



## Chapter One

Murder was not a realistic option, but it felt good to contemplate it. Berry smiled and settled back in her chair. Killing Bernard Simpson would be so easy she thought. She just had to wait in his office until he returned from a faculty meeting, then stab him with the dagger hanging on his wall.

She was tall, strong, and worked out. She ran three kilometers every day. He was a weasel who would have trouble fighting off a ten-year-old girl.

Bernard was also a coward. Berry knew he'd buckle at the knees, piss his trousers, and then cry for his mother. And why not, she was probably the only person who loved him. When it came to loveable, Bernard had little going for him. He was the stereotypical social introvert. He was bald, plump, and his pasty completion accentuated his teenage acne-scars.

Bernard was as appealing to women as a pig-eyed, mummy's boy.

Berry knew Bernard was a religious fanatic. Somehow that made attacking him an even more appealing prospect. Berry had graphic information about how Bernard treated his former wife. When Berry was still in private practice, Ruth Simpson had been one of her clients.

Ruth Simpson was happy to discuss her then husband's religious obsessions. Every morning he woke at six, and prayed for an hour alone. While his wife prepared breakfast, he sat in the kitchen and read the bible aloud. Ruth Simpson was a non-believer, but she quickly learned to keep her thoughts to herself.

As a younger woman, Ruth tried to explain to her husband, the difficulty she faced taking the bible seriously. It had not been easy for her to find the right words, to talk about her feelings. Because English was her second language and while she spoke it well, she did have trouble expressing her deeply held fears, and explaining her spiritual beliefs.

Berry had been shocked by Ruth Simpson's revelation that Bernard frequently hit her and called her an ignorant sinner. He punished her for weeks or until she agreed to pray with him to seek God's forgiveness.

Ruth understood that forcing her to pray for forgiveness gave her husband an ego-rush that made him feel like one of the Lord's true footsoldiers.

Ruth Simpson was smart woman. She had no trouble trading shallow words for redemption. Especially if it saved her from weeks of punishments that included food deprivation, and her husband withholding money, and taking away her liberty.

After six counselling sessions, Ruth made the decision to leave the marriage. She walked away from their beautiful home, found a job waiting tables in a strip-club, and lived in a converted garage that had no running water. Most women would have struggled with the transition, but not Ruth.

To her poverty was a state of mind. By her calculations, the loss of her middle-class life was nothing compared to the independence she gained from walking away. The fancyhouse may have provided shelter from the natural elements, but it

gave her no protection from emotional abuse and religious tyranny.

Ruth's weekly wage was enough to pay the rent, put food in the pantry, and it allowed her to cover her household bills. Being in control of her personal destiny was a priceless gift she had given herself. And the cost had only been determination and courage. To Ruth's amazement whenever she tested her courage, she discovered, her ability to overcome fear expanded twenty-fold.

Berry sighed and closed her eyes. The desire to murder Bernard evaporated into a warm glow. Knowing she had helped Ruth Simpson made her feel good. She smiled and settled down to mark the assignments piled high on her desk.

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Outside in the hall, Billy Newman hesitated, then knocked gently on the door. He shuffled his feet to overcome his nervousness.

“Come in.” Berry called out, “The door’s open.” Billy inhaled deeply and turned the handle. He hadn’t rehearsed what he would say. He was just going to play it by ear. Relax man, he told himself. Don’t let her see she’s anything more than your lecturer. The fact that she’s sexy and bloody smart, means nothing to you man, he reminded himself.

Berry Eliot wasn’t beautiful in the way his workmates expected a woman to be beautiful. Most of his mates had been raised on the skinny-blond-blue-eyed propaganda machine. They were hard wired into the Barbie imagery.

He pushed the door open and smiled. Berry looked over the top of her glasses. “Hello Billy. Do come in.” she said, gesturing towards the visitor’s chair. She waited for him to settle then said, “Well this is a surprise.” Her voice was bright and friendly. “How may I help you?” she asked

“Actually, Doctor Eliot, I was hoping you could give me some feedback on how I’m doing.”

“Doing? You mean in the course?”

“Yes ma’am. Am I doing okay?”

“Billy you’re doing remarkably well. I would have thought you could tell that from my comments on your assignments, and the excellent marks you’ve achieved.” She tilted her head to the side, then added, “Maybe you don’t trust marks as a genuine benchmark for achievement.”

“It’s difficult for me ma’am.” Billy looked serious, “When I lay bricks I can see if I’ve done a good job.” He frowned. “With bricklaying it’s easy to assess the quality of the work. I can tell when I’ve done a great job.”

He paused and studied her. “It’s different with Uni stuff ma’am. I haven’t been doing it long enough to know the difference between a good job and a bad one.” A broad smile flashed across Berry’s face. “I don’t want to just do a good job, ma’am. I want to be up there with the best.”

Berry nodded. She knew exactly what he meant. “Ever since I was a kid, I’ve always wanted to be the best. Hard work doesn’t scare me ma’am. I’ll work till I drop, but I need benchmarks. I need to be able to compare my work to the master tradesmen. That way I can see for myself where I fall short, and then I can work out how to improve.”

He settled back in the chair. “I used to spend a lot of time visiting buildings constructed by the great tradesmen. So, I could study the techniques they used. I mean really study them. Then I’d work out how they did it. I spent hours practicing and often I’d only manage to get one small detail right.”

Billy shrugged, “Still it paid off in the end, because there aren’t many jobs I can’t do well now. I’ve never talked about it to anyone, but my bosses could see my work was getting better and better.”

Billy lowered his eyes. “One old timer told me my work reminded him of some of the European masters.” Billy stopped talking. Faint colour showed through his deeply tanned skin. “I’m sorry ma’am, I sound like a damned prat. I didn’t mean to brag. I’m just having problems working out how to be a better student. I really want to do well.”

“I know you do Billy. And I completely understand how difficult it is, if you don’t have clear benchmarks. A great deal of trust is required during the early stages of academic life. Students rely heavily on their teachers to give them feedback on their progress.”

Berry smiled. "It's a less than perfect system Billy. And it's a slow and frustrating one. However, there are tangible ways for you to be able to test your own progress. It's a formula I've used for years, and one I still apply to my own work."

"A formula?"

"Yes. An easy one to remember. But it requires total honesty Billy. There's no room for ego and self-importance if you want it to work."

"I'm not sure I get it ma'am."

Berry looked over the top of her glasses and studied him. They were so alike. So keen and impatient to be the best. She remembered how she had asked the same questions. She still questioned the validity of a system that failed to identify exceptional ability and did not recognize genius when it walked through the door.

She blamed the system's flaws on human ego. Many academics were so blinded by their own vanity, that they actually thought they were divine storehouses of knowledge. They believed themselves to be infallible. They saw their students as brain-slaves. Living organs to transplant their ideas into.

They used their students to gain immortality, and to them, students were nothing more than human achieves. It was a perfect way to ensure their ideas were never challenged and they remained intact.

Berry shivered, folded her arms, and inhaled deeply. She knew these people were anything but infallible. They were extremely imperfect, self-appointed, priests-of-science. They were flawed academics, who wanted to freeze the human race in a time warp. Berry called them the FEFs; flat-earth fanatics.

“Billy you have huge potential. Your research results are impressive.” Berry smiled and nodded gently. “While your ideas are unique and still require sound testing, they’re highly plausible.”

She gave him a moment to take in her comments. “Look, I know you’re unsure about your future career path Billy. But I believe you will end up developing new pathways that others will follow.”

Billy frowned. “I think you’ll have to explain it a bit more.” He said softly.

“The results from your controlled study and your arguments are highly persuasive.

Sure, they're only preliminary findings, and the sample group is fairly small, but I'm willing to bet that you're on the right track. You just need more time to prove your theory." Berry watched him processing her comments. She settled back and waited.

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

Billy's eyes sparkled. "I just know most people with mental health conditions don't need more pills to get their lives back. They need new ways to reconnect with life." He sighed. "I haven't told you the whole story" he said, "I think I should."

"Only tell me what you want to Billy."

"I've done some additional research with a mate of mine." Berry raised her eyebrows slightly.

"A mate?"

"Yeah. He's a Neurologist. He's discovered some pretty amazing stuff. Like the fact that changes take place in the brain's physical structure when people take drugs over a long period of time." Billy looked serious. "And I'm not talking about

Chrystal Meth, and shit like that. Plenty of scientists know about that stuff. No. I'm talking about legal drugs. The rubbish doctors are prescribing all the time.

It's scary Doctor Eliot. We're making people's brains mutate." Billy inhaled deeply. "In a few generations the human brain could end up almost useless."

Billy's eyes widened, "Sure humans will still walk and talk, well sort of, but they won't be able to problem solve or think critically. And that's because the human brain will be fucked up. We'll be like trained monkeys. Worse in fact. More like programmed robots."

Billy shook his head. "Imagine what would happen ma'am, if humans become robots. Machines programmed by special interest groups, like marketing companies at best, radical terrorist groups at worst. It's almost too bloody scary to contemplate isn't it?"

Berry remained silent for a moment and then leaned forward, "Tell me about your friend Billy. Is he someone you trust completely"

“Trust how?”

“To do the proper research, and not sensationalize his findings?” Berry paused, then added, “or steal your work and misrepresent it as his own?”

“Totally trustworthy ma’am.” Billy smiled broadly, “He’s a regular good guy. He’s not a glory hunter. He’s as worried as I am about the possibilities.” Billy shook his head. “No ma’am he won’t tell a soul about his work until he is certain of his findings. He still has a long way to go before he can be one hundred percent certain that his work is legitimate.”

Billy nodded. “You can be sure his work will be exact science ma’am.” He smiled broadly. “We’re going to go into practice together.”

Berry tilted her head slightly. “Really? Now that is interesting.” She returned his smile. “How did you and your scientist friend meet?”

“In the cradle actually. We’re first cousins. His mother is my aunt. My mother’s sister.” He chuckled, “We’ve been blowing stuff up since we could walk. We were the stereotypical mad scientists. Our parents were always scared to leave us home

alone, because they thought we'd burn the house down." He laughed.

"Dr Jeckle and Mr Hyde hey?"

"Worse."

"So how come he went straight into science, but you chose the building trade?"

"My father was in construction. He wanted to have Newton and Son on the letterhead, I guess. My dad always said, '*Get a trade son. You'll never be out of work if you've got a trade behind you.*'"

Billy paused, "He was a great guy, and I wanted to be just like him. So, I went to trade school and the rest is history."

"What made you move on?"

"Once I could do it better than most of the other tradies, it just stopped being challenging for me." He hesitated for a moment and then added. "When Dad died, we didn't need the letterhead anymore."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He worked in a high-risk environment. He knew the dangers. He

would have died much earlier if he'd worked a desk job."

Billy shook his head. "He was happy right up to the end. It was pretty hard on my mother though." Billy looked intently at Berry. "She wasn't well educated. She was a country girl. The daughter of nineteen-fifties Polish immigrants. Her father believed a girl's job was to stay at home and help to look after the men in the family. She left school when she was twelve years of age." He swallowed hard. "But she read a lot. Everything she could get her hands on in fact. When she was a kid, she used a torch to read under the bed covers at night.

My mother is a very intelligent woman, but she isn't a rebel like her sister. Her sister left home as soon as she could. She got a job and paid for her own education."

"Your aunt encouraged you to come to university?"

"My mother and my aunt. They knew I needed big challenges and they wanted me to make something of myself. When I was a kid my mother made sure I read books. She loved watching Leon and me study. Leon's my cousin, the scientist. Mum was always giving us stuff to use in

our chemistry experiments. Dad told her she was just confusing me.”

“Confusing you?”

“He said she filled my head with useless stuff. He wanted me to get a trade; as a sort of insurance policy. He’d been through wars and he’d seen starving families.

He didn’t want his wife and children to experience what he had gone through growing up in Poland.”

Billy paused for a moment but held her gaze. “My dad was a good man ma’am. A real practical bloke. He wasn’t into books and fancy education. He thought it was a waste of time because corrupt governments could take it all away and leave you with nothing. As I said, he just wanted me to have the skills that would guarantee I’d always have work.” Billy smiled. “But you know, I think he’d have been a little bit proud of the fact I managed to get into university.

He’d boast to his mates at the pub. But he’d never tell me he was happy I was doing “girlie” work.” He paused again. “He wasn’t the type to show emotions to his kids; thought it was a sign of weakness.”

Billy fell silent.

“Your father gave you good advice Billy. Your construction experience has given you first-hand knowledge of real people. It has taught you valuable lessons that most academics never learn. I think he was right to call it a “girlie” lifestyle, but he just missed the mark a little. The mind is every bit as powerful as the sledgehammer.” She looked at him and smiled. “We need to handle both well in life.” Her smile developed into a laugh. “God, I wish I could throw a twenty- pounder. There’s a certain academic I’d like to knock off his pompous perch.”

“Really ma’am?”

“Oh yes Billy. Really. One of my colleagues could do with a king-sized flattening to puncture his inflated ego and reduce his body mass.”

Billy laughed with her. “I’ll give you hammer throwing lessons if you like.”

“Thanks. I have a meeting with him in ten minutes. If it goes like all our other meetings, I just might take you up on the offer.”

Billy stood and extended his hand to her.

“Thank you for talking with me Doctor Eliot. I feel better now.”

“Thank you for dropping by Billy. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed chatting with you. And please believe me when I say you’re doing brilliant work.” She shook his hand and walked with him to the door. “Your Dad would be very proud I’m sure.”

“Thank you ma’am.” His eyes fixed on hers. “It’s great being able to talk with you. Can I come by again soon? I’d like to tell you more about Project X.”

“Project X?”

“That’s that Leon and I call our research.”

“Of course. I’m keen to hear all about it. Now you’d better hurry to your next class. You don’t want to be locked out of the lecture hall.”

“No chance of that. In the four years I’ve been coming to Uni, old Marty has never started on time. He’s not like you ma’am. He doesn’t give a damn if students attend his lectures or not. He often forgets to attend them himself.”

Berry laughed again. “It’s amazing isn’t it? The university is like a home for special

people. A sort of village for individuals who make their own rules and play God with other people's lives. I can't think of another work environment where the employees decide when, or if, they'll attend for duty.

It's a bit like a home for the frail aged and the socially inept all rolled up in one." She frowned. "It's a system built on the Peter Principle." Berry shook her head slowly. "My God. What hope is there for the future?"

Berry opened the door and watched him walk down the passageway. She knew the reason the system worked in spite of itself, was because students like Billy could think creatively and they dared to take risks. The Billys of the world would press on and make the really important discoveries. They're open to new ways of seeing, Berry thought, and this gives them a depth of understanding that many academics lack. Billy, and people like him, didn't need to be told how to think. They just needed to be encouraged to trust their own ability, and to be allowed to try out new ways of doing things. In their own way and in their own time.

## **Chapter Two**

“Good morning Bernard. How’s life in the Ivory Tower?”

“And a very good morning to you too, Doctor Eliot.” Ignoring her comment, the Faculty Directory said, “Thank you for making time to meet with me at short notice.”

He gestured to a cluster of visitors chairs arranged in a semi-circle in the conservatory; a modern addition, built on a whim when the university’s building and assets manager identified an end of year under-spend. Rather than returning the funds to the Consolidation Account he had offered them to the Behavioural Sciences, Faculty Director. Three hundred and fifty thousand dollars to undertake a few minor refurbishment projects. The conservatory swallowed the funds entirely.

The extension was a charming addition to an already grand office suite. Constructed almost entirely of glass it provided a spectacular view of the manicured lawns and gardens, of which the university was so proud.

Berry glanced around the office and smiled when she saw Bernard’s favourite

artefact. A magnificent Japanese sword mounted on a cedar wall plaque just inside the doorway. She thought, for the second time that day, how easy it would be for someone to enter the office, grab the thing from the wall, lunge at his fat body, and kill the bastard.

“You look happy today my dear.”

“Do I?” She walked to the lounge area and settled in a heavily padded chair. Berry glanced at him. “And why wouldn’t I be happy Bernard? I have a great life and a clear conscience.”

“A clear conscience is the most valuable thing a human can possess.” He studied her for a moment. “A rare thing indeed.” He said, settling himself opposite her.

“Then I am a fortunate woman, aren’t I?”

“You most certainly are my dear.”

“So, what is so important that it couldn’t wait until the faculty meeting tomorrow?”

Bernard cleared his throat and fully extended his bulk in his chair. “I want to discuss an extremely generous research grant.” He paused and moistened his lips with his tongue. An image of a large

bluetongue lizard flashed through Berry's mind. "A grant that will allow us to study the benefits of a number of new drugs that are designed to help people with mental illnesses become active members of society again." he added.

"Interesting. And just who has made this generous offer?"

"Weizmann Pharmaceuticals." His tone challenged her to comment.

"And what exactly will the research entail."

"Investigating effective ways to help people who are suffering from severe depression. The new drugs will help them re-engage with society in a way they have only dreamed of." Bernard sounded excited. "This money will allow us to develop a program that will help countless numbers of individuals who currently live, or more accurately exist, without any hope of ever having a normal life. We will be able to ..."

"Spare me the lecture Bernard. I teach the course, remember." Berry said cutting him off. "What sort of strings would be attached to the money?"

“Strings? There are no strings.” She knew he was annoyed, but she didn’t care.

“Oh, come on Bernard. A pharmaceutical company wants to throw money at us and there are no strings.” Berry said, slowly moving her head from side to side. “The cash will have three-inch steel cables attached to it.”

“You’re wrong Berry.” He protested.

“Bernard take off your glasses and give them a good clean. Pharmaceutical companies are not into philanthropy, they’re into profits. Big profits.”

Berry stood and gazed through the glass. “And what about academic integrity? And pure and unbiased investigation? How would we maintain those rather important research principles?” Berry’s eyes demanded an answer. “Give me the name of this kind-hearted benefactor?” she challenged.

“I understand your concerns and share them of course.”

“Sure you do.” she said sarcastically.

“Other universities successfully manage sensitive research grants Berry. There is no

reason why we can't too." His tone was patronising, only he confused it with being gentle.

"The name Bernard. You still haven't given me the name." She demanded.

"I told you Weizmann."

"Who at Weizmann's"

"Daniel Jackson."

Berry's face instantly paled. "Kyle's father?"

"Yes." He said weakly. "The fact he is Kyle's father will not cause a problem though." He added unconvincingly.

"Of course there's a problem. His son is one of my students. I couldn't do the research; there'd be a conflict of interest." Berry sat down again and stared at him. "That's it isn't it? You asked me here to tell me you're taking me off research."

The director returned her stare and then nodded. "I'm sorry Berry. There is no other way."

"There are many other ways Bernard. You just don't want to look at them." She pushed her body back in the chair. "So, am I being

relieved of all my projects?"

"I'm afraid so."

"And teaching? Is that to go too?"

"Of course not. You're an excellent teacher.  
We need you."

I'm an excellent researcher too Bernard."

"I know. But we have to protect the university."

"From whom Bernard?" her eyes hardened.  
"You or me?"

## Chapter Three

The lecture hall fell silent when Berry stepped up to the rostrum. She looked out at the sea of faces. The hall was packed, and the students were waiting for her to start. She reached over to the control panel and flipped one of the switches. Instantly the smart board behind her lit up.

Berry watched the small monitor in front of her and then spoke. "Today's lecture is

about Research Ethics in Australian universities.”

A murmur rippled around the room. “Yes, I know. I had scheduled another topic; *What Drives Individuals to Act Kindly Towards Others?*

I hope you’ll accept the unannounced change and agree ethics is too important to overlook. I have uploaded a presentation of the scheduled lecture to the Virtual Classroom; along with an audio file and lecture notes. You can download them at any time. The podcast can be downloaded to your MP3 player, so you can listen to the entire lecture at your convenience. If you have any questions, I will be happy to respond to all your emails.” She paused and then asked, “To ensure you’re in agreement with the topic change let’s have a show of hands.”

Berry stepped back and watched. Only one student kept his arms firmly on his writing console. Many of the students added a verbal vote as they raised their hand. “Thank you.” She said softly, “Let’s begin.”

Berry spoke for forty minutes, explaining the reasons why a genuine arms-length separation between funding sources and research professionals was essential to maintain integrity and unbiased findings. She spoke about the nuances that must be identified in relation to grant-donor motivation, their social position, and power; all of which have the capacity to exert influence. She explained the need to examine the personal and business affiliations of all the parties concerned and stressed the importance of identifying donor expectations.

Berry presented a wide range of simple examples to demonstrate each point and she spent a considerable amount of time showing the students how easily independent research, and project boundaries can become blurred when a close relationship exists between the funding body and university personnel.

She went to great pains to show how to identify the potential danger zones and helped the students understand how easily research outcomes can be altered by external and internal influences.

A flood of relief swamped her when she finished, and a barrage of questions broke out. They told her she had done her job well.

The session ran thirty-five minutes overtime and it would have continued, if one of her colleagues had not arrived to commence a new class. Berry packed up her stuff and hurried outside where she found many of the students assembled in a small courtyard a short distance from the lecture hall.

Jessica Andrews, Kyle Jackson, and Thomas O'Reilly called to her and asked if she would join them in the undergraduate's coffee shop. They wanted to ask her a few more questions about the lecture material.

"Sorry guys. No can do. I'll have to take a rain-check." She said. "I might be able to catch up with you tomorrow sometime though. Call me." she added and returned to her office.

The corridor was dim, but she could see someone sitting in the waiting area and hurried towards them. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting; the lecture ran over time." She dug into her briefcase and fished out her keys. "Do come in." she said.

"Thank you." The man rose and followed her into the office. "No need to apologise. I was running late myself." He watched her unpack her case and smiled. "Still having trouble time framing lectures hey?" He sat down without waiting for an invitation and stretched his legs. "How come you can't just chuck the rabble out, ten minutes before the session's official end time?"

"Give me a break. As if you're much better. I still remember all the times you made me wait until you ended your class." She dropped into her chair and grinned broadly. "It's great to see you Nick. How was Europe?" She didn't wait for an answer. "When did you arrive home? Coming back here for a while?"

"Hey, steady on. Got back on Saturday. Europe was great." He paused and then added, "And the answer is no. I'm not coming back."

Berry looked disappointed. "I thought you'd change your mind after you had a break." She picked up a paperweight and rolled it around in the palm of her hand. "So, what brought you here today?

"You."

"Me?"

"Is that a problem for you?"

"No. Of course not." She lowered her eyes. "Why would it be?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps you'd rather close doors and end chapters."

"Come on Nick. You'll always be my best friend. Sure, we've closed doors, but friendship endures. And you'll be included in all the new chapters I write." She smiled. "Hey, you're stuck with me; like it or not."

"Good. Now how about you take me to lunch at the Staff House? They won't let me in anymore; unless I'm the guest of an esteemed academic." He laughed, and then added. "I miss the Staff House. I have to go to the supermarket now. And cook even. Not having meals on campus is the thing I'll miss most."

"Really? I thought you miss my company."

"I'm still in that club. I don't need university permission to renew my membership every year." He winked at her. "Unless of course you've decided to withdraw privileges too."

"Idiot." Berry took her jacket from the narrow cupboard beside the packed bookcase. "Come on then. Let's eat. I'm starving."

They walked in silence, both enjoying the beautiful grounds and each other's company. Nick watched the students sauntering around. He knew he would miss them.

They found a vacant table on the balcony, overlooking the duck pond, and ordered roast turkey with cranberry sauce. Instead of the usual house wine Nick ordered a bottle of Françoise Feuillat-Juillot, chardonnay.

"My God Nick. What's the occasion?"

"Graduating from university." He raised his glass to her. "I'm finally leaving the hallowed halls behind." He tapped her crystal flute with his. "I'm off to explore unknown territory." He added.

"Scared?"

"A little."

"Good. You'd be a fool not to be a little scared." She sipped her champagne and looked at him. "You'll be Okay."

"God I hope so."

"It's a huge step Nick, but I know it's one you had to take."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Don't you ever feel like walking away?"

"You know I do. Often."

"What keeps you here?"

"The students."

"And the research?"

"There is no research."

Nick frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm off the research program."

"What?" Nick coughed. The wine went down the wrong way. "I don't believe it."

"You'd better believe it my friend. It's true."

"But why?"

"Money."

"They can't pay you anymore?" He looked puzzled.

"No. Nothing like that of course. Regardless of what the press says about the university being broke, you, and I both know it's in good shape."

Berry shrugged and sipped the wonderfully mellow liquid. "Funding source conflict." She continued. "Big Drug Company. The CEO, who is also a major shareholder, is the father of one of my students."

"So drop the class. Get a replacement teacher."

"Not an option." She held his gaze. "Bernard wants someone else to take over the research. He's already found someone." She paused for a moment, "Someone who doesn't have my hang-ups about money and interference." Her brow creased; her eyes smouldered. "It's a bloody joke Nick.

This drug company is notorious for trying to buy favourable research outcomes. Jackson, the CEO, founded the company. He's the biggest shareholder. He and Bernard are good buddies."

"Go to the Vice-Chancellor."

"Sure Nick; brilliant idea. The fucking VC is Bernard's best friend. He's really going to support me. If I make a fuss and become a problem to him, I'll be out the door in a flash. Even though the VC is only acting in the position, he's an ambitious, hypocritical, arsehole who actually believes he owns this place." Berry told him about the Weizmann sponsorship. "So much for unbiased outcomes." Her eyes moistened. "I'm hurt at the moment, but I know by tomorrow I will be angry. Very, very angry. And then I might do something I will live to regret."

"I'm sorry Berry."

"Don't be. I'll be fine." She swallowed hard and dabbed her eyes with the table napkin. "Perhaps I need this Nick. Maybe it's time for me to move on too."

"Private stuff doesn't have the same kudos as an institution like this one. It's a young field, but it's full of promise." He covered her hand with his. "And it's not run by old stuff-shirt bastards. You can be your own person in the private sector. Shits like Bernard are driving more and more fine academics out Berry. Sandstone buildings, one-hundred-year-old rose gardens, and stained-glass windows don't cut it anymore. Excellent minds are leaving because the new generation of smart-people can see through the veils." Nick gave her a reassuring smile, "They are choosing independence over old school ties. They are not willing to trade their integrity for the dubious ethics Bernard Simpson and his cronies peddle in the name of tertiary education."

"You're right to leave Nick."

"And you?"

"I'd leave tomorrow if I could take my students with me."

"You can. Set up a private university."

"Fees Nick. Most of my students could never afford the fees I'd have to charge to be viable."

"Then find private companies to sponsor scholarships."

"It's a nice dream Nick." She moved her hand from his and smiled. "No. I need to look for another solution and if there isn't one, then maybe I will just have to get over it and stick to the knitting I know; teaching." Her eyes lit up suddenly. "There's more than one way to skin a cat Nick. I can work with my brightest students and help them do ground-

breaking research.” She paused, thinking of Billy and his cousin. “I have a few brilliant people in my classes.”

“I’m sure you do. In fact, I’m sure you were the one who identified their ability in the first place.” He looked serious. “Don’t waste your own brilliance Berry. Get out and follow your own dreams.”

“Problem is Nick. I’m not sure what dream I want to follow.” She shrugged. “What the hell, I might give up teaching all together. I could become an investigative journalist and do an exposé of this place. Tell the world what really goes on here.” She chuckled. “And I’d do a number on Bernard Simpson. I’m sure his former wife would love to tell her story to the media. It would make great TV viewing.”

“That’s a great idea. You could take it to the press”

Berry looked serious for a moment, but then a bright smile lit her face. “Or I could just kill the bastards.”

Nick laughed. “Sure, that’s also a possibility. Not necessarily, one I’d fully endorse. But, it’s certainly an option. Maybe you should only consider it as a last resort.” He shook his head and smiled affectionately. “Please don’t ask me to help you though. That would place a serious strain on our friendship. You know what a coward I am.”

“Thanks Nick. I knew I could always count on you to bail out when the going gets tough.”

“Tough is fine, but suicide just isn’t my thing.” He stood and pulled her to her feet. “Be careful Berry. The university is a powerful institution.”

## Chapter Four

Berry waited for the late arrivals to take their places before she spoke. “Right people let’s get on with it shall we?” She looked at Billy but directed her comments to the group. “If you’ve checked your emails you would have received your last assignment result. And my comments. Did anyone not get their work back?”

“I didn’t get mine.” Kyle Jackson said, leaning back in his chair and cupping his hands behind his head.

“Really Kyle? When did you last check your email account?”

“A couple of days ago.”

“I emailed the assignments last Friday Kyle. I sent it to your student account and to your Hotmail address. It should have arrived Kyle.”

Frustration pierced her voice. “Why don’t you use Trudy’s PC to check your accounts again.” She pointed to her assistant’s desk.

“Sure miss. I can do that.” Kyle stood. He wasn’t faking the attitude. He sauntered over to the desk, swung his body upwards, and sat on it. He punched the on-button with too much force and waited for the machine to boot up.

Sarah watched in silence, but Berry could tell from her body language that she had something on her mind. “Does anyone want to talk about their results?” Berry asked, making eye contact with Sarah. “Feel free to air any grievances you may have.” She paused. “I suspect some of you may think I have been less than generous with my marks.

Sarah looked embarrassed; her voice was soft but firm. "I think you have given me a good mark. Thank you."

"You deserved your mark Sarah. You worked hard for it. I was extremely impressed with your project. Well done." Berry said, turning to Billy. "And what about you Billy. Are you okay with your final mark?"

"Absolutely ma'am. It's much better than I expected."

Kyle returned to his chair and gave her a challenging look. "I think you did a lousy job marking my work." He stared at Berry, his face tinged with red from the anger he wasn't doing anything to hide.

"And why is that Kyle?"

"You've given me a B minus." His eyes narrowed, "And you've advised me I'm in danger of failing the course."

"Perhaps we should discuss this in private Kyle."

"No way. I want you to tell everyone why you've got it in for me. You always give me low grades." Kyle stood and folded his arms across his chest. He was a tall young man and he knew exactly how to use his body to intimidate people.

"I am very happy to discuss the matter with you Kyle." Berry said without hesitation. "I just think that it is better to talk about student progress privately. That way we can examine the situation in depth and identify the knowledge gaps." Berry spoke gently and sincerely. "We can work together to develop a few useful strategies that will help you to move forward again." Berry sighed heavily. "I have an obligation to formally advise students when they are in danger of failing to meet the course requirements. I left a number of messages

on your voice mail asking you to call in to the office, so we could discuss your progress.”

Berry’s eyes remained locked on Kyle’s. “You didn’t respond to any of my messages, so I had to email you the notice.” She turned to the other students. “I think we might have an early coffee break folks. Kyle and I need to talk. How about we meet back here in one hour.” The students started to pack up their things, relieved to escape the tutorial room.

“Let’s not.” Kyle yelled. “Let’s talk now. I want everyone to hear why you discriminate against me.” He lunged forward. “Explain to them why you hate my father so much that you want to hurt him by failing me?”

Berry remained seated and looked directly at him. “Kyle that is a serious accusation.”

“You’re dead right it is.”

“We need to discuss this alone.” She paused for a moment and then added. “And then perhaps you need to lodge a formal complaint against me with the Dean of Students.” Berry stood and faced the group. “I’m sorry but I will have to cancel today’s tutorial. I will schedule a replacement session as soon as possible.” The students started for the door. Berry turned to Kyle. “Mr Jackson, please remain here. We need to have a serious discussion.”

It was dark when Berry finally left the office and walked to the staff car park. Her vehicle was on level six; two floors below the roof. She sighed as she exited the elevator and realised the parking level lights were out. The emergency lamps cast an eerie pale glow across the bays. She looked towards her vehicle and noticed a large male

leaning against the driver's door of her old model Lexus. It was difficult to see his features in the poor light, but something told her he wasn't a staff member. She couldn't think of any of her co-workers who could pass for a wrestler and carried an iron bar around with them.

Berry gripped the handle of her briefcase and spun around. She raced back to the elevator, which was still standing at level six. She punched the door opener; her throat muscles tightened. and breathing was difficult.

The doors opened instantly and once inside she punched the close button with her fist. The man sprang towards her, but the thick aluminium panels snapped shut before he could grab them. Berry applied her full force to the close button to stop the doors from being re-opened from the outside. She punched level one with her left hand and gave thanks to a God she didn't really believe in.

The elevator moved effortlessly downwards. When it stopped again, she jammed her briefcase hard against the door frames to hold them open and to break the laser beam. She raced into the foyer, dragged a visitor's chair into the elevator, and wedged it between the two open doors. Satisfied she had decommissioned the unit she grabbed her case and sprinted along the hallway.

Berry knew the building like the back of her hand, so she didn't have to waste time getting her bearings. She raced up a flight of stairs, turned into another corridor and wrenched open an external door that led to a suspended walkway. It connected the main administration building to the staff offices. She used her swipe card to enter.

Berry went straight into the common room and

sighed with relief when she saw the standby light on the coffee machine was glowing. She poured herself a cup of the strong liquid and sipped it slowly while she assessed the situation.

Calmed by the coffee and the familiar surroundings she picked up the staff phone and called Security. They answered on the third ring. She smiled when she heard Hank's loud voice on the line.

"Hi Hank. It's Berry Eliot here."

"Hi Doctor Eliot. You're working late. Is there a problem?"

"No. Not really. I was just in the parking station and noticed a strange person wandering around. I think he's a building contractor or something. I thought I'd let you know just in case he's not authorised to be on the grounds."

"We don't have any contractors working here at present Doctor. All the new development projects were wound up before the newsemester started."

"Oh really? Well then you might want to check it out."

"I'll go over there now. Thanks for letting me know. We can't have strangers wandering around without proper authorisation." Hank said.

"We had a spate of break-ins during the summer vacation and the police said a professional gang was doing over all the large universities and colleges in the region."

"Well, I'll leave it with you Hank." She said casually.  
"I'll probably see you when I go back to get my car."

"If you're going home now, I'll walk over with you."

"Great. I'll meet you on the path outside the staff

building.” Berry said, “I’ll be there in five.” She hung up the phone and drained the coffee mug. Having Hank as an escort made her finally relax.

## Chapter Five

“Berry there’s a Daniel Jackson on line one for you. Shall I put him through?” Berry’s assistant Trudy called through the intercom.

“Sure Trudy. I’ve been expecting a call from him.”

“So, you do know him? He said he wasn’t sure you would.”

“I don’t actually know him, but I certainly know of him. Put him through, I’m just in the mood to talk with the illustrious Mr Jackson.” Berry sat back in her chair and inhaled sharply. “Berry Eliot.” She said into the phone.

“Doctor Eliot, this is Daniel Jackson.” He paused to give her time to be impressed by the name. “Kyle Jackson’s father.”

“Mr Jackson. How may I help?”

“I’d like to talk to you about Kyle’s progress. I was hoping you would agree to have dinner with me one evening this week.”

“Unfortunately having dinner with a student’s parent is against university policy sir. All academic staff are required to maintain an arms-length relationship with students and their families.” Berry said. “I’m surprised you don’t already know this.”

“I am aware of the policy doctor. However, as I

would like to discuss another matter with you, I just thought we could talk over a nice dinner. And we could also discuss Kyle's progress."

"I'm sorry Mr Jackson. It's out of the question. I'm happy to arrange a meeting in my office. Tomorrow at one-thirty would be good for me. If you're free then."

"Let's make it tomorrow, then. It is just a shame I won't have the pleasure of sharing a fine meal with you." There was a slight pause. "Perhaps another time."

"Certainly not while Kyle is a student at the university Mr Jackson. Thank you for the invitation just the same." She said sincerely. "I will see you at one-thirty tomorrow sir."

"I'll look forward to it."

"Good-bye Mr Jackson."

"Good-bye Doctor Eliot."

Berry replaced the handset in its cradle. "I can't wait Mr Jackson." She said aloud. "What gave you the idea that I could be bought off with a fancy dinner and an overpriced bottle of wine? Bad move Mr Jackson. Bad move indeed."

Shortly after her phone rang again. "Bernard. What a surprise. What's happening over there in the sandstone halls of fame?"

"Nothing changes much here Berry. It's a predictable environment on this side of the rose garden. It makes life a little easier to manage, even though some people may consider it somewhat dull."

“Some people like me you mean?”

“Now, young woman don’t go jumping to conclusions. I was not inferring you would find life over here dull. Quite the contrary. I suspect you would soon have us all dancing in the hallways.”

“So, Bernard, what’s really on your mind? Cut with the chit-chat and get to the point. I’m sure you’ve got as much work to get through as I do, so don’t waste your time with the comedy routine. It’s not your style.”

“Some people could easily be offended by your manner Berry. People who don’t know and understand you, could easily confuse your upfront attitude with rudeness.”

“People like Daniel Jackson?”

“Daniel Jackson. I’m not sure about him. Perhaps he could work you out without too much trouble. He has a son. I am sure he knows how the modern world is put together.”

“Bernard are you going to tell me why you called. I’m guessing it has something to do with Daniel Jackson. I just had a call from him.”

“So, Daniel has phoned you?”

“A few minutes ago.”

“I hope you were nice to him.”

“Nice? No, I wasn’t particularly nice to him, but I was professional.” Berry felt her anger rising. “So, what’s all this about?”

“Daniel phoned me at lunchtime. It seems Kyle is not doing well in your class. Is that true?”

“Yes, it is true Bernard. I emailed him an *In Danger of Failing* notice. That’s standard practice. I had a

meeting with him this afternoon to discuss ways for him to get on top of his overdue assignments, and to listen to all the lectures he should have already downloaded.”

“He’s a good lad Berry.”

“He’s a bad student Bernard.”

“His family always pays his fees upfront.”

“So?”

“So, they are extremely valuable to us.”

“More valuable than academic integrity?”

“Academic integrity is not being discussed here.” Bernard paused. “However, losing the support of a very influential family is.”

“Let’s not go there again Bernard. You and I have already had this conversation. I am prepared to work with this student to find ways to help him get on top of his problems. I’d do that for any student who is falling behind. I don’t care if they’re from a wealth family or they live in a trailer park. But I am not prepared to give anyone marks they don’t earn.” Her frustration was reflected in her tone.

“Kyle Jackson is a lazy student. He thinks his father can buy him a degree. He spends more time in the university bar than he does in the lecture halls. He never submits assignments by the due dates. He expects preferential treatment.” Berry paused for a moment to consider her words carefully. “He thinks his father’s wealth gives him an advantage.” She sighed heavily. “I’m sorry Bernard, but I can’t do anything to get him over the line. He must do that himself with hard work.”

“You are being too rigid on this Berry. You could give him a helping hand.”

"I will give him a hand. I'll give him an extension on all his overdue assignments, and I will show him how he can improve his work and study habits, but I will not do his assignments for him. And I will not give him marks he hasn't earned." She waited for Simpson to respond.

"You should at least review all the work he has already submitted. I'm sure if you look hard you will be able to award him a few additional marks."

"Bernard for God's sake. Poor quality essays and late lodgements will always mean low marks. If Kyle was a bloody genius, and he managed to score ninety-five percent for every project, late lodgement penalties would wipe out at least half of his final mark. Are you telling me to disregard the late lodgement penalties?" Berry demanded.

"I'm suggesting you make an exception for the past work. I know Kyle will get all his work in on time from now on."

"And how do you know this Bernard?" "His father has given me his assurance." Berry was seething. She had trouble speaking. "So, you and Daniel Jackson have been talking." Her voice was a notch higher than normal. "Did you check Kyle's progress status Bernard?" She snapped. "If you did, you'd have a pretty good idea of how bad his work is. Did you read the assignment lodgement reports?"

"I have looked at Kyle's report and I completely understand why you are reluctant to modify his results."

Berry cut him off. "Modify them?" She screamed. "You can't be serious. Please tell me this is a joke Bernard. An elaborate test to see if I would succumb to academic fraud."

"It is not a joke Berry. I want you to review Kyle

Jackson's marks."

"Well then Bernard you need to send me a formal instruction that spells out exactly what it is that you want me to do. When I get it, I'll pull together a re-mark panel and they can go over all his work." Berry paused a moment. "Send the instruction Bernard. And you can tell your friend I don't give a shit who the hell he is. I am not going to cheat for him or his bloody son."

"Calm down Berry."

"I won't calm down Bernard. You may not care if I commit fraud to save Kyle's sorry arse. But I sure as hell do.

Think about it Bernard. The university has a penalty system for a damn good reason. How can you negate that? Students who submit their work late without requesting a formal extension, deserve to lose marks." She said.

"Most students get their work in on time. They give up their social time. They pull all-nighters. And they make sacrifices. What gives you right to trivialise their efforts? They deserve to be rewarded for taking their degree seriously.

How dare you suggest a student, who treats the whole thing as a game, be rewarded for trying to gain an advantage he doesn't deserve."

Moisture formed on Berry's eyelids. "No way is it going to happen Bernard. I believe students deserve to know that hard work does pay off." She paused and then added softly. "It's our job to show good students their hard work will be rewarded." Berry closed her eyes tightly and counted to five.

"Kyle Jackson's work is consistently below an acceptable standard. I've had to interview him twice about plagiarising assignment content. Three of his assignments were plucked straight off

a dodgy Internet site.”

Berry struggled to suppress a second scream. “Kyle Jackson is a cheat, Bernard. He is a disgrace to his family. If you want to do them a favour, you’ll tell them the truth about their darling son. Get them to sort him out before it’s too late.” She didn’t wait for him to reply. She hung up the phone, slumped forward and put her head on the desk and gave up on suppressing the scream.