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# ASK ANYONE

by Caleb

## CHAPTER 2

I awoke next morning to typical Melbourne autumn weather – cold, misty and drizzly. The gardens around us were painted with autumn colours but they seemed somehow muted. Perhaps it was a reflection of how I felt. I knew that today would probably be my last day at *Michael/Angelo* and breakfast was gloomy ... with porridge.

With real sensitivity, Aunt Prue forbore to comment on my black mood. I did not do the crossword in the morning paper as I usually did, but just sat there, wallowing in my misery. At the end of the meal, I pecked her on the cheek and muttered, “I’ll see you later.” She held on to me tightly for a few moments before letting me go in silence. The tram trip into work was as hateful as ever, and highly polished Suzy in the reception area merely raised a disdainful eyebrow at my sullen “Good morning.”

The questions from the layout department seemed more than usually banal...

“No. No. *Iridescent* is spelt with one “r”... that's right... no, not two...It derives from Iris, the Greek goddess of the rainbow ... Don't you have Spellcheck on your computer? ... Oh.. I see .. Well, glad I could be of help..”

I was collating some papers when I heard Ruth on the phone. “Yes Mr. Boynton... I'll send him right up.. Mr. Boynton.”

She called out to me. “Mr. Boynton wants you to take this file up to his office.”

I sighed. This was it. Well, I decided that I should put the best face I could on it and try to come out of this fiasco with as much dignity as I could muster. The trip up in the lift seemed to take forever. When I got to his office, Angie, his secretary was on the phone and when she saw me, she said in a husky whisper and with extravagant finger pointing, “Go right in. He's waiting for you.”

I knocked on the door and his calm deep voice said, “Come in.” I looked around the door and was surprised to find that he wasn't at his desk, but I saw him standing at the corner window gazing out on the weeping cityscape. I cleared my throat and said nervously, “M-ms Casey said you wanted this file, sir.”

“Just put it on my desk please, Cunningham ... and take a seat.”

I saw with a start there was another file on his desk – my personnel file. I swallowed hard and placed the file I was carrying carefully beside it and gingerly sat down.

The silence seemed to yawn out interminably. He said, “It may surprise you to know, Cunningham, that since our talk yesterday, I have been able to think of little else.”

I licked my lips and started, "Sir. I ..."

He then suddenly turned around and said, "Tell me about yourself, Cunningham."

That took me by surprise. I looked indecisively at my file on his desk. He understood me perfectly. As he sat down, he said, "I want to know more than what is on record. I want to know about you ... the person who is Simon Cunningham." He then sat back and gazed into the distance in the same way he had done the day before, waiting for me to talk.

So I talked. I told him of my family, my irregular birth, the breach in my family caused by my mother's abandoning me, my upbringing, and of course I told him of Aunt Prue and my long dead grandfather. What I did not tell him was the pathetic history of my sex life. He listened carefully and when I was finished there was a short pause and he asked suddenly, "Are you gay?"

That question really took me by surprise. I became very flustered. "I thought ... um ..I mean... because I asked ..." I petered out and then said quietly, "Yes, I am."

For the first time he looked at me. "And what makes you think that Angelo Pucino is the man for you?"

I gulped. I had not questioned my attraction to him. As I tried to put my chaotic thoughts in order, I answered very slowly and quietly. "Because I am attracted to him. Because he is everything that I am not.. everything I want to be... beautiful, self assured... Because I would like to ... love him .. and to have him love me.." I dropped my eyes. What else could I say?

He leant forward on the desk and absently started lining up the files. He said in a low voice, "I've known Angelo since we were at Sydney University together. In those days we were more alike. And for a time, a very short time, we were together..."

That came as a shock. I was astounded at the confession and slyly glanced at his wedding ring.

He continued, unaware of me. "...but he moved on, and I recovered, and we remained friends. I think I'm his only friend. I see the way he influences people – his oh-so-easy charm and charisma, the effortless way he can bend people, both men and women, to his will."

I said, by way of defending him, a man I had never met, "Well ...they say he brings a lot of contracts to *Michael/Angelo*."

Michael Boynton, the senior partner of the company, pressed his lips together austerely and said, "It is not a way I care to do business."

He sat back and looked at me. "So. Be warned, Cunningham. Loving him will not be easy."

It dawned on me then what he was about. "Does this mean ...?"

He was way ahead of me. "Yes, Cunningham. It means that you and I ... together ... shall formulate a campaign to ..um ... break in Mr. Angelo Pucino."

He flipped the intercom and when his secretary responded, "Yes, Mr Boynton..." he said briskly, "Angie. I want you to start a new account file. Mark it ..." and he shot a glance at me with a wisp of a smile.."..um ...*Simon Love*..."

"Yes, Mr Boynton..."

"...And when you have done all that has to be done to start the new file, bring it in here and leave it on my desk. When I get a moment I'll fill out all the info required."

"Yes, Mr. Boynton..."

"Now. Have you got my diary there? I would like to set aside one hour every day , say

from nine to ten in the morning, for the next four weeks ... to work on the *Simon Love* account. We can review it after four weeks.”

“Yes, Mr Boynton. I may have to move around a few of your appointments...”

“Please do that. If there is a real clash, let me know and we'll sort something out. Oh, and Angie...”

“Sir?”

“..Um ...I would prefer it if Angelo did not know about this...”

There was a short pause, and she answered, “Of course, Mr Boynton...” I could hear the lack of understanding in her voice.

He smiled a tight smile. “Thank you, Angie.”

As I watched him marshalling his forces, I began to become a little alarmed. He was going to devote some of his time – well, a lot of his time by the sound of it – and for what?

His time was valuable. How would I be able to repay him? I felt I had to say something. As soon as he had finished speaking to his secretary, I said, in a rush, “Mr. Boynton... I don't think I'll be able to .. um .. afford you...”

He smiled a slow wide smile, transforming his features. “There will be no charge, Cunningham. Look on it, if you will, as an exercise in the practical application of the principles of Advertising.”

I couldn't let it go at that.

“But why?” I asked, mystified by his actions, “Why would you do this?”

His smile faded and he looked very thoughtful. “Because ...” he replied, “because I think it is time that my partner grew up; because I think, in spite of his leaping from bed to bed, that he is basically very lonely. He needs a companion, a man who will love him in spite of himself.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. “Me?”

He inclined his head in agreement. “You are the right age; you are male; and though it may surprise you, you have had an upbringing many would envy; I don't think you have an ounce of vanity in you; you are patently intelligent, and amazingly well-educated. From what I know of you, I believe, I truly believe, you could be the making of him.”

I flushed before this lavish praise.

He looked at me for a moment and then held out his hand towards me over the desk.

He said, with a glinting smile, “Do we have a contract?”

There was absolutely no hesitation as I grabbed his hand and shook it with vigorous enthusiasm.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Boynton, “ I gushed, “ for as long as you want.”

He nodded and said “Good,” decisively. He leant forward and put his elbows on the desk and spoke to me carefully and plainly.

“Now,” he said, “there are two things that we must be very clear about from the outset. The first is our objective.” I nodded eagerly, not quite understanding him.

He smiled slightly at my eagerness and asked me, “How will we know when our campaign has been successful?”

I looked at him blankly, then the penny dropped. “Well, I suppose, “ I said cautiously, “when he loves me.”

He sat back and gave a cynical smile. “A little hard to assess, I think. Our goal

must be able to be measured.”

“Oh, I see.” I thought about it. What did I want? I licked my lips and said with a slight blush, “When he... when he ...um... takes me to his bed.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Is that all you want? For him to fuck you? Remember hardly a day goes by when he is not bedding some willing young thing. Is this what you want? To be another notch on his bed post?” He was watching me carefully.

I was nonplussed. No. That was not what I wanted. I wanted him to .... desire me... to love me.

“No,” I said at length. “I want him to value me, but I don't know how that can be assessed....unless...perhaps...” a thought struck me “perhaps I will know I am successful when he asks me to move in with him.” He was looking at me with an enigmatic look on his face. “I don't think I can expect more than that.”

He seemed to consider that. “Yes. I agree. That would be a very good indicator that we have been successful.” He seemed lost in thought.

“And the second thing...?” I prompted.

“What?”

“You said there were two things that had to be clarified at the outset.”

He looked me in the eyes across the expanse of his desk.

“What will be our criterion for failure? How will we know when it is time to pull the plug? To stop the campaign because it is fruitless?”

I had never considered this. So I reflected on the question. What would make me stop? Well, obviously, lack of results. But I knew myself... I knew that I would persevere, even in the face of arrant failure, as long as there was the slightest hope of success. But I could not expect this man who was helping me to do this. No. His time was too valuable.

“That's it,” I said suddenly. “A time limit. If we have not achieved success in say, three months, then we stop.”

He nodded. “Good. Very good. We make an ad-man of you yet. Is three months long enough?”

“Six months?”

“Yes, I think so. We don't want to drag this thing out, but we must give ourselves enough time. Any longer, and I think it will be too hard on you emotionally.”

I dropped my eyes. I didn't want to tell him that, after Warren, my emotional sensibilities had the texture of stone.

I watched him as he rooted around in one of the desk drawers, extracted a small decorative box, and placed it on the desk in front of me. I looked at him, puzzled.

“Open it,” he said.

I did so. Inside was a perfume atomiser with a pale gold liquid in it. I looked at him for explanation.

“It's a men's cologne that Angelo is very keen for us to market. Very keen. Tell me what you think of it.”

I cautiously sprayed the back of my hand, sniffed and recoiled.

“God,” I cried, “it's awful ... and so strong.” He grinned as I pushed the atomiser away from me.

“I agree,” he said with a laugh, “but here's the interesting thing... Angelo is quite taken with it. He thinks the perfume is very original.”

I sniffed carefully at it again. I couldn't help the distaste showing on my face. “It smells ... woody ...um...mossy... but with a nasty undertone...” I was suddenly reminded

of a phrase I had read somewhere. "....primaeval... like the moss is rooted in the slime of decay."

He raised his eyebrows. "Primaeval. That would be a good name for it. Tell me, Cunningham, have you ever spoken to Angelo?"

I grinned sheepishly. "I tried to introduce myself to him at the get-together yesterday, but I got the big brush-off."

His eyes were suddenly sparkling with mischief.

"Let us try an experiment," he said. He pushed the atomiser towards me. "Put it on." And he waved a hand vaguely round his face, and flipped a switch on his intercom.

"Yes Mike ..." came the voice on the other end, and my bowels turned to water.

"Glad I caught you, Angelo.."

"I'm just stepping out the door, Mike. Plane to catch."

"Could you bring me the Thompson file as you leave?"

"Sure thing. Be there in a minute."

I was sitting with my mouth open.

"Put it on. Put it on," he said, and I reluctantly did so. "Now," he continued, "when he comes in, don't say anything but just sit there."

So I sat, in a miasma of Jurassic swamp.

A jaunty knock on the door and Angelo Pucino breezed in. It was just as well that the boss had told me not to say anything, because I would have been unable to speak - I was speechless with admiration. He was exquisitely dressed in a beautiful and very expensive Italian suit with a coloured shirt that set off his amazing brown eyes to perfection. He was carrying a briefcase and an Aquascutum raincoat over his arm.

He had a file that he waved around.

"Here 'tis," he said, "Gotta rush. See you in about two weeks." Of course, I was completely ignored.

Micheal Boynton flashed a smile at him. "Thanks. I'll be in touch tonight."

Angelo Pucino turned to go, and then the strangest thing happened. He stopped by the door and slowly turned back and looked at me as though seeing me for the first time.

"It's ... uh...?"

"Cunningham, sir," I supplied, "Simon Cunningham. I work in Ms Casey's department."

He smiled at me. Me! A smile that caressed me with sexual promise.

"Of course it is," he said. "Well, I'll see you when I get back... Simon." A smile and a wink and he was gone.

I turned to Michael Boynton, who was sitting back in his chair with a wide grin on his face.

"I ... don't ... be... -lieve ... it..." I managed to choke out. "That stuff is dynamite." At that moment, I would gladly have bathed in it, in spite of its revolting odour.

He carefully returned the cologne to its box.

"Now," he said briskly, "Angelo will be in Sydney for two weeks, so we have that time to plan the first assault."

He looked at me through narrowed eyes, considering.

In a spooky echo of Aunt Prue, he said suddenly, "Is that what you usually wear to work?"

I nodded, a little embarrassed.

He assessed me, muttering, "Hmmm. Stand up. Turn round."

I was wearing my favourite tweed jacket. I had matched it with a pair of jumbo wale corduroy pants of a very nondescript dark grey/green colour and a Country Club shirt of a cotton/wool mix and a traditional hunting check. I also wore a tie – sage green wool with a fringed edge. I rotated slowly for his inspection and after he had nodded, I sat down again.

He said, “Have you ever tried contacts? You have attractive eyes, you know. You shouldn't hide them behind those horn rims you wear. You look like a mad scientist.”

As ever, the slightest criticism made me stumble over my words. “I've never t-tried contacts, sir.”

He smiled sympathetically, understanding perfectly my hesitancy.

“Our first task then,” he said, “will be to repackage the product... you. Think about contacts, and we'll have to do something about your clothes. You dress like a geek.”

I went scarlet with humiliation.

He continued on, seemingly not to notice my embarrassment. “When you come to work tomorrow, I want you to wear the smartest, trendiest clothes you have.” He raised his eyebrows at me, demanding my agreement.

“Yes, sir,” I mumbled.

He rolled his eyes. “Cunningham,” he said, “we'll be working together quite closely over the next couple of months. I think you can drop the 'sir'. I'm not that much older than you, you know.”

I felt like a hare that was harried by the hounds. “What do you want me to call you, s- ...um ... Mr Boynton?”

“ 'Mike' will be fine.”

I suddenly felt very shy. “Yes ... um .. Mike,” I muttered.

He grinned. “That cologne was only the beginning. You know, I feel rather sorry for Angelo. He won't know what's hit him.”

I glowed with pleasure. “I hope so, ... Mike.”

“Right,” he said, suddenly very business-like. “I'll see you here, in this office at nine tomorrow, dressed in your smartest threads. By then, I'll have some other ideas about how we can plan this campaign.”

I got up to leave and felt I had to say something. “Um .. Mike...” I said, and to my dismay I couldn't think of anything to say. “Um .. thanks.” I left the room closing the door firmly behind me.

Angie looked at me curiously as I passed her desk. “See you later, Simon,” she called after me. I turned and said shyly, “Bye.”

Ruth Casey peered at me over her chain-driven half spectacles. “What *is* that after-shave you're wearing?”

I grinned at her from across the room. “It's called Primaeval, and it's a line that Mr. Boynton is thinking of marketing. He gave me a sample to try. Do you like it?”

There was a pause as she considered. “No.”

I laughed. “Good call. I think it's vile, but I could hardly refuse.”

She gave me a sour look. “Sometimes, Simon, you're too obliging for your own good.”

Which, I suppose, was a nice way of saying that I was spineless.

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That night, after dinner, I went through my wardrobe, trying to find the trendiest clothes I had. I was doomed to failure. I had not realized it before, but Aunt Prue was right - I did indeed dress like a middle-aged man. It was very depressing. Because of my ingrained shyness, I shrank from drawing attention to myself, so all my clothes were a symphony in dung and sludge. Finally I dragged out my black suit; I had only worn it once. I daringly matched it (well, daring for me, anyway) with a dark blue shirt and a sincere black tie.

Aunt Prue looked up from the strange surreal embroidery that she was doing and watched me as I handed the clothes to Li to freshen up for the morning.

"Going to church, dear?" she asked.

I smiled. "No. There's ... um ... a formal thing on at work tomorrow."

She nodded but did not make further comment.

As she carefully chose a skein of thread, she said suddenly, "I was shopping in the Village this morning. You'll never guess whom I saw there."

I smiled. Aunt Prue always insisted on calling Toorak shopping centre, one of Melbourne's most up-market shopping centres, "The Village".

I poured two sherries and hand her one. "Whom did you see?"

"Thank you, dear. I saw Maria Blanchard."

I froze. Aunt Prue was unaware of my reaction and she continued on.

"It must be nearly six years since we'd seen each other. She was with her son, the one who was studying law. What was his name again?"

"Warren," I answered very softly and looked out on the night garden.

She was concentrating on her work. "Yes, that's it. I must say she has really let herself go. She's put on so much weight, I barely recognized her. In fact, she recognized me before I knew her. And he's become so very pompous. He's a barrister now, so I suppose that's understandable. She was bemoaning the fact that he can't become a QC anymore."

"Barristers can still apply for silk, but they're not called QC's in Victoria now. They're called Senior Counsels."

She looked up. "Oh. I didn't know that. Anyway, I invited them over for a little dinner party next week."

I downed my sherry in one gulp.

I had to think fast. "Do you think this shoe-box of a house is big enough to entertain in? We've never had a dinner party here before. Perhaps it might be better to go to a restaurant?"

She looked around at the room. "I had never considered it, dear. I think you may be right.... but not a restaurant, dear ....restaurants are so ... so ..."

"Common?" I couldn't help being a little cynical.

She gave me a high-nosed look. "The word I was looking for was 'impersonal'." She resumed her stitching. "I have a better idea. We could open up the big house. There's no one in it at the moment."

"What! That's a lot of trouble for a mere dinner party."

She smiled thoughtfully. "I don't mean the whole house, dear. Heaven forbid! No, just the dining room, morning room and the kitchen." She turned the idea over in her mind

I grinned. I realized what she was about. She intended to play the game of Oneupmanship with her old sparring partner.

Then she said, "Why don't you invite someone from your work? Preferably a couple. Then the numbers won't be uneven."

"I don't know anyone that well."

She looked at me with an unreadable expression. "No? That's a pity, dear. I'm sure Warren would like someone interesting to talk to - apart from yourself, I mean." She continued calmly to stitch at her embroidery. I was speechless.

"It will be nice to see Maria again, don't you think? And of course, Warren." And

she looked up and gave me a bland smile.

I was shocked to the core. That smile informed me that Aunt Prue had always known about my affair with Warren. Never before had she even hinted that she knew anything. How did she know? And, more to the point, what was she about, inviting them here? It was not like her. Usually consideration for others was her mantra.

I sighed, admitting defeat. "Shall I book in the cleaners for early next week?" She smiled and nodded. "Yes, dear. Please. And I might ring Harriet and get the name of the caterers she used for Miranda's twenty-first." She was obviously getting carried away by the vision of this dinner party. "I'll talk to Henry about flowers. The roses are looking particularly good this year. And Li and I can look out the silver and linen and china from the store room." She looked up at me, with a bright smile. "Your grandmother's Spode, I think."

I gaped at her. "That's very grand. We're not entertaining the Queen." She gave me a pitying look. "Don't be silly, dear. I like the Spode service. We haven't used it for years."

Trying to keep the cynicism out of my voice, I asked, "Is this going to be a black-tie affair, Aunt Prue?"

She gave a tinkly laugh. "Of course not, dear. Just something smart." And she gave me a searching up-and-down look. I knew what was on her mind, and I remembered the comment that Michael Boynton made about my looking like a geek.

I said colourlessly, "I shall probably be buying a few new clothes this week-end, Aunt – for work."

Again the bright smile. "Lovely, dear. Make sure you get something nice. We'll want to look our best, won't we?" And she resumed her stitching with an irritatingly satisfied air.

I stood for inspection in my black suit, while Michael Boynton leant back in his chair and twiddled a pencil in his fingers and assessed my efforts at trendy dressing.

After a long pause, he said suddenly, "Oi vay."

I stared at him. "What?"

He gave me a wry smile and said, "You look like you're going to a bar mitzvah. Is that the best you can do?"

I closed my eyes, determined not to let him rattle me.

"I d-don't have many clothes," I said, trying very hard not to make it sound like a whining excuse.

He sighed. "Sit down Cunningham, and thank you anyway for making the effort. You and I shall have to go shopping very soon. This weekend?"

I nodded, relieved that the decisions would be taken out of my hands. "Yes. Yes. This weekend would be good." I was thinking of the dinner party that was looming.

He looked at me pointedly. "You'll have to be prepared to spend a little money."

I was prepared for this. "That won't be a problem, s... Mike."

"Good." He smiled conspiratorially, and withdrew a large journal from one of the drawers of his desk. "I had a little luck last night," he said. "Quite by chance, I was looking through Angelo's appointment diary from last year and I noticed that he has the habit of annotating it."

I was puzzled. "Of course he annotates it. It's a diary."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, no. I mean, he annotates the annotations. He writes comments against some of the entries. It's all very revealing ... almost Freudian."

I was a bit at sea, but I smiled with polite interest.



He thumbed through the diary. "For instance, against an appointment date with Kyle Onslow, he's written 'Red head' .. with two exclamation marks."

"So?"

He gazed into the distance. "I remember Kyle Onslow... he was indeed a redhead... very distinctive..." He saw my bewilderment. "Onslow Packing. We handled their account at the end of last year. He was the son of the owner."

I felt impelled to ask, "Did he and...?" and I trailed off.

He did not pretend to misunderstand me. That look of stern neutrality flickered over his face once more. "Oh yes ... on more than one occasion, I would guess."

He continued to turn over the pages of the diary. He grinned. "Look at this one.... 'Cha-cha-cha'."

I smiled along with him. "What's that mean?"

He shrugged. "Maybe this one was a dancer ... um... Harry Bakewell ... Bakewell Confectionery."

I said, "I don't understand."

He looked at me with sly triumph in his face. "Don't you see, Cunningham? This diary is a gold mine. Angelo has carefully written out all the things that turn him on. This knowledge is priceless. If we could somehow gather all these attributes and give them to you, Angelo will not stand a chance."

I couldn't help scoffing. "That's not possible."

He was thoughtful for an instant. "You may be right," he said, and then suddenly his face lit up and he reached for his intercom. "...And then again, you may be wrong."

"Yes, Mr. Boynton?"

"Angie. Could you please get Kyle Onslow on the line for me... Onslow Packing."

"One moment, Mr Boynton."

He leant back in the chair. "I think I'll see for myself just how red his hair is."

I was mystified. "Why? What good would that do?"

He gave me a strange lop-sided grin. "Have you ever considered colouring your hair?"

I gaped at him, at a loss for words. He saw my stunned surprise and said, a little tartly, "Well. We'll have to do something about it. It looks like a spiteful haystack."

I ran my fingers self-consciously through my hair. It had always been unruly since childhood. I wore it rather long, and with its dirty blond colour, I had to admit that "spiteful haystack" was a good way to describe it – good, but cruel.

"Mr. Onslow on line one, Mr. Boynton."

"Thanks Angie." He gave me a speaking look and then picked up the phone and leant back in his chair, and as I watched in amazement, a new persona seemed to flow over him. I realized I was watching a master tactician at work. His conversation was warm, friendly yet businesslike, and all the while there was an undercurrent of ... of what?

'Sexual innuendo' was perhaps too strong a description yet it was very clear to me, and I'm sure to the man on the other end of the line, that the meeting that Michael Boynton was arranging was more – much more – than a mere business dinner.

And at that moment I was surprised to find that I envied this mysterious Kyle Onslow.