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CHAPTER 1



A nail was such a small thing, Rose thought. But when you had to make 7000 of them by hand, store-bought nails seemed like an unimaginable luxury.

‘Stop staring at those nails and come on!’ said her boss Old Steve, striding ahead down the aisle of Gruntings Hardwarehouse.

Old Steve had already powered his way through Nuts, Bolts and Washers, and was fast entering the Extension Leads aisle. He was surprisingly spry for a man in his late fifties. She’d be losing him soon in this maze.

Gruntings was a vast warehouse: 47 hectares of everything a tradesperson could possibly need, want or even imagine. And Old Steve wanted a lot more than he was actually buying. They’d been roaming the aisles for three hours now; Rose wasn’t sure where the exit was at this point. Rows and rows of metal shelving surrounded them, stacked all the way to the ceiling, but none of the merch seemed to meet Old Steve’s exacting standards.

Rose was starting to suspect he just liked wandering around, chatting to the other tradies. Mid-week, mid-morning, the store was full of them: buzzing about in a purposeful yet unhurried fashion, like hi-vis bees. Every now and then a mobile phone would chirrup, and a figure in polar fleece and work shorts would drift past, saying, ‘Hello? Where are ya? Yeah, nah ... I’m in Security Doors ...’

Old Steve’s old-fashioned, artisanal approach to cabinet making was exactly the kind of work Rose had wanted when she’d finished her apprenticeship six months earlier. But she

hadn't realised exactly how artisanal Old Steve's approach could get. For the first three months, all he'd let her do was clip lengths of wire from a seemingly endless bale. And then, one Monday morning, Steve had ceremoniously handed her a file. 'You're ready now,' he said.

'Ready for what? Breaking out of jail?'

Old Steve had pointed at the pile of cut wire. 'You've gotta sharpen those at one end,' he said, 'and then flatten the other.'

'I've been ... making nails?'

'Before you can make a door,' Old Steve had said sagely, 'you've gotta know what you're walking into.'

The quality of Steve's work was legendary. But Rose didn't just want to learn; she wanted to run her own business some day. Old Steve had coughed pitifully throughout their first meeting, and hinted heavily that he was planning to retire soon. Rose had believed him; when she'd asked around about him, the reports of his fanatical commitment to hand-crafting had dated back decades. And after all, everyone called him *Old Steve*. But no sooner had she started in the job than Old Steve's cough miraculously vanished. Now he seemed to have all the time in the world, like a tape measure that would never stop paying out inches.

She caught up with Old Steve at the Garden/Solar Lighting aisle. 'Are we done yet?' she said, optimistically.

Old Steve laughed. 'Next we've gotta get axe handles.'

'What do we need those for?'

'Because you're gonna sand them down into hammer handles. It's the only way to get them fitting your hands right.'

Rose didn't even bother to hide her groan.

Old Steve had already moved on, turning the corner from Extension Leads and striding down the Extension Cords aisle. Ahead, at Extension Cables, several other tradies were gathered in conversation. As they got closer, Rose realised she knew one of them.

‘Young Steve?’ Rose said. A nuggety young tradie, in a faded polo shirt and khaki shorts, turned at her voice.

‘Rose?’ Young Steve broke into a grin. ‘How are you? It’s been ages.’

‘When’d you get back?’ she said. ‘I haven’t seen you since before I finished up at Graham’s.’

‘You left? That was a tough apprenticeship. They really should have kept you on.’

‘They tried. But I wanted to make cabinets, not just cut wood.’

Young Steve frowned. ‘So if you’re making cabinets, what are you doing here in electrical?’

‘We’ve stopped in at just about every bloody department today. Right now my boss has us looking for axe handles to turn into hammer handles.’

He laughed. ‘Good one! Next thing you’ll be telling me you’re working for Old Steve.’

Up ahead, Old Steve was realising Rose had fallen behind. ‘Hey!’ he yelled over his shoulder. ‘If you can’t handle the pace, how are you going to pace the handles?’

‘Oh shit, you *are* working for Old Steve,’ Young Steve said, giving Rose a pitying look. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Rose hung her head. ‘Not as sorry as I am.’

‘Is it true he makes his own nails?’

‘If you mean “does he get me to make his nails?”’, then yes. Yes, it’s true.’

‘I heard he had one guy making glue out of this disgusting –’

‘Done that too,’ Rose said quickly, shuddering at the memory of Old Steve’s Blood Moon Glue. She still couldn’t look at bananas the same way. ‘Next week he’s got me making plywood. Out of sawdust. Got to make the sawdust first, though.’

‘Mate, you gotta get out of there.’

‘I’d love to, but I need the money,’ said Rose. ‘Plus, Old Steve’s nail salon doesn’t really leave me time to go job-hunting.’

I keep asking around, but nobody here has any leads.’ She paused. ‘Any big-paying jobs up north?’

‘No idea. I’m back here now for the coroner’s inquest.’

‘Wow. Who died?’

‘Didn’t you hear?’ Young Steve said. ‘Viewers were blaming the tradies after the bridge collapsed during the stampede challenge. It was massive on the socials. Hashtag too-shoddy-for-the-forest.’

Rose frowned. ‘Um, I don’t watch . . . reality television? Is that what you were doing?’

‘Yeah, I was on *Too Hot for the Forest*. Working on the show, I mean. I think you saw my hands holding a screwdriver in one episode.’

‘Is that the one where they bring a bunch of D-grade celebrities out to the bush and abandon them there with no clothes on?’

‘Naked, sure, but they’re hardly abandoned. We built a little luxury village in the trees about five metres off-camera. All mod cons, fully plumbed. And fully wired, courtesy of yours truly.’

Rose was trying to decode his proud smile. ‘So . . . you’re famous now?’

‘Oh no, I’m strictly behind-the-scenes. But the production company’s pretty decent. They’ve got me working on *Surprise Funerals* down here until it all blows over. That is not a show you want to make an appearance on.’

‘I dunno,’ Rose said, ‘if the money’s right . . .’

‘Well, if you’re interested in this kind of work . . .’ said Young Steve. ‘I mean, it’s not glamorous. They boss you around – you do what you’re told. And it’s really basic stuff, no fancy craftsmanship. You’d just be throwing shit together.’

‘I’m making nails out of wire. Anything’s a step up.’

‘Okay, gimme your phone.’ She handed it over, and he typed in a number. ‘Give these guys a call, tell them I sent you. They’re always looking for joiners and carpenters for behind-the-scenes work.’

Rose felt a tap on her shoulder. It was a Mundell 15mm chrome-plated easy turn, attached to a powder-coated galvanised steel garden post. ‘Very funny, Steve,’ she said.

‘Less talkin’, more walkin’,’ Old Steve said from behind her. ‘There are seven kilometres between us and those axe handles.’ Without waiting for a reply he set off down the aisle.

‘Oh well, great to see you,’ said Rose.

‘Don’t forget to make that call,’ Young Steve said. ‘I’m surprised Old Steve lets you have a mobile you didn’t make yourself.’



CHAPTER 2



Rose had been driving through Ocean Springs for two hours and she still wasn't entirely sure she was getting closer to where Endeavour Productions was filming *Mansions in the Sky*.

According to Young Steve, this was a renovation reality show filmed in a housing estate that had failed to find any buyers and had been abandoned in a half-finished state. And now Rose could see the reason it had failed: it was at the end of kilometres of winding suburban streets.

Rose was used to navigating grids of main roads and side streets, but today she'd been travelling in endless near-identical curves. She guessed the streets were laid out this way as a means of engineering a quiet neighbourhood; they would certainly deter hoons, rat-runners, and other fast drivers. But they also deterred through traffic. Worse, a highway passed by the back of the failed housing estate, but the linking roads had never been built.

Ocean Springs was a deserted outer-suburban citadel: the only way in was the longest possible way. Her satnav was barking instructions to 'take the third exit'; it thought some of these streets didn't even exist. More than once, Rose considered giving up and turning around.

Eventually, though, she started passing by vacant lots, and soon there were entire stretches of bare and undeveloped land between clumps of McMansions. A few tattered banners still fluttered, advertising the proposed estate. And at the final turn-off before the cul-de-sac that had become the *Mansions in the*

Sky set, Rose spotted a billboard promising the development would be completed by 2014. Someone had spray-painted 'PENIS' under that. She guessed they wouldn't be showing that on camera.

There wasn't an official car park, but a group of cars was parked on the vacant block of land on the corner, so Rose left her ute there. As soon as she opened the door, a warm, gritty wind hit her in the face. The ground was bare, with no trees as far as Rose could see – only tufts of weeds and pale, bleached grass struggling up through cracks in the clay soil. No surprise that the cars around her were already covered in dust. Rose ran a finger along the bonnet of her ute and it came up black. She rubbed her fingers together, feeling the dirt.

She'd had no idea how to dress for a job interview in television; Young Steve had just said she should turn up at any time and introduce herself, so she'd chosen her newest and cleanest work gear, and had arranged her hair in a neat bun. She hesitated, then wiped her fingers on her pants. She wasn't going to be on camera anyway, so how she looked shouldn't matter. Should it?

The activity seemed to be concentrated at a cluster of houses at the bulb end of the court. The developers hadn't bothered putting in footpaths, so she stuck to the road as she walked. Tradies in dusty hi-vis were busily making their way in and out of the houses she passed, while others without vests stood around; Rose figured they must be part of the production team. Some of the houses looked almost ready for the owners to move in; others looked half-finished, with walls missing and tarps flapping in the breeze. A couple were little more than frames, and one block just had the slab in place.

Ahead she saw a sign that said 'SITE OFFICE', with an arrow underneath pointing towards one of the nearly finished homes. The driveway was still bare earth, but there was a concrete path leading to the front door; Rose was halfway along it when a

young woman wearing a headset rushed out from behind the garage, waving silently at her. Rose stopped. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ the young woman said in an urgent whisper.

‘Site office,’ Rose said, pointing at the door.

‘They’re filming in there!’ the woman said. ‘You tradies should know to use the back way.’

Suddenly the door opened, and the woman grabbed Rose’s arm, pulling her off the path. Two male tradies in their twenties stood in the doorway, talking to someone still inside. They were both tall and blond, and a little too tanned for mid-September; compared to Old Steve they were gods.

‘Go round the back,’ the woman hissed, giving Rose a shove between the shoulder blades. Rose frowned at this indignity, but decided to say nothing. The woman was talking into her headset, not even looking at Rose; in the doorway the tradies laughed like they’d just heard the funniest joke ever.

The back of the house was more like the site offices she knew. The scruffy grass by the back door was churned up by boots, and a stack of offcut wood was piled against the house’s back wall. The back door opened, and an electrician came out.

‘Excuse me,’ Rose said, ‘I’m looking for Cody Somerville?’

The man jerked his head to indicate the door he’d come through; his hands were full of coiled electrical leads.

She didn’t want to knock on the door – what if she was interrupting a conversation being recorded inside? – but then she realised that just barging in wouldn’t be any less disruptive. Hesitating, she peered through the window, but fortunately she didn’t spot a film crew. An older woman in jeans and an oversized grey cardigan, her frizzy hair pulled into a messy bun, was sitting alone at a kitchen table, looking through a stack of forms.

Rose stepped through the doorway. ‘Excuse me?’ she said. ‘My name’s Rose, and I’m looking for Cody Somerville.’

‘That’s me,’ the woman said. ‘Unless you’re from my kids’ school, in which case, I died in a fire.’

She took a long gulp from a mug. Rose noticed the dark circles under her eyes. The logo on the mug had originally read ‘The Dock’, but someone had graffitied out the ‘o’ with permanent pen and replaced it with an ‘i’.

‘Um, no, I’m not,’ Rose said. ‘I called the Endeavour office and they said you were the person to speak to. I’m here because Steven Lewis told me you were hiring at the moment.’

Cody took another gulp from her mug. ‘Looks like you heard wrong,’ she said.

‘Oh,’ Rose said. ‘I thought you might need carpenters.’

‘A carpenter? You’re hired,’ Cody said, then drank from her mug again.

‘Really? That was easy.’ Rose beamed. ‘When do I start? This place looks amazing.’

‘Just one problem,’ Cody said. ‘You’re not starting here.’

‘Oh,’ Rose said. ‘Is there, like, an off-site space where you do prep work?’

‘Not quite,’ Cody said. ‘You’ll be working on our sister show, *The Dock*. It’s a bit shit.’

‘A bit ... shit?’

Cody laughed at Rose’s disappointment. ‘Compared to all this, yeah. They only do one show a week and the tradies get zero screen time. But we need carpenters and you’re a carpenter, so if Steve recommended you, he must think you know how to keep your mouth shut.’

‘Is that important?’

‘Ask Steve. Not that he’d tell you anything.’ Cody winked. ‘Steve knows when to keep quiet.’

Rose didn’t say anything.

‘You’re a fast learner – I like that,’ Cody said. ‘I’ll give Bernie a call, let him know you’ll be there tomorrow.’ She went back to her forms.

Rose watched her for a moment, then cleared her throat. ‘So, um,’ she said when Cody looked up, ‘where exactly do they make *The Dock*?’

Cody stared silently at her.

Rose coughed. ‘The docks?’

‘I like a fast learner,’ Cody said.



Rose felt like skipping back to her car. She had a new job, and it didn’t involve manufacturing basic equipment from scratch. She looked around with new eyes at the hustle and bustle of the TV show taking place; she belonged here now. The entertainment industry was her home, and this hub of activity was her workplace.

Walking behind a truck, she noticed a large marquee set up on an empty block, with a clear plastic windshield wall pegged down on one side, and a food truck parked in front of the other. People were taking trays from the truck to sit at long tables set up in the shade under the marquee; clearly this was their version of a cafeteria, only the food looked fancier than anything she’d seen on a worksite. Usually you’d be lucky to get a meat pie from a mate who’d done a run down the shops, and a drink out of an esky someone had brought from home; here they were chowing down on burgers and salads, and chatting workers were ignoring plates covered with steaming piles of rice and pasta.

She was idly thinking about how much she’d save here on lunches alone when she bumped into someone. ‘Sorry,’ she mumbled, deeply embarrassed; what kind of person gets distracted by free food their first day on the job?

‘Don’t worry about it,’ the someone said, a chuckle in his voice. She looked up; the first thing she noticed was that he had tissues sticking out of his collar. What would those be for? Was

he sweating a lot? He did have a nice shirt on. Maybe he was protecting it from his sweaty neck?

He saw her noticing and laughed. ‘Sorry, they put the tissues in to stop us from getting make-up on our clothes.’

Now that she looked more closely, she could see he did have a touch of bronzer on his face, and maybe some tinted moisturiser on under that to even out his complexion. But he didn’t have many wrinkles or spots to hide, and his green eyes were already startling enough to draw her attention, and then she realised she was staring because he actually was pretty good-looking, so she turned away and shit, was she blushing now?

‘So um, yeah,’ he was saying, ‘I don’t usually wear make-up, just so you know, but they’re recording some of the to-camera pieces this afternoon and –’

‘You’re one of the contestants?’ Rose said.

‘Yep,’ he said, ‘I’m Dave.’ He held out his hand, but before Rose could take it a young woman wearing a headset – not the one she’d seen before; they must have an army of them here – had appeared out of nowhere and grabbed him by the arm.

‘I’ve found Dave,’ she said into her headset as she towed him away, ‘filming in five.’

As he was dragged off, Dave looked back at Rose and shrugged, giving her a smile before he turned away.

If all the contestants looked like him, Rose thought, then maybe she should have been watching this show. She turned away and promptly walked directly into someone else.

‘Sorry,’ she said, taking a step back.

‘No worries,’ he said. ‘Always happy to bump into an attractive young woman.’

She looked him over. At least this guy didn’t seem to be a contestant. He was maybe in his mid-thirties, wearing jeans, elastic-sided boots and a zip-neck jumper under a quilted vest. He had the same general appearance as the vest: shiny and upholstered, like a private-school sports star made sleek by years

of business-class travel and fine dining. His thinning hair looked as if it had grudgingly agreed to stay after he'd promised it he was going to change.

'So,' he said, 'you look like a woman who's good with her hands.' He laughed. 'Sorry, you must get that a lot.'

'Yep,' she said. This guy seemed like the kind of man who cruised through life on a wake of his own confidence, which might mean he was important. 'I'm Rose,' she said.

'Leary Barker,' he said. 'Executive Producer, Endeavour Productions.'

'Oh,' Rose said, holding out her hand. 'You're my boss. I'm Rose, I've just started on *The Dock*.'

A look of panic bloomed on Leary's face. 'I'm not gonna get Me-Too'ed! Not again!'

Rose looked at him in complete puzzlement. 'I'm sorry, what?'

Leary laughed nervously, holding his hands in the air as he rapidly backed away. 'I mean, I'm sure *we two* will get along fine ... you know, seeing as I'm extremely respectful and professional ...' A look of relief came over his face. 'Yes, that's what I just said – *we two!*'

Rose watched him go, not sure whether to laugh or call out. He quickly disappeared around the back of the food truck; she turned and headed back towards her ute.