

Prologue

When Shaun Reid, CEO of The Energy Co, summoned all employees to the boardroom just before close of business on Friday afternoon, neither Debra Fast nor Quinn Paladino had any idea that their worst nightmare and their greatest wish (respectively) were about to come true.

Like everyone else in the building they'd been counting down the hours until the weekend officially began and the last thing anyone wanted was to listen to Shaun wax lyrical about the qualities of the new guy.

Deb had a hot date to look forward to and Quinn had her parents visiting from South Australia. How the tables had turned—Quinn spending Friday night with her family and Deb out on the town!

She was grinning to herself when Quinn popped her head over the top of her cubicle at 4.45 pm.

'It's time,' her friend announced, tapping her smart watch.

Deb groaned as she closed the spreadsheet she'd been working on. 'Why couldn't this have waited until Monday?'

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Quinn shrugged. ‘That’s one of the many mysteries of the world. Along with why Shaun has employed yet another man to fill the director of sales position. So much for gender quotas.’

‘So, you think the rumour’s true?’ Deb asked—both she and Quinn clearly disheartened by the thought.

‘Of that I have no doubt.’ Quinn threw a hand in the air as if she were throwing in the towel. ‘But you know Shaun’s a man’s man. Powerful women terrify him. Come on, the sooner we get to the boardroom, the sooner it will be over.’

‘Just got to finish one thing and I’ll be there.’

‘I’ll go save you a seat,’ Quinn promised.

People were already crammed into the room by the time Deb arrived a few minutes later. The massive oak table that usually took pride of place in the middle had been pushed to the front, extra chairs had been brought in and were now lined up in rows like a classroom, but there weren’t enough seats for everyone. She wouldn’t mind standing at the back near the door to make escaping hastily once the meeting finished easier, but as promised Quinn was guarding a vacant chair beside her.

‘Over here!’ she yelled, waving her hands like they were at some kind of football match.

Deb apologised as she squeezed past Mikael from legal and Samira from customer service and made her way to Quinn.

‘Where’s Shaun?’ called someone from the back. It sounded like No Mates Nate. ‘Does he think we have all night?’

Murmurs of agreed disgruntlement echoed around the room as Quinn’s phone pinged with an incoming text. She glanced at the screen then to Deb. ‘Mam and Dad have landed. Hope this doesn’t take long cos I wanted to be home to meet them.’

Before Deb could reply, the door at the front—the one that came direct from Shaun’s office—opened and a hush fell over the room as everyone’s heads swivelled towards it.

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‘Oh my God,’ whispered Quinn, her jaw dropping as she gazed at the tall, broad-shouldered man who entered with Shaun.

Her whole face lit up and Deb immediately understood why. The new director of sales was without a doubt one of the best-looking men she’d ever laid eyes on; the problem was this wasn’t the first time she’d seen him.

As the few other single employees—women and a couple of men—perked up around her, a chill snaked through Deb’s body. Her heart thumping, she lowered her head and slid as low as possible in her chair.

‘Good afternoon,’ began Shaun, his smile so cheesy his artificially white teeth were in danger of blinding them all. ‘I’d like to thank you all for coming to welcome our newest member of The Energy Co family, Oscar Darke.’

People started to applaud but every single cell in Deb’s body froze. Despite the addition of beard and glasses, there was no longer any room for doubt.

‘Oscar comes to us with an impressive resume of experience and lots of innovative ideas. I’ve asked him to say a few words, tell us a bit about himself and his vision for the future of the sales department.’

‘Thank you, thank you.’ Oscar clapped Shaun on the shoulder as he took his place, needing to stoop a little to talk into the mic that had been set up to add to the fanfare. ‘I have to say I’m a little overwhelmed by such a warm welcome. I know you’re probably all itching to hit the pub for happy hour so I’ll try to make this snappy.’

With each smarmy sentence Oscar uttered, bile rose in her throat.

She silently willed him to stop talking so she and Quinn could escape without making a scene. Maybe Quinn would have some idea what Deb should do.

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'I'm really looking forward to getting to know you all over the coming weeks,' he concluded. 'Have a great weekend.'

'Holy smokes,' Quinn hissed, leaning towards Deb and echoing her thoughts as everyone else stood. 'It's him!'

'What?' The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. How could Quinn possibly know? And then she realised ... her friend's expression was one of glee, not horror.

'He's The One! I'm going to go introduce myself. Coming?'

Hell no!

Somehow, she swallowed those words.

'Are you okay?' Quinn asked, frowning slightly.

'Actually ...' Deb put a hand on her stomach. 'I'm feeling a little queasy. I've got to get out of here.'

'Are you going to be sick? Do you want me to come with you?'

Deb shook her head. 'I'll be fine. I just need some fresh air.'

Without another word, she hightailed it to the elevators, almost tripping in her rush to get away. *Thank God it's the weekend.* She would need every second of the next forty-eight hours to work out how she was going to handle this, because one thing was certain.

She could not work in the same office as that man.

Debra

Three months earlier

Deb didn't know who was more nervous as she turned into the car park at Smythes Ladies College—her daughter or herself. Even though changing schools had been Ramona's choice this time, it was always nerve-racking starting at a new place, trying to make new friends, getting to know new teachers.

'What are you doing?' shrieked Ramona.

Clearly, Deb *wasn't* the only one on edge. 'What does it look like I'm doing?'

'No. No. No!' Ramona pointed ahead to where a row of SUVs that looked like they were fresh from the car dealership were cruising through the Kiss and Drive. 'Drop me off there.'

'But I thought I'd come in with you. Help you find the right classroom.'

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‘*Mum.*’ Ramona groaned and rolled her eyes as if Deb had just suggested she wear a clown costume to school. ‘I’m not in kindergarten. I don’t need you to hold my hand anymore.’

‘I know but ...’ Trying not to show her hurt, Deb looked anxiously towards the school’s vast entrance. Surrounded by immaculate gardens, the main building with its sandstone walls, steep-sloping roofs and arched windows, looked like something out of Harry Potter—a stark difference from the local Catholic high Ramona used to go to. What if she got lost?

‘Mum, *please,*’ Ramona implored. ‘I’ll be fine.’

‘Okay. If you’re sure.’

As Deb relented and slowed her ancient Toyota Corolla in the Kiss and Drive, Ramona pulled down the visor and checked herself one last time in the mirror. Officially, make-up was forbidden at school, but when Deb had called her out for wearing foundation, blush, mascara and tinted lipstick, Ramona had told her to take a chill pill—that everyone did it and it was hardly visible anyway. Deb hoped she was right because the last thing either of them wanted was Ramona getting in trouble on her first day. Until this summer, she’d never even bothered with make-up.

‘Let me stop the car before you get out,’ Deb said as Ramona reached for the door. ‘Having to call an ambulance on your first day would not for a good start make.’

She was trying to be funny, but Ramona didn’t laugh. ‘Thanks for the ride,’ she said, grabbing her bag from the floor and opening the door in one fell swoop.

‘Forgotten something?’ Deb called.

‘What?!’

Deb leaned towards the passenger side and tapped her cheek.

Ramona shook her head. ‘Sorry. No time. Wouldn’t want to be late.’

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Deb jolted as the door slammed and the sound reverberated around the cabin. She watched as Ramona hitched her brand spanking new SLC school bag up her shoulder and joined the hordes of girls—all dressed identically in the uniform of blue-plaid summer pinafore, white short-sleeved shirts underneath and black shoes with white socks—swarming up the steps.

What had happened to her little girl this summer? Make-up, slamming car doors, no kisses—it was like someone had snatched her sweet daughter and replaced her with a stranger.

She jolted as a horn sounded behind her and glanced in her rear-view mirror to see a long line of fancy cars waiting to pull in behind her. Blinking back stupid tears, Deb pulled out of the school grounds and rejoined the morning rush hour traffic. It went against every bone in her body to leave her precious daughter alone on her first day, which was why she'd offered to take her. She didn't normally drive to work but thought Ramona would appreciate not having to navigate public transport.

Apparently not.

Her car came almost to a standstill in the traffic on New South Head Road and she switched on the radio to try and drown out her thoughts. The office wasn't far as the crow flies from SLC but at this time of the day she'd be lucky if she made it in less than half an hour. *And* she'd have to pay an exorbitant amount for parking.

By the time she arrived at the parking tower down the road from her building, she was in danger of being late. She made a mad dash down the street and was almost at the elevator when she remembered it was her turn to buy morning coffee.

'Dammit,' she muttered as she rushed to the café next door and joined the long queue.

'Double-shot skim latte and an almond cappuccino, please,' she asked when she finally made it to the front.

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‘Name?’ barked the guy behind the till.

As if I don’t tell you every second day. ‘Debra.’

While she waited, she shot off a quick text to Ramona: *Hope everything going well, and the girls are nice. Can’t wait to hear about your day tonight. Love you.* She knew how bitchy girls could sometimes be—especially to a kid from the western suburbs who could only afford to be at the elite school because she’d scored a scholarship. If it wasn’t for the fashion program Ramona had been desperate to join, no way Deb would have endorsed this move.

Collecting the coffees, she headed up to the thirteenth floor in the painfully slow elevator, smiling at Lexi, the receptionist, as she entered. ‘How’s that bump of yours going?’

Lexi rested her hands on her burgeoning stomach. ‘Giving me grief. And he kicks so much at night, I’m barely getting any sleep.’

Deb offered her sympathies and then continued, not wanting to linger long enough to get into proper conversation. As much as she liked Lexi, it got boring answering phones and directing traffic, so sometimes the receptionist resorted to gossip to pass the time.

‘Hi, morning, hello,’ she called to various people as she walked towards the finance department, detouring via digital marketing on her way.

‘Quinn not in yet?’ she asked Toby and Linc.

The two men in their early twenties, who both wore skinny jeans, black Converse and almost exactly the same shirts, shook their heads, not even looking up from their phones.

‘She had a date last night. Maybe she finally hooked up with someone,’ said Linc, exchanging a smirk with Toby. This was the only department where the employees didn’t even bother trying to be surreptitious when on their mobiles in office hours.

Ignoring this remark, Deb put the almond cappuccino down on Quinn’s desk. It was a miracle she could find a place among the clutter,

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which included make-up, bright-coloured hair accessories, a framed photo of her large family, tiny plush toys and other trinkets. The state of her desk was worse than Ramona's bedroom and that was saying something, but somehow Quinn managed to do her job, and do it well.

'See you later, boys,' she said as she left.

Neither of them replied.

There was a heated discussion happening in the kitchen between Sally, the NSW sales manager, and Steve from IT—probably The Mug Thief had struck again—but Deb kept her head down and continued to the payroll department. Her colleagues, Brendan, Garry and Ian—all middle-aged, semi-balding, married men—chorused a cheerful 'good morning' despite already being ensconced in spreadsheets.

Setting her latte on her desk, Deb slumped into her swivel chair. She couldn't stop wondering about Ramona—how her day was going, whether she'd found her first class okay, what the teachers were like, if the other students were being welcoming. Why didn't high schools have those apps where you could log in and watch your child through a camera? Lexi was constantly on her phone watching what her eighteen-month-old twins were getting up to in the day-care centre downstairs.

Then again, if SLC had such a thing, Deb would probably never get any work done. Speaking of ... She switched on the computer and began going through her emails. About half an hour later, one popped up from Quinn.

Never have I felt more in dire need of caffeine. I owe you my life!!!

PS. How was Ramona this morning? Nervous?

Deb chuckled at Quinn's dramatic exclamation as she dipped into her handbag to grab her mobile. She sent the photo Ramona had reluctantly allowed her to take to Quinn.

RACHAEL JOHNS

Why the even-more-than-usual need for coffee? Big night?

Did you get lucky?

PS. No idea re Ramona, she barely said two words to me.

Sent photo to your phone.

Lucky? Lucky?! Simon was lucky I didn't stab him in the eye with my chopstick before main course.

PS. OMG Ramona looks—ARGH—are you sure that's really your daughter? She may as well be wearing a straitjacket. I thought this school was supposed to be fashionable?!?!?

Smiling, Deb took a sip of her latte. When not in school uniform, Ramona favoured vintage clothing, and would spend hours scouring second-hand shops. In the last couple of years, she'd even started making clothes herself, learning everything from YouTube videos. She had a style of her own and a flair for making old stuff look cool that impressed Deb whose wardrobe was almost entirely shades of black, something which both Ramona and Quinn berated her for on a regular basis.

What happened with Simon? I thought he sounded promising.

PS. It's the program she's in not the school that's fashionable. In terms of uniform, SLC is stuck in the dark ages—or so Ramona told me when we spent an exorbitant amount buying it.

That daughter of yours is a smart chicken.

Regarding, Simon. Rendezvous? Five minutes, usual spot!

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It's a date.

Deb glanced at the time on her computer screen and decided to take an early break. The way she was feeling right now, it wasn't like she was going to achieve much anyway. Listening to Quinn share antics of her latest Tinder date—or was it Bumble or Hinge?—would hopefully take her mind off Ramona.