

Screenshot

DONNA COONER

POINT

TO KATY, A BRILLIANT WRITER AND EVEN BETTER FRIEND

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-0-545-90399-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, June 2018

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll

CHAPTER ONE

SKYE

The man in front of me has three dead goldfish in a Ziploc baggie. He's wearing a camouflage T-shirt that doesn't quite cover his stomach and he's peering at me over the top of a pair of hot-pink reading glasses, as though I can solve the problem in the bag.

I can't. I just work here.

"The sign says 'Customer Satisfaction Always,' right?" he asks. "I bought them on Wednesday morning and they were like this on Thursday night."

Well, not quite like *that*. "Are they frozen?" I ask.

He nods. "I put them in the freezer. I wanted to preserve them until I could come back in the store."

Let's just get this over with. I ask, "Do you have a receipt?"

"No. But they cost \$4.68 each. They were on sale."

"So, \$14.04 total," I say, plugging the number into the service desk refund register.

"Did you do that in your head?" he asks, blinking at me.

"Yep," I say.

"Are you some kind of child genius?"

"I'm sixteen. Not exactly a child." I carefully pick up the baggie with just my finger and thumb. "And yes, I'm a genius."

Because that's why I'm working here at the Kmart returns desk.

He doesn't get my sarcasm. He smiles, embarrassed by the tears in his eyes over those dead fish. There is no ring on his stubby finger, so maybe the fish are all the company he has, and instantly I feel guilty. *At least you could get a cat or something. I think we sell hamsters. Get a hamster. Something with fur.*

"Sign here," I say, pushing the return slip across the counter. I smile back at him, and that seems to improve his mood.

"Smile more" is the first thing on my new to-do list. See, I was elected student council vice president this past fall, but next year I want to run for student council president. And just last week, I read online about how important "likability" is in a candidate. But likability is such an intangible quality. What does it even mean? So I did some research. Okay, I did a *lot* of research. And "smiling more" seemed to be a key ingredient. If I ever want to run for *real* office someday, I need to learn this kind of stuff now. I've always been a hard worker.

"Thanks," the fish guy says, signing the slip.

I notice that the assistant manager, Mr. King, is watching us from over by the magazine racks. Mr. King is only the part-time assistant manager. The rest of the time he is the faux barista and works at the store's snack bar. He is tall and thin, all elbows and Adam's apple, and he mostly smells like lettuce with a whiff of coffee when he twirls around, which he does a lot.

Who knew lettuce had a smell?

Despite his smell, Mr. King is not a bad guy as managers go. On slow late nights, he used to make extra frozen lattes and pour them into tiny little plastic cups. He'd put them out on a plastic clearance Valentine's Day heart-shaped tray and say they were samples, but he gave most of them to his staff. Until a cashier told him that was practically stealing. Mr. King is super active in the New Life Baptist Church. So I no longer get free caffeine samples and Mr. King has to pray a little extra for his generosity.

Thou shalt not give away too many samples of Frappuccinos. I Venti 3:14

I give Mr. King a confident little nod, to tell him I'm on top of this whole dead fish thing, but he just walks off toward Toys. I figure I'm definitely a contender for employee of the month.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," I tell the man across the counter. He gives a big sniff and pushes the pink reading glasses up his nose. I hand him his money back and say, "Have a nice day."

I'm supposed to say that after every transaction. I'm good at doing what's expected—it's my superpower. Sometimes people are good because they want to be good, and sometimes it's just because they are afraid of NOT being good. I probably fall into the second group.

After the fish guy leaves, I glance down at my phone under the counter. This is against the rules, but Mr. King isn't close by.

I open ChitChat, everyone's current social media obsession. The thing that makes ChitChat different from other apps is that you can't set your profile to private. Whatever you post is up there for all the world to see—unless you choose to delete it, of course. But the other catch? You can't delete any posts until fifteen minutes have passed. No take-downs, no edits. My best friend, Asha, says it makes you commit to what you post. I think she just loves the edginess of it all. Sort of like truth *and* dare all rolled into one.

I go to Asha's profile. All her posts include her signature hashtag: #IAMAshaMirza. Like people wouldn't know?

#IAMAshaMirza *running*.

#IAMAshaMirza *at my locker*.

#IAMAshaMirza *snowboarding*.

The latest is a video, posted right after school today. It's captioned #IAMAshaMirza *eating a taco*. And, if you had any doubts, she is taking a big bite. Over and over again. On an endless ChitChat loop.

Seriously?

Of course, I am quick to notice the undeniable differences between our lives. Because that is what the internet is for, right?

First of all, Asha's *not* standing under fluorescent lights in an ugly blue smock, next to a stack of too-tight jeans, a pile of sales flyers, and a Ziploc baggie full of three dead goldfish. She *is* wearing sunglasses and there is a lake sparkling behind her. Not just any lake—it's the lake she actually lives on. The wind blows her thick black hair off her face to one side, like those photos with models in front of fans. Only this is real. *Or at least as real as Asha gets.* Her short-sleeved shirt is pink with flowers and shows off her sculpted arms to perfection. Considering it's March in Colorado, she has to be freezing in that shirt. But it does look good on her. She smiles at the camera in that "I know I'm hot, but if you tell me that in a disrespectful manner, I will beat you to a pulp" kind of way.

I imagine posting a selfie—me in my sad blue smock, standing behind the service desk.

#IamSkyeMatthews stuck at work.

I smirk. No way. Asha would be furious if I stole her signature line. Besides, ChitChat is all about showing off.

I close out of ChitChat and check my email. I have one hope of escaping the Kmart service desk this summer. Her name is Senator Ann Watson. She is the youngest member of the United States Congress, and her Colorado office is

located right here in town. If she would just read my outstanding application answer to *Why You Should Be Our Summer Intern*, I'm sure I'd get a response.

But there is no email from the congresswoman or her staff. I sigh. Things could be worse. I could have only dead fish for friends.

Since I have a phone in my hand and haven't been caught yet, I pull up a picture of me, Asha, and our other best friend, Emma. The Three Musketeers. We've been together since we were ten. We couldn't be more different—inside and out. Asha is short and powerful, with brown skin, jet-black hair that frames her heart-shaped face, and bright-green eyes. The leader of our little group, she loves to do things other people are afraid of. She loves it even more if she can make someone else do these things with her.

Emma is pale, blonde, tall, and willowy. She can recite a hundred movie scenes from memory, but can't remember her homework. A little spacey maybe, but she's the heart of our group. I don't know who Emma would pick if she had to choose between me and Asha. I don't ever want to find out.

Then there's me in the middle, where I always seem to end up. The mediator. The politician. I have long, light-brown hair and hazel eyes. I'm ordinary. Not striking like my best friends are.

I decorate our faces on the screen with some silly filters and balloon emojis. Then I text the photo to Asha.

ME: HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

She answers immediately.

ASHA: THANKS. ANY BLUE LIGHT SPECIALS?

ME: HA. VERY FUNNY.

From someone who has never had to work even a part-time job in her life.

ME: HOW WAS YOUR TACO? ☺

ASHA: DELISH. WORKED IT OFF. JUST RAN 15 MILES AND READY FOR BDAY CAKE NOW!

Asha is training for a marathon. One of these days, I have no doubt she's going to lead some elite special operation to rescue hostages from a dangerous dictator.

Then I remember. *Oh, no. The cake.*

I text my boyfriend, Luke.

ME: CAKE?

LUKE: ALMOST DONE. MAKING GANACHE FROSTING. WILL BRING IT WHEN I PICK YOU UP.

Luke and I are the perfect couple. He likes to cook all the things. I like to eat all the things. Luke is also adorable,

with curly dirty-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a soccer-star body. He's my first real boyfriend. The first guy who ever kissed me in the school hallway—outside the band classroom on September 9. The first guy I ever went to a big dance with—the winter prom, January 27. The first guy everyone linked my name with—Luke and Skye. It has a nice ring to it.

Everyone says so.

I glance over my shoulder at the clock on the wall behind me. Two hours and thirty-two more minutes of price checks and broken blenders before Luke picks me up and drives me to Asha's for her birthday sleepover.

I've been looking forward to *and* dreading this Friday. It will be great to see my best friends, of course. But I'm worried our conversation will eventually turn to all the fun summer plans in the works. If Senator Watson doesn't respond to my application soon, my summer is definitely not going to be fun.

I slide my phone into my pocket. *Back to work.*

I watch as a customer in the toothbrush aisle selects a purple one from the top row. She pushes her loaded shopping cart with one squeaky, broken wheel toward the checkout. Harmony Heaven is the only cashier we have on duty right now. With a name like Harmony Heaven, she should be nice.

She is not.