

ONE CLOWN SHORT

A NOVEL

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To April, Kathy and Glenn
For always giving me new material to work with
And to Richard for his undying support

CHAPTER ONE

THE INTERVIEW

It was a clear, crisp January day. She'd been driving around for over an hour looking for the place. None of the Internet map sites had ever heard of the address. She'd spent hours searching them all. She usually left plenty of time to find her way to an interview, giving herself some time to relax and gather her thoughts, but that was not the case today. Less than five minutes to spare. She was feeling rushed and not on top of her game.

"This must be it," Mandy thought as she turned into the enormous parking lot. It was empty for the most part—only a couple rows near the building were filled with cars. She scoped out the entrance and found the closest spot.

"Wish me luck," she said with her eyes toward the sky. Mandy had been looking for a job for almost six months. She had never heard of this company, Big Top Supplies, nor had she been able to find any information on it. The classified ad in the paper read:

*Large supplier of entertainment equipment
Manager of Sales Training
Stable company with room for advancement
Excellent Benefits, 401K Salary Neg. Send resume to:
Big Top Supplies
P.O. Box 49223
Winter Falls, Florida 33223*

She answered every classified ad that even vaguely reflected her skills. All Mandy needed right now was a job, doing anything, anywhere. She couldn't afford to be picky. When she got the call to come in for an interview, she didn't think twice. She felt unprepared, but she was desperate. Mandy was just squeaking by. She was working part-time at the local Burger Boy just to keep her head above water. She couldn't ask her parents for the mortgage money again. It was painful every time she had to ask.

"No one in the family ever stooped so low as to work at a Burger Boy. Why aren't you more like your sister?" Her sister had married a jerk with money and sat around eating bonbons all day. Why would she want to be like her? Mandy had had to ask for money a few times since she was laid off from what her mother called "that lowly job" as a customer service manager. "So what if the job was outsourced to India?" Mandy was told. "It's the kind of work those people were meant to do." Not Mandy. She had been raised "better than that," or so her mother repeated to her, over and over and over again.

"Please, dear God, let me get this job," she said as she walked to the front door

"I'm here to see Larry Adams," she told the dour-faced receptionist. "My name is Mandy Maloney. I have an appointment." Mandy looked around the waiting area. Pictures hung on every available inch of wall space. Circus pictures: flame throwers, elephants, clowns, human cannonballs, jugglers, trapeze artists.

"So that's why the name of the company is Big Top," she thought. It had never dawned on her that this company was all about the circus. "Well, I guess this ought to be interesting, to say the least."

As she waited for Larry Adams to appear, she went over in her head her carefully prepared responses to the sure-to-be-asked canned interview questions. They had been on every other interview she had been on in the last six months. Mandy had no reason to believe this interview would be any different.

Tell me about yourself.

What are your long-term goals? What are your strengths?

What are your weaknesses?

What about this job interested you?

If I could ask your last supervisor about you, what would he say?

"Ms. Maloney?"

Mandy shook herself out of deep thought and quickly stood up to offer her hand. "Yes. Mr. Adams?"

"Please call me Larry. Nice to meet you. Let's go into my office."

As they walked through the halls, Mandy couldn't help but be awestruck by her surroundings. All the walls were painted bright reds, yellows, greens, pinks, and purples. "This must be a fun place to be every day," she mused.

They entered Larry's office, and it too was filled with circus posters and sales awards (in the shape of cotton candy and sno-cones).

Mandy's eyes must have grown large trying to take it all in.

"I was taken aback by all this when I first arrived here too. I thought I was in circus overload for a while. You'll get used to it."

In an interview-style response, she said, "It must be so motivating to be surrounded by all this every day. I know it makes me feel good, with all the bright colors and circus animals."

"Well, that's what we live for here. The circus puts food on my table and gas in my car. My kids have gotten used to those three squares every day! Tell me, Mandy, what do you like most about the circus?"

"Ummm, I guess I'm a . . . clown and cotton candy girl," she stuttered. "Clowns are always having so much fun, joking around and acting silly. And cotton candy is so light and airy and sweet. It's such a pretty color of pink." She was really stretching to pull this response out of her brain.

“Good, I like that—clown and cotton candy girl. I’m a hot dog and trapeze boy, myself. There are people here that just live for the human cannonball or the parade of elephants, or dream of being the ringmaster. That’s what’s so great about the circus. It has something for everyone, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does.” She was feeling more than a little nervous. She hadn’t been to a circus since she was a child and wasn’t prepared to talk in any detail about it. Her heart sank. Being unprepared was never a good thing for her in an interview. Her nerves were kicking in and her mother’s voice, saying, “Why can’t you be like everyone else in the family,” was playing over and over in her head.

“Larry, can I ask you about the responsibilities of this position in sales training? What exactly does the job entail?”

“This job? You’ll be perfect for it. You’ll have to develop a training program for our field sales staff to get them up to speed on all the hundred thousand items that we sell. You know the circus can’t go on without a good-fitting pair of oversized clown shoes!” “How big is the staff of this department?”

“I think there are about fifty people in this area. You’ll have two supervisors, and the rest are writers and research people. You’ll also have a few doodlers who spice up the documents with cute pictures and circus jokes. Other than that, I don’t really know what else they do over there, and I don’t really care. That will be up to you.”

Now Mandy was really nervous. He was talking like she already had the job. Larry didn’t seem truly interested in anything about her, except that he was staring at her breasts. He was beginning to give her the creeps.

“Well, I think we’ve talked enough. Can you come in on Monday? How does \$75,000 sound to start? Yearly bonus ranges from thirty to fifty percent of your annual salary. And I haven’t had a year yet where I got less than seventy-five percent. This is a great place to work.”

Her mouth dropped open. This was the craziest interview she had ever been to. For some odd reason, asking if she could have some time to think it over didn’t seem appropriate. And she was desperate. Telling her mother she had a job would at least put her back into semi-good graces for a while. She wouldn’t have to listen to her parents complain about Burger Boy anymore. She hadn’t been able to get that greasy smell out of her clothes, no matter how many times she washed them.

“Monday is perfect. What time should I come in?”

“Terrific, you clown and cotton candy girl!” Larry winked. “Be here at nine. It’s going to be so great to have some fresh blood in here, especially someone who’s so knowledgeable about the circus.”

Mandy thought, “Knowledgeable about the circus? What am I getting myself into? Is this guy crazy?” The pay was fabulous—she could get off the hook with her parents and out of debt. And she could stop flipping hamburgers! Hallelujah! But what did she know about what kinds of supplies were needed to run a circus, let alone how to teach someone else about them?

Mandy stood up and extended her hand to Larry. He did the same.

“Mandy, we’re happy to have you as part of the team.” As his eyes moved slowly up and down, Mandy suddenly felt like she had just been undressed

“See you on Monday morning! You can find your own way out.”

She called her mother from her cell phone on her drive home. “Mom, guess what! I got a job!”

“Well, finally you’ve called with some good news for a change.” “I start on Monday. Manager of sales training at Big Top Supplies.”

“I’ve never heard of Big Top Supplies. What do they do? I hope you haven’t gotten yourself into another menial position, Mandy.”

“They sell circus supplies. It’s a good job—good benefits and a good salary.”

“Well, it’s about time. I hope that this year I can say something positive about what you’re doing with your life in the Christmas newsletter.”

“Just wanted you to be the first to know. Bye, Mom.”

“Every single time I call,” Mandy thought, “my mother knows just where to put the knife in and twist. I am not going to let her get the best of me. I have a job! I have a job! I’m calling Burger Boy, and then, let the party begin!”

CHAPTER TWO

THE COMPANY CHEERLEADER

Mandy arrived early on Monday morning. She was too nervous to even attempt to eat breakfast. She parked her car in a far corner of the vast, empty parking lot. A little exercise would help calm her nerves.

It had been surprisingly difficult to turn in her resignation at Burger Boy. At thirty-two, she was the oldest person working there. All the kids looked up to her, and in a funny kind of way she was sad to leave them. She was the mother hen and they her flock. She decided to keep her uniform as a reminder that she was never too good to do even the most menial of tasks. Or maybe she would wrap it up and give it to her mother as a birthday present. That would score her some brownie points, now wouldn’t it! She would have it dry-cleaned and then pack it in mothballs so it wouldn’t transfer that disgusting smell to anything else in her closet.

It was time for Mandy to have a real job again, if that was what Big Top Supplies was going to be. She had her doubts but had made her choice, and she certainly couldn't refuse the paycheck. In the same way she took to flipping hamburgers, Mandy would give it her all.

As she approached the front door on Monday morning, Mandy could hear someone shouting.

"Gimme an M!

"Gimme an A!

"Gimme an N!

"Gimme a D!

"Gimme a Y!

"What's it spell? MANDY! Yeah!"

Her stomach began to sink, and if there had been anything in it, she would have thrown up right then and there. As she came around the corner Mandy could see pink and purple pompoms flashing wildly about.

"Way to go, Mandy, way to go!"

Clap, clap.

"Way to go, Mandy, way to go!"

Clap, clap.

"Are you Mandy?" A very excited young woman in a cheerleading skirt and sweater bearing the letters BT came rushing toward her.

"Yes, I'm Mandy Maloney."

"Yeah! You're here! Welcome to Big Top." The pompoms never stopped shaking and her pigtails were in constant motion. The woman did a cartwheel in the grass followed by two back flips.

"Welcome! My name is Tiffany, and I am the official Big Top welcoming committee."

"Well, thank you, Tiffany. I am . . . overwhelmed by your energetic spirit." Actually Mandy was shocked by the spectacle, but Tiffany seemed to be enjoying this responsibility. And she wasn't even breathing heavily, after all that.

"I love my job. I love spreading good cheer. That's why I'm the Big Top cheerleader." With pompoms still shaking, she said, "C'mon Mandy. Come with me."

Mandy followed the bright and chipper Tiffany to the front door. Abruptly, Tiffany stopped and turned to hold the pompoms over Mandy's face. They started to shake, tickling Mandy's nose. Tiffany started to cheer.

"Introducing the newest member of the Big Top family."

The pompoms began shaking in front of her face with more vigor. Her nose was itching like crazy now, but she was afraid to make a move.

"Mandy Maloney!"

Tiffany swept her hands down Mandy's head and chest, finally giving her a good view of what lay before her. Enthusiastic applause and cheering filled the lobby. There must have been fifty people clapping along with Tiffany. She felt like she was going to pee her pants. Wouldn't that make a great first impression? Mandy didn't want to know what color of red she had turned. It was a shade she had never seen before—that she knew for sure.

"Mandy is our new manager of sales training. Make sure you stop by her office tomorrow and introduce yourself. It's the cotton candy pink one on the third floor. But right now we are off to orientation.

Thanks for coming, everybody!"

Mandy heard laughter as the crowd began to disperse. The laughter began somewhere around the word "orientation."

"Tiffany, does everyone get this warm of a welcome?"

"Of course. That's my job. I'm the Big Top cheerleader." Tiffany replied with a tone of *how could you ask such a stupid question and doesn't every company do the exact same thing*. "It's just that today you are the only new person. Usually I have more of a crowd. So today was a little strange." She curled up her nose.

Mandy followed the pompoms through the hallways to a room with a big sign on the door: *Orientation*. The room was filled with what she was beginning to think of as "normal" pictures, plaques, and awards covering every inch of wall space. At one seat in the front of the room was a stack of papers a few feet high. Tiffany pointed Mandy toward it.

"Let's get going, we have a lot of paperwork to get through. Here's your pen.

"First, your network sign-on and e-mail address."

Mandy read the paper. Her new e-mail address would be *cottoncandygirl@bigtop.com*.

"There's no time to read every paper, Mandy. We're going to be here all day as it is. Just sign by the X and let's keep going."

Oh, the ever positive Tiffany! Mandy did as she was told. Medical insurance forms, 401K, stock options, emergency notifications—the papers just kept coming. Tiffany was flipping them one by one off the pile, placing the next one in front of Mandy as soon as she signed the last one, and turning it face down onto the completed pile. "How much longer can this go on?" Mandy thought. Finally one of the papers caught Mandy's attention.

"Company car. I get a company car?"

"Well, you are eligible, but I have to tell you that, if you choose the car, there's only one model to choose from."

"What is it?"

"It's a yellow- and purple-striped station wagon with an elephant on top."

Mandy looked at Tiffany strangely.

"No one has ever taken it. They take the allowance instead. You'd be the first."

"I think I'll take the allowance."

"Good choice."

She signed the paper and moved on. The next paper placed in front of her read

What size shoe do you wear?

What is your favorite TV show?

What is your favorite color?

What is your favorite act in the circus?

What is your favorite movie?

What size underwear do you wear?

How tall are you?

“Tiffany, where are we going with this?” Mandy asked. “What is all this information for?”

“In a little while the clown costumer, Jose, will be here to take your measurements. This helps him design a suitable clown costume for you.”

“Clown costume?”

“Yes. Everyone at Big Top gets their own personally designed clown costume to wear on special occasions. Isn’t that just the coolest?” she squealed. “I just love mine. I’d wear it to work every day, if I could. When was the last time you worked at a company that gave you your own personal costume to wear?” Tiffany was oozing with excitement as she spoke.

“Uh, yes, very cool,” Mandy hesitatingly agreed.

She kept on signing. The papers got more confusing as the day wore on.

Have you ever been to Niagara Falls?

Are you allergic to latex?

Do you know why circus peanuts are always orange?

Mandy had to sign to certify her answer on each piece of paper.

Mandy finally looked at her watch as she signed the last paper. It was now 4:15. She hadn’t even had a break for lunch, and she was famished. As she took the last piece of paper and put it on the pile, Tiffany grabbed her pompoms and began a cheer.

“Mandy, Mandy, we’re almost done.”

Clap, clap.

“Then it will be time to have some fun!”

Clap, clap.

“Yeah!”

Tiffany clapped, threw her pompoms in the air, and jumped up and down. She ran to the corner of the room and grabbed a big canvas bag. She plopped it down in front of Mandy just as she’d done with all the paperwork.

“This is for you. A couple of things need some explanation.” She began to search for and pull items out of the bag. “Here is your company-issued kazoo. Keep it attached to your badge at all times. Here is your badge.” Tiffany examined it closely. “Look at your picture. You look so cute!”

“When did they take my picture?” she wondered. “I do look cute,” she said as she caught a glance of it. “Must be the marvel of airbrushing.”

“There are a few other things in there to help you get started and feel at home.”

Mandy had started to rifle through the bag when the door opened. Jose, the costume designer, had arrived. Mandy stood on a pedestal and allowed herself to be poked, prodded, and measured on every conceivable inch of her body.

When he was finished, the costumer smiled at Mandy and said, “This will be my finest work ever, I promise you! You are so cute—the perfect model!” He quickly packed his things and scurried out the door.

“Mandy, we’re finished!” cheered Tiffany. “Don’t forget to look through your bag of goodies, and we’ll see you tomorrow morning!”

“Mandy, Mandy, your first day is done! “Now go home and have more fun!” “Fun? I’m exhausted.”

“All you did was sign a few papers. How can you be tired?” “I bet you never get tired, do you, Tiffany?”

“Nope, and I sleep like a baby every single night. Good night, Mandy!”

Mandy dragged herself to her car and plopped herself in bed the minute she got home. She had stopped at Burger Boy on the way home. As much as she hated working at the place, she had become addicted to the Double Cheese Chicken Big Boy Meal. Luckily, she had not inherited the propensity to put on weight. That was one good thing she had gotten from her mother.

“All I did was sign papers all day,” Mandy thought. “Why am I so exhausted? What on earth could they possibly need all those silly papers for? And a clown costume? What a waste! You’ll never see me wearing a clown costume, that’s for sure.”

She pulled the latest classified ads out of the garbage on her way into the house. Based on how her day had gone, she figured she needed a backup plan, or in the case that she didn’t answer all those questions to their liking. “Why are circus peanuts orange, anyway? And who in their right minds even likes them?” As she lay in bed watching the news, Mandy rummaged through the bag Tiffany had given her. The classifieds could wait.

“Let’s see what kinds of goodies they gave me.” First she pulled out the kazoo. It had “BIG TOP” in red letters written on it. “I know what this is for.” She gave it a good, hearty blow. Next came a bag of balloons, a stapler, a baseball cap—all imprinted with Big Top’s logo.

“Oh, and look, a notepad with my name and e-mail address on it. Surprise, surprise, it’s pink. And a recipe for cotton candy. Look, a packet of lemon-lime sno-cone flavoring. Sure hope the dental insurance is good with all that sugar they’re eating. A dictionary. What do I need a dictionary for?” She threw it back in the bag and retrieved a CD. It was titled “Great American Circus Tunes.” “I can hardly wait to play this in the car on my way to work every morning.

That ought to get me fired up and ready to go.” The rest was nonsensical junk, in Mandy’s mind. She pulled out the kazoo and then plopped the bag into the deepest corner of her closet.

As she tried to fall asleep, she couldn't help but go over all the day's events in her mind. She never had such a bizarre day of work in her life. "I'm afraid this place is going to turn out to be one clown short of a circus," Mandy thought. "On the other hand, it appears that it already is, based on what they put in the welcome bag. Good thing my resume is still in good shape. I'll go through the want ads in the morning," and she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

I'VE GAINED FIFTY POUNDS

The next day on the job didn't start out much better than the first. Tiffany greeted her again at the front door with the "Gimme an M" cheer, complete with pompoms. Then she escorted Mandy to her new pink office on the third floor. And boy, was it pink! There would be no falling asleep midday in here. She didn't even need to turn the light on, it was so bright.

"I don't even like pink. What possessed me to ever say I was a cotton candy kind of girl?"

She was concentrating on getting her office the way she wanted it when she heard a knock on the door. "Hi, I'm Gary."

"Hi Gary. I'm Mandy Maloney. It's nice to meet you." Thank God, finally she met someone without pompoms. "Would you like to go to the cafeteria for lunch?" "That sounds terrific. Let me get some money."

"You don't need any money for the cafeteria. It's all free. Now, it's only circus food, mind you, but it's free."

"What do you mean by circus food? "You'll see."

"OK, if you say so."

They chatted easily all the way to the cafeteria. Gary seemed like a nice guy with his head on straight. Mandy was glad to find a new friend in this place full of strangers. The cafeteria looked like the rest of the building. It was blue and green and yellow. Even the trays and flatware were brightly colored. It was an overload for the senses once the smell of circus food was added to the mix.

The menu for lunch in the Big Top cafeteria was as follows:

Popcorn Peanuts

Hot Dogs

Cotton Candy

Sno-cones All Flavors

“This is the menu for lunch? Hardly very healthy is it?” Mandy was surprised by the lack of green vegetables and fresh fruit. “How can you have a hot dog every day for lunch?”

“You have to keep in mind that every day is the circus here. The smell of popcorn permeates the place. Sickening, isn’t it? Like you’re shopping at the five and dime. Follow me. I know someone in the kitchen who can make us a salad. And a damn good salad it is. Get to know him. It’ll be worth it.”

She followed Gary back into a far corner of the room. “Billy!” he shouted. “Billy!” Suddenly a man wearing a tall chef’s hat popped out of the back room carrying two carryout boxes.

“Here you go, Gary. Two chef’s salads, just like you ordered.”

“Thank you so much,” he said as he took the boxes from his hands. “This is Mandy. She’s new here and is getting the second salad. I think she’ll be ordering them just like me, so be nice to her, Billy.” “It’s nice to see some new faces around here. Welcome, Mandy.

It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you. Popcorn isn’t really my thing, so I appreciate the salad.”

“I know. You like cotton candy better.” He winked.

As they walked away to find a table, she asked, “Does everyone around here know about the cotton candy?”

“You bet your life they do. Watching your office being painted pink was the highlight of a lifetime. Not much turnover here. The pay is too good.”

They sat in a far corner of the room. Gary instructed her to get a forkful and then close the lid on her box. If too many people found out that Billy was making them something special, he’d stop doing it for them. She was told to be very protective of her salad. And she was told that very emphatically.

As they finished their lunch and headed back to work, Mandy wondered how much crazier Big Top could get. She was about to find out

“Hey Gary, who is Mandy Maloney?” A man pushing a cart overflowing with boxes was approaching them in the hall outside her pink office.

Mandy waved her hand at him. “Hi, I’m Mandy.”

“That’s right. They told me it was the pink office. Hello, I’m Albert. Welcome to Big Top. I’ve got your electronics delivery.”

“I already have a computer. What else do I need?”

“Aah, Gary didn’t tell you yet?” Albert glanced over as Gary began to scoot away down the hall. “You, pretty lady, are now on call 24/7.”

Albert began to take the boxes from his cart and stack them on Mandy's desk. "Here's your cell phone, BlackBerry, pager, and laptop. Oh, and this is an MP3 player, preloaded with circus tunes. Here is your portable printer, just like they use when you return a rental car. And the piece de resistance . . . where is it?" He rummaged through everything else that was still on the heavily laden cart. "Here we go, your heavy-duty leather belt!"

Mandy stared in disgust at the thick men's belt that Albert was now holding in the air for all to see. How was she going to coordinate this with her stylish business suits? "I have to carry a laptop on my belt?"

"No. You carry the laptop in your hands. Everything else goes on your belt. Here's your digital camera."

"What do I need a digital camera for?" Mandy was waiting for the theme from the Twilight Zone to start playing.

"Got me. I just deliver the stuff."

Mandy watched Albert connect the docking stations for all the devices to her desktop computer. He was lining them up like little soldiers across her desk, carefully hiding all the cords behind her computer. While he was doing this, she began to examine the belt. It was about two inches wide and reminded her of a handyman's tool belt. It should have had a hammer and a wrench and a screwdriver hanging from it, not all these crazy gadgets.

"It does make sense," she tried to convince herself. "These are the tools of the 21st century."

"OK, Mandy. You're all set." Albert began to pack up his cart.

"Let me help you get going. Put on the belt and I will arrange everything for you. I do this a lot. I know what order will work best for you."

"I'm going to trust you on this one." She picked up the belt and put it around her waist. "Uh, Albert, I need some more holes punched in this thing. It's too big for me." She handed it back to him and he proceeded to use his screwdriver to make another hole about six inches from the last one

"Try that."

"That works, I think." The belt still hung loosely around her waist. It really didn't go very well with her new pinstripe business suit, which she had bought specifically for her first full day at her new job.

Albert began to very methodically clip things to her belt. "Are you right handed or left?"

"Right."

"On the right side, first is the cell phone, then the pager, then the BlackBerry, then the MP3 player." The MP3 player was kissing her right butt-cheek. "On the left goes the printer and the digital camera." He stepped back to admire his work.

"Where do I put my own personal cell phone?"

"Why didn't you say something? Now I have to rearrange every- thing. Where is it?"

Mandy handed it to him. He slid the pager and the BlackBerry over so that the two cell phones were side by side and moved the MP3 player so that it now sat on her left butt-cheek.

“Now, all these devices are set to vibrate. Leave them that way. You don’t want to disturb half the world when they start going off.”

“Yes, sir!”

Albert pushed his cart away, heading down the hall, and Mandy returned to her desk. She would have to request a chair without arms if she were ever going to be able to sit. As petite as she was, she could only sit on the very edge of the seat while wearing the fully loaded belt.

Mandy tried to do some work, but she couldn’t stop fidgeting. All this equipment pressing on her body was so uncomfortable. How do they do this all day?

She went about her work as best as she could, clicking and clumping everywhere she went. Not knowing her team very well yet, she tried to ignore their giggles and cat calls. She could feel them lean out of their cubes and stare as she passed by.

“Love the outfit! Where’d you get it?” “Look, a traveling electronics salesman!”

“I know a good chiropractor when you need one.” “What’s your phone number? How ‘bout a date?”

Finally Mandy got up the nerve to reply to these strange people. “Even if I knew the number, I wouldn’t give it to you! One thing I’m not is stupid. I know you’re all chomping at the bit to make me light up like a Christmas tree. Not going to happen on my watch— got it?”

She heard a few stifled giggles before they stuck their heads back into their cubes. She was nearing the end of her rope. It finally dawned on her that Gary didn’t have all this on when they went to lunch. How did he get off the hook? She began to drag herself toward his office. She’d been carrying this stuff around for way too long. Each step felt as if she were carrying a hundred-pound weight around each ankle. It felt as if it had taken her an hour to arrive at his door.

Out of breath and barely able to hold herself up in the door frame of his office, she said, “Gary, how come you aren’t carrying all this around? Why am I the only lucky one?”

She couldn’t stop breathing heavily. It was as if she had just run a marathon.

“Medical excuse, Mandy, medical excuse.”

“How can I get one?” She huffed a few more short breaths.

“Dr. Feelgood, at your service. What seems to be the matter?”

“I’ve gained fifty pounds in a day. I think I’m going to die.”

He scribbled a few lines on a blank piece of paper and handed it to her. “Give this to Larry the next time you see him. This will get you officially off the hook.”

“But this isn’t a real doctor’s excuse.”

“Doesn’t matter. I write these out for everyone. Larry doesn’t even look at them. Violet was the only one who lasted more than a day. I think she wore this getup for a couple weeks. You’ll understand why, once you meet Violet. She’d call herself any time she needed a thrill, making them all vibrate at once. Then she’d go in her office and close the door.”

“Really? I can hardly wait to meet her.”

Suddenly Mandy felt a strange sensation. It seemed to be moving, circling around her waist. She looked down and realized that all the contraptions on her belt were buzzing, and the printer was spewing paper into a sloppy pile on the floor.

"I don't even know any of the numbers. Who could be calling or paging me?"

"Albert must have just finished posting your information on the company Web site. You know that no work has been getting done today waiting for that to happen. We don't get new people here very often. Have to have a way to break them in, you know."

"Great. How do I get rid of these things? Where can I find Albert to return them?"

"He won't take them back. Find yourself an empty drawer." He slowly opened a drawer in his desk. Mandy peered in to see it stuffed full of personal electronic devices, with a big leather belt curled up in the corner

"Why do we waste money on all this stuff if no one uses it?"

"Got me. I just work here."

The strange sensation started moving again around her body.

This time her feet felt as light as feathers as she raced back to her very pink office to find an empty drawer. One by one she struggled to get each contraption off the unyielding belt. They all seemed to be stuck like glue. Each one landed with a loud thud in the bottom of the drawer.

"I still feel like I'm buzzing. Is this belt wired up too?" She wrestled the belt off her waist, only to find that her own cell phone was still attached and vibrating madly.

"Hi, Mom."

CHAPTER FOUR

HERE'S TO YOUR MORNING COFFEE

"Oooo Mandy, you are looking so fine this morning." He gave her the once-over. "By the way, where is all your equipment?" This was how Larry said hello as Mandy entered for the Monday morning staff meeting. Gary, Violet, Raymond, and Albert, Larry's other direct reports, were already seated in the conference room.

"Thank you, Larry. And good morning to you too," she quipped back. "I gave you the doctor's excuse the other day, remember?"

The coffee cups were still raised to the four mouths, although no one appeared to be drinking.

“We want you to be a fresh little clown, Mandy. Next item on the agenda.”

The cups went back down onto the table.

“On Friday the three o’clock break will be at four o’clock. This is so all the employees can hear a message from our CEO regarding our year-end earnings release.”

“Excuse me, Larry. Forgive me since I’m new here. What is the CEO’s name again?”

Larry began to show his irritation at her interruptions. “Biglar Topler.”

Mandy scrunched her face into an unusual expression. Violet looked over at her with her big, Elizabeth Taylor violet eyes. Coffee cups up.

“Really?”

Now Larry was more than annoyed by her constant interruptions

“Really. You are so cute and so smart. Figure it out. Hence the name, Big Top. Pretty original isn’t it?” he said with a sarcastic tone in his voice

Mandy had had it with the cute comments. And why was he showing an attitude with her? “I’m new,” she thought. “Aren’t I allowed to learn some things about this company that is being so generous to me?” If she didn’t need that first paycheck so badly, she would have walked over and slapped him. She looked around the table at the others. She should have followed her hunch when she thought he was creepy at the interview. There couldn’t have been anything left in those cups. No one had said a word during the entire meeting except her and Larry. They were all engrossed in that morning cup of coffee.

Mandy tuned out Larry as she began to wonder what she was doing here. “These people are all nuts. What is it with those coffee cups, anyway?”

“And that’s the last thing on my list. Have a good week, you’re dismissed.”

Cups came down, chairs pushed back, and the mad rush to the door began.

“Mandy, can I speak with you for a moment? Where is your coffee cup?”

“I already had my morning coffee.”

“Well, then have another cup and make it decaf. Or drink tea or water, or lemonade for all I care. You must bring a coffee cup to all my meetings, whether you are going to drink out of it or not.”

Mandy was confused again. It was difficult to understand what the expectations were supposed to be at this company. No one had told her she had to bring coffee with her to the staff meeting.

“Why?”

“Because I said so. I like looking at cute girls, but I don’t need to hear what your cute mouth has to say. It makes you not so cute.”

“OK, Larry, not a problem. I’ll get myself a coffee cup.” “Terrific! They have some nice ones down at the gift shop.” She’d be sure to stop there on her way to human resources to report this creep for harassment. Mandy turned on her heels and bolted out the door. She caught up with Violet in the hallway.

“Violet, can you fill me in on what that was all about?”

“He’s playing with your head big time, Mandy. Can’t talk here. Let me take you out for lunch today. I’ll tell you then.”

“That’ll be great, Violet. I really appreciate you taking me under your wing. So many things here seem a mystery to me.”

Violet was a positively stunning woman. She had soft, flowing auburn hair and violet eyes that knocked your socks off every time you looked at them. She had the perfect figure. It was obvious that she worked out at the gym to keep it that way. She was so unlike Mandy, who was blessed with good skin and hair and a slender figure. Mandy rarely wore makeup and kept her hair in an easy, wash-and-dry style. Violet worked hard at her perfect hair and makeup. She pulled everything together with the latest fashions. And she turned men’s heads—that was for certain

At twelve o’clock sharp, Mandy and Violet joined the mass exodus out of the building.

“Violet, I can get us a free lunch at the Burger Boy if that’s OK with you.”

Mandy was still pinching her pennies until that first fat pay-check made its way to her bank account. “I worked there when I was between jobs. The manager said he would hire me back anytime. I was the best employee he ever had.”

“He probably meant the only employee he ever hired with a brain. How could you stand it?”

“It helped pay the bills. It was still better than sitting around feeling sorry for myself.”

“Then Burger Boy it is.”

The lunchtime line crew was excited that Mandy was paying them a visit. Everybody loved her. The manager came out of the back, as she had predicted.

“Lunch is on me!”

The two women found a table in the corner, away from all the lunch-hour commotion.

“Here’s how Larry operates. Every time a new person comes in, he does his best to intimidate the hell out of them. The guy’s an idiot. We’ve heard that he has some kind of connection in the executive office. That’s why he’s still around. If you file a complaint, which, based on what he was saying to you this morning, you would have good reason to do, you will be the one who’s fired. Not him.”

“Why did he tell me that I had to have a coffee cup?”

“No one is allowed to speak at the staff meeting except him.” Mandy almost choked on her hamburger.

"The coffee cup gives us something to do other than biting our lips. He doesn't like the sight of blood, either. He came up with the coffee cup idea after one guy bled all over himself and the carpet."

"He bled that much from biting his own lip?" Mandy couldn't believe her ears.

"The unspoken rule is you must hide behind a coffee cup, or else. He's in charge, and you are worthless. He knows everything and you know nothing. You made him crazy today. Don't be surprised if he does this to you again."

"You're really scaring me now, Violet."

"He did the same thing to me when I first got here. He kept asking me out and trying to hit on me all the time. It was very annoying. He wouldn't quit. Now, I'm not a prude, but he's a creep. Even I wouldn't stoop that low. All of the sudden he stopped. Finally got the message, I guess. Or found someone else to torment. One or the other."

"That's plain disgusting."

"Not to worry. He's harmless when it comes to everything else. He's never going to look at any of your work. He'll never read a single training module that you write. He's an idiot and has no idea what you are supposed to be doing. That is totally in your hands. Just don't ever speak in one of his meetings. And anyway, the meeting only lasts about five minutes normally. We were only there for an hour today because you had to ask so many questions."

"I just don't understand who's running this company. This is craziness. Even Burger Boy has it together better than that."

"You know, no one has ever seen Biglar Topler."

"Aren't we going to see him give the earning results on Friday on TV?"

"No TV, Mandy. They pipe in his speech over the PA system. We all sit at attention and listen. You'll get a written reprimand in your personnel file if you don't." She threw her head back and rolled her eyes.

"Will I ever stop being amazed by all this? I'm beginning to think I've entered the twilight zone." The TV show theme song began to play again in her head.

"No, you're in the circus." She smiled slyly as she sipped on her milkshake.

When Mandy got back to her office, she was surprised to see three identically wrapped packages on her desk. The paper was covered with bright-colored balloons. The bows were large and fluffy in—what else—a shade of cotton candy pink. She looked at the tag on the first box.

To: Mandy

From: Albert, Welcome.

The next said: *To: Mandy From: Raymond*

You Are So Cute (Hee Hee).

And the last box said:

To: Mandy

From: Gary

Get out while you can.

“Well, which shall I open first?” she said to herself. “Let’s start with Albert.” She found a lovely coffee mug inside in the shape of a lion. Its tail was the handle. Inside Raymond’s box was another lovely coffee mug. This one was striped with bright red, yellow, green, and blue circus colors. And last but not least was Gary’s. He had sent her—what else—a coffee mug. It was the most unusual of the bunch. It was a black top hat with a white rabbit crawling out creating the handle. As she took it out of the box, it began to play the circus fanfare. *Da da dal la la la la da da daa*. The tag on the bottom of the cup said “Entry of the Gladiators.” She set it down and the music stopped. “Guess I won’t be taking that mug to Larry’s meeting.”

Violet appeared at Mandy’s door, also bearing gifts.

“Let me guess. A coffee mug?”

Violet laughed when she saw all the mugs lined up on Mandy’s desk.

“You should know that you are loved. Usually we just let the new people fend for themselves. It’s more fun to watch them squirm. But we like you, Mandy. You really are a breath of fresh air around here.” She opened the box. Violet had selected the most beautiful coffee mug she had ever seen. It was buttery yellow with ivy dancing across the side. Violets were dotted here and there. A dainty white butterfly was perched on the lip. Another was sitting in the bottom of the mug, ready to make Mandy smile each time she took a sip. “Violet, thank you so much. It’s gorgeous.”

“I’m glad you like it. Use it in good health.” She winked and left. Friday came, and Mandy was very interested to hear from Biglar Topler at three o’clock. At about five minutes before three, a bell rang. Then a woman’s voice said, “Five minute warning. Please get in your seats.” People started scrambling across the floor hurrying to their desks

A circus tune began to play. Mandy was going to have to learn the names of all these tunes. She guessed that was what the CD was for, which was in the bag at the bottom of her closet.

“Welcome to our year-end earnings results update.”

This was a man’s voice that she also did not recognize.

“Hello. This is Biglar Topler, the chairman of Big Top Supplies. It is my pleasure to tell you that our company is doing great. We had a great year. We opened some new accounts which are all doing well. We increased sales via our Web site, which is quite an accomplishment. The demand for circus equipment is growing. People have more free time and more money to spend on good, clean family entertainment. In other words, Big Top is in great shape. Thank you for all your hard work and dedication. Signing off, this is Biglar Topler.”

Some more circus music, then the bell rang again. The woman’s voice said, “Return to work now.” All was quiet.

This was by far the strangest earnings announcement Mandy had ever heard. “I just have to keep telling myself that Mom and Dad are soooooooo proud of me.” She went back to work as she had been told

CHAPTER FIVE

LULU AND THE DANISH

Mandy had been on the job for a couple weeks and now things seemed to have settled down to normal, except for her conversation with Violet and the earnings announcement. Or maybe she was beginning to accept the crazy circus way of doing things as normal. She was getting the hang of the company-issued kazoo. Every meeting began with the ceremonious blowing of the thing. By blowing it, they were showing camaraderie of some sort. Another mystery no one seemed to understand.

The New Year's champagne glass had been mysteriously replaced with a giant cupid, complete with bow and arrow. The entire cube was covered in pink and red hearts of varying shapes and sizes. A huge bowl was full of candy message hearts there for the taking.

She was beginning to detest the color pink. Every time new people came in to introduce themselves, they said, "Oh, we heard you were the cotton candy girl with the pink office." Mandy began to think that a cotton candy machine would be rolled in any minute.

Then she would be responsible for the afternoon sugar fix, which, based on what she had seen so far, came like clockwork every after- noon at three on the dot.

Every day featured a different treat. One day cookies, the next ice cream or brownies. It reminded her of the Good Humor man and all the kids running down the street chasing the ice cream truck. A bell would ring at precisely three p.m., and the nameless circus music would begin to play, announcing the arrival of the day's snack. Every cubicle would empty immediately as each worker made his or her way to the break room.

Today Gary showed up at her door. "Hey, come on, let's take a break."

Gary was the manager of the company Web site. His office was two doors down, and he had been showing her the ropes ever since that first day in the cafeteria. His office was painted a pale blue with a lion on each wall. Mandy figured he must have said he liked the lion tamer best during his interview. He seemed like a regular guy, and so far Mandy liked the way he made her feel at home. Not like Larry Adams, who was beginning to make her skin crawl with the funny grin he always got on his face when he saw her.

"Sure. What do you think is on the menu today?"

"Let's go walk around the parking lot. Don't get into that habit or you will end up being Lulu Junior."

"Who's Lulu Junior?"

"That's who you'll be if you get in the chow line every afternoon around here. You haven't met Lulu yet?"

"No, I'm still trying to get my head around the organization chart. I've only been here a few weeks, you know."

“Lulu is the executive vice president of entertainment and food sales. I don’t want to give you any preconceived ideas about her, but let’s just say she doesn’t need a hoop to fill out her clown costume.” “Gary, when exactly will I be required to wear that clown costume that, supposedly, I am going to look so cute in?”

“You’ll see.” Gary paused. “I can’t tell you, Mandy. It’s kind of a rite of passage around here.” Then he rolled his eyes at her. “But honestly, none of us really know. I’ve only worn mine trick-or- treating with my kids. Add it to your list of Big Top brain teasers that need to be solved.”

“Oh God, what have I gotten myself into?” She was again having regrets about taking this job. It just kept getting weirder.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not that bad around here. Lulu is having her town hall meeting tomorrow, so you’ll get to meet her then.”

The walk around the parking lot was refreshing. It made her feel good to know she had made some friends at Big Top. Gary seemed like a sensible and stable family man. He talked often about his wife and children, but they always remained nameless. Mandy didn’t feel she knew him well enough yet to ask if anyone had a name. It was as if he was trying to keep them all to himself. “My wife said this and my wife did that.” Her name was “my wife” in every conversation Mandy had with him.

Mandy headed back to her pink office to try to finish her first training document on every kind of balloon known to man. The training book was five hundred pages long since there were so many different products, all with a different purpose. Who knew? She became engrossed in reading about balloons.

“Mandy!” She looked up to find Larry at her door. “Tomorrow morning, nine o’clock in the meeting room. Lulu is having her monthly meeting.” That creepy grin was on his face again. “It’s a whole- day affair, so clear your calendar.” And just like that he was gone.

The next morning Mandy found Gary and they went to the meeting together. She had stopped at Violet’s office first, but it was dark

“Where’s Violet today? Doesn’t she have to go to the meeting?” “Violet won’t be in today. She always calls in sick on Lulu’s meeting day. It’s an excuse for her to go out and party and try to pick up men in the middle of the week. She thinks she might find someone new at the bar scene if she mixes up the nights out.”

“That may be the only sane thing I’ve heard about this place. Calling in sick for no reason at all. Happens everywhere.”

They found two empty seats at the back of the room. “It’s not good to sit too close,” Gary whispered to her.

The room gradually filled up. The door opened again, and in came an enormous woman dressed in a red- and white-striped pantsuit. Her orange hair was styled in a Marge Simpson-like beehive. Her red hoop earrings, which were probably six inches in diameter, lay flat on her shoulders, since she had no neck. No such thing as a dangle earring for this woman.

“Lulu?” Mandy mouthed the name to Gary. He shook his head up and down.

“Attention! Attention everyone. Let’s get started.”

Lulu had the voice of a child, high pitched and squeaky. Again Mandy was startled by the sound coming from this enormous woman. “We have much to cover today. We will have a coffee break at ten and lunch will be served promptly at noon. I’m having a very special menu prepared for you today that I’m sure you will all enjoy. And something extra special will be served for the three o’clock snack.” She suddenly got a look on her face like a kid in a candy store. She clapped her hands together in excitement and smacked her lips.

“Ooooh! It will be so yummy! But I can’t tell you what it is. It’s a surprise! Now, how do we start all of our meetings?” Everyone reached for their kazoo and blew.

Lulu flipped on the projector and started talking. Soon the high- pitched voice began to grate on Mandy’s nerves. She nudged Gary. “How do you stand this?”

“Aah, secret weapon.” He pointed to his ear. Bright green foam earplugs. Then Gary motioned for her to look down the row. Every- one was napping happily, eyes open and ears plugged.

“Why didn’t you warn me?” Mandy frowned.

“Remember those initiation rites I told you about?”

Mandy sighed and sank down into her chair. She really was interested in what made this company tick. So many mysteries she felt she needed to solve. Even from where she sat, trying to read everything that was crammed onto the one and only PowerPoint slide was next to impossible. “Doesn’t she know it’s a presentation, not a dissertation?” Maybe the slide would change after the snack break.

Mandy glanced at the clock. Five minutes until ten. “Oh, thank God,” she thought.

“It’s a little before ten,” Lulu chirped. “Let’s take our potty break early so we have plenty of time to enjoy our coffee and doughnuts. Let’s be back in our seats at 10:15.”

The stampede began. Mandy became trapped in the chaos. She saw Lulu heading toward her out of the corner of her eye. The prison stripes got closer and closer, and finally a plump hand was outstretched right in front of her.

“You must be Mandy. I’m Lulu. It’s so nice to have you on board.”

Mandy shook her hand, which was as limp as a wet dishrag. “Thank you. I’m glad to be here. It has been such an interesting presentation so far. I’m really learning a lot.” She tried to act as if she were telling the truth.

“I’m so glad, my dear. Come, come, let’s get something to eat before my little piglets scarf it all up.” She grabbed Mandy’s hand and led her to the table

“Come on, eat up. This all looks so good and you, Mandy, are soooooo skinny.” Well, at least she didn’t say cute.

“Just a cup of coffee will be fine, thank you.”

“Are you sure? There’s plenty. Oh, look, cheese danish! I just love cheese danish, don’t you?” Lulu piled three of the enticing sweets onto her plate.

Mandy suddenly felt nauseated. Lulu continued to talk with her mouth full. Mandy had no idea what she was saying. She nodded her head politely and threw in an occasional “yes” and “that’s interesting.” Lulu glanced up at the clock, which read 10:14. She swallowed all that was in her mouth in one big gulp.

“Gotta go, dear. Nice meeting you.”

She waddled off to the front of the room. What happened next was permanently etched into Mandy’s memory. Lulu suddenly started to choke. She began gasping for air, turning blue, and not one person seemed to notice. Mandy and Gary popped out of their seats and ran to help her. They both put their arms around her, trying to give her the Heimlich maneuver, which was not easy on a person so large. Everyone else in the room was staring at them. No one called 911. No one moved. Finally, what appeared to be all three of those cheese pastries were dislodged and landed with a thud at Lulu’s feet. A wave of muted chuckles and concealed laughter rippled through the room.

As Mandy helped Lulu to a chair, Gary yelled over the ruckus, “The meeting is over, go back to work.” The stampede began once again.

“Lulu, are you all right? Can I get you some water?” Mandy was unsure how to comfort her in this situation. It was probably more embarrassing than anything else.

“Water would be nice, dear.”

Lulu was breathing heavily. Her voice seemed deeper—not so shrill—and her hands were shaking.

“I think we should call the paramedics to check you out at least.”

This was Gary’s contribution.

“Oh no, dear, I’m fine. I just need to sit for a few minutes.” “Gary and I will stay here with you.” Mandy winked at him. “You are both so sweet to come to my rescue.” In a very gruff, deep voice she followed, “None of the rest of those ingrates even bothered to lift a finger.” The color was returning to her face.

“Lulu, let me drive you home.” Gary offered the ride before he realized what Lulu’s size might do to the family minivan.

“Oh no, dear, I’m fine, really. I only live across the street. No long commute for me! Maybe I’ll start walking. It might help me take off a few pounds,” she giggled. “But you’re right, I think I’ll go home.”

She stood up and glared toward the back of the room. “Oh, Gary, would you be a dear and put a couple of those fabulous blueberry muffins on a plate for me? I hate to see all that food go to waste. What a feast the team will have today at the three o’clock break!”

“Can I get you anything else, Lulu?” He wrapped several pastries in a napkin.

“I need to get my purse from my office.” “I’ll get it for you,” Mandy offered.

“Oh, you are such a dear, but I can’t let you do that for me.” “Well, then let me walk with you.”

“Oh no, dear. You go back to work. I can find my way to my office by myself.”

“Really, Lulu, I’ll be happy to get you whatever you need.”

Her voice changed tone again and became quite stern. “No, dear, you cannot go to my office. I appreciate your help, but you have done more than enough. Now go back to work.”

Mandy and Gary were both stunned by Lulu’s refusal of their assistance. They gathered their things and headed back up to their offices, leaving her alone in the meeting room.

“What was that all about? Why was she so mean?”

“Mandy, no one has ever seen her office.”

“What do you mean?” “It’s off-limits. Period.”

“Why?”

“No one knows for sure. I’m not sure I could even find it if I had to. If you ever get invited there, watch out,” he warned.

“You know, this place gets stranger by the minute. I think they should charge admission every morning when we come to work. It’s like the carnival freak show around here.”

As soon as she said this they came to the holiday cube, which had every inch covered with brightly colored beads in every shape and size. A mannequin posing as a king was dressed in full regalia, a lavish purple robe with an ermine collar, and a bejeweled crown and enough beads around his neck to strangle him. His mask was made of gold and red feathers that stood at least a foot over the top of his head.

“That’s why we love it here so much. It must be Mardi Gras.”

CHAPTER SIX

HIS NAME REALLY IS BOZO

A few weeks later, Mandy returned from a business trip on which she had done some field sales training. This was her first venture out into the world of circus sales. It was a whirlwind trip through New York City, Miami, and Chicago. In each city she got a different glimpse of the Big Top sales staff.

In Miami, they all marched into training class with red clown noses and hand buzzers. After the third jolt, Mandy stopped shaking hands. This group could not sit still. Paper airplanes and the fake noses were flying around the room throughout the four-hour training session. She doubted they retained much about the new popcorn machine or the clown pie soap mix that were being highlighted.

In New York the group was only slightly more subdued. They at least all had nice suits on. And in Chicago, only two salesmen even bothered to show up. She was told, off the record of course, that the rest of the team went to play golf. The last sales trainer had never turned them in.

It was an interesting trip, to say the least. Mandy was happy to have not had to stare at the pink walls for a few days.

“Hey, Gary!” She called him on the phone from her office. “Mandy, welcome back. This place was insane without you here.”

It was good to hear his cheerful voice.

“The toilet in the ladies room wouldn’t stop flushing. It flushed nonstop for hours.”

She began to laugh. “Isn’t there such a thing as a plumber around here?”

“I guess not. I finally went in there and put all my weight on the handle until it stopped. I refused to retrieve Violet’s BlackBerry until the flushing had stopped. I was afraid of losing my hand, it was flushing so furiously. My wife wanted to know why I would choose to fix a toilet at work, while I won’t lift a finger at home.”

“There’s never that kind of excitement in the men’s room, is there?”

“No, and I hope there never is. The women were all going crazy over it. Some woman tried to keep me out of there until she could go home and get her crystals. Something about spiritual energy.”

“Hey, how do I file an expense report around here?” “You’re in for a real treat. You need to go see Bozo.” “Bozo? Is that his real name?”

“Yep. No one believes it. This is the only company that would hire him. You’ve probably seen him during afternoon break. He always wears obnoxious plaid pants. His cube is over there by the copy machine in accounts payable.”

“Thanks for the info.”

“Good luck,” he said with a smirk in his voice.

Mandy gathered up her receipts and took a deep breath as she headed out of her office. “Here we go again.”

She found the copy machine and then looked around for Bozo. “Whoa! Hel-lo!”—she was face to face with a life-size cardboard stand-up of Bozo the Clown. Must be the place.

“Bozo? Hi, I’m Mandy Maloney.” She instantly recognized the plaid pants. She extended her hand, but slowly pulled it back when Bozo did not reciprocate.

“I was told to see you for some help in filing my expense report. I’m fairly new here and I don’t know the proper procedure.”

All Mandy got back was a blank stare. Finally—“How much money do you want?”

“Well, I haven’t added it all up yet. Can I use your calculator?” “No. Just tell me how much money you want.”

“You mean I just tell you a figure—no paperwork to fill out?” “You got it. You want a hundred dollars, five hundred, one thousand? Just tell me. You think it over. Send me an e-mail when you decide.”

Mandy was dumbfounded. She hesitated. “And this e-mail should say ‘Mandy Maloney, \$100?’ Anything else?”

“That’s all. You’ll have your check tomorrow.” “What should I do with my receipts?”

“Throw them in the trash for all I care. And no cents. Don’t give me any cents. I’ll only have to round them off . It gives me a head- ache.”

“Thank you, Bozo.” Mandy turned and walked away, shaking her head in disgust. “This is the most unethical thing I have ever heard of. How on earth is this company staying in business? I don’t get it. Are there no morals around here?”

Mandy added up her receipts. They came to \$1256.79. She fired off the e-mail to Bozo Fierstyne.

Mandy Maloney, \$1256.00.

No cents, just as he asked.

The next day, as he had promised, a check was delivered in the amount of \$1300.

Revulsion could not even come close to describing her shock. “I thought he only wanted me to round off the cents. This is outright fraud and abuse of the company’s money. No wonder those salesmen are out playing golf when they should be working.”

She took the check and marched down to Larry Adams’s office. It was empty, stripped of everything down to the bare walls. Mandy about dropped to her knees. She let out a huge sigh.

At that moment her cell phone rang. Her mother had the most perfect sense of timing, she could hardly stand it.

“Hi, Mom. What do you need?”

“I need you to take me to the doctor.”

“Mom, I’m working. I have a job now, remember?”

“I forgot. I still need you to take me.”

“What’s wrong with your car?”

“It’s in the shop for repairs. Your father refuses to get me a rental car in the meantime.”

“Call Jillian. She doesn’t have anything to do all day. I have to work, Mom.”

“I can’t get in the car with her. You know she’s a terrible driver. I won’t ride with her.”

“Mom, I’m working. You’ll have to find someone else to take you—I can’t. Call a cab if you have to.” Now Mandy was really irritated, between Bozo and her mother. She felt a migraine headache coming on. When was she going to learn not to pick up the phone when her mother called? The conversation never ended on a high note.

“That costs money, Mandy.” “I can’t do it. Call Jillian.”

“I don’t know what we did wrong with you. When are you going to be more like your sister?”

“Bye, Mom.” She hit the end button.

She stuck her head back in what had been Larry's office and yelled at the painter, "Where's Larry?"

"Don't know, lady. My orders say 'new person needs banana yellow walls with chocolate brown trim.'"

Mandy threw down her arms and left. "What kind of person gets yellow walls with chocolate trim—the frozen banana kind of guy? I don't know if I can take much more of this. And no one even to complain to." Her head was pounding more with each passing minute. As Mandy turned to leave, she almost bounced off Lulu's big belly before she could stop herself.

"Hello, dear. How are you?" "Lulu, what happened to Larry?"

"Oh, dear, he decided the circus was just too much for him. Do you like the yellow paint? I picked it out myself. I didn't care for the shade the random paint selector chose."

"It's very nice. I wanted to talk to Larry about my expense report. Something just doesn't seem right to me."

"What's wrong?"

She explained about the rounding off and throwing the receipts in the trash

"Oh, dearie, don't worry about that. Bozo is a fine employee. He's been keeping track of our expense reports for years. You can trust whatever work he does."

"Oh, OK," she hesitated. "But I'm really not comfortable with this, Lulu. This is stealing the company's money. I don't want any part of it."

Lulu furrowed her brow as she looked at Mandy's check. "How much were your expenses?"

"Twelve fifty-six and seventy-nine cents."

"I want you first and foremost to pay your credit card. So please cash the check. I'll have the difference deducted from your paycheck, if that will make you feel better. Please make me a copy of this and all your receipts. I'll send Ronnie, the mailman, over to your office to pick it up by the end of the day." Lulu abruptly turned and entered the empty office to admire her color selection.

An angry Mandy went back to her office to start making copies. She wasn't sure that Lulu's solution was going to help, but it was better than nothing.

"I just don't understand how this company works. Why would anyone think it's all right to inflate an expense report?"

"Knock, knock."

Ronnie the mailman stood in the doorway. "Here to pick up your expense report."

Mandy had neatly assembled all the paperwork and placed it in an envelope for him.

"Here you go."

"I'll make sure Miss Lulu gets this right away. She said it's very important."

"It is important. Thank you."

Ronnie stopped short in the doorway and turned around to face Mandy.

"I know you didn't ask for my advice, but try to remember, things are not as they appear to be around here."

When Mandy looked up from her desk, he was gone. She stared at the empty doorway, not believing what she had heard.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DON'T YELL FIRE

Mandy still couldn't bring herself to take the fraudulent expense check to the bank. It was sitting propped up in front of her computer, just in case Lulu decided to change her mind.

Tony, one of Mandy's best writers, knocked on the door.

"Mandy, I know you gave me a tight deadline on the module for the flaming hoop, but I just don't understand what the manufacturer is trying to say in the instructions."

"Well, let's look at it."

"Right here it says, 'Do not hold hoop in bare hands while flaming.' Does that mean don't hold the hoop at all? It makes no sense. How can you light it if you aren't holding it? Or does it mean put a glove on and light it? That doesn't make any sense either. Looking at the pictures, it seems it doesn't have a grip at all. It looks like it lights all the way around."

"That's very odd. Who's the buyer we could call to get some clarification?"

"Violet might know. She used to work for Butane Bob." "Who's Butane Bob?"

"He's the vice president of fire throwing and extinguishing equipment. And if you haven't met him yet, you're in for a treat."

"I guess I can hardly wait. Let's see if we can find Violet first." She went down the hall to check, but Violet wasn't in her office.

"OK, Tony, take me to the infamous Butane Bob. Do I call him Butane Bob, or is that another joke like everything else around here?"

"Call him Butane Bob. He loves it. When he found out that's what he had been nicknamed, he laughed so loud you could hear him on the second floor. He thought that was the greatest. He's been Butane Bob ever since."

His office wasn't hard to find. The door was bordered with yellow, orange, and red flames of varying size and shapes. The nameplate was a big red BOB, no last name. Mandy knocked.

A voice from inside said, "You're supposed to ring the bell. Don't you see it?"

A big red button was placed underneath the big red BOB name-plate. Mandy pushed it. A siren went off, shocking them both.

“Come in,” said the voice.

When she entered, she was confronted with more red. Everything was red. Red desk, red chairs, red walls. The only thing that wasn't red was Butane Bob's white hair. He appeared to be of average height with a toned physique. As he stood, he showed a trim waist and muscular arms. His shirt and trousers, which were also red, fit him as if they had been finely tailored. But his hair! Mandy couldn't get past his hair. It was as if he permanently had his finger jammed in the light socket.

The snow-white hair was at least six inches long and stood on end all over his head. Mandy held out her hand and introduced herself. Just then her cell phone rang.

“Excuse me.”

“Mandy.” It was her mother. “Some man called here wanting to know why you haven't paid your credit card bill.”

“Ahhrrrgh.” She wanted to crawl into a hole, but Butane Bob's office didn't seem like a good hiding place at the moment.

“Are you sure you have a job? I think you're lying to us. You haven't asked us for money in a while. If you were working, why wouldn't you pay your bills?”

“Mom, I'm busy. I'll call you later.”

“No daughter of mine better be sleeping in her car like some skid row drunk.”

“Mom, I'm busy.” She tried to sound firm, but with her mother that never seemed to work.

“You had better not be trying to pull the wool over my eyes. I just don't understand why you can't be more like your sister.”

She hung up the phone and tried to regain some composure. Why did she always answer the phone when her mother called? And in this red hot office, of all places, in front of a strange man she had never met before. “This must be what a hot flash feels like,” she thought.

“I'm Mandy Maloney, the manager of sales training and curriculum. It's nice to meet you.”

“Mandy Maloney. I've heard about you. Wondering when I would get a visit.”

“This is Tony, and we have a question about this new flaming hoop. We were hoping you could help us so we can complete our training module on time.”

“Well, then you came to the right place. I know all there is to know about anything flaming.” He ran his fingers through that amazing hair.

Tony went through the same concerns he had explained before to Mandy.

“Well, Tony, good catch. You most certainly can't handle a flaming hoop without a grip. Let me have someone check into it. You'll hear from me by the end of the day.”

“Thank you, Bob. It was nice meeting you.”

“It's Butane Bob. Same here.”

Once they were out of earshot, Mandy said to Tony,

“Gee, he seems normal compared to a lot of people around here—except for his hair.”

“He is a pretty nice guy, but don’t get the idea that he’s the normal one around here. I heard that he was smoking a cigar while putting gas in his lawnmower one day. That’s what made his hair like that. But he loved the feeling so much of the wind blowing through it while driving his red Porsche that he just left it that way.”

“Really? How weird is that?”

“He’s fascinated by fire, so he probably didn’t think twice about it.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

ROAD TRIP

“Mandy! Violet and I need your help.” It was Butane Bob, shouting as he ran down the hall toward her office. She was ready for him as he rushed through the door.

Calmly she asked, “What can I do for you, Bob?”

“It’s Butane Bob,” he said, catching his breath. “Violet and I need hands-on in some of our stores. The stores aren’t doing too well, you know.”

“We have stores?”

“Yes, we have stores,” he replied with disgust.

“We’re going to get a firsthand look at what they need and want in marketing and advertising. We’ll interview some employees, see if we can’t come up with a better plan.”

“What kind of plan do we have now?”

“We don’t. So any plan will be better than what we’ve got going now.”

“Where do I come in?”

“Since you’re doing such a great job with the training material, I thought you could work with the store folks on some of our new product lines. It might help them sell more if they knew more.”

“You mean to tell me no one in the store sees the product training manual?”

“No, I don’t think they do.”

“Don’t you think they should?”

“I think you have a point there, Mandy. So why don’t you come along with us and find out? Then you can add that to your project list.”

“Come along where?” She was starting to wonder where this conversation was headed

“Minneapolis, Louisville, and Houston. We’ll make a day trip to a couple Florida stores when we get back. So are you in?”

“OK, Butane Bob, I’m in. When do we leave?”

“Next week. Call travel and have them copy Violet’s itinerary.”

Whoosh—he was gone. She picked up the phone and dialed Violet

“Violet, what’s up with this road trip?”

“Oh, so Butane Bob has paid you a visit? I didn’t even know we had any stores until he asked me to plan this trip. All my marketing strategies have been aimed at entertainment companies and their purchasing agents. No one has ever said anything about the stores.”

“So what do you need me for?”

“I think Lulu told him that’s what he had to do. I have a funny feeling he didn’t know we had stores either.”

“Really?” Mandy was surprised by that comment.

“Did you know we had stores?”

“Honestly no. I’m so wrapped up with those crazy sales reps, it never dawned on me that we had a second sales channel.”

“I’ve been doing the research. At last count we had 159 retail stores in North America. We’re going to visit ten of them.”

“What do you think we’re going to find, if no one around here even knew we had a store?” Mandy asked.

“When Butane Bob first told me about this trip, I said to myself, ‘This will be an experience.’ Then when he said we were visiting stores that no one in the company even knew existed, I said, ‘Well, this will be an experience.’ But when I factored in that I was going to be on planes, trains, and automobiles with Butane Bob, I began to feel sick to my stomach. This will be far more than an experience—it’s more like a once-in-a-millennium lunar eclipse!”

“Gee, thanks for the pep talk, Violet. Now *I* feel sick. I can hardly wait to call travel and add my name to the list.”

“Good thing is, it looks like we’ll have some free time in Louisville. Maybe we can have a girls night out and pick up some cute jockeys or rich horse owners. What do you think?”

“We’ll see how it goes, Violet. I think we might be opening a huge can of worms out there, and it just might be more exhausting than you think.”

The itinerary arrived from travel later that day. “That was quick and efficient, unlike everything else around here,” she thought. They were scheduled to leave for Minneapolis bright and early Monday morning.

The threesome met at the airport. They were all groggy and in need of their morning coffee, but Starbucks hadn’t opened yet. It was that early. Once on the plane, Butane Bob happily settled into his first class seat without any regrets. Violet and Mandy both tried to get some sleep while scrunched into middle seats back in coach.

Apart from Violet spilling coffee all over herself, the plane ride was uneventful.

While waiting for the rental car, Mandy asked, “So, what’s the game plan for today?”

“No game plan. We’re just going to wing it,” said Butane Bob.

“Wing it?”

“Yes, wing it. Frankly, between you and me, I don’t know what else to do. Don’t tell anyone, but I didn’t even know we had stores until Lulu told me. Even she agreed that we have no idea what we’re going to find out here.”

“How many stores here in Minneapolis?”

“Three, I think. Violet has the addresses. Hop in, ladies!”

In true Butane Bob fashion, he laid rubber on his way out of the parking lot. As they pulled up at the first location, everything appeared to be normal. It was a neighborhood shopping center with a grocery store on one end, a drug store in the middle, and a Big Top Supplies at the opposite end. Butane Bob had no trouble parking in the closest space to the front door. He would have parked in the handicapped space if Violet and Mandy hadn’t protested.

The store greeter gasped at the sight of Butane Bob.

“Good morning,” he said in a cheery voice. “How are you doing today?” But he couldn’t keep his eyes off the hair.

“Morning. My name is Butane Bob, and this is Violet and Mandy. We’re from the Big Top headquarters in Florida.”

“Really? No one’s been here or even called from corporate in a couple years. Do you have some ID?”

“Sure. Ladies?” Butane Bob was deferring to the two of them to produce the identification. They began to fumble through their handbags for their badges. Violet found hers first and blew the kazoo in celebration

“Well, we’re here to change that. Is the store manager here?” asked Butane Bob.

The greeter scrutinized the badges, and then blew his own kazoo once he was satisfied. He then picked up a megaphone and shouted, “Bob. Bob to the front. Urgent, Bob.”

Almost immediately a smartly dressed young man in a neatly pressed but faded Big Top shirt and khakis stood before them.

“Hello, I’m Bob. How can I help you?”

Butane Bob went through the introductions again. As he did, the store manager’s eyes got bigger and his mouth began to fall open.

“Bob, we’ve come here to find out how to better support our stores in order to drive more revenue.”

“Better support? Is that what I heard you say?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! Just support us. Send us inventory to sell. Don’t make us beg, borrow, and steal to get it. Return our phone calls, give us some training—do something. You pay the rent and deliver the payroll, but that’s it. Advertise to get some traffic in here. You didn’t need to make a trip all the way here to find that out. A simple phone call would have sufficed.”

Butane Bob backed away, pushing Violet forward. Using her sweetest and most sincere tone of voice, she said, “Bob, we have come here to genuinely help. We’ve only recently been made aware of the state of our stores and have come here to develop a plan to change that. Your reputation as a terrific manager is well known in Florida. That’s why we chose you to help us.”

“No one in Florida even knows I exist. I took this job with the promise of advancing my career. And where am I, five years later? Nowhere! And suddenly the three of you show up and are going to save the world! Or should I say the circus?”

Throughout this tirade, Butane Bob had been slowly backing out the door. He was going to avoid any confrontation at all costs. Mandy stepped up.

“Bob, let’s do this. We understand that you’re angry. So why don’t you show us around the store and your stockroom. Then we’ll sit down and log all of your action items for us. That will give us all a clearer picture of where we need to go. We’ll bring in some lunch for you and your staff. How’s that?”

He took a deep breath. “That will be fine. You caught me off guard, that’s all. I’ve been hung out to dry and ignored for so long here.”

“I do understand. Let’s wipe the slate clean and get started.”

As Bob led them through the store, Mandy and Violet were busily taking notes. They sent Butane Bob to get lunch for everyone. He was making just-plain Bob nervous, anyway. Might as well give him a task he was good at and get him out of the way.

The shelves were sparkling clean but as bare as Old Mother Hubbard’s cupboard. There was only one pair of clown shoes in stock, sized fifteen wide. On a rack for two dozen styles of balloons, there were only two lonely packages. There was an abundance of kazoes, however, all with the Big Top logo, in big barrels at the end of every aisle.

“Bob, let me ask you a question. You have so little inventory, but your candy shelves are completely full. Are you being stocked with candy and nothing else? That seems odd to me.”

“I go over to the drug store when they have sales and stock up on circus peanuts and gummy bears. Then I send in an expense report. The check always comes back for twice what I ask for so I use the extra to get what I can in the way of inventory at the wholesaler down the street. I’ve never been able to figure out why the check is for more than I send receipts for. I tried to return it once and the check kept coming back.”

“Very resourceful of you, Bob.”

“I also get inventory from the store across town. That manager doesn’t really care too much. He’s passing time there. He’ll give me whatever I want. I don’t think that store has made a sale in a year or so. You might want to look at the sales reports every now and then.”

Butane Bob burst through the door with a cart full of pizzas, sodas, snacks, and cookies.

“Lunch is here!” he announced. Bob showed him the way to the break room.

“I only have two employees. How many people were you trying to feed here?”

“They can take some home and have it again for dinner. And they can have it again for breakfast,” he said as an afterthought.

“We do appreciate your generosity. Thank you.”

They all grabbed some pizza and then crowded into plain Bob’s office to work on the plan. Mandy and Violet listened to every word from plain Bob. They continued to take copious notes.

Once he was finished talking, Mandy said, “OK, let’s recap what we have here.” She followed her notes down the page as she spoke.

“You need inventory.

“Current fashionable merchandise

“Back stock for what is on the floor.

“A better and more specialized selection of candy than you can get at the drug store.

“A phone.

“A cash register. You ran out of sales checks years ago.

“Party items, paper plates, decorations. “Training material.

“We’ll have to fulfill your inventory before we can send the training manuals.

“Advertising to drive some traffic in here.

“New uniforms. They haven’t been updated in eight years. “Clown makeup.

“More inventory to sell.

“OK. Do you think that covers it?”

“Oh, one more thing. Can you get that inter-office mail straightened out? It’s bad enough that you continue to send me planograms and markdowns for inventory I don’t have, but it takes six weeks to get here. Even if I had the stuff, I would have missed the sale, anyway.”

“How do we send it to you now?”

“On a slow boat from China, as far as I can tell. I find it sitting outside the door when I get here in the morning. I’ve never seen who’s delivering it.”

“We’ll be sure to add that to the list.”

“Then I think this is a very good start. I feel better now that I’ve met you and we’ve worked through this.”

Butane Bob had been silent throughout the session. He sat squeezed into the corner of the tiny office, without saying a peep all afternoon. As they said their good-byes and headed out the door, he began to mumble.

“Biglar, Biglar, Biglar. Where is Biglar? What are you doing, Biglar?” He hung his head over his chest.

“Butane Bob, what are you saying?”

“Nothing, Violet, nothing.”

“You know, that other Bob is kinda cute. Do you think he’s married?”

“Violet, do you have a one-track mind? We’re here to work, remember?”

“I’m never going to find a man if I’m not looking for one in every possible place. Wouldn’t it bother you, Mandy, to always be working and never have a date?”

“My sister cured me of that. She married a creep and thinks she’s in seventh heaven. Why? Because he controls her every move. She doesn’t have to think about a thing. Not the kind of life I’m looking for, that’s for sure.”

It was a little after three when they drove up to the next store on their list. The handwritten sign on the door read:

Store Hours 10 a.m. until 2 p.m.

M – F

Butane Bob looked at his watch. When they tried the door, they were surprised to find that it opened.

“Hello! Hello! Anybody here?”

They heard a loud clatter. Looking around, they spotted an old man sprawled out on the floor behind the counter. A chair was upside down on the floor beside him.

“Are you all right?” Mandy rushed over to him.

“I must have dozed off,” he said as he stood up and brushed himself off.

“What time is it?”

“Quarter after three.”

“Well, then I’ve had myself a good little nap. I was supposed to lock the door an hour ago. Who are you?”

The old man caught his first glimpse of Butane Bob as he began to speak. His head jerked back in utter surprise.

“We’re here from the Big Top headquarters in Florida. My name is Butane Bob, and this is Violet and Mandy.”

“How’d you get that name? Set your hair on fire, did ya?”

“Something like that. Is the manager here?”

“No, he leaves at one every day. I lock up.”

“What’s your name, gramps?”

“Gramps! You got it right on the money! How’d ya know?”

“Wild guess. So, Gramps, if you could tell me one thing that we need to change to bring in more sales, what would it be?”

“Ha! Easy question. Stuff to sell. Look around—the shelves are bare. Everything we do get, that Bob from the other store comes here and takes. But you know”—he scratched his chin—“if we had any sales, I’d have to find another job.”

“Why’s that?”

"I'm retired. Forty years in an ice cream plant. I couldn't wait to be retired, lead a life of leisure, and be warm at least some of the time. But you know what? My wife drove me crazy. We've been married almost fifty years and, for the life of me, ever since I retired I've had no idea why I married the witch in the first place. 'Nag, nag, nag, nag, nag.' I came in here one day just to get out of the house. I was hired. I sit here by a cash register with no cash in it and I nap. I give my paycheck directly to the old lady and now we're both happy. But if I really had to do some work, it would be messin' up a really good thing. I couldn't nap so much. Forty years making ice cream took its toll on the body, you know."

"Gramps"—Violet was scribbling out a note—"can you give this to the store manager tomorrow? I'd really like to speak with him after I get back to the office. Here's my name and number."

Gramps took the paper and put it in his pocket. "Will do, missy. It was nice of y'all to stop by. Now I'll have something to say to the wife when she asks me how work was today. She asks every day, and every day I have to make somethin' up."

"Thanks for your time, Gramps. We're glad to be able to give you and your wife a little change of pace."

"Wait till I tell her about your hair. Oooo-eeeeee! Are we going to have a good laugh over that!"

Butane Bob smiled and headed outside. The girls waved good-bye, and Gramps locked the door behind them.

The next morning Violet and Mandy met for breakfast in the hotel lobby. They were still in shock over yesterday's events.

"It can't be any worse today, can it?" Violet seemed worried about the day ahead.

"I doubt it, but then again there's not much that can surprise me anymore." Mandy was secretly worried too but was trying not to show it.

Violet spotted Butane Bob's red clothes out of the corner of her eye.

"Here he comes."

"I'm starving. Where's the waiter?" he said as he pulled out a chair to join them.

"No waiter here. It's a buffet, self-service," said Violet.

He went to look over the display of food. "Hey! Where are the made-to-order omelets?"

"Oh, boy, here we go," Mandy said under her breath. "They don't have that here, Butane Bob."

"Why not? How much am I paying for this breakfast?"

"Nothing. It's free, included with the room."

"I want the \$15.95 breakfast buffet with lox and bagels and a waiter and made-to-order omelets. I love to watch that beautiful blue gas flame curl around the omelet pan and see that gorgeous yellow liquid boil and bubble into the perfect breakfast."

Other people, who had been enjoying a peaceful breakfast, were now beginning to stare. Mandy got up and went over to him.

“Butane Bob, you can’t get that at this hotel. It’s free. You serve yourself and the eggs come already scrambled from a bag.”

“From a bag!”

“Yes, they buy them already scrambled in a bag and just heat them up.”

“Oh, what is the world coming to? I don’t know if I can eat eggs that come in a bag. I won’t get sick, will I?”

“No, just add a little salt and pepper. You won’t know the difference.” Suddenly Mandy spotted the waffles. Thinking it might take his mind off the eggs, she said, “Look, Butane Bob, fresh waffles. See those cups? Pour one into the waffle maker and voila!—fresh waffles.”

“Ooooo.” He walked over to examine them more closely. “Can I have two?”

“You can have all you want.”

“Wow, I’m beginning to like this.” His eyes never left the waffle iron while the batter was cooking.

When he came back to the table, his plate was heaped with waffles, eggs, fruit, and muffins. He ate it all, as if it were his last meal. Violet sat watching in awe of this spectacle. She picked up a bottle from the table and handed it to him

“Do you want any Tabasco for those eggs?”

“Mmmm, that’s perfect,” he mumbled with his mouth full. He grabbed the bottle from her and poured it generously over everything on his plate. “How did you know I love Tabasco?”

“Just a hunch.”

Arriving at their third store in Minneapolis, they found it dark, locked, and deserted. When they peered through the window, the store looked completely empty. The shelves were completely bare.

“Violet, how many on the payroll here?”

“Just one—the store manager, Roger Dilly.”

“He must be somewhere sipping piña coladas while collecting a paycheck. Make sure we fire him when we get back and close this place down for good. At least the last guy kept the store open for a few hours a day. Let’s go.”

They arrived at the airport with plenty of time to spare.

“Violet, aren’t we going to Louisville? The boarding pass says St. Louis.” Mandy was examining her ticket.

“I don’t know. Butane Bob, are our stores in Louisville or St. Louis?”

“You two are just too caught up in the details. Wherever it says we’re going is where we’re going. You need to relax.”

“OK, you’re the boss.”

The flight to St. Louis was uneventful. Again the women were herded into the back of the plane while their fearless leader settled into his comfy first-class seat. Once they arrived, they made their way to the rental car lot.

“Now where are we headed?” Butane Bob deferred all map reading to whomever was sitting in the front seat with him.

Violet shuffled her papers to find the address. “469 Exeter Avenue.”

“Sir,” he asked the attendant at the gate. “How do we get to 469 Exeter Avenue?”

“Exeter Avenue . . .” He squinted his eyes so he could think about it. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of Exeter Avenue.”

Violet shoved the paper past Butane Bob, out the window to the attendant. He looked it over several times, and then it seemed as if a light bulb had turned on in his head.

“This says 469 Exeter Avenue, Louisville, Kentucky. You, my friends, are in St. Louis, Missouri. Wrong city, wrong state.”

Then came ranting from Mandy in the backseat:

“I told you we were going to the wrong place. No one wants to listen to me.”

“You need to relax. Any stores here in St. Louis?”

“We didn’t even know we had stores until last week. How would we know if there were any in St. Louis?” Mandy was furious at Butane Bob’s lack of concern

“Violet, call and find out.” He no longer had the relaxed demeanor of a few minutes earlier.

“Hey, buddy, you’re blocking the exit. Move out of here.”

He stepped on the gas, forcefully throwing Violet and Mandy into the backs of their seats.

Violet reached for her cell phone. “Gary, quick, I need a favor. Are there any stores in St. Louis?”

“We have stores?”

“Yes, we have stores,” she said with an exasperated tone. “Are there any in St. Louis?”

“Violet, where do you think I’m going to find that information? I didn’t even know we had stores until a few seconds ago. Where are you, and what are you doing?”

“Don’t ask. Just find out and call me back. Hurry!”

They pulled up at the airport.

“Mandy, go see if there are any flights to Louisville. Quickly!”

He slammed on the brakes. She went flying out the car door, stumbling onto the curb. The car sped off, almost running down a few pedestrians.

“Sorry, ma’am. There’s only one flight to Louisville and it leaves at 7:15 in the morning. I’m afraid you’re out of luck until tomorrow.

There are only two seats available for tomorrow’s flight. Do you want them?”

“There are three of us. Let me check. I’ll be back in a minute.” As Mandy ran out the door, the car came speeding toward her.

Screeeeech went the brakes. “Get in, no stores here,” yelled Violet. “No flights either.”

“Then we’re driving. Let’s get out of here.” The car peeled out of the airport toward the freeway.

Once they reached the freeway and were past all the airport traffic, Butane Bob stepped on the gas.

“Aah, nothing like the open road. It’s such a feeling of freedom—the wind in your hair.”

“Too bad we didn’t get a convertible for the occasion,” said Mandy and Violet, who were amused at having had the same thought at the same time.

“Yes, it really is too bad. I just love the rush it gives me, with all that fresh air all over me. Should we go back and get one?” asked Butane Bob.

“No!” the women replied, again in unison.

The speedometer read ninety miles per hour. Mandy tightened her seat belt.

Violet, who was in the front seat, asked, “Does this car have an airbag? How far is it to Louisville? Can we stop at the liquor store? I’m going to need a drink to get me to Louisville.”

“It’s about 250 miles. We’ll be there in no time. Sit back and relax. Enjoy the ride.”

She turned to get Mandy’s reaction from the backseat. “Close your eyes and take a nap.”

“Take a nap?” interjected Butane Bob. “And miss all this beautiful scenery? You two need to learn how to live on the edge a little. You’re going to end up like Gramps back there in wherever we were. Oooo, look—there’s a Burger Boy at the next exit. Who’s hungry?”

An “Ugh” came from the backseat.

“I love Burger Boy. What’s wrong with it? They have the best cinnamon-flavored milk shake.”

Violet began to chuckle.

“Maybe Mandy can get us a free meal.”

“A free meal! You can do that for us?”

“What? You can’t afford a meal at Burger Boy, but you can fly first class everywhere you go?”

“The company paid for that. And frankly, I’m a little surprised they didn’t fly you two first class. Usually everyone gets to fly that way. Please, Mandy. Please get us a free meal.”

“And the company is going to pay for your lunch too. So why do I have to stick my neck out to get you a free meal?”

“For the sport of it, Mandy. For the sport of it.”

She threw up her hands. “Butane Bob, relax. I worked at a Burger Boy at home when I was between jobs. Once I went there with Violet and got us a free lunch. I won’t be able to do that here. They don’t know me.”

“Oh, but you need to try. Please, pretty please. I love that cinnamon shake. It would really hit the spot about now.”

As they were walking through the parking lot, Butane Bob coached Mandy on what to say.

“Can you at least give them your employee number and get a discount? Tell them your wallet was stolen and you have no money.”

“There are three of us. All of our wallets were stolen?”

“Hmmm, good point there.” He thought for a moment. “You’re a smart girl, you’ll figure it out. I’ll have a double cheeseburger with everything and extra hot sauce, large fries, and a cinnamon shake.”

“If you need me to flutter my eyes at him for you, Mandy, I’ll be happy to help.”

Mandy was apprehensive as she approached the counter. The other two found themselves a table in the back, so as not to be too obvious.

“Is the manager available?”

“I’m the manager.” He looked to be about sixteen.

“Hello. My name is Mandy Maloney. I’m employed by Burger Boy in Florida. I’m traveling with some friends and our luggage was lost. My wallet was also stolen. We’re very short on cash and need to get to Louisville. Can you help us out? I’ll make sure you get repaid as soon as I get back home.”

“You with that guy with the hair?”

“Yes.”

“If you let me take his picture, you can have anything on the menu. On me.”

“Really? Then take as many pictures as you want.”

“Cool!”

She brought the food to the table.

“Butane Bob, the food was free as long as I agreed that the manager be able to take your picture. He likes the way you look.”

“Then I had better comb my hair.”

“Don’t do that. I think that’s what he likes about you.”

The three were just about finished eating when the manager appeared at their table with a camera.

“Here, let me clear the table for you,” he said as he picked up a tray. “I don’t want all the trash in the picture. We get raises based on how clean we keep our stores.”

First he posed Butane Bob by himself and snapped a few frames.

Then he turned to Mandy. “Would you mind taking a picture of the two of us together?”

The geeky young man and Butane Bob the ham put their arms around each other’s shoulders and smiled enthusiastically for the camera.

“Cheese!”

“Take a couple more, just in case.”

“That ought to do it.” She handed him back the camera.

The manager began looking at all the shots in his digital camera. “Cool! Thanks. Need another cinnamon shake for the road?” he said, pointing to Butane Bob’s empty cup.

“That would be fabulous. Love that cinnamon shake!”

“How can you drink those things? They’re disgusting. Cinnamon shakes.”

“No, Violet, they are the perfect blend of fire and ice. I could drink them all day long. My mouth lights up like a fire, but my stomach stays cool and comfy. It is such a beautiful shade of red. I’m surprised I didn’t come up with such a concoction myself. I’d have been a millionaire by now.”

Butane Bob got his shake for the road and they piled back into the car. They arrived in Louisville at about four in the afternoon.

“Let’s stop by that store first before we call it a day.”

Violet plotted their course through town on a road atlas she found under the seat. “Here it is. Exeter Avenue.”

Looking out the window of the car, Mandy observed, “This must be it, with the cannon in the parking lot.”

“What?”

“Right there, a circus cannon.”

There was a woman sitting under a big sign that read:

ON SALE

BE A HUMAN CANNONBALL

CANNON

\$999.99

They approached the woman and went through their usual introductions.

“From the corporate office? You ought to be ashamed of your- selves, showing up here. I sit in this parking lot day in and day out trying to sell this lousy cannon. It’s the only thing I’ve got left to sell.”

“We came to change that for you. What’s your name?”

“Wilma. I use my own car to tow this monstrosity out of the store every morning and tow it back in every night. And I sit out here rain or shine.”

“Wilma, do you have any other employees?”

“What do you think I am—stupid? As much as I despise this company, I know enough that I don’t need to waste more of the company’s money by keeping useless employees on the payroll.”

“Then why do you do this everyday?”

“I would like more challenges in my job, but other places aren’t any better. See that office supply store across the way? That store is busy all day long. But you know what? Their corporate office allows each store to have only twenty shopping carts. Their customers were complaining all the time. No carts in the store. They were in the parking lot, and there was never enough help to collect them fast enough. I finally gave them some of mine. I have two hundred carts, barely used. So it’s no better. Headaches no matter who I choose to work for.”

“Here’s a list that we put together in some other stores that we visited. Look it over and let me know if it’s in line with what you would like to see happen.” Mandy had scribbled out a handwritten copy of the list and handed it to Wilma.

“This would be an excellent start. I can’t think of anything more right now. But you know what? Can you fix the inter-office mail?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Aside from that it takes at least a month to get here, you keep sending me markdowns for inventory I don’t have. It’s just a waste. Nothing gets here on time anyway, so why bother?”

As they got back into the car, Butane Bob said, “We’re done. I’ve seen enough. Let’s go home.”

“Done,” the two women agreed.

As they were driving through rush hour traffic on the way to the airport, Butane Bob shouted, “Look Mandy! Burger Boy! Do you think you can pull off the same trick again for dinner?”

“Do I have to? Isn’t once enough?”

“Come on. You know how much I love it.”

Mandy approached the counter with Violet, and Butane Bob found a table in the back. She told the manager the same sad story.

“Are you with the guy with the hair?”

She hesitated—“Yes.”

“Can I take his picture? Then the burgers, fries, and cinnamon shakes are on me.”

“What’s with the picture taking?”

“The company is looking for a new spokesperson for the cinnamon shake. Seeing that he’s all dressed in red with that crazy hair, he’d be perfect. I get a big trip to New York if I win.”

“Butane Bob, they want to take your picture again,” Mandy said as she set the food on the table

“Should I fix my hair?”

“No, I think that’s what they like about you.” “Say cheese.”

Flash.

CHAPTER NINE

THE NEVER STARTING MEETING

The meeting notice read:

Please be prompt!

We have much to cover in this very important meeting.

8 a.m. sharp in the IT conference room on the second floor. The purpose of this meeting is to get the corporate business owner's input of a new employee intranet portal. Our aim is to create one place to service all of our daily needs, reduce time and paper, and allow our employees all over the country to become more efficient in their daily work routines.

“Wow! What a novel idea—become more efficient.”

The meeting notice was sent by Patti Gulley on behalf of Paul Brown. Mandy didn't know either of these people. She hadn't had much interaction with anyone in information systems yet. But she thought that this might be the perfect opportunity to get her training manuals to the stores via the portal.

She arrived at the conference room at about five minutes before eight the next morning. The room was dark. She turned on the lights, picked her seat and sat down. Then she waited.

“So much for being prompt,” she thought. As she waited, she went through her day planner and tried to organize her day for when the meeting was over.

Review and approve the training module on juggling props.

1 p.m. meeting with doodler staff on how to freshen the look of their artwork.

Talk with Lester about his attendance issues.

2 p.m. Conduct online training session with the sales team n Iowa.

4 p.m. meeting with Butane Bob on a new line of cannons for humans.

It was a good thing she had brought the new training manual on juggling with her, to use as an example of the volume of her team's work that would need to be available on the Web site. She could get a head start reviewing the draft while she waited.

Mandy was startled when a man she had never met before came into the room at around eight thirty.

“Good morning. I'm Mandy Maloney.”

“Oodgay orningmay. Icenay otay eetmay ouyay, Mandy. Iway amway Paul Brown.”

“Excuse me, I didn't understand what you said.”

“Oodgay orningmay. Icenay otay eetmay ouyay Mandy. Iway amway Paul Brown. Areyway ouyay ethay onlyway oneway erehay? Erewhay isway everyoneway? Iway oughtthay Iway aidsay eightway amway arpshay.”

Mandy looked at him. “I'm sorry, I must have been deep in thought.” She tried to laugh it off. What was this man saying to her? She couldn't understand him. Was her hearing going bad?

“Erewhay isway ymay assistantway ithway ethay ojectorpray? Isthay ouldshay avehay allway eenbay etsay upway ybay ownay.” He left the room

Pretty soon the others started to arrive, Gary and Violet among them.

“Looks like we forgot to tell you.” “Forgot to tell me what?”

“Any meeting request that comes from IT always starts a minimum of a half hour late.”

"I've been sitting here since before eight. Some guy came in a couple minutes ago, but I couldn't understand a word he said."

Gary and Violet started to laugh out loud.

"Didn't you bring your dictionary? Or did we forget to tell you about that too?" asked Gary, still unable to control his laughter.

"I guess you forgot again," she said sarcastically. "What dictionary?"

Everyone seated in the room held up a yellow and red book at the same time

"It was in your bag at orientation. It's the Information Technology-slash-English dictionary."

"I was half asleep when I looked through that bag. It's stashed in the closet somewhere at home."

"Well, you had better find it. You're going to need it. It's standard issue around here."

Mandy threw her head back in frustration. Another quirky thing to remember. The list was getting so long. She wondered if it was ever going to be possible to keep them all straight.

The man who had been there earlier came back into the room

This time he was accompanied by a woman who was also unfamiliar to Mandy. They were chatting like old friends. Mandy could not make out a single word. As they took their seats, the woman held out her hand to Mandy.

"Iway onday'tay elievebay eway avehay etmay. Ymay amenay isway Gail Lightman."

"Mandy Maloney. Nice to meet you." They shook hands and all the while Mandy had a very confused look on her face. She glanced over at Violet. She mouthed "Gail Lightman and Paul Brown" then pointed at her translation dictionary.

"Asway oonsay asway ymay assistantway ingsbray ethay ojector- pray, eway illway etgay artedstay."

Paul Brown ruffled through his papers. "Ohway Iway eemsay otay avehay orgottenfay ethay andoutshay. Iway'llay ebay ightray ackbay."

The group sat there in silence. It was closing in on nine o'clock. Gail started to talk.

"Isthay isway away eryvay importantway ojectpray eway areway oinggay otay iscussday odaytay. Iway amway illedthray otay ebay orkingway onway itway. Mandy atwhay isway ouryay ositionpay inway ethay ompanycay? Iway onday'tay ememberray eeingsay anway announcementway introducingway ouyay."

Gary and Violet were furiously turning the pages of their dictionaries

"Mandy, she's talking to you. She wants to know your position in the company."

"She didn't see your announcement," Violet interpreted.

"Oh, uh, I'm the manager of sales training."

Gail sat smiling, seeming to thoroughly enjoy putting them through their paces. Gary and Violet took it all in stride as they searched for words in the dictionary. Mandy was becoming increasingly annoyed by the whole situation.

“Itway isway ickenay otay avehay omesay eshfray alenttay aroundway erehay. Etlay emay ogay andway eesay atwhay isway eepingkay Paul.”

“You are fresh talent.” Gary was reading from his dictionary. “Good to know. Is it unreasonable for the fresh talent to expect a meeting to start on time? I’ve got things to do today.”

“We all do. This just goes with the territory.”

“And you just blindly accept this kind of rude and obnoxious behavior?”

“We’ve heard they are highly respected in their field around the world. Big Top is lucky to have them,” Violet chimed in.

Mandy glanced at her watch. It was now half past nine. Paul and Gail came back with another woman who was carrying the projector. The three of them started to set it up and connect Paul’s laptop.

They plugged one cord into the projector, but then the other end wouldn’t fit in the laptop. It was like musical chairs trying to figure out which cord went where. The projector finally came on, but the laptop went dark. No one else in the room moved an inch to help.

“Iway amway osay orrysay orfay isthay elayday. Iway appreciateway ouryay atiencepay. Iway owknay eway allway avehay otherway orkway otay oday.”

No one picked up a dictionary this time. Everyone stared blankly back at the two. By this time the assistant had left to get some help.

Mandy was beyond annoyed. She had been sitting in this room for more than two hours, and the meeting had not even started. Plus, she couldn’t understand a word that was being said. She got up to leave.

“Ohway onay, onay, onay. Ouyay an’tcay ogay. Eway illway etgay artedstay inway away inutemay.”

Gail blocked the door. “Excuse me please, Gail.”

“Onay, ouyay ancay otnay eavelay.” Gail was standing her ground. Mandy turned to Violet for a translation.

“You are not allowed to leave. They will be ready in a minute.”

As Mandy returned to her seat, Gary whispered, “You have to keep in mind, they both passed the test to get into Mensa, but couldn’t follow the directions on how to get to the induction meeting. They never made it.”

“So that’s why Big Top hired them? They’re so smart, they can’t find their way out of a paper bag?”

Finally the projector came on and Paul’s presentation appeared on the screen. He passed out the handouts, and it seemed as if they were ready to go.

“Elcomeway otay ethay initialway eetingmay orfay ethay eationcay ofway ourway employeeway intranetway itesay. Eway avehay itequay away itbay otay overcay isthay orningmay osay etlay’say etgay oinggay. Asephay oneway eginsbay odaytay. Asephay otway illway eginbay onway Friday.”

The screen said “Phase One” in big bold letters. The next screen said “Phase Two.” Nothing else—just “Phase One” and “Phase Two.”

“Ooklay atway ethay imetay.” He looked at his watch. “Iway avehay anotherway eetingmay otay attendway. Ankthay ouyay orfay ouryay attentionway isthay orningmay. Ymay assistantway illway informway ouyay ethay imetay andway aceplay ofway ourway extnay eetingmay.”

Paul shut down his laptop and walked out. Gail followed him. Everyone else in the room was scrambling through their dictionaries to figure out what just happened. As people found words, they shouted them out. Mandy tried to write them down.

Meeting

Attend

Another

Attention

Thank you

Inform

Meeting

Next

Place

“I think he has another meeting and he’ll let us know where the next one will be. Thank you.” They all gathered up their things and left.

“Violet, what was that all about?”

“Those two? They’ve both been here for years. They were recruited from what I’ve been told is a very fine and highly regarded university.”

“What foreign country is it in and why don’t they speak English? They seem to understand what we’re saying.”

“They do understand us. They just like being hoity-toity, like they’re better and smarter than the rest of us. They don’t get why we can’t understand them. Supposedly it was quite a coup when they signed up to work here. Some very big companies were also after them, I’ve heard.”

“We were probably the only ones who agreed to issue a translation dictionary to all the other employees,” Mandy said with some disgust.

“You might be right on that one.”

Mandy was so frustrated by the lack of productivity in her morning that she decided to take things into her own hands. It was important that this intranet site get up and running so that the sales people had a central spot to locate information. It would also help reduce the amount of paper her team alone generated each month. And it might score some brownie points for her with Lulu. Not that she thought she really needed them, but one never knows. She sent a meeting notice to Paul Brown, asking to talk with him directly about it.

He replied almost immediately. “Ookinglay orwardfay otay itway.”

“Whatever that means. I guess I’ll have to look for that dictionary when I get home.”

Ten o'clock the next morning arrived, and it was time for the meeting with Paul Brown. Mandy had reviewed in her head over and over what she was going to say. "This is an extremely important project, with huge cost-saving benefits to the company. It needs to get going. The stores are so desperate for this. How can we work as a team to get this off the ground in the next two weeks? We need to put together our game plan now."

She arrived at Paul Brown's office on time. He wasn't there.

"Great. Here we go again."

She entered and took a seat, making herself at home. This man didn't understand good manners, so why should she? If it were any- one else, Mandy would have waited politely outside the door until the person arrived. She looked around the room. It looked like many of the other offices, with awards and circus memorabilia all over. The walls were orange.

"I wonder what that means."

Her eyes came to something on the wall that looked out of place. It was tucked between a 1995 Information Technology Specialist of the Year award and a picture of Mt. Everest. It was a diploma of some sort. Mandy got up out of her chair to get a closer look.

Dewitt Matchbook University

Hereby confers upon

Paul Juice Brown

The degree of

Bachelor of Science

For the timely and accurate completion of the matchbook correspondence course

This Fourth Day of June, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety

"What is that—a matchbook correspondence course? Where's that prestigious university Violet was talking about?"

Paul entered the room to find Mandy examining his diploma. "Mandy, adglay ousyay areway akingmay ourselfyay atway omehay."

"I was just admiring all the honors on your wall." "Atwhay idday ousyay antway otay eesay emay aboutway?" "That's an unusual middle name—Juice. Is it a family name?"

"Ymay othermay asway away ugehay anfay ofway Anita Bryant. Iway avehay away istersay amednay Florida andway anotherway oneway alledcay Orange. Incesay Iway asway away oymay, eshay optedway otay ivegay emay Juice asway away iddleamay amenay. Ownay atwhay idday ousyay antway otay eesay emay aboutway?"

If she had any free time, she would look up some of this in her dictionary when she got back to her office. A few words were scribbled on her notebook so she wouldn't forget. But she really didn't feel like playing into his arrogance right now. Mandy began to go through all the lines she had rehearsed. Paul sat behind his desk nodding his head. When she had finished, she sat back in the chair and waited for him to respond.

"Eway avehay oresstay? Interestingway. Isthay isway away iticalcray ojectpray—Iway ancay eesay atthay. Iway avehay away eveloperday Iway ancay assignway otay ouyay ethay eginningbay ofway extnay eekway. Ehay illway ebay inishedfay ithway ethay otherway applicationway ybay enthay."

"When can someone start on this? It's a desperate situation out in the field. I need an answer from you."

"Iway oldtay ouyay Mandy, ethay eginningbay ofway extnay eekway. Ishay amenay isway Steve Stephens. Ouyay'llay ikelay orkingway ithway imhay."

There was a knock on the door. "Paul, you're late for the staff meeting."

Paul got up and gathered his papers.

"Orrysay, otgay otay ogay. Iway'llay avehay Steve allcay ouyay."

She stomped her feet in frustration. "Who does this man think he is? Shows up late, leaves early, and talks over my head because he gets a kick out of it. What could he have learned in a matchbook correspondence course that makes him think he can treat people this way? And talk that way? I have got to find another job before this place falls into the ever-flushing toilet for good!"

CHAPTER TEN

RINGMASTER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Mandy suddenly heard chatter roll through the cubicles outside her office.

"What could that be all about?" she wondered. A head popped in her doorway.

"Mandy, look at your e-mail. Quick, quick, quick." Cassie was very excited about something.

She opened the announcement addressed to all e-mail users.

To: All Corporate Employees

The Board of Directors is proud to announce a new employee recognition award. We know that our company can not be successful without the hard work and dedication of our employees, who consistently go above and beyond the call of duty.

Our new program is called "The Ringmaster Extraordinaire." Every employee in the company now has the opportunity to recognize fellow workers who go the extra mile doing what is best for the company.

Every time one of you is nominated, you will be presented with a beautiful pin of recognition. These pins will be distributed to managers beginning tomorrow. Complete the nomination form that you will find on the intranet. Bring that form to your manager, who will give you the pin to personally present to your coworker.

Please wear this pin proudly. Big Top would not be the successful company that it is without you. You are all the Ringmaster Extraordinaire!

"Pretty cool, huh, Mandy?"

"Pretty cool, Cassie. Just don't all run in here at once with your nomination forms."

"Oh, you are so funny."

"Cassie, we have work to do around here. Go back out there and tell them that unless the new training material on trapeze gear is done by tomorrow, there'll be no pins for any of them!" she said, waving her out of the office. Mandy giggled to herself as she heard the rumblings after Cassie delivered the announcement to the group.

The next morning, Ronnie, the mailroom man, showed up at Mandy's door, red faced and out of breath.

"Mandy, these pin deliveries are killing me." She had never seen his mail cart overflowing like it was today. "Here are yours." Ronnie dropped a huge white box on her desk.

It landed with a loud thud.

"This is full of Ringmaster pins?"

"You got that right. Twenty five pounds of pins for each manager. And I'm the lucky guy making all the deliveries."

"How many pins equals twenty-five pounds? Five thousand?"

"More like six or seven thousand, I think."

Mandy looked down at the box and then back at Ronnie's bright red face.

"You better take a rest. Let me get you some water. You don't look good at all."

"No, no, don't worry about me. I have four more stops and then I'll hang out in my secret hiding place for a couple hours. I've got a little fridge in there, so I'll be fine. And I have some other extra special treats to help me relax—trust me." He smiled and winked. Off he went, struggling to push the heavy cart.

“Secret hiding place,” Mandy thought. “Have these people no pride? Why would he tell me he had a secret hiding place to begin with? Or is that another clue to the riddle, ‘Things are not as they appear?’ The shock factor never goes away here.” Mandy tried to move the box off her desk but couldn’t. It was that heavy. She sliced it open to look at the pins.

The pins were absolutely gorgeous. Each pin was about three inches across, in the shape of a circus tent. The tent was multi-colored with the ringmaster in the center. At the bottom were the words “Ringmaster Extraordinaire at Big Top Supplies.” No wonder the box weighed so much. She turned around to find a crowd of people at her door, all waving their nomination forms.

“We’re here for our pins! Look, Cassie already has five.” Cassie proudly stuck out her chest to display her collection.

“Wow, Cassie, that’s terrific. Line up—one pin for one form.” Mandy handed out so many pins that, once she took care of the last person in line, she could finally lift the box and move it off her desk. Suddenly Gary appeared showing off two pins on his collar. “Where are yours?”

“No one has seen fit to nominate me for anything yet.”

“Nomination, shnomination. I took these out of my box. No one will know the difference. Notice there are no instructions for recording all these forms anywhere.”

“You’re getting to be as bad as the rest of them. Ronnie told me he was going to rest in his secret hiding place for a while after making all the pin deliveries.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes, he did. He also told me that things are not as they appear. What do you think that means?”

“Well, Mandy, you got me. But why mess with a good thing?” “Don’t you ever want to do the right thing—for once in your life,

Gary?” She was getting angry.

“Get off your high horse. You’re doing the same thing I am by working here. Taking the fabulous salary and benefits and putting up with all this crap, even though it irritates the hell out of you.”

“You’re right, you’re right, I apologize. I don’t know how much longer I can take this, though.”

“Start putting your feelers out again. It’ll make you feel better. That’s what I’m doing.”

“I don’t have any high hopes for that working out. Been there, done that. I chose not to move to India—that’s how I ended up here in the first place. All the good jobs are moving offshore these days.”

“I’ve got some connections. I’ll see what I can do for you.”

Just then, two more people showed up at her door looking for pins. Mandy sent them away with the pins and closed her door, and then broke down and cried. She was disheartened by their blatant lack of respect for doing the right thing. No one seemed to care as much as she did about doing what was right and about working hard to earn a reward. It was all just handed out on a platter for the taking. Her team was competent but lazy. They laughed when she tried to counsel them on how to improve.

“Why,” they would say. “I get a ten-percent raise no matter what, so why bother trying to push the envelope?” How did this happen? Who created these monsters?

It took only a week for Mandy to dispense all of the Ringmaster Extraordinaire pins in her twenty-five-pound box. People displayed all of their pins in every imaginable way. They were worn as earrings, strung on necklaces, attached to barrettes and worn in their hair—you name it, and it said “Ringmaster Extraordinaire.” Mandy wondered how long it took some of them to get dressed each morning. The pins were everywhere. It gave the appearance that everyone in the company did such an extraordinary job, and it was so heartwarming—Ha! Cassie had two of her pins made into earrings, which were so heavy Mandy thought they would pull her ears off.

“Mandy, go see Bozo. He has more pins than all of us put together.”

This was announced at her weekly staff meeting after the discussion turned to when a new supply of pins would arrive at her door. She tried to brush this off. She had purposely not ordered a fresh box, since it was so annoying to her that they had become a status symbol instead of a reward for a job well done.

“Really. Bozo’s entire shirt, front and back, is covered with pins. He has so much mail at his desk, it’s hard to even find him in there. He’s starting to put them on his pants.”

“OK, OK. I’ll see what I can do.” She had fought the battle long enough.

She was caving in to their demands for more pins. She did have a new expense report to turn in, so, just for fun, she thought she’d check out the infamous Bozo. Sure enough, the mail was stacked all around his desk. When he saw Mandy coming he stood up to display his pins.

“Bozo, don’t you look fantastic! Thanks for doing such a great job for the company.” One thing she knew about Bozo was that he loved to be stroked

He grinned from ear to ear. He had even started to display some pins on the cardboard clown.

“Thanks, Mandy. Don’t you just love my new look? I get compliments all day long now.”

This was the most conversation she’d ever gotten from him. Well, if it helped bring this guy out of his shell, then maybe she should ease up.

“That’s terrific, Bozo. You look very fashionable. Here’s my latest expense report. Thanks as always for taking care of it for me.”

“My pleasure. I haven’t gotten a pin from you yet, though. I’ll have to process the reports with pins first.”

Oh, here we go.

“I’m sorry, Bozo, but I’ve run out of pins. I’m waiting for my refill.”

“As long as I know it’s coming, I can go ahead and cut your check.”

“The minute I get them, I’ll bring some over.”

Shortly after she returned to her office, Mandy heard a fire truck siren. She didn’t think much of it, since it was a daily occurrence for the paramedics to retrieve someone out of the call center downstairs. Someone faked heart pain down there on a regular basis to get out of doing an honest day’s work. She walked the aisles of her own area to make sure no one was passed out on the floor. No one was.

About an hour later, the local salesman, Pete, knocked on Mandy’s door. His face was ashen, his hands were shaking, and he could barely stand.

“Pete, what’s wrong?” She rushed to help him into a chair. “Let me get you some water.”

“No, I’m OK. Just let me sit here for a few minutes.”

“What happened?” Mandy sat beside him and held his hand. Tears welled up in his eyes.

“I went to see Bozo, to drop off an expense report.” His voice began to crack. “I shook his hand like I always do. I gave him a shock of static electricity. All those pins!” He held his head in his hands and began to cry. Mandy’s mouth fell open.

“He was electrocuted. Lulu just told me he died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. They couldn’t get all the metal off in time to revive him. Mandy, it was so horrible.”

Mandy tried to hide her shock. “Don’t blame yourself. It was an accident. A very tragic accident.” She hugged him. She handed him some tissues. Inside her heart was pounding and her thoughts were racing.

“Let me get you some water.” She closed the door as she left. She ran to Gary’s office, hoping he was still there.

“Gary, bad news.”

“What?” he said, without even looking up from his computer. Just then her cell phone rang. “Ugh, my mother! Hi, Mom. I’m pretty busy right now. Can I call you back?” “What are you busy doing?”

“Mom, I’m working.”

“Oh, I forgot that you have a job. You hadn’t had one in so long, I completely forgot about it. I guess that explains why you haven’t asked for money lately too.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll call you later.” After she hung up the phone, she said to herself, “When am I going to learn not to answer when she calls?”

Gary had been cooling his heels while listening to her silly conversation. It was the same conversation he heard Mandy have with her mother day after day. She always answered when she called, no matter where she was at the moment. He was beginning to think that no one else even had her cell phone number.

“What’s going on? Spill the beans.”

“Pete, the salesman, gave Bozo a shock of static electricity when he shook his hand. Bozo is dead! He was electrocuted by all those pins.”

Gary’s eyes became as big as saucers. For once, Mandy had left him speechless.

"He's in my office right now crying his eyes out. He's devastated. Can you try to find Lulu or someone to fill us in, so that we can tell our people before the rumor mill starts buzzing out of control?"

He responded weakly, "I'm in shock."

"Let's tell our teams at once. I think it will be a little easier if we're together. Get Violet too."

Mandy went back to check on Pete, and Gary headed down the hall.

"How are you feeling? Can I drive you home?"

"My wife is coming to get me, but thank you. We're going to stop and see Bozo's parents."

He started crying again. "I'm not sure I can face them."

"It wasn't your fault. They'll understand that. Let me walk you downstairs so we can wait for your wife."

As the car pulled up to the lobby entrance, Pete began to insist that Mandy come with them.

"Please, please, I can't face them by myself." He and his wife were both begging her.

Pete's wife was also a mess, tears streaming down her face.

"Let me drive," said Mandy. "You two sit in back and try to calm down before we get to Bozo's house." When she said the name Bozo they both began to wail even louder than before.

In a neighborhood of neatly manicured lawns and freshly painted cottages, she knew immediately which driveway to turn into. They approached a small house that was a deep purple color.

The roof was pink and the shutters lime green. An elephant made of concrete sat on his haunches with the mailbox perched on the end of his trunk.

Pete and his wife had composed themselves to some degree. They walked to the front porch arm in arm. He knocked softly on the sunshine-yellow front door. "Maybe they're not home. Still at the hospital or something. Let's go." As he turned away, the door slowly opened. An elderly man said to them, "Come in, come in. We've been expecting you."

"We're so sorry for your loss."

"You have my deepest sympathies."

"Thank you. My wife, Clarabelle." He introduced an elderly woman wearing a floral '50s-style housecoat with pink rollers in her hair. "Please have a seat. Make yourself at home."

The house seemed ordinary on the inside. Not a circus memento in sight. The furniture had to be at least fifty years old, but looked to be in perfect condition. The plastic cover it had been wrapped in all these years had certainly done its job.

Mandy exchanged pleasantries with Bozo's parents for ten minutes or so. They insisted that they were fine and didn't need anything. Pete and his wife sat and sobbed through the entire conversation. Clarabelle kept handing them tissues until a sizeable pile had formed next to Pete's chair.

Finally she looked at Mandy, pointed at the pair, and said, "What's wrong with them?"

"They're very sad about the loss of your son. Pete feels responsible."

“Well, I am too, but you don’t see me weeping like a willow tree. I gave birth to that boy and even I’m not crying that much.”

Mandy picked up on Clarabelle’s cue.

“Uh, I think we should be leaving now. Please let me know if there is anything at all I can help you with.” Mandy fully intended to come back later with a casserole and some other goodies to stock the refrigerator, but she had to get rid of these two babbling idiots first. Clarabelle didn’t seem to be in the mood to deal with them either, and rightfully so.

Bozo’s father escorted them to the front door. He followed them out onto the porch. Grief was now beginning to show itself on his face. He had seemed so composed during their visit.

“He was obsessed with those pins, you know. It drove me crazy.” His voice began to quiver. “Every day, when he got home from work, he and Clarabelle took all the pins off what he’d been wearing. She would rub out all the pinholes. Then he would pick out the next day’s clothes, and they put them all back on. It took hours.” A tear began to roll down his cheek.

Pete and his wife began to wail all over again at the mention of the pins. Bozo’s father handed them some more tissues from his pocket.

“At least now I can paint this house a decent color and live out my days in peace. You have no idea how many people drive down the street and start honking their horn in front of this house. And I can get rid of that god-awful elephant! Some things are a blessing in disguise. Bozo left us over a million dollars, you know. His bank statement came in the mail, today of all days, so we opened it. How he ever saved all that, I will never know. He was an idiot. I thought my wife had let go of her senses when she insisted on naming him that. But looking back, I think she knew exactly what she was doing. The name Bozo suited him perfectly.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

“Larry, what were you thinking when you hired that Mandy Maloney? A clean-cut, all-American girl. WHAT were you thinking? She’s going to single-handedly foil our entire plan.”

“Believe me, she’s not that smart, Louis. And besides, she was the only person who answered the classified ad. Plus, she’s really cute. I don’t like ugly women, you know.”

“Think again with the right brain, Larry. Lulu came to see me. Mandy’s refusing to cash her expense check. No one has ever refused to cash an expense check before.” He began to speak in a high-pitched, singsong manner. “It’s not right. I would be taking the company’s money. That’s stealing.”

“Why didn’t you tell me Lulu was coming up here? If she sees me, our cover will be blown for sure.”

“Oh, get over it. You were behind closed doors at the time with your girlfriend, doing Lord knows what. You really need to get a hotel room or something. Every couple of hours, I have to spill something outside your door and call the janitor to vacuum it up to drown out all the screaming you two do.”

“I wondered what that was. It really puts a damper on the sex.” Louis looked at him with an evil eye.

“Here’s your mail, Mr. Everly.” Ronnie entered the boardroom and dropped the mail in the basket by the door.

“Thank you, Ronnie.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Everly,” he said as he disappeared down the hallway. Louis walked over to close the door and thumb through the mail

“Nothing from Biglar, so we’re safe for another day. It’s only another few days before the Three Ring announcement comes out. Keep your fingers crossed and say your prayers, and get everyone you know to say a few prayers, including your wife. I know my sister well. She’ll pray hard to have plenty of money in the bank and finally be rid of the likes of you. Has the press release been completed yet?”

“Gertrude finished it yesterday.” “Did anybody proofread it?”

“I did. My Gertie is a natural-born writer. I really don’t understand why I had to fire her.”

“Get your head out of your pants, for Christ’s sake! I want to see it before it goes out.”

Larry hated to take orders from anyone, even Louis. Louis was getting testier every day. As long as he was keeping him out of hot water with his wife, Larry had no choice but to follow. But it drove him crazy. He knew there was nothing to worry about. The scheme was perfect. The company would be sold, his bank account would be fat, and he and Gertie would be living the life of kings. Biglar must be dead. It just didn’t make sense that he would leave Louis in charge and then never return his calls if he didn’t expect him to make some decisions. So what if he never officially signed the company over to Louis? No one would ever be able to tell. The signature was too good. That Gertie was a real artistic talent—in more ways than one!

Louis handed Larry an envelope.

“Aah, the mortgage payment.” He ripped off the check and tossed the stub into the wastebasket.

“Now that was a good hire—Bozo.”

“Without him we’d be sunk. He keeps draining the funds just like we planned. Three Ring will have signed on the dotted line, and we’ll both be in Monte Carlo before they find out that they paid good money for nothing. No stores, well-paid employees playing golf, an overflowing warehouse, and a guy with a fire siren as a doorbell. Won’t they be surprised? We, on the other hand, will be nowhere to be found. Brilliant.”

“And that smelly guy. What’s his name again?”

“Davy Jones. Big Top fired him, he was so obnoxious. And brilliant me hired him back. He may smell up a storm, but people don’t pay once they’ve heard from him. I hid him where no one will ever find him, and I made sure he had enough air freshener nearby to keep him sweet-smelling for years.”

“I wonder why he can’t take a bath.”

Larry began to laugh. “Hear that ambulance? Another sucker bites the dust. Instead of the paramedics showing up here once a week, it’ll be three times a day because of all the stress. They’ll be dropping like flies. That’s a tough crowd over at Three Ring. Even if these suckers survive, they’ll find themselves on the unemployment line. Life is sweet! Biglar sure better be dead, or he’ll have prison time to deal with when he gets back.”

“Biglar is getting what he deserves. He had it easy inheriting a family company. I had to beg, borrow, and steal for everything. In college, he was smarter, better looking, and always had the girls. I got his discards. Even my wife, Dolly, claims she dumped him for the wonderful and charming me.” He pumped up his chest. “Thirty years later, I still don’t believe her. He dumped her and I was next in line. That was his plan. He pointed her in my direction to get rid of her. He thought he was doing me a favor by bringing me into this business after graduation. Ha! Like I wasn’t capable of getting a job on my own. He thought he was better than me. Now it’s my turn to live the good life. Let Biglar do the suffering for a change.”

“Aren’t you living the good life now, Louis? What’s a five million dollar home on the water and two Mercedes in the garage, if it’s not the good life?”

“All that is thanks to Bozo, not Biglar.”

“Why didn’t you try to get a job on your own out of college and tell him to shove it, if you hated him that much?”

“His mother offered me a job—no muss, no fuss, no resume to write, no job interview. I didn’t have to work for it and it was money in the bank. Life is all about money in the bank. That’s how my parents raised me.”

Just then there was a knock on the door. It was Ronnie.

“Excuse me, Mr. Everly. I need to pick up the trash.” Ronnie reached for the wastebasket and handed it out the door. He closed the door behind him

“And what about that one, Louis? Do you really think he has no idea what happened to Biglar?”

“Trust me, Larry. The elevator doesn’t go all the way to the top. Biglar gave him a job here to get him out of his hair at home. The two of them never really got along, as far as I could tell. And I spent a lot of time in that house over the years.”

“If you say so.”

“I know so. Now, go get me that announcement. I’m having dinner tonight with the principals from Three Ring. I have to assure them that everything is in order.”

When he returned to his office, Gertie was waiting for Larry, wearing only a few strategically placed leaves.

“Happy Arbor Day, honey.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

WELCOME TO LULU’S OFFICE

The mood was somber the day after Bozo’s funeral. The funeral had been a fine affair. The Big Top offices were closed so that all who wanted could attend. The huge crowd overflowed into the parking lot of the funeral home. Tiffany left her pompoms at home and wore a stunning black chiffon dress which showed off her perfect figure. A huge spray of lilies graced the coffin. Lulu gave a touching eulogy. Bozo’s parents remained stoic through it all.

The holiday cube had been draped in black. Bozo’s picture hung in the center of a huge funeral wreath. A ribbon had the words “Ringmaster Extraordinaire” written in gold glitter.

The words “Ringmaster Extraordinaire,” however, had been permanently erased from everyone’s vocabulary. No longer were the deadly pins proudly displayed on jackets and scarves. In fact, they had quietly made their way into the trash cans. The area landfill was never going to be the same.

Mandy was going about her usual morning routine. She was enjoying the peace and quiet without the usual nonstop chatter across the cube farm. As she plowed through her e-mails she came across a meeting request from Lulu.

“Lulu? What could that be all about?”

TO: Mandy

FROM: Lulu

Today at 3:15 p.m. Lulu's Office

Mandy, I would like to discuss an opportunity with you. Please come to my office after the three o'clock break.

She raced down to Gary's office.

"Gary, what in the heck does Lulu want to see me about?" "Lulu wants to see you?" he asked quizzically.

"Yes! Today, after the three o'clock break."

"Oh, that can't be good," he was shaking his head. "Rarely does anyone get to go in there. I've heard it's quite the place."

"What do you mean by that?" Fear was rapidly setting in.

"No one gets to see it unless they're being fired. I don't know of anyone who has gone in there and then stuck around to tell about it."

"Great!" She threw her hands in the air. "I just finished paying back my parents."

"Relax, Mandy. Lulu has loved you ever since you came to her rescue in the danish incident."

"She loves you too, Gary. Why aren't you being summoned?"

"You get to have a little girl talk with her. No boys allowed."

Mandy stuck her tongue out at him and left.

3:15 couldn't come fast enough. The quiet had become really deafening. Mandy could hear herself think, and her thoughts were not pretty. Her parents were suddenly so proud. She had finally convinced her mother that she was employed when she handed her a check for the entire amount she owed them. Their wayward daughter finally had a good job and was supporting herself. There would be no saving face if indeed Lulu intended to fire her.

The three o'clock snack was virtually untouched. Bozo's death was the only thing Mandy ever witnessed that put a damper on the afternoon break. As Mandy headed to Lulu's office, she noticed that the cardboard Bozo had returned. It had stood proudly next to the coffin at yesterday's funeral. A sign read:

Please sign Bozo.

This will be given to his parents as a remembrance.

Several signatures had been strategically placed over his heart, on his nose, and in his flaming red hair. Mandy added her own and said a prayer.

She knocked on Lulu's door.

"Mandy!" She seemed surprised to see her. "Come in, dear. Have a seat."

Mandy looked around. What was unusual about this office was that it was so ordinary. The walls were a pale buttercream color. A few sales awards were tastefully placed on the walls and credenza.

The desk was neat and clean. All the furniture was sparkling, as if it had just been dusted. A huge bouquet of multi-colored balloons was tied to the back of a chair in the corner. They looked out of place.

Lulu waddled over to close the door.

“Mandy, I’ve invited you here to ask a huge favor of you.”

The knot in Mandy’s stomach twisted itself even tighter.

“I know you tried to tell me about the indiscretion in your expense report. Frankly, I ignored you, and that was wrong of me. I have known about Bozo, may his soul rest in peace,” she said as she crossed herself and looked skyward, “but I did not act on it.”

What is she getting at? Mandy was confused that she was the one hearing this confession.

“I had to fire Larry Adams when he refused to take this position. He liked Bozo and his big fat checks more than he liked me. Now, I must swear you to absolute secrecy. Do I have that—cross your heart and hope to die?”

“Yes, Lulu, absolutely. You have my word.” Just then the door burst open.

“My lovely Lulubelle, I’m here! It’s time to cool you off a little bit!”

It was Ronnie the mailman.

“I didn’t know you were busy.” He sheepishly snuck back out of the room.

Lulu was an unbelievable shade of red. Mandy was afraid she might explode at any minute. The pause was as pregnant as it could get. Mandy sat perfectly still, waiting for Lulu to speak. She began to put two and two together. Refrigerator, leather sofa, a small television in the corner. Ronnie’s secret hiding place. No wonder no one was allowed in Lulu’s office. She must have forgotten to tell Ronnie that she had an appointment. The picture in Mandy’s mind of Lulu, who doesn’t need a hoop to fill out her clown costume, and the lazy and overworked mailman in a secret hiding place was not something she wanted to imagine. She started to get the creepy crawlies, thinking maybe they had done it in the chair she was sitting in.

“I apologize for that. I’m ashamed. I hope that I can trust your word in this situation as well.”

“Yes, Lulu, you can. I promise.”

“Now where were we? Oh yes! Tomorrow it will be announced that Three Ring Circus Supplies will be acquiring Big Top Supplies.”

Mandy gasped.

“We need to get a handle on our accounting processes before Three Ring finds out. We can’t afford to jeopardize this acquisition. I’m promoting you to Director of Accounting Services.”

“But Lulu, I’m not an accountant!”

“I know, Mandy, but you have a conscience and sense of ethics, unlike the rest of us. What I need right now—and fast—is someone to stop the bleeding. I need you to manage the process and create some checks and balances. You’ve got the right stuff. I have complete confidence in you.”

"I appreciate the compliment, but I'm not sure I can do this." "Of course you can, dear. Gary is going to take over your current position, which, by the way, you have been doing a fine job at. The sales people love what you have done with the training material. It's brilliant what has been posted on the portal so far. That you have gotten so much information out to our stores so quickly makes you a hero in my book. You start tomorrow. I'm giving you a twenty-five thousand dollar raise."

"But Lulu—"

"No arguing with me, dear. The company needs you to do this. Start with fixing the expense reports. You won't make any friends doing that, but once it's fixed, all the rest will be a cinch."

Mandy could barely get herself out of the chair. Her legs were like rubber.

"Thank you, dear."

Mandy gave a halfhearted smile and left.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

The next morning Mandy was still trying to make sense of her conversation with Lulu. She hadn't slept at all from worrying about it. How was she supposed to single-handedly straighten out the accounting department? Bozo had worked here for fifteen years screwing up the expense reports. How could she, without any accounting experience, fix that before anyone from Three Ring figured it out?

She was avoiding Gary. She had left the building right after her meeting for that very reason. She knew he would be hanging around her office trying to get the latest gossip from her. Since she never came back, he probably thought she'd been fired. "The urban legend says I was supposed to be fired, so why not keep the myth alive a little while longer," she giggled to herself.

She was now holed up in her office with the door closed. She was trying to tie up a few loose ends so that Gary wouldn't be totally out of the loop when he found out that he was given responsibility for her entire team. Her phone rang a few times and she didn't answer it. Once was Gary. Another was Violet. She could tell they were frantic by how many times their numbers showed up on the caller ID.

Mandy hadn't seen Violet in a couple days. They hadn't even spoken about her meeting with Lulu. Mandy thought it best to leave her in the dark until the merger announcement came out. Just then her e-mail alert dinged. "Here we go!"

To: All Big Top Employees

From: Executive Offices

As we make our way through the maize that is the circus, we are faced with many challenges every day. Are drive and passions for the circus our stirred inside us. The prize in the Cracker Jack box for all of us is the ten carrot diamond ring. Or for some of you, the brass ring on the marry go around.

However in this changing business economy we can't always fined the prize alone. Without help and a strong team we will waist our energy. As of June 1st Three Ring Circus Equipment will acquire Big Top Supplies. The employees of Three Ring are prose in there field. We welcome there advice and expertise during this time of transition. The roll that each and every one of you will play is crucial to the success of the merged company. As we make our way through the merger maize let's keep our I on the prize, that gorgeous 10 carrot ring. We will emerge stronger and will awl be rewarded handsomely. The rode may be long but the rewards are meny. The following organizational changes are being made to assist with the merger. Mandy Maloney has been promoted to Director of Accounting Services. She has responsibility for developing and executing our quality control.

Gary Blissler will now assume Mandy's responsibilities for sales training and documentation in addition to are ecommerce sites. He has been promoted to Director of Everything Sales Related Support. Violet Smith has been promoted to Director of Public Relations and Communication Liaison. They all report to Butane Bob until there jobs are eliminated by Three Ring. Let's not loose site of the contributions they have all made to Big Top Supplies. We which them well in there new positions. To remind us dayly of are future success, click the attached link for the new Three Ring wallpaper and screen saver for your pea sea. Enjoy and stay tuned for more information on our celebration party event coming soon.

“Who wrote that?” Mandy was appalled. Spell-check wouldn’t pick up most of these errors, but hadn’t someone at least proofread the thing before hitting that send button? Violet would never have turned out something like this. Suddenly she felt sick to her stomach. It was time to panic. “Violet and Gary haven’t been told. This is how they heard about their own promotions. This is bad, very bad. I’m really in no mood for what I know must be waiting outside my door.” The phone began to ring over and over and over again. Her voice mail light was blinking incessantly. “Putting this off will only make it worse. I need a drink. Or some drugs. Or something.” Her heart was sinking and her faith that anything positive would come to pass was nonexistent.

She very carefully opened the door and peeked out. She should have known—Cassie, the team spokesperson, was first in line. There were about ten others behind her. She heard from the back of the crowd, “Oh, thank God, she wasn’t fired!” It was Gary breathing a sigh of relief. Upon hearing that, the crowd sharply turned to see who had said it. They stood dumbstruck when they realized it was Gary. Violet was pushing her way through the crowd. A look of outright fear was on her face.

“Mandy! What is going on? What do you know that the rest of us don’t?” She was screaming at the top of her lungs.

Cassie piped in. “Mandy, why are we being taken over by a vegetable company? All that talk about corn and carrots and peas. It just didn’t make any sense.”

“Violet, Cassie, Gary—please calm down.” Mandy looked around at the group. “I know you all want to talk with me. And I want to talk with you. I will share with you what I know, but believe me, it’s not much. Let me see if I can find a conference room so we can all sit down and talk comfortably.” As she said that, she saw red coming toward her out of the corner of her eye.

“Mandy! Violet! Gary! I need to see you right away.” It was Butane Bob. “Right now, in the firehouse. Hurry! This place is out of control!”

“No shit, Sherlock!” said a voice from the dispersing crowd. Mandy had always heard that his office was called the firehouse, but she thought it was just another way to make fun of him. She had never heard Butane Bob call it a firehouse before. As the crowd thinned, Mandy mouthed to Gary and Violet, “Weren’t you told?” She got a silent but very angry “No!” in return.

They took their appointed chairs in the firehouse. All that red was giving Mandy an instant headache—as if she weren’t seeing enough of it already, without coming in here.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to speak with all of you before that announcement came out. I was disabling the fire siren doorbell.

This place is in such an uproar already, it doesn’t need a fire alarm to get the masses riled up any more than they already are. First, I want to apologize to all of you. Reading that announcement was scary enough in its own right.” He paused for a moment. “Who wrote that, anyway?” He was shaking his head in wonder.

“Butane Bob, that was a horrible communication.” Mandy had to speak up. “How am I supposed to set an example for my team, whose job depends on their ability to write in a clear and understandable way, when trash like that comes from the ‘executive office?’” She made little quote signs with her fingers.

“Pretty pathetic, isn’t it? I can’t get a hold of Lulu to find out what’s going on. Anyway, for all of you, you have new jobs starting immediately. Your pay raise is twenty-five big ones. Mandy, take some time to get Gary up to speed. Violet, you can move to Mandy’s office, since she will be moving over closer to accounting.”

“Do I get to pick another color for my walls?” Mandy joked, trying to lighten up the mood in the room.

“Already been done for you by the random paint selector application. Green, the color of money, I believe is what was chosen for you. It’s amazing what we pay Paul Brown good money to do for us, and yet we can’t even understand a word he says.”

Mandy rolled her eyes again.

Gary and Violet both sat stiffly with clenched jaws, gritting their teeth

“Again, I’m sorry for the way this happened. I really do appreciate your contributions to the company. This place would have tanked long ago without all of you. Gary, Violet, I know you will roll with the punches as always. We need more like you around here.”

Gary and Violet sat in silence. They were both angry and really wanted to have at it with Mandy for not telling them about the merger. Butane Bob’s compliments rang hollow. They both thought they had a pact with Mandy to share all information, no matter how top-secret it was. They felt betrayed.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence. But what does this mean, this merger?” asked Gary.

“Don’t know. It’s even news to me. I was called in for a seven a.m emergency meeting. Lulu wasn’t even there. Louis Everly made the announcement. Strange stuff, that’s for sure.”

“Who’s he?” they asked all at once.

“He’s a board member. Biglar left him in charge. They were college roommates and best friends.”

“What do you mean, left him in charge? Who is it that is giving the earnings reports?”

“Well, I’m told it’s Biglar, but I’ve known Biglar for many years and it sure doesn’t sound like him.”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t sound like him?” Violet’s voice cracked.

“No one has seen Biglar in several years. He was having a mid- life crisis of sorts and went off to find himself. This is his family’s company. He lived and breathed the circus since he was a baby. He needed a break. He left Louis in charge. They are very old and dear friends. I have to assume that Biglar is in contact with the board.”

“Now I’m really getting nervous.” Gary fidgeted in his seat and tried to casually wipe his sweaty palms on his pants.

“No need to be nervous. Please keep calm. We will get through this, one way or the other. Please trust me on that.”

The group left the office with Mandy walking behind Gary and Violet, who were still as mad as hornets. Gary suddenly stopped dead in his tracks.

“What does that mean—no one has seen Biglar Topler in years?”

He stared straight into Mandy’s eyes as if she was hiding that information from him also.

“Honestly, I don’t know. Swear to God, Gary, I don’t know. But it explains why we need straightjackets to work here. It’s very bizarre, if you ask me.”

“You really don’t know anything about that? Are you sure?” said Violet, who was also staring her down.

“OK. I’ll come clean. I knew about the merger. Lulu told me when I went to her office yesterday. She swore me to secrecy. I chose to let you think I had been fired, as the story goes. But I swear on a stack of bibles, that’s the only thing she told me. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“I didn’t know you went to Lulu’s office. Why should we believe you now?” Violet was still the skeptic.

“Well, what if I told you that Lulu’s office is Ronnie’s secret hiding place and I think the two of them are doing it.”

Both mouths fell wide open and their staring eyes got even bigger. They started to crack the small semblance of a smile.

“Ooooo, gross.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“And what if I told you that Paul Brown has a degree from a matchbook correspondence course? No Ivy League education—he’s just a snot. Satisfied now?”

Just then her phone rang. “I am not answering it. I am not. Please don’t let me answer it. Please stop me. Please.” She opened the cell phone. “Hi, Mom.”

The two doubters broke into uncontrollable laughter. They finally realized that Mandy was a true-blue friend, through and through.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

“Good morning, Violet. My name is Lisa Peeples. I am the environmental director at Three Ring.”

Violet was not in the mood for an interruption at the moment, especially by someone from Three Ring. Their people were swamping all of them with meetings, conference calls, and repetitive tasks. She was sick of it.

“What can I do for you? As if I didn’t have enough to do already.” Her voice had a sharp edge to it.

“You have been nominated to work on the recycling committee. Three Ring has a very extensive environmentally friendly program for recycling all kinds of things we use every day in the workplace. We use only recycled paper, toners, napkins, and coffee cups and sleeves, all the way down to the pop bottles we drink from. We are very green.”

“What’s a pop bottle?”

“You know. Soda pop. It’s what we call it in the Midwest instead of soda.”

“Well, that’s a new one for me. Pop, huh?”

“Now that Big Top is part of Three Ring, we need to get you on board with our green program as soon as possible. It’s so exciting for me to involve more people in saving our world.”

This woman was entirely too chipper for Violet’s current frame of mind

“Who nominated me? I need to go kill whoever it was.”

“It’s not so bad. Just think of the contribution you will be making to save the environment so it will be there for your children and grandchildren to enjoy.”

“Well, if I keep getting more work piled on top of me, I’ll never have a chance to find a man to have those children with.”

“Paul Brown is also on the committee, and I’m scheduling a meeting for tomorrow at three.”

“Paul Brown? You have got to be kidding.” Violet was deflated at hearing his name. “Do you have your dictionary?”

“Oh, I don’t need that silly dictionary. He speaks pig latin.”

“Pig latin? Really? Why does he do that?”

“Because he can. All of you idiots fell for it all these years. The people are really dumb here at Big Top. No wonder you couldn’t stay in business.”

Violet was almost at her limit in the conversation. “So how did you figure out it was pig latin?”

“At first I thought it was so incredibly sexy, like being in bed with some romantic foreigner. The sex was really hot! But then I began to wonder what he was saying. I kept a notepad by the bed and wrote down words here and there during the off moments.”

“You slept with him?” She had stopped listening after Lisa said the words “sex” and “hot.”

“Didn’t you? I’ve heard that you like to get around.”

“My morals may not be the highest, but I do have some rules when it comes to sex. One of which is never sleep with someone at work. Too messy. Plus I always thought that he and Gail had something going. You never see one without the other and they’re both in on the pig latin thing. But not everyone follows the same high standards, do they Lisa?”

“I don’t consider this work, so I’m not mixing business with pleasure. And for your own information, Gail is gay. Maybe you should try something at work for a change. It could prove to be exciting. And since you’ll all be gone from here soon enough, there’ll be no mess, will there? I’ll see you tomorrow at three, Violet. Nice meeting you.” She turned on her heels and marched out.

Once Lisa Peebles was out of earshot, Violet said, “What a whore. Even I wouldn’t stoop so low as to sleep with better-than-thou Paul Brown.” She ran straight over to Mandy’s office to tell her the dirt.

“Three Ring has some stupid environmental program we have to adopt. We have to recycle the coffee cup sleeves. Who would have nominated me to do that? And I have to work with that creep Paul Brown. And this woman slept with him just so she could figure out what he was saying! And guess what? Gail is gay! Can you believe it?”

Mandy couldn’t control her laughter. She had never seen Violet as wired up as this. “What is the world coming to?”

During the meeting the next day, Violet was amazed at Paul Brown’s ability to speak plain English. She could understand every word for a change. No translation dictionary was necessary, even though she had brought hers along, just in case.

“I have to return to Three Ring, so I trust that I’ve prepared you both well enough to conduct this meeting without screwing it up. I know I can trust Paul,” as she batted her eyelashes. “I’m not so sure about you though, Violet.”

“We won’t let you down, Lisa. Violet and I will come through with flying colors.”

The following day, the entire corporate office gathered in the auditorium for the “green meeting,” as it was called. They all thought they were getting a pay raise. The color green’s meaning of environmentalism was the furthest thing from their minds.

“Effectiveway omorrowtay, ecyclingray insbay illway ebay acedplay atway ariousvay ationsstay onway everyway oorflay.”

“Oh, good grief. It’s bad enough all you men think with the tiny brain in your pants, but do you have to talk with it too?” Violet grabbed his arm and pulled Paul off the stage. “Here, pass out these handouts to everyone. Keep yourself busy.”

“Effective tomorrow, recycling bins will be placed at various stations on every floor. There will be eight separate bins. This is in your handout, but please pay attention.” She scoured the room with her eyes to make sure there were no snoozers.

“White is for paper. All paper MUST be recycled. No exceptions. Green is for glass, yellow is for plastic, blue is for toner cartridges, red is for coffee cups, brown is for coffee cup sleeves, purple is for styrofoam, and black is for napkins.”

“Effective immediately, you may only use recycled paper and recycled toner cartridges made by El Cheapo Depot. All other brands are restricted from being purchased. All paper products from the cafeteria must be used a minimum of four times and then put in the appropriate recycling bin. If recycled items are found in your regular trash basket, you will be given three warnings before you are out. Out means you will be terminated. No exceptions. Come to think of it, if we are required to recycle everything, then there won’t be anything in your trash basket, will there? Get it?”

All in the room nodded in agreement.

Cassie’s hand was waving wildly in the next to last row. “How can we tell if the napkin has been used four times or not?”

Thinking quickly on her feet, “Four smudges of lipstick. So ladies, reapply often.”

Another voice in the crowd shouted out, “What if we had chicken wings for lunch? You know they serve them every Friday in the cafeteria, don’t you?”

“Same rules apply. Four wings per napkin. So if you have twelve wings, you are allotted three napkins. Got it?”

“Got it!”

“OK, if there are no more questions, be sure to pick up your Three Ring reusable coffee mug on your way out. Use it often to help keep the earth green. Thanks everybody!”

After the room had emptied, she said, “That went over well, don’t you think?” Violet was looking for some positive reinforcement.

“Yeah, like a lead balloon. Use a napkin four times. That’s un- sanitary.” Gary was grossed out by the whole affair.

“If the mystery person had nominated you, Gary, then you’d tell Miss Greenie how you feel about that, wouldn’t you?” “Don’t think so. I’m lying low these days.”

The recycling started with a vengeance. Every night at about five o’clock, a line would form in front of the colorful bins. Each employee carefully sorted out their trash. The threat of “three strikes and you’re out” felt very real in the new Three Ring regime.

One night Mandy was working late trying to get through the mountain of paperwork on her desk. Ever since Three Ring took over, the paperwork was four times what it used to be. Staying until nine every night was getting old. She was taking her trash to sort at the recycle bins before she finally went home. The janitor was there emptying the bins as she approached. He was dumping each bin one by one into the same garbage cart.

“We spend all this time sorting this stuff for you and you have to re-sort it again when you get downstairs. That seems like a waste of time.”

The man kept dumping one bin after the other, apparently ignoring Mandy.

“Have a good evening,” she said as she started to walk away.

He kept on smiling and emptying the trash. She turned back and asked, “Do you speak English?”

He kept on smiling and nodding as he continued to do his job.

A few weeks later, during her routine review of expense invoices, something looked very unusual to Mandy. “We are suddenly spending three times as much on office supplies as we did a month ago. We are ordering this stuff three and four times a day. No wonder we have so many more invoices to process. What’s going on?”

She headed over to see Gary and Violet to ask if they could shed any light on the situation. As she headed down the aisle, it seemed that the recycling bins had multiplied overnight. They were all full to overflowing. Excess toner cartridges and coffee cups littered the floor. In her haste, her heel caught on something in the trash heap.

She flipped over, doing a complete somersault, landing spread eagle in the aisle. Several sets of eyes began to peer out from the adjacent cubicles.

“Well, if it isn’t Mandy.” It was Violet staring down at her. “I think that’s my most comfortable pose. I’m surprised to see you trying it out for a change.”

“Very funny. Help me up.”

“Wait a minute, Mandy.” It was Gary holding out a cell phone. “It’s your mother calling.”

“Smart-ass. Help me up.”

“To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“I need to talk with you.” They made their way down the hall to Violet’s office. “I’ve been going over our invoices, and our expenses are triple what they were last month. Office supplies are out of sight. Paper products for the cafeteria are astronomical. We’re paying El Cheapo Depot double what we paid our other vendor. And I have more than twenty invoices to be paid for those reusable coffee mugs, all approved by Lisa Peebles. What do we need so many of those for if they’re reusable?”

“One use of the reusable coffee mug with hot coffee in it and boom!—the bottom falls out. Did you take a good look at the rug while you were down there? Stains all over the place. Half of my team has been in here asking me to pay their dry cleaning bill now that it’s not free anymore. Coffee all down the front of them. All over their desks. I can’t begin to tell you how many training manuals we’ve had to reprint.”

“I heard my name, and then I eavesdropped for a little while.” Lisa Peebles had made herself comfortable in the extra chair in Violet’s office.

“Lisa, looking at these invoices, our costs have quadrupled since we started purchasing supplies from El Cheapo Depot.” Mandy exaggerated in an effort to make her point to the dense Lisa Peebles. “For example—the toner cartridges. The cost is half of what we were paying before, but we’re buying four times more than we used to.”

“You should know that you can only print about two pages before having to replace the toner cartridge. Don’t you see them piled up in the bin out there?” Gary was trying to stare her down while he made his point. Ever since he got the truth out of Mandy, he felt he was the master of his stare-down technique. “And the paper is so thin, it jams up the printer all the time, so I use a half a ream and five toner cartridges just to print a ten-page document. It’s ridiculous!”

Lisa was digging her heels in; that was becoming obvious. “There is something I need you to understand here. It may take you some time, since you’re all a little thick, but this initiative is not about saving money. It’s about doing our part to save the environment. Your invoices are right in line with the costs at Three Ring. So you should be commended for doing your part to save the earth.”

“All the coffee mugs broke. How is that being kind to the environment?” Violet had been dying to get her two cents in.

“I think it’s the curse of the Big Top company. We have been using those mugs at Three Ring for years without a problem. It must be the coffee you use here. It’s pretty gross, if I do say so. Or it could be that you are all a bunch of klutzes. That would be my observation.”

“But Lisa, a couple weeks ago I saw the garbage man dumping all the bins into a single trash cart. Are you sure all this trash is being properly recycled?”

“Of course it is, Mandy. Don’t insult me. The housekeeping staff has been given very specific instructions on how to handle the recyclable items. I went over it with them myself. And they all received handouts as reference for later.”

“But Lisa, they can’t speak—”

“They have been given adequate instruction. You should all feel proud about being green. I don’t understand why you don’t want to be green. We owe it to the community.”

She stormed out of the office mumbling, “When are we going to get to fire all these crybabies? They just don’t get it.”

“I feel a garbage assignment coming on,” quipped Gary. “I promise I’ll keep my eye out for the trash pickup.”

“Me too. Anything to prove to that bitch who’s right. I really hate her—can you tell? I’m with you on this one for sure.” Fire was crackling in those violet eyes.

About two weeks later Gary came to Mandy’s door. He stood there not saying a thing. He was holding an aluminum soda can in one hand and a napkin with the required four lipstick marks in the other.

“What do you have there, my friend Gary?” “Evidence, my friend, evidence.”

“And what kind of evidence is it?” She was trying to play along with him.

“Evidence that will put Lisa Peeples out of business.”

“You have piqued my interest. Please tell me more.”

"I was taking my usual afternoon walk in the parking lot. Early on in my career here, I swore off the sweets and started taking walks during the break. My wife is a very good cook and I was coming home every night without an appetite because of the afternoon treats. In order to keep the peace, I decided to swear them off for good. Old habits die hard with me. When I hear that music playing every day at three on the dot, I go for a walk, no matter how much work I have in front of me. Anyway, today I see all kinds of trash blowing around the parking lot. And since I'm supposed to be helping out my community, I start to pick it up. Plus I figure the exercise won't hurt me. I pick up several things and head to the dumpster.

The dumpster is full and the lid is half open. I lift it up and look inside, and—lo and behold—every kind of garbage imaginable is in there. Food, paper, bottles, cans, and toners are all sitting quite cozy in the dumpster together."

"I knew I could count on you to solve the mystery, Detective Gary."

"Ah, but the story gets better. While I'm inspecting the trash, the garbage truck drives up and empties the dumpster into the back with everything else it has picked up today from who knows where all around town."

"So much for being green. Do you want the honors of talking to the honorable Ms. Peeples? Or should we let Violet do it? She'd get great enjoyment from it."

"I vote for Violet." "Me too."

They handed the evidence over to an ecstatic Violet. By the twinkle in those violet eyes, both Mandy and Gary knew there would be sweet revenge in her future.

"This is fabulous! I can't believe we caught her red-handed. I'm going to enjoy delivering this to that hussy."

Violet had the perfect plan all worked out in her head. But Lisa Peeples was never in her office when Violet paid a visit. Ten times a day she would stop by with her trash can full of garbage. She couldn't wait to dump the whole thing all over Lisa Peeples's head. The office was always empty.

Finally Violet took matters into her own hands and called Lisa's cell phone.

"Good afternoon. Jolly Jugglers, this is Lisa Peeples. How can I help you?"

Violet knew that Jolly Jugglers was small but nonetheless a competitor of Three Ring. "She's up to something if she's answering the phone for Jolly Jugglers," she thought.

"Hello, Ms. Peeples. This is Violet Smith from Three Ring." Dead silence

"Violet, did I say Jolly Jugglers? Freudian slip. I worked for them before I came to Three Ring. What can I do for you?"

"I have a dumpster full of trash that should have been recycled. Where would you like me to leave it? In your office here at Three Ring? Or should I have it delivered to you there at Jolly Jugglers?"

Dead silence once again.

"Violet, please don't blow my cover. Please." She was begging.

This was good. She was right where Violet wanted her.

“I would never do that to you, Lisa. What do you think I am, a backstabber or something?”

“You have to try to understand my position.”

“I do? Last time I checked, I was taking orders from a director at Three Ring. I doubt I have that same loyalty to Jolly Jugglers. They don’t happen to sign my paycheck.”

“Please try to understand. I screwed up and didn’t check the phone number before I picked up the call. Everybody wants to be green, but nobody wants to pay anyone to manage the program for them. I have to fund my retirement account just like everyone else.

I have to work for two different companies just to make ends meet. Three Ring pays me peanuts! Jolly Juggler isn’t any better. At least Jolly Juggler lets me work from home so no one knows I’m double dipping, except you.”

“Well, how much do you think Three Ring will pay you when they find out that nothing is being recycled? It’s all going into the community dumpster.”

“It is not.”

“I have the proof. It’s right here in my hand, waiting to be dumped all over your desk.”

“No way.”

“Yes way. Shall I save it for you to see when you return? Or should I write your resignation letter for you?”

More silence.

“Let me call you back in an hour or two, once you’ve had some time to think it over.”

Click.

“What a stupid, arrogant bitch that woman is! Fund her retirement account, my ass! She needs to go back to where they drink pop—wherever that is! This is Florida. We drink soda, and we eat black beans with rice. We love our little melting pot! Handing a janitor written instructions to follow—where does she think she is? I’ll teach that Lisa Peebles what recycling means!”

Several times a day Violet began to visit Lisa Peebles’s office to deposit a load of trash on the desk. It was beginning to pile up quite nicely, covering the computer and phone. And it was finally beginning to make its way to the chair and the floor, cascading gracefully from the desk. She took great pleasure in this task. She was finally getting a smidgen of satisfaction out of this miserable thing called a merger.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

YOU SUCK!

“Come on, Mandy, or we’ll be late for the meeting.” Gary was rushing past her office.

“What meeting is this? I can’t keep track anymore with all this takeover shit going on.”

“This is the one about the new performance appraisal system. Someone from Three Ring is showing us how to use their system.”

“What was wrong with ‘Here’s your ten-percent raise, thanks for nothing, see you next year?’”

“I guess Three Ring likes to do things by the book. Won’t that be a switch?”

As they passed by the holiday cube, Mandy noticed it had turned red, white, and blue since the last time she had checked.

“What is it? Flag Day or the Fourth of July? I don’t even know what day it is anymore.”

“Over the years I’ve noticed that not much decorating goes on between Memorial Day and Labor Day. One theme covers all. She must go on summer vacation.”

Mandy and Gary were handed a packet as they entered the room by Tiffany, who was now the friendly HR clown. Tiffany much preferred her cheerleading outfit and pompoms. But there was a new sheriff in town that thought Tiffany in a clown costume was more appropriate.

“Hi, Tiff!” They all exchanged a discreet, close-to-the hip wave so as not to be noticed. As they waited for the meeting to start, Mandy flipped through the information in the packet. “Gary!” She elbowed him to interrupt his conversation with Violet. “Check this out. Page six.” Page six displayed the rating categories along with an explanation of how each were to be used.

You suck.

You suck less than the next guy doing the same job. You suck more than the next guy doing the same job. You are fired.

You are not fired today, but beware tomorrow.

“Well, at least it’s some kind of rating system. Isn’t that what you wanted?” He began to belly laugh uncontrollably.

Violet looked over at Gary as he was holding his stomach. Mandy repeated, “Page six.” Violet scrambled to find the page.

“Attention, attention.” It was a voice none of them recognized. “Let’s get started. ATTENTION!”

There was large woman standing in the front of the room who they didn't know. She was yelling in an angry manner to get the noise to stop. She looked thin compared to Lulu. Where is Lulu, anyway? No one had seen her since the merger announcement. The crowd began to quiet. The voice remained loud and angry as she said, "I am Dimple Vanderdoober, The director of performance."

Unenthusiastic applause broke out. "Dimple? Gary, did I hear that right?"

"You did. Hang on, ladies. I think we're going for a ride."

"I come from Three Ring. I'm going to introduce the first of many procedures that are changing as part of our merger and integration. With that, let's get started. We have no time to waste around here."

"Do you think that's her real name?" Violet whispered. "Well, Bozo was his real name, so anything's possible."

"The first change around here is there will be no earplugs. You will no longer be needing them. Please pass them to the HR clown as she makes her way around the room." When Tiffany got to Gary, she pretended to take his earplugs as he carefully slid them back into his pocket.

"Second change. Today is the last day of the three o'clock break. Enjoy it. Tomorrow it will cease to exist."

The chatter started up again across the room.

"I have one rule in my meetings," shouted Dimple. "No side- bar conversations. Did you hear me?" She yelled over the din, "NO SIDEBAR CONVERSATIONS! If you have something to say, say it so the entire group can hear." She glared in the direction of Mandy and her friends.

"We're going to go through this new rating system today. I will go into depth on what each rating category means and how to communicate that to your staff. This is the rating system that we will use for every performance appraisal, beginning today. Then we will have a Q and A. You have all been given informational packets. I strongly suggest that you read through them thoroughly when you return to your offices."

"Let's get started. *You suck*. This rating is for your average everyday performers. They come to work, they do their job, they don't complain. That is all you are ever going to get out of these people. Since we will now be working with a bell curve, it is estimated that sixty percent of our employees will fall into this rating."

You suck less than the next guy doing the same job. This is for your top performers. These are the people you can count on to go the extra mile for you. In some systems this would equate to an *exceeds standards* Any questions so far?"

The room was totally silent.

"Good, maybe you're smarter than I think. Let's move on then. *You suck more than the next guy doing the same job*. This is for your marginal employees. This will be about fifteen percent of the employee population."

“The next category is *You're fired*. These people are doing nothing all day and need to go. You know who on your team will fall into this category. Lastly, *You are not fired today, but beware tomorrow*. This is equivalent to a written warning. They may have some potential and are not so horrible that they fall into the *You're fired* category.”

Everyone in the room was stunned. They couldn't speak or move. Some managers did understand that it wasn't normal to give every- one a ten-percent raise and be done with it. Most, however, were afraid of the ensuing revolt once they had to explain this to the rank and file

“The next piece is in your packet, and it's important, so we need to go over it. Turn to page nine.”

Mandy felt like a young schoolgirl. If she didn't march along with the crowd, soon the nun would rap her knuckles with a ruler.

This woman has never cracked a smile in her life. How would anyone have known whether she really even had a dimple in order to have named her that?

You suck is a four-percent raise.”

You suck less than the next guy doing the same job is a five-percent raise.”

You suck more than the next guy doing the same job is a three- percent raise.”

You're fired. No explanation is needed. No raise, they're gone.”

You are not fired today, but beware tomorrow is a two-percent raise.”

“Any questions?”

Mandy could not get a picture out of her head. Swords and knives thrashing all about. Chairs and desks overturned. Hard drives erased. Monitors smashed. Blood-stained walls. The chaos was devastating and all consuming.

“Gary, what are we going to do?” she whispered. “Get out the battle gear, that's for sure.”

“But they might like being put on a written warning while still getting a two-percent raise, don't you agree?”

“I think that's the least of our worries.”

Dimple rapped her knuckles on the table. “There will be no side- bars in this room. The two of you in the third row—please share with us your conversation. Now!”

Gary opened his mouth first. “We were just saying how nice it'll be to have a rating system. That way our employees have a real picture of where they stand.”

“Oh really? Why don't I believe you?”

Mandy chimed in. “That was it, Dimple. The employees have been asking for more structure like this.”

“I will see the two of you in my office as soon as we're finished here.”

Violet began to giggle.

“And you too, who thinks this is funny. I will see all three of you in my office as soon as we are finished here. Now, where were we?” Dimple started another diatribe on the wonders of this appraisal system. The room was dead silent except for the sound of her voice.

“Any questions?” Mandy heard Dimple say. No one moved.

“Good. Then I have done an excellent job today as usual. You are dismissed. The three musketeers follow me.”

In single file the group followed Dimple down the hall to her office, like chicks following the mother hen. She motioned for them to have a seat and slammed the door behind them.

“I was told I would find the likes of you here at Big Top. Behavior such as yours will never be tolerated at Three Ring. So I suggest that the three of you remember that, or you will be out on the street with no job at all sooner than you think.”

Violet, Gary, and Mandy were as still as church mice. “Now for your punishment. I want your reviews of every person on your staff on my desk by noon tomorrow.”

“But Dimple,” Violet interrupted, “I have forty-three people, and Gary just took over Mandy’s group of over fifty. And Mandy doesn’t even know the names of half the people in accounting yet. How can we give fair reviews to people we hardly know?”

“No ‘but Dimple’ from you, young lady. They will be on my desk by noon. I will see if Big Top has enough brains to follow my directions. You will just have to figure out what is fair amongst yourselves. That will determine how much more work I have to do to get this motley crew in shape.”

They hung their heads in shame as they left the office, if only to make Dimple feel like she had impressed them. After the episodes with Lisa Peeples, they had become well aware of who they were dealing with. As soon as they were out of Dimple’s field of sight, they raced down the stairs and outside so that their conversation wouldn’t be heard. They knew that if they huddled in an office, the employees on their teams would get suspicious. The battle that was about to erupt was first and foremost on their minds. They needed a game plan, and fast.

“Well, we’re certainly going to earn that big fat salary now, aren’t we, Mandy?” Gary was being sarcastic, but Mandy could see how angry he really was.

“Let’s not forget these instructions about the importance of a fair and accurate performance appraisal,” said Violet. “Oh, and look, it has suggestions for gently administrating the review to the employee.

‘Show compassion for their situation, listen to their concerns, and let them speak freely.’ I think I’m going to throw up.”

The three continued to pick at each other as they made their way across the enormous parking lot. They found a picnic table at the far end and plopped down. Mandy had a feeling it was going to be a long night.

“We have to list all our people and classify them. Then we can tweak it from there.”

“I vote we just tell them all they are not fired today and be done with it.” Gary was exasperated.

“Ah, but you are forgetting that bell curve.”

“You always have to be the spoiler, don’t you, Mandy?”

They began to list names and ratings. Crumpled paper began to pile at their feet as they crossed off, changed, and moved people in and out of categories. Their pencils began to wear down to stubs. Gary got out his pocket knife to sharpen them. It was eight o'clock at night and they were still sitting at the smoking table outside, writing, erasing, and calculating that perfect bell curve. Finally, they had it done

"That's a wrap. We can key this into the spreadsheet tomorrow morning and have it on Dimple's desk long before noon," said the always optimistic Mandy.

"What a bitch that woman is. But at least this is done," said the cynical Violet.

"We had better study the gentle administration, because once we start this there will be no turning back. Get a good night's sleep!" Mandy was still cheery even at this late hour. Violet and Gary slumped back into their seats with the thought of what tomorrow would bring.

There was no sleep for any of them that night. With circles under their eyes, at ten o'clock the next morning, Mandy, Gary, and Violet, spreadsheets in hand, marched into Dimple's office.

"Good morning, Dimple. We have all our performance appraisals for you." Mandy was leading the way.

"My, my, and you are even early. I really didn't think there was anyone at Big Top up to the challenge. Let me look at this."

Dimple took the paperwork and started to examine it closely. She pulled a pair of half-glasses out of her desk drawer so that she could see it more clearly.

"Hmmm, hmmm. Nice touch adding the bell graph." She put the papers down and looked at the three, who were anxiously awaiting her verdict. "I have to admit, you did a fine job. Now go inform your employees. Go. That's all I have to say to you. Inform them all today."

As they walked down the hall, Gary murmured, "Now let the fun begin."

Mandy decided to start with the easy ones and work her way down the list. First she called Andy into her office. He seemed to be one of the few people she had met on her new team that didn't subscribe to the Bozo method of accounting.

"Andy, we have instituted a new performance appraisal system.

This system will bring some structure to how employees are rated in our company, allowing you to know what your strengths and weaknesses are, and what you need to work on in order to improve."

"Andy, you have been rated *You suck less than the next guy doing the same job*, and you will receive a five-percent raise. Five percent is very good."

Mandy held her breath.

"What? I suck? And the raise has always been ten percent. What could be so great about only five?"

"Andy, please relax. You've been given the highest overall rating. I value your contribution to the team."

"But you said I suck."

"No, I said that your rating is *You suck less than the next guy doing the same job*."

“Mandy, that sentence still has the words ‘you suck’ in it. I give my all for this job—and you’re telling me I suck?”

“Andy. This is a new rating system. It will take some time to get used to it. Let’s talk about this again later when you’ve had the chance to let it sink in.”

“Nothing needs to sink in. This sucks!” He got up and stormed out of the office. As he opened the door, Cassie had already appeared, heading up a line behind her.

“What’s going on? We heard yelling in Gary’s office and they’re all crying over in Violet’s area. I ran over here to find out what was happening. Everyone else was too chicken.”

“Come on in, Cassie. One at a time. I’ll be quick, you won’t be waiting long.”

Mandy knew to get them in, get them out, and suffer the consequences after that. There was nothing in her repertoire of management skills that could save this.

“Cassie, we have a new appraisal rating system.” She scrolled down the list to find her. “Here you are, Cassie Schneider. You have been rated *You suck* That’s a four-percent raise. Thank you. Please send the next person in.”

“I *what*? I suck? What are you trying to tell me? Twelve years of hard work I’ve put in here, and you’re now telling me that I suck?”

“Yes, Cassie, that is your rating, and it’s a good one. Would you like me to read you the other ratings so you can see where you fall into the whole?”

“Please. I’m waiting with baited breath.”

She read through the list. As she heard each new category, Cassie’s jaw dropped further and further toward the floor. She got up without saying a word. The next in line came in.

This went on nonstop until five o’clock in the afternoon. As the word spread, fewer and fewer people chose to put up a fight. In— out. Mandy was afraid to leave her office. Lord only knows what was being plotted. Finally she stuck her head out and saw that there was still a line outside both Gary and Violet’s offices. She called out.

“Next!” A person she didn’t recognize came over.

“What’s your name?” “Olivia Schradley.”

Mandy ran her finger down the list to find her name.

“Olivia, you have been rated *You are not fired today, but beware tomorrow*. That’s a two-percent raise. Thank you. Send in the next person.”

“Name?”

“Richard Bobolo.”

“Richard, you have been rated *You’re fired*. Please pack your things and go. “

“Fired! You’re firing me?”

“Yes. Please pack your things and go. You will not be getting a raise. Please send in the next person in line.”

“Why am I fired while Fred over there gets to stay? He’s no better than me.”

“Well, if memory serves me right, if you didn’t sit around all day playing solitaire on the computer you might have been given a better rating. So solitaire was the deciding factor. Remember that at your next job. Please go pack your things.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that. I didn’t think anyone could see me.” As he left the office he yelled out, “Guess what, I’m fired! You won’t have me to kick around anymore.” Cheers and applause rang out from a far corner of the floor

“Uh oh,” Mandy thought, “they’re all together and out of sight. Something’s up.”

Finally someone told her that there were no more people in line. She breathed a huge sigh of relief. She found Gary and Violet collapsed in their chairs.

“I’m exhausted,” moaned Gary.

“That was the most horrible thing I have ever had to do in my life,” whispered Violet, her voice barely audible.

“Let’s shoo everyone out of here and then go have a drink. We earned it today.”

“Great idea. I’m in,” said Gary as he attempted to pry himself out of his chair

Mandy found her work areas empty. Violet and Gary found the same. They did not have a good feeling about tomorrow but were too exhausted—not to mention mentally drained—to worry about it.

They waited patiently for the elevator, and when it came, who was in it but none other than the infamous Dimple Vanderdoober.

“Well, if it isn’t my three musketeers!”

They gave a halfhearted “Hi, Dimple.” “How was your day today?”

Mandy forced a big smile and replied, “Just fine, Dimple. How was yours?”

“Glad to hear everything went well. I am beginning to think that maybe Big Top is not in as bad a shape as I originally thought. The three of you seemed to handle your first task with ease.” As the doors of the elevator opened in the lobby, she said, “Good Night!”

They couldn’t get to the bar fast enough. They barely spoke, other than to say, “Bring us another round.” Their brief spurts of conversation were limited to the events of the day.

“Mary Mooney started to cry so hard when I told her she was fired that she used up all my tissues. Everybody that came in afterwards had to wipe their nose with their hands. It was gross.” Violet got some hand sanitizer out of her purse and offered it to the others.

They gulped down the drinks in front of them.

“Somebody got so nervous while waiting in line, they started to fart. Talk about gross. I got a whiff every time the door opened.” Gary pinched his nose shut as he waved down the waitress. They each gulped down another drink.

Gary and Mandy knew that they had said “Another round” one too many times after they spotted Violet dancing on the bar. She had said she was going to the bathroom. They both started to wonder where she was, and then Gary caught a glimpse of her from the corner of his eye.

“Mandy, look.” He pointed to the far side of the room. “She’s cut off. This happens every time she gets a couple drinks in her. She starts looking for someone to take home with her. And she’s a real lightweight when it comes to drinking too.”

“You’ve seen her do this before?”

“Sure. You would never know it by the way she handles herself at work most of the time. One thing about Violet, she loves her drinks and her sex—in that order. I’ll go retrieve her. I can drive her home.”

Gary grabbed her ankle and she stopped dancing. “Come on, honey, let’s go home.”

“You are exactly what I’ve been waiting for.” Violet hopped down from the bar before she realized that it was Gary. “Oh, it’s you.” She was disappointed. “I was looking for a real stud. You’re married.”

“Just because I’m married, you think I’m not a stud? I’m insulted, Violet.”

“Well, don’t be. You’re not my type no matter how I look at it.” “You’ve had enough. I’m going to drive you home and put you to bed.”

“Oooooohhhhhh, are you? Now I really am getting excited.”

“Violet, I’m recording every word so I can play it back at work tomorrow. So be careful what you say.”

With that, she quietly followed the two of them out of the bar. She got into Gary’s car and not a peep was heard from her the entire way home.

The next morning a bleary-eyed Mandy drove into the parking lot of Big Top Supplies. It wasn’t its usual empty self. The place was teeming with people carrying placards and wearing sandwich boards. “Big Top Sucks!” read one.

“Big Top took the Candied Apple right out of my mouth . . . and my children’s too!” read another.

“Twelve long years and I’m fired.” That must be Richard Bobolo.

“Oh God, here we go.” As Mandy got out of the car, she could hear the chant, “Big Top Sucks. Big Top Sucks,” over and over again. She made her way through the picket lines and into the lobby, only to find it filled with managers gawking at the spectacle outside.

“What are you all staring at? Don’t you have a job to do?” Her head was pounding.

“Relax—we’re locked out of the building. We’re waiting for security.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re locked inside the building. All the badge readers have been disconnected.”

About thirty managers were trapped in the tiny lobby, with more entering each minute. It was getting hot and stuffy, and the constant chant of “Big Top Sucks” was making her head pound even more furiously.

Finally Ronnie appeared from the other side of the glass doors with a key. As he opened the door, he said, “You’re not going to like what you find in here. Enter at your own risk.”

The crowd stormed the door to escape the stifling lobby. Mandy hung back to avoid the pushing and shoving that was jostling her brain. As she walked down the hall to the elevator she felt that something seemed different. But what? She walked past the cubes and into her office. She couldn't get over the sensation that something had changed. She had expected to find carpets slashed and computers strewn about. That hadn't happened. As she entered her office and stood by her desk, it hit her. The walls were white. No more green the color of money. She stuck her head out the door, and saw others doing the same. Not a speck of any color other than white could be seen anywhere. She ran over to her old office. No more pink.

"Gary, are your lions gone?"

"Yes, they are. And I must say, I kind of miss them."

"No more violets for me," echoed the violet-eyed Violet.

"I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. What's it going to be?"

"Well have a seat, and you'll find out."

Gary got up from his chair and Mandy sat down.

Fzzzt, blzzt-fzzzzzttt.

"What is that?"

"Whoopee cushion—but I can't figure out where it is."

She got up and started to examine the chair. She turned it over, looking at every crack and crevice. Not a tear, not a seam, nothing to show how the whoopee cushion got inside.

"That's so weird. How'd they do that? Does everyone's chair have one?"

"I haven't tried mine yet." Violet ran back to her own office.

Fzzzt. Fzzzzzt.

They started to hear a chorus of fake farts moving down the hall from office to office.

"Sounds like they got them all."

"Whoopee cushions and white walls I can live with. I still think there will be more."

They peered out the window to see all the picket signs marching around the parking lot. It sounded as if they were still chanting "Big Top Sucks and so do we."

Mandy decided to head back to her office and get some work done. Straightening out Bozo's mess wasn't going to happen all by itself. She stopped in the bathroom on the way. All the stall doors were closed. She heard a toilet flushing and waited her turn for someone to come out. It was unusual for such a large crowd to be in the ladies' room all at the same time, especially since most of the employees were outside on the picket line. She waited for a few more minutes. No one was coming out. Finally it dawned on her. She bent over to look under the doors. Not a pair of feet in sight.

"Gary! Gary!" she yelled as she ran across the floor. "All the stall doors are locked and the ever-flushing toilet is at it again!"

He threw his hands over his head. "And I just got these pants back from the cleaners."

Violet followed them to the ladies' room when she heard all the commotion. Gary crawled under the stall door and tried to undo the latch. He couldn't. He was furiously rattling and shaking the door, trying to force it open.

"Must be super glue. I can't get it open." "Don't make me laugh—I really have to go." "Can't help it. I really think it's super glue."

He crawled into the next stall. Same thing. Finally he crawled out and lay on the floor laughing. Mandy joined in and screamed,

"Stop! I have to pee!"

Violet hung her head over the sink snorting, she was laughing so hard. Pretty soon it was a laugh-fest in the ladies' room as more people came in expecting to use the facilities.

The men followed, curious to see what was going on. All this with the roar of the ever-flushing toilet in the background.

Albert piped up. "If you think this is funny, wait till you go to the cafeteria. All the tables and chairs are hanging upside down from the ceiling. Each place is set with silverware and there's even a centerpiece in the middle."

A roar of laughter filled the bathroom.

Suddenly the door flew open. The laughter stopped immediately. Butane Bob. His face was as red as his clothing.

"What's going on in here? Someone has superglued the fire siren switch to on and all of you are on the bathroom floor laughing!"

Laughter rolled through the bathroom again. Violet couldn't stop snorting and several others joined in. Mandy couldn't hold it any longer and dove under a stall door. Tears were running down her cheeks

"Stop flushing the toilet!" shouted Butane Bob. "For God's sake, Mandy, we have all heard other people go to the bathroom before. This place has gone to hell in a handbasket, and you're worried about being modest."

The laughter became even louder than ever before. From the floor, Gary tried to say, "The ever-flushing toilet has been superglued on," but it was difficult to understand him, he was laughing so hard.

"What did he say?"

Violet answered slowly. "The ever-flushing toilet has been super-glued in the flushing position. We can't make it stop. It's not Mandy. It's the toilet in the last stall."

"It's done this before?"

"Many times. Except now it's permanent."

Butane Bob turned on his heels in disgust. "All of you into the firehouse right now!" He stopped and added, "Well, it really looks more like an igloo than a firehouse at the moment, so just follow the siren and you'll find it."

A cell phone began to ring.

"Mandy, tell your mother you're busy! I need you in the firehouse right now!" She was laughing too hard to even consider talking to her mother.

"I'm letting her go to voice mail," she shouted from behind the stall door.

"That's a step in the right direction." Butane Bob stormed out of the restroom. They waited for the door to close behind him before bursting into laughter again.

When they arrived at the firehouse, it looked more like an iceberg, and the whole situation was now the sinking of the Titanic. Butane Bob sat down behind his desk.

Fzzzt-bzzzt.

Giggles couldn't be held in any longer.

"How are we going to get these people out of the parking lot and back to work? Thank God the local news hasn't shown up yet."

"Think again, Butane Bob. The satellite truck is pulling up as we speak." Gary stood peering out the window. The crowd from the bathroom had already taken all the seats.

"Can we reinstate the three o'clock break? That usually draws a crowd," said Albert.

"What do you mean, reinstate?" Butane Bob cocked his head to one side as he spoke.

"Dimple Vanderdoober cancelled that and confiscated earplugs in her performance appraisal meeting the day before yesterday."

"Who is Dimple Vanderdoober?" Butane Bob now had his head cocked to the other side.

The chuckling stopped on a dime. Mandy wanted to hide under the chair. Both Gary and Violet had fear in their eyes. The tension was suddenly so thick it could have been cut with a knife.

"She's the new director of performance. She came from Three Ring," answered Mandy bravely.

"She's the one who started all this with her new performance appraisal system."

"What!—no more automatic ten-percent raises?" Butane Bob was really in the dark on this one.

"Nope, Butane Bob. Either you suck or you don't. One or the other. It's the Three Ring way."

"What do you mean I suck?"

"That's the new performance rating—you suck."

"Oh, good grief. What have we come to?" Smoke almost started coming out of Butane Bob's ears. "OK. Fire's out. Get back to work, all of you."

They all scurried back to their desks. Mandy tried to get some work done, but it wasn't easy. First, she was hung over, although the laugh attack had helped her headache go away. More disturbing was that Lulu hadn't been seen since the merger announcement, and now Butane Bob didn't know who Dimple was. There was a knock on the door

"Mandy?" It was Cassie.

"They're getting hungry out there. Will there be a three o'clock break today?"

“No, Cassie. I’m sorry. The break has been cancelled by Three Ring. We could all stand to eat a little healthier anyway, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, you’re right. But we’re hungry right now. It’s tough—all that marching around and yelling.”

Mandy thought for a minute. “If I go see what I can conjure up from the cafeteria, will you get everyone to go home? And come back tomorrow ready to work?”

“You’re the best. We all know this didn’t come from you, or Gary or Violet.”

“Thanks, Cass, I appreciate you trying to see both sides of this. Now get out of here before someone else sees you. And make every- one go home!”

Her e-mail alert rang, not a moment too soon. It hadn’t rung all day. No one was working, so why would it?

To: All Big Top Employees.

Tomorrow beginning at nine a.m. we will have a celebration unlike any other in the history of our company. It will be held in the parking lot. Please wear your company clown costume. Please come with a smile on your face. Be prepared for fun, food, prizes, and excitement! See you there!!

Sincerely,

The Board of Directors.

“Perfect! How do I get this to the picket line? They’re certainly not able to read any e-mail today.”

First she found a copy machine and made as many copies as there was paper in the machine. Then she rushed down to the cafeteria.

She stopped to stare at the chairs on the ceiling. All the paper meant for recycling was strewn on the floor like sawdust in a barn. She was kicking it around as she walked, and some of the really disgusting stuff was sticking to her ankles. The bins themselves were carefully stuck to the ceiling, one of each color surrounding each table. About half had been taken down, and the chef was busy trying to pry the silverware off one of the tables.

“Do you have anything to eat around here?”

“Only thing I can give you is yesterday’s three o’clock snack. That was made before we got the order not to. It’s chocolate chip cookies. Everything else is for tomorrow’s party. I’d skip the cookies if I were you. The spread for tomorrow is going to be something else!”

“The cookies are perfect. Can I take them?”

“Sure. They’re already getting a little stale.”

She grabbed as many boxes as she could carry along with the copies of the e-mail and snuck out the side door. The minute someone spotted her, she was swarmed. Once free of all the cookies, Mandy started passing out the invitation.

“Please come. Please help put this to an end.”

She didn't get much of a reaction. They were mainly interested in getting the sugar fix. So as soon as the copies were gone, she headed back inside. She figured once the word got around, they would start conspiring again. Good or bad, whatever they decided, she wouldn't know until the next morning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TO MERGE OR NOT TO MERGE

Mandy had never bothered to open the box containing her clown costume when it was delivered. Since it was such a big secret as to when she would have to wear it, she took it home and shoved it in the back of the closet with everything else she brought home from the office. The box was so big that she tripped over it several times before she figured out a way to wedge it into the corner. Last night she unwedged it from the closet, but she still didn't bother to open it. It would just have to be surprise in the morning.

In the morning, she slit open the huge cardboard box only to find a beautiful gift box inside. She lifted it out and carefully slid off the lid. Inside the clothing was wrapped in pink tissue paper with a gold circus tent sticker holding it together.

"I feel like I'm eight years old, opening the biggest gift under the Christmas tree." The box was so gorgeous, she almost didn't want to open it. It was too pretty.

The suspense was starting to get to her, so she slid her finger under the sticker to reveal her costume. The outfit was neatly folded. It was stuffed with more pink tissue paper to keep its form. She gingerly grabbed the shoulders and lifted it from the box. As she admired it in front of her, Mandy was overcome by how beautifully made it was. The fabric, the stitching, the trim, and the detail were all perfect.

It was a slim style. Thank goodness, no hoop! The fabric was as green as grass in silk shantung. At the neck, wrists, and ankles were crisp ruffles of yellow and red. Down the front were four large yellow pompoms covering the buttons. She slipped it on and then admired herself in the mirror. Not bad for a first-time clown.

Next she unwrapped the wig. It was blonde with pigtails tied in big red bows.

"Well, this ought to be interesting. I've never been a blonde before."

Next were her shoes. Mandy was so afraid of getting a pair of big oversized shoes to clomp around in. Instead they were a pair of ruby red patent leather pumps in a size 7 ½ A, just as she had written on the piece of paper at orientation. They were a perfect fit and looked stunning even with the eyelet anklets she had on. She slipped on her gloves and her petite red rubber nose and went off to work.

An enormous tent filled the parking lot. Clowns of all shapes, sizes, and colors were everywhere the eye could see. Tiffany was making her way through the crowd, shaking her pompoms and cheering at the top of her lungs.

“Swing to the left! “Swing to the right!

“Stand up! Sit down!

“Fight! Fight! Fight!

“Goooooooo Three Ring!!!”

As she milled about in the sea of clowns, all of the sudden kazoos blared in each of her ears. She nearly jumped out of her skin. Gary and Violet had snuck up behind her and were laughing hysterically at her frightened reaction.

“My, don’t you look stylish.” Gary was not surprised that Mandy had the most sophisticated clown costume of them all.

“How did you find me? I can’t figure out who anyone is—except for Tiffany.” She rolled her eyes.

“We have our ways of identifying you,” Gary said in a mysterious voice.

“Get a load of the shoes.” Mandy twisted her ankles about to show them off. “Aren’t they gorgeous?”

“Wow!” Violet piped in. “How did you get so lucky? I have to plod around like a cow in these clodhoppers.”

Violet was dressed like a big pot of flowers. She had to wear a hoop, much to Mandy’s delight. The bottom was terra-cotta in color with a wide brown belt acting as the rim. The top was made of lovely yellow chintz with tiny violets all about. There were several huge purple flowers down the front. On her head was another pot with a lone purple flower sprouting from it, on a stem that was long enough to dangle just above her forehead.

“Heads up, Mandy.” One of the huge flowers spritzed her with water.

“See, I’m a self-watering flower pot.”

Gary couldn’t stop laughing—Gary the lion tamer, royal blue leotard and all. He wore a gold cape, a whip over his arm, and a belt as big as that of the world heavyweight champion.

“My kids thought it was Halloween when they saw me getting dressed this morning. Let’s get some coffee before the big wigs start spewing from the mouth.”

The tables were spread with every kind of pastry and candy imaginable. The cookies were decorated with the words “Big Top” overlayed with three interlocking red rings. The same design was attached to toothpicks stuck in all the cupcakes. “Big Top and Three Ring = #1” was spelled out in chocolate-covered strawberries in the center of the table.

“They sure went all out. Do they really believe that all this can make up for a *You suck* review?” Mandy was amazed by the elaborate and excessive display of food.

“Obviously somebody does,” said Violet as she piled more strawberries onto her plate.

“Attention! Attention!” said a voice over a loudspeaker from the direction of the stage. “Gather around!” The usual circus music began to play.

The crowd moved en masse from the food table toward the stage, cupcakes in hand.

“Hey, look at all of you!” It was Butane Bob. “He is one of a kind, that Jose the costume maker,” he said as he admired their getups.

Butane Bob was dressed in—what else—red. The form-fitting outfit, as always, showed off his muscular body. Layers of yellow, orange, and red ruffles framed his face. He wore no makeup or wig. Classic Butane Bob. Jose wasn’t just a master tailor but knew exactly how to weave the personality into the costume he was designing.

“Like my outfit? First time it has ever been out of the box. I was in a panic that it might not be red.”

“You look fabulous! It’s perfect for you,” Mandy complimented him.

As they made their way toward the stage, they could see ten chairs lined up behind the podium. Dimple Vanderdoober was already seated. She was wearing her usual business suit.

“Where’s her clown costume?”

“Jose probably didn’t have enough time to finish it. But then again, after he met her, he probably didn’t want to make it for her. He’s a kind and talented guy, Jose, but he’s not someone you’d want to piss off. See Paul Brown over there? I think he pissed Jose off.” Butane Bob spoke as if he knew Jose quite well.

Paul Brown was wearing a wig of chartreuse dreadlocks and Groucho Marx glasses, nose, and moustache. His baggy brown jumpsuit, with oranges all over it and a huge pink bow tie, appeared several sizes too large. He looked like a really emaciated scarecrow, or like he forgot his hoop. It was hard to tell.

“Jose probably thought he was making fun of the way he talked. I think he might be a pretty nice guy if I could just understand him. But according to Violet, you have to sleep with him in order for that to happen.”

“Why does he have oranges all over his costume? Oranges seem odd for a clown costume, don’t they?” asked Violet.

“Well, I know that story, after spending long hours with the translation dictionary,” said Mandy. “His middle name is Juice. He has sisters named Florida and Orange. There was something about his mother and Anita Bryant I couldn’t quite figure out.”

“Wow, people tell you everything, and you’re not even sleeping with them. You amaze me sometimes, Mandy. Gary, anytime we need the dirt now, we know to ask Mandy. Everyone spills their guts to her.”

“Hello, Mandy. You look great!” Paul was waving to her from the crowd.

“Hello, Mandy,” waved Gail.

“Wait”—said Mandy. “Violet, isn’t that Larry Adams sitting on the stage?”

She squinted to get a better look.

“I think it is! And who is that woman next to him? Look, they’re holding hands!”

Mandy was on tiptoe trying to get a better look, and also trying not to put a crease in the patent leather shoes.

“I think that’s Gertrude, but it’s been a while since I’ve seen her.”

“Gertrude?” asked Mandy.

“You know, the one that was fired but still comes back to decorate her cube for every imaginable holiday in the world.”

“Why is she holding hands with Larry Adams?”

“You got me on that one, Mandy.

“There’s that slut, green Lisa Peeples, in the green suit sitting next to Dimple. I guess Jolly Juggler wasn’t having a party today. And that’s probably why Paul Brown is speaking normal English. He must have gotten some from her last night, since she was in town for a change.”

Several more people, whom none of them recognized, took their seats until all the chairs were filled. A man got up and stood at the podium.

“Who’s that?”

Gary thought it might be Louis Everly, and then Butane Bob confirmed it for them. “That’s Everly, all right.”

“Attention! Attention!”

The crowd quieted down as Louis Everly began his speech. “Good morning, and welcome all you former Big Toppers to Three Ring!”

The crowd was unimpressed.

“We are embarking on a new era of excellence in the sale of circus supplies. I appreciate all of you joining your new board of directors this morning. Isn’t it a glorious morning?”

He was trying to get the employees fired up, without success. Dimple, Larry, and Lisa Peeples were clapping with enthusiasm, but they were alone in doing so.

“I know that you are all thinking, ‘What’s this going to mean to me?’ Well, that’s why we are here today. The future is bright, and I’m going to tell you why.”

Suddenly there was commotion coming from the hedge next to the stage. Mandy was straining to see what was happening, still worried about putting that crease in her shoes. She couldn’t see, but based on all the screaming she heard, she believed a bear was in the bushes. In an instant, Lulu emerged and was standing on the side- walk. There was no mistaking Lulu in her red and white stripes.

“You are not going to explain anything. You’re not the CEO, Louis Everly! You’re fired!”

“No, Lulu, I fired you,” he screamed back. “You’re not going to ruin my party!”

The crowd let out one huge gasp.

Lulu's wig flew through the air. She popped open the buttons of her blouse. She tore off the suspenders and stepped out of the fat suit. She was struggling to get out of the heavy cooling vest, all the while screaming at the top of her lungs.

"You can't fire me. I'm Biglar Toplar. I own this company!"

A man sprung out of his chair behind the podium. "I bought this company fair and square! Who are you to tell my employees they're fired?"

"If you bought this company from Louis, then you didn't buy it fair and square! Why, you ask? Because he doesn't own it! I do! I'm Biglar Topler. If my signature isn't on the paperwork, then you own nothing."

The crowd gasped again, only this time much louder.

"I didn't buy this company from anyone named Louis. Here's his signature right here." He was holding up a fat binder, pointing at a page. "Biglar Topler. Why do you keep calling him Louis? This is Biglar."

"No, this is Biglar," he said, pointing his thumbs toward his chest. "That is Louis Everly and he can't sell this company! I own it, not him. You're all fired

"And so are you," he yelled, pointing at Dimple.

"And for you two lovebirds, you're fired as well. What about the English language don't you understand?"

The gasping was louder still.

"I thought I could trust you. You were my most trusted friend in the world. Now I know differently. Get out of here, all of you!"

"You'll be hearing from my lawyer," said the man with the binder.

"No, you'll be hearing from mine. Now get out of here, NOW!" Louis motioned to the angry businessman that it really was time to leave. The entire board of directors scampered off the stage with their tails between their legs, leaving Biglar alone, and what was once Lulu was now a pile of clothes on the sidewalk.

Deafening applause and cheers rang through the crowded parking lot. The applause went on for at least ten minutes, allowing Biglar's face to return to a more normal shade of pink.

He gathered his composure and began to speak. "Good morning. I am Biglar Topler. It's my pleasure to meet all of you this morning. Quite an entrance I made, wasn't it?"

Cheers once again rose from the crowd.

"I want to extend to you my heartfelt apologies for putting you through this tough period of time. I thought I had left the company in competent hands. I thought wrong. My family has given its blood, sweat, and tears to grow this company into something fantastic."

The crowd stood mesmerized by his speech.

"I deeply regret that I have let my family down and that I have let you down. Big Top can not exist without the fine people it employs. You do not suck. You are winners, each and every one of you!"

Applause and cheers filled the parking lot again.

“Big Top is back in business, and boy, do we have work to do!”

More cheers

“So let’s go remove those creepy Three Ring screen savers! Big Top is back!”

A thousand clowns were jumping up and down with excitement. Tiffany started leading a cheer at the front of the stage.

“Swing to the left! Swing to the right!

“Stand up! Sit down!

“Fight! Fight! Fight! “Gooooooooo Big Top!”

Gary, Violet, and Mandy were unable to move. The rest of the clowns were following Tiffany’s stand up-sit down routine. They stood rigid in the midst of the moving crowd. They were in shock and couldn’t speak but only stood with their mouths hanging open.

The crowd brushed past them in their hurry to get back to work. Biglar had gotten them going—that was certain.

Butane Bob came up behind them with a huge smile on his face. “Aah, Biglar’s back. We’re saved.”

As the crowd dispersed, they were the only ones left standing in the parking lot. Biglar managed to escape from the well-wishers wanting to shake his hand. He made his way toward the group.

“First, I want to give a personal thank-you to the four of you. I know that whatever was thrown at you, you took the ball and ran with it. I thank you for your hard work and dedication during this extremely difficult time. I was the one who made it difficult, so I take the blame for all that has happened.”

They continued to stand motionless.

Mandy noticed that the voice was different. It was not the high-pitched squeal that they heard at the beginning of the shouting match with Louis. With every word he spoke it seemed to get deeper.

“I know you’re all stunned. I’ll give you some time to gather your thoughts. I promise you I will explain everything. But then we are getting to work!”

He slapped Butane Bob on the back.

“Meet me in my office at eleven o’clock. I believe Mandy knows the way. We’ll have a working lunch. You can ask all your questions and then we’ll make a game plan for the future!”

Biglar turned and left. The foursome still could not move.

“Aah, Biglar’s back.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WILL THE REAL BIGLAR PLEASE STAND UP

As the sun got higher in the sky, the motionless foursome began to sweat in their clown costumes. Their bewilderment was slow to wear off.

“We wouldn’t want a stinky clown, now would we?” said Mandy, surprising even herself. “Let’s go inside and shed this fine attire.”

Slowly they moved toward the front door, with Violet clomping all the way in her big brown shoes. Gary suddenly stopped and cracked his whip.

“I LOVE THE CIRCUS! LONG LIVE BIG TOP!”

The happy clowns lingered by the front door, not wanting the moment to end.

As Mandy made her way across the floor to her office, she found a buzz of activity within her team. Everyone seemed to be busy at their own desks, making their way through the piles of paperwork that had been accumulating.

“Is there anything else that could surprise me today?”

With her clown costume safely at the dry cleaner, Mandy went to Gary’s office to gather him and Violet and then lead the way to Biglar’s office. She was surprised to see Butane Bob chatting with Gary.

“Good, Mandy’s here. Let’s go—don’t want to be late. Lead the way!”

“Butane Bob, you don’t know where Biglar’s office is?”

With a wink, he said, “Nope, not a clue. Didn’t want to know. Didn’t want to be fired.”

They followed Mandy as she weaved her way through the mass of cubicles to the far corner of the floor.

“Welcome! Welcome!” said the man as they entered the secret hiding place. It was odd to hear a deep voice coming from a man who they all once thought was a woman. “Have a seat. Lunch will be here shortly. We’re going to relax and clear the air. Sound good?”

“Sounds fine, Biglar.” Butane Bob shook Biglar’s hand and took seat.

Even though they felt they knew Lulu well, this seemed like a whole new ball game. All the apprehensions of breaking in a new boss were welling up in them.

Can he be trusted?

How honest can I be with him?

Do I really want to be here?

Aah, Biglar’s back.

They got as comfortable as they could in their appointed seats and waited for what was to unfold. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Biglar settled back into his chair and took a deep breath. “I might as well start at the beginning. About five years ago I decided to take a little vacation. The business was doing well and I had plenty of money in the bank, but it wasn’t enough for me. I felt like I needed a change of scenery—to refresh myself, clear the cobwebs. So I threw a dart at the map and it landed smack-dab in the center of Africa.

Then I called the travel agent to book an African safari. I thought it would be perfect to get in touch with what the circus was all about, in the birthplace of its finest animals.

“Louis Everly was my friend. We were roommates in college. He served on the board of directors for several years. My mother, God rest her soul, who was the founder of this company, adored him. He was like a son to her. I felt like second fiddle whenever he was around. He was a wonderful friend, though. Or so I thought.

“The day before I left, I said, ‘Louis, I’m going on a safari in Africa for a month. Look after things while I’m gone.’ He said, ‘It will be my pleasure, Biglar. Have a wonderful trip.’ We shook hands, and off I went on my adventure.

“The minute I stepped off the plane in Johannesburg, I was transformed. After my first ride in an open-air Jeep through Kruger National Park, my transformation was complete. Nature at its finest. I felt I had found the meaning of my life. As I traveled around this beautiful place, I felt the urge to use my good fortune to make a difference in other people’s lives.

“While on the safari, I met a doctor and his wife—Bill and Bebe. We became good friends and we called ourselves Bill, Bebe, and Biglar, the B trio. Bebe came up with that name, ‘B Trio.’ She’s a gem, that Bebe! Bill was always struck by the poverty and need for health care that we saw when we visited villages. Bebe was always interested in the schools that we saw. I was always interested in the animals—the lions, elephants, rhinos. One day we were sitting at camp, telling stories, and the light bulb suddenly went on!”

Mandy looked over at the others. They were all hanging on his every word, as was she. Where could this possibly be going that would lead him to undressing in a parking lot in front of a thousand people?

“The light bulb! We would put together a small traveling circus. We would go into remote villages bringing medical care. The circus would entertain the people until they could be seen by the doctor. We could distribute basic personal hygiene kits, give vaccinations, bring supplies for the local schools, and give a reason for the kids to laugh and not cry about a visit to the doctor. It was perfect.

“I called up Louis and had him send what I needed. We had a tent, clown costumes, a juggler, a trapeze artist, and even a cotton candy machine. Oh, did the kids love the cotton candy! The doc, Bill, wasn’t so crazy about it, due to its lack of nutritional value, so I scaled down the portions. But oh, did they love it!”

Biglar paused for a moment while he recalled a fond memory. “Where were we? Oh well. I never felt as good about my life as I did during those years. I learned a valuable lesson. We’re obligated as human beings to take care of others in whatever way we can. It means treating other people with respect and dignity, no matter what. Everyone on this planet has something valuable to contribute to this world.

“Excuse me, I digress. I know you’re thinking that I was off doing good deeds and had completely abandoned my responsibility of running this company. Not true. Not true at all. I called Louis every other day. When I would return to the city, he would fax me sales figures and copies of advertising. A couple years ago he stopped taking my calls and sending me faxes. I trusted him so completely that I didn’t believe I had any reason to worry.

“One day I was relaxing alongside Victoria Falls, enjoying a glass of wine. There’s some very fine wine in Africa, believe it or not.

“Someone said, ‘Mr. Biglar, a telegram for you, sir.’ I will never forget that telegram as long as I live. It was from Ronnie.”

“Ronnie?” Mandy blurted out. “I thought he was having an affair with Lulu.”

The jaws of the other three in the room could have been scraped from the floor. Biglar couldn’t help but chuckle. “You’re getting ahead of yourself now, Mandy. Just hang on.

“The telegram read:

*Come Back. Stop. Out of control. Stop.
Stealing hard earned money. Stop. Ronnie.*

“Ronnie has been employed by my family for thirty years. He was our butler. After my parents were gone, I felt I really didn’t need a butler for myself. He was getting close to retirement and didn’t want to work as hard, so I got him a job delivering the mail here. I knew that Ronnie was completely trustworthy and, in fact, quite wealthy. My mother made sure of that. He received Big Top stock options every year as his bonus. I was still very confused as to why Louis appeared to be betraying me.

“I called the doctor. I paid my performers for a year in advance. I kissed Bebe on the cheek—and what a bittersweet kiss it was—and said good-bye to the B Trio Circus.”

Tears welled up in his eyes.

“On a sixteen hour plane ride I had plenty of time to think. That’s where I created Lulu. And a splendid creation she was at that! I knew Louis wasn’t stupid, so I had to make sure that I crossed all the t’s and dotted all the i’s. Ronnie stocked my home with food, wine, and supplies for a month so that we could plan our attack without being disturbed. I knew that if I walked right in and confronted Louis right off the bat, I would never find out the truth. I knew him too well.

“Once I arrived home, we worked day and night for three weeks straight perfecting her dress and her voice.”

“Well, you certainly didn’t take the time to consult Women’s Wear Daily. Lulu was never going to make it to the cover of Vogue.”—this coming from Butane Bob, Mr. fashion plate himself.

“No, we didn’t, but you wouldn’t believe how hard it is to find attractive clothing for large-size women.”

Mandy and Violet began to laugh. “But why did you settle for those red prison stripes? Didn’t you know that horizontal stripes make a woman look even larger?”

“You didn’t like that outfit? Ronnie and I both liked it the best. I felt very feminine in it.

“Anyway, when the time came, we had to get Lulu hired. I had made many good friends during my years in Africa. So I called one of them up and said, ‘Please send a telegram to Mr. Louis Everly at Big Top Supplies.’ The telegram read:

Lulu Tubman will be reporting for work on Monday. Stop. Executive Vice President Entertainment and Food Sales. Stop. Package arriving w/salary info tomorrow. Stop.

Reports directly to me. Stop.

Will update me daily from now on. Stop. Returning to states next month. Stop. Your friend Biglar. Stop.

“When Lulu showed up for work on Monday, Louis was in a foul mood. He walked her down to this office and said, ‘Get to work.’

That was it. The office suited me just fine. It’s hidden away and off the beaten track. Perfect for keeping the illusion going. I had Ronnie start the rumor that if you were called to Lulu’s office you would be fired in order to keep everyone away. That fat suit is hot! Even with the wonderful cooling vest that we sell thousands of each year, the suit is still hot. Trust me. Five times a day, I would have to get undressed to cool off. Plus, I had to keep the helium deliveries a secret.”

“Helium?” They shouted out in unison.

“Now, I thought all of you were smarter than that. A few hours ago I was Lulu—remember, with the voice so high and irritating that you all wore earplugs? So quickly you forget. I was sucking down helium every chance I could get. Initially we had a problem filling the balloons and having them stay inflated for any length of time. We were so excited when we read Mandy’s new training material on balloons. We ordered the long-lasting variety, and they solved all our problems. So thank you for that, Mandy.

“Louis was getting crankier than ever as Lulu met with him. It seems he had been crafting the sale to Three Ring for quite some time—long before Lulu appeared. He had been ignoring my telegrams and calls, hoping he could sign on the dotted line before I returned. He had to put it on hold when she showed up. But when Biglar didn’t materialize in a month like he had said, things were put into full gear. The dollar signs kept flashing in his eyes, the greedy jerk.

"The dollar signs weren't the only thing in Louis's mind. Larry Adams is his brother-in-law. He put him on the payroll to help infiltrate the rank and file. He always had it in the back of his mind that I would try to trick him. He truly believed he had a foolproof plan to steal the company from me."

"He's a creep, that Larry," injected Mandy.

"He's a creep all right. His job was to find ways to spend the company's money as recklessly as possible. The list is long—pink walls and cotton candy machines, rounding up of expense reports, and the three o'clock break, just to name a few. Ah yes, I was not the creator of the three o'clock break, sad to say. It was just easy for me to go along with it, since I was dressed in a fat suit after all. Lulu had to fire him after check stubs were found in the trash that listed reimbursement for his mortgage, car payment and electric bills from company funds."

"What's the deal with Gertrude?" Gary had been wondering about her ever since he saw her holding hands with Larry as they sat together on the stage.

"Gertrude has an interesting story. She's the holiday girl and Larry's long-time lover. She made every day a holiday, and, from what I understand, she also did that in the bedroom."

"Yick."

"Uhg."

"Gross."

"She would dress up as Cupid or St. Patrick or Uncle Sam, for all I know, and Larry couldn't get enough of it. He was hooked.

So when the sales manager prior to Mandy wanted to fire her, Larry was afraid of being exposed. There was excellent reason to fire her. Her job was sales documentation. She had never graduated from the eighth grade. Gertrude couldn't spell, let alone put a complete sentence together. Larry finally had to give in to the manager and let her go. But before he did, he drew up an agreement where Gertrude could continue to decorate her cube for as long as she lived. She loved the holidays, so that was perfectly fine with her. It helped soften the blow to his beloved Gertrude. That part was really for Larry. I overheard them once doing it in the New Year's champagne glass.

"Larry was starting to feel a little strapped between his wife and his mistress. He was getting away with having the company keep ole Gertie in rent, gas, and expensive vacations, so he felt perfectly justified in having Big Top keep his wife out of his hair while he was at it. Larry was sloppy, however. He had been submitting all his personal expenses to Bozo to pay—mortgage payments, cell phones, groceries. And Bozo cut the check. Larry, however, had a bad habit of throwing the check stub in the garbage while still in the office.

"I asked him to take the job which is now Mandy's and he refused. I confronted him with the check stubs and fired him before he had a chance to argue with me. I called Louis and told him what I had done. He thanked me for looking out for the best interest of the company. I wanted to punch the scummy liar.

“At Larry’s urging, Louis put Gertrude on the board of directors. She was appointed secretary. Oh, love is blind. So when Louis asked Larry to write the merger announcement, he, in true Larry fashion, delegated the job to Gertrude. I can hear him now. ‘Do a good job, Gertie. Soon we will be sailing on our yacht in the Mediterranean, making love, getting a tan, and hobnobbing with the rich and famous.’

“Lulu had to fire him for a few more reasons. I knew that Bozo was doing exactly what Larry told him to do. And Bozo was being paid handsomely to do it. Too bad he didn’t live to enjoy some of that money. He was the victim of another stupid scheme to deplete the company bank account. I understand his parents are on an around-the-world cruise as we speak. And I hope that they’re having the time of their lives. They had no idea what their son was up to.

“Louis came down to Lulu’s office on the day Dimple Vanderdoober arrived. He informed her that, due to the merger, her job had been eliminated. He had not heard from me since the telegram announcing that Lulu was coming. He thought he was in the clear again. He obviously thought wrong.

“I put Ronnie on high alert, packed my things, and left. He filled me in on the new performance appraisal system. I knew a revolt of some kind was imminent. The day of the picketing, I joined in and blended in with the crowd. The talk was so juicy that day. They were just on fire. They were mad—so mad. That’s how I got the party announcement. I hadn’t been able to break into the company systems, but it was certainly not for lack of trying. Brilliant move, Mandy. Cookies and a party invitation. They couldn’t resist. They’d gotten hooked on that afternoon sugar fix after all these years.

“That brings us to here, today. Do you have any questions?”

Violet asked, “Who was always going through the trash?”

“That was Ronnie. He’d deliver the mail and fish a couple things out of the trash can when no one was looking. We got a lot of good stuff out of the boardroom. Lots of good evidence, which is now in the hands of my attorney.”

Biglar looked down at his watch. It was after nine p.m. “Well, it’s been a long day. We’re all exhausted. Go home, get some rest, and be back here at eight o’clock tomorrow morning, when the real fun will begin!”

Butane Bob whispered to the others,

“Aah, Biglar’s back.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHERE'S THE WAREHOUSE

Right on time, the group gathered in Biglar's office the next morning.

"Good morning, everyone!" Biglar was quite upbeat.

Mandy and Violet had stayed in the office the last evening, talking over the events of the day until almost midnight. The bags under their eyes certainly weren't lost on Biglar.

"We have a long, hard road ahead of us. There will be long hours and long days. It's important, however, that we all take care of ourselves, eat well, and get plenty of rest. Being sick is not going to help. Do I make myself clear, Mandy and Violet?"

"Yes, sir. Perfectly clear."

"Let's get going, and let the fun begin! I made a list of some things we need to do immediately to reduce our expenses. I want all of you to add your thoughts and ideas. We need a place to start. Here's what I came up with.

"Elimination of the three o'clock break. Done—cross that off.

"Elimination of special paint in the offices. Oh, I can cross that one off—already been taken care of. Two down. See, we're making progress already. Three Ring was good for something, wasn't it?"

They all had a good laugh.

"No more clown costumes. It breaks my heart to tell Jose that, but it has to be done."

"Eliminate that goofy car we offer and the car allowance for those who aren't in sales."

"Oh man, you're taking away my car allowance?"

"Gary, either you're with me or you aren't. Which is it?" Biglar's tone had become serious.

"Just kidding. I'm with you Biglar, don't worry. I'm with you."

"Closing of all unprofitable stores."

"Excuse me, Biglar, but aren't they all unprofitable at this point in time?"

"You have a point, Butane Bob. What would you suggest?"

"How about closing those where the manager is no longer even opening the store but still collecting a paycheck? You can probably save a bundle just by firing the employees who aren't working."

"Good idea, good idea." Biglar scratched down some notes. "Let's eliminate all the duplicate departments that do the same thing. We only need one accounts payable department. And how many overlapping training departments does Gary have?"

"Oh, man! Now I'm going to have to fire some more people," said a frustrated Gary.

"I thought you said you were with me?"

"Sorry, Biglar. I am. I'll shut up."

"Thank you. Moving on. Any more suggestions?"

“Stop funding the cafeteria. The employees can pay for their own meals.”

“Get rid of all those electronic gadgets. You know, the pager, the BlackBerry, the printer—none of us use it.”

“I use mine,” said Violet defensively.

“Not for their intended use, that’s for sure,” said Gary, who was still smarting from Biglar’s reprimand.

“How would you know? Yours are stashed in a drawer in your desk, never to see the light of day, Dr. Feelgood.”

“Enough bickering from all of you. The electronics go, except for the cell phone. You’re going to need that in the coming days. We have to start working together as a team.” Biglar was beginning to lose patience with their whining.

“Everyone takes a five-percent pay cut for one year. And I mean everyone. So you know that we are in this together, I have already given up my entire salary for one year. OK? We are in this together, and I mean it.” Biglar seemed so proud of himself.

“Mandy, it goes without saying you will have the expense report policy fixed by the end of the week. And if anyone whines at you about it, send them to me.”

“Not a problem, Biglar. Already on my list.”

“Fabulous. Other ideas? Now’s your chance.”

“Can we somehow streamline all that paperwork in HR? My first day I spent eight hours just filling out paperwork with Tiffany the Cheerleader.”

“What is Tiffany the Cheerleader’s position?”

“To be the cheerleader. I don’t know what else she does.”

“Butane Bob, find her a real position and lose the cheerleading outfit. She is very cheery, though. We’ll need her to help with the morale in the days to come. Get her to work on reducing the paperwork. That will show us whether she has any talents apart from shaking a pompom.”

“But Biglar,” Violet interjected, “we really need to make some sales. Advertising is key here, but without any merchandise to sell, how can I work on advertising?”

“Good observation, Violet. When was the last time we took inventory? That should be our first step. Do we even know if we have anything in the warehouse?”

Together they said, “We have a warehouse?”

“Well, we did the last time I checked. I can’t imagine we stopped paying the rent since we kept paying it for everything else. Why don’t we all take a trip over there tomorrow and see what’s going on? It could either be a lot of fun or just depressing. How about it?”

“I bet on depressing,” groaned Butane Bob. He’d been sitting back taking in the scene, not saying a word.

“You know what—let’s go now. I don’t want to wait. Go home and change into some jeans and meet in the parking lot in an hour.”

Upon their return, a long yellow limousine was waiting for them. “Biglar rides around town in a yellow limousine?” exclaimed Violet

“Looks that way,” answered Gary.

A door opened and Biglar stuck his head out, waving for them to get in.

“Like the wheels? Since I’ve been incognito for so long, it was hidden in the garage. This seemed like the perfect opportunity to take all of my friends for a spin.”

Gary stretched out on the plush leather seat. “Now this is the way to travel. How far is the warehouse from here?”

“Oh, just a couple blocks down the street.”

Violet nudged Gary to get his feet off the seat. “Make room for the rest of us, could you?”

“Easy does it. It’s not often I get chauffeured around town. I need to make the most of it.”

It was a good thing the windows were darkly tinted. If anyone had seen the expressions on those five faces, they would have immediately called an ambulance, thinking they had been in an accident. Each face was contorted in wonder at the gaudiness of their ride. They all looked as if they were in immense pain. The inside of the vehicle was pink leather with blue trim. It had a full bar with a leopard-print countertop. Dudley Do-Right cartoons were playing on the big-screen television. Mandy was wondering what planet she had landed on and where these aliens were taking her. The limo suddenly came to a screeching halt.

“This must be it—depressing, just as I thought,” said Butane Bob

The limo parked on the street to let them out. There was no room to pull into the parking lot. Tractor trailers were parked nose to nose on every inch of blacktop. No building was even visible from their vantage point.

“You sure there’s a warehouse here?”

“This is the address. It wouldn’t have been like Louis to tear it down. He preferred to run things into the ground, sapping every last dime out first.”

It was a good thing that they had had the foresight to change into old clothes. It was a maze. They ducked under trucks and between tires. The trucks were parked so closely together, there was barely room to move between them.

“Hey, here’s some grass. We must be getting close.” Gary had been leading the way. “Uh—no. False alarm. Just a big weed in the blacktop.”

“Hey look, there’s an old rusted car over there. Wonder how long that thing’s been sitting there.”

“Aah, I remember this place now.” Biglar had come to a sidewalk and stood looking at the building in admiration. The rest of the group followed the sound of his voice.

“I remember the day when my mother had a ribbon-cutting ceremony to open this warehouse. I was about ten years old. The clowns, the jugglers, the spectacle—it was really something.”

“Is that the original sign on the top there, Biglar?” asked Mandy. It was a fifties-style sign that had seen better days. The purple of “Big Top” had faded to pale lavender. Several of the letters were broken. The sign read “Bi Top Suppl.”

"I remember when that sign lit up this neighborhood. It could be seen for miles. This was my mother's pride and joy. I remember that she insisted on picking out that sign herself. It had to be just perfect. She was going to make sure the whole world knew what a success she was. She must be turning over in her grave right now at the sight of this." He began to cry.

"Biglar, please don't cry. This can all be brought back to its former glory. Have faith. We can do it."

"Sorry, Mandy, I didn't want you to see that. You're right. We have nowhere to go but up. So let's get to work!" He quickened his step and they all followed suit.

"Nowhere to go but up!" they repeated after him. They found the front door bolted shut, so they made their way around the back. They passed by eight bay doors before finding one that was open. Butane Bob lifted himself up onto the platform.

"Anybody home?"

"No more deliveries today. Come back tomorrow."

"Not making a delivery," he shouted, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from. "I'm here from the Big Top office."

A big surly-looking man came out of the shadows. "You say you're from the office?"

"Yes." He pointed to the rest of the group still standing down below.

"We're planning a sale and wanted to see what we needed to get rid of."

"Well, you can run one hell of a blowout. Look around. All this needs to go. Shelves are busting out at the seams. Stuff keeps coming in. Nothin' is going out."

"So I see. My name is Butane Bob. And you are?"

"Curly. Nice to meet ya. Why doesn't anyone at the office answer the phone?"

"Phone system wasn't working. It's fixed now." That was a lie, but it sounded good as he said it.

Curly gave him a doubting look in response. "Hmmm, hasn't been working for a few years, has it?"

"Where should we start, Curly, if we were going to run that blowout circus sale?"

"In the parking lot—whad'ya think? Pick a trailer and get it outta here. I'm surprised you even found your way in here. I ain't left the place in about four years, best as I can recall. Too much trouble."

Biglar looked as if he were going to cry again. Mandy and Violet tried to shore him up as best as they could by holding his arms.

"Well, do you know what's in any of these trailers, Curly?"

"Nope, haven't a clue. One guy calls everyday to see when he can unload his trucks. Start with those."

"Lead the way, my friend." Butane Bob waved the others to follow. "Lead the way."

Biglar began to sob uncontrollably on Gary's shoulder.

“Violet! Mandy! Help me!” Gary began waving his arms about, trying to get someone’s attention. The girls had gone off to explore the rest of the warehouse and were nowhere in sight behind all the unopened cartons stacked haphazardly around the place. He half-heartedly patted Biglar on the back in an effort to console him.

Suddenly Biglar began to wail. “How did I let this happen? I’m such a failure. I’m a disappointment to my family. My poor mother, may she rest in peace—she’d call me a disgrace.”

Curly looked over at Butane Bob. “What’s wrong with him?” Butane Bob put his arm around Curly’s big shoulders. “Come with us, Curly, for dinner and a couple of drinks. Looks like we’re going to need them. Plus, it will do you good to get out of here for a little while.”

“You payin’?”

“I’m paying, come on.”

Gary was still flailing his arms about, trying to figure out what to do with Biglar. Biglar didn’t appear to want to stop crying anytime soon.

“Come on, Biglar,” Butane Bob shouted out. “This will all be over once it’s done. We’re taking Curly here out for dinner.” Biglar’s head slowly came up, and like a lost little puppy he followed Butane Bob and Curly toward the door. Gary now had a huge wet spot on his shoulder. He frantically flapped his shirt to get it to dry faster.

“Mandy, Violet, let’s go. We’re leaving.” The two of them popped out from behind a huge stack of boxes.

“We’re coming.”

“I know the shortcut outta here, so follow me,” instructed Curly.

“We’re all for a shortcut. Seemed like it took us an hour to get in here,” said Gary, still frantically trying to dry his shirt.

“Should we leave some bread crumbs so we can find our way back in tomorrow?” Mandy quipped.

In five minutes, they were all safely inside the yellow limousine cooling off. This time it was Curly who was fascinated by the tackiness of the limousine. Biglar seemed to have composed himself, at least for the time being.

“We’re going to my house for dinner. We’ll be more comfortable there. Ronnie is having something brought in.”

“Uh, excuse me, Biglar,” Gary interrupted. “Would you mind dropping me back at the office? My wife is expecting me. It’s our anniversary.”

“Happy anniversary!” they said in chorus.

“Not a problem, Gary. Be sure to give your wife our best. Thanks for all your help today. See you tomorrow.”

“Anytime, Biglar,” he said as he glanced over at his still-soaking wet shirt.

As soon as the door closed, Biglar began to mumble under his breath, “All I do for him and he can’t even have dinner with us.”

The others were busily chatting amongst themselves about whether Gary's wife actually had a name other than "my wife" and didn't hear what Biglar said.

When they arrived at Biglar's house, everything was set as if they'd been invited to a formal dinner party. Fresh flowers in the foyer, candles lit throughout the living room, wine and hors d'oeuvres waiting on the bar.

"Biglar, your home is lovely. But I thought Ronnie was just bringing something in. I would have dressed more appropriately if I had known we were dining formally," Mandy said with a wink.

"We would have gone out somewhere nice, but I didn't think that Curly was dressed right or had proper manners to eat in a restaurant." He gave a disgusted glance in Curly's direction.

Now granted, Curly's T-shirt was worn and faded and had a few too many pizza stains on the front. His pants hadn't been near an ironing board since the day they'd left the factory, which by all accounts was many years ago. And he said "ain't" a few too many times. But Mandy had never heard Biglar, or Lulu for that matter, criticize anyone like that before. Besides, Curly hadn't left the warehouse in several years. What did he expect?

Biglar suddenly had a strange look in his eyes that made her very afraid. Without appearing too frantic, she tried to get Butane Bob's attention. He, however, was thoroughly engrossed in whatever it was Curly had to say.

"I was known as the White Glove Robber. It was all over the papers. I wonder why you ain't never heard of me. Never left a print—anywhere."

"Oh great, we've been harboring a fugitive," she said under her breath as she made her way into the conversation. Violet was hanging on every word he said. She was gulping down her glass of wine, hoping no one would notice.

"I only stole good stuff. Cash, jewelry, cameras. I worked alone, so I never bothered with anybody's TV or computer. Don't know how to work 'em, anyway. Too heavy to carry. I was so good at pickin' locks that most of the time they ain't even know they'd been robbed.

I never left a mess or nothin'. I broke in, got what I wanted, and left. I was good. I was damn good. I think that's why I ain't never got caught."

"Never got caught? You must be good."

"I don't know why you ain't heard of me. I was sure I was famous. Don't you read the papers or listen to the news or nothin'?"

"Well, Curly, you said it has been a few years. We probably just don't remember."

"I forget I ain't been out in the real world. No TV, no papers. I don't know what's going on anymore. And that's OK by me. It was time for me to lay low for a while."

"You sure found the right place for doing that!" Violet slurred.

"I worked odd jobs over the years whenever I needed to let things cool off for a while. This one I kinda liked. And besides, there was no background check or drug test. That was always high on my list. Jobs without them ain't easy to find, let me tell you. I used to threaten my mother that I was going to run away with the circus. I was a bad kid. She always told me, 'Go ahead. Go, you dumb kid.' So as an old man I sure as shootin' got my chance."

"Call Tiffany about initiating background checks, first thing in the morning," whispered Butane Bob out of the corner of his mouth.

"When the parking lot started filling up, fellas started dropping like flies. I had nowhere to go, and I figured the cops were still looking for me, so why mess with a good thing? I couldn't go no place, anyway. My car is rusting away in that mess of a parking lot. I ain't been able to find it nowhere."

"We saw it on our way in today."

"You did? I miss my Bessie. She got me out of many a tight squeeze. That she did. Think you can find her again for me?"

"Once we start clearing out the trucks, she'll appear on her own, I'm sure." Butane Bob seemed nonplussed by Curly's tale.

"So, Mr. Butane, what's your story? By the looks of that hair, I figure you must have a story."

"Well, Curly, I'm glad you asked that. Most people are afraid to. Where should I start? I have a fascination with fire. It all started when I was a child. I saw my first fireworks display at five and was hooked. I was enthralled with blowing things up."

Curly, Mandy, and Violet were hanging on his every word. Butane Bob had never before opened up to anyone about his personal life.

"My parents were so afraid that I was going to burn the house down that they sent me away to boarding school. What they didn't know was that the school had a terrific chemistry teacher—Mr. Mueller. He was my friend and mentor until the day he died. He took me under his wing and I blew up all kinds of things. He was a really cool guy."

"Like I love to pick locks, you love to blow things up?"

"I love it. Gives me such a rush. Then I grew up, and reality set in. I needed to support a wife and children. Then I found this job, a perfect mix of fire, fun, and explosions. I'd give my eye teeth to be shot out of a cannon, you know."

"You have a wife?" Violet cocked her head in disbelief.

"See Violet, there's a lid for every pot. There's hope for you yet!" Mandy got a chuckle out of Violet's expression.

"Yes, a beautiful fiery wife named Ruby. And two wonderful kids named Blaise and Sunny. We live in a red house, drive red cars, wear red clothes—we all love the color red. Life is good. Life is really good."

“Well, if everything in your house is red, then I guess you don’t have to worry about your undies turning pink when you do the laundry.” Violet guzzled another glass of wine after she heard that Butane Bob was married.

Through all of this, Biglar sat with his arms crossed in the corner of the sofa. He sat staring at his guests while they were engaged in lively conversation. He wanted no part of it. They were having too much fun.

The dinner bell rang. Biglar got up and showed them the way to the dining room. The table was set with fine china and crystal. Each place card had a name and they all took their assigned seats. Biglar, of course, was at the head of the table. Butane Bob to his right and Mandy and Violet on his left. The table sat sixteen, and Curly’s place was at the opposite end, all by himself.

Violet kicked Mandy under the table. “What’s going on?”

“I think he’s getting ready to snap,” she whispered in Violet’s direction. “Curly, why don’t you move up here next to Butane Bob?”

“Mandy. I am the host, and that’s his seat.”

“Curly’s a very interesting conversationalist, Biglar. I’d love to hear some more of his stories.”

“Not in my house you won’t.”

Butane Bob gave a firm yet stern look that said, “Enough, just roll with it for now.”

A lovely meal of steak and lobster was served. Each place had its own sterling silver butter warmer. The Caesar salad was created by the chef tableside. The steamed vegetables were cooked to perfection. The fine wine flowed freely, much to Violet’s delight. This was far nicer than being in any restaurant, except for Curly’s banishment.

They hadn’t realized how hungry they all were, and that they ate in complete silence was barely noticed by any of them.

After the last bite of decadent caramel pecan cheesecake was finished, Curly said, “Mmm, that was good. Thank you, Mr. Biglar.

That was one fine meal. The finest I’ve had in my life. I appreciate your hospitality. Thank you.” It was obvious that Curly was trying to show his most sophisticated side.

“You’re welcome, Curly. Thank you for your many years of service to my family’s business.”

It was late. They said their good-byes to Biglar. The yellow limousine pulled up to drive them all home. Mandy couldn’t contain herself once the door was shut.

“Butane Bob, what was going on in there? Making Curly sit at the end of the table all by himself—that was rude.”

“I was surprised by that myself. I have never known Biglar to treat guests in his home that way. There were rumors when he left that he was having a nervous breakdown, but they were just rumors. He’s stressed out, that’s all. Curly, please don’t take it personally. Biglar has a very kind heart. He’s under a lot of pressure these days. Please accept my apology on his behalf.”

“Apology accepted, Mr. Butane. That was one fine spread, and I enjoyed the hell out of it. After the first bite, I didn’t really care where I was sittin’. I’ve been living on pizza and potato chips for a long time, you know. Somehow the guy still comes to fill the vending machine every day. If not for that, I woulda starved to death a long time ago.”

“Tell Biglar he’d better get a grip.” Mandy was just plain disgusted.

“He’s been sucking down too much helium.” Violet’s drunken comment was followed by uncontrollable giggles. Her laughter was contagious, since they had all had a little too much to drink. They all laughed and joked the rest of the ride home, and it felt good.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TRY DRESSING UP A CIRCUS PEANUT WHY DON’T YOU?

“Listen up, everyone.” Mandy had called an emergency meeting. The word “emergency” was able to catch everyone’s attention lately.

“We have a crisis situation at our warehouse and we need your help. Our stores have been depleted of merchandise to sell. Why, you ask? Because it’s all being stored in hundreds of tractor trailers in the parking lot. We need to unload and distribute this entire inventory quickly. So here’s where you come in. I need volunteers to go to the warehouse and help. Who would like to volunteer?”

Every hand in the room shot up.

“Great. Meet in the parking lot tomorrow morning at six. Wear old clothes. A bus will take us over there.”

“How far away is it?”

“It’s just down the street, but there’s no room to park. The lot is full of tractor trailers—remember? Six a.m. sharp. OK? Don’t be late.”

Gary handed everyone a steaming hot cup of coffee as they boarded the bus in the morning. Violet handed out truck numbers. Each trailer had been numbered from 1 to 439. Curly had taken care of that task. Even he was surprised by the number. Teams of four were assigned to three trucks each. If each team could clear out all three of their trucks, it would be a very good day for Big Top Supplies. They were keeping their fingers crossed.

As the bus began its journey to the warehouse, Violet began to bark out instructions. But first they had the required and ceremonious blowing of the kazoo.

“On the count of three. One. Two. Three.” *Bzzzzztfff.*

“Each team has also been given a list of store numbers and addresses. The contents of each truck must be inventoried. This is your inventory sheet.”

She waved a pink preprinted pad over her head.

“It doesn’t really matter what we send to these stores, only that we send them a variety of merchandise. If you open a truck that’s filled with one item, then start unloading. Share the contents with your neighbors. Then take the yellow pad.”

She began to wave that in the air for all to see.

“Log the contents of your truck. One copy goes inside, two copies go to Curly. Curly is coordinating the drivers who will move the trucks and get Big Top back in business!”

Everyone on the bus was screaming and cheering and waving their arms wildly in the air.

“Go Big Top!”

“Down with Three Ring!” “Go Big Top!”

“Hey, where’s Tiffany when you need her?”

A little squeak came from the back seat. “I’m here.” She waved her pompoms. “I’ve got laryngitis. Doctor says no talking for a week.”

Noses were glued to the bus windows as they arrived at the warehouse.

“Where’s the building?”

“Oh, it’s in there. For now, you’ll just have to trust me on that one.”

Cassie turned to Mandy. The pep rally spirit had been drained from her face. “This is serious, isn’t it?”

“It’s really serious. But we’re a team and we’re going to work it out as a team. It’s not going to be easy, but I know we have what it takes.”

“We do, Mandy. Look at Tiffany. She’s sick and even she came to help.”

“Then let’s get to work, my friend Cassie! Let’s get to work!”

The treasure hunt began. Whoops and hollers could be heard every few seconds as some new gadget was uncovered. They found balloons, shoes, magic tricks and gags, hula hoops, clown makeup, stilts, and wigs in a rainbow of colors, among many other things.

Tony came running across the parking lot, if it could be called running—it was more like zigzagging between all the tractor trailers.

“Mandy, I’ve been writing sales training manuals for almost ten years. I have never even seen half of this stuff before. This is the best training class I’ve ever had.”

“Tony, that’s fabulous! This is pretty fun, isn’t it? I feel like a kid in a candy store.”

“Me too. It’s hard work, but we’re having a lot of laughs. We’ll get Big Top back on top, you wait and see. We can do it.”

It was energizing to see everyone so pumped up. It was only noon and already they had sent thirteen trucks on their way.

Plain Bob was getting the first truck. Mandy and Violet wrote a personal note to him and taped it to one of the boxes. His store was on the list for a second truckload, so when they finally uncovered the circus peanuts, they were going to make sure he got a double order.

“Ooooooooo, gross. What’s that?”

A group had gathered around the back of one of the trucks. Some kind of orange goo was oozing out of the bottom of the door. Butane Bob and Curly were trying to lift the door, without success.

“It’s stuck. What is that stuff, anyway?” Even Butane Bob was grossed out by the strange gooey substance. He moved very carefully so as not to get any of it on him. He started waving for Gary to come and help them.

When Gary saw the orange goop, he said, “Why do I always have to be the one that gets dirty?”

“Because you’re good at fixing things. I only put out fires.”

“Why don’t you just light this up and see what happens?” Gary was not looking forward to entering the mass of unidentifiable glop.

He found a crow bar a few tractor trailers down the row. It had been a struggle all morning to get some of the old, rusty, dry, unoiled doors to open.

“Try this.”

The three men were standing on the end of the truck, tugging and pulling and pushing. Finally Gary wedged the crow bar into the tiny bit of space between the door and the floor that the pair had been able to manage. Butane Bob’s face was the color of his clothing. Gary was sweating bullets.

“Too bad this isn’t a padlock. I’d have us inside in twenty seconds flat.” said Curly, who was as red as Butane Bob’s clothing *and* sweating bullets.

Creak, creak, creak. Little by little the roll-up door started to move. One last, big push and the door shot up like a flash. Orange goop was everywhere, dripping from the ceiling, popping out of the seams of cardboard cartons, lying in big globs all over the floor. They all stood staring at it, afraid to touch it for fear of the unknown.

Butane Bob was not going to get dirty—that was a given. Curly looked as if he were going to have a heart attack, huffing and puffing, barely able to stand. That left Gary. He took a deep breath and plowed inside like a freight train. He grabbed the first box and yanked it out of its sticky spot. As he turned the box, the words “Circus Peanuts” and “Keep in a Cool Place” came into view.

“Circus peanuts! How long d’ya think these things been sittin’ here, bakin’ in the sun?” panted Curly.

“By the looks of things, a long time. Is this what happens to them once they get in your stomach? They turn into a gooey mess? Kind of reminds me of an old sci-fi movie—blobs of weird alien matter, bubbling and growing, taking over the planet.”

Gary was trying, without success, to get the gooey mess off his shirt and pants. What he did get off was now stuck to his fingers.

“Circus peanuts are orange, and I love all things red, orange, or yellow. You know—fiery kinds of colors. One of my favorite snacks of all time is a bag of circus peanuts and one of those cinnamon shakes. Oh, that’s good! Interestingly enough, no one knows why circus peanuts are orange. I say they were made orange just so that I would love them! But now I doubt that I will ever be able to face a circus peanut again. This is the most disgusting thing I have seen in a long time.”

Butane Bob had turned white as a sheet. He jumped off the truck and ran out of sight. Soon they heard him retching his guts out behind the truck.

“Show’s over. Let’s move on to the next truck,” Gary shouted in order to disperse the gathering rubberneckers. “Look around. We’ve got lots more work to do here.”

Trucks were slowly but surely making their way out of the parking lot. Cartons were strewn all about, but they never stayed in one spot for long. The crews were doing a great job of shuffling the inventory around so that each store got a good mix. Bessie had been uncovered. Curly cried at the sight of her, his beloved getaway car. She had rusted-out holes in the side big enough to fit your head through. All the tires were as flat as pancakes. The leather seats were faded and split. The windshield had a big spiderweb crack in it.

“Wonder if this baby’ll start.”

“Curly, I think she’s seen better days. She’ll probably be happiest at the junkyard.”

Butane Bob was keeping a safe distance from the rusty old car. Curly was admiring the car as if he had found a long lost lover, stroking it gently.

“She got me outta many a jam, ya know. But I ain’t got the keys no more. Lost ‘em somewhere inside that warehouse, and Lord only knows where. So I guess you’re right—she’ll have to be junked.”

Butane Bob thought he saw Curly shed a tear. “Curly, we’ll go get you a new car. As soon as we get this place cleared out, we’ll get you a car you’ll actually be able to drive. You remember how to drive, don’t you?”

“It’s been a while, but I think I do. Thanks, Mr. Butane. You’re all right in my book.”

A loud commotion was heard coming from the far end of the parking lot. A group of workers was dancing and singing at the top of their lungs. Butane Bob had finally gotten control of his stomach and followed Violet and Mandy to see what was going on.

“Costumes! We found about five trucks full of costumes! Come take a look.”

“Violet! Run a Halloween ad! There are costumes here in all sizes, from babies to adults. And look at them!” There are fairies, ballerinas, clowns, lion tamers, witches. You name it, it’s here.”

Violet was busy scribbling a note to herself.

“This is perfect with Halloween a few weeks away, don’t you think?”

“Perfect. And such a simple ad. Buy Halloween costumes at Big Top Supplies. Lots to choose from.”

“That’ll work. Maybe you should consider a second career as an ad writer, Mandy. I think you have a knack for it. Hey, any French maid outfits in there? I need a new one.”

“French maid?”

“Yep, every year I go out on Halloween as a French maid, and no matter who I come home with, the sex is always great. You should give it a try sometime, Mandy. You need a little loosening up. When was the last time you had some really great sex?”

“Violet, we have work to do here.”

“I knew it. Been a while, huh?”

“You know, maybe if you didn’t hop into bed with every man you meet, you might have that husband you’re always dreaming of by now. No one buys the cow when they can have the milk for free.”

“Well, if that approach works so well, where’s your husband?”

“OK, OK. I hear you, Violet. We can discuss that later. Now let’s get back to work.”

Costumes of all kinds were strewn across the parking lot. Some workers were actually wearing the costumes and dancing around in them. The pink fairies, green hornets, and orange pumpkins were making them all forget the mission of the day. Curly donned a Frankenstein outfit, complete with neck bolts, and joined in the festivities.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mandy saw a flash of yellow. The yellow limousine had pulled into the parking lot. The door flew open before the limo had even come to a stop. Biglar bounded out of the car and started running toward them, thrashing his arms and screaming.

“I pay you buffoons good money to work, and this is the thanks I get? Get to work!”

The employees became quiet and slowly started to remove their costumes. Butane Bob came running, forgetting for the moment that he felt like throwing up again.

“Biglar, Biglar, they were just blowing off a little steam. It’s hot, and we’ve been working nonstop all morning. Look around. You could actually pull that limousine into the parking lot for a change.

These dedicated employees of yours have made a lot of progress this morning. You need to relax.”

“Uh, oh—here come the crocodile tears again,” said Gary out of the corner of his mouth

Biglar began to cry. This was becoming such a regular part of the day that no one seemed moved by it. “I’m supposed to be the leader, aren’t I, Butane Bob?”

“Yes. Yes, you are, and I can’t say that you’ve been doing a very good job lately.”

“Oh, Butane Bob, what would I do without you? You are my rock. I don’t know what’s wrong with me these days. I need to lighten up. But there is so much pressure, so much stress.”

As soon as those words passed from Biglar's lips, a lovely pale pink princess, crown and all, went flying by on a pool of grease left by one of the trucks. Two fairies followed suit, and then came a clown, a witch, and the French maid. Black gooey motor oil flew everywhere.

Anyone standing within ten feet became covered in it too.

Biglar began screaming again. "The sale of those costumes could mean the life or death of this company! Now they're ruined! That could be the difference meaning a paycheck, food on the table, gas in the car! What are you clowns thinking?"

Butane Bob attempted to cover Biglar's mouth with his hand. Biglar shoved him away and kept right on yelling at the top of his lungs. The grease monkeys sat in a heap trying to stifle their laughter.

"I'm trying to make this company profitable again. That will never happen with a bunch of ingrates like you!"

Gary came to Butane Bob's rescue and grabbed Biglar's arm. The two of them forced him backwards into the yellow limousine. All the while he continued to shout. Shoving him into the back seat and slamming the door was the only thing that could silence his ranting.

The limo sped off.

In the commotion, Mandy realized that she had lost track of Violet.

"Oh God, I hope that's someone else in the French maid outfit. Violet! Violet!"

Violet slowly emerged out of the pool of grease and slid over toward Mandy.

"Violet, Biglar is furious! If he finds out that was you ruining his costumes, that will be the end of all of us. They had to drag him back into the limo to get him out of here."

"I told you he sucked down too much helium." "Why do you keep saying that?"

"I was premed in college."

"Really? That doesn't seem like you."

"Well, that was before I discovered the joys of sex. Once that happened, I had to find a major that allowed me more free time.

During a sorority initiation I had to suck on helium and try to scare the pledges. I was sick for a week afterwards. So I'll bet money that's his problem."

"You never cease to impress me, Violet. Now go get cleaned up so we can get the rest of these trucks out of here. I don't want to have to come back here again tomorrow. One day like this is enough fun for me. Isn't it for you?"

Violet wiped a big blob of grease out of her hair, throwing it onto the ground. She wiped her hands on the already filthy French maid costume.

"Maybe I'll dress this year as a dirty French maid," she said as she coyly batted her eyelashes.

By the end of the day, the Big Top Supplies warehouse parking lot was empty—except, of course, for Bessie and the truck full of melted circus peanuts. They were exhausted, but they were on cloud nine.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

“Please please please please please please!”

“Cassie, I don’t think this is the best place for you.”

“Mandy, if you only knew how much I love this company.” She paused for a moment. “Now granted, Mr. Topler really screwed up. But I’m committed to making things better again since I know that he is too. He has a good heart. And I need to keep this job for many years to come.”

“But this is collecting money—calling customers and asking them to pay for things they bought four or five years ago. I guarantee it has all been written off and they’re going to laugh in your face. It’s going to be ugly, and I mean really ugly.”

“I’m ready for ugly, I really am. Pleeese.”

She hated it when Cassie begged. Mandy hesitated for a moment.

“OK, but you must make at least thirty calls a day, and we had better have at least a million dollars out of you by the end of the week. Otherwise, I’m sending you back to Gary.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you. You won’t be disappointed, I promise.”

Cassie was smiling from ear to ear as she ran around the desk and gave Mandy a big bear hug. Mandy was hoping that the million dollars would scare her off. Her other collectors only had quotas of twenty calls and one hundred thousand dollars a week. Now she hoped no one would let Cassie in on her secret, because all she really needed right now was warm bodies with unbroken dialing fingers.

Cassie sashayed across the floor chanting, “Mandy caved! Mandy caved!” so all could hear.

No time like the present to get started. Mandy looked at the first account on the list. Adam’s Apple Big Fun Place. “Let’s see, their past due balance is \$143,692.46. Never made a payment. Oh, and look, we’re still shipping to them. \$20,000 just last week.”

She dialed the phone and took a deep breath. “Accounts payable please.”

“AP, Chrissie speaking,” said a voice that sounded more like a man than a Chrissie.

“Hello, Chrissie, my name is Mandy Maloney, and I’m calling from Big Top Supplies. How are you today?”

“Good. Whadda you want?”

“Chrissie, Adam’s Apple has a large past due balance with Big Top. I’d like to find out when we can expect payment.” “Hold on.” Clunk went the phone.

Mandy could hear talking but couldn’t make anything out. After several minutes Chrissie came back on the line.

“Check went out yesterday. We heard there was some trouble at Big Top, so the manager released your money. It’s been sitting around earning interest for a while.”

“Great. Can you tell me where the check was sent?” She didn’t trust that funds weren’t still being diverted into Louis’s bank account.

“I remember changing the remit to. Winter Falls, Florida, I think it was.”

“Terrific, Chrissie! Thanks for your help.”

“Well, that was easy,” she said as she hung up the phone. “Maybe Cassie can collect a million dollars per week after all.”

Number two on the list—Buffalo Barney’s Wild West Show. Balance of \$52,384.23.

“Hello, this is Mandy Maloney from Big Top Supplies. Buffalo Barney’s has an overdue balance with Big Top, and I’d like to know when we can expect payment.” Click went the line.

She dialed again. “This is Mandy Maloney again. I think we were cut off.”

“In your dreams, lady. I hung up on you. Get lost.”

“The outstanding balance is severely past due.”

“I could give a shit. Tell your troubles to someone who cares.”

“Can I speak with your manager?”

Clunk. A different voice came over the phone. “Yeah?”

Mandy went through the introduction again. “When can we expect your payment?”

“Never.”

“Why do you say never?”

“Davy Jones called me last week—said I had hit the jackpot and our slate had been wiped clean. Big Top is out of business. So we owe you nothing. Wrote it off already. Get it? I owe you nothing.”

“Who is Davy Jones?”

“Well, if you don’t know, lady, then I can’t help you. But he’s a nice guy and you ought to hire more like him. What a sorry piece of crap that Big Top is, anyway. Your products suck too. Now Three Ring—they have their act together.”

“Big Top is alive and well and is certainly not out of business. We shipped you a gross of balloons just yesterday, for that matter. Your past due balance is now due and payable.”

“Tough shit, lady. Not paying.” Click went the receiver.

“Now Three Ring—they have their act together,” she said mockingly as she hung up the phone. “Yeah, right. They invented the term ‘you suck.’”

Mandy had a sinking feeling that another Louis and Larry caper was about to be uncovered. She e-mailed Tiffany in human resources and asked, “Do we have an employee named Davy Jones? If so, where does he work?”

A few minutes later the reply came.

“Davy Jones was an employee here from 1997 until 2003. He was terminated for insubordination by Gary Blissler. He was hired back as a consultant in 2004. His last assignment was in credit and collections.”

“He was fired and then we hired him back? And now he works for lucky me. Great.” She shook her head in disbelief.

“Gary, do you know Davy Jones?”

“Davy Jones? Hmmm. Sounds familiar. Why?”

“You fired him and someone hired him back. Now he works for me, only no one knows who he is. Can’t find him anywhere.”

“Are you sure he still works here?”

“He’s calling up customers and telling them they don’t have to pay their bills. He’s saying Big Top is out of business.”

“I guess he’s still working here then.” He opened a file drawer and started looking for something. “You’re in luck. Here’s his file. Hey, get a load of this! I fired him for insubordination. He told me to go fuck myself when I asked him to come into my office.”

Gary kept reading, and by the expression on his face, the story was about to get even juicier. “Davy Jones was caught urinating in the coffee pot earlier the same day. I was preparing to discuss the complaint with him when the incident occurred.”

“Sounds like a real gem of a guy.”

“Aah, it’s all coming back to me now. People had been suspecting something wrong with the coffee for quite some time, but no one had any proof. A woman named Esther hated this guy so much that on this day, she came in at about four o’clock in the morning to spy on him. He showed up at about five thirty thinking he was alone. Right there at the coffee bar he unzipped and let ‘er rip right into the pot. Esther snapped a Polaroid picture. She grabbed the pot and ran down the stairs. She hid the pot, piss and all, until I arrived.”

“I doubt that the one psychology class I took in college equipped me to deal with anything like that.”

“I went home and drank heavily that night. That’s what I learned in college.”

“Where do you think he’s hiding?”

“Hard telling. But if you want my advice, I’d stake out the coffee machine. He’ll let down his guard sooner or later.”

The following morning at her daily staff meeting, Mandy got an earful from her collectors. As usual, Cassie stood out in the conversation.

“I’ve made more than my quota of calls every day but I’ll be damned if I can collect even a dime! I’ve been hung up on, called foul names, and screamed at—all because of someone named Davy Jones! I don’t want to go back to Gary. Please don’t make me.”

“Do any of you know who he is?”

—a resounding “NO.”

“Well, he’s here somewhere. We have to try to find him.”

“A long time ago there was a guy that worked here who I think was named Davy Jones. No one liked him. He stunk. I wonder if it’s the same guy.”

“You mean he would have been rated *You suck?*”

“No, I mean he smelled. Like rotten fish. All the time.”

“You couldn’t get near him, he smelled so bad. He wore the same blue shirt and pants every single day. The joke was that he went to Davy Jones’s locker at night and surfaced from the ocean every morning to come to work.”

“Gary didn’t mention the body odor—only that he peed in the coffee.”

Several people spit the contents of their mouths across the table. Coffee was sprayed all over the room and little brown dots covered every piece of paper in front of them.

“That’s it. There will be safe coffee in my office beginning tomorrow morning. Jerry, you’re responsible for making it look like we’re drinking the coffee from the communal pot. Don’t want him to become suspicious.”

Mandy thought for a minute. “If anything seems out of place, tell me. Tell your customers that this Davy Jones is not employed by Big Top. Big Top is still in business! Their balances are past due and payable immediately or we will begin legal action. We’re going to find this creep. Agreed?”

“Agreed!”

“The rest of you, keep your eyes and ears open at all times. If he smells as bad as all of you say he does, then we ought to be able to sniff him out pretty quickly. We must be vigilant. This is revenge!”

“We’ll find him, don’t you worry. Big Top is going to survive, or else!”

The team was excited for a change. This was a boost for Mandy. “Now go collect some money! We have quotas to meet! Tomorrow morning I want to hear about money in the bank!”

Once the room was empty, she called Gary. “You didn’t tell me about the b.o.”

“Aah, I’d forgotten about that. You could smell the guy a mile away. They didn’t teach you how to have that conversation in college psychology either.”

“So it’s one and the same guy?” “One and the same.”

“Well, if he’s hiding here somewhere, we ought to be able to smell him out, don’t you think?”

“Like I said, Davy Jones was no rose. That’s for sure.”

If Mandy heard one more customer mention the name Davy Jones, she was going to scream. Call after call—Davy Jones said this, Davy Jones said that. No wonder the collectors were so frustrated.

They had only been able to reduce the account receivable balance by about two hundred thousand dollars in the past couple of weeks.

They were never going to save Big Top at this rate.

“Sir, please. Davy Jones is not employed by Big Top Supplies. Your balance is due and payable to us. The debt of The Wild West Shootout Show has not been forgiven. Let’s talk reasonably and see what we can work out for payments.”

“Are you going to stop shipping to us?”

“Unless you’re willing to work out payments with us, we will have no choice but to suspend deliveries to you and begin legal action.”

“Big Top has the best cap guns. We sell them like crazy in our gift shop. We can’t live without them. How much do we owe you?”

“Four hundred and twenty-nine thousand, three hundred and thirty-three dollars.”

“I’ll cut the check today.” “You will?”

“I’ll be fired if we run out of those cap guns. I’ll cut the check.” Mandy had hung a bell outside her office. They were to ring it every time a customer agreed to pay. It wasn’t seeing much action. She grabbed the rope and began furiously ringing it. Everyone stood up to see what all the commotion was about.

“Wild West Shootout Show! Four hundred thousand! Davy Jones can’t beat us!”

The team began to applaud. Finally a positive moment had come in what seemed like a cloud of doom. Even the smallest motivation would do some good. Violet kept a stash of stickers that she doled out periodically for a job well done. Anything would help at this point. She went to borrow some.

As she headed over to the other side of the floor, a permeating odor began to fill her nostrils. It was a hideous smell.

“Where is he? You’ve found him. Davy Jones—he’s here. Who has him?” Her voice got louder and louder. “Where is he? I want him!”

Violet came out of her office when she heard the yelling.

“Mandy, relax. We haven’t found Davy Jones for you.”

“Then what’s that smell if it’s not Davy Jones?”

“The plumber has been here all morning trying to figure that out. During the revolt, it seems the little devils also filled the drains with coffee grounds.”

“Coffee grounds?”

“Yes, coffee grounds. Who knew that over time they turn to cement. The sink was clogged, and as the snake drilled through, the crap of a thousand years reared its ugly head—hence the smell of sewage.”

“From what I understand, that’s also the smell of one Davy Jones. Are you sure it’s not him?”

“I’m sure. We haven’t found him. You need to keep looking.” “You’re hiding him, aren’t you, Violet? You have a date with him tonight, don’t you? Fess up. I know you too well.”

“You’re losing your mind, girl. If he’s not wearing hundred-dollar cologne or better, then he’s not sleeping with Violet. I do draw the line in a few places. You need to get a life.”

Mandy, with her head down and her shoulders slouched, sank to the floor. “Now I’m totally bummed out. I’ve got to find this bastard before we go completely bankrupt. I’m desperate. Please help me! He’s got to be here somewhere.”

“He’ll turn up sooner or later. Just don’t forget the Lysol.” “Somehow I don’t think Lysol is going to do it. It certainly isn’t helping us with the sewage smell today, is it?”

“A little hundred-dollar cologne ought to fix us up in a hurry, don’t you think?” Violet winked and left Mandy in an exhausted heap on the floor.

After a short, frustrated cry, Mandy dragged herself back to her office. She couldn't get herself together enough to even think about calling the next customer on the list. "Oh crap, my pen's out of ink." She threw it down on the desk and rummaged through the drawer for another. "Why don't I have another pen?" In all the time she'd worked there, she had never needed to ask for supplies. They'd just magically appear whenever she ran out of something.

"This place is driving me crazy! What happened to the good old days?"

"Hey, who knows where we keep supplies around here? My pen ran out of ink and I need another notepad."

"Juliette keeps the key. It's a closet way back in the far corner. Grey door, next to the freight elevator. You'll find it."

Juliette gave Mandy the key and pointed her in the right direction. She wandered around, past more cubes toward the back of the building. She tried the key at the first grey door she came to. It was the janitor's closet.

"But the key works. That's odd," she thought. She wound around and came to the freight elevator. "Must be getting close. There it is." She spotted the door. When she tried the key, the door opened, but just barely. The tiny room was filled with boxes stacked to the ceiling. She had to squeeze herself through the small opening to get inside.

"We really need to learn to put things away around here."

She started trying to move the boxes out of the way so that she could move around. She tripped over a large pallet of items wrapped in shrink-wrap. The label read "Air Freshener."

"What do we need all this air freshener for? Who's doing the ordering? This place is filled with junk we'll never use."

On clicked the light bulb in her head. She started sniffing, pointing her nose in every direction. Nothing. She moved some more stuff out of the way and went further into the room. She sniffed some more. She thought it was starting to smell different, but couldn't be sure. A light was on back in the corner. Mandy headed in that direction. As she approached the light, the odor suddenly overwhelmed her. She covered her nose and mouth and wished she had brought a can of that air f reshener with her. Even spray-can floral would smell better than this.

"Aha!"

A pudgy red-headed man covered in freckles fell backwards out of his chair at the sound of Mandy's voice.

"I found you, Davy Jones! Did you think you could hide back here smelling like that forever?"

Stunned, he didn't move. He could only stare at this stranger who was yelling at him while holding her hand over her face. He tried to get off the floor, but several boxes had landed on him during his fall. He couldn't move.

"Are you Davy Jones?" "Yes. Who are you?"

"Let's just say there have been several organizational changes at Big Top recently, and you now report to me. And guess what—you're fired!"

“Oh, I don’t think so!” His voice was firm and adamant. “You are mistaken. I report to Mr. Larry Adams. You can’t tell me I’m fired. I only accept instructions from him.”

“Let’s get you up to speed, why don’t we? Bozo is dead. Louis Everly and Larry Adams were sent packing a few weeks ago. They had their sorry fat asses kicked right out of here. Biglar Topler has regained control of this company. Larry and his girlfriend Gertrude have gone to parts unknown without a penny to their names. So guess what—you’re fired.”

“Do you happen to have his phone number? I’d like to verify that with him.”

“GET OUT!”

Davy tried to get up but couldn’t. Mandy had to help him out from underneath the boxes. Just as she had been told, he was wearing a blue shirt and blue pants. She made a mental note not to touch anything with the hand that had touched Davy Jones. She was going to have to go home after this and decontaminate.

He started gathering papers from the desk.

“Put everything down and leave. You cannot take any paperwork out of this building. If I find anything personal when I clean out and disinfect the desk, I’ll have it delivered by courier to your home.”

“I was looking for a pen. I trust that you brought some paperwork for me to sign.”

“I think “you’re fired” ought to do it. No paperwork is necessary.”

“I’d think again if I were you. Last time I was fired I received quite a handsome silver parachute. I expect the same this time.”

“Silver parachute?” What was this guy talking about?

“I’ve heard of a golden parachute, but never a silver one. Would you care to fill me in?”

“Yes—a silver parachute. I was paid to cover my living expenses for a very generous period of time. I want that again.”

Mandy couldn’t help but chuckle. Where did people come up with this garbage? “Listen up, Mr. Davy Jones. You were not paid any ‘silver parachute.’ You were fired for pissing in the coffee pot. See, I wasn’t born yesterday. I did my research. Now get off your high horse and get out of here—now.”

“Well I don’t listen to a woman. You get off your own high horse and leave me alone.”

Mandy was clearly steaming mad and had turned as red as a lobster. That she even uttered the word “piss” showed that she was mad. She’d been swearing quite a bit lately. The stress was getting to her. “I’m going to say it one more time. Get out—right now—before I throw you out myself, you bastard!”

He seemed to get the message and started making his way out of the room. He passed within an inch of Mandy, right under her nose.

“You really do stink.”

“Thanks for the compliment. Bitch.”

Mandy followed as he made his way out of the building. She wasn't going to take any chances with this creep. As they passed by the collectors, she heard someone say, "PU!—what's that smell?" Heads began to pop up, and as they spotted Mandy storming after the blue shirt and pants, they began to applaud.

"She found him!"

"It's Davy Jones! He's been found!" "Yeah! Mandy found him! Way to go!"

"Cassie, go back to the supply room. There's plenty of air freshener there. We're going to need it," she said as she raced to make sure he got into the elevator.

The ride in the elevator was the longest of her life. The stench was overwhelming and there was no way to escape it. She escorted Davy out the front door and into the parking lot. She watched him get into a Bentley.

"Hey, Davy! When was the last time you got a check from Larry Adams?"

"What's it to you, cunt?"

"Might want to stop at the car dealer on the way home and see about trading that thing in."

He gave her the finger and sped off.

"—if they'll take it, that is. Hope they can get the stink out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Violet appeared at Mandy's door, out of breath.

"We don't have enough money in the budget for the TV commercials. We have to get one made today or we won't be able to get it on TV for Thanksgiving."

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll make the commercial ourselves. Run home and get your clown costume. Send as many of your people home to get theirs too. And practice this while you're driving. The melody is 'Jingle Bells.'" She thrust a piece of paper at Mandy and disappeared down the hall.

Dashing through the crowds

In a one-horse open sleigh

To Big Top's sale we go

Laughing all the way!

*Bells and whistles ring
Making smiles bright
Oh what fun it is to shop
At Big Top's sale tonight
Woo woo woo on the kazoo
Woo woo all the way
Oh what fun it is to shop
At Big Top's blowout sale!*

"What's she smoking these days? I can hardly wait to sing this while wearing my clown costume."

Mandy returned in her costume with those gorgeous ruby red slippers. They made it all worthwhile. The auditorium was filled with clowns, and the film crew was ready to roll. A small set in the front was lavishly decorated with blinking lights and garland. A huge sleigh sat in the middle.

A man stood at the microphone. "Attention, please. I need Mandy, Violet, Gary, and, uh, Butane Bob to come up front. I need the rest of you to find a seat, and I will let you know when we're ready for you.

"My, what attractive clowns you all are." He placed Gary in the middle of the sleigh with the girls on either side. He gave Butane Bob the once-over and shook his head. He was not sure what to do with him.

"Just stand over here to the left of the lion tamer. Perfect."

"When I say 'rolling,' I want you all to dance. Dance any way you want. I don't care. Just keep moving."

The lights were glaring and Mandy couldn't see anything in front of her. The music began to play, and then he said the word—"Rolling!"

Violet had to take off those clodhopper shoes of hers in order to get into the sleigh. Gary cracked his whip a few times. Butane Bob was so rigid that, even when Mandy started doing the bump with him, he barely moved. They had to have looked like they were the klutzes of the century—hardly like circus clowns.

"Cut! Fabulous!"

"OK, the rest of you fill in all around these four. Good, good." He repositioned a couple of clowns and then stood back to examine his work. "Now let's sing. And don't forget where the kazoo comes in. One, two, three."

They sang, off-key, Violet's version of "Jingle Bells." Playing the kazoo was the only saving grace of the whole commercial. They'd had plenty of practice over the years doing that, anyway.

"Fabulous. That's a wrap."

"A wrap?" Mandy looked at Gary. "We've been here less than ten minutes."

“Low-budget film.”

“Who sprang for the decorations and the sleigh?”

“Our old friend Gertie. We found them while we were cleaning out the storage and thought we could save some money. Three quarters of the space was filled with Gertie’s decorations. I found some very expensive German beer steins in her collection. I have to say, her Oktoberfest was the best bar none. Brats and sauerkraut and an ice cold keg of beer everyday for three weeks. I sure could use that beer right now.”

“I see we brought in the champagne glass too.” She pointed to the corner of the room

“That’s in case we need to have an after-Christmas sale too. Violet has been humming “Auld Lang Syne.” My guess is that she’s trying to cook up some more corny lyrics.”

One evening a few days before Thanksgiving, Mandy turned on the TV after another long day at work. She looked up from the mail when she heard “Jingle Bells” begin to play.

“Oh my God! There we are, singing and dancing like a bunch of goofs. Well, we are a bunch of goofs.”

“Doorbusters six a.m. to noon

“Fantastic savings on everything in the store.

“Biiiiigggg Tooooooop Bloooooowwout Saaaaalllllle!!!!”

“We’re doomed. All this hard work for nothing. No one is going to look at that sorry excuse for a commercial and then get up at six in the morning the day after Thanksgiving to shop at Big Top. That’s for sure.”

The corporate office of Big Top Supplies was closed on the Friday and Saturday after Thanksgiving. All the employees had been assigned to a store or the warehouse to help with the after-Thanksgiving rush. Black Friday, it’s called—the day retailers finally get out of the red and into the black, or so they say. But there could be a month of Black Fridays and Big Top would still not be able to see itself out of the red. Mandy and Violet were manning the phones at the warehouse. Gary was going to a store. He wanted to be part of the action, if there was any. They had each spent the past few weeks coaching the employees on how to take care of customers in the store.

“Keep smiling. Use ma’am or sir. Be polite no matter what.” Mandy got so sick of repeating these things over and over that one day she yelled, “This is life or death, and don’t you forget it.” That had seemed to drive the point home.

She decided to call Gramps to see if the message had made its way to the rank and file.

“Gramps, how are you doing? It’s Mandy Maloney.”

“Mandy! Everything’s terrific.”

“Are you ready for the holiday rush?” “I’m ready. You betcha.”

“Well, I’m counting on you to bring in some big numbers for the company.”

“My little lady is here to lend a hand. Everybody loves my little lady. She’s as sweet as can be.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re getting along for a change.”

“The day I went home, after you and that guy with the funny hair were here, I had a story to tell. We laughed so hard we were crying. And you know, I had never heard her laugh before—in fifty years, not once. Then, when the commercial came on, I jumped up pointing at the TV. ‘There he is!’ I told her. She’d thought I made him up. We laughed some more. We laugh every time it comes on. And it comes on a lot!”

“Gramps, I’m glad to hear you have everything under control. If you need anything, I’ll be on the warehouse line.”

“I’ll have the little lady give you a call. She’ll get a kick out of hearing your voice.”

“Bye, Gramps. Take care.”

Everyone was in place, exactly as planned, bright and early on Friday morning. The coffee was hot and the doughnuts were plentiful. Mandy and Violet took their assigned seats at a desk and waited. And waited. Gary called once to say that it was slow but steady. At about eleven, Mandy called Cassie’s cell phone to see what she was up to.

“Slow, very slow. I’d say there’s about two hundred dollars in the cash register.”

“Two hundred dollars? That’s it? We’re screwed. Cassie, go drum up business any way you can. Go stand out on the street. Show a little leg—anything to get people into the store! Didn’t anyone listen to my life or death speech?”

“That was a little over-the-top. Give us credit for a few things. We know you’re stressing out. We all are. Patience is a virtue; remember that. We’ll get through this one way or the other. Isn’t that what you tell me all the time?”

“Here’s our choice, as I see it. We either continue to be gainfully employed or see each other every day on the breadline. Which do you prefer?”

“OK, OK. I’ll call you again later this afternoon.”

Everyone assigned to phone duty sat patiently waiting for the phone to ring with an order. And they waited, and they waited, staring at the phone as if they could will it to ring.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

It was Mandy’s phone, and she was so shocked to hear it, it took her a moment to answer.

“Big Top Supplies. This is Mandy.”

“Mandy Maloney, you are in deep shit.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s your brother, William.” “How did you get this number?”

“I called directory assistance and someone at your headquarters gave it to me. You’re in big trouble with Mom for not showing up for Thanksgiving dinner.”

“I told her I wasn’t coming. I was working.”

“She wasn’t buying it. All she did was go on and on about her ungrateful daughter who ‘doesn’t even have the decency to come for Thanksgiving dinner.’ She went on and on about how much money she loaned you. How much money did you borrow, for God’s sake?”

“I paid it all back!”

“We saw you a couple times in the commercial dancing like a lunatic in a clown costume, along with a guy with crazy hair. I couldn’t convince her that that was better than you being there in person.”

“I give up, William. All she does is complain about why I can’t be more like you or Jillian. I can’t stand it anymore. And I always pick up the phone, no matter where I am when she calls. She has this sickening hold over me and everything I do. I can’t stand it!” Her blood was at the boiling point. And her brother—he had some gall to call her at work

“Mandy, calm down. Trust me, I get it. She’s picked on Barbara so much over the years, she’s filed for divorce. She can’t take it anymore either.”

“Divorce?”

“Trust me, I didn’t bring that up at the dinner table. I told her that Barbara’s father was ill and that she had to go to be with him. She said that that was fine with her since she didn’t like Barbara anyway. Why I ever married her, she would ‘never figure out.’”

“And Jillian just sits there cooing at that no-good husband of hers. Am I right?”

“You got it. He’s a bum, that’s for sure. He didn’t shave and wore a greasy old T-shirt to dinner. Then he let out a huge belch just as I took my last bite of pumpkin pie. I spit it out, I was so disgusted. Jillian thought it was funny.”

“Listen, William. I’m sorry I chickened out and left you to fend for yourself. I’m stressed out over Mom, and my job is on the line.

The company is in a very precarious position and we’re all working our butts off to pull out the holidays. She calls me all the time telling me to do this and do that. I just can’t take it anymore.”

“Me too—at all hours of the day and night. That’s another reason Barbara left. We couldn’t even have sex without the phone ringing. It’s like she knew.”

“How has Dad been able to stand it all these years?”

“He tunes it out. I think he’s probably deaf. He sat watching football all day. Didn’t even come to the dinner table.”

“I’m sorry you’re getting a divorce. I truly am.”

“I know, Mandy. You were always the only one who had a heart. How you ended up in this family, I will never know. One bit of good news for you, though.”

“What’s that?”

“The Christmas newsletter has already gone out. You didn’t get bashed too badly. No more than usual. If it hadn’t already gone out, after yesterday you would have been toast.”

“Listen, William. I’ve got to get back to work. Thanks for calling. Keep in touch.” She hung up the phone and laid her head on the desk. She was exhausted and was feeling very depressed.

“What’s the matter, Mand? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Violet always called her Mand when she wanted to show her sensitive side for a change of pace.

“My mother’s on a rampage and my brother’s getting a divorce.” “Is he cute? I need a date for New Year’s Eve.”

Mandy glared back at her. "Violet, there is just no business. What are we going to do?"

"It's not over until the fat lady sings. Or, what is it that Butane Bob says all the time? 'This will all be over once it's done?' Something like that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

WHERE IS MY VALIUM?

The Big Top headquarters building was dark except for one light in Biglar's corner office. Biglar sat behind his desk contemplating his fate. What was once Lulu hung in the corner. The red- and white-striped outfit that he adored stared back at him with an angry look. The helium tank stood tall but with all its balloons now hanging limply by its side. The once neat-as-a-pin desk was now covered with several inches of papers waiting to be read and signed. He had purposely not listened to his voice mail so that his mailbox would remain full and not allow any more messages to be left.

The banks were calling constantly and he was all out of things to say to them. The lawyers were not far behind. He had no choice but to close the company. All because of his own stupidity. He had no one to blame. He had let his family down. He had let Ronnie and Butane Bob down, the most loyal friends a man could have. Biglar had had to let Ronnie go for good. He couldn't justify having him on the payroll anymore. They had spent a lifetime together. It had been one of the most painful conversations of his life. Ronnie seemed fine. He kept saying that he was ready to retire. But Biglar knew better. Working for the Toplers was the only job he had in his entire adult life.

Next he would have to have the same conversation with Butane Bob, another truly loyal friend who had stuck by him through thick and thin. All this pain and heartache because of his own selfishness. Biglar had started to think that life was no longer worth living.

And those hardworking kids. Telling them would hurt the most. They gave their all, but he had nothing to give them in return. Mandy worked tirelessly trying to collect money. Violet was so creative and was getting the advertising back on track. Gary had redone the entire Web site and sales were starting to pick up. But it was too little too late. He held his head in his hands and admitted his defeat. He pulled the phone out of the wall and hurled it across the room. In one swift motion, he swept all the papers off the desk into a heap on the floor.

Then he walked over to the helium tank, put his lips over the nozzle, and took a long, deep breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

IT'S A STAMPEDE!

The phone woke Mandy with a jolt.

“Quick, turn on the news.”

The TV was on. She had dozed off on the sofa.

“It was a rough day for holiday shopping,” said the reporter. “Here at the Big Top Supplies store in Minneapolis, Minnesota, shoppers were lined up for the doorbusters. The doors opened promptly at six a.m. and the mad dash began. One woman fell in the stampede for bargains and lost her wig. But being beat to the bargains wasn’t going to stop her from looking her best while shopping.” The clip showed a woman lying on the floor, reaching for her wig that had flown off in the chaos. She and her precious headdress were being trampled by the crowd rushing in behind her. She stayed on the floor until she got it back onto her head. Once she got up, she primped her hair with her fingers and started running along with the rest of the shoppers. All this took place in the entrance of a Big Top Supplies store.

“Who is this?” she finally asked into the phone.

“Gary. Can you believe that? I’ve seen the video at least five times tonight.”

“Wow.”

“Hopefully tomorrow will be a better day.”

“Let’s hope. Get some sleep. Call me at the warehouse tomorrow.”

Mandy turned on the TV in the morning as she was getting dressed. Again the video clip was played of the woman and the wig. She saw it a third time when the national morning program came on, starting with, “At a Big Top Supplies store . . .”

The warehouse was buzzing. The phones were already ringing off the hook. “Send this! We’re out of this! Anything, send anything!” By ten, they were out of order pads. Mandy was scratching out orders on a piece of scrap paper when her phone rang again. “Hello, this is fulfillment. Mandy speaking.”

“Oh, Mandy, I got you!” “Who is this?”

“This is Mabel, Wilbur’s wife in Minnesota.”

“Wilbur?” She thought for a minute. “You mean Gramps?” “Gramps, that’s him.”

“How are you, Mabel? It is nice to finally talk with you.” “Mandy, we need stuff to sell. You know, that whole wig thing happened right here. She was just the sweetest girl. And pretty—why she felt she needed to wear a wig is beyond me.”

“You talked to her?”

“Sure I did. I helped her pick out some other things when she didn’t get the balloons she wanted, because they were all gone by the time she got that wig back on. We had a very pleasant conversation.”

“Mabel, thank you so much for your fine customer service.”

“This place is a hoot. Wilbur and I have more laughs now. Finally there’s something to keep us going. You know, busy hands are happy hands.”

“What do you need for the store?”

“Those balloons sold out right away. And we don’t have any face makeup or red noses left. We had over a hundred juggling kits and they’re all gone. The shelves are looking pretty bare. At least I’ve been able to give them a good cleaning. They hadn’t been dusted off in some time, I can tell you that.”

“I’ll fix you up, Mabel. Give my best to, uh, Wilbur.”

“He’ll be so excited when I tell him that I talked to you. You keep up the good work.”

“Thank you, Mabel. Bye.” At least Mabel had managed to put a smile back on Mandy’s face, if even only for a brief moment.

“Violet, I’m going to see if I can help the pickers fill some of these orders. No one has been by to pick up any new orders from us lately.”

Violet was talking and vigorously writing and waved her off, so Mandy headed down the hallway toward the picking and packing area. It looked strangely different to her, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on why. She spotted Biglar reading what looked like a huge plaque hanging on the wall that Mandy had never noticed before.

“That’s it. All the boxes have been cleared out of this hallway.

That’s what’s different,” she said to herself.

Biglar turned when he heard her voice. “Yes, the place is starting to shape up, isn’t it?” The tone of his voice seemed normal for a change.

“What are you reading, Biglar?”

“This is the building dedication plaque. I remember well the day it was placed here. My mother was a wonderful woman. I was very blessed to have been a part of her life.”

Mandy began to read the plaque aloud.

*On this 5th day of November, 1960
Big Top Supplies dedicates this, its
First warehouse.*

*May the joy and laughter of the circus
Fill its halls forever.
To Biglar, My Beloved Son.
Love, Mom*

“Wow, isn’t that special? Biglar, that should warm your heart.”

“I’d forgotten that it was even here. I hope that people will come by and begin to realize the passion and commitment that built this company. That was not what destroyed it.”

“I think they know that already or they wouldn’t be here pitching in on their day off.”

“I’ve been acting so terribly lately. I hope you’re right. Look at me—I’m a wreck. I’m smoking again, for crying out loud.” He held up his hand to show her the lit cigarette.

“Biglar, a cigarette is not going to solve your problems. You need to get rid of that. Go take a walk or go to a yoga class. Do something that will help clear your mind.”

“You’re right.” He impulsively threw the cigarette down the hall.

They stood in silence for a few seconds. “Biglar, why didn’t you ever get married?” Mandy was curious about Biglar since the day she met him.

“Aah, Mandy, I’ve never been very lucky in love. I had one true love in my life—Dolly, Louis’s wife.” “Louis’s wife?”

“Yes. We met in college and knew we were soul mates from the moment we met at a fraternity mixer. We planned our life together—marriage, children, a white picket fence. We were two peas in a pod.”

“What happened to make her decide to marry Louis?”

“We had a little spat one day. I don’t even remember what it was about. She wanted to hurt me and she knew that Louis was my best friend. So she put the moves on him right in front of me. I was devastated but young and too full of pride to confront her. I was best man at their wedding. I sobbed uncontrollably during the bridal toast, and Louis’s brother had to take over for me. I locked myself in my bedroom for a month after that.”

“But now that Louis is in jail, along with all his cohorts, don’t you think she’s regretting her mistake?”

“She still has a special place in my heart, after all these years. I don’t wish her any ill will. And then I met Bebe.”

“Bebe from the B Trio?”

“Yes, Bebe from the B Trio. Until her, I had never met anyone that could take Dolly’s place. But, you see, she was already taken. Bill was a fine man and a good friend. The attraction was mutual but off-limits for both of us. So you see, Mandy, I am very unlucky in love.”

They continued to talk for at least ten minutes before Mandy started to smell smoke. She began to walk up and down the hall, sniffing as she went.

“Do you smell that? Smoke? I can’t figure out where it’s coming from.”

“Mandy, over there!” Biglar was pointing at a stack of cartons that hadn’t yet been moved.

“Fire! Fire! Fire!” he screamed at the top of his lungs. Mandy was screaming too, while sticking her head in every nook and cranny of the place, looking for a fire extinguisher. A group of warehouse workers ran toward them. Butane Bob brought up the rear, extinguisher in hand.

He began spraying anything and everything. Once he reached the site of the fire, he sprayed that too. Then, thinking the fire was out, he bent over to inspect the box on the bottom. There were still some smoldering embers, and Butane Bob’s hair came just a little too close. Next thing anyone knew, his hair was flaming. Thinking quickly, he turned the extinguisher on his own head.

“Wooooo! What a rush that was! What the hell started that?” “Must have been Biglar’s cigarette. He was smoking.”

“Smoking! Have you lost your mind?” With that he sprayed the white foam all over Biglar, covering him from head to toe. “That’ll teach you. You need to get a grip, Biglar.”

The two white foamy men stood there staring at each other. One was so angry that he didn’t even notice that half of his hair was gone.

The other hung his head in shame. “I’m so sorry, Butane Bob. I don’t know what’s gotten into me lately.”

“You need to figure it out—and figure it out quick. All these people here are busting their asses for you. And what are you giving them in return? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! You are pathetic.” He turned and shouted to the onlookers as he stormed off, “He’s so worried about cutting costs, and look at him now. Doesn’t think twice about burning the place down!”

“Go home, Biglar,” said Mandy. “I’ll call you tonight and let you know how we did in sales today. You’re making things worse by being here, so please leave.”

“Mandy, I feel like a dope. How can I make this up to him?”

“Only you can decide that, but I’ll tell you—an appointment at a top notch hairdresser might help. As horrible as his hair is, he’s really pretty vain about it. And stop smoking! As if things weren’t bad enough already, you’re killing yourself to boot!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

YUM! YUM!

“No, Cassie, there’s no Christmas party this year. Money is so tight—you know that.”

“We’re all stressed out. A little party would help take the edge off. Just a little party, Mandy? We’ve been working like dogs lately.” She was begging in true Cassie fashion. “It’s so depressing around here. When what’s-her-name was here, this place sparkled like the North Pole at Christmas time.”

“You mean Gertrude?”

“Yeah, Gertrude. Now we’re stuck with the Fourth of July all year round.”

“If you don’t like it, why don’t you change the decorations your- self? Gertrude isn’t around anymore.”

“I can’t do that. A long time ago, before Gertrude was fired, I went to get a box of candy valentine hearts from the big Cupid in her cube, and the next thing I knew, she was in my face threatening me within an inch of my life not to mess with her stuff. Everyone else had been helping themselves. I thought that’s what it was there for. But I guess I was the only one that got caught. I won’t go near that cube now. She put the fear of God in me.”

“Maybe Gertie was afraid of you homing in on her territory.”

“Me and that creep? You’ve got to be kidding! Notice, no one else will change the decorations either. I can’t be the only one she scared the crap out of.”

She thought for a minute. “How about . . . what if we all bring something? We’ll have a potluck! That’s it—a potluck.”

Mandy had a stomachache after every company potluck she’d ever attended. She cringed at the thought. She’d rather eat at Burger Boy than suffer through a potluck. But, as usual, she was ready to acquiesce to Cassie.

“OK, Cassie, a potluck it is. I’ll bring in the hot dogs if you make the chili for chili dogs. Deal?” Mandy had made chili dogs for the group a few times as a treat. They loved them so much that they asked her to make them every week or so.

“Deal! I’ll send around a sign-up sheet for everyone else.”

“And let’s include Gary’s and Violet’s groups. It’ll help make it more festive, don’t you think?”

“Ugh.”

“What do you mean, ‘ugh?’”

“That’s a lot of people. I’ll have to make a lot of chili.”

Money was on everyone’s mind since they no longer got those ten-percent raises they had become used to. On top of that, they had all taken the mandatory cut in pay. With the old big fat paychecks, they’d all gotten used to living beyond their means. They were starting to feel the pinch. And the prospect of the unemployment line loomed heavily.

“Don’t worry, Cassie. I’ll give you some money toward the chili, OK?”

A smile came back to her face—“OK!”—and off she went.

When the sign-up sheet came around, beside Mandy’s name was already written “hot dogs”. It was the typical office potluck list of spinach dip, brownies, and green bean casserole. All were things that made Mandy’s stomach turn. Suddenly she noticed that next to Violet’s name Cassie had typed “paper plates and napkins.” How come Violet got off the hook so easily?

“Gary, how come Violet gets to bring the plates and napkins to the potluck?” She called him on the phone as soon as she saw the list.

“Mandy, let me ask you a few questions. Do you enjoy potluck lunches at the office?”

“No, they give me a stomachache.”

“And can a little Pepto-Bismol cure that stomachache for you?” “Usually. Sometimes I need a little Imodium to go along with it.”

“Good, then consider yourself lucky. If Violet brought food that he cooked in her own kitchen, we would be transporting you to the emergency room for certain. One thing Violet is not is Julia Child.”

“Really? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. Doesn’t she know that the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach?”

“Uh, no. One time she invited me and my wife over for dinner. She had a date with some guy she was hot and heavy with. She had asked my wife for her recipe for chicken Madeira. She forgot to get the Madeira wine, so she decided to wing it. She substituted some Boones Farm, I think. It was horrible.”

“They still sell Boones Farm?”

“That or Ripple. It was one of the two. The meal was awful! We stopped at Burger Boy on the way home. I don’t think she ever saw that guy again. Even the sex couldn’t keep him coming back for more.”

“Wow. She’s that dumb, huh?”

“A couple times she tried her hand at cookies and the like. One time the cookies turned into a bag of crumbs before they made it to the office. She left the bag on the table with a sign that said “help yourself.” No one did. Her cooking prowess is well known around here.”

“Well, you don’t want me cooking either, but at least I can follow a recipe if I have to. Stopping at the grocery store for hot dogs is about as good as it gets, however.”

“Hot dogs should be pretty safe. Everyone is really looking forward to this. We’re all pretty stressed out around here. I’m glad you came up with this idea.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank Cassie. I get indigestion just thinking about a potluck.”

On the day of the party, Mandy came in early to get things set up. She had a couple long tables that she arranged in the main aisle. She put Christmas-red and -green paper tablecloths on them and placed a small poinsettia in the middle as a centerpiece. Some of the employees had ventured into the decorating arena that had been off-limits in past years. There were stockings and snowflakes and even a few twinkling lights draped over the cubes. It looked very festive. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Throughout the morning the tables gradually filled up with goodies. At around eleven o'clock, the Crock-Pots started coming out with hot food in them.

"Mandy, I'll put my chili over here, next to the hot dog steamer."

Cassie was waving at her from across the floor.

"Turn my steamer up a touch while you're there, please, Cassie."

A few minutes later Violet appeared with a huge box of plates, napkins, and silverware. "Where do you want this, Mandy?"

"Hey, Violet! How's it going? I haven't seen you in a few days." "I've been out shopping—can't you tell?" She winked as Mandy led her to the food tables. They took a minute to survey all the food and find a spot for the utensils. Violet opened each Crock-Pot and inspected the contents as she passed by.

"Not much chili in this one. Is there more somewhere else?" Mandy peeked into Cassie's pot. It was not even half full.

"I gave her forty dollars to make enough for sixty people. What was she thinking? What are we going to do? Everyone thinks they're getting chili dogs for lunch."

"There's plenty of food here. No one's going to starve, that's for sure."

"They've been looking forward to chili dogs. It's not like we splurged on a Christmas ham or turkey, for God's sake."

Mandy tried to think for a minute while Violet just stared at her. "I know," she said. "You go to Burger Boy and get four quarts of chili, and we'll mix it in. Quick, Violet. Go. If anyone catches you, just tell them that Butane Bob was craving a cinnamon shake and that you had to get it for him so he would stop hounding you for some idiotic project he's making you work on."

"Can you call over there first with some sob story so I can get it for free?"

"Violet, get out of here now! Hurry!"

About fifteen minutes later, Violet appeared with an enormous handbag over her shoulder that was concealing the contraband chili.

Mandy enlisted Gary to hold back the hungry masses. Violet wedged herself in between the table and Gary.

"Distract them. Quickly."

Gary looked at her dumbfoundedly. "What am I supposed to say?"

Violet yelled out, "Look, there's Dimple Vanderdoober! What's she doing here?"

The crowd was stunned by this remark and turned away from the food. Violet slipped a container of chili into the Crock-Pot. When they turned back, she was calmly stirring and serving up more chili dogs.

Gary got the hint. They went through this routine again and this time Gary yelled out, "Look, it's Gertie! She's come to decorate the cube." This caused such a commotion that Mandy saw it as an opportunity to take away the empty container evidence.

"Good job, you two. Fooled them once again."

"Violet, can you please serve me some of that wonderful chili?" It was Cassie.

"It will be my pleasure." She heaped on an extra helping.

Cassie must have been hungry. She couldn't wait to sit down and started eating right there in front of them. "Mmmm, this is good. But I don't remember putting any onions in my chili." She was examining her plate closely.

Thinking quickly, Violet said, "They must have been in the can of tomatoes, don't you think?"

"Hmmm, must have been. This is so good. I'm so glad I have another whole pot of this at home."

Violet whispered in Gary's ear, "Mandy is going to shit when she hears that. She gave her the money to make enough for everyone."

"Never a dull moment at the circus, is there? Come on, let's sneak into Mandy's office. I brought gifts."

"Gifts? What a surprise! You shouldn't have."

They both filled up their plates and made themselves comfortable in Mandy's office. A plate with only a plain hot dog and a few chips was sitting on her desk.

"Potlucks make her sick," said Gary.

"I'll take anything, so long as I don't have to cook. I'll be taking home a plate for dinner, that's for sure," said Violet as she began to eat from her heaping plate of food.

Gary stood in the doorway and called for Mandy. "Come on. I've got gifts! Hurry!"

"Gifts? I didn't get you anything," said Mandy as she came walking closer.

"That's OK. It's the season of giving, not receiving."

First Gary handed Violet a small box wrapped in sophisticated gold paper. Then he handed Mandy a much bigger box wrapped in cheery, childlike, Santa-Claus paper.

"Go ahead—open them."

They both gingerly began to unwrap their boxes. Both were a little embarrassed by this gesture since neither of them had given any thought or energy to any Christmas shopping this year. They were just too tired.

Violet found a gift certificate to Vivian's Closet, a local lingerie store in her box

"Gary, thank you so much. That's very sweet of you. Lord knows I can always use something new and sexy for when Mr. Right comes along. Merry Christmas." She reached over and kissed him on the cheek.

Mandy kept unwrapping her big box. Finally she revealed a twelve-speed, extra-heavy-duty stainless steel blender. She admired it as best she could, considering Violet's lingerie.

"Thank you, Gary. This is very kind of you." She put it on the floor, out of sight.

"Don't put that down. Let me see it, Mandy." Violet was having trouble wiping the huge smile off her face. "What were you thinking? Lingerie for me and a blender for Mandy? Are you the kind of guy that buys his wife a vacuum cleaner for her birthday and saves the sexy stuff for his girlfriend?"

"Give me a little credit, would you, Violet? New underwear is the perfect gift for you with all the action yours gets. It was the first thing that came to my mind for you. Now as for Mandy, she was much more difficult. But I thought, 'What would Mandy like that would loosen her up a little?' Lingerie would only sit in her drawer with the tags still on."

"What makes you think I need to loosen up?"

"Well, let's put it this way. Vivian's Closet didn't come to mind when I went looking for a present for you. So I thought I would talk you into having a party and you could use the blender to make margaritas. That would certainly loosen you up."

"Can't say that I understand that logic, but thank you for the gift. I'll be sure to schedule that party as soon as it lets up around here. I'll have to practice making those margaritas in the meantime so that I have the recipe down before the party." She tried to cover up how angry she really was, but without much success.

Mandy felt deflated. These were her friends, or so she thought. Gary was really sweet to give her a gift, but she couldn't get past that it was a blender of all things. She was working too hard and was too tired—that's all. Her Christmas spirit was lost.

"Hey, Mandy, we almost forgot to tell you—and you are never going to believe it!"

"What? Spill the beans!" Gossip was just the thing to get her mind off the blender.

"Cassie told Gary and me that she loved her chili so much, she has another pot of it at home for dinner."

"Get out of town! You're kidding me, aren't you?"

Gary and Violet slowly started to get up from their chairs and began to make their way to the door. "Oh, no. It's the God's honest truth. She admitted it point-blank—another big pot at home in the fridge."

She pretended to throw the blender at them as the two raced down the hallway

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE BIGLAR FINISH

The threesome was on cloud nine at the prospect of today's morning update meeting. The books were closed and the word was that they had finished the year with a small but nonetheless actual profit. All the long days and sleepless nights were about to bear the fruit of their labor. And they owed it all to a stampede.

"I've heard from accounting that it's good news!"

"Maybe we can take a little vacation together for some R & R." "Violet, haven't we spent enough time together lately? Maybe some time apart would be the perfect vacation this time. What do you think?" The last thing Gary wanted to do was introduce his children to a vacation with Violet

"I don't want to go on vacation alone. Can't we go together? The Bahamas, Aruba—somewhere warm and sunny with lots of piña coladas. How about a cruise? That would be fun. Lots of booze and good-looking men. I need that right about now."

"Violet, a vacation sounds great, but I think I need to move on. I'm so stressed out between my mother and this insane asylum, I need to find a permanent change of scenery. Plus, I don't feel like competing with you on a boat full of single men. You'd win, hands down."

"Aw, come on, Mand, it's easy to look like me. Contact lenses and a dye job. I'll fix you up before we go—no problem. But you're the ray of sunshine around here. What could possibly be so horrible that you'd want to leave town completely? This place, I can understand, but leave me and Gary? You can't. We'd miss you too much." She pouted.

"Read this. It's the Christmas newsletter. I brought it to work so that I wouldn't be tempted to read it every time I saw it sticking out of my Christmas card basket at home. I didn't feel like being irritated over and over again. I couldn't bring myself to throw it out, and I knew I wouldn't ever have time to read it while I'm here." She handed the green glittery piece of paper to Violet. Gary read over her shoulder

Dear Family and Friends,

It has been a wonderful year, all things considered. William, our eldest, turned forty this year. That makes us feel very old. He is a millionaire many times over. We are quite proud of his uncanny ability to sue the pants off everyone he comes in contact with. His wife leaves us cold and we wish he would give us grandchildren, but other than that we don't worry about him.

Jillian, our youngest, is happily married to a fine man, Joe. She is giving us a grandchild next April. We are thrilled. Her career will be motherhood, the same as her own mother. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Mike had a bout with gallstones in August but is finally feeling much better. I started taking medicine for high blood pressure. Other than that we are both feeling fairly healthy.

Our beloved Fifi is now in doggy heaven. We miss her so much. She was our constant companion for over twelve years.

Mandy, our middle child, continues to plague us with disappointment. She has been employed since the beginning of the year—at what, however, we don't know. But we are actually quite surprised that she has held a job for this long. You may have seen her in a commercial for Big Circus Stuff. We are hopeful that this is a start to a career in television.

Wishing you all the happiest of holidays and a wonderful new year!

The Maloneys

“Are you sure you’re not adopted?” said Gary. “You should burn that and forget about it.”

“Why didn’t you just throw it in the trash? Why do you have to keep tormenting yourself with it?”

“You know that invisible hold my mother has over me. I can’t bring myself to do it.”

“Gallstones and the dog had higher billing than you,” said Violet. “That’s not enough to make you get rid of this garbage? You can’t leave us, Mandy. Tell your mother you moved and stay here. It doesn’t seem to me like she’ll ever come looking for you. Change your cell phone number. She’ll never find you. And besides, Biglar and Butane Bob like you the best. You’ll be made a vice president soon, I know it. The only way I’ll get to move up the ladder is to be dragged along on your coattails.”

“Yeah, Mandy, I need your coattails too,” said Gary with a grin.

“I’ve got to figure out something. I just can’t take it anymore.”

“Where’s Butane Bob?” As they passed his office, they couldn’t help but notice that the firehouse was strangely dark. “I wonder where he could be. He’s never more than a few steps behind us.”

As they rounded the corner to Biglar’s office, they were greeted by a strange voice. “Good morning, good morning. Please, please come in.”

A man they did not recognize was showing them into Biglar’s office. Or was it? The room had been completely cleaned out—the desk, chairs, pictures, everything gone. Three metal folding chairs sat in the middle of the room. An office chair sat beside a very small desk that had two separate piles of manila folders on it. Two other men nodded and greeted them politely.

“My name is Nikhil Ismathbatcha. I am here to inform you, at the request of Mr. Biglar Topler, that all functions of this company are now being outsourced to India. I am the outsourced CEO. I work for much less money than Mr. Biglar, and I do a much better job.

This is Kadar Sathyamurthy, the outsourced chief financial officer, and next to him is Srini Badugu, the outsourced information systems manager. They do a much better job too, for a cheaper price.”

Gary leaned over and whispered to Mandy, "Did they give him a copy of the Paul Brown IT translation dictionary? Do they know about pig latin in India? He'll be lost without it. We all were in the beginning."

"Mr. Butane Bob has left the company to fulfill his obligation to the Burger Boy. He won something called a cinnamon shake contest."

Mandy and Violet could barely contain their surprise. "They gave him big money to do commercials. After that he intends to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a hairdresser. Hopefully he will be his own first customer." He shook his head and appeared bewildered.

"How did he get his hair like that?"

They laughed, breaking at least some of the tension. "Long story."

"Here is your relocation package to India, should you choose to accept it. Otherwise, here is a severance package. Mr. Biglar Topler is being very generous in paying you with full benefits for five years." He began to digress. "You really should consider moving to India. Live cheap. Curry. Mmmm. The best there is. Visit the Taj Mahal. Very beautiful place. Everything is very good there. You will like India." None of them could believe what they were hearing.

"Mr. Biglar regrets not being here with you today. However, the past year has been very stressful for him. He has returned to his circus in Africa to do his life's work. Plus, he keeps mentioning someone by name of Bebe he couldn't wait to see again. Anyway, he is also planning a circus in India, so he doesn't lose touch with the operation of the company.

"I will need your decision by end of day today. Do you have any questions to ask me to help you decide?"

"Easy choice for me." Gary was the first to speak up. "I'm taking the severance package. My wife and kids would never move to India. I ought to be able to find a job here within five years, don't you think?" He thought for a minute. "I've developed a fine-looking resume during my tenure here at Big Top. Let's see—a plumber, TV commercial star, warehouse clerk, hatchet man, and lion tamer. Nope, staying here—finding a job will be a cinch."

"Excellent choice, Mr. Gary. Excellent choice."

"Are there any cute guys in India?" Violet piped up next.

"Aah, many, many men. All good-looking and in need of a good woman. Come, come to India. You will find a good husband."

"Can I take that cruise I've been wanting first and then let you know? Maybe I can find a guy here without moving all the way to India. That can be my backup plan."

"No, Miss Violet, I must have an answer today. No time to waste. I have a company to run."

"What are you going to do, Mandy?"

"Me? I'm going to India. I don't even need to think twice about it. I've always wanted to travel and see new places. At least there my mother won't be able to call me every ten minutes to tell me what a failure I am. Do they even have phones in India?"

"Phones? Yes, we have phones. Look, latest technology." He picked up a very small and sleek cell phone to display to the ignorant Americans

“Hopefully I’ll be permanently written out of the Christmas newsletter by moving away.”

“Good, good, good. We have one in, one out, and one on the fence.” He handed a package of papers to Gary and a different one to Mandy.

Gary signed quickly and handed the papers back to the out-sourced CEO. He rushed out of the room, waving to the women as he left.

“We’ll be in touch.”

Mandy began to review her package very carefully, examining every line.

“Hey, it says here my yearly salary is fifteen thousand US dollars. I can’t live on that. I could go back to Burger Boy and make that, without all the headaches.”

“You have been outsourced. That is what your salary is on out-sourced pay scale. It is very cheap to live in India. I am the outsourced CEO and you can’t make more than me. So in or out? What’s it going to be?”

“This place really is one clown short. You can have this back. I’d like the same thing you gave to Gary, please.”

“Me too.” Violet got on the bandwagon.

They flipped immediately to the last page and signed without reading a thing. The outsourced CEO smiled as they handed him the papers.

“What do you mean by one clown short?” He was curious about the American expression.

“You’ll figure it out soon enough. Let it be a surprise. Come on, Violet. Let’s go book that cruise.”

With a huge sense of relief, they both walked out of the room, ready for whatever the future might hold. The outsourced CEO flopped into the chair behind the desk.

Fzzzzzzzzzzttttttt.

The two stopped dead in their tracks and burst out laughing.

Mandy giggled, “Well, I guess this is all over now that it’s done.

End.