



# Chapter 1

THE PHONE ON MY WORK desk rang, cutting through my Thursday morning stupor. I jumped and gave a little *wah!*

Graham at the desk next to me chuckled. “Nervy today. Dreading a call from the debt collectors?”

I shot him a scowl then a quick grin. “Local Government and Planning, Emma speaking.”

“Emma, it’s Trish. Could you come round to my office for a sec?” I raised my eyebrows. This was the first time in the nearly eighteen months I’d been at my job that I’d been called into my director’s office. An uneasy knot of anxiety spread through my stomach like an algae bloom.

“Sure thing. See you, uh, right now I guess.”

Graham raised his eyebrows as I walked past him.

“Trish,” I said in reply.

“Oooh, maybe you’re getting a raise.”

“Maybe.” *Or maybe I’m getting fired.* I cast my mind back over the last few weeks to pick out anything I’d done, any e-mail I’d sent, that could have gotten me into trouble with the higher-ups at the Department of Local Government and Planning. Maybe the reply I sent to the concerned citizen in Eromanga who asked if NASA had lodged a planning application to build a rocket launch pad next to his house. I had advised there were no such plans currently lodged with the department, but maybe I should have double-checked? No, my job could be pretty mundane and I could achieve my targets on auto-pilot most of the time, so it was more likely to be something I *hadn’t* done—a box left unticked, a file left not lodged with the relevant regional council.

Trish was not particularly scary; in fact, she was pretty nice, and good to work for—ultra-organised but didn't take the Queensland state public service thing too seriously. She once told me you could only survive as long as she had in department-land if you either drank the Kool-Aid or treated it all as a bit of a joke. And she prided herself on not being a micro-manager, which meant, at least to my knowledge, she hardly ever called people into her office for private audiences.

"You want this door shut?" I asked as I walked in.

"Yes."

My stomach sank. She never wanted the door closed. As it clicked shut it silenced the general hum of keyboards clattering and my workmates discussing upcoming weekend plans. I sat across from her, not sure what to do with my hands. In the end I wrung my fingers together and plonked them on my lap.

"Emma, I wanted to run something by you. You live in Logan, right?"

My voice caught in my throat. "That's right." *What the...?*

I had bought my little place in a complex of fifteen townhouses because it was near the train station and cheap as chips compared with Brisbane prices. If you draw a wibbly blob where the suburban sprawl of Brisbane meets the suburban sprawl of the Gold Coast, that's Logan.

Sure, people looked down on it as undesirable, and it's the teen pregnancy capital of Australia with a higher-than-average rate of servo robberies, but surely living there didn't bring me down in Trish's estimation so much she was going to fire me. At least I hoped not.

"Good. I had a long-suffering friend in HR phone me in a bit of a tizz earlier. They had someone lined up to start in the manager role at one of the Logan electorate offices, but she didn't last 'til morning tea, and they need a replacement urgently. The local member's a minister, and the department wants to keep her happy. My friend thought if they hired someone local, their expectations might be a bit..."

"Lower?"

"More easily managed."

"Ah." I exhaled and unclasped my hands. I wasn't in trouble!

"Would you consider it? I'll hate to lose you, but you're well-organised and good with people, so I think you'll do really well."

“Wait... Me? I thought you were going to ask me if I knew anyone who might be able to do it. *Me*, manage an electorate office?”

I wrung my hands again. It was way too much. My stomach clenched at the thought of having to rouse on subordinate staff who were late for work or took cigarette breaks that were too long.

“Sure. I say ‘manage,’ and, yes, you’ll be the most senior officer there, but it’s only two pay grades above your substantive here. I think you’re more than capable if you’re willing to do it. And my HR friend said he’d buy me a bottle of wine if I can find someone to start on Monday.” She leaned forward in her chair.

Out of my swirl of confusion a question occurred to me. “Why did the other lady leave? Is the MP impossible?”

“No, I don’t think she had time to meet the MP. Feedback she gave HR on the phone was the office was, and I quote, a ‘shithole.’”

“Wow. That’s an, um, evocative description. Which electorate office is it?”

“Landells.”

I laughed. “That ‘shithole’ is literally over my back fence.”

“Oh, er, sorry. I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

“No worries at all! Look, it’s not a posh area by any stretch of the imagination. People wear mullet haircuts completely unironically and nannas are more likely to wear neck tattoos than pearls. That might have been enough to scare this last manager off if she’s not used to it.”

“Or if she’s particularly snooty.”

“Good point. Um...” I bit my lip and looked at the ceiling. My current job shuffling papers was fine, but I didn’t see myself doing it forever. And, buried under my anxiety about no one taking me seriously as a boss, I felt a tiny thrill of excitement at the unexpected opportunity thrown my way.

I sat up straighter in my chair. On the other side of the desk Trish’s eyes were wide and her fingers were intertwined loosely, almost like she was praying. My doubts and questions about the situation faded and were replaced with the instinct to make my boss happy on the slow Thursday afternoon. *She really wants that bottle of wine.*

“Okay, I’m in. I’ll do it,” I said.

She balled her hands into fists and held them up. “Yes! I’ll phone my friend right now. He’ll be thrilled. Thanks, Emma.”

“No, thank you for the opportunity.” I stood up.

“You’ll be working for the Honourable Bridget O’Keefe, Minister for...” She grabbed a scrawled-upon sticky note. “Corrective Services and Minister for State Development, Innovation, and Infrastructure.”

“Wow, all of the things then.”

“Sounds like it. Thanks again. And...”

I stopped on my way out the door.

“If it doesn’t work out, I’ll be happy to have you back here.”

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A couple of hours later I stepped outside for my lunch break. My office building was on a busy street in Brisbane’s downtown. I walked my usual break-time route three blocks to the Botanical Gardens and the welcome cool of the shaded lawns next to the big duck ponds. A bearded dragon lizard the size of a dachshund made a mad dash across the path and jumped into the pond with a splash, making a woman near me scream. She must have been a tourist because the locals—human and duck-kind alike—didn’t bat an eyelid. I sat down on my favourite bench near the formal flower garden with a view of the river and grabbed my phone from my pocket.

Polly picked up my video-call request straightaway.

“Heeeeeeey! You’re a sight for sore eyes. Loving the collared business shirt! You look like a regional flight attendant. And look at that sunshine! What I wouldn’t give for some freaking sun once in a while.”

Although it was four in the morning in Dublin, Ireland, Polly was working the graveyard shift on the front desk of the hostel she lived at. I drew my phone back a bit to see my outfit. She wasn’t far off with her flight attendant jibe. With my light-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and my collared shirt, all I needed was a faux-silk scarf tied around my neck to complete the look.

“Hah! How much caffeine have you had? You looked wired. And don’t blame me for this sunshine. You knew the weather was going to be shit when you moved over.”

“I know, I know. But you know damn well I didn’t move to this potatoville hell for the weather.”

My best friend and former housemate had broken her tight-knit Filipino family’s hearts and moved to the other side of the world for one

reason, and that reason's name was Declan. She had met him at a pub in the Valley and they dated for a bit. Polly had fallen hard but Declan always kept her at arm's length and was never willing to make it official. I could never understand what she saw in him—he was skinny, pale, badly dressed, and only watched movies if they were part of the Marvel universe—but Polly was a sucker for an Irish accent. And, if I was being fair to him (which I was hardly ever in the mood to be), he never once led her on or lied to her about his intentions. He was a young, horny guy who wasn't keen on a white picket fence and family picnics on the weekends.

“Have you been seeing much of Declan?”

Polly looked away. “Uh, we had a late dinner the other night,” she said, her voice a little higher than normal. “What's new with you? You haven't drunk-texted Fuckface this week I hope.”

I rolled my eyes. She always deflected Declan talk by mentioning my awful ex. Ailee had been my first serious girlfriend. We had met playing football together for the Underwood Hawks AFL team, hooked up with four weeks to go in the season, and dated for three months after a footy trip to Airlie Beach. She had always insisted on keeping our relationship on the down-low because her super-Korean super-Christian parents wouldn't approve. Pol had pointed out this wasn't an excuse from keeping me a secret from *everyone* in her life, including our footy team—three-quarters of whom were same-sex attracted. When she dumped me out of the blue to get into an instantly Instagram-official relationship with a boy from her church I didn't get out of bed for three days.

“No, I haven't fallen off the wagon.”

“Good. I read the other day that it takes a third of the duration of the relationship to get over a break-up. So a three-year relationship takes a year to get over, and a thirty-year relationship takes—”

“All right, all right. Thanks for the lesson in fractions, Miss. Sounds like you've been googling *Why is my best friend taking so damn long to get over her dumb three-month fling?*”

Polly scratched her nose and suddenly became very interested in something off-screen to her left.

I scoffed. “Sprung! Anyway, I do have news, which I know is unusual for me.”

“Oooooo! Dish.”

“I got offered a job at that politician’s office right over our back fence.”

“Whoa! The one next to that weird shop that only had tins of baked beans in the window that we thought was a front for an illegal poker den?”

“The very same. Although the bean shop isn’t there anymore. I think the guys running the gambling racket wanted somewhere a bit classier.”

“Yeah, the gang-lords’ clients thought our neighbourhood wasn’t nice enough,” she said laughing.

Even though we liked joking around about how shitty Logan was, it was a great place to live and we’d never felt unsafe. Brisbane people just liked making fun of the less-trendy city down the road—kind of how London people made fun of Essex and New Yorkers made fun of the Jersey shore.

“So, are you going to take the job?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think I am. Trish said I’ll be the most senior person there, except for the local MP who I guess is technically the boss.”

“Wow! That is huge. Good for you, Em! So you’ll be running the place. Girl-boss extraordinaire!”

“Hah, something like that. You don’t think I’ve taken too much on, do you? I mean, I don’t have any team leader experience, and I’m going to have to manage other employees and stuff.” My stomach tightened and I swallowed hard. My current job wasn’t too bad and maybe I was dumb to jump into something else, especially a job where the last candidate didn’t last two hours. I told Polly about her, and her “shithole” description.

“Ah, don’t sweat it. She’s probably never been further from the middle of Brisbane than the leafy inner suburbs, and finds it hard to breathe if she can’t smell a double-shot espresso macchiato. She didn’t say the people were terrible, did she?”

“No.”

“And she didn’t say the work was stressful?”

“She didn’t stay long enough to start the work...”

Pol wagged her finger at me. “Uh-uh-uh, just answer the question please. Did she report the work was stressful?”

“No ma’am.”

“Then all we know for sure is that our hood is too real for one woman who we’ve never met and is probably the worst person ever. And we love our hood. We had the best times ever living there.”

I smiled but felt tears prick at the back of my eyes. There was less laughter and the adventures were tamer with Polly on the other side of the world. “You’re right, mate. You’re one hundred per cent right.”

“Plus, they played your favourite Kim Petras song on the radio over here this morning. It’s a sign!”

“*Heart to Break*? Wouldn’t that be a sign this job is going to end in heartbreak?”

“No. Duh! The radio played that song on today of all days because good things are coming your way.”

“I think that’s the definition of magical thinking.”

“Well, just call me Harry Potter because I’m a bloody magician.”

“Wizard.”

“Exactly! You know I’m right, and you know you got this, and you know I fucking love you to bits.”

“I love you too, you dope. Now I better get back to work and tell them to start organising my farewell morning tea.”

I walked back through the gardens and stopped at the edge of the ornamental pond. A very fat eel swam toward me with purpose. His name was Eric, and people fed him too much stale bread, even though there was a sign expressly forbidding it. He turned his head to fix one of his protuberant eyes on me, then swam away in disgust.

I would miss my daily visits to Eric, even though I was a constant disappointment to him. I bounced on the balls of my feet. Polly’s pep talk had made me feel lighter, and the tension headache that had been forming above my right eyebrow was gone. A new environment, new faces; it would do me good.

I tried to picture my new boss Bridget O’Keefe. I hadn’t had to vote in a state election since I moved to Logan, so hadn’t read up on local politics. There was a big sign with her picture on it outside her office on the main road, but I’d only ever glanced at it long enough to get an impression of dark hair and a smile.

I let out a long breath. “Let’s just hope she’s happier with me than you are, Eric,” I said quietly.



## Chapter 2

WAS THERE A MEMO THAT said a minister's electorate office had to be in the shittiest location imaginable? Perhaps party leaders thought putting their best and brightest in a low-rent shopfront surrounded by cracked pebble-crete scattered with cigarette butts gave a "down-to-earth" factor.

If this was the case, the office of the Honourable Bridget O'Keefe MP fitted the brief perfectly. Pebble-crete? Check. Cigarette butts? Check. She had even gone above and beyond by having empty shopfronts on either side of her office—one with a cracked window inexpertly mended with duct tape.

I squinted against the glare reflecting off the concrete car park. Americans would call this a strip mall. Did we call it that? I'd watched too much Netflix to even know anymore. It was 8:25 in the morning on a mild September day, and I shuddered inwardly to think of how hot and bright the shopping centre would be in summer.

I had given myself ten minutes to walk to work, and it had taken me four.

Polly and I had lived in my two-bed, two-bath townhouse together since we were twenty-three. Through a combination of living at home, working part-time at the local supermarket throughout uni, and landing a boring but well-paying public service job right after, I had managed to save up enough for a deposit. My parents sold their house in Brisbane and downsized to a little place in Cairns, a city in tropical far-north Queensland, to be closer to my grandparents. They'd given my brother and me a little chunk of money from the proceeds. Much to my mother's dismay, he spent his on a motorbike and a licence even though he had never ridden before.

I had thought about getting another housemate, but Polly was only ever meant to be gone for a few months. Her absence got extended again and again, but I was loathe to put someone else in her room in case she decided to come home on a whim. She did lots of things on whims. Plus, I covered the mortgage payments fine without her rent, and now I had landed an unexpected pay raise.

I'd arranged on Friday via a phone call to meet another staffer employed here at 8:30 a.m. Her name was Haromi, and she'd sounded young and slightly uninterested. Not unfriendly though.

There were no cars in the carpark, so I moved into the shade in front of the shops and took a stroll to look at the other businesses. It really was singularly uninviting. I had lived over the back fence for three years and never once visited.

There was a hairdresser called Modern Stylingz advertising their prices in felt-tip pen on pieces of paper sticky-taped to the inside of the windows; *Full head foil's \$80.*

There were more interesting apostrophes in the laminated menu Bluetacked to the window of a rather unloved-looking cafe called, perhaps ironically, The Jolly Bean. The menu also boasted *raison toast, scrambled eggs* and *gourmet toastee's*.

A physiotherapist, pathology lab and a little takeaway called China Surprise rounded out the bunch, if you didn't count the empty shopfronts with For Lease signs in the windows. I turned at the end of the row to walk back when a nice little bright blue car turned into the carpark and pulled up outside the electorate office.

I made my way back just in time to meet the girl who had gotten out of the car and was pulling a set of keys from an oversized handbag. She looked at me as I approached and I raised my hand in an awkward greeting. "Haromi? Hi, I'm Emma." I stuck my hand out to shake hers.

She looked at it for a moment then dropped the keys back in her bag and took my hand in both hers. "Hello, Emma. And welcome." She looked into my eyes and smiled. She was very young and quite slight, a little shorter than me, with her black hair pulled up into a bun on the top of her head. She wore a huge cardigan which came down past her knees draped over a black T-shirt and black leggings. A jade circle hung from a leather necklace at her throat. I thought two things simultaneously: I was

extremely overdressed in my expensive pant suit and collared shirt, and I liked Haromi. Her energy was laid-back, like she could have worked at a not-so-busy shopping centre Juice Boost rather than a state government electorate office.

She let go of my hand and found the keys again. She opened the door and, with a small flourish, gestured for me to go in before her.

“This is where the magic happens,” Haromi said, sweeping her arms wide then plonking her big bag down on the desk nearest the door. She flicked a switch and fluorescent bulbs flickered to life, revealing, well, a bog-standard crappy office space. There were three desks in the larger communal office we were standing in, and two smaller offices at the back with fake panel-wood doors and large windows with horizontal blinds for privacy. The blinds in the left-hand office were hanging down at a jaunty diagonal.

“The air con works when it’s in the mood,” Haromi said as she walked to the opposite wall and flicked another switch. I jumped as, with a giant death-rattle, something started to whirr loudly.

“They bothered putting ducted air in this building?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah. My cousin says this plaza was built to be...” She paused for a moment as if remembering an important statement, then continued, accentuating each word by piercing the air above her head with a pointed finger. “The commercial and business hub of greater Landells.”

“And when was that?”

“1988.”

I snorted. “Awesome.”

“Your office is through here, by the way.” She strolled into the one with the diagonal blinds.

“Hold on, I don’t want an office,” I said, following her into the pokey and dated little room. I had never liked being alone for too long. Even at uni I had preferred studying in the noisy refectory than at home with no one else there. I was lonely enough at home with Polly gone. I felt untethered when I was by myself, and my thoughts jingle-jangled in my head. They were not necessarily unpleasant thoughts, but I got bored with them pretty quickly without someone there to break up the monologue.

“Do you got mind if I move my desk out with you?”

“Well, I dunno. Let me check.” She turned her head from side to side so ostentatiously that she turned a full circle. “Whaddaya reckon, guys? Can our new friend sit out here with the cool gang?” She closed her eyes and paused. “They say yes, Emma! Congratulations.”

“Wait, so it’s only you here?”

“Me, myself and I. That other lady came the week before last. Lisa. She was dressed even nicer than you. I gave her the same grand tour I’m giving you and she didn’t come back Tuesday, or ever.” She sighed loudly. “Plus, you’re my boss anyway, so you can pretty much do what you want, hey?”

I snorted. “Boss! I’ve never even managed a chook raffle,” I said, looking around the office. My gut started to tighten. The air con spluttered, stopped completely, leaving us in silence. We lifted our chins to look at the ceiling. It was covered in stains that looked a little like fluffy clouds, except that they were a disgusting brown colour. I wondered if people had been allowed to sit smoking at their desks, and how long ago they were made to stop. The air con grumbled, whirred, and then settled back into its noticeable hum.

“Well, you’re my senior officer, so it’s your responsibility to do whatever the fuck you want. And you need to stick around because I have a good feeling about you.”

I straightened my shoulders and put my hands on my hips. “All right, I’m in.”

“Good because that office tour is hard and I don’t want to give it again.” She looked at her phone. “Now, we’ve been here ten minutes so I think it’s time to go for coffee.”

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We both got into Haromi’s little car to go to a nearby cafe because, in Haromi’s words, the coffee at the Jolly Bean was so bad it “made you bleed out your eyes.”

We drove five minutes to Kia Ora.

“Oh, I love that place,” I said when Haromi told me where we were headed. “I used to go there all the time.”

“Why ‘used to’?”

“I went all the time with my housemate Polly, but she moved overseas.”

“Bummer. Does the cafe bring back bad memories?” she asked, flicking radio stations from a cheesy pop song to a bouncing Aussie hip-hop anthem.

“Oh no, nothing like that. I just, you know, feel weird going out to drink coffee at a table by myself.”

Once we had our takeaway coffees in hand and were driving back I asked Haromi why the electorate office was so awful. She told me that up until three months before, my senior electorate officer role had been filled by an old guy named Kelvin.

“He was so lazy,” Haromi said. “But he didn’t want to retire because he hates his wife and didn’t want to spend any time with her.”

“He told you that?”

“Oh, yeah. He was pretty much the worst. He was holding out and holding out for a severance pay-out. They finally gave in and paid him a heap of money to retire so they wouldn’t have to deal with him anymore. They couldn’t find anyone else for a long time, then Lisa came for one day, and now you’re here.”

“Gawd, Kelvin sounds awful.”

“Totally. And I was sort of like his assistant but he never did anything so there was never anything for me to do. The days dragged. There’s only so many hours a day you can look at Facebook. I don’t like Facebook!”

“I hate Facebook too. What’s the minister like?”

“Bridget? Oh, she’s nice. She’s very...busy. She’s always got a thousand things to do, so you never feel like bothering her with chit-chat or anything. She comes in on Fridays. She’s in her ministerial office in the city the rest of the time.”

We pulled up outside our office again.

When we were back inside I took my bag out of the office assigned to me and set up at the desk across from Haromi’s.

“Hey, Haromi,” I said.

“Yes, boss-lady?”

“Instead of doing a crappy job like Kelvin, let’s do a semi-good job of this electorate office gig. It’ll make the days go faster.”

“I’ll drink to that,” she replied, taking a big swig of her coffee.

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My big dream of doing my job in a “semi-good” way didn’t get off to a good start. For one thing, Kelvin had left no handover notes or directions of any kind as to what an electorate office was meant to do. When I asked

Haromi what she knew about what Kelvin did, she said he answered the office's e-mails with cut and paste templates. She had a few of them saved. Every one of the templates were differently worded missives fobbing the constituent off because either: a) The issue wasn't the electorate office's problem, or b) The Member for Landells would consider it but was probably far too busy to do anything about it.

Haromi and I agreed we could do better than that, but neither of us had any idea what advice we were allowed to give, or what we could do to help anyone. We searched the office for a handbook, or anything that would illuminate us as to what we were actually meant to do to fill the day.

Haromi started by going through the drawers of the two vacant desks in the front office, and I decided to try my luck with the dusty, ancient filing cabinet in Kelvin's old office.

I started with the top drawer and it became pretty clear early on I was wasting my time. The documents were not grouped in any coherent way, and it was beyond the powers of my imagination to glean what use they could be to an electorate officer. There was a 200-page Logan City Council annual report from 1997, a menu from a Thai takeaway and a newspaper clipping about a greyhound named My Sweet Cookie coming in first at Sandown. I made it to the last drawer with nothing to show for it but a big pile of recycling. The drawer was pretty stuck, and it took a bit of banging and pulling to wrench it open. I pulled out the first file.

"Hey, Haromi!" I called, jumping up from my sitting position on the floor and walking toward the door of Kelvin's office. "This folder's marked Private and Confidential but the only thing in it are three dead silverfish."

I pulled up short as I rounded the corner, because I was confronted with the face emblazoned on the signs out the front, only shrunk down to life-size, and it was looking right at me.

"Uhhhhh..." I felt frozen to the spot. I was suddenly aware of the thick layer of dust coating my hands, and probably parts of my face and clothes too. I also realised one side of my shirt had come untucked. Should I tuck it back in? Or would that call attention to it? *No, you're ok, just be cool. Shit! She's coming this way!*

The face was advancing on me, along with the adjoining body, arm outstretched. "Hello, Emma. I'm Bridget. It's so good of you to come and help us out at such short notice. I'm looking forward to working with you."

My grubby hand was grasped in a firm handshake.

*Right, time to say something, dummy!* “Yes...” I said, then paused. “You too,” I added. Another pause.

The Honourable Bridget O’Keefe appraised me for a moment, probably wondering if the new manager of her electorate office was soft in the head. Up close she was, what? Impressive? Polished? Well put-together?

She looked to be in her late thirties and had excellent teeth—big, shiny and white. And great hair - dark brown and shoulder-length, thick, framing her face. And it looked exactly the same as the photos on the signs. Not a centimetre shorter or longer, and not a hair out of place. How often would she have to get it cut?

“Oh, sorry,” I said, suddenly shaken from my silent reverie. “I’ve got your hand all grubby. Haromi, can you fetch a wet wipe?” *Yes, issuing instructions as a good manager should.*

“Nope.”

*Damn.* I looked at her. She was watching Bridget’s and my exchange with languid attention, as if it were a very boring play. I raised my eyebrows.

“We don’t have any,” she said.

“Right,” I replied.

“It’s no problem,” Bridget said, pulling a travel pack of disinfectant wipes from the handbag hanging off her shoulder.

“Sorry, again. We’re in the process of doing a clean-out, as you can see. There’s some stuff filed away that’s really old, and I don’t know what purpose it ever served. It’s pretty dusty work though...” I trailed off as Bridget pulled a travel bottle of hand sanitiser and applied it vigorously to both hands. *That’s a bit of overkill.* It crossed my mind that maybe she was awful. That’s why her staff didn’t stick around.

“Again, lovely to meet you, Emma,” she fixed me with another shiny smile. “I’m sorry I can’t stay long but I’ve got a cabinet meeting at ten. Just wanted to pop my head in and say hi. It looks like you’re making a great start in this role.”

I basked in the shininess. And found myself grinning back.

“Thanks...so much,” I said, as she pushed open the grotty glass door and swept out.

I stood and watched an older gentleman in a suit and tie jump out and open the back passenger door for Bridget to get in. When he was back

## PERKS OF OFFICE

behind the wheel he gave me little wave, just a lifting of one set of fingers, and I waved back. Bridget said something to him which made him laugh, then he backed the car out of the parking space and drove off.

Haromi's voice was in my ear before I realised she was standing beside me, also looking out the front window.

“She gone, bro.”

I laughed. “Yep, I guess she has.”



## Chapter 3

TWO DAYS LATER MY PHONE rang.

“Landells Electorate Office, this is Emma.”

“Hi Emma, it’s Bridget.”

“Oh, um, hi... Bridget.” Awkward.

“I was wondering if I could ask you a favour actually.” She paused.

“Sure, anything, Bridget.” She hadn’t ever actually told me I was allowed to call her Bridget. I had no idea if her staff in the city called her “Minister”. I figured probably at least I should have called her “Minister” once, and given her a chance to say, “Oh please, call me Bridget”. Oh well, in for a penny in for a pound, I always say. Plus, people usually introduced themselves using the name they wanted you to call them. I’d never dealt with people who had official titles bestowed on them by the English Crown before though.

“My chief of staff is tied up here with something and another adviser is off sick, so could you please print off some speaking points I’m about to e-mail you and meet me at Paul Park State High School in half an hour? I’m about to get in the car.”

“Uhhhhh, yah. Great. Sounds good. Will do. See ya then. Bye.”

When I finally stopped saying things and hung up, I logged into my computer to wait for her e-mail. She had a great voice, clear but not forced. I liked that she asked me for a favour, rather than telling me to do something. It was probably a tactic she’d learned somewhere, maybe in a self-help book, one of many she probably had at her house, called *Communicating With Underlings so They Don’t Resent You and Do Everything You Say*. Or maybe at politician school.

“You look weird,” Haromi said as she walked past on her way back from the loo.

“Oh, nah. I’m fine. Bridget phoned and asked me to print these speaking points and meet her at Paul Park High. Wait, can I borrow your car? I can pay you back for the petrol and put it on expenses.”

“What, the fifteen cents it will cost you to get to Paul? I’m right for that, thanks.”

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The school was your bog-standard state high school, with its cement paths running between garden beds with hardy, low maintenance plants; but this school had an orderly air I could only imagine set it apart from other Logan schools. There was no sign of graffiti, and not a single piece of rubbish on the ground. They might have spruced up the front for Bridget’s visit, but I don’t think a generally crappy school could have done such a good job making itself look nice just for the day.

I’d fronted up to the main office, where a brisk-looking lady with a nametag that said Mrs Barker greeted me from behind a high desk. I say she greeted me but really she continued to type quickly and said “Yes?”

Mrs Barker clasped her hands and smiled when I told her I worked for the minister, then pointed me toward where Bridget was going to park. I thanked her and went to find some shade to wait in.

I suddenly remembered Paul Park was Polly’s old school. She’d never tried too hard academically—mostly because she got passing grades with just her natural smarts and flair for improvising—but she always said she’d loved playing soccer for the school team. I took a photo on my phone from my vantage point looking back toward the school entrance and the office. I messaged it to her, writing *I’m stalking your past* as the only means of explanation.

The little dots that showed she was typing popped up immediately. I scoffed. It would be the middle of the night in Dublin. Polly didn’t do normal sleeping patterns, and said the best sleep was to be had after crashing into bed drunk at dawn. We used to crash quite regularly after a night out together, back when we were both single. We’d drink for a bit in the straight pubs and bars and I’d try to find the only (other) gay girl in the place, then we’d head to Fortitude Valley and Polly would try to find the

only straight (enough) guy at the Wickham or the Beat. I smiled, getting lost in the memory of one night when Pol was in particularly fine form and had jumped up next to the DJ at the Wickham, grabbed his mic and yelled, “Does anyone identifying as male in the house tonight want to buy me a drink?” to deafening cheers and applause. She’d ended up going home with a lovely tall boy from Dirranbandi who was chaperoning his newly out younger brother. He was a sweet guy... Derek, Daniel?

*WTF! Why are you at Paul??!?*

*A work thing.* I typed back. *Hey, did I go home alone that night you met that bloke from Dirran?*

Dots again immediately.

*NO WAY dummy! The night I hooked up with Damian was the night you hooked up with that hot-as-Rihanna-looking-fine-as-shit honey with the French accent before you blew her off because Fuckface messaged you for the first time in months—U UP?—and you raced over like a dummy.*

I cringed. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen in real life had come up to me while I was ordering a beer and asked me to dance. Dancing had turned to light making-out which had turned into heavier making-out, with Polly’s enthusiasm for the situation ever threatening to be a distraction. Her hatred for Ailee was already firmly entrenched by that point, and every time I came up for breath, Pol took time out from dancing all up on Damian from Dirran to catch my eye and give me a cheesy thumbs up.

But Pol was right. I had gone into the toilets at some stage and seen a text from Ailee, saying she missed me and her parents had gone on a Christian weekend getaway to Mt Tamborine. In the cold light of day (actually becoming quite hot standing under a tree next to a high school car park), the ridiculousness of Ailee texting me after she was the one who instigated a “time out phase” so she could “figure some things out” was astounding. But that night I was the wrong mix of drunk and horny, so with a brief good-bye to Hottest Woman I’d Ever Seen in Real Life, and a lie to a flabbergasted Polly that I was tired and was heading home, I got an Uber to Ailee’s house. The fact the sex was explosive was cold comfort. It

had an edge to it, a danger and a passion I knew even then came from the fact that kissing her, touching her, was always the stupidest fucking thing I could possibly do. I never found out the Hottest Woman I'd Ever Seen in Real Life's name.

Bridget's ministerial car turned into the car park. Her driver jumped out and opened the door for her.

You would never have known she'd had a hectic morning with staff shortages. Her hair shone and her pretty, blue sensible skirt suit was uncreased and sat perfectly. She smiled as I greeted her, and a slight bit of relief showed on her face.

"Emma, thanks for coming down. I really appreciate it. And you've got my speaking points? Great. I thought I was going to have to read them off my phone in front of the whole assembly!"

I laughed, probably more loudly than what she said warranted.

"Are you going to be okay if I wait here, Minister?"

Damn it. The chauffeur didn't call her by her first name like a nube.

"Yes, that's fine Ray. Emma can look after me from here."

Mrs Barker had seen the car and came to join us. Bridget greeted her warmly, mentioning her last visit to make it clear she remembered her. Mrs Barker positively glowed under the Bridget treatment.

"Assembly's begun, Minister. I'll take you backstage for when it's your turn to speak."

"Oh, call me Bridget, Shirl. We're old friends by now."

Dammit!

Shirl Barker opened up a side door and led us slowly up some steps to the side of the stage in the big school hall. The hall was new and quite nice, and I was glad my taxpayer dollars had gone into it. A student was at the microphone speaking about the amount of money raised at a recent something-or-other for some other thing. She spoke well and without a trace of nerves. I peeked around the curtains at the rest of the student body and they were sitting with polite if not rapt attention. The speaker made some small joke I missed, and the audience gave a mild titter.

"Future political star right there, hey?" I said quietly, turning to Bridget. She looked up from the speaking points she was reading by phone-light in the close darkness between the stage curtains. Did I catch a slight strain in her face?

“You’ll be great,” I said before I realised it. She tilted her head and gave me the slightest of smiles. At that moment Mrs Barker came up and whispered it was time for the principal to introduce her.

As Bridget walked a few steps in front of me to the edge of the stage curtain, I allowed my internal cringe to show briefly on my face, hidden in the safety of the backstage darkness. Of course she’d be great. The woman had done hundreds, if not thousands, of speeches—most of them much more important than a preamble to this half-arse school award presentation, smack-dab in the centre of Centrelink city. *Oh well, at least you can stop trying to make a good impression, because she now thinks you’re a fucking idiot.*

It was her job to turn the shininess on for everyone from international dignitaries to the Shirls of the world, to build an instant moment of rapport that would linger. Then she or her party could use it for their political advantage, either as influence, or at the ballot box. She’d turned the shininess on me for a grand total of twelve minutes and I was already telling her “You’ll be great” like we were best friends in a primary school play. I mean, me reassuring her? The woman might be the premier someday. I cringed again. I’d overstepped, and I was going to have to be more careful if she was going to take me seriously.

The principal, Mr Eames, who was young to be the principal of such a big school, probably not much older than forty by the look of him, came up to the mic. The student body, who had been remarkably quiet through the assembly so far, quieted down even more, and the attention directed toward the stage became almost a palpable energy. Wow. This bloke had missed his calling as a cult leader to be able to get nine hundred teenagers in polyester polo shirts to actually listen to him; it was nothing short of a miracle.

He was an engaging speaker, with a deep voice and great smile. I snuck another look out at the kids and confirmed my suspicion that ninety-three per cent of the female student body and probably ten per cent of the male was well on the way to being in love with him.

The audience clapped politely when Bridget walked up to the podium. Her speech was good too. Her voice was slightly thinner and higher than her normal speaking voice, but she spoke well and the students didn’t seem too bored.

A few of them filed onto the stage and Bridget handed each of them a plaque thing and shook their hands. Mr Eames thanked her again and she

walked off-stage toward me. She stepped out of the stage lights and into our space in the black curtains. She took a deep breath in, exhaled slowly, then pressed her lips together and looked at me.

I stood there. The words, “You did great,” rose to my mind, but it was you’ll-be-great-gate all over again! And I’d forgotten all the other words there were. We stood there regarding each other in the darkness for a while, and it was as awkward as it sounds.

“We should head out.” The words occurred to me—I said them, listened to them, and was relieved they sounded pretty normal.

“Yes, I suppose we should.”

“I mean, Shirl awaits.”

“Indeed she does.”

I led the way back out through the curtains away from the stage and down the stairs. I opened the door and we stepped out of the darkness into blinding sunlight.

“Ooo, bright,” said Bridget.

“You got sunnies?”

“Yep, in the car.”

I nodded. We continued walking.

“Well, what did you think?” she said. “Would my presenting the awards plus brief remarks have changed any of those kids’ lives today?”

“For sure,” I replied, matching my easy tone to hers. *Why not?* “I thought your remarks were quite... remarkable.” Ouch. I glanced at her to gauge the damage, but she smiled at me. A real smile; less shiny, but more, what? A smile that threw off the symmetry of her face, to one that crinkled. A smile that allowed the faintest lines around her eyes to show through her make-up. A beautiful smile. *Uh-oh.*

\* \* \*

“TBH, I’m pleased,” said Polly.

“Pleased? You once told me people having crushes on their bosses was so cliché it literally made you gag.” I was making dinner with the laptop open on top of a Tupperware container full of self-rising flour, just to be sure I didn’t spill anything on it. It was 10:30 a.m. in Dublin, so Polly was still in bed after a big night.

“Yass, but I’m just glad my little worm is showing an interest, even a dumb interest, in someone other than a certain Fuckface-who-shall-not-be-named.”

I brandished my knife at her. “Little worm? Harsh.”

“I just mean, a little creature that is so, so defenceless, and is squinting its little eyes at the big world after crawling its little pale self out of the dirt for the first time,” she said. “That’s you,” she added helpfully.

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not even a proper crush,” I said, squinting my eyes (like a little worm, I guess) as I sliced a brown onion.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, it’s never going to go anywhere.”

She shook her head and sighed. “Liam Hemsworth isn’t likely to come knocking on my door anytime soon. Are you going to claim my seven-year crush on him isn’t proper?”

“No, you’re right. I guess I’m using her to distract myself from the fact my love-life is up shit creek. I look forward to it when I know I’m going to see her.”

“I bet you do, you horny toad. What does she look like, anyway? Bangin’ bod?”

“Leopoldina Alexandra Ocampo,” I said, drawing myself up to my full height.

Polly grimaced; she knew she was in for a rant when I used her full name.

“Just because we are women, it does not give us the right to objectify women. When we do it, it gives unenlightened men permission to do it. So, no, I will not break the Minister for Corrective Services and Minister for State Development, Innovation and Infrastructure down into a list of body parts and rate them for your benefit.”

“S’cool. I image-searched her while you were talking. She’s...” She held up her phone and squinted at it. “Not your usual type.”

“You’re impossible.” I sliced more onion. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

She continued scrolling and squinting. “She’s thicker, less sporty than you usually go for. And I never took you for a boob girl.”

“Firstly,” I said, outraged, “you seem to be suggesting I only date skinny chicks, which is untrue.”

“Calm the farm, Em. Jeez. I’m not throwing shade at you, girl. I’m paying you a compliment. Your taste seems to have matured from your basic footy girl model, so I’m pleased. I get massive school debate captain vibes from her though. I can’t believe we’ve been friends this long and I never knew your type was sex-starved overachiever.”

“Well, it might surprise you to know Mia Freeburton-Hughes, who was debate captain at my school, once told me she loved debate so much because she could catch a dick any time she wanted. I went to a debate team party once and it was wild. I’m pretty sure it turned into an orgy right after I left.”

“Ha! Well, your minister for blah-blah might never have had sex in her whole life for all we know. When you finally make your move she might explode from all the pent-up energy.”

“Well, in that case it’s lucky for her that I am never ever going to make a move.”



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# PERKS OF OFFICE

BY LIZ RAIN

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