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ASK ANYONE

by Caleb

CHAPTER 1

“Simon, dear,” said Aunt Prue breathlessly over the breakfast table, “I read the cards for you last night.”

I looked up from the crossword I was wrestling with and peered at her over my horn-rims. “A little early in the year, isn’t it? You always read the cards for me on my birthday and that’s not for months.”

“I know, I know. But last night I had the strangest compulsion. I felt it was necessary – no, urgent – that I do a reading. Very odd. I haven’t felt that urgency for a long time.”

I started buttering a piece of toast. “Spirits clambering at the window sill, were they?”

“Do not sneer, my dear. There are more things in Heaven and earth ...” she quoted in sepulchral tones.

Aunt Prue was my most favourite person in the world and I did not want to offend her.

“Sorry Aunt. So tell me. What did the cards say? What’s in store for the Knight of Cups?”

Surprisingly, Aunt Prue looked a little shifty.

“Um... no. Last night you were not represented by the Knight of Cups, my dear.”

Now that did surprise me. “But you’ve always use the Knight of Cups to represent me. What then?”

Aunt Prue examined an infinitesimal speck on the array of amber beads on her ample bosom.

“I used the Popess,” she answered airily, not meeting my eyes.

The piece of toast I was buttering, shattered.

I carefully gathered up the broken pieces. “The most feminine card in the pack. Is this some sort of oblique comment on my life, Aunt?” I said drily.

In spite of her apparent dottiness, Aunt Prue was no fool. “Your sex life is your own business, Simon. It is not my place to pass judgment. No. In this instance the choice of the Popess was perfect: a gentle passive person, immersed in books and learning, waiting to be awoken to Life’s great wonder.”

“Why not The Star then?”

She fixed me with her shrewd pale eyes and said meaningfully, "I do not think virginity is a quality you possess in abundance, my dear."

She had me, the old fox. I said drily, "Touché."

She smirked, satisfied that that point had been established.

"So," I said, forced to admit that she had piqued my interest. "What did the cards say?"

"Dear, I have never seen such cards – so unlike anything I had laid out for you before. There were none of the usual cards – choices, warnings, vague indications of the direction to take...no no. The layout centred around two men, two men of opposing characters...."

I was a little bewildered. "Well, If I am one of the men, then who...?"

Aunt Prue shook her henna dyed curls. "No, dear, no. These are two men apart from yourself. I rather think they could be the two men in that Leonardo Da Vinci place you work."

I grinned. "Its *Michael/Angelo*, Aunt Prue."

I had been very fortunate to have secured a position with *Michael/Angelo*, one of the most ground-breaking advertising agencies in Melbourne. Granted, my job was only Research Assistant, but it was a dream job for me, allowing me to have a job in the city while at the same time, anonymous enough to suit my overwhelmingly shy personality. I was able to spend my time in research which I loved, with little requirement for me to meet the public. The two men my Aunt Prue referred to were Michael Boynton and Angelo Pucino, the partners who had founded *Michael/Angelo*, and who were making it one of the most exciting young companies in Australia.

I failed to see how they could be any sort of influence on my future. Neither of them, I think, knew of my existence.

She cast a critical look at me. "Is that what you're wearing to work?" she asked suddenly.

I shrugged self-consciously. "Yes. I thought there was a nip in the air, so I'm wearing my tweed coat." I loved that coat, it was old and comfortable with leather patches at the elbows.

She grunted and said, "You look like a middle aged man. You're only twenty-four, Simon."

I was a little miffed, so I poured myself a cup of tea and said, "What else did the cards say?"

"Only that the next six months will be critical for the rest of your life... for your happiness... your real happiness...."

I blushed slowly. She said gently, "Simon, my dear. Forgive me but I know you're lonely, and it pains me."

I said quietly, "I am not unhappy, Aunt Prue."

She bowed her head in acquiescence. "I know, but you can do better than merely being 'not unhappy'." She paused watching me as I avoided her eyes and drank my tea.

I muttered, "I can't talk to people. I become tongue tied."

She sighed, "Well," she said, "the time is fast approaching when you shall have to grasp the nettle. Perhaps the Knight of Swords or the King of Wands will assist you to your

destiny."

I put down the cup, intrigued. "Who are they?"

"You would have a better idea of their identities than I. Perhaps the two men from ... um ... Michael/Angelo I mentioned before."

I pondered. I knew so little of the owners of the business. My immediate contact at Michael/Angelo was Ruth Casey, a very efficient lady who ran the Research Department and who had interviewed me for the job.

I finished my breakfast and said to Aunt Prue as I stood. "Time to go I think." I leant down and kissed her cheek. "'Bye, Aunt Prue. Have you got much on today?"

She held me tightly for a moment and then said, "I'll look in at the tea shop later this morning, and I have to go to the gallery."

I nodded and said, "Now don't be silly and try to catch a tram. Get a taxi or better, get Tran to drive you in the Rolls...God knows, it's eating its head off in the garage... and take your mobile phone. I worry about you, you know."

"Thank you, dear," she started buttering another slice of toast, "but Tran is terrified of the Rolls and he keeps getting lost. His sense of direction is abysmal."

I grinned and nodded. "A taxi then." I turned to leave the room and a thought struck me.

"You know, I never seem to get Sword cards when you read them. Always Cups and Wands. A Knight of Swords. Unusual. Strange, but I never get Pentacles, either."

Her head came up. "Do you want Pentacles? Are you short of money?"

I laughed softly. "No dear, not at all."

She gave me a searching look. "...We can easily call Geoffrey, and have him look at the Trust."

"No ... thank you," I said firmly. "I have ample money for both my needs and my caprices. My new job pays very well, you know. 'Bye." I blew a kiss to her and left for work.

The trust that Aunt Prue referred to, had been set up by my grandfather, her father, when my mother, a free spirit of the eighties, decided that a baby would cramp her style too much and made it plain that she intended to doorstep me. My grandfather was furious at such airy irresponsibility from one of his daughters, and savagely drew up the trust, dividing the bulk of his fortune between me and Aunt Prue, with only a modest sum that my mother could draw on. She seemed not to care, but went gaily dancing off, disappearing into the World's great maw. She could only be traced from the places round the globe where she drew on her share of the trust. I was left, as a rather docile baby in the arms of Aunt Prue, who took up the slack and became, for all intents and purposes, my mother, supplying me with the bread-and-butter love and affection that every growing soul needs.

We, the Cunninghams, were Old Money. Although these days Old Money is not as valuable as it once was, it still has some clout. And in my grandfather's day it had its responsibilities. *Noblesse oblige*. Old Money did not adopt out inconvenient bastards. At first he looked on me askance – his duty, the cross he had to bear – but I was such an obliging child that eventually his attitude towards me softened, and at his death his feelings, I think, approached something akin to love.

Aunt Prue and I were left, on his death, as co-owners of a large rambling stone mansion on an extensive block of land in the leafy Melbourne suburb of Kew – the bastion of Old Money. Aunt Prue categorically refused to sell, in spite of some very very attractive offers, but did make some concessions to the unequal task of keeping up the big house,

by moving both of us into the chauffeur's cottage and renting it out. Our tenants were a succession of flashy spenders, who always arrived with a bang but who would, after several months, fold their tents like the Arabs and silently steal away. Aunt Prue would then shrug her aristocratic shoulders and say scathingly, "Stock Exchange money – it comes; it goes."

The gardens of the big house were laid out in the 1920's, by the great garden designer Edna Walling, and now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century they were fully mature. There was none of the modern political correctness of using native plants in these gardens. They were full of Walling's signature plants – maples and crab apples, oaks and beeches, American hornbeam and dogwood. And roses – lots and lots of roses. All this was under the care of Henry, who had been gardener in my grandfather's time, and who had been at one time, I strongly suspected, one of Aunt Prue's lovers. He now lived in a little cottage at the far end of the garden and from there ruled his domain with an iron hand. He and Aunt Prue often had screaming rows about what should be planted in the garden, but he always won, and it was really a tribute to his stubbornness that the garden remained true to Edna Walling's vision, and as such, became a draw card for landscape design students.

After each fight with Henry, Aunt Prue would be stricken with remorse and whisper to me that I should raise his pay. She didn't realize that he would have worked for her for nothing, but I managed to pour oil on the troubled waters and raise his pay a little – not as much as Aunt Prue wanted, but as much as he was willing to accept.

From the mysterious Old Money jungle tom-tom in this part of Melbourne, Aunt Prue learned of Tran and his wife Li, Vietnamese refugees who had been employed in one of the big houses in Toorak but who had been dismissed when the house was sold. She persuaded Henry to take on Tran as his assistant, while Tran Li became our housekeeper. Like Henry, Tran and Li succumbed to Aunt Prue's charm and would have walked over hot coals for her. Tran became our general handyman and took over management of the kitchen garden, so that we always had a plentiful supply of fresh fruit and vegetables. Henry grudgingly acknowledged that Tran was a good worker and "Knew what he was doing."

Michael/Angelo occupied a recycled bank building in the middle of down-town Melbourne. The building had been erected at the height of the gold rush in the late 1800's and was grandly appointed with the requisite stone columns on the facade and an enormous public area inside with an impressive coffered ceiling. This public area was now converted to the reception area of the agency, dominated by a floor-to-ceiling reproduction of the famous Michaelangelo fresco of the Creation of Man from the Sistine Chapel – the finger of God giving the spark of life to Adam. Across this illustration were the letters *Michael/Angelo* in bronze in classic Roman type-face.

In front of this startling fresco was an incredibly highly polished reception desk, and seated behind the desk was Suzy, an incredibly highly polished receptionist. She was so immaculately dressed and so carefully made up, that she gave the impression of not moving her lips when she spoke, lest she should crack her highly finished facade. I don't know what the visitors to the agency thought of her, but she scared the b'jesus out of me.

My place of work was in the vaults of the old bank, where the Research Department and the records were housed. The space was large and well ventilated and this is where I had my desk and where my boss, Ruth Casey ruled her little kingdom. Although I had been in this job for only a few weeks, I got on well with Ruth. In spite of her uncompromising

appearance, she had a very dry sense of humour and was a generous and kind boss. I quickly established myself in the Research Department, and Ruth moved most of the day-to-day duties of the Department to my desk... answering random phone questions from the creative staff ("What are the names of Santa's reindeer?") and cutting articles from the daily papers and filing them away. From time to time I was given some reports to complete which I did to her satisfaction.

My lunch-hour was spent in the staff canteen, not really contributing to the general discussion but listening avidly to the gossip and scuttlebutt. I was of such an unprepossessing appearance, that I was barely noticed. Those who did acknowledge my presence had nothing to talk to me about. I didn't mind. I tended to stammer a little when the spotlight of conversation focussed on me and always came across as slightly stupid.

By a strange coincidence, during the lunch hour of the very day that Aunt Prue had mentioned her reading of my cards, the gossip zeroed in on Angelo Pucino, who could be, I decided, one of the two - either the Knight of Swords or the King of Wands. I listened as discreetly as I could. The general consensus of opinion was that he had nailed yet another fat account for the agency but "We all know how he did that – ask anyone"....

Jack Malloy, one of the copy writers noticed my confusion. He leant across to me and whispered, "He fucked the son of the owner."

I was shocked. "Angelo Pucino is gay?"

Jack nodded sagely. "Queer as a quince."

I munched my sandwich thoughtfully. "What about the other one...um ...Michael Boynton?"

Jack gave a bark of laughter. "Who knows? Who cares?"

Desley from the Art Department overheard this exchange and said knowingly, "He wears a wedding ring."

It was my turn to nod wisely."Ah. Not gay then."

Jack gave me a look. "Jesus. You've got a lot to learn." A comment which quite naturally choked off any other contribution I may have made to the conversation.

It seemed that the Fates were conspiring with Aunt Prue to hasten my destiny. That afternoon, the whole staff of *Michael/Angelo* were assembled to listen to an address by the owners of the business. It was my first opportunity to observe the two young men who ran the company and I was not disappointed. Michael Boynton was an impressive man, not precisely good looking, but with loads of charisma. He was obviously the senior partner and it was he who gave the talk to the staff. He talked for quite a while about the contracts that the company had landed and his speech was of the "let's all pull together" kind. Impressive though he was, it was Angelo Pucino that I couldn't keep my eyes off. He was tall and slim and dark and beautifully dressed, classically handsome with a dazzling smile and exuding Sex Appeal like a searchlight over a darkened city. I felt my body responding in an alarming manner to his presence. Looking round, I could see that I was not the only one. All the women and a lot of the men were bewitched by him but he seemed unconscious of their regard. Here, I realized, in front of me was my *beau ideal*. This was the man I wanted. The sad thing was – he hadn't the faintest idea I existed.

Although I had realized that I was gay from an early age, my paralysing shyness made my teen years painful and embarrassing. It was not until I went to University that I had my first grand passion – my first Great Love Affair. His name was Warren and for six wonderful months I believed myself the happiest and luckiest person in the world. Of course, this was followed by the Great Awakening. I had opened myself to Warren, had poured out all

my longing for love ... only to taste betrayal, debasement and ultimate humiliation. I was to him merely a convenience for his lust, something to do while he waited for someone better and finally, an object of ridicule.

But I learned my lesson well. After Warren, I vowed I would never again put myself in another's power to such an extent. Whereas before I was shy but eager, after Warren I was all but unapproachable, building a shell around me, layer by layer so that I would never be hurt again.

I watched Angelo Pucino all the while his partner was talking. I half listened to what was being said. He spoke of the necessity of advertising to the smooth running of the country's commerce, and how the science of advertising had reached such a point that anything could be sold to anyone with the correctly chosen advertising campaign. I suppose they were inspiring words, and certainly the applause he received seemed to show that most of his employees agreed with him.

But my eyes were only for Angelo Pucino. When the presentation was over, and the drinks and nibbles were served, I watched him as he circulated among his employees. I had to admire his sexy charm and easy grace. His partner was circulating too, but I scarcely noticed him.

I remembered Aunt Prue's words. The time had indeed arrived to grasp the nettle. I saw my chance when he was at the bar getting a drink. I moved up beside him and said, in a loud jolly voice, "Mr. Pucino....Hi". He looked at me, surprised that I had addressed him. While I had the impetus, I continued, "We've not met. I'm Simon Cunningham.... from the Research department." The barman handed him his drink, and he saluted me with it and murmured, "Cunningham..." and with a vague polite smile, moved away. I was left standing by myself. Typical, I thought and I sighed, and looked around.

Ruth, my boss, had seen what had happened. She moved up beside me and ordered a glass of wine. While the barman was getting her drink, she murmured to me, "He's out of your league, you know." I just dropped my eyes and did not reply.

Strangely, she did not move away. She stood beside me sipping her wine. "You need to do something to make him notice you."

"What do you suggest I do?" I asked sourly, "Dance naked on the bar?"

She laughed. "That would work, if a little obvious." I gave a reluctant laugh at the absurdity of it.

"No," she continued thoughtfully, "every woman he meets and a lot of men simply throw themselves at him. He won't respond to that. Too used to it. No. You need to do something different... something unexpected ... something subtle. Make him chase you."

Easier said than done, I thought. But I could see she was right. Why should he be interested in anything I could offer? I needed to advertise.

Advertise. It was like an Epiphany – St. Paul on the road to Damascus had nothing on it. I worked in an advertising agency. I could learn to advertise – myself.

An excitement coursed through me. I clutched my drink firmly and made my way blindly across the crowded conference room trying to return to the quiet of my desk where I could think. I was a little heedless of my surroundings and jostled my way through the crowd, until I stumbled on the rebound from brushing past someone and ...crunch! I stood on someone's foot with my full weight.

My poor victim let out a heartfelt "Jesus!!" and I turned round to look into the grimacing face of Michael Boynton, the Big Cheese.

The horror of what I had done was like a drenching of cold water.

"Sir!" I cried, appalled at my action, "I do beg your pardon. My clumsiness was

inexcusable."

The expression on his face changed from pain to one of bemusement at the patrician phrasing of my apology. I hovered around flapping my hands ineffectually and he waved me aside. "It's fine. It's fine."

All I could think of to say was to repeat, "I'm s-so sorry!" I began to stutter at the shock of being so maladroit.

He said, a little tersely, "I said it's fine." He saw me cringe under this almost reprimand and said more kindly. "I'm fine. Thank you."

I backed off, smiling weakly and flushing deeply. I fled, making my way to the lifts in the corridor outside. I was breathing heavily as I pressed the button for the lift, jamming my thumb on it. The lift pinged, the door opened and I practically fell inside. As the lift descended, I drained the drink I was carrying and breathed slowly, trying to still my racing heart.

The doors slid open when the lift reached its destination – the basement where my office was – but I stood there for a long while. Something possessed me. I slowly pressed the "up" button and I returned to the party level.

There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood,

Michael Boynton was my employer. Michael Boynton had given that speech about advertising selling anything. Michael Boynton was the help I needed.

I looked around the room but I couldn't see him. He must have left, I thought. I could not abandon my plan now. I looked down the length of the corridor outside and saw that the door at the far end was slightly ajar. His office.

I peeked inside. He was sitting at his desk, leafing through what looked like a diary. I knocked quietly. He looked up and his eyebrows shot up into his hairline.

"Have you come to stomp on my other foot?" he said grimly, but with a slight smile. I smiled tentatively in return. "No, sir," I murmured. "I wonder if I might have a brief word with you sir?"

He gave me a long appraising look. "Who're you?"

"Cunningham, sir. Simon Cunningham. I work in the research department."

He nodded. "Ah yes. Ruth Casey's new assistant. Well, come in, Cunningham and shut the door behind you."

I did as he asked and stood at the desk in front of him. He made a small annotation in his diary, then closed it and said, "Sit down Cunningham." I sat, on the front of the chair. I was not at ease. With a slight air of amusement, he noticed the way I was sitting and then leant back in his chair and said, "What can I do for you?"

I licked my lips and said carefully, "I was very interested in what you were saying about advertising. I thought you spoke very well."

He smiled sardonically and said "Thank you."

I continued, "I was particularly interested in what you said about advertising allowing anyone to sell anything. You made it sound like a ... a universal truth."

He smiled. "It is hardly that, but it is a sound business principle. Advertising is the lubrication that allows the wheels of commerce to turn. Any man can sell any product if he uses the correct advertising strategy. But it has to be the correct strategy. That's where advertising becomes an Art rather than a Science. It's not enough to compose a jingle or to paint a hoarding in bright colours. The Advertising strategy has to be appropriate to both the seller and the buyer." He smiled widely. I had obviously prompted him to his favourite subject.

I looked him in the eyes and said quietly, "Do you really believe that or is that just bullshit?"

He was shocked at the effrontery of my question, and a hard look descended on his face.

"Of course I believe it," he snapped. "I would not be sitting in this chair otherwise."

I refused to be intimidated by him. I had come this far. I nodded wisely and said, "So if you had to sell, say.... refrigerators to Eskimos... according to you that would be possible?"

He frowned. "Yes, of course."

"How would you go about it?"

He gave me a long puzzled look. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "I would examine the life-style of the Eskimos and identify where refrigerators would be useful .. reliability, perhaps.. um.. or... precise control of the temperature of the refrigerators... especially in the light of environmental factors, such a global warming..." He looked at me again very puzzled.

I understood what he was saying. "Yes, yes. I see. You could ... um... perhaps suggest to them that a refrigerator would be the best container for their fish..."

He nodded his agreement, but I could see he was becoming more puzzled.

"What is the point of these questions? Do you have something to sell?"

I couldn't bring myself to be that explicit.

"Would you adapt the refrigerators so that they would conform more to the Eskimos' cultural heritage? Perhaps change the storage capacity of the refrigerators to fit dead seals ...?"

He nodded, still looking at me mystified. "Yes. That would be very legitimate approach. Perhaps colours to suit cultural patterns... or .. or .. perhaps I would alter the electrical motors to suit their power supply... What is it you are selling?"

I couldn't avoid answering the question any longer.

Choosing my words carefully, I said, "I wish to sell a very particular product to a chosen buyer. Now this buyer has never used this product. He does not know it exists. There is no guarantee that he will even want the product, but I, as the seller, firmly believe that the product will be... will be... good for him." This sounded lame, even to my ears.

He leant back in his chair and looked at me for a long time, trying to work out what I was talking about.

"Have you invented something?" he guessed.

I smiled slightly. "No. Nothing like that." I looked at him. I wanted reassurance. "Given the scenario I just described, is it possible I could sell to this buyer."

He threw up his hands in a resigned gesture. "I can only repeat my previous assertion. You can sell anything to anyone, provide your advertising strategy is correct." He looked at me closely. "Does that answer your question?"

I felt a wash of disappointment. I don't know what I had expected – something more tangible than the answer I received. Pulling myself together, I nodded and said, "Yes.. yes, thank you sir. Thank you for your time. I shan't keep you any longer." I stood and made for the door.

"Cunningham." Loud and commanding. I stopped and turned and he looked me squarely in the eyes. "What do you want to sell?"

A long pause. I came to a decision. "Me."

Never taking his eyes off me, he slowly raised a finger, beckoned me back into the room and silently pointed to the chair. I slid into the seat. He watched me through half-closed eyes, weighing ... assessing... He tapped the desk with a single fingernail...tap...tap...tap. Then he swung his chair around so that he faced slightly away from me and folded his arms. Not looking at me, he asked quietly, "You obviously have a buyer in mind. Who is it?" I suspected he already knew the answer.

I saw no reason to lie to him. "Angelo Pucino," I answered succinctly.

I watched his face in profile. Many subtle expressions flitted across it, expressions I couldn't interpret, until it settled into one of stern neutrality. He gave a sigh and turned back to his desk and opened his diary again. He did not look at me.

"Thank you, Cunningham," he said, "That will be all. Please shut the door on your way out."

And that was it. I slunk out of the office and shut the door. As I made my way back to my own office, the enormity of what I had done struck home. I trembled as I realized I had put my own job in jeopardy. It was only a matter of time before I was fired for my trouble. I grabbed my belongings and left the office. I couldn't stand to stay there.

Mercifully, Aunt Prue wasn't home when I arrived. I looked at the time. It was still early in the afternoon, so she was probably still at her craft gallery. Li appeared as I flopped down in an easy chair. "Mr. Simon," she said, surprised to see me, "You home early."

I nodded. "I need a drink, Li. Would you get me one please?"

She smiled. "I get beer." She disappeared and reappeared a moment later with a can of beer, which she opened and handed to me.

I took it gratefully and took a large gulp. I closed my eyes as it sank down and murmured, "Thank you."

I sat there, my mind in neutral. Then I realized the irony of the situation. I had definitely identified the Knight of Swords. A Young Man with the power of life and death, or in this case, with the power of dismissal. And I could do nothing but wait for him to sink his sword into my wretched body.