She hugged her arms about her waist and started walking blindly up the beach again. She'd been searching for love. She'd ached for it. That was why she'd fallen for Chris. He'd focused all his attention on her in a way nobody in her life had before —except for Grandad—and she'd lapped it up like a starving woman. Like the stupid, weak woman that she was.

It was only later that his possessiveness and jealousy had come to light. Or at least that she'd recognised them for what they were. If she hadn't been so needy she might have realised sooner and she could have ended the relationship then. But she hadn't, and now she was paying the price.

'I made a mistake,' she said when she was sure of her voice. 'Haven't you ever made a mistake?'

She glanced up, but his face had frozen into a dark mask.

He gave one hard nod and a curt, 'Yes,' and then swung on his heel and set off back the way they'd come.

She glanced around—Monty was still splashing in the water beside them—and then dashed to catch up with Rico. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make that about you.'

He blinked and the mask disappeared. 'I'm the one who's sorry. It's hit me what a high price innocent mistakes can carry. It hardly seems fair.'

She took in the knotted tie, the polished shoes, and wondered what mistakes lurked in his past.

'Take the youth I work with. Most of them are paying for other

people's mistakes. It's not their fault they were born to teenage mothers or have parents who've turned to alcohol or drugs.'

'And you want to make a difference?'

His eyes flashed. 'I will make a difference!'

For some reason his words chilled her. Or perhaps it was the tone in which they were uttered.

'Have you ever taken self-defence classes, Neen?'

It wasn't a question designed to dispel the chill that gripped her. She chafed her arms. 'No.'

'Why on earth not?' He reached out and pulled her to a stop. He dropped his hand again almost immediately. 'Surely that's one of the sensible precautions you can take?'

She turned away from him and stared out across the water and up at Mount Wellington, which towered over the city of Hobart, dominating it.

'Neen?'

She finally turned back. 'I kept hoping I wouldn't need to, that the threat wouldn't become physical.' She scanned the beach and the park beyond. 'Besides, I suspect he's watching me, following me. I haven't wanted to give him any ideas.'

* * *

Rico stared down at Neen and his heart clenched. She seemed suddenly small and fragile. His hands fisted at the thought of anyone hurting her—at the thought of any man hurting a woman.

Knowing how to protect herself against a physical assault was vital, even if it wasn't a fact she wanted to face. He didn't know

if her ex—this Chris—would actually resort to violence, but it would be better for her to be prepared.

Besides, knowing she could physically handle herself would empower her.

He straightened and readied himself for an argument. 'Self-defence classes have just become a mandatory requirement for the position you were offered this morning, Neen. It's one of the things I came around to discuss with you.'

Her jaw dropped. 'Ooh, Rico D'Angelo, that's a big, fat lie.'

For a moment he thought she might even laugh. He'd like to see her laugh. He frowned and dragged his attention back to the matter at hand. 'It was an oversight of mine that I forgot to mention it when I interviewed you. The fact is you'll be working with disadvantaged youths. Some of those kids have been brought up by the scruffs of their necks.'

'And violence is a language they know?'

'Fluently.'

He had no intention of staffing the café with anyone who had that kind of a question mark hanging over them, but... He stared at Neen and his blood ran cold. 'I don't think we'll run into those kinds of problems, but you will be dealing with teenagers.'

'And teenagers can be hormonal and unpredictable?'

He let out a breath when he realised she wasn't going to put up a fight. 'So can some of their parents and friends. It's the world they've grown up in.'

'Which you're trying to change?'

He read the scepticism in her eyes. He should be immune to such scepticism—he fought it every working day of his life—but for some reason hers burned and chafed him. He rolled his shoulders and tried to dismiss it.

'The café budget will cover the cost of your self-defence classes.' She looked as if she was about to argue and he held up a hand. 'I insist. I'll be the one choosing the trainer, and I'll be receiving reports on your progress too.'

She blinked.

He'd make sure he chose the best. He couldn't believe this hadn't occurred to him before. If he could get more funding for future initiatives of the same nature, he'd make it an essential requirement for all his managers.

'I'll wait to receive the details from you, then.'

She turned to survey Monty and he couldn't help noticing how the sun picked out the lighter strands in her chestnut hair. 'I can't believe how much energy that dog has.'

Monty still frolicked in the waves—chasing them as they receded, snapping at them and leaping over them as they rolled in. The dog's utter physical joy in being alive struck him.

He shook himself. What was he thinking? He was too busy these days for swimming and beachcombing. He set his jaw. And he didn't regret it. Not one bit.

He swung back to Neen. 'In the meantime...'

She raised an eyebrow.

He'd make sure her class started asap—next week if he could

arrange it—but... 'It won't hurt for you to have a couple of pointers now. Remember, if someone does attack you, your primary goal is to disable them long enough to get away. You don't want to stick around and fight someone who's bigger and more experienced than you are.'

'Right.'

He set her square on to him. 'If your attacker comes at you from the front, like this—' he made as if to grab her shoulders '—I want you to knock his arms away like this, then grab a fistful of his shirt and knee him in the groin as hard as you can.'

She eyed him doubtfully. 'As hard as I can?'

'Believe me, any jerk who tries to grab you deserves everything you can throw at him.'

'Right.'

'And scream. Scream your head off as hard and as long as you can.'

Nine times out of ten fear of discovery would have an assailant hightailing it for the hills. 'Now turn around.'

She did.

'If an attacker grabs you from behind, like this—' he seized her around the shoulders, pulling her hard back against him and pinning her arms to her sides '—I want you to—'

He broke off as a growling, snarling dog hurtled towards them. Monty had been transformed from boisterous goof to frightening assassin in a blink, and Rico watched in frozen fascination.

Neen, however, was caught by no such abstraction. Before he

had the wit to push her behind him she'd reefed out of his hold and boomed, 'No!' at Monty, holding one hand straight out in front of her like a traffic cop.

The dog skidded to a halt, kicking up sand.

'Down!' she commanded in a hard, loud voice, making a demanding downward motion with her hand.

Monty whined and pawed at the sand.

'Down!' She repeated the hand signal.

Monty lowered himself to the ground, resting his nose on his front paws, but his eyes remained glued to Neen.

'Dogs work on a system of hierarchy,' she told him in a much softer, more modulated voice.

'Uh-huh.' His heart-rate started to slow.

'I need Monty to know that you're higher in the food chain than he is, so he learns to treat you with respect.'

He swallowed. 'Happy to help out in any way I can.'

'Shake my hand.'

He did.

'Now keep hold of it and bend down so I can kiss your cheek.'

He did as she bade and her scent hit him hard—a mixture of strawberries and oakwood...and dog. Cool lips touched his cheek and something in his chest lurched. Suddenly every bad-boy impulse he'd spent the last ten years repressing roared into ear-splitting life.

And then she moved away, although she kept hold of his hand. It gave him a chance to drag a steadying breath into his lungs. It

was the beach. It had to be. All this sun and sand. It had been a long time since he'd stopped to enjoy either. And being here felt like a holiday.

'Monty.' She kept her voice soft and clicked her fingers. The dog immediately rose to nuzzle her hand. 'Put your hand down to him, Rico, so he can smell it, remember it...and apologise.'

Rico did as she said, not the least afraid Monty would bite him now. Neen's confidence had filtered into him, and he knew she wasn't the kind of woman who would put anyone at risk. Monty promptly licked Rico's hand.

'Good dog,' Neen said, finally releasing Rico and giving Monty a lusty scratch all the way down his back.

The dog groaned and arched against her. Rico didn't blame him one little bit.

'How come you know so much about dogs?' he asked, in an attempt to take his mind off the curve of her hips in those jeans that she wore. The sun. The beach.

'I grew up with them.'

'But you don't like them.'

'That's right.'

He watched as she pulled a tennis ball from her pocket. 'Okay, Monty, let's really wear you out.' And she threw it.

Rico shook his head. 'My teenagers aren't going to know what's hit them.'

* * *

Neen returned home from the beach with Monty early the next

morning to find workmen waiting by her front door. Her palms turned clammy. She scanned the complex and its surrounds, but nothing looked out of place.

Except for the workmen. Her hand tightened about Monty's lead as she approached them.

'Are you Ms Cuthbert?' one of them asked. At her nod he said, 'We've been booked to fit new screen doors, as well as security systems to each of the five apartments here.'

She straightened. 'Who hired you?'

He glanced at his clipboard. 'The real-estate agency responsible for these properties.' He named the company.

'May I see?'

He handed the order form across to her. As he'd said, the agency's name appeared in the requisite box, but she didn't doubt for a single moment that Rico was behind this somehow. Exactly how escaped her, but she was starting to see he was the kind of man who got things done.

'I'm Unit Three.' She handed back the order form. 'Shouldn't you start at Unit One?'

'The tenant in Unit One is away, and the real-estate agent isn't available to open the place up to us until tomorrow. According to my records Unit Two is currently vacant so, again, we have to wait on the agent.'

Audra's apartment. Or at least it had been.

'If you have any enquiries I've been told to direct you to the real-estate agency. Do you mind if we start work now? It should

only take us an hour...two at tops.'

'Not at all.' She had no intention of looking such a gift horse in the mouth. She unlocked her front door and gestured inside. 'Be my guest.'

She sat in the courtyard with a pot of tea while Monty dozed in the patchy spring sunlight. On impulse she pulled out her phone and punched in the number Rico had given her.

'D'Angelo,' a voice barked without preamble, and for some reason she found herself having to fight back a smile.

'Hello, Rico, it's Neen here.'

'Is everything okay?'

'Yes, thank you.'

It was a long time since anyone had made her feel so cared for.

Her hand tightened about the phone. Wanting to be looked after, taken care of, loved, was what had got her into this trouble in the first place.

'I...um...I just wanted to thank you. I don't know how you managed it at such short notice, but the security company is here already.'

He didn't say anything and her scalp started to prickle with self-consciousness.

'Rico?' The self-consciousness turned into something more sinister. If this was one of Chris's tricks... 'I...if you didn't organise for a new screen door and security system for me, you'd better let me know right now.'

She'd have to ring the agency to check this was all aboveboard.

Which was what she should've done in the first place! What on earth had prompted her to ring Rico? Because he'd made her feel cared for? Her throat burned. Hadn't she learned her lesson?

'The real-estate agent in charge of your block of units owes me a favour. I decided to call it in.'

She sagged.

'I'm afraid it'll mean a slight increase in your rent.'

She didn't mind that in the least. 'Well...' She swallowed. 'It was kind of you. I just...I wanted to thank you.'

'I'm just protecting my investment. Did you get a chance to read through the contract?'

She sensed his efforts to distance himself and it made her frown. Not that she'd expected yesterday's confidences to have made them bosom buddies or anything, but she'd developed friendships with all her other employers. She didn't know why Rico should be any different.

But he was.

She recalled the dark fire in his eyes, the way his hands had clenched yesterday when he'd said he would make a difference. She suppressed a shiver.

'I did read over the contract. I made an amendment.'

'Which was?'

'I'm not signing a two-year contract, Rico. I thought I'd made that clear. I changed it to twelve months.'

He didn't say anything.

'An oversight, no doubt.'

She wondered if he sensed her eye roll, because he suddenly chuckled and the sound filled her with warmth. 'Believe it or not, it was an oversight. Even though I would like you to reconsider.'

And just like that she believed him. After all, she had an entire security company tramping through her house at this very moment to prove the man's honour.

'It's just once I make a decision I like to get the ball rolling as soon as I can. I forgot to have that line changed.'

She reached out to trace the pattern on her teacup. 'Why does this project mean so much to you?' Why was this man so driven?

'As soon as the café is up and running and I have the figures to prove its success, I can start canvassing for funds for additional cafés in other parts of the city.'

'You want to run a chain of charity cafés?'

He blew out a breath. 'Why not?'

She couldn't think of a single reason. Except... 'Don't you ever stop for fun?'

He didn't answer that, and she winced at how it must have sounded—like a come-on. Her nostrils flared. No personal questions! No curiosity! Curiosity was only one step away from interest, and she wasn't interested. In any man. Full stop.

'Are you busy today?' The question shot out of him, as if on impulse, and suddenly she could imagine him without a tie. In fact...

She bared her teeth and cut off that line of thought.

'I know you don't officially start work until Monday, but I'd

like to show you the premises we've organised and get your opinion on them.'

A tiny thread of excitement wormed its way through her—the first twinge of professional interest she'd felt since she'd been served with the papers informing her that Grandad's will was being contested.

'I'd really like that, Rico.' It would be better than sitting around here, stewing about the will. 'But the security company is here for another hour or so. At the moment I don't feel comfortable letting someone else lock up for me.'

'Of course not. And what about your car?'

'The tyres are being replaced, quote, "sometime this morning".'

'But you're free this afternoon?'

'Free as a bird.'

'Excellent. I can show you the café then, and maybe you could meet a couple of the trainees.'

Rico had certainly put together an interesting programme. 'Where should I meet you?'

'If you come to my office, say one-thirty, we can travel together.'

'I'll be there.'

'And, Neen?' he said, before she could ring off. 'How did your dinner go last night? The one you were stressed about?'

Her stomach clenched and roiled, although it touched her that he'd remembered. Last night had been an unmitigated disaster

and—

'Neen?'

She shook herself and did what she could to inject humour into her voice. 'Given the week I've had, it went exactly as expected.'

Utterly, utterly dreadfully.

'I'm sorry to hear that.' He was silent for several seconds. 'Still, the week hasn't been a complete loss. Don't forget you did score an interesting job.'

Her lips lifted. 'There is that,' she agreed, before they rang off.

An 'interesting job', huh?

She sighed and poured herself another cup of tea. Time would tell, and even if it did prove true it didn't make up for not being able to follow her heart's desire and open her own café.

You didn't apply for the job as consolation. You applied to stop yourself from moping and twiddling your fingers.

She pressed her hands together tightly. Hopefully soon enough she could put all her dreams into action. She stared up at the sky. 'Fingers crossed, Grandad,' she whispered.

* * *

'We've been given these premises on a two-year lease for practically peanuts,' Rico said as he unlocked the door to the Battery Point property.

'How on earth did you manage that here?' Neen breathed. 'It's almost waterfront, and just a couple of streets away from Salamanca Markets.' She glanced up and down the street. 'The rents around here are outrageous!' She knew because she'd

checked.

Rico just shrugged.

The man was a miracle worker. 'You called in a favour, right?' If he weren't careful, he'd run out of those.

'The owner of this property is the manager of a local dairy farm. I've promised him a lot of advertising—on the flyers announcing the café's opening as well as on the menus.'

'Good PR.'

Rico switched on the lights. 'That's what he thought.'

Neen took in the size of the generous front room, with its two lovely bay windows overlooking the street. It was a pity it didn't have water views, although she supposed if it had he could have kissed his cheap rent goodbye.

'Obviously I said we'd do whatever maintenance was necessary.'

There was certainly a lot of cleaning up to do.

'What do you think?'

'I think we can make this look charming. All it needs is a lick of paint and some elbow grease.' She stepped back. 'It looks as if we could seat sixty in here comfortably.'

'That's what I was hoping you'd say. Come and check out the kitchen.'

She trailed a hand across the wooden counter and display case that ran the length of the back wall. She could imagine it polished and gleaming, housing a vast array of cakes and slices to tempt and delight. A smile built inside her. That cabinet was perfect.

She couldn't have chosen better for her dream café, and—

She straightened, shook herself and followed Rico through to the kitchen.

It was smaller than she'd hoped. 'Have you had an occupational health and safety check completed yet?'

'Not yet, why?' he barked, spinning around. 'Do you see any potential problems?'

She pointed. 'Exposed wiring there, there and there...and that power point looks like a fire hazard.'

He swore.

'I'm not feeling particularly confident about the safety of that ceiling fan either.'

He glared at the ceiling.

'Still, the ovens look as if they'll be okay once they're cleaned up.' She opened a cupboard door and grimaced as a cockroach scuttled away. 'It's far too dark in here, and that's going to be a real issue. We'll need strip lighting all the way along here. We need to see properly. I can't risk anyone's safety around hot stoves and sharp knives. I wouldn't risk fully-trained, experienced staff, let alone novices.'

'The boys will learn!'

'Of course they will.' She wiped a finger along a bench and inspected her finger with a grimace. 'But they'll learn much quicker and more safely with proper lighting.'

He blew out a breath. 'That'll cost a fortune.'

She eased back and folded her arms. 'Did you ask me here for

my honest opinion or to pat you on the back and tell you what a fabulous job you're doing?'

He stuck out his jaw and glared. She could see that behind the glare he was frantically calculating the budget he had to work with. 'That peanut rent suddenly makes a lot of sense,' he growled.

'How much are you paying?'

He told her and she shrugged. 'We're smack-bang in the middle of Hobart's tourist hub. You're still getting a great deal.'

He didn't say anything. She wasn't even sure he'd heard her.

'What's out that way?'

He shook himself. 'Storeroom, staff bathroom and the back door.'

He led the way, throwing open the storeroom door as he passed. Something furry brushed past her ankles. She let out a little scream.

Rico swung to her. 'Wha—?'

'Out the back door. Now!'

She pushed him all the way out into the cement courtyard, then stamped her feet up and down three times and shuddered twice. 'Yuck!'

Rico stared at her as if she'd lost her senses. 'What on earth are you doing?'

She stabbed a finger at him. 'I can deal with mice, and I'm even prepared to take a shoe to a cockroach, but I absolutely and utterly draw the line at rats!'

His face darkened. ‘There aren’t any rats.’

‘Oh, no?’ She pointed behind him. ‘Then what do you call that thing creeping down the back steps?’

CHAPTER THREE

RICO SWORE ONCE, violently. The rodent scuttled down the steps and slunk behind some garbage bins.

A rat. A goddamn rat! The Health Department would have a field day with that. For a moment his vision of a thriving chain of charity cafés blurred and threatened to slip out of reach. Unless...

He glanced at Neen. Unless he could convince her to keep her pretty mouth shut about the incident. Unless he could—

He broke off his thoughts to drag a hand down his face. What on earth was he thinking? He couldn’t put the public’s health at risk like that. Besides, that kind of scandal would scupper all his plans. But...

His head dropped. His shoulders sagged. He was so darn tired of fighting for every allowance, for every penny of government money, for every—

He stiffened. Get over yourself, D’Angelo! You have nothing to complain about.

All-too-familiar bile filled his mouth. He lifted his head and pushed his shoulders back to find Neen surveying him with narrowed eyes and pursed lips.

His gut clenched. Then a car backfired and she jumped and whirled around. She turned back, patting her chest. ‘Rodents make me jumpy,’ she said with a weak smile.

His lip curled. Rodents of the ex-boyfriend variety.

'Are you up to date on your tetanus shots?'

That threw him. 'Yes.'

She pointed at the door. 'Then you can go back through there, switch off the lights and lock up. I'll meet you out the front.' She headed for the gate. 'Oh, and grab my handbag, please? It's on the counter in the kitchen.'

And then she disappeared.

Scowling, he did as she'd asked and met her on the footpath in front of the café. He handed over her handbag and tried to think of something encouraging to say but couldn't think of a single thing. Her eyes were too bright, too perceptive. She'd witnessed his moment of despair and it didn't matter how much he wished she hadn't. It was too late now—he didn't have the energy to make light of rats or cockroaches or dodgy wiring.

He went to unlock the car, but she shook her head and took his arm. 'C'mon.'

'Where are we going?'

'We're having an emergency meeting.'

'A...? Where?'

'At the pub around the corner.'

'But...'

She stopped and kinked an eyebrow at him. 'But what?'

He didn't know. Just...but.

She let go of his arm and kept walking, but he noticed the way she scanned the surroundings. As if waiting for something

unpleasant to jump out at her.

He hesitated for a fraction of a moment before setting off after her. 'I have work to do.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Ain't that the truth?'

A weight fell onto his shoulders so heavy he thought it might flatten him into the ground.

'And excuse me if I correct you, Rico, but we have work to do.'

The weight eased a fraction. He moved forward to open the pub door for her. 'What would you like to drink?'

She lifted her chin, her eyes almost daring him to contradict her. 'It's been a hell of a week, and I'm thirsty.'

He couldn't have explained why, but his lips started to twitch. 'A schooner of their finest?'

She smiled. 'You better make it a light. I don't want to go all giggly and stupid. And a packet of crisps—salt and vinegar. I'll be over there.' She pointed to a table in the corner.

When he returned, he found her seated with a pen and pad in front of her. She sipped the beer he handed her. She tore open the packet of crisps and crunched one.

'Okay, we need to make a list of what needs doing and prioritise it.'

He set his lemon squash on the table with a thump. Rather than despair, he should have started troubleshooting—like Neen. He should have been proactive. He was usually so—

Louis's birthday. He fell into a chair. Today should have been Louis's birthday, and the knowledge had taunted him from the

moment he'd opened his eyes that morning, surrounding him in darkness and a morass of self-loathing.

He jerked in his seat when he found himself the subject of Neen's scrutiny again.

'When was the last time you had a decent night's sleep?' she asked.

Ten years ago.

The unbidden answer made him flinch. He stared back at her and ferociously cut off that line of thought. 'I could ask the same of you,' he said, noting the dark circles under her eyes.

A shadow flitted across her face and he immediately wished the words unsaid. Some jerk was harassing her. Of course that would be playing havoc with her peace of mind. Then there was that dinner of hers last night, which obviously hadn't gone well. The last thing she needed was to be reminded of her troubles.

'What happened at dinner last night?'

He couldn't believe he'd asked. He stiffened, seized his squash and took a gulp, almost choking on it. She raised an eyebrow and he couldn't tell if she was laughing at him or not.

'Sorry, none of my business.'

'It ended in accusations and angry words.' She shrugged. 'Which is what I expected. But a girl can hope, can't she?'

His hand tightened about his glass. Very carefully he set it down. 'You didn't entertain that ex who's—?'

'What kind of idiot do you think I am?'

Blue eyes flashed at him, easing the tightness in his chest. He

frowned when he realised the tightness had threatened to relocate lower. He did what he could to ignore the burn and throb. Louis's birthday. It had thrown him off kilter the entire day.

'Sorry, I...' He shook his head. 'I've had too much experience with women getting caught up in the cycle of domestic violence.'

'Personal experience?'

'No.' He hadn't watched it from the sidelines growing up. He hadn't suffered from it himself. He had no such excuse. 'On-the-job experience.'

She stared into her beer. 'It'd be awful to see one's mother go through that.'

It was hard enough watching it in the families of the kids he was trying to help.

'Remember how I said there was an issue of a contested will?'

He nodded.

'Dinner last night was with the other interested party.'

And it had ended with angry words and accusations? 'I'm sorry it didn't go well.'

She shrugged. 'Thank you, but it has nothing to do with work. What we need to do is come up with a game plan.'

He was so used to people requesting—demanding—assistance from him that Neen's take-charge attitude threw him.

In a good way.

'I see the most pressing concerns as, one: getting the place fumigated, and two: getting in an electrician to check the place over. Rats will gnaw through anything.'

'I know a good electrician who'll be happy to help in return for a bit of advertising.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Precisely how big are we going to make our menus, Rico?'

That surprised a laugh out of him. 'I don't have any contacts in the pest-control industry.' Though whichever company he selected he could talk to them about taking on an apprentice or two, couldn't he? There might just be a silver lining in all of this, after all.

'You're obviously worried about the budget.'

She lifted her beer to her lips and it suddenly struck him how pretty she was. Not in a loud, showy way—nobody would ever call her beautiful—but with her fall of thick chestnut hair, pert nose and wide mouth she was most definitely pretty.

And the longer he stared at her the more that weight on his shoulders lifted.

She touched her face. 'What?'

What was he doing? He didn't have time to consider a woman's finer attributes. He didn't have time for romance. Certainly not with an employee. He was tired, that was all. He brushed a hand across his eyes. He hadn't had a holiday in...

Ten years.

'Worry about budgets goes with the territory,' he bit out.

Behind the blue of her eyes her mind clearly raced. She had lovely eyes—not too big and not too small, but perfectly spaced and—

He dragged his gaze away. This woman didn't miss a trick, and he would not be caught out staring at her again.

'Look, this is a charity café, right? It's a programme to help train disadvantaged youth and place them in the workforce, yes? Then there must be huge scope to get the community behind it.'

'Every single charity and community service initiative can make that exact same claim.' He sat back. This was one of the major problems he faced—getting good exposure for his programmes, finding backing and sponsorship. 'The community is feeling a bit...' he grimaced '...a lot "charitied out". People only have so much to give.' And they were asked to give to so many different causes.

He understood that. He even empathised. But if he could just get a few more key players interested... The problem was, his kids weren't cute and cuddly. They were scowling, slouchy, smart-mouthed teenagers. That didn't do him any favours in the advertising stakes.

Neen tapped the table with her pen. 'Earlier in the year there was a family whose home was severely damaged by a storm. Unbeknownst to them it wasn't covered in their insurance.'

He scowled. Rotten insurance companies.

'One of the local radio stations put a call out to tradesmen for help and they were flooded with offers. Apparently the advertising the tradesmen received was worth the work they did. We could do something similar. We could create a bewitchingly irresistible press release and send it in to the station of our

choice.'

That had potential. 'I have a contact at one of the radio stations.' His heart started to thump. If they could get a fumigator and an electrician free...

For a moment he was tempted to seize her face in his hands and kiss her. He took a gulp of his drink instead.

She shimmied in her chair, her eyes bright. 'Do you have a contact at the local television station?'

Why wasn't he the one bubbling over with ideas? Once upon a time... He shook the thought off. 'You're thinking of getting someone to interview me, you, some of the staff?'

'I'd prefer to remain in the background.'

He remembered her ex-boyfriend and beneath the table his hand clenched. 'Right.' He frowned. 'Look, I've spoken to the press a lot, Neen, and I have no problem with that, but some of the boys are barely articulate.' If they did a television interview they'd need to show the boys to their advantage or they'd be doing more harm than good.

Her lip curled. 'Aren't you sick of all those earnest ad campaigns?'

He shrugged. All he knew was if you stuck a puppy, kitten or a baby in front of a camera you received ten times more funding.

'Why couldn't we do something fun? Use humour?'

He recognised the fire in her eyes and momentarily envied it. 'Like...?'

She suddenly laughed, and it hit him that she smelled of the

crisp alpine air that could be found in Tasmania's Southwest National Park. A place he hadn't visited in over...

Ten years.

He swallowed and kept his eyes on Neen's laughing face until the darkness started to dissolve and lose its hold.

'Why couldn't we show a motley bunch of teenage boys walking the streets and looking threatening and scary, with a voiceover that says, "Do you want these boys prowling your street?" There could be elderly people rushing into their homes and locking their doors in a really over-the-top way. And then we could pan to the café, with all the boys gainfully employed and serving coffee and scrummy cake to all those previously scared residents. The voiceover could then say something along the lines of, "Help us get them off the streets and gainfully employed".'

Rico had to laugh at the picture she'd created.

'We wouldn't show them actually doing anything illegal. There'd just be a whole gang of them, and they'd be pushing and shoving each other and yahooing like teenage boys do. For some reason people seem to find that intimidating.'

But she didn't?

He remembered the way she'd bellowed at Monty on the beach and shook his head. Of course she didn't. He frowned, though, when he remembered the way she'd jumped when that car had backfired. Was that just to do with her ex?

'It'd generate interest.'

'It'd cost valuable money...and time.'

‘But if it brings attention to your cause...?’

She had a point.

‘Anyway, let’s move on. As far as an advertising campaign goes, that’s your lookout.’

He marvelled at her energy.

‘I think once we have the occupational health and safety approval we should organise a working bee. We could do the whole radio call-out for help, but can you convince your teenagers to work for nothing?’

‘Some of them, yes.’ Some of them desperately wanted work, wanted a chance. More than he could possibly employ this time around.

‘If they help paint and decorate the café I expect they’ll start to feel invested in it. Especially if we reward them with free pizza.’

‘That’s an excellent plan.’

She sipped her beer. ‘And one you’d already thought of, I see.’

It was something of a relief to know she didn’t have a monopoly on good ideas. ‘Promise teenage boys free food and they’ll be there—wherever there is.’

She laughed. ‘This is probably something else you’ve already considered, but...’

‘But?’

‘We will get tradesman who’ll offer us their time free of charge—painters and carpenters—if we put a call out. Are there any likely suspects among your boys who’d welcome an apprenticeship in those areas?’

He was already on it, but... 'Darn, you're good.'

'I also think we need to build up hype for the café's opening. Could we raffle or auction tickets to attend lunch on our opening day?'

He rested his elbows on the table. 'I think it's a great idea, but I still want to open the café a week Wednesday.'

She pursed her lips, and he almost laughed at the way she hauled in a breath.

'So we're going to be busy next week, huh?'

'Flat out. I'd rather advertise a gala event for a couple of months down the track. I'd like to invite restaurateurs, managers of catering firms, hoteliers...anyone who might be interested in hiring our trainees.'

She clapped her hands. 'We could work towards a Melbourne Cup luncheon. That gives us plenty of time to get the boys up to scratch.'

And it would give them time to create a snowball effect in the local media too, with the clock ticking down the days. 'Excellent!'

He sat back. Instead of hard work and an endless round of bureaucratic red tape, Rico started to envisage the fun of the project, the satisfaction of achievement...and the knowledge that he could make this project work.

He could get boys with too much time on their hands off the streets. He could give them a sense of direction.

He stared at Neen. Again he had to fight the urge to reach across and kiss her.

He rolled his shoulders. Gratitude. That was all it was.

He drained the rest of his squash. 'Neen, I'm impressed. I knew the moment you walked into my office that you were the right person for the job.' Which begged the question, why had he ranked two other applicants higher? Why hadn't he trusted his gut instinct?

'But?'

'It's only now I'm seeing exactly how right you are for it. When you refused to sign the two-year contract I questioned your commitment, but I was wrong.' He sat back. 'Exactly where have you come by all your energy, your ideas?' Because if he could he'd bottle it.

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears. She ducked her head to hide them and his chest clenched tighter than a politician's handout.

'What...?' He swallowed. 'I was offering you a compliment.' Or at least trying to. 'What did I say wrong?'

* * *

The red sting took Neen completely off guard. She forced herself to breathe through it, though the effort left her throat bruised and her eyes aching. She gave thanks that the pub was dim and quiet.

'What did I say wrong?'

She was barely acquainted with this man, but she knew down to the last detail the frown he'd be wearing. She went to say it was nothing, that she was just being silly, but the words refused

to come.

To be perfectly frank, she didn't feel like lying. Not to Rico. He might be driven, and wholly given over to his good cause, but beneath it all he was a nice man. He saw a problem and searched for a solution.

Except for that brief moment back in the courtyard earlier. Then he'd looked as if he could sleep for fifty years.

She glanced up and winced at the concern in his eyes. She didn't want him turning her into some paragon and sticking her on a pedestal titled 'Exemplary Employee'. She'd only disappoint him. She expected that enough of his job was thankless as it was. She didn't want to add to his load.

She forced back a sigh. 'You asked me where my energy and my ideas came from...'

'The question was rhetorical. I was trying to praise you.'

'I know, and I appreciate it. You made me feel I was doing good work, making a difference in a good way.' It had been a while since anyone had made her feel like that.

'But...?'

She leaned towards him. She almost reached out to touch his hand. At the last moment she pulled back, though she couldn't have explained why. 'Rico, my dream is to own my own café. For three and a half months I thought that dream was about to become a reality. I was scouting out premises. I was playing around with prospective menus. I got talking to people in the know about prospective staff. My mind was buzzing with ideas.

But...’

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