

## *Chapter One*

I watch with fascination as the beads of sweat form on his forehead and he blinks nervously. My heart is hammering in my chest and I think I'm about to have a panic attack.

He shifts nervously in his seat and fixes me with a sympathetic look.

"It's not good news Miss Anderson. Unfortunately, we are going to have to let you go."

I just stare at him. Both of us are now locked in a staring contest as the information sinks in. The atmosphere is tense and stifling and I feel the shock take hold.

Mr Prendergast looks as miserable as I now feel. I almost feel sorry for him. He is just a scapegoat; the hatchet man, dealing with the dirt in the business and delivering bad news. I almost feel sorry for him - almost!

He coughs and stares at me with the expression of someone who wants to wrap this up quickly and remove himself from the situation he's been forced into.

I just stutter in disbelief; my voice shaky and weak. "When?"

He clears his throat and shuffles some papers on his desk.

"Today I'm afraid. You have until the end of the day to tidy up any loose ends and say your goodbyes. I would suggest making sure everything is in place and left neatly. You will be needing a good reference and we will make sure it's a good one if you handle this in a professional manner."

I bite back an acid retort. He must be joking. Not only have I been fired from the most mediocre job I have ever had, but he also wants me to leave quietly and with dignity. It's only 9.30 and I'll have to sit at my desk for the rest of the day, putting on a brave face and acting professionally, when I feel anything but. I manage to stutter, "Why?"

He looks at me awkwardly. "It's Brexit I'm afraid. It has claimed many casualties already and I'm sure you won't be the last."

I look at him disbelief. He has got to be kidding – BREXIT!! We're a firm of accountants for goodness' sake. We don't have one foreign customer. There is more work coming in than we can deal with; what a rubbish excuse.

He glances at the clock on the wall and looks at me with a brief expression of kindness. "I'm sorry Annie. If it were up to me, we wouldn't be having this conversation. You're a good worker and I will be sorry to lose you."

I look at him and feel the tears welling up as I register the kindness in his eyes. "What am I going to do now?"

He just smiles ruefully.

"Take it on the chin and carry on. There's nothing else you can do. This is just one of those things that happen in life. Whatever happens next will make you all the stronger. Dust yourself

off and start job hunting. A good worker like you will soon find another job and you may be happier for it. I will always give you a good reference."

He rummages in his desk and writes a number on a piece of paper. His cheeks colour up and he blinks nervously. Pushing the paper towards me he says quietly.

"Take my number, Annie. Despite everything, I want to help. If you need a reference outside of this place call me. You'll be fine, I just know it."

I smile gratefully and take the number. Pushing my seat back, I stand on shaky legs and summon up every last shred of my dignity as I say, "Thank you, Mr Prendergast. It can't have been easy for you either." I turn away, fighting back the tears. As I leave his dusty office, my mind is racing. What the hell do I do now?

Walking back to the office I think about my situation. This is a disaster. Why do companies always get rid of staff just before Christmas? Nobody is recruiting now so close to the festive season. After Christmas will be just as bad. I am now seriously screwed and I want to punch the wall and scream like a mad woman because I don't have a clue what to do next.

Instead, I reach the open office where we all sit and take a deep breath. My meltdown will have to wait; I need to get a grip and take stock of the situation

As I walk in, I notice nobody looks up. There aren't many of us and we all sit segregated behind our little partitioned desks as we set about our work. My little cubbyhole is just that. The worst position in the room, with the least amount of space. That doesn't surprise me. Most of the others have been here for years. I, however, haven't even made it through the probationary period.

The air is silent and I realise that everyone already knows. There is an unnatural quiet in the room. Everyone has their heads down and look busy. Most unlike the usual practice of looking busy, whilst doing anything and everything rather than actual work. It would appear the only one who didn't know this was coming is me.

Actually, I'm quite glad about that. As I sink into my spinning chair and grab the desk to stop myself from shooting off across the room, I think about what to do next.

I stare at the screen on my computer and try to make sense of the jumbled thoughts, all crowding for attention in my mind.

It's not fair! I have worked at Mackinlay-Sanderson for three months now. A Junior Accountant, with her first step on the ladder after graduation. It wasn't the best job but was a start. Today my three-month probationary period is up and I was looking forward to a bit of stability in my life.

Now I'm being tossed out into the cold streets of winter, to fend for myself in an unforgiving world. I don't understand why this has happened. Of everyone in the office, I am the hardest worker. Most of the others just whinge and whine and do everything they can to pass the buck. I have helped each and every one of them out and tried to make a good impression.

I sigh heavily. Well, they do say, *last in first out*, and that is certainly true in this case.

Suddenly the phone rings, making me almost jump out of my skin. I listen, as it invades my quiet contemplation and then realise that nobody else is going to answer it - as usual. I just lift the receiver and say shakily.

"Mackinlay-Sanderson, Annie speaking, how may I help you?"

An irate voice shouts in my ear. "Mr Brown here of Ransom's Hardware. Somebody was meant to get back to me about my VAT return last week and I've heard nothing. I've got the Inland Revenue breathing down my neck, for money I don't have. Now are you going to stop filing your nails, or whatever else you do with your time, young lady because you sure as hell aren't working on my account, and sort this frigging mess out."

Feeling suddenly light-headed, I just say firmly, "I'll just connect you to the person responsible for your account Sir."

He shouts. "I thought that was you. Don't tell me you're so useless someone else has been drafted in. I knew I should have gone with Rivers and Matthews, your company is rubbish."

With a sudden sense of freedom, I cut him off. I don't have to deal with him or his stupid VAT returns any longer. Let someone else put up with his verbal abuse for a change.

For the first time since I heard the dreaded news, I feel in control. I'm not sure what's happening, but the worm has turned and I've had enough. Standing up, I look around me and smile. "Coffee anyone?"

All eyes turn in my direction. They look at me nervously and nod collectively.

I head off towards the dirty little kitchen, making a mental note to inform public health of the bacteria filled time bomb, waiting to go off in this building.

Feeling like a strange, revenge seeking, slightly maniacal, cartoon villain, I set about my task.

I grab the dirtiest mugs from the sink – the ones that are wallowing in a pool of dirty water from yesterday.

Without rinsing them I set them up and turn the kettle on. I rummage around in the back of the cupboard and pull out the coffee that has been in there since 2011. Then I grab the milk that has been festering in the fridge since last Tuesday, ignoring the new Milk of the Day.

Then I proceed to make the rankest coffee known to man for every last one of them.

Since I arrived three months ago nobody has once offered to make me a drink. I have been the tea girl and general dogsbody to a group of people who have never made me feel welcome. I have listened to their inane stories and bent over backwards to help them out at every given opportunity.

I am always the first in and last out and often work through my lunch. They give me the worst jobs and blame me when anything goes wrong. I always thought it was because I was new. You should earn your place in the office hierarchy, so I just accepted the situation and strived for excellence. Well, look where that got me.

Grabbing the biscuits that nobody likes from the cupboard, I walk back to the office balancing the tray.

First stop is Margaret. A large woman, in her fifties, who always looks at me with disdain. She lives on her own with her cat and has every ailment known to man. She is a true study of medical science, and I have listened to every story of her fight against every health issue that one person can get. She sees me coming and quickly picks up her phone, pretending to speak to anyone

rather than me. She just smiles her thanks briefly as I set the germ encrusted mug down in front of her.

Next stop is Jason. Office lothario and the laziest one of all. He thinks he's a real catch and flirts his way through the working day, amid a sea of innuendo and what he thinks is flattery. It just comes across as sleazy and cringy and I'm glad I won't have to put up with him anymore. I smile as I set the mug down in front of him. He smiles and licks his lips as he studies me, with what he obviously thinks is a sexy look. Probably hoping for one last shot at a fumble against the photocopier.

"Thanks, darling, has anyone told you, you'd make someone a very sexy wife one day?"

I don't rise to him and just smile. "Yes, my boyfriend, every day as it happens. What about you Jason, you found the woman of your dreams yet, or is she still on your Christmas wish list?"

He smiles creepily. "Still looking Annie. The trouble is when you work with her every day and she doesn't know you exist, it's hard to find someone else to measure up."

He leans forward and stares at me creepily.

"Why don't you agree to have lunch with me and forget about that boyfriend of yours. You won't regret it, darling, I'm considered quite a catch."

I just smile and push down the feeling of nausea that threatens to explode, all over his shiny grey suit.

"Sorry, I'm a bit busy today. Maybe some other time."

I move off before I dump the rest of the tray on his smug, sleazy face. I won't miss him at all.

Next stop is Malcolm. The oldest one here who appears to have nothing else but work in his life. He keeps his head down and just nods as I set the mug in front of him.

Of everyone, he is the rudest. He is short with me and the most unhelpful man I have ever met. He appears to hate the world and everyone in it. He deals out the worst jobs that come into the rest of us, like a croupier in a nightclub. He takes all our ideas and passes them off as his own at the regular weekly brainstorming session with management.

Subsequently, he is in charge and has risen through the ranks with little effort on his behalf.

Another one I won't miss in the slightest.

Finally, I get to Verity. Middle-aged and into eighties power dressing. She sports an old-fashioned perm and still has shoulder pads in her suits. Her make-up has never changed, and she wears the highest stilettos and teeters around the office trying to look professional.

She is abrupt and cold and speaks in a put-on professional voice that sounds unnatural. Everyone is, dear, or love and to my knowledge, she has never married. She has always treated me like a moron and looks at me like a bad smell under her nose.

"Here you go, Verity. This should keep you going through those endless spreadsheets."

She doesn't even smile and just nods her thanks. Cold bitch!

I resume my seat and place the mug of germs in my desk drawer. That should fester nicely by the time anyone finds it.

Now it's time to wrap this up and tie up the loose ends as instructed. The first job is to sort out my computer files.

I drag all my important ones into a file named trash. I know I shouldn't, but I appear to have lost any sense of morality as the anger takes hold. Brexit indeed. I know what this is. My three-month probationary period is up and they would have to raise my salary. They obviously do this all the time, because to my knowledge, I am just another young recruit in a long line, who doesn't make it past three months. They use and abuse us and then let us go, making room for the next victim. The others are protected, given the length of time they have worked here. New recruits are disposable and weak, with the law firmly not on their side.

Well, I am not going quietly. Maybe they will think again next time they take someone on. It's time to make a stand.

Once the files have been hidden and coded I set about comprising my global email to - 'All Staff.'

*My fellow colleagues.*

*It is with great sadness that I must inform you that I will be leaving today.*

*Unfortunately, Brexit has claimed yet another victim and I am off to discover the world outside these four walls.*

*I have enjoyed getting to know you all and will think of you all fondly.*

*Mr Prendergast – You are a kind and decent man. You don't deserve the rubbish they throw at you and should really consider a new job. Of everyone here you work the hardest and will be the one, I will miss the most – even though you fired me!*

*Margaret – what can I say? You are a medical miracle and I will miss your endless tales about the state of your health. It was fascinating to hear the detailed descriptions of your many illnesses and you really are a brave soul. At least you have the comfort of your cat Freddy to go home to every night. I will miss your tales of the little guy and his fur ball afflictions. Not to mention the tales of his escapades throughout the day, as you watch him via your cat cam, that you have uploaded onto your phone. Your kindness towards me has been duly noted and you can feel pleased that you have managed to not find out one item of information about my life whilst divulging absolutely every last bit of information about your own - a true skill!*

*Jason – I will miss your constant attempts to get me on a date whilst you stare at my chest. I am sure you will move on quickly to my replacement, who may be more susceptible to your questionable charms. I am not sure how long it will be before they find out that you actually do no work and just continue with your quest in discovering the solution to the Rubik's cube. Btw, I mastered that in secondary school, maybe you should move onto something a little less challenging?*

*Malcolm – Always full of the joys of Spring and one that we can all go to for friendly words of advice and encouragement. Oh sorry, I mixed you up with someone else I once worked with. I have enjoyed watching you at our weekly brainstorming meetings, as you take everyone's ideas and then head upstairs to management and pass them off as your own. Such an admirable skill, worthy of the promotion you seek to the coveted third-floor management suite. Carry on passing*

*out the worst jobs to the rest of the staff, whilst keeping the best ones for yourself, safe in the knowledge that everyone talks about you behind your back.*

*Verity – So professional and a real role model. In fact, everything I don't aspire to be and hope never to see again in any future colleague I may work with. The last three months have been such fun, watching you stagger around the office in your 80s-fashion, looking down your nose at the rest of us, from the great height that your 6" heels afford you. Word of advice – Mason's Department Store has a fabulous personal shopper, who could even drag you into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Money well spent in my opinion.*

*Lastly management. Mr Mackinlay and Mr Sanderson. Two men who sit in their ivory tower, reaping the rewards of everyone else's hard work. Making such interesting decisions, such as the one that cancelled the use of the word Christmas and replaced it with Winter Season. How our customers must have applauded your sensitivity to the other faiths on your annual 'Winter Seasons' card. Oh, and not to mention the charity that benefitted from your ban on sending each other Christmas cards, and donating to the Mackinlay foundation that your wife set up, helping needy children in Africa. I'm sure the £2.50 raised this year will be gratefully received. Just a heads up, whilst you sit upstairs congratulating yourselves on your charitable ways, the rest of your staff are organising their Christmas get together at the Pheasant. Don't feel bad that you're not invited, you probably wouldn't want to mix with the peasants, anyway.*

*Well, it's been good to chat, but I need to get on with the rest of my life. Three months has passed by in a flash and if it has taught me anything it's that it was among the worse of my life. So, it is with considerable relief and immense happiness that I bid you all farewell and move on to bigger and better things.*

*Happy Winter Season to you all.*

*Annie*

## Chapter Two

I'm still laughing to myself, as I speedily exit the building. I pressed send and then bolted before the email hit the fan.

I don't care anymore. Our wages were paid into our banks this morning and I don't need a reference from them. Three months will easily be explained away in my CV. I could say I was writing my memoirs, or something.

However, there is still the pressing matter of finding a job. Two weeks before Christmas and not a hope in hell of finding one this side of the festive season.

My phone buzzes pulling me away from my panicked thoughts and I smile as I see it's from my best friend Gail.

*You up for lunch babe?*

I quickly type. *Emergency! Just got fired! Meet me in Giovanni's in five?*

The response is almost instant. *Wtf!!! I'm on my way.*

As I head towards our favourite coffee shop, I try to contain the panic setting in. Gail will know what to do. She will be the cool, calm head of reason. My rock in my hour of need.

"Oh, my God, this is a disaster! What are you going to do, I can't think straight?"

Her words come out in a jumbled mess, as she surges towards me, like a tornado in the desert, her bag knocking everything off the tables as she passes them.

Ignoring the angry stares of the other patrons, she sits down and looks at me with wide, slightly crazy eyes.

I shrug. "I'm not sure. It's quite a shock, and I never saw it coming. I had hoped you would have a few sensible ideas."

I fix her with a desperate look and she shakes her head.

"Not really. I could ask if there's anything going at the salon. We always need casual staff around Christmas as everyone wants their hair done."

I smile gratefully. "That's kind of you, but I'm not sure washing hair and sweeping up is for me. Not that I wouldn't mind doing it, in fact, I would quite enjoy it for a change. No, I need money and fast. My flat won't rent itself and its expensive living in London. My savings are non-existent and the Christmas bills have maxed out my credit card."

We stare at each other as the sinking realisation of my situation sinks in.

We are interrupted by my phone buzzing angrily. Looking at the display I can see it's the office calling. Even the phone sounds angry on their behalf.

Gail notices my expression and raises her eyes. "What's happened?"

I grin mischievously and tell her every last delicious detail of my revenge. By the time we have wiped our eyes and gulped down our lattes I feel a lot better.

Gail looks at me with a considered expression. "So, what now?"

I sigh heavily. "I'll head home and start looking for jobs on the web. I could use the time to get my CV up to date and strike all evidence of my time with Mackinlay-Sanderson. If I put my mind to it, I'm sure I'll find something."

Gail smiles reassuringly. "Of course, you will. I know, how about I pick you up later and we drown our sorrows in Divas?"

Shaking my head, I smile ruefully. "I'd better stay in and try to sort my mess out. I should save what little money I have left, anyway. How about we meet up for coffee tomorrow instead? I may be in a better frame of mind by then."

Gail smiles softly. "Of course. Well, I'd better get back. I left Mrs Abbot with a whole head of foils in. She'll be bright red instead of Auburn by the time I get back."

She stands up to go and then grins. "Leave it with me, honey. You know, every mover and shaker in these parts head through our salon doors at one time or another. Let me put the feelers out and see if I can find you something. People love a good gossip with their hairdresser."

I look at her gratefully. "Would you? I'd be eternally grateful."

She laughs. "Like I said, leave it with me. Your new job is just around the corner. I can feel it in my waters."

As I watch her go, I try to shake any image I now have of Gail and her waters.

I head off home via the Tube. Luckily, it's not too crowded, given that it's only mid-morning. My situation buzzes around my head and I think about my predicament. I love working in the City. It has such a buzz about it and everything we need is on our doorstep.

Gail works in a nearby salon that I used to go to and we became best friends. We often head out after work and hit the West End. We have a great life and I am reluctant to let go of it so soon.

My flat is just outside London and I love living there. It's a safe-ish neighbourhood and my neighbours are lovely. It may be small but it's home and I would hate to give it up.

By the time I get back there, I have with me a firm resolve to sort this out once and for all. As I put the key in the lock, I take comfort in being in my own space again. Finally, I can think straight.

I fire up the computer and make myself a coffee. Now for the rest of my life.

## *Chapter Three*

Three hours later and all I've managed to do is update my CV and register with a couple of agencies.

I am interrupted by the phone ringing. As I answer it my heart leaps as I hear the welcome voice of my boyfriend Gary.

"Hey, babe. You still on for the party tonight?"

My heart sinks. Of course, tonight is Gary's office Christmas party and plus ones are invited. He works in an Insurance company not far from where I work, sorry worked! We met in Divas six weeks ago and he is now officially the love of my life.

I take a deep breath. "Sorry honey, I'll have to give it a miss tonight. It's been a really bad day and I'm in no mood to party. You go though."

He sounds annoyed. "Why, what's happened? I've told everyone you're coming now and I'll look like an idiot."

I swallow hard as I voice the words that have caused my life to change so quickly.

"I got fired today and the last place I want to be is an office."

Just for a minute, there is silence and then he says softly. "I'm sorry babe. What happened?"

I sigh heavily. "My probationary period was up and so was I it would seem. I was about to get expensive so they cut costs and terminated my temporary contract. Typical Accountants!"

I'm not sure but he almost sounds annoyed.

"Well, don't let the bastards get you down. Come out with me and we'll get roaring drunk and do unspeakable things when I take you home to my bachelor pad."

Despite myself, I grin. Hmm, may not be such a bad idea. I mean a drunken night out with the man of my dreams, followed by a night of unbridled passion, sounds good to me.

I almost relent, but then see yet another recruitment site flash up on Google.

"Sounds great, but I'll have to pass. You go though and I'll see you tomorrow instead. I may be in a better mood by then."

"Well, I'm disappointed babe, but I understand. I'll have a word with my boss. Maybe they could use your skills in our accounts department. It would be good to work together. We could indulge in illicit pursuits in the stationery cupboard during the working day."

I laugh. Gary always cheers me up.

"See you tomorrow Romeo and have fun. Make sure you get a cab home. I know you and your friends from work. The bar will be dry within minutes with you lot around. Just stay safe and try not to have too much of a hangover when you pick me up tomorrow."

He laughs. "Love you, honey. Don't work at it too hard. Something will come up and if it doesn't there's always tomorrow when we meet up."

He laughs and I grin as I hang up. Gary is actually just what I need right now. Somebody fun to take my mind off my situation. Anyway, pushing him from my mind, I set about the thankless task before me.

By the end of the day, all I have achieved is discovering there isn't any job with my name on it. I grab a salad from the fridge and eat it, whilst staring morosely at the news. I may have to take Gail up on her offer at the salon. Something will be better than nothing, and it will tide me over until the New Year.

Feeling a little better about the one decision I have made that may bring in some money, I think about Gary and the party.

Maybe I should go. He's right they may need some help in their accounts department, or anywhere else come to think of it. Burying myself away in my flat isn't going to get me a job. I need to network, get out there and meet and greet. This will be the perfect opportunity. I'm such an idiot.

Two hours later I am standing outside Gary's office block. All around me people are milling around, either heading out to the many bars that surround the office complex or attending their own Christmas parties.

Despite being cold it's a lovely evening. London always looks magical at night and the stars are out in force tonight. The air is crisp and cold and my breath shows itself as a hot steam as I breathe out. I pull my coat around me tighter and hurry off inside.

Minster Insurance is located on the fifth floor. As I wait for the lift I look around me with interest. This building is modern and sleek. It homes many companies within its walls and I could so picture myself working here.

Maybe I should come back tomorrow and find out more about what companies are here. I could chat to the receptionist and pick her brains. I must be proactive in looking for a job; sitting around in my flat won't pay the bills.

The lift arrives and I join a group of party goers as we head off within its metal walls. It feels like a space rocket taking me into the unknown.

A guy next to me looks at me appreciatively and I pull my coat tighter around the obligatory little black dress that I have worn for the occasion. My hair is curled and sits piled on top of my head and my makeup is heavy to withstand the evening ahead.

He shifts closer to me and I shrink against the walls. He smiles and I see a spark ignite in his eyes as his gaze travels the length of me.

"Hi there, are you looking for Matthews and Finch?" I shake my head.

"No, Minster Insurance. My boyfriend is waiting for me there."

My words don't faze him and he just grins. "Well, if you don't find him, then head up to our party. We're on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, 3<sup>rd</sup> door from the right, out of the lifts. I'll buy you a drink if you like."

I just smile and look down. "Thanks, but I'll be fine."

He shrugs as the lift arrives at my floor and I exit quickly before he can say another word. Maybe working here wouldn't be such a good idea.

## *Chapter Four*

Gary's office is heaving. The noise is tremendous and as office parties go, this one appears to be a good one. Unlike Mackinlay-Sanderson, these people obviously know how to have a good time.

There are Christmas decorations everywhere and they obviously don't have a problem with Christmas cards because there are lots of them scattered around desks and pinned to noticeboards.

The music is thumping loudly and I almost can't hear my own thoughts. It would appear there are many people that work here, judging by the amount of bodies crammed into the rather large open office space. I know that plus ones were invited, but even so, this place is crammed.

I crane my neck to look for a familiar face, but immediately draw a blank. Somebody pushes past me and I stumble. Just as I think I'll embarrass myself by falling to the ground, a strong hand reaches out to steady me. I look at my rescuer gratefully and find myself staring into the eyes of a guy who looks about my age.

He grins and I feel him checking me out.

"Hey. I haven't seen you before, do you work here?"

I shake my head and shout back frantically, trying to make my voice heard above the music.

"No, I'm here with someone but appear to have lost him."

He rolls his eyes. "Typical. All the good ones are already taken. Who is he, maybe I can help?"

"Gary Marshall!"

He laughs. "That figures, Gary's always had a lot of luck with the ladies."

I feel annoyed at his words. I know Gary is good looking and a cheeky chappie, but he's a good boyfriend and maybe once played the field, but not anymore. He obviously senses my disapproval because his face softens and he smiles apologetically.

"Well, he's one lucky guy. Come on, I'll help you look for him. Shouldn't be too difficult because if I know Gary he will be hugging the makeshift bar area."

I smile at him gratefully. Despite first impressions he seems quite nice really, so I follow him further into the crowd.

The music is loud so we must shout to be heard. He pushes through the heaving masses and leads me to the end of the room where a group of desks have been pushed against a wall and are groaning under the weight of a small off-licence.

"What are you drinking?!" He shouts, grabbing a plastic cup from the desk."

"Red wine, if you've got it!"

I watch as he pours a large amount of wine into the cup and thrusts it towards me, before grabbing a beer from the plastic ice filled crate underneath.

He smiles and clinks my drink with his. "Cheers and Happy Christmas."

I smile and take a large gulp of wine. This is surprisingly good wine, not the usual petrol that gets served at these things.

He looks at me and smiles and I notice how attractive he is. Tall, quite well built, with dirty blonde hair and a wicked grin. If I wasn't so in love with Gary, he would be very much my type.

"So, how long have you been with Gary?"

I smile back at him. "Six weeks. We met in Divas."

He laughs. "Of course, you did. Gary loves that place, he really should have shares."

I look at him curiously. "What about you, what do you do here?"

He rolls his eyes. "Sorry, where are my manners? My name's Alex and I run this office for my sins. I'm in charge of the claims department and it's my job to keep these unruly guys in check."

I raise my eyes. "It would appear you have your work cut out then."

He laughs as a guy falls against the table and sends the plastic cup tower crashing to the ground. He hiccups and then stumbles off without another word.

Alex laughs and picks the cups up.

"They're allowed a one night pass at the annual office party. The rest of the time I rule over them, with the proverbial rod of iron."

I laugh. "I don't doubt that for a second."

He grins. "So, what about you? What do you do when you're not running around after Gary?"

I sigh heavily. "I'm an accountant- between jobs as of today."

He looks at me and raises his eyes. "Why, what happened?"

I shrug. "Three-month probationary period came to an end, and I was yet another casualty of Brexit."

He snorts. "And you believe that do you?"

I shake my head and roll my eyes. "Of course not. I know how it all works and Brexit was just a convenient excuse. They have a revolving door when it comes to probationers and I should have seen it coming. I'm just going to have to be smarter next time."

He looks concerned. "If you give me your number, I could enquire here for you?"

I laugh and roll my eyes. "Sure, that would be very kind of you. I need all the help I can get at the moment. It would appear there isn't much call for accountants this side of Christmas."

I rummage around in my bag and pull out a squashed business card. I had these printed when I job hunting before, thank goodness, I still have 2000 of them. I think I will need every one of them.

He looks at the card and smiles. "Well Anne Anderson, I'm very pleased to meet you. My name is Alex Carstairs and I will do my utmost to assist you in your quest for employment."

I shake his outstretched hand and grin. "I'm pleased to meet you too, and thank you kind sir, all offers of help are gratefully received."

We just grin at each other and then I remember that I'm here to find Gary. I look around to see if I can spot him.

"You know Alex, I still can't see Gary anywhere, do you think he's even here?"

He shrugs. "I saw him earlier. He could have slipped out I suppose. Oh, there's Alan his partner in crime, he'll know where he is. After all, they are usually joined at the hip."

Once again, I follow him into the crowd and try to stop my wine from leaving its plastic holder, as we crash into the sea of bodies all around us.

Finally, we stop in front of Alan; at last a familiar face. He is obviously quite drunk already because his eyes are red and he looks at me as if he can't quite place me.

Alex shouts. "Have you seen Gary anywhere?"

Alan shakes his head in confusion and slurs.

"He's around here somewhere."

He blinks and then looks at me carefully as though he can't quite place me. Then the realisation hits and he looks surprised.

"Hey Annie, I thought you couldn't make it."

I shake my head and smile. "I changed my mind. I thought it better than wallowing in my dilemma at home, I mean it is Christmas after all, the season to be merry."

He shakes his head and if I'm honest looks slightly worried.

Alex looks at him thoughtfully and then a rather inebriated woman presses herself against him.

"Alex honey, I've been looking for you everywhere. Come and dance with me."

She then proceeds to rub herself against him, gyrating like she's in a scene from dirty dancing. My goodness, the workers here certainly know how to party. I couldn't imagine doing that to Mr Prendergast. Mind you, if he looked like Alex I may be tempted.

Alex reaches out and very firmly pushes her away and smiles.

"Come on Fiona, let's find Kevin. I'm sure I saw him looking for you over by the photocopier."

He grins at me and rolls his eyes. "I'll leave you with Alan. If anyone can find Gary he can. It was good to meet you Annie."

I smile gratefully. "Thanks Alex, have a happy Christmas."

He grins and pockets my card. "You too. Hopefully I'll be in touch re a job in the New Year. Maybe Santa will be kind to you."

I laugh and nod. "Let's hope so. Like I said, it would appear that I need all the help I can get."

I watch as he guides a very drunk Fiona through the crowd. Gosh, what a nice boss he is. Gary is lucky to work for him.

I turn back to Alan, but find he is nowhere to be seen. What? How did I lose sight of him so quickly?

I look around me, but it's as if he's melted into the floor. Where is he?

Sighing, I start scanning the room. Surely, it's not too difficult to find him in here.

Ten minutes later and I still haven't found either of them. All around me couples are having a great time and there is much laughter and lots of smooching. Chance would be a fine thing.

Suddenly I spy Alan again, pressed up against some girl near the wall. I keep my eyes on him and walk with determination towards them.

Tapping him on the shoulder, he looks around and his face falls.

"Oh Annie, sorry, haven't you found Gary yet?"

I shake my head as his date, for want of a better word, looks at me curiously. "Are you looking for Gary?"

I nod and she goes to speak, but Alan jumps in and throws her a strange sort of warning look.

"I think he's gone Annie. I saw him leave ten minutes ago. I thought you'd found him and were heading off. Maybe he's gone to Divas."

His partner looks surprised and looks between us before looking down to the floor.

A strange feeling of uneasiness creeps over me. I'm not stupid. Alan is covering for Gary and I don't know why.

Suddenly the music stops and somebody shouts. "Sorry guys, can I just have your attention for a minute."

We look over and I see Alex standing on a chair at the end of the room.

"I'll make this short as I don't want to cut into your drinking time. I Just wanted to say thanks for all your hard work this year. Our targets were met, and we came out among the top in the

company. You're a great team and can expect a bonus for your trouble in your Xmas pay. Now enjoy tonight and don't get too drunk and get home safely. Have a lovely Christmas and let's make next year even better."

He goes to raise his glass and as he does so, the distinct sound of the tune of Hawaii-5-O, chimes through the office.

I know that sound – it's Gary's ringtone. It appears to be coming from the door next to me. I just have time to register the panic in Alan's eyes, before I yank the door open. It reveals Gary with his trousers around his ankles, pressed very much into a girl, with her dress around her waist and her legs wrapped very firmly around his.

The office is silent as we witness the two-people going at it, in what appears to be the stationery cupboard.

Just for a second time stands still. I watch in shock, my boyfriend and the love of my life getting it on with another, in front of not only my disbelieving eyes but everyone else in the office, who are looking at the oblivious couple in shock. Suddenly the girl's eyes open, and she utters a small shriek into Gary's mouth and pushes him away. He looks around in confusion and then registers the fact that the whole office is watching him and then his eyes settle on mine.

Panic fills them and he looks at me with confusion as he whispers, "Oh my God, Annie!"

Pain fills my heart, quickly followed by anger. You have got to be KIDDING me!!

The anger takes hold and I do the first thing I can think of. Stepping forward, I throw the contents of my plastic cup all over his cheating, lying, despicable face. Then I turn around and make my way out of the office, through the stunned crowd and out of the most humiliating experience of my life – so far.

