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ASK ANYONE

by Caleb

CHAPTER 3

I had never heard of Ronaldo's, and I certainly had never met anyone like Ronaldo himself. His shop – or rather, his place of business – was tucked away on an upper floor in one of the most prestigious buildings in Collins Street in the heart of downtown Melbourne. There was no glittering plastic about Ronaldo's; the whole shop breathed privilege and money – beautiful bevelled glass entrance doors, dark panelled wood, thick luxurious carpets and discreet music in the background, so unlike any other hairdressing salon that I was familiar with.

Ronaldo himself was tall and elegant with his black hair beautifully cut to the shape of his head. His skin was without a flaw, and was an even *café au lait* colour that must have been obtained by hours of dedicated tanning, or else, I decided, by careful application of a solution from a bottle. He was lean and muscled like a swimwear model and his black shirt was worn tight across his chest so that, left open, it displayed a large amount of smooth flesh and lots of bling. There was a good, old-fashioned, politically incorrect Australian word that described Ronaldo – he was a dago. The only thing he lacked was the little pencil moustache.

He greeted my boss like an old friend and swooped up to him crying, "Michael, dulling," and kissed him full on the lips. I was a little shocked, but no one else in the shop seemed the least bit surprised, especially not Michael himself. Ronaldo then stepped back and his glance slid from Michael to me.

"And who is this?" This was uttered with all the disdain of someone sniffing at something he had stepped in.

Michael gently urged me forward with a touch to my back, and said with his winning smile, "This is Simon Cunningham, the one I told you about. I would be very grateful if you could work your magic on him – today."

Ronaldo looked me up and down and sneered slightly. "Today? You're cutting it a little fine, Michael sweets. The sun is already up.... however..." and he crooked his finger indicating that I should approach him, which I did, shuffling forward like the gormless geek that I was. He grasped me by the chin and ruthlessly twisted my head this way and that, examining me carefully.

"Hmmm..." he murmured, "good bones... yes...something can be done, I think." I grinned at the slight compliment. He said to me dismissively. "There is no reason to smirk, twinkie. Remember, bones are the stuff of Death. True beauty is a living thing – light upon the skin... hair caressing the face..." His voice faded slightly as he continued his assessment of me. He turned to Michael. "Yes. Something definitely can be done, but I have to tell you, Michael, I despise whoever sold him those hideous goggles."

Micheal laughed slightly and said, “... also colouring.”
Ronaldo gave a satisfied “Ah!” and again looked disdainfully at the spiteful haystack. “And what colour did you have in mind?”

Looking a little discomforted, Michael fumbled in his inside coat pocket and withdrew two plain envelopes. He carefully withdrew a lock of red hair from one, and handed it to Ronaldo, who moved to a stronger light to examine it.

“Yes,” he murmured, “a true Preraphaelite red.” (It just looked like red to me.)
He flicked a glance at me. “Yes. This will do very well, I think.” He held the lock of hair up against my face and nodded with growing enthusiasm.

I, it seemed, was given no vote in the matter.

He then said suddenly, “What’s in the other envelope?”
Michael handed it silently to him. Ronaldo looked inside and let out a peal of uninhibited laughter.

“Jeezus, Michael!” He bellowed and stamped his foot in delight. Gone was the pseudo-Brazilian accent. What came out was pure broad Australian.

The horror of growing realization swept over me. I snatched the envelope from Ronaldo and peered inside, seeing a springy mass of pale red-gold pubic hair. I was livid. I turned furiously to my boss and ground out, “There is no way I am letting him near my pubes!”

Ronaldo laughed an insulting laugh. “Oh .. twinkie ... twinkie...”
I rounded on him and snapped, “Would you please do me the basic courtesy of using my correct name!” with all the hauteur and arrogance that I had inherited along with a century and a half of Old Money.

Ronaldo’s eyes widened with shock. There was a frozen moment and then he dropped his eyes. “My apologies,” he muttered. “Please excuse me.” He turned away and disappeared into the bowels of the salon.

Michael moved up beside me as I stood there, furiously steaming, and he murmured, “Whoa! You scared the shit out of me. Where did that come from?”

I looked at him with a stony face and held up the envelope of pubic hair. “I might ask the same of you.”

He had the grace to look a little embarrassed.
“Kyle Onslow was very generous. I asked only for a sample lock of his hair ... from his head.”

Unaccountably, I was reminded of Gimli the Dwarf from the film of *Lord of the Rings*. “I asked her for a single golden hair from her head. She gave me three.”

I couldn’t help smiling, and asked, giving him an oblique look, “That was very generous. Did you do the .. um .. harvesting?”

He couldn’t meet my eyes, and was saved from further embarrassment by the return of Ronaldo, who said, in a low ingratiating voice, thick with an exotic South American accent, “The girls are ready for you, *señor*. If you would step this way” and he stood aside to allow me to pass.

Michael said, “I’ll see you later.”

I felt a stab of alarm at being so summarily abandoned.

“You’re not staying?”

He looked at me, surprised. “Well, I hadn’t intended to...” and he saw my panic, and so moved close to me and said, in a confidential whisper, “In spite of what you may think of the man, he is a genius... a real artist. He will do his very best for you.”

I gave him a nervous smile and nodded briefly. I was still terrified of being by myself and it must have shown, because he suddenly relented and said, "I'll return before you are finished. But I do have some errands to run down-town. I'll be back at – say – noon." He smiled kindly at me until I nodded again in agreement. With a smiling, " 'Bye," he was gone.

Ronaldo had watched this interchange in silence, and when Michael had left, he gave me an sideways look and said, in a neutral voice, "There aren't many who can snap their fingers and have Michael Boynton come running..."

I was shocked at his assumption. I said austerely, "I work for him. We have business together."

He raised a cynical eyebrow, his whole body eloquent with disbelief. However, he did not pursue it but merely nodded and conducted me into the inner sanctum where the transformation of Simon Cunningham, geek, was about to begin.

When I arrived home that afternoon, I saw that the French doors from the morning room to the verandah of the big house were open so I assumed that Aunt Prue and Li were rummaging around in the store room. I unloaded all my parcels (and there were a lot of them) from the taxi and ferried them into the sitting room of the cottage. I felt very self-conscious about my hair, and for some obscure reason I was glad than my arrival home was unwitnessed.

I was engrossed in unpacking my loot when I heard a loud gasp and turned round to see Aunt Prue and Li standing in the doorway, each of them had a hand over her mouth. Li, in that typical Eastern way, was shyly giggling behind her hand while Aunt Prue... well, I found it hard to interpret her expression. I self-consciously stood up for her inspection.

She managed to choke out "Simon... your hair..."

The pleasure I had felt at my new hair-style faded as I saw her reaction.

I said uncertainly, "You don't think it looks like a carrot going super-nova... do you?" I was alarmed to see her eyes brim with tears.

"Aunt Prue.." I began but she interrupted me.

"Oh Simon," she said, "You are beautiful... beautiful!"

I flushed with pleasure at her reaction.

"Men aren't beautiful, Aunt Prue," I said, but I was pleased with the compliment.

She smiled a tremulous smile. "No dear, but nephews are... and sons are." This last was said as a whisper and I barely heard her.

I remembered my new specs. "Wait. Wait." I said excitedly and fumbled in the wrappings and found my new (and very expensive) specs and exchanged them for the horn-rims I was wearing, for her inspection. They were aviator-shaped, with neat slick black wire frames. She was very impressed. "My dear .. such a difference."

She still couldn't tear her eyes away from my new red hair. "When you said that you were going to buy some new clothes, I had no idea..."

I grinned widely. "Mike wanted me to get contacts but I couldn't bring myself to wear them so we compromised."

She fixed me with a hawk-like stare. "Mike?"

I suddenly realized that I had never mentioned our arrangement to her, and with that came the further realization that she would probably not approve.

"M-Michael Boynton, my boss." Her eyebrows shot up. I hurried on. "He suggested I buy some new clothes ... and things ... um.. he asked me to call him Mike."

Aunt Prue rolled her eyes to heaven. "Oh, not 'Mike', dear. If he insists you treat him informally, then 'Michael'."

I should have known this would be her reaction. I laughed. "You really are such a snob, Aunt Prue."

She managed to look stern. "There is such a thing as correct behaviour, Simon. Vulgar familiarity is never acceptable."

It was my turn to roll my eyes to heaven.

"I'll try to remember ... Aunt Prunella." I smirked wickedly at her.

She pursed her lips. I knew she detested her full name. "You would also do well to remember," she said cuttingly, "that there is a vast difference between informality and intimacy."

In spite of her come-back, I knew I had won that round. However I could not – would not – admit to her that she was right ... that I found calling my boss 'Mike' very difficult. I would be much happier with 'Michael'. I wryly reflected that I was exactly the same sort of snob that she was.

A deflating thought.

Dressing for work on that Monday morning was a very strange experience. Whereas it had been my usual habit to reach for the nearest article of clothing in my wardrobe, that day I was racked with indecision. I had so much choice! I was determined to appear at work in a clap of thunder, so I finally decided on a copper coloured silk shirt overprinted with sketchy black-and-white mice. The tie I wore was of the same fabric but it was printed with Siamese cats. I wore the tie loose (very daring) with the top button of the shirt undone. I matched it with a pair of exquisitely cut black pants (also new) and finished the whole ensemble off with a beautiful dark golden brown suede jacket.

I wryly calculated that this whole outfit had cost me several months' wages. Ah well!

Spurning my usual tram ride to work, I alighted from a taxi at the front door and sauntered in. Highly lacquered Suzy at the reception desk stared at me, her face actually showing an expression - shocked amazement, and she could not respond to my jaunty "Good morning!"

Ruth stared at me intently over her specs as I self-consciously took my place at my desk. After a significant pause, she gave a quirk of a smile and said drily, "Yes. Very much better than dancing naked on the bar."

I grinned. "Good morning, Ruth," I said and she replied, "Good morning Simon," in a voice that was bereft of any expression, though I noticed she was smiling a little smile to herself as she continued with her work.

We worked together in a companionable silence. The first job I had to do every morning was to scan the newspapers for anything of interest. There were several articles that I thought should be added to our files so I was intent on cutting them out when Ruth suddenly said, "When you go upstairs for your meeting this morning, could you take these papers to one of the copy writers... Jack Malloy preferably."

I looked at her, startled, but she was oblivious of my reaction and calmly continued with what she was doing. I became more than a little flustered when it slowly dawned on me that my morning meetings had become the subject of the office scuttlebutt.

I glanced at the clock. There was time to deliver the papers before my meeting, so I said, "I'll go now." Ruth looked up and nodded and smiled but otherwise made no comment.

The copy writers were laughing and chattering, but as I entered the room, the noise died and silence greeted me. I felt that every eye was on me and, in spite of my steeling myself, I felt a blush rise like a thermometer. I found my way to Jack's desk, and mumbled that Ruth had sent him the papers I deposited there. He nodded dumbly, his mouth open as he gazed at me. I turned to leave and then I heard it, loud and clear – a wolf whistle. It took every ounce of strength I had not to run from the room. I heard the chattering begin as I left, rising like a flock of querulous birds.

This encounter had robbed me of any bravado I may have felt, so that by the time I reached Angie's desk, I was once again my old geeky self.

She gasped and exclaimed, "Holy shit! You look hot, Simon!" and she licked her lips at me.

I snorted, trying to be businesslike. "Can I see him?" I asked gruffly.

She waggled her eyebrows at me and flipped the intercom.

"Yes, Angie?"

"Um ... Simon Cunningham to see you, Mr. Boynton." She then lowered her voice so that she sounded like a sex siren. "... A very hot and sexy Simon Cunningham, Mr. Boynton – he'll set every girl's knickers wagging."

There was a long pause.

"Thank you for the editorial, Angie," he answered calmly. "Please send him in."

She blew a kiss to me as I passed her desk.

"Well!" he said in an explosion of breath, as I entered, "I never would have believed it!"

I smirked, slightly embarrassed as I took a seat. He gazed at me quite frankly, his clear hazel eyes dancing.

"Do I look .. um.. OK? Do you approve?"

He grinned widely and nodded his head. "You look ... amazing," he said at last and with such conviction that I really believed him. "We can safely say, I think, that Phase One of the operation is a success..."

"Phase One?" I queried.

"The repackaging of the product... you." He leant back in his chair still looking at me. After a pause, he said "So... on to Phase Two."

I was smiling like an idiot. "What's Phase Two?"

He lifted his briefcase to the desk top and extracted a fat file from it – a manila folder bulging with papers and tied around with cloth tape – like a legal brief.

"This," he said, "is Phase Two." He slid the file across the desk to me. "I want you to study this. Make it your bed-time reading."

I stroked the file and looked at him, smiling, and said, "What is it?"

He leant back in his chair with a strangely complacent air. "That, my dear sir, is a dossier – a dossier on one, Angelo Pucino."

I looked down on the file in amazement.

He was obviously very pleased with himself. "Yesterday, while you were doing whatever you do on a Sunday, I was spending the whole day compiling that dossier.... In it you'll find everything that you need to know about Angelo.. from the bald facts of his life to all the private correspondence that I could find from him, along with various reports and comments from a large variety of people and rounded out with my own observations and opinions of him..... And as they say in the Book of Common Prayer, you are to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest."

I stared at him in amazement and slowly my feelings of happiness and well-being faded as the import of what he said sank in. The warning bells were ringing.

I said quietly and carefully. "You want me to read this?" I touched the cover of the file with a trembling hand. The temptation to open it was almost over-whelming.

Almost, but not quite.

I looked up at him, appalled at his hideous complacency.

I took a deep breath and said quietly, "No."

"What?" He didn't seem to be able to comprehend my reaction.

"I said 'No'! This not how I want it to happen... to have him presented to me, his privacy ripped open, his secrets exposed, his character filleted and spit roasted for me to gorge upon like some unholy bird of prey. I don't want this. I want to love him, to respect him... to have him love and respect me. Do you think that will happen if he finds out that I had studied this vile dossier? And let's not kid ourselves, he will find out – a thing like this cannot be kept hidden. No. I want no part of it."

His good humour vanished and his face became hard.

"This is the quickest way I know to give you what you want... to nail him."

That did it.

"To nail him? *Nail him!!?* No, Mr Boynton, I do not want to *nail* him. I do not want to trap him, to rein him in, to snare him or bring him to heel. He is not some wild beast whose spirit I have to break. He is a man whose love I seek "

He jumped to his feet and said scathingly to me, "Then what do you think all this was for - the hair, the new clothes - if not to nail him?"

I stood and faced him over the desk and snarled at him, "Not to nail him. Never that. But it seems we have completely misunderstood each other. Where does allurement end and entrapment begin? We have obviously very different ideas on the subject."

He sat down and scowled at me and said pettishly, "You come to me for help; I give you my help and you throw it back in my face."

I was now desperately angry, because of his presumption, but mainly because of his lack of understanding of what I was saying.

"If I do what you ask," I said, my voice throbbing with outrage, "I shall be irretrievably corrupted. The price you ask is too high. It is not a price that I would ever consider paying. Better I die a sad and lonely old queen than exploit a man's inner-most secrets in such a way."

I stared into his snapping eyes and I felt a knife turning in my chest. "And this man is your *friend*. I can't believe it. You blithely expose him to a third party without any compunction and solely for the satisfaction of wallowing in your own cleverness. I think you despicable."

He went white with fury, and I turned on my heels and left the office slamming the door behind me. Angie, in the process of buffing her nails, looked up startled with her mouth open as I stormed past. Behind me I heard him fling open the office door and bellow furiously after me, "CUNNINGHAM!!"

I paused with my back to him. Doors up and down the corridor opened and heads popped out, as everyone tried to find out what was happening.

I took a deep breath and without turning back continued my way to the lift. I was trembling as I pressed the "Down" button but I would not acknowledge his presence.

I swept to my desk and sat down heavily. I was shaking and sweating. Ruth was on the phone. At first I was unaware of what she was saying, but I suddenly heard her say, "Yes, Mr. Boynton. He's just come in ..."

She covered the phone with one hand, and stridently whispered to me, "What in heaven's name did you say to him? I've never heard him so Yes. Yes, Mr. Boynton. I'll get him for you...."

She held out the receiver to me.

I looked at her. "Tell him to go fuck himself!"

Her eyes opened in shock. "SIMON!"

I was instantly sorry. "No, don't tell him that. Tell him... tell him..." and I came to an instant decision. "Tell him that I don't work here anymore."

She gave me a long, long look, and then slowly put the receiver to her ear and said carefully, "He can't come to the phone, Mr. Boynton. He is very upset and seems to have disappeared into the toilet... yes, Mr. Boynton ...yes. I'll tell him." She hung up and looked at me.

I said sourly, "Tell me what?"

"You are to go to his office at the first opportunity," she said in a matter-of-fact voice. I said nothing, but I started fuming at his high-handedness.

She looked at me over her specs. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I answered baldly, "No."

She didn't react but nodded slightly, and quietly turned her attention to her work. I came to a decision and started packing up my personal items on my desk.

"What are you doing?" she asked quietly.

I looked at her. "As I said before, I don't work here anymore."

"Simon, stop." She stood up and approached my desk. "I don't know what's going on between the two of you..."

"There is nothing going on between us," I snapped.

She paused, then began again, more firmly this time. "I don't know what is going on between you, but do not resign. Something of great significance has obviously happened that has affected you deeply, but there is nothing that cannot be resolved ... with time. If you feel you can't stay, then take the rest of the day off. In fact, take the rest of the week off. You look like you need it. I should dearly like to know what happened, but if you don't want to tell me then I shan't pry. But I don't want to lose you. You're too valuable."

In spite of my emotional turmoil, I was touched. I bit my lip in indecision.

"Thank you," I muttered weakly, and then with a bitter smile, "I'll probably be fired anyway."

She resumed her seat and said in a business-like manner, "No you won't – not if I have anything to say in the matter. Go home. I'll see you next Monday, bright-eyed and bushy tailed. Don't worry about our Mr. Boynton. I'll endeavour to keep the enemy from storming the citadel."

Her phone rang again. We looked at each other, both knowing who was on the other end. She waved me away and, after a studied pause, deliberately picked up the receiver. As I fled, I heard her say, "I'm sorry, Mr Boynton, but he muttered something about being sick and went home"

I arrived home to an empty house, and in spite of it being only about ten in the morning, I

went straight to my room and flung myself on my bed. I lay there for several minutes almost in a catatonic state, and then slowly tears began to roll down my cheeks.

Why was I crying? I could not deceive myself. I had allowed my emotional defences to be breached infinitesimally and Michael Boynton (the bastard) had swept in and once again my feelings had been trampled on. The hurt was almost as great as before. This time, I realised, it was because I *liked* Michael Boynton. We seemed to have so much in common. The desolation in discovering just what sort of person he was, was almost unbearable. So I wept.

"Aren't you going to work this morning, dear?" Aunt Prue asked as I sat down at the breakfast table. She was obviously startled by my appearance – unshaven, uncombed hair, and wearing my old sludge-coloured clothes.

I looked a little shifty. "Um .. no," I said, "My department is being.. um ... overhauled repainted. They're putting in a new storage system, so I'll be in the way. Ruth gave me the week off. I go back next Monday."

Aunt Prue gave me a searching look but she seemed to accept my explanation readily enough. We ate in silence. I could not concentrate on the morning cross-word but was lost in reverie – not thinking about anything really.

Suddenly Aunt Prue said, "If you're not working today, would you mind coming to the Village with me and helping out in the gallery?"

I snapped back to reality and said, "Of course not, Aunt... but what...?"

"Marigold is expecting a new consignment of quilts from America to be delivered today. I'm going over to help her unpack. We're going to mount a small exhibition and have an opening on Thursday."

I grinned. "That sounds like fun. How many quilts will there be?"

She looked thoughtful. "About sixty, I think."

I was impressed. "That's a lot of quilts. They must have cost you a fortune."

She grimaced and said sourly, "They did. And there was Import Duty on top of that. But" and she sighed, "Marigold is sure we can sell them. She bought them last year when she was over there."

I said, "I'm surprised that the US would allow things like that to leave the country."

She gave me a cynical look. "Things like that, as you so eloquently phrase it, are never appreciated, even by those who should know better."

I smiled at her, a lop-sided smile. "Still," I said, "I'm sure you'll sell them at an obscene profit."

She couldn't meet my eyes.

I continued, "So what's the plan?"

She bit into a muffin. "Today we'll unpack, and perhaps erect the racks. Marigold has worked out where everything is to go, but of course there will always be last minute adjustments. Tomorrow, if we're lucky, we can get all the hanging done. That leaves Thursday morning to prepare for the opening, which will be at two in the afternoon."

I was impressed at the scale of the operation. "It sounds like a lot of work. Will I be enough? Should you think of hiring some Brute Force and Ignorance?"

"Marigold has that in hand. She has applied to Centrelink for some labour. They will be there today, I believe."

I laughed. "Good. Maybe I shall be able to just point and look important."

She gave me a pitying look. "Hardly, dear. You will find, I believe, that you'll be busy all

day - for two days."

When we reached the studio/shop in Toorak, I realized she was not joking. Marigold Palmer, her partner, had begun to unpack and was in the middle of checking off the quilts against the despatch list when we arrived. She greeted us with obvious relief and immediately put us to work, unpacking, sorting and checking.

Marigold was even more eccentric than Aunt Prue. As always, she dressed like a Renaissance Pope – her pepper-and-salt hair dragged back into a bun on the top of her head, and the flowing, richly coloured kaftan she invariably wore was hung about with many long necklaces and bracelets, all sporting enormous chunky precious and semi-precious stones. She wore so much make-up she almost looked like a clown, but her manner was imperious and her attitude formidable. She wore very large, tortoise-shell framed specs that kept sliding down her long nose and she kept unthinkingly pushing them back up. Because she was busy checking off the lists, she had a few extra pencils shoved through her bun right next to several (very rare) Chinese jade prayer sticks.

A couple of hours after Aunt Prue and I arrived, the hired muscle shambled in. There was only one of him, but he was enormous – a tattooed maori, whose New Zealand accent was so thick that I could barely understand him. However, in spite of his really frightening appearance, after about five minutes in his company, I found out that he was, in reality, a very gentle creature, of sunny disposition and simple outlook, without an ounce of malice in him.

His name was Ricky ("Call me Ricky, bro'...") and he said he came from a country town in the North Island called Why-kick-a-moo-cow (at least, that's what it sounded like) and here was I thinking that Australia had odd place names! When he announced the name of his home town, he went into guffaws of mirth. I failed to see the joke dismissing it as some incomprehensible example of New Zealand humour.

Ricky was very adept at assembling the racks from which we were to hang the quilts, so much so we were finished by about two o'clock, far earlier than Aunt Prue had reckoned. After a break for lunch (I had a banana and Ricky inhaled two pizzas) we began the careful task of hanging the quilts. Aunt Prue and Marigold chose the quilts that had to be hung in particular positions, and stood by while Ricky and I, on separate step-ladders, carefully attached the top edges to the cross bars of the racks.

We worked at a fairly steady rate. I was forever scrambling up and down the step-ladder and moving it constantly. At one point, I was intent on securing one corner of a quilt when I heard Marigold call up to me, "Oh Simon, there's someone here to see you."

I was surprised to say the least and I stopped what I was doing and looked down from my perch.

And there he was – Michael Boynton, holding a sprig of greenery in his hand. He solemnly offered it to me.

I was stunned. He had no expression on his face and kept his arm extended. I was uncomfortably aware of Aunt Prue, Marigold and Ricky, all pausing to watch the little drama that was unfolding before them.

"What are you doing here?" I said sourly.

Completely dead-pan, he said, "I come bearing gifts." Again he offered me the sprig of greenery. I could see that it was an artificial spray of wattle, which he held in his fist, like a school-boy.

"What is that?" I said carefully, trying to keep any suggestion of petulance out of my voice.

Looking me straight in the eye, he said,

“This is the wattle
The symbol of our land;
You can stick it in a bottle,
Or hold it in your hand.”

In spite of my steely self-control, I felt a bubble of laughter well up in me. I burst out laughing. “You’re a fucking idiot, you know that?”

He smiled at me, a long slow smile and his eyes were twinkling.

I had no choice, God help me, but to smile back at him.