



## CHAPTER 2

'O.K. Guys loosen up here. We've got a heap of work to get through and a deadline to meet.' Claudia stood at the head of an immense white marble slab that was mounted on four metal pillars to form the conference table. The boardroom was constructed entirely from laminated glass. It had a 180 degree view of the opera house, so décor items were kept to a minimum.

Eighteen pewter frame chairs, upholstered in soft cream leather, and the massive marble slab, were a carefully orchestrated understatement, intended to exquisitely showcase the spectacular outside view.

A low hum of discontent reverberated around the room, sending Claudia a clear message the team's enthusiasm was critically low. They'd all been working 18 hour days for the past six weeks. Catered food had long lost its appeal, they just wanted to go home to be with their families. Duty induced resignation, tinged with a healthy amount of discontent, pretty much summed up the mood.

Claudia understood their frustration 'Look guys, I'm with you on this; it's a shitty way to spend a Friday evening. But please trust me; I will make it worth your while.' She paused, then added, 'As soon as we've finished this you can all take four days leave.'

'Sure Claudia.' Thomas called from the back of the room, 'and who's going to run the place while we're off playing golf, or indulging in some serious retail therapy?'

Claudia made direct eye contact with him, drew in her bottom lip and sucked it gently for a moment, and then she gave him one of her dazzling smiles. 'My dear Thomas, you'll be delighted to hear I've already asked the PAs to contact all our clients to tell them our key people will be unavailable next week.' Her eyes moved around the room; she saw signs of re-engagement, 'And as a special treat, Sarah

has also arranged a daylong harbour cruise for tomorrow; complete with a champagne lunch prepared by Doyle's seafood restaurant, followed by an on-board screening of Woody Allen's, *Crimes and Misdemeanours* for anyone who cares to stay on.'

The collective body language altered immediately; backs straightened, fingers gripped pens, and renewed determination was evident. 'Well, let's get serious folks' Claudia said as she pressed a small button embedded in the marble. Sarah and a junior assistant appeared at the door, each pushing a Hotel Menzie's dining cart. This was no junk food. This was à la carte at its finest.

When everyone had served themselves generous portions, Claudia addressed them again. 'Please eat while I talk' she smiled, 'and let's not worry about good manners. If you've got something to say, I want to hear it; even if it is through a mouthful of food.'

She flicked on the Light-Pro and stepped to the side when a brilliant image flooded the screen that had dropped silently from the ceiling. 'What you see here folks, is the new science lab and other purpose built workrooms and offices.' She gave them an apologetic look, 'I'm sorry I couldn't show it to you before this, because we were still brokering a deal with the former owners.'

Claudia paused briefly and then added, 'This complex was designed and built to house the climate change division of CSIRO. And now my friends it's ours. The deal was finalized at ten o'clock this morning.' A stunned silence held them captive for a split second, and then an eruption of wolf whistles, clapping and hooting reverberated from every corner.

Thomas sprinted to the front, grabbed her, and swung her around like a rag doll. He lowered her gently, and let his lips brush her ear, 'Claudia you are a genius. How on earth did you raise the Kappa?' Claudia ran her fingers through her short bob, readjusted her jacket, and responded as gently as possible.

'Thank you Thomas. It wasn't easy.' She breathed easy when Sarah advanced the presentation to the next slide. 'Right now let's get right down to business everyone' Claudia said, 'I'll start with a quick update on how we managed to purchase the Pod from CSIRO, and then I'll allocate the tasks we need to gift wrap by 7am tomorrow.'

She poured herself a mineral water and sipped it while people made themselves comfortable. 'Babcock and Baillie put up the eight million we needed to buy the POD. My parents put up their cattle stud as security.' She motioned her colleagues to hold off the questions, 'B&B has underwritten the deal, subject to a ten million Kappa injection from a New York consortium of business owners and property developers, called Green Star.

Green Star is a not-for-profit organization that saw some of our reports. They liked our modelling and now they want us to issue them with a licence to use the software. As you all know New York and Sydney will face the same problems if rising sea levels exceed the minimum projected levels.

Green Star has already made a four million down payment to Babcock and Baillie. They'll pay the balance when we deliver our complete modelling reports and the new version of AtmosFear.' She paused, to give them time to take in what she'd said. 'I know the software is good to go, but I'm still freaking about the models. Dave and his team have run off more than ten thousand scenarios without a hitch, but I'm still obsessing.' Everyone laughed, and Claudia smiled; she knew they'd nicknamed her Coco. An acronym for: *Compulsive Obsessive Chief Officer*.

'I want each team to swap their finished models and run each others stuff through some fancy scenarios again. Be creative. Do at least one hundred *what-if* calcs on every component. When you're finished we'll meet back here to look at the results.' She paused to see if they were still with her, then nodded to Sarah who threw up the spectacular POD image again, just to remind them that the Holy Grail was only hours away.

'Sarah has a team of excellent people on standby. As soon as we hit bull's eye, they'll finish the reports, print and bind them, and then they'll be ready for the overseas dispatch. Sarah will send the encrypted files to Green Star, and the hard copies will be sent by air courier, in a sealed, high-security document container, at eight tomorrow morning. Christoph, from our New York office, will meet the plane and hand deliver the container to Green Star.'

'No prob boss' Andrew said confidently. 'We'll have it sorted by ten pm so Sarah's people can have the lot by midnight.' He nodded to the others, 'Ain't that right guys?' All heads nodded. 'Any questions?' he asked. 'Good. Then let's get on it shall we?' He grabbed a pastry from a silver tray, 'See you back here at ten Mine-Boss-lady.'

Sarah and Claudia walked back to their office suite. 'Christoph phoned.' Sarah said casually, then deliberately stepped back so she could observe Claudia's reaction. There was a slight pause and she noticed Claudia straighten her back, as she placed one hand in the centre of her chest. Both small gestures; not something a casual observer would pick up. But Sarah didn't fit that category. She knew the hand on the chest was the reflex action of someone with a broken heart. Sarah wanted to reach out and comfort her friend, but that would be out of line.

Claudia turned her head slightly, 'Did you refer him on to Thomas?'

'Well no.' Sarah cleared her throat. 'He said right off he didn't want to talk to Thomas. He said he needed to talk to you.'

'I'm sorry Sarah, but he has to work through Thomas. Christoph knows that' She added, pushing open the office door, pleased for the small diversion. 'Would you phone Christoph please and explain that Thomas will be tied up until very late. Find out if the matter is urgent and suggest a video conference around lunchtime tomorrow. You and Thomas can both talk with him.' She cleared her dry throat. 'Thomas will be coming in around twelve; only for an hour or so, then like the others he'll be taking leave until next Friday.'

She walked to the window. City lights reflected on the water's surface, and the opera house beckoned like a giant sloop, inviting her to hasten away to a place where no one would ever find her. She heard Sarah cough.

'Is there anything else we need to discuss? It's going to be a long night, and I'd like to get some fresh air after I phone New York' Sarah asked rather formally, struggling to suppress a scream. The moment passed quickly and she slipped back into her PA role.

'No, that's all. There won't be anything else until I meet with the team at ten.' Sarah nodded, 'I have all the admin people on standby. They only need thirty minutes notice to get here. If they start at midnight, I'd say they'll have it wrapped up by three am, four at the latest.'



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