

Over the Edge

By

Suzanne Carroll

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About the Author

Suzanne lives in Sydney with her husband and children. By day she works in an office where she sneakily scribbles plot ideas on yellow sticky notes and hopes they don't accidentally end up on the departmental monthly report.

One such sticky note has turned into her first novel, *Over the Edge*.

For Andrew,

With love and appreciation for your patience, support, cooking skills, and for building me a writing desk. Thank you.

Rebecca and James,

I love you both as big as this world, and all the little bits around it.
Thank you for sharing me for a while.

Chapter One

I think I'm having a panic attack.

Heart fast, breaths shallow, chest tight, and the quiet corridor on the twenty-ninth floor seems far too long. The plush carpet feels like quicksand, and as I hurry in my ridiculous heels I doubt I'll reach my goal, but somehow I do. I make it to the deserted ladies room before the angry tears start.

I lean against the glass sink with my back to the imitation art deco mirrors.

"Deep breaths," I mutter through gritted teeth as the first hot tear creeps down my cheek. It's followed quickly by another. "Slow, deep breaths. Count to ten." I get to three before I yank my phone out of my bag and stab at the keypad. "Please don't be in a meeting. Pick up, pick up . . ."

And then I hear Dan's voice. "Zoe, babe, how was . . ."

"Dan, your mother is out of control!"

There's silence from the other end of the line, and I'm holding my breath as I wait for my fiancé to say something. But even before he speaks, I know what he's going to say, because he says it every bloody time. A second later he doesn't disappoint me.

"Whatever she's done, I'm sure she didn't mean . . ."

"Oh yes she did! She meant it! This was deliberate and planned and premeditated and I knew we should never have agreed to let her pay for the wedding!" I'm pacing in front of the fancy sinks and mirrors.

Dan takes a long, exasperated breath. "Zoe, listen, just six more weeks, sweetheart. Six more weeks and then you'll be Mrs. Costi and we will be . . ."

"Your mother is Mrs. Costi."

I'm hissing. Actually hissing. Even I'm surprised by the venom in my voice. This doesn't sound like me. I can feel Dan's shock through the phone.

"Let me just shut my door," he says. While I wait for him, I hazard a glance in the mirrors and study the reflection of the crazy woman I've become. Normally my face is smooth and my cheeks are pink, but right now I'm pale and everything is sharp angles and lines. My auburn hair is pulled into a tight, smooth ponytail. This morning it made me look sleek and elegant, but I've been tugging at it. Loose strands hang, lank and limp, around my face.

My gaze moves lower. Somehow my white linen shirt has gone from fashionably creased to rumpled, and the shabbiness is enhanced by my grey pants which bear the

stains of the coffee I spilled on myself minutes earlier. I flatten my palm against my shirt and try to smooth it. Then I splash a little water on my pants and make things worse. Another tear creeps onto my cheek.

This has been creeping up on me. The stress, the anxiety slowly building until it's hit me, hard and fast. I wasn't like this a month ago. Or a week ago. I wasn't even like this this morning. It's only ten thirty—three hours ago Dan and I were in the shower together.

“Okay babe, door closed. What exactly has she done?”

Where to start? I could go back two years to the first time I met Marie Costi and she complimented my shoes then told me her maid had a pair just like them—last season. Or a year later, on the night Dan and I announced our engagement and she smiled and said as long as her son was happy she really didn't mind. Or three months ago when I was excluded from his parents' fortieth wedding anniversary dinner because it was for “family only.”

“It's the cake,” I snap.

“What cake?”

“The wedding cake, Dan! The fucking wedding cake!”

Dan's gasp comes just as the bathroom door opens.

Two girls walk in. One gives me a wary sort of glance, then pulls out a red lipstick from the pocket of her tailored pants and moves to the mirrors to refresh her makeup.

The other girl is Sarah, our wedding planner from Charlton Webb Events. We've spent the last hour together in her office going over more details for the Dan Costi—Zoe Harper wedding extravaganza next month, including the emailed list of changes requested by Mrs. Costi that I'd known nothing about.

Sarah's mouth falls open as I try to compose myself. I'm supposed to be on my way back to work, and she knows this.

“Zoe? What's wrong? Has something happened?” She frowns, staring at my phone which is still clutched, whiteknuckle-tight, to my ear. “Is it the sequins on the silver chair ribbons? I've had the feeling all along you didn't like them. Or is it the fireworks? You did look a bit shocked about that.”

I open my mouth to tell her about the cake. I even make a sound, a sort of deep squeak, but the words won't come. I'm such a coward and I hate myself for it, but if I say anything, Sarah will report back to Dan's mother and there will be trouble.

“Everything's fine. Fine.” My voice is too bright and I'm smiling so wide I think I've pulled a muscle. The red lipstick girl frowns and edges away until she's practically huddled in the corner. It's understandable. I'd probably edge away from me, too.

Sarah doesn't look convinced everything's fine. But that's probably because I don't sound very convincing. And I'm certain the scary smile isn't helping.

“Are you sure?” she asks and bites her lip. “Because if something is making you unhappy, you should tell me. Seriously. Please, let me know. Because Sydney's wedding of the year has to be perfect, after all. Perfect! Nothing can go wrong. Nothing. And we can't have an unhappy bride.” Her voice has climbed until it's one step short of shrill. Maybe I'm not the only one who's stressed about this wedding.

“I'll call you back,” I murmur to Dan and shove my phone deep into my bag.

For a moment, I consider taking Sarah's hand. I want to clutch it hard in mine and tell her I understand. That I feel her pain. I want to tell her we should run away from the

circus, away from the evil ringmaster, and arrange a different wedding. One with just Dan and me and a planner who hasn't suddenly developed a nervous twitch in her left eye. But I'm not Sarah's client, Marie is. They have a contract. A legally binding agreement to produce the greatest show on earth, and I'm only the monkey who will do tricks for the crowd's amusement.

So my hand stays still.

Instead I tell her again that everything's fine, straighten my shoulders, and try to act casual. Like I have minimal meltdowns in the bathrooms of luxury office buildings every day.

I lean forward to check my makeup and rub at the smear of mascara on my cheek while Sarah watches. She's biting her lip again. When I'm finished, I excuse myself politely and avoid eye contact as I walk into the corridor.

As I hurry towards the lift my phone rings with Dan's favourite song.

"Let's elope," he says without preamble.

"Yeah, right. That's not funny, Dan."

"Are you panting?"

"I'm running away from the wedding planner."

I glance over my shoulder, checking for Sarah, but there's no sign of her. She's probably trying to convince the other girl I'm not a danger. Or maybe she's suggesting I am.

I round the corner, stop in front of the lifts, and punch frantically at the down button.

"I'm serious, Zoe. This wedding is stressing you out, and that's stressing me out."

I want to tell him it's not the wedding, it's his mother, but I bite my tongue.

"Dan, seriously, we can't elope. Imagine the trouble that would cause.

And the cost."

We'd owe his mother for the rest of our lives and the thought makes me sick. I start biting my thumbnail.

"But you're more important," he says.

I stop gnawing at my fingers, and though I try to smile, my heart isn't in it yet. "Really? You'd do that? Elope?"

The idea is more than tempting. While I wait for Dan to answer, I imagine us running off together and getting married without any fuss or drama. No sequined chair ribbons or six tier wedding cakes with sugar doves on each layer.

"Dan? Are you still there?"

"Sorry, babe. What were you saying?"

"Eloping?"

"Sure. If you want to elope, we'll do it. If that's what you really want." "Me? You were the one who suggested it."

"Okay, so, are we running away together then?"

So tempting.

But my mum has spent months handembroidering my bridal veil with delicate flowers and tiny seed pearls. And Dan's young cousins are beyond excited about being flower girls. They've been practising rose petal scattering for weeks.

Of course we can't elope.

"Zoe?" Dan is getting impatient. "On or off?"

"On," I say. "The wedding is on."

He chuckles. He knew I wouldn't go through with it.

“But listen, Dan, what I really want to . . .”

His voice is a distant mumble, he’s talking to someone else, so I stop and wait for him to come back on the line.

“Zoe? Sorry, were you saying something?”

“I . . .”

“Sweetheart, Brandon has just walked in. We’re supposed to be in a pre-trial meeting and I have to go. I’m sorry. We’ll talk tonight in the car, okay?”

I remember with a new sinking feeling that has nothing to do with plush carpet that it’s Thursday and Thursday means dinner with Dan’s parents. I can’t bear it tonight.

“Dan, do you think can we miss dinner this week? After this morning I really don’t feel up to it.”

“Babe, I have to go to this meeting. If you think there’s a problem about tonight just tell me and we’ll cancel.”

I cannot believe he’s said that. My fading anger reignites and is aimed like a flamethrower at the man on the other end of the phone. “If I think? Think? There is a problem, Dan, and I did just tell you!”

We’re back to silence again and I screw my eyes shut. Then Dan is muttering to Brandon that he’ll be there in a minute.

“Sweetheart, you didn’t actually tell me anything,” he says gently. “You mentioned a fucking wedding cake, that’s all. And it was kind of hot, if I’m honest.” He’s smiling. I can hear it in his voice.

“Stop it, Dan. I’m angry.” Though I’m surprised at what he’s said.

“I’ve never heard you use that word before,” he whispers. “Will I get to hear you say it again?”

“I said stop it. This is serious and you’re trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

“I thought you had a meeting?”

His soft chuckle rumbles through the phone. “I’d rather talk fucking wedding cakes with you.”

Of course he makes it sound funny and suggestive at the same time. I try to hold on to my anger. I need my anger, but it begins to slip and fade. It’s his voice, and what he said, and the fact I’m holding up an important meeting.

“Are you there, Zoe?”

“I’m here.”

He chuckles again. “So, tonight then? We’ll talk in the car. Love you, babe.”

“Love you, too.”

“Six weeks.”

“Six.”

As the line goes silent, I realise I never got to tell him the problem with the wedding cake. And we’re still going to dinner with his parents.

Shit.

He always does this. He never listens and somehow he always finds a way around me. I could scream. I stab at the lift button again, jabbing it over and over until I think it’s got the message. Then I step back.

Things will be better after the wedding. They will. Dan and I will get back on track and things will be better.

I stare out the window at the Sydney skyline. The city is so peaceful from here. And remote. I try to pick out landmarks without getting too close to the glass. I've never been good with heights.

My office building is a couple of blocks away, clearly visible, with Creed Constructions spelled out across the top. Beyond it there's a glimmer of water, a small corner of the harbour peeking through the tower blocks. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, and I imagine what it would be like to be out there today, in a sailboat, coasting over the water with the breeze and nothing to do and nowhere to be. The wedding and all its drama begins to fade away.

A couple of breaths and my body begins to relax. The thought of skipping work and going sailing is silly and impulsive, but it makes me smile. The harbour foreshore is only five minutes from here and dotted with plenty of those charter boat places. I could pay someone to take me out. In less than an hour, I could be on the water, sailing away . . .

Except I don't do that sort of thing. I am responsible and reliable and I won't rush off on some sudden, isolated, random whim. Instead I'll go to work and prepare the monthly report for my boss and type the notes from yesterday's meetings. But I still wonder what it would be like to not have to be somewhere. To be able to simply breathe.

I start chewing on my thumbnail, then stop quickly before I ruin my manicure.

My nails are coated with two layers of clear lacquer. They're shiny and glossy and utterly boring.

The whole fingernail situation is bloody ridiculous.

I've been doing my own manicures since I was fourteen, but Marie is insisting on regular, professional maintenance because everyone will be looking at my hand when I show off the wedding ring. And because she's paying, she's banned me from the rich, bright colours that I love and she hates. These days I have only two choices from the You Nailed It Hand Spa. Classic Clear or Pearly Pink.

More like Insipid Pink.

I feel naked with my nails undone.

"Six weeks," I whisper as I study my fingertips. "Six weeks and I promise, you'll be glowing Revolution Red." I might even stash the bottle in my bouquet on the big day, ready to pull it out and start painting as soon as I've said "I do."

The tension comes creeping back. I drop my hand, roll my shoulders, and stare at the tiny slice of water in the distance. It sparkles, blue and silver, winking at me through the concrete and steel of the city.

My life is concrete and steel. Rigid and structured. Every hour seems booked up and accounted for—work, Dan, wedding.

My days in the office are stretching longer and longer. There's always a function for Dan's law firm. As a junior partner he needs to make an appearance every time, with me in tow.

And then there are the wedding preparations. For months, every weekend and every spare moment has been taken up with planning.

Two weeks ago, we spent a whole Sunday with Marie trying to decide which colour to have for the floating candles in the table centerpieces. The Sunday before that, we had to choose those chair ribbons—which Marie overruled, anyway.

The wording on the invitations took a week of my life.

Hair appointments. Make-up trials. Dress fittings.

Who knew there were so many different shades of white and ivory or that doves can be trained to walk down an aisle in pairs. Or that our names could be written across the sky with fireworks as we leave the reception, after the belly dancer has eaten fire for our guests' amusement. And Marie says my nail polish is tacky.

Our intimate wedding for family and friends has turned into a circus for two hundred and forty people. I know seven of them.

Six weeks, I remind myself. Six weeks. And then we'll be on our honeymoon—fourteen days in Vanuatu. It can't come soon enough.

My phone beeps from the depths of my bag, startling me and telling me I have a text. I smile when I see it's from Jo.

Jo's been a coworker for two years but my best friend for ten, since that first day at university when she was lost and I had a map. And in six weeks, she'll pull on the lilac dress Marie Costi has chosen and be my bridesmaid.

After the stress of this morning, Jo's message will be a relief. She's always good for a laugh or a sympathetic ear, especially when it comes to Dan's mother.

I open the text, expecting some quip about my meeting with Sarah, but my mouth falls open when I read the tiny words on the screen:

Get back here now!

Chapter Two

“Angus Creed is in the building!”

Jo practically pounces on me as I arrive, out of breath, at my desk. For someone usually so cool and together, she’s very flustered. Her sleek dark bob swings as she tosses a look over her shoulder towards the lift.

“He arrived an hour ago, completely unannounced. No one knew a thing. Nothing.” She comes into my little part of the Creed Empire that is marked out by three walls of blue partition and sits on the corner of my desk. She settles in, crossing her legs and adjusting her skirt. The silver bangles she always wears jangle lightly on her wrist.

“This is the reason for that panicked text? Jo, I thought something important had happened. I almost broke a heel hurrying back here. I could have been sailing right now.”

“Sailing?”

“Never mind.” I drop my bag into the bottom drawer, drop myself onto the chair, and switch on the laptop. The overflowing in-tray offers me a choice of files and I grab one from the middle. My framed photo of Dan and my three novelty coffee mugs get shifted so I can start work and the box of tissues goes on top of the in-tray. It towers there, delicately balanced.

Jo’s clearly appalled by my lack of interest in the movements of our CEO. “Is that all you’re going to say?”

“Jo, he owns the company, he owns the building. He can arrive unannounced if he wants.”

But I’m beginning to notice what’s going on around me.

No one is working. People are gathered, whispering, in small groups. Colin from PR and Gemma from business development are huddled together in the lunchroom, though they work two floors apart. Their heads are bowed, almost touching, and as rivals for the role of biggest company gossip, this apparent knowledge-sharing is unusual.

Even more unusual is that my boss, Brian Burgman, director of contracts and tenders, has his door closed. He’s in deep discussion with the head of finance, Madeline Fletcher. Madeline’s office is three floors above ours.

She never comes down here. Ever.

Suddenly I'm interested.

Four years ago Creed Constructions went from national to multinational, and its owner, the workaholic visionary Angus Creed, has spent those four years based in Chicago, and sometimes London, as he grew the business in the US and Europe. Shopping malls, hospitals, schools, office towers, apartment blocks, bridges—Creed Constructions builds them all.

There are five offices worldwide, and while Mr. Creed keeps an office on the top floor of this building, he hasn't set foot inside it in the two years since Jo got me the job here.

"You're in the PR and communications department." I turn to face Jo. "You should know why he's here. Isn't there a press release or something?"

"No, that's the thing," she says pointedly, obviously glad I've got the message at last. Suddenly she frowns and her gaze travels over me like she's only just seen me. "Is that a coffee stain on your pants? Zoe, what's happened to you?" She grabs a tissue from the box, dips it into yesterday's water glass and hands it to me. "You've got mascara under your eye, too. Right one."

I thought I'd got it all. Damn. I wipe the tissue over my skin and Jo watches closely for any missed bits.

"Bad meeting with the wedding planner?"

I redip the tissue and wipe again. "I'll give you the gory details later. Just tell me what's been happening here." She nods, pulls up a visitor's chair, and gets more comfortable.

One of the things I like about Jo is she knows when to let something drop.

"He arrived about an hour ago and went straight upstairs. Jack and Susan had no idea he was coming."

"Really? The director in charge of the Asia Pacific region didn't know? Or his PA?" That's startling on its own. Susan's office on the forty-first floor is usually the font of all knowledge.

"Exactly," says Jo, nodding. "But word got round pretty fast that Creed was here because Colin recognised him in the lift. He was up there for a while and then he came down with Jack. He's been visiting every floor. He came through here about ten minutes ago; you just missed him." I tap my pen against my laptop as I think this through. Jo waits patiently.

"Okay, so I'm playing devil's advocate for a minute . . . The sudden, unexplained appearance of the CEO sounds all very mysterious, I agree, but how do you know they weren't expecting him?"

Jo's expression screams "are you serious" as she leans forward to give me her rationale.

"Zoe, if management knew Creed was coming, they would have told us. There would've been days of preparation and tidying up." She shoots a glance at my towering tray. We both look at the overflowing recycling bin near the photocopier and the cluttered noticeboard. Some of the memos pinned to it have been there since I started. They're side-by-side with faded postcards, photos of last year's trivia night, and a sign that says Don't Ask Me, I Just Work Here. "Rod in accounts would have been told to wear proper shoes instead of his massage sandals. Brian would be in a tie," Jo points at his office, "and Helen from human resources wouldn't be wearing jeans."

"Oh."

“Exactly. She was in tears when Creed arrived. She’s out panicbuying something else right now.” Jo sits back and folds her arms. “So, yes, Zoe, I’d say the visit is unexpected.”

I start doodling on the corner of the nearest file, absently sketching out a little house with smoke curling from the chimney. “He’s come alone? No team of assistants to follow him around?”

Jo shrugs and shakes her head. “Not that we know of.”

Gemma has moved on from Colin and is deep in discussion with a small group by the printer. In Brian’s office Madeline is hammering home a point about something. Her hand is slicing through the air and between slices she pushes her glasses up on her nose. Brian is shaking his balding head as he answers her. His face is pale. I’m guessing they’re not discussing whose turn it is to host Cake Tuesday, or whether Casual Friday should be reinstated.

“Do you think he’s come to restructure us? Redundancies?” The unwelcome thought comes creeping and I freeze mid-doodle, leaving the door of the little house incomplete. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? We’re in a global financial crisis and the number of new jobs we’re taking on has dropped. We’ve only submitted three new tenders this month.”

“I’ve been trying very hard not to let my thoughts go down that path,” Jo mumbles and stares at the tissue box, frowning and pensive. “I’m only three months into my mortgage.”

My stomach drops. This wouldn’t be a good time for me to lose my job either, and my mind drifts to the terrace house in Bondi. Dan and I fell in love with it on our first inspection and we’re planning to bid hard when it goes to auction this weekend. Then we can move out of the studio apartment his parents bought him as a graduation present. It’s a year that I’ve lived there with him and it still isn’t home. But the terrace, with its old timber floors and window sills deep enough to sit on, felt like home as soon as I stepped inside. I’d already picked out a spot near the fireplace for my Tiffany floor lamp.

Abandoning my doodle, I begin to gnaw on my manicure again. Dan could probably afford to buy the house on his own, without any financial input from me, but that’s not the point. I want it to be our place, bought together. Especially since the pre-nup means I’m not entitled to any share of his property if something goes wrong. Which it won’t.

I don’t want to think about the pre-nup. That topic is done and dusted. I’ve signed it and moved on. Like Dan said, it’s an insurance policy, that’s all. No big deal.

“I don’t think so,” Jo says suddenly and she slaps my hand away from my mouth.

“You don’t think what?”

“I don’t think this has to do with redundancies—things might have slowed, but we’re still taking on new jobs. The company was still making profit last quarter.”

“Yes! Yes, that’s true.” A delicious all-is-not-lost feeling begins licking at me. I could kiss Jo right now.

“And he wouldn’t come on his own to do it. He’d send a team. No, he’s here for another reason.”

While Jo ponders, I consider the possibility that Angus Creed has just decided to come home for a while.

“He’s handsome.” Jo smiles. “Very handsome. Looks younger than thirty- two, even with the designer suit and the Rolex watch.”

It occurs to me while I know a little about Angus Creed, I have no idea what he looks like. There was a photo in a newsletter a while ago, but it was small and I wasn’t particularly interested. Bad employee that I am, I don’t follow the company that closely. I don’t go on the intranet.

“Thirty-two is young to have so much responsibility.”

“Young to have so much power.” Jo picks up my discarded pen and begins making her own doodles on the corner of a file. “There are billionaires younger than him, though. That Internet guy was twenty-three when he made his first nine zeros.” She scribbles a line of circles and shrugs. “Probably explains why he’s still a very eligible bachelor—no time for a private life.”

“Probably explains why the big engagement ended.” Gemma sticks her head over the partition and grins. “But that’s just one theory, isn’t it?”

“What engagement?”

Gemma’s grin vanishes. From the look on her face it’s like I’d asked what Christmas was.

“Seriously, Zoe? Don’t you read magazines? Or watch cable? Twitter?”

“I have Facebook.”

“How many friends?”

“Fourteen.”

“You see?” Gemma’s shaking her head. “This is why you don’t know anything.”

“Those stories are tabloid gossip, Gemma. No one believes them.” Jo’s using her serious voice, so now I’m really intrigued.

“Was he engaged? I thought he was supposed to be Mr. One Night Stand?” I vaguely remember reading that reference somewhere.

“That was years ago. You really should try to keep up.” Gemma turns to Jo. She’s obviously given up on me. “There’s talk on Twitter she’s writing a book about what happened that night. Should make for interesting reading —you know, right from the horse’s mouth.”

“Who’s writing a book? What night?”

I might have outdone myself. Gemma is clearly so unimpressed with my lack of tabloid knowledge that she doesn’t even bother to answer before she rolls her eyes and moves off to dissect Mr. Creed with someone else.

Jo chuckles. “You don’t keep up at all, do you?”

“You know I don’t. I’ve never got the hang of pop culture.”

“Describing tabloids as pop culture might be too generous. Okay, listen and I will educate you.” Jo takes a deep breath before launching into a brief biography of our CEO’s love life.

Angus Creed was the young, handsome, brilliant, empire-builder, never photographed with the same girl twice. Models, actresses, nightclubs, parties—the whole cliché. Until he started dating Eden Childs.

Jo’s eyes narrow. “I am assuming you know who she is, right?”

“She does those Lady Shaver commercials. And she was in that movie with the guy with the bad hair.”

“Gold star to you.” Jo gives me a wide smile. “But before all of that Eden Childs was a catalogue model working part-time in Creed’s Chicago office. That’s how they met. She was the Tuesday and Thursday receptionist.”

“He dated an employee?”

“He was going to marry an employee.”

“This was before I started working here?”

“About a year before. There was going to be a huge wedding in the south of France, but they split up the night before the ceremony. Huge fight apparently, screaming and yelling. The tabloids said he trashed their hotel suite.”

“Trashed?”

Jo shrugs. “You know how things get exaggerated. Someone probably knocked over a glass of water. Anyway, he hasn’t been linked, or even been seen, with anyone since. No nightclubs, no parties. Media-wise, it’s like he’s disappeared, except for the occasional work-related thing.”

This is all news to me, but the timing explains why I’ve missed it all. Three years ago I was at home in Stanthorpe with Mum, and focused on very different things.

“And now Eden Childs is writing a book about their break-up?”

“I doubt it. Sounds like more twisted rumours. She’s never said anything definite about their break-up in interviews, but the magazines still manage to make it sound like he cheated on her all the time.”

“What does he say?”

“He doesn’t do interviews.”

Jo begins to tidy my scattered collection of coffee mugs, lining them up and turning their handles so they all face the same way. “He’s actually quite charming,” she says. “Even smiled at me as he walked through the department.”

“*Only* at you?”

Jo ignores my comment, but she’s a lot more forthcoming when I ask what Angus Creed looks like.

“Tall. And dark. And he has these shoulders.” She holds her hands wide, like a fisherman bragging about the size of his catch. “Very confident and sure of himself, obviously. He walked through the place like he owns it.”

“He does own it.”

She rolls her eyes. “But it wasn’t like he was trying to make a point about it. It was just, I don’t know, natural. He shook hands and said hello. Very smooth. Very professional. A little aloof. Colin was almost drooling over the Rolex watch.”

“Josephine Kelly, it sounds like you have a crush.”

Jo’s mouth pops open and I think she’s about to argue with me, but I’m wrong.

“I’m too old and too single to have crushes,” she mutters instead. “But you’re right— one whiff of power and money and I’m a goner. I’m disappointed with myself.” She frowns as I put my coffee mugs back where they were.

“So do you want to talk about your meeting this morning?” She uncrosses and recrosses her legs and I check the time.

“We should probably do some work.”

“No one else is at the moment.”

That’s true, but I still don’t want to talk about the wedding. Just the

thought of it and my muscles are like rocks again.

“Marie’s overruled me on the wedding cake.”

“I thought your cousin was making the cake?”

“So did I. It was going to be her gift to us, but Marie says it will look home-made and tacky—and those were her exact words. I saw the e-mail.”

I start doodling again. A dragon this time.

“This is the cousin who has her own cake decorating business, right?” “Yep, Kathy’s Cakes. But that’s not good enough for Marie.”

“Can she even do that?”

“She’s already done it. The replacement cake’s been ordered, six tiers, sugar doves, cascading flowers . . . Sarah showed me a picture.”

“Is it nice?”

“Hideous.” I scribble over the dragon until it’s a mess of blue ink. “But Marie’s paying for everything, so . . .” I shrug.

“Have you told Dan?”

“I tried. You know what he’s like.”

Jo frowns. “Could you try reasoning with Marie? She backed down about the belly dancer, didn’t she?”

I wince. “Yeah, I’m not sure. Sarah was very evasive this morning when I asked if the Amazing Aziza had been cancelled. Oh, and apparently Marie’s added another journalist to the guest list.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yep. That’s three reporters now. Instead of speeches we’re going to have a press conference.”

“Okay, I’ve heard enough.” Jo folds her arms across her chest. “Let’s go look at antiques at lunch time. We could get the bus to Glebe Point Road, wander around Latimer’s, and still be back in an hour. We’ve done it before.”

Jo knows my weakness—anything with a history, anything that doesn’t have “Made in China” stamped on the bottom. Unless it’s a vase from the Ming Dynasty. A browse through Latimer’s Antique Emporium would be very therapeutic. Even better than sailing.

“But I’ve already had most of the morning off.”

“Tomorrow, then? In the meantime . . .” She opens my bottom drawer, pulls out the emergency pack of chocolate mini muffins, and we each have one. Or two.

“Mm, so good,” I mumble round a mouthful. “These should definitely be the sixth food group.” Jo’s nodding as she licks chocolate off her fingers. Her eyes are closed as she savours. “Maybe we should have these at the wedding instead of cake. What do you think?”

Conversation stops and mini muffins are forgotten when Brian opens his office door. Madeline heads back to finance and my boss rubs his hand over the top of his balding head. It’s a familiar, nervous habit. Brian’s a worrier, always jumpy and on edge, so this morning must have killed him.

“Hi, Brian.”

“Zoe, you’re here. Jo’s filled you in on our special visitor? Good, good. There’s nothing to worry about, though. Word has come down from the top: there will be no staff changes; he’s not come to restructure the company. He’s just dividing his time more

evenly amongst the offices, so it's business as usual. A few weeks here and then he'll be gone, back to Chicago." He nods and runs his hand over his head again. "Business as usual."

"Like I said," Jo mouths. The relief is sweet.

"How's that monthly report coming?" Brian asks.

"Almost done. I'll have it to you after lunch."

"Good, good. Excellent." He wanders into his office and Jo stands.

"I should get my arse back to PR. Try not to let Marie get you down, okay?" She gives my arm a squeeze. "And if the mysterious Mr. Creed makes another appearance, call me."

She disappears and I open the report file on my computer. Five minutes later I get a text from Jo.

Just caught Colin on the Rolex website!

Angus Creed doesn't appear again, but the rumours keep buzzing: he's closing the Sydney office; he's expanding the Sydney office; he's come home to escape a stalker; the mafia is after him. The stories get more and more outrageous, but Helen from HR looks very smart in her new navy blue slacks.

Five-thirty comes, and I'm ready to head out the door when Brian waves me into his office. He has the phone in one hand and a folder in the other.

"I know you're on your way home, Zoe," he whispers. "But would you mind taking this file upstairs to Jack's office for me, please? I'd go myself, but I've got this conference call about the hospital." He turns pale at the mention of it. The contract to build a new hospital in Wollongong would be the biggest score we've had in months and he's going to lose even more hair over it. "Make sure you hand it to Susan," he says. "Don't leave it on her desk."

Of course the lift takes forever. At this time of day they're all being summoned to go down, not up. A headache begins to nag at the base of my head. I pull the hair tie from my ponytail and my hair swings loose around my shoulders. I'd love to cut it, but I'm supposed to be wearing it up for the wedding. For a moment I entertain myself with visions of Marie's face if I turned up to the church with a buzz-cut. It would almost be worth feeling the winter chill on the back of my neck. Finally, the lift doors ping open and I take a smooth ride to level forty-one.

I don't go upstairs very often, but when I do, I'm always struck by how quiet it is. It's a different world up here.

When I step out onto the plush grey carpet, I'm surrounded by silence. The walls are woodpanelled and dark, but their heaviness is broken by scattered artworks and potted plants. There is a reception area with leather arm chairs and Susan's wide mahogany desk sits in the middle. The whole effect makes me think of an Edwardian gentlemen's club and I almost expect a waiter to appear with a tray of drinks.

Susan is nowhere in sight. To the left of the reception area is Jack Munroe's office, and as I move closer I can hear faint voices and realise she's in there talking with him.

The office to the right must be Mr. Creed's. Whenever I've been here before, that door's been closed, and I wonder if his office has been kept as he left it—or if it's sneakily been used for storage. Maybe Susan's got the decorations from last year's Christmas party stacked in there. The carpet's probably littered with specks of glitter and tinsel in the corporate colours. That stuff got everywhere. It's almost May, and our department still sparkles in the sunlight.

I can imagine the panic Mr. Creed's surprise arrival caused.

Tonight the door is open a little and I resist the urge to take a step closer and peek inside. Instead I study the art on the walls—Australian classics, bush landscapes, and the wide dusty streets of country towns.

There's a new piece I don't remember seeing before—a photograph, enlarged and beautifully framed, of a lighthouse at night. Its silver beam cuts through the darkness while savage waves crash on the rocks below. It seems unrelated and out of place. And it has nothing to do with construction. It's a bleak and lonely picture and I wonder who chose it.

On the wall behind Susan's desk is another photograph and this one I'm familiar with. It's black and white. A man in overalls stands proudly beside a truck with W. H. Creed, Master Builder written on the side. There is a new housing estate—all bare ground and spindly wooden frames—in the background. I mightn't be up-to-date with the tabloid gossip, but this part of the Creed story I do know. I wonder what William Creed would think if he could see what his son has done with the family business. There's still no sign of Susan and it's almost ten to six.

If I don't leave soon, we'll be late for Dan's parents. I toy with the thought of calling Dan to tell him I'm stuck at work and he should go ahead without me. It wouldn't be a complete lie. But tempting as it may be, it's not worth the fallout. Once, when I missed the Thursday dinner because of work, Dan gave me the silent treatment for two days. He could sulk for Australia and win gold every time.

Jack and Susan are still talking. Her desk is so neat with just her nameplate, her laptop at the side and an in-tray that doesn't overflow. No novelty coffee cups or photos or precariously placed tissue boxes. The only thing that's out of place is the brochure lying in the centre. Govett's Leap Retreat in the Blue Mountains. The photo on the front shows a waterfall spilling into a wide pool fringed with ferns. With an awkward twist of my head, I read the blurb upsidedown.

There's a sound from my right and I realise I've moved close enough to see into Mr. Creed's office. Not all the way, just a little, but since the opportunity to peek has presented itself, I take it.

The first thing to catch my attention is the corner of a dark wooden desk. Beyond it is a wall of glass that overlooks the city. I'm about to move closer when a man walks into view, his back to me. Startled, I stop, foot raised, and almost fall forward into a potted palm. A couple of the fronds whack me in the face.

This must be Angus Creed—the visionary who took a family building business and turned it into a billion-dollar construction empire, or the cheating playboy on the run from a stalker. I guess it depends which newspaper one reads.

Of course I don't want to be caught staring into his office, but I'm curious, fascinated, even. He is tall, like Jo said, and his shoulders are broad in a crisp white shirt. His dark hair just brushes his collar. He stares out the window, hands on hips, like a king surveying his kingdom, and I wonder how many of those buildings out there were built by him. How many bear his mark?

He's standing so still and my conscience begins to prickle. I shouldn't be watching him without his knowledge, so I go to step back again, taking him out of view. But Angus Creed rolls his shoulders and I stop.

There is something so raw, so vulnerable in that simple movement, in the language of his body. I'm stabbed by a sadness I can't explain. Suddenly he doesn't seem like a powerful visionary. Or a cheating playboy.

He lifts his hands and I see a flash of the coveted watch. Then his hands disappear as he unties his tie. It drops on the floor a moment later, a spiral of silky red. He rests his palms flat against the glass and rolls his shoulders again, slower this time. The shirt pulls tight, defining hard muscle beneath the thin fabric. Then he bows his head and I have to turn away. This is too intimate. There's something so defeated in his posture, and for some reason I find myself thinking of the lighthouse.

"Zoe? Can I help you?"

Susan. Shit. I almost stumble over my feet as I whirl around to face her. In her silk shirt and pencil skirt, she is as neat and trim as her desk. She gives me a polite smile as she walks over to shut Mr. Creed's door, shielding him from my prying eyes. Colour roars across my cheeks as I hold out the folder.

"Brian wanted Jack to have this."

"Thank you." She takes the folder, tucking it into the crook of her arm. There is something slightly intimidating about Susan. She's not really the type to hide a fibreglass reindeer in the CEO's office. And because I don't want her to think I've spent all my time staring into that office, I nod towards the brochure.

"Are you planning a holiday? The retreat sounds great. I was just reading the blurb."

"It's lovely," she says. "I've stayed there a few times."

I return her smile, but the small talk is going nowhere so I say a quick goodnight and leave.

The lift takes me to the ground floor. As I walk through the revolving doors and out onto the street, I wonder what has brought Angus Creed home.