

The Buyers

By Sophie Masson

There was that moment when you just knew they were hooked. In this kind of market, any obvious sign of enthusiasm was fatal, or so the buyers seemed to believe. But Elena had seen it too many times to be fooled by studied casualness or to be put off her rehearsed patter. 'There's so much potential here, and the owner's keen to sell,' she said, covertly studying them.

They were young, these two, younger than the vast majority of the couples she usually saw filing through this suburb's Open Houses. Early twenties maybe, neatly if not smartly dressed, giving off an air at first of slight embarrassment, soon replaced by a watchful calm. The young woman was slight and slim, her long dark plait and straight grey skirt giving her a slightly old-fashioned appearance, while the tall, burly young man looked like a tradie, though not necessarily a successful one, judging by the rather shabby ute parked outside. When they'd first come trudging up the path, Elena had thought, *Waste of time, just Saturday afternoon stickybeaks*, but now, she felt differently. They seemed like 'live buyers.' Yet there was something else about them that troubled her. It wasn't that they were so young, though that could be an issue, eyes bigger than their stomach, or rather, their wallets. It wasn't that they didn't look cashed-up enough; she'd long ago discounted people's appearance or dress style or even the cars they drive around in, as a reliable indicator of whether someone could afford a property. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something seemed a little off in their manner.

Handing out her card, she said to the young couple, 'Give me a call when you've had a think.' The look that passed between them made the niggling feeling grow into actual unease, so that she added, 'although of course this house may not be quite what you're looking for.'

'Thank you,' was all the young man said, 'we'll be in touch,' while the young woman said nothing at all, just swept her gaze around the room. The house was a deceased estate, the current owner a nephew of the old boy who had lived there for years amongst piles of junk. The nephew wanted a quick sale and though he'd agreed to a quick clean up, he'd rejected Elena's suggestion of a 'house stylist' to dress up the place in a way that would maximise its

appeal to buyers. She'd tried to tell him it was worth spending a bit of money on that, turning it into a neutral yet appealing stage for the rehearsal of buyers' own hopes and desires instead of mirroring the personality of its present owner—a mirror which in this case would have made most people flee. But he'd said no, this had been his uncle's house, he wasn't going to airbrush him out of existence, people would just have to take it or leave it.

An unfamiliar sensation stirred in Elena now. 'I have a couple of other properties on the books that you might want to look at,' she said. 'I can even take you now, if you like.'

'Thanks, but we're right,' said the man, and the woman just nodded. Elena realised at that moment that in fact she hadn't uttered a word during the inspection, apart from 'Hi', when Elena had greeted them at the door. He'd not said much more, mind you, just the basics for bare politeness. And that was it, really, she thought, pinpointing with a mix of relief and puzzlement what she felt was odd—they hadn't asked any questions, they hadn't consulted each other in whispers or poked around in corners when they thought she wasn't looking. Of course, some people kept their cards very close to their chest, but apart from that moment when she'd seen that stiffening which marked a wordless decision taken, this couple hadn't behaved in the way you might expect.

Back in the office, Jock—who never took a Saturday off—was inclined to airy dismissal of any concern. 'Takes all sorts,' he said, unoriginally, 'and maybe they'd had a fight just before they came, that's why they weren't speaking. Besides I bet you they're just building up to some half-arsed offer, if we hear back from them at all.' Elena didn't persist; she knew her concern was too nebulous to be of any practical interest to Jock. He might respect her instincts and experience, but he was also not one to waste time on perhaps and maybes. Besides, he was very likely right. His experience in the real estate industry long predated hers, after all: she'd only been in it seven years to his twenty-five. And it was possible that Jock was right and the couple's silence had to do with an argument. But when she was on her way home, relishing the prospect of a well-deserved glass of wine in front of an enjoyably cheesy Netflix Christmas movie, she suddenly had another thought: they had not expressed any surprise at the somewhat quirky layout of the house, which everyone else she'd shown through it had unflinchingly expressed. *It was as if they knew already.*

But they couldn't have, surely. The house had been on the market just one week. And she'd done all the Open House sessions, not Jock. They had definitely not come here before this afternoon. Wait-- maybe one of them had lived there before? But the deceased previous owner had been a childless bachelor who had lived on his own in the house for thirty-five years previously, and his heir the nephew hailed from some flyspeck town in western NSW. So, given how young the couple were, neither of them could possibly have lived there, although it was possible an older family member had, perhaps previous owners before the old boy. Wait on, I'm just spinning a yarn, she thought. They hadn't expressed surprise because they weren't the type to. I should stop thinking about them because we probably won't hear from them again.

But she had only just made herself a cup of coffee on Sunday morning when her mobile rang. 'Private Number' read the screen display. Thinking it was Jock—his landline was private, and he was known to call Sundays, if he was at a loose end—she hit 'Answer', ready to give him a bollocking for calling too early. But it wasn't Jock's voice at the other end; it was a stranger's, a woman's, light, clear, with a slight accent Elena couldn't place. 'Ms Angelos, we're ready to make an offer.'

For a moment a still-sleepy Elena had no idea what she was talking about. Then recovering, she said, 'On which house?'

'The one you showed us yesterday afternoon.'

'Oh. I see.' So that girl could talk, despite her silence during the inspection! And she did not sound in the least intimidated or meek, as Elena had half-imagined she might be. She sounded in control. And it had been her had made the call, not him. Clearly I misread the dynamic between them at the inspection, Elena thought, a little dismayed. Rallying, she went on, 'Well, I must warn you that the owner has stated that he won't accept below the reserve, and...'

The woman cut her off. 'The offer is well above the reserve.'

'How much, then?'

'Three and a half million.'

Elena only just managed to stop herself from gasping. The highest they'd expected was one and a half million, and the reserve was a couple of hundred thousand less than that. Decades of neglect had ensured there was a lot of very expensive work to do on the house, and despite its being in a good area, it was not in a great street, plus the so-called back garden was just a square of dirty paving. Most of all, the old boy's heir was keen to sell and had instructed them to accept any reasonable offer. This was *not* reasonable: but in the opposite way to what was usually meant. She managed to grasp at her wits sufficiently to say, 'Er—okay. That's great. I will pass on the offer to the owner. May I have your names and contact details, please? Also, we will need details of your solicitor and lender and...'

'Coming by email,' said the girl, tersely, and before Elena could reply, she ended the call. Elena tapped through to her work inbox. There was no new email. She hesitated, then called Jock. He answered immediately, and after she'd finished explaining, said, 'You sure she wasn't winding you up?'

'Pretty sure she wasn't. But...'

'Yeah. I get it. A bit strange. Did you...'

'Hang on, Jock. An email's just come through.' Leaving him on the line, she went back to the inbox, and read, with growing astonishment:

To Ms E. Angelos, Homeland Estate Agency:

As discussed:

Offer: \$3.5 million on property 17 Burns Rd.

No lender. Payment to be made in full by Cajetan Trust.

Solicitor: Ms Jaime Hughes, contact details below. Available today. Request contracts be exchanged asap. Address all enquiries to Ms Hughes.

And that was it, apart from the address and phone number of the solicitor, cut and pasted in. The address the email had been sent from, shazz356@gmail.com, was not calculated to inspire confidence, either. Elena hesitated. She could forward it to Jock, but what if it was some sort of hack thing, some kind of malware? She should just delete it. But what if it was for real? In the end she took a screenshot of it, before deleting it and returning to Jock.

'I know it might sound paranoid,' she said, 'but...' and she described what she'd done and read him the email.

'You did the right thing, Ell. Jesus! What the hell's going on? Did those people look like trust fund types to you?'

Elena gave a short laugh. 'Hardly.'

'Sounds like a scam but I guess we need to check. You want me to call the solicitor?'

'No. I'll do it and get back to you. And if it seems on the level, I'll insist on a goodwill deposit.'

'Yep, way to go. Meanwhile I'll give a call to one of my mates to check up if a Cajetan Trust exists. Say nothing to Terry just yet.'

Terry was the owner. 'Course,' Elena retorted, slightly offended he'd think it needed to be said.

'Bugger me, Elena, but this is a right old turn up for the books!' Jock sounded almost excited despite his caution. As they ended the call, Elena thought she understood his reaction. She'd have felt like that too, if she hadn't met that couple in person. As it was, the unease she'd felt yesterday had only grown. Why were those people so secretive? Visions from headlines and crime shows flitted across her mind. Expensive property bought outright--dodgy trusts--no individual names--untraceable phones and generic email addresses, and a lawyer willing to be bothered on a Sunday: it all added up to something extremely suspicious. Maybe we should reject the offer outright, or better still, ignore it, she thought. We're running an agency that's had to work hard to shake off the previous owner's questionable reputation, we shouldn't go anywhere near stuff that stinks to high heaven. And if she was honest, there was also that niggling worry left over from the past--from the fatal episode eight years ago when not doing enough research had led to public humiliation, the destruction of her previous career as a lawyer, and the breakdown of her marriage.

But Jock was right, they couldn't just reject it. They needed to check bona fides, that's all. Or they'd be failing in their duty to Terry, not to speak of themselves--the commission to the agency would be more than respectable, at that price. And besides, the strangeness of

the situation, and of these buyers, had awoken things in her she'd thought gone. Curiosity; and the capacity for surprise.

She called the solicitor's number. Anticlimactically, a recorded message answered, and she left a brief message. Clicking out of the call, she went on Google, entering Cajetan Trust. Yes, Jock had said he'd check with his mate but then he had an old-school distrust of the Internet, even though of course he and Elena were exactly the same age, in their mid-forties.

There did not appear to be any trust registered with that name at the Australian Securities Commission, but then it wasn't a legal requirement, to register a trust if it wasn't complex enough to be called a company. You just needed an ABN. She was just about to go to the ABN Lookup site to check when a call came through from a number she didn't recognise.

It was the solicitor. She sounded as briskly professional as her voicemail message and answered Elena's questions without a hint of concern. Yes, she could confirm the serious intent of the offer. Yes, there was no lender involved because the buyers could pay the entirety upfront. Yes, there was no problem providing a goodwill deposit, furthermore, it could be paid pretty much straight away. Yes, there was no problem giving basic details of the Cajetan Trust, and she would email those through at once. She was empowered to act for the trustee, the solicitor went on, but she could not reveal anything about the beneficiaries. 'They have requested complete confidentiality, and I am bound to respect that. However, I can assure you that I am empowered to sign contracts on their behalf.' She would not even confirm if the young couple who had come to the Open House were in fact the trust beneficiaries, even though surely they must be.

But of course Elena had no idea of their names, and no way of finding out. There was nothing she could do except thank the solicitor and tell her they'd be going to the seller with the offer. 'My clients need an answer by tomorrow morning preferably,' the solicitor replied, 'they are keen to move swiftly. As soon as we have a positive response, a substantial deposit will be paid.' She did not seem to even consider the possibility Terry might refuse, and no wonder—what could Elena put up to him as a reason for knocking back a price so over the odds? Unspecified doubts and vague unease: it didn't amount to much, beside the prospect of a real estate jackpot. And as the details about the Cajetan Trust

emailed immediately by the solicitor after the call matched exactly those Elena found on the ABN Lookup site, there was nothing she could really advance as a reason for stalling.

Which was exactly what Jock said, when she called him back. He hadn't yet been able to speak to his knowledgeable mate, who'd gone away on an overseas holiday, but when he heard Elena's report, he said it didn't matter anymore, they had enough details. He offered to ring Terry, 'in case you still feel uncomfortable' but she refused. She had to get through this irrational haze, and discount those niggling feelings.

Terry was predictably delighted and said yes straight away, 'as long as it's all kosher.' Of course it is, she found herself reassuring him, the buyers just took a great fancy to the house and they are keen to acquire. 'Well, takes all sorts', Terry replied, 'can't wait to be shot of it myself, especially at that price, like winning the lottery it is, given I've been on struggle street till now.' He'd told her previously that the smalltown newsagent's where he worked had been struggling, like so many retail businesses these days, so his shifts had been cut back and his gardening/handyman sideline had folded too. He had his mother's house, but as he cheerfully conceded, it wasn't worth much, and as he put it, 'there was a bit of a cash flow problem going on.' So the inheritance from his uncle had been a godsend.

They talked a bit more then Elena hazarded a question as to whether by any chance his uncle had ever taken in a family during the time he lived there, and Terry laughed, saying, no way, old Stan was a complete loner and couldn't stand kids, 'not even me, Ell.' He'd called her 'Ell' from the beginning, a nickname reserved for use only by people Elena knew well, like Jock, who she'd known since school days. But she could hardly tell a client that, especially someone like Terry who might take it badly—and take his business elsewhere, to the glitzy bells-and-whistles agency across the road for instance, with its quirkily-painted cars and shiny-haired youngsters brandishing 'cool' social media marketing campaigns. Yes, she and Jock were doing okay in their own agency, but not so well that they could afford to piss off a client. Right now, this particular client seemed quite the opposite of pissed off, indeed, he told 'Ell' that she should 'celebrate' with him at a dinner that very night 'in the best restaurant—you name it, you deserve the best for pulling this off!'

To her own astonishment, Elena found herself saying, 'Well, why not?' which seemed to delight Terry even more. 'It's my lucky day all right,' he said, chuckling, 'next thing maybe the Lotto ticket I bought the other day might win, eh, Ell? '

'Maybe,' she said, smiling despite herself at his bouncy cheerfulness. Terry was a bit rough around the edges, sure, but he seemed a nice guy. Plus he was not bad-looking at all, she had to admit. Mind you, it possibly wasn't all that wise to go out with a client, but just now she found she didn't much care about wisdom. It was nearly Christmas, after all. The silly season, so they said. And you needed silly, sometimes.

'Okay, then, Ell,' he said, breaking into her thoughts, 'where do you want to go tonight?'

She gave him the name of a place she'd seen written up in a magazine, and had thought appealing, and he said he'd book at once online and text her the time. Sure enough, a text came a couple of minutes later: *See you there at 7. Cheers, Terry.*

She had a momentary qualm but dismissed it. More of the unexpected! It was strange to feel this way, prickling with nerve-endings that she'd thought cauterised for good. But now was not the time to dwell on it. She called Jock and told him of Terry's acceptance of the offer—without any mention of anything else, of course—and then straight after that called Jaime Hughes.

'Excellent,' the solicitor said, sounding quite unsurprised. 'Then we may proceed at once. I will start drawing up the papers today. And please send me your agency trust account details. We will arrange for the deposit to be paid now. '

'Okay. But we haven't agreed on a figure yet for the deposit,' Elena said, scrambling to sound calmly professional.

'We suggest one million, is that acceptable?'

Elena swallowed. 'Yes, yes, of course. '

'Good. Then I look forward to getting your email.'

'Wait, I just want to... ' Elena began, but wasn't able to finish as Jaime Hughes ended the call. She had been about to make one last-ditch effort to find out more about the buyers; but now it was too late, it would always be too late, it was out of her hands now. As she emailed

the agency's bank details to the solicitor, she thought, well, that couple might be drug barons or gangster heirs or even celebrities slumming it or just ordinary people with extraordinary means for all she knew but it made not one jot of difference. It was all going ahead, no matter what. And she had to accept that. She had no control over it. And that was a strangely liberating feeling.

Over dinner that night, she and Terry talked first about the sale, but not as much as she'd expected—he didn't seem to be curious about the buyers, for example, other than to say you could never tell, with people. And soon they got onto other topics--she listened to surprisingly engaging tales of Terry's 'struggle-street' childhood—it really had been a struggle, reading between the lines, though he told it with such a light tone. Perhaps it was the excellent wine and food, perhaps the stories, perhaps both, but she ended up telling him a little of her own childhood, and her migrant parents working their fingers to the bone so she could go to university and get the brilliant professional job they craved for her. 'And I got it, only it didn't turn out quite as we'd planned.' She hadn't really intended saying that, and dreaded his questions; but again to her surprise, he did not press her on it, only raised his glass to her and said, lightly, 'Ah well, life never quite turns out how we planned, but we're still standing, and that's got to be hope, right?'

'Right,' she agreed, with a little laugh, raising her glass in return.

'And now I'm a millionaire, even a multi-millionaire, who'd have thought it?' he said.

'Thanks to you.'

'Not at all. Thanks to the buyers. To the Cajetan Trust.'

'Okay, thanks as well to that lot. Hey, that's an unusual name, Cajetan Trust, isn't it? And kind of appropriate.'

'What do you mean?' she asked, sharply.

'Well, I had a job on a cattle station once, back in the day, young guy there jackarooing like me, backpacker though, he was from Argentina, his name was Cajetan. His given name, I mean, not his surname. Told me he'd been named after the patron saint of gamblers and good fortune. Saint Cajetan.' He laughed. 'See what I mean now?'

'Yes,' she said, staring at him. 'What happened to that guy?'

'You mean, you think it's him behind this Trust? Nah, sorry, isn't the one. Poor guy died in a car accident only a few months after he returned home.' He sighed. 'His name didn't exactly bring him good luck.'

'No,' said Elena, a little flat, 'it didn't.'

'But it obviously did for someone,' Terry went on, 'or they wouldn't have three and a half million buckaroos to throw away on a dump like my uncle's place.'

'It's in a good area, a good investment,' Elena defended the listing half-heartedly, 'and it will scrub up well, I'm sure.'

He snorted. 'Sure, once they spend another half a mill or so.'

'More, I'd say,' Elena agreed.

'Crazy, Sydney is,' Terry said, shaking his head, 'catch me living here.'

'Oh. I thought...' She stopped, trying to stop the absurd dismay from creeping into her voice.

'Of course, you could buy a mansion back home with that money. A farm, even.'

'Grubbing around in dirt, waiting for rain, and the bank breathing down my neck? Nah, mate, no thanks! As to the mansion...well, Mum's house suits me fine, might just spruce it up a bit now. Actually, I'm thinking of finally going on that world trip I was planning when I left school, only Mum got MS and I had to stay put and look after her as Dad just pissed off, he couldn't handle sickness, ever. Never got round to the trip, in the end, even after she died. No money, for a start.'

'Couldn't your uncle help?' she asked.

'Old Stan? Nah, he was tight as a tick, all his life. Was quite a surprise when I got the letter from the lawyer to say he'd left me the house. I thought he'd forgotten all about me. Almost forgot about him, myself, to be honest.'

'And so you never left your hometown?'

He laughed. 'Give me a break, Ell, course I did! Just not much further than occasional trips to Sydney and the coast, on holidays. But the world trip, forget that! You don't earn much, working in a newsagency, especially when your shifts get cut. Not that I'm complaining. My

boss is a good bloke and you see a lot of life, in a newsagent's. Especially when you're on the Lotto counter.' He paused. 'You know what, though? I never even bought one Lotto ticket myself before the other day, that surprise you?'

'Not really,' she said, 'working with that every day, you must know the odds are totally stacked against winning.'

He looked at her, a smile lighting up his whole face. 'Well, if my numbers come in tonight, you'll have to come celebrate with me again, won't you?'

'There's no *have to*,' she retorted, briskly, 'but I'd be happy to.'

Their eyes met. 'That's good,' he said, lightly, 'but best not leave it to Lotto to arrange to meet again, eh, Ell?'

'No, better not,' she said, softly.

Shortly after, they left together, but only to share a taxi—she didn't invite him in when the taxi dropped her off at her place, and he didn't ask, another point in his favour. Elena had just got in the door, kicked off her shoes, and poured herself a whisky nightcap—no way she could go to bed straight away—when her mobile rang. It was Jock.

'Sorry to call you so late,' he said, 'but I had to tell you. My mate overseas, he just got back to me about those buyers. About the Cajetan Trust. You aren't going to believe this.'

'It's all a scam,' cried Elena, 'oh, no, don't tell me, I can't...'

'A scam? No, no. That name, Cajetan, it refers to...'

'The patron saint of gamblers and good luck,' Elena broke in.

'Yes. How did you know? Never mind...Anyway, my mate got excited when I told him the name, says there's been a rumour going round for years in investment circles, of someone who won a huge lottery jackpot years ago and instead of spending all the money invested most of it and it's now a colossal sum, which is all parked in this Cajetan Trust.'

'You mean that young couple won a big jackpot? But then why would they...'

'No, no, listen. The story goes that the Trust selects people to help. All sorts of people in all sorts of situations.'

‘You mean, it’s a private lending body?’

‘No, not lending. *Giving.*’

‘But that’s absurd! If it’s true, it’s a crazy thing to do. So they gave that money, just like that, to the young couple to buy the house?’

‘Nah. My mate thinks they’re Trust employees posing as buyers. They’re probably not even a real couple at all—I mean, they’re probably not together, just colleagues—which might explain that weird feeling you got about them. It’s the Trust itself that’s buying the property.’

‘But if it’s not that couple that’s being helped, then...’

‘Yep, you got it. It’s Terry. Who as we know is in dire need of a cash injection.’

‘But he didn’t know anything about...’

‘That’s right. He wouldn’t know. That’s just the way it works.’ He paused. ‘Don’t you tell him, either.’

Evading that, she retorted, ‘Are you sure your friend wasn’t drinking or high, when he told you all this?’

‘She, actually. And no. She’s as level-headed as they come. Even more than you, Ell.’

She laughed. ‘Me? You have quite the wrong impression, I’m afraid.’ Her head was spinning, her heart skipping, she felt as though she might laugh and cry at the same time. ‘Look, your mate talked about a rumour, Jock. And rumours—they’re just that. Not fact. Things like that—they just don’t happen. It’s got to be some scam, some fraud. This Trust story, it’s impossible, it’s like—like a fairy tale.’

Jock shrugged. ‘Cynical old agent as I am, it’s the crime story I usually go for. But you know what? Today, it’s the fairy tale I’m inclined to. I’m not going to delve further.’

‘In case it all disappears in a puff of smoke, you mean?’ Elena said, but Jock just laughed and said, ‘Good night, Ell, see you in the morning.’

She was still sitting staring into space when a text came through from Terry. *Hey, my Lotto numbers didn’t come through. But ever wanted to travel the world?*

The world is a big place, she replied. Where would we start? She hesitated. Only a moment. And then pressed **Send**.

Local News Item:

The True Christmas Spirit

A run-down property sold recently for a record \$3.5 million has been converted into modern accommodation for a homeless family who will only be required to pay a minimal rent. The mysterious Cajetan Trust which owns the property could not be reached for comment but were described as 'angels' by the grateful family, who had been facing another Christmas on the streets.

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