

Prologue

October 1991

An office in New South Wales, Australia at the headquarters of the Australia Telescope National Facility

Larry Pottle was a satisfied man. Here he sat, a staff astronomer in what was the newest, fastest, glitziest radio telescope array in the world and he was going to the States to talk about it. He leaned back and stretched, just as the mail arrived in the hands of the luscious Maggie. “Package for you, Sweetie”. She dropped the package on his desk. Larry admired her departure.

“Well, stone the crows,” he muttered as he looked at the return address. From Uncle Morgan, recently deceased, of the Army Observatory near Washington, D.C. “The old guy must have posted this just before he carked it.”

Larry opened the package and discovered that he was the recipient of the old recluse’s research notes. He thumbed through them, then reached for the latest edition of the *Astronomical Journal*, finding his way to a well-worn page. “Holy dooly!” He picked up all of the material and high-tailed to the director’s office, made a cursory knock on the door and barged in.

Ham looked up. “Nice to see you, mate.”

“Take a look at this, Ham.” Larry plunked the stuff on Ham’s desk.

Ham did a quick look. “Cripes! Whaddya think we should do about it?”

“I’m going to be in D.C. for the Conference. Can you extend my stay for a day? Letitia Krackov is at the Army Observatory. Might be a good idea to talk to her before we do anything.”

“No sooner approved than done.” Ham reached for the phone.

Chapter 1

October 7, 1991

“Alex! Put your hand where it belongs.”

Alex, aggrieved. “*This is* where it belongs.”

I shot a glance at my tousled-haired husband, sitting innocently in the passenger seat beside me. “You loon, you’re going to get us into an accident.”

“Oh, awright.”

I shot a second glance. He was now sitting with hands folded in his lap, looking adorably angelic, and whistling “I’m Called Little Buttercup.”

Alex and I both worked at the Laboratory for Industrial Technology (LIT), I as a management scientist reporting to the Deputy Director, Alex as a computer scientist and senior technical guy. LIT itself was part of a larger entity, the Department of Trade and Industry (DoTI, pronounced “dotty”). I was shortly to get an inkling of just how dotty the Department was.

I pulled into a space in the LIT parking lot and turned off the motor. Alex leaned over and gave me a serious kiss.

"Howsabout a snoggle, keed?"

"Don't mind if I do." We were in the midst of the snoggle when there came a rapping on our windowpane. We sprang apart.

It was Don Cromarty, my boss. "If you get to the part where you're making babies, I'm selling tickets."

We got out of the car and joined Don.

Alex glared at him. "I'm glad to see you, too."

Don laughed and Alex trotted off toward his lab. I caught up with him, grabbed his ears, kissed him on the nose, and returned to Don. We walked toward the admin wing.

"D'ja read the paper this morning?"

I nodded. "You mean the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas brouhaha?"

"Yeah. Just in time for his hearings as Supreme Court Justice. Do you think he really sexually harassed her?"

"Hard to tell how it'll play out," I said. "I can't think of any reason why she would have accused him if it wasn't true. The woman is a law professor at a major university. Starting this kind of a stink is not going to make life on campus particularly pleasant."

We parted at the entrance, Don to his office, me to mine. Walking, I pondered my life. Husband I adored. Couldn't ask for a better job or boss. And a LIT Director whom I had known

and loved for years. Darn close to perfection.

I'm uncomfortable sitting behind a desk while talking to whomever drops into my office. So my desk is backed up to the wall opposite the door. When someone comes in, I only have to swivel to be face-to-face, with no barrier between. As I opened my office door, the eminent Dr. P.I. Lee swivelled to greet me. Dr. Lee is the LIT Director and the beloved Uncle Pie. My first (deceased) husband, Harry, and I were the honorary niece and nephew of Uncle Pie and Aunt Bessie.

Pie was born of a Chinese mathematician father and a Jewish housewife mother. Always beautifully tailored, shoes shined, hair brushed, the illusion was shattered by his outrageous Brooklyn accent. He came to LIT from UCLA via MIT at the request (pleading?) of the Secretary of the Department.

"Hi, Pie." I gave him a kiss and plunked myself in the visitor's chair. "What brings you here?"

"Did you see the story in this morning's Post?"

I looked at Pie, puzzled. It was not like him to make idle chitchat during office hours. "Saw the headline and skimmed the story. It's a stunner."

"Yeah. It is that."

Silence.

I studied Pie. "What is it that you're avoiding telling me?"

“*Bubele*, it’s a long story, well, maybe not so long. You know the US Naval Observatory?”

“Uh huh. In the District, near the Vice President’s house.”

“Ever been there?”

“No. Pie, you don’t want me to take some visiting dignitaries on a tour of USNO, do you?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It’s like this. USNO has been there forever and a few years ago, the Army noticed it and decided that if the Navy had an observatory, the Army should have an observatory.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. Anyway, the Army found some pocket change and built an observatory about fifteen miles from here on Blessing Mountain near Bella Villa County.”

“Blessing Mountain isn’t a mountain, it’s a big hill. You can’t do serious astronomical work there. That’s goofy!”

“*So nu?* It’s not the only goofy thing the Army’s ever done. Anyway, now they agree with you and they’re trying to get rid of the thing.”

“And?”

“And DoTI wants to acquire it.”

“What in God’s name for?”

“Well, the official reason is that the facility is capable enough to examine near-Earth asteroids to see if they can be mined for metals useful in industry. A speculation that may be true. There are almost nine thousand asteroids with diameters over forty-five meters. They think (the Secretary didn’t tell me who ‘they’ are) that some of those

asteroids have high levels of platinum. If so, one of those asteroids could contain the equivalent amount of platinum mined in a whole year on Earth. That would make each small asteroid worth several billion dollars.”

“That’s very impressive. Now tell me what’s the unofficial reason?”

“I dunno if there is one. But the Secretary’s kid – he’s about twelve – is an astronomy nut. I think the Secretary wants him to have a telescope.” I digested this. “Okay. Now that we’re both on the same side of the Looking Glass – why are you telling me this?”

“Because we want you to spend a couple of weeks there, sizing up the place and evaluating the personnel. Make recommendations about whom we want to keep.”

“Pie, no! I love it here. Alex and I take turns driving to work every day. We only have one car. Don will have a cow. Won’t you miss me?”

“I’ll miss you. If anything happens on the Hill I’ll probably screw it up. But the Secretary asked for you. I argued but the *shmegegge* thinks he’s doing you a favor – a reward for nearly getting yourself killed the last time you helped DoTI out. He says it’s a good career move for you; he’s probably right.

“You can keep driving with Alex. I’ll get you a government car to go from here to there. It’s not much out of the way.”

“Rats! When do I start?”

“Tomorrow morning. They’ll have a briefing book over here in an hour or so. I’ll round up a car for you. I’ll call and let them know that

you're coming.”

“I bet they'll be just thrilled. Have you told Don?”

“Not yet. Would you like to tell him?”

I scowled at Pie.

“Okay, okay,” he said, “I'll tell him. Are you going to eat lunch in the cafeteria?”

I nodded.

“I'll bring you the book there. Noon?”

“That'll be good.”

Pie departed.

So much for the perfect life.