The Cally Uniter 

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Whenever I see a girl in a gold bikini, I think of Princess Leia. Here on the Gold Coast, gold bikinis are common, so I think of Princess Leia a lot.

Princess Leia doesn't stand for any nonsense. When the giant slug made her wear that ridiculous bikini, she whipped out her chain and gave it a thrashing. Then she changed quick smart into something more sensible.

'Dance with the hottest crowd in town, our stunning waitresses will ensure ...'

Punching the radio 'off' button, I squeeze my car into a metered spot near Cavill Avenue and glance at my watch. Late again. The good thing about working in Surfers Paradise is that the meter maids will be along soon to stick money in the meter. That's if they don't recognise my parents' bombed-out Daihatsu, in which case they'll know I'm no tourist, but a shameless leech on the system.

I jog up the street, jumping sideways to avoid getting wiped out by a guy with a nine-foot surfboard on his head. A tout calls out from a doorway, gesturing towards his shop. *Get your stuffed koalas, didgeridoos and Akubra hats here, folks.* Or that's what I

imagine he's saying. As I don't speak Japanese it's hard to be sure.

I nod at the tout. He nods back. Seiji's All Australian Souvenir Shop and Outback Bar is my regular lunchtime haunt. I don't buy much but it's always quiet in there, compared to the hustle bustle of the street. Seiji is nice. He never seems to mind if my ice-cream drips. He's a good salesman, too.

As I push through the door of Gold Star Investigations I pause to savour the thrill it gives me. Here I am. Straight out of school and already a private investigator in training. It's funny, though, how when dreams come true they're never quite what you expect.

I hadn't thought it would be so hard to work with Rosco. He and I are no strangers. We grew up on the same street in Southport. He was one year ahead of me in school, but we hung out together after hours. Rosco was Luke Skywalker and Han Solo to my Leia. We took turns to play Yoda, and very accomplished in Yoda-speak we were. The force was with us. I misheard this phrase the first time he said it, before I watched the movies, and *the horse is with you* became our little in-joke.

Rosco ditched me as a playmate when he turned ten and I didn't see much of him for a while. It soon became clear that he hadn't ditched me to hang out in the skate park with the other boys, though. Rosco had his eyes on broader horizons. He started his first business when he was eleven, selling funky caps online. At fourteen he switched to designing apps for businesses and made some serious money. Now he's thrown all this capital into opening Gold Star Investigations. The Gold Coast, he says, is crying out for PIs. He's changed a lot since we were playmates, but I suppose I have, too.

Rosco's been in business for six months and I am his first

employee. My relationship with him as a CEO is different to when he was Han Solo. From the moment I started, a week ago, he's treated me like an IQ-challenged sidekick. My role is clear. I am not Princess Leia, Nancy Drew, or even Batgirl. No, I am Watson to his Sherlock, Hastings to his Poirot, Robin to his Batman.

Rosco has now become something of an enigma to me. He makes out like he's a typical Aussie surfer boy, but he's never been that. How many nineteen-year-old surfers start their own PI business? I know why I'm in the game, but as for him ... no idea. He says it's purely business but I'm not buying it. If he was trying to make money, he'd have stuck with IT.

As I sprint up the grey-carpeted stairs, my glasses fog up from the effort. I burst into the office and, even through the haze on my lenses, I can see that Rosco doesn't look happy. 'Sorry, Rosco. You wouldn't believe the traffic.'

'Hudson rang, asking after his background check.'

'Yeah, sorry. I'll be right onto it.' Islink off to my corner. My work to date has revolved around two things – internet searches spiced up with a bit of surveillance. This involves sitting in bushes taking shots of men doing things they don't want you to see. Crouching in bushes is the assistant's job. Exactly what the manager's job is, I haven't yet worked out. Fast-talking and hustling, perhaps. Rosco's good at that.

I press the power button, polish my glasses on my T-shirt, and hum the theme music from *Star Wars* as I wait for my computer to boot up. Everyone has their morning routines.

'Earth to Tatooine. Look out the window and tell me what's wrong with this picture.' Rosco is behind me. It's been ten years since we played *Star Wars*, but he still knows the theme song when he hears it.

The music dries up in my throat and I slide my glasses back on. This is Rosco's form of on-the-job training. I might be earning less than minimum wage, but I'm getting the benefit of his vast experience, he says. When he tells me this I resist the urge to point out he only trained as a PI last year.

A few times a day he pops up beside me and gives me a grilling. You're doing surveillance in a suburban street; how do you avoid getting noticed? he'll bark. Or, Name three good ways to get information out of a reluctant witness.

I feel like he'll keep me in after work if I give the wrong answer. Or maybe boot me out for good. Rosco can't expect a super sleuth on my salary, but a girl who's learned all she knows from Nancy Drew and Veronica Mars might not be what he had in mind either. He's having second thoughts about me, I can tell, and he's not the type of guy to let a childhood friendship cloud his judgement. Business is business. As much as I try to stay cool, I want to keep this job.

My pulse races as I peer out the window. It's a typical Gold Coast street scene. Two blonde teenage girls in short shorts. Two blond teenage boys in baggy board shorts with surfboards. One couple – an older man with a girl around my age. A yellow bus with red and blue surfboards painted on the side, stopping to pick up passengers.

'Nothing. It's a trick question.' He's done that to me before. *Just keeping you on your toes*, he says.

'Look again.'

I look again. The teenage boys have turned to watch the girls go past. The bus is making its way up the street. *Nothing abnormal – code green*. There must be something about the couple.

The man is middle-aged and dressed in what passes for casual

on the Gold Coast: ironed polo shirt, tailored slacks and white leather shoes. He looks ready for a round of golf at Sanctuary Cove.

The girl is one of those sleek beauties who look like they don't even need to try. Her glossy hair hangs to the belt of her simple, but probably designer, little white dress. Gorgeous for sure, but her type isn't exactly unusual on the Gold Coast. *Code green, or* ...

'No suntan!' I yell like a contestant on Quiz of the Century.

Rosco smiles - a proud teacher. 'You're getting there.'

The couple pause beneath our sign, glance up and down the street, then open the door.

I look at Rosco and he nods. 'They're coming our way.'

This is a momentous event. It's the first time since I've started that a potential client has visited the office. Now, the theme from James Bond, *The Man with the Golden Gun*, starts in my head; *Olivia Grace and the case of the*—

There's a sharp knock. Rosco acts cool. Straightening the collar on his blue cotton shirt he opens the door.

The couple take off their sunglasses, as if on cue. 'Good morning, Mr Ledger.' Their accent is American. If they are surprised to find the office staffed by teenagers, they don't show it. Rosco has never let his youth affect his confidence.

The girl is even more beautiful close-up. She's almost geishalike with her pale, oval face and brilliant red lips.

`Let me introduce you to my assistant, Olivia Grace, `says Rosco.

I bound from my chair, tugging my too-short T-shirt over my cargo pants. I need to make a good impression. *How? How? How?* Cogs whir in my head. Steam practically comes out my ears, I'm thinking so hard.

Rosco raises his eyebrows. I'm taking too long. I should say

hello, but it's so boring, so unimpressive. I can do better than that. The couple's faces are impassive. They think I'm shy.

*I've got it.* I open my mouth. 'Howdy,' I say in a hearty voice.

It doesn't go down as well as I'd hoped. They look puzzled.

Perhaps they didn't hear me. I try again with a different emphasis and a more encouraging expression. 'Howdy partner!'

The girl smiles and I breathe again.

'Oh, you mean *howdy pardner*.' She sounds like she's walked out of a movie set in New York. One filled with yellow taxis and smart-talking street vendors. 'Your pronunciation is very,' she purses her shiny, red lips, 'Australian.'

The man gives me a small nod. 'Can we speak somewhere private, Mr Ledger?'

Rosco ushers them towards his glass-walled office, flinging me a *what the hell?* look over his shoulder.

Deflated, I sink back to my seat.

Rosco is ensconced with the Americans for some time. I complete the Hudson check in a fury of efficiency, print it out and arrange it in a folder. Glancing over at Rosco, I see he is putting everything he has into this pitch. His suntanned face is animated and he doesn't pause to flick his blond hair out of his eyes. He looks like Han Solo trying to convince Chewbacca to break out of prison.

I pretend to work until I hear Rosco's door open. The American couple walk straight to the door. I can't let them go like that. This is a big job, I can sense it. It's an American job, a New York job, and jobs don't come bigger than that. I want in.

I'm well qualified to liaise with American clients. I lead an exciting multicultural life. Watching Hollywood blockbusters and eating hamburgers is my favourite weekend activity.

'Bye guys, can't wait to ride shotgun with you,' I call. That's what they always say in the movies – *ride shotgun*. It means to help someone out, I think.

The Americans swivel at the door. They stare at me, their faces blank, then the girl murmurs something to Rosco. He taps the side of his head with his index finger. I strain my ears but can't catch what he says. It doesn't look good.

*Code orange. Code orange.* Faster beats my pulse. In times of stress I find Yoda-speak calming.

As their steps recede down the staircase Rosco turns on me. 'Ride shotgun? What the hell? I had to tell them you were a few spanners short of a picnic.'

'Did they know what that meant?'

'They got the idea.'

'I was just trying to be friendly. It's nice to talk to people in their own dialect. It makes them feel at home.'

He folds his arms and looks stern. The fact that I've seen him dressed in his mother's white dressing gown brandishing an umbrella as a lightsaber should be helpful right now, but it is not.

*Code red. Code red.* I've seen that look before, he's about to ditch me. I decide to get in first. 'Okay, sorry. It's not working out, is it? If you want me to leave, I'll go.' I stand; stuffing the snowdome surfer I bought from Seiji yesterday into my shoulder bag.

The corner of Rosco's mouth quivers.

I pick up my Surfers Paradise drink coasters and drop them in my bag too. I can't believe it; he's really going to let me go.

Rosco laughs. 'Don't be such a drama queen. Everyone makes mistakes. Go get some lunch; I'll see you back here in half an hour.'

I pull my souvenirs back out and sit them on my desk. Disaster averted. My pulse settles. *Code green*.

Rosco leans against the door frame watching me, his face unreadable. 'Olivia?'

'Yes?' I have no idea what he is going to say next. It's so weird how someone you've known since childhood can turn into a stranger.

He puts his hand in his pocket and jingles his change. 'Get me a salad roll while you're out, will you?'

Nancy Drew and Princess Leia put up with this would not, but I want the job so I put out my hand. 'White or wholemeal?'