

## HECTOR

Both Jarrod and Hannah were nervous but neither could mention it to the other. Sixteen more stairs and Jarrod would have her at the front door of his apartment. It was a small not-serviced-by-a-lift studio apartment. There were six flights of stairs, which Jarrod would climb up and down at least twice a day. He didn't mind because it either meant he was going up to bed or down to get out. He liked to get out and he enjoyed the freedom. When Jarrod used the stairs this particular time he was worried. It was a hot night. He was clasping a 2004 bottle of Penfold's Bin 389, and he was sweating. So much so that the perspiration ate into the paper bag that secured the bottle. He wanted everything to be perfect and tepid wine was of no appeal. A bottle this good needed to be served at 17 degrees.

"That's all of them?" puffed Hannah stomping the very last stair as though to raze them.

"I promise next time I'll carry you up," said Jarrod sifting his pockets for the keys.

"Next time?" Hannah placed her fringe back behind her ear. "Next time I hope you live somewhere with an elevator."

Hannah fidgeted with her bracelet while she waited for Jarrod to open the door. She looked at the tendons in his arms as he fumbled with the keys. She thought, "Is he just as nervous as me?" She normally wouldn't go out if she had work the next day but she wanted to impress Jarrod, so she made an exception. Hannah worked in a coffee shop near Jarrod's apartment, but she lived thirty minutes out of town. If she wanted to get a good night's sleep and get to work on time she would have to end their date early, but Hannah had a plan. If she were to stay the night, then getting to work would be easy. She could go straight there in the morning. She knew what staying the night meant. It was what she wanted, too, but there is a protocol to sex and dating.

They both knew that sex could not be guaranteed on their second date. For example if one made an inappropriate joke, coughed without covering their mouth, laughed too loud, or served the wrong food it would ruin it for both of them. The protocol was the unwritten constitution of dating. The subjects they spoke about had to stick to a certain pattern. Exposing one's ideologies at an early stage in the relationship could be disastrous. If the protocol was broken then, she would have to go home.

Jarrod switched on the lights and air-conditioning as they walked into the apartment. "I'll just get some glasses. The wine will have to breathe for a bit. You can sit down if you like."

Hannah sat down on the couch and leant over to the coffee table to look at a pile of magazines. She didn't dare to read any. Doing so would break the rules. Instead she examined their variety. She examined everything just to get more insight on Jarrod. The couch was leather; the coffee table shabby-chic; his desk was glass and the walls were covered in framed pop art. This told her as much as she already knew from Jarrod's daily coffee order. Jarrod had a disposable income, which he liked to spend on unnecessary things, one being regular double-shot café-lattés. Jarrod's apartment was strangely decorated. Hannah could tell he had money, but his taste was questionable.

"What's with all these decorative looking hat stands?" Hannah asked cautiously. "I've never seen you wear a hat when you get coffee."

"Didn't I tell you about Hector?"

"I didn't think you lived with anyone?" Hannah added. An extra person would definitely break protocol, especially in a studio apartment.

"There he is." Jarrod pointed.

Hannah saw shiny black feathers and crest. Hector looked at her with a side eye glare, his chest out. Hannah stared back. Hector had grey bags under his eyes that emphasised his age. He was an old bird.

"He's so pretty." Hannah was awe struck.

"Fuck off!" Hector screeched. "Pieces of eight."

"Did you teach him?" Hannah laughs, but continues without waiting for an answer. "I've never seen a more beautiful bird ...such beautiful black feathers."

"My parents got him for me to remind me of home in Eaglendale. We used to get lots of them on our property. I haven't taught him much. He was the local publican's. He's a foul-mouthed red-tailed cockatoo."

Jarrod was pleased that the bird was working. Hector was buying him some time.

Hannah searched the room again before asking, "Do you keep him in a cage?"

"No he just flies about and he has a couple of perches and stuff," answered Jarrod.

The wine bottle sat unopened on the kitchen bench.

"His previous owner," Jarrod said, "was Ken. He eventually had to cage Hector. Hector hated

the cage, but he liked the pub because the drinkers loved him. Some taught Hector to swear, others made him dance for nuts and seeds and the remainder taught him parrot clichés like “Polly wants a cracker”.

Hannah laughed, delighted at this story, forgetting the wine. Jarrod, sensing her interest continued.

“‘Na-na-nah, you got to stay in,’ Ken would say while nudging Hector back anytime he opened the cage to refill the seed or water.”

Jarrod surprised himself mimicking Ken, keeping Hannah amused.

“‘The missus’s orders. When you were out free you were trouble and I know it’s my fault.’” But, Ken felt bad for Hector. Ken knew that before Hector was Hector, when he belonged to no one, he could fly from fore dunes to savannah without restriction and eat anything in between.”

Hannah sighed.

Jarrod was frantically banging the drawers in the kitchen. Jarrod caught Hannah’s eye. “Sorry. I can’t find the wine knife. I’ve gotten so used to the screw top bottles that I’ve lost it.”

“Ohhh,” Hannah sounded momentarily disappointed, then brightened. “So what happened to Hector?”

“Well,” Jarrod said thankful for the distraction, “Apparently, Ken’s wife Marge was sick of having to wipe bird poo off the bar, stools and floor. She grew tired of his squawking and screeching. She thought Hector was like an upset idiot savant. But Ken knew better. Then Marge would turn up: ‘I know you’ve had that bloody bird out of the cage again. There’s shit every where.’ And Ken would lie and say, ‘I only took him out to clip his wings.’ Of course, Ken didn’t even like clipping Hector’s wings. He thought that a well-trained bird could be trusted.”

“Old Crone!” Hector squawked.

Hannah laughed.

“Is that what he used to call Marge?”

“Well Ken told her it was one of the barflies and that they wouldn’t make as much without that bird. When Ken knew Marge wouldn’t be home for a while he would let Hector out on the bar. When Marge returned to the pub she knew how long the bird had been out by how much she had to clean.”

Jarrod was distracted again opening the same drawer in the kitchen and rifling through tea

towels and Tupperware containers.

“Maybe we could just have tea or coffee or something? We don’t have to drink.” Hannah lied. She stood up from the couch and walked over to the kitchen. The protocol was under siege. No wine – No sex. “I have to work tomorrow I probably shouldn’t be up drinking all night anyway.”

“Don’t be silly. I saw a clip on YouTube where a guy opened a bottle with a shoe. We’ll get it open.”

“What? Really!”

“I might have to watch the clip again but it’s definitely worth a try.”

Jarrold walked out of the kitchen and over to his desk. His desk was the cleanest it had ever been. He’d spent the whole afternoon making the place look perfect for Hannah. He wanted Hannah to stay the night just as much as she wanted to but they couldn’t just say that. He sat down and opened up his laptop and while waiting for it to load, looked around. He could feel a hot wave settling in his cheeks.

Hannah bent in closer to see the screen. Hector squawked and flew off into the kitchen. Hannah turned to watch him fly. “I think it’s good that you don’t keep him caged. I think Ken was right.”

They searched the internet for other random household objects that could open the bottle. They felt close to each other sharing the mouse and keyboard.

\*\*\*\* BANG \*\*\*\*

The loud thud brought Hannah’s and Jarrold’s attention to the kitchen. The bottle of wine wobbled precariously. Jarrold rushed over in time to save the wine bottle hitting the ground. Hannah followed. She really didn’t want to drink tea.

Hector was perched on top of a small bench-top wine rack. He stood on one leg on the kitchen bench with the wine cork in his claw while slowly ripping it to shreds with his beak.

“I’ve never seen him do that before.” Jarrold was just as surprised as Hannah.

Enough wine remained for Jarrold and Hannah to pour a glass of wine each. They felt more

relaxed now because the protocol was being followed. As they sat on the couch, Jarrod felt comfortable enough to place his hand on Hannah's thigh. She reciprocated, gazing into his eyes which would only be broken by a kiss. It didn't matter that neither of them drank much wine. The protocol had to be followed. The wine had to be opened, but it didn't have to be drunk.

The bottle-opening trick was the last trick Ken had taught Hector. The gimmick had worked for the barflies. If Marge was out of sight, Ken would charge them extra to have their wine opened by his bird, but he had to be quick, in case Marge caught him.

