



a novel

She's the Boss

Lisa Lim

she's the boss

- [Title Page](#)
- [Chapter One](#)
- [Chapter Two](#)
- [Chapter Three](#)
- [Chapter Four](#)
- [Chapter Five](#)
- [Chapter Six](#)
- [Chapter Seven](#)
- [Chapter Eight](#)
- [Chapter Nine](#)
- [Chapter Ten](#)
- [Chapter Eleven](#)
- [Chapter Twelve](#)
- [Chapter Thirteen](#)
- [Chapter Fourteen](#)
- [Chapter Fifteen](#)
- [Chapter Sixteen](#)
- [Chapter Seventeen](#)
- [Chapter Eighteen](#)
- [Chapter Nineteen](#)
- [Chapter Twenty](#)
- [Chapter Twenty One](#)
- [Chapter Twenty Two](#)
- [Chapter Twenty Three](#)
- [Chapter Twenty Four](#)
- [Chapter Twenty Five](#)

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by Lisa Lim



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Chapter One



THWACK! TWHACK!

The hood of my Mini Cooper smashed into rolling tumbleweeds as I sped across the plains. Twenty minutes later, I swung my car into Lightning Speed Communication's parking lot. After circling the lot several times, I negotiated a rather tight parking spot between two Chevy pickup trucks.

Sandwiched between the two monster trucks, I was clambering out of my Mini Cooper when a silver Corvette flew into a reserved parking spot and came to a screeching halt.

Show off.

Men who drove Corvettes usually had something to prove. The door clicked open and a tallish, broad-shouldered man got out of the car and straightened himself. The smell of his cologne, co-mingled with the smell of success, clung to him like an invisible mist. He was extremely well-coiffed, clad in a gray suit, single-breasted with peak lapels. I noted the high collar and working buttons on the cuff, left unbuttoned. *PHWOAR!* This guy wears his suit as comfortably as most men here wore jeans. His effortlessly chic attire screamed of good tailoring and simply stated, "I am definitely not from Pocatello, Idaho."

"Hi." I smiled delicately, just the right amount to accentuate my cheekbones.

He acknowledged my presence with a nod and gave me the visual once over, up and down assessing the basics. When his steely eyes settled on my skirt, his demeanor instantly shifted. The hard set of his shoulders revealed his disapproval.

I rarely ever felt underdressed. Nonetheless, next to Mister I-just-flew-in-from-Milan, I felt like a bedraggled beach bum in my denim mini, cotton tank top and flip flops.

I began to quail under his considering look. Nervously, I reached for my Ray-Bans perched atop my head.

Today, like most days, my hair was styled in a loose, wind-swept ponytail, giving me the tousled and unkempt look, which I loved because it allowed

me to indulge in my inner messiness. What I *didn't* love was how chunks of my hair got tangled up in the metal hinges.

I yanked, tugged and twisted at my Ray-Bans but they refused to budge.

“Damn it!” I uttered a low curse, tugging frantically. Finally, I made an almighty effort and yanked harder, freeing my sunglasses and snapping off chunks of hair in the process.

Great. This is why I had unwanted bangs.

By the time I'd emerged from my curtain of uneven bangs, Mr. Corvette had already disappeared.

I breezed into the office, humming “Takin’ Care of Business,” punctuating the bass slide with a particularly impressive air-guitar performance. In the midst of all my head banging, I ran smack-dab into Hillary, a fellow ‘soop’ (short for supervisor).

“The new director is here,” she hissed. “He just moved into town, all the way from Palo Alto, California.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed brightly. “What’s he like?”

Hillary opened her mouth and seemed on the verge of saying more, but she didn’t. “I’m trying not to be an office gossip,” she said woodenly instead.

The expression on my face indicated that I found this a very disappointing position for her to take. Let’s face it, while no one claims to *like* office gossip, everybody enjoys it.

I lifted an inquiring brow. “Should I have cause for concern?”

Hillary managed a micro-smile. “You’ll find out soon enough. We have a meeting at Conference Room Seven in fifteen minutes. Don’t be late!” With that, Hillary turned on her combat boots and stomped off.

With a deep sigh, I started for my cubicle, passing other cubicle dwellers as I walked by. How I yearned for my very own office. It didn’t have to be anything fancy. Just something a little bigger than a coffin-sized cubicle. Really. My cubicle was so small I almost needed an oxygen mask just to sit in it.

I had barely sat down at my desk when Rick’s head popped over my cubicle partition. “Karsynn, I have an escalation.”

It was much too early in the day for this. “What’s it about?”

“The caller insists that he will only speak to a supervisor.”

“Why?”

“He says it’s highly technical.”

“Give me a minute.” I fired up my computer and slipped on my headset. I was looking forward to this call with all the enthusiasm I usually reserve for laundry. “Transfer him to me. Extension 488.”

Seconds later, my phone beeped. “Good morning, sir. My name is Kars and I’m a supervisor here at Lightning Speed Communications. Now, Rick tells me that you have a very technical issue.”

“Yes,” the caller replied haughtily, “highly technical.” Huge emphasis was placed on the word *technical*.

“OK sir . . .” I adjusted my headset so it sat comfortably in my ear. “Tell me about this technical issue.”

“I’m signing up for online access and it’s asking me to register. The first question is: ‘What is your name?’ So what should I do?”

I rubbed my temples. “Err, type your name . . . perhaps?”

“And the next question is: ‘What is your email address.’ So what do I put down?”

“Your email address,” I said, steeling myself to patience.

“That seemed to do the trick,” the caller muttered, seemingly surprised. “How did you know what to do?”

Um, I thought cynically, I used my brains.

I sat back and sighed heavily. This caller would have stretched the patience of a saint. Fifty million cockamamie questions and light years later, I thanked him for calling and released the call. I checked my watch. Shoot! I was late for the meeting.

“Rick?” I called.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll be in a meeting for the next hour or so. If there are any more escalations, you can take care of it since you’re the only team lead in charge right now, OK?”

“Got it,” said Rick, sitting in his pile of junk and yet his garbage can was curiously empty. Clearly, he was not a believer in the old adage that a tidy desk means a tidy mind. It never ceases to amaze me how he can work in such filth. I’m not that fussy, but I was brought up with certain standards of hygiene.

I found myself staring helplessly at the ever growing mound of dust and debris. It was so thick I could hardly see the surface of his desk. “Rick!” I coughed loudly as I walked past his cubicle. “Seriously. It’s like Operation Desert Storm in here.”

“Oh.” He looked up and smiled at me benignly. “I’m not asthmatic so the dust doesn’t bother me.”

“But it bothers your neighbors.” I sneezed into my left hand because I only really use my right. “And it bothers me.”

“All right,” said Rick sourly, “I’ll clean my desk next week.”

I shook my head in polite disbelief and started toward the conference room.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said in a small voice and slipped into the empty chair next to Pamela. Hmm. The atmosphere became mighty frigid.

Oh what fresh hell! My eyebrows almost collided with my bangs.

Mr. Corvette was standing in front of the conference room.

“Now!” he snapped. “Since some of you here are late to the meeting, allow me to properly introduce myself. My name is Carter Lockwood. Dick Jones has officially resigned and as of today, I am the new site director of this call center.” He continued his sordid soliloquy and began pacing the floor, moving with the easy rolling gait of a man who spends most of his time in the boardroom.

“Company dress code!” His deep voice carried across the room. “Why are we not enforcing it across the board?”

His question was met with silence. I shrank in my seat and didn’t dare glance at him for fear he’d put me on the spot. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him walk up to Pamela. “Please pass these out.” His tone was brisk as he handed her a stack of papers. Pamela took a copy and handed the stack over to me. I helped myself to a copy and passed the stack along to Jewel. Then I quietly skimmed the memo.

Unacceptable business attire:

- * Miniskirts (skirts shorter than 3 inches above the knee)
- * Underwear as outerwear
- * Tank tops, tube tops, halter tops with spaghetti straps (straps must be at least 3 inches wide)
- * Beach wear, and that includes flip flops
- * Midriff length tops
- * Provocative attire (lace or sheer clothing)
- * Off-the-shoulder tops, sleeveless tops or dresses (worn without a cardigan or blazer)
- * Workout clothes or shoes

- * Evening wear
- * Torn, dirty or frayed clothing
- * Anything too short, too tight, or low-cut

Department managers and supervisors must enforce the Company Dress Code.

1. If an obvious policy violation occurs, the department supervisor will hold a discussion with the employee and ask the employee to go home and change his/her attire immediately.
2. Repeated policy violations will result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

A sudden loud voice made me jump. “Karsynn Higginbotham! Pamela Pornero! Jewel De’Nyle!” Carter commanded to all and sundry, “The three of you, please come up to the front of the room.”

Pamela and I exchanged identical raised eyebrow expressions and traipsed to the front.

Jewel sidled up to me. “What’s going on?”

I shrugged weakly. “No idea.”

Carter stood before us and I tried to remain quiet and confident under his open appraisal. To avoid his glowering gaze, I found myself staring at his mouth. It was practically another presence in the room.

If loose lips sink ships, then Carter Lockwood’s lips would sink an entire fleet.

I summoned up a smile when I realized Carter’s eyes had rested on me.

“You’re Karsynn, right?” he asked, nostrils flaring.

“Yep.”

“And you’re a supervisor, am I right?” There was an uncomfortable hard edge to his voice as he said this.

“Uh-huh.” I squared my shoulder blades.

“Then why are you dressed like *that*?”

“Like what?” I stared at him nonplussed.

Was it wrong to dress like a surfer girl when I don’t actually surf?

“Like *that*!” he barked.

Humph. It’s a good thing he refrained from using any derogatory names. I’ve always wanted to say, “YOU BETTER LAWYER UP BECAUSE I’LL SEE YOU IN COURT!”

Not that I'd ever follow through with my threat. It just sounded so cool.

"What sort of example are you setting?" Carter demanded, making no effort to hide his smug contempt.

Under his scrutinizing gaze, my skin began to prickle and my confidence waned. He made me feel horribly self-conscious about my short skirt that was showing acres of bare legs. How I longed for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

"I-I . . ." It came out like a frog's croak. I found myself become correspondingly more tongue tied.

Then Carter turned his attention to Pamela and Jewel. "And I understand that the two of you are team leads."

"Yessssireee," was their sassy reply.

"Then act and dress like you're team leads!" Then he turned and fixed me with an eagle glare as if I was equally culpable for their decision to dress like hookers.

I was not.

If Pamela and Jewel wanted to dress like that, so be it.

Let it rest. That is the Buddhist way.

Yes. I am sometimes a Buddhist. And achieving Zen is no mean feat. It takes a *helluva* lot of effort to attain nothingness. And then what do you have?

Nothing. Nada. Zilch. But that is the goal of enlightenment, I guess.

Taking a deep breath, I began silently meditating like a Tibetan monk.

OHM . . . OHM . . . OHM . . . SABBE . . . SATTA . . . SUKHI . . . HONTU . .

.

It means: May all beings be happy.

It didn't seem to be working. Carter was far from happy. Far, far, far from it. He wheeled around and addressed the entire room. "Everyone, listen up! This is a fine example of how you should *not* dress. And because Karsynn, Pamela and Jewel have clearly violated our company dress code . . ." He left a pause so dramatic everyone tensed. "I am sending them home to change."

There was a collective snort of laughter and I found myself blushing in shame at being spoken to like that in public. I held my head up high and practically split my face into two, pretending that it didn't faze me.

Face like thunder, Carter's voice descended to a single ominous note.

"*Capisce?*"

"*Capisce,*" I replied through gritted teeth, taking a break from being

Buddhist.

“Good.” Carter gave me a short, tight smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Forget all this attaining enlightenment! Forget all this pseudo-profound Zen teachings! I glared at Carter with blistering scorn, taking a silent inventory of the countless ways I could exact my revenge.

God and Gautama Buddha! How I hated this man.

His bluntness set me on edge.

What did he think we were? Cattle at a livestock auction?

“For now, the three of you can return to your seats.” His tone was harsh, an order rather than a request. “After this meeting, I expect you to go home and change into something more appropriate.”

Pamela and Jewel returned to their seats, giggling like a pair of giddy schoolgirls. Still reeling, I walked back to my chair and sat down with a huff. “Excuse me?” I raised my hand. “There seems to be a double standard here. How come you have a problem with how we’re dressed and yet it’s OK for men to swan around the office in their Spandex cycling shorts and Lycra bodysuits?”

Carter folded his arms across his chest. “You have a problem with that?”

Feeling rather like Wonder Woman, the purveyor of truth and justice, I bravely said, “I do.”

“Why?”

“Well,” I began, “the front view can be somewhat off-putting, but the back view with the butt padding . . .” I stopped myself just in time.

The back view made men look as if they were wearing Always Maxi Wings pads. Nonetheless, I didn’t think it was appropriate to discuss menstrual pads at a business meeting.

“Actually,” said Hillary with a note of faint-heartedness, “those Lycra cycling shorts scare the living daylights out of me. It forces me to look where I don’t want to . . . like at a bad car accident, know what I mean?”

“Yep.” I nodded energetically. “I know exactly what you mean. It’s hard to watch it but it’s impossible to pull your eyes away.”

Encouraged, Hillary continued, “Truthfully, those shorts leave little to the imagination. If you ask me, private parts should remain private.”

Hillary had a point. Those skintight spandexy shorts shrink-wrapped men’s genitalia, reducing them to store-bought, Saran-wrapped Concord grapes. What’s worse is some men take it to the extreme. Take for instance, Seymour Lewis, a fellow supervisor, who walks around in a full-bodied unitard—the

sort of unitard that can only be purchased at a dance supply shop, likely intended for women only but labeled “unisex.”

Seriously? Grown men at the office all trussed up in shiny Technicolor Lycra unitards?

How sad is that?

Sensationally sad I tell you!

Carter surveyed the room. “Anyone else have a problem with Lycra cycling shorts?”

Seymour stood up with an air of defiance. “I don’t!”

I cast a swift glance at Seymour in his sad, sad, unitard. “Moose knuckles.” The word just slipped out of my mouth before I could stop it.

What the hell made me say that?

I had an unnerving talent for putting my foot in my mouth. And not just my foot, mind you, but my whole leg.

“What did you just say?” Seymour demanded.

How I wish my mouth had a ‘Backspace’ key. “Oh,” I said inanely, “nothing.”

“I heard you! Level with me, Kars!” Seymour sent me daggers. “Why did you just say moose knuckles?”

I smiled wanly with a turn of my head that indicated the topic was inappropriate, but Seymour simply refused to let it drop.

“Tell me!” His voice pitched higher.

“Well,” I said, “you know how some women have camel toes?” I coughed lightly. “Well . . . um . . . you have moose knuckles.”

“Hey, I don’t mind them.” Pamela smothered a giggle. “Let’s face it, once you’ve seen one set of turkey giblets, you’ve likely seen them all!”

On the far side of the room, a shy voice piped in. It was Chester, an ex-Humanities professor who had left academia years ago because he hadn’t been granted tenure. “Actually,” he said slowly, “camel toes and moose knuckles are the only reason why I go to yoga class.”

The table went deathly quiet. There was a moment of still silence as all heads swiveled toward Chester. Meanwhile, Seymour was still twitching about in his sad, sad unitard. “See!” Seymour was practically shouting.

“There’s absolutely nothing wrong with Lycra!”

I blinked in amazement. This guy was clearly oblivious to the spectacle he represented.

“What’s so wrong if some of my lumps and bumps are present?” Seymour

remained intentionally obtuse. “So what if my ‘boys’ are on display? C’mon, is this the Victorian age or something?”

“Well,” I said in a small voice, “can’t you wear cycling shorts that don’t actually make you look like Hulk Hogan at the Ice Capades?”

“First of all,” Seymour harrumphed loudly, “I was planning on changing after I’d checked my emails. And secondly, this suit enhances my performance. Trust me; baggy shorts don’t even come close to the performance of Lycra!”

“Are you in the Tour de France trying to shave tenths of a second off your personal best?” I fixed Seymour with a pointed look. “What? Was that a ‘No’? Then you don’t need Lycra.”

Hillary chimed in, “If you don’t have billboard ads all over your bodysuit, then you obviously don’t need Lycra.”

“Uh-huh.” Jewel did a zigzag finger snap. “Do you even bike fast enough for it to make a performance difference? And let’s be real, your ten mile commute is in no way equivalent to the rigors of a race. So really, there is no excuse for wearing Lycra!”

“You women don’t get it, do you?” Seymour hissed loudly. “It’s not just about shaving off seconds! It’s so that I’m not walking around bowlegged like a Dungeness crab all day. And it prevents chafing.”

“Chafing?”

“Ball burn,” was Seymour’s illuminating reply.

In a sudden moment of clarity, we collectively said, “Oh . . .”

“Look,” said Carter, taking charge of the meeting that had clearly spiraled out of control, “if you want to wear Lycra on your bike, by all means do. But please Seymour, once you come into work, go straight to the men’s room and get changed.”

“Yes, Seymour. Please do,” I added virtuously. “And none of this: *Oh, I’m just checking my emails* and the next thing you know is you’re at a meeting in a full blown unitard.”

“It’s a body suit!” Seymour shouted.

“All right guys, you’ve made your point. I think we’re all agreed then . . .” Carter glanced around the room. “No Lycra. I’ll be updating the Company Dress Code and moving forward, Lycra shorts and body suits will be considered unacceptable work attire. Now before I end this meeting . . .” He eyed me quickly. “Karsynn, Pamela and Jewel—after you’ve changed into some proper clothes, I expect you to report back to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Pamela and Jewel bolted out of their seats and were out the door in the blink of an eye.

“Wait!” I called out to their retreating backs and took off running at a fast clip. “Hey,” I said, catching up to them in the hallway. “How come you’re OK with what just happened in there? Aren’t you even the slightest bit ticked off?”

“What for?” Pamela twirled a strand of hair around her finger, staring dreamily into the distance. “I think the new director is sex personified. And I love a man in charge.”

“Um, you mean our new dictator?” I smirked. “If you ask me, Muammar Gaddafi has just been exhumed from the dead and is now Carter Lockwood.”

“Oh don’t be silly, Kars.” Jewel waved a dismissive hand. “I’m sure Carter is a sweetheart. I even detected a trace of Southern accent in his voice. He has that cultivated, extra-special Southern charm that no woman can resist.”

Pamela fluffed her strawberry-blond curls. “Carter’s as cute as a bug in a rug. And he sure put a quiver in my liver.”

Jewel was just as smitten. “He’s *muy, muy, muy caliente*.”

Goodness. Carter was already wreaking havoc amongst the ladies.

“Well isn’t that nice,” I said with a certain Southern belle charm.

“Hullooooo ladies!” came a familiar voice. Clutching a Marc Jacobs man purse, Truong glided down the hallway, owning it like a catwalk.

I almost did a double take. Why was he dressed like the Chiquita Banana Lady?

“Truong!” I gave him a cheery wave. “You’re back from Africa.”

“Sure am.” He smiled brilliantly. “I’ve been *biz-ay*.”

Truong’s boyfriend, Ayinde Akinnuoye-Agbaje, is a towering, seven-foot Kenyan with deep facial scars. He bears a striking resemblance to Seal (the singer, not the fish-eating aquatic mammal). Anyway, Ayinde had wanted Truong to meet his parents and Truong, always game for anything, dropped everything and jetted off to Africa.

“*Jambo* everyone! *Jambo*!” Claspings his hands, Truong executed a gallant bow. “That’s ‘hello’ in Swahili.”

I found myself bowing slightly in return. “*Jambo*!”

Then he came over and gave me a rib-cracking hug. “Lovely to see you, Kars,” he said running an expert eye over me. “Nice farmer’s tan!”

“Don’t you start already!” I laughed, hugging him back. “I’ve missed you!”

“Truong!” Pamela thumped his rail thin back. “How was Africa?”

“It was fabulous but I had to cut my trip short.”

“How come?” I said in some surprise.

“Oh the horror!” Truong gasped theatrically. “There was a sudden outbreak of elephantiasis all around Africa. And let me tell you *girrrrrrl*, the minute my eyes clapped on this big African man, pushing a rusty wheelbarrow carrying his scrotum—this monstrous and gargantuan growth that must have weighed over a hundred pounds—I booked the first flight out of Kenya.”

Pamela looked stricken. “You mean to tell me that elephantiasis made this poor man’s testicles a prisoner to a wheelbarrow?”

“Yes.” Truong nodded gravely. “It was so scary.”

I shook my head at the unimaginable horror. “Well aside from the elephantiasis, how was your trip with Ayinde?”

“Oh Kars, it was so sexy seeing Ayinde in his element. You know, he *is* the Son of the Soil.”

“So,” I ventured, “what did you do in Kenya?”

“Oh we spent a lot of time at the Masai Mara National Reserve. We saw lions, cheetahs, leopards and rhinos roaming the Serengeti plains. We fed giraffes in Nairobi, we watched the sailing dhows in Mombasa, we climbed Mount Kenya, we went deep-sea fishing and ice-skating.” Truong sighed dreamily. “Africa was wild.”

“Ice-skating? In Africa?” I enquired in some surprise.

Truong adjusted his silk scarf. “Honey, anything is possible in Eeefrica.”

“Truong.” I found myself smiling in spite of myself. “Why are you talking like a South African? You can’t just ‘catch’ an accent.”

“Speaking of accents,” said Pamela, “I love our new director’s accent. And get this, he even speaks Italian.” She swooned, almost tripping over herself. “He is a total Renaissance man.”

I raised my eyes to the ceiling. “Just because he used the word ‘*capisce*’ it does not make him an Italian linguist.”

“Italian linguist?” Pamela pooh-poohed. “Nah! He’s more like an Italian mobster.”

In return, I adopted a John Gotti tone and did the “mobster mumble.” In short, I talked as if I had a huge Cuban cigar dangling from the edge of my lips with smoke seeping out from both sides of my mouth. “You got a shylock with a beef ’cause you haven’t paid your vig? Now listen up wiseguy! Nobody messes with the most powerful Don in the city. NOBODY! You know why? ’Cause I ain’t got no problem breaking a few eggs to make

an omelet. *CAPISCE?*”

“Ohhhhh.” Truong’s interest was instantly piqued. “Tell me more about this Renaissance man.”

“Renaissance man? More like Neanderthal man!” I smirked sardonically. “I mean, we all sprang from apes but clearly Carter Lockwood didn’t spring far enough!”

“Excuse me?” came a quiet voice. A dangerously quiet voice.

I twisted round and jumped in horror. It was Carter the Caveman. I had no idea how long he had been standing there, but from the look on his face, probably long enough. His glare was so blighting that I almost shriveled on the spot.

I wanted to bolt for cover under my desk.

“Um . . .” I trailed off, my head jerking backward and forward like a petrified turkey. “And I’m sure he’s the most intelligent primate, such as one of those simians. They’re chimpanzees!” I went on, snatching straws out of thin air, “Gorillas! You know . . .” I swallowed hard and spoke almost inaudibly, “since they’ve got opposable thumbs. And um, opposable toes . . .”

Meanwhile, Pamela and Jewel were gazing at Carter with open mouths, putting on a full display of unbridled lust, no doubt having their own ‘*Fifty Shades of Grey*’ moment.

How shameless! What happened to subtlety? What happened to feminine wiles? And where was their pride? Honestly! Have a bit of dignity.

Carter barely registered their open-mouthed reactions. He was probably used to women being reduced to imbeciles in his presence. Not to mention, he was far too busy glaring at me severely. Assessing. Judging. Challenging.

He barked, “Humans *are* primates.”

“I knew that!” I said in an unnaturally high voice. Slightly unsettled, I looked away from the Geico Man and took an inordinate amount of interest in the wilting Ficus plant next to the water cooler.

“If I recall,” said Carter in arctic tones, “I’d sent the three of you home to change into some proper clothes.”

“I know you did,” I said in a very small voice (barely audible, in fact), “but I thought you didn’t mean it.”

“I meant every word of it!” he said shortly.

Huh? How on earth did he hear me? I was practically whispering like a dolphin. I stared at Carter in astonishment. He must have supersonic hearing.

“And,” he went on, “I would appreciate it if you’d comply with my request.

Right now, all you're doing is wasting company time and company money."

I shifted my gaze back to the Ficus plant and stared at it as if my life depended on it. Then I heard a high pitched squeal, followed by, "Be still my beating balls. I don't believe we've met."

My head whipped around and snapped to attention. I shot Truong a warning look but he was far too busy preening. "It's a good thing I'm spoken for." He smiled benignly. "Otherwise you'd be in trouble, big boy!"

I winced slightly to myself. A permanent scowl was etched on Carter's face but as his steely eyes slid over Truong, his entire face contorted and went through several alarming transformations.

Today of all days, Truong was decked out in his man heels with rainbow pride. Muscular limbs and thick calves bulging out of Steve Maddens, hairy tarantula legs atop six-inch spiked stiletto heels.

When Carter finally found his voice, he said, "Is that the trend now? Men in heels?"

"Well I wouldn't call it a trend," Truong remarked lightly. "If you look back in history, it's far from unprecedented. Men in heels were *de rigueur* in pre-Napoleonic France."

Carter reached into his manila folder, extracted a printout and thrust it at Truong. "I suggest you read this. It's the Company Dress Code. And in my opinion, that dress you're wearing would be considered evening wear."

"This?" Truong glanced down at his mauve and indigo muumuu. "This is not a dress," he said with offended dignity. "This is a Senegalese style Dashiki. It's traditional African garb for men."

Carter was looking as if he was having a lot of difficulty taking all this in. "In any case," he said tersely, "it's not . . . um, what was that word you used again?"

"*De rigueur*?" Truong offered.

"Thank you." Carter gave a crisp nod. "Well, your choice of footwear and attire is *not de rigueur* and it is certainly not appropriate for the work place."

"Says who?" Truong flashed a fashion model pout.

I smiled in spite of myself. Truong's fragile looks belied his boldness.

At this point, Pamela and Jewel had quietly slipped away.

Carter drew to his full height. His dark eyes flashed. "Says the new director of this call center."

Truong's vivacity seemed to leak out of him like a punctured bicycle tire. He stood there, speechless, staring at Carter as if he had just sprouted horns.

Carter turned his hot gaze on me. “And you!”

My stomach plunged. “What?”

“Why are you still standing here, Miss Higginbotham? I suggest you go home and change, then report back to me.”

“Miss Higginbotham?” I suppressed a snort. “Please, just call me Karsynn. And someday if you’re nice enough, you may even call me Kars.” And with that, I brushed past him before he could say another word. “And Truong, I’ll catch up with you later.” I threw him a saccharine smile before promptly removing myself.

Chapter Two



With a deep sense of foreboding, I took a swift left toward Gaddafi's office and knocked on the door.

"Enter," bellowed the tyrant.

An obnoxiously large poster immediately caught my eye the second I stepped into the room. It was hard to miss, practically taking up an entire wall. I stopped to give it the attention it demanded. It was one of those kitschy 'inspirational/ motivational' posters. But instead of skydivers holding hands mid-air, this one featured colorful hot air balloons dotting an azure blue sky. A requisite Confucius-like saying completed the 'inspirational' effect:

The superior man is slow in his words and earnest in his conduct.

Humph. Thus far, Carter had been quick with his words and frivolous with his conduct, which in my assessment just proved that he was an inferior man.

Holding on to that thought, I said, "You wanted to see me?"

A mask of polite detachment was fixed on my face. Naturally, I did not appreciate having to schlep all the way back to my apartment to change into something that Carter would deem 'decent.' To make a bold statement, I'd thrown on the most modest dress I could rummage out of my closet. I practically looked like a singing nun.

He spoke without bothering to glance up, "Take a seat."

Clearly, he was not in a receptive mood.

Unnerved, I edged farther into the room and slumped down on the leather swivel chair opposite his desk. For want of anything better to do, I studied his profile. He was in his late thirties, I judged, from the lines around his eyes. And those dark eyes were heavily fringed with long lashes. Not only were they long, they were also incredibly thick and bushy . . . eyelashes like a freakin' camel.

Eventually, I broke the silence with deliberate brusqueness. "Carter?"

"Karsynn," he said in a politely bored voice that seemed to intimate 'please don't bother me at the moment.'

"To what do I owe the displeasure?" I said with more anger that I'd

intended to reveal.

His jaw went rigid. His steely eyes flickered toward me for a brief moment, then he resumed working on his computer in silence as if I weren't even there.

Just as well. I took the opportunity to survey the dictator's new office. Aside from the cheesy poster, the room was threadbare. Not a plant in sight, no photo frames of wife and kids, mom and dad, or even a pet dog. Just stacks and stacks of folders arranged with scary precision atop the mahogany desk. With the absence of anything interesting to look at, I studied my cuticles. When I glanced up, Carter was watching me.

I stared at him in tense silence.

He returned my gaze, unflinching, his dark eyes examining me with considerable attention. From the look on his face, I gathered my outfit had passed the test.

Good.

Then he sat back in his chair, made a pyramid of his hands and continued staring at me in silence.

Unblinking, I stared back at him.

He stared back. Extra hard.

I hardened my resolve and stared back, *extra, extra* hard.

He stared back even harder and held my eye firmly until I gave way and blinked. "What's this?" I smiled disconcertedly. "A staring contest?"

He's going to fire me, I thought. Bracing myself for the worst, I held my breath. If there had been plants in the room, I'm fairly certain they would've been unable to photosynthesize for lack of CO₂.

Eventually, Carter began, "Your team's stats are unacceptable."

"Oh." I had to clear my throat twice before I could answer, "I'm working on it."

He leaned back in his chair and regarded me impassively. "According to this report, your team had the highest Auxiliary Time (in common call center parlance, Auxiliary Time, also known as AUX time refers to time the agents are unavailable to take calls) and the lowest Quality scores last month. And the prior month. In case it's slipped your mind, you're a supervisor and you need to be supervising your team. In other words," he added tersely, "supervising is not a passive verb. It's an active one."

I debated the proper approach and opted for the most straightforward. "I don't believe in micromanaging. My agents are adults and I treat them like

they're adults. Besides, micromanaging takes away their sense of independence and when they think they're being manipulated or controlled, then they won't be. You of all people should know that the most effective managers impress in unobtrusive ways. And," I added for good measure, "it is far better to be loved than feared."

"Feared or loved as what? As a parent? As a law enforcer? As a professional boxer? As a teacher? See?" he remarked with a complacent air. "With each role, you'd get a different answer. And as a supervisor, your agents must fear you. You must empower them to do their jobs. And if they don't listen to you, then you treat them like kids."

"I'm not their mom," I said dryly.

"You're their supervisor," he shot back. "Same thing! You're not here to make friends. And you want to know what the key to failure is? It's when you try to please everybody."

"Easy for you to say," I countered. "To them, you're just some stranger from corporate headquarters who just happened to waltz into town. This may come as a surprise to you but these people *are* my friends. I've worked alongside them for years and years and years and years."

He regarded me cuttingly. "Are you done now?"

"As a matter of fact, no." Icicles dripped from my voice. "Look, I *get* your deal with the company dress code but your approach today was all wrong. Your tone and your manner was a total turn off and you know what? That just guarantees that no one will listen."

For a brief moment, he looked at me with something approaching respect. When he spoke again, his tone was fractionally warmer, but not much. "It's your job to make your agents listen. A good supervisor relationship requires distance and it requires boundaries. And if you don't know how to do your job . . ." A hint of warning came into his voice. "I might just have to find someone else who can."

I took several long, deep breaths and steadied myself, keeping my emotions in check. But Carter wasn't quite finished yet. "I expect your team's stats to improve by the end of this month. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

His tone had made it quite clear that it was he who was calling the shots here. And my tone had made it quite clear that I understood. He shifted his gaze back to his computer, making it abundantly evident that it was time for me to leave. I could take a hint.

With leaden legs, I stood up and started for the door.

“One more thing,” Carter’s acerbic voice halted me.

I froze, knowing this wasn’t going to be good. Carter’s tone was so acidic it was giving me heartburn, gastritis and acid reflux all at once.

“When your agents don’t meet their stats, I expect you to write them up and copy me on everything.”

“Will do,” I replied, an edge of rancor slipping into my voice.

“Thank you.” A look of quiet satisfaction crossed his face. “Do you have any questions for me?”

Yes, I thought. What is the quickest way out of here?

Belatedly, I realized Carter was looking at me expectantly.

For added confidence, I placed my hands with lazy confidence on my waist.

“No,” I said curtly, “I don’t. Will there be anything else?”

“Why?” He raised his eyebrows at me, as if daring me to answer. “Wasn’t this enough?”

I felt a sharp pang of annoyance but I behaved myself and quelled my childish urge to yell, “*Ja wohl, mein Führer!*”

“You can go now,” he said in clear dismissal. As an afterthought, he added half-heartedly, “And I look forward to working with you.”

I attempted a smile.

Carter smiled tightly.

I smiled back at him with all the synthetic sweetness of Splenda.

Carter smiled wider in return.

“Oh, I look forward to working with you, too,” I said with radiant insincerity. Without another word, I strode out of the dictator’s bunker.

“Sweet mother of Zeus!” Truong gasped. “You look like you’re about to murder someone. What happened?”

“Carter Lockwood happened,” I said darkly.

Truong snickered. “I suspected as much.”

“You know, I’ve been around men who are completely arrogant, but Carter is another category altogether. Seriously, I have no idea what his problem is.”

Truong gave me his answer to all of the world’s ills. “Maybe he’s on his period.”

“I think he hates me. And he’s not even subtle about it.” My voice turned wistful and I felt a sudden stab of longing for my old boss. “I miss Dick Jones. In contrast to that tyrant over there.” I gestured my head in the general

direction of Carter's office. "Dick Jones was Aung San Suu Kyi!"

"Dick Jones!" Truong exclaimed with deep contempt. "DING DONG THE DOUCHE IS GONE! C'mon, Dick was as shallow as piss on concrete. I could *not* report to that box of rocks and let's be real, he was the worst director in the history of directors."

Hmm. Truong had a point.

He carried on ranting, "I still resent him for sending me home last month. All because I wore short shorts but at the same time, he was totally OK with girls prancing around half-naked. Seriously, Dick kept his brains between his legs and I don't miss his double standards one bit."

"All right," I admitted, "Dick was a little biased."

And the more I thought about it, he really was. I had to work extra hard, putting on an elaborate dog and pony show to clinch my promotion. Whereas Amy E. Areola, Wendy D. Whoppers, Pamela Pornero and Jewel De'Nyle (yes, those *are* their actual names, or so they claim) played the 'low-cut blouse' game and just breezed on up to the top.

Truong's voice jolted me out of my reverie. "Now say it with me: DING DONG THE DOUCHE IS GONE."

"DING DONG THE DOUCHE IS GONE."

"See!" Truong said winsomely. "Carter is a step up from Dick. Were you expecting another Dick Jones?"

"I don't know what I was expecting, but I sure wasn't expecting Carter Lockwood."

"C'mon! Admit it, Kars." He nudged me in the ribs. "Doesn't Carter just make you go weak in the knees?"

"More like weak in the stomach. His management style is so . . . so Pavlovian."

Truong's eyes shrank. "For real?"

"Afraid so. Carter Lockwood means business. Have you even read his Company Dress Code Manifesto?"

"Not yet." One of his quick smiles lit his face. "Is that why you're wearing that dress?"

"Oh this?" I curtsied prettily. "You like my frock?"

Truong crossed his arms and made a great play of studying me. "Erm . . ."
His words petered out.

"What?" I asked. "What?"

"You look like shit."

“Why thank you, Truong! You’re a real boost to a girl’s ego.”

“No, seriously. Why are you dressed like a deranged Amish woman? It’s tragic!”

“The real tragedy,” I said with a strained smile, “is *your* whole outfit.”

“Hey!” he said a touch defensively. “I’m on your side, Kars. If I were a supervisor, I’d dress as though I meant business.”

I lifted a skeptical brow. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Then how come you’re dressed like Mrs. Roper meets the Chiquita Banana Lady?”

Truong sighed in a way men do when faced with unreasonable women. “First of all, it takes a village to look this good, thank you very much,” he said with offended dignity. “And secondly, I’m not a supervisor; I’m just a lowly minion here. I’m not trying to claw my way to the top. But *you*, my friend, *are*. And Coco Chanel once said that if a woman is poorly dressed you notice her dress and if she is impeccably dressed you notice the woman. Right now honey, all I notice is your dress.”

“Point taken,” I conceded. “Just make sure you read Carter’s dossier and comply with it or else I’ll be forced to write you up.”

Truong pulled a face. “Someone’s throwing her weight around.”

“It’s not me. It’s *him*. You heard what Carter said; he seems to think he’s God, so really, his word is Gospel. And since you’re on my team, you’re going to have to buck up. Your sales are stellar so keep up the good work on that front, but you seriously need to improve your Auxiliary Time.”

“I’ll work on it,” Truong said amiably.

“Thank you. I have a feeling we’re all going to see some changes around here, whether we like it or not.”

“You better *like* it, Kars.” Truong coughed lightly. “Don’t let Carter get under your skin. It’s only his first day here and the two of you are already butting heads. Trust me, you don’t want to *go* there.”

“I can’t help it.” As far as I was concerned, Carter Lockwood was a douchebag and I took great pleasure in rattling his cage. After how he’d humiliated me, he’d forfeited any rights to be treated nicely.

“Kars, don’t go head-to-head with him. Even if you win the battle, you’re gonna lose the war.”

“What if I’m right?” I said indignantly.

“Then keep your mouth shut. The more right you are, the more damage it

will do you in the long run.”

I sighed deeply.

“So you’ll try?” Truong persisted. “You’ll try to get along with Carter?”

“I guess,” I said noncommittally. The idea of getting along with Carter seemed as impossible as scaling Everest in a bikini.

I was threading my way through the maze of cubicles when I caught Jennifer Carley idly browsing the internet.

“Jenn, why are you logged out? You’re supposed to be on the phones right now.”

“I’ll hop on the phone in five minutes.” Her voice was laced with irritation.

“But you’re supposed to be on the phone *now*.”

“Well I’m busy,” she hissed.

“Busy doing what?”

“Checking out job-posting sites so I can get the fuck out of here.”

I was momentarily flummoxed and rendered speechless, slightly taken aback by her abrasiveness. Before I had the chance to be mortally offended, Jenn caught herself and quickly apologized. “Sorry Kars, it’s not you. It’s this job. I need a change and I need to be making more money. Working for a paltry twelve bucks an hour just isn’t cutting it for me.”

I twisted my lips. “Why don’t you stop by my desk in twenty minutes? I’ll have Scheduling Ops take you off the phones.”

“For what?”

“We need to have a talk,” I said in all-seriousness. “In the mean time, you need to log in and start taking calls.”

Jenn gave me a silent salute. “Yes ma’am.”

Exactly twenty minutes later, Jenn wandered over and hovered by my cubicle in an agitated manner.

“Jenn! Have a seat.” I set aside my paperwork and turned to face her. “So tell me,” I said earnestly, “are you really unhappy working here?”

She hesitated for a second, then asked, “Can I speak candidly?”

“Of course.”

“The work sucks and the pay sucks. I have student loans up the ying yang, a car loan, rent . . . I’m living from paycheck to paycheck, just barely surviving. And I want to thrive, Kars, not just survive.”

“Well, what if I told you that you could thrive here.” I paused dramatically for effect. “In this call center.”

“Here?” Jenn fixed me with a deeply skeptical eye.

“Listen,” I said, “I know twelve dollars an hour isn’t much but what if I told you that you could be making over a hundred thousand dollars per year.”

“Really?” Jenn’s eyes were sparkling with vitality under the fluorescent lighting. “A hundred thousand dollars?”

“Yep, you got that right.”

“A hundred thousand dollars?” she repeated.

“A hundred thousand dollars,” I confirmed.

“A hundred thousand dollars?” she asked once more.

“YES!” I exclaimed, my patience fraying. “Which part of a hundred thousand dollars don’t you understand?”

Jenn sank back against the chair and began to brighten like a flower given water. With exaggerated courtesy, she said, “Go *onnnnnn*. Tell me how I can make that kind of money.”

“By embracing sales,” I said simply.

Jenn’s shoulders immediately stiffened. “But I’m not good at sales.”

“Then you learn to be good at it. And I can help you. Now tell me, why aren’t you pitching any products?”

“Fear, I guess . . .” Jenn gave a short shrug. “Fear of rejection.”

“Do you know that all the super stars on the sales team fail half the time? In selling, rejection, as they say, comes with the territory. And rejection is rarely ever personal so try not to take it personally.”

“Yeah.” Jenn laughed harshly. “But knowing that does not make it any easier to take. I hate to fail.”

“It’s OK to fail, Jenn. Failure is inevitable. If you care enough about success, you’re going to have to try, fail, and correct your mistakes.”

“So . . .” There was a pause until she added, “How do you propose I get better at selling?”

“Well, it helps if you know our products and services. Educate yourself on every facet of it. Make it the bane of your existence.”

“All right.” Jenn nodded thoughtfully. “I guess I can work on that.”

“And build rapport with your callers; learn something personal about them. Find out what they want to buy. It’s so much easier to sell someone what they want to buy than it is to convince them to buy what you are selling.”

“Mmmmm.” Jenn seemed to be considering this for a bit.

“Most importantly,” I carried on, “be a good listener. Take your cues from the callers.”

“How?”

“By asking the right questions.”

“I don’t know . . .” Jenn trailed off unsteadily. “I don’t think I know how to sell.”

“You do know,” I said, putting conviction into my voice. “Most of us are born salesmen. Take me for example. At school, I sold my peers on accepting me. At home, I sold my mom a ton of bullcrap.”

Jenn started giggling. “What sort of bullcrap?”

“When I was sixteen, I convinced my mom that I couldn’t survive without a car.”

“I tried that.” Jenn smirked. “Didn’t work for me.”

“Well,” I pressed, “did you ever convince your parents to let you stay out late at night?”

“All the time.”

“See!” I said with a satisfied air. “You were selling back then and you still do it today. Every day. You already employ the aspects of selling: the powers of persuasion, the art of negotiation, and the definitive teenager’s tactic—to never ever take no for an answer.”

“Hmmm.” Jenn tilted her head to one side. “I guess I did sort of get what I want . . . most of the time.”

“So there!” I gave her a sunny smile. “I know you still have it in you.”

“All right,” said Jenn at last. “I’ll give this job another shot.”

“Good. Let’s see how you do and if your stats improve, I might be able to get you on the Sales Team.”

“So I can make a hundred thousand dollars per year?” There was a determined glint in her eye.

“Damn straight!” I enthused.

After that little pep talk, I caught a little pep in Jenn’s step as she strode off. Feeling marginally better, I returned to my computer and tried to get some work done. No easy feat. Barely two seconds later, my concentration was temporarily waylaid by Shoshanna Hunter. She wafted past my desk, smelling like a flower.

“Hold up.” I halted her. “Why are you late Miss Hunter?”

“I’m late?” Her perfect eyebrows arched in a question.

“Sure are.” I checked my watch. “Thirty minutes.”

“Well, my new shampoo instructions said to lather, rinse and repeat. So um, I did. I lathered and rinsed, and lathered and rinsed until I was completely out

of shampoo.” She carelessly tossed her hair over one shoulder. “The problem with society these days is people just aren’t willing to commit to the long haul. And you know what? I’m committed!”

I could not think of a single solitary thing to say to her. Clearly, she wasn’t brimming over in the brains department.

In the pause that followed, Shoshanna stared at me with those puppy eyes and turned her head a little to the side, smiling at me beguilingly, expecting instant forgiveness.

So fake.

She seriously needed to dial back her neediness.

While her antics must turn most men into mush, it left me completely unmoved. Shoshanna seemed to assume that everyone was going to be captivated by her beauty. And she seemed to think that she could use her good looks to get away with the sort of behavior not allowed to us less favored mortals.

All her lame excuses might have worked with her prior male supervisors, but it certainly wasn’t working with me.

I was so tempted to throw my monitor at her stupid head. When I finally found my voice, I said, “I’m sorry, Shoshanna, but I’m going to have to write you up. Don’t forget, three strikes and you’re out.”

“What?” Her puppy eyes turned into poison darts. “You’re going to write me up for being committed?”

“Nope.” I kept my tone neutral. “I’m going to write you up for being late *and* for being a complete idiot.”

“How dare you call me an idiot,” she bristled crossly. “I’m reporting you to HR!” With that, she stormed off in a huff, flicking her hair this way and that as if her life depended on it.

I stood perfectly still, staring at her retreating back.

With all that incessant hair flipping, her head might just snap off.

Which wouldn’t exactly be a bad thing.

I sighed and battled with my conscience over my malevolent thoughts, but it was only a brief tussle.

I sighed again. Who said being a boss was easy? It made me feel suddenly despondent. Then I remembered *Homeland* was on tonight and cheered right up.

Chapter Three



It was Friday, which was my Monday since Wednesdays and Thursdays are my days off. I should write a song titled My Weekend Starts on Wednesday, and the chorus would go like this:

Last Tuesday night! T.G.I.T! T.G.I.T!

Really. I was so tempted to shoot the next person who yelled, “T.G.I.F!”

“Good morning,” I greeted Carter in the hallway with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

“Morning,” he replied with equal warmth.

I walked to my cubicle and set my steaming hot coffee on my desk, humming “TGIT! TGIT!” fiercely to myself. At some point, I stopped humming when I felt someone’s eyes boring into the back of my neck. I threw a glance over my shoulder and was surprised to find Carter standing right behind me.

“What do you want, Carter?” I asked impatiently. “I am very busy and can’t waste time in idle chatter.”

The sound of inelegant snorting wafted over from the direction of Truong’s cubicle.

Carter spoke briskly, “Will you please see me in my office in fifteen minutes?”

Well shiz! I thought as apprehension filled my chest. It’s never good news when your boss wants to see you first thing in the morning.

I gave a silent salute. “*Ja wohl, mein Führer.*”

“What?” Carter shot me a savage look.

“Nothing.” I gave him my practiced machete smile. “I’ll be there. But first,” I added complacently, “I’ll have to attend to the backlog of issues awaiting my attention.”

“All right,” he said, studying me with a glint of amusement. “Come see me in an hour then.”

“Will do.” I turned from him and proceeded to log into my computer, tapping loudly at my keyboard, looking fearsomely efficient.

Slowly, the tension that had taken up residence between my shoulder blades

began to ease as I whiled away the minutes sifting through emails from Groupon, Living Social, Plum District, Eversave, Savemore and Saveology.

What can I say? I'm a sucker for a good deal and I wasn't quite ready to delve into the real work of the day. Next, I found myself clicking through and deleting over a hundred emails. Goodness. My inbox was flooded from being CC'ed on every little thing, even projects that I had no attachment to, just to keep me "in the loop."

Really. I wanted out. Of the loop.

"Hey, Kars!" called Rick. "Come over here a sec."

I pushed my chair back and walked over to Rick's cubicle. "C'mon, Astley!" I chided. "You need to quit watching these stupid YouTube videos."

"But you gotta check out this video." He was staring at his monitor, utterly mesmerized. "This friggin' hamster is levitating. And it's reciting the Gettysburg Address. Mid-air!"

"Seriously?" I peered over his shoulder. "PWHOAR!"

Ten minutes later, I was still standing there, open-mouthed and enthralled.

David Blaine and David Copperfield had *nothing* on this hamster.

Eventually, I said, "OK, Rick. No more YouTube videos. You can get in trouble if Carter catches you."

Then I heard my stomach growl. A girl's gotta eat, so I wandered off in search of nourishment. I stopped by the cafeteria and ordered another cup of coffee along with a short stack of pancakes to fortify me. Then I sat by a window and allowed myself the luxury of a leisurely breakfast. Afterward, fully nourished, I headed out to the duck pond for a cigarette break.

The sun broke through the clouds and I was bathed in the warmth of organic vitamin D. I sat at my usual corner, soaking up the rays, looking out at the view, allowing my mind to do its usual morning jog.

One of the mama ducks, Svetlana Zakharova (named after a Prima ballerina from the Bolshoi Ballet) waddled over to me. "QUACK!" she quacked.

"QUACK!" I quacked back. "Guess what Svetlana? I've brought you a little treat."

Before long, a whole squadron of ducklings came paddling furiously toward me. "Calm down my little ducklings. There's plenty of food to go around."

Stepping back, I began showering my mallard friends with bread crumbs.

Later, after the duck feeding frenzy had died down, I bid adieu to my feathered friends and walked back into the building. As I picked my way

back to my cubicle, I made a stop at the water cooler and exchanged pleasantries with my co-workers, Mateo and Alfredo.

“Hey Kars! What are you going to watch until the next installment of *Game of Thrones*?”

“I don’t know, Mateo,” I said gravely. “I really don’t know.”

“Winter is coming . . .” proffered Mateo like he was the Lord of freakin’ Winterfell.

In *Game of Thrones*, the meaning behind those words is one of warning and constant vigilance. To which I responded, “I am your Khaleesi. Where are my dragons?”

It was another GOT (*Game of Thrones*) in-joke shared amongst us resident geeks. I know. We’re weird like that.

I filled my paper cup and took a reviving gulp, casually glancing around the office while nodding after Mateo and Alfredo. They were still discussing their favorite HBO shows in intimate detail. We were all filling time, I realized, reaching for any triviality before having to confront doing actual work. After downing a gallon of water, I checked my watch. Oh! It’s time.

Where *did* the hour go?

“See ya later guys. I’ve got a meeting with Gaddafi.”

Sitting across Carter’s desk, I smoothed down my skirt, removing invisible lint with a light, flitting hand.

“How are you?” he asked in a particularly friendly voice.

“Fine, I guess.” I sighed dramatically. “My work day is just starting.”

“Good thing it’s an easy job then,” he said patronizingly.

I couldn’t tell what I wanted to do most, smile serenely at Carter or deck him.

“So . . .” Carter studied me with a glint of amusement. “Did you manage to take care of your backlog of issues?”

I nodded sagely. “I did.”

“If you ask me, it looked like Procrastination Station out there. But that’s not why I wanted to see you.”

“Oh.”

“It’s been brought to my attention that your team swears too much.”

“So?” I gave a careless shrug. “I accept swearing as part of our workplace culture. In fact, studies have shown that swearing can offer pain relief. It serves as a simple form of emotional self-management and it triggers an

emotional response that leads to stress-induced analgesia.”

“Stress-induced what?”

“Stress-induced analgesia,” I said slowly. “It’s a numbness to pain that the body generates as a protective mechanism in response to mental anxiety and trauma. And,” I added meaningfully, “you know how traumatic it can be on the phones.”

I felt a sharp pang of annoyance with Carter who said nothing but simply sat there with a deeply skeptical expression on his face that spoke volumes. Finally he said, “So you’re asking me to advocate swearing in this call center because it’s healthy? Why not make cursing a part of our health care system? And should there be a recommended daily swearing allowance?”

“What’s the harm in it? It’s harmless venting and social bonding. And sometimes bad language can be good for you.”

“Really?” said Carter with a certain degree of cynicism.

“Really. I even have the science to back it up.” My face, alive with the energy of a true enthusiast, explained, “There was this study done on how long a bunch of college students could keep their hands in cold water. The students could either repeat a curse word they chose or a non-swear word. And guess what? The students who swore lasted an average of forty seconds longer than the students who did not swear. So you see,” I said triumphantly, “swearing really does decrease your sensitivity to pain.”

“And you read about this, *where*?”

“In *The Journal of Pain*,” I informed him loftily. “I did some research on this subject for a term paper.” I leaned back with a thoroughly self-satisfied grin on my face. “Don’t you love it when research backs up unacceptable behavior?”

Carter gave an amused half-smile.

“Besides,” I went on, “my agents don’t curse at the callers. Mostly, they just joke amongst themselves and if they need to vent, they always place the callers on MUTE. And if cursing helps them manage their stress levels, then why stop it?”

“Because,” said Carter in a level voice, “this is a call center and the customers can hear it when agents are dropping profanities in the background.”

“OK,” I conceded. “I see your point and I’ll see what I can do about it.”

“Thank you.”

I drummed my fingers on the arm of the chair, then crossed and uncrossed

my ankles. “Is that all?”

“No. It isn’t.” He said it with such contempt I got annoyed again. “I’ve got a complaint from HR. One of your agents claims that you harassed her.”

My guard instantly went up. “If it was Shoshanna who filed that grievance, she was thirty minutes late and she gave me the lamest excuse. And I did not harass her! All I did was call her an idiot.”

“Please use some tact next time,” he said shortly.

Tact, sadly, was not my middle name.

Oh, and I *knew* it was Shoshanna.

It *had* to be her. That cow! That notoriously pampered, spoiled and impossible cow! Always coming in late, wandering around, disrupting other agents who were on the phones.

Humph. I’d show her. I’d put a stop to her bovine wanderings.

Carter cut into my thoughts. “It’s the first grievance filed against you. If there are more than three, then we’ll need to talk some more.”

I sat there fuming to myself.

“Don’t get all bent out of shape. Listen, everyone makes errors. It’s when those errors are repeated that it becomes a mistake. Got it?”

I nodded, not feeling capable of saying anything else.

“Right now, I’d like you to send an email to your team informing them that they can no longer curse on the floor.”

“All right.” I stood up to leave and said with a resigned forbearance, “I’ll take care of that.”

When I was halfway out the door, Carter called after my disappearing back. “And copy me on that email.”

Without a backward glance, I raised my hand weakly in acknowledgment.

I sat down heavily at my desk, gripped my pen and frowned in concentration. This was a delicate subject with the staff, and I had to approach it, well, delicately. If I put a stop to the swearing, then I had to give my team an alternative, some sort of outlet . . .

With a deep sigh, I hung my head and idly spun the globe on my desk, watching it rotate on its axis. Suddenly, I had a flash of inspiration.

“BOO-YAH! I’ve got it!”

Galvanized into action, I pulled up Outlook and began fervently tapping away at my keyboard.

From: Karsynn.Higginbotham@lightningspeed.com

To: All team members

Subject: Swearing at the workplace

Team, this PSA comes to you at Carter Lockwood's behest. I regret to inform you that as of right now, swearing is no longer allowed on the floor. I know this will be difficult for you. I know that you constantly struggle to assert control over your environment in any little way you can and I understand that cursing is an outlet for you . . . a way to keep your emotions in check when you're about to lose it on the phones.

So, I have come up with a solution. Whenever you have the urge to drop a cuss word, simply replace the expletive with any place on the map. A country, a city, a provincial town, a place . . . be creative! Expand your geography!

To kick things off, here are some places in Greenland:

Nuuk

Qaqortoq

Iginniarfik

Uummannaq

Qasigiannguit

Upernavik

Qeqertarsuatsiaat

Sarfannguit

Ikerasaarsuk

See how fun this can be? And, you've just learned something new today.

p/s Inuulluarit!

It means goodbye in Greenlandic (it is an Eskimo-Aleut language). And yes, I speak Eskimo!

If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to come and see me.

Karsynn A. Higginbotham

Supervisor at Lightning Speed Comm.

Quote of the day: Tell me what you need and I'll tell you how to get along without it.

With a flourish, I clicked ‘Send,’ and soon after, I heard the raging sounds of protest.

“Nooo!” Truong exploded. “Bangkok!”

Nate yelled, “Machu Picchu!”

Jenn screamed, “Timbuktu!”

And then more protests: “Amsterdam!”

“Bombay! Bolivia! Baghdad! Beirut!”

“Madagascar!”

“Kandahar!”

“Dusseldorf!”

“Hey, Kars!” Truong’s voice broke through the cacophony. “There’s a town in Austria called Fucking, a city in Germany called Rimsting and in the Bavarian Alps you can go skiing on the white slopes of Wank. There’s also a place in India called Dikshit, in Australia there’s Tittybong and in Scotland there’s Lord Berkeley’s Knob. Would you consider those places acceptable?”

“Nope,” I said at once. “That would defeat the whole purpose, wouldn’t it?”

“Ffffffffffuuuuuu . . .” Truong caught himself before lambasting,
“Ffffukushima Daiichi!”

Chapter Four



My diet. It swings like a pendulum.

Ghetto. Gourmet. Ghetto.

For the past week, my diet had consisted of Flamin' Hot Cheetos and Diet Coke (lunch), Gruyère cheese paired with a bottle of Riesling (dinner) and Pop-Tarts (breakfast). So when Truong had invited me over to dinner at his mom's place, it was an easy yes. I'd heard that his mom, Mrs. Nguyen, was a goddess in the kitchen. A wok queen, so to speak. I'd fully expected dinner to be nothing short of amazing. A culinary explosion. Well, I was sort of right.

Can your stomach explode from eating too much?

You bet-cha.

"More?"

"No thanks, Mrs. Nguyen," I politely declined her offer to scoop me up a third helping. After all, I'd just inhaled two cows and three piglets.

"OW!" I squawked as Truong kicked me hard under the table. "You never say no to my mom," he hissed. "She's an old battle-axe! The minute she moved into this house, the mice hurled themselves onto the traps."

I hissed back, "I am not a kamikaze mouse."

Smiling placidly, I added, "Oh, I'm so stuffed, Mrs. Nguyen. I really don't think I could take another bite."

"What?" Her eyes suddenly flashed. "You don't like my *cơm tấm*?"

"No, no. I do," I insisted. "I love your grilled pork."

"Good!" She gave a crisp nod of satisfaction and plopped another piglet onto my plate. "Here, have more."

After the feast to end all feasts, I began clearing the plates when Truong pulled me aside and whispered, "My mom says you didn't enjoy the meal."

"What? Why in the name of Saigon would she say that?" I groaned, clutching my gut. "I ate so much it hurts to even breathe."

Truong gave me his signature Truong look. "The second you savored that first bite of her *cơm tấm*, you were supposed to moan with ecstasy, declaring it the most delicious *cơm tấm* you'd ever tasted. There should've been lots of talk about the *cơm tấm* . . . how it's robustly flavored, sophisticated yet

simple. That's how it should have played out and you my dear, Kars, failed to play your part as the satisfied dinner guest."

"Well, I'm *sorrrrrry*."

"Didn't you like it?"

"Of course," I cried. "I mean, this is the first time I've ever had cơm tấm, so yes, it was the best cơm tấm I'd ever had."

"Excellent!" Truong clapped my back. "Now why don't you run along and tell that to my mom."

I carried the dishes to the kitchen and found Mrs. Nguyen loading the dishwasher. "Mrs. Nguyen," I said earnestly, "that was hands down the most delicious cơm tấm ever."

"Really?" she asked anxiously, drying her hands on a kitchen towel.

"Yes! It was fantastic." I gave her an endearing pat on her shoulder. "You are by far the best cook in town, Mrs. Nguyen."

"Thank you, Karsynn." She beamed at me like a beacon. "Now are you ready for some mango and sticky rice? It's my specialty dessert."

"Truong!" I hissed. "When you invited me over for dinner you should've told me what I was in for. Seriously. This was like an amateur competitive eating contest."

"Urghh." Truong crawled onto his bed and collapsed atop the duvet. "My stomach's about to rupture."

"Rupture? Mine's about to detonate!"

"Lie down. It'll make you feel better."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I can't move." I sat on the floor, curling my feet up under me so I was sitting like a pretzel. "I'm going into a food coma."

"Suit yourself, boss."

"Don't call me that," I said reproachfully. "I may be your boss at work, but outside of work, I'm just Karsynn."

"You know . . ." Truong emitted a gleeful chortle. "Sometimes I can't believe you're my supervisor. How did that even happen?"

"Well it happened," I said complacently. "So you better *recognize*."

Truong gazed up at the ceiling, reminiscing. "Do you remember when you were just a lowly minion with a superiority complex? A fresh-faced agent on the floor?"

I smiled fondly. "I remember . . ."

Truong went on, "I'd never seen someone work so hard at avoiding work."

"How dare you!" I swatted him with a pillow. "I worked my ass off!"

"Stop!" he cried, half-laughing. "And in the middle of smoking a cigarette, you'd pause for another cigarette break. Do you remember that?"

"Oh yeah." I bit back a smile. "Cigarette breaks *during* my cigarette breaks. What's wrong with that?"

"Everything." Truong snorted inelegantly. "It used to drive The Führer bat shit crazy!"

"The Führer," I echoed. "I can't believe we used to call Hillary that. She's mellowed quite a bit since then, don't you think?"

"Now she has. But back then, working under Hillary was like living in the Village of the Damned."

"True . . . I guess the name we gave her was well deserved."

Truong gave me a peculiar look. "Funny you should say that."

"What?"

"About us . . . calling Hillary The Führer."

I lifted a delicate brow. "And why is that funny?"

"Well," Truong hedged.

"Well what?"

"Um, all the agents on your team have a nickname for you, too."

"Nooooooooo!" I gasped. "They do? What is it? Tell me!"

Truong sat there grinning, taking enormous pleasure in my anguish. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Positive."

"OK." Truong propped himself up on his elbows. "Get ready for this . . . they call you Chancellor Angela Merkel."

"NOOOooooooo." I buried my face in my hands.

"Oh yes." Truong's eyes glinted with mischief. "Ve haf vays of rescuing your economy. But if you go bankrupt . . . KAPUT! Like Greece and Spain, then ve vill abolish the Euro and bring back the Deutsche Mark," he intoned in a silly German accent before bursting into hysterics.

"Humph." He needn't sound so enthusiastic about it. "If I'm Chancellor Angela Merkel, then you're Mahmoud Ahmadinejad."

"Hey Chancellor." Truong held up his hands in mock arrest. "Don't shoot the messenger."

"But," I said indignantly, "I don't think I'm a bad boss."

“You’re not bad,” he teased, “you’re awful!”

“If you think I’m awful, it’s all that book’s fault! It puts heat on women bosses and it perpetuates this stereotype that all of us are inherently evil.”

Truong didn’t bother to hide a snicker. “But you *are*.”

I glared at him with blistering scorn.

“Calm down. I’m just messin’ with you.” He sat up and adopted a more serious tone. “All right, which book are you referring to?”

“*The Devil Wears Prada*.”

Truong started giggling. “You’re more like *The Angel Wears Payless*.”

I threw him another dirty look.

“*The Devil Wears Prada*. I didn’t read the book but I saw the movie; Meryl Streep played the delicious villain. All right, I see it . . .” He nodded thoughtfully. “I see where you’re going with this. She *does* make me fear the evil female boss.”

“See!” I said with a satisfied air. “It’s partly Hollywood’s fault. They make you despise the lady boss and cheer for the hooker with a heart of gold.”

“Hey!” Truong looked askance. “*Pretty Woman* is one of my all-time favorite movies and Julia Roberts will forever remain my beloved tart with a heart.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s a tired trope that needs to be laid to rest.”

“Oh, it never will be. Not when Hollywood loves hookers as much as the politicians do.”

“True . . .” I trailed off. A beat. Another beat. “Truong,” I said at last, “can you be straight with me?”

“I always am.”

“Do you,” I broke off and added hesitantly, “do you wish you were on someone else’s team?”

“Of course not,” he said at once.

I sighed. “The other day, I overheard Adam saying that he preferred working on Joshua’s team.”

“Weird.” Truong tilted his head to one side. “Why would Adam say such a thing?”

“In his exact words, Joshua’s a lot less emotional than me.”

“*Jalapeño* Joshua?” Truong’s voice pitched higher. “Are you kidding me? That guy’s a hothead! I’ve got chest hair longer than his fuse.”

“See what I mean!” I frowned to myself. “There’s such a double standard. When Joshua loses his temper, oh he’s just being a man. But when I blow my

top off, I'm being hormonal, moody, *emotional*. It's just not fair!"

"Mmmm."

"And you know what the worst part is?"

"What?"

"Pamela and Jewel agreed with Adam! They said men make better bosses. And I thought they were supposed to be on my side." I threw my hands up in despair. "Can a sister get a little solidarity in the Sisterhood?"

"I don't judge a book by its cover and I certainly don't judge my boss by gender. So I wouldn't worry about it too much."

"But I can't help it. I feel like I constantly have to prove myself. You tell me, should I be more masculine or feminine?"

"It depends." Truong chewed on his bottom lip. "Why don't you define masculine and feminine?"

"Why don't *you* define it? After all, I'd like to know how you really feel about all this."

"Generally speaking . . ." Truong seemed to be choosing his words carefully, "Women are more nurturing and caring. Men are less so and they tend to focus more on other things . . ."

"Like?" I pressed.

"Oh you know," he murmured airily, "things like facts and logic whereas women tend to focus more on feelings and um, their emotions."

"I'm not emotional!" I cried defiantly. "I get things done! If you want to talk about a task, go ask a man. But if you want it done, ask a woman!"

"By the way," Truong said mildly, "you're getting really emotional right now."

"Stop using that word," I huffed with annoyance. "I am *not* emotional!"

"All right, I'll give you credit where credit is due. You do get things done a lot more efficiently than Joshua."

"Thank you!" I said with dignity. After a pregnant pause, I asked, "Do you *really* think I'm emotional?"

"Well, all women are emotional when their basement is leaking. Then it's like the communists have invaded the summer house."

"Truong! You're such a sexist pig! You can't blame me for having PMS. And by the way, the preferred expression is Elmo riding the cotton pony."

Truong pulled a face. "What do you have against Elmo?"

"Nothing!"

"Speaking of double standards," Truong said pointedly, "when a man talks

dirty to a woman, it's sexual harassment. When a woman talks dirty to a man, it's \$3.95 a minute. And when you women look after your own, it's called 'Solidarity in the Sisterhood' or at worst, you're labeled a radical feminist. But when I try to watch out for my brothas, I'm called a chauvinist."

"Ah, but there lies the difference. Feminists believe in the equality of sexes, whereas chauvinists don't."

"Hey! I believe in the equality of the sexes. Hell, I wore spiked heels to work yesterday."

"Oh yeah, that reminds me. He wants you to tone it down a notch."

"Who does?"

"The dude with the lips."

"You mean Carter, the male version of Angelina Jolie?"

"Yep."

"Tone what down? Exactly?"

"You know," I said carefully, "dress a little less like an eccentric piano player."

"You mean dress less like Liberace?" His voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Or Elton John, perhaps?"

"Erm . . ." I trailed off.

"Honey!" Truong did a zigzag finger snap. "Carter has no right to dictate how I dress."

"But, Truong." I cushioned my words with thoughtful pauses. "He's imposing this dress code on everyone, not just you. I know you want to celebrate who you are, but maybe the workplace is not such a good place to be doing it. The blouses, the ruffles, the dresses, the heels, it can be a bit much at times."

"A bit much?" Truong looked at me with sudden anger and a torrent of words came spilling out. "Let me tell you what's too much! When I was nine years old, my dad had a one-on-one talk with me. And do you want to know what he said? He said that if he ever found out that I, his only son, was a homosexual, or as he called it, a *hợp với người đồng tính*, he'd snap my neck in half."

I swallowed hard and spoke around a croak, "I'm sure he must've been joking."

"He was dead serious," Truong deadpanned. "My own dad. Can you believe that? I stayed in the closet for years and years, locked away in my own Narnia." There was a small silence and then he added, "I only came out

when my dad passed away two years ago. So now I celebrate who I am. How I dress is who I am. And I am who I am, Kars. There is no alternative.”

“But what about your mom? Wasn’t she there for you?”

He emitted a silent laugh. “My mom was too busy grieving over my sister.”

“Oh . . .” I trailed off. “I never knew you had a sister.”

“That’s ’cause she took her own life.”

I couldn’t speak for shock. The silence was stifling.

Eventually, Truong explained with patient resignation, “My mom was one of those tiger moms. Any grade less than an A was unacceptable. So from an early age, me and my sis . . . we associated our self-worth and who we were with how well we performed at school. Whenever we didn’t get an A, oh hell! My mom went ape shit! She made us feel awful. Worthless, even.”

Quietly, I said, “She sounds just like Amy Chua.”

“But my sister didn’t turn out like Amy Chua’s daughters. Actually,” he amended, “she did, in a way. She was every Asian parent’s wet dream. Scored straight As, took AP classes, placed first at the Science Olympiad, president of the Student Council, perfect SAT scores, attended Harvard Med School.” He said nothing for a moment, then, “During her second year at college, she took her own life.”

“Why?” My voice came out strangled.

“Haven’t you heard?” He gave a little shrug and said in a sardonic voice, “The tiger mom approach makes depressed cubs.”

I knew Truong well enough to know that he was using mockery to mask his deep anguish.

“But no one really knows with Tien.” He sighed deeply. “She had always kept up this facade that everything was great. Inside, she must have mentally cracked under all that pressure. Sometimes, I wish I’d done more to help her. Should’ve. Could’ve,” he said almost angrily.

In the pause that followed, I reached for a silver framed picture sitting on the nightstand. “Is this your sister?”

He nodded and smiled ruefully in answer. “We were twins, you know. I was actually a surprise. When Tien was born, my parents thought she was going to be one big baby.”

“Really? But how could they not know?”

“My mom never wanted to have an ultrasound and when she went for her routine checkups, her doctor only heard one heartbeat.”

“That’s insane.”

“I know. Tell me about it.” Laughing in a fatigued way, he tried to joke, “After Tien was delivered, the doctor said, ‘Oh, I think there’s another baby!’ Five minutes later, I entered this world as my mom cursed, ‘Holy Shitballs!’”

I started laughing. “Your mom never said Holy Shitballs!”

“Well, she said something along those lines in Vietnamese.”

“You and Tien.” I took a long last look at her picture before replacing it on the nightstand. “Were you close?”

His face softened and he smiled slightly. “Very close. I’d give anything to have her back. So would my mom. My mom . . .” He stopped and gave a bitter laugh. “Once a stoic tiger mom, well it crushed her. Now all we have left of Tien is a room full of perfect report cards, sheaves of terms papers—all graded A’s of course, and a shelf lined with her gold medals and trophies. Ironical isn’t it? It’s what my mom had always wanted from Tien. And mom got what she wanted.” He didn’t say any more but his eyes said the rest.

“Truong,” I said gently, “don’t blame yourself.”

In an abrupt confession, he said, “For a while I blamed my mom. She wanted us to be successful so much that nothing else mattered. Not even our happiness. Do you know,” he added heatedly, “that suicide rates are outrageously high amongst Asian Americans?”

“No.” There was a startled pause and I said in a small voice, “I did not know that.”

His face went oddly blank. “Well now you know. And I refuse to become another statistic. So Kars, you can tell Carter Lockwood that I am going to celebrate who I am, and live my life how I wish to live it. Not how my parents want me to live it. Or how society wants me to live it. OK?”

“OK,” I said quietly, giving just the smallest nod of understanding.

For a while, we lapsed into a deep and poignant silence. My heart ached knowing that Truong’s tender heart was hurting. I decided now would be a good time as any to change the subject. “Do you want to hear some office gossip?”

Truong sat bolt upright and brightened like the sun. “Does Dolly Parton sleep on her back? Hullo? YES. GIMME SOME GOSSIP NOW!”

I laughed, reveling in the excitement I heard in his voice. And I didn’t keep him in suspense for long. “Pamela and Deepak are dating,” I blurted out.

“Deepak?” His eyes widened like saucers. “Deepak Prasad the supervisor?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Uh-oh,” said Truong in a dark, ominous tone, “Pamela’s journey to gonorrhea has just begun.”

“I warned her about him, but she doesn’t seem to care.”

“That sounds just like Pamela. By the way, how’s the living situation going with her?”

I sighed. “She’s not the easiest roommate, but she’s bearable. I just wish she’d stop prancing about. I don’t understand why that woman can’t walk. *Walk*. Like a normal person.”

“Pamela the prancing party chick.” Truong gave a great yawn. “Is she even around much?”

“Not really. Ever since she started seeing Deepak, she’s hardly home.”

“Pamela and Deepak,” Truong muttered idly, “who would’ve thought those two would wind up together?”

“I know.” I stretched my legs in front of me and added impishly, “Who would’ve thought you and Ayinde would wind up together?”

His eyes flickered. “You have a point.”

“Anyway, how are things with you and Ayinde?”

“Well . . .” he said hesitantly, “not so great.”

“How come?”

“Ayinde hasn’t given me an Australian kiss. Can you even believe that? And we’ve been dating for over six months now.”

“Australian kiss?” I waited for him to amplify this illuminating statement.

“It’s the same thing as a French kiss,” he explained, “only down under.”

I let out a gale of laughter.

“It isn’t funny!” He pouted. “In fact, it’s a travesty of international proportions. My kitty hasn’t meowed for months because my boyfriend seems to think ‘going down’ is a button you press on an elevator.”

“Truong! You don’t have a kitty!”

“All right,” he amended, “my Snoopy hasn’t whimpered for months.”

“Well then,” I said decisively, “it’s time you got creative.”

“I have been! I even changed my ringtone to ‘Downtown’ and Ayinde still didn’t get the hint.”

Snapping my fingers like Sinatra, I found myself humming to the tune of ‘Downtown,’ and before I knew it, we were bursting into life-affirming music, belting out the chorus Broadway style.

It was such a powerful rendition. We sang with raw conviction, hitting all the high notes, moving in between the medium and low notes with

mathematical, though never mechanical, precision. Afterward, we were completely spent.

“That was totally a *Glee* moment,” said Truong, catching his breath.

“Totally! Speaking of *Glee*, I have to pee,” I said in a rush, like I was Dr. friggin’ Seuss. “Do you have a bathroom I could use?”

“As a matter of fact I don’t,” Truong replied tonelessly. “I shit in the backyard.”

“Seriously, Truong!”

“Seriously, Kars!” He fixed me with a sardonic look. “You know better. When you ask a stupid question—”

I rolled my eyes and finished, “I’ll get a stupid answer.”

He slapped me on the back affectionately, almost winding me. “You *know* it.”

I sighed. “Let’s try this again. Where is the bathroom?”

“Down the hallway, second door to your right.”

Chapter Five



Cinco de Mayo was upon us and it fell on me to organize another potluck—my worst nightmare. Most of my fellow co-workers don’t cook, nearly all of their creations are processed or done with shortcuts by assembling canned or frozen ingredients (a.k.a. Rachel Ray style of cooking). And those who *can* cook have absolutely no concept of food sanitation.

The morning of the potluck, Shoshanna walked in carrying a casserole dish and gingerly tucked it under her desk.

“Shoshanna,” I said lightly, “why don’t you refrigerate your dish?”

“Oh, my casserole will be fine. It’s hot right now and I know it’ll cool to room temperature, but that’s all right. I’ll just heat it up in the microwave oven when it’s time for our potluck.”

I managed a tepid smile, horrified to think of all the bacteria growing in her casserole like brain-eating amoeba in a Petri dish.

Next, Nate strode in with some store-bought potato salad and deposited it next to his workstation. Um, doesn’t he know that mayonnaise must be refrigerated?

I sighed wearily and headed to the break room, intent on refrigerating my seven layer taco dip. When I pulled the fridge door open, my eyes widened and my hand flew up to my mouth in horror. It looked like the inside of a microwave oven after a watermelon explosion.

My stomach did an involuntary lurch. Pssh! How disgusting.

Do these slobs live like this at home, too?

Probably, I surmised.

Really. I shook my head in disbelief. I worked with a bunch of pigs.

I slammed the fridge with deliberate force, scribbled a note down on a Post-it and stuck it right in the middle of the fridge:

CLEAN UP AFTER YOURSELF! YOUR MOM DOESN’T WORK HERE!

There! I straightened myself, feeling marginally better.

“Let me guess,” came a familiar voice, “the fridge is gross again.”

I spun around and exclaimed, “Yep! Don’t go near it, Truong!”

He started backing away from the fridge like it was a parcel bomb. “Inge has a mini fridge. Let’s go store our food there.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

As we meandered through the maze of cubicles, I grumbled, “Some of these people just don’t understand the concept of keeping cold foods cold and hot foods hot.”

“Relax,” said Truong, patting my back. “Exposure to new bacteria will only strengthen your immune system. Look at me! I’ve got a stomach of steel.”

“I’m afraid.” I let out an involuntary little shudder. “Very, very afraid. I’ll never know if someone didn’t wash off the cutting board with soap in between cutting up meat and vegetables.”

“I guess you’ll have to take your chances.”

“No thanks,” I said gravely. “I don’t enjoy playing Russian roulette with my food.”

“So you’re not gonna eat anything?”

“I’ll be filling up on chips and pretzels.”

“Bo-ring.”

“And remind me again, why we do this every month?”

“Potlucks are fun!”

“More like mandatory fun,” I said with resigned forbearance. “At some point these monthly things become a drudgery.”

“You’ll have to admit though, it’s fun watching people fighting to be first at the table for spinach dip and store-bought potato salad.”

“No. When Rick doesn’t bring anything and dares to show up, plate in hand—now *that’s* fun to watch.” I made a face. “Ohhhh . . . daggers.”

“I’ll shoot Rick daggers all right.” Truong shot me a sidelong glance with that blade sharp smile of his. “And if he even dares to come back for seconds . . .” He left a portentous pause.

I frowned to myself. “It’s always the ones who don’t bring any food who are the gluttons. By the way, what did you bring?”

“Bread pudding,” he said with a playful wink. “It’s drenched in rum so you won’t have to worry about bacteria breeding.”

As we turned a corner, Jewel wafted past us carrying an oversized Tupperware container. “Oh hell no.” Truong held back a groan. “Please don’t tell me she brought marshmallow salad again.”

“I think it’s called a Waldorf salad. Wait no, I think it’s a Watergate salad. Or maybe it’s called an Ambrosia salad.”

“Just call it an embarrassment,” Truong said dryly. “It’s not a salad if it’s got mini marshmallows in it. Marshmallows are not even a vegetable. It’s candy. Why not just make a Snickers salad?”

“Actually,” I said tragically, “there is such a thing. It’s made out of Snickers bars, apples and whipped cream.”

“That’s the craziest shit I’ve ever heard.”

An acerbic voice butted in, “What is?!?”

We turned at his exclamation. It was Deepak, a fellow supervisor and a newly minted MBA (he never failed to tell you that). He had a habit of always saying, ‘I’ll take one for the team.’ And yet I’ve never actually seen him make any sacrifices for the benefit of anyone other than himself.

“Hi, Deepak,” I greeted him with a forced smile.

He began sculpting his hair with his fingers. “What were you guys talking about?”

Today, like most days, Deepak wore his hair like his personality—slicker than greased goose shit.

“Oh,” I replied vaguely, “we were just talking about controversial salads.”

Truong, noting that one of Deepak’s hands was laden with plastic bags, asked, “What did you bring for the potluck?”

“I brought two desserts. Ritz cracker apple pie with melted cheddar cheese and mayonnaise cake.”

“Whaaa?” My breath caught in a tiny gasp. “Cheddar cheese on apple pie?”

“I’m from the Midwest,” said Deepak, by way of explanation, “and apple pie without cheddar cheese is like a hug without a squeeze!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I observed that Pamela, Jewel and Debbie were visibly distraught. Like high school cheerleaders, they frequently moved around in a pyramid formation.

The synchronized human pyramid moved in our direction and stopped in front of us.

“Oh, Deepak,” Pamela called tearfully, breaking the formation. “I could really use a hug right now.”

Deepak dumped his plastic bags at his feet and wrapped his arms around Pamela. “What’s wrong, babes?”

“It’s Amanda . . .” she sobbed into Deepak’s shoulder. “Her husband just had a heart attack. H-h-he’s dead.”

“Amanda?” I turned sheet white. “Amanda Briggs on Hillary’s team?”

Debbie barely had the strength to string two words together. “Yes,” she

managed.

“B-but,” I stammered, “I just saw Amanda at her desk fifteen minutes ago and she seemed OK then . . . does she even know?”

“Carter just gave her the news,” Jewel spoke quietly. “We overheard him just now as we were walking past his office.”

“Is Hillary even here today?” Truong asked anxiously.

“No,” I murmured distractedly, “today’s her day off.” Then I spotted Amanda leaving Carter’s office. From the stooped curve of her shoulders and from the way she was hugging her arms around herself, I sensed her anguish and deep despair.

Guided by intuition, I cut purposefully across the floor until I reached her side. “Would you like me to give you a ride home?”

“Please.” Amanda gave me a grateful smile. “Let me just go and grab my things.” As she strode off, I popped my head around Carter’s door. “I’m taking Amanda home. I should be back in half an hour.”

Exhaustion was layered into Carter’s face in fine lines. He simply held my gaze and nodded.

I concentrated hard on driving without grinding the gears, which I’ve been known to do whenever my mind’s preoccupied. Amanda sat staring numbly out the window with her forehead pressed against the glass, her shallow breaths forming a ring of condensation around her head.

“How could this could happen to my Ben? It just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Gripping the steering wheel, I gave Amanda a sidelong glance. She seemed to be drifting in and out of a kind of semi-conscious state. When she spoke again she might have been in a trance. “Ben’s only thirty-five, you know.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said quietly. I hoped the simple phrase expressed the extent of what I felt. They were such easy words, offered with little or no thought, yet I meant every word of it.

Amanda’s face was an impassive mask. “Me too . . .” There was a pause until she added, “You know, our ten year anniversary is just next month. I had this whole trip planned. To Yellowstone. It’s where we had our honeymoon. We’d stayed at the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel . . . so beautiful, so peaceful. And we saw so many bison. But not many bears, though. Ben was all about the bears . . . always wanting to snap a hundred pictures of them.”

Amanda carried on talking about the time they had spent at Yellowstone, and it seemed to ground her for a bit. At some point, she slipped and lost her footing. “I had this amazing trip all planned. And now . . . now I’ll be planning a funeral. Oh God!” She buried her face in her hands and burst into gut-wrenching sobs. “This is so-so sudden. I just saw Ben this morning, getting ready for work. I-I haven’t had time to prepare for this. I didn’t even have a chance to say goodbye to him.” She began to cry even harder.

I swallowed hard, pushing against the lump that was blocking my throat. Then I pulled over to the side of the road, stalled the engine and put a comforting hand around Amanda’s shoulder, hoping she wouldn’t shrug it off, grateful when she didn’t.

Chapter Six



“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” said the priest. After the first Episcopal prayer, Amanda rose from the pew and strode to the front of the church. For the first few seconds, “Hi,” was all she could manage. She stood there for a moment, composing herself. Then, “My Ben . . . I know he loved me. And I know he loved his family because he was never afraid to say it or show it.” Her voice did not crack and she looked strong and brave in front of a crowd of over three hundred.

She talked about her beloved husband, Ben, as if he were sitting in the front-row pew, gazing at her. She spoke about simple moments they had shared and I could sense the painful effort that it required from her.

Her husband was taken away so suddenly, without any warning, without preamble, that there was no gradual transition, no time at all for her to adjust. The way her world had been, with her husband alive, was gone. She now had to face a new reality . . . the way the world *is*, with him gone. My heart broke into a million pieces for her.

When her tribute came to an end, Amanda looked around at the sea of faces. “I’d like to leave you all with a poem by Canon Henry Scott-Holland. I know in my heart this is how Ben would have wanted to be remembered . . .” She unfolded a piece of paper, cleared her throat and began.

Death is nothing at all.

I have only slipped away to the next room.

I am I and you are you.

Whatever we were to each other,

That, we still are.

Call me by my old familiar name.

Speak to me in the easy way which you always used.

Put no difference into your tone.

Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together.

Play, smile, think of me. Pray for me.

*Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.
Let it be spoken without effect.
Without the trace of a shadow on it.
Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same that it ever was.
There is absolute unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?
I am but waiting for you.
For an interval.
Somewhere. Very near.
Just around the corner.
All is well.*

At 6:15, the service was over and the priest informed the congregation that there would be a receiving line. Quickly, I rose from my pew and stood at the front of the queue that was quickly building up. When it came to my turn to pay my respects, I walked up to Amanda and was surprised to find Carter exchanging words with her.

"Thank you," said Amanda, clasping his hand, "for the lovely flowers you sent to my home."

"It's from all of us," Carter said kindly. "Everyone at the office sends their deepest sympathies."

"Ahem," I cleared my throat and smiled. "I'm here too, on behalf of everyone at work."

"Karsynn." Amanda's voice was warm and lilting. "I've been meaning to thank you for all those groceries you dropped off the other day."

From the look on Carter's face, he was just as surprised to see me.

I reached in and gave Amanda a hug. "I'm always around if you need anything."

"Oh Kars." She hugged me back so hard I thought I might not live to see tomorrow. "You've offered your support from day one. That alone is a gift. Thank you." Amanda stepped back and looked from me to Carter. "And thank you both for coming. I wasn't expecting anyone from work to show up."

"We're all thinking of you, Amanda," I said meaningfully.

"We are," Carter added in a gentle voice. "You're not alone in this."

She smiled briefly in acknowledgement. "I know. But all this . . . it just seems so foreign."

“Yes, I’m sure it does.” The way Carter said it, it was soft and sad at the same time.

Amanda began laughing somewhat ruefully. “I seem to be consoling people who have come to console me. But don’t get me wrong, I’m certainly not complaining.” She glanced over my shoulder, taking in the long line that stretched all the way to the back of the church. “It warms my heart to see how many people love and care about Ben.”

I nodded solemnly and was on the verge of conveying my heartfelt sympathies when Carter cut in, “Right.” He squeezed my elbow slightly. “Karsynn and I shouldn’t keep you. Take care, Amanda, and please take all the time you need.”

I was able to give Amanda a quick hug before I was unceremoniously dragged away by an impatient Carter.

I stepped outside into a heat wave and took refuge under an awning. Leaning against the cool concrete wall, I lit a cigarette and closed my eyes, just for a second. Halfway through my infinitely relaxing cigarette, Carter strode out of the church, looking as if he’d just stepped off the pages of GQ.

So there he was.

After our brief encounter back in the church, I had been surreptitiously tracking his presence. He had moved through the crowd, maintaining a safe distance from me. And then I had lost him. But here he was again.

I hated to admit it, but he cut a fine figure in a black suit. As the wind tugged softly at his brown hair, Carter caught my gaze and I found myself coldly scrutinized.

Whoa! His eyes could skewer a person at a hundred paces.

Why was he always so mad? Mostly everyone at work was terrified of him and as far as I knew, no one had ever seen him smile. Although, with Amanda back there, I did see a brief glimpse of kindness. He was charming, even. Nonetheless, it was obvious to me that Carter had now dropped the charm act and any trace of kindness had been entirely erased. He was his usual broody, arrogant self.

I took a deep drag and angled my head to the left, blowing a smooth stream of smoke across my shoulder. I allowed myself the faintest glimmer of a smile as Carter advanced toward me. “What’s the matter, Carter? Did a pigeon poop in your eye?”

“No,” he replied nonplussed.

“Did someone stab you in the brain with a wooden stake?”

“No!” Carter’s voice surged with irritation.

“Walk barefoot over a bed of glowing coals?”

This time, Carter said nothing, but his eyes flashed like hot embers.

I ventured, “Smack your head on a tree branch, perhaps?”

His jaw went rigid as he stood before me. “Are you suffering from verbal diarrhea? Or is there a point to this onslaught?”

I took another drag on my cigarette.

“You know,” Carter went on, “there is a saying in Russia: One idiot can ask more questions than a thousand wise men could answer.”

“Is that so?” With palpable lack of interest, I asked, “Was the Russian philosopher named Smirnofficus?”

“What?”

Jeez, Carter certainly was slow on the uptake.

“Never mind,” I said lightly, blowing out smoke rings and watching them float away. “I was just wondering why you’re always scowling. Half the time you look sort of constipated.”

Carter paused for a fraction of a moment, clearly put off by such open hostility. “That’s because you reek of a charcoal furnace,” he said, not looking the least bit contrite. “And I find it very difficult to breathe when I’m around you.”

I looked at my cigarette in surprise to see that it had burnt away without me even noticing. I lit another and took a long drag.

“Do you mind?” He coughed loudly. “Your second hand smoke is killing me. Not to mention, it’s turning you into a black lunged cow.”

Wait. Did he just call me a cow?

“How dare you! You-you,” I sputtered, racking my brain for a suitable cutting comeback. “You pink-lunged prick!”

Pink-lunged prick? I blinked furiously. *Really, Kars?*

Judging from Carter’s stupefied expression, he had been called many things, but never that. Meanwhile, my gloves were still on and I boldly stepped into the ring. “Why do you even care so much about your health?” Since cigarettes had much the same effect on Carter as garlic on a vampire, I continued puffing like a chimney. “You’re so miserable all the time, I’m actually doing you a favor. Heck, if you lived a day longer you’d just be prolonging your misery.”

For a while, he simply stared at me and said nothing.

Belatedly, I realized I'd sounded callous. After all, I'd still have to see him at work tomorrow. That is, if I lived to see tomorrow. For one irrational second, I contemplated committing *hara-kiri* before Carter actually did the deed for me.

By now, Carter had regained himself. His face clouded with anger and he sent a death wish in my direction.

I gulped. If Carter placed both his hands on the sides of my head, there was no doubt in my mind that he could squash my cranium like a coconut.

Nervously, I tossed my hair over my shoulder and decided to play nice in a pathetic attempt to cover up my faux pas. "So tell me." I summoned up a smile and said ultra-casually, "What do you do during your spare time? That is, when you're not tormenting your workers or scowling at the sky?"

I did have the satisfaction of seeing his eyes narrow slightly. I think Carter was surprised by my question and even more surprised by my interest in him.

Instead of responding to my question, he said dryly, "And why, may I ask, are you flicking your hair? Are you flirting with me?"

"Me? Flirt with *you*? Pssh! Puh-lease! I'm just flipping my hair, you know . . . like a typical girl."

"A typical girl? Really? For a moment there I wasn't so sure."

"What do you mean?"

"Well . . . it had crossed my mind that you could be a hermaphrodite."

Humph. I walked right into that one.

I stubbed out my cigarette under my foot before fixing him with a hard stare.

For one glorious moment, I made a mental image of a Carter voodoo doll and spent an enjoyable minute sticking imaginary pins into him.

"Oh, look who's scowling now," he said, not trying very hard to disguise the fact that he was laughing. "You can dish it, but you can't take it, can you?"

God! How I despised that man!

Our eyes locked in mutual distaste. I was still in two minds about whether to pick a fight with Carter when my gut instinct convinced me it wouldn't be a good idea. After all, he was still my boss.

And for a second, it looked like Carter was struggling in his mind as to whether to stay and fight or go in peace. At long last, he gave me one of his ice-cold lightning smiles and walked off into the crowd.

Gloves off. And truce. For now.

Chapter Seven



Yikes! I gasped in horror then smacked my hand over my mouth. The zombies had breached the walls and they were going to eat me alive, starting with my brains! I stood there motionless, peering out my window, transfixed by the rhythmic swaying of the undead.

Oh my God! The realization came without warning and my heart thudded with fear. The zombies weren't going to leave until I was their supper. They were waiting for me . . . like crows on a wire.

I awoke with a start to a crow cawing outside my window. Sunlight filtered through the threadbare curtains and I could almost make out the bird's shadow.

Phew! I sighed heavily, lighthearted with relief.

It was all just a bad dream.

I forced myself out of bed, pushed back the curtains and came face to face with the black crow. It glared at me with its beady eyes.

This was a bad omen. Black crows signify death!

"CAW!" went the crow, "CAW! CAW!"

Shit. I stepped back in horror. For every 'CAW' cawed, one day would pass before someone died!

I raced to the bathroom, tugged on a pair of jeans and shot out the front door. "Maddy!" I cried as I barged into her apartment. "Oh thank God you're alive."

The scene was so familiar I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Maddy was working on her laptop, her foot resting on the kitchen chair and her fluffy Persian cats, Spartacus and Crixus, were snoozing by her feet.

"Ah!" Maddy glanced up from her laptop. "This is just like my chick lit novel. You're my impossibly charismatic friend who just pops up at opportune times to offer me witty advice."

"Did you see the black crow?" I paused to catch my breath. We lived in the same apartment complex and for all I knew, the crow could be cawing at every window. "Did you see it? Did you?"

"See what?" Maddy asked patiently.

“THE BLACK CROW!”

“Nope.”

“Well I did. And it cawed at me. Three times.” I paced agitatedly across the floor. “It went CAW! CAW! CAW!” I stopped pacing and craned forward, staring at Maddy with round eyes. “I swear, someone’s going to die. AND THAT SOMEONE COULD BE ME!”

“Don’t be silly,” Maddy said mildly. “Crows don’t signify death. Remember that movie *The Crow*?”

“No,” I said distractedly.

“Crows are protectors of the dead.”

“Oh,” I murmured. Now that the imminent threat of death had been removed, my wits were slowly coming back. I slumped down on the kitchen chair, careful not to disturb the Gladiator Cats. “Well that’s a relief.”

Maddy stared at me and said nothing for a while, then, “Are you all right, Kars?”

“Me? Yeah. Of course. Why?”

“You seem a little out there.”

“I do?”

She nodded solemnly. “And you know what?”

“What?”

“I think we need to find you a decent man,” she said with all the generosity of the newly engaged.

“Thanks. But *no thanks*,” I said a touch defensively. “And please stop doing that.”

“What?”

“Trying to set me up with all these men. You need to stop.”

She threw me a saccharine smile. “When has telling me not to do something ever stopped me from wanting to do it?”

“Maddy!” I sighed with heavy resignation. “Just because I’m alone, it doesn’t mean I’m lonely. Anyway, I like being single. It’s a nice sense of . . . of irresponsibility,” I finished. “Seriously. I’m tired of taking care of my boyfriends.”

“That’s because you’ve only been dating boys.” She fixed me with a pointed look. “Not men.”

Truth is, dating was the furthest thing from my mind. My thoughts drifted back to the funeral service I’d attended only days ago. In spite of loss, life continued. I felt lucky to be here, alive at this moment. And for some

inexplicable reason, I felt this sudden compulsion to connect with the people I love, not leave anything left unsaid, lest one of them decided to keel on me. And Maddy was on the top of my list for she has always given me a ready ear, unconditional love and infinite wisdom.

“Maddy . . .” I sat forward, elbows resting on the kitchen table. “Have I ever told you that you’re my bestie in this whole wide world and I love you dearly like a sister?”

“Not really.”

“Well I do,” I said meaningfully.

“I do too, Kars,” she said sappily. “Now can I get back to my work?”

“Go ahead,” I said with offended dignity. “Don’t stop on my account.”

While Maddy resumed working on her laptop, Spartacus hopped onto my lap and began to purr raucously. Obliging, I stroked his fur with one hand. “So how’s your *New York Times* bestselling novel coming along?”

Maddy was nose deep in her laptop and spoke without looking up, “I’ll be lucky if it even gets published.”

“Of course it will,” I said reassuringly. “Are you going to use your real name or a pen name?”

“Hmmm.” She tilted her head to one side thoughtfully. “I’m not so sure. All these authors seem to be using their initials; it’s all the rage these days.”

“Really?”

“Apparently,” Maddy went on, “if I use my initials, I’ll be in good company. J.K. Rowling, C.S. Lewis, R.L. Stine, J.D. Robb, J.R.R. Tolkien, T.S. Elliot, D.H. Lawrence, H.G. Wells, J.D. Salinger, J.M. Barrie, E.B. White—”

I cut in, “O.J. Simpson! M.C. Hammer! Hah! You’re not in such good company now, are you? Just because they use their initials, it doesn’t mean they’re better than you.”

“But doesn’t M.M. Lee have a nice ring to it? I think it sounds professional, melodious even.”

“Sounds pretentious,” I said truthfully. “And it makes me think of M&Ms leaving. Not a good thing. Trust me.”

“Or,” Maddy carried on brightly, “once I marry Mika, I could be M.M. Harkett.”

“Nah. Now I have this image of M&Ms being hacked to death.”

“Fine.” Maddy hung her head and said with heavy resignation, “I guess I’ll stick to my real name.”

“Have you made any real progress on your book?”

“Not really.” She sighed deeply. “I’ve been stuck on chapter two for weeks.”

“I have a solution.” I stood up abruptly and Spartacus gave an indignant yowl. “Sorry, kitty,” I said emphatically before darting back to my apartment, bounding back moments later with a bottle of wine and two glasses. “This will get your juices flowing.” I poured wine into the two glasses and pushed one toward Maddy. “So, what seems to be the hold up?”

“I’m trying to figure out my hero.” She took a swig and gazed unseeingly toward me. “I’m not sure if I want him to be a beta hero, a chief or a bad boy.”

My glass stopped halfway to my mouth. “How many male archetypes are there anyway?”

“Eight, I think.” She began chewing on her bottom lip. “Let’s see if I can remember all of them . . . there’s the chief who is usually a self-made millionaire or some successful investment banker. He’s more interested in leading than communication, which makes him bossy, arrogant and domineering.”

“Oh, I know that type all too well.” I winced into my wine. “He’s usually hot-tempered and rarely ever admits he’s wrong. He’s the alpha male; the testosterone-filled chest thumper.”

“Yep! You hit the nail on the head! Then there’s the bad boy who usually finds some type of redemption by the end of the story. And there’s the beta hero.” Maddy sighed dreamily. “My favorite.”

I stared absently into my glass, surprised at the magical way it seemed to have emptied itself. “I could’ve told you that.”

“Huh?”

I reached for the bottle and refilled my glass. “More wine?”

“Please.”

“Your fiancé is a beta hero,” I stated matter-of-factly and topped off her glass. “That’s why the beta hero’s your favorite.”

“He is, isn’t he?” Maddy grinned stupidly, hugging herself with happiness. “He’s the best friend who brings you soup when you’re sick. He’s the handy man who changes your flat tire. He’s down to earth, sensitive, kind, gentle, a regular boy next door. But he’s also the nice guy who all the girls overlooked in high school, in favor of the bad boys of course.”

“Bad boys!” A faint smile touched my lips. “Been there, done that.”

“And there’s the smooth operator,” Maddy went on, “he’s the rakish rogue, the suave playboy who’s afraid of commitment. And let’s not forget the tortured soul; he’s typically an artist or a musician, a lost and wandering soul who desperately needs help finding himself.”

“Let me guess,” I chimed in, “he’s also a bit of a loner, maybe even an outcast. And he’s moody and broody, walks around with dark clouds looming over his head, like Edward Cullen.”

“Yep.” Maddy nodded briefly in acknowledgment. “Most vampire novels celebrate the tortured soul hero.”

“All right, you can stop there. I don’t need to know *all* the heroes. If you ask me, you should go with the chief.”

Maddy slowly sipped her wine. “And why is that?”

“Because I love a man in charge. The beta hero is just so predictable.”

“How so?”

“Let me guess, the beta hero is good with the forehead kisses and brushing hair off the face, right?”

Maddy laughed and winced as if I’d thrown an accurate punch. “But women eat that stuff up! All men should add that to their repertoire of moves.”

“I disagree!” I heartily exclaimed. “Here’s my pet peeve with the beta hero, instead of just kissing the girl, he asks for permission first.” I pulled a face. “Men like that should grow a pair! Any idiot who asks for a kiss should be denied. Always.” I took another swig. “Such pussies!”

“Hey! You better check yourself,” Maddy cried, half-laughing. “The man I’m about to marry is *not* a pussy.”

“Sorry, no offense to Mika, but he’s not really my type. I prefer my men like . . . like Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

“Mr. Darcy, eh?” Maddy leaned back against her chair and regarded me speculatively. “The dominant chief? The stoic and arrogant man in charge?”

“Only on the surface,” I pointed out.

“Speaking of men in charge, how are things with you and your new boss?” I drained my glass of wine and filled it again.

“So I take it that things aren’t much better?”

“Put it this way.” I sighed dramatically. “I don’t think they could get much worse. He doesn’t seem to like me and the sentiment is entirely returned.”

“But Truong tells me you have a *thing* for him.”

“Did he?” I muttered, making a vow to do something unpleasant to him as

soon as I got the opportunity.

“Umm hmm. Truong says there’s so much chemistry between you two that he could almost light it with a Bunsen burner.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” I retorted. “Bunsen burners use a single open gas flame.”

Maddy gave me a narrow-eyed look. “So *do you?*”

“Do I what?”

“Have a *thing* for him?”

“Don’t you start as well,” I muttered grumpily.

“Truong says he’s simply divine.”

“He’s quite attractive, I suppose,” I said in a mood of large-minded fairness. “If you like that sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing?”

“Long lashes and a full mouth.”

“You mean the sort of mouth that would be the envy of every fashion model?”

“I guess . . .” I picked up the bottle of wine and idly examined the label. Cat’s Pee On A Gooseberry Bush. It was a 2008 Sauvignon Blanc and I’d bought it at my local Trader Joe’s because the name just sang to me. I shrugged to myself. For ten bucks, it was a fairly decent bottle of wine.

“Do you like the wine?” I asked suddenly. “We’re drinking Cat’s Pee On A Gooseberry Bush.”

“It’s nice.” Maddy nodded absently, twirling her wine glass. “Is he nice?”

“Is who nice?”

“Your new boss.”

I grimaced. Nice was not a word you’d apply to Carter Lockwood.

Maddy was looking at me expectantly. “So what is he like?”

I thought of him with a sudden burst of resentment. “Carter Lockwood is an island unto himself. He’s rude, cold, hot tempered, conceited, controlling, overbearing. Everything’s got to be his way or the highway. And you know what else? I think he’s crazy. Yep.” My voice pitched higher. “CRAZY. The mayor of CRAZYTOWN!”

Maddy smiled blithely. “You sound like the crazy one right now.”

“Whatever.”

“C’mon, Kars. I’m sure he’s not that bad.”

“No, really. He is.”

For a while, Maddy sat idly gazing, tapping one fingernail against her tooth.

I could almost see the cogs turning in her brain. “Let me guess. Is Carter perpetually grumpy? Always scowling?”

“Yes! How did you know? All the time. Seriously, if Carter Lockwood scowled any harder, his whole face might just splinter.”

Maddy snorted inelegantly.

“What’s so funny?” I demanded.

“Truong was right!” She keeled over laughing. “You *do* have a thing for him. I think you’re secretly smitten with him. Besotted. I even detect some unresolved sexual tension.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” I nearly choked on my wine. In fact, I should have tried harder. “What would make you even think of such a thing?”

“Because,” she sputtered, “Carter is a chief. He’s the archetype hero you picked! He’s *your* Darcy.”

Dun. Dun. DUN.

No. This cannot be.

I tried to speak, failed, so I drank some more wine.

“C’mon.” Maddy pushed her chair back and padded into the living room. “You’ll have to see this with your very own eyes.” She plucked a DVD from the shelf and popped it into the player.

“What are we watching?”

“*Pride and Prejudice*.”

“The BBC miniseries with Colin Firth and Jennifer Elhe or the movie with Keira Knightley?”

“The BBC adaption of course! That version is a masterpiece!”

“Untouchable!” I agreed, settling myself on a battered sofa that had seen better days. “Although, no actress could ever portray Elizabeth Bennet to my satisfaction.”

“And why is that?” Maddy asked wryly.

“Because,” I said it like it was a given, “I visualize myself as Elizabeth Bennet. I almost died when Darcy says: *In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.*” I went boneless, spineless. Clutching my heart, I gushed, “Oh Darcy.”

“No one ever talks like that anymore,” said Mika, walking in through the front door. “And if any guy ever said that to you, I suggest you run for the hills.”

“Hi, honey,” said Maddy. The look on her face when she first spotted Mika

entering the room . . . how I wished I had that kind of love in my own life.

Although I'd gladly eat crow before admitting that to Maddy.

Mika lobbed his jacket in the approximate direction of a kitchen chair and without bothering to wait and see if it hit anything, walked over and swept Maddy up in a bear hug.

I watched the two of them with fascinated eyes, feeling more and more like the proverbial fly on the wall. Unexpectedly, I experienced a sudden constriction in my stomach, a painful longing. Sure, I had dated. But they were flings. Somehow, I could never begin to feel the trust required for a deeper attachment.

Eventually, Mika released Maddy from his playful grip and flashed me a boyish grin. "Hi, Kars!"

"Hey."

"How's the party planning going?"

"No worries," I said reassuringly. "Truong and I are *on* it!"

"Just promise me, OK, no strippers at the Bachelorette party."

"You know I can't promise you that," I informed him with a wide-eyed innocent expression. "It's entirely up to the bachelorette." My eyes cut back to Maddy. "So? Stripper or no stripper?"

"Stripper!"

"All right," Mika conceded. "Then just make sure he looks like Chuy Bravo."

"No way!" Maddy balked. "Get me a hot policeman! Or fireman. Or sailor. Or construction worker."

Mika crossed his arms and sighed with heavy resignation. "Just get her the Village People."

"Shhhhh." I made shushing noises and turned my attention to the TV. "The show's about to start."

Mika perched on the edge of the sofa. "What are you girls watching?"

"*Pride and Prejudice*."

A big grin spread over his face and he gave a guffaw. "Later." He got up and started for the front door.

"Hey!" Maddy called after him, "Aren't you gonna watch this with us?"

He held up a hand in mock horror. "I'd rather dispose of biohazard waste."

Hours later, Maddy and I were still watching our little drawing room drama, *sans* Mika. On the flat screen, Elizabeth Bennet was having it out with Mr. Darcy.

“And your defect, Mr. Darcy,” said Elizabeth, “is to hate everybody.”

“And yours,” replied Darcy, “is willfully to misunderstand them.”

“See!” Maddy cried, “Darcy was just misunderstood.”

“Mmmmm.”

“And look,” said Maddy, pointing one perfectly manicured finger at the TV, “there’s Darcy . . . scowling again.”

“But Darcy’s scowl, his wooden stiffness is simply a facade for the strong emotions that rage underneath . . . he’s masking his underlying passion. He scowls to cover his discomfort.”

“Yes,” agreed Maddy in heartfelt tones. “Now do you see it?”

“What?” I drew a blank. “See what?”

“Fitzwilliam Darcy!” she rushed excitedly. “Doesn’t he remind you of Carter Lockwood?”

I blinked.

She coughed loudly. “He does, doesn’t he?” she finished with a satisfied air.

I fought to keep my face expressionless.

“C’mon,” she went on teasing with an unrepentant grin, “admit it.”

I simply ignored Maddy’s proselytizing. I would admit to nothing. I prided myself on being the only woman in the entire office impervious to Carter’s good looks.

Meanwhile, on the flat screen, Elizabeth Bennet was saying crossly, *“I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine.”*

Chapter Eight



“Half of these applicants are dumber than algae! Most of them are padding their resumes,” Carter fumed. “They can fib all they want! I make most of my hiring decisions by intuition.”

With a palpable lack of interest, I murmured, “Mmmm.”

Carter went on ranting, “I know if they’re a good fit within the first five minutes of the interview.”

“That may be how you do it.” I regarded him glacially. “But I like to give these candidates a chance before I actually jump to any conclusions.”

“Suit yourself,” he harrumphed.

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine.” Carter’s scowl deepened.

Hillary’s gaze went from Carter to me. “I’m with Carter on this one,” she said in her usual no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners tone. “CHOP! CHOP!” She karate chopped the air. “Let’s make this quick! We’ve got about twenty more people to interview.”

“Who’s next?” Carter asked.

Hillary glanced at a resume. “Maxwell Simpson.”

“He’s late.”

“Actually,” Hillary amended, “he’s a she.”

“Girls these days,” Carter grumbled, “walking around with men’s names.”

“And what sort of a name is Carter?” I threw him a sweet smile, intending to infuriate. “Do you know that you’re named after a line of baby clothing?”

I did have the satisfaction of seeing his eyes narrow slightly before Maxwell stepped into the conference room. “I’m so sorry,” she apologized profusely. “I was stuck in traffic.”

She sat down and I smiled at her politely, indicating that the interview was about to commence.

Hillary wasted no time with small talk. “Let’s begin, Miss Simpson. So tell us, why do you want to work here?”

“Um,” she hesitated, “because you were advertising a position and I’m currently unemployed.”

What a stupid question, I thought. Why does anyone want a job? Because they need the money, that's why! Only the filthy rich would ever work at a job just to pass time.

Carter asked the next question. "Where do you see yourself in five years?" "Truthfully," she said, echoing my thoughts, "five years closer to retirement."

Kudos to her. In five years, I pictured myself on a beach in Bali, sipping a Mai-Tai, looking out at the endless ocean, trying to catch my next wave. Not that I know how to surf. I know jack squat about surfing but if I was in Bali I'd imagine a 'roided out surfer from Australia with a name like Lachlan would be teaching me how to surf.

My daydreams have a very large canvas.

Carter's voice jolted me out of my reverie. "Tell us about your weaknesses."

"All right." There was a brief pause until Maxwell added, "My weakness is I never reveal my weaknesses to anyone."

I found myself smiling in spite of myself. I actually *liked* this chick.

Carter gave Hillary an imperceptible nod and I knew she'd clinched the job.

"Thank you," said Hillary. "We'll be in touch."

As soon as Maxwell was out the door and out of earshot, Hillary punched the air. "Record time! That interview only took us two minutes. If we keep this up, we can be done by lunch time."

"Let's switch things up." Carter crushed a piece of paper and tossed it into the trashcan. "I'm tired of asking them these scripted questions. We're going to start asking them some meaningful questions. Questions that actually give us a glimpse of their true characters."

The next candidate breezed into the conference room. Names were exchanged, hands shaken. Then Carter got down to business. "If you were an animal, which one would you be?"

WHAT? I quelled a giggle with difficulty. *This* was his meaningful question?

The candidate replied, "A cow in India."

The second candidate said, "I'd be a lion because I like to nap about eighteen to twenty hours a day."

Seriously. Why not just say he's a lazy pig?

The third candidate said, "I'd be a Yeti and force someone to take a non-blurry picture of me."

I'd almost chewed my Bic pen down to the tip when Jake, the fourth candidate with the Puka shell necklace, actually gave the question some thought. "I'd be a squirrel," he said at last.

I found myself grinning from ear to ear.

Carter's mouth curled slightly at the corners.

Hillary was beaming.

Smiles all around. Everyone was just peachy and hunky dory.

A squirrel!

What a brilliant and gutsy answer. For it is an irrefutable fact that squirrels are one of the most resourceful animals in the world.

But then his brilliant and gutsy answer was irrevocably tempered by his addition of, "I'd be a squirrel because I like to play with my nuts."

I made a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a snort.

Later, after Jake and his Puka shell necklace had left the building, Hillary breathed out a weary sigh. "His brain must have atrophied around the age of fourteen."

"Fourteen?" Carter snorted. "He had the mental acuity of a six-year-old."

"That guy was high on life." I smirked. "And glue! Among other things."

I suppose I should have known what to expect. Christ. The guy actually wore a Puka shell necklace!

There are only two occasions in which Puka shell necklaces are tolerated:

- * A guy is an incredible douchebag and wants the world to know it.

- * Said guy has blond-tipped hair and works at a tanning salon.

That's it. No other exceptions.

Well . . . I guess I might just make *one* exception:

- * The guy is a Samoan, a Tongan, a native Hawaiian, or belongs to any sort of native tribe.

Shortly afterward, the next candidate, Matt Hendrickson, strutted into the room self-importantly. I leaned closer to Hillary and whispered, "Oh my God. Scientology has cloned Tom Cruise."

Hillary whispered back, "He *does* look like Tom Cruise."

"Right," said Carter, pen in hand. "Let's get started."

Matt sat down and Carter asked him the same asinine question, "If you were an animal, which one would you be?"

"C'mon." Matt rolled his eyes, looking decidedly irritated. "I came here to

interview for a job, not play make believe.”

I felt the control of the interview slipping out of our hands. Something had to be done. Later, after Tom Cruise had stormed off in a huff, I turned and confronted Carter. “Really!” My voice pitched higher. “What is the point to all this?”

“The point of these questions,” said Carter in a level voice, “is to show how they measure up to the unknown. Their reaction is what I’m looking for. Do they demand why they’re being asked a trivial question? Do they roll their eyes at me?”

“Umm hmm.” Hillary nudged me in the ribs. “Did you see how Matt’s eyes practically rolled off his head? Tsch-tsch. I can’t believe he threw such a hissy fit.”

“Look,” Carter went on, “sometimes you have to answer strange questions. You just do. And if these people aren’t willing to go with the flow, then they won’t make it very far. Not in job interviews. Not in life. What I’m looking for are team players. People who can think on their feet; people who don’t think they’re too cool to answer simple and nonsensical questions.”

“I don’t know,” I said uncertainly, “this whole interview process is so . . . so . . . discombobulated.”

I liked that word. *Discombobulated*.

“Discombobulated?” said Carter in a voice that didn’t give me a clue as to whether he was harboring murderous thoughts about me.

“Discombobulated,” I said more timidly this time.

Hillary began speaking to me like she was nurturing a little kitten. “This is what it boils down to, kid. You’re gonna be spending a third of your life with your co-workers so it’d be a good idea to hire someone who not only qualifies for the job but who is also pleasant to be around.”

“Point taken,” I conceded as other more pressing matters were weighing on my mind. “And by the way, he *did* look like Tom Cruise, didn’t he?”

“He sure did!” Hillary enthused. “But what do you think is cheesier? A block of cheese or Tom Cruise?”

“Why the comparison?” I smirked. “Do you have something against cheese?”

Then we looked at each other and burst into girlish laughter.

Carter sighed with deep exasperation, his long mouth tight with disapproval. “Can you two quit talking about celebrities?”

Weak with laughter, I cast Carter a quick glance and enquired, “What’s so

wrong with celeb gossip?”

He looked down his imperious nose at me. “You’re so predictable,” he said haughtily.

“Really?” I remarked dryly.

“Really,” said Carter. “I suppose your ideal man would be Brad Pitt.”

“Nah.” I pulled a face. “He’s older than the Grand Canyon. Ian Somerhalder is more my type.”

Hillary looked mystified. “Ian who?”

“Ian Somerhalder,” I repeated. “He plays Damon Salvatore in *The Vampire Diaries*. Oh. My. God. Hillary! He is smokin’ hot!”

Carter’s voice was suddenly brisk. “Let’s get on with the interviews.”

“Sure.” I sat back and folded my arms. “But can you ask the candidates a different question? The zoo animal one is getting a bit old, if you ask me.”

“Of course,” Carter said amiably and fixed me with a pointed look. “But why don’t *you* come up with the next insightful question.”

“Gladly.”

The next candidate breezed in and introduced himself as Kiefer McDonald.

“Hello, Kiefer,” I greeted him with a jovial smile. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

“Let’s.”

“Who is your favorite celebrity?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Carter slapping his forehead.

I blatantly ignored him and devoted my full and undivided attention to Kiefer.

“I’m old school,” said Kiefer, “so I’ll have to go with Michael J. Fox.”

“And why is he your favorite celebrity?” I asked. This time I purposefully didn’t look at Carter to see what he’d thought of my question.

“Michael J. Fox has made me laugh and cry in a variety of roles. But for me, the greatest role of all is the one he lives every day . . . just going about his life, going to work, and showing us all that Parkinson’s disease may affect his body, but not his spirit.”

After Kiefer had left, I said, “I *really* like him.”

Hillary nodded enthusiastically. “So do I.”

Carter grudgingly acknowledged, “He did give some good answers.”

“See!” I shot Carter a triumphant look. “That’s because I asked some very good questions.”

Carter gave an amused half-smile.

“I’d like to come up with the next set of questions.” Hillary paused for a

fraction and turned to address Carter. "If you don't mind."

"Of course not."

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," said Carter.

The door was swung open and a well-upholstered man walked in. "Hi!" he said gregariously. "I'm Jason Schlegel."

Without preliminaries, Hillary fired the first question, "Jason! Which person, living or dead, would you most like to meet?"

"The, um, the . . . living one?"

"Which living person?" Hillary pressed.

"Eh-el-Elvis," Jason stammered. "And I can prove that the King still lives."

"All right." Hillary's smile wavered slightly. "Next question: What would you put on your headstone?"

Jason grinned. "If I got this job, I'd put 'Most Loyal Lightning Speed employee.' "

"Actually," I said *sotto voce*, "that question doesn't quite make sense because he wouldn't be able to put anything on his headstone once he's dead."

Hillary said quietly, "I liked his answer, though."

Next, a thick and strapping woman, (think Russian women's weightlifting team) with big hair and an even bigger personality bounded in, clutching a large tote bag. "Hi y'all!" she drawled. "I'm Mindy Thompson."

Everyone shrank slightly from her exuberance. And gosh, she had a ferocious perm. Her hair was so large it was practically another presence in the room. Some breed of half-human (think Rod Blagojevich) was probably nesting in that weave, somewhere.

Mindy went on, "I just wanted y'all to know that I've violated my probation by leaving Texas and crossing multiple state lines, but this job is so worth it. I just wanted y'all to know that this interview means a lot to me. Seriously, I'd do anything to snag this job. Heck, I'm even risking jail time."

Carter's jaw dropped. When he'd finally regained control of his facial features, I hissed under my breath, "Everyone deserves a second chance."

He sent me a shriveling look which I duly ignored.

"Please, Mindy." I gestured expansively. "Have a seat."

Mindy sat down and deposited her large tote bag under the table.

"So tell us, Mindy," I said kindly, "what is your greatest achievement?"

She twisted a lock of hair and smacked her bubblegum lips. "I wrote a

novel.”

“Really?” I said brightly. “That’s fantastic. What kind of novel?”

Mindy gave me an enormous toothy grin and flashed her donkey veneers. “BDSM.”

“BDSM.” Hillary wrinkled her nose, looking at Mindy in rather a puzzled way. “What’s that?”

Please don’t answer that. Please don’t *go* there, I tried to communicate this with my eyes.

But Mindy was only too willing to talk about it and once she’d started, there was no stopping her. “It stands for bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism. But it’s not all about pain and spankings and whips and chains. Tickling can be a part of the lifestyle too, you know.” She smacked her bubblegum lips. “It doesn’t have to be all about the Red Room of Pain.”

Hillary’s face was beginning to take on a slightly grayish tint.

I had to clear my throat twice before I could pick up the thread of conversation. “Mindy, can you tell us about one of your accomplishments that’s work related. Something you did at a previous job, perhaps?”

“It is work related!” Mindy shot back, “I wrote my entire BDSM novel when I worked at Best Buy.”

“Thank you for your time,” said Carter in a clear dismissal.

There was a startled pause, after which Mindy lightly enquired, “Did I get the job?”

I smiled wanly. ‘Don’t hold your breath’ was clearly implied even if it wasn’t enunciated.

“Well,” said Mindy, “y’all have a good day, then.” Clumsily, she got to her feet and knocked over her large tote bag, spilling all of its contents. A cobalt blue vase rolled across the floor and stopped at my feet.

I peered closer. Hmm. This was not your run of the mill blue vase. This was an opalescent cobalt blue, one of a kind, hand-blown teardrop glass vase designed by Simon Pearce. And just this morning, it was proudly displayed in our lobby.

Guilt was written all over Mindy’s face. She stared at us with mounting alarm, stumbled over her words, repeated herself. Eventually, she stopped speaking. She knew the game was up from the look on our faces. Manically, she stuffed everything back into her tote bag and bolted out the door.

Cool as a cucumber in a bowl of Tabasco sauce, Carter picked up the phone and called security. “Stop the blond woman before she leaves the premises.

Her temporary security badge will show her name. Uh-huh, that's right, it's Mindy Thompson and she's carrying a large tote bag." Pause. "Yes, she's stolen company property." Another pause. "Thank you. And please notify the authorities. Let them know she's on probation and have them contact her probation officer. Thank you."

Carter replaced the receiver and we swapped looks. He said nothing for a moment, then, "I think that went quite well, don't you?"

"Well," said Hillary, "that was a very interesting interview. BDSM." She made a little fluttering gesture with her hands. "I never realized I lived such a sedate lifestyle."

I burst into laughter at the absurdity of the whole thing. Tears of laughter came pouring down my face and I laughed so hard I nearly ruptured my spleen.

Then Carter, too, was openly laughing. A rich, disarming laugh.

What on God's green earth? I stopped suddenly and stared at him dumbstruck.

Carter Lockwood was actually laughing?

Alert the media! Alert the paramedics! Something was seriously wrong.

"Carter," I said in a hushed awe, "I didn't think you had anything remotely resembling a sense of humor."

"Well," Carter said simply, "when God made Mindy Thompson, he definitely had a sense of humor."

Suddenly, the door crashed open and I turned to smile mechanically at the three men who had just barged in. They looked like gorillas in white suits and dark glasses.

"I'm sorry," I said in some surprise, "but we're only interviewing one person at a time."

"Oh, I know that," said the first gorilla. "It's just me here for the interview."

Carter's mouth took on a particularly grim line. "Then can you please explain who these other two men are?"

"Why, of course," he replied with a pearly white smile. "They're my references!"

Suffice it to say, the interview with Larry, Moe and Curly was over as soon as it began.

Chapter Nine



The door was flung open and I turned toward it, watching Carter stride in, lips first. They swam into the conference room like a rainbow trout.

“Why are all these people in my meeting?” he demanded.

I took in the scene through Carter’s eyes. The conference room was jam packed. “It happens all the time,” I remarked lightly. “Meetings here are attended by far too many people and most of them don’t even need to be here. If you ask me, it’s a big drain on company time. Meetings,” I said in my best infomercial voice, “the practical alternative to work.”

Carter’s frown deepened. “So why are they here?”

I shrugged. “I guess they don’t want to feel left out.”

“But I didn’t invite them!”

“Someone obviously did.”

Carter adjusted his tie and cleared his throat. “Since half the call center is present here at this meeting, I’d like to say two things. One: Amanda Briggs will be returning to work next week. In case some of you aren’t aware, she’s recently lost her husband. I’ve had some conversations with Amanda over the phone, and she is doing well. Now when and if you do speak with Amanda, please don’t worry that you will be bringing up the pain of her loss; she’s well aware of her loss. Rather, your acknowledgement doesn’t just recognize his death, it reaffirms that his life was lived.”

Truong met my eyes from across the room and we both raised our eyebrows in reluctant admiration. Everyone seemed to be listening intently, hanging on to Carter’s every word as if he had a direct line to the Almighty.

In a meeting like this, I undoubtedly felt the influence he wielded. And as much as I hated Carter, I had to admit, the guy was like duct tape. Simply put, he had a light side and a dark side to him . . . and he held shit together.

Shit like this call center.

“And two,” Carter’s voice carried across the room, “the only people who should be in this meeting are Karsynn Higginbotham, Deepak Prasad, Jewel de’Nyle and Shane West. The rest of you, please leave now. This meeting does not concern you. ”

The conference room started emptying out and I found myself humming, “Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall. Ninety-nine bottles of beer. Take ninety-five down. Pass it around. Four bottles of beer on the wall.”

And then there were four. Well, if you included Carter, then there were five.

Carter sat down and began, “The four of you are in this meeting because I’ve received your application for the Project Manager position.” He stopped to let it sink in. “One thing you should know about me is that I have a somewhat unconventional approach to managing my team. I don’t simply look for opportunities to do the unexpected, I create them.”

Deepak butted in quickly, “I know exactly what you mean! I’m constantly going against the grain, paddling against the tide, bursting through conventional wisdom, so to speak.”

By now, Deepak had talked himself up so much that his head had blown up a thousandfold. An unlikely vision flashed before me. Deepak’s ginormous head was floating down Central Park West like a giant air balloon in Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Someone seriously needed to deflate that giant head of his.

Meanwhile, Deepak carried on talking about Deepak. “People have always knocked down my ideas because they’re too far out there. But look at Google! It’s one of the most successful companies around and guess what? Like Carter, the Google team takes an unconventional approach to managing.”

I groaned inwardly. Deepak’s false flattery was so transparent.

“That’s true,” Carter acknowledged. “Google allows its employees to spend one day each work week focusing on their own projects. It sparks creativity. And this ‘non-work’ time has delivered fifty percent of Google’s offerings. Gmail, Google News and Google Talk—all spin-offs from these personal passion projects.”

“My cousin works for Google!” Deepak exclaimed, almost too loudly. “And he tells me they have a workshop on campus for their employees. They use it to build projects out of metal, wood and Legos! Can you believe that? Legos!”

I brightened. Now he had my attention. Legos were the building blocks of my childhood. “So.” I cleared my throat twice. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Carter, but if I’m reading you right, you’re actually giving us permission to play on company time?”

“Funny you should mention that, Karsynn, because that’s *exactly* what we’ll be doing tomorrow.”

“What are we doing?” I asked anxiously.

“We are going on a field outing and we are going to play on company time.”

“Why?” I frowned, slightly puzzled by this.

“Let’s just say that it will help with my decision.”

I blinked. “So you won’t be holding any interviews for the Project Manager position?”

“Nope. This whole outing essentially replaces the need for interviews.”

Hmmm. Interestinger and interestinger.

Jewel fluffed her strawberry-blond curls. “What kind of outing are we talking about?”

“Tennis and lunch afterward,” Carter informed us. “So dress appropriately and bring your tennis gear.”

“It’s too hot to play tennis!” Jewel grumbled, holding a tennis racket that must have weighed more than her entire body. The sun was beating down on the tennis court and Jewel looked out of place and out of her element. To me, she belonged somewhere glamorously decadent. I often pictured her in a flowing stola, lounging on a divan with men in togas on each side, fanning her face and feeding her green grapes.

“Hey!” Deepak nudged me in the ribs. “Check out the couple over there. You can watch a couple play mixed doubles and know whether or not they’re married.”

Surreptitiously, I glanced over at the next court. An expensive blonde skipped to the net and missed the ball by a mile. Her partner shot her an endearing look. “Awww. You look so cute when you miss, baby cakes.”

I turned to Deepak. “They’re definitely *not* married.”

“Definitely pre-marital,” Deepak agreed.

Meanwhile, across the net, the other couple was hissing at each other like a pair of Bengal tigers. “Don’t hold your racket like that, stupid!” the guy with the handlebar moustache was yelling at his partner. As the match went on, he continued to berate and blame his partner for every point they lost.

“Post-marital,” I said with a gurgle of laughter. “Definitely post-marital.”

“To err is human,” Deepak proffered, “to put the blame on someone else is mixed doubles.”

“Anyway,” I carried on airily, “I’d never marry a tennis player. To them ‘love’ simply means nothing.”

“All right,” Carter called out, “Karsynn and Deepak—you two will play against Jewel and Shane. I’ll umpire the match.” He paused for a fraction, surveying our determined faces. “Any of you have any questions?”

Was this a test? Will the winning team vie for the Project Manager position?

Instead of voicing my thoughts, I jogged onto the court, swinging my racket high in the air. Jewel overtook me and smirked. “Scared?”

“You wish!” I shot back, my eyes following her as she went. I found myself drawn to Jewel’s slender legs; they seemed to stretch on forever and ever.

I gave myself a mental shake and scolded myself for being grateful that her face had the bone structure of a komodo dragon.

I began warming up with some aerobic squats and leg lunges. Taking my lead, Deepak started skipping sideways. Just as I felt my hamstrings burning, I overheard some snippets of Jewel’s conversation. “Now listen up, Shane,” she said tersely, “do you want to win or do you just want to play some tennis?”

Shane huffed, “Of course I want to win!”

“Then get out of my way,” she hissed, “and let me handle this match.”

Deepak and I swapped knowing glances.

Jewel seemed to think that she was all *that*, but sadly she was about to find out that she was *not*. For you see, I was about to go full on Venus-and-Serena on her dainty ass!

“Hey guys!” Jewel taunted, idly playing with a lock of hair that had escaped from its ponytail. “I didn’t know that garden gnomes could play tennis.”

Goaded, I glared back at her with my nastiest expression, but without her inner conviction of being so superior, I couldn’t carry it off properly. “Don’t you know that dynamites come in small packages? And besides, even the smallest person can change the course of the future.”

“Hah!” Jewel snorted, aiming her racket at me. “You better watch out! Because I will be altering your future today.”

“Hey Jewel!” Deepak yelled across the court. “Check your ego! And unless you’re using tampons, quit acting so stuck up.”

Humph. Jewel could talk smack. I don’t get mad. I just get even.

I’d show her who was the Wimbledon champ.

“Quit lollygagging!” Carter shouted from the sidelines. “And let’s play

some tennis!”

“I’ll play the net and you stick to the base line,” said Deepak, jogging toward the net.

That suited me just fine. “You got it!” I squinted unattractively in the afternoon sun, staring down my opponent. My strategy was simple; play at a steady level, serving hard and smashing low forehands. Jewel would soon be acquainted with my lethal weapon: my serve!

Scrunching up my face in concentration, I tossed the ball in the air, brought my racket down hard and heard the delicious *THWOP* as my racket connected with the ball. It was a one hundred mile per hour serve. The centrifugal force of my topspin struck Jewel right at her abdomen, pulverizing her ovaries.

“OWWW!” Jewel squawked and Deepak punched the air. “Jewel, my dear,” he said with a satisfied smirk, “you just got served!”

Carter yelled, “Fifteen-love.”

Ace on the first serve! Hah! Take that Malibu Barbie!

I jerked my head at Jewel. “And *that* was for calling us garden gnomes.”

“Very nice serve!” Deepak thumped my back. “You were *ferosh!*”

“Oh you ain’t seen nothing yet,” I said coolly.

You only live once, but you get to serve twice. I swept my sweaty hair away from my face, tossed the ball in the air and drove my racket through it, sending the ball down the middle of the court.

“RUN! RUN!” Jewel shrieked, running in circles. “Get the ball, Shane. GET THE BALL!” Then out of nowhere, Jewel came flying down the court, sprinting after the ball, tearing my eardrums asunder. “GET OUT OF THE WAY! OUT OF MY WAY! I’VE GOT THE BALL! I’VE GOT THE BALL!”

The bitch was insane.

As her racket struck the ball, she let out a sort of painful howl, a primal scream. Sweet baby Jesus! She sounded like a woman in the throes of childbirth without the aid of an epidural. The tighter the match became, the more Jewel’s grunts crescendoed into raging roars.

I found it mildly annoying. I had always assumed that tennis players grunt because it enhances the power of their strokes, similar to how lunkheads grunt when they lift weights to gain a surge of strength.

Today, that notion was quickly disproven.

Jewel would lightly tap the ball when going for an easy volley and emit a

scream of epic proportions.

It went something like this: “UUUURRRRRRRRRGGGGHHHH!” and “EEEEERRRRGGGGGUUUUUH!”

This went on for what seemed like hours.

This endless sufferance.

I was ready to slit my wrists and hemorrhage to death right in the middle of the tennis court.

I wanted to smack her over the head with my racket so she’d really have something to grunt about.

“What the hell?” I said irritably, wiping the sweat from my brows. “I’d hate to be next door to Jewel on her wedding night.”

“I kind of like it.” Deepak smirked. “It sounds like she’s got a dildo permanently jammed up her clitoris set on vibrate.”

“Um, you like hearing grunting noises as fuzzy balls get hit?” I threw him a peculiar look. “Weirdo!”

Deepak made a face at me. “*You’re* the weirdo.”

“No,” I shot back, “*you’re* the weirdo.

“Shut up and serve!” Deepak snapped and I did. *THWOP!* The ball went soaring across the court.

“OUT! OUT!” Jewel screamed. “The ball went OUT!”

I yelled back, “The only thing that ball was *out* of was your *reach!*”

Carter intervened, “It was out!”

“What?” I demanded crossly. “You can’t be serious!” I fumed and flung my racket into the air in disgust.

“Calm down, Kars,” Deepak scolded, “we need to keep our cool.”

“I’m cool!” I said hotly, reaching down to retrieve my racket.

Before I could take my place behind the baseline, Jewel hit a high lob.

Deepak deemed it unreachable and yelled, “YOURS!”

With amazing footwork, I ran backward and hit the ball between my legs, sending it back into my opponent’s court.

Jewel lurched forward and returned it with a weak lob shot. The ball floated so high that it got lost in the sun.

Hah! She would pay dearly for that! I coiled myself under the sun-touched ball that seemed to be hanging mid-air. As the floating ball gently curved and descended, I jumped up high in the air like a ninja and hit an overhead smash. The ball sliced through the court, kicking up dust near Jewel’s helpless baseline.

Money shot!

“YESSSSSS!” I screamed, feeling my endorphins skip with vengeful satisfaction.

Deepak raced toward me and slapped me a high five.

We ended up winning the first set.

The second set went like this: Jewel would hit lob shots with topspin, and I would hit the return with backspin to keep the ball in play. And when she’d hit lobs with backspin, I’d return the shot with powerful topspin. Shane just sort of stood there like a village idiot.

In the spirit of teamwork, I tried to include Deepak but instead of running toward the ball, he’d run away from it, yelling, “YOURS!”

Miraculously, Jewel and Shane ended up winning the second set. But by the third set, they had lost steam. And they were no match for my formidable tennis forehand—my meat and potatoes shot. I was physically relaxed, mentally alert and played with poise, whereas Jewel was over fatigued and cracking at the seams. By then her grunting noises were reduced to that of a drowning cat. It was obvious to all that I had the overwhelming edge.

With the determination akin to a mating salmon, I hardened my resolve and played even more aggressively, rushing, skidding, shuffling, reaching out to get one more shot, sharpening my already lethal service return. When I flashed a cheeky drop shot, Jewel just sort of froze. She stood there motionless, declining to even give chase. And when she *did* go after the ball, her sluggish backhand kept finding the net.

I was closing in.

After a long rally, the ball came close to the net and I chipped it. Jewel lurched forward and managed to get it back to me. I tore down the court and went diving for the ball, but it wasn’t enough. I became painfully aware that there was absolutely no way I could reach the ball unless I pulled a Hail Mary. Arms flailing, I made a heroic leap and flung my racket at the ball.

Then time stood still.

Actually, it just sort of slowed down. Everything seemed to move in slow-mo frames.

Frame one: The racket went soaring through the air and nicked the ball.

Frame two: Jewel made a low and guttural growl of protest, “NOOooooo.”

Frame three: The ball went BOING, BOING, BOING, bouncing over the net, cross court.

Frame four: Carter stood up and announced, “Game-set-match.”

Frame five: Jewel screamed until she went puce.

“Victory is ours!” I dropped to my knees, kissing the green court.

Jaws were on the floor.

Love was pouring over me like chocolate gravy on biscuits and bacon.

Spectators were cheering.

Wait, there were no spectators in the stands. Come to think of it, there were no spectators’ stands either.

It did not matter.

“Victory is ours!” I yelled once more, falling backward, spread-eagled and overcome with joy.

Jewel folded her arms across her cage-like chest. “You were just lucky.”

“Lay off the champ, will ya,” Deepak snapped. “We were badass!”

“Damn straight,” I added smugly.

“Really, Kars.” Deepak extended a hand and pulled me off the ground.

“You’re not a bad player—for a girl!”

“For a girl?” I slapped him on the back, almost winding him. “Talk about backhanded compliments.”

Still, it didn’t faze me in the least. I was still easing down from the dizzying heights of Wimbledon stardom.

Carter strode across the court and gave us a congratulatory smile. “Good game guys!” Then he turned his attention to Shane and Jewel. “The two of you can head on back to the call center now.”

As the sore losers swept past us, Carter added, “Karsynn and Deepak, head on back to the locker rooms and clean yourselves up. You’ll be joining me for lunch at the club house.”

I’d come prepared. Sensei Truong had taught me well. I was dressed to kill. To slay. After a quick shower, I got myself gussied up. I slipped on my J. Crew power suit and paired it with my studded black Maneater heels. A quick glance in the full length mirror, a final flick of mascara and I was ready.

The overall effect was smart business casual meets edgy rock chick.

Then I power walked over to the power restaurant for our power lunch.

On the way, I met up with Deepak and we immediately sized each other up to see who was the better dressed (definitely me, I surmised).

His outfit was giving me the douchebumps.

I could see the hallmarks of iron creases on the front of his skinny jeans.

Who irons their jeans? Deuce Bigalow Male Gigolo, that's who!

And who wears nut squashers like that to a business meeting? His jeans were so tight they looked like they were painted on. I was fairly certain that if he farted, his Italian shoes would blow right off his feet.

"So . . ." I fell into step beside Deepak. "What's your strategy?"

Deepak gave me a playful wink. "I'm just going to do what I do best."

No further explanation needed. Deepak had elevated ass kissing to a fine art, so I knew what to expect. "You're such a brownnoser!"

"Actually," Deepak amended, "I'm more of an ass kisser."

"Same thing."

"Nope." Deepak ran a hand through his gel-slicked hair, flashing his gold cuff-links. "There's a big difference between ass kissing and brownnosing."

"Really?" I said mildly. "And what might that be?"

"Depth perception."

I rolled my eyes. "Deepak, you're so full of it."

"Hey, when I can't dazzle with brilliance, I baffle with bull."

I sighed. Deepak always sounded so rehearsed, like an actor struggling to make the best of imperfect lines.

"Trust me," he carried on brightly, "it's a clever strategy."

I raised a skeptical brow. "If you say so."

"And what about you?" Deepak enquired, "What's your strategy?"

"Me?" I gave a careless shrug and said truthfully, "I'm just going to be myself."

"I'm not too sure if it's a good idea to show your true self, warts and all."

I knew Deepak was addling with my mind. "Well," I said, putting conviction into my voice, "that's my strategy."

"Anyhow," said Deepak, "now that it's down to you and me, it's gonna be the *Clash of the Titans*."

Dead from exhaustion after the grueling tennis match, I couldn't sum up the energy to hold a conversation with Deepak. With some effort, I nodded and half-smiled at his gentle babbling.

God. He talks crap. And he does it so well.

Chapter Ten



“Oh there you are, Carter!” said Deepak in a voice of artificial surprise. Carter was sitting outside the Shanghai Cafe, thumbing through his BlackBerry. As we approached, he looked up with a fairly unwelcoming expression and briefly acknowledged our presence.

I managed a perfunctory smile, aware that he was openly observing us. “Have you been here before, Carter?”

“Nope.” His reply was succinct, as usual.

I preened and straightened myself, in case Carter wanted to comment on how nice I looked. He didn’t.

Deepak flashed one of his practiced smiles. “Shall we go in now?”

We strode into the restaurant and beneath my spiky heels, the plush carpet yielded pleasingly. I glanced around, taking in my surroundings. The atmosphere seemed relaxed but conducive for business.

Deepak strutted to the front of the house and declared self-importantly, “We need a table for three. Pronto.”

Without looking up, the hostess informed him that there would be a thirty minute wait.

“Thirty minutes?” Deepak snorted quietly. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” Despite kicking up a fuss, Deepak left his name with the hostess and rejoined us.

Minutes later, the frazzled hostess bustled past us with a quick “Excuse me.”

I was mildly surprised when Carter dazzled her with a roguish grin. “Hi there!” he said. “It’s so nice to see you again.”

“Oh, hi!” The hostess immediately squared her shoulders. “Nice to see you too, sir.”

“Oh, there’s no need to call me sir. Carter will do.”

After a frozen moment, she brightened and said, “Right. Carter. So nice of you to come back to the Shanghai Cafe. I think we might have a table in the back that has just opened up.”

“Really?” Carter said brilliantly. “That’s fantastic!”

“Yes. Right this way, please.” She led us to our table with a noticeable spring in her step.

I pulled out a chair and said *sotto voce*, “Carter, you told me you had never been here before.”

“And I haven’t,” he said simply.

“So basically, you were deceiving the hostess.”

“Not really.” Carter leaned back and studied the menu. “I was just being friendly.”

“But,” Deepak cut in, looking genuinely perplexed, “she told me there’d be a thirty-minute wait.”

Deepak’s question was met with silence.

“Good afternoon, folks,” our waiter greeted us with the requisite air of gravitas. “My name is Arthur and I’ll be your waiter this afternoon.”

“I think we’re ready to order.” Carter glanced around the table and Deepak and I nodded our assent. “Yes,” said Carter decisively, “we are.”

“Wonderful!” said the waiter. “Let’s start with the lady at the table.”

“Um.” I nibbled my bottom lip. “I’ll have the Szechuan Chicken, please. Extra spicy.”

“Good choice,” said the waiter. “And to drink?”

“An Arnold Palmer iced tea.”

Then the waiter turned to Deepak. “And for you, sir?”

“Er . . .” Deepak studied the menu whilst hemming and hawing, his face a mask of indecision. “I’m not so sure.”

“Shall I come back in a few minutes?”

“No, no.” Deepak’s voice surged with irritation. “Actually,” he said in a rush, “I’ll just have whatever this fine gentleman next to me is having.” He flashed Carter a hundred watt smile.

I shifted uneasily in my seat and noticed that Carter didn’t quite return Deepak’s smile. “Do you even know what I’m having?” he enquired sharply.

“I don’t,” Deepak replied. “But I’m fully confident that you have excellent and exquisite taste.”

At this point, Deepak had lost his depth perception.

Carter glanced up from his menu. “I’ll have the Phoenix Claw.”

“And to drink?”

“An ice cold Tsing Tao.” Carter snapped his menu shut. “Thank you.”

Deepak made a great play of studying the wine list, lightly tapping a finger on his chin as he evaluated the selections. It’s a shame he didn’t have a beard

to stroke, too. “I’m torn between the Château Mouton-Rothschild and the Beerenausele. Or,” he added reflectively, “maybe I should just go with the Blanc de Blancs.”

Mon Dieu! Sacré bleu! Deepak spoke with a note of *hauteur* in his voice, complete with all the proper inflections.

It sounded something like this: I’m torn between the sha-TOH moo-TAWN rawt-SHEELD and the BAY-ruhn-OWS-lay-zuh. Or maybe I should just go with the BLAHNGK duh BLAHNGKS.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or be highly impressed.

The waiter made a suggestion. “Sir, the Château Mouton-Rothschild would pair nicely with the Phoenix Claw.”

Deepak nodded wisely. “I’ll suppose I’ll go with the sha-TOH moo-TAWN rawt-SHEELD.”

“Excellent,” said the waiter. “We offer both the 2006 and 2010.”

“A 2010? GOD NO!” Deepak said it with such force that he almost fell off his chair. “I’m no animal! I don’t drink wine that young.” He frowned with disgust. “Besides, that year was too wet.”

“It was a wet year,” agreed the waiter in heartfelt tones. “So you’ll go with the 2006 then?”

“Of course!”

“Certainly, sir.”

As our waiter wandered off, Deepak tutted, “I’m such an acid freak. Flabby wine just doesn’t cut it for me, you know what I mean?”

I did not deign to reply.

“By the way.” Deepak’s eyes cut back to Carter. “Is the Phoenix Claw some sort of crab or lobster claw?”

Carter slowly sipped his iced water. “It’s chicken feet.”

“Chicken feet?” Deepak’s voice pitched higher. “Um, sounds delightful.”

“It is.” Carter’s facial muscles moved into a fraction of a smile. “Just try not to think about where the chickens have been walking before you devour those gnarly toes.”

There was a rabid gleam in Deepak’s eye and I went into a coughing fit in a weak attempt to disguise an acute attack of the giggles.

Twenty minutes later, our food arrived. Almost immediately, Deepak reached for the Kikkoman bottle and drizzled soy sauce all over his chicken feet.

Carter looked slightly put out. “You haven’t even tasted it yet.”

Deepak carried on dousing the chicken feet with soy sauce. “I like my food salty.”

“But,” Carter said pointedly, “if you had tasted it first, maybe you’d have found it salty enough.”

“Speaking of salt,” said Deepak, expertly changing the subject, “when the Romans conquered Carthage, they salted the earth so that nothing could ever grow there again. But here’s the thing, we dump salt all over the roads to melt ice in the winter. Now that salt then gets washed away by the rain and it seeps into the soil. So tell me, how come grass and weeds and all kinds of green still flourish and grow along the roadside?”

Huh? What the hell was Deepak talking about? Romans? Weeds? Who knows?

I wondered if his skin-tight pants had cut off all circulation to his brain. Following his words was like trying to sort out a riddle in a different language.

Instead of simply saying, “Avoid ambiguity! Adopt clarity!” I almost wanted to yell, “Eschew obfuscation! Espouse elucidation!” just so I confuse Deepak as much as he was confusing me.

Oh well. True to form, Deepak was baffling with his bull.

“Deepak,” Carter said dryly, “I think you need to take that story about the Romans with a pinch of salt.”

All this talk about salt was making me thirsty. I drained my glass of Arnold Palmer and tucked into my meal. Carter soon followed suit, but not Deepak.

He forked about his chicken feet in a dispirited fashion, picking up a wiry foot, examining it closely before setting it back on the plate. Mostly, Deepak just stared forlornly at his chicken feet, like a poor lost soul drifting on a bamboo raft out in the middle of the South China Sea.

“Use your fingers and start by biting off the toes between the joints,” Carter instructed with what sounded like obvious relish. “Then chew off the skin and spit it out.”

I had to stop myself from giggling.

Deepak’s face was a picture. “D-d-d-do . . .” Deepak stopped himself and swallowed hard. “Do I eat the nails, too?”

Carter shook his head whilst sucking on a cartilage. “Go on, try it.”

Deepak bared his teeth in a smile. He looked like he would rather gouge his eyes out or die of the bubonic plague than go near the chicken feet. He put his fork down with a slight clatter, reached for his glass of wine and polished off

the contents in one quick gulp.

“How’s your wine, Deepak?” I asked conversationally.

“Mmmm,” he said pensively, “it was ingratiating without being obsequious.”

I smiled benignly.

“Do you drink wine too?”

“I do,” I said blithely.

“Really?” Deepak raised his eyebrows in surprise. “What kind?”

“The ones with screw caps,” I said with a straight face.

“Oh.” He wore a slightly offended air and for once, he was apparently lost for words.

Hah! This was too much fun.

Really. I found this whole situation highly amusing. But as I sat there watching Deepak staring manically at his chicken feet, my conscience eventually kicked in.

Hmm, despite its appeal, I’d better not exacerbate the situation.

And I’m proud to say that I behaved and resisted all urges to tease, taunt and test Deepak’s patience. I even threw him a bone, so to speak.

With extreme generosity, I said, “Hey, Deepak! Can I try one of your chicken feet?”

Deepak slid the entire plate toward me. “You can have it all!”

I reached for a scraggly chicken foot and held it aloft. Then I pointed a fingered toenail at Deepak’s heart and spoke around a croak, “E.T. phone home.”

Deepak was now openly laughing and even Carter cracked a semblance of a smile.

Encouraged, I began wiggling the chicken foot. “My Preciousssss,” I croaked like Gollum, or is it Smeagol? Anyway, it’s that creepy creature from *The Lord of The Rings*. “We wants it, we needs it. Must have the Preciousssss.”

Deepak snorted loudly. “That was pretty precious, Kars.”

After that, there was a perceptible lightening of the atmosphere. Though Deepak never touched his chicken feet, the rest of the meal went by rather smoothly, or so I thought, until Carter sent Deepak back to the call center.

Then it was just me. And Carter. At a Chinese restaurant with a plate of cold chicken feet sitting between us.

Awkward sauce! Sweet and sour sauce!

I looked at Carter warily, wondering what was coming next.

“Coffee and dessert?” he asked.

“Yes, please.”

Carter signaled for the waiter and requested the dessert menu.

“So,” I began, “why did you choose me over Deepak?”

“Deepak made a decision before knowing all the facts.”

“What?” My voice was incredulous with disbelief. “He did? When? Where?”

“Just now,” Carter said simply. “He salted his food without even tasting it first.”

“Oh.” I managed a tepid smile.

The waiter arrived with the dessert menus, breaking into our conversation.

“Thanks,” I said before turning back to Carter. “Was that the only thing you factored into your decision?”

“Of course not,” said Carter, scanning the menu. “People often reveal their true selves in the most innocent situations. Sometimes it’s the little things you say, or don’t say, that often make the most lasting impressions. I watched Deepak’s interactions with people—the waiter, the hostess and it gave me a glimpse of the Deepak underneath the shiny veneer. On the surface, he seems to be more interested in looks than performance, in appearances than real accomplishment. To him, form is far more important than substance.”

“Mmm.” I sat forward in my chair. “But he’s a good talker.”

“Deepak may talk a lot but he doesn’t always know what he’s talking about. Not to mention, his false flattery was highly transparent and it backfired.”

“OK. So now I know why you *didn’t* pick Deepak. But why did you pick *me*?” I asked lightly, though with a twinge of alarm. “Did I just get the job by default?”

“Not entirely.” Carter briefly glanced up from his menu and held my gaze. “I also watched how you dealt with situations.”

“And?” My tone was guarded.

“You don’t take yourself too seriously. I like that.”

My eyes widened like platters. “You do?”

Carter went on, “I liked the way you handled lunch with Deepak. You made light of a situation by pointing out the absurd. A good sense of humor is an important asset in the business world. It diffuses tension, be it in a board room or in a casual meeting, which gives you the upper hand.”

“I am not your clown,” I said mildly. “And I don’t exist simply for your amusement.”

“I never said that you did. Clown or not, you created a favorable impression. And when you’re dealing with people, a sense of humor goes a long way. It creates one of the most favorable long-term impressions.”

“Hmmm. So is a sense of humor the most important personal asset in business?”

“Nope. Common sense is. Although,” he added wryly, “common sense is not so common these days and if you don’t already have it, then you probably never will.”

I looked at him expectantly.

A smile played across his lips. “And yes, you have it. If I didn’t think that you did, you wouldn’t be sitting here right now.”

“I see. So . . . the tennis match, this lunch, it was all a test?”

“In a way it was,” he admitted. “Think of this whole experience as your first lesson as the new Project Manager . . . always keep your guard up while encouraging others to lower theirs. Usually, the less formal the venue—”

I cut in, “Like tennis?”

“Like tennis,” he echoed. “Or like this lunch, then the more likely it is that people will let their guards down.”

Over coffee and dessert Carter began telling me, at some length, about the new position. I found myself nodding at all the appropriate moments while my mind raced along its own track. I still couldn’t believe I got the job.

Sometime later, I was caught slightly off guard when I realized Carter was no longer talking. In the pause that followed, he sat forward, his dark eyes studying me over the rim of his cup. Eventually, he began, “Why do you . . .”

“Why do I what?”

“Try so hard,” he finished.

I shrugged. “When you don’t look like Jewel De’Nyle, Pamela Pornero or Kylie Kleevage, you have to try extra hard.”

Quietly, he said, “You underrate yourself, Karsynn.”

Yowzah! Was Carter Lockwood actually paying me a compliment?

“When I look at you,” he continued, “I see the steel in your eyes. Your spitfire ambition. And in a way, I see myself.”

I allowed myself a quiet, glowing smile. But his ringing vote of confidence in my abilities was slightly marred by his addition of, “A less intelligent version, a little rough around the edges, but driven and diligent nonetheless.

There's still a lot you need to work on."

My smile slipped a notch. "Like what?"

"You react to situations. You need to force yourself to act rather than to react. Put some emotional distance between yourself and situations."

"I'm just being myself," I said weakly.

"If you consistently present your '*this is me, take it or leave it*' self, then you're not going to be a very effective manager."

I fixed him with a deeply skeptical eye. "And why is that?"

"A great deal of role-playing goes on in business and the key is to come across as your best self by playing a role that features your strongest business qualities, all while hiding your worst."

"But when I'm being myself, I'm being assertive."

"It's OK to be assertive, but assert yourself only when the time and place are appropriate. And you need to focus."

"On what?"

"Focus more on getting what you want and less on getting something off your chest."

"So much to learn." I sighed. "And so much office politics."

The exasperation in my voice caught Carter's attention. Well, it wasn't exactly hard to miss. "Office politics . . . haven't you noticed that people who complain about office politics are always its victims?"

"I'm not complaining," I said indignantly. "I'm simply stating a fact. Anyway I don't believe in playing office politics. I have my principles, you know," I added with dignity.

"More sins are committed in the name of principle," he scoffed. "Besides, principles are usually a convenient cover-up for a bruised ego."

"Hey, I don't have a bruised ego. I just refuse to play the game anymore."

"Listen," Carter said, "is climbing the corporate ladder a game? Absolutely. In fact, it is several games going on at once. You have to recognize real talent and not be misled by appearances. At the same time, you must figure out a way to let the true decision makers know how good you really are without making enemies of the people in between. You must keep your peers as friends while maintaining the support of your subordinates. And you have to be vigilant, always making sure that other people don't steal your ideas and use them as if it were their own."

At this point, my head was spinning. I felt like I was suffering from mild vertigo. Carter steamrolled on, "Let me ask you this; can you look good

without necessarily making someone else look bad? Can you play the game without playing politics? And when I say politics, I mean dirty politics.”

“I think I can do that,” I said faintly.

“Good. Once you know the rules of the game, then you have nothing to worry about. ”

“Right,” I said in a voice that revealed my doubts, “I have nothing to worry about.”

Carter looked at me thoughtfully, presumably weighing up the pros and cons of hiring me for this job, I thought with sudden despondency. “Look,” he explained kindly but firmly, “things may have been different with the last director, but under my watch, you don’t have to play dirty politics in order to get ahead. If that were the case, Deepak would be sitting here right now.” He paused to let that sink in. “Not you.”

I stared at him for several beats. “OK,” I said at last, taking his word at face value.

He leaned back against his chair and regarded me evenly. “May I offer you some advice?”

I bit back a smile. “Isn’t that what you’ve already been doing?”

He chose to ignore my jab. “You get along by getting along. See your peers as your allies, not as your competition. The smarter you make the people who work for you look, the smarter you are going to look as a manager.”

“You get along by getting along?” I quelled a giggle with difficulty.

“You’re not exactly the ideal person to be dispensing that sort of advice.”

“I know,” he said, smiling warmly at me for the first time. “I’m working on that, aren’t I?”

True. His gray eyes had lost their deep-freeze look and he was a lot more approachable. At that, I began to think about forgiving him. Only began, mind you. In any case, I thought I’d at least try to get along with Carter Lockwood. Granted, he wasn’t the easiest person to get along with, but I resolved to make a concerted effort.

“And,” Carter added, “if you can hitch your wagon to a few of the brightest stars, you’ll likely climb right up the corporate ladder with them.”

As Carter sat there sipping his coffee, I found myself staring at the ring of condensation his cup had left on the table. Then a thought bubble appeared above my head. I decided, there and then, that I was going to hitch my wagon to Carter’s star, so to speak.

“So . . .” I took a quick gulp of coffee. “I know I got the job, but I need to

hear you say it.”

“Karsynn,” he said slowly, “you got the job.”

“Thank you,” I said with as much firmness as I could muster. “I will never disappoint you on how hard I work.”

“That’s nice to hear. Now,” he said decisively, his tone turning serious and business-like, “I think it’s time we got back to discussing your job title.”

“Ah yes! Project Manager!” I said aloud, enjoying the lilting sound of it rolling off my tongue.

“Naturally you’ll be working five days a week. And I’m sure you’re fully aware that your job duties will include planning, executing and wrapping up projects that may be outside the scope of regular company business.”

I nodded. “I am.”

“You’ll need to constantly be on your toes and think outside the box.”

“How can I think outside the box when I work inside a cube?”

Pointedly ignoring my comment, he asked, “And I take it time away from home and overseas travel is OK with you?”

“It is.”

“Excellent.” There was a hesitant pause until he added, “Because we’re sending you to Malaysia for two months to spearhead our new call center.”

“Malaysia!” I exclaimed in surprise. “Isn’t that the Land of the Orangutans?”

“Well, aside from the orangutans, it’s a popular destination for establishing global enterprise call centers. Intel, Bose Corp and Agilent Tech have set up shop in Penang. Labor is cheap and a large percentage of the population speaks English.”

“Penang?” I looked at him, genuinely perplexed. “I thought you said Malaysia.”

Carter sighed with patient resignation. “Penang is an island off the northwestern coast of peninsular Malaysia.”

“Oh,” I murmured airily. I guess I should brush up on my geography . . . expand it beyond places in Greenland.

Carter cut into my thoughts. “Are you OK with that?”

Was I OK with that? Hell yeah! Working on a tropical island sounded like a relaxing vacation in the Maldives.

“Of course!” I smiled radiantly. “When do I leave?”

“Not for two weeks. And,” he hedged, “there’s one more thing.”

“What?”

“I’ll be coming with you.”

My smile instantly evaporated.

Oh snap! This was going to be like vacationing in Abu Ghraib.

“For the time being you’re to continue your duties as supervisor. It’ll give you time to train Rick so he can take over your responsibilities once you’re gone. And you’ll have time to tie up any loose ends and get your agents used to the transition.”

“Two weeks?” I inhaled sharply. “It’s a little short notice, but I should be able to handle it.”

“Good!” he exclaimed. “And by the way, you do realize, don’t you, that this Project Manager position is only a temporary one? Once the project is wrapped up, you’ll resume your position as supervisor of your team. Comprene?”

“Comprene.”

The news of my epic win on the tennis court had spread like wildfire through the office. Hillary, the only remaining non-office-gossiper, seemed to be the only one out of the loop.

Her gaze went from me to Deepak. “So which one of you obliterated Jewel on the tennis court?”

“Ah . . .” I smiled modestly. “That would be me.”

Shortly afterward, a small crowd had gathered around me and people began assaulting me with a barrage of questions:

What happened? Did you get the job? Did you take the job?

Amidst the cacophony, I crossed my arms and stared at them until they all shut up. Then I busted out the robot dance in the middle of the floor. “Aww yeah! Domo arigato, Mister Robato, you’re looking at the new Project Manager! And I’m leaving for Malaysia in two weeks!”

“TWO WEEKS?” Truong was practically shouting. “ARE YOU CRAZY? YOU CAN’T LEAVE IN TWO WEEKS!”

“WHY NOO-TTT?” I asked, speaking in a robot voice.

“We have a bachelorette party to host.”

“Oh shit!” I clapped my mouth. “We’ll have to move the date up.”

“We’ll have to do a lot more than that.” Truong cast me a look of utter disdain. “Tsch-tsch. We promised Maddy a party she’d never forget.”

I couldn’t think for shock. All I could say was, “CRAP!” and then “HOLY CRAP!” and finally, “HOLY CRAPPITY CRAP!”

Truong raised his eyebrows in silent reprimand. “Did you forget the six Ps?”

“Of course not.” And to prove it, I dutifully chanted, “Proper Planning Prevents Piss-Poor Performance.”

“You got it!” He thumped me on the back affectionately. “So what say we start planning?”

Chapter Eleven



“How’s it going?”

“Oh, hi, Hillary. Everything is just fine! Everything is just hunky-dory!” I exclaimed in a voice that clearly indicated it was *not*.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“Pffft. Not enough time.” I sighed. I was busier than a bricklayer in Baghdad. “Something always comes up. Every time I try to get some work done, an agent bounces into my cubicle with another question or demand.” I sighed a second time. “I’ve got so much to do before I leave . . . performance reviews to write up, monitors to listen to, meetings to attend, a bachelorette party to plan and this constant flow of interruptions from people. Arrgh!” I banged my desk suddenly. “At the end of the day, I’m actually further behind than when the day began.”

“What do you have to do now?”

“Train Rick Astley so he’ll know what to do when I’m gone.”

“Train him?” Hillary didn’t try to hide a smirk. “What for? Rick is just shy of useless. Trust me. Training Rick would be like polishing a turd.”

“He’s not that bad,” I said, coming to Rick’s defense. “He just needs time.”

“You’ve got Rick and I’ve got Geronimo,” Hillary grumbled. “It’s like Dumb and Dumber up in here.”

“Who’s Geronimo?”

“He’s a newbie on my team. Brains of a chicken, I tell you! I swear sometimes, it takes me five hours to show him something I could do myself in five minutes.”

“Then why don’t you do it?”

Hillary drew a blank. “Do what?”

“Take five hours to save five minutes.”

“Oh! What a waste of my time,” she declared with a huff of annoyance. “I’d rather do it myself.”

“Hillary,” I chastised, “haven’t you heard of the mathematics of delegation? Five hours now could save you hundreds of hours in the future. If you just spent a little time to teach Geronimo how to do his job now, you’re freeing

up your time so you can focus on other things later.”

With uncanny timing, Carter popped his head over my cubicle partition. “Well put, Karsynn. It’s too bad that so many people in management fail to appreciate this simple arithmetic.”

Hillary turned bright tomato red.

“Anyway,” Carter continued, “I came here to remind you that we have a meeting in five minutes.”

“On my way there, boss.” Hillary gave a silent salute and marched off.

“Another meeting?” I held back a groan, locked my computer and started for the conference room.

The lights dimmed and I sank further back into my seat, blinking up at the diagram in front of me, seeing everything yet taking in nothing. This PowerPoint presentation was one huge data dump. Pardon my French, but it was also one colossal cluster fuck. The charts and graphs had no structure, no significance. I ducked abruptly, half expecting to get shot in the head by one of those flying bullet points.

Give me liberty or give me death! By PowerPoint.

Carter pushed up his sleeves and loosened his tie. “This next slide might be a little hard to read.”

That was probably the understatement of the year. I squinted up at the two point Palatino font that was barely legible. Stifling a yawn, I let my eyelids drift shut and slipped into a zone . . . into the PowerPoint Zone.

Seconds later, I came out of my trance, wondering why it was so dang cold in this conference room. I shivered, crossing my arms, making myself into a fortress against the cold air blasting from the vents. I let out another big yawn, thinking this pretty much summed up my definition of hell for years . . . sitting in a freezing ass conference room and forced to watch PowerPoint slides for all eternity.

Yawning again, I found myself counting the ceiling tiles. It was the only thing I could do to keep myself awake. There were three hundred and fifty two ceiling tiles. At some point, I must have dozed off because I almost broke my nose on the conference table. I sat up blearily, blinking back the focus into my eyes.

When everything finally snapped into focus, I found Carter staring hard at me. “Were you having a nice nap, Karsynn?”

I grinned, genuinely trying to look innocent but genuinely unable to pull it

off. “Me? What? No!” I fibbed. “My eyes were closed because I was meditating on the key points of your presentation and, um . . . I was envisioning a new paradigm.”

Carter threw me one of his wintery expressions, raising the temperature two degrees or so and resumed his PowerPoint presentation.

After that near fatal incident, I sat bolt upright in my seat and tried my best to stay alert.

No easy feat.

Sheesh. This PowerPoint presentation was as boring as rice cake. You’d think this was the Geneva convention or something, without the hate-spewing Ahmadinejad.

Ah! A blue pie chart. Lovely. How I longed for a blueberry cheesecake pie.

Ohhhh! More flying text whizzing by followed by colorful graphs hijacked by unicorns shooting rainbows out of every orifice.

At this point, I came close to slitting my wrists.

Mmmm. Another fancy slide. This one looked like the Shroud of Turin. I glanced furtively around the room, wondering if anyone else saw the face of Jesus on that slide. For a while, I sat in reverent silence, absorbing this sacredly divine, celestial and monumental moment.

Then more pressing matters clouded my mind when I realized I’d forgotten to record *Homeland*. I sucked in my breath and muttered a shaken curse, “Damn it!”

Carter’s eyes fixed darkly on me and I threw him a syrupy smile before gazing back at the illuminating face of Jesus.

“Excuse me, Karsynn,” said Carter, cutting into my PowerPoint prayer. “Since you appear to be so absorbed with this slide, why don’t you take over this presentation?”

“Is that really necessary?” I laughed nervously. “You seem to be doing a great job. Superb job. Really.”

“No, no, I insist.” He gave me a short, tight smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Would it be presumptuous of me to say that you haven’t the slightest clue what this whole presentation is about?”

“Of course I know what it’s about,” I said, racking my brain for a suitable answer. Vaguely, I’d recalled Carter talking about CIP and decided to take a wild stab at it. “Um, you were talking about CIP, also known as continual improvement process.” Carter remained silent and so I let myself rattle on. “It’s an ongoing effort to improve products, services, or processes. These

efforts can seek incremental improvement over time or breakthrough improvement all at once. Erm, processes are constantly evaluated and improved in the light of their efficiency, effectiveness and flexibility. And CIP is the trajectory in which our organization is taking.”

Clearly, I was talking out of my ass, but I thought it all sounded pretty good.

Carter stood perfectly still and gave me a look that indicated he knew I was talking out of my ass. Well, it didn’t take a genius to come to that conclusion.

“Actually,” he said at last, “I was talking about how we can improve sales across the board.”

“Sales!” I exclaimed with great aplomb. “Of course!” I smiled reassuringly, unsure of exactly who I was reassuring. Myself, most likely.

Carter looked at me with deep interest. “Your team seems to be doing very well in sales. Care to share your secret?”

“Sure,” I said in a voice that didn’t quite sound as though it came from me.

“I think I can do that.” I shifted in my seat and looked around the room.

“Right. Now, how many of you here often feel like selling is an intrusion? Raise your hands.”

Several hands shot up. “Good. Good.” I nodded enthusiastically. “You see, I hate to impose on others too and that feeling that you have—that selling is intrusive—it’s a good thing. It’s an asset. Those that do well in sales on my team, well, they all seem to have a sixth sense about this. They can immediately tell by the tone in a caller’s voice when the timing is all wrong and they won’t antagonize the caller by attempting to pitch a sale. I believe that effective selling is not only directly tied to timing, patience and persistence, but also to the sensitivity of a situation. A sensitivity to the person on the other end of the line.”

“But,” said Hillary, looking at me in a rather puzzled way, “how do your agents end up closing so many sales every month?”

“I have my agents schedule a time that is more convenient for a call back.”

“A call back?” Hillary echoed.

“Yep,” I replied, “a call back. I don’t think the old foot-in-the door school of high pressure and super aggressive sales techniques work anymore. I just don’t. And I’m not so sure they were ever effective to begin with. Maybe it was necessary forty, fifty years ago when a salesperson was not likely to see or speak to a customer for months. But today, if you are being intrusive and have enough awareness to sense this, then there is no excuse for not picking a

better time to call back.”

Carter nodded thoughtfully at me. I could almost see this notion taking root in his brain. “You do, of course, have to be willing to call back.”

“Of course. I give my agents time off the phones every week for call backs.”

“So that’s it?” said Hillary, nonplussed. “That’s your secret?”

“Uh-huh,” I said with an air of nonchalance.

Carter had one hand over his mouth and the other loosely on his waist. “The simplest ideas are often the best,” he said reflectively. “And I like that approach. From the calls I’ve been listening to, some agents just don’t *get* it. They may sense that the caller is in a hurry or in an irritable mood, yet they’ll deliver their sales pitch anyway.”

“Or,” I helpfully pointed out, “a caller will even *ask* the agent to call back some other time, yet the agent will still say, ‘Oh, this will only take a minute.’ ”

“In case you’re forgetting,” Hillary cut in, “that’s what the agents are supposed to do. If they don’t pitch a sale there and then, they’ll get marked down by Quality Assurance.”

“I’m aware of that,” I said blithely.

The cogs were turning and Hillary was thinking. Slowly, ever so slowly, the penny dropped. “Ohhhh. That’s why your team’s quality scores are so dang low.”

I sat forward and countered, “But their sales are off the charts. Which brings me to this.” I cast a swift glance at Carter and directed my last comment at him. “Why don’t you make a change? Bring this up the chain of command?”

Our eyes locked across the room. There was no love lost in Carter’s eyes, but he looked at me with a new hint of respect. “I’ll see what I can do,” he said noncommittally.

Sure you will. I smiled at him with a certain degree of cynicism.

All I had ever gotten from my superiors were empty promises. And I expected no different from Carter Lockwood.

Chapter Twelve



I stared at my blinking monitor. Nothing. Nothing came to mind. I pushed my chair back and paced agitatedly across the floor, thinking.

It was Henry Paulson's annual performance review. I was supposed to identify his 'strengths' but so far, I could not think of a single solitary thing to say.

Still, I couldn't just leave it blank.

Or could I?

Nah! It'd be too cruel.

With a weary sigh, I sat down at my desk and began typing.

"What are you working on?" Carter asked, stopping by my cubicle.

"Annual performance reviews," I replied.

He peered over my shoulder. "Henry Paulson's review, eh? This should be interesting."

I stopped typing. "What do you know about Henry Paulson?"

"Oh, I know a lot about Henry. I've listened in on plenty of his calls."

A mild panic began to set in. "Really?"

"May I take a look at his performance review?"

"Go ahead," I said hesitantly. "I guess you'll have to see it sooner or later."

" 'Henry Paulson is a keen analyst,' " Carter read aloud. "Well, that's a nice way of saying he's thoroughly confused half the time."

I bit my lip to stop myself from grinning.

Carter went on, " 'Henry approaches difficult problems with logic.' Now, do you mean to say that he always finds someone else to do his work?"

"Of course not," I said weakly.

Carter rubbed his chin absently. " 'Henry has a refreshingly relaxed attitude at work and he is very socially active. He stays abreast on company developments and above all else, Henry Paulson is a loyal employee.' Really, Kars?" He cocked an eyebrow as if to say, "That's stretching it a little, don't you think?"

I stared rigidly ahead, trying hard to keep a straight face.

"Let me translate this for you," Carter said, not trying very hard to disguise

the fact that he was laughing. “Refreshingly relaxed attitude at work? Henry sleeps at his desk. Very socially active? He drinks a lot and I have a sneaking suspicion he’s a functioning alcoholic. He stays abreast on company developments? He obviously gossips a lot. And loyal? The only reason Henry is loyal is because he can’t get a job anywhere else.”

“Well . . . there’s always two ways of looking at things.”

“Anyway,” Carter said, “that’s not the reason I stopped by. I actually have some news for you.”

“Good news?” I queried softly, “Or bad news?”

Carter rewarded me with a smile that made me realize he could really be quite attractive at times. “Good news. I pitched your idea to the powers that be, and they gave it the green light. Which means all the agents on the floor are allotted time off the phones for customer callbacks.”

“Thanks,” I said gratefully. I couldn’t believe he’d actually come through. A director that actually follows through on his promise?

A rare occurrence. Unheard of, in fact.

“Thank you,” said Carter in all-seriousness. He was looking at me with a degree of approval that was a welcome change from how he usually looked at me. “Thanks to you, our agents will likely close more sales this quarter.”

“We sure need it.” I sighed. “We’ve been in a slump for months.”

“Oh and that’s not all,” he hedged.

“What?”

“I actually have some more good news for you.”

“More good news?”

Could I stand any more good news?

“It’s in regards to your upcoming project. And I think you’ll be quite pleased to hear about it.”

Pleased? I wasn’t just *pleased* about the news. Are you kidding me? I was over the moon. Aww yeah! Malaysia, here we come! It’s a shame I couldn’t spill the news to Truong and Inge just yet. I had to wait until next week.

Carter’s orders.

With a copious amount of coffee to fortify me, I started tackling more performance reviews until I was interrupted, once again.

“Kars, I got the invite!” Inge bounded into my cubicle, holding up a pink card dusted with silver glitter.

“Let me see. Let me see.” My hands fluttered up and Inge happily

surrendered the card to me.

The Bachelorette Party
“The Last Fling Before The Ring”
In Honor of Madison Lee aka. The Future Mrs. Harkett
Hosted by Karsynn and Truong
June 18th at 8 p.m.
The Venetian Hotel
488 S. Capitol Blvd,
Pocatello Idaho 83702
RSVP regrets only

“Nice!” I sat back and smiled. “Truong sent the invites out early.”

“When exactly is Maddy’s wedding day?” Inge asked, taking up residence on my desk.

“Hmm.” I twirled the card in my hand. “I think it’s two months after her Bachelorette party.”

Inge tilted her head thoughtfully. “How come the Bachelorette party is so early?”

“She’ll be visiting Mika’s family in Belgium so it’ll be sort of a farewell *slash* good luck *slash* Bachelorette party since they’re gonna have a big wedding reception in Brussels. And when they come back in two months, they’ll celebrate their nuptials here, too.”

“Two weddings?” Inge’s breath caught in a tiny gasp. “Wow.”

“So . . .” I said coyly. “Are you planning on coming to Maddy’s last fling before the ring?”

“Hell yeah! Wouldn’t miss it for the world! Not when you throw the best parties around here.”

“Actually.” I frowned slightly. “I’ve sort of dropped the ball on this one. I’ve been so busy with work that I just haven’t had the time. Truong’s taken full charge of the party planning.”

Speak of the devil and he doth appear. Truong poked his nose round my cubicle partition. “All you need to know about the party is that it’s something huge.”

Inge started giggling. “Really?”

“Really.” Truong looked at us with dancing eyes. “Not just huge. Fuc—” he stopped and caught himself. “Sorry. Frankfurt-ing huge! FALLUJAH, FIJI,

and FINLAND huge. We can't have Maddy just fizzle out of single life. Just you wait and see, I'm gonna send her out with a BANG!"

"Falkenberg yeah!" Inge cheered, throwing him a fist bump.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed. "I'm quite impressed by your sense of geography. Where's Falkenberg?"

This seemed to please Inge immensely and she positively beamed at me. "It's in Sweden."

"Fjuckby!" said Truong. "That's a village in Sweden," he quickly explained.

"So, Truong . . ." I turned to him and asked, "What exactly do you have planned for the bachelorette party?"

He shrugged in a way that struck me as being distinctly evasive.

I shot him a parental look. "Truong, please don't do anything that I wouldn't do."

The whole gang had gathered at a luxury suite at The Venetian Hotel. No, not the Venetian in Las Vegas. The Venetian in Pocatello, Idaho.

At seven on the dot, there was a tentative tap on the door.

"The stripper's here," Truong announced with great aplomb. "Now if you have any dollar bills, get them out quickly and stuff them in your pockets!"

There was an unmistakable air of fidgety excitement. I was reaching for my handbag when the door was flung open dramatically. A petite and pasty man strutted into our room, clad in nothing but a scant and bedazzled lederhosen.

All the girls shrieked with stupid laughter.

Um, I thought strippers were supposed to dress as cops, or firemen or pizza guys, or something like that. What in the name of Vegas was *this* freak of nature?

The dainty stripper stood before us. And then the strangest thing happened. He started yodeling. YODELING!

"Guten tag. Yodeleh-hee-hooooo," he yodeled. "My name is Gottlieb Glitzjuice and I hail from München, Germany."

Maddy edged closer and whispered in my ear, "Was he just mountain yodeling?"

"Jah." I whispered back, "I believe he was."

Pamela hissed, "Where is his Tyrolean hat?"

"Huh?" Inge looked perplexed. "What is a Tyrolean hat?"

"A silly green Alpine hat," we said simultaneously.

“The hat I can deal with.” Maddy shook her head. “But that lederhosen is wrong on so many levels.”

“Girls! Girls!” Truong chastised. “Be a little open-minded, will you? Why are you morally opposed to his lederhosen?”

“You’re not?” I challenged. “Do you own a pair, then?”

“Of course I do,” Truong said with dignity. “In fact, I wear my leather lederhosen with pride at Oktoberfest every year. I even pair them with my Wundersocks for some POC.” Then, seeing our slightly puzzled expressions, he explained, “Pop of color. And,” he continued, “as for Herr Gottlieb’s Tyrolean hat, I’m sure he probably just left it up in the Bavarian Alps.” He raised a champagne glass at the stripper. “Am I right, Herr Gottlieb?”

“Achtung!” Gottlieb grunted in response.

And then I saw “it.”

Great balls of fire! Truong wasn’t mincing words when he said it was something huge. ‘It’ was definitely huge, for lack of a better word.

From Gottlieb Glitzjuice’s scrawny stature, I fully expected a shrinky dink. But as my gaze shifted downward, my eyes clapped on the world’s largest salami in a sling. His one-eyed monster resembled a third leg severely infected with elephantiasis.

“Egad!” Pamela’s eyes grew wide and her expression slightly sick. “Look at that giant Bratwurst!”

Maddy was frowning in disgust. “What on God’s green earth is *that*?”

“What?” I asked. “What?”

“Those yellowish stains all over his lederhosen.”

I smacked my hand over my mouth, fervently praying that those yellow stains weren’t Gottlieb’s actual glitzjuice.

Maddy was thinking, the cogs were turning. “Oh my God!” she shrieked as the cogs were clicking. “It’s his man yoghurt!”

My stomach lurched in horror.

Pamela and Jewel went pale with shock.

“Ggg-gg-got-Gottlieb,” Inge sputtered. “He just wiggled his Wienerschnitzel at me!”

With uncanny timing, Truong dimmed the lights. “Now, now ladies. Relax. Don’t get overly excited just yet. Gottlieb hasn’t even begun. First things first, we need some sexy music.” He started fiddling with his iPod and seconds later, he was gyrating his hips to the *Bom Chicka Wah Wah* beat.

“Achtung! Achtung!” Gottlieb grunted, thrusting his pelvis as he advanced

on us.

All hell broke loose.

The sound of shrieking and general mayhem filled the room.

We fled in every which direction as Gottlieb launched himself into the fray. The closer he got, the more we squealed like scared sheep attacked by a killer albino monkey.

“Girls! Girls! Get a grip!” Truong’s sharp voice cut through the hullabaloo. “We don’t want to be kicked out of this hotel suite before the show has even begun!” Acting like the Stripmeister Shepherd himself, Truong corralled us like the scared sheep that we were and ordered us to take turns lying down on the bed.

Maddy, the bride-to-be, was the first sacrificial lamb.

With a great sigh and even greater trepidation, Maddy edged closer and closer to the bed and arranged herself on the mattress. Taking his cue, Gottlieb crouched over her and swung his giant Bratwurst in her face, spinning his flaccid penis like a helicopter propeller.

Christ! The guy’s fervor made the average Chippendale look positively restrained.

Next, it was my turn. My stomach was in knots. “Um,” I broke off and restrained a shudder. “Why don’t you go first, Inge?” I ventured anxiously and shoved her forward. At this point, I was fairly certain that I would’ve shoved my grandmother forward to delay the inevitable.

“No-no.” Inge jumped and took ten steps backward. “You go first.”

“Methinks the ladies doth protest too much,” proffered Truong, the Shakespearean Stripmeister.

Meanwhile, Gottlieb was looking distinctly put out by our reactions. “Lay down!” he commanded to all and sundry.

Oh hell no! I recoiled as far as I could, but still not far enough to evade Gottlieb’s clammy fingers. He grabbed me by the arm, backed me up against a wall and began grinding on me like a Chihuahua in heat. Paralyzed with fear co-mingled with repulsion, I squeezed my eyes tightly shut to block out the images. The unimaginable horror.

Truong, sensing my mounting distress, stepped in between us and announced gleefully, “My turn! And I’d like a Tea Bag, please.”

“Tea Bag?” Inge frowned, confusion clear on her face. “Isn’t that a Republican movement?”

“No.” I shook my head slowly and explained with patient resignation,

“That’s a Tea Party. Two *totally* different things.”

Pamela nodded gravely. “*Totally* different.”

“Oh.” Inge looked absolutely dumfounded at this. “So what’s a Tea Bag?”

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves. “Just stand back and watch Inge . . . you’ll find out soon enough.”

With the prowess of a European gigolo, Gottlieb squatted over Truong and dunked his sagging ball sacks onto Truong’s radiantly beatific face.

Inge blinked. “I’m so glad Gottlieb didn’t take off his lederhosen.”

It was my turn to blink. “Thank heavens for small mercies.”

“Ohhhh!” Truong squealed with delight, “Dunk the Darjeeling tea, my darling! DUNK IT!”

Good Lord Ganesha, Krishna, Vishnu and Shiva!

I almost expired in a dramatic fashion. In all fairness, I’m no Naive Nellie and I’m certainly no Debbie Downer, but this was, unequivocally, one of the most disturbing experiences in my life.

At this point, all the women in the room were either gagging with revulsion or shrieking with sheer terror at the top of their lungs.

Thankfully, the Tea Bag ceremony only lasted about a minute. Gottlieb cast us a feral look and snarled, “Ach, which one of you would like me to munch on your sauerkraut?” He began thrusting his meat pole at us. “Achtung! Achtung!”

It was pandemonium. Screaming bloody murder, we darted to a corner and huddled there, clutching one another, far, far away from Herr Gottlieb Glitzjuice.

“Ack!” Inge shrieked. “He’s coming closer! HE’S COMING CLOSER!” She squeezed her eyes shut and began muttering Hail Marys under her breath.

“Get out your dollar bills!” I ordered urgently. “Quickly! NOW!”

In sheer desperation, I started flinging dollar bills at Gottlieb from behind the huddle, hoping he’d leave us alone.

Gottlieb did not get the hint.

Quite the contrary.

The stripper started stripping.

And while mooning the whole room, he tripped over his lederhosen and face planted. Fully nude, he picked himself off the floor and came charging toward the huddle. We took off running with sudden supersonic speed.

Alas, the hotel suite was small and despite our preternatural speed, Gottlieb ultimately caught up to one of us. It was inevitable.

This time, he cornered Pamela and she stood there shrieking while he did the obligatory grind. Eventually, Gottlieb let her go and Pamela bolted for the relative safety of our pack (we tried our best to stay together, you know, safety in numbers and all that). She was relieved, and all of us assumed the nightmare was finally over.

It was not.

Gottlieb was relentless. He hunted down and trapped his next prey. This went on for quite some time. This endless sufferance! I desperately wanted to wake up from this Nightmare On Gottlieb Street.

Next, Gottlieb managed to back Jewel to a wall. “Ohhh,” Gottlieb purred. “You have the body of a gym rat.” Then he began grinding on her, rat on rat.

Jewel kept faking modesty. “Oh my God, I’m sooo embarrassed.” She giggled hysterically. “I can’t believe he’s doing this!” But then she’d thrash about, grinding on Gottlieb as if he were the last gerbil on the planet.

This is when Truong stepped in and placed a firm hand on Gottlieb’s shoulder. “I think it’s time for you to go now.”

Gottlieb wrangled on his lederhosen, then Truong slipped him a hefty tip and showed him out the door. “Thank you for your services.”

Gottlieb gave a cheery wave and with a resounding “Tschüss. Bis später!” he headed off back to the Bavarian Alps. Well, that was the hope.

Truong sagged against the door and breathed out a sated sigh. “So what did y’all think of Gottlieb Glitzjuice?”

I blinked. “Is he really gone?”

“He’s gone,” said Maddy.

Inge squeaked like an overwrought mouse, “Is he really?”

“He is.” Pamela breathed out a big sigh of relief.

Then we collapsed into a heap on the floor, weeping uncontrollably, giggling together in shared, mild hysteria.

I polished off my drink and signaled to the bartender for a refill. “I’m never drinking tea again,” I announced, pushing the memory of Gottlieb’s tea bagging performance from my mind.

Inge took a deep swig. “And I’m never eating cake again, either.”

I found it impossible not to stare at the giant penis cake as my eyes made the scenic route back to my drink. Oddly enough, the giant penis cake was staring right back at me. The baked phallus loomed large with the words: ‘Cumgratulations Maddy.’

Truong was in charge of the cake, so really, I should have seen this one coming, pun intended.

I winced into my vodka. “I’m not so sure I’m up for eating baked genitalia.”

“I’m up for it!” Truong downed his drink and slammed his glass on the counter. “It just proves that I *can* have my cake and eat it too!”

Maddy pirouetted over to the bar and draped her arms around our shoulders. “I love my phallus cake, guys. I mean, the two of you have certainly outdone yourselves! Look at this schlong! Blue icing for the knards and chocolate shavings for the pubes! Really. I couldn’t have asked for a better cake.” She was teary-eyed and choking with emotion.

Clearly, she was drunk off her ass too.

“Well, I’m glad you love the cake,” said Truong, ensconced in his smug sense of superiority. “Pssh! All the bakery had was Buttercream Marbles. And I said: *No, no, this will not do!*”

I twisted back to my drink, staring into the clear liquid. “So this cake is your creation?”

Truong beamed like a beacon. “All mine. Anyway, enough about me.” He raised his glass. “I’d like to propose a toast to Maddy. Here’s a toast to love and laughter and happily ever after.”

“Hear, hear!” We clinked glasses.

“And,” I slurred, “here’s to being single, drinking doubles and seeing triple.”

We did another round of shots. “Salud!”

Maddy lifted her glass. “And I’d like to propose a toast to Kars. May you have a blast in Malaysia!”

I raised my glass even higher. “I’d like to propose a toast to Truong and Inge—who will be joining me!”

“WHAT?” Truong and Inge were practically shouting, “WE’RE GOING TO MALAYSIA?”

“Ooops!” I clapped a hand over my mouth. “My bad! I wasn’t supposed to say anything until next week.”

“So we’re going?” Inge’s voice was incredulous with disbelief.

Truong’s eyes bulged in their sockets. “Are we really?”

Oh! What the hell. The cat was already out of the bag. Besides, I was in a blindingly good mood and decided to dispense bonhomie to all.

“Yes!” I breathed, all flushed cheeks and bright eyes. “Carter said I could

bring along two of my top sellers. And you two are *it*! You'll help me spearhead the new call center and all your expenses will be paid for!"

Truong punched the air and shrieked, "Free trip!"

"An exotic getaway," said Inge, staring into space with a still expression on her face. "Just like *Eat, Pray, Love* . . . Coconut trees swaying on white beaches. Snorkeling in waters filled with rainbow colored coral. A medicine man named Ketut. Ahhhh," she released a dreamy sigh.

"Um," I cut into her tropical island fantasy, "that movie was filmed in Bali. And I'm not sure if this whole trip will quite measure up to the spiritual journey of *Eat, Pray, Love*." I stopped talking when I realized my words were falling on deaf ears.

Truong shrieked, "Free trip!"

Inge shrieked, "Free trip!"

"There'll be work." I laughed, reveling in the excitement I heard in their voices. "And Carter will be there too, so we can't just slack off. But I'm sure we'll have time to play."

"Free trip!" Truong shrieked for the umpteenth time.

"This calls for another toast." Maddy raised her shot glass. "To Malaysia."

"To Malaysia." We knocked back our vodka and slammed our shot glasses down on the counter.

Chapter Thirteen



“Yoo hoo! Plane waitress.” Inge’s lilting voice carried across the aisles.

“Inge!” Truong admonished. “That’s so rude. They’re called air stewardess. Or flight attendants.”

I busied myself, snapping on the seatbelt and getting out my Kindle Fire.

Truong peered over my shoulder. “What are you going to read?”

“Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*.”

“Oh come on.” Truong smirked, his brown eyes mocking me. “Genghis Khan is no longer riding around in a big fur hat with rabbit flaps, conquering Central Asia and Europe, looting, raping and pillaging. The wrath of Khan is long gone, honey.”

“The wrath of Khan is still very much alive.” I lowered my voice, nodding in Carter’s direction. He was sitting comfortably in Business Class whilst the rest of us were left to languish in Economy. “Sun Tzu says that if you know the enemy and you know yourself, then you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.”

“So . . .” Truong’s eyes glinted with mischief. “Does this mean that you’re gonna try and get to know the elusive Carter Lockwood?”

“From your lips to God’s ears.” I nodded sagely. “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

“Good thinking,” said Truong, nodding his head effusively.

I grinned at him, pleased by his enthusiastic response. At long last, Truong seemed to understand that military strategy and tactics learned from the battlefield as observed hundreds of years ago by the ancients could still be applied to present everyday life. Then Truong added, “Are you going to subdue Carter by seducing him in bed?”

OK, maybe he didn’t *quite* get it.

“Of course not!” I said at once. “First I’m going to befriend him. Then I’m going to ask him to become my mentor so I can learn *everything* from the guru himself. And then I’ll take his job.”

“That is,” Truong pointed out, “if he agrees to take you on as his little protégé. What if he refuses?”

“I’ll find a way,” I said staunchly. “Hell, if the mountain won’t come to Muhammad, then Muhammad must go to the mountain.”

“Huh.” Inge looked at me in astonishment. “Kars! I had no idea you were a Muslim mountain climber.”

“I’m not.”

“Then why did you call yourself Muhammad and why are you so keen on scaling a mountain?”

“It has nothing to do with Islam or mountains. It’s just an old proverb.” I explained with patient resignation. “It means that if you believe in what you are doing, you can overcome any obstacle.”

With the light touch of a Geisha, Truong heeded, “If by ‘obstacle’ you mean Carter Lockwood, then I suggest you tread very, very carefully.”

“Why?”

“Honey.” Truong reached over and patted my hand. “Girls shouldn’t play with fire, and boys shouldn’t give them matches.”

“So you don’t think I should do it?”

“*Girrl*.” Truong whipped out his signature diva snap and smiled a wicked little smile. “I think you should.”

“What? Share rooms?” I slumped forward on the front desk, growing increasingly distraught. “You’re kidding me, right?”

The receptionist shook her head slowly. “This hotel is fully booked for the duration of the Malaysian Grand Prix.”

“Mmmm.” Truong idly drummed his fingers on the marble counter. “Why don’t we try a different hotel?”

“I’m afraid all the hotels near the airport are fully booked up.” The receptionist smiled benignly. “But like I said earlier, we do have two rooms available here for you.”

“Great,” Carter said tonelessly.

With extreme generosity I added, “On the bright side, it’s only for one night. Our flight to Penang leaves tomorrow morning.”

Carter’s face bore an expression of infuriatingly polite disbelief. Given the circumstances, I couldn’t really blame him. Due in part to long lines and an excessive delay in customs and immigration, we had missed the connecting flight to Penang. So for the time being, we were stranded in Kuala Lumpur.

“Why don’t you and Carter share a room?” Truong winked hard at me. “I’ll share the other room with Inge.”

“That’s fine with me,” Inge chirruped.

Wait. This was certainly *not* OK with me. “No way,” I said firmly. “I am not, definitely *not*, sharing a room with Carter. I’ll just bunk with you and Inge.”

Truong was staring at me owlishly.

“Truong, is something wrong with your eye?” I asked, earning myself a deep dig in the ribs.

“Remember Sun Tzu?” he hissed.

“Sun Tzu?” I said with artificial surprise. “What about him?”

Carter looked at us suspiciously, as well he might.

Truong adjusted his expression quickly. He edged closer and whispered, “Remember what we talked about on the plane?”

Of course I did. But I wasn’t about to let Carter in on my Sun Tzu strategy. Although, I could see where Truong was going with this. No doubt, this was an opportunity for me to get to know my elusive enemy.

“Fine,” I said with all the enthusiasm of someone asked to suck the hairspray out of Donald Trump’s comb-over. “I guess I’ll share a room with Carter.”

“Fine.” Carter’s jaw went rigid. “I guess I don’t really have a choice.”

I winced inwardly. My eyes cut back to Truong and he made an “isn’t this exciting” face at me.

In return, I made a face that clearly shouted, “NO IT IS NOT!”

We stood next to each other in silence as the lift ascended, then Carter turned to me and said in a level voice, “While I realize it isn’t your fault that we missed our connecting flight—”

“Why, how kind of you to acknowledge that.”

Carter’s mouth took on a particularly grim line. Whoopsie! I’d forgotten he didn’t care to be interrupted. I bit my tongue while he nobly climbed back onto his pedestal and continued proselytizing, “I just don’t think it’s a good idea for us to be sharing a room. I find it highly inappropriate.”

And on and on he went galloping on his high horse. He just wouldn’t stop. I was already surly and exhausted after the long flight and to add to that, my ears were now aching. Great Mother of Pearls! Carter was so uptight that if you stuck an oyster up his ass, you’d have a cultured pearl in less than a week.

I sighed dramatically. “In what part of this conversation am I supposed to

express interest?”

Carter fixed me with a basilisk glare.

“And doesn’t it get tiring, Carter?” I asked mildly. “Being so uptight all the time? You needn’t worry, though. I’m not planning on jumping your bones and doing it like they do on the Discovery Channel.”

“Will you just STOP!” he snapped.

“Why don’t YOU just stop!”

I could almost feel the nudges passed between Truong and Inge as they hung tactfully back, wisely staying out of this Battle Royale.

Finally, the lift chimed and its doors slid silently open. We walked to our rooms in tense silence. “Room 488!” I exclaimed brightly. “That’s us, Carter.” I swung the door open, letting it bang against the wall. “Bye, Truong! Bye, Inge! I’ll catch up with you later!” I yelled over my shoulder. “And if you don’t hear from me . . .” I threw a pointed glance at Carter. “Alert the authorities!”

Carter silenced me with a frown and slammed the door shut so violently it almost came off its hinges. Then he flicked on the lights and stepped back, staring at the queen sized bed.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” he said gallantly.

For a while, we unpacked in silence, me by the bed, Carter by the couch.

As I was fishing in my suitcase for my toiletry kit, I felt Carter’s gaze searing into the back of my skin. I spun around and caught him watching me with interest. I understood the look on his face and gave him time to indulge it. Nature had blessed my bottom rather than my bosom, and I was OK with that. My derriere more than made up for it. If I threw down the gauntlet to Pippa Middleton, challenging her to a Battle of the Butts at Buckingham Palace, I bet you I’d win.

As I played out this fantasy, Carter cleared his throat.

“Are you checking out my badonkadonk?” I asked.

I knew my bodacious badonkadonk had somehow made an impact on Carter because it took him a few beats too long to pick up the thread of conversation. “And what, may I ask, is a badonkadonk?” he managed at last, in his usual crushing-the-underlings tone.

“The first ‘donk’ is for donkey. And the second ‘donk’ is also for donkey. So basically, it’s an ass of asses,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Karsynn,” he stated purposefully.

“Carter,” I stated back.

“Quit making an ass of yourself. To answer your question, yes, I was staring at your donkey ass, or as you so eloquently call it, a badonkadonk. Because,” he added wryly, “there happens to be a long strand of toilet paper stuck to the back of your pants.”

“What?” I whipped my head around and yanked on the ten-foot long TP. And then came the sinking feeling, the awful deflation. My whole body underwent a thermal flush. Calmly, I grabbed my bag and allowed myself one large sigh before crossing the room, headed for the one and only sanctuary that remained.

I stepped inside the bathroom and locked the door behind me.

Sagging heavily against the sink, I swore even more heavily.

Toilet paper hanging from my bum? God. I cringed with mortification.

That pretty much cemented my shame. For all eternity.

And how long had it been hanging there?

How did it even happen?

I made the slow deduction. When I’d stood up after using the toilet and pulled up my pants, the toilet paper that I’d used to line the seat must have decided it couldn’t bear parting with my delightful bum.

Furious with myself, I ran a warm bath, releasing a steady stream of profanity under my breath. Slowly, I sank my head back into the still water, exhausted and overcome by jet lag.

After my invigorating bath, I toweled myself dry and caught an involuntary glance of myself in the mirror. I jumped back in fright. Pfft! I let out a puff of air. I looked as shitty as my passport photo. With some effort, I dragged a brush through my recalcitrant hair, tugged on a baggy T-shirt, an old pair of gym shorts and padded out of the steamy bathroom.

Carter was adjusting a pillow on the sofa and appeared to be getting ready for bed. A thought suddenly occurred to me. “You don’t sleep in the nude, do you?”

“Only on hot summer days,” he replied, plumping up a pillow.

I walked to the AC and cranked it all the way up. “Don’t get any ideas,” I informed him loftily.

“Well,” said Carter.

“Well what?”

“Who’s the uptight one now?”

“Hey!” I exclaimed, vaguely surprised that Carter was slowly unbending. “I’m glad you’re loosening up somewhat.”

“I’m not always uptight, you know.”

“No,” I said with a certain degree of cynicism. “I *don’t* know.”

“Fine,” Carter said. “I’ll prove it to you. For the entire duration that we’re here in Malaysia, you’ll see another side of me.”

“OK. Then why don’t you prove it?”

“Right now?”

“Why not? I’m curious to see this—” I paused and made air quotes with my fingers—“*other* side of you.”

“All right.” He straightened himself, vaguely conscious that he’d just witnessed a challenge being made. “What do you have in mind?”

“Let’s play a joke on Truong and Inge,” I suggested, feeling wild with the risk of it. “They’re in the room right next to us.”

“What sort of joke?” he asked carefully.

Too late. I was already making extremely loud moaning noises and banging the wall with my fist. “Oh, Carter! Spank me baby!” I cried and banged the wall again. “Harder! HARDER!”

Carter’s face was a picture. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Messing with Truong and Inge.” I laughed so hard my sides were splitting. “They’re gonna think we’re boinking.”

Carter folded his arms and looked me in the eye, saying nothing.

I was well into one of my laughing spasms. I tried to stop laughing. But I couldn’t stop. Eventually, I regained enough control to ask, “You don’t think it’s funny?”

“No.”

My little cloud of euphoria burst with a sudden POP. “Oh.” There was an ugly pause until I added in a very small voice, “Not even a little?”

The corners of his mouth curved up a fraction. It was almost a ghost of a smile, but not quite. More like a phantom. “Maybe a little,” he acquiesced. Then he let out a great big yawn and arranged himself in a horizontal position. “That’s enough ‘fun’ for tonight. Go to sleep now, Karsynn.”

“I can’t.” I grabbed my towel and began scrubbing my scalp. “My hair’s still wet.”

Carter turned on his side and faced the wall, summarily dismissing me. “Good night.”

I sat on the edge of the bed. A beat. Another beat. I cleared my throat loudly. “Um, Carter. You don’t happen to have a hair dryer, do you?”

All I got was a grunt and then a final, “Good night, Karsynn.”

“Good night, Carter.”

My pillow was wet. My hair was damp. And I had a migraine the size of Mexico. I tossed and turned all night, listening to Carter’s rhythmic breathing. Finally, I heaved myself up, sat on the edge of the bed and switched on the lights. I blinked, trying to get my bearings. Then I reached for my iPhone.

It was two a.m., and I was wide awake.

I glanced over at Carter sleeping on the sofa, taking in his dark lounging figure. Hmm. I noticed he carried a slight paunch around his girth and in a peculiar way, I found that even more attractive than men who were ripped to shreds. You know the type. Washboard abs, killer biceps, chiseled to perfection, one percent body fat. While I realize some women find that attractive, I simply see them as men who spend too much time at the gym, making working out a priority above everything else.

Not to mention, the guys I’d dated in the past who were built like a brick shithouse expected the same standard from their women. I learned, much later, that they had high expectations of me. There was a lot of narcissism there and the relationships never lasted long.

While I may be petite (OK, more like short), I’ve always had a belly, that pocket of flesh just above my nethers that just never seems to go away. I call it my Burrito Baby. She even has a name. Consuelo Soledad O’Brien. When my weight goes up, Consuelo gets bigger and when my weight drops, Consuelo just gets smaller. But she’s always there. My Burrito Baby Belly.

Over the years, I’ve come to accept that bellies are, simply put, beautiful. And now, I like my men regular (not perfect) just like me.

I stole another quick glance at Carter. In his deep slumber, his lips were parted in a half-smile and soft sleep noises whispered out of his mouth. Then he turned on his other side, giving me an admirable view of his smooth torso, long limbs and um, tight buns.

Something very odd happened to my heartbeat.

He wasn’t perfect, but he sure as hell was sexy.

Stop it, Kars! I scolded myself. He was also utterly insufferable and arrogant.

I looked away with determination.

Ah! A mini bar! My stomach lurched and I practically hurled myself at the mini bar when the price list suddenly caught my eye.

For a brief moment, I stood perfectly still and simply stared at it.

12 oz can of Coca Cola - \$9 USD

A small packet of Pringles - \$9 USD

Kit Kat bar - \$10 USD

Give me a break! I could not believe they had the staggering nerve to charge ten dollars for a Goddamn Kit Kat bar. I uttered a low curse, “Bastards!”

“What?” came a groggy voice from the sofa.

“Oh. I wasn’t talking to you, Carter. Go back to sleep.”

“I can’t anymore,” he said, sitting up.

We fell into a convivial silence, staring at the mini bar in a rather maniacal fashion. Eventually, I dragged my gaze away from it. “I’m hungry,” I informed Carter. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” There was a pause until he added, “I’m starving.”

“Wanna go out and get something to eat?”

He raked a hand through his sleep-rumpled hair. “At this hour?”

“Why not? I’ve heard about these *mamak* food stalls that are open twenty-four seven.”

“Twenty-four seven?” Carter looked at me with deep interest. “Like a call center?”

I nodded.

“All right,” he said. “This I’d like to see.”

If synchronized-head-turning were a sport, Carter and I would have scored a ten out of ten. We whipped our heads this way and that, taking in our surroundings, soaking up the sounds. We were in downtown Kuala Lumpur, or KL as the locals called it, where the cityscape of lights were more brilliant than the stars. All around us, rows and rows of food stalls took up entire sidewalks; plastic chairs and tables spilled over adjoining lanes and street corners.

It didn’t take us long to find an empty table. As I pulled out a chair and sat down, I was struck by the vast number of people at the *mamak* joint at this ungodly hour. Clubbers gathering after a hard night of partying, swing shift workers enjoying supper, college students just hanging out . . . it all held a very relaxed vibe.

“I guess it’s true what they say about this place,” I said in a hushed awe,

“this is the city that never sleeps.”

Our heads swiveled round as another Suzuki motorbike sped past our table, carrying a family of four.

“Not so much *al fresco* dining as it is a sidewalk hangout spot,” Carter observed.

“I like this,” I insisted. “No frills, no fuss, roadside dining.”

“Where’d you hear about these *mamak* food stalls?”

“The Travel Channel,” I said, brightening. “On Anthony Bourdain’s *No Reservations*.”

“Never heard of him.”

“You haven’t?” I raised my eyebrows in silent reprimand.

“Nope. What’s the deal with his show anyway?”

“Well, I enjoy watching it because he sees a city from a local’s perspective. And to him, the perfect meal is not about upscale restaurants and the Michelin Stars. It’s more about the ideal combination of food, atmosphere and company.”

Carter had more pressing matters on his mind. “What should we order?”

“Roti canai seems to be pretty popular; it’s some sort of fried Indian bread.”

“All right. I’ll try that. What about drinks?”

“Oh! We have to order *teh tarik*. It’s pulled tea.”

“Roti canai and pulled tea it is,” Carter declared with an air of gravitas.

“What about you? What are you having?”

“Satay!” I exclaimed cheerfully. “Should I go place our orders?”

“Please.”

I departed on my errand, walking past an endless array of food stalls until I came to the roti stall. For a brief moment, I stood rooted to the spot, watching the street vendor with rapture as he poured milk tea back and forth, from one glass to another, pulling it higher and higher.

“Two *teh tarik* please,” I informed the vendor airily. “Oh, and one roti canai.”

He gave the smallest nod. “Where do you sit?”

I pointed to our table.

Intent on my other mission, I picked my way through the kaleidoscope of food stalls, all reflecting Malaysia’s colorful ethnic mix. My eyes lit up when I finally came upon a satay stand. I placed my order and rejoined Carter at the table.

It wasn’t long before two glasses of frothy tea were delivered to our table,

along with Carter's roti canai. It was served on a banana leaf with a side of red curry. Shortly after, my plate of chicken satay arrived accompanied by a bowl of peanut sauce.

We tucked into our food and for a while we ate in companionable silence.

As I sat there chewing on my satay, it occurred to me that this would be a good time as any to pick Carter's brains. I debated the proper approach and opted for the most straightforward. "Carter," I stated, "I'd like to be your protégé."

"My protégé?" He cocked an eyebrow. "So you wish to glean some wisdom from me?"

"Uh-huh." I licked my fingers, tasting hints of lemongrass and turmeric.

"Yes. I'd like you to teach me everything you know."

Carter tore off a chunk of roti and dunked it liberally into the red curry.

"Well that will cost you five thousand dollars."

"You drive a hard bargain."

"Lesson number one—always charge for your expertise."

I held back a groan. "You're so full of it."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"All right," he said haughtily. "Do you want to learn from me or not?"

I nodded.

"So be quiet and let me speak."

I made a zipping motion with my hand over my mouth.

"Let me tell you a story."

I drew a finger across my throat and made gagging noises. "Stories are for toddlers!"

"Do you want to hear it or not?"

"Fine," I mumbled.

Carter ignored the lack of enthusiasm in my response and launched right into his story. "A French woman, upon spotting Picasso in a café, approached the great master and insisted that he make a quick sketch of her. Graciously, Picasso obliged. After studying her for a moment, he used a single pencil stroke to create her portrait. He handed the woman his work of art and she gushed, 'It's perfect! You managed to capture my true essence with just one stroke. Now how much do I owe you?' "

I cut in dramatically, " 'Five thousand dollars,' said Picasso."

Carter frowned heavily. "Are you telling the story or am I?"

“Go *onnnn*,” I said with exaggerated courtesy.

“Picasso informed the woman that she owed him fifty thousand francs. And the woman was furious. She said to Picasso, ‘It only took you a second to draw it!’ To which Picasso responded, ‘Madame, it took me my entire life. It was my fifty years of serial preparation and fifty years of perfecting my unique talents and fifty years of honing my experience plus the five seconds that produced this sketch.’ ”

“Nice story.”

“You see,” Carter continued complacently, “it takes years and years of study and practice to build expertise in any profession. And with that knowledge comes the appearance of ease and the perception that what’s being asked is—oh, no big deal. But, it *is* a big deal.”

“OK,” I acknowledged. “What I’m asking you *is* a big deal. But will you do it? For free?”

“I’ll do it if you pay for our meal.”

“You got it!” I said at once. “You’re cheap!”

“That’s because I just gave you a huge discount. Now,” Carter cleared his throat, “what would you like to know?”

“I’d like to know the secret to your success,” I said directly.

“The secret to my success?” he repeated. “Well, I’ll have to say courage. The courage to get things done, the courage to accept failure, the courage to pick myself up when I fall. I may not be as smart, talented or as skilled as the next person, but I’m not afraid to go out there and make things happen for myself.”

“You sound like Oprah.”

“Well, I’m not done talking yet, my little protégé. Two—I’m constantly learning and challenging the status quo. I’m always thinking of new ways to do old things, which is why I still hop on the phones and take calls. I talk to the callers. I talk to the agents. I talk to middle management.”

“It’s nice to know that all that is not beneath you.”

“It’s not. And it will never be. Trust me, Kars, pride and ego will get you nowhere in the workplace. Sometimes, you don’t learn and you don’t get new ideas unless you’re in the front lines. Whenever I see a problem, my immediate instinct is: How can I fix it? How can I make it better?”

I sighed. “You’re telling me stuff I already know. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Fine.” He rose to the challenge. “One of the most important life skills they

don't teach you at school is how to sell."

"But you're a director now." My voice carried a trace of accusation. "You don't need to sell anymore."

"That's where you're wrong. I still spend the majority of my time selling aspects of the business. Without sales, there would be no business to manage."

"So what exactly do you sell?"

"I sell ideas. I sell initiatives."

"Like what?"

"Like how to lower production costs, how to run the business more efficiently."

"Hmmm." I twisted my lips. A thousand questions sprang to my mind. "How long have you been doing this?"

"My first real sale where I'd actually made a large profit? When I was thirteen."

"What'd you sell?"

"Well before I sold anything, I did your run of the mill market research. After school, I collected soda cans in the cafeteria and sorted through them to find out which drinks were the most popular."

"Warren Buffet did that too, but he collected bottle caps at gas stations."

"Yep. And that's why Warren Buffet is now a major shareholder of the Coca Cola company. But I took a slightly different approach. After collecting the soda cans, I recycled them for a small profit and with that money I bought cases of soda at Sam's by the bulk."

"That's a lot of soda."

"Yes and no. Usually I bought the half cans."

"Why half cans and not the regular sized ones?"

"The half cans were cheaper and they were a lot easier for me to haul around."

"Let me guess, then you turned around and resold the soft drinks at school?"

He nodded briefly in acknowledgment. "The vending machines at school were selling soda for a buck twenty five. So, yeah . . . I cut into their profits."

"How much did you make on each sale?"

"Seventy-five cents. And I made quite a bit that first year. Three years later, I had saved up enough to purchase my very own vending machine."

"Why didn't you just take out a loan from your parents?"

“Didn’t have parents,” Carter deadpanned.

I made eye contact for as long as possible to make sure Carter wasn’t joking. He didn’t bat an eyelid. “What do you mean you didn’t have parents?”

“Mom passed away when I was five. Then my life became a cliché. Dad remarried, my stepmom was a witch and I was sent to live with my grandparents. Looking back, it was all for the better.” He sounded so indifferent about all of it.

Taken aback, I said, “Was your step-mom really that bad?”

“Put it this way.” He laughed harshly. “She’s the kind of mom who eats her young.”

“Oh,” I said inadequately. “How was living with your grandparents?”

His face relaxed into a smile. “It was good. We lived in a small town in northern Minnesota—Roseau.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s ten miles south of Canada.”

“When you say small . . .” I lifted an inquiring brow. “How small are you talking?”

“One radio station and three stop lights.”

“Phwoar! That makes Pocatello almost seem like Manhattan.”

“Like I said, it was small.” He lifted his glass and took a quick gulp of tea. “My grandparents’ house was thirty miles out on a turkey farm.”

“Did you help out on the farm?”

“I did,” he said, brightening. “Every morning I’d go out to the turkey shed with my grandpa and we’d lay out the pine shavings and cedar chips.” He stopped and cracked a semblance of a smile. “And whenever my grandpa put on Willie Nelson, all the turkeys would start bobbing their heads.”

I burst out laughing.

“Yeah.” He rubbed his chin. “You didn’t know? Turkeys love Willie Nelson.”

“No.” I gave another hiccupping laugh. “I didn’t know that. And it’s funny that your grandpa knew that.”

“I know,” Carter said fondly. “He was a pretty cool cat.”

“So, what was your grandmother like?”

“She and my grandpa, they were both hard workers.” He hesitated for a second before adding, “Life wasn’t always easy for them on the farm; most of the local farmers struggled to meet the rock bottom prices of the major

turkey producers.”

I rested my chin on my fingers. “And what about you?”

“Me?” He smiled a proper smile and his eyes went crinkly. “I had big dreams. Excuse the pop reference, but I wanted to be bigger than my circumstances. Some people use their family as an excuse not to achieve, and I have no patience with that. Yep, my dad wasn’t around, but I used it as an excuse to want to achieve.”

“So where *was* your dad? Didn’t he ever visit you at the turkey farm?”

He looked down and stared into his glass. “He had a new family. Two sons. Anyway, he flat out told me that he no longer had room for me in his life.”

“What a jerk!” I said hotly.

Carter shrugged indifferently.

“What did you do after you bought that vending machine?”

He spoke slowly, as though addressing a five-year-old, “I scouted the neighborhood for a high traffic spot.”

“D’oh!” I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t take a genius to come to that conclusion.” I rephrased my question, “Where did you end up parking your vending machine? At your school cafeteria?”

“I wish,” he said ruefully. “But they wouldn’t allow it. I ended up parking it at a dance studio close to the city.”

“Like a ballet school?” I asked idly.

He nodded. “Classical ballet, tap, jazz . . . that sort of thing.”

“How convenient,” I said in a teasing voice, “you could check out the chicks while you restocked your machine.”

“I wasn’t interested in dating back then,” he replied, a little stiffly. “It was classic Business 101. I saw a need and filled it.”

By now, the satay and roti had disappeared into our bellies. I placed a cigarette between my lips, reached for my lighter, flicked the wheel and lit it. I took a deep drag then angled my head to the left, blowing a stream of smoke across my shoulder. The more I learned about Carter, the more I wanted to know. “So,” I asked conversationally, “are you dating anyone now?”

“Why do you want to know?” A smile quirked his lips. “Are you interested in selling yourself to me?”

“No.” I could feel myself begin to blush. “But *you* just did. You got all *up-close-and-personal* with me, drew me in with your fascinating story and now BAM! I’m sold on you.”

“You are?” He grinned widely. “That was a pretty easy sale.”

I took another deep drag and gazed unseeingly toward Carter. In a moment of candor, I said, "You know, my dad left me, too. When I was twelve. Went out of my life." I snapped my fingers. "Just like that."

I felt an unexpected pang. All those emotions were still there. Resentment, anger, hurt.

Carter stared intently at me. "Where is your dad now?"

"In jail." I laughed bitterly. "For life."

Carter said nothing for a moment, then, "Have you visited him?"

I shook my head firmly.

"Why not?"

My eyes flickered. "Do you see *your* dad?"

"No."

"I didn't think so," I said with a faint smile.

In the silence that followed, we looked at each other and shared a moment of mutual understanding.

There was such an air of intimacy . . . it was weird.

"But hey," said Carter, putting on a bright tone, "look at us right now. We're doing just fine. And haven't you heard? The stone that the builder refused will always be the head cornerstone."

I dragged heavily on my cigarette. "Is that a verse from the bible?"

"Hell if I know." Carter took a swig of his tea. "I think I heard it from a Bob Marley song."

We clinked glasses. "JAH MAN!"

I pushed the memories of my dad out of my mind and changed the subject. "So, any more advice you can give me?"

He seemed to consider this for a bit before responding. "Most management philosophy that you read in a textbook or learn in a classroom is not going to be of much use. Once you factor in people's egos and personalities, even the most sensible theories begin to fall apart."

"Egos," I echoed. "I wonder if Lightning Speed is large enough to accommodate both of our egos."

"Of course it is. But don't let your ego get in the way. Learn how to delegate. When it comes to project management, the ability to delegate is what separates the good managers from the bad ones. So train your agents, and then let go of a responsibility."

"Sounds easy," I said.

"It almost never is."

“Why not?”

“Egos get in the way. Most Project Managers would rather be seen as the authority than support the authority or the expertise of people who work for them.”

“Well, sometimes it’s difficult to let go of a responsibility.”

“Again,” said Carter, “it all boils down to ego. Some managers convince themselves that they can do everything better than anyone else.”

“Well maybe it’s because they’re afraid that if they give up that responsibility, they’ll become redundant to the company.”

“That’s why it takes a very confident person to become a good Project Manager. You need to have confidence in the people you work for and confidence in the people who work for you. And you need enough confidence in yourself to overcome those ego problems.”

“I have confidence,” I said resolutely. “And I don’t have a big ego. Really. I don’t. I just act like I do.”

“Oh and there’s more,” said Carter. “It’s not just your own ego you need to worry about. You also have to deal with other people’s egos.”

“Great,” I said with heavy sarcasm.

“The good news is the size of someone’s ego is one of the easiest things to figure out. And once you can read ego, understand its impact on business and control it by either stroking it or pushing it, then you’ll be fine.”

“So . . . big egos are bad and small egos are good?”

“Not always.”

“But how can a giant ego even be a good thing?”

“Well, a lot of deals get made simply because someone’s ego is so big that psychologically he can’t afford not to get it done. So always use what you know about a person to your benefit. It’s all about learning how to read people and at the same time, learning how to influence their reading of you.”

I stared at my Jedi master. “How do you do it? Read people?”

“It’s called being street smart. And while it is not teachable, it is learnable.”

“So tell me.” I sat forward in my chair. “How do I learn?”

“It’s simple, really. By the powers of observation. And by listening. In meetings, pay attention to the little things people say or do unconsciously.”

“Like?”

“Like the way a person looks away at the sound of a particular question. Like the way a person chooses to phrase his thoughts.”

“Mmmm . . .” I murmured pensively.

“And pay attention to the cubicles; more often than not, how people choose to decorate their space is often an extension of themselves.”

I sat up straighter. “What can you tell about me just from observing my cubicle?” I cleared my throat loudly. “I’m sure you’ve noticed that my desk is always immaculate. Thank you very much,” I added smugly.

“With you . . .” Carter studied me for a moment. “My gut feeling tells me that your clean desk is a sign of a cluttered drawer.”

Holy Crapola! How did he know? Was this guy a psychic?

“Guilty as charged.” I grinned sheepishly.

“And pay attention to a person’s eyes. The eyes will always tell you what someone is really thinking. In most business situations, people communicate with their eyes what they can’t do with words.”

I opened my eyes wide so they were bulging in their sockets. “What do my eyes tell you right now?”

The corners of his mouth twitched as his gray eyes met my bulging brown ones. “They tell me that I am boring you to death.”

“No you’re not,” I said emphatically. “I thought I was blinding you with my earnestness.”

“Anyway, my point is the clues are everywhere. You just need to be tuned in to them. Most people are not. Either they’re too busy listening to themselves, or they’re too involved in their own agenda to notice what others are doing.”

“And this so called ‘reading’ of people.” I turned my head slightly to blow a smooth stream of smoke across my shoulder. “How does it really help you?”

“Well, for one, it helps me predict how people are likely to react or respond in almost any business situation. And that in turn impacts my actions. In the past, I’ve failed to close a few deals simply because my sit-back attitude and failure to stroke a few egos came across as cold and arrogant.”

“All good advice.” I nodded thoughtfully. “Thanks for sharing your management philosophy.”

“Take it from me, Karsynn,” he said in a level voice, “the only management philosophy that *does* work is the one that acknowledges that *none* of them do. People and problems don’t fit into molds. So just be flexible, but at the same time, strive for consistency.”

By now, the tip of my Marlboro Light had wormed back and I lightly tapped it, letting the ashes fall onto the side of the road.

I really do have a lot to learn, I thought with a sinking heart.

All too soon, dawn had sprouted and my worries began bleeding away with the night. The air grew even more electric and all around me, people were moving to a rhythm I could not follow.

The sky turned pink and as I stared at the pale and watery sun that was rising in the horizon, I found myself thinking of Carter, surprised by how laid back and likable he was once he dropped the authoritative persona he usually wore like a cape.

Chapter Fourteen



Our guide at work, Ah Beng, spoke English as easily as if it were his mother tongue, though his pronunciation had an unmistakable Chinese cadence.

“This way, please,” said Ah Beng, leading us down the tight corridor of Lightning Speed’s Penang call center. “How do you find Penang so far?”

“It’s nice,” Carter responded with a warm smile. “It has a certain old-world, colonial charm.”

“It does,” agreed Ah Beng as we turned and twisted through another corridor. “When the British were here back in the sixteenth century, they definitely left their mark.” He made a swift left and I tried to stay on his heels without actually knocking into him. “So what’s on the agenda today?” he asked.

“For me it’s training,” I said, clutching a thick binder. “Training, training and more training.”

Ah Beng turned to Carter. “Your reputation precedes you. I’ve heard you’re somewhat of a legend in this call center business.”

“I can’t be a legend yet,” Carter said lightly, “I’m not dead.”

I smiled. I appreciated Carter’s self-deprecating humor. And for the most part, I appreciated his presence here. While I constantly second guessed myself, Carter appeared thoroughly relaxed, at ease within the confines of his fiefdom.

Quite frankly, my experience was limited enough to be dangerous. I was totally winging it.

“Will you be joining me in today’s training class?” I gave Carter a smile that didn’t quite hide my nervousness.

“No,” he replied. “I’ll be in meetings all day. But between you, Truong and Inge, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Right,” I said with utter uncertainty.

“Now listen up everyone.” I surveyed the training room. “As I’m going

through this Nixus 2.0 training manual, please feel free to stop me if you have any questions.”

“And,” Truong chimed in, “always remember that there are no stupid questions, although they are the easiest to answer.”

Jami K. raised her hand.

“Yes, Jami?” Truong prompted.

“Isn’t that a bit of a paradox? First you state that stupid questions do not exist. Then you implicitly state that they do in fact exist.”

“All right then,” Truong amended, “there are no stupid questions. Period.”

“I have a question,” said Sandeep.

Truong nodded encouragingly. “Go on.”

“Should I eat a battery?”

Mariam’s hand shot up. “What will happen if I leap off the Burj Khalifa?”

Truong looked dejected, deflated almost.

“Cut it out guys!” I admonished. “We only have two hours to go over this Nixus training manual before we have to move on to other subjects. So please! No more interruptions unless they are pertinent and add to the topic.”

I sidled up to Truong and whispered, “There may not be any stupid questions, but there sure are plenty of inquisitive idiots.”

After we had covered all the aspects of the Nixus 2.0 application, the agents were tested on their knowledge. When they were done with their tests, Truong, Inge and I graded them and handed them back.

“Hey!” Jimmy Choo yelled from behind the class. “How come you failed me on the test? I filled in *all* of the blanks.”

“You may have *filled in* all the blanks,” I said in a resigned voice and sighed faintly, “but your answers were all *wrong*, Jimmy.”

Truong rubbed his temples. “I’d like to find the guy who first said there are no stupid questions and shoot him.”

I stood up, stretched my back and cracked my knuckles. Now it was time for the necessary evil: Sales Training.

“Positioning,” I stated. “Who can give me some examples?”

Becca responded, “A company positions itself for the future.”

Jami added, “A product is positioned for the marketplace.”

“I position myself for a promotion,” said Sandeep.

“All good examples,” I acknowledged with a nod. “Here’s another one: You position yourself for a sale. Positioning is a matter of determining what

someone is really buying when they buy your product or service and then conveying those impressions and motivations back to the buyer. A good salesman can take ten facts about a product and by stressing some and de-emphasizing others, create ten different impressions.”

One hour later . . .

I saw the glazed-over eyes and drooping eyelids. Mostly everyone had their heads propped up in their hands, as if the boredom was physically weakening them. One girl sitting near the front appeared to be scribbling down a shopping list. Two guys in the back had dozed off.

This wasn’t the response I’d been hoping for.

I sighed with heavy resignation, vividly recalling how that was *me* during the first week of training. So really, how could I blame them?

Truong sidled up to me and whispered, “Do you mind if I wake them up a little?”

“Not at all,” I replied graciously and stepped back to give him the floor. “Go right ahead.”

“All right, class.” Truong clapped his hands. “Can I have everyone’s attention, please? Right. Good. We’re going to do a little bit of trivia. Can anyone tell me—who was the first computer technician?”

The class responded enthusiastically.

Becca’s hand shot up. “Alan Turing.”

“Konrad Zuse,” said Mariam.

“Bill Gates,” said Sandeep.

“Steve Jobs,” said Jami K.

“No, no, no. And no,” said Truong. “It was Eve.”

Becca’s hand shot up again. “As in Adam and Eve?”

“Yep.” Truong gave a crisp nod. “And can anyone tell me why?” He left a dramatic pause. “Take a wild guess.”

“Um,” Sandeep hedged, “because Eve had an apple? Like a Macintosh Apple computer?”

“Close,” said Truong wearing an impish grin. “It’s because Eve had an Apple in one hand and a Wang in the other!”

With a strangled voice, I quickly stepped in before things got out of hand. “Truong, I think that’s enough trivia for today.” Then with a strained smile, I turned to face the class. “What say we throw you guys on the phones now? I think it’s time you started taking some calls.”

I heard the low groans and moans sweeping through the class.

“Excuse me.” Ifzan raised his voice amidst the cacophony. “If I don’t know what I’m doing on the phone, can I ask for help?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“Of course you can ask for help,” Truong echoed. “But there are certain limitations. For instance, it’s OK to ask for help but if you repeatedly ask for the same kind of help, then it might indicate to me that you have some sort of learning disability.” His perfect eyebrows arched in a question. “And we don’t want that, do we?”

Ifzan shook his head fiercely.

“All right then.” I clasped my hands and glanced around the room. “Let’s go take some calls!”

Beep!

“Thanks for calling Lightning Speed Communications, my name is Sandeep. How can I help you today?”

“Are you from India?” asked the caller.

“No sir. Are you?”

I was listening in on the call and made urgent signaling gestures at Sandeep, but it was too late. The caller snapped, “Oh, so you’re trying to be smart with me eh, Sanjay Gupta?”

“My name is Sandeep, sir.”

“Whatever, Sanjay!”

“Sir,” said Sandeep in a level voice, “you’d asked me if I was from India and I was just wondering the same about you.”

“No,” the caller said sharply, “I’m *not* from India.”

“OK,” said Sandeep bluntly.

“But of course *you’re* from India,” blasted the caller. “I’m calling tech support, aren’t I? It’s like asking if New Zealanders like sheep.”

“Huh?”

“Is Mitt Romney a Mormon? Is Iran building nuclear weapons? Is Bill Gates rich?”

“Yes,” Sandeep responded feebly, “I’m sure Bill Gates is rich.”

“It was a rhetorical question, you idiot!” the caller barked. “You know, like: Does a bear shit in the woods? Is the Pope Catholic?”

“Wh-whaa?” Sandeep stammered. “Are you asking me if the Pope shits in the woods?”

The caller drew in his breath with a loud hiss. “YOU INFIDEL! How dare you commit blasphemy against the Pope?”

“Sir . . .” There was an ugly pause until Sandeep continued with some hesitation, “Are you having a bad day?”

“YES I AM HAVING A BAD DAY AND YOU JUST MADE IT TEN TIMES WORSE!”

Click. The caller hung up.

Sandeep turned to me with abject misery scrawled on his face. “I have no idea what he was so mad about.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” I said gently and took a swig of coffee while I attempted to frame my response. “Sandeep, in the future, though, please try to keep in mind that it’s not only about *what* you say to the callers, but *how* you say it. When you’re on a call, the senses that the callers use to form an opinion of you and the company are reduced to just one—sound. And because of this, you need to watch your tone of voice.”

“Point taken,” said Sandeep.

“Granted,” I added kindly, “that customer *was* a moron and I understand it was a harmless question on your part, but still, just try to watch your tone next time.”

“Understood,” Sandeep reiterated.

I took another swig of coffee and went on to listen to the next call.

Beep!

“Thanks for calling Lightning Speed Communications, this is Dominique. What can I do for you today?”

“I need help with—” The line went fuzzy, cutting off the caller mid-sentence.

“I’m sorry sir,” said Dominique, “come again.”

“Well I can assure you,” replied the caller in a suggestive voice, “I have not *come* quite yet.”

I made a note to coach Dominique on that later on.

Somewhat flustered, Dominique steered the caller back to business, “Sir, what is the reason for your call?”

“I can’t seem to log in to my account.”

“Are you sure you used the right password?”

“Yes,” affirmed the caller, “I’m sure. I just saw my brother use it.”

“Oh,” said Dominique in some surprise. “Can you tell me the password your brother used?”

“Sure,” said the caller, “it was five asterisk symbols.”

I shook my head in sheer disbelief. In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then he made computer illiterates.

When the call had finally ended, Dominique exclaimed, “What an imbecile!”

“Tell me about it,” I said wearily. “Oh and Dominique, next time please try not to use ‘come again.’ I know that may be what you’re used to, but instead, try using, ‘excuse me’ or ‘pardon me.’ Do you think you can do that?”

Dominique nodded. “Of course.”

“Thank you.” And then I was on to the next call.

Beep!

“Thanks for calling Lightning Speed Communications. This is Becca, what can I do for you today?”

“I need help getting the date and time changed on my PC.”

“I can help you with that, sir. First, I need you to right-click on your desktop.”

“OK,” said the caller.

“Now, do you get a pop-up menu?” asked Becca.

“No.”

“All right, sir. Can you right-click again?” There was a fraction of a pause. “How about right now? Do you see a pop-up menu?”

“Nope,” said the caller, sounding decidedly irritated.

“Hmmm. Can you tell me what you’ve done up to this point?”

“You told me to write ‘click’ and and I did.” The caller made an exasperated sound. “I got out a piece of paper and wrote down ‘click’.”

Becca looked to me with tragic eyes.

I gave her a respectful few seconds of silence so she could gather her thoughts and pull herself together. Then she resumed walking the caller through the steps until she hit another road block.

“I’m stuck!” The caller’s voice was increasingly agitated. “What the hell do I do now?”

“Can you tell me what you see on the screen?”

“It says, ‘Hit ENTER when ready’.”

“So click ENTER.”

“Now?”

“NOW,” said Becca through gritted teeth.

“B-but,” the caller stuttered, “how do I know when it’s ready?”

I really didn't know whether to laugh or weep with frustration. And I wasn't even the one helping the caller. Becca's frayed nerves were almost at the end of their tether and she looked like she was on the verge of throwing in the towel. With shaky hands, she placed the caller on MUTE and turned to me. "I can't do this, Karsynn."

"Yes you can, Becca. Take a deep breath," I coached. "Deep breaths. Happy thoughts. Yes. Breathe out the sad . . . now breathe in the glad."

"Breathe out the sad," she repeated slowly, "breathe in the glad."

"Better?"

"A little."

"Good." I reached over and patted her hand. "You can go back to the caller now."

"Right," said Becca. "I can do this." She gathered all her remaining strength and released the MUTE key. "Sir, just click ENTER whenever *you* are ready."

"Finally," said the caller with a big sigh of relief, "I'm there."

Becca breathed out an even bigger sigh of relief. "Have I answered all of your questions today?"

"No!" the caller snapped. "Can you tell me how I can get to the Program Manager?"

"Of course, sir. Press the CONTROL and ESCAPE keys at the same time. That brings up a task list in the middle of the screen. Then type the letter 'P' and it should bring up the Program Manager."

"What P?" the caller demanded with a shrill of annoyance. "I don't see a P."

"On your keyboard, sir."

The caller sounded ever more confused. "What do you mean?"

"P . . . on your keyboard!"

"You SICK, SICK young woman," scolded the caller, "I'M NOT GOING TO DO THAT!"

Later, after that call had ended, I decided to give Becca a ten minute break from the phones. By the look on her face, she might well have been in danger of committing bloody murder, though given the circumstances, I couldn't really blame her.

And then I was on to the next call. The agent, Siew Mei, was already halfway into the call.

"Sir," said Siew Mei. "Let me repeat your password once again. That's F as

in Fried Chicken, A is in AIDS, B as in Botulism, C as in Cancer and Q as in Cucumber?”

I bit back a smile. Siew Mei could sure benefit from using NATO phonetic alphabet.

After the caller had clicked off, I gave Siew Mei the standard drill. “Write this down: Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, India, Juliet, Kilo, Lima, Mike, November, Oscar, Papa, Quebec, Romeo, Sierra, Tango, Uniform, Victor, Whiskey, X-Ray, Yankee, Zulu.” I spoke slowly and clearly, pausing to enable her to catch up. “You got all that?”

“I think so,” Siew Mei murmured, madly scrawling away in her notepad.

“Good. In the future, that’s the alphabet code you should be using. Oh, and one more thing.”

“Yes?” Siew Mei looked at me anxiously.

“Cucumber starts with a C.”

Chapter Fifteen



Carter had kept to his promise. I became his protégé and started attending meetings in his shadow. And it was great to see Carter in his element. He was like Yo-Yo Ma, playing the clients like a concert cellist on an opening night at Carnegie Hall.

As we were heading to the boardroom, Carter turned to me and said, “One of the best ways to impress a client is to take an hour of his time when he’s expecting you to take two. One of the worst is to take three hours.”

“In other words,” I said, “keep it short.”

“Keep it short and you’re giving your client the gift of time.”

I nodded in what I hoped was an intelligent manner. “So who are we meeting today?”

“Tomohisha Sato from Narita Teleservices,” he said briskly. “He just flew in from Japan.”

“Why are you meeting him?”

“We’d like to buy a stake in his company. “

“Why?”

“We’d like to take Lightning Speed Communications to the next level. Become a global telecom provider. And right now, every telecom provider has increased their appetite for Japan’s telecom pie. Lightning Speed, being one of them. And if this deal goes through, we’ll gain a significant foothold in Japan.”

“No. I meant, why *you*? Why are *you* heading this meeting? Shouldn’t some executive VP of operations be negotiating this deal?”

“While I’m here in South East Asia, it just makes sense for me to handle it.”

“Mmmm.” I frowned to myself. I had the strangest instinct that I had missed something important but I just could not put a finger on what it might have been. But before I had time to prevaricate, Carter opened the door to the boardroom and stepped back with exaggerated courtesy, waving me to go in front of him.

I stepped inside and found several high-ranking executives seated at the

table with their intimidating files in front of them. For the first few minutes, there was a general hubbub of greeting all around and there was much ceremonious handshaking. After the standard formalities, Carter sat down, adjusted his tie, cleared his throat, and then he was off.

Mr. Tomohisha Sato had brought along a translator so Carter spoke slowly and clearly, pausing to enable his interpreter to catch up and accurately translate the conversation.

I sank further back into my seat, painfully aware that I was tossed out of my depth here. As the meeting progressed, I watched Carter with an envy tantamount to awe. He was a masterful negotiator—skilled, focused, professional and confident without being too overpowering. There's a very fine line between confidence and arrogance and Carter never once crossed that line.

He entertained when it was appropriate and became grave when required. He sang to the tunes Mr. Sato wanted to hear, getting him excited about future projects and prospects. Somehow he even managed to make 'reluctant' concessions so Mr. Sato felt like he was walking away with the big prize. It was obvious to all and sundry that Mr. Sato was rice pudding in Carter's hands.

Konnichiwa and Holy Mochi Balls! Was Carter Lockwood a geisha in his previous life? I half-expected him to kneel before Mr. Sato in a silk kimono and pour him a cup of sake.

"What I hope," Carter finished, "is to reach an agreement that is mutually advantageous to both parties." He paused to let that sink in for a moment. "Can I have your commitment?"

A kind of dramatic silence occurred as Carter and Mr. Sato looked at each other to see who was going to respond first. Neither did.

The silence was deafening, but Carter just let it sit there.

Carter didn't restate his case. He didn't lobby. He didn't let Mr. Sato know it was a tough decision. He simply sat there, making a pyramid of his hands, waiting for Mr. Sato to say something.

It was a brilliant and gutsy move. A game of wits, so to speak. Who was going to be the first to lose theirs? I wondered, staying glued to my seat in fascination.

Eventually Mr. Sato began to talk, and he must have talked without pausing for a full fifteen minutes while his interpreter rushed to keep up with him. By the time Mr. Sato was done talking, he had come around. Basically, he had

talked himself into agreeing with much of Carter's position.

Carter met my eyes across the table and regarded me with a complacent grin.

I smiled a wide, relieved smile and wished I could feel that confident in my own abilities.

Suffice it to say, it was a slam dunk.

The deal was sealed.

After the meeting, I hung back while Carter tidied up his files.

"Do you know that Mr. Tomohisha Sato can speak and understand English perfectly well?"

Taken aback, I asked, "Then why did he bring along an interpreter?"

Carter gave a short shrug. "It's common practice for Japanese businessmen. A translator buys them time. It gives them more time to frame their reaction and form a response."

"I see." There was a small silence and then I said, "You sure gave Mr. Sato plenty of time to frame his reaction with all those pregnant pauses."

He smiled wryly. "Silence is a void and people feel an overwhelming need to fill it. For me, it's always served one of two purposes: it either lets the other person talk or it forces the other person to talk."

"And you wanted Mr. Sato to talk," I stated matter-of-factly.

"Of course. I always want the other guy to talk because eventually he may say what I want to hear."

"Hmmm." I stared into space with a still expression on my face.

"Interesting . . ."

In the meantime, Carter was already striding out of the boardroom at breakneck speed. I scrambled to my feet, bolted out the door and belted down the hallway. Huffing and puffing, I soon caught up to him. "Must you always walk so fast?"

Carter said with a certain amount of irritation, "Must you always walk so slow?"

"So . . ." I let out a puff of air and stated the blindingly obvious, "Silence is your weapon."

"It is. It's also my defense. When I remain silent, it allows me to collect my thoughts and that lessens my chances of saying a lot more than I need to, mean to, or want to."

"I see," I said needlessly to buy some precious thinking seconds. "But what

if Mr. Sato had said *no*?”

“If people have a need to say *no*, let them,” Carter said simply. “A few well-placed *no*’s can create the right environment for a *yes*.”

I raised my eyebrows and nodded to register immense respect for all this information. “So Carter . . .”

“Yeah?”

I fixed him with a pointed look. “Can I have a pay raise?”

“No.” His refusal was automatic.

“That’s OK.” I smiled sweetly. “I’ll just keep on asking and someday you might just say yes. So . . .” I cleared my throat and adopted a more serious tone. “Can I have a pay raise?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“No.”

I fluttered my eyelids at him. “Pretty please with sugar on top?”

He stayed silent.

“Pretty please with sugar on top and a cherry? And a dollop of cream?”

He still said nothing.

I kept on adding more and more toppings—Reese’s Pieces crumbles, Oreo crumbles, chocolate sprinkles, coconut flakes, nuts, sour gummy worms, mini gummy bears, generally making a total nuisance of myself.

Carter looked pained. “Karsynn?” he said at last.

“Yeah?”

“Please stop talking.”

“OK.” I grinned.

“Thank you,” said Carter with a slight inflection in his voice that indicated that he might have in fact enjoyed our playful banter.

Chapter Sixteen



I stood up, stretching my arms wide to ease my aching back.

I'd spent the last month in a frantic whirl, training the staff, developing schedules, tracking the schedules, controlling quality, creating a budget, sticking to the budget, setting up business liaisons with the software and hardware vendors, estimating all the costs involved with the project, estimating the time involved to complete the project, managing my team, creating processes for my team to follow, ensuring that everyone was working at their full potential. . . . all this and more, amongst other things.

The only constant was change. I learned to be flexible and I learned to delegate tasks and accomplish objectives through Truong and Inge—my A Team.

Really. I don't know what I would have done without them. The whole dynamic of this project percolated with enthusiasm because of Truong and Inge.

And Carter.

He was my SME (Subject Matter Expert) and whenever I'd needed his guidance, expertise and know-how, he was there for me. Whenever things went wrong, he was also there for me. And whenever something went right, I felt a compulsion to share my news with him.

Speaking of Carter, Truong and Inge . . . where were they?

I glanced furtively around. I hadn't seen them since this morning's staff meeting, which was rather peculiar.

Then I heard voices. Singing voices.

"Happy Birthday to you, CHA-CHA-CHA! Happy Birthday to you, CHA-CHA-CHA! Happy Birthday dear Karsynn, CHA-CHA-CHA! Happy Birthday to youuuu."

Before I could utter a big, "Thank you," I was ceremoniously cut off by a final, "CHA-CHA-CHA!"

"Aww guys," I gushed. "I can't believe you got me a cake."

"He did," Truong rushed excitedly, shoving Carter forward. "It was Carter's idea!"

I glanced at Carter in surprise, slightly caught off guard. Usually, (actually, *always*), I was the person in charge of coordinating birthday “fun.” But when my birthday rolled around, no one ever did anything. Somehow it never occurred to anyone that someone had to actually make the birthday happen. Last year, my birthday was a complete letdown. Everyone just stared at each other like confused armadillos, wondering where the cake and card had come from every other time there’d been a birthday at the office.

Carter was staring intently at me, looking a little sheepish.

With dancing eyes, I mouthed, “Thank you.”

His face broke into a disarming grin. “My pleasure.”

From then on, it became a huge bowl of awkward sauce.

Over fifty corporate drones crowded around me, holding on to their paper plates and plastic forks, all looking at me expectantly.

“Um . . .” I smiled inanely. “I guess I’ll cut the cake now.”

I had barely cut the first slice when someone shouted, “WHOA! That’s way too big!”

“Yeah!” Another person yelled, “I only want HALF that amount.”

Sheesh. It’s my birthday. Why are they criticizing me for cutting my own birthday cake? Besides, I shouldn’t have to cut the cake. Who the heck came up with that idea? The Cake Boss?

Hullo! The birthday girl shouldn’t be expected to do the grunt work.

Then I overheard someone say, “Who is she? The birthday girl?”

And the response was, “I don’t know. I’m just here to eat cake.”

Truong craned forward and whispered, “Why is a birthday cake the only food you can blow on and spit on and everybody still rushes to get a piece?”

I really had no idea.

I whispered back, “I’ve never seen some of these people in my life. Where did they all come from?”

“Hell if I know.” Truong snickered.

Then it became even more uncomfortable when people I didn’t know started coming up to me to wish me happy birthday and engage me in the smallest of small talk.

“Hi! Happy Birthday.”

“Thank you,” I said politely.

Uncomfortable pause.

“Delicious cake, by the way.”

I smiled at this, not quite knowing what to say in response.

The look on his face was unbearable as he struggled to pretend he was grateful.

Another uncomfortable pause.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Kars, but don’t worry about it. I don’t believe I’ve ever gave it to you.”

And on and on it went. My eyes strayed restlessly around the room until they found Carter. He was standing at the far end of the room, watching me. As our eyes locked, we shared a small, private grin.

Silently, I willed him to rescue me.

He must have read my mind because he cut purposefully across the floor and in several long strides, covered the distance between us.

“Hi again,” he said, standing before me.

“Hi.”

“Want to go get some fresh air?”

“Yes. I’d love that.”

As we threaded our way out of the maze of cubicles, we passed by several agents face down in their keyboards.

We exchanged knowing glances and exclaimed, “Cake coma!”

“It’s such a nice day,” I remarked casually as we started down a well-worn path that curved into a lush garden. We found ourselves surrounded by hibiscus in bloom, hanging orchids and beds of bougainvilleas. The air was heavy with humidity and the heady scent of jasmine.

“It is,” said Carter.

Weeks had passed, and Carter and I had somehow relaxed in each other’s company. I was beginning to think that perhaps for once everything was going right. We were getting along. The job was working out great. I no longer measured the time I spent at work. I enjoyed sinking my teeth into this project, performing tasks that produced tangible results. The entire center was pulsing with potential and running efficiently, due in part because of me.

And Carter, Truong and Inge of course.

“You’ve changed,” I said at last.

Carter looked at me with interest. “How so?”

“You’re more relaxed,” I said, tucking some loose strands of hair behind my ear. “Not so uptight, not scowling as much.”

Our eyes met and I felt a frisson of awareness.

Weird. This peculiar self-consciousness that I felt with Carter, it threw me off my stride. I was accustomed to being in charge of my emotions. But with him . . .

“I think it’s this island,” he said by way of explanation. “And maybe it’s you.”

“Me?” I felt the color rising to my cheeks.

“You. You’ve made my job really easy.”

“Oh.” My heart plummeted.

“I like the work you’ve done with the team. With this center. With the entire project. Really Kars, you’ve got this whole place running like a well-oiled machine.”

“Thanks,” I replied, grateful for the recognition. I can’t explain it, but I felt sensitive to his opinion of me.

By now the sun was setting and our shadows were lengthening. Carter stopped mid-stride and gave me a look that did strange things to my equilibrium. “You’ve changed too, Kars.”

“Oh yeah?” I said carefully.

“You seem more,” he paused, seemingly to search for the word, “happy.”

“I am,” I said, lifting my head to the salty breeze. When I turned back to face Carter, he was smiling at me.

“What?” I found myself laughing. “Why are you staring at me?”

“You look gorgeous today.”

Me? Gorgeous?

Carter had called me gorgeous?

I eyed him severely for signs of insincerity. I found none.

“Thanks,” I said, shoving him playfully in the arm. “I thought I was relegated to that corner of the universe occupied by hermaphrodites and black lunged cows.”

“Oh . . . that.” One of his quick smiles lit his face. “Well I’m sorry I ever called you that. I was only trying to rile you up.”

“Why?”

He gave me a long and lingering look. “I think you’re very attractive when you’re angry.”

My heart did an ungainly flip-flop. “Um . . . apology accepted, then.”

We fell into a convivial silence as we paraded decorously around the gravel path. I found myself studying a yellow butterfly that was flitting about me. It met up with another and they became a team, flying in tandem.

Sort of like me and Carter, I thought.

“So, any plans this weekend?”

“Work,” he replied vaguely. “I’m always working.”

Apparently. He was at the office all the hours God gave him.

“And what about you?” he asked.

“Anything *but* work.”

He looked at me in some surprise. “I thought you enjoy what you do.”

“I do. Work may be my world but it’s not my life. And by the way, when was the last time you went out with friends?”

His mouth curled slightly. “When I was eighteen.”

“Carter!” I chided. “What’s wrong with you?”

“All right, I can change that.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Starting right now.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.” His eyes were fixed on my face, seemingly awaiting reaction. Butterflies started up in my stomach and I nodded to show that I understood. “Karsynn?” he said at last.

“Carter?” I grinned, sensing his awkwardness. And mine.

“I was wondering,” he said hesitantly, “would you like to go out with me sometime?”

“Erm . . .” I could actually feel my cheeks growing hot. “OK.”

“How about tonight?”

“Sure,” I said in a voice that didn’t quite sound as though it came from me.

“Dinner at my place? I make some mean Mexican food.”

How did he know? I’ve missed Mexican food so much that I’d fall into paroxysms of delight at the mere sight of a taco stand.

“Sounds good.”

“Stop by my room at seven?”

“Seven’s perfect.”

Later, after Carter had left to attend another meeting, I stood there for a moment, scattering my thoughts to the four winds of heaven, wondering if this dinner invitation meant more to the both of us than was superficially apparent.

Chapter Seventeen



“You do make a mean tortilla soup.”

“Thank you.” Carter turned slowly to me and smiled. We were sitting a fraction apart on the wicker sofa. “I’ve honed it to perfection.”

I laughed. “Never one for false modesty.”

All in all, dinner with Carter had gone rather well. We immediately fell into conversation, chatting idly about nothing in particular and laughing about silly things. Now, after a satisfying meal, we had retired to the living room and the conversation was still flowing like wine.

“I’ve been dying for some Mexican food. Back home, I eat some form of Mexican food at least once a week.”

Carter leaned back on the sofa, folding his arms behind his head. “For me, it’s at least three times a week.”

I curled my feet up under me and sighed. “Why doesn’t good Mexican food exist in Asia?”

“As every *carne* connoisseur knows, the further you get from Mexico, the lamer the tortillas. That’s why I brought my dry spices all the way from home.”

“Well you sure know your ingredients, Señor Carter.”

He nodded sagely. “As every good cook should.”

I looked at him with interest. “How come you’re so good at cooking Mexican food?”

“My grandmother was from Mexico and I learned from the best.”

“Can you speak any Spanish?”

“Of course,” he said, brightening. Then he lowered his voice and intoned, “*Para continuar en español, oprime numero dos.*”

I started giggling. “Even I know that one! ‘To continue in Spanish, press two.’ I sometimes hear that in my sleep.”

Carter nodded briefly in acknowledgment. “It’s always a manly voice, too.”

“Yep,” I agreed in heartfelt tones. “Always a manly voice . . . with a deep, rich baritone.”

“Like the voice of God?”

“Nah!” I pooh-poohed. “More like a telenovela actor.”

“I suppose,” he said with a quirk of his lips.

I leaned back, resting my head against the plush cushions. “Besides cooking Mexican meals and working, what else do you do during your spare time?”

“Read. I enjoy reading. And before I forget—” He stood up abruptly and cut across the bamboo floors. I kept my eyes focused on his retreating back; he disappeared into his bedroom and emerged seconds later holding a thick hardcover book. “I’ve been meaning to give you this,” he said, pressing the book into my hand.

I sat forward and read the title aloud, “*The World is Flat.*”

He stood awkwardly and raked a hand through his hair. “I hope you’ll read it.”

Leafing through the pages, I quickly surmised it was an Economics textbook of some sort. I feigned enthusiasm and lied, “Of course I’ll read it.”

Carter sat back down on the sofa and said, “Good.”

Sensing a lull in conversation, I felt compelled to fill the silence and launched into a fairly long soliloquy about some ideas I had for work.

Carter quietly interrupted, “Let’s not talk about work.”

“OK.” It came out like a frog’s croak.

He was studying me, his dark eyes intent and laden with desire.

My eyes dropped to take in that handsome curve of his mouth. “So . . .” I said, amazed that my voice was coming out properly.

“So . . .” His words seemed to hang in the air, his eyes momentarily flickering to my lips and then back to my eyes.

Hardly knowing where to look anymore, I dropped my eyes and began to study the grains in the bamboo floor with close attention. I didn’t dare look up in case he read my every desire in my face. The air grew electric and the room seemed to have shrunk. Carter was imposing no matter when I saw him, but in his little apartment, his size and magnetism were overwhelming.

This is silly. I can’t be staring at the bamboo floor all night.

I forced myself to look up and meet his eyes. My breath caught in a tiny gasp. Those deep eyes of his held the promise of seduction on a voluptuous four-poster bed with a sheer canopy, complete with Egyptian satin sheets in the middle of a deserted beach, under the moonlight with gentle waves lapping quietly against the shore.

Involuntarily, my hands fluttered up and I found myself straightening Carter’s shirt collar with shaky fingers.

He caught one of my wrists. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"I think," I muttered a bit unevenly, gently brushing my fingernails against the front of his pants, "this is a bad idea. A very, very bad idea."

"A bad idea," he echoed a bit raggedly, linking his hands around the small of my back, pulling my hips toward him. I fell onto his lap and straddled him, my arms wrapped around his neck. We kissed, long, hard and passionately, our tongues gently interlocking, our breaths hot and moist. I threaded my fingers into his hair, stroking the back of his neck where the short hairs grew.

Carter stroked me through the thin cotton material of my shirt, sliding slowly upward then downward, touching me everywhere. He deepened his kiss, his lips molding to mine, tasting, caressing. Then he drew back reluctantly and looked at me intently. "Are you sure?"

I spoke almost inaudibly, "Yes."

Carter worked on the small buttons on my shirt until it fell open to reveal my lacy black bra. He reached out and cupped my breasts. Slowly, he dipped his head and lapped my hardened nipple through the lace, suckling, teasing, drawing it deeper and deeper into his mouth.

I let my eyelids drift shut, savoring the feel of his tongue swirling and sucking, drinking in my shudders. My fingernails dug into his shoulders as he lavished the same attention on my other breast. I was drowning in need, my moistened nipple rasping against the lace. "Carter," a whispered breath slipped past my lips.

His hands were all over my bare skin, skimming my stomach, my rib cage, my thighs, running down my back, cupping my bottom. Then I felt his fingers hook into the elastic at my waist, tugging my skirt until I was stripped down to the bare essentials. In short, I was naked all except for three lacy triangles covering my breasts and my lady bits.

Carter sat back and stared, his eyes roaming all over me, drinking me in. It wasn't fair. I was as naked as a jaybird, well . . . a jaybird in trashy lingerie, and Carter still had all his clothes on.

So not fair.

I shifted slightly, feeling suddenly bashful.

Gosh. It's a good thing I'd got a Brazilian wax. Just last week my lower lady bits were so obscured by hair that it had resembled Chewbacca.

Carter shifted too and knelt before me, holding my gaze as he spread my thighs apart. "Open your eyes, Kars. Watch me. Watch me make love to you."

I did. It was hot and sexy, though unwillingly, I found myself giggling. The lazy sweep of his hooded eyes alighted on my face. “Don’t ruin the moment, Kars.”

I nodded fervently and bit my lips, trying hard to keep a straight face. Conjuring sensational powers of self control, I managed to keep obediently silent for all of two minutes when I heard Carter give an audible sigh, then, “You’re about to ruin the moment, aren’t you?”

I shook my head vehemently, fighting for control.

I tried to keep it together. Really, I did.

But I was fully incapable of such self restraint. Barely a second later, I burst into a spasm of giggles. Eventually, I regained enough control to say, “I’m so sorry, Carter, but I have to close my eyes.”

Then I did.

Carter was not a man who believed in rushing his pleasures. He was sweet and tender, and he took his time with me. The things he did . . . bits of me were quivering that I had never known could quiver.

Erm . . . I’ll stop there. Any more would be X-rated.

Whoo! I exhaled. What a great way to combine business with pleasure.

Sated, I nestled my head under Carter’s chin, feeling warm and safe in his arms, fully secluded from the outside world.

Hmmm. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that my boobs seemed to have gotten bigger in the last hour. Is that possible? From all that boob massaging?

Should I have Carter confirm this?

Nah. It was probably the boob fairy. She still visits me from time to time . . . ever since the tooth fairy ditched me.

Quietly, Carter asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I said stiffly.

“No really,” he pressed, “tell me.”

I quickly turned my thoughts to weightier issues. “Oh you know,” I murmured airily, “this and that.”

He drew me closer and I wriggled deeper into his arms. His shoulder felt solid and curved perfectly to fit my cheek. Ever so gently, he started stroking my hair. “Karsynn . . .”

“Mmmmm . . .” I smiled, bliss skipping through my veins.

“I really like you, but—” he broke off.

The smile slowly faded from my face.

“I don’t think we should do this again. I think we should wait.”

A knife to the heart. I nodded, not feeling capable of saying anything else.

Carter smoothed his hand down my spine. “We should wait until our working situation is different.”

I swallowed hard, pushing against the lump that was blocking my throat.

“Of course,” I heard myself say, “I never expected anything more than this.”

“Karsynn,” he said disparagingly, “this meant more to me than just a one-night stand.”

“Uh huh,” I said coolly, throwing back the covers and slipping out of bed. Realizing I was stark naked, I searched around on the floor for my clothes and headed to the bathroom to get dressed.

“Karsynn!” he called after me.

Muttering furiously to myself, I slammed the bathroom door shut and closed my eyes, feeling perilously close to tears. God. I’m such an idiot.

Afterward, fully dressed, I muttered a quick good-bye. “Don’t bother getting up,” I said in a rush, “I’ll see myself out.”

Clicking the door into place, I made the walk of shame back to my room with my heels in my hands and smudged eyeliner under my eyes, feeling decidedly empty.

My shoulder angel, the more sensible voice that I tend not to listen to very often because her advice is so annoying, told me I was a fool and a harlot.

Shame, shame, shame on me!

My shoulder devil, the not-so-sensible voice inside me told me not to worry. The sex was good and I had a great time. There was nothing to be ashamed of. A walk of shame was shameful only if I felt ashamed about it.

In the end, my shoulder devil effectively silenced my shoulder angel by slapping duct tape over her mouth.

Lifting my chin up, I smiled radiantly and walked down the corridor with my head held high, turning my walk of shame into a stride of pride.

Chapter Eighteen



Oy vey! I was sweating like Charlie Sheen in a brothel. And I seriously needed to take another shower. I was drowning in this humidity!

Drowning!

Bzzz. Bzzz. Bzzz. Damn it. It was those pesky mosquitoes again. They refused to leave me alone. Why weren't they drowning in this humidity, too? Like I was?

I fell back against the mattress and stared at the bloodsuckers buzzing about me. I imagined they probably wore snorkels, goggles, wetsuits and flippers just to stay alive in this humidity.

Hell, I might even be sprouting gills myself.

I don't think I could ever get used to this humidity, not even after staying here for two months.

TWO MONTHS! I sat bolt upright in my bed with a gasp. I've been here two full months! I was actually truly surprised by this. The hours, the days, the months just sped between my fingers. Carter and I never slept together after that fateful night. Nope. There was no more friction under the sheets, though there was plenty of friction at work. The sexual tension was almost palpable.

People must have been able to sense it at meetings. If we weren't sitting next to each other, we were positioned to be able to communicate nonverbally. To me, it seemed that if people didn't know that something was going on between us, they just weren't paying attention.

But Truong was paying attention. Last week, he'd finally confronted me. "Is something going on with you and Carter?"

Though I vehemently denied, Truong saw right through me. "You can't fool me," he said. "When two people start communicating more with their eyes than their words, they're probably sleeping together."

Truong was almost right. Something *was* going on between me and Carter, but I didn't know what it was. We weren't dating, we weren't having sex . . . we just worked together.

But I couldn't deny the ever-building sexual tension between us. It was

intense. It didn't seem like a passing fling. Passing flings I knew how to handle only too well. But Carter Lockwood was new territory. Was this an emotional affair? I don't know. But whatever it was, I didn't have the option to walk away from it because I worked with him everyday.

Nonetheless, we tried to maintain a level of detachment and kept things strictly professional at the office. Outside of the office, it was a slightly different story. We took advantage of the little private moments we could find and it was during those moments that Carter was warm and friendly, flirty even. The change in Carter's personality had me totally unnerved. And I came to realize that he was a mass of contradictions, stern and uptight, but also tender and a lot more laid back than he let anyone see.

Bzzz. Bzzz. Bzzz. A mosquito buzzed about, jolting me out of my reverie.

SMACK! I swatted it with my open palm and watched the blood splatter on my arm. "Hah! Take that you Monsanto mosquito!"

Last week, Malaysian officials had released thousands of genetically modified mosquitoes into the wild in an attempt to curb the spread of dengue fever. These 'Frankensuckers' were sterile male *Aedes* mosquitoes. Since only female *Aedes* mosquitoes spread dengue fever, the hope was that when these female mosquitoes mated with the impotent males, they wouldn't produce any viable offspring, thereby curtailing the entire mosquito population.

To me, it sounded like the beginning of a sci-fi horror story. Once the genie was out of the bottle, it wasn't going back in.

Humph. How symbolic. Once Carter and I had crossed that line, there was no going back either.

Eventually, I rolled out of bed and surveyed my packing with a dismal air. In a way I was grateful I was leaving in just three days. Leaving this humidity, leaving these mutant mosquitoes, leaving memories of Carter . . .

Carter again!

He seemed to be able to slip effortlessly into my head.

I needed some physical distance from him. Back in the States, we wouldn't be living in such close quarters. Here, his room was eight doors down the corridor from mine. Not a good thing.

I dragged my thoughts from all things Carter and padded to the window. I threw back the curtains and stared out at the ocean, watching the white ripple rising and disappearing into the even surface of the water. A child sat playing with sea shells on the sandy beach that seemed to stretch on for miles and

miles.

Suddenly, my iPhone beeped and I fished it out of my back pocket. It was a text from Truong.

Did you just butt dial me?

I texted back:

Maybe . . .

Seconds later, my phone beeped with another text.

I'm on the beach with Inge. Come join us.

I texted back:

You are? I'm staring out my window.

Truong texted back:

Are you way hung us?

I texted:

How can I be way hung when I don't even have a ding dong?

Truong texted back:

Oops! My bad! My phone keeps auto-correcting watching to way hung.

I texted back:

LOL. That's probably 'cause you're always asking men if they're way hung.

Truong texted back:

True. Anyway, come down to the beach. Now.

I texted:

I'll be there in twenty.

Truong texted:

Oh, and invite your boyfriend!

I texted back:

I don't have a boyfriend.

He texted:

Just do it. I'd like to know if Carter is way hung.

I twisted my lips. I knew I shouldn't. I wanted to, *needed* to keep an emotional distance from Carter. Still, I found myself thumbing in a text:

Me, Truong and Inge will be laying on the beach. Care to join us?

Seconds later, my iPhone beeped. Carter had texted back:

Public promiscuity is not really my thing.

I texted back:

Huh???

Carter texted back:

You spend your time lying, not laying, on the beach. Unless you're engaged in sexual activity and are, in the vernacular, laying someone on the beach.

Before I could form a quick comeback, my iPhone beeped once more. I read Carter's text.

If you see something lying on the ground, it is just resting there. But if you see something laying on the ground, it must be doing something else, such as laying eggs. Chickens lay, people lie. Unless you're a chicken. Chickens do lay eggs.

I pressed my iPhone against my forehead in silent reprimand, realizing the flirtatious implication of my words. Upon gathering myself, I texted back:

Of course I know chickens lay eggs. And no, I do not wish to be laid by you. I'd rather be stuck on an island with Glen Beck. And since when have you become the Grammar Police?

My phone beeped.

Since you proposed to have sex on the beach with me. Here's another example of the correct use of the word lay: You have to lie down for me to lay you.

I was slightly shocked by Carter's flirtation with impropriety. Though I knew perfectly well that I should keep things professional, I was perfectly incapable of such self-discipline. Humph. He thought he was so clever. Well I'd show him. I texted back:

You can be on top 'cause I don't wanna get sunburnt.

For a while, there were no texts from Carter.

Shit! Did he think I was actually serious?

Just in case he was harboring any delusions along those lines, I swiftly thumbed in another text:

JUST JOKING! I DO NOT WISH TO LIE WITH YOU OR GET LAID BY YOU. PERIOD.

Carter texted back:

See you at the beach.

Smiling, I texted:

K.

As I was tugging on my bathing suit, mosquitoes continued swarming around me. I slapped my arm, slaughtering two Frankenbugs in the process. Then I stood in front of the full length mirror, scrutinizing my buttressed thighs.

Tsh-tsh, Kars. It's time you did some Brazilian Butt Lift exercises.

Wait a minute! I froze. What are those massive bumps protruding from my forehead? Craning forward, I angled my face under the light to get a better view.

Mosquito bites, I surmised. Hmm. They must have feasted on me all night.

"Holy Guacamole!" I muttered under my breath as I continued examining my face in the mirror. Those mosquito bites looked like pimples the size of

Guatemala!

I whipped out my iPhone and texted Truong:

Please don't make fun of me. I look like I have three enormous nipples!!

I went pale with shock when Carter texted back:

Don't worry about your third nipple. I say milk it for all it's worth.

After taking several long, deep breaths, I gathered my wits and texted back:

FYI, that text was meant for Truong. Not you. And my iPhone auto-corrected pimple to nipple. I HATE THIS AUTO-CORRECT FUNCTION! Anyway, I'll be at the beach with Truong and Inge. See you there. Or not. I don't care.

I kicked off my flip flops, clutched my sarong and walked down the beach, my bare feet prickling under the sun-warmed sand.

Suddenly, I heard someone yell, "HEY ACNE!"

Shielding my eyes against the pallid glare of the sun, I spotted Truong and Inge, sun-bathing in the nude. I made my way over to the nudists and dumped my towel and beach bag at my feet. "And by the way Truong, it's not acne! It's mosquito bites!"

The acid annoyance in my voice was completely lost on Truong. "They look like acne to me," he said, brushing me off as though I was some pesky mosquito.

I pinned my hair up in an artfully messy bun. "Nude, Truong? Really?"

"What?" he said mildly, "I'm just communing with Mother Nature. And besides, I'm not fully nude."

True. Truong had a straw hat covering his meat puppet.

I arranged myself on my oversized beach towel. "You too, Inge? Topless?"

"Men are allowed to go topless, why not women?" She lifted her dark sunglasses and perched them atop her head. "Anyway, it's pretty common in Europe. Why don't you try it?"

"Me?" My eyes widened. "Nah! I just don't feel comfortable."

"You're not comfortable in your own skin?"

I squirted out a glob of sunblock. "I'm comfortable with who I am, but I'm not really comfortable exposing my body."

"Look!" Truong began gesturing wildly. "HUBBA! HUBBA!"

Following the direction of his dazzled gaze, I spotted Carter walking along the shore, clad in nothing but a mankini. They were black, snug and quite exquisite.

HUBBA, HUBBA indeed.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Truong's straw hat was lifting higher and higher. He turned a deep shade of amber and placed a hand over his hat in a weak attempt to still his throbbing gristle. "A gentleman always lifts his hat," he said blithely.

I shook my head and slathered sun block all over my arms. "Hey, Inge, don't you want to cover up your Topless Towers of Illium?"

"Not really," she replied with palpable lack of interest. "Why don't you shoo Carter away? I'd like to sunbathe topless without him hovering by my side."

"Yeah," Truong chimed in. "Go shoo him away."

"Shoo Carter away?" My voice pitched higher. "What do you think he is? A fly? And what do you think I look like? A Shoo Fly?"

"Well . . ." Truong hedged.

Humph. I frowned to myself. That was a bit rich coming from someone with a straw hat on his peen. I was half expecting his peen to spring to life, doing its best impression of Usher.

"Kars," said Truong dryly.

"What?"

"Go!" he ordered severely. "At whatever cost, keep Carter away from us."

"All right, all right. I'm going." I rose to my feet, grumbling, "I can clearly see I'm not wanted here."

I padded down to the beach, leaving the nudist colony behind.

Carter was walking close to the water's edge. He looked weary, almost sad, like he had the fate of the whole world resting on his shoulders.

I lengthened my stride and fell into step beside him. "Hi."

"Hi." His face relaxed into a smile and he tactfully avoided staring at the massive red bumps decorating my forehead.

We stopped walking and stood facing the vast and open ocean in companionable silence, letting the sea foam surge across our toes. For a while, we watched the tiny, frothy bubbles pocket and curdle under our feet.

Eventually, I broke the silence. "You seem preoccupied. Care to share what's on your mind?"

"No." His voice caught in a husky rasp.

“Aw, c’mon.” I shoved him playfully on the arm. “What gives? You seemed OK when you were texting me just minutes ago.”

“That was before I got the call.”

“What call?”

Carter stared rigidly ahead with a faraway look in his eyes.

I lifted my head to the breeze and tried to look semi-attractive, which was almost impossible. The wind was blowing and my hair was flying all over the place. “I’ve hardly seen you at work all week,” I said, pulling chunks of errant hair out of my mouth. “Where have you been?”

“Meetings,” said Carter absently. “Conference calls. Negotiating the new contract.”

“Huh?” I stared at him opened mouthed, wondering if I’d heard right.

“What new contract?” I asked with a twinge of alarm.

There was an excruciating pause, a silence bordering on awkward. I looked at him sideways in an effort to gauge exactly what was on his mind but his face betrayed no emotion.

Eventually, Carter began in a hollow voice, “Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn’t matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle . . . when the sun comes up, you’d better be running.”

Huh? Why in Ghana was he going on about lions and gazelles?

“Um, Carter . . .” I stared at him apprehensively. “I think you’ve been in the sun too long.”

“I’m fine.” There was an uncomfortable hard edge to his voice as he said this. “That was from the book I gave you. Have you read it yet?”

I shook my head sheepishly. “It’s not really my kind of book. I mostly read chick lit, lad lit and hen lit. Oh,” I added airily, “I also read *People* and *US Weekly*. But not *The National Enquirer*.”

Carter stood perfectly still and stared at me for a minute without saying anything.

I folded my arms defensively and looked him in the eye. “What?”

He gave me a strange look, as if he were trying to determine if I was a Sunni or a Shiite. I was neither, obviously. Then he said slowly, “Do you understand what I was trying to say?”

My brain started curling at the edges. Slowly. Very slowly, it all started to unravel. My gut told me it had something to do with the ‘new contract’ he’d

let slip earlier on.

Were we being bought out by a new company? Outsourced? Both?

“So,” Carter continued, “who do you think is the lion?”

“India. Philippines. China . . . any country that takes jobs away from Americans. They’re all hungry lions. Am I right?”

Carter gave an imperceptible nod.

I paused, giving my thoughts a chance to catch up. “And what about Malaysia? Would you consider it a lion, too? A threat to our survival?”

“My point is,” said Carter, deflecting my question, “we are no longer gazelles. We are not even zebras or antelopes. We’ve become slow and starving elephants.”

“But even if the elephant is thin, he is still the lord of the jungle. He is the largest beast in the animal kingdom.”

“The arrogance of Americans!” he said almost savagely. “An elephant that is stuck in the mud will tear down the tree with it.”

“Enough.” I heard myself sounding normal, clinging to the sound of normal. “Please. Enough talk about lions, gazelles, zebras, antelopes and elephants. Be straight with me, Carter. What’s going on?”

Once again, silence stretched and grew thin.

Carter’s face took on a depressingly shuttered look. At long last he said, “I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to discuss it. Any of it.”

“Why not?”

“I’m sorry.” He ran a hand through his wind ruffled hair. “I’ve already said too much. Please, Kars, I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone.”

“Tell anyone what exactly?”

He hedged and seemed on the verge of saying more, but he didn’t. Instead, he took a long last look at me before he turned and walked back up the beach.

I stood there paralyzed, watching his retreating figure, thinking, what the hell just happened?

There was a brief outburst of swearing. “Iginniarfik! Qassiarsuk! Oqaatsut! Nutaarmiut! Kangerluk!” I spat.

Oh wait! Why was I ranting off Greenlandic places like some demented Eskimo?

Earth to Kars. You’re not at work!

Fuck! FUCK! FARRRRK!

Whatever it was, I had a nagging suspicion it wasn’t good.

Chapter Nineteen



The nagging unease continued to plague me for days, even after we had returned home. My need to speak to Carter about my concerns grew increasingly uncomfortable. He hadn't volunteered any further information about the alleged 'new contract' since that fateful day on the beach, and I couldn't bring myself to confront him about it. Perhaps I was afraid of what he might say. And the longer I left it, the harder it got. Now I had this sensation of having gone too far out to sea and lost the sight of the shore.

I stopped at my cubicle and just stood there for a moment, my mind a tired blank. The crude light that fell from the fluorescent bulbs was already bringing on a splitting headache. Gosh. Why was it always so bright in here? I closed my eyes, waiting for the throbbing to subside. Seconds later, I opened my eyes and spotted the menacingly large folder of work sitting in the middle of my desk.

With a deep sigh, I sat heavily down and set to work. From the corner of my eye, I dimly registered Kelly Morehouse, a fellow supervisor, standing by my cubicle. Usually, I was only too willing to be distracted, but seeing my head bent over the keyboard, Kelly respected my unwritten agency protocol and tiptoed past me with exaggerated care.

But the peace and quiet didn't last for long.

"Your birth certificate is an apology from the condom factory!" yelled Nina Romero.

"How dare you!" Jenn Carley fired back, "Well, you know what? You must have been born on a freeway because that's where accidents happen!"

They were hissing and clawing like a pair of angry felines.

Welcome back to reality. The ultra glamorous job of a call center supervisor.

"Girls! Girls!" I stepped right into the kerfuffle. "Stop all this yelling! Please. I just got off the plane yesterday and I really don't need this right now. If you have a problem, please log out of the phones and come see me at my desk."

Grudgingly, Jenn and Nina withdrew their talons and trudged over to my

cubicle.

“So . . .” My gaze went from Jenn to Nina. “What seems to be the issue here?”

Nina pointed an accusing finger at Jenn. “She stole one of my accounts! It was a big account, too! A 1-800 Database Access Service for Helm’s new medical center.”

“No I didn’t!” Jenn countered, “When the client called back, he wanted *my* assistance. I offered to transfer him to you, but he simply refused to deal with you! He said he preferred my tone of voice.”

“I was perfectly polite,” Nina said haughtily.

“Not according to the client. And while we’re here, I’d like to make a formal complaint.” Jenn pointed one perfectly manicured finger at Nina. “I’m allergic to her scent! She smells like a scratch and sniff snicker!”

“My perfume is called *Sage Cucumber*,” Nina remarked loftily, “and it’s from Bath and Body Works.”

“Who cares where it’s from.” Jenn stared at Nina as if she were something particularly noxious. “It gives me migraines and it makes me nauseous! My throat is closing up now.” Jenn made a retching sound. “See! I can hardly breathe when I’m around you!”

I sighed. One person’s scent was another person’s headache.

“Well,” Nina countered, “I should have a right to wear my perfume to work.”

“And I should have a right to be able to breathe at work!” Jenn shot back. Then all eyes were upon me.

Jenn spoke up first, “Does Nina’s right to wear smelly perfume surpass my right to breathe? I THINK NOT!”

Nina quickly added, “If people can’t wear perfume and deodorant, there’s going to be lots of body odor at work.”

“Well,” I pointed out quite reasonably, “there’s always unscented deodorant.” There was an uncomfortable silence. “Or . . . I could always move your desks.”

“I’M NOT MOVING DESKS,” Jenn snapped.

Nina hissed, “I’M NOT MOVING DESKS EITHER. OVER MY DEAD BODY!”

Was that a gurgling noise from my brain?

It must have been. At this point, I was drowning in the Pacific Ocean.

My first reaction was to do nothing. But then Jenn could sue the company,

citing her inability to work properly under pungent conditions.

My second reaction was to tell Nina that she couldn't wear her perfume to work, but then she could file a law-suit saying that I had violated her civil liberties.

After carefully weighing up the odds, I came to a decision.

"OK," I said firmly, "like it or not, the two of you are moving desks."

"THE HELL WE ARE!" Jenn and Nina wheeled around and stormed off in a huff.

Sheesh. The inmates were clearly running the asylum.

With a deep sigh, I worked in obedient silence for all of two minutes when my concentration was temporarily waylaid by Ryan. He was talking loudly on his cell phone as if the whole world was his phone booth.

"Oh hewwo there babeee. Say hewwo to Daddy." Ryan's voice pitched higher. "Daddy bear wuvs you, Cindy boo. Does Cindy boo wuv Daddy bear too?" Pause, followed by a shrill peal of laughter. "Oh, I know you do. Are you weady for sweepy weepy time, pwincess? Nighty, nighty now. Smoochey woochey. What? You hungwee? Mew too. You love mew? Well boo boo I love mew too pwincess. Mew mew."

A backside parked itself on my desk and a familiar voice said, "What's with Ryan and all the mewing? Is this the Call Center Pussy Convention or something?"

I leaned back in my swivel chair and linked my hands behind my head. "Hey, Truong."

"Hey!" He jerked his head. "So what's up with Ryan?"

I shrugged in return. "Who knows? He's on his cell phone."

"Hey, Ryan!" I stood up abruptly once he had finished with his call. "Is Cindy your baby daughter?"

"Oh no," said Ryan in some surprise. "She's my wife."

"Oh . . ." Truong and I exchanged identical raised eyebrow expressions. Why? WHY?

Why do people talk in baby talk when they're not talking to babies?

"How nauseating!" said Truong, echoing my thoughts. "I think my ears are bleeding."

"What?" I taunted, "You mean you don't use baby talk with Ayinde?"

"Oh, hell no!" he said forcefully. "And we don't use any bullcrap cutesy names like babes, boo or princess either."

"So what do you call each other? By your actual names?"

Truong smiled a little wry smile. “Ayinde usually calls me butt hole and I call him ass wipe.”

“Butt hole?” I snorted inelegantly. “Ass wipe?”

“I know, I know,” Truong said blandly, “we’re weird like that.”

“Well anything is better than princess.” I gave a little shudder. “That, in my books, is a death wish.”

“Umm hmmm.” Truong whipped out his signature diva snap. “Unless you’re Prince Harry, don’t be calling me princess.”

Ryan put his head around my cubicle and made shushing noises at us. “Excuse me! Can you guys tone it down a notch? I have to call my wife again.” Then with staggering nerve, he hit redial on his cell phone and resumed talking in his grating baby voice. “Oh hewwo again my pumpkin wumpkins pwincess. I just wanted to let you know that the ham sammie you made me today was so delish. What? Uh-huh. Of course we can snuggie wuggie when I get home.” Pause. “Oh yes, I likey, likey. We’ll have some funsey wunsey time tonight pwincess. Love mew. Love mew so much.”

I had to listen to it all until I wanted to scream.

And did he just say, *likey, likey*?

“Truong!” I could feel the bile rising in my throat. “Please get me a bucket!”

At the end of my shift, I made my way toward the lift and caught sight of Carter and an elderly man in a suit that was surely as expensive as it was tasteless. I narrowed my eyes. They seemed to be in deep discussion, their grim faces drawn together in concentration as though something important had passed between them. For some inexplicable reason, this began to scrape my nerves.

BAM! I walked smack-dab into Hillary.

“Sorry,” I quickly apologized. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

“It’s OK,” said Hillary, in a worse state of nerves than I was. “I wasn’t watching where I was going either.” She took a deep breath and nodded in Carter’s direction. “I was too busy watching those two.”

“Me too.” My jaw went rigid. “Do you know who that guy is? The one talking to Carter?”

“Word is,” Hillary lowered her voice in an ominous fashion, “he’s the CEO of Zimm Communications.”

With uncanny timing, the lift pinged open and I stepped in.

“You coming?”

“Nah,” said Hillary, “I’ve got more work to do.”

Right as the doors were sliding shut, Carter glanced up from across the room and held my gaze. Exhaustion was layered into his face in fine lines and his dark eyes seemed to be telling me something.

Something was brewing. That look he gave me set off alarm bells ringing in my brain. An unholy alliance was developing and something dreadful was about to go down very soon.

My apartment felt depressingly empty. I headed straight to the kitchen, got myself acquainted with a stiff drink and collapsed onto the sofa. With the lights turned off, a sort of soporific mood descended upon me and I found myself staring into my drink. Thinking.

My overwrought mind was teeming with implications. I tried to stop the inevitable momentum of these thoughts; that same old loop that was circling like vultures inside my head. I took a deep swig and closed my eyes in despair. I needed to confide in someone.

Someone I didn’t work with.

Instinctively, I dived into my handbag, fished out my iPhone and called Maddy.

“Hey, Kars,” she answered on the third ring.

“Maddy,” I said emphatically, “the shit’s about to hit the fan. I just *know* it. Tomorrow at work, everything will be blown into fragments and I shall lie amongst the trampled flowers.”

“Quit being so melodramatic.” She laughed. “Slow down. What’s going on?”

“I think Zimm Communications is going to buy out Lightning Speed and we’re all gonna lose our jobs.”

“Calm down, Kars. No one’s going to lose their job. They just can’t fire everyone. Who’s going to take the calls?”

“The call center in Malaysia. The very one I helped set up!”

“Don’t be silly. Why would you even think that?”

“Because Carter kept going on and on about lions and gazelles.”

She made an exasperated sound. “You’re not making any sense now, Kars.”

“It has something to do with outsourcing. Then he slipped . . . something about a new contract. And at work today, the head of Zimm Communications was there.”

There was a deafening silence from the other end of the line.

“Maddy? Are you there?”

“I’m here,” she said quietly.

“So what do you think I should do?” I asked anxiously.

“You need to confront Carter about it.”

“I can’t.” And I really couldn’t. Carter and me . . . well, we seemed to be stuck in an emotional limbo land. Not to mention, he’d been immersing himself in his work and maintaining his distance from everyone. Myself included.

“Well,” said Maddy, breaking into my thoughts, “then you won’t find out about what’s really going on until it’s too late.”

After I clicked off the phone, I downed my drink, feeling it trickle down the cold pit in my stomach, thinking it was quite possibly already too late.

Chapter Twenty



“Hillary, have you seen Carter? I just popped into his office and he’s not there.”

She looked at me, a mild panic surfacing on her face. “He’s in the boardroom meeting with several high-ranking executives.”

“Oh.” I felt my shoulders tense up. “Are the people from Zimm Communications in there too?”

Hillary gave an imperceptible nod. “Afraid so.”

So it was happening . . . the wheels were now in motion, I thought, with a slight drop of my heart. I became alert with expectation and all around me, speculation continued to run rampant. A sort of grand scale panic had taken hold of the office. I felt the nervous bustle as people began engaging in bitter talks about a possible takeover by Zimm Communications.

Behind me, voices grew closer. I craned my neck to find Truong walking toward me with Inge in tow. “Kars! We just heard Carter talking about you.”

“Me?” I said in some surprise.

“Yep. He’s in the boardroom with all the head honchos.”

“Were you eavesdropping on the meeting?”

Collectively, they shouted, “NO!”

“All right,” Ingerborg confessed, “we were.”

“In the shadows of Kremlin . . .” Truong lowered his voice and said in a decidedly cloak and daggerish manner, “we spied on the traitors, the saboteurs, the enemies within.”

“Stop it, Truong!” Inge quickly cut him off. “Kars, forgive us for indulging in a little harmless espionage. We didn’t have any Soviet era eavesdropping bugs or anything like that. I promise. We were just pressing our ears to the door.”

“So what was Carter saying about me?”

“He was vouching for you. He said if you wanted something done right, ask Karsynn.”

I allowed myself a quiet, glowing smile. “What else did he say?”

“He said that you were a solid performer and insisted that you be on board.”

“On board with what?”

“The new management team.”

By 2 p.m. it was all over the news. Zimm Communications Inc. had completed its \$12.6 billion buyout of Lightning Speed Communications, creating a sprawling telecommunications giant serving thirty seven states.

“You’re WHAT?” I raised my voice, looking desperately at Carter.

He could not meet my eye. “I’m not just a director here. That was just a cover.”

I looked at him in alarm. “So who are you then?”

There was a small silence and then he said, “The Executive Vice President of Operations.”

“And what about right now?” I kneaded my hands together, twisting my fingers. “Are you still a senior VP now that Zimm has bought out Lightning Speed?”

He stared down at his desk for a few moments then raised his head. “I was involved in negotiating the new contract with Zimm.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Quietly, he said, “Yes.”

“So why did you lie about who you were?” I cast my eyes around the room, half expecting a camera crew to come leaping out of nowhere. “Are you filming for an episode of *Undercover Boss*?”

He shook his head. “I wanted to see how things really worked. And getting to know you has been an eye-opener. You have a different take on what’s going on than on what I was being told.”

“Why?” I asked directly, eyeing him warily. “Why did you go through this . . . this sham?”

“I wanted to identify how things could be improved. And, and . . .” There seemed to be a long and tortuous journey from his brain to his mouth.

As he hesitated, I added wryly, “Is Carter Lockwood even your *real* name?”

“It’s Carter Price. Lockwood was my mother’s maiden name.”

We looked at each other, not really sure what to say.

He took several, long, deep breaths. “Look, Kars, we need to streamline the business and sometimes the best decisions for doing things are not always the fairest or the most popular.”

Streamlining. Humph. Such a *sanitized* word.

“By streamlining do you mean slash, downsize the workforce, scale back,

fire, lay off?”

Carter gave the smallest nod, unflinching.

“But why?” I implored. “Zimm’s CEO flies around in a private jet and he gave himself a thirty million dollar pay raise this year. And now you’re cutting five thousand jobs? It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Outsourcing always makes sense in a recession,” he patiently explained, as if I had the mental acuity of a two-year-old. “The cost of labor in Malaysia is a fraction of what it costs here. The cost savings from this restructuring will allow Zimm to invest in expanding its subscriber base and that will help improve earnings.”

Carter sounded so indifferent. So cold, cut and dry . . . like a textbook.

“Improve earnings? Seriously? I just don’t know how the CEO of Zimm is going to make ends meet with just thirty million dollars in his bank account,” I smirked. “Poor guy must just struggle daily.”

Carter raised his eyes heavenward.

I was now ranting, “Why doesn’t the CEO and all the top level execs—including you—just take a pay cut and sell off all your private jets? That will save plenty of jobs. But *nooooo*. You guys would rather lay off the hardworking employees so that you get a big pay raise.”

Carter regarded me evenly and said by way of appeasement, “You still have a job. We’d like to retain you as Project Manager. Your job will be to ensure that the transition goes smoothly.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “What about the others?”

“I’m afraid we’re shutting down this center. And the centers in Boca Raton, San Jose and Cleveland.”

“So that’s it?” I felt suddenly enraged. “We are all expendable? That’s the real bottom line?”

“My role is to maximize profits,” he replied in neutral tones, “not make the employees happy.”

“Your role is to make the shareholders happy,” I shot back. “Follow the money, so to speak! Cut corners in order to fatten your own pockets at the expense of hardworking people. Line your pockets and move on.”

Carter visibly bristled. “Yes, I have an obligation to do everything legally possible to maximize profits for my shareholders by running this company in the cheapest, most efficient way possible. But all that enables us to compete more effectively in the global sense.”

“So cheap labor wins, huh? And to hell with what it does to anyone else?”

To hell with keeping jobs in America?”

“Corporations are not set up to be patriotic, Karsynn. The goal of business is to make a profit.”

I laughed harshly. “But how can you and the shareholders expect healthy dividends when you sow only greed in your business plan? Where is the compassion toward the people who work for you? Where is the social responsibility?”

“Like I’ve said before, and I’ll say again—the goal of business is to make a profit.” Carter was beginning to sound like a broken tape recorder.

“But there should be a balance,” I said sharply, my anger returning at full force. “There should be a balance between profit making and considering the impact of your actions. Thousands are going to lose their jobs, Carter. *Thousands*,” I said disparagingly. “And all the jobs are leaving America. That’s so wrong.”

“Let me ask you this.” He paused and looked me squarely in the eye. “Hypothetically speaking, if Zimm Communications decides to move its operations to Michigan or Kentucky because wages are lower there, is that still morally wrong?”

I delayed my response, giving my thoughts a chance to catch up.

Carter forged on, “What you need to understand, Karsynn, is that every economy on this planet is intertwined, and a benefit to the global economy is a benefit to *every* economy.”

“Hypothetically speaking, Carter, what do you think would happen if every job in America was outsourced? Huh?” I raised my voice. “Then what?”

There was an uncomfortable pause. For once he was apparently lost for words.

In the end, he gave me the same old rigmarole. “Bottom line is, we need to cut costs. The reality is, capitalism does not work without cheap labor. Period. And we can run our business a whole lot cheaper in Malaysia than we can in America.”

“Just because you can, doesn’t mean you must,” I beseeched. “That’s the moral imperative.”

His eyes suddenly flashed. “Kars, you’re foolish if you can’t understand how the free market works and you’re completely naive if you can’t accept the global mindset. Your idealism is all very nice but pragmatism is the only way to survive. We live in a global economy and it’s time you got out of your little shell and see how this world is changing.”

“Naive?” I drew in my breath with a loud hiss. “I’d rather be naive than selfish! You owe more to society than simply lining your pockets and feathering your own nest! And you know what? I’d understand using outsourcing as an option if it were a matter of survival; if the choices were to outsource or the company goes bust. But Lightning Speed and Zimm both posted record profits in the billions! BILLIONS! So don’t call me naive.” I stopped and took in a shaky breath.

Carter stared rigidly ahead, but I wasn’t quite finished yet. My breath may have run out but my words hadn’t. “This whole outsourcing business, it’s not about the survival of the business, is it?”

The silence was crippling.

“Is it? I demanded. “No. It’s so you and all the shareholders can watch your bank accounts get nice and fat and juicy. I’ve heard this bullcrap one too many times. About how corporations must lay off workers, outsource and offshore because it is a necessary sacrifice, only to hear about back door deals with senior execs later on. This is not capitalism. This is CRONY capitalism.”

Carter winced as if I’d just thrown an unfair but accurate punch. “All right, Karsynn, that’s enough now!” he said impatiently. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. And right now, there are other more important things I need to discuss with you.”

“Like what?” I asked wearily.

He slid a stack of papers across his desk. “Please look this over and meet with your team members today.”

I felt a pulse of dark anticipation, a sickening dread.

As I stole a quick glance, the words ‘NOTICE OF TERMINATION’ jumped back at me.

“Are we firing everyone today?”

“No. We’re keeping most of the supervisors and team leads. Ninety percent of the calls have already been rerouted to the call centers we have in India, Malaysia and the Philippines. We’ll maintain a skeletal crew here until the end of this month.”

“And after that? Everyone will be gone?”

Carter chose not to answer my question. “We’d like to retain you as Project Manager. In the next few months, Zimm plans on buying out Intelifon, so they’ll looking to set up seven new call centers in India and the Philippines.”

I sank further back in my chair, frustrated and exhausted.

“Have you ever fired anyone?” Carter’s voice was gentler, kinder.

I couldn’t speak. It felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest.

Carter went on, “Think of it as a necessary evil. You know the saying, fire fast, hire slowly. So be direct, be swift, be clear and be concise. Don’t try and sugarcoat things and don’t try to soften the blow.”

I nodded, not feeling capable of saying anything else.

There was a pause until he asked, “Have you watched *Moneyball*?”

“That movie with Brad Pitt?”

“Yep.”

“No,” I replied despondently, “I haven’t.”

“Well, there’s this line from the movie . . . would you rather take a bullet to the head or five to the chest and bleed to death?”

I briefly mulled over the alternatives. “I’d rather have a flesh wound and live.”

“That wasn’t one of the options.” Carter sighed heavily. “Would you like to do a dry-run together?”

“I guess,” I responded halfheartedly.

He simply sat there, waiting.

“Oh, I’m supposed to go first? Right.” I had to clear my throat twice before I could begin. “Carter, I am sorry to inform you that your employment is terminated as a result of company restructuring. You’ll receive one week’s severance pay. Any vacation you have accrued will also be paid with your final check. And . . . um, we value you immensely and thank you for all your contributions.”

Carter lightly tapped a finger on his chin and posed a question. “If you value me, then why are you laying me off?”

“I-I . . .” I found myself become correspondingly more tongue tied. “I’m sorry, Carter. I can’t do this.” I sat staring at the stack of pink slips and it occurred to me that I might not be strong enough for this. “I really can’t do this. I can’t fire my friends.” In desperation, I heard myself say, “There has to be another way.”

“There is no other way.”

“Don’t you people have a conscience?” My voice carried a trace of accusation.

“Newsflash, Kars, corporations aren’t real people so truly, they can’t have a conscience.”

“But the people running it *should* have a conscience. Tell me this—” I fixed

him with an eagle glare. “The decision to close down this call center, was it entirely your idea?”

“No.” He paused, his eyes distant. “I was very much against it. I had advocated offshoring some of the work overseas but never shutting down the centers here.”

“So what happened?”

He sighed resignedly. “I was outvoted by the board of directors.”

Perhaps Carter did have a vestige of a conscience after all.

“And how long have you known about this?”

“For a while. I knew it would happen sooner or later. I just hadn’t anticipated it would be this soon.”

There was an ugly pause.

I felt the weight of responsibility I didn’t deserve.

Eventually, Carter broke the silence. “Linda from HR will be with you when you meet with your agents.”

“What for?”

“You need someone from HR present as a witness. Also, your agents can discuss benefits and such with Linda afterward. And it’s a good way for you to CYA.”

I barely had the energy to nod. And if I’d had the energy, I’m sure I would’ve cried.

“You’re not doing anything wrong,” Carter said wearily. “You’re just doing your job.”

I swallowed the sawdust in my throat. “Then why does it feel so wrong?”

Chapter Twenty One



“You ready to do this?”

I brought my gaze back to Linda’s impassive face. “Not really.”

“Karsynn,” she said kindly, “firing employees is a necessary evil. It is how supervisors and leaders earn their scars.”

I sucked in my breath and steeled myself, but I was having trouble summoning the energy to even begin. My heart, my head, my feet felt heavy.

There was a fraction of a pause. “Right,” said Linda. “You need to call in the first one right now.”

My heart was thumping erratically as I punched in Nina Romero’s extension. When her phone beeped, I heard myself say in a stilted voice, “Nina, can you please come see me at the Lightning Four Conference Room?”

“Sure thing,” she replied.

“Now remember,” Linda offered her free counsel, “Nina may take the news calmly, she may break down in tears or she may get very angry. Perhaps even violent. I’ve seen some agents go through all of those stages and more. Don’t assume that she’ll take her severance notice quietly and walk away without a fuss. It always helps if you accept her rage in a calm and collected manner.”

Silently, I nodded.

Linda continued, “After she reviews the severance package and signs the release form, do not let her linger. Tell her that she has to leave the business premises immediately. We’ll make a short stop at her desk so she can pack up her personal items. Then we’ll escort her to the security gates.”

I cast an apprehensive, frowning look at Linda. “Why?”

“We don’t want to give her the chance to steal company files, destroy computer data or change any computer passwords.”

Seconds later, Nina walked into the conference room and sat down. Numbly, I went through the motions of delivering the life-draining news, feeling as if I were watching myself from a distance.

When I’d finished, I gave Nina some time to absorb everything.

I twisted my fingers nervously. “Do you have any questions?”

“I can change,” Nina said at once. I saw her red cheeks, her resolute eyes. “I really can.”

I opened my mouth to speak but before I could say anything, Nina plundered on, “I’ll do better at selling. I promise. I’ll build rapport with the callers and I’ll follow up on every sale. I’ll come in thirty minutes early to study. Or I can take a pay cut. I can even take another position for half the pay or I could work fewer hours.” I heard the sheer desperation in her voice, pleading, imploring.

“It-it’s,” I stammered, “it’s um, not you. It’s-it’s Lightning Speed. Sorry, it’s Zimm Communications.” Oh God. This sounded like a bad break up. “I’m so sorry, Nina.”

Scar one.

Next, Ben Harper was in the hot seat. I eyed him warily, wondering what was the best approach. In the end I decided directness was the answer.

“You can’t do this to me!” Ben shouted. He was panic-stricken and it looked like all the blood had drained from his face. “How the hell am I supposed to tell my wife that we no longer have health insurance?” He stood up and began pacing the floor, walking back and forth in a belligerent disbelief. “TELL ME!” He drew his fist into the wall. “I have three kids and my wife is pregnant. Our fourth kid is due this Christmas.”

“I’m so sorry, Ben,” I said gently.

“This is what I get for working my ass off for this company?” he demanded and I had no words for him.

Security was brought in before Ben could do any more damage.

Scar two.

Then it was Inge’s turn. She looked at me with sudden anxiety, grasping hold of my hand, pressing her fingernails into my palm. “But what will I do?” she asked tearfully.

“I’m so sorry, Inge.” I squeezed her hand. “I know you’ll be OK.”

The truth was, I didn’t know if any of them would be OK. There was no tangible certainty.

I kept on talking while Inge simply sat there, concentrating on the severance package I’d laid out before her, struggling to make sense of it. Her chin started quivering and she began to cry. “Where do I sign?”

Scar three.

Next, it was Truong’s turn.

He smiled at me, but his smile seemed forced. “Is this some sort of cruel

joke?”

“No, Truong. Trust me, I wish it were.”

I could see it in his rigid posture, how badly he wanted to believe that it did not faze him. But I knew better. He had expected a merger or a buyout. Not this. And as I sat staring at one of my very best friends and one of the top agents on my team, I felt again my own self-reproach. I heard myself speaking, saw Truong nodding, and yet I felt like I was not fully present.

Eventually, I stopped talking. There wasn't anything I could say that would change things. There wasn't anything I could say that would ease his pain. In fact, the very act of speaking just seemed like an insult.

When I rose to console Truong with a hug, he stiffened.

Scar four.

At this point, I was cracking at the seams. I felt personally responsible for their pain and I could barely summon up the strength to hold it together any longer.

There was a tentative little tap on the door, then Cynthia Rowley came walking in. She was an elderly woman with a sweet disposition, and she reminded me a lot of my own Aunt Cynthia. I couldn't believe I was about to do this to her.

Before I could even begin, Cynthia took my hand in hers. “I know you have to do this, my dear. And I know you don't want to. And I know that it weighs heavily on your conscience. But it's OK,” she said kindly, “it's about that time for me to retire anyway.”

“Thank you,” I said gratefully, feeling my emotions swelling inside me like a balloon. “Thank you for making this easy on me.”

Numbly, I went through all the requisite paperwork, and when it was finally over, Cynthia sat smiling at me with warmth spilling into her eyes and I almost came undone. “I'd like to give you a blessing, my child.”

“You do?” I asked in some surprise. “What kind of blessing?”

“It is a Franciscan Blessing and I know it will speak to your heart.”

“Um, OK,” I said a little uncertainly.

“Good!” Cynthia reached across the table and clasped my hand once more.

Not really sure how to react, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to appear reverent.

Cynthia began, “May God bless you with restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at

injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.”

I pried one eye open, thinking the blessing was over. It wasn't.

“May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy. And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.” Cynthia gave my hand a gentle squeeze before releasing it.

I went quiet for a while. Then I opened my eyes wide, gave a grateful nod and said, “Thank you. Thank you so much for that, Cynthia.”

“You're so welcome, my dear.”

“Could you do me a small favor?” I asked earnestly.

“Anything for you, Karsynn.”

In a voice filled with charm and serenity, I said, “Could you please give Carter the Franciscan Blessing? I think it would really speak to his heart.”

Cynthia nodded sagely. “I'll make sure that I do.”

The layoffs went on for half the day. Every person and every friend I'd wounded left a burning scar on my conscience. By the end of the day, my entire body was pockmarked with scars. If this is how leaders earned their scars, then maybe I wasn't quite cut out to be one.

“That's what happens when you're sleeping with the boss.” I could hear the satisfaction in Jewel's voice. “That explains her salary hikes, the plum assignments, the free trip to Malaysia.”

“Did she really sleep with him?” asked a soapy voice.

“She did,” said Jewel with obvious relish, punctuated by hearty laughter.

I sat for a while, tears stinging the back of my eyes. Part of me wanted to cry, but I didn't. This was neither the time nor place to break down and cry. There was no privacy here. None. Every time someone in a cubicle nearby shifted, I heard the creak of a chair.

I pushed my chair back loudly and started down the hallway. I found myself staring at the cubicles, the potted plants, the printers, the fax machines, the water coolers, seeing everything yet taking in nothing. I focused on my surroundings so I could stop thinking about what I'd just done. Briefly, I wondered if everyone around me noticed my body language.

If they did, they were careful not to make any eye contact.

I quickened my pace, trying to outrun my thoughts, and slipped into an elevator that was about to close. Downstairs, I made my way past security, through the exit gates and stepped outside. The news of the layoffs had dulled the brilliance of this sunny day. Hugging myself, I walked with little, hurried steps, all hunched over, trying to make myself appear as small and as insignificant as I felt.

I came to a slow halt at the duck pond. The wind blew hard against me and I shivered, crossing my arms, making myself into a fortress against the wind. As I stood there, taking deep gulps of air to steady myself, the sharp odor of guilt assaulted my senses and bit at my nostrils. The smell clung to my skin, saturated my clothes and stagnated in the air. The acrid, pungent and unmistakable odor of guilt. I had to breathe deeply from my diaphragm so I wouldn't hyperventilate.

Suddenly my fragile control snapped. "Oh God." I buried my face in my hands and burst into gut-wrenching sobs.

I felt rather than heard Carter come up behind me.

"Shhh," he soothed, pressing his body to my back. "Don't cry."

"Damn you, Carter!" I choked through racking sobs. I did not understand where the tears were coming from, I just knew I couldn't stop them. "Damn you for making me do that to my friends."

He gathered me into his arms and sighed into my hair. "I'm sorry."

I let my body pour in toward his, steadying my head against his chest. "I am a horrible person." I sniffled through red and swollen eyes. "A horrible boss. A horrible friend."

"That's not true," Carter whispered, wiping away my tears. "You're a good person. And you've been a good friend to me."

I began to cry even harder, my breath coming in short gulps and hiccups. "You're not my friend, Carter."

"Shhhh." He sighed again. "Don't say that."

"You're just some cog in the system who sold out to The Man."

"Say what you want about me. I can take it."

"I thought you were better than that."

"I'm not," he said gently, "and I never said I was."

"Why do you do this?" I buried my face in his shirt. His presence was a fresh assault to my senses, another shock to my system. I shut my eyes. I just wanted him to go away. Why did he always confuse me so much? "Why do

you do this?" I muttered furiously, feeling helpless against him. "I want to hate you so badly, but I can't."

He pressed his lips to my forehead and his voice caught in a husky rasp. "So don't."

Chapter Twenty Two



“So how did Truong and Inge take the news?”

“How do you think?” I asked morosely.

“Badly,” said Maddy at last.

I emitted a silent laugh. “I don’t think they’ll ever speak to me again.”

“Don’t be silly. Give them some time. They’ll come around.”

“No they won’t. I still have a job and they don’t. It’s the ultimate betrayal.”

“Kars, stop beating yourself up. It’s not your fault.”

“It’s not my fault,” I said disparagingly, “but it’s my problem.”

There was a fraction of a pause, then Maddy said, “You should be thankful that you still have a job.”

“I was sleeping with the enemy,” I spoke quickly, determined to get everything off my chest, “that’s why I still have a job.”

“Wait!” Maddy practically shouted down the phone, “What are you talking about?”

“I worked my butt off to prove myself and you know what?” I said bitterly, “Now all that doesn’t matter. I’ve lost all their respect. I’m just written off as the slut who screwed to keep her job.”

“Stop talking a mile a minute, Kars. Slow down.”

“He played me out. And I fell for it. I fell for *him*.”

“Who?”

“Carter Lockwood. Carter Price. I don’t know anymore.”

“Carter? You said you hated him.”

“I do.” Then I amended, “I did. You see, Carter doesn’t play the guy you love to hate. Noooooo. He does something far trickier; he makes you love the hateable guy.”

There was a deafening silence from the other end of the line. Then, “Are you saying you’re in love with Carter?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. I was utterly thrown by my feelings and I didn’t know the answer to that. Was I?

After a lengthy pause, Maddy mercilessly pumped me for more information. “So how did it happen?”

“How did what happen?”

“How did you end up in bed with him?”

“I don’t know, Maddy, it just happened.” I sighed wearily. “He cooked dinner for me one night. Mexican food. It was spicy and delicious and it hit the spot.”

“*Tu puta madre!*” Maddy burst out laughing. “I didn’t know Mexican food made you horny.”

“Well, apparently. And then one thing led to another and . . .”

“Details!” Maddy ordered urgently, “I want details!”

I sucked in my breath with a loud hiss. “Don’t ask me how, but somehow he touched my hand and then,” I hesitated a second, “then I . . . um . . . touched his shvantz.”

“You touched his SHVANTZ?” Maddy shrieked. “Karsynn! You slut. How do you go from touching hands to touching his middle leg?”

“I don’t know.” I made an exasperated sound. “They’re both limbs?”

“So how was the sex?”

“Mind-blowing.”

“Oooh *girrrrrrl*. You dipped your pen in company ink.”

“Hey!” I cried a touch defensively. “At least I just dipped my pen. With Mika, you practically *dropped* your pen in company ink.”

“True.” I could hear the smile in her voice. “Mika is stuck with me for life.”

“For life . . .” I echoed. “I don’t want to be stuck to Carter for life. I don’t want to like him. I don’t want to be attracted to him.”

“Look,” Maddy said in an emphatic voice, “you spend as much time with Carter as you do with your family and friends. You spend at least forty hours a week at the office. You guys work together, eat together, drink together, cap off a long day with a few highballs at the usual watering hole—”

“Wait,” I interjected. “I’ve never gone to a bar with Carter. Just Truong and Inge.”

Despite my mumbled protests, Maddy carried on expounding and there was no point in stopping her when she got in her stride. “What I’m trying to say is I can understand how these things happen. Hard work doesn’t always leave you much time for socializing, and we both know how hard you’ve worked. And do you know that twenty percent of marriages stem from office romances? I mean, look at me and Mika. We fell in love at that call center.”

“Maddy . . .” I sighed dramatically. “Me and Carter, what we have is nothing like what you and Mika have. We don’t have a great romance. We

just had sex. Once.”

Quietly, she said, “But it’s more than just sex. Isn’t it?”

“OK.” My voice pitched higher. “I liked him, admired him even. But maybe it was just the idea of him . . . faced with the reality of him, I’m not so sure anymore . . .” I trailed off unsteadily.

Maddy waited for me to continue, and when I didn’t, she tacitly dropped the issue. “Are you ready to be my maid of honor?”

“Almost ready,” I replied, grateful for the change of subject. “I’m still working on my speech.”

“No worries. You’ve still got a week to finish it.”

“I know . . .”

“Kars?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Get some rest, OK?”

I hugged my legs tightly. “I’ll try.”

“Good. Because I want my maid of honor looking radiantly happy at my wedding. And,” she added in a teasing voice, “maybe you can bring Carter along as your date.”

“No way in hell!” I said at once. “Remember? Chicks before dicks! Truong and Inge will be my dates . . . that is, if they’ll still have me.”

“Of course they will,” she said reassuringly.

“I hope so . . .” I broke off, staring forlornly at the ceiling with the phone pressed against my ear, too exhausted to move, trying not to cry. “I’m worried about Inge.”

“Oh, don’t worry about her. Fragile looking people like Inge are usually the strongest.”

“And what about tough looking bitches like me?” I let out a short sharp laugh. “Are we usually the weakest?”

“You’re not weak, Kars,” she said in an indulgent tone. “You’re just one giant softie.”

Peaks and valleys. Life is full of them. I found myself dealing with this painful truth. Problem was, I couldn’t seem to find my way out of this bottomless valley. I’d spent the past two days trying to catch up on sleep, to no avail. I had too much on my mind. Now my whole body felt bone tired. Come to think of it, my mouth felt bone dry, too. After a frozen moment, I poked my head out from beneath the duvet, threw back the covers and

dragged myself out of bed. I staggered into the kitchen in search of a drink to quench my raging thirst.

Stifling a yawn, I peered inside the fridge. A case of *7 Hour Energy* stared back at me. Hmm. I'd heard of *5 Hour Energy*, but never 7.

Must be some generic off brand from Dollar Tree, I surmised.

Who drinks this stuff, anyway? I wondered absently, scratching my head.

Oh yeah. It was my roommate Pamela.

Tempting. Very tempting. I could sure use an energy boost right now.

Oh what the hell! I made a split second decision and opened five bottles of *7 Hour Energy* and chugged them all down.

Why five you ask? Well the bottles were little.

Five minutes later, I blasted off into some alternate universe. Colors became increasingly vivid and bright. Geometric patterns were superimposed on objects. Space and time seemed to speed up. Everything was super loud, as if someone had turned up the volume. I started feeling jumpy and my heart felt like it was about to explode right out of my chest. Taking a deep breath, I collapsed onto the couch and tried to light a cigarette. But I realized that I couldn't because my hand was on backward. What the fuck? Was I tripping on mushrooms?

While my mind was hurtling chaotically into the stratosphere, I fumbled in my purse, fished out my iPhone and frantically thumbed in a SOS text to Maddy. Then the strangest thing happened. The text started jumping off the screen. PHWOAR! I stared in bewilderment. There were letters inside of letters, inside of letters, inside of letters, swirling around in little circles. Almost like an echo.

"ECHO!" I said out loud. Seconds later, I heard five hundred echoes ringing in my ear.

Discombobulated, I began pacing the floor. Up and down and up and down. I felt like I was in the eye of a tornado. My palms were sweaty and my head was pounding like the thundering hooves of a thousand wild stallions. Through the stampede of horses bludgeoning my brains, I somehow managed to do some mental arithmetic. Let's see, I drank five bottles of *7 Hour Energy*, so that equals thirty-five hours of energy. Crap! I was going to be wired for a while!

This drink actually works! Who would've *thunk*?

At some point I started talking to myself, saying weird stuff like, "I know not where this is nor how I came to be here." I even had a conversation with

the sofa. “I know not who you are.” I stood there talking to the sofa. “Nor how I came to find you.”

Truly bizarre stuff.

I took a deep breath. Right. I needed something to calm my fraying nerves and gnawing anxiety. I needed to put on some whale music and do some calming yoga. Then I realized that I didn’t own any whale music and I didn’t know any yoga poses except for the downward dog position. My frantic eyes darted across the room and zeroed in on a book—*The World is Flat*.

Yes. I could sure use a flat world right now. Quite frankly, my present world was wavy, warped and undulated. And I needed it flat.

Flattened.

Hastily, I grabbed the book and turned it around in my hands, vaguely recalling that Carter had insisted I read it. All right, I thought, this dull and tedious Economics textbook should do the trick. I had no doubt it would numb my mind in a matter of seconds.

Five hours later, I was still reading the book. I read all day and all night.

Ten hours later, I closed the book. I stood up for a brief second and slumped heavily back onto the sofa, struck by David Schlesinger’s words. He’d sent out a memo to his editorial staff, back when he was the managing editor at Reuters. I don’t fully recall what was written in his entire memo, but here is the gist of it in my own words:

Change is not easy. Change is hard on those caught by surprise. And change is hardest on those who find it difficult to change. But change is normal. It is expected, it is not new, and change is important.

Work flows to locations and workers who can get the work done most efficiently. This does not hinder us because it allows us to do different, and sometimes, more sophisticated work. It’s difficult for us to think about ‘our’ work being outsourced, and off-shored. But as painful as it is, we should also think of the opportunity as well as the obligations of off-shoring. Ultimately, each one of us must tend to our own economic destiny.

Sitting in my darkened living room, I stared into space, chewing on that passage, thinking of the frailties and rewards of my job.

Sometime later, I struggled to my feet, padded to my room and crawled back into bed. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was out for the count.

Chapter Twenty Three



Hillary stopped dead in her tracks. “What the hell is this?”

“I don’t know . . .” I paused and took stock of the situation.

Over five hundred people had descended on Pocatello Square; they were chanting and holding up various signs.

One sign said: THE GREED OF WALL STREET BROKE MAIN STREET.

Another sign said: WALL STREET GOT BAILED OUT BUT MAIN STREET DIDN’T.

The next one said: CORPORATIONS ARE ROBBING US WITHOUT A GUN.

And another one said: I CAN’T AFFORD A LOBBYIST, I AM THE 99%.

One sign even said: MY ARMS ARE TIRED.

Whoa! The Occupy Wall Street movement had sprung up right here in rural Idaho. This was Occupy Pocatello.

Mesmerized, Hillary and I began walking toward the crowd, merging into the thicket. All around us, men and women carried themselves with a forthright bearing that said, “We will not back down until justice has been served.”

“Hell no!” Someone chanted, “We won’t go!”

A middle-aged man emerged from the crowd and started preaching, “You know what the problem is? Impressing Wall Street has become the Great American corporate pastime. Long term gains are sacrificed for short term benefits. Bad corporate decisions are made because a company would rather *look* good than *be* good. Don’t you think we’d all be better off if corporations tried to impress themselves rather than their shareholders?”

I nodded fervently in agreement.

Someone in the crowd yelled, “What do we want?”

A crowd of people shouted, “Accountability! Accountability! Accountability!”

Hillary leaned toward me and whispered, “What a silly, misguided circus. If these people are going to beg, at least have the decency to become homeless

and be grateful.”

I whispered back, “Hillary, some of these people *are* homeless.”

“Oh.” Hillary started backing away. “Let’s get out of here before it turns into an angry mob. And besides, we don’t want to be late for work.”

As we picked our way through the crowd, squeezing ourselves past the mass of bodies, I came face to face with Carter.

“You!” I froze.

“You!” He seemed to freeze too.

For a second, we both stood frozen to the spot.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

Carter fired back, “I could ask you the same question.”

“Excuse me guys,” Hillary hastily cut in, “but I’m getting out of here before things get out of hand.” And with that, she wrestled through the throng and took off at a fast clip.

Carter took my hand and I allowed myself to be led away. He walked me down to the end of the street and stopped at a quiet corner.

“Sit,” he ordered.

Obediently, I sat on the sidewalk.

Carter hitched up his chinos and sat down next to me. He handed me a bottle of Evian. I uncapped the liter-sized bottle and chugged half of it down.

For a long while, we didn’t speak and the air seemed to pulsate with unspoken words. Two granola girls walked by, their patchouli scented heads swiveling as they passed Carter. One of them virtually devoured him with her eyes.

Carter greeted their fawning in his usual way—with a scowl and an abrupt dismissal.

I sat back with a self-satisfied grin. Those girls were wasting their time and their lustful thoughts. The love of Carter’s life was his work.

“Karsynn,” he began, “there are so many things I’ve been wanting to say to you. But I just couldn’t.”

“Why don’t you start right now?” I looked at him expectantly and folded my arms across my chest. “Go ahead.”

“Look, I know you hate me. But you have to understand that many call center jobs are disappearing and it’s not my fault. Most routine jobs have gone overseas. What’s left are high skilled jobs and lower waged jobs that can’t be outsourced or automated.”

“So what you’re trying to tell me is no one is safe,” I stated matter-of-

factly.

“Yes,” said Carter, “no one is safe. Someday, your job, too, might become redundant. Companies are striving to do more with less. With less money and less resources, which means fewer employees. Kars . . .” His eyes were pleading. “You have to accept the fact that some jobs are leaving America and they are never coming back.”

“I need to switch careers then,” I said with sudden despondency. “Become an accountant or something.”

“Accounting work is already being outsourced,” Carter informed me. “Over a million tax returns are prepared in India each year.”

“Then I’ll become a dental assistant,” I said with a certain amount of cynicism, “like every other contestant on a reality show. Or maybe I’ll be just like you.” I glared at him in a manner that would have curdled dairy. “You unscrupulous bastard! You ruthless liar! You douchebag! You jerk! You jackass! You-you—” I ran out of epithets, PG-rated ones anyway.

When my diatribe came to an end, I took a deep breath to steady myself.

Carter looked hurt by the character assassination he’d just been dealt. Deep down inside, I recognized that my anger was excessive, yet I couldn’t control it.

He sighed. “Why are you so angry with me, Kars?”

“I used to admire you.” I laughed harshly. “Can you imagine that? And I was so desperate for your approval. I wanted so much to be just like you.”

“You want to be like me? You want to learn what I do? Well I kill jobs,” he said almost savagely. “That’s what I do. When I strive to keep the company competitive, I kill jobs. When I strive to keep the company running more efficiently, I kill jobs.”

Blunt way to sum it up, I thought.

Then I got to my feet. I was tired of sitting. I was tired of Carter’s weak excuses. “So you’re a serial job killer.” I sent him poison darts. “And you’re pleased with that?”

“I’m not. But if I don’t do it, they’ll hire some other person who will. If Zimm doesn’t do it, some other company will. It’s *my* job to keep the company competitive.”

“So that’s where your interests lie?” I felt my anger returning at full force and a torrent of words came spilling out. “It’s all about the business. It’s all about the short term gains with you and not the long term friendships. That’s why you have no friends, Carter. Haven’t you heard that saying: where all

things being equal, people will buy from a friend. And when all things are not equal, people will *still* buy from a friend. Right now, I'm the only friend you've got. Hardly anyone at work is buying your bullshit. I may not have been around the block as long as you have, but I've learned that there are very few absolutes in life. This is one of them: You need friends! And," I added spitefully, "you get along by getting along! Remember that line?"

Carter's eyes flickered but he remained silent.

"And why are you here anyway?" I demanded crossly. "You're the one percent. Look around you. You don't belong here."

I waited for him to raise his voice at me, to defend himself, to make his case against me, but he didn't. All he did was look toward the ground.

"Carter?" came a man's voice, muffled by the distance.

"I'll be right there," Carter called.

I stood rooted to the spot. "Who's that?"

"Saul," he hedged.

"Who's Saul?"

"A friend of mine," he responded in a weary voice.

"You have a friend?" I stepped back in surprise. In fact, you could have knocked me over with the proverbial feather. "I'd like to meet him."

Carter said nothing for a moment, then, "OK. Follow me."

We turned a corner and he led me down a narrow alleyway until we came upon a frail and elderly homeless person. "Saul, this is Karsynn."

He half-rose to his feet and leaned toward Carter as if he couldn't support his own weight. "Nice to finally meet you, Karsynn. I've heard so much about you."

Weariness from a long day caught up with me and I sighed.

I glanced at my watch. It was nine p.m.

With another sigh, I grabbed my handbag, slung it over my shoulder and walked down the hallway. It was eerily quiet except for the sound of my heels clicking softly on the tile floor. As I swept past Carter's office, I stopped. His door was closed but the lights were still on.

Squaring my shoulders, I lifted my chin and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he called.

I opened the door and leaned heavily against the doorframe. "Don't you ever get tired?"

"Not very often," he said, standing to greet me. "What about you?"

"I'm always tired," I said with a leaden-footed attempt at lightness.

"Go home then," he said kindly, "get some rest."

I stood rooted to the spot and dropped my eyes, studying the tip of my shoes with close attention. "I'm sorry," I said at last.

"For what?" His voice sounded a little strained.

I smiled ruefully. "For judging you."

"Well, I'm sorry I gave you reason to."

I looped a finger in the silver chain around my neck and began twisting it around my finger. "It was nice meeting Saul today. He's a sweet guy."

"He thinks you're sweet too," said Carter with a ghost of a smile.

In the pause that followed, I tentatively broached the subject, "I'm just curious, how did you get to know him?"

Carter shrugged a little and then said, "I took him out for breakfast a couple times and we just went from there."

"Why?" I asked disconcertedly. "Why him? Why Saul?"

He said nothing for a moment, then, "Remember my grandfather I told you about who worked on a turkey farm?"

I nodded.

"He was also a veteran. A Vietnam war veteran. Anyway he mentioned something in passing once . . . and it just stuck with me."

I nodded again, waiting for him to say more.

"He said that one out of every six men and women in our homeless shelters is a veteran. One out of every six has once worn a uniform to serve our country."

"I know," I said quietly. "It's a national disgrace."

"Funny." There was a brief pause as his dark eyes met mine. "That's exactly what my grandfather used to say."

"Do you know," I continued in a level voice, hoisting my handbag over my shoulder, "that one third of Americans are one paycheck away from being homeless? And when you kill jobs here, you're not exactly helping the problem? Now what do you think your grandfather would say about that?" I asked, a challenge.

He sighed in deep exasperation. "You need to stop doing that, Karsynn."

"Doing what?"

"Hoping that I'll play the good guy." He stared at me with those frank gray eyes and he suddenly looked so tired, so young, so vulnerable.

I knew his tired expression was masking deep anguish and for a brief

moment, I almost recognized the boy inside the man. The boy who had lost his mom and was abandoned by his dad. The boy from small town Roseau who grew into a man who worked so hard to make a name for himself. And I found myself shedding all pretense of not caring about him.

“That’s because I know you’re better than that,” I said, putting conviction into my voice.

“I’m not.” He looked so forlorn that my heart sank. Then he sighed deeply and ran a hand through his hair. “And I’m not going to change just because you want me to.”

There was a lull of silence.

Carter broke it first.

He looked down at his desk and spoke quietly, “I’ll be heading back to California next week.”

Although I knew exactly what he meant, I still found myself asking, “What do you mean?”

“My work here is done.” I caught a slight edge in his voice that revealed his doubts. “And I’m needed back at the corporate office. Negotiations are already on the way for several new contracts.”

So you can kill more jobs, I thought cynically.

He seemed on the verge of saying more and I edged closer, feeling the urge to encourage him. But I sensed him pulling back from me.

It took me a few seconds to get the words out, “So that’s it, then?”

A rueful smile crossed his face and I knew right then what he was trying to tell me. “That’s it,” he said with a kind of finality, his voice grave, his words couched in a whisper.

Chapter Twenty Four



“Truong!” I stood to greet him.

“Karsynn, darling!” His voice was lilting.

Stiffly, we offered each other our cheekbones and hugged without any bodily contact.

“Look,” Truong began, “can we just please skip this part where we dance around each other? I’m not mad at you, OK.”

“Good.” I smiled gratefully. “And thanks for meeting me here.”

“Pssh! Are you kidding me? Karsynn and karaoke? I wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

I laughed. Everyone hates being humiliated and yet, karaoke still exists. I was one of those people who would staunchly insist, “NO! NO! I can’t sing. I couldn’t possibly go up there. NO! NO! I WON’T. Oh, all right, give me the damn mic!” And then I’d be elbowing people out of the way to get to the stage.

Truong removed his jacket and scooted into our booth. “No one should karaoke unless they’re drunk, so what say we get a round of shots?”

“Sure,” I said, trying not to sound as grim as I felt. “I could use a drink right now.”

Several rounds of shots later, I wobbled off the stage and staggered back to our booth. “Put your hands together,” said the karaoke jockey, “for that um, *unique* rendition of Call Me Maybe!”

“That’s not fair,” Truong slurred sentimentally, “the more you drink, the better you sound.”

“The more I drink,” I slurred back, “the better *you* sound.”

“Ouch.” Truong winced into his glass.

“The jockey said I sounded *unique*,” I breathed, all flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

“It means you sucked.” Truong let out a loud belch, not bothering to stifle the sound. “Let’s face it, karaoke is a combination of people who shouldn’t drink and people who shouldn’t sing.”

“I’ll drink to that.” I downed my vodka. “I’ve had a shit day.”

Truong craned forward, staring at me with round eyes. “You had a shit day?”

I nodded gravely. “I had a shit day.”

Truong hiccupped. “I had a shit day too.”

Collectively, we bellowed, “WE HAD A SHIT DAY!”

Riveting. This felt almost like scintillating conversation, but not quite.

We fell into a convivial silence and sighed, wearing glum expressions of world-weariness on our faces. Then we drank ourselves stupid.

“Right now,” I hiccupped. “I want an honorable death by polar bear.”

“Hmm.” Truong tilted his head thoughtfully. “Like you wandered out onto some floating glacier and then you got attacked by a polar bear?”

“Yeah.” I slammed my fist on the table. “On a floating glacier, damn it!”

“Oh.” Truong blinked. “Why a polar bear?”

“Because,” I gestured expansively and began waxing loquacious, “a polar bear is a master of his harsh environment. And people far and near will ask: What happened to Karsynn Alaynna Higginbotham? And they will be told this epic and legendary battle that will forever go down in history. On—”

Truong butted in quickly, “You mean like *Moby Dick*?”

“Oii!” I cried reproachfully. “You made me lose track!”

“Sorry,” Truong murmured, slumping forward onto the table. With exaggerated courtesy, he slurred, “Go onnnnnnn.”

I paused in my semi-drunk state, trying hard to remember what I’d wanted to say. Oh yes! “As I was saying,” I carried on loftily, “on a grueling Trans-Antarctic expedition, Karsynn was mauled by a huge polar bear. But—” I raised my index finger. “Before her untimely demise, her heart knew no bounds. She braved the harsh elements and fought most valiantly. Most, most valiantly, punching the polar bear in the nose!”

“In the nose?” Truong echoed.

“THE NOSE!” I exclaimed with gusto. “AND THE LIPS!”

“The lips?” Truong looked at me with a big question mark in his eyes. “Are we talking about a polar bear now or are we talking about Carter?”

I said nothing for a moment and stared miserably into my drink. “He’s leaving, you know.”

Quietly, Truong said, “I know.”

I glanced up, startled. “How did you know?”

“We’ve exchanged words over the phone. Briefly.”

“Over what?”

“He didn’t want me to say anything.” Truong hesitated before continuing. “But he made some calls and got me a job at Vodacomm.”

“Doing tech support?”

Truong nodded. “Apparently, he knows the IT Director over there.”

“Just you?”

“Inge and Jenn too, as far as I know.”

“Mmmm.” I fought to keep my face expressionless. “I did not know that.”

“He didn’t want you to know.” Truong took a deep swig of his drink.

“Carter even apologized to me.”

“For what?”

“Well,” he hedged, “in the past, he’d fire people without them even knowing it.”

“Really?” I lifted a skeptical brow.

“Uh huh,” said Truong in a hushed awe. “He’d find jobs for them and let other companies ‘steal’ them away before the massive layoffs. But in our case, he said it all happened too fast.”

“Oh,” I said inadequately.

“I know,” Truong said grimly.

I swallowed hard and spoke almost inaudibly, “Did he say anything else?”

Truong shook his head. There was a small silence and then he said, “I’m sorry he’s leaving.”

“I’m not,” I said, a touch wistfully.

We paused for a minute, each occupied with our own thoughts.

“I like Carter.” Truong hung his head and gazed unseeingly toward me with tragic eyes. “He has this incredible presence, yet he has no fucking pretensions, know what I mean?”

I knew exactly what he meant. Carter had created this alternate persona—this man who’s so tough that he doesn’t care about anyone. But deep down, he really does care.

“So tell me,” said Truong, draping a comforting arm around my shoulder, “on a scale of one to Adele, how bad was your breakup with Carter?”

I smiled wanly, feeling more depressed by the second. “We were never together.”

Truong gave my shoulder an affectionate squeeze. “Keep telling yourself that, darling.”

I downed my drink, facing up to the painful realization that I had always wished deep down that Carter understood how I had felt about him.

But now it was too late.

Oh well, I reflected bitterly. Rejection City always welcomed me with open arms.

Chapter Twenty Five



“These rings symbolize your union. An unbroken circle of love to be worn all the days so long as you both shall live. May the spirit of love bless these rings and may they be a true symbol of the love of the one who gives it, and the one who wears it.” After a dramatic pause, the minister turned so he was facing Mika. “Mika, please repeat after me. Maddy, I give you this ring as a part of me.”

“Maddy.” Mika gazed lovingly into Maddy’s eyes. “I give you this ring as a part of me.”

With an imperceptible nod, the minister continued, “Not to encircle just your finger, but our whole being.”

“Not to encircle just your finger,” Mika repeated, “but our whole being.”

“I give you this ring,” said the minister, “as a sign of my love and faithfulness.”

“I give you this ring.” Mika’s eyes crinkled. “As a sign of my *undying* love and faithfulness.”

Quiet laughter greeted his vows and Maddy smiled at her betrothed with misty eyes.

“In doing this,” finished the minister, “I take you as my wife.”

“In doing this.” Mika’s voice was firm and confident. “I take you as my wife.”

The minister then turned to Maddy and had her repeat the same vows.

I gazed at my best friend, glowing with pride. In her silk organza Vera Wang, with her hair up in a soft, elegant chignon, she looked every inch the radiant bride. Then my wandering eyes settled on Inge. I couldn’t help but admire how her bridesmaid dress accentuated that hourglass figure of hers.

I sighed, wishing I could look like that. I was wearing the exact same dress, the same shiny green ball of satin, but I looked like a Bartlett pear. Not an Anjou pear, Bosc pear or an Asian pear, mind you. But a Bartlett pear—the King of pears.

The minister’s voice jolted me out of my reverie. The vows were now completed and he was waxing lyrical. “May you love deeply, laugh heartily,

practice patience, and smile often. May you dream together, grow, be crazy, give, give in, and trust to take. May you see many sunrises, listen to the rain, savor special moments. May you rediscover each other, listen carefully and always have open hearts.” He paused for a weighted second, then, “You may seal your vows with a kiss!”

Mika bent over and planted a long and lingering kiss on Maddy’s lips.

The minister raised his voice. “By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you, Maddy and Mika, as husband and wife!”

Over two hundred guests rose to their feet and thunderous applause erupted in the chapel’s walled garden.

“Hot damn!” Truong wolf-whistled. “Mika said yes to the dress!”

I choked on a laugh. I had to admit, Mika cut a fine figure in his red kilt and tartan. Bagpipe music filled the ballroom and I was eager to bust out some Highland dance moves. But first, as maid of honor, I had a speech to deliver.

I rose ceremoniously to my feet and clinked my champagne glass with a fork to get the crowd’s attention.

Soon, all eyes were upon me.

I looked around at the sea of faces and gulped. “Good evening, everyone! For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Karsynn, Maddy’s maid of honor, and I’d like to start by congratulating the newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Harkett.”

I smiled maternally at the happy couple as claps and whoops echoed through the room. “Thank you all for being here today to celebrate the beginning of their union. I’m afraid I’m not very good at writing speeches, so instead I’m gonna rap.” I paused a fraction and added with a certain amount of street-cred glamour, “I’m gonna rap freestyle. And, I’m going to need a little help from two very special people in Maddy’s life. Everyone, please give it up for Grandmaster Flash Truong and Inge E. Fresh!”

Amidst the flashing strobe lights, Truong and Inge jogged to the front of the dance floor.

I hailed a passing waiter and hastily handed off my champagne glass. Then I rushed to explain, “I have to do those hand gestures when I’m rapping.”

“Of course.” The waiter nodded gravely.

“Thank you!” I beamed at him and slid across the floor, coming to a slow halt next to Truong and Inge.

“Ready?” I jerked my head.

“Ready,” responded my posse.

On cue, all three of us slipped on our Ray-Ban sunglasses.

Signaling the DJ, I yelled, "Hit it!"

Truong and Inge began beatboxing to a steady hip-hop 'chicka-chickah' beat. Gripping the mic, I began busting out rhymes whilst doing the Mos Def Wave (arms lowered at the elbow, one palm outward, fingers pressed together like a Miss Universe pageant wave, but not exactly, moving my elbows to a steady beat as if to say, "*All right, homie, I'll make myself scarce!*").

*Life is the flower, for which love is the honey
And the road walked with love is such a sweet journey
That culminates with a wedding between the two
Who gather at the altar to say, "I do."*

I paused, allowing Truong to insert his signature grunt, "YEUGH. UHH-UHH."

*Vows are exchanged, and rings are too,
Sealed with a kiss, and topped with 'I Love You.'
The newlyweds then retreat to a honeymoon,
And Maddy comes back pregnant, not too soon,
They live happily ever after, as one big family.
And that ladies and gentleman, is the gist of my story.
Some of you are thinking, "Wait a minute, that never happens!"
But sometimes it does, when the stars align in heaven.
And every once in a while, fairytales become reality,
As love sometimes shapes one's destiny,
A perfect couple would be Maddy and Mika . . .*

Inge crossed her arms, bobbing her head to the steady beat. "YEP! YEP!"

And this rhyme for them goes something like this:

*The winds of love have blown the Asian flower,
To bloom in the heart of a Belgian stud forever,
The Cupid's arrow has struck once again,
And the lives of Maddy and Mika will never be the same,
For the love shared between these two,
Is like love never seen before, so pure and true.
Couples come and couples go,
As some marriages are just fo' sho'
But the both of you, I know fo' shor'*

*Will remain together fo-eveh mo’
For I have seen the two of you,
Holding hands and walking through,
Every experience, good or bad,
Every moment, happy or sad,
In times of sickness and in times of health,
In times of poverty and in times of wealth,
If there’s a piece of advice I can impart,
Don’t let debt tear you apart!*

Waving his arms, doing the Slim Shady chop, Truong grunted, “UHH. UHH. Till debt to you part!”

*I know the two of you will share much love,
During the times of all above,
For the love between the two of you,
Just gets better and better, all year through,
And this is not the ending of your love story,
It is the beginning of a special journey,
For I see many happy moments ahead,
As the both of you are destined by fate,
I see many children, five, maybe ten,
But that depends on how much Mika’s a man!*

Truong threw his arms in the air and slipped in a, “WHURRRRD!”

*I see many cars in your garage—Ferrari, Lamborghini,
Yeah right, those miniature ones from JC Penney!
Truth is, I don’t know how many kids or cars you’ll get,
But one thing I do know for sure is that,
I see Mika walking ahead to open the door,
For Maddy, even when he’s seventy-four,
I see Maddy whipping out dinner,
Even when she’s sick and down with a fever!
I see the both of you growing old,
With such a beautiful story to be told!*

Truong finished it off with a, “WAKA! WAKA! BOiiiiiii.”

Crossing my arms, I threw in a smooth, “SWAAAGGG!”

Our performance was greeted by rip-roaring applause. Somewhat pink around the ears, I turned to Truong and Inge, beaming. “We brought the house down.”

They beamed back at me. “We sure did, girlfriend.”

Having soaked up the applause, I cut across the floor, reached for my champagne glass and returned to the mic. “So everyone . . .” I paused until I had their full attention. “Maddy has always been my other half, but now she has found a new half. But I realize, it’s OK. We can be thirds.” Minor laughter echoed through the room. I looked over at Maddy and there she sat, a picture of marital contentment, smiling at me with tears in her eyes. Tears burned behind my eyelids and I almost choked up as I smiled back at my bestie. “And now, ladies and gentleman, please join me and raise your glasses to give a toast to Maddy and Mika.”

The guests rose to their feet, lifted their champagne glasses and cheered, “To Maddy and Mika!”

Shortly after, the DJ called all the single ladies to the floor. Ah, it was time for the bouquet toss. Most of the bridesmaids began limbering up with some aerobic squats, lunges and leg presses. Taking their lead, I removed my diamond encrusted heels and started doing some quadriceps stretches. Then I did some hip circles. In short, I stood like Wonder Woman and rotated my hips. Next, I started power walking on the spot to keep my heart rate elevated while keeping my joints safe.

“Psssst!” I heard Truong hissing from the sidelines.

I eyed him quickly. “What?”

“You need to stop doing that.”

“Doing what?”

“Power walking.”

“Why?” I sighed with a certain degree of irritation.

“You look like you desperately need to rush home and take a huge crap.”

He smiled endearingly. “Just saying.”

Before I could think of a suitable comeback, Maddy glided across the floor and stood erect with a bouquet of gardenias in her hands.

“You ready, girls?” She threw a quick glance over her shoulder.

Collectively, we hollered, “Ready!” and quickly got ourselves into a football huddle position.

“OK.” Maddy took a deep breath and raised both her arms up high. “On the count of three. ONE. TWO. THREE!” She flung the bouquet over her shoulders and it went soaring through the air in a perfect arch with all eyes glued to its form. I clapped my hand up to my mouth in horror as the bouquet

struck a crystal chandelier, sending it crashing down to the marble floor.

A collective gasp went up and then a reverent hush fell across the room.

While everyone else around me stepped back, I stood perfectly still, staring at the bruised bouquet surrounded by shards of broken glass. “Oh hell!” I cursed aloud. “I have to get it!”

“Wait!” Maddy’s voice halted me from behind. “Don’t do it!”

I threw her a saccharine smile. “When has telling me not to do something ever stopped me from doing it?”

Maddy sighed with heavy resignation.

Lifting up my skirt, I tiptoed around the shattered mess, my footsteps so light as to leave the smallest sliver of crystal undisturbed. Right as I was about to reach for the bouquet, it suddenly struck me—this was my Pippa Middleton moment! The moment her satin clad derriere stole the show at the Royal Wedding.

Carefully, and ever so demurely, I bent over, aimed my ass at my captivated audience and scooped up the bouquet, all while managing to look fairly come-hither I thought, given the fact that I looked like a giant pear in my green satin dress.

Smiling winsomely, I held up the bridal bouquet like it was some sort of Heisman trophy and the crowd screamed its approval.

“Oh God, Kars.” Truong giggled hysterically. “The lengths you’re willing to go to for a bridal bouquet. Don’t worry, after that little stunt you pulled, flashing your ass, I’m sure you’ll find your husband tonight.”

“It’s not even about that,” I declared with a huff of annoyance. “The whole thing just brought out my competitive edge.”

“Since when has bouquet-catching become a competitive sport?” Truong teased, stepping aside to make room for the hotel staff who were on their hands and knees, clearing up the mess.

I laughed. “It’s always been a competitive sport.”

Minutes later, the dance floor was spic-and-span and bagpipe music started blaring from the loud speakers. All around me people were dancing. The beautiful newlyweds, smartly dressed children, parents, grandparents, my coworkers, Truong and Inge, friends that I’d known forever. Closing my eyes, I let myself exist without a care in the world, spinning around to my heart’s content, tossing my head back and laughing, feeling my dress whirl around my calves. I probably looked like a complete nutter, but I didn’t care.

Out of nowhere a drunk guy came careening by, knocking right into me.

“Hey!” he said shortly. “Watch where you’re going!”

“Watch where *you’re* going,” I shot back.

“Oh, it’s you!” He leered suggestively. “The sexy maid of honor.” Then most unexpectedly, he began bumping and grinding on me like a complete buffoon.

Sheesh. This man was seriously oversexed and he was giving me serial rapist red flags. I tried to walk away but he grabbed me roughly by the arm and began gyrating his hips. “Dance with me, woman!” he ordered.

I made a moue of discontent but despite my reluctance, he refused to let me go. I floundered with an air of helplessness and that’s when I spotted Carter, cutting purposefully across the floor, advancing on us like a sheriff with guns blazing.

My heart swelled with pride. The sight of him was arresting.

I held my breath as Carter stood before the drunken buffoon. “I believe the lady wants to be left alone.”

Oh my God. I almost expired on the spot. His dangerously quiet protect-the-woman soap box voice made me feel all gooey and sentimental inside. My life was turning into a rom-com slash chick flick and I had this sudden, unexplainable urge to restrain Carter, pleading, “You won’t actually *hurt* him, will you?”

Carter moved swiftly to my side, putting his arm around my shoulder. “Are you OK, Kars?” He looked to me with concern.

I nodded, making a little fluttering gesture with my hands.

The two men continued staring at each other as if neither was particularly impressed with what they saw. Then the oddest thing happened. The drunken buffoon got himself in a guard dog position and lifted his leg over my hips as though he was about to mark his territory.

“Please don’t pee on me,” I said with a gurgle of laughter. Then I remembered I was playing the damsel in distress and quickly summoned up some sad thoughts and adjusted my expression so I appeared somewhat, um, distressed.

“I suggest you leave her alone. NOW.” Carter’s tone was still as courteous as ever but that courtesy cloaked an edge of steel.

Hmm. Silently, I thought—*I suggest you walk away before you live to regret it*—would have been a better line.

Eventually, the drunken buffoon backed down. He muttered something incoherent and sloped off, presumably in pursuit of hotter prospects. Or a

toilet.

What? He gave up that easily? I had to admit I was a little disappointed. I was secretly hoping the drunken buffoon would have fought harder, forcing Carter to valiantly defend the full blown attack on my virtue.

Carter turned his attention back to me. “You seem to attract trouble,” he said with a smile in his eyes.

“I certainly don’t invite it,” I said virtuously, the picture of injured innocence.

Then the lights started to dim and the DJ switched to a slower tempo.

Carter took a step closer. “May I have this dance?” His voice was deep and his gray eyes glimmered with a delivery that made my blood rush faster.

“Of course.”

He held me close, with his hand on the small of my back. I had no idea why he was here, and I didn’t want to ruin the moment by asking him.

“Your friend Maddy invited me . . .”

“I see,” I said softly. “How long have you been here?”

“The whole time.”

“Oh.” I could feel myself turning crimson with embarrassment.

“When you bent over to pick up that bouquet,” said Carter, his eyes flashing with amusement, “I got a good view of your *badonkadonk*.”

I laughed into his jacket. “Did you?”

“I did.” He laughed too. “An excellent view. And Kars—”

I gave up trying to hide my face against his shoulder and raised my head. “Yeah?”

“You could always switch careers and become a rap superstar.”

“Damn straight!”

He pressed his face closer to mine, our foreheads gently touching. “You were cute.”

“Cute?” My breath caught in a tiny gasp. I was mortally offended. “Oh no you di-uhnt! You mean I wasn’t nitroglycerin, sizzlin’ and droppin’ more lines than a fly fisherman?”

His mouth curled slightly at the corners. “Maybe you should just stick to your day job.”

“Mmm.” I bit back a smile. “Maybe you’re right.”

We danced for a while, our bodies never fully separated.

“Thanks,” I murmured quietly, “for what you did for Truong. And Inge and Jenn.”

“Don’t thank me. I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know . . .” I trailed off. There was a small silence and then I said lightly, “Don’t you have a plane to catch soon?”

He sighed into my hair. “Where would I go?”

My eyes suddenly flashed, demanding an explanation.

Quietly, he said, “I’ve resigned.”

“You what?”

“I’ve stepped down as Senior VP of Operations.”

Taken aback, all I could manage was, “Why?”

He said nothing for a minute, then, “Me and the CEO—Ralph Kovacevich—we didn’t really see eye to eye. Never have, actually. The way Ralph wants to run the company . . .” He stopped and gave a bitter laugh. “Put it this way, he wants me to increase operational efficiency and profits by cutting back more jobs. In his demented world, there’d only be executives and shareholders.”

“But you can’t just quit, Carter. That’s crazy! Reckless!”

Firmly, but just as quietly, he said, “It’s not reckless, Kars. I’m taking a risk. A calculated risk.”

“What sort of risk are you talking about?” I asked faintly.

“I’m going to head my own private equity investment and advisory firm. It will focus on start-up companies.”

“What kind of start-ups?” My mind was buzzing with questions.

“Mainly R&D. Contrary to what you think, Kars, I don’t enjoy putting people in the unemployment line. But neither am I in favor of corporate charity. And if I want to help keep jobs here, then I have to help invent jobs that don’t yet exist.”

“B-but,” I stammered. “What made you change your mind?”

He gazed steadily at me. “You.”

“Me?” I asked in wonder, my throat clogged.

“You,” he said once more. “I’ve been thinking a lot about our conversations . . .”

I swallowed hard and spoke almost inaudibly, “Oh yeah?”

“I see it now. All this time . . . I’ve been making a living, but I haven’t been making much of my life.” He ran a finger along my cheek, regarding me with such tenderness my heart skipped a beat. “And what you said about my grandfather . . . you were right. He would have been disappointed in me. I owe it to him. I owe it to myself. And I’m not saying outsourcing is wrong.

It's an issue of competing interests—whose interests should be better served, ours or theirs. I've wrestled with this, Kars. Back and forth. The thing is . . . all these corporations have no conscience and the people running them, who presumably have a conscience, have no liability. So they do whatever the fuck they want. And I'm tired of the bullshit. I'm tired. I just want to do what feels right."

His jaded eyes cut right through me. He sounded so hard on himself, so torn. I held out my hand to put a stop to it, but he was determined to plough on. "Look, Kars. I can't predict the future. I can only try and make this corner of my world secure. And I want you in my corner, Kars. I *need* you in my corner."

I stared at him apprehensively.

Carter stared back at me and if I didn't know him better, I'd have said that he looked a little nervous. He shifted his weight, cleared his throat. "I'd like you to come work for me." His words seemed to hang in the air. "Be my right-hand man."

"Right-hand woman," I said in a low voice, though my heart was lifting.

"Right-hand woman," he amended.

"Mmm." I concealed my fluttering emotions behind a casual expression of indifference. "Would I have my own office?" I asked with an air of nonchalance.

"Your very own," he said, drawing me closer. "With a view."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

He gave me a slow and lazy grin that shined from his eyes. "Maybe."

"And this new job . . ." I coughed lightly. "Would it entail having to sleep with the boss?"

His eyes turned warm and tender. "Only if you want to," he said gently.

I could scarcely breathe. At this point, our bodies were pressed so close together we were practically transmogrified into Siamese twins. But I was OK with that. I felt pleurably trapped.

"What do *you* want?" I asked in a small voice.

"I just want to spend as much time with you as possible," he murmured, holding me tight.

"I suppose I'm OK with that," I said, amazed that my voice was coming out properly.

For a while all we did was stare intensely at each other, seeing nothing, yet

seeing everything.

“But right now . . .” said Carter, keeping those beautiful gray eyes fixed on mine, “I want to sweep you up and carry you away to a deserted cabin somewhere in the mountains and make love to you all day and all night.”

There was silence as our eyes locked and I felt an unwilling grin spread across my face. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

The private cabin sat on twenty-three acres of forested paradise with beautiful views all around. But the only view I had eyes for happened to be stretched out in bed beside me.

Carter pressed his mouth to the hollow of my throat. “How was it?”

I propped myself up on my elbows, upon his chest. “A lady never kisses and tells.”

He slid his hands along my arms, leaving a trail of sensation in their wake. “I’ll make this simple for you. On a scale of one to five, with five being ‘very satisfied,’ four being ‘somewhat satisfied,’ three being ‘neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,’ two being ‘somewhat dissatisfied,’ and one being ‘very dissatisfied,’ how did I do?”

“Mmm.” I pursed my lips thoughtfully. “I’ll have to say you were a three.”

Carter flopped back onto the pillow. “You were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied?” He clutched his heart theatrically. “Dagger to the heart.”

“Well . . .” I snaked an arm around his waist. “All that means is that there’s more room for improvement.”

He looked me up and down very slowly, his eyes travelling in unhurried thoroughness, making a quiver start from the top of my spine and go all the way down to my legs. “I’m always up for the challenge.”

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This novel reads like a season of The Office (with Ricky Gervais). I can really see this novel being turned into a sitcom on NBC and I'd be tuning in to every week to watch. ~Chick Litaholic

A hilarious comedy with some snark and punk. ~Kritters Rambling

AN EXCERPT FROM CONFESSIONS OF A CALL CENTER GAL



Beep!

“Thanks for calling Lightning Speed Communications, this is Maddy. How can I help?”

“G’day. Me name is Poida Woite. And I need some help with me password.”

How awesome! An Aussie from Down Under!

I peer at his name on my computer screen: Peter White.

“I can help Mr. White, but first—”

“Poida,” he interjects kindly. “Just call me Poida.”

“Okay, Peter,” I say amiably. “I’ll just need to ask you a couple of questions for verification.” And once that is out of the way, I tackle the task at hand. “Now you mentioned earlier on that you needed help with your password?”

“Aye mate,” he huffs in affirmation, like pirate Captain Jack Sparrow. “I’d like to change it to Inicondi88.”

“Now, Peter, let’s make sure that I’ve got this right. Is the first letter *I* like *igloo*?”

“Norrr, *I* as in *int*,” he corrects.

Int??? What the heck is int???

“Um, you mean *I* as in *India*?” I persist.

“Nyet! *I* as in *ipple*,” he says, agitation creeping into his voice.

Pause.

Now I’m even more confused. What the hell is an *ipple*?

“De fruit!” His voice rises with frustration. “*Ipple* de fruit! *I* for the first letter of the *ilphibet*!”

“Ohhhhhh.” I stifle a laugh. “*A* as in *Apple*. Yes. Gotcha! So you want your password to be *Anaconda88*?” I confirm.

“*Ibso-bloody-lutely!*” he exclaims with a mixture of relief and exasperation. My mouth twitches at the corners.

I reckon that they don’t speak English in Down Under; they speak Strine.

Peter chuckles heartily. “Bloody hell, Sheila, I was beginning to think ye

were a muppet. Ye dun't know i dunny from i bottom dollar. More is the pity, the great Ozzie vernacular is fizzing ind only i galoot like ye ne'er tire of diddling me, mekin me seem silly as i two bob watch."

O-kay, I didn't understand nearly half of what he was saying. Something about a puppet, I gather.

"Puppet?" I ask perplexed. "Did you just call me a puppet?"

"Muppet." He emits a throaty laugh. "Muppet means *idiot*."

An idiot? Who is the idiot here? At least I can pronounce the letter A. I'm sorry but 'A' is *not* pronounced 'I'.

Crikey! After that call, I have this sudden urge to throw some shrimp on the barbie. Perhaps I'll even adopt a dingo and name him Mitch. On second thought, I'll name him Poida.

The next day, I find myself staring impassively at my cubicle wall. Resting my elbows on the desk, I silently brood while waiting for a call. It's pretty slow today. It's the day after Valentine's Day or what I like to call 'Singles Awareness Day.' And all these couples are just too darn exhausted to call in after spending the night locked up in their love boudoirs, caught in the throes of passion.

No complaints here.

At least something good comes out of that evil day.

"Truong, your Mikquisha is taken," I say sullenly.

He adjusts his silk scarf. "My Mikquisha? More like *your* Mikquisha."

"Nope," I say despondently, "not anymore."

His expression softens. "Oh, what's wrong, Maddy? Tell Mama Truong all about it."

After a pause, I say, "I saw him with a girl yesterday."

"Describe her," he instructs firmly.

"Gorgeous. Long stringy blond hair. A bleach-o-saurus and a tan-o-saurus and—"

He cuts me off, "I know who that bitch is! Orange Slut with Split Ends. Her name is Tatiana Green."

"Tatiana Green?" I snort briefly. "She's more orange than green. Her name should be Tatiana Tangerine."

Truong emits a gleeful chortle.

"But wait!" I cry. "How do you know her?"

Then I realize—how can he not? Truong is privy to everything that goes on

in this call center. He isn't called the ABC or the AP wire for nothing.

Truong studies his cuticles. "Oh, I have my sources," he says with candor. Then he whips out a purple filer and sands his nails with vigor.

A plume of nail dust settles on my desk.

So annoying.

Truong also clips his fingernails in the middle of calls, which I find absolutely repulsive. I personally would never floss, pick my nose, use q-tips, pop my blackheads or shave my pits at work. That is why it is called *personal* hygiene.

I'll be conversing with my callers, and in the background I'll hear the maddening *Clip Clip Clip Clip* sounds resonating in my ears, sounding very much like Japanese water torture. And before I know it, fingernail shrapnel will be zinging in all directions.

My work space is fraught with danger!

Seriously, I really don't think I'm overreacting when Truong's essentially sending large organic bits of himself my way.

I'm dreading the summer time; that's when he'll waltz into work in flip flops and clip his toenails. Ugh! That's the problem with Truong. He brings in his whole grooming kit and operates Truong's Nail Salon in his cubicle.

Although Truong's grooming habits bug the hell out of me, I'm trying my *darndest* to act like a tolerant neighbor. Well, that is until a fingernail scrap lands inside my mouth while I'm in the midst of yawning.

"Truong! Cut it out!" I sputter and spit out his nail. "Please, this is not Truong's Nail Salon," I remind him for the umpteenth time.

"All right, I'm done. I'm closing shop." He stows the clipper and filer away. "By the way, that's why you're supposed to yawn with your mouth closed."

"That's technically impossible," I retort.

"Whatever! Just cover your mouth next time," he chides, like it's *my* fault that his fingernail landed inside my mouth.

Moments later, Truong roots around in his Marc Jacobs man purse and fishes out a bottle of nail polish. After giving the bottle a good shake, he unscrews the cap and begins to give himself a manicure.

"Thank you for fumigating this place," I say with a trace of sarcasm.

He ignores my jab. "It's Chanel Vendetta," he intones like a vindictive vixen.

I check out his raven black nails. "Nice. Very Adam Lambert."

My gaze shifts over to his pinky. “Hey, Truong, why is your pinky nail so long?”

“For digging ear wax, nose wax and eye wax,” he says without missing a beat.

I make a disgusted face.

“I’m just kidding! Although I know that’s what you were probably thinking. Am I right?” He looks me squarely in the eye.

I shake my head but it’s transparently obvious I’m lying.

He dips the brush into the bottle. “It’s actually for good luck.”

“I see. But you know what some people will assume it’s for?”

“What?” he asks without looking up.

“Scooping up cocaine for a quick bump.”

This time, Truong looks up. “*Girrrrl*, I am no druggie! That shit does not fly with me. I’ve never done drugs in my life,” he protests huffily. “But you want to know who’s a coke head?”

Feeling a bit restless, I swivel my chair, spinning it round and round in circles. “Who?” I ask dizzily.

“Tatiana,” he deadpans.

I shoot him a speculative look. “How do you know?”

He shoots back one of his infamous *I-know-I’m-the-shit* sort of looks.

“Mama Truong knows *everything*.”

“Well, spill the goods then, Mama.”

He holds his hand up eye level and appraises his work. “She and I went to the same high school, and I caught her doing blow plenty of times.”

Intrigued, I lean forward in my chair. “Tell me more.”

“That Tatiana is one skanky hoe. That hoe slept with the entire high school football team *and* cheerleading squad.”

I give him a wide-eyed look of disbelief. “No way!”

“Way. Girl she so *did*. That chick is one hot mess.” Truong inclines his head, like he always does when he is about to impart some juicy bits of gossip. “She works in the cafeteria downstairs because she’s got a felony record. They won’t hire her up here. *No, no, no*. That bitch is gang-sta man! She’s done time in the slammer.”

“Time in the clink? For what?” I ask, astonished.

He blows on his fresh manicure. “She stole someone’s identity, and she got busted with a DUI.”

I let out a short gasp.

Truong shakes his head. "I can't believe *our* Mikquisha would go out with a stupid, skanky slut like that."

I can't believe it either. But Truong has sparked my interest. I need to satiate my ardent curiosity and find out more about this Tatiana character.

"Truong, when's your lunch?"

He glances at his Cartier. "Right now."

"Me, too. Do you want to go down to the cafeteria?"

He smiles a wicked little smile. "Hell yeah, sista! Let's go check out Tatiana the Tangerine."

End of this sample. Enjoyed the preview?

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