

CHAPTER

1

The cat was back.

Vera stood, bin in hand, at the kitchen door of the old Federation building she'd just signed a lease on and met the cat's stare with one of her own.

'Scram,' she said, as she tipped the rubbish she was carrying into the alley skip bin. She was too tired to put much heat into the word. The cat paused in a puddle of spring sunshine then settled into a brick of fur.

Excellent. She'd have no trouble at all running kitchen staff, a barista, and a team of waiters if this was how a stray cat responded to her commands.

She lowered the rubbish bin to the ground and took a second to ease the knots in her back. What had she been thinking? She knew nothing about running a café, particularly one in a small tourist town in the Snowy Mountains. All she knew was that she needed an income to pay for her aunt's medical bills, and cooking was the only skill she had left.

A horn tooted from the street out front of the building and had her checking her watch. Ten o'clock, bang on time. She hurried back inside, stripped off her rubber gloves, and peered through the plate glass windows that formed two sides of her shopfront. A delivery truck stood by the kerb, and two tradies were untying ropes and hauling drop cloths from the huge sign resting in its tray.

Vera felt a prickle of emotion deep in her stomach. It took a moment to recognise the prickle for what it was, it had been so long. She opened the front door and stood in the entryway as the last of the cloth was lifted, and her excitement grew from a prickle to a roar.

'You want us to hang it now, love?'

Yes. Hell yes, she wanted them to hang it now. She may be about to make a monumental financial blunder; she may be unsure, and nervous, and sick with worry about whether her daft, outrageous idea was going to pay off, for her *and* her aunt. But by god, yes, she was ready.

'Let's do it,' she said.

The two men reached into the truck's deep tray and hauled. She caught her breath as the sign came clear: glossy chocolate background, pale cream writing in a stylish font she'd agonised over. The border of wildflowers had come up so much better than she'd imagined, with the yellow billy buttons plump and cheerful, and the delicate stems of pink triggers providing some old-fashioned whimsy. THE BILLY BUTTON CAFÉ, PROPRIETOR VERA DE ROSSI.

She pressed a hand to her heart. She felt a little wild herself.

A slow clap sounding from the park on the street's far side distracted her as she signed the delivery invoice.

'Noice.' The broad country accent drew her attention to a buff-looking guy on the denial side of fifty staring at her with his arms crossed.

‘Um, thanks.’

He stepped onto the road. ‘I’m your eleven o’clock,’ he said, as he walked past her and into the dimly lit chaos that was currently the interior of the café. ‘Crikey. Lots to do, lucky I’m early.’

Vera felt a frown forming and willed it away. She was a café proprietor now—she needed to be friendly. ‘We’re not open yet, sir.’

He turned to her, offered her a hand to shake and a grin that was all manicured beard and charm. ‘Graeme Sharpe. I responded to your newspaper ad for café staff.’

Hell’s bells, where was her head? She was supposed to be a detail person, and she had totally forgotten she had an interview booked for later in the morning. ‘Of course. Sorry, I lost track of the time.’

The man eyed the clutter, and she followed his gaze as it moved about the room. The chairs were piled high in one corner, still wrapped in plastic. Tables needed legs attaching, copper urns and drooping ferns formed a pyramid in the middle of the floor. ‘Vera De Rossi,’ he said. ‘Proprietor. That’s you, I take it?’

‘Yep.’

‘Uh-huh. You run a café before, Vera?’

‘Nope.’

‘You serious about making this one work?’

Vera pursed her lips. Who was interviewing who, here? This Graeme guy wasn’t lacking in confidence. ‘I’m deadly serious about making The Billy Button work.’ Understatement of the year. If the café didn’t turn a profit, her Aunt Jill’s safe haven in the dementia ward at Connolly House would be gone before she’d had a chance to change into her slippers.

‘And food. You buying in from suppliers, or making your own?’

‘Making it here. Cakes to eat in and take away, big breakfast menu, light lunch menu. Maybe dinner down the track. You know, my bank manager didn’t ask me this many questions.’

He smiled. 'Just checking if you and I are going to be a good fit. If you're interested in hiring the best barista north of Fitzroy, I'm your man. Only, I have to warn you, I *do* have experience in running cafés and I'm fussy, bossy and opinionated. But in a totally good way.'

She drew in a breath. Hiring a man with the razzle-dazzle of a talk-show host had not been what she'd envisaged, but she was here in Hanrahan to remake herself, wasn't she? Rigid and fussy, that was the old Vera. This new Vera had to be flexible.

She could adapt. 'Barista, you say.'

'My lovely, I can make you a latte that would make an angel sing.'

She fought down a smile. 'That's quite a claim. Do people outside of the city know how to make decent coffee?'

He threw his hands up in mock horror. 'Such prejudice. Skinny flat whites, iced long blacks, affogatos—show me your machine, lady, and I'll show you caffeine heaven.'

She grinned. 'Sheath that indignation, Dundee. I believe you. Unfortunately, the espresso machine hasn't arrived yet.' She eyed him, wondering if he really *would* suit. Graeme the barista was clearly a small-town people person—she'd need that, because she sure as hell wasn't any good with small towns. Or people. She could barely run her own messed-up life. 'Do you have references?'

He winked. 'All sorts. What skills are you needing referenced?'

'Coffee-making, obviously. But I'll be needing more than a coffee that can—um—show me heaven. I need a front of house person. Like a maître'd of a restaurant. Someone who knows the customers' names, keeps the peace when someone decides their skinny-soy-half-strength-with-a-quarter-sugar isn't hot enough. Someone who can keep an eye on young staff and check the milk

order when it arrives and balance the till. Who isn't above giving the loos a quick swab when the waitstaff are slammed.'

'Oh,' he said, nodding his head. 'You need a miracle worker. The answer, then, is yes. I can do all of that and more.'

Graeme sounded too good to be true. She frowned. This café was the only way she was going to be able to keep an income coming in if the worst happened and her lawyer couldn't keep her out of prison. She couldn't afford to not ask tough questions, not when so much was at stake. 'If you're such a hotshot, Graeme, how is it you're out of work? And why are you burying your barista awesomeness in Hanrahan?'

He shrugged. 'Love and lust, Vera.'

Did he just say—

He must have read her look of befuddlement, because he laughed. 'I know, right? Who would have thought Hanrahan was such a hotbed of romance for middle-aged guys like me? I moved here to be closer to my partner Alex about a year ago, but it's well past time I found myself some gainful employment. And Marigold—have you met her yet? Town busybody? Heart of gold and impervious to snubs?—well, she showed me your advertisement and said fate was giving me a gentle nudge.'

'Fate?' God, she hoped not. She was hoping the disastrous string of events which resulted in her placing the advert in the local paper had come to an end. She'd had quite enough of fate for the time being ... especially as her own never seemed to arrive as gentle nudges. Her fate felt like it was being flung from a distance by a vengeful goblin.

Graeme smiled. 'Marigold is a bit of a hippy. She throws words like fate and karma and mindfulness around like she's throwing frisbees for a pet dog ... I blame it on the yoga.'

They had moved deeper into the room, to where tape marks on the old floorboards marked where the new timber veneer counter would be installed, and she did a survey, wishing the hard work was done already. To her right, tall sash windows looked out over Paterson Street to the small park, and a soot-stained fireplace of dark brick soared from floor to ceiling.

To the left, more windows framed the view of lake and mountain that had driven the monthly rent up to a worryingly high amount.

This café was a gamble, and one she couldn't afford to lose: if fate had truly brought Graeme to this moment of decision, desperation had been what had brought her. She shouldn't employ the first person she interviewed, no matter how sweet he seemed. She had a lot riding on this café, and so did her aunt.

She racked her brain for another employer-like question to ask. 'Have you been out of work long? I'll be needing someone who can put in a full working week. There'll be some early starts, too.'

'I know the drill, Vera. The thing is ... I get a bit antsy when I have too much alone time. I've been building an extension on our house which has kept me flat strap, but I'm happier surrounded by a bit of bustle.'

Alone time. Sounded like bliss to her, and she was hoping for plenty of it herself now she'd moved to Hanrahan. She didn't know anyone, and no-one knew her. She'd learned her lesson: getting involved brought nothing with it but hurt and betrayal, and she was so done with that. Her relationships from now on were going to involve her, her battered pile of recipe books, and the never-ending list of tasks she had to complete to get this café up and thriving.

She made a snap decision. Graeme didn't look like a bad bet, and she needed a barista. A fun one with charm to spare was just icing on the cake. 'Okay. Why don't we say a four-week trial? I'll pay

above the going rates, but only just, because I'm pretty much broke. I'm hoping to open a week from today, and there's plenty of work if you want to start sooner.'

Graeme held out his hand. 'You're making the right decision, boss.'

She grinned at him, because really, who wouldn't? He was one hundred per cent adorable. And besides, she had a good feeling about this arrangement. Her new (and only) employee was like the fire to her hydrant, the dazzle to her drab. The more he kept the customers entertained, the more she could devote herself to her pots and pans in the privacy of the commercial kitchen out back.

'When you say I can start sooner ... I do have a few ideas.'

And so it began, she thought. Her café was no longer a one-woman dream. 'Ideas? Like what?'

'Are those bentwood chairs I see, tucked under all that plastic?'

'Yes. Mahogany stain. I was hoping for some club chairs in a cigar-coloured leather, but my bank manager was starting to look pale and sweaty whenever I asked if I could extend the overdraft.'

Graeme moved forward to lift the plastic and inspect the exposed wood. 'Now, where's the fun in getting it all perfect at once? These chairs will look lovely ... old school, to suit the building. What's the age of this place, Federation?'

'Nineteen ten, according to the lease I signed.'

'You'll be wanting to capture a little of that charm, I expect. What are your other decoration plans?'

She felt a little rush of affection for this stranger who had, within the space of a few minutes, grasped the importance of getting The Billy Button Café right. This wasn't some hole-in-the-wall take-away joint she was trying to create. She took a breath. 'I'd love to talk over my plans if you have time. I had a graphic designer help

me with the sign, but everything else’—she gestured to the clutter of stuff she’d dragged in or had delivered—‘is a collation of ideas I’ve been gathering in a scrapbook for years.’

‘Scrapbooking? Oh, goody.’ Graeme said it like he was a kid at a party who’d just spied the pile of party bags to be given out. ‘Can I see? Is it here?’

‘Er ... sure. It’s in that box over there along with the paint rollers and drop cloths.’

She waited until he’d pulled it out and spread it open on one of the round, iron-footed tables she’d set up.

‘Oh my,’ he said. ‘Stylish but warm, I love it.’

She shrugged. ‘Look at this place. Those huge sash windows, the fireplace, the decorative swirls in the ceiling. Anything else would seem, I don’t know—’

‘Sacrilege?’

She grinned. ‘I was going to say a wasted opportunity, but sure, let’s scale it up to sacrilege.’

Graeme gave a chuckle as he turned the page. ‘Girlfriend, scaling things up is my special skill. Oh ... these deep green velvet banquettes, I love them. You could pop a corner banquette there, near the inner room.’ He spun on his heel. ‘Perhaps another by that window.’

‘Way ahead of you. A carpenter down at Cooma is whipping them up as we speak. Should be here in a day or two.’

‘Lighting? Please tell me these abominations are going.’

Vera looked up to the strips of fluorescent tubing lining the stained ceiling. ‘I’ve found some simple fixtures at a disposal store. Copper rods that bring the lights down low, a simple glass fitting that has an amber glow to it. If I had an endless budget I would have tried for some vintage fittings but ...’

‘In time, Vera. Lightbulbs are an easy change. Who do you have in mind to do the painting? What is this current wall colour, anyway, apricot jam?’

She laughed. ‘I know, right? Hideous. You should see the kitchen, it’s like a tree frog exploded in there. I’m doing the painting. That’s today and tomorrow’s job, along with retiling the fireplace surrounds and waxing the floorboards. Once that’s done, I can start placing the furniture and have the counter delivered.’

Graeme walked over to the stack of tiles leaning against the decorative skirting board lining the room. ‘These are gorgeous.’

Yeah. They ought to be for the work she’d put into them. She’d found them advertised as a giveaway from a house renovation in Queanbeyan. Glossy, deep-green handmade tiles a century old that had enough of a ripple in the surface shine to give them whimsy. She’d spent an afternoon chipping them off an unwanted kitchen backsplash, breaking as many as she’d managed to save. They were magnificent—and so too would the fireplace be, if she could somehow get it to look like the pictures she’d gathered in her scrapbook, with her vintage tiles set subway style about the cast-iron firebox. The timber mantel was already perfect. Made from a blackened hardwood, she liked to imagine it had been polished by the people of Hanrahan for over a hundred years.

‘I should have enough for the fire surround,’ she said.

‘Does the chimney work?’

Hell, she hadn’t thought to ask the landlord. She’d been daydreaming about serving mulled wine in front of a snug fire once autumn arrived in the mountains, and hadn’t given a thought to the state of the chimney. ‘I have no idea. I’ll add it to my list.’

Graeme made a *hmm* sound and continued inspecting the bits and pieces she’d assembled.

‘Maybe you could help me find a local florist, Graeme. I’m hoping to use local wildflowers as centrepieces on the tables. Fresh or preserved, I don’t mind.’

He grinned at her, a smile that was as wide as it was wicked. ‘Oh, have I got a florist for you, Vera.’

‘Um ... thank you, I think.’

‘About these tiles. I can do the fireplace for you, if you’re willing to trust me with it.’

She’d disappeared into a daydream imagining The Billy Button Café beautifully dressed and ready to party, plump yellow wildflowers adding a little sunshine to every table, but Graeme’s words pulled her back to the dusty drop-cloth reality.

‘Excuse me? Did you just offer to do a DIY project for my fit-out?’

He shrugged. ‘Sure. Why wouldn’t I?’

‘Um ... because people aren’t usually that nice. Not where I moved from, anyway.’

Graeme gave her the full benefit of his megawatt smile. ‘You’re in Hanrahan now, Vera. Besides, I am one fussy renovator. If I’m going to be looking at that fireplace all day, I’m going to be needing some precision grout lines.’

‘Huh,’ she said. ‘I don’t like to boast, but I’ve watched three online tiling tutorials. I’m pretty much an expert now.’

Graeme grinned. ‘I think we’re gonna make a great team, boss. You got an apron hiding in that pyramid of stuff?’

Aprons she had. They were works of art, chocolate brown and piped with cream edging. There was no way in hell she was letting one of her new aprons anywhere near a DIY tiling project.

‘I can offer you a plastic garbage bag or a grease-stained old tea towel?’

‘Ew. Why don’t I pop home and get into my overalls. I’ll be back in an hour.’

She reached out and touched her new café manager on the arm. 'Are you sure you want this, Graeme? Building something from the ground up like this? It's going to be a lot of work.'

Graeme rested his hand over hers and turned to give the interior of her café one long look. 'Girlfriend,' he said, 'this place is going to be a sensation.'

She hoped so. She really hoped so. She looked through the smudged glass windows, to where The Billy Button Café sign swung in a breeze curling up from the narrow northern arm of Lake Bogong, and squared her shoulders.

She couldn't afford to let *anything* get in the way of this café being a hit.

CHAPTER

2

Josh Cody slid a loop of gut into his hooked needle and carefully knotted the last suture.

‘How many?’

He looked up at his sister, who’d popped her head in round the door of the surgical room. ‘Eight. Three black, one chocolate, four yellow. You owe me ten bucks.’

Hannah flashed him a grin. ‘You’ve got mad diagnostic skills, Dr Cody.’

He ran his hand over the chest and stomach of the plump labrador on his stainless steel table. She’d been exhausted when the man who’d found her in his shearing shed had brought her in—luckily, he’d performed more than one emergency caesarean by now. The operation had gone smoothly, which made being called Dr Cody, Veterinarian, feel less like the dream of a moron who’d screwed up his chances and more like the hard-earned truth.

‘Did you find a microchip? I can run it through the database.’

‘Nothing. Her fur’s in a poor state, nails are brittle and torn up, and she’s a little long in the tooth to be having a litter. She’s not underweight though. Hard to say if she’s a stray, or just has owners who haven’t got a clue how to look after a pregnant dog.’

He glanced down into the plastic tub on the bench, where eight furry lumps the size of vegemite scrolls snoozed atop a pink fluffy heat pack. The cause of this morning’s drama, the chocolate pup who’d tried to enter the world sideways, lay on his back, a tiny pink tongue poking from his snout.

Hannah moved in next to him and reached a hand into the bucket of pups. ‘Poppy’s going to go nuts when she sees them.’

He sighed. ‘I hope so.’

He’d not seen his daughter for weeks. And her absence from his life had chiselled a hole in his heart that even the excitement of his new vet career couldn’t fill. She was mad with him for moving from Sydney to ‘the boonies’, as she called it, and kept finding new ways to make him suffer. The first time he’d brought up the idea of relocating to Hanrahan she’d flounced off back to her mother’s, returning a week later with a second set of ear piercings. Dragging her feet about visiting was Pop’s latest brand of torture.

Sure, he got it, school and assignments and Year Ten exams mattered ... but didn’t he matter too?

‘Give me a hand with getting her off the table, will you, Han?’ he said, turning his attention back to a problem he *could* do something about.

‘Sure.’

They lifted the sedated dog and carried her through to a pen. ‘You written up the chart yet?’ said Hannah.

‘No time. She looked ready to pop when Trev carried her in.’

‘Trev? The old bloke from out near Stony Creek? Wow, I haven’t seen him in yonks. I thought he hated the hustle and bustle of town.’

He snorted. ‘Hannah, I hate to be the one to break it to you, but Dandaloo Street in Hanrahan can in no way be described as hustle and bustle.’

‘That is so not true. You haven’t seen the fuss and bother going on in the old bank building. Some fancy new café is opening up. Hanrahan is cosmopolitan these days, big brother.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Noted. I’d also like to point out that the only hustle and bustle we need to worry about right now is the fleas on this dog. I’d better find the old girl a flea collar.’ He rested his hand on the brown dog’s head. ‘You’ve got fleas as big as bandicoots, Jane, you know that? Don’t worry, we’ll get rid of them for you.’

‘Jane?’

He shut the pen gate and returned to the bench to collect the pups. ‘Jane Doe. Isn’t that what they call unidentified people in cop shows?’

Hannah put her hands on her hips and gave him the you’re-an-idiot look she’d been sending his way for nearly thirty years. ‘Only the dead ones, moron.’

He pulled her long brown pigtail. ‘My case, so I get naming rights. I say it’s Jane Doe.’

He put the pups into the whelping box next to their mother’s cage. She’d be waking soon enough, and once he was sure she wasn’t so sedated she’d roll on the new arrivals, he’d pop them in with her. One happy family.

Just like he and Poppy could be if she ever condescended to pay him a visit.

‘Before you get into the paperwork, I want to show you something.’ Hannah dug into a pocket of her navy scrubs and pulled out a thin card. ‘A box of these arrived this morning. What do you think?’

He read the card in her hand and flashed his sister a smile. Finally. *Finally*. ‘I didn’t know you were getting these printed.’

She punched him in the arm. ‘I don’t have to tell my new partner everything.’

He read the words a second time: JOSH CODY, CODY AND CODY VET CLINIC, CNR DANDALOO STREET AND SALT CREEK FLATS ROAD, HANRAHAN. It had been a year since his little sister had invited him to buy into her growing vet practice in the historic mountain town where they’d grown up. He’d still been a student then, Poppy living with him every second week, and working construction on weekends to keep the bills paid. It had taken him three seconds to decide that was the move he wanted to make, but it had taken another three months before he’d told Poppy his move to Hanrahan was no longer a dream but reality.

She’d been so thrilled she’d moved all her belongings out of her bedroom in his apartment and taken up residence permanently at her mother’s.

‘Just getting used to be being abandoned,’ she’d thrown at him. Happy days.

What Poppy didn’t understand was how much Hanrahan was a part of him ... of all the Codys. His grandparents had lived here back when the Snowy River still flowed in all its glory from the mountains to the Southern Ocean, flooding pretty much everything in its path when the snows melted. Despite her current refusal to reside with him, Poppy was as much a Cody as he was, which meant she needed to know that city life wasn’t the only type of life she could have.

And then there was the other thing. The personal thing. Fifteen years in Sydney, scraping and saving and working his arse off to get by had just about done him in. He needed this. He needed respect, and he needed to be valued. And—he rubbed his hand over the Poppy-sized ache in his chest—he needed his daughter to be the one doing the respecting and the valuing.

Maybe then he could finally quit beating himself up for blowing his chances.

As he slipped the card into the back pocket of his jeans, he choked down the lump in his throat. 'I love it. Thanks, Hannah.'

She grinned. 'You can thank me by sweet-talking Sandy into opening a pack of the good biscuits. I've got surgeries back-to-back this arvo, and if I don't get some chocolate into these veins, I'll be too weak to cut the boy bits off Mrs Grundy's dalmatian.'

Josh winced. Why was it women vets always said that with such relish? 'Enough said.'

Hannah moved to the workbench and started assembling gear. 'Before you disappear, there is something else I need to tell you.'

Josh studied his sister's face. 'Why do I get the feeling this other thing isn't as fun as a shiny new business card?'

Hannah pulled a mask off the storage shelf, gloves, a canister of the jerky treats they fed to the furry patients to remind them that their vet visits could be fun, despite the needles and indignities they might suffer. 'It's in the mail-in tray. The local newspaper.'

'Why would the local newspaper put an expression of doom on your face?'

'Remember the community section? The Hanrahan Chatter?'

'Sure. Someone hit a birdie at the golf course. So-and-so got married. Garage sale on Brindabella Avenue followed by bingo at the community hall.'

'Not this week.'

He clamped a hand down on the sterile dressings she was layering on a tray. 'Just spit it out, Hannah. What are the noisy miners twittering about now?'

She flicked him a look. 'Maureen Plover took it over some years back. Remember her?'

'No.'

‘Sure you do. She used to work in the pharmacy.’

‘Lots of hair? Gimlet eyes? Stood guard over the condom display?’

‘Wow,’ his sister said, with the deadpan inflection his daughter had also mastered. ‘That’s what you remember, huh?’

He shrugged.

‘Well, these days she keeps herself busy nosing around everyone’s business and writing a column for the Chatter, and this week, you’re her hot topic.’

‘Crap.’

‘Uh-huh. High school hero returns ... some titillating backstory about Beth, none of it true ... finishes with a plug for the vet clinic, as though that makes it all friendly and sweet.’

He closed his eyes. When would this town let it go?

‘I’m sorry, Josh.’

He sighed. ‘Yeah, me too. We got any wood out back in the shed? I’m feeling a strong urge to drive an axe through something, and firewood would be a better option than finding Maureen Plover’s home office and trashing it.’



He left Hannah to prep for her afternoon list and stepped into the cluttered office out back where they kept their case notes and work desks. He tapped out a quick *Have You Lost Your Dog?* flyer, then frowned at the social media logo on the screen as he waited for the printer to rev up. May as well use the internet for good as well as evil, he thought, and posted a message on the clinic’s community page. *Found, one chocolate labrador, aged 8–9 years, contact Josh.* Thank god the gossips of Hanrahan hadn’t been switched on about social media back when he was making waves on the town’s news radar; the backlash then had been bad enough.

He had to ignore it. Gossip in the local paper was no reason to sour his return to Hanrahan. Poppy's passive-aggressive texts were a different matter, but he couldn't blame the old biddies of Hanrahan for that.

He looked at the text message he'd received that morning in response to his reminder that her two-week school holiday was about to start, and she still hadn't said when she'd visit.

It's not all about you, Dad.

True. But couldn't it be a little bit about him? He was two biscuits into a self-pity snack when the idea struck him. Assurances and pleas and begging hadn't worked ... maybe it was time for a new strategy. He'd been busting a gut to make everything work for her to visit him, offering to book train tickets, pick out a new doona cover, coordinate with her mum and her school term and whatever activities she had on so it would be easy for her.

Maybe that was part of the problem?

He picked up his phone before he could overthink it.

She answered on the second ring.

'Shouldn't you be in class?' he said.

'Hey, you called me, remember? Anyway, I've got a spare this arvo.'

'Phones in lockers. That's the school rule.'

Her sigh carried with it the weight of teenage girls everywhere who had to put up with dorky dads asking them tedious questions. 'I can hang up, Dad, if you're concerned about the minutiae of phone usage rules at Rosella State High.'

She was right. He didn't want her to hang up. 'About Hanrahan,' he said.

'Can we not get into this again? I've said I'll come out sometime, all right? I've got a lot on so I can't commit. I only get two weeks

break in October, and I don't want to waste half of that time on a train.'

'Cooma Train Station is five hours from Sydney, not five days.'

'Whatever.'

Ouch. The sting of that three-syllabled word was worse than a snake bite. He should know—he'd had someone's pet python latch onto his arm twice in the last fortnight.

'Anyway, the reason I was calling ...'

'Yes?' she said.

He took a breath, then worked at injecting a note of frazzle into his voice. If this strategy was going to work, he needed to give it some heft. 'I've kind of lost the plot with getting the flat ready.'

'In what way? You didn't pick some gross colour for my room, did you?'

'Baby pink, just like you asked for.'

'I so did not! Bloody hell, Dad.'

He chuckled. 'Just winding you up. I haven't got around to paint yet. I only just got the planning notice sign erected out front.'

'What do you need that for?'

'It's a formality for council. Gives the locals a chance to make comment before council approves the plans. The building is heritage listed, you know.'

'Huh. Like I care about old buildings.'

'Oh? Well, that's too bad, because it's *your* heritage. I don't want to mess it up by making a dumb building decision.'

'What ... *my* heritage?'

'Well, the building will be partly yours one day. And it's part of Snowy Mountains history. Not everybody gets to restore a three-storey Victorian stone building built during the gold rush.'

'Wow. I had no idea it was so old.'

Was that interest he was hearing in his daughter's voice? She delivered her comments with such a chilly tone, sometimes it was hard to tell.

'Plus, I'm no good at choosing sheets, or any cooking appliances besides a sandwich maker, and the tiling in the bathroom's only half done.'

'You do make epic toasted sandwiches, Dad.' Yeah—she was definitely warming up a little.

He sighed. Mournfully. 'I don't know, Pop. It's so difficult making all these decisions all by my lonely lonesome self.'

Silence pulsed down the phone line for a long moment.

He broke first. 'Poppy? You still there?'

'No. The deputy principal just saw me on my phone, so I'm currently being dragged off to the interrogation room to be torn apart by alsatians.'

He grinned. 'So, what do you think? Could you spare a teeny-weeny bit of time over your break to help your old dad out?'

'If this is your idea of bribery, it sucks.'

'Will you think about it?'

The silence dragged out again, but this time Poppy was the one to end it. 'I'll try,' she said.

'I love you,' he said.

'I know,' she said, and the line went dead in his ear.

