



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

DON'T TELL EVE
by Airlie Lawson

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Chapter 1

Jess was struggling through yet another interminable meeting in the overheated boardroom, trying to make the most of her time by surreptitiously sketching her new boss's shoes. She'd dropped her pen twice already to get a proper look at them. This particular pair was sky-blue suede with platform cork heels, round toes and ankle straps. They were shoes not designed for the thick of calf.

As she leaned down, just one more time, Jess had the urge to reach out and . . . No, she shook her head to dislodge that disturbing thought before it took hold. Stroking her boss's shoes, in public, was not only potentially a bad career move, it was also sure to arouse a certain amount of suspicion.

Eve had materialised several months earlier, and while some said she seemed too much like a plump, middle-aged Barbie doll to be able to run a prestigious, venerable company like Papyrus Press, Jess wasn't one of them. She'd always been fond of Barbie – she'd even once made a coffee table using a clan of the oddly shaped creatures for legs – so she certainly wasn't going to judge Eve by her appearance. Her actions, however, were a different matter.

Which is not to say that Eve's appearance wasn't intriguing. It wasn't so much the bouffant, gravity-defying hair, or the disproportionately large, distracting bust: it was the way she dressed.

When Eve had arrived at what she and many others saw as a global backwater, her already bold outward persona had evolved and the Eve who presided over the boardroom table was a woman who was afraid of neither shoulder pads nor batwings. Sequins didn't scare her at all. And, sartorially speaking, where she went, she expected others to follow. While she didn't expect – or want – her new employees to emulate her distinctive style, she did expect them to make an effort. In her first staff meeting she had quickly assessed the employees she'd inherited, rolled her kohl-rimmed, lilac-

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shadowed eyes and immediately banned the wearing of careworn, threadbare, comforting cardigans of integrity, Hush Puppies and bargains from the local op shop. She had ignored the subsequent collective intake of breath from the editorial department. It wasn't just that Eve didn't want to be forced to look at drabness, there was more to it than that. She had a plan and part of that plan involved giving the company a makeover – on every front. Her time there was going to be memorable, of that she would make sure. It had to be, because getting home, away from what she saw as a humid, hot, insignificant outpost of cultural and financial empire, depended upon it.

She'd come to this decision on the disastrous day she'd been told of her exile; of her chance to – as the old yet virile man lying next to her had put it – 'prove yourself a businesswoman'. After her initial fury, Eve had relaxed. It was true, things had got a little complicated after their liaison had been discovered by his obviously unstable wife, and neither of them wanted it to appear as though Eve's rapid rise through the company's various media divisions had been connected to their 'special' relationship, so she'd convinced herself she'd be back home in a corner office in Midtown in no time. After all, as she'd said to her husband while they sat sipping champagne in Business Class high above the Pacific Ocean on the way to her new position, how hard could it be to reverse the fortunes of a small antipodean publishing company?

Within days of her arrival, Eve had signed a lease to take over the long-time vacant top floor of the building in which Papyrus was housed, and had hired an interior decorator. Pre-Eve, the boardroom had been a dark panelled space, more like a traditional gentleman's club than a corporate office. On the walls had been shelves featuring the award-winning, best-selling – or not – books published by the company. On the floor had been a discreet carpet, so discreet that when it had gone no one could recall what it had actually looked like. And, in the centre of the space, there had lived a practical, slightly scratched and mug-marked oval table, the irregular colour of heat-damaged chocolate. It had been surrounded by matching straight-backed, hardwood, mean-bottomed chairs.

The new boardroom had rather a different feel. The walls were matt aubergine and hung with huge movie posters. The floor was covered in white rubber, and blood-red fluffy sheepskin rugs lay dotted about. The table, now oblong, was white and supported by a tree trunk, also white. No actual books were on display anymore.

It was a room that was only spoiled, the new management believed, by the views from the vast windows – views that changed every few minutes, as this particular floor revolved, a legacy of its days as an unsuccessful theme restaurant. During most meetings, a newly installed set of pistachio-coloured blinds were pulled down.

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Hiding the view was Hilary's job.

Hilary did have other responsibilities, although no one but Eve knew the full extent of them. Hilary had arrived at Papyrus just after Eve and, because she seemed to be in charge of departures, it was believed she had something to do with human resources. However, she also attended every key sales, editorial and marketing meeting, so it seemed her influence wasn't limited to this area. Head of Special Projects, her official title, told people nothing: what was clear was that wherever Eve went, Hilary followed. But if Eve was a peacock, Hilary was a peahen. Her uniform consisted of storm-grey, dangerously tailored pants suits, stiff dark leather boots and hair wrenched back into a bun so tight that it rendered the use of Botox redundant.

During this particular meeting, as at all others, Hilary balanced primly on the edge of a small purple velvet armchair, while next to her Eve lounged on an orange velvet throne, nibbling periodically on a never-ending supply of chocolate macadamia nuts. Flanking these two was an assortment of people – 'the team'. 'The team' were united only in their mutual discomfort: all were perched on stools designed to look like mushrooms and feel like concrete. Roger sat closest to the door. As always, he wore a tense expression and an inadvertently snug grey suit with a slight sheen. His focus was on the non-existent cleavage of the girl to his left, Daisy. Young Daisy wore a tight red tank top featuring a photograph of a pug, and the words 'you gotta love me'. She was simultaneously chewing gum, fiddling with her hair elastic and doodling on her notepad. The pad revealed that she dotted her i's not with small circles but with hearts.

Opposite these two were David, Ilona and Kate. David had written 'buy eggplant, garlic and tomatoes' at the top of his agenda. Ilona, a deceptively soft-featured woman of a similarly indeterminate age to Eve, had written 'cami? merry widow? dusty pink, watermelon or lilac? must leave by noon'; she had an afternoon fitting at the town's most exclusive lingerie boutique. And then there was Kate, whose unnaturally rosy complexion was evidence that she was listening to what her volatile new boss was saying. Kate had a predilection for guilt, and Eve the knack of inducing it. Several others around the table had arranged their expressions to indicate they were paying attention, and others were attempting not to slouch on their stools.

Jess, who was busy redefining the term slouch, was hoping that she could have just a few more moments under the table.

'Jeh-ess?' Eve drawled from high above, in her distinctive Southern accent.

'Shit,' Jess responded as she emerged, having hit her head on the way up.

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'Have you discovered somethin' down there that you'd like to share with the rest of us?' said Eve.

'Sorry, dropped my pen.'

'Three times in the last ten minutes? What's wrong with you?' Hilary had perfected a kind of low-pitched nasal snarl that she'd found she could use on most occasions. 'Jessica?'

Jess took a couple of deep breaths. Hilary didn't frighten her, just riled her, especially when she called her Jessica. It wasn't Jess's name: 'Jess' appeared on her birth certificate.

'That's right, take your time, Jessica. No one here has anything more important to do than witness your amusing antics.'

'Sorry, it's one of those days. Don't you ever have them?' As Jess asked the question it occurred to her that Hilary probably didn't allow herself to have those days.

A sniff suggested she was right.

While this exchange was going on, Eve, in a manner that indicated her intentions were not benign, had been carefully straightening the pile of books in front of her. After Hilary's sniff, she picked up the one on top and waved it in the air. 'So, who wants to tell me about this?'

Silence. The team was listening, but not stupid.

'Oh, be brave.'

Bravery, as each member of the team knew, was for masochists. They glanced surreptitiously at each other.

'Well,' began Roger, breaking ranks, 'It's number one on the fiction bestseller list, has been for weeks and —'

'Yeah, yeah, we know that,' said Eve impatiently.

Roger was about to continue when Eve clarified herself.

'What I want to know is why we didn't publish it.'

They all knew the direction in which this was heading and that there was no way to stop it. The best that could be done was to remain perfectly still and hopefully ride it out.

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What felt like hours passed and then David started to scratch at the neck of his new black poloneck jumper.

Eve saw movement and pounced. ‘David, perhaps you can enlighten me?’

David’s forehead was quickly covered in beads of sweat. ‘Um . . . well . . . um . . . oh God.’ He paused for a tiny instant before choosing, in a gesture of wild inappropriateness, to tell the truth. ‘We saw it, okay? I wanted it, but no one else did. Well, I don’t mean no one else exactly, but the thing was that the sales people said, well, they said quite a lot of things, but essentially they didn’t think the market was quite ready for it – and wasn’t going to be – not for a long time.’

‘Why was that?’

Melting under Eve’s glacial gaze, David chose this moment to dab at his forehead with a tissue. It was a clean tissue but not, apparently, a fresh tissue. Instead, it was one that must have been sitting for weeks in his pocket, disintegrating a little more each day. Everyone around the table watched with morbid fascination as the tissue’s tiny particles clung to David’s face.

Unsure of how to interpret Jess’s throat-cutting gestures, David ignored the health risks and answered Eve’s question. ‘The subject matter, I guess. I mean, it’s a novella, set in a dystopian near future and narrated by a blind, genetically modified donkey and there was nothing else on the best-seller list like it, though of course there have certainly been a number of authors who have, books which have, from Huxley to Self to —’

Eve cut in. ‘Don’t bore me with a lecture in lit’ry history. The point is: what did you think of the writin’?’

‘Oh, the writing, right, the writing, yes, of course, wonderful – moving, imaginative, inventive —’

‘Okay, we get the picture. What about the author?’

If it hadn’t been on a par with shoe-fondling in terms of career moves, Jess would have covered her ears at this point.

‘The author? What do you mean?’ said David.

‘“Who” is the word you’re lookin’ for. You know, the person who wrote that “movin’, imaginative” work.’

‘I don’t quite understand what you’re getting at . . .’

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Jess silently willed David to admit that he'd fucked up. After all, he knew it, Eve knew it, they all knew it.

'Did you consider mentionin' to either the sales or marketin' people, or, hey, both, the actual name of the author?'

'Of course not.' David was genuinely shocked. 'It was written under a pseudonym. It wasn't meant to go public, not ever, not the way it did, not . . . Oh my God . . .'

And there it was.

Eve finished his sentence calmly. 'Not at the time of publication, causing a media frenzy – no, of course it wasn't. It was always going to be a little secret, because when a country's,' her voice rose marginally, 'FUCKIN' president —'

Hilary whispered to Eve.

'Prime minister, whatever, writes an AWARD-winning novel, sure, that's always going to be easy to keep quiet about, no problem.'

During the interrogation Roger, who always had something better to do, had been tapping away at his BlackBerry, flirting online with someone he assumed was both young and female. At the word FUCKIN' he stopped and added his own thoughts. 'David, you cocksucker.' His tone indicated this wasn't meant as a compliment. 'Don't even try to put the blame on us – we'd NEVER have turned down the FUCKING prime minister's novel if we'd known it was the FUCKING prime minister's FUCKING novel. Sure, it was unreadable and pretentious, but hell, we're talking about the prime minister here. And one who's actually in office, NOW, not one of those sixteen old tax leeches.' Roger took what would have been a thoughtful pause, if he had been a thoughtful man. 'Did he come into the office?'

Jess tried to hide her smile. Roger was in a sulk because he had wanted to meet the prime minister. The impenetrable novel was a side issue.

'Of course he didn't come into the office, we met in a hotel suite, with his agent – and I signed a confidentiality agreement. His agent said that he wanted to keep his careers separate; that he didn't want people judging his book by his politics, and it's completely understandable, as that's exactly what's happened, hasn't it? Have you read some of the reviews?'

'You're missing the point, David. Why do you think the agent told you it was the prime minister's book in the first place? And introduced you?' It gave Hilary great joy to direct her pointy black boot at a prostrate body.

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'I . . . I . . . don't . . . Because he trusts me?'

'So, nothing to do with making sure the book was taken seriously, that the advance paid for it was huge and that we could structure an enormous promotional campaign around it "accidentally" being revealed that he was the author?' said Eve.

Even after months witnessing Eve's inquisitions, Jess still found them disturbing. It wasn't the pyrotechnics, those she could handle, it was knowing how much Eve enjoyed herself. The thing about Eve was that she didn't look like a witch. If anything what she most resembled was an amateur ballroom dancer: big hair, big lips, big hips. She was fantastically flamboyant, carefully constructed and yet, somehow, always just a little bit wrong.

'But,' said David, 'this isn't my fault – I took the book seriously and I believed the agent was sincere.'

'You fuckwit,' muttered Roger, proving himself, as usual, the consummate wordsmith.

The meeting continued in this vein, with Eve working her way around the table, asking rhetorical questions and picking up books, occasionally throwing one against a nearby wall when she felt the need for emphasis. Finally, ritual public humiliation out of the way, it was time for the new projects to be pitched. In the old days, before Papyrus had been taken over by the international communications giant MaxMedia, Papyrus's publishers were allowed to buy whatever they wanted. Some speculated that this was how the company had ended up being taken over. Regardless, things were different now and they all knew that Eve's primary agenda was to get the place making money because then she'd be sent home to some flash, important job. The office gossip was unusually accurate on this occasion.

Dedication to her goal meant that while Eve's Papyrus wasn't the relaxed, comfortable place it had been, there were a few people prospering under the new regime. Jess, for one, thanks to her insurance policy. And Phil. The Phil who sauntered in leaving the aquamarine doors swinging, saloon style, just after everyone had presented their new projects – and had been told these projects were too new, too old, too dull, too small or too, too, just too.

'So, where are we at, kids?' was his opening line; there was never a 'Sorry I'm late' from Phil. He glanced lazily at the agenda in front of Daisy in foreign rights – being admin-focused, she always ticked items off as they happened – and then tilted his neatly trimmed goatee in Eve's direction. 'I have four words for you: football, key, player, signed. My work, for this fiscal, then, is done.'

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‘And everyone’s budget, for this year, then, spent? How much did you pay?’

Jess addressed Phil in a manner that she reserved for him alone.
‘Don’t you worry your pretty little shaved head about it, sweetie-pie – more noughts than you can count.’

Jess’s pretty little head wasn’t close to shaved, despite Phil’s regular description of it as such. It was simply that he liked women with long hair and had been appalled when Jess turned up one day with a messy pixie cut. Before that he’d considered her attractive, in a blue-eyed, honey-haired, slim-figured way that required little imagination for any viewer to admire. Now, though, he wasn’t sure what to make of her.

‘I’m sure Phil ran it by Finance before offering,’ said Eve.

Jess wasn’t. If he hadn’t run it by his beloved leader, he wouldn’t have run it by Finance. She’d worked with Phil long enough to know how he operated.

But Eve believed that anyone who could have been a body double for a young Clint Eastwood could only be a straight shooter, incapable of deception. ‘Speaking of money,’ she said to Jess, ‘tell me about Alex.’

Jess’s insurance policy was known as Alex, superstar chef, best-selling author, national treasure and the sole reason the company remained solvent. He was also the business partner of Jack, Jess’s ex-boyfriend. Not that anyone was supposed to know that Jack was now ex – Jess had decided it was strategically wise to keep that a secret. Jack had been an amenable and easygoing boyfriend, and was proving an amenable and easygoing ex – he’d agreed with her request, having understood why she’d made it.

‘He’s working hard and we should have some material soon. We’re still on track for an early October release,’ Jess lied.

‘I heard he was on vacation.’

‘Yep, that’s right, recharging the batteries, but the book’s under control.’

Jess’s legs, toes and fingers on the hand under the table were all crossed. Her other hand was touching wood. Alex was on much more than a holiday. The book didn’t exist, and if Alex had anything to do with it, wouldn’t. Ever. He’d told Jack that he planned to stay in his Himalayan mountain retreat indefinitely.

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‘So when will we have material?’ It might have been years of marketing experience that gave Roger the ability to sense when someone wasn’t speaking the whole truth.

‘Soon.’

‘When?’

‘Soon – I’ll let you know.’

Phil raised an eyebrow. For him this wasn’t a subtle movement, as it also involved cocking his head. But nothing Phil did was subtle.

For some reason, Jess had a sudden conviction that Phil knew something. It was conceivable that he did. After all, he and Jack and Alex played on the same social football team. But Jack had promised not to say anything, he knew how important it was that Jess resolved the problem before her colleagues, and in particular her new boss, discovered there was one. Had been one. She would solve it. And as for Phil, he couldn’t know, she was just being paranoid. There was a lot of it going around.

Just as the shuffling that denoted the end of a meeting began, Eve, ever the performer, held up an ornately manicured hand. ‘Wait, I’m not finished.’

Daisy studied her agenda.

‘You won’t find it there,’ Eve said, patronisingly.

They were all nervous about unscheduled announcements from Eve, with good reason. It wasn’t just that she filled them with fresh paradigms, new matrices and exciting synergies. That would have been bad enough. The problem was that these fresh paradigms, new matrices and exciting synergies actually meant something. Generally they meant that Eve had been speaking to the Finance department, and everyone knew that nothing good could ever come of that.

‘As y’all know, I’ve been working hard to get Papyrus back on track, and I have already made a number of important changes.’

From somewhere to her left Jess heard a snort – or more likely a snore. The source was Noel, the contracts director, a man who hated the place, with the sort of concentrated hate that put a spring in his step and a twinkle in his eye. He’d hated the place since he’d arrived at Papyrus twenty-five years ago, long before MaxMedia existed, let alone had mastered the art of the hostile takeover.

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Eve ignored the interruption. 'But more changes are needed, and that's where y'all come in.' Here she stopped momentarily, giving the team time to imagine the worst. 'We value your input and believe y'all have something special to give, so, to that end, we're going to give you the chance to make a real difference to the company. I don't just mean doin' your job, I mean thinkin' bigger than that. What we're gonna do is hold a competition. They'll be a prize for the best money-saving idea – submit as many as you like and be as creative as you like. No need to limit yourself to your department or area. Think laterally, be ambitious. The new Papyrus rewards ambition and what we want is blue-sky thinkin'.'

She let Hilary explain the rules, then stood up and sashayed out, fuchsia ra-ra skirt swishing, parrot earrings swinging. The rest of the team scurried after her, Jess hiding her sketches, Phil attempting to peer over her shoulder.

Hilary waited until the room was empty before pulling on the cord of a pistachio-coloured blind to reveal the endless, irritatingly clear skies and a glaring harbour fringed with green and dotted with lazy ferries, busy fishing boats and glossy maxi-yachts. She understood exactly why Eve loathed the place.

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