

Chapter 1

Claudia Mc Bride's office door was open. An open door got things done quickly. Open doors meant open minds.

Claudia liked doing things with the minimum of fuss. It made perfect logic to her, that once you found reliable and trustworthy people, you looked after them. You treated them with respect and you did everything possible to avoid unnecessary complications. Responsible adults didn't need to be regimented like boarding school students. They needed to know what they were directly responsible for; they needed to understand what was required and when it was required, and they needed the tools to get the job done in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Claudia made sure her people got what they needed, when they needed it. As the CEO she made it her responsibility to know what her people required. She took her people seriously; they rarely waited long for decisions to be made, or to get the equipment so they could do their jobs effectively.

Three years had passed since **EcoLogic** had formed a strategic alliance with the American company **Weather Scope**. The joint venture made their combined force one of the most influential organisations in the western world. Claudia had started EcoLogic from scratch, after resigning from her senior research position with **The Centre for Australian Weather and Climate Research**, twelve years earlier.

When EcoLogic opened for business the offices were furnished with cast-offs the staff dragged out of their garages and attics. The only unifying feature was that no two pieces matched, and all of them needed multi layers of paint to fill the

deeply scratched surfaces. But what they lacked in smart office furniture and fancy décor items, their combined genius and high energy levels made up for; and then some. The EcoLogic team members, weren't just good at their jobs, they were outstanding. And that's why it wasn't long before people who really mattered were noticing them.

People like the New York based, Weather Scope. They were on the lookout for smart new scientists; smart new technology and youthful enthusiasm. The hunt really began in earnest when Weather Scope called for expressions of interest to find an affiliate partner. EcoLogic didn't just meet the selection criteria, they exceeded Weather Scope's expectations on every point.

After they signed the contract, which gave them the right to wear the international group's badge of honour, the team convinced Claudia it was time to move out of their extremely cramped offices. She agreed that a slash and burn was long overdue, but only on the condition that she didn't have to assist with the tasks of sourcing the new accommodation, and that shopping for, and selecting, office furniture and fittings would be done without her..

She wanted nothing to do with the relocation project, and apart from approving the final décor plans, she didn't want to be involved in any of the process of finding, selecting and refurbishing new accommodation. Claudia made it perfectly clear that she was totally abdicating all responsibility for the EcoLogic rebranding. She provided a generous budget to the project, but had absolutely zero input into dismantling one office space and setting up the other. So the team had taken complete responsibility for relocating the equipment, records and everything else they had accumulated over the years.

It had taken Claudia many months to really claim the top level, designer-decorated, office as her own. Not that she didn't like it; she did. She loved the extensive use of metal, glass and marble, softened with soft cream leather, but during her time as a rather austere public servant, she had grown accustomed to cedar and sandstone. She knew she had to break the establishment stereotype, but it took a little time before she felt really at home in the new environment.

Claudia sat at her desk by the window, but today she had hardly noticed the opera house's spectacular white marble sails, or the breathtakingly beautiful harbour, outside. Today she was totally focused on business; the business of climate change.

Katherine Spender, EcoLogic's marketing manager, stuck her head around the laminated glass door and tapped her pen on one of the huge stainless steel hinges. 'It won't work you know' She called across the room.

Claudia looked up, pushed her half glasses higher on her nose, and sighed. She was working to a ten o'clock deadline and a nine-thirty interruption was not welcome. 'What won't work?' she asked without attempting to hide her frustration.

'Working your butt off won't change anything. It won't make it disappear in a puff of smoke.'

'Oh come on Kate. I don't have time for this right now.' Claudia put down her pen with unnecessary force, and pushed the pile of documents to the side. 'You of all people know how important this is. The deadline is non-negotiable.' She leaned back in her white leather chair and frowned.

For a while neither of them spoke. Then Claudia said, 'OK, so I've been working a few too many hours these past weeks' her eyes moved towards the window and soaked in the outside beauty; she sighed again. Only this time it wasn't from frustration; it came from deep inside, and carried a torrent of pain to the surface. Tears she'd been trying to contain all morning, finally won the battle.

Katherine closed the door, quickly pulled the cream silk drapes across the glass wall facing the passageway, and then she crossed the room and placed her hand gently on Claudia's shoulder. 'Hey girlfriend, what's going on?' She said gently wishing she could take away the pain she saw reflected in the eyes of the only person she really loved.

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 dining 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 capital?' 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 cash 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.'

Chapter 3

Christoph sat, staring at his desk phone. His brain was working, but his mind was not. None of his thoughts made sense to him. Ursula was back, even though he'd told her over the phone that he didn't want to try again. They'd been apart longer than they had been together, with little contact during the two year separation.

But now she was back. Waiting in the apartment for him; wanting to put things right. But he knew there was nothing right about him and Ursula. Their relationship had never been right. How can you make something so wrong, right? He asked himself.

Suddenly, as if the question had been a power shot, he stood up, walked to the window and looked down onto the street. Weather Scope's, Madison Avenue location was a fine piece of real estate, but tonight he would give it away for a ten minute telephone conversation with Claudia.

He was staring at the scene playing out below when the phone on his desk rang. He felt an internal rush of chemicals. A toxic brew induced by shock, fear and anger. The piercing ring was trying to break through the fog barrier in his head, but his brain refused to send the necessary signals to his legs, arms and voice. He stood paralysed, tears his only reaction. The phone continued its vicious assault. Christoph felt nothing. Yet the tears kept falling.

Audio chaos was replaced with silence. Not a slow transition, it was instant. Leaving Christoph with the feeling that the room was being pushed into space, to drift around in a void. Then with the tenderness of a child hugging a puppy, his emotions began to flow again, and ever so gently, love bathed him in hope again. It was a feeling stronger than the magnetic pull of the moon on the tides. He felt energy flowing back into his veins.

Christoph turned slowly from the window and with unsteady feet, returned to the desk and lowered himself into the security and comfort of the leather chair. The phone rang again, but this time he reached over and plucked the handset from its cradle. 'Hi this is Christoph.' His voice was strong again, but for a second he wondered if he was crazy. Surely, only the insane, move from despair to hope so quickly. The mentally alert did it much more slowly. Normal people moved through stages of grief and happiness, and they sent out clear signals to show others where they were at. Well that's how he imagined normal people behaved. 'Thomas? Good to hear from you. How's it going down-under?'

'Not bad. Not bad at all. We'll have the calcs done pretty soon, and then with the help of an army of keyboard Olympians, the reports should be finished by two am, our time.' Thomas sounded confident and relieved to be making the announcement. 'Claudia has everything set for the documents to take off at eight in the morning.'

'Good.' Christoph swallowed hard to clear a passage for his words to flow through. 'Good', he repeated. 'So how's everyone coping with the pressure?' He did care how all his colleagues were holding up under the strain, but he didn't kid himself that his desire to know how Claudia was coping, emotionally and physically was the true reason for asking. Claudia had, single-handedly, brokered the deal. She

had to be exhausted. Was anyone taking care of her? Was she eating? Was she getting any rest?

All silly questions; he knew she wouldn't rest until every task had been completed, and every staffer had been despatched into the arms of their loved ones. Then, and only then, would she kick off her heels, remove her jacket, and sink into her beautiful white leather chair. The chair they'd chosen together. Not because she actually needed a new chair, but because she wanted a physical signpost to mark the day they pledged their love ... to each other.

He recalled her saying an office chair was a perfect purchase, because it would gently embrace her every time she settled into it. She said its whiteness symbolised the purity of their love and it was something she would use every day.

Yes, he told himself, when everyone had left the office. When she was finally alone, she would give her body up to the chair's embrace. He could see her doing it. Her hair would fall a little to one side as she settled herself into the soft creamy leather. He knew the expression she'd have on her face, as she checked the To Do list Sarah would have left on her desk before she went home. Then Claudia would tell her brain she was signing off for a while. That's when pleasure and contentment would sweep through her body.

His memory allowed him to savour her voice, letting the stored recording of her inflections and verbal nuances float around in his head. The corners of his mouth hinted at a smile as he dredged up a memorised version of a high-fidelity audio file she'd sent him a few months after their two companies formed their alliance.

As the CEO he'd been involved in stage one of the agreement development. He'd vetted all the responses to the Expression of Interest, but due to a special assignment in Europe, he was not involved in the interviewing process. These were conducted by the Vice-President and two other directors. They made the final selection and put an offer to Claudia McBride and her Australian team.

The two companies had been working together for about six weeks before Christoph had any direct contact with her. Although, of course, he was regularly updated on how things were progressing; all the feed-back was excellent.

From her first day on the job Claudia had made a difference. Her warm disposition, and her special brand of humour, made her extremely popular. On his return, Christoph was intrigued by the grapevine stories he heard. His curiosity was greatly aroused when he heard the younger New York staffers assessment. They said she was one, seriously smart, super cool chick.

His memory bathed him in the sound of her beautifully modulated voice, with its slight British accent (*acquired, she told him later, from her very British elocution teacher, her mother engaged to tutor her from around the age of ten. The lessons were intended to correct a childhood lisp*). A faint smile creased the corners of his mouth as he recalled the welcome back message she'd left on his voice mail. She assured him she and her Australian team were delighted to be working with him.

'Hi there Christoph, it's me Claudia' she said cheerfully, 'I hope I have the pronunciation right. If you could hear how most people here at EcoLogic massacre the cadences of your beautiful European name, you would react in one of two ways. Either you simply would not recognise the sound as your name, and therefore you would not respond. Or you would be so offended by the *language-terrorism* that you would refuse to have direct contact with anyone from the Australian office again; demanding we refer all enquiries to your lovely Russian secretary.

Personally I highly recommend the latter course of action because Australian men are completely mollified by Russian women. They become total cowards and completely subservient when they're confronted by a well spoken, no-nonsense Russian of the opposite sex.'

There was a short silence before Claudia continued, 'I'm really not sure why I recorded this voice-mail.' Another tiny pause. 'I think I want to remove any doubt you may have about my ability to speak the English language as you know it.

You mentioned in an email that you studied Australians while you were sitting in airport lounges, and you actually thought they spoke a foreign language. So I guess it's important for me to show you I do actually speak English, not the Australian dialect, that you have difficulty translating.

I must also mention that I have it on good authority, that you actually use sub-title translations on the rare occasions that you watch Australian produced television programs.'

He remembered that she had on a later occasion also sent him audio files of her favourite poems and songs. She said the lyrics described her feelings for him.

His heart pounded and he cried out, 'Gone. All gone.' Extinguished by one malicious keystroke the night Ursula arrived home and deleted all the files on his laptop, while he was trying to sort out a complex satellite problem.

The loss had been as painful as the sudden death of a loved one. He recalled how he'd been paralyzed; staring in disbelief while an intoxicated Ursula screamed abuse at him. Her voice had sounded like a flock of crazed sea birds? His brain had been scarred by the sound.

Thomas's voice pieced the fog inside his head. 'Hey Christoph. Are you still there? We've got a really bad connection. There's a time-delay thing happening. Look why don't you hang up and I'll call you back. Maybe we'll get a better line next time.'

'Sure Thomas. I'll be here.'