

EVERYTHING
IS
PROBABLY
FINE

A NOVEL

Julia London



HARPER MUSE

Everything Is Probably Fine

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Chapter 1

Lorna Now

THEY CALLED HER KING KONG.

Not to her face, of course. In polite company, they said Lorna Lott was a hard nut to crack. One tough cookie. All business, no play.

Behind her back they said something else. Lorna knew this because she had a habit of striding into conversations around the proverbial watercooler. It didn't take a genius to know that when the conversation came to a dead halt just as you entered, you were the subject. But since she had a bit of genius in her, Lorna knew to slow her steps before entering the break room to catch the whispers and comments.

As best she could tell, the King Kong moniker had popped up after the unfortunate incident during the quarterly sales conference. She'd broken the heel of her shoe by getting it stuck in a grate on the way to work—a classic romantic comedy maneuver without the requisite hunk to save her. No one in the office had or would admit to having a shoe that fit her size 10 dogs. So Lorna hobbled through several presentations, and apparently her hobble gave off a gorilla vibe. Well, she couldn't help her feet. They matched her five-foot-nine body. Her late uncle Chet used to say she was built like a farmer. “Some of my favorite

people are farmers,” he’d add cheerfully.

She also tended to scowl, which probably didn’t help. “I’m not telling you to smile,” her boss whispered at the same sales conference, “but could you look less . . . mean?” Lorna tried. She really did try.

Anyway, they called her King Kong in the break room, and she tried to laugh it off and tell herself that it didn’t matter what they called her as long as they met their sales quotas. But she wasn’t unaffected by the name. She was not an automaton; she had feelings and very much wanted to be liked, even in her role as a sales team leader. She just didn’t know how to get people to like her. She’d been leaning into the awkward side of things most of her life, and now that she was in her forties, it was clear she didn’t know how to be un-awkward.

And there was the whole low-key rage thing. The vague feeling that she needed to clock someone for no good reason. She didn’t like that feeling, and she’d been working on developing a different mindset. She was a frequent visitor to the library, checking out self-help books. Edward, her favorite librarian, had nodded along sympathetically as she explained she needed to learn how to be more likable, and he’d directed her to guides that advised her to smile more, ask questions, and soften her approach with humor. Then when she told Edward she needed to learn how to harness a killer instinct to make more sales, he showed her all the books designed to help her reach a million dollars in sales or climb the corporate ladder. Those advice books tended to be a little more aggressive in their approach—work hard, know your product, don’t give up, *persist, persist, slay*.

She was very good at persisting, anyway. She was a goal setter. When she had the idea to learn how to row after watching one summer Olympics, she did it, right here in Austin on Lady Bird Lake. Create needle art? The angel on her cubicle wall was her

own creation. Sing? She'd absolutely nailed it as an alto in the community choir until Jed Faris took over and turned it into a show choir singing pop tunes. Lorna did not believe that choirs were meant to sing pop tunes.

The point being, Lorna looked tough, acted tough, and knew how to achieve goals. Sure, she could be a little hard on her sales team when they lagged behind the quotas she set, but it was her job as team leader to light a fire under their butts. That she seemed "mad" or "pissed" was just their way of deflecting.

Once, a therapist had suggested she work on being more in the moment and aware of how snappish she could be. *Snappish?* That hardly seemed fair. Wasn't everyone snappish at times? Wasn't everyone subconsciously mad about something? Sure they were—politics, gas prices, extreme temperatures, tornadoes, wildfires, ice storms, barking dogs. Social media, long queues, not enough cashiers. Zoom calls, traffic, poverty, high heels, skinny jeans. More ice than soda, more bun than burger, more noodles than shrimp. There were any number of things on any given day to set off even the saintliest person. Such was the nature of modern times.

But she was working on it. And in the meantime, she was trying very hard to be likable.

So when no one even made eye contact when she came back from lunch, Lorna thought through what might have upset them. It probably had something to do with the sales team meeting she'd convened yesterday. Their cubicles were built around a "discussion pit" made of couches that were too low to the ground and sprinkled with colorful pillows that smelled like mildew. In the center was a scarred table for drinks and pastries. The pit sort of looked like a giant flower. Lorna had gathered everyone together to discuss quotas because, as she liked to say, quotas were set to be achieved, not waved at as they flew by.

She'd indicated she didn't think they were working smart (she'd read that in a self-help book: *Work smart!*).

What else had she said? It wasn't *that* bad, was it? She was pretty sure she'd said worse in the past and they'd all survived. Why this should put their panties in a twist, she couldn't say. Except . . . except maybe she'd been a smidge harsh. Lorna was hard on herself, and sometimes she found it difficult to discern where her internal self-flagellation ended and her inappropriate comments during pep talks began. They tended to be the same in theme and tone.

Okay, she'd bring donuts tomorrow. People would forgive a multitude of sins if there were donuts, and even more if strawberry sprinkles were involved. She'd just pulled out her cell to check which delivery service would bring donuts when her office phone buzzed. "Lorna Lott speaking."

"Good morning, Lorna."

It was Deb, Lorna's boss. Unlike some of her colleagues who found their bosses to be insufferable, Lorna really liked Deb. She looked up to her, admired how she'd risen to the top of management with hard work and dedication. That was what got you places—whining did not get you anywhere.

"Could you please step into my office?" Deb asked.

"I'd be delighted." That wasn't a lie. Lorna popped up and briskly traveled the ten feet to Deb's office.

Deb was standing behind her desk. She was sixtyish, short and round, with a bowl-shaped head of curly gray hair. She always wore a pair of glasses on her crown and preferred a standard daily uniform, a move that was either genius or insane—Lorna could never decide. Black pants and a black cardigan or blazer. The only thing that varied day to day was the color of her blouse. Today, Deb's silk blouse was peach colored, with tiny little swans dotting the fabric. Personally, Lorna favored tailored suits. Her

self-help books had taught her that suits give an air of authority. Particularly dark colors. *King Kong*.

“How was your evening?” she asked Deb. They weren’t friends, exactly, because Deb’s large family and many children kept her from socializing outside of work. But they were friendly. They sat together at company meetings and often had lunch together in Deb’s office to talk about work.

“Good, thank you. Shut the door, please.”

Lorna hesitated. Deb never asked her to shut the door, and her trouble meter began to tick. “This must be about that raise,” Lorna said, and chuckled at her joke in a feeble attempt to gauge the seriousness of this door-shutting business.

Deb did not smile. “Have a seat, Lorna.” She gestured to the small, round conference table where they often had lunch.

This was not good. Lorna’s scalp tingled with dread. “We don’t need to sit, do we? I know you’re very busy—”

“Sit,” Deb said more firmly.

Lorna sat.

Deb took a long, deliberate drink of water, then came around from behind her desk and sat next to Lorna. She sighed. She glanced toward the window, which overlooked several massive transmission towers, and sighed again. “Lorna, Lorna, Lorna,” she said sadly.

Oh no. Lorna’s belly began to somersault. She hadn’t been fired from a job since she was a teen. Quite the contrary—she had worked her way up through employee of the month awards to sales achievement awards. Yet she had an uneasy feeling that something bad was about to happen. Her immediate thought was to head off whatever it was, to correct whatever mistake she’d made before Deb could act. “Is this about the new sales quotas?” she blurted. “I know they’re high, but you don’t win the blue ribbon for going easy.”

“No,” Deb said. “But the quotas are insanely high. We’ve discussed that.”

They had, but Lorna knew what her team was capable of. She drew a shallow breath. “Did . . . did something happen at the sales team meeting yesterday?” she asked. “I mean, I know what happened, I was there, but was someone . . . offended?” *Again?* she whispered in her head.

Deb didn’t say anything but emitted another weary sigh.

There was a fine line between assertive and mean, and Lorna had missed the line a couple of times. “I admit, I was a little annoyed that they hadn’t met this month’s threshold.” And she did say something that she knew was bad, but in her defense, she had not directed it at any one person. It had been more of a collective slander. “For what it’s worth, I didn’t call any one individual a moron,” Lorna said quickly. “I said it was like working with a bunch of morons. I didn’t mean to insult them, Deb. I was just trying to be funny and make a point.”

Deb looked dubious.

“Millennials, man, am I right?”

“You’re a millennial, Lorna.”

Right. She kept forgetting that.

“I didn’t call you in here to talk about the sales team meeting, although this admission doesn’t help your case.”

Her *case*? Well, that tipped her right into a small eddy of anger. Her *case* should be ironclad. She was the top salesperson at this firm. She pushed them, but it wasn’t like there was no reward for that push. The more sales, the more money they all made. She frowned, trying to think of what she had done wrong so she could fix it. That’s what she did—she fixed things, set everything to rights. Then she went home to her small apartment and ate frozen dinners and talked to her dog and fumed like any working woman in this country would do. *Think*. “The Auto-

Zone account,” she said, sitting up. That had to be it. “I had the team stay late last week to get the specs out quicker.”

“On the promise of pizza. Which you didn’t order until eight o’clock. People have lives outside of work, you know.”

Unfortunately, she didn’t really know. “I’m so sorry. I was attempting positive motivation.” She’d read all about it in her book about hitting a million in sales.

“It’s not positive when they don’t actually get the pizza until well into the night.”

“I’ll make amends to the team.”

“I hope you do. But that’s not—”

“Please don’t say it’s Franklin Industries,” Lorna blurted. She had everything riding on that account. Her promotion. Her bonus. Her raise. Her house.

Deb cocked her head to the side. “Are you okay?” She leaned closer to place her hand on top of Lorna’s, which, Lorna suddenly realized, was curled into a tight fist.

“What? I’m fine.”

“But it looks like you’re crying.” Deb gestured to Lorna’s face.

Damn it. She really needed to see a doctor because her eyes had recently started leaking all the time. “No, no.” Lorna grabbed a tissue from the box on the table. “Everything is fine.” *Probably.* “It’s allergies.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” She dabbed at her face.

“Okay,” Deb said, sounding uncertain. “I was trying to say that the problem we are having is you.”

More leaks. Lorna dabbed harder at her face. “Me? That’s crazy. I’m fine.”

“What about the email attachment?”

Lorna paused while her brain sorted through a dozen email attachments she’d sent recently. She found nothing offensive.

“Pardon?”

“The email attachment in which you . . . expressed some thoughts.”

She’d expressed some thoughts? What was wrong with that? Her thoughts were pretty basic and mostly about work. Or instructing others to work. Or what was for dinner, or when she could walk her dog, or what the guy who lived above her was doing at 10:00 p.m. on a Tuesday that sounded like a flash mob rehearsal. But she hadn’t put any of that in an email.

“Oh dear,” Deb said. “You don’t know.”

“I don’t know anything,” Lorna admitted.

Deb sighed heavily again. She reached for a plain blue folder on the table and drew it toward her. She opened it, flipped through a couple of pages, found what she was looking for, and slid the paper across to Lorna.

Lorna was reluctant to take it but forced herself to look down and read. She didn’t get very far because words started to swim. *King Doofus. Most Likely to Get Punched.* These words, *her* words, did not belong in this office. She’d written them in a letter she was composing to her sister. Her sister was her sounding board. Or she would be if Lorna ever sent the letters she typed, printed out, and stuffed into envelopes. But that was neither here nor there, because somehow, Deb had *this* letter. “I don’t understand,” she said slowly. She looked up from all the terrible words. “This is a letter to my sister. No one else was supposed to see it.”

“Well, you made it un-private when you sent it to your entire team early this morning as an attachment to the Franklin Industries specs email.”

Lorna’s heart nosedived to her toes. She felt suddenly sick—she’d been up at five working from home this morning, and both the specs document and the letter had been recently opened on her computer. When she responded to an email from the team

about the Franklin project, she must have attached the wrong file. “Oh no.” Her voice was shaking slightly. Her eyes burned and her chest heaved with an emotion that was so hot and toxic she almost couldn’t breathe. “No, Deb, you don’t understand—these were jokes.”

“Your jokes are not funny.”

Well, no kidding, looking at this list now. No matter how hard she tried, she could not be funny. “It’s . . . it’s something we used to do as kids. You know, make up superlatives for people.” Even she knew that explanation wasn’t very helpful. Lorna winced and looked at the page again. How could she have been so careless? She felt the blood draining from her face. And the faint but steady drum of anger that this had happened in the first place. “This is so bad,” she admitted. “I would never intentionally hurt them. Never, Deb. I didn’t mean . . . Listen, I will figure out how to make it up to them. I’ll—”

“Lorna.” Deb handed her another tissue, because apparently her eyes were really leaking. “I think you know you have a problem that needs to be addressed.”

That felt . . . alarming. Did she know that? Maybe a little part of her? “Look, I was careless, and I feel horrible, and I’ve been working a lot lately, you know that, because I really want the promotion to senior vice president for all the reasons we’ve discussed, and I let—”

Deb surged forward, placing her hand on Lorna’s again. “As your boss, I’m telling you that you have a problem. Now, I like you, Lorna. But this isn’t the first time we’ve had an issue with something you’ve said or done. It is clear to me that you have a lot on your mind and you need better coping strategies.”

Lorna was shaking her head. Maybe she was shaking her whole body. She felt like she was standing outside of herself, not really absorbing this properly. Not really understanding. She

kept a tight control of everything in her life and could not allow it to get out of control. Out of control was when bad things happened. “Are you firing me?” she asked, her voice scarcely above a whisper.

“No,” Deb said softly. “And I don’t want to. You’re really good at what you do and you could go far. But I want you to get help.”

“Okay,” Lorna said. “I will get help. But really, I probably only need some sleep.” Even as the words left her mouth, Lorna knew that wasn’t what she needed. Who typed letters to her sister going through the roster of her team? Who spent her birthday picnicking at Zilker Park with just her dog? Who couldn’t get invited to an after-work happy hour to save her life? And Deb, whose opinion she trusted, looked very skeptical. Lorna scooched forward. “I can see how things might look a little . . . disconcerting. I don’t mean to be this way, I swear it, Deb. I *want* to be their friend. I’m having a bit of difficulty figuring out how.”

Deb nodded. “It’s good that you recognize you can be a little . . . much.”

“Cringe, even,” Lorna added helpfully.

“I know you’re a good person, Lorna. But Dirk is not happy. He’s questioning my judgment about you.”

Dirk Kendall was the CEO of Driskill Workflow Solutions. He would have the final say about her appointment to senior vice president and the raise that would accompany it. Not to mention the signing bonus. All the things Lorna needed and had worked so hard to achieve.

“I convinced him to let me help. But, Lorna, you need to get your act together. Fortunately, at Driskill, we take mental health very seriously.”

That was debatable, but Lorna was not in a position to point that out.

“I’m putting you on leave—”

Lorna gasped as if Deb had just sentenced her to death.

“—and sending you to our new wellness program. You’ll be entering the day program at Bodhi Tao Bliss Retreat and Spa on the shores of Lake Austin.” She smiled as if Lorna had won a grand prize. As if she should be happy about this turn of events.

Lorna knew that place—she’d sold them their workflow software and then laughed bitterly at the thought of all those spa-goers walking around in plush bathrobes. That some people didn’t have to work and could lounge around all day made her a skosh furious.

“Their day program is called Leaves of Change, and it’s thirty days.”

Lorna’s mouth fell open. “Are you crazy?”

“I most certainly am not,” Deb said curtly.

“I mean . . . this isn’t like you, Deb. I can’t take that kind of time off. We’re about to finish Franklin Industries, and you know how important that is to me.” That was the sale that would put her over the top. The project that would get her the promotion and the raise and the bonus. The bonus that would enable her to put a down payment on her grandmother’s house.

“Franklin Industries will not be finished in the next month. We are just now developing the proposal.”

But she needed to be here to develop the proposal. This was a disaster. *That stupid letter.* Lorna straightened, making her spine stiff. That was something else she’d learned in her books—posture mattered. “I understand. But the thing is, I am very good at my job, and the team can’t really function without a leader. Also, I want to go on record and say that I don’t think any of this is necessary. I promise I will make amends. And I will work very hard not to be snappish.”

Deb did not look pleased. “The problem is that I don’t believe you can make proper amends to your team until you address

whatever is the cause of your . . . unhappiness.”

Lorna opened her mouth to argue, but Deb held up a hand. “It’s not up for debate. Human resources has already prepared the paperwork. All I need from you is the name of someone on your team who can head things up while you’re out.”

A seismic urge to beg or, conversely, to toss a chair through the window was building in her chest, pushing all the air from her lungs. It was impossible to explain to Deb how important her plans were. She had no other way to achieve her goal of buying her grandmother’s house. Well, except maybe adhering to the terms of the trust her mother had left for her, and that *certainly* wasn’t happening. Talk about a rage-inducing thought.

Panic like she hadn’t felt in years seized her. She always had a plan. She was always working toward something. That was all she did! She *worked*. And she tried not to say rude things or get angry with people who let her down, and okay, she needed improvement. But she did *not* need a wellness program.

“So . . . you need to gather your things and sign some papers and speak to your team to get the ball rolling. Okay?” Deb leaned forward in her seat like she was about to stand.

Lorna could hardly think to speak. “I don’t know if I would choose the word *okay*.”

“Listen.” Deb put her hand on Lorna’s again, which was now balled into a fist so tight she was surely cutting off circulation. “It’s going to be all right. You’ll be back before you know it. Take a few breaths and work through things. I know the last few years have been very difficult for you.” She stood and straightened her blouse with the tiny swans, signaling that the meeting was over.

No, Deb, this will not be all right. It will not be even remotely all right. She could feel the cracks spreading across her bubble already.

“Okay,” she forced herself to say, and then made herself stand

up too. “Okay.”

It was not okay.



Chapter 2

Lorna Now

LORNA'S ENTIRE TEAM SEEMED ALMOST GIDDY WHEN SHE announced she'd be taking some time off.

"Thirty days?" Kendra, the newest hire, asked with more enthusiasm than she had ever shown for work. It was practically a squeal.

Lorna affirmed it was thirty days, although she was already plotting how to shorten that time. She reluctantly named Lance (Most Likely to Microwave Fish) as the team leader. He wasn't the best salesperson, but he was the most organized of the bunch. Suzanne was determined not to let Lorna leave until she explained herself.

"I just don't understand why I was given Most Punchable Face."

"It was a joke, Suzanne. A bad one," Lorna said. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, but why did you say it about me?" She looked around pointedly at her colleagues. "Does *everyone* think my face is punchable?"

"I'm sorry to you all," Lorna said before anyone could answer. "I was just trying to be funny in a letter to my sister."

"What is funny about me looking like a serial killer?" Sheldon asked curtly. "What does that even mean? Is it my hair? It's my

hair, isn't it?" he said, running a hand over his old-style flattop.

None of the other team members made eye contact with him. They were saved from having to respond when human resources showed up. Beverly Rich, who was assigned to Lorna's team and who had "sat in" on more than one meeting, was grinning like this was a birthday party and she was about to blow out the candles. "Time to go, Lorna," she said cheerfully, and gestured to the exit.

"Right." Lorna picked up her things. "So listen, guys," she said as Beverly put her hand firmly on Lorna's elbow and began to steer her toward the exit. "I'm really sorry. I know this is sudden, but I will be back, and we will make our goals, and we will get our bonuses. Don't worry!"

No one said a word until the exit door closed behind her. Then Lorna heard several people start talking at once.

Was she really that bad?

She walked out into a blistering, bright day, her box in her arms. What, exactly, was she going to do now? She spotted Raymond, the guy who panhandled at the intersection in front of their building every morning, and walked over to him. She handed him her Driskill coffee thermos and the snack bag she kept in her bottom desk drawer for late nights. She was tired of Fritos anyway. "Looks like I'm going on a little vacay," she said.

"For real?" Raymond asked, taking the proffered items. "Never knew you to go on vacation."

"I know," she said morosely. "I don't know who will bring you donuts on Fridays."

"Hmm," he said, looking thoughtful. "I'll figure out something. Enjoy yourself. You deserve a break."

He had no idea. "Take care, Raymond. Mean streets of Austin and all that."

"Aw, they're not so bad," he said as he ripped open a bag of

Fritos.

She walked on, her box a bit lighter without that Driskill thermos that leaked half the time. Why give out thermoses that were going to leak, anyway? How did that say *staff appreciation*? It said careless, thoughtless, and cheap to Lorna.

On the drive home, her anxiety turned to nausea. This was a huge miscarriage of justice, and therefore, according to her self-help books, an “opportunity.” *Stand up for yourself!* She should have fought back. She should have admitted she knew she wasn’t funny, that she’d made a terrible mistake, and yes, she was easily annoyed, but that didn’t mean she ought to be put on leave for a month or that she had a problem. Had anyone taken the time to consider what they stood to lose in sales without her there? Of course they hadn’t, because that would have been her job. She knew, without a doubt, that she could peddle workflow software better than anyone.

She was not the problem.

She turned onto her street in Central Austin, where the old live oaks with their long and twisty limbs created a canopy. Halfway down the block, she pulled onto a gravel patch for parking carved out of what once had been a grand lawn. The patch held exactly four cars. Or, rather, three cars and one giant truck that forced them all to park so close they had to squeeze their bodies out of their doors.

That gravel patch was something else to be angry about. It was an eyesore before the beautiful, pink-brick Georgian home. This grand house had once belonged to her grandparents. When she was a child, her family spent weeks during the summer and holidays here. In her preteens, they’d moved in and lived here until her mother sold it. Then it had been chopped up into four separate apartments. That was before the paint on the wooden window frames had peeled and the trumpet vine had grown

wild up one corner of the house. Before the bricks in another corner had begun to crumble and one of the chimneys needed to be patched. Before that strange, musty smell permeated the central hall.

And yet, despite its run-down appearance, the house was still impressive.

She slumped down petulantly in the driver's seat of her car. Her breath had grown short, a sure sign she was getting rage-y. Her entire plan to buy back the house was in jeopardy now. She'd been saving for so long, since the moment she saw the For Rent sign on one of her weekly drive-bys a couple of years ago. She'd stalked this house like it was a cheating husband until she was finally able to snag one of the apartments.

Her great-grandfather, a honcho at the University of Texas in his day, had bought it when houses in this neighborhood were being built to accommodate the university elite. Both floors boasted a wide center hallway, constructed to encourage airflow in the days before air-conditioning. The rooms were spacious, the ceilings high and ornate. The floors solid oak. The backyard was deep and ran to a small creek tributary where Lorna and her sister Kristen used to catch frogs and minnows and an occasional garden snake.

When she and Kristen were girls, Nana would wake them up for pancakes and French toast, served with happy faces made using fruit and whipped cream. On spring afternoons, Nana would lay a quilt in the backyard, then serve them an English tea with finger sandwiches. The tea was iced, but Lorna still felt like a princess. In the winter, when it rained, Nana and Papa would create a scavenger hunt for the two of them, leading them to all the nooks and crannies in the house where they'd find little objects, like an empty Zippo lighter, a thimble, a deck of playing cards. When all the items were found, they were awarded

with candy and permission to watch their favorite TV show—*Full House*.

Later, after her parents divorced, Lorna, Kristen, and their mother moved in with Nana, who was a widow then. Papa had died from a lung ailment as best Lorna could recall now. Lorna and Kristen had the two rooms on the top floor at the back of the house. Kristen learned how to climb out those windows and down a tree within a few weeks. Lorna had been too clumsy and too fearful of falling to try.

There was an old tomcat that came by every day and slipped into a hole in the skirting around the house and lived beneath them. Nana was allergic to cats, so they'd never had pets, but Lorna pretended that tomcat was hers. She walked every day to a small neighborhood school while Kristen was bused to a bigger middle school.

Every Halloween, they had the spookiest house, all of them eager to decorate with ghosts and witches. On the porch they kept cauldrons of punch and candy. In the summer, their yard was the prettiest and most inviting—green grass, flowers in the window boxes, a tire swing beneath one massive oak. But the yard began to fade when Nana couldn't tend it anymore. Barn swallows built their nest in the swing.

Lorna had believed they would live happily forever in that big rambling house. But then Kristen ran away, and Nana accidentally drank herself to death, and Mom sold the house and moved them into a garage apartment, and this house was chopped into four apartments with cheap, tacky baths and kitchens added in.

Lorna now lived where the dining room and kitchen used to be. The space had been unforgivably mutilated, a bath installed in what had once been the large walk-in pantry. She intended to restore the house to its former glory when she owned it.

And she *would* own it.

Last year, her landlord, Mr. Contreras, he of the bushy crop of white hair and bushier mustache, mentioned he was looking to sell in the next couple of years, as the old house needed lots of expensive repairs. Lorna had told him then and there that she would buy it from him.

He'd looked down at her like a grand priest from on high. "Now why would a woman like you want to own a pile of bricks like this?"

She didn't know what a "woman like you" was supposed to mean. "It could be restored."

"Not without cash, baby. A *lot* of cash. The foundation alone would set you back twenty-five grand, and that's using one of my contractors. Not to mention the property taxes are skyrocketing in this neighborhood. Nah, you don't want this. No one will be able to afford a property like this except a developer. You a developer?"

"No. I sell workflow software."

Mr. Contreras chuckled as if she'd meant that as a joke. But she hadn't, because she was Not Funny. "Find yourself a good man and move to the suburbs like everyone else, sweetheart."

Well, that was easier said than done, and that was assuming she even wanted the life Mr. Contreras had prescribed. But she couldn't care less whether he underestimated her—she'd been saving like mad, pushing her team to the brink of revolt just so she could hit the highest sales mark. Thanks to her drive, everyone had made more money, and she was a shoo-in for senior vice president and its signing bonus and better salary, which, added to her savings, would be enough for a down payment on the house. It was a win-win-win-win-win.

Or it had been, until the egregious events of today.

She felt sick again. In a dull grip of panic. And furious, like she could pick up her car and hurl it down the street.

They couldn't just get rid of her, could they? For the mistake of attaching a private letter to a work email? That *attachment* was for Kristen! Which was doubly frustrating because Kristen would never read the letter. Mostly because Lorna would never send it to her sister in Florida, because she and Kristen were on a break just now.

Anyway, if that was how they were going to treat her, their *top salesperson*, then she should just find another job. That would show them. *Way to chase off your best talent, Driskill Workflow Solutions.*

Or . . . Or. She could at least consider meeting the conditions of the trust. But only as a last resort.

Her head was beginning to pound with the tension invading every inch of her body. She got out of her car and walked stiffly to the door. As she neared the entry, she could hear the thud of something hitting the house over and over.

Where once there had been a double door with twin side-lights, there was now a single door with reinforced glass and a keypad entry. She punched in the code and entered the building as another thud rattled the old house.

A stack of mail had been strewn across the console just inside the entry. Removal of the original door with its mail slot had necessitated the erection of a mailbox on the side of the house with four separate compartments. But, in the inimitable reasoning of the US Postal Service, they'd all been keyed the same. It had become the habit of the residents to empty all four boxes and dump the mail on the table for everyone to sort through. Lorna considered this a security breach of the highest order, but as Martin from upstairs had once pointed out, if someone broke in and stole all the offers for free window replacement estimates, no one would be harmed.

She found only two items of mail for her—both junk—and

moved on to her apartment door at the base of the stairs: 1A, as it should be. She stuck her key in the lock just as Martin came bounding down the stairs with a backpack slung over his shoulder, his over-the-ear headphones on his head. The red earpads made him look like he was wearing apples. “Hey, Lorna,” he said as he sailed past her.

“Martin,” she said crisply. She had not yet registered her complaint about his marching band rehearsals or whatever was going on upstairs at night, but she liked to give advance notice of her displeasure. Not that Martin noticed—he was out the door before she could ask him if he wanted to know what was bothering her.

There was that thudding again.

She opened the door to her apartment and stepped inside, placing her bag on the chair at her small writing desk. “Agnes?” Usually her dog was waiting for her at the door, dancing around on her short little corgi legs. But the apartment was still.

She walked through her apartment looking for her dog. There weren’t many places to look: her space had been partitioned into a living and small kitchen area, a bedroom, and the intolerable bathroom. As she was on the ground floor, she also had an exit to the backyard with a dog door. Mr. Contreras had tried to charge her extra for that access, but Lorna had countered that the fact her bathroom was a closet ought to bring the price down. In the end, he did not raise her rent, and Agnes was free to come and go as she pleased while Lorna was at work.

The large backyard was available to all the residents, but until a couple of months ago, Lorna and Agnes were the only ones who ever used it. It was overgrown in some places, bare in others. The flower beds grew nothing but weeds now.

But then a kid had moved in across the hall from her. On the day he and his dad moved in, the kid had spotted her—or rather,

Agnes—when they'd come back from a walk. "I like your dog!" he shouted at her from across the lawn.

Of course he liked her dog—*everyone* liked her dog. With a curt nod of acknowledgment, Lorna had kept walking.

"Can I pet it?" he shouted.

Lorna stopped walking. She did not want to stand in the sun and humor the kid, but she also didn't want to seem like a witch. "It's not an it; it's a her."

The boy took that as a yes and came charging toward them. His dad, laden with two boxes, was apparently perfectly fine with his son petting a stranger's dog. He'd barely even registered them before disappearing inside.

The kid had round cheeks, blue eyes, and reddish-brown hair that was in desperate need of a comb. Sweat poured off him—not that he seemed to notice. She thought he was seven or eight, overweight in a way that made her ache for him because she knew from personal experience how cruel kids could be.

As he squatted down next to Agnes, his face split with a broad smile. "I love dogs. They are my favorite animal. But also sloths are my favorite because they're really cool."

"Sloths?" Lorna had recoiled slightly. "Sloths are no comparison to dogs, sir."

"What's your dog's name?"

"Agnes."

"Hi, Agnes. *Hiii*," he said, scratching her behind the ears.

Agnes lapped up the attention like warm milk, her bobbed tail wagging hard. The kid laughed at her eagerness. Then the man came out and yelled and the kid got up. "Bye!" He ran off.

Since that day, the kid was always in the yard, and if he was in the back, Agnes was with him. Agnes adored him.

Lorna suspected Little Mr. Sunshine was responsible for the thudding and went to the back door. She turned the lock and

then stepped out onto her small landing. Just as she did, a large object whizzed past her head, slammed into the side of the house, and bounced up and off again. She'd almost been decapitated by a soccer ball.

"Sorry!" the kid called out as he and Agnes chased after the ball.

"You should look where you're kicking," Lorna said irritably, but the kid was too far away to hear. "Agnes, come!"

Agnes ignored her. The kid kicked the ball again, this time sending it to the back of the lawn.

"Fine." Lorna walked down the few rickety steps onto the lawn, then followed the path that led to the creek. There used to be pavers here, but they were long gone. She could feel the heels of her sensible pumps sinking into the loamy dirt and wished she'd thought to take them off. The kid was squatting in the grass, looking down at something. And Agnes was beside him, digging furiously, kicking up dirt that landed on Lorna's pant legs until she thought to move. That's when she noticed a very big hole in a bald patch of the grass. "What's this?" she demanded, gesturing wildly to the hole.

The kid pulled the soccer ball out of it and looked up at her, blinking in the sun. "It's a hole."

"I see that it is obviously a hole, but what is it doing here? Agnes, stop that," she commanded.

Agnes stopped for a moment, turned her dirt-covered snout to look at Lorna, then gleefully resumed.

"Aggie and I dug it today."

"Why?"

He examined the hole as if searching for the answer there. Honestly! Like this house wasn't falling around them as it was. The lawn was so unkempt that a boy could see it and believe it the best place for a hole.

“Do you have a shovel?” Lorna asked, making a mental note of the complaint she’d submit to Mr. Contreras. *Children should not have shovels to dig holes for no apparent reason.*

“The shovel is over there,” the kid said, pointing to a small equipment shed that was leaning slightly to the left. And there was the shovel, propped up against the wall. So typical of the yard crew—they left out equipment that the tenants’ rent paid for to be stolen or taken up by young boys with bad ideas.

“But I found this really cool metal thingy.” The kid dropped the ball and looked around the grass, then triumphantly produced a green metal stake, the sort that plastic fencing was tied to.

Lorna stared at it. Then she stared at his red, sweaty face. “You found this and thought, *I’ll just dig a massive hole?*”

“It’s *really* deep,” he said proudly.

“So deep someone could fall into it and break a leg.” Not to mention it was just another thing she would have to repair when she got the house back.

“Aggie fell in, and she didn’t break any of her legs.”

“Is that right?” Lorna asked, her hands going to her hips. “Well, first of all, her name is Agnes. Second, her legs are so short they are nearly impossible to break.” She marched over to the shed and grabbed the shovel, intending to store it or hide it before Boy Genius got any more ideas.

“I forgot her name. Sorry, Aggie,” the boy said to the dog, and leaned down to pet her head. Agnes wiggled closer to him. Traitor.

“Where is your father?” Lorna demanded as she came back with the shovel.

“He’s at his job. Sometimes his job lets him come get me at school. But most the time I ride the bus. I get off at the corner and I walk home and wait for my dad. Kenzie wanted me to

come home with her one time, but Dad said I have to have permission.”

“Okay, well, that’s a lot of information I won’t necessarily retain,” Lorna said. “Second, you shouldn’t be digging deep holes for people to fall into and break their ankles.”

“Okay,” he said.

He was terribly agreeable, this sweaty, chubby kid. She studied him a moment. In her considered opinion, he was too young to be left alone. She felt something against her pant leg and glanced down. Agnes had at last acknowledged her, the one who bought squeaky dog toys and kibble that cost as much as caviar, and was licking the dirt she’d kicked onto her clothes.

The skin on Lorna’s neck began to tingle like it did when she felt she might scream. She was still holding the shovel, but instead of using it to fill the hole, she shoved the blade into the edge, filled the scoop, and hurled the dirt away. She did it again. And again.

She kicked off her shoes, hard, and they sailed across the yard. She could feel her hair fall out of the containment pins. She kept digging, fast and furious, tossing mounds of dirt, forgetting the kid, forgetting Agnes, forgetting everything but the rage that wanted to explode out of her head.

“Hey!”

She didn’t hear him at first, she was so intent on the hole.

“Hey!” the kid shouted again.

Lorna realized in a moment of horror how she must appear to the boy. He was probably frightened out of his wits. She paused, her mind racing around all the things she could say to ease any distress she’d caused. That was probably impossible—her chest was heaving as she tried to catch her breath. Her back and chest had sweated through her clothes. Her pant leg was sticking to her skin.

“Do you think there’s treasure buried here?” he asked excitedly. “Because the Indians used to live here. They might have buried something!”

Lorna paused to consider it. She doubted there was treasure of any sort, but she and Kristen had buried a box of coins back here once. “Maybe. We won’t know if we don’t dig.” She started digging again.

So did the kid, with his metal thingy. He didn’t last long. Neither did Agnes. And when Lorna finally gave up, her rage spent (for the moment—rage had a way of creeping back in when she least expected it), she dropped the shovel and fell onto her butt beside the kid. Her clothes were ruined. She was covered in sweat and dirt. And she wasn’t entirely sure what had just happened.

“Are you okay?” the kid asked.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? I’m *fine*.”

“Because you’re crying,” he said. “Wait!” He hopped up and ran to the back door that led from the main hall. He was back a moment later with a bottle of water and a metal box. He handed her the water bottle, then put down the box. She glanced at it—it was a first aid kit.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re crying,” he said again. He produced a small bottle of aspirin. He opened the lid and shook two into his grimy palm. He held them out to her. “I cry sometimes too, and my dad gives me these. He cries *a lot*.”

Weird. “I don’t need this, but okay,” she said, and took the two aspirin, washing them down with a grimace.

“Your hair is really big,” he said.

“I’m aware.”

“It’s like a superpower. Like Samson.”

Lorna snorted and took another swig of his water before wip-

ing off the mouth of the bottle with the tiny bit of sleeve that had escaped sweat or dirt. “Not exactly,” she said.

“You have to believe,” the kid said. “That’s what my dad says.”

His dad sounded like a dolt. Believing didn’t give you a superpower. “What’s your superpower?” she asked as she looked around for her shoes.

“I’m still deciding,” he said, and began to draw something in the dirt with his metal thingy. “My dad says you have to try different things to find out what you like. Hey, want to see my box of badges?”

She had no idea what a box of badges was but shook her head. “Maybe some other time. I need to clean up.” She rolled onto her knees and came to her feet, holding on to the shovel for support.

“Can Aggie and I still play?” the kid asked.

“I don’t know. Can you do it without being loud? Because you were being loud when I came out here.”

He looked surprised by this news. “*Super* loud?”

“Super-duper loud,” she said, although she wouldn’t swear to it in a court of law. “Can I trust you to stop kicking the ball against the house?” She bent down to pick up her shoes.

“I’ll be quiet. When we have quiet time at school, my teacher said I’m the quietest.”

Doubtful. “Congratulations. Just keep it down. I had a terrible day. And don’t fall in the hole—I don’t need a lawsuit.”

“Okay. Come on, Aggie!”

“*Agnes*,” Lorna said again, but the two were already off like a shot across the yard.

She returned to her apartment, pausing at the threshold to kick clumps of earth off her shoes. No sooner had she closed the door behind her than the kid kicked the ball against the house again.

She stood very still in the kitchen, her eyes closed, her fists

clenched at her sides. Then she stepped back to the kitchen door and watched the boy and Agnes. She'd been so happy playing in this backyard as a kid. Before everything went to hell. Nostalgia, warm and thick like honey, moved through her, filling her up. It was the good kind of nostalgia. Sometimes it made her feel sick, because not all nostalgia was good. But this was not that.

She watched the kid and Agnes long enough that if anyone saw, they might think she was being creepy. When the two went racing around the side of the house to the front yard, she finally turned away.

She heard a car door slam, then voices. Moments later, there was a knock at her door.

Lorna straightened her suit jacket, then remembered she was covered in dirt and sweat. She frantically tried to smooth her hair away from her face but felt it pop right back around, probably going off in a million frizzy curled directions. No time to fix it now. She went to the door and opened it a sliver. The man who lived across the hall with the kid was standing there, his arm around his son. She'd only seen him across the lawn, but up close, she realized he was bigger than he appeared at a distance. A little taller than her, and broad shouldered. He looked to be roughly her age, maybe a bit older, forty-five-ish, give or take. His hair was shaggy and long, almost reaching the shoulders of his plaid shirt. His eyes were nearly navy blue, and he was sporting an afternoon beard. He was good looking. Much better looking than the men in her office. Good-looking enough that she didn't want to look away. She could see instantly what the kid would look like when he was grown: barrel chested and strong.

He cocked his head to one side to see her better in the crack of the door. "Hi there," he said, and smiled. A very lovely smile. "I believe we have your dog."

As if on cue, Agnes trotted forward. Lorna opened the door

a little wider so she could trot in, but immediately returned to peering through just a crack. “No problem.”

He was still smiling, and she couldn't work out why. Was he just . . . friendly? “Everything okay?” he asked.

“All good here,” she said quickly.

He nodded, then put his hand on the kid's shoulder. “Can you say thank you for allowing you to play with her dog?”

“Thank you for allowing me to play with your dog,” the kid said. “Bye, Aggie!”

Lorna wanted to correct him again but held her tongue. She wasn't a complete curmudgeon.

“I'm sorry,” the man said. “I got caught up at work. I hope my son didn't bother you.”

“No. He's just . . . young.”

“That he is. Anyway, thanks again. Have a good afternoon.”

Lorna gave him a curt nod to indicate that as much as she would like to have a good afternoon, that ship had already sailed. She watched them disappear into the apartment across the hall, the man's arm around his son, the son chattering about (and she might have misheard this) missile launches.

She closed the door and turned around. Agnes had already melted onto the floor in a splot. Her nubbin of a tail began to wag when Lorna glared down at her. “Thanks a lot.”

Agnes kept wagging her cropped tail and added a happy pant to it.

Lorna's wave of nostalgia and any residual rage had already emptied out of her, leaving her numb. She glanced at the neat stack of letters on the console table next to her chair. They were all pink. All from her stepmother. All unopened.

Next to the pink envelopes was a stack of white legal-sized envelopes, all securely sealed with premade address labels affixed. Those were the letters she wrote twice a week, without fail, to

Kristen, but could not find the courage or forgiveness to send. Just looking at them made her eyes well with tears, which infuriated her. What did she have to cry about?

Unfortunately, of late, Lorna had noticed that she often felt like crying and couldn't say why. It was weird and stupid, and she operated under the assumption that if she ignored it, it would go away like that mysterious bump on her neck did.

But it was also weird and stupid to write letters to her sister she never sent. She avoided her father's calls as best she could, and when she couldn't, she kept them unpardonably short. Her attempts at humor made her sound like a psychopath sometimes, and the worst part of all was that she didn't know why she did any of it.

She didn't know why she was so closed off to the world. But she'd built and fortified a super-max bomb shelter in her that even she couldn't penetrate. The only thing she knew for sure was that living in a bomb shelter could get pretty lonely. Sometimes she really wanted to force open the door and have a look at whatever it was she was hiding from. Or missing. But mostly, she felt too scared to face it.

She looked down at her dog. "Come on, Agnes," she said, and started for the kitchen. She got some kibble for Agnes and a snack pack of Nutter Butter cookies for herself. As she stood there munching the cookies over the sink, she looked again at the stack of letters.

She turned away from them. A bone-deep weariness settled over her.

Maybe she would do this wellness thing. She didn't put much stock in things like that, but then again, she'd never actually tried it. But then again, she did not like to do things that made her uncomfortable. But wasn't she always telling her team to open their minds to the many possible roads to sales? Maybe she

needed to open her mind to the many possible roads to wellness.

It wasn't as if she really had a choice at this point. She needed her job if she was going to buy this house. Sure, she could find another job, but she'd put so much time and effort into Driskill. She deserved the promotion. And she didn't want to start over.

She polished off the last Nutter Butter and fetched her phone. She retrieved the papers Beverly had so gleefully shoved in her hand as she walked out the door this afternoon and called the number to schedule her first appointment.

Hello, Kristen—

Today I almost got myself fired because of a letter I wrote to you. Figures. Apparently, I push the team too hard to make our goals. Well, guess what? I have to push if I am ever going to buy back Nana's house, which we lost because of you. Happy now? And don't hand me Mom's old argument that it wasn't your fault but the fault of society and a lack of affordable health care. We all know it was you. You promised. You promised and promised and promised and you never did live up to your promises and now I have to go to a wellness thing. Thanks a lot.

PS: Saw there is a hurricane headed your way. I hope you have those hurricane windows everyone talks about.

Chapter 3

Lorna Now

THE BODHI TAO BLISS RETREAT AND SPA WAS ONE OF THOSE swank West Austin places, set on lush acreage on the banks of Lake Austin. In other words, it was for rich people. There were cabins for long-term residents of the program (Lorna wondered how long anyone would want to be part of the program. One month? Three months? A year?), all on the water, all with little patios, the length of a fishing line from the shore. There were activities like paddleboarding, yoga, and nature walks. Gentle music drifted through the trees from the same apparatus that provided the soft lighting, following people wherever they went. And a scent that Lorna found cloying—incense—smothered any other natural smells.

People wandered around in slide-on sandals and those plush white bathrobes that had made her angry when they bid the job. Servers milled about with trays of orange juice and green cleanses. The whole thing was so Austin that Lorna couldn't help but grit her teeth.

She'd worn trousers and a smart jacket to her first appointment because she was a professional. And a wee bit insecure. She certainly wasn't the type to show up at the grocery store or pharmacy in denim shorts, and she wasn't the type to wear

leggings to a place like this. But she was the only one dressed in this manner—everyone else was wearing loungewear. Everyone was way too casual these days.

The young woman behind the counter was all smiles and soft white linen. She had inky-black hair that hung down her back in a silky tail. Her skin, Lorna couldn't help noticing, was flawless. "Good morning," she said brightly. "You're Lorna Lott?"

Obviously. She had just given the woman her driver's license and paperwork. "Yes."

"Purrrfect," the girl said. Her name tag said Xandra, which Lorna guessed she'd spent her entire life spelling for baristas, who still got it wrong. She might have attempted a joke about the woman's name but, given her recent history, thought it better to remain silent.

"If you will come this way," Xandra said, and began to walk down a hall. "Did you bring a change of clothes?"

"What?" The first signs of panic erupted on Lorna's scalp in the form of aggressive tingling. "Was I supposed to?"

"Not necessarily. Some people like to change into something comfy."

Comfy? No one said prepare to be comfy! she silently screamed.

Xandra opened the door to a stark white room. White beanbags were scattered about the floor, and a few white chairs were arranged around small white writing desks. The room smelled of incense, and classical guitar music was playing faintly in the background, the sound competing with the trickle of a small water feature running in the corner. Lorna stepped into the room as a dark slash across this otherwise snowy landscape. *King Kong strikes again.*

She turned back to Xandra. "I think there must be some mistake. I am here for the wellness program."

"Yes, we have you down for that. This is where we start the

program. There are a few intake questions we need you to answer.” She handed Lorna an iPad. It was white.

Lorna handed it back. “I already did that over the phone.”

Xandra handed the iPad back to her again. “That was the initial intake. This is the more in-depth one.”

Lorna slowly, reluctantly held on to the iPad. She’d thought the initial interview was invasive enough, asking her height and weight and if she was on any medications. Why did anyone need to know that?

“Have a seat wherever you feel most comfortable and fill it out. Your concierge will be in to fetch you for the morning meditation in about thirty minutes.”

“I haven’t signed up for any classes yet,” Lorna said. “What do you mean, concierge?”

“Morning meditation is not a class. We start each day by centering ourselves. Everyone on campus is expected to participate. Your concierge will explain all.” She pressed her palms together at her chest and bowed.

“Great, thanks,” Lorna muttered, but Xandra had already exited stage left.

With a sigh of annoyance, Lorna looked around the room. The beanbags were interesting, but there was no way she was going to humiliate herself by trying to get up and down from one of those. She picked a desk and chair in the corner of the room, as far from the door as she could be, and swiped the iPad to get started.

The first thing the form required was a name, which annoyed Lorna, since they already had it. Same for her address. She wondered if Driskill’s workflow design was responsible for this crappy interface. She would love to give that smug engineer Gordon her feedback.

She answered more routine questions, dashing off her yes-no

replies with little thought, until she got to a group of questions that gave her pause. *Are you sexually active? What is your gender preference? Do you identify as LGBTQ+?*

Wow. Nosy much? She couldn't imagine what that information had to do with why she was here. Not that she completely understood why she was here, but unless they were worried about a venereal disease, she didn't think it was germane. They had some nerve to ask.

From there, the questions became increasingly intrusive. *Do you abuse substances? If yes, what substance and how often per week? Have you had any thoughts about harming or killing yourself in the last ninety days? Do you ever have any thoughts about harming or killing someone else? Do you ever hear voices? Do you sleep through the night?*

She had the urge to harm something else right this minute.

She continued down the list, dashing off *no no no*. Frankly, she wasn't sure what embarrassed her more—that she was not currently sexually active or that she wasn't cool enough to smoke pot. Why couldn't they ask something that would give them real information about her, like did she have a dog? Everyone knew that dog lovers were generally better people than those who didn't love dogs. Why didn't they ask if she took care of her mother when she was dying with cancer? Didn't that count for something?

By the time she finished, sharp pangs of regret for agreeing to this were shooting through her bowels.

A brisk knock on the door was followed by the entrance of a young man dressed in all white, his skin as dark as her suit. "Hello, Lorna," he said.

"Hello . . . you."

"My apologies, I should have said. I am Montreal."

Lorna blinked. "Not Toronto?"

Montreal smiled. "Montreal. My sister is Toronto."

"Seriously?"

"No." He chuckled. "I'm an only child. Have you completed the intake?"

She handed him the white iPad.

"Wonderful. It's time for the morning meditation. If you will follow me."

With a grunt, Lorna got up. "For the record, I don't actually do meditation."

Montreal merely smiled.

She followed him down another white hall and into a gymnasium. At least here, there were people dressed in something other than all white. But there were a lot of those fluffy white bathrobes wandering about too. And she was the only person wearing a suit. *Great, another fashion disaster. Just buy a few potato sacks and call it.*

There were people handing out braided mats. Montreal handed one to Lorna and invited her to sit where she felt comfortable. "I'll fetch you after our morning practice." He smoothly disappeared into the crowd.

Lorna felt conspicuous. Like it was obvious to the dozens of people in here that she did not belong. She would have felt more comfortable in an office. But she found a space and put her mat down, then somehow maneuvered herself onto it, even crisscrossing her legs while praying her tight pants didn't split.

There was a platform stage at one end of the gym, a lone ottoman the only thing on it. A man with a high bun of hair appeared through a side door, walked up onto the stage, then arranged himself in a seated position on the ottoman, his legs crossed, feet on his knees. He was not wearing white, but purple and green robes. A long gold chain with some sort of emblem Lorna couldn't make out hung from his neck. She sincerely

hoped she hadn't gotten mixed up with a cult.

"Good morning," he said. He spoke softly through a mic pinned to his lapel, his pitch a little higher than she might have expected from looking at him. "Welcome, everyone, and a particular welcome to our newcomers. Could we have a show of hands?"

Lorna didn't raise her hand. She didn't want any attention. She mentally tried to squeeze herself into a smaller frame.

The man with the bun looked at the few hands that had gone up, clasped his hands in a prayer pose, and bowed his head to them. "Our morning meditation is designed to help alleviate stress and center one's thoughts for the day's work ahead. Please close your eyes and empty your mind. Let your breath be your guide."

Lorna closed her eyes. Emptying her mind was impossible. All sorts of thoughts were ping-ponging through just now. *Will they let me leave here or is this a "Hotel California" situation? How long do we have to keep our eyes closed? Is anyone looking at me? What's the deal with his sorcerer robes?*

"Please begin by counting your breaths." He made a very loud inhaling noise that lasted forever, then slowly released it.

Lorna took a deep breath too. *I hate this. Why empty your mind when there is so much to think about? I don't have time to be here. Deb didn't have to make me do this. Man, my pants are tight. My leg is falling asleep. Did I give Agnes her biscuit this morning?*

"Breathe in, breathe out slowly," the man said.

Lorna followed instructions to let the breath reach her toes. Amazingly, she felt herself begin to relax. *This is how they get you. They relax you to the point you don't know what you're signing up for and then—whammo—you're literally drinking the Kool-Aid. How am I going to fill that damn hole in the backyard? That kid will probably hurt himself if I don't. Why do I feel so angry? I'm literally just sitting*

here.

It felt like the stillness went on forever. Lorna never did empty her mind of all the thoughts. A gong sounded, and it was over. As people picked up their mats, Montreal came to find her.

“Micah is ready for your assessment now.”

He led her down a marble-tiled hall, the sounds of more classical guitar and the sweet scent of incense trailing after them, to a room that was, surprisingly, painted blue. Inside was a glass-top desk and two white beanbags. Another water feature was running in the corner. The windows were big and the leaves of a tree outside scraped against the glass in a sort of soothing rhythm. On the walls were paintings of elephants and symbols Lorna assumed were mystic in some way.

“Have a seat,” Montreal said, gesturing toward the beanbags. “Micah will join you shortly.” He smiled and backed out of the room.

Lorna glared at the beanbag he’d pointed to. This assessment business seemed designed to intentionally make her feel out of place. First the meditation, and now she was in a room meant for either a princess or a hippie. It was clearly not meant for King Kong. But King Kong lowered herself in her tight pants onto a beanbag anyway.

The door suddenly swung open and a man with a long tail of salt-and-pepper hair down his back swept in. He was wearing silk joggers, a short kimono jacket over a Grateful Dead shirt, and thick, black-rimmed glasses. He looked like he’d just come from a tai chi class.

A pink manila folder was tucked under his left arm.

“Welcome, Lorna,” he said, as if they’d met dozens of times before. He walked straight to a hot plate and the teapot there. “I like to have a little herbal tea during these sessions. May I offer you some?”

Lorna eyed him suspiciously. “What sort of herbs?”

“I’ve got them all. What’s your pleasure?”

There was no pleasure in this, but she did like a cup of lavender tea. “Lavender?”

“An excellent choice.” He turned a dial to heat the hot plate. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Micah Turnbull, a licensed clinical social worker and an avid coach of life.”

Lorna was momentarily confused by his wording. “A life coach?”

“Personally, I think that phrasing is limiting, but yes, I am. Now it’s your turn. Tell me about yourself.”

She hated this. He could probably look at her and know everything he needed to know. Classic spinster story, thank you. “I don’t know what to say. I’m not really an avid anything.”

“Fortunately, that is not required. Just tell me a little something so I can get to know you.”

“Umm . . .” There was a weird rumbling deep inside her. She was pretty good at not letting anyone see her. Especially herself. “Not much to say, really. I just work a lot and that’s about it. I like dogs.”

He poured water into two mugs. “What kinds of dogs?”

“All dogs. But I have a corgi.”

“Great breed. What about a partner? Do you have one of those?”

She shook her head. Her stomach was beginning a slow churn. It always made her feel strangely guilty that she was in her forties and did not have a partner. She’d had them. Two, to be exact. And a smattering of dates in between. But neither significant other had lasted long, and the more time went on, the more isolated she’d allowed herself to be.

“Friends?”

She thought of Agnes and Deb. While she considered them

friends, she imagined Micah might not. “Not really.”

“Family?”

Okay, this was getting awfully personal, and she could feel her anger meter kicking into gear. She didn’t like to talk about her family. “I don’t see what that has to do with . . . this.”

Micah poured the tea, handed her a mug, and, holding the other one, sank effortlessly onto the beanbag facing hers. He wrapped long, tapered fingers around his mug. “So, if I’ve heard you correctly, you’re single, you don’t have many friends, maybe fewer family, and you work a lot.”

When he said it that way, she sounded pathetic. “That about sums it up.”

He smiled and sipped his tea. “That’s a bare list, though I think there is more to you than that.”

“Nope.” She sounded curt, and she didn’t mean to be rude. But she didn’t care to look more closely at what there was to her. She was perfectly satisfied with what she’d presented and had come to terms with this version of herself. It didn’t do any good to go looking around for other things to add. That could only make the picture worse.

“For example, you’re a good salesperson,” he said.

“Oh.” She hadn’t thought of that. “Yes, I am. The best at Driskill. And that’s not bragging—I’m just really good.”

“I have no doubt. You manage a top-notch sales team too. The best in the company is what I read.”

Well. She didn’t know if she’d go so far as top-notch. Notch, maybe.

“But maybe not always as effectively as you would like?”

Okay, here we go. “Gross understatement, my man,” she said, trying to sound chill. Sometimes at work, when he wasn’t eating fish and was being chill, she’d hear Lance say “my man” to his friends on a call.

“And you may have some unresolved personal issues getting in the way of effective management and interpersonal relationships?”

That was a strange thing to surmise and entirely wrong, and did he want her to be just annoyed, or was he going for furiously annoyed? “No. Everything is fine. Why, what did Deb tell you?”

“Deb?” He put aside his tea, opened the folder, and pulled out a piece of paper to examine. “Beverly Rich compiled the referral. Do you know who she is?”

“Unfortunately,” Lorna muttered.

“It doesn’t matter who referred you. It’s clear to me that people who work with you care about you.”

Wrong. No one at Driskill, save maybe Deb, cared about her. They were probably having a pizza party right now to celebrate her absence.

“I urge you to open yourself up to our process. The goal is to remove any internal blocks you may have to working effectively with a team. Or anyone, for that matter. And those who are able to remove internal blocks are generally much more forgiving of themselves.”

That was the goal? Dumb goal. “I don’t have blocks. I work effectively with a team. I told you, everything is fine. This is just supposed to be a break.”

He winced sympathetically. “But *do* you work effectively with other people? Because you said just a moment ago that you don’t.”

“*You* said I didn’t always manage effectively.”

He said nothing.

“I work effectively with them. I assign work and all the other things managers do.”

Still nothing.

She did not understand what she was supposed to say. “Okay,

I get it. I know they don't like me, but we sell a lot of software." There. She'd admit what she knew was true.

He nodded. "Wouldn't it be great if you could sell a lot of software and also have a good rapport with the team?"

Would it? She honestly didn't know anymore.

"I'm thinking a great place to start is with some exercises where you can learn how to connect with your innermost self. I like to use consistent meditation for that."

This guy was insane. She was already composing the email in her head. *Deb, thanks for trying, but the Bodhi Weirdo Place is not going to work for my particular issues.*

"The idea is to gain mental clarity so we can really tackle issues that you identify. As you go along in the program, we'll progress to some more out-of-the-box ideas to connect you with your inner peace and effect change."

Whoa. She did not like the sound of that. "Okay, hold up," she said, lifting her hand. "I've been to therapy before, and this doesn't sound like anything I've ever had to do. This sounds made up."

"Nope. Our approach has been studied and proven effective for people just like you. What we do here is one, acknowledge the need for change, two, contemplate why that change is necessary, then three, prepare to make positive changes before actually making them. In other words, we work on giving you the tools to identify necessary changes and then make them in a way that lasts. And then, of course, we'll work on tools to maintain those changes after the program." He suddenly leaned forward, his gaze piercing hers. "Lorna . . . do you think you need to change?"

Mumbo jumbo. She could feel her body coiling up. Did her company actually spend money on this nonsense? Was there any choice but to be here? "Maybe a tiny bit," she said, holding up thumb and forefinger to show how tiny the bit was. "How far

out of the box are we talking?”

Micah smiled again, which, she was realizing, was his way of deflecting. “That’s up to you. But I think you’ll like the direction we’re going. It’s all designed to help you help yourself.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” she muttered.

“For today, let’s get some background. We were talking about family—”

“No, you were mentioning it. We weren’t talking about it.” As long as they were pursuing clarity of thought, she was happy to clarify that she was *not* talking about her family.

“You’re correct. Let’s do that now.”

Oh boy, he was not taking the hint. Lorna put aside her untouched mug of tea. “Look, Micah, I appreciate that you’re doing your job . . . although I really don’t get your job, and that’s on me. But I don’t like the idea of getting too personal.”

“Are we getting personal?”

“You want to talk about my family.”

He shrugged lightly and took a sip of his tea. “We don’t have to talk about it. Perhaps you could just give me a general outline. Your mother is . . . ?”

She forced herself to swallow. “Dead. Cancer.”

“Oh.” He put down his teacup and leaned forward. “I am very sorry for your loss. That must have been incredibly hard.”

It wasn’t just hard. It was torture, misery, anguish . . . all the things. The burn of tears immediately sprang to the back of her eyes. It had been several years now, but Lorna could hardly think of that time without feeling miserable. “Yes,” she said. “I was her caretaker, and in the end . . .” She’d said things to her mother that would haunt her forever. “It was awful. I don’t want to talk about it.”

He reached for a box of tissues and handed them to her. “Then we won’t talk about it. Your father?” he asked, pivoting.

Her father? Another bad topic. “Umm . . . remarried. A long time ago. He lives in Florida.” Dear old Dad, who had come crawling back when it was too late.

“Any siblings?”

An image of Kristen popped into her mind’s eye. But it wasn’t the same Kristen Lorna had seen last. It was the Kristen of her youth. Her big sister Kristen, the lithe, tanned, blond, pretty Kristen she’d so admired. Lorna remembered always laughing then, with Kristen, at Kristen, around Kristen. Those were happy times. Her skin began to feel clammy. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been sick, but she was feeling weirdly queasy. Like she was at the top of a roller-coaster ride and waiting for the drop. “A sister,” she managed.

“And where is she?”

“Also in Florida. With my dad.”

“What’s her name?”

She swallowed down a swell of nausea. “Kristen.”

“Younger? Older?”

“Does it really matter?” she blurted. She was doing her best not to lose her cool, but this line of questioning was so . . . intrusive. She curled her hand into a ball and shoved it under a bent leg, trying to keep a grip. Micah simply looked at her, waiting for an answer. “She’s older.”

“And you and Kristen are close?”

Her throat was constricting, making it difficult to breathe. “No. Not now. We used to be. Look, I really don’t want to—”

“When—”

“We’re on a break!” she snapped. Was she perspiring? She felt so hot suddenly. She imagined dark stains spreading under her arms. She wanted to rip off her jacket.

He pushed the box of tissues closer to her. “Are you doing okay, Lorna?”

She grabbed a tissue. "I'm fine. There is something wrong with my tear ducts. Look, Micah, my sister and I are on a break because she's an addict, and her addiction has ruined my life. Is that what you want to know?" She paused to dab at her eyes. *What in the world?* Was she going to keep shouting private things at him? This was precisely why she didn't want to talk about it.

"Ah," Micah said, like he'd just caught on to the theory of relativity.

Like what she'd said meant anything to him. He didn't have a clue, because unless you had lived with an addict, you could not imagine how addiction could throw an entire family into a tailspin and how sometimes you really wanted to step out of the room. Or out of a life. Or out of your own body. "I really don't want to talk about it."

"Okay." He tapped on his knee a moment. "I can imagine it must be very painful."

"Enraging is more like it."

"It looks like we have a lot of ground to cover before we design a program for you."

"Nope. Think we covered it," Lorna said firmly, trying to regain her internal composure. "They are in Florida, I'm in Austin. It's all good."

"Okay," he said, and smiled again. But this time, his smile seemed piteous, and she had to get out of there before she did something terrible like smash her fist through one of his elephant paintings.

She rolled onto her knees from the beanbag to get up, wondering how she was going to get to her feet without humiliating herself. But she had no time for grace and poise. "I'm sorry, I have a prior engagement. I should get going."

"Sure, Lorna," Micah said. "We'll pick back up tomorrow. I've got a pamphlet I'd like you to read on the power of meditation as

a gateway to healing.” He leaped up like a cat and walked to his desk, sparing her the humiliation of sticking her ass in his face while she gained her feet.

He picked up a brochure and handed it to her. “I look forward to working with you,” he said. “And if I may, I think you have nothing to lose and everything to gain from this experience.”

“Uh-huh.” This room, and her jacket, and her life, was unbearably tight and hot. She had to get outside and breathe. “See you,” she said, and walked out of his office before a torrent of sweat broke from her forehead.

