

*Monday*

‘Hello, miss?’ It was Boris, my carpenter, and he sounded worried. ‘Miss, I found something.’

‘Something? What? Where?’

‘I dug the hole for the post. I found ...’ His voice dropped. ‘... body.’

‘What?’

‘A *body*, miss.’

‘What kind of body?’ I was thinking, for some reason, of an old car body—a Valiant or a Ford or something, and wondering how they’d got it in the door.

‘You know, bones. Skellington.’

‘A *skeleton*?’ I almost dropped the phone. And I’m ashamed to admit it, but my first thought was, *This is going to completely stuff up my renovations.*

The day had started like almost every day did, with me at my little house, talking to a tradie about their day’s work on my renovations. All I wanted to do was get agreement on the task for the day and head off to my own work. But no.

‘They’re all so far away, miss ...’

My carpenter was telling me the story of his life. Of course.

Boris was bemoaning the fact that all his family were thousands of kilometres away in Croatia and he missed them so much and there was this girl ... I nodded and smiled sympathetically, but in the meantime, I had a chipboard floor that needed to be pulled up before the electricians could come in and rewire.

Why not tell him to get back to business, you ask? It just doesn't work that way. Trust me, I've been through this before.

Boris is short and stocky, but his face has the long lines and the deep, sad eyes of a hound dog, and he was never sadder than when he was talking about his family. With other people, he has a reputation for never saying more than two words at a time. With me, he rambles.

Don't ask me why it happens. Maybe it's my face. Maybe my background in interviewing makes me put on an interested look automatically. Me, I think that character is des-tiny, and my fate is to go through life having people tell me their problems, their sorrows, their disappointments—and sometimes their triumphs. And I admit—it is interesting. People always are, if you listen long enough.

'So, maybe, I get permanent residency ...' Boris concluded hopefully. I patted him on the shoulder.

'I'm sure you will.' I shifted my gaze to the floor. The plasterers had finished, thank God, which meant the chip-board, already a bit damp and mouldy, was now festooned with drying lumps of plaster. Next to my beautiful clean walls it looked even more disgusting than it had before.

'The electricians will be here on Thursday to do the power points,' I said, slightly plaintive. My big brother the builder says that the best way to get help from tradesmen is to simply state the problem and let them come up with the solution. They don't like amateurs telling them what to do. This is true of female tradies as well.

Boris patted my shoulder.

'Don't you worry about that, miss,' he said. 'Them floors'll be gone by then. I'll pull 'em up and put in the newel post.' The freestanding staircase in one corner was held up structurally by a square metal column underneath the half-landing, but the balustrade needed a newel post at the bot-tom to hold it steady. The old one had simply rested on top of the chipboard floors, but Boris was going to put in a proper post that went down to ground level and had a solid concrete footing.

He hefted a big crowbar and grinned, showing one gold tooth and one gap among otherwise blindingly white teeth. I grinned back. I like Boris. He's a good carpenter, and I could trust

him to look after my house. I felt it needed looking after, even though there's nothing there yet, except the bricks and, now, the beautiful old-fashioned proper plaster walls. My tiny little worker's cottage, only twelve feet wide, had been emptied out completely—plaster scraped from the walls, carpet gone, new damp course, new ceilings, and soon the floors themselves would go, at least on the ground floor. I was redoing that from the dirt up, because it had been *really disgusting* when I bought it (only reason I could afford it). The only snag was that I had to live with my parents for the duration.

I looked around, at the morning sunlight coming in through the back window, the high ceilings complete with ceiling roses and rose-patterned cornices, the Victorian mouldings around the doors, and sighed. It was worth it. I loved this house. It was the kind of house I'd walked by as a uni student, when I lived in a block of flats around the corner, and imagined living in one day.

I left Boris to it and drove to work, past the statues of World War One soldiers on Anzac Bridge, past the Fish Market where the tourists were taking pictures of the fishing fleet, over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and up the free-way to Artarmon. I technically work at the Children's and Education Department of the ABC in the city, in Ultimo, but my day-to-day work is at Artarmon.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is what an American friend of mine calls 'PBS on steroids' but it's probably more accurate to compare it to the BBC. We don't have the BBC's budget, but we are government funded and apolitical. 'Innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services' is our charter, and we use TV, radio and the digital universe to deliver them.

The program I was currently a researcher for was what is known in the trade as a 'co-production', which means that we worked with an outside contractor, Star Shots, who had the rights to sell the show overseas, and that was where I was based. I had to organise the week's shooting schedule and make sure I had delivered all the recce information the camera crews needed to find and shoot the footage we wanted.

The show was called *Stage 1: Launchpad*, and was an education program aimed at littlies in the first three years of school. Heavily linked to the curriculum, we made pro-grams about things like 'Where does milk come from?' and 'How do fish come from the sea to the table?' and 'What happens at the zoo after closing time?'

I was the researcher and scriptwriter, which meant I was given a topic by the director/producer, Jennifer Jay, and then I found the information, locations, people to interview, any-thing we needed, really, and put it into a script.

By the time I got to Star Shots in Artarmon it was rain-ing hard. Not one of those Sydney squalls which dumps buckets on you and passes in a few moments, but a solid, long-lasting rain that would probably go on all day. So much for my camera shoot at Luna Park. We were making a show about what happens at the amusement park behind the scenes.

As I walked in, shaking off my umbrella and my unruly mop of hair, Jennifer Jay hurried out of the office. Jennifer Jay (everyone uses her full name, like a character in a picture book) hurries everywhere. She's a slight woman with the nervous mannerisms of an ex-smoker trying not to reach for a fag. Sharp brown eyes, pale skin, dull brown hair that always seems to be showing a strip of grey at her centre parting—and how is that possible, unless she does it deliberately, which I wouldn't put past her? You don't much notice how she looks because she is very intense, very concentrated on you or the job or both.

'So,' she said as I walked in, 'which tradesman have you been charming this morning?' This was what she always asked if she thought I'd been wasting time on the house. I wasn't technically late. I work public service hours, because I'm an ABC employee. Jennifer Jay was, too. But the other people at Star Shots were private contractors, which means they worked all the hours God sent, so they'd been here since before breakfast. Jennifer Jay liked to work along with them, clocking up flexi hours which she never took. I don't think she has a life outside the show. She's divorced with no children and the only reason she goes home is to feed her cat and swap her library books. Which makes her sound pitiful, and that is so wrong.

'The carpenter wanted to tell me the story of his life,' I said defensively. She laughed, and so did the receptionist, Cherie. It was an ongoing joke. Mind you, both Jennifer Jay and Cherie had told me the story of their lives on different occasions, so I didn't feel they should laugh too loud.

Particularly as Cherie's story about how and why she got her many piercings had needed a very strong stomach to listen to.

Jennifer Jay looked out the window to the parking lot.

‘That shoot at Luna Park has been called off. Weather Bureau says this’ll go on all day.’ She scowled. She resents wasting camera time. ‘Do we have anything else we can send them to? Indoors?’

I went through my to-do list in my head, but couldn’t think of anything. We’d done the indoors shooting at Luna Park last week, on another wet day.

‘Not on this program,’ I said. ‘I could have a try at setting something up for the next one.’

‘The archaeology one?’

‘No, the one on recycling. Archaeology’s the one after that. There are sections of the recycling centre that are under cover.’

Jennifer Jay nodded.

‘Have a try.’

She walked off to Editing and I went to the production office, which was, as always, full of people, whiteboards, old digital tapes, paper, and fraying posters from past productions sticky-taped to the walls.

People always think that working in television is glamorous. Maybe if you’re interviewing starlets on the red car-pet at the Oscars, but not in our production office, and not when you’re knee deep in cow dung in the middle of a milking yard at five o’clock on a cold morning, trying to write down the *exact* sequence of moves the dairy farmer makes so the camera crew will film *everything* they need to. Not glamorous. But quite a lot of fun, all the same.

And I like the fact I learn stuff—the behind closed doors stuff, the trade secret stuff. It’s surprising, the amount of information I have tucked away. I started out writing video scripts for the Museum of New South Wales, so all in all I’ve learnt some esoteric facts in the last few years.

On that particular morning, I had dumped my bag on the desk and was looking at my emails when my mobile rang.

'Hello, miss? Miss, I found something,' said Boris. And that's when it all went pear-shaped.