

Hitch Hikers

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

On a warm, late summer day, the tall, green-clothed trees surrounding the beautiful old Victorian house were buzzing with the sound of male cicadas frantically calling females, while inside, all was quiet. The ponderous ticking of the grandfather clock in the marble-tiled entry hall was by far the loudest noise.

That was until Janice loudly and very forcibly said, 'Fuck it!' as she once again cursed her aching wrists and tried to ease the stiffness caused by the numerous, week-old bruises adorning her arms and shoulders. She'd just discovered that typing on her computer was a lot more difficult than she'd imagined, but despite the waves of despair which washed through her with depressing regularity, she was determined to finally finish setting down a dispassionate record of the violence she'd endured from her husband over the past eighteen months.

She'd started this task several times, but her publicly charming and quietly-spoken husband, Luke Emery, always managed to discover her records and to gleefully delete them. She'd then cop another savage beating which he made sure left few visible marks, but usually managed to confine her to bed for a day or two at a time.

One smart thing she did was to always take photos of the injuries with her mobile phone. Either she took them herself or got Jill, their pretty 22-year-old housekeeper to do it.

Despite the profound depths of her own predicament, her greatest concern was for the safety of her beautiful twin girls, soon to turn 19. By good luck or perhaps due to Luke's intentions, they saw none of his insane rages, although Janice felt, with a prickle of dread, that the day was fast approaching. The girls thought the sun shone out his fundamental orifice, and for some strange reason, he tried hard to maintain that delusion. So, for their sake alone, Janice tried to conceal her injuries as best she could, assisted by the hopelessly intimidated Jill.

However, with Luke's rages becoming more frequent and severe, Janice sensed that he was about to lose it completely, so before then, she wanted the girls, Jill and herself away from this man who'd become a raving lunatic.

Although Janice had a comfortable private income, courtesy of a doting grandfather, her husband was a well-connected, multi-millionaire. He'd made the bulk of his fortune in the earth-moving business, but had lately branched out into property development.

He bought up old inner-city industrial sites and warehouses at suspiciously low prices, from near-bankrupt owners, then converted them to upmarket, trendy housing. The enterprise did extremely well, with an endless supply of yuppies anxious to move in from the leafy and tranquil outer suburbs, to bury themselves in the joyless concrete canyons of CBD Melbourne.

Unfortunately, both her accountancy training and gossip in the local town, told her that Luke's income from these projects fell well short of his very extravagant outgoings.

She shared her concerns about possible financial discrepancies with her father, a well-respected Melbourne barrister, to whom she'd become much closer since her mother had died eight years ago. So far, she thought she'd managed to hide Luke's violence from him.

Her father confirmed the rumours about Luke's dodgy dealings, where stubborn building owners suffered painful midnight visits from Luke's bully boys. Additionally, there were hints of huge kickbacks to politicians and local council planning department heads. However, Dad correctly pointed out the need for Janice to find some hard proof of wrongdoing, before trying to make a case against her lunatic husband. Otherwise, it was just her word against the power of Luke's shady connections with nearly everyone in high places!

Janice had a small, pretty room on the ground floor, where she kept her computer and large collection of books, with a lovely view over the extensive gardens and expensively-manicured lawns. In happier times, it had been one of her favourite pleasures to curl up in a comfortable chair and read, with the beautifully-tended gardens to gaze at occasionally.

These days, she was too stiff to curl up anything bigger than her little finger, and by his Lordship's decree, her door had to remain open all the time. Conversely, Luke's private study, just two rooms away, was always locked with a thumbprint-operated deadlock, whether occupied or not.

This particular day, with the monster in residence, the silence was forcefully broken by a hammering on the front door which was next to Luke's study, and as usual, Jill answered the imperious summons.

Janice heard the door open, and immediately a loud, aggressive male voice demanded to see Luke.

'Mr Luke is busy, sir', Janice heard Jill's frightened tone, 'he can't be disturbed.'

'I'll bloody well disturb him,' the voice yelled, 'get the stupid fucker out here now. We've got things to discuss!'

Before Jill had a chance to reply, Luke had ripped his door open and stormed out, instantly in a towering rage.

'What the fuck's going on?' he demanded loudly, glaring at a terrified Jill and the belligerent visitor in turn, 'What part of 'I'm busy' don't you fuck-wits understand?'

Jill started stammering an apology, but was violently swept aside by Luke's arm as he charged through the front door, roughly shoving his visitor out in front of him. Just before the massive iron-banded, oak door crashed closed, Janice heard him yelling, 'How dare you come to my house, you ignorant prick! I've told everyone there's never to be any.....'

Janice quickly walked up the hall, gave a trembling Jill a quick hug of comfort and sent her back to what she had been doing. Shaking her head at yet another example of her husband's uncontrollable temper and decidedly odd business dealings, she was walking slowly back to her sitting room, when she noticed Luke's study door was open. With a quick look over her shoulder and a mental coin-toss, she stepped inside and looked around, however nothing seemed out of the ordinary, until her gaze locked onto his computer, still running with a letter displayed on the screen.

With a flash of inspiration and an unfamiliar surge of daring, she darted back to her room, grabbed a portable HDD from her drawer, and returned to Luke's study. She glanced out the window and was reassured to see the two of them, still shouting and poking each other in the chest. With trembling hands, she plugged the drive into a spare USB port, then started a copy of all the desktop folders and documents, including a copy of the main Documents folder itself.

Even with the super-fast USB3 format, it seemed to take a terrifyingly long time to copy everything, although she kept a close watch on the continuing drama out front, ready to stop the process and run if it came to a premature conclusion.

She fought an almost overwhelming desire to pee, at the thought of Luke's reaction if he caught her in here, let alone copying his private files. A surge of panic almost pushed her to the verge of aborting the copy run, when finally, a soft chime announced completion, so she hastily ejected the drive, restored the desktop to as-found condition and left the room.

She knew Luke would be less than happy when he came back inside, and even more so when he found he'd left his study door unsecured. However, as he hadn't seen her

when he charged out of his office, she thought she might get away with pretending to have been absent all the time by going rowing on the river.

An hour later, pleasantly sweaty, and with some of her muscular pains in temporary abeyance, she returned, and went to her room to shower and change.

Which was where Luke found her.

What followed was the mother of all beatings, where he didn't bother to give her a chance to confirm or deny any wrongdoing – instead, he blamed her for the bloke who came unannounced to the door, as well as for somehow making him forget to lock his study door. As usual, he became aroused during the beating and as he got ready to have sex with her, she kicked out and landed a perfect blow right on his nuts.

Once he had recovered his breath, and un-curled himself from a foetal position on the floor, he limped away, threatening all sorts of retaliation, leaving her naked and bleeding on the floor of her bathroom. They'd been living in separate bedrooms for some time and hadn't had consensual sex for years, so his fumbling, ineffectual attempts at penetration had become the final act in the more severe beatings.

On this occasion, once Luke had retreated to his study with several packs of frozen peas, Jill took more photos of Janice's injuries, then helped clean her up before the girls came home. Together, they concocted a story about tripping over the vacuum cleaner and falling downstairs.

That night, as she lay in bed, too sore to sleep, she had a disturbing thought. *'When Luke was beating her up, why was he so upset about the stranger turning up at the door? It would've been more logical if he'd asked whether she'd been in his study.'*

Over the next few days, they had no contact of any sort, with Luke out of the house at odd hours, presumably busy with work. That gave her time to partially recover and plan for her and the girls' escape. Screwing up her courage, she finally told the incredulous girls the whole sordid story and gratefully accepted their unqualified expressions of support. She activated her master plan when Luke told Jill he'd be away for the day on business. Firstly withdrawing a large bundle of cash from her bank account, then with packed bags, she had Jill drive them to the train station for stage one of their disappearing act.

She advised Jill to take her car and do the same, although she knew the girl wouldn't take that advice.

That evening, when he returned from work, Luke's meltdown was of truly epic proportions! From some unrewarded sense of loyalty, Jill hadn't left, so she became the new number one target. Luke hadn't really bashed her before, but this time she copped the full treatment.

He dished out what he would have lavished on Janice, including ripping off all her clothes and attempting to have sex with her. That part, at least, she found to be a bit of a joke as he proved to be so short-changed in the erection department, she could barely even feel him, let alone be hurt by his grunting efforts! It was his weight on her and the gusts of foul breath washing over her face which were much worse than the little she could feel further down. The beatings were a totally different matter however, as Luke was a master at that, and she was thankful that he didn't break any bones.

After letting her clean herself up, he secured her hands with handcuffs, then tied a short rope to the linking chain, before leading her, still naked, after him wherever he went. When he stopped in one place for a while, he'd tie the rope to any handy, heavy piece of furniture, leaving her to kneel or sit awkwardly on the floor.

The Offer

She was also present when, later that evening, Luke received a phone call. It came just after he'd arranged for his foreman, Jimmy Fitzroy, to make a late-night visit to the daughter and her husband of the owner of a derelict building in the old docks area. Luke had been trying to buy the place for a pittance, but the old guy just wanted a fair price for his property – a concept Luke found quite ridiculous.

Luke's advice to Jimmy that they should wear condoms this time, fell on deaf ears!

Luke was calculating what this latest acquisition would do to his bank account, when the phone rang.

'Hello? Who's this?'

'Mr Emery, I presume?'

'Speak up, for Christ's sake! You sound like Darth Vader! Ha, Ha. What've you got a cold or something?'

'Never mind what I've got, Mr Emery. It's what you've got which is the subject of this call. Can you confirm you have two blonde, 18-year-old daughters?'

'I guess that's common knowledge, so yes, I have... but what's the age and hair-colour of my daughters got to do with you?'

'Listen carefully, Mr Emery. I have a proposition which could be worth a lot of money to you.'

That grabbed Luke's attention like nothing else.

'Okay, but go slow! You're still very hard to understand and I don't have one of those robot translator things. Ha, ha!'

'Very droll, Mr Emery. Now pay attention. I represent a gentleman who resides in another part of the world and is offering a large sum of money for two blonde, Caucasian, virgin females, under the age of 20. He has seen photos of two such girls on your, ah... group's website, and wishes to know if these girls meet his specification and can be made available for a suitable price.'

'Holy crap! Are you offering to buy my daughters?'

'Not at all, Mr Emery. I am merely acting as the agent. It is my client who is offering to do just that.'

Luke was quiet for a minute, thoughts whirling around his head. It was one thing to trade nude photos of his daughters with like-minded deviates, but a huge step up to actually selling the girls. Where would he find another pair like them? Blonde, beautiful and happy to be photographed naked. Even with all his resources, it would be a difficult search.

Naturally, the concept of being concerned for the safety and future of his offspring didn't enter Luke's calculations for one moment. However, the dangled prospect of converting the girls into some serious money was of far greater interest. And so the negotiations began.

'Just how seriously are we talking here, Mr Vader? I mean – they are my daughters.'

'From what I hear, Mr Emery, you couldn't care less about them, except as a continuing source of naked photos for a bunch of twisted old men to masturbate over!'

Luke made a show of spluttering indignantly, 'Listen you fucking robot. You watch what you say!'

The cultured, yet distorted voice suddenly took on a hard edge. *'No! You watch what **you** say, Mr Emery. You're the one who needs the money, since you are teetering on the verge of a bankruptcy abyss. In this instance, you are simply the most convenient source of these items, but by no means the only source. So be very careful what you say, or the offer of all that lovely money will disappear like a drop of water in the desert!'*

That shut Luke up immediately. 'Okay! Okay! Don't get your knickers in a twist! Let's suppose for the moment that I'm interested. What's the deal?'

'That's better. Upon production of the two girls, in perfect health, with no marks or bruises, and with their virginity physically intact, at a place and time to be advised, I am authorised to offer the sum of one million US dollars. Each!

The money will be transferred to your bank account upon hand-over of the items and medical verification that they meet the required specifications.'

Luke thought quickly. Two million US translated to about \$2.8 Australian and would keep the banks off his back for a while longer.

'Very well. That's agreeable. But when do you need them?'

'I will contact you shortly, once I've spoken with my client, but expect my call within 10 days.'

'Right! Ah... look. The ah... items have gone away for a few days.'

'I don't see a problem, Mr Emery, provided you produce the items within the ten-day time frame I suggested. Will that be an issue?'

'Ah...no. No, I'm sure that'll be fine. They'll be ready.'

'Excellent, Mr Emery. I'd like to say it's been a pleasure doing business with you, despite my natural dislike of persons of your peculiar persuasion. Still, business is business, as the saying goes and we can't always choose.'

There was a definite 'click' as the Darth Vader voice hung up, leaving Luke sitting slightly stunned, as the import of the deal sunk in. There was still no remorse over the morality of the 'deal', just that a near three-million-dollar payday was sufficiently rare in Luke's world to warrant serious thought.

Now he just had to get the long-legged, blonde moneybags back from wherever that stupid bitch Janice had dragged them off to. His next action was to hit a speed dial number on his phone.

'Jimmy. I've got a job for you.'

'...Yes, I know you're on a job. This is different.'

'...I don't care what time of night it is. Don't argue with me, you fucking idiot! Who pays your outrageous salary? And who makes sure you've always got plenty of girls – and the right sort of boys as well? Don't you forget it because I won't.'

'...Okay. That's better. Now, I want you to put a team together and find my family.'

'...No, of course they're not here! Would I be asking you to find them if they were here? Christ! What a moron. Get your thumb outta your bum and zip your fly! You've got work to do.'

With that, Luke passed on details of Janice and the girls' disappearance and authorised spending as required to find them.

CHAPTER 1...Monday pm...Eden...Harry

Around 16:00 Monday afternoon, the summer sun was just starting to lose its heat as I wandered up from the wharf where I'd tied my dinghy, a Rigid Inflatable Boat, or RIB. I stopped at the newsagent to buy a paper, and chatted briefly with the owner, a very pleasant, friendly lady who always asked after my cat, Jasper. She was quite attractive as well as friendly, so any time with her was good value. However, with more customers lining up, I reluctantly left, stepping just next door to the small bar and grill. Most afternoons, I met with Johnny, the boat refueller and Harbour Master for a beer or two. I also ate there most days, since while I quite enjoyed cooking, it was a pain doing it just for myself. The only other alternative was a hike up the steep hill into town to the Fisherman's Club, although the quality of the feed and the friendly, happy staff made it worth the walk.

I'd been in Eden for four weeks now, taking my time about cleaning up my 60ft catamaran, *Firebird*, as well as resting myself and Jasper, my 25kg, black, Chausie/jungle cat cross. We'd taken a battering from an east-coast low which had suddenly developed off the coast, and which gave the parachute anchor a good work-out in the 30 to 40ft seas whipped up by 50 to 60kt winds. The boat didn't sustain any real damage, just a few annoying leaks in the deckhouse joints where they shouldn't, and a big crack in the rear deck hardtop by something very heavy landing on it.

That something had long disappeared by the time I'd carefully ventured out into the spray-lashed cockpit, to find that it had broken a solar panel, left a smear of blood and some very large scales which didn't come off any fish I'd seen before. By the time the wind had settled down and the waves dropped to a less intimidating height, Eden was the nearest decent port, as well as a very pretty place. With no firm schedule, I was happy to be able to have the time to appreciate the peace and beauty of this lovely part of Australia.

Jasper also appreciated the rest, having retired to his bed on a spare bunk at the onset of the storm, regularly voicing his displeasure at the screeching wind noise and unusually violent motion with mournful yowls.

Now that I'd been in Eden a while, I quite fancied staying longer, although my eventual goal was to explore the west coast of Tasmania before winter set in. Macquarie

Harbour and the fascinating remote wilderness of Port Davey further to the south, held an attraction like few other places had.

This Monday afternoon, however, since Johnny was already waiting, it wasn't long before we were sitting at our usual window ledge, sipping cold schooners of beer and perving at the surprising number of wandering female tourists.

'How's that mini black panther of yours?' Johnny asked, 'you haven't brought him ashore for a few days.'

'Nah,' I chuckled, 'not after that silly bloody Dutch woman freaked out when I was walking him around the wharves. Since the rotten bitch wanted to report me to the cops for keeping a dangerous animal, I've decided to take him elsewhere for his walks.'

Johnny laughed, 'Yeah. But you must admit, it was hilarious. All the time she was screaming and yelling, Jasper just sat and looked at her. Tell you what though, he's scored a big hit with Molly at the newsagents. She reckons he's the duck's guts!' He gave me a sly grin, 'She reckons you're a bit of alright too.'

'Ah, turn it up,' I chuckled, feeling slightly embarrassed, 'she's always asking after him and she's a really nice lady, but I think you're stretching things a bit. Still, she's pretty and very nicely built. I reckon she must work out.'

Johnny gave me a flat look. 'Yeah, right. And of course you hadn't noticed that she's got great tits as well.'

I didn't encourage him further with a reply, and got back to Jasper's exercise program, a much safer subject.

'Anyway, as I was saying, to keep Jasper happy, I've been taking him over to Aslings Beach and letting him have a good run around that sand spit. He really likes the sand and it's a safe place for him. I'm not too keen on either of us swimming off the boat. There are too many bitey things lurking in this particular bay.'

He nodded, and after a few sips of beer, Johnny said, 'How did things go with that woman and her daughters?'

I looked at him blankly, 'What woman and what daughters would that be, Johnny?'

He looked annoyed with himself. 'Oh. Sorry. I must've forgotten to tell you.'

'Yeah, mate. I think you just might have.' Sometimes Johnny can be so vague, I don't know how he stays in business.

'Well anyway, last Saturday this woman, who's also a pretty good sort by the way, with two chicky-babes in tow, comes into the office and asks if there are any yachties heading out in the next few days who'd be willing to take on some crew. So I mentioned

the Yanks as a long shot, but having three decent-sized kids, they hardly need extra crew. There's also the fact they only just arrived, so they won't be leaving soon.

Then there's the Danish couple, but since she seems to like lying around naked most of the time, they probably wouldn't want anybody else around. Their boat's a bit small for another three anyway, although I sure Henk would love to have more females aboard!

Course there's Doris and Albert, but I doubt they're going anywhere in the near future either, and although they'll need crew when they do, they probably wouldn't take amateurs.

Then, when I mentioned that you were heading off to the Tasmanian west coast sometime soon, she looked interested, but then just said thanks and wandered off.

I guess she hasn't been to see you yet?'

Like most re-fuelling persons in ports, Johnny is a chronic gossip and busybody, and was always trying to get information to add to his trading stock.

'No, mate. I haven't seen or heard from them.'

'Oh. Okay. They must have buggered off then.' We drank and chitchatted for a while, then as we started our second round, he nearly knocked my beer over as he suddenly pointed past me and quietly said, 'Hey! There they are. That's them. The three ladies. That's Mum in front.'

As befits a fully paid-up member of the Female Appreciation Society, I slowly turned my head and saw a woman of medium height, mid-thirties, dressed in baggy shorts and a loose bright-orange top, walking along the footpath. She was flanked by two tall, lanky teenage girls wearing the obligatory just-sprayed-on short-shorts, complete with what looked like razor slashes, and brief tops with lots of bare, tanned skin in between.

'Yeah, that's them,' Johnny repeated. 'See? I told you Mum wasn't bad looking. The chicky-babes are a bit of alright too.'

'Christ, Johnny. What are you? The local dating service pimp? Look after your own sex life.'

Unoffended, he grinned, 'Just helping, Harry, just helping. You know me.'

He was right, however. She wasn't bad looking at all – rather pretty really, with short, blonde hair and a pleasantly rounded body in welcome defiance of the current anorexic standard of attractiveness. She had really nice legs and moved with a feline grace the baggy clothes failed to hide. Her daughters were also blonde and pretty.

Because of the dark fly screen over the open window in front of us, we could watch without getting sprung, but then they conveniently stopped at a café table just a couple

of metres from our vantage point, where the two girls parked themselves, while Mum went inside to order.

They were close enough for us to hear some of what they were saying.

One said, unhappily, 'Oh Ange, even though Mum explained why we've been dragging our sorry arses around from motel to motel these last three weeks, I'm really getting sick of it!'

Her sister replied in an equally frustrated tone, 'Yeah, I know. Every time we think we're clear of dear deviate Dad's goons, they pop up again.'

'What I don't understand is how the rotten buggers keep finding us,' her sister said miserably. 'Some days I forget where we are.'

'I know,' Ange comforted her, 'the only bright side is that he must really have the shits now we've left. I just hope Mum's idea of a boat ride somewhere works out.'

'Yeah. It's a loopy idea, but it might be a good place to hide for a while.'

'I agree,' Angie replied, 'but I'm not sure just jumping on a boat with strangers is going to be easy. I mean, it's not like catching a bus or something. There's no scheduled service outta here.'

'True,' the other replied, 'and there aren't many yachts anyway. But I'm starting to really miss our friends and hanging out at the mall. Like, it's only been three weeks, but it seems like forever and it's not over yet!'

Angie nodded sadly, 'Yeah. I know, sis.'

Her sister said hopefully, 'Maybe we can stay in one place long enough to get to know some good-looking boys our age! I'm getting a bit tired of us being the only two 18-year-old virgins in town.'

'Yeah! That'll be fun.' Angie giggled. Which started them both giggling, but quietened down when Mum returned, carrying a tray of drinks.

'I'm glad to see you can still laugh.' Mum said, eyeing them both as she sat.

'Yeah, sorry we've been a bit down, Mum,' Angie said. 'It's just all this travelling and shifting motels every couple of days. We're missing our friends.'

Mum nodded. 'I'm really sorry things happened like this, but running away seemed to be the only thing to do at the time. Being selfish, I was getting tired of being the resident punching-bag!'

'Oh Mum! We're sorry about that too and do understand. But what's the plan now?'

'Well,' Mum replied to the first girl, 'I've pretty well run out of ideas. Apart from this wild idea to jump on a boat and disappear for a while. That would give your Grandad time to deal with the legal stuff and maybe stop your dad chasing us.'

'Got all that, Mum,' Angie replied, 'and we'll help all we can, but it won't be like catching a plane or a bus. How do we hitch-hike a ride on a boat? Or more importantly, how do we convince the skipper to help us? I mean, we'd have to tell all, surely?'

Mum grinned, 'You're right. I'm sure it's not just like catching a bus, but otherwise I don't know how it works. I asked around the wharves to see if there was anybody willing to take on three crew members with minimal boating experience, but nothing has popped up so far.'

The second girl replied, 'Get a grip, Mum. Our 'boating experience' was just messing around the bay in Dad's power boat. There's nothing like that here apart from the fishing boats and they're no help. They live here! Everything else that floats seems to have bloody great masts poking up, and that means sails and rope and stuff which we know nothing about!'

'Yeah. You're right, Zoe!' Mum replied, 'but someone might help us if we keep asking. If not from here, then maybe at another port with more private yachts. We really need to break our trail for a while.'

'Yeah Mum,' Zoe replied, 'I'm sorry and we do understand. It's just so frustrating, but don't worry, we're with you.'

Mum smiled. 'Thanks girls, I know you are. I just want to try to make the best of this crazy situation.'

They sipped their drinks in silence for a while, before Angie said, 'So who have you asked about a boat?'

'Well,' she replied, 'apart from the trawler guys, the best one seems to be the refueller fella down on the main wharf. He said he'd ask around for us, but out of several possible, he suggested there's a single guy with a catamaran who's maybe leaving in a few days.'

CHAPTER 2...Eden...Monday pm

I looked at Johnny with raised eyebrows, my curiosity stirred by their tale.

'How does that sound to you?' I asked quietly.

He frowned. 'I don't know, mate. Sounds legit, but jeeze, they're carrying a shit-load of heavy baggage. You might find yourself in the middle of a real dust-up with a pissed-off husband chasing them.'

I grinned back. 'True. But I'm a sucker for helping damsels in distress.'

'Yeah,' he smirked, 'especially if they've got tits and look good!'

I scowled at him. 'How can you say such a thing? My intentions are pure!'

'Yeah, sure! Purely depraved!'

I stood and drained the last of my beer. 'Okay, enough of your insults. Come and introduce me and I'll see if they can convince me.'

'But seriously for a moment,' I looked carefully at him, 'if I do take them on, you have to keep quiet. Like really, totally, I-know-nothing-boss type quiet. You can't tell anybody that they even spoke to me, let alone where we've gone. It sounds like some heavies may come around asking questions, especially because she's spread the story of wanting a boat ride, so you have to say that nobody wanted to take them on and they left town heading north on a bus or something. Okay?'

Johnny looked thoughtful, which maybe was a bit of a stretch for him.

'Yeah. You're right, that's what I'll have to say. No problem mate, I'll handle it.'

I clapped him on the shoulder with a show of more confidence than I felt, and said, 'Good man. Let's see if I can learn more about their story face-to-face.'

As we walked outside, I hung back a bit so that hopefully Johnny was recognised.

Luckily he was and the mother's face lit up. 'Hey! There's Johnny now,' she said to the girls. 'Hi, Johnny!' she called out as he pretended to walk on past their table.

'Remember me? Janice. I was asking you about boats leaving Eden.'

Although Johnny's acting wasn't exactly NIDA-standard, he still managed a passable double-take and pasted a sappy smile on his dial as he stopped and said, 'Oh, yeah. Sure, Janice. Course I remember. In fact, I was just inside having a beer with my mate, Harry here. He's the one I mentioned.'

Three sets of assessing female eyes swivelled like lasers in my direction. They saw an average height guy, about 5'11" or so in the old measure, in his late 30s. Clean-shaven with pleasant but un-remarkable features, or so I've been told, with vivid blue eyes and shaggy, sandy hair. The lean body was thanks to good genes, my former occupation and the lifestyle of living on a boat. Not wanting to scare them too soon, I hoped they missed the hard, sometimes haunted look I've been told lurks just under the vague gaze of a dedicated boat-bum I preferred to show the world.

Her initial scrutiny complete, Janice jumped to her feet with a huge smile on her face, and stuck out her slim hand, unadorned with any jewellery.

'Hi. I'm Janice Emery and these are my daughters, Angie and Zoe.'

I shook hands with them, pleased that the girls responded immediately and had genuine smiles and firm grips, the same as Janice.

'Hi, I'm Harry Stevens. Johnny says you're looking for a bit of a boat trip.'

Janice sat down and waved to the fourth chair at the table. 'Well. It's a bit more complicated than that, Harry, but if you'd join us I'll try to explain. Johnny, do you want to sit as well?'

Johnny shook his head. 'No thanks Janice. Now I've found Harry for you, I've got to get back to the wharf. I've got three trawlers due in the next couple of hours to refuel. Talk to you later, Harry. Bye girls.'

He sketched a loose wave to everyone and headed for the wharf diagonally across the road from where we sat, as I pulled out a chair and parked my bum. Up close, Janice was still pretty, but her bright green eyes were almost mesmerising, and fixed me with that intense gaze, which I suppose was very natural under the circumstances. At the same time, I was doing my own assessment, hopefully less obviously, and decided it would be best to pretend I'd not heard anything of their previous conversation – just to see if the story stayed straight.

I also reminded myself not to let my current lengthy drought of female company unduly influence my decision to take on crew – something I normally avoided like the plague.

After Janice finished explaining the events leading up to the present, with the girls listening carefully and watching for my reactions, I accepted she wasn't trying to snow me with some bullshit. She told it like I'd heard before, although with many more useful details tossed into the mix. For instance, her husband, Luke Emery was a very wealthy man with connections at all levels of industry and government. He had mobilised a search with his own thugs to comb the country looking for them. She and the girls were puzzled why her husband was trying so expensively hard to find them.

'I mean, we understand he'd like to have us under his control again, but this search must be costing him a fortune,' Janice said, 'and I know for certain that he's financially over-extended, so money is very tight at the moment. Much too tight to be wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars on this wife and daughters hunt!'

She also explained that although her mother had died of cancer eight years ago, she still had her father, family and friends, who just needed time to put together the case against Luke, get a DVO, and file for divorce. Meanwhile, she and the girls needed to buy time for that to happen, which explained why they were trying to stay off the radar and out of the clutches of Luke's so-called investigators.

'Every time we change motels and jump on a train or bus, they seem to be able to find us again within a few days. We've really been lucky to escape them each time, but that can't last. I thought this crazy idea might break the trail for a while.'

She fixed me with a level gaze, thankfully without pulling the sad, teary look. 'So,' she said, 'do you think you can help? I do have money, cash, which friends have been posting to me. I had to stop using plastic since it left a trail, but it's getting harder to find motels which will take cash. Still, I want to, and can pay our way. The main thing is, since we've been here way too long already, we really need to leave as soon as possible.'

I sat back and thought while I looked at each in turn. Janice radiated a mix of impatience and fear – the girls seemed more interested in the new environment they were possibly getting into, and were carefully and openly checking out the bloke in charge of that environment.

I had no problem with the scrutiny.

Despite my earlier flippant comments to Johnny, I did have a lot of concerns about the size of the mess I was potentially getting into. An angry husband with his own goon squad could make formidable foes. Still, I could always dump the ladies somewhere safe, then bail out and sail away if things got too hot. Whether or not I stooped that low to cop-out, depended on how well they fitted in and behaved.

I was far from being a saint, and as Johnny suggested, 'if it was pretty and had tits', I'd prefer to have all three ladies close by. The opportunity to get to know Janice better had a lot going for it, since she seemed highly intelligent, was very attractive and it'd been quite a while since I had a female crew member who might just be persuaded to share my bed.

All this heavy thinking must have taken longer than Janice was prepared to sit still for, since she kicked me in the shin. Not too hard, mind, but still not the behaviour I'd expected.

'Oy!' I said, in surprise, as the girls giggled at my reaction. 'What's that's for?'

'For taking so long to answer me!' she said in exasperation. 'Are you going to help us or not?'

'Bloody hell woman, you're impatient, aren't you?' I snapped in annoyance. 'You'd better not do that when we're at sea. I'm supposed to be the Skipper! That means I'm allowed to toss you overboard if you misbehave!'

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