

The school bus creaked to a stop before the small, white bungalow. Children's laughter carried on the springtime air.

Inside the house, Annie McDaniel reached for the book bag. She approached her nephew, to help steer his arms through the bag's straps. She gave no warning before touching Dillon.

The moment her fingers brushed his arm, he darted out of reach. Struggling on his own, he positioned the bag on his back.

His rejection hurt more than it should have, especially since she hadn't prepared him for the physical contact he dreaded. It was a foolish mistake. He was a five year old whose world had vanished in a burst of gunfire. The experience had left him frightened, skittish, a mere shell of a boy.

Despite her disappointment, she forced a cheery note into her voice. "Better hurry, Dillon. The bus will leave without you."

The gentle warning prodded him out the door. Head bent low, he trudged across the lawn. He climbed the steps of the bus without a backward glance.

Annie offered a half-hearted wave. There was no sense worrying about when, or if, Dillon would heal. It was a miracle he was a part of her life at all.

The school bus rumbled away. From the house next door Miriam Di Nardo approached at a swift march, her helmet of salt-and-pepper curls capturing glints of sunlight.

They met in the driveway separating their homes. "I thought you'd already left for work," Annie said.

"On my way now." Miriam fiddled with her sedate gold earrings. She was dressed smartly in black pumps, a grey skirt and a matching blazer. "Ready for the interview?"

"I hope so." Annie smoothed down her pencil-thin black skirt, a recent find at a consignment shop. "How do I look?"

"Like a skittish colt. Ditch the nerves, dear. They won't leave the right impression."

"I still don't think this is a good idea." Even now, she wasn't sure how Miriam had talked her into applying at the marketing firm.

"Don't sell Michael short. He'll recognize your talents. You're a whiz on a computer, dear."

“Yes, and I own a greenhouse, meaning I’ll need Thursdays off. Why should your boss agree to full-time hours over four days, not five?” She couldn’t imagine how Miriam’s boss would react once he discovered she wasn’t merely a tech-head, but a business owner in her own right.

“Stop fretting.” Miriam gave her unusual and distinctive snort of disapproval. “The minute you start talking computers, Michael will want you on staff.”

“I don’t have a degree.”

“Who cares? You’ve taught yourself valuable skills in desperate need at Rowe Marketing. As for Green Interiors? Tell Michael about the greenhouse *after* you’ve gained his confidence.”

“I’ll give it my best shot.” She wished she possessed a shred of Miriam’s confidence. “I need to land a second job fast.”

“It’s not right that you have to fight for custody of Dillon.” Miriam shook her head with disgust. “You’re his aunt. He should be adopted by you.”

“It won’t happen unless I find steady work with medical benefits.” The insurance she’d cobbled together since receiving temporary custody of Dillon only covered the basics. God forbid if he ever became seriously ill. The bills would eat through her meager savings.

Miriam pulled her into a rocking hug. “Now, perk up. You’re a bright young woman. I’m sure you’ll land the job.” Drawing away, she added, “So I’ll see you at 10:30 this morning?”

“On the dot.”

“If Michael attacks with a dozen questions, just remember Dillon. You’re taking on a second job to keep him here in Fairfax with you.” Miriam started toward her car. From over her shoulder, she added, “Don’t let Michael scare you. He’s a hothead, but you deserve the job.”

Working for a hot-tempered boss *did* scare her—a little. “Is he intimidating?”

“Most of the time he’s great. But he doesn’t like Fridays.”

The warning lifted Annie’s brows. “What’s wrong with Fridays?”

Stalking into the men’s john, Michael Rowe decided there was something downright

malevolent about Fridays.

He despised how Fridays always brought unpleasant surprises. It seemed most of those bolts from the blue were disasters sent to derail him. He was a big guy—six foot, two inches in his stocking feet, and hard to knock down. Still, a staff of frantic employees could send the most stable executive right off the tracks.

From the last stall, the unmistakable sounds of retching echoed off the walls. A more sensible man would hightail it back to the sanctuary of the executive suite. Shrugging off the urge to leave, he rapped on the door.

“Bill, you dying in there?” he asked.

The toilet flushed. “Yes.”

“Hang on, buddy. I sent the new secretary out to pick up antacids.”

“You sent Bitsy to the drugstore?” Bill wheezed. “Are you crazy?”

Offended, Michael pulled back to glare at the closed stall. “Yeah, I sent Bitsy. So what?”

“She’s an idiot, that’s what. You never should have hired her.”

“She types eighty words a minute.”

“That’s not all she does.” Bill let loose a sickening belch. “Know why she needed a ride to work today? Her car is in the chop shop—third time this month. Haven’t you noticed it in the parking lot? The blue Mercury?”

“The demolition derby model is hers? I sent her out in the company car!”

“Good thing the Beemer’s insured. Bitsy’s young, blind and brutal on all things automotive.”

An image of the corporate BMW hurtling toward a tree accosted Michael. “Why didn’t you mention she’s a lousy driver?”

“It’s never come up. Hey, I’m busy puking here. Go away.”

On a groan, Michael changed the subject. “You shouldn’t let Violet get to you like this. Every time she cries, you puke. It’s got to stop.”

“Give me a break,” Bill shot back. “While you’re conveniently holed up in your office, she bleeds tears all over the art department. Which works for me, but then she heads for copy and scares the crap out of my staff. What is it with artists? Why do they fall apart every time they finish a project?”

“No idea.” Michael slapped the stall door in much the same way he’d slap Bill on the back. “If Bitsy isn’t back in ten, I’ll send Miriam out for the antacids.”

“Thanks.”

Returning to his office, Michael ran headlong into Terrence Kholer. Since it was Friday, Rowe Marketing’s lead artist displayed all the signs of full meltdown. Nuclear reactors couldn’t cause as much damage as Terrence when his core became unstable.

Terrence grabbed him by the lapels of his sports coat. “I’m going to kill Herman. I’ll decapitate him! Do you hear me?”

Michael tried shrugging free. “Slow down. What did Herman do?”

“He’s wrecked the computers again.” The art director backed him against the wall, an impressive feat given that Terrence had a slight build and the physical strength of a fashion model. “He lost ten of the images I was working on when he crashed the computers. He’s dead, do you understand?”

“Damn it, back off. Where’s Herman now?”

Terrence snapped his hands to his sides. “Don’t ask.”

“Like hell. Where is he?”

“All right, all right—he’s hiding under my desk. I heard whimpering.” The artist shot off a smug look. “It’s not my problem.”

Which, Michael knew, meant it was *his* problem. “Is he breaking out in hives?”

“Gads—his face looks like a pizza with a double serving of pepperoni. The eruptions are volcanic.”

“You scared the crap out of the kid again? If so, it’s *your* problem. Crawl under your desk and drag him out. And get him the calamine lotion from Miriam’s desk. You know where she keeps it.”

The mention of Michael’s secretary stamped fear on the art director’s face. No one at the firm messed with Miriam. One glance from her steely eyes brought order to any situation.

Terrence fiddled with his mustache. “You want me to fetch the calamine from the dreaded gatekeeper’s desk? Have you lost your mind? I refuse to go near her on Fridays.”

Michael offered his most surly expression, the one that usually brought instant submission. “Now, listen up,” he said. “I don’t give a damn what Herman did. He’d run

the computers just fine if you'd stop scaring the shit out of him. Drag him out from under your desk and get the calamine lotion. While you're at it, make Violet settle down. Is she still crying?"

"It's not my problem."

Irritation surged, but Michael battled it down. "Where is she?"

"In the cafeteria. Roaming makes her feel better when she's overwrought."

There goes breakfast. He'd planned to grab a granola bar from the vending machine before interviewing the tech applicant. No way was he going near the cafeteria now.

"Just take care of it," he snapped.

He walked away. To the left and right, employees inside offices chatted softly or worked at computers. The satisfying aroma of coffee spiked the air, mixed with the gardenia perfume Violet favored on her moodiest days. He didn't understand why Terrence's assistant chose an old-fashioned perfume better suited for someone's grandmother—it certainly clashed with her purple hair and punk rocker mien. Nor did he understand why the rest of the staff allowed the emotional girl to flood the cafeteria with tears when they ought to storm the Bastille and take the place back.

At Miriam's desk, within inches of the relative safety of his office, he spotted the new secretary shrinking into the wall. Bitsy's mousey hair looked wind blown. Recalling Bill's warning in the bathroom, he wondered if the corporate Beemer was strewn in pieces somewhere in Fairfax.

From behind thick glasses, Bitsy's eyes widened with the sort of quivering apology he knew he didn't wish to hear.

"Mr. Rowe—"

He held up a hand, silencing her. To Miriam, he said, "Notify the insurance company."

She picked up the phone. "I've already checked the company deductible."

"Good deal." He turned to Bitsy. "Did you get the antacids for Bill?"

"Yes, sir," she squeaked.

"He's in the men's john." When the secretary paled, he gave her the full force of his gaze. Confident he'd rendered her mute, he added, "March in there and slide it under the stall. Get moving."

After the girl stumbled off, he asked Miriam, “Has she arrived?”

“She’s waiting. Her resume is on your desk.”

Michael went inside the massive cave he called an office. If wide, open spaces and lavish accouterments were the ticket to intimidating employees he figured he’d done himself right. A slab of granite served as his desk. A wet bar was tucked into miles of cabinetry. The carpets underfoot were thick and inviting. He strode across with his frustration rising.

There wasn’t time today to waste interviewing Miriam’s friend for the post of Systems Analyst and General Dragon Slayer. He needed a Titan, some guy with an I.Q. of 200 and enough computer savvy to get the damn computers running and keep them running.

His patience thinning, he strode past the woman seated before his massive desk. He dropped into his chair without giving her so much as a once-over. He’d grown tired of interviews. Not one applicant had been qualified. He’d already decided to fly up to New York City with a stellar pay and benefits package, and steal an IT pro from one of the national ad agencies.

When he looked up, Annie McDaniel returned his gaze with a level examination from blue-green eyes. Mythical eyes of a compelling hue—green one moment, blue the next. Her skin was a translucent sheath framed by blonde hair, her features delicate and her mouth so pink that it called up an image of spring’s first rose. He was still appreciating her eye-popping beauty when he realized she was waiting for him to speak.

“You’re Annie McDaniel,” he remarked, stupidly.

“Yes.”

“Friend of Miriam’s, right?”

“I live next door.”

“You’d like to work in marketing?”

“That’s the plan.”

He dragged his hand across his scalp before drawing his attention to her resume.

“Says here you work at . . . a greenhouse. Green Interiors.”

He looked up in time to see her swallow hard. “Green Interiors offers horticultural design services to Virginia businesses,” she said. “We bring in plants to soften the look of

an office. Studies show that workers are more productive when surrounded by the natural world.”

He liked the way her lips got pouty when she grew serious. “No kidding.”

“It makes sense if you think about it.”

“And here I thought all my employees need is a good paycheck and a swift kick in the ass.”

The comment slipped out before he could check himself. She appeared horrified, which pleased him for reasons unknown.

“You aren’t serious, are you?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.” Michael rocked in the chair. “I’ll get back to you.”

Despite his sour mood, he liked how indecision relaxed the faint lines in her forehead and softened her mouth. Annie McDaniel was wasting his time but she sure was pretty. All she was missing were translucent wings and fairy dust.

His impolite appraisal sent wisps of pink across her cheeks. “It seems you’re in no mood to conduct an interview.” She gave a questioning look. “Should I go?”

A sudden, genuine smile lit his face. “I wish you would.”

She bounced to her feet. But she didn’t leave. He sent a silent curse to the mischievous god of Fridays.

Gingerly, she sat back down. “Mr. Rowe, I spent thirty minutes driving in heavy traffic to get here. I understand you’re busy. Would you at least extend the courtesy of reading my resume before I leave?”

“We don’t grow petunias here,” he replied tightly. “This is a marketing firm. If you’re ready to move up in the world, why not take your shovel and gardening gloves to one of the greenhouses in the area?”

“I have other abilities if you’d just read on.”

“I don’t have time. I’m sure you understand.”

She rose, and he sensed deliverance. Now she’d bolt for the door. They always did. It was nothing to be proud of, but he’d perfected the art of closing the interview.

But his satisfaction was short-lived. A combative flush spread across her cheeks. She curled her fists, her knuckles showing white and her legs trembling the slightest bit beneath her secondhand skirt. Hell, this was new. Never before had an applicant mustered

the courage to stand up to him. The disappointment in her eyes had been replaced by . . . what? He wasn't sure.

Whatever it was, it didn't bode well for him.

She jabbed her finger at the resume. "Please stop baiting me. News flash—I have expertise with computers. It doesn't match up with the horticultural gig, but what do you care?"

The outburst was stunning. Floundering, he tried to form a retort.

He was still trying to get his neurons to fire when she asked, "Are you always this grumpy?"

He blinked. "Grumpy? Hell, I'm being damn polite."

"You're surly, actually. No wonder you can't find an employee."

He bristled. "News flash—I have fifty employees."

"You must pay well. Your personality wouldn't lure anyone into your employ. If you're always this temperamental, it might be more than I can tolerate."

Was *she* always this blunt? He leaned back in his chair, off-balance from the rude line of comments. "It's Friday, deadline day," he said, pulling himself together. He motioned to the door, thirty paces away. "Hear that?"

She lifted her nose like a hunting dog. "Someone is crying."

"I've got a puker, too. Down the hall in the john. Your buddy, Miriam? She seems all sweetness and light, but trust me—she's been ballistic since 9 A.M. I should douse her with Valium." He snapped up his wrist to examine his watch. "It's 10:42. By noon, some maniacal client will be on the phone scaring the daylight out of the secretaries. Rowe Marketing isn't the best place to park your gardening gear. There are easier jobs."

Her wispy, feminine brows rose. "Are you trying to frighten me?"

He saw no reason to lie. "You bet."

"I'd still like an interview."

"Then sit back down." Pleased by her spunk, he offered what he hoped was a malevolent smile. "You've got my attention. Thrill me."

She rattled off a list of software products she'd mastered and the social media platforms she understood. He mentioned the Rowe Marketing website, which picked up viruses so frequently it was on life support, and she assured him that old plug-ins were

probably to blame. *What's a plug-in?* An image of a hundred electrical sockets danced through his brain, with the mess of computers, printers and light tables all plugged in to keep his fussy art director happy. He pushed thoughts of Terrence from his brain and encouraged the valiant Anne McDaniel to continue, in part because her knowledge *was* impressive, but also because she was so nice to look at.

She had guts, he'd give her that. Most applicants showed signs of stress by now. Five minutes into one of his interviews, the average slob was perspiring.

He pulled from the reverie when she stopped. "Are you listening to me?" she asked.

For a split second, he struggled to get back on track. "Yes. No. I'm looking for a computer guy," he rapped out.

"Or woman."

"Whatever." He scanned the resume. "Your computer skills are self-taught?"

Some of her confidence evaporated. "Yes."

"No college?" When she rubbed her lips together in a fetching display of frustration, he set the resume down. "You seem sincere. However, I need someone with proven computer experience *and* the credentials to back it up."

"You're sure?"

"You bet. No degree, no job."

The comment doused the light in her eyes. Regret gave Michael a swift poke in the ribs as she mumbled a few words in leaving. She hurried out with her head held high, and he considered calling her back.

Ditching the idea, he got back to work.

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