

Excerpt – The Other C-Word

I dreaded Mondays. They always loomed up before their time, like some quiet, inescapable, energy-sucking demon. It wasn't because I didn't love my job or minded getting up early. They just seemed to signify the end. The end of another wasted weekend.

I finished my last-minute preparations to the sounds of Manic Monday by the Bangles. It was a cliché, but it was the song my younger sister Stevie blared every Monday morning. I hastily tied my combat boots and adjusted the cuffs of my khaki pants as I thanked the gods for the hundredth time that I worked for a casual company.

I was about ready to leave when my cell phone buzzed in my hip pocket. I did a stunned eye roll seeing Kathy Carver's name light up on the display. She was the executive assistant to David Henley, the owner of our company. I answered the phone hesitantly, wondering why she was calling when I wasn't even late...yet.

"Hello," I said, trying to coax fake cheeriness in my voice.

"Hi, Marley. It's Kathy Carver," she replied, as if I didn't know. She was all business except for the intermittent cough between words. "I need you to do something for me."

Oh boy, this couldn't be good. Kathy Carver didn't like me very much, so the only plausible explanation for such an early phone call was some sort of grunt work she was pushing off her plate and onto mine. On more than one occasion, she'd reminded me that she was an executive assistant while I was just a lowly assistant, although no such distinction in titles really existed at our small company.

"What can I do for you?" I surprised myself with the fake level of enthusiasm in my voice.

"I need you to pick up the consultant at the airport. You know, the one that's going to clean house." My face fell with the reminder that the dreaded consultant was coming today. The whole office was buzzing about the whiz kid from New York Mr Henley had hired to turn around our company. The consensus was that he would fire all our asses and move our production to China. Actually, it was fire almost everyone. People like Kathy were probably safe, but her not so subtle warning let me know I was not.

I worked at an athletic apparel company that also sold a budding line of women's clothing. Times were tight, and although we had carved out a niche market, everyone was worried about our economic outlook. The rumour was that this consultant was a last-ditch effort by Mr Henley to improve our profits. I was completely rooting for him, even if it meant I'd lose my job, which was most likely anyway.

"He needs a ride from the airport?" I realised immediately how stupid my question sounded when that was what Kathy had just told me.

I heard the sigh on the other line, supporting my own conclusion that my question was redundant.

"Yes, Marley, he needs a ride. I was supposed to do it, but I'm sick. I need you to get to the airport, pick him up and bring him to our office. Can you handle that?"

I thought about it for a second. Really, her question was... are you such an idiot that you can't do this?

"Um, sure I can do that. What time is his flight coming in?"

"In an hour."

I glanced towards the clock, tightening my grip on the phone. The airport was almost an hour away.

"I'll email you his flight info. I have to go now. I'm really sick." For emphasis, she ended the call with a few more coughs.

I ran to my laptop and printed the email as Stevie walked into my room.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked, placing my errant clothes in the laundry basket against her hip.

"Kathy Carver," I said, piling a few additional garments into the bulging basket. Stevie cast me her famous eye roll that could probably cut through ice—not owing to the Kathy Carver call but because I had so many dirty clothes in my room. Yeah, I could be neater. Stevie was the epitome of neat. What's more, she was a complete fashion plate. She had an uncanny ability to pair not just colours, but patterns together. Today, she was wearing a red and white fitted striped shirt with a grey pencil skirt and argyle hose. It sounds weird, but she pulled it off like the true creative person she was. Stevie's a graphic artist, and although she wasn't required to dress so formally for work, she always did. Her long brown hair was up in a Tortoise-shell barrette and it even looked like she'd deliberately picked her black rimmed Prada glasses for this outfit.

"What did she want, Marley?" Stevie put down the laundry basket to pet Van Morrison, her cat. I hated that cat. It was mutual. Stevie's boyfriend—well now fiancé—Adam, had bought him for her, because he felt there was too much oestrogen in our household. That cat followed Stevie everywhere. He also loved my younger sister Billie, and our mother. It was me he despised, even when I was being nice and feeding him treats. He would accept my offering, arching his back, showing off his orange fur in my direction, lulling me into a false sense of security. Then, just when I petted him, Van Morrison would hiss, claw my hand and scamper away.

Stupid cat.

"I have to go pick up the consultant." Stevie knew about him. We called him the consultant because I had no idea what his name was. Everything was supposed to be top secret, but my best

friend Dillon worked with me and always had the good gossip. It was Dillon that had found out the guy was some sort of business guru and had apparently saved many companies in crisis.

"Seriously, Marley? Are you wearing that?" Of course, Stevie would ask this question. We were as close as two sisters could be, but our fashion senses differed greatly. I liked to wear comfortable—what Stevie referred to as 'boyish'—clothes. My wardrobe mostly consisted of flannel shirts, jeans and T-shirts.

"What's wrong with it?" I asked, assessing my khakis and plaid button-down shirt.

"Do you want him to think you're a slob?"

"I look fine. I'm in the dress code."

Stevie rolled her eyes, "So? Don't you want to impress him? Maybe he won't be so quick to fire you then."

"Stevie, my days are numbered either way."

"Dress up...just this once." Her voice got sing-songy as she uttered the next words, "I'll let you borrow my Louboutins."

My mouth dropped open. Okay, I'll admit I'm a twenty-five-year-old tomboy, but I'm still a girl at heart. I liked to dress up occasionally and look good, usually in Stevie's clothes. She was very generous with her wardrobe, and we had identical body types. She was, however, prickly when it came to her designer stilettos. A chance to wear Louboutins made my mouth water just a little.

"Deal, but I have to hurry. I'm already going to be late."