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Changing Lara

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Chapter One

Lara looked her boss in the eye and said it slowly and firmly, hoping her feeling of relief didn't show. 'I'm afraid I can't accept that posting. I'm about to retire.'

'*You!* But you're only fifty-two, in your prime.'

'Gunther, I'm fed up of moving all over the world for the company, more than ready to settle down.'

He chuckled. 'Good tactical move. OK, we'll increase your salary.'

That was his answer to everything: throw money at it. 'Sorry, but the answer is still no.'

He frowned. 'I should have explained it better. Mal Porter has just dropped dead in Australia and we desperately need you to take over there.'

She was startled. 'Mal? The fitness freak?'

'The same. Just goes to show that nothing in this life is foolproof, eh?'

Nothing and no one, she thought, and that only made her more certain she was doing the right thing in retiring early.

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'Mal was in the middle of a big project and you're the only one with the skills and experience to take over mid-stream. The financial penalties will be huge if we don't bring it in on time.'

She felt more concerned about the people involved. 'Poor Mal. His wife must be feeling gutted. They were such a close couple.'

'Yes. Yes, of course.' With barely a pause, Gunther added, 'So will you at least consider it?'

She spoke without thinking it through, wanting only to get out of this easily. 'You'd have to double my salary to get me out to Australia. My family are all living in England now and my first grandchild is about to enter the world.'

'Double it!'

'Yes.' She didn't let him outstare her. 'I'm not at all keen to do this, Gunther.'

'I'll, um, see what the powers that be say.'

She didn't expect them to agree to *that*, but when they did offer to double her present salary, plus supply totally subsidised accommodation, if she'd take over the project, she had to rethink.

After doing some sums and deciding she could face a few more months of working, she agreed.

That meant she missed the birth of her granddaughter, which she regretted deeply, but she told her daughter about the amount of money involved and after the first stiff reaction, Darcie said she understood.

'I won't take on anything else after this.'

'You said that last time, Mum.'

'Well, this time I mean it with all my heart.'

She really did mean it. She'd changed in the past year or

two, didn't exactly understand what was going on inside her head now but she definitely *felt* different.

As for her son, well, Lara doubted she'd see much of Joel even if she was living in England because he sounded to be busier than ever. All he said when she told him about her new job was, 'Good for you, Ma!'

'It's my last project.'

He chuckled. 'Oh yeah? You said that last time. Hang on. Ah. Have to go. There's someone I need to speak to on the other line. Keep in touch.'

And he was gone.

Joel was as bad as she used to be about work, Lara decided. No point in telling him to slow down and smell the roses. He liked the smell of money far more. It was no wonder he'd left several broken relationships behind him. Who'd want to settle down with a man who was never there, however personable he was?

Or with a woman who was never there.

Lara had moved on far enough from her divorce by now to acknowledge that Guy had been right about one thing: she had been away too often to maintain a worthwhile marriage. He was the sort of man who enjoyed company and he'd told her bluntly that he wanted a wife who shared his bed regularly.

It had been a relatively amicable split, compared to some, with regret on both sides but no quarrels over finances. Their relationship had been cooling for a while and she hadn't been willing to give up her job just when she was on the cusp of a big step upwards.

She'd taken that step, but done it alone.

As for Guy, he'd soon started dating again and after

a while he'd found someone else to share his life with.

Lara hadn't. Who did you date when you were the boss?
And when most of your staff were younger than you?

There were times when Lara regretted choosing what she now thought of ironically as her 'brilliant career'; there were other times when she was very proud of what she'd achieved.

Had it all been worth it? Mostly she thought it had, but sometimes, in the middle of yet another dark, lonely night in a bland, beige hotel room, well, she couldn't help wondering.

Lara had worked in Australia before and once again she enjoyed many things about living down under. Who wouldn't? Great climate, friendly people, excellent food.

To her surprise, however, this time she didn't enjoy the job itself. Been there, done that. She was bored by the minutiae of revamping the Australian branch. She couldn't raise any enthusiasm for sales figures or customer communication programs, let alone selection procedures for new staff. She was missing her family more than she'd expected to, far more than she'd ever done before.

She had only 'met' her tiny granddaughter online and longed to hold her. She heard from Darcie regularly about how adorable little Minnie was and what a wonderful grandfather Guy was.

The latter hurt more than Lara had expected.

She soon stopped showing baby photos to her colleagues, most of whom only pretended an interest, but in private she regularly studied the photos of the baby she'd never touched, the baby who was her flesh and blood. She even shed tears over them. She must be getting soft in her old age.

Old? She wasn't old. Well, not very.

The day she turned fifty-three, she bought herself a bottle of champagne but didn't open it. She scolded herself for getting upset. She should be used to having no one to celebrate her birthday with by now. But the tears took a while to stop.

A few weeks before she planned to retire for real, there was a business downturn and the company began shedding jobs, something it did periodically. Brilliant! She applied for voluntary redundancy.

Morris Turner, current CEO of the whole Australasian region, visited Sydney and called Lara into his office for a private meeting. 'I'd like you to withdraw your application for redundancy, Lara. We need you to move to Singapore and—'

'I'd rather not.'

'We'll make it up to you financially, of course.'

'No, thank you.'

His voice became persuasive. 'Just give us a few more months, Lara. Come on, you know you enjoy managing these projects. You've handled this last one brilliantly.'

She stared at his elegant figure: stylish business suit, modern hairstyle and all. What stood out to her were the gleaming white teeth parted in a slight smile. He'd spent a lot of money on having his teeth fixed. She was suddenly annoyed by the falseness of that smile, which he could don so easily. It was very different from the real smile he occasionally wore when he was with his wife.

'Lara? Are you with me?'

'What? Oh, sorry. You're wrong, Morris. I no longer enjoy managing these projects.'

He continued to try to persuade her to accept and when she didn't give in, the discussion turned nasty.

'I'll make sure you don't get that redundancy,' he said suddenly.

'If you do that, I'll make sure it tarnishes your reputation as a manager. It could even be seen as discrimination against a woman because Harley Black has been granted redundancy and he's at my level.'

'Be very careful that you can live on your savings, then, Lara, because if you don't do this for me, I'll make sure you never find work in the company again, possibly even in the industry.'

Her voice was as sharp as his. 'I'll never *want* to find work like this again, Morris. I have my next occupation all planned. It's part-time and will be far more enjoyable.'

She started towards the door without waiting for him to say anything else. And he must have believed her because he let her go.

Back in her own office, she sat down, covering her face with her hands for a few moments and using a breathing exercise to calm herself down. She'd suspected for a while that she was in danger of burning out if she didn't take care, but she hadn't told anyone that.

Retirement day came at last, and to her amusement her last working day was 1st April. It seemed appropriate, she thought as she got ready for the obligatory party and fuss.

Inevitably, Morris Turner was there and at one stage, he cornered her. 'I meant what I said, Lara. You won't easily find another job. No one messes with me.' His smile never faltered as he spoke.

‘For heaven’s sake, Morris. I didn’t do it to mess with you. I need some downtime.’

‘You’ve never needed it before. And smile, damn you. Do you want everyone to know we’re at odds?’

‘Doesn’t matter to me now.’

She turned and walked away from him, nodding and saying suitable goodbyes to people as she pushed steadily through the crowd.

Done, she thought as she left the ugly modern office building. Over and done with.

She didn’t look back.

It was a huge relief to board her flight to the UK that evening. The flight seemed to go on for ever but at last they landed at Heathrow.

After she’d retrieved her suitcases from the carousel, she joined the shorter queue of British citizens returning to the UK, passing quickly through the various checks to the airport exit. She was home to stay.

Only, was this her home now? She hadn’t lived in the UK continuously for years.

Yes, of course it was home! She’d grown up here, married here and her children were here. There was nowhere else she would want to go.

She’d even found herself somewhere to live, couldn’t wait to see the house she’d bought online. It was in a new housing development in Wiltshire, called Penny Lake. The name had caught her eye first, then the fact that it was a small development of the sort often called leisure villages, on the same campus as a golf club and hotel.

As long as she wasn’t extravagant, from today onwards

she wouldn't need to work at all unless she chose to.

Why wasn't she bouncing with joy, then?

Why did she feel so off-balance?

It was mid-morning local time when she wheeled her luggage trolley towards the meeting point and looked for the driver of the limo her financial adviser, John Crichton, had volunteered to organise to take her to Wiltshire. She scanned the signs various drivers were holding up to collect their passengers but there was no 'Lara Perryman' on any of them. Strange, that. Perhaps her car had been held up by traffic.

She waited impatiently for a few minutes but no driver looking for her joined the group. Most of them collected their passengers and left within minutes.

Taking out her phone, she rang John's office to find out what was happening but there was no answer. His receptionist was usually there at this time of day, even if he was out. Lara had never really taken to Sandra, but the woman was super-efficient, you had to grant her that. However, there wasn't even his usual 'sorry to miss you' answerphone message today.

Almost half an hour crawled past and still there was no sign of Lara's vehicle – nor had she managed to get through to John's office.

Feeling more than a little frustrated, she decided she'd waited long enough. What had gone wrong? Could he have mistaken the day? It seemed unlikely. And even if the car he'd hired for her had been in an accident, someone would have phoned John and he'd have got in touch with her. Only they'd have got no answer from the office either.

In the end she decided to hire a car and drive herself to Wiltshire. The delay made her wish she hadn't given in to John's insistence on arranging transport for her, but he was usually more efficient than this. He'd managed her finances ever since her divorce and done it well, too.

She intended to organise her own finances from now on and was looking forward to doing that.

She glanced round for car hire companies, not looking forward to driving along the crowded M4 motorway. It wasn't pleasant at the best of times and today she was exhausted before she even began. However, needs must. She'd probably go straight to bed when she got to the hotel on the same site as her as yet unfurnished house.

After going through the necessary formalities, she was driven out to the depot where you picked up your vehicle.

They had coffee or tea available for customers. The tea was ghastly stuff but she downed a plastic cup of it quickly to help keep herself awake, then was taken outside and given a gabbled run-through of how the controls worked.

Once the young guy had gone back inside, she settled into the driver's seat, following the signs to the M4 and easing into the heavy traffic. Thank goodness she was on the very last stage of her journey.

She didn't bother with the radio because her mind was on her new house. It had been ready for several months now, but her diversion to the Australian project had stopped her even checking it out. She'd bought it while working in America from the online plans, an impulsive act very unlike her.

She'd only been half-heartedly looking through houses for sale in England at the time, just to start getting the feel of property prices in Wiltshire, where she'd decided to settle.

Of course she'd contacted the builder and asked a lot of questions before she signed up for a house. She wasn't *that* rash.

A sign read 'Slough'. She nodded at it, then went back to her thoughts.

John Crichton had counselled her against buying a house like that but for once she'd ignored his advice. She was good at reading house plans and could use them to mentally walk through the place. The design she'd chosen would suit her needs perfectly and the fact that it was in a leisure village would bring her a way of life as well as a home. There would be neighbours to meet, things to do. She might even take up golf. No, perhaps not. She'd never been in to sport. But walking, yes. She would enjoy walking in the English countryside.

Her daughter, Darcie, and her son-in-law had gone to check out the development and later checked her finished house. They'd said it had been well built.

In spite of that, her accountant had said it would be risky to make the final payment till she'd seen it herself. She'd ignored that advice too. Her daughter wasn't a fool, nor was her son-in-law.

Besides, this developer wasn't a big, faceless international company but one where you were in direct contact with the people who owned the business. She didn't know why but she instinctively liked and trusted Molly Santiago, who took care of sales and customer relations at Penny Lake while her husband supervised the building side of things.

It was like that sometimes, even online: you felt an instant rapport with some people and not with others.

The redundancy payment Lara had received added a nice extra chunk to her savings. It was sitting in her

personal bank account right now. It would more than cover furnishing her new home and buying a car.

John had also said he could get a better day rate than she could for placing the money temporarily, but she'd wanted to have it to hand so she'd refused his offer.

When she stopped at a motorway services near Reading for a comfort break, she tried again to reach John with the same result: no answer.

She was beginning to feel uneasy about this. He hadn't had a heart attack or something, had he? But even if he had, the answering service would still be operating, surely?

She'd soon be passing Swindon. Living round there would be convenient for visits to her daughter and her son, because Joel worked in Bristol and Darcie lived in nearby Gloucestershire. Lara's mother had died a few years ago and her father had found a new partner and moved to live with her in Portugal. Lara would drop him an email once she was settled in, maybe go and spend a few days with him and whatshername, as he'd invited her to do. Or maybe not.

She'd felt a tinge of envy at the thought of how quickly both her ex and her father had found new partners, though Guy's second marriage hadn't lasted, had it?

She'd have liked to find someone too but it just hadn't happened. So all right, she would remain Ms Independent and cope on her own with whatever life threw at her. She was used to that.

Not long now to her turn-off. She couldn't wait to get there.