

## THE LOVE TRAP by Giorgio Marino

MY HEART SKIPPED when I saw Perry Roberts ahead, striding into a wind that whipped his coat tails around long muscular legs. Involuntarily I recalled an image of those legs, unclothed, in another place, another time. I remembered his smell, his touch, the intimate moments we had shared.

Clenching the steering wheel, I squeezed my eyes shut, expelling memories of the past from my mind. *I will not cry*, I told myself. Too much had happened to allow the past to intrude on the present.

Dropping the keys in my coat pocket, I sprang out of the car, adrenalin energising my limbs. From the car park I could see down the cliffs to the sea, to where waves smashed explosively on the rocks. Naked energy churned the water at the base of the cliffs into a ferment of foam, and its violence startled me into an awareness of the urgency and danger of this meeting.

I slammed the car door shut as Perry called, “Rachel”.

He beckoned me from where he stood, on the path only metres from the cliff edge. My heart thumped in my chest and for a moment I could think only of flight. Intuition shrieked caution and I panicked, my fingers fumbling for the car keys in my pocket.

Perry laughed, ‘You can’t run out on me, Rachel.’

I withdrew my hands. He was right. I couldn’t run away. The need to close this chapter of my life was greater than my fear. I took a deep breath, and wiped my sweaty palms on the inside of my pockets. *Finish it!* I exhorted myself.

I stepped onto the path and walked towards him.

It felt ridiculous as I drew close to my former lover—like a disturbing dream that I couldn’t wake up from. A gust of wind cut through me like an icy lance and I shivered, dread chilling my bones. But this was no dream. I buttoned my coat and pulled the collar up around me. The insulation was welcome, and not just against the wind.

Perry scrutinized me and I met his gaze evenly. It became a battle of wills until Perry finally broke into a disarming smile.

‘Glad you could make it.’ he said in a manner which seemed designed to antagonise me.

I nodded and patted my pocket. ‘I’ve got the disk.’

His eyes glinted. ‘What’s the hurry?’

I stared back at him as my skin prickled. *How many women had he seduced before me?* I lifted my chin and mustered a deliberate tone. ‘It’s cold and late, and there are places I’d rather be.’

\* \* \*

We had met four months ago, at an Energy Conservation conference in Sydney. It was an exciting day for me. The conference provided the forum to present my PhD paper on a new solar battery I had developed. My speech had been well received, and I was feeling invincible, partly for the response but mostly from conquering the nerves that plagued me on occasions like this. I had just left the podium, still flushed with my success when Perry had approached me.

‘Dr Lambert! Congratulations! An excellent paper,’ a broad Californian accent said behind me.

I turned around to see a tall, well-built man with the most piercing blue eyes and compelling good looks. This man didn’t fit the mould of scientist or environmental activist.

‘I’m glad you found it interesting,’ I said carefully.

‘Very,’ he said, shaking his head in admiration. ‘Your work is fantastic.’

*Effusive*, I thought. This man *definitely* doesn’t fit. Nonetheless I replied, ‘Thank you,’ with more than my usual modesty. A cool, professional demeanour suddenly seemed appropriate.

‘Your solar batteries are really neat, Doctor Lambert.’ He flashed me a radiant smile. ‘They’d be perfect for our water filtration plants in North Africa.’

*Neat?* I thought, dragging my attention away from perfect teeth. ‘I didn’t catch your name.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said holding out his hand. ‘Perry Roberts of the Desrenewal Institute.’

We shook hands as I asked, ‘And the Institute is ...?’

He glanced at his watch, and flushed with embarrassment. ‘I’m terribly sorry. I have to rush but could we meet for lunch sometime. I’d love to discuss more about your work.’

He peered searchingly into my eyes, and this time there was no misreading the signal. *This was to be a lunch with possibilities.*

‘Lunch sounds fine,’ I replied, handing him my card.

‘I’ll call you next week,’ he said, pressing a card into my palm and closing my fingers around it.

My throat tightened at his touch. *Things like this just don’t happen to me.*

‘I um, look forward to it,’ I replied with difficulty. He flashed a smile and I dragged my eyes away from his long legs striding with the formidable grace of a wild animal. I examined his card and my internal voice was far more honest. *Eeek!*

\* \* \*

The conference was on a Friday and marked the end of my intensive research towards a Doctorate in Physics. My solar battery had already been recognised for its revolutionary design. So Perry’s professional inquiry was not as surprising as the suggestion of *romantic* interest. I must admit, I was out of dating practice. For the last three years, my social—and love—life had been relegated to the too-hard-basket. Nothing serious had crossed my narrow path for quite a while. So I was alone, single and celibate. Mr Perry Roberts had entered my life just when I’d decided that I deserved a relationship.

Over the weekend, I must have looked at his business card a hundred times. The thought of getting to know the man was intriguing. He was a different genus to my scientific male friends. My curiosity got the better of me and I looked up the Institute’s website. Surprisingly, the site was “under construction” and only had three pages. The content was very American. Very slick. The Desrenewal Institute was an American aid organisation servicing the drought stricken areas of the world. But the website failed to highlight any achievements or actual projects. Against my better judgement, I found myself grinning like a school girl. I should’ve realised that things didn’t quite add up. Though I must admit, my instincts were submerged by infatuation, naivety, and a sprinkling of lust.

By Tuesday of the following week, he hadn’t called so I rang his office number. The line clicked and an American receptionist answered the call to advise that Mr Roberts was out. I left my name and number. I was relieved; I didn’t quite know what to say.

He phoned me an hour later. We organised lunch for Friday, then had dinner on Saturday night, and an intimate brunch on Sunday. Perry was a marvellous companion: thoughtful, generous, funny. And as a lover, he was gentle and romantic. We were together almost every evening in that first fortnight and inseparable on weekends.

We talked and talked—all night sometimes—about our lives, business, science, the environment, and us, endlessly about us. To my amazement, he knew so much about the third world, politics and international aid, but very little about theoretical physics. I was delighted that I could teach him something. I know now I should have known better. But my desire for love and marriage, and a family home with children had overwhelmed me. I allowed myself to trust him completely on a very short acquaintance. And yes, I showed him my solar battery designs ...

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The wind wailed between powerlines as I stared at this other Perry Roberts. It was as if he had metamorphosed into something obscene—an evil Mr Hyde from the loving Doctor Jekyll. It was still hard to believe I was dealing with the same man.

He leered as his eyes swept over me. ‘You’re looking pretty neat these days.’

I felt like screaming. His overuse of the word neat was annoying. I couldn’t imagine why I hadn’t seen it on our first meeting. Was I that *desperate*? I shudder at how long his true nature would have been hidden from me. I was lucky; an unexpected coincidence had revealed his duplicity to me.

\* \* \*

I was out with colleagues on a Wednesday night to celebrate a birthday. Dinner was consumed with numerous bottles of wine, and we decided to party on at a nightclub. My colleague Sara had spotted him first. The music was deafening, and through a combination of gestures and glinting eyes, she communicated for me to consider an attractive proposition.

I followed her gaze and spotted my Perry across the room. He’d told me this morning that he’d be in Melbourne overnight. We even had a romantic reunion scheduled for tomorrow evening. So naturally, I assumed that his trip had been cancelled and he’d come looking for me. I smiled slyly as I appraised my gorgeous man. None of my colleagues knew of our relationship, so I was looking forward to Sara’s reaction when I introduced him.

I began to walk over but froze with my mouth open. A tall brunette had stood up next to him. I watched him assist her out of the club. His hand swept down her buttocks with unmistakable intimacy. The girl leaned in and kissed his cheek. Then he smiled his I-love-you-so-much smile—the same smile that had been extended to me this morning.

Sara was looking at me strangely as the blood drained from my face. I fled into the ladies’ room and locked the cubicle door behind me. I was shaking with anxiety, fear and grief, and regretted the wine which confused my thoughts. Suddenly, I wanted to go home.

I left the club and caught a cab home to my apartment. The lift to the 18th floor made me queasy so I walked out onto the balcony. I held onto the railing and stared bleakly at the colourful lights of Sydney’s tower buildings reflecting on the harbour. I don’t know how long I sat out there. But by daybreak, my tears had disappeared. Shock had changed to hurt, to bewilderment and finally into anger. My early doubts had returned with a vengeance and my resolve hardened with the rising sun. I showered, dressed in jeans and a cotton top and called in sick. Then I reached for the Yellow Pages and began ringing numbers until I found someone who would see me that day.

\* \* \*

I jumped when the buzzer rang at ten o’clock. I questioned him on the intercom and confirmed it was my private investigator. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door, and Bruce Jackson introduced himself. He was tall and heavy set with the good looks of those rugged men in beer ads.

However his line of questioning revealed a careful intelligence and an interest in detail which quickly irritated me in my hung over state. We talked over coffees and he made copious notes until my bad temper and frustration were vented.

‘I’m not paying you to drink coffee all day!’ I snapped as I jumped out of my chair and strode to the window.

‘But Miss Lambert,’ he said in a calm reasonable voice. ‘I need to make sure I have all the facts.’

I turned around as quickly as I dared. ‘What more do you need to know?’

He rubbed his chin. ‘I want to hear the story again, from the beginning.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘I’ve told you everything.’

He shrugged. ‘Everything except *why* ...? Why did this bloke pop out of the blue, and a week after the first meeting you’re showing him everything ...’

I flushed darkly but the accusation had rendered me speechless. The gumshoe was right. I returned to my chair and sat down. ‘He said the Institute funded water purifiers in North Africa. I told him my solar batteries would be a useful power source for ...’

‘Did you show him your designs,’ he asked.

I flushed again and buried my head in my hands as the magnitude of my naivety dawned on me. ‘They’re on my laptop ...’

‘How did he see them?’

I swallowed with difficulty, wiped my eyes and retrieved my laptop from the study. I flipped open my laptop, turned it on and punched a series of keys. My Desktop window lit up and I pointed at a folder. ‘They’re kept in here, but it’s password protected.’

‘Is it Bendigo1948 as well,’ Bruce demurred. ‘I just saw you enter the keys.’

I shot him a glance and nodded weakly. ‘The University Admin constantly sends us reminders to change passwords.’

Bruce grunted. ‘Passwords are useless when someone’s watching.’

‘He wasn’t just anyone,’ I protested.

‘What files do you keep on your laptop?’ Bruce interrupted. At least one of us was staying focussed.

‘Everything,’ I replied softly. *How could I have been so stupid!* I tapped a series of keys and brought up the specifications on screen. ‘The entire manufacturing process is here.’

‘And you showed a complete stranger —’

I glared. ‘He wasn’t a stranger!’

‘Whatever you want to call it, Miss Lambert.’

‘He was supposed to be my life partner ...’ My voice faltered. ‘We were supposed to be in a relationship,’ I added lamely. But my self possession completely deserted me and tears rolled down my cheeks.

Bruce sighed wearily. ‘Well, let’s work out what’s really going. Did he copy any files?’

I shook my head glumly. This gumshoe had just humbled my illustrious PhD brain. ‘I don’t think so. We keep a log of all the times that each document has been accessed.’

I quickly switched into the programme, and a spreadsheet appeared. I scrolled through the long list of dates and times that the document had been accessed and my heart sank. There were a series of logins around four and five AM.

‘I don’t believe it,’ I muttered. ‘He used my computer in the middle of the night after we had ...’ I searched Bruce’s face. ‘But how did he do it without waking me?’

Bruce stared into the distance and gradually brought his gaze back to mine. ‘Do you take sleeping pills?’

‘No.’

‘Did you drink anything before you went to sleep?’

‘We always had champagne nightcaps,’ I muttered. ‘He always brought a bottle. There’s one in the fridge from his last visit the night before.’

Bruce stood up and walked to my kitchen. He removed the bottle and held it up to the light. ‘I can’t see anything.’

‘What are you looking for?’

‘Evidence of sleeping powders.’

He spotted the two flutes on the kitchen and pointed. ‘Are those recent?’

I nodded dumbly. ‘I haven’t been in the mood for cleaning.’

Bruce looked at them carefully, then snorted and walked back with the slender glasses. ‘Look,’ he said, pointing to the glass with lipstick on the rim. ‘See the white residue in the bottom? Looks like your boyfriend slipped you a mickey.’

I crossed my arms and looked away, furious with myself.

Bruce Jackson Private Detective pocketed his notebook with the tired expression of a man who has seen it all. ‘I’ll let myself out. I’ll make some calls and see what else I can find out this Perry Roberts.’

\* \* \*

That afternoon, Perry Roberts came to my door. I was stunned at his appearance of normalcy. He carried a dozen roses, a bottle of French champagne and a winning smile.

I glared at him and his smile died on his lips.

‘What’s wrong my darling?’

‘I want my files back, and after that I don’t ever want to see you again.’

He blinked innocently. ‘I don’t know what you are talking about, darling.’

The lie inflamed my already raging feelings of hurt and anger. ‘Get out! Get out! Go!’ I yelled, pointing down the corridor to the lift.

His expression darkened. ‘This will make it difficult for me, Rachel.’

The admission still had the power to hurt me. *Denial is a powerful beast.* ‘So it is true!’ I said bitterly.

‘I don’t know what you know and I don’t care.’ He tossed the flowers into the kitchen. ‘I’ve copied all the files except for the last one which you will give me now.’

‘Over my dead body!’

He sneered. ‘Your choice Rachel. Or do you want me to tell your University colleagues that you gave away intellectual property to the first man that made you—’

I slammed the door in his face.

\* \* \*

Bruce had been busy. The following morning, he was back on my doorstep. I let him in and babbled my conversation with Perry. My private detective listened, nodding politely while he waited for me to finish.

‘It makes sense now,’ he said gruffly and flipped open his notebook.

‘The Desrenewal Institute is only a dummy company. The Australian “head office” is a single room rented out in Sydney. But the parent is VRIS Corporation, a US defence contractor that manufactures high tech portable weapons for infantry forces. They’ve been in trouble for selling weapons into places where they shouldn’t.’ He stopped to look at me. ‘This will interest you. Their latest offering is a new range of weapons that have Sat Nav guidance systems for greater accuracy.’ He looked at me again. ‘The biggest selling feature? The weapons use solar charged batteries.’

I groaned. Bruce had just confirmed my worst fears, and I would not have described it as interesting. More like disastrous. Hopes for my brilliant career were

rapidly fading. Not only had I allowed my design to be stolen, but it had been stolen by a company that for ethical reasons we could never have sold to.

‘What about that girl in the nightclub?’

Bruce looked almost cheerful when he flicked through his notebook. ‘Ah, yes. She’s a personal assistant for the CEO of another military contractor.’ He raised an unruly eyebrow. ‘I’m afraid you’ve been caught in a love trap.’

‘Huh?’

‘Ahh . . .’ Bruce rubbed his chin. ‘A love trap is err, the seduction of a target by an agent for the purpose of getting valuable information. It’s a technique commonly used by spies.’

I gaped at him. ‘You mean Perry’s a secret agent?’

‘More like an industrial spy?’ Bruce shrugged. ‘I’m sorry but you’ve been had, Rachel.’

This was no longer news to me. For a few minutes I just crossed my arms and felt thoroughly sorry for myself. Thankfully, Bruce didn’t make a sound. Finally I looked up and whispered, ‘How am I going to tell the University?’

‘Better coming from you than him,’ Bruce said gruffly.

I nodded dumbly. ‘You’re right.’ I glanced at my laptop computer and mused, ‘He still needs another file. If only there was a way I could erase all the files . . .’

Bruce stared at me for a moment, then smiled slyly. ‘You know, there is a way . . .’

\* \* \*

The following night, I met Perry Roberts on the cliff top.

‘Do you have a disk for me?’ he asked savagely, and thrust an open hand at me.

I shuddered. To have been involved with this monster was frightening. I pulled the plastic case out of my pocket, and passed it to him.

‘It’s the last file?’ I said and added, ‘but you won’t be sure until you try, will you?’

Perry grabbed my upper arm and squeezed it hard. ‘It better be!’

Wincing, I cried out in pain, ‘Yes, yes.’

He let me go, blue eyes iced over into steel grey. ‘It had better be.’

‘Copy it onto your computer with the others and you’ll have the complete manufacturing process,’ I said resignedly.

Perry relaxed, and added, ‘Well it’s been terrific Rachel. I did enjoy your company.’

‘I regret the day I ever set eyes on you,’ I retorted.

‘Oh, I don’t think so,’ he said, grinning.

He reached up and grazed my cheek with the back of his fingers. I turned away and his thick powerful fingers dropped to my neck. I held my breath, suddenly aware of the extreme danger.

His eyes narrowed and his breath panted like an animal.

I imagined the headline: *Young scientist commits suicide by jumping off a cliff.*

His fingers tightened around my throat. My lungs fought for air. Black blotches began to appear before my eyes.

A car door slammed.

Perry released me and whirled to look up the hill. ‘Who’s that?’ he hissed.

I stumbled back on rubbery legs and rubbed my throat. ‘A little life insurance policy,’ I croaked as I stepped back way from the cliff edge. ‘And he carries a gun.’

Perry clenched his fists. He reminded me of a playground bully who had been beaten at his own game. ‘Well I’ve got the files.’

I lifted my chin and glowered at the man I had declared my love to. ‘Anything to get rid of you.’

I turned and walked stiffly back to the car, away from the pounding seas, the salt air and Perry Roberts. I reached my car.

‘Has he gone?’ I whispered to the bulky man leaning against the bonnet.

‘Yeah, he’s gone.’ Bruce Jackson grunted.

My legs gave way and Bruce caught me. ‘You did good Rachel,’ he said gruffly as he led me to the passenger seat. ‘Give me your keys. I’ll drive.’

I looked back to the cliff top as we drove out of the car park. Perry had disappeared. Now all I could do was wait. And hope that the surprise Bruce had planted for him on the disk would work.

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It took three long months before the University had secured world wide patents for the new solar battery. The patents prevented any other company from manufacturing them, except under license. It also meant that Perry’s company had failed to utilise the stolen designs and so I concluded that Perry had been tricked by the booby trap we had left for him.

My significant regret was not to personally witness the effect on Perry when he presented the stolen drawings to his bosses. As soon as the files were displayed on a screen for more than a few minutes, a computer virus would break up the images and reconstitute them into a message “you’re all very naughty boys”.

THE END