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the Risky way Home

Riveting and mysterious...

You won't put it down.

The Risky way Home - Chapter 1

Casey climbed a flight of steps paved with slate. The studio was on the second storey of a complex built in the old colonial style. It was certainly a beautiful area in which to work.

‘Well, I’m here now,’ she mumbled to bolster herself up. ‘I might as well go through with it. I suppose I have nothing to lose.’

Asking her old school friend for a job was the last thing Casey ever expected to be doing. Suzanne had been loads of fun but Casey remembered her old way of drawing her friends into trouble with the teachers. She’d been so popular, the other girls had considered it a rather a privilege than a problem. Scandal seemed to surround Suzanne like an aura from her earliest childhood. She used to tell Casey that she’d been the victim of a kidnapping. Her mother had stolen Suzanne and her brother away from their father. But that had been ‘top secret.’

Casey passed a dry-cleaning shop and saw sundry formal garments hung up inside. Next was an optometrist’s window with a display of trendy spectacle frames. Before and After was the place she was looking for – the name Suzanne had chosen for her glamour photography studio.

Casey cleared her throat and a bell tinkled over the door as she walked in. Behind a counter sat a ruggedly handsome young man with cropped, blonde-tinted hair. ‘Good afternoon. Can I help you?’

‘I’m looking for Suzanne Bowman.’

‘I’ll get her.’ He called, ‘Suze, there’s someone here to see you.’

Casey studied the gleaming hardwood floorboards. She looked at the plump blue leather couches in the waiting area. Suzanne knew how to land on her feet. She’d done hardly a scrap of work at school but always got by on sheer audacity.

‘Casey Miller! Great to see you!’ Suzanne rushed over and enveloped Casey in a cloud of overpowering perfume. The wavy black mane of hair still flowed down her back like a lustrous cloud. ‘Well, what have you been up to since we left school? Mum told me you’d been to University.’

‘Yeah, I finished a degree in History.’ Casey couldn’t help flushing. She knew this was not the sort of accomplishment Suzanne would admire.

‘History, that’s right. You always were the brainy one. So what’s next?’

Casey sighed. ‘That’s the problem. I started a teaching diploma but quit because I hated it. I’m not cut out for teaching.’

Suzanne giggled and patted Casey’s shoulder. Rings gleamed on every slender finger.

‘I don’t blame you. Do you remember when we used to bombard poor old Mr Bell with little paper bombs during science?’

‘I know how it feels from Mr Bell’s side of the desk now. I was hopeless at discipline and keeping lessons on track. I felt like a pigeon in a pack of vultures. But Dad is upset with me for not hanging in there for longer than one term. I know he’ll be angry unless I come up with another job quick smart.’

‘Gee, that’s too bad,’ Suzanne said. ‘What can we do for you today? Can we cheer you up with a lovely photo of yourself?’



‘Actually, I saw your ad in the paper. You’re looking for somebody to help with make-up and clothes for your clients, aren’t you? I thought I’d come and apply.’ Casey fumbled with the clasps of her handbag. ‘I have some references. I did a few make-up and accessory courses last year during my holidays.’

For the first time, Suzanne was serious. ‘Thanks Casey. We put that ad in the classifieds a few days ago and there’s been a great response but we haven’t chosen anyone yet. By the way, this is my partner, Eric Adams. Eric, Casey and I went to school together. I haven’t seen her for five years.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Casey.’ His bold gaze lingered over her. ‘Most of the other applicants have had at least some experience in the industry.’

Casey flushed. ‘I understand. I didn’t really expect to get the job... I just thought I had nothing to lose and... it’s been good to see Suzanne again, anyway.’

‘Listen, leave your references here. Eric and I will look at them. I promise I’ll contact you as soon as I can. Where are you living?’

‘At home with my parents.’ By now, Casey wished she hadn’t come.

‘You’re joking. Do you mean to tell me that you drove all the way from Victor Harbor to Adelaide when you were at uni? That’s almost fifty kilometres!’

‘No, I lived in one of the boarding colleges then.’

Another young lady stepped through the door. ‘Hello, I’m here for my two o’clock appointment.’

‘Yes, you must be Kylie? Step through here.’ Suzanne peered over her client’s shoulder at Casey. ‘I’ll be in touch.’

‘Thanks.’

Casey stepped into the warm air outside. She leaned against the rough stone wall and let her breath out in a long stream. Why did I ever think I had a chance? They made it clear that other applicants are more experienced. I’ll bet they’ll refuse. Suzanne was just being too polite to tell me on the spot. Asking scatterbrained Suzanne Bowman for a job had been as awkward as Casey had anticipated.



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Casey and her mother sat in their cosy sitting room sipping hot chocolate before bed. 'I felt like the prize idiot,' Casey groaned. 'I had a nerve to think she'd hire me. I have no experience in the glamour business at all. I'll bet Suzanne was just stalling for time by telling me she'd get back to me. I haven't even seen her for five years.' She buried her face in her hands.

'At least you've caught up with an old friend,' Helen Miller said. 'I'm sure she feels flattered that you applied. I remember when Suzanne would come here to get you and you'd whiz off on your bikes to the beach.'

'That was a long time ago.'

At school, Suzanne Bowman had been a pivot around which other girls swarmed. She gave the impression of being ravishingly beautiful but a closer look revealed that she was really not even particularly pretty. Striking was the word used best to describe Suzanne. Casey would have died for Suzanne's graceful, willowy figure.

'You ought to see her boyfriend. He's gorgeous.'

'Do you mean the chap in the studio with her? I don't think he's her boyfriend. Moira says he's only her business partner.'

Casey was astonished. 'She introduced him as her partner. I assumed she meant partner partner.'

'Not according to Moira. She might be wrong, though. Suzanne never keeps her mother up-to-date with what's happening in her life.' Helen sighed. 'I feel sorry for Moira. She thinks the world of both her children but they don't seem to understand her. She helped Suzanne get that business up and running and I don't think she got much thanks for it.'

'Did Moira pay for Suzanne's business?'

'She lent a hand. Suzanne couldn't afford all the equipment and fancy clothes she dresses her clients in otherwise. Eric put up his share too. He's the one with the photography expertise. Moira tells me he's quite brilliant.'

Casey shook her head and sighed. 'Where did she discover him? Where does Suzanne meet all these interesting people?'

The Bowman family had always been an enigma. They had appeared in the district some twenty years earlier and bought a large family home. Before that, they lived in France. Rumours had quickly spread that Moira was a wealthy woman although she lived a simple life with her mother and two children. Since the children had left home, Moira and her elderly mother continued to live the same frugal way. Casey liked her. Moira had always been kind to Suzanne's friends. Perhaps having a rich mother explained some of Suzanne's lucky breaks. Casey had no idea if Suzanne's old kidnapping story had a grain of truth in it. Moira seemed far too timid to commit a daring crime.

Casey's father poked his head through the sitting room door. 'Casey, there's a phone call for you. I think it's that Bowman girl.'

Casey leaped out of her armchair and shot past him. Doug Miller looked at his wife and shrugged. 'What's the big deal? We haven't even seen the Bowman girl for five or six years.'



Casey snatched the receiver off the kitchen bench. 'Hello.'

'Hi Casey. You've got the job.'

Her heart jolted. Then and there, she decided that there was nobody in the world like Suzanne who deserved all the lucky breaks she ever got. 'That's fantastic. How can I thank you?' Casey's pulse raced.

'Meet me tomorrow for lunch. We'll discuss pay and all the other mouldy old details then.' Suzanne's giggle tinkled over the line. 'This is the first time Eric and I have been in the position to hire an employee. Business has been booming like you wouldn't believe.'

Casey heard a door slam in the background at Suzanne's apartment and several laughing voices urged her to get off the phone.

'Alright, gotta go. I'm off to a party with a French theme. You should see me sitting here, dressed as Marie Antoinette. This powdered wig will have to come off after a few drinks. Let's make it noon tomorrow, back in the studio. Au revoir.'

Casey replaced the receiver in its hook. For some reason, the joy she felt was mingled with regret. Casey trudged upstairs to bed. She kicked off her huge fluffy slippers, sat on the edge of her bed and gazed down at her flannel pyjamas.

Wish I was going to a French party.

* * *

Casey met Suzanne at midday, as planned. Eric greeted her pleasantly and returned to work.

Suzanne grabbed Casey's wrist and whizzed her on a whirlwind tour over the premises. Next to the viewing room was the actual photograph studio. A huge camera on a tripod and a fancy silver umbrella stood at the back and by the opposite wall was a roller blind of backdrops. Suzanne flicked them down one by one: pale mauve, violet, light blue, autumn leaf scene, toy land scene for children.

'You'll never need to come in here, though. This next room is where you'll be working.'

They stepped through to a walk-in-wardrobe room lined with beautiful clothes. One wall was for men, one for children and two for women. Behind it was a smaller, ante-room with full length mirrors from floor to ceiling. There was a sink and a small fridge against the back wall. In a corner stood a huge make-up cabinet bursting with eyeshadows, mascaras, lipsticks, blushers and pencils.

'Suzanne, I'm lost for words.'

'Great, isn't it? Let's tootle off to lunch now. Eric will hold the fort for an hour but I need to be back in time for my male model,' Suzanne winked. 'Some young guy wants a portfolio. Eric's always willing to let me handle those clients and I don't complain.'

They left the studio, chuckling. Suzanne took Casey to "The Hedgehog's Hole", her favourite café. They settled into a cosy booth for two by the window. Suzanne ordered ham, cheese and asparagus croissants dripping with butter and double cheese while Casey conscientiously chose a salad platter. Suzanne had always been able to eat whatever she pleased without gaining a scrap of weight.

'Most of the week, a mobile lunch service delivers to us,' Suzanne was saying. 'They make the



most scrumptious food. But I wanted to come here today for a good natter. Will you be able to start on Monday morning?’

‘Absolutely.’ Casey still had no accommodation in Adelaide. She pushed an olive around with her fork and wondered if she dared ask Suzanne to help her find somewhere. Suzanne might suggest a friend who needed a new flatmate.

‘You’ll be bringing clients through to us, helping them to dress when they’ve chosen clothes to suit the image they want to present, looking after the laundry and cleaning up. And you’ll be doing some bookwork and handling a bit of cash. I’m warning you, you’ll find yourself having to change clients’ minds whenever they choose something that would look dreadful.’ Suzanne wrinkled her nose. ‘I’ll be happy to leave all that to you so that I can concentrate on photos and make-up.’

‘Suzanne, you’ve helped me out of a really tight spot. I was sure you’d think I hadn’t enough experience,’ Casey confessed.

‘Some of the applicants did have more,’ Suzanne admitted, ‘but I convinced Eric to let me have a go at having an old friend work with us. I like the idea much better than hiring a stranger.’

‘I’m glad you talked him around.’ Casey silently resolved to give the wonderful Eric no chance to regret the decision. ‘Suzanne, do you know of any fairly cheap accommodation I could share? It’s a long way to North Adelaide from Victor Harbor.’

Suzanne set her chin on her hands. ‘Hmmm, I hadn’t given that any thought. We’ll have to organise something. You can’t spend all your free time travelling. I don’t think any of my friends have room just now. I’d ask you to share my apartment but my boyfriend, Tim, wouldn’t like it. There’s already another girl living with us and I really think he’d dig in his heels over two. I’m sorry, Casey. Wish I could...’

‘Never mind. I’ll find somewhere. So, your boyfriend’s name is Tim? I thought Eric might be...’

Suzanne flourished her hands in a sweeping gesture of denial. ‘Good heavens, no way! Eric and I tried to start something once but we’re too alike. We see each other far too much at work for a relationship, anyway.’

Casey nodded, saying nothing. I think it’d be great to work with a man I love, she mused to herself.

‘Tim suits me better than Eric. He’s a fairly intense sort of guy. Mysterious. Eric is stunning to look at, though.’ Suzanne’s sharp features suddenly brightened. ‘Hey, are you interested in him?’

Casey felt heat infuse her cheeks. ‘Hang on! I’ve only just met him.’

Suzanne giggled. ‘You were never good at hiding things. You think he’s a dream. Admit it. It’ll be fun working with you. I’ll do the best I can for you, I promise. I’d rather see Eric with you than with the little flirt he’s just split up with. She tried as hard as she could to convince him to stop working with me. She was jealous because Eric used to go out with me. She didn’t give a stitch about his feelings or his career. Although I’m not his girlfriend anymore, I want to see him happy. You might be good for him.’

By now, Casey was blushing. Suzanne sensed her embarrassment and changed the subject.

‘I’ve been off on a tangent. All this isn’t helping you find a place to live. But I’ve just had a



brainwave! You can stay with Piers. He's been looking for a boarder.'

Casey's heart sank. 'Your brother?'

'Yeah. He has a big old house a little way out of Mount Barker and he's always short of cash. Did you know he has a little three-year-old boy?'

'Your mum mentioned something.' Casey's mind raced to think of a polite way of refusing. Suzanne's younger brother was the last person she wanted to live with. He'd been in many of Casey's classes at school but had not shared his sister's popularity. He and his two sole friends had been renowned misfits. Suzanne used to call him her greatest embarrassment. Whenever anybody referred to the 'three stooges', people knew they meant Wayne Forbes, Justin Edwards and Piers Bowman.

Piers had been smarter in lessons than either of his friends but he was judged by the company he kept. He had Suzanne's wild and woolly hair but it had looked odd on a boy. He'd generally suffered asthma attacks during P.E. lessons and had to stagger off the oval to puff his Ventolin.

Suzanne dropped her napkin on her plate and sprang to her feet. 'Come on, let's go back and strike while the iron's hot.'

'No, don't go to any trouble on my account. I can just as easily shoot back and forth.'

'Rubbish! Mount Barker is far closer than Victor Harbor. It won't be putting me out because I'll be doing you both a favour.'

Back at the studio, Suzanne made her phone call. 'Hey Piers, it's me. I've found you the perfect boarder. Do you remember Casey Miller from school...? I'm dead serious. She's going to work for me and Eric in the studio. She needs somewhere closer than Victor Harbor to live so I thought of you ... No, she likes the idea. It'll help you both out of a tight spot. Jerome'll like Casey too. I want her to start on Monday so we could come and move her in on Sunday afternoon... Fine. We'll see you then.'

Suzanne hung up with a satisfied beam. 'All done. Piers would be delighted to have you. Those were his very words. He just couldn't believe you'd consider going there. I can tell you, you won't find cheaper rent anywhere else.' For the first time, Suzanne studied Casey's face. 'You don't mind, do you?'

Casey pursed her lips and chose her words carefully. 'Suzanne, I'm not sure. Piers and I never had much in common you know.'

'Now, come on, Casey. You're not harking back to school days, are you? They're a long way behind us now. He's really not all that bad.'

Casey felt herself in a bind. How could she be honest about Piers without offending Suzanne? Suzanne had generously offered her a job for which she was not qualified and then organised some living quarters at Casey's own request. Casey could think of no way to stipulate, 'I don't want to live with your dopey brother,' without sounding incredibly ungrateful.

Instead, she mumbled, 'You really shouldn't have gone to all that trouble.'

'It only took two minutes. I'll meet you here at the studio on Sunday afternoon and we'll drive up to Piers' together. You'll love Jerome. He's a little doll.'

When Casey slid behind the wheel of her car half an hour later, she groaned and thumped the steering wheel with her forehead. How on earth would she come up with an acceptable way to back out of the arrangement? Why did I open my big mouth? A few hours drive each day



would be preferable to living with Piers Bowman but Suzanne wouldn't hear of it. Casey knew she would have to try hard to find some even closer accommodation to the city in the space of three days.

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Had Casey Miller known the peril in store for her she might have turned down her dream job offer.

Things are definitely not as they seem. Her personal judgments are turned upside down as she finds herself drawn into a story of terror and revenge that began twenty years earlier. All the while her heart is torn between two men; suave polished Eric and calm reclusive Piers.

This riveting novel will have readers unravelling mysteries with Casey and rejoicing in the choices she makes as she finally discovers the home of her heart.



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