

NOW SHOWING

BY

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DOUBLE OR NOTHING

For the first time in our history we are located in the right part of the world at the right time.

– Wayne Swan, Australian Treasurer, 2011, post-GFC1.

Dave Kelly was not in the middle of nowhere. He was somewhere; somewhere between Newman and Marble Bar in the far north of Western Australia. Marble Bar is the hottest town on the planet. The earth is red and black and so filled with minerals that working there is like standing on the hotplate of a barbecue.

Dave crouched on top of a bullet hole-riddled wire mesh telephone cage repairing the antenna next to the solar panel. It was midday and the solar panel thrived. So did the litter of flies on Dave's sweaty shirt. They gathered and bit through the fabric and then fought to get to his mouth and eyes. The husk of a dead kangaroo lay across the road, ignored by the flies now that Dave had come along, like a godsend.

Dave felt the screwdriver start to slip through his sweat-slick fingers and leaned to catch it but missed and it dropped and disappeared in the soft red dust below. 'Shit,' he said as he stood. That's when he saw the jeep coming towards the T-junction where he was working. It was going like the clappers, trailing dust and heading straight at Dave. Dave looked at his Telstra van parked by the solar telephone, then up at the approaching jeep which showed no signs of slowing. If Dave was a betting man he might have tried to calculate the odds of a vehicle collision between the only two cars within a three hundred kilometre radius.

The jeep tried to turn right without braking, and began to slide sideways. Dave felt a little surge of excitement as he looked to where he could jump to avoid being skittled, but the front wheels of the jeep caught as it cut across the corner and growled away, showering Dave in a wave of thick, choking dust. So he didn't see the crash. He just heard the unmistakable thump and the sad, empty clatters.

*

Dave's van skidded in its own slew of dust coming to rest a hundred metres up the highway.

The jeep lay on its back, one wheel still spinning. A mobile phone was ringing amidst the bits of luggage and food and broken glass. Dave found the driver, his legs pinned under the jeep. There was a lot of blood and no pulse. The flies were already gorging. The mobile phone stopped ringing, so the only sound was the slow gurgle of liquid

escaping from some ruptured engine part.

Dave looked along the debris trail that led from the jeep to a shattered tree stump near the road. The unlucky bastard had hit the only tree in a thousand kilometres. Dave dialled on his Telstra sat phone.

Something flashed in the sun. Dave walked towards it.

‘Newman Police Station.’

‘Yeah mate. Car accident. About a hundred and fifty K north of you.’

‘Near the phone box?’

‘Yeah, very near the phone box. Anyway, the driver’s dead.’

‘Oh. Okey-doke. No rush then, eh. Be up in a few hours. Don’t touch anything.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it.’

Dave looked down at an aluminium case. He looked back to the man lying under the jeep and to the desultory scatter of his personal effects. He looked out at a stretch of temporarily unmined emptiness of the North-West. Maybe it was the heat and its dry crushing weight. Maybe it was that the dead man looked vaguely like Dave himself. Maybe it was the lazy backhanded bad luck of the tree stump. Whatever the cause, Dave was given to an uncharacteristic moment of soul searching.

*

‘You know,’ said Dave to Terry on the phone later, ‘I thought of Maverick.’

‘The film Maverick?’

‘Yeah. He’s sitting on a horse with a noose around his neck in the middle of the desert with the rattlers slithering out of the sack towards the horse’s feet, and he thinks the first lines he says in the film ...’

‘He thinks he should give up gambling?’

‘Not at all. No. His voiceover says, “It had been just a shitty week for me from the beginning.”’

*

Dave was installing a wall phone in a perfectly air-conditioned executive apartment kitchen.

The owner stood talking on her mobile in the living room. The

curtains were open and she looked out at sailboats on Perth's Swan River as though they were all hers. 'I don't care, Richard. Sell everything European. Yes and German. Even German. They may get dragged down into this. I want to lay low until this new meltdown finishes ... melting.'

Dave checked the dial tone and gently replaced the landline telephone in its new cradle on the wall. He looked over to the lady, ignoring him as she listened to her mobile. She was dressed in a business skirt and blouse. Diamonds sparkled from her ears. More diamonds winked and twinkled from around her neck. The 'at home' jewellery.

She was in her mid-forties and in pretty good shape, but she had one of those small mouths which seem best shaped to indicate angry disappointment. 'And dump Asia. No, Richard. Not the Chinese. They don't count as Asian. I know the Japanese never used to be considered Asian either, but have you seen their GDP to national debt ratio?'

Dave headed for the bathroom. It was a palace designed for an Ancient Greek. There was slate with gold trim and a wall-sized mirror. Dave lifted the phone and heard the dial tone purring again.

He went into the bedroom, frightening himself as he confronted two Daves stepping towards him. The lady sure liked her mirrors. And her telephones.

The bed was unmade and strewn with light filmy lingerie. Dave picked up the telephone on the bedside table, checking the dial tone there. She liked her diamonds too. There was a chunky diamond bracelet on the bedside table. Dave picked up his tools from the table and two pieces of snapped wire he'd missed from the installation.

'Richard, am I going to have to spell everything out to you every step of the way this morning? I don't care whether it's night there. It's morning here. Don't be pedantic. The Indians are usually Asian but just might be a little Chinese right now.'

Dave closed the bedroom door, silencing Richard's dimness about economic racial profiling.

He picked up the bedside telephone and dialled. Daryl answered at the other end, saying the company name, 'Sure Thing, You Betcha.'

'Daryl, can I talk to Mungo?' asked Dave, keeping his voice down.

Daryl was one of Mungo's enforcers. He made up for his lack of physical power with hard work. 'If you haven't got it, Dave, Mungo's not gonna be happy.'

'Yeah, well I want everybody to be happy. So, can I talk to him?'

Dave picked up the bracelet and twirled it around his index finger watching the pretty sparkles while he waited for Mungo. There was a book on the table. *Ellora's Cave. Beg.* There was a huge-chested black man kneeling before a woman's shoulder.

'Is this good news, Dave?' asked Mungo at the other end of the phone.

'It's going to be excellent news, Mungo. Five hundred on Denmark Prince. That's today at Flemington.'

'How is this good news, Dave?'

'That's five thousand right there, only hours away.' Dave watched himself in one of the mirrors. Saw his face bright and happy and convincing.

'Which, even if it comes in, Dave, isn't enough, is it?'

'No, but I get to keep my legs for a few more weeks while I work on the rest, don't I?'

'See, there you go doing it again, Dave. You think you're making a joke, but what you're really doing is describing exactly what's going to happen.'

Dave heard a noise and turned to find the woman in the bedroom, her little mouth crumpling smaller.

Dave turned back to the phone and said, 'No Terry, it's still feeding back with the echo. I'll try calling you back from one of the other lines.'

'Kelly!' yelled the phone as Dave hung it up and then stood to smile at the owner.

'Looks like I still got a couple of glitches to iron out.' Dave smiled again and then politely smoothed the sheets where he'd been sitting.

'You were placing bets.'

'What? Oh that. No, we use certain key words to check the frequency modulation. You know, like the roadies do for a band. Check, check. L-l-l-l-l-egs. Leg-gs breaker breaker.'

'You were placing bets on my phone.' Her eyes were fixed on the phone as if his act of defilement were visible. She started around the bed towards the phone.

Dave didn't panic so much as make a split second strategic decision which, in hindsight, proved tactically poor. He grabbed the phone and cradle with both hands and pulled hard, ripping the socket out of the wall and upending the bedside table.

The woman stood, looking in horror at the wall and then the table and finally at Dave holding her telephone.

'Sorry. I had to do that. For your own protection. Couldn't risk feedback shock from the digital pulse through an unalloyed signal.' Dave tried to meet her eyes.

She raised the mobile telephone that was still in her hand and poked buttons.

Dave righted the table and set the broken phone back on it. He picked up the book which had fallen.

She said, 'Yes, Complaints Department please.' She stood waiting, looking at him.

Dave's pulse quickened. His breathing got faster. His brain clicked into an extra gear. It was the feeling he got when he'd put everything from the whole meet on the last race. The longer the odds, the greater the rush.

'Okay. You're probably the richest, most powerful woman I've ever met. Right now, this very second, I've got to tell you, you look like one of the sexiest. And most powerful.'

Her eyes widened.

'I can tell you work too hard. All these phones. All those calls. Work work work. And for what? What about you in all this. You have needs. I can see from these mirrors, the bathroom, these soft, delicate nightclothes – that you're a sensuous woman.'

She looked down at her bed, possibly aghast. But maybe, just maybe – not aghast.

Dave said, 'Let's not leave this room wondering all our lives what might have been. Say "no" to the rest of the world. Say, "Yes. Let's go a bit crazy, and both make wild, passionate love together, right now."'

Dave was panting, just a little. He smiled. Knew he had the shy thing going in the smile that women had said made him look like a cute, naughty boy.

She was looking. She had looked at him and then to the bed,

calculating the potential profit/loss perhaps. For that frozen moment, Dave knew, she was starting to think about it.

Then her mobile, still at her ear, said, 'Telstra, Complaints.'

Dave said, 'What do you say? Want to take a chance?' He tossed the book on the bed.

'Yes,' she said to the telephone. 'I'd like to make a complaint about one of your workers.'

Dave sighed. Throwing the book on the bed had probably been a touch too much.

'Actually, it's a large number of complaints that include malicious damage and sexual harassment.'

She smiled at Dave, her mouth like a paper cut.

'You used to be a lawyer, didn't you?' he said.

'That was the job I came back from.'

'I know.'

'You were on the phone when I got back from it.'

'I remember.'

*

Dave's desk abutted Terry's in their workshop/office area. There was one piece of paper on Dave's desk and nothing else.

On Terry's desk were two computers, two blotters, two staplers, two paper punches and two telephones, one of which was at Terry's ear.

'Keep the Telstra shares and the Commonwealth, for sure, but I want to get into insurance. Any big company. Right.'

Dave looked at the paper on his desk, then back up to Terry as Terry put down the phone.

Dave said, 'Can I use one of your phones?'

'Nope.'

Dave looked over his empty desk. 'My chair?'

'What are you going to sit on?'

'Who says I'm going to lose?'

'You always lose. Ray's looking for you, by the way.'

Dave looked down at the piece of paper in the middle of his desk.

'Yeah, well maybe I'll get my reprimand a bit later.'

Terry smiled in the smug way he had.

'Get stuffed.'

Terry smiled and said, 'Okay. Your chair against one of my phones.' He took the well-worn deck of cards from his drawer. The cards had once been Dave's. 'Why don't you use your mobile?'

'No credit.'

Terry shuffled, looking up at Dave. 'Don't take this the wrong way, mate.'

'I'm pretty sure I will, but get it out of your system.'

'You sure you're not spinning out of control?'

'Is this a roulette wheel image, Terry, or a crashing plane image?'

Terry put the cards down on the desk, face down. 'Hmmm,' he said. 'Maybe I'm thinking of a ferris wheel. More your style. At the fair. Next to the bearded lady.'

'Maybe I like spinning.' Dave cut the deck, holding up the face card. It was a five, not good when high card wins.

'But the ground is rushing up to slap you on the face.'

'That's beautiful, Terry. That's a beautiful turn of phrase. You were at the fair, I could tell and the thing *was* a ferris wheel and it spun me off, didn't it?'

Terry nodded.

Dave said, 'Now are you going to cut the fucking cards?'

Terry cut the deck. Kept his hand face down a moment for dramatic effect, then showed Dave and watched Dave's face to see, but Dave gave him absolutely nothing, forcing him to look at his three of diamonds.

'Get stuffed.'

Dave said, 'My luck's turning,' as he dragged one of the phones back onto his desk.

'Watch out for the ground.'

Smug. Very smug.

*

Dave's flat was nearly empty. There was one black vinyl armchair, a phone and an answering machine in the living room. Dave believed that message bank was a rip-off. Some racing formguides were scattered across the floor.

Dave switched on the answering machine, and headed for the kitchen.

'Hi. Dave Kelly. Speak to me nicely.' Beep.

In the fridge alcove was an eski. Dave opened the eski and took out a can of beer and a pizza box.

Kevin came on the answering machine. 'Um hi, Dave. Um. Sally asked me to call. Um. It's about your maintenance payments. Um. Sorry mate.' Kevin lowered his voice and said, 'You could try Excalibur tonight. I'm riding, and I reckon it's got the nod.' Beep.

Dave sat in the chair with his beer wondering about Kevin pimping his ride so his wife's ex-husband could make the back maintenance payments.

There was another call. Mungo. 'Denmark Prince is still running. Which is extremely bad news, Dave. Come and see me. Now!' Beep. Click. Whirr.

*

Trish Fong ran a thriving Cash Converters franchise very close to Dave's house. Trish said it had picked up considerably during the two-speed economy era of rampant mining profits for some and soaring unmanageable prices for everyone else.

Dave took his eski into the shop.

'Dave. What you doing here so late?'

'Missing the home comforts.'

There was a couch and another armchair that matched the one in Dave's lounge room. There were other bits of furniture that would probably kit out Dave's flat rather nicely, including a newish refrigerator.

'I had to shift your TV, Dave. Sorry.'

Dave shrugged, then reached into his pocket and pulled out the diamond bracelet.

Trish jumped back from it with a squeal, 'Agggeee.'

Dave twirled the thing, making the diamonds flicker.

Trish came forward. 'Dave. This is no good.'

'Thought you'd be interested.'

'A present? For my daughter?'

'Trish, you never let me near her. No, I mean business. Big sentimental value mind. My dear grandmother's. But I need to sell it. For her operation.'

Trish didn't smile. She was looking at the bracelet like it was a blue-ringed octopus. 'Are you crazy? With agreements and police checks and waiting periods, unless you've got an actual sales docket, and twenty years worth of provenance and chain of custody. And a stat dec – even with all that this'll take about four weeks to clear'

Dave shrugged, returning the bracelet to his pocket. He picked up the eski from the floor and took out his passport and his telephone answering machine.

'I'm not buying your passport.'

'I could Chinese up the photo.'

Trish shook her head. She pointed at the answering machine. 'Nobody uses those things anymore. It's all on your mobile.'

Dave looked glum.

Trish sucked her front tooth as she did and then said, 'I'll give you ten for the eski and the thing.' She meant the answering machine.

*

Dave came out of Trish's Cash Converters and was punched in the nose.

He fell back to find himself sitting on the pavement looking up at Mungo's enforcers. Daryl was smiling. But Tiny, who wasn't, looked concerned.

Dave touched his nose experimentally. 'I was coming to see you guys.'

'What a coincidence,' said Daryl. 'And here we are.'

Dave looked at his fingers and saw there was no blood. 'Are you losing your touch, Tiny? It's not broken. I'm not even bleeding.'

Tiny said, 'Yeah, I pulled it a bit, Dave.' Tiny demonstrated his gentler punch in the air above Dave's head.

'Thanks, mate. I appreciate that.'

Tiny nodded.

‘When you two girls have finished catching up, Mungo says you’re to give us \$20,000.’

‘Quite right,’ nodded Dave, remaining down on the pavement.

Daryl said, ‘It’s broken legs time. On account.’

‘That’s fair.’

Dave reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the diamond bracelet, holding it up towards them like garlic to vampires. Or was that raw meat to wolves?

Daryl took it and stepped close to the light of the shop window where he pretended to have jeweller skills. Finally, he said, ‘Twenty-four hours.’

‘Forty-eight.’

‘Thirty-six.’

‘Done.’

Daryl started walking towards a dark Lancer, but Tiny shuffled forward and bent down. ‘You didn’t steal it, did you Dave?’

Dave didn’t want to lie to Tiny. He liked him. He nodded.

Tiny said, ‘Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’ve always respected you, Dave.’

‘Thanks, Tiny.’

‘But now I don’t.’

*

Dave stood near the monitor in the sparsely populated TAB listening to Kevin’s race. The buzz had been mild as he’d placed the bet. True, it was his last ten dollars, but it was only ten. A bald punter stood in a corner, red, sweating and grunting, as if he were in the middle of a solo sexual act. Dave waited for his own rush of anticipation or adrenaline or dread. He waited as the race neared the end. Another punter, a lady in very stretched trackie daks, looked like she might cry. Dave took his ticket to the window, feeling nothing.

Geraldine fed it in. She brightened. ‘Good call, Dave. Nice odds.’

‘Winners are grinners, Geraldine.’

She started counting out money. Hundred dollar bills.

‘Let’s put it all on the next, eh?’

*

Dave sat in the visitor's seat across the desk from his supervisor. Ray raised his finger like a conductor about to start the orchestra up. Looking at Dave he moved the finger over to the mini-recorder on the desk between them and pressed the record button.

'I am giving you a verbal warning concerning dissatisfaction with your performance. Do you acknowledge you understand this?'

Dave leaned forward and talked into the recorder as slowly as Ray had. 'Yes, Raymond Beam, I, David Kelly, understand your verbal.'

'This is the third verbal warning of poor performance.'

'Yes, three.'

'Have you received written material concerning your rights and the nature of your performance management?'

'Yes. Received and read.'

'Is there anything you do not understand about these verbal warnings concerning poor performance?'

'I, David Orlando Kelly, understand, Raymond Beam. What's your middle name, Ray?'

Ray pressed stop. 'When you get back from up north, I'll have something in writing.'

'North?'

'Yeah, Dave. As far away from other humans as we can find. Middle of nowhere. You can pick up a van in Port Hedland. Now fuck off.'

'Ah, so he'd turned the recorder off by then?'

'Ray is less polite when he's not "on".'

'You do have a way with authority figures.'

'Yeah, well. It has been a shitty week.'

'That's why I've called you. You're not still up north are you?'

'I'm coming to that.'

'It's not nowhere, Ken,' said Dave to the dead man. Dave had covered him up with a jacket. He'd found his wallet and was looking at Ken's driver's licence.

The driver's phone started ringing again. The ringtone was 'Journey'. Dave tracked it to an Iridium 9555 lying in the dirt behind

the jeep. He'd always thought 'Journey' should have been called 'Marrakesh' or 'Kasbah'. Something Middle Eastern. 'Hash Salesman' would have worked.

He buttoned on the phone and a Scotsman started yelling, 'About bloody time. I don't like being messed about, Ken, and ye're messing me about. I've set things up fir Perth. Yir ticket and travelling money are at airport. Getting t'stones through is up tae ye.'

'Um,' said Dave, when there was a gap. 'Bit of bad news on that.'

'Don't ye start haggling wi' me, laddie. Twenty thousand. Do it or I'll huv bad news for ye,' yelled the Scotsman. 'Doon't fook me about.' Click.

The aluminium case flashed in the sun again like a wink. It was the kind used by geologists to carry samples. Dave opened the case. Inside were small brown and white rocks. They didn't look so much like stones as bits of muesli. One of the bits of muesli sparkled.

'Gold?'

'Diamonds, Terry.'

'Diamonds!'

'Diamonds.'

'Cos you were working a mere two hundred kilometres from Argyle? Dave, you are so full of it.'

'Am not.'

'You can barely fix a fucking phone. How come you know you've got a case of diamonds?'

Dave left the scene of the accident and he flew back to Perth. When he opened the aluminium case at the Cash Converters, Trish Fong leapt back and screamed like a fifty year old Chinese-Australian woman jumping into the cold surf.

When she recovered she said, 'Have you suddenly got a direct line into the diamond industry?'

'Things are starting to fall my way.'

Trish took a metal pen and used it to turn a couple of the rocks. 'Diamonds, but uncut. They look industrial.'

'Industrial?'

‘Not for jewellery. For making cutting tools and drills and shit.’ She shrugged.

‘So worth anything? Curio value?’

‘Are you crazy? Ever hear of Triads? Tongs? These have got to be hot. You heard of the Spider Boys? Africans. There’s Africans here, you know. Everywhere you look. Are these blood diamonds?’

‘I don’t think they’re blood diamonds. I was working up north a few hundred K away from the Argyle Diamond Mine.’

‘And you thought you’d dig in the ground, huh? They aren’t very pink.’

‘Pink?’

‘They have these pink diamonds. No. No good. You’re trying to get me killed. No more diamonds please, Dave.’ She nudged the case closed using her elbow. ‘Household goods and electronics.’

‘You already have most of my household goods, Trish.’

‘I’ll give you twenty for the case.’

*

Dave stood near the check-in of the Perth International Airport counting the money in the envelope for the third time. One thousand English pounds.

Dave had shown Ken’s driver’s licence at a pick-up counter in the airport, deciding the photo on that looked a little more like him than the one in Ken’s passport. They gave him a manila envelope. Inside was an airline ticket to Amsterdam and an address. A typed note said *Go by the name of Angus MacFergus, rest of payment COD*. There was a smaller envelope containing the money.

Dave was calculating how many Aussie dollars that would be and how quickly he could build that stake into a dream run at the track when a couple of businessmen hovered a little too close and he felt he should not flash his roll. That was when Terry phoned.

Terry said, ‘Where are you?’

‘Mate. Um, trying not to spin out of control.’

‘Well, I think you’re seconds from impact.’

‘You’re such a pessimist, Terry.’

‘That solar panel you were supposed to fix. You didn’t. And there are

certain enquiries from the cops up north that you might be the person leaving the scene of an accident.'

'Ah.'

'And they'd like to ask you if you took any personal effects, like money and identification, from the deceased.'

'Hmm.'

'Daryl and Mungo have been calling the office.'

'Yes, of course.'

'And more police down here in Perth would also like to talk to you as a person of interest.'

'Oh? What's that about?'

'A missing diamond bracelet.'

'Is that everything, Terry?'

'I think that brings us both up to date with the events of this week. Maybe you should head for Darwin.'

Dave looked past hundreds of waiting or wandering passengers to a beautiful woman standing near the newsagent's. She smiled at him.

Terry said, 'So, what are you gunna do?'

'I think I'm going to keep spinning, Terry. But not to the ground. I'm going to spin faster and faster and go up – like a helicopter.'

Dave buttoned off and looked for the beautiful woman who'd smiled and made him feel like good things could happen in his future, but she was gone. Instead, the businessmen were there again. Their suits were cheap and ill-fitting and slightly out of fashion. The younger one winked at Dave.

'You shouldn't have winked, Bruce.'

'Then you punched me in the arm, Mal.'

'Thank you, officers. Let's back up a little, Ken.'

'My name's Dave, Inspector Compton.'

'No, let's not do that again please. Ken, why are you going by the name of Angus MacFergus?'

'It was at the airport. At a counter.'

'From Dewar?'

Dave bought a carry-on bag for nineteen dollars and ninety-five cents and used his ticket and Ken's passport to get a boarding pass. As he was walking towards the security person who checked boarding passes and passports he recalled his few international travelling experiences. He'd been to Bali twice and to New Zealand once. Each time had involved questions and X-ray machines. He began to doubt the wisdom of trying to get on the plane with diamonds stuffed in every pocket. So, just before the door of no return, he patted his top pocket, as though searching for cigarettes and turned around and went out of the terminal.

'Mal thought you'd bailed, Ken. Gutsed out on us.'

'Yes, thank you, officer. Your version, Ken. For the record.'

'Call me Dave.'

Dave got his Telstra van from the parking lot and drove to one of the service gates around the side. He beeped his horn until a security guy came. He didn't get out of the van. The guard waved and yelled. Dave waved his hand impatiently. The guard finally opened the gate. And Dave drove past him.

Dave parked his van near the baggage handlers shed and wandered in, yelling at the first guy he saw, 'You got a problem with the phones?' It was a safe question. Everyone had problems with their phones. But the guy shook his head and raised his hands and indicated a hearing impairment or too little English and pointed back to an office.

Dave nodded and waved, but as soon as the worker turned, he joined a luggage trolley heading out towards a Qantas jumbo connected to the departure gate number printed on his boarding pass. 'Is this the plane to Amsterdam?' he yelled.

'Man, you can't come out here,' yelled the baggage driver.

Dave pointed to the emblem on his shirt. 'Telstra.'

The guy was already driving away towards the open stomach of the plane. The engines were warming, whining painfully.

Dave went under the back of the plane near the wheels and up the rear steps where they were loading sealed containers of food and drink.

A hostess blocked his way, just inside the rear door. 'Hey.'
'Telstra.' He tapped his chest insignia as though it was a police badge. 'Your inboard communication system has problems?'

'You'd have to see the captain,' she said, pointing forward.

Dave stepped past her into an aisle where early passengers were getting seated. Another hostess stepped out, her smile on hard.

The first one said, 'Doesn't it get fixed by engineers?'

Dave reached into his envelope and produced his boarding pass and waved it at both of them. When they looked confused, he said to the hostess who'd met him, 'Just professional interest.' Then he turned to the hostess in the aisle and said, 'I wandered back here for a look. I'll come back later, when you're not so busy.'

Dave wandered down the aisle, with his boarding pass out and a studied expression of seat-searching, fighting the tide of passengers coming the other way.

He found his window seat but someone was in the way. In the aisle seat sat the beautiful woman who had smiled at him from the airport newsagents. Serendipity is a glorious thing when the converging items aren't jeeps and Telstra vans. He put his empty carry-on in the overhead locker, then gave the woman his winningest smile. 'I can hoist myself over, or we can shuffle?'

She stood and stepped out into the aisle and Dave slid and sat too heavily on one of the mounds of rocks in his back pockets. He gasped.

The beautiful woman moved back into her seat with a swish of knees from her ruffling skirt, looking at him oddly.

Dave said, 'So, flying eh?'

'Yes. That's what my ticket suggests.' She reached for a magazine.

Dave considered this first rebuff as no more than part of the process like, say, the haka before a good rugby game. He offered his hand, smiling. 'Angus MacFergus.' He thought that next time he said it he might try to put a bit more Scots spittle in 'Fer'.

She said, 'And don't tell me. You work for Telstra.'

Dave looked down at his shirt in shock. 'How did you guess?'

Dave saw her suppress a smile. There was hope. She had dark brown eyes and dark hair and a kind of perfect Italian nose.

'And you are?'

‘Not looking to make a new friend.’ She opened her magazine and started reading. She hadn’t said it that rudely. It wasn’t irrevocable.

Dave adjusted a couple of the rock bulges in his back pockets. ‘I’m betting that by around the thirteen hour mark, I’ll have worn you down.’

‘Given that this flight goes to Singapore and that’s only five and a half hours, those will be very long odds.’

‘My favourite kind.’

*

Her name was Margaret St James. Dave had shaved and showered as she’d instructed and stepped out of the bathroom and into the main room of the houseboat in Amsterdam wearing nothing but his best smile. Margaret was waiting for him.

‘You’re a legend, Ken.’

‘Cheers, Bruce. Unfortunately, also waiting were Campbell and Karushi, although I didn’t know that was their names. Not then.’

‘Oh,’ said Dave on seeing the men in the dim kerosene lamplight. They looked as displeased as Dave felt.

‘Angus,’ said the tough-looking one in a thick Scottish accent. He stood blocking the stairs leading up to the deck. Campbell.

‘Ah,’ said Dave.

The Indian man held a briefcase and looked from Dave to Margaret. Karushi. ‘What the ...’ he said in a London accent.

Margaret got up from the table. ‘Angus, you’ve obviously got things to do. How about we take a raincheck. I can see this isn’t a good time.’

‘Wait,’ said Campbell. He had scars crisscrossing both cheeks. ‘Whit’s she daein’ here?’

Her name was Margaret St James and he did wear her down but somehow she got ahead coming off the plane from Singapore to the Netherlands and Dave couldn’t seem to push through all the other passengers to catch up to her as they filed into Schiphol airport. Then he saw the two dodgy business guys up ahead. They were scanning the passengers. The younger one was tall and tanned and fit-looking.

The older one was in his mid-fifties, with an angry red face and rumpled body. They stood with a new thin man in a much better suit. The thin man talked into a walkie-talkie, also examining the incoming passengers. Dave finally felt the prod of alarm and ducked away to the toilets.

He went into a toilet stall and considered a new plan. Every pocket of his pants was stuffed with the uncut diamonds, the delivery of which would bring him twenty thousand somethings, which it was not unreasonable to assume was cash. Twenty thousand was a very good number to be dealing with, given the debt to Mungo. It was seriously worth the punt.

Dave figured he might as well get comfortable. He emptied the stones from his pocket into the carry-on bag and joined the dazed and addled line of passengers trudging to customs. He had his passport ready. He felt his breathing go shallow, his pulse begin to get up towards the happy level. He recalled that in many airports today, apart from having men in dark uniforms carrying machine guns, there were also cameras pointing at the incoming. Trained professionals, possibly mothers and priests, scanned the faces of passengers looking for signs of guilt. Dave wondered if the mounting excitement he felt as he approached his customs official would be mistaken for guilt and unleash the machine guns.

‘Hello,’ said Dave to the customs man as he handed him his passport.

‘Good morning, sir,’ he said. ‘Anything to declare?’ Before Dave had time to manufacture his lie, or make up a really good joke, the customs man looked over Dave’s shoulder.

Dave turned. The thin man in the good suit stood examining Dave, his left hand cupping his chin, his index finger tapping on his pursed lips. He looked past Dave, and nodded, precisely.

‘Thank you sir,’ said the customs man. ‘Have a nice stay in the Netherlands.’ He put Dave’s passport on the counter and looked up for the next passenger.

A more circumspect man, given to cosmic questioning, might have taken a moment at this point. Dave, on the other hand, believed in gift horses and never looking them in the mouth. He picked up his passport and walked through.