

The Girl in
Steel-Capped
Boots

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LORETTA HILL



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*For the real Lena,
My beautiful sister and successful engineer.
When we were younger, I wrote stories to make you laugh.
Nothing much has changed.*

Chapter 1

‘We’d like you to go to the Pilbara.’

Oh no. ‘Er . . . the Pilbara?’ Wasn’t that a wasteland of bush, red dirt and hot weather? Lena clutched her hands together in her lap, noticing even in her dazed state that she had chipped her nail polish.

Damn.

‘Yes, Cape Lambert to be precise,’ her boss, Ivan, continued.

Focus.

‘Oh right.’ She smoothed her cream skirt across her thighs and regarded him with what she hoped was an expression of intelligent interest. ‘I’ve heard about the project we’ve got going on out there. Sounds big.’

It was. It was one of the biggest projects Barnes Inc had taken on that year. Theoretically, Lena should have felt honoured that she had been chosen to go, but she didn’t.

Not even slightly.

The outback was something to be celebrated on Australia Day, or perhaps on a stroll through Perth Museum. But as far as Lena was concerned, one should never *live* there. Lena liked the city. She liked the nightclubs. And she loved shopping.

Couldn't she use her skills here?

Ivan pushed the papers on his desk together into a neat pile. 'We believe as a graduate engineer this experience will enhance your site skills. This is a vital requirement for a good engineer. Would you be interested in taking this position?'

Lena's skin prickled as she registered the importance of the question.

It was a test. He was asking her if she was serious about her career.

'Yes, yes, I would.'

For goodness sake, sound convincing.

She cleared her throat and tossed her dark blonde mane. 'It's very important to me to do well here, Ivan.'

'Glad to hear it.'

Oh good. The Tone. It wasn't the first time Lena had heard that particular blend of condescension and sarcasm in someone's voice. In fact, she got it a lot. Heard it on her first day of work when she'd arrived wearing her lucky red suit. Heard it at her first meeting when she'd laid her turquoise smartphone on the table next to her notebook. What was it with engineers and fashion? Was there some rule against bright colours and quality accessories that she hadn't read about at university?

An internal groan echoed in her head. There was a lot she hadn't picked up on over her four years at university. She hadn't even worked out that she was there to study not party until her third year. It was her parents' fault really, sending her to a strict private school for girls. It was no wonder that when she broke out, all she wanted to do was let her hair down. She licked her lips. 'So . . . er . . . how long do you need me there for?'

'About three months for starters.'

For starters!

Lena swallowed. She had been told about others who had been transferred there. They never came back. The outback was like the Bermuda Triangle. It sucked you in and pretty

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soon the people in the city didn't know where you were or what had become of you. She'd be leaving all her friends behind. She pictured the parties booming without her. No one glancing up from their cocktails to ask where she was. No one looking at the door to see if she had arrived. The scene cut unhappily to her sitting under a gum tree in dirty clothes, fanning herself against tropical heat. Her hair, unrecognisable – fuzzy and teased to an enormous height by the weather. Unconsciously, her fingers reached behind her ear to pull at strands.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine. Fine.’ But her throat had constricted painfully as Ivan's face came back into focus. She knew she couldn't say no. This was the point where she was expected to fail, give up the ghost, show herself to be unfit for the profession she had chosen.

But I can do this. She sat up straighter, determination thickening her spine. She had too much to prove – more than the other engineers who didn't wear skirts and clips in their hair. She could be as good as any of them; and here was her chance to show it. So she stretched her lips into a gorgeous cherry-gloss smile.

‘When do I start?’

‘Immediately. Have Megan book a flight for you.’ His heartless and dismissive assent had Lena biting her lip, desperate to buy back time.

‘Could I have a few days to organise myself?’ The Myer Stocktake Sale hadn't finished yet and she wanted to catch up with all her friends before she left – perhaps even throw one of her famous parties at her favourite club.

Ivan raised his eyebrows. ‘Okay, Monday then.’

Lena knew by the tightness around his mouth that she couldn't push her luck any further. ‘Perfect.’

She headed back to her cubicle on wobbly legs and had to clutch her desk as she lowered herself into her chair.

What have I done?

She grabbed her mouse and as she moved it the Barnes Inc screensaver on her monitor disappeared and her email flashed up on the screen. There was a new message from Robyn.

RE: Dinner at il Ciao tonight?

Lena clutched her mobile and tapped her best friend's name in her favourites.

'Hey. Did you get my email?'

'Sure, yeah. Dinner's fine,' Lena rattled off, her head darting from left to right to see if any of her colleagues were within earshot. They weren't but she lowered her voice further anyway.

'Something terrible has happened.'

Robyn gasped. 'You've ruined your red velvet coat.'

Lena rolled her eyes. 'Not that bad.'

There was a pause and then another deep breath. 'OMG. *They found out.*'

'Close.' Lena gritted her teeth against a wave of panic. 'They're *going* to find out.'

'How? When? Did you stuff up?'

'No.' Lena shut her eyes. 'If anything, I think they're impressed with me. I mean, they've got to be. They've just decided to send me to the Pilbara.'

Robyn snorted. 'Then what the hell are you worried about?'

'Have you not been listening? They're going to send me to the *Pilbara*, Robyn – as in the outback, as in the rear end of nowhere!'

The gravity of the situation had finally dawned on Robyn: her reply came back breathless. 'OMG. You're right. You'll die out there. Tell them you won't go.'

'I can't do that.' Lena bobbed her head over the wall of her cubicle again, on the lookout for eavesdroppers. 'It's all part of my initiation. They're trying to find my limits. I have to prove that I can do this. I have to show them I'm a good engineer.'

'Puh-lease. *We* know you're a good engineer.'

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‘No, we don’t.’ Lena moved the phone closer to her mouth so that her lips brushed the receiver. ‘Don’t you see, Robyn? Maybe this is exactly what I need.’

‘No life and a tropical cyclone?’ Robyn’s voice was firm. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘It’s not quite cyclone season there yet.’

‘Who cares? Whatever. Just don’t go.’

‘I have to do this.’

‘Lena, you *don’t*,’ Robyn said. ‘Nobody knows about what happened in uni except for you, me and Intellectually Impaired. And let’s face it, he’s not going to tell anyone.’

‘That doesn’t make it right.’ She shook her head. ‘This might.’

Robyn’s sigh was long and exasperated. ‘Well, if you’re going to the Pilbara, for goodness sake don’t take your red velvet coat.’

The flight to Karratha was relatively short and Lena whiled away the time reading a magazine. Immersing herself in articles such as ‘Ten Ways to Liven Up Your Wardrobe This Summer’ and ‘Is He Cheating on You and How to Find Out . . .’. Anything to distract herself from the fact that she was off to live on a construction site for three or more months, just to prove that Intellectually Impaired didn’t have a point: ‘You’re a beautiful girl, Lena . . . the real world won’t fall for you as easily as I have.’

She could still see the fury on his face when he’d said that to her. That wrinkled brow she used to love kissing smooth – in the beginning, when she’d idolised him.

He’d come into her life at just the right time. He was so smart and dedicated and so good at everything she wanted to be good at. He’d helped her too, helped her a lot. She never questioned that part and would probably always be grateful for it. But people change. People grow up. She certainly had.

Wheels colliding with the tarmac jolted her from her thoughts and she shot a glance out her oval window. There wasn't much to see. Karratha Airport was small compared to the Perth one: just a single-storey country terminal, surrounded by low scrub. She grimaced. This town was considered the big smoke. Her boss said she'd be taken from here to live on the outskirts of a much smaller place called Wickham.

The man waiting to pick her up was similarly disappointing: short, bald, tubby and decidedly cranky-looking. He was clearly a Barnes Inc employee because the blue shirt he was wearing had the company logo embroidered over the breast pocket. His legs were covered by navy army surplus pants. Lena's mood slipped another notch. *That uniform better be optional.*

Taking a deep breath, she strolled forwards, her hand held out before her in what she hoped was a friendly and enthusiastic manner. First impressions always paid and she needed to make a good one.

'You must be looking for me. I'm Lena Todd.'

She stood there frozen in greeting for a good three seconds, while he simply stared at her like she had sauce on her face. Sweat dampened the back of her neck as she began to wonder whether she actually did. Withdrawing her hand, she lifted it upwards towards her nose.

It was only then that he spoke. 'I'm Mike Hopkins.'

'Pleased to meet you.' She stuck her hand out again.

This time, however, he simply turned away and started walking towards the carousel. She hurried after him, realising that it wasn't her imagination – he *was* being deliberately rude.

Great. What's wrong with me now?

She squared her shoulders and turned on the charm. 'It's rather hot here, isn't it? I mean, considering we're just coming into winter.' She fell into step beside him, passing a French-manicured hand across her forehead and flashing him her most winning smile.

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Mike snorted. 'This is nothing. And you'll get nowhere if you're complaining already.' He stopped walking abruptly as they reached the carousel.

'Oh, I wasn't complaining,' she assured him. 'I love warm weather! Don't you?'

He ignored her comment. 'What does your bag look like?'

'Bags,' she told him. 'I have three.'

'Three!'

'Three red ones.' She nodded. Red was her lucky colour. Most of her things were red.

'You can't be serious.'

The smile dropped off her face. If he was going to insist on being rude, there was no point in wasting her perfectly good charm on him. 'Why not?' She put her hands on her hips.

'That you have to ask only reinforces my point,' he replied.

Unbidden, Kevin's voice echoed in her head: 'I told you, you weren't built for this profession. But you wouldn't have it.' She shook it off. Sexist rubbish. She was wise to Mike: he was a dinosaur. The subject of her observation took the opportunity to turn back to the carousel and seize a red bag that was passing them.

'Is this yours?'

She lifted her chin. 'Yes.'

A few seconds later, he had piled her vanity onto the rolling case and had the carry-on in his hand. She moved forwards to take it, but he pulled it out of her reach. Fuming, she caught up with him as he marched off and firmly tugged at the carry-on. She was perfectly capable of carrying her own gear. She had a lot of clothes, but she wasn't a princess. He returned her glare but let her bag go.

'What's in these things anyway?' he demanded as he neared the airport main entrance. 'Have you packed your boyfriend as well?' As she opened her mouth to tell him, he stopped her with a hand held palm out. Then came The Tone. 'No, don't tell me. I already know.'

Lena knew she had been optimistic to believe The Tone wouldn't follow her to Karratha, but she was aghast to hear it so soon. She had foolishly hoped that at least the first person she met might give her the benefit of the doubt. It was her disappointment which made her snap. 'You know, you're pretty rude.'

Having drawn her sword, Lena waited with bated breath for Mike to pull out his own. But he didn't, merely throwing her a contemptuous look – half smirk, half smile – and exiting the airport.

Her temper spiked. She caught hold of it and breathed deeply until her heart rate dropped to below Livid (if just above Cross). Mike was unquestionably and deliberately spiteful for no reason. After all, they'd only just met: how could she have offended him?

The vehicle Mike led her to was a two-seater ute covered in red dust. It was only just possible to see that its original colour had been white.

'Are all the cars out here this dirty?' she asked.

Mike's expression was scornful. 'You haven't seen dirty yet.' He paused. 'We'll go to the camp first to drop off your stuff. And then I'll take you to site.'

She swallowed. 'Er . . . camp? You don't mean tents, do you?'

His smile was positively evil. 'No.'

'Oh good. I was led to believe I would be given my own place.'

His smile broadened. 'You'll be given your own place.'

She studied him with narrowed eyes but he said no more, confining his attention to starting the ute. It made a gurgling, choking sound before roaring to life, almost as if it were coughing out the red dust first. Soon they were turning onto the main road. Mike adjusted the music volume just loud enough so they didn't have to talk. She was quite happy with that and focused on the view out the window.

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It was the outback.

Harsh, unforgiving and seemingly barren.

Lena was too much of a city dweller to find the stark flat redness inspiring. It was shrubs not trees that dotted the landscape beside the road. And the greenery was not lush. It was a dry green that looked parched – the colour of army personnel uniforms. The soil beside the road was red and pebbled. The only thing that was nice was the sunshine: bright and unfettered by a single grey cloud.

She was disappointed that the main road that led out of the airport took them past Karratha without entering it. Wickham was supposed to be a lot smaller and it would've been nice to have a benchmark.

Her first glimpse of the 'camp' was a bit of a shock, though Mike's unmistakable enjoyment of her horror kept her from mentioning it.

She decided that she didn't like Mike Hopkins, and set her face. He wasn't going to have the satisfaction of disconcerting her.

I am perfectly okay with this.

'This' was a grid of identical white boxes sitting on weed-ridden rock and soil. There were hundreds of them in neat rows making up a giant rectangle. Lena had seen these types of buildings before – at outdoor concerts. Her skin crawled. In her experience, they functioned as toilets or first aid offices, not bedrooms. Mike parked the ute, grunted and got out. He walked around to the rear of the vehicle so he could retrieve her bags from the open loading tray, but she jumped out after him and grabbed two bags before he could get to them. He simply shrugged, took the last bag and told her to follow him.

They entered the maze of boxes, gravel crunching underfoot. Lena looked around in vain for any sign of life, but empty, grimy cabins stretched as far as she could see. When they reached a T-junction, Mike pulled a key out of his pocket and examined the tag attached to it.

‘You’re number E32,’ he said and handed it to her. Turning away, he went left down one of the roughly hewn paths that cut through the maze. She followed him, trying to remember each turn they took.

He stopped. ‘This is it: your dongar.’

Dongar?

She looked over at what appeared to be no more than a garden shed on stumps and decided it was an apt name. Under Mike’s smug grin she climbed the two concrete blocks that led up to her front door. Unlocking it, she pushed it open. A gust of dry heat whooshed out and fried her. Bracing herself, she stepped in.

The box was smaller than an average bedroom for one and filled to capacity with mismatched furniture. She turned on the air-conditioner that was clumsily fitted into the window and then took a step back to take stock as it rattled into noisy life.

The plasterboard walls were covered in an ugly paper that she wouldn’t line a drawer with let alone a whole room. The glass window above the air-conditioner was barred by security mesh which made her feel like she was in a cell. There was a single bed against one wall, a tall thin wardrobe at the foot of the bed and a small desk and plastic chair against the other wall. In the corner beside the front door was a bar fridge. The thin strip of space she was supposed to move about in was only half a metre wide. Unfortunately this small area was completely covered once she unhooked her bags from her shoulders and lowered them to the floor. She knew one thing for certain: the wardrobe was not big enough to contain her clothes.

A snigger sounded behind her. ‘Do you want this one as well, or should I just leave it outside?’

She spun around and held out her hands. ‘I’ll take it.’

‘You better hurry up,’ Mike informed her as he dumped the bag at her feet. ‘There’s still a lot to do this afternoon.’

Lena stashed it in the wardrobe and then stepped outside, closing the door behind her. Again, she followed Mike through

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the maze, struggling to remember the way as they weaved between the dongars.

‘How many people live here?’ she finally asked.

‘About three hundred and fifty, give or take.’ He paused. ‘Your amenities are directly in front of E block. There’s only one toilet and bathroom block for the ladies.’

‘Why?’

‘There are only four ladies,’ Mike said. ‘You’ll make a fifth.’

Lena’s mouth dropped open. She was used to being in a workplace minority. But five out of three hundred and fifty? For every female on the job, there were seventy guys! She chewed her lower lip. The gap was much narrower at head office – *and* she could easily escape the odds after work by stepping out into the street. She *lived* in this camp now.

There was no escape.

Oh crap.

Mike seemed oblivious to her alarm. ‘I’ll take you to meet Ethel,’ he said without stopping. ‘She’s in charge of the camp. She was the first female we ever had living on site.’

The endless dirt track widened to reveal a larger dark brown brick building on the edge of the plain of dongars – the only permanent building on the entire site. They entered a small room with a long white counter against one wall. The place was clearly an office but it reminded Lena of a hospital. The decor was all white and plastic. A woman seated behind the counter looked up when they entered but continued to talk on her phone. She had bad hair, bad make-up and horrendously yellow teeth.

‘I’m sorry but it’s not our policy to try and position brothers next to each other,’ the woman was saying. ‘Yes, I realise the dongar next to yours is empty but it’s not our policy to reserve them, especially not for two weeks. This is not a motel.’

Clearly, the woman was neither tolerant nor flexible. Ethel’s half-veiled eyes remained fixed upon Lena the whole time she

was talking. It was a move, Lena realised, that was deliberately made to intimidate her. So she pulled back her shoulders and stood taller, not keen to be bested at this game.

Ethel hung up the phone without a goodbye and raised a pair of impatient and poorly pencilled eyebrows by way of greeting. Unabashed, Lena came forwards.

‘Hi, I’m Lena Todd. I just arrived –’

‘I know who you are,’ Ethel returned without warmth. ‘You look far worse than I expected.’

Riled and still sore from Mike’s insults, Lena couldn’t stop herself saying, ‘So do you.’ This impulsive rejoinder seemed to amuse Ethel. Lena was privileged with the first glimpse of what could’ve been a smile but was more like a cross between gas and a sneer.

Mike interrupted and for once Lena didn’t care. ‘I’ve just finished showing her her dongar,’ he said.

‘I see.’ Ethel swivelled in her chair to the shelving behind her, grabbing forms out of pigeon holes. ‘Breakfast is from five am to seven am. Dinner is from six-thirty pm to eight pm. Do not come outside those times because the mess hall will be locked and you will not be fed. A packed lunch will be provided for you to take to work at breakfast time. The door on your right leads to the mess hall, the door on the left leads to the games room. There is a gym next to the car park.’ She slapped the forms on the counter. ‘On these, fill out your details and who we are to contact in case of emergency. These others are a map of town, a map of the camp and a form for television hire.’

Lena nodded and Ethel slapped a pen on the counter, sat back and began to file her nails.

Lena glanced at the television form. ‘Surely the dongars aren’t big enough for a television as well.’

The file stopped moving and Ethel’s eyes flicked upwards, though her chin didn’t follow. ‘Do you have a problem with the accommodation?’

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Lena decided to be honest. ‘It’s just a little smaller than I was expecting.’

Ethel snorted. ‘And no sweet-smelling soaps or chocolates on the pillow either. Welcome to the real world, honey.’

Lena stopped arguing and started on the personnel form – she didn’t imagine she’d want to watch the limited television channels the outback offered anyway. In any case, she was in a rush: she needed to get straight to the office so she could reassure herself that she hadn’t left Perth in vain – that there really was an opportunity to prove herself in this godforsaken place. That the Pilbara, for all its warts, would teach her something about being a good engineer. An engineer who was *built* for this sort of work. No pun intended.

She checked her watch. It was four-thirty. If she went to the office immediately, she’d catch the staff before they clocked off. She turned back to Mike. ‘Shall we go to site?’

He looked her over. ‘Do you want to get changed?’

For half an hour, she couldn’t be bothered. Her khaki shorts and collared shirt were casual, but neat. ‘No, I’ll be fine.’

Ethel and Mike exchanged a look. A look Lena didn’t trust, but didn’t have time to worry about. She was desperate for good news before the day was over. She had to get to the office before she lost control and begged to be taken back to the airport for the next flight home.

The Cape Lambert work offices were located about two kilometres off the main highway, at the end of a lonely gravelly track that stopped right on the beach. The first thing that struck Lena when the sea came into view was that it didn’t look right. She had never seen a beach where the sand was red almost right up to the water’s edge. Here, just where the water lapped, it changed to a light yellow colour. There were black jagged rocks everywhere. It wasn’t the kind of shore she’d want to wander along in bare feet. Opposite the coastline were three giant office dongars. One was labelled with a dusty sign: *Barnes Inc.* In the background she could

see the giant stockpiles of iron ore, plant and other port facilities. Mike pulled the ute to a halt next to some others parked outside one of the office dongars. They both alighted and Lena held a breath as she made the last few steps to meet her fate.

There was no way she had intended to make an entrance, but the second she strode into the dongar everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at her. Gooseflesh broke out on the back of her neck as she stood there, rooted to the spot, uncertain what to do. Everyone in the room was male except for two women operating a photocopier. They were also dressed in the same uniform as Mike.

Suddenly her perfectly respectable shorts felt inappropriately short and her smart business shirt much too fitted and much too pink. Many pairs of eyes raked her from head to foot more thoroughly than an MRI scans for cancer.

‘Well, blow me away and send me to the crazies,’ said a bald gentleman sitting closest to her. He stood up and held out his hand. ‘I’m John Lewis. Who might you be?’

Relieved, Lena smiled warmly at him and shook his hand. ‘Lena. Lena Todd. I’m the new engineer.’

‘The new *engineer*.’ The Tone was unmistakable. Once again she cursed her outfit.

‘I better take you to see Carl,’ Mike said, clearly enjoying the situation. ‘Come on.’

Lena smiled tightly at John Lewis and followed Mike past the clutter. The office dongar looked roomy from the outside but wasn’t on the inside. It was broken up into cubicles and filled to capacity with cheap furniture and computers, all of which were covered in a film of red dust. The Barnes Inc staff continued to watch her.

There was a kitchen tucked away in a corner. It was filthy, as though it hadn’t been cleaned in months. Both the bin and sink were overflowing and the counter was red and black at the same time with a zillion handprints all over its surface. Just as the ‘why me?’ questions started bubbling up, Mike gestured

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Lena towards an office. It was the only one in the building with proper dividing walls and a door that opened and shut. Lena was eager to make the project manager's acquaintance. Maybe someone as senior as Carl Curtis would bring some sanity to her arrival. She stuck her head tentatively through the doorway.

'What the fuck do you want?'

At first she thought he was talking to her and almost jumped back. But then he waved grumpily at her to come in and she realised he was talking on the phone.

'No I don't have a fuckin' spare crane driver.' He pointed at the chair in front of the desk. 'Greg, you've got twelve fuckin' blokes out there, for fuck's sake. What the fuck are they doing?'

Lena swallowed as she sat down and looked around at his messy desk, over-filled bookshelves and squeaking desk fan. The man behind the desk looked to be in his early forties and was in dire need of a shave.

'I don't fuckin' care, Greg. Surely one of the fuckin' bastards can drive a fuckin' crane!' He paused. 'No worries, Greg. I'll just pull a fuckin' crane driver out of my fuckin' arse.' SLAM.

He ran two giant paws through his dark brown hair and rolled a burly set of shoulders. 'What can I do you for?'

Lena smiled and tried for a cheery note. 'I'm your new engineer.'

His eyes flickered over her. 'Fuck.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Don't,' he warned, 'cause I sure as hell ain't begging yours. And you may get offended by what I say next.'

She didn't doubt it but raised an eyebrow with what she hoped was haughty discouragement. He merely grinned. 'You think that expression makes you look highly superior, don't you, little lady? But let me burst your city bubble for you. The blokes out there, they don't care. They don't care about you.'

They don't care about me. And they don't care about this job. This is the Pilbara. And it's the Pilbara that makes the rules.'

Lena folded her arms and sighed. 'It seems to me,' she noted, 'that all the Pilbara seems to make is rude people.'

He gave a short sharp laugh. 'Been treating you to a bit of home brew, eh?'

She nodded. Carl was offensive on so many levels but for some illogical reason she liked his abrupt manner far more than Mike's underhanded comments.

'How old are you?' he asked.

'Twenty-three.'

'Almost fresh out of university,' he mused.

What's that supposed to mean? Her nerves shot through the roof. 'I've been working six months now and there hasn't been one complaint, thank you very much.' Too late she realised she had protested too much.

'Don't get your knickers in a knot,' Carl shot back. 'That's not what I was getting at. Just because you're smart, doesn't mean you won't get stepped on.'

Her brain latched onto the first part of his last sentence. He thought she was smart. Her heart jumped with hope. Had somebody said something? Had she come with a recommendation?

'Perth said you were as green as a cucumber.' He rubbed his forehead. 'So don't do anything without consulting me first. I have no time to make sure you don't fuck up.'

'I have no intention of f- . . . stuffing up.' She straightened her back. 'You have no right to judge me. I haven't done any work for you yet. You -'

He held up a hand for silence, nodding impatiently. 'Yes, yes, yes. I fully realise your feelings, etc., etc. But fuck, why are you here if you expect to sit in an ivory tower and be admired?'

'I'm here,' she gritted her teeth, 'to get some good experience as an engineer. Experience I couldn't get if I remained in the city.'

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I'm here to prove I deserve my degree.

He scratched his head. 'Well, if that's what you're after then I'll be damned if the Pilbara won't give it to you. But do us all a favour. Get yourself a uniform and boots – steel-capped. Tie up your hair and –' he waved a hand at her in helpless frustration, 'I don't suppose there's anything you can do about the rest of it.'

The news that fashion was frowned upon on the Pilbara was depressing but she was reasonable enough to note that perhaps there was just cause for the concentration camp outfit. She couldn't take everyone staring at her all the time. She wanted to blend in. Besides, from the look of the place, the uniform was the only clothing hardy enough to take the punishment. 'I will see what I can do,' she replied gruffly.

Carl opened his desk drawer, pulled out a manila folder and pushed it across to her. 'Here's something you can get on with.'

'What is it?' Lena flipped open the file.

'We're compiling a spreadsheet of all steel piece marks on the drawings. The drawing files are in the cabinet next to the office entrance.'

'You want me to do data entry? Can't you get a secretary to do that?'

'For now we need you to do it.' His phone rang and his hand was on the receiver before she could utter another word. He spun his chair around so that his back was to her and started talking.

'Don't fuck with me. Those parts were supposed to arrive two days ago. I'm not fucking around because some fucker –'

Lena didn't wait to hear what the 'fucker' had done. She stood up, sucking a breath in between her teeth. Frankly, she was very disappointed with Carl Curtis and his language difficulties. Everything was unfolding just as she had feared. Even without knowing the whole truth about her, the Pilbara Barnes Inc crew thought she was useless. If she wanted this

posting to change things for her, she was going to have to fight for every opportunity. And fight hard.

She could almost feel Kevin's eyes burning a hole in the back of her head. Chills feathered down her spine as she fought to suppress the memories. 'How can I believe in someone who spent more energy on her wardrobe than on a subject at the heart of her degree?' *No one's asking you to believe any more, Kevin.*

She stepped out of the office and found that Mike hadn't bothered to wait for her.

'Great,' she muttered under her breath. 'Where am I supposed to go now?'

Someone standing behind the kitchen counter was watching her – a tall gentleman, broad shouldered, slim hipped and chisel jawed. He was dressed in the usual site shirt, blue jeans, an orange and yellow reflector vest and a pair of worse-for-wear steel-capped boots. This was complemented by a coat of dust and sweat. Nonetheless, there was something appealing about him. Cowboys. Smelly and dirty, they still managed to be attractive.

'Good afternoon,' she said.

'Hey.' He inclined his head, crow's feet crinkling his laughing eyes.

Buoyed by his friendly expression, Lena approached the counter. 'I've just started here and I don't know where I'm supposed to go next. Mike, the guy who was showing me around, seems to have disappeared.'

He grinned and Lena's confidence rose to the next level. He had perfect white teeth and beautifully shaped lips. She smiled back with unreserved enthusiasm.

'Mike has a tendency to get distracted.' He held out a hand. 'I'm Gavin, the piling engineer. They told us you were starting.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. Believe me,' he glanced around, 'this place could do with someone like you.'

The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots

‘Thanks,’ Lena crooned somewhere between incredulity and relief. ‘I plan to do the very best I can. I really want to make a difference here. And I’m just so glad that not everyone is so unwilling to give me a proper chance.’

‘Are you kidding?’ Gavin shook his head. ‘You’re a godsend. Look, if Mike isn’t around, I could probably give you a few pointers.’ He looked at her shorts. ‘But have you got anything to get changed into?’

Lena groaned. ‘Don’t worry. I’ve already spoken to Carl about getting a uniform . . . well, sort of.’

‘Oh okay,’ he nodded. ‘Well, when you’ve changed, you should probably start in the kitchen. As you can see,’ he gestured at the full sink, ‘it by far needs the most work. We haven’t had a proper cleaner since the project started. This dirt is months old. I think there are some mops and cleaning products in the steel container out back.’

This statement took less than a second to suck all the joy out of Lena’s smile.

‘What did you say?’

‘I have no idea if we have a vacuum,’ Gavin continued, unperturbed. ‘But I’m pretty sure there’s a few brooms out there too. Geez, it would be so good to have this place clean.’ He winked at Lena. ‘Like I said before. You’re a godsend.’