



ALSO BY MARGO CANDELA

More Than This

good-bye to all that

Margo Candela

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one | TRUE LIES

Forces of Nature . . .

It's true Los Angeles doesn't have real weather. It's usually sunny, mild, and picture-postcard perfect the closer you get to the beach, where the air quality is better and the real estate more expensive. It can get a tad chilly in the winter and occasionally it even rains in the spring, but you can get away without ever having to buy a winter coat much less rain boots. Warm coats and rubber boots are more for the sake of fashion than for the sake of necessity. But generally, outside of a Hollywood soundstage, you won't find rainstorms, lightning, and especially snow.

Well into my teens I assumed trees only changed color and lost their leaves in movies, seasonal TV specials, and in the promotional calendars the local auto body shop sent every third week of December. In L.A. palm trees are always tall, skinny, and green and only sway with any sort of drama when Santa Ana winds decide to blow in.

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My defining experience with real weather occurred during a weekend trip to Tempe, Arizona. I was in the tenth grade and attending a cheerleading competition. The twelve of us and our coach arrived a day early, checked into a local motel, and spent most of the night cowering in bathtubs as a lightning storm raged outside. What I saw, between running from room to room, was awesome. The storm was a true force of nature—unpredictable, dangerous, and beautiful. I was as scared witless as the rest of my teammates, yet drawn to the windows at the same time.

I get the same sort of thrill standing off to the side of the paparazzi pen as they strain against the metal barriers that separate them from their willing prey. Bursts of light from their cameras illuminate the curvy, but still very thin, blonde as she takes her first tentative steps onto the red carpet. It's almost as if they can smell it—fresh meat. Nicolette Meyers is the perfect blonde, hazel-eyed, twenty-three-year-old girl next door who happens to have a pair of tastefully done C cups.

Nicolette has a minor but crucial part in the movie that's premiering tonight, *Risk Management III*. She delivers a pool-side drink to Redford Henson, megastar of *Risk Management I* and *II*. About twenty-two minutes into the movie she appears and in her bikini top is the pinkie-size supertechno doohickey Redford needs to carry the plot into the second act. When Redford plucks the device from in between her cleavage, her top comes off and Nicolette then joins the chosen few as a Boob Girl. It's nothing more than a gratuitous skin shot, but it's become a hallmark of the *Risk Management* franchise.

As Nicolette reaches her mark, a piece of duct tape cen-

tered on the carpet so cameras will catch the movie poster in the background, she shrugs off her trench coat. The paparazzi roar to life, and all it takes is a little thigh and shoulder. If I could bottle up their barely contained intensity, it could run my air conditioner for an entire weekend.

“What’s her name?” one of them yells. “Is she a Boob Girl?”

“Nicolette Meyers! M-E-Y-E-R-S,” I yell back when I notice the Belmore Corporation public relations bunny is too busy fawning over some B-list movie actor to do her job. “It’s Nicolette Meyers!”

“Nicolette! Nicolette!” the paparazzi yell, as if they have her name on a loop. “Nicolette! Nicolette!”

That they had no idea who she was until a few seconds before is no matter. Nicolette’s name is going to be on everyone’s lips and her boobs on everyone’s mind tomorrow morning. But she’s going to have to do more than pose demurely in her borrowed designer frock. The paparazzi won’t turn away from a budding starlet, but they’re not going waste time giving her posing lessons either.

I edge myself toward the metal barrier that separates the mere humans from the stars and other very important people who know they’re somebodies even if your average *Us Weekly* reader doesn’t. This group includes my boss, Bert Floss, who has just stepped out of his limo and onto the carpet with his new trophy wife on his arm.

Bert is the vice president of Marketing for the Belmore Corporation, the company behind *Risk Management*. Of anyone here, he’ll be the one to notice Nicolette isn’t causing the splash the marketing report assured him she would. And it’s

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my job, as his trustworthy, hardworking, and indispensable assistant who wants to be promoted out of her current job to junior exec, to make sure the marketing research is proven right. After all, I'm the one who wrote the memo that said Nicolette Meyers would be a big deal.

I push forward, shoving bodies out of my way, not bothering to apologize to the guy I just rammed my elbow into. The paparazzi are used to it—they have the manners of a pack of hyenas. But they have their uses, and I've been to enough premieres to know how to give them what they want so that Belmore can get what it wants.

I fumble underneath my jacket to pull out my employee ID and all-access event pass. I'm wearing both around my neck on a lanyard, but I'd tucked them away, hoping to go incognito. My task is to catalog reactions to every aspect of the night's event. From the color of the red carpet to the popularity of the mini-truffle burger that will be served at the after party. Once I get enough information, I'll write up a memo and have it on Bert's desk well before he shows up for work at 8:30 tomorrow morning.

"I need to get through." I wave my credentials at the security guard. I'm not anything near short, standing five eight in flats and five ten in my usual two-inch heels, but this guy towers a good foot over the top of my head.

"No one gets on the carpet that doesn't pull up in a limo," the security guard says over the noise of the crowd.

He's not even close to being impressed by a no-name starlet who's crashing and burning a few feet away from us. He's especially not impressed by some equally no-name twenty-five-year-old in a rumpled corporate lady suit. My go-to little

black dress is in the trunk of my car with the rest of the stuff I meant to drop off at the dry cleaner's days ago. That I didn't get the chance to slip into it is no great loss. There's really nothing sexy about a three-quarter-length-sleeve dress with a slight cowl neck. Really, I could wear it to the Vatican for tea with the Pope and still be kosher. It's the kind of dress that gets the job done without getting in the way of me doing my job.

I've learned to downplay my looks, which got me on the homecoming court in high school and referred to as pretty often enough so I feel fairly confident that I am. I have a heart-shaped face with good cheekbones, big brown eyes under strong brows, and shiny brown hair, but now I control how I look instead of letting my looks control how other people see me.

For a long time, most of my life really, I'd been happy to be a pretty face in a sea of the same, confident that my looks would get me somewhere in life until I realized that would be somewhere I didn't want to go. A pretty face with no motivation equals a restaurant hostess and not much else in this town.

My goal in getting dressed every morning is to find a balance that will allow me to succeed at Belmore and not have to wear thick-framed glasses and go without Frizz-Ease to prove I have working gray matter in my head. But seeing myself through the security guard's eyes, I know I've stopped swimming in a sea of pretty and settled firmly in the land of frumpy. In the scheme of things, it's a sacrifice that's worth it if it gets me where I want to go.

The last thing I want is someone thinking I'm too attrac-

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tive to be good at my job. I dress unobtrusively with simple hair and makeup to match because I want to be taken seriously. I don't want to stay Bert's assistant forever, and I can't let something as distracting as cleavage get in the way of my career advancement. Once I make it into my own office, I'll upgrade from my staid suits and two-inch nun pumps to something with a bit more personality. I might even show some collarbone again.

Case in point, Nicolette Meyers's looks (and boobs) have gotten her where she is, but she's going to need my brain (and chutzpah) to get her any attention.

"Please! I'm on the list. Please check it," I beg the security guard. "I'm supposed to escort her inside the theater."

I look toward Nicolette, who can sense by the diminishing pops of light that she's losing the interest of the paparazzi. The wattage on her smile dims with each millisecond that her picture isn't taken. A handler, her agent, manager, or even an overinvested parent would tell her to do something, anything—even something cheesy, like blowing a kiss—to keep the paparazzi snapping.

I'm able to see my stressed-out face in the security guard's sunglasses. He's wearing them because they're a movie tie-in. Ray-Ban has issued a specially designed pair called, fittingly enough, the Redford. While Redford Henson doesn't wear this particular design in the movie, he's been sporting a pair for the last few weeks. They're completely sold out, and Ray-Ban is rushing to get another shipment to stores. The sunglasses were my idea, something I mentioned to Bert after visiting the *Risk Management III* set last year. Redford was wearing sunglasses to hide his bloodshot eyes—he was going

through a nasty divorce and custody battle at the time—but what I saw was a marketing opportunity. Bert took the credit for my idea, which I presented to him in a memo, but it still earns me points in my promotion account. An account I want to settle in the very near future.

The security guard compares the photo on my Belmore Corp. ID to the face on my, well, face. Satisfied I'm not pretending to be Raquel Azorian because that's who in fact I am, he then scans my all-access pass with the electronic reader attached to his belt. The light flashes green, proving it's legit. He then checks the master list, which is printed on, of all things, old-fashioned paper. This list has all the names of who is and who is not allowed past the metal barriers. Mine isn't on it.

As this is happening, I'm forced to wait. The worst thing I could do is throw attitude his way. He can keep me here all night if he wants to. He has this power because his orders are to keep anyone off the carpet who doesn't belong there.

"Is this chick going to do something besides stand there?" a raspy-voiced paparazzo asks.

"Where are the Ward twins?" another yells, lowering his camera. "Move it, honey. Get outta the way!"

Nicolette has sense enough not to relinquish the prime spot of real estate even though she's being motioned to move along. She's had her moment in the false sun of media celebrity, and now it's time for someone more important to take a turn.

"Don't move," I scream. My voice cracks with anxiety, but she hears me. Nicolette scans the crowd. A picture-perfect smile is still on her face, but desperation is creeping into her

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mostly vacant eyes. She knows she's drowning but is trying to look good while it happens. Bless her. "Stay right there!"

Finally the security guard motions for another to help him move the metal gate. My feet in their sensible pumps go from standing on anonymous concrete to sinking into plush red carpet. Ignoring everyone and everything, I sidle up to Nicolette and hiss in her ear. "Turn around, stick your ass out, and look over your shoulder. Now."

She does it, and the paparazzi go nuts. I step back, melting into the crowd again so I can enjoy the storm from a safe distance.

Nuts, Bolts, and One Shiny Cog . . .

Less than eight hours later I'm sitting in the marketing department conference room on the seventeenth floor of the Frank Gehry–designed Belmore Corporation Tower. I spend more time here than I do in my apartment, located just a few miles away. In fact, I still have boxes of clothes sitting in my living room that I've given up on ever opening two years after moving in. I've been meaning to call Out of the Closet and have them picked up, but it's one of the many things not related to my job that I haven't gotten around to taking care of. I'm not entirely sure what's in there, but I hope my forsaken clothes might be of some use to someone who doesn't mind secondhand Gap jeans and never worn Belmore promotional T-shirts.

"This could be a major cock-up, ladies and gents." Bert Floss says this with a proper amount of gravitas, which comes

with the thirty years of marketing experience under his strained leather belt.

“A major cock-up,” he repeats with an especially hard *k* on the *cock*. “The shitstorm is coming, folks, and my umbrella is only big enough for me.”

That’s a new one, I think as I jot it down. I have a notebook where I keep a running list of Bert’s business-related aphorisms. Very few things Bert says can be embroidered on pillows, but he rarely fails to amuse and educate at the same time.

“Can anyone see what I’m seeing?” Bert asks, more for his own benefit than for that of anyone else. He doesn’t expect anyone to answer his question, but he does expect a solution.

Bert uses his ever-present laser pointer to direct attention away from BlackBerrys in laps to the PowerPoint slide on the screen behind him. On it is the image from the DVD cover sleeve for the season three compilation of the *Twin Tales* television series.

Stars Cat and Cara Ward, Belmore cash cows, look a tad on the bovine side. Their side ponytails, cropped jeans, and white T-shirts under denim vests only serve to accentuate the baby fat that pads their middles and fills out their cheeks. The photo was taken when the girls had a brief awkward period that shortened season three from the usual twenty-four episodes to twenty. By the time season four started taping, they’d morphed into the lithe, hollow-cheeked fashionistas we’ve all convinced ourselves they’ve always been. But right in front of our noses is the very obvious proof that they look chubby, and the Ward twins cannot be chubby.

To come out and say that the twins look fat is not only

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wrong but monumentally stupid. Even Bert is smart enough to keeping from calling the elephant in the room an elephant. Anything he says will get back to the twins. And even though Bert is the vice president of marketing and sits three chairs away from the president of Belmore, Cat and Cara are Hollywood royalty. While he wouldn't lose his head, he wouldn't be sitting at the head table of any corporate function for a very long time. It's scary to think two nineteen-year-old high school dropouts have that kind of power, but they do. In this town, celebrity outranks just about everything except bigger celebrity.

"Tell me I'm not the only one who sees what the issue is here," Bert prods. It's a rhetorical question only a fool would answer, and that fool's name is Cris Fuller.

"With all due respect, I don't think there's an issue," he says.

Fuller is the senior exec in charge of marketing the *Twin Tales* DVDs, and he's number two in the department. He clears his throat and waits for Bert to acknowledge what he's said. But Bert ignores him until Fuller raises his hand and follows proper protocol.

"Fuller," he barks, giving him permission to speak.

"Mr. Floss. As I said, I don't—"

"Fuller"—Bert cuts him off without looking at him—"you're in charge of this fuckup, so anything you say should bring us closer to rectifying this mess. Speak, Fuller. What solution do you have to offer us?"

For a moment naked emotion—hate and contempt mixed in with a dash of fear—plays out on Fuller's pinched face. Botox keeps his brow from furrowing, and his tanned face

absorbs the light, but it's there before it disappears just as quickly. As much as Cris Fuller despises Bert, he knows who the boss is.

"The cover image can be Photoshopped," he says through his capped and gritted teeth. "I've gone ahead and had a preliminary mock-up done for you to look at."

Fuller hands me a folder, which I hand to Bert. Inside is the tweaked image that takes the twins from chubby and normal to acceptable Hollywood standards for puberty. They're still in their Wal-Mart shopper-friendly outfits, but they look at least ten pounds thinner and a little taller, too. It's Fuller's solution, but he had nothing to do with solving the problem.

This morning, desperate to make polite chitchat when we'd ended up riding the same elevator, I mentioned how refreshing it was to see that the Ward twins had at one time looked like relatable, average human beings.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Cris Fuller always assumes everyone is out to screw him, because screwing people over is second nature to him.

"You know," I said, regretting every word I'd uttered starting with "good morning," "they look like regular twelve-year-olds."

"Not acceptable. It won't fly." When Fuller is upset, his color rises. My little remark caused him to go two shades of red.

"I can call in a favor, Mr. Fuller," I said quickly, hoping to stave off a freak-out. "There's someone I know in Art, and they work fast."

"Fine. Do it. Get it done." He didn't have to add that I was not to tell anyone.

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I'd given Fuller the retouched image right before the meeting, having sprinted up the six floors from Art to make it in time. My good deed would be neither appreciated nor acknowledged by Fuller, but now he owes me. This alone was worth more than a thousand empty thank-yous.

Bert flips open the folder, glances at the image, scribbles his name on the proof, hands it back to me to hand back to Fuller. It's the Belmore chain of command in action. Even though Cris Fuller makes four times the amount I see on my paycheck every two weeks, he still has to go through me to get to Bert.

Fuller makes to rise from his seat.

"And the audio commentary?" Bert's not through with eviscerating his wannabe successor.

There is no audio commentary because the Ward twins have grown into statuesque, platinum-haired business moguls who want to pretend they've never been the painfully normal, pudgy preteens of season three. As far as they're concerned, season three and age twelve never happened.

"It's been pushed back due to scheduling conflicts." Fuller shifts around in his seat. His designer suit, spray tan, and Botox can't hide his discomfort at being called onto the industrial-grade carpet. "They've been out of the country and—"

"We can't put out a fucking television show compilation without audio commentary, Fuller." A bulldog in temperament and looks, Bert chews on Cris Fuller like he's a mere chicken bone, splintering him into little bits until he's nothing but gummy marrow. "Or are you planning on getting voice-over actors to do it for them?"

It's actually not a bad idea, and Fuller, if he'd been paying attention to his own job instead of politicking for Bert's, could have come up with it himself. Bert knows Fuller is chafing at being the number two in the department. This is why he's called a meeting—to remind all of us Cris is just Fuller and Bert is Mr. Floss.

"Of course not, Mr. Floss," Fuller mumbles, embarrassed at being publicly put in his place.

"What was that?" Bert snarls.

Fuller flushes again. It turns his skin a terra-cotta color, but he wisely keeps his mouth shut. No one says a word in his defense because we're too busy enjoying Bert doing a little jig all over his ass. There is nothing he can say to make Bert happy because Cris Fuller hasn't done a lick of work on the project. He left it up to the junior execs, who focused on other projects they judged to be more beneficial to their own upward trajectory at Belmore.

Cris Fuller's crash and burn is an opening for me to show I can do more than just hand folders to Bert. I'm an amateur at company politics, a blood sport at Belmore, and I might get in way over my head, but he's given me the perfect opportunity to shine. I would be a fool not to take it. The rest of the marketing department may not know it or even care, but I, too, want to step up another rung of the Belmore Corp. ladder.

I take a deep breath and raise my hand. I am calm and in control. Showing any hint of fear or doubt now would be a big mistake, bigger than drawing attention away from Cris Fuller. If I embarrass myself, I'm embarrassing my boss, and that would be unforgivable. "Mr. Floss?"

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“Yeah,” Bert says. It takes him a moment to register that it’s me, his usually silent assistant, who’s been brave (or dumb) enough to say something. “Raquel?”

He’s not used to me speaking up in meetings, where my function is to be there merely for his convenience. If there’s a message I have to convey, I put one finger on his forearm and then whisper it near his ear. If Bert asks me a question, I answer with what he wants to hear. I save my opinions and insights for when we’re sitting in his office. He stares out the window, sips his coffee, and I, as casually as possible, tell him what’s on my mind about a certain project or present him my ideas.

As Bert’s longest lasting assistant, having been on the job for three years, I’ve learned how to finesse him without making him feel like he’s being worked over. This skill is both a curse and a blessing. Bert likes me, and it’s good for my boss to like me, but it also means that he wants to keep me close. Wives and girlfriends have proven unreliable, but I’m like Helen Mirren’s character, Mrs. Wilson, in *Gosford Park*. Just like Mrs. Wilson, I know what Bert wants before he does, and I make sure that what he wants done happens as unobtrusively as possible. And, like the perfect 1930s English servant seeing to the comfort and needs of a manor house full of high-maintenance guests, I have no life outside the life I’ve made for myself inside Belmore.

By speaking up, I’m forcing Bert’s hand. If he promotes me, I will move on and become another person he needs to keep an eye on. We both know it’s going to happen. Otherwise why would he spend so much time teaching me everything he knows about marketing?

“I have good rapport with Cat and Cara,” I say.

“You do?” I’m not sure if Bert is annoyed or amused by me asserting myself outside the confines of his office. He’s definitely surprised, which I hope works in my favor.

“I do.” I keep my answer simple so I don’t trip myself up by relinquishing too much information.

In Hollywood who you know and who knows you is invaluable currency. I’ve shown my boss that I am worth more than just my assistant-level salary and that Cris Fuller has been a fool to undervalue my not so obvious worth.

The truth is the Ward twins wouldn’t know me if they ran me down with their Range Rover. This doesn’t matter, because I know their agent, Frappa Ivanhoe. We met a year ago, during the promotion push for *Twin Tales: Freshman Year*. To keep me from burning out from the job I’d mastered and already outgrown, Bert gave me the task of showing up at the Ward twins’ shared Hollywood Hills mansion to rouse them from bed and make sure they were almost on time for interviews and photo calls. Frappa and I bonded over the long hours of standing in the background, holding out our palms to accept their chewed-up sugarless bubble gum. Much to my surprise, Frappa has become a real friend—a rare thing in the smoke-and-mirrors world of Hollywood, especially since Frappa is the one blowing the smoke and angling the mirror.

“If Mr. Fuller would like, I’d be happy to facilitate scheduling a day and time for them to come into the studio.” I dip my head in his direction to signal supplication, however false it might be. “Cat and Cara are available—”

“Mr. Floss, the girls are out of town,” Fuller protests. He’s trying to gain the upper hand, but instead he’s just proving that he’s dropped the ball. “They’re unreachable.”

Bert cuts him off with a wave. “I don’t know about you,

Fuller, but I'd like to find out how my assistant has figured out how to do your job. Go on, Raquel."

"The twins came back from Europe a week ago; they're in New York until Friday and then are checking into the Chateau Marmont because they're in a dispute with their building contractor," I say quickly. This is information Fuller could have discovered himself by reading Hollywood gossip blogs or, in my case, being good friends with their agent. "I'd be happy to work with their representation and make sure they're able to commit to studio time as soon as possible."

"Could you do that, Raquel?" Amusement at Fuller's expense is evident in Bert's voice.

"Yes." I look straight at Bert as I answer. "I can do that."

In the end, Bert's is the only opinion that matters. He is the vice president of this department, and only he can promote me to junior marketing executive. Not Cris Fuller. Right now, I'd bet a month's salary that Fuller wouldn't spit on me if I was on fire.

"Good." Bert rolls the word off his tongue like it's a piece of sticky taffy. "Make it happen, Raquel."

"Of course, Mr. Floss."

I pretend to write a note to myself so I can hide the smile that overtakes my face. Looking down also helps me avoid Cris Fuller's death stare.

Flirting with Disaster . . .

A few hours later, still glowing from my morning meeting triumph, I sit down at my desk. I have some time to myself

while Bert is away at his therapy appointment. Determined to make these precious minutes as productive as possible, I study the car brochures I've accumulated over the past weeks.

I've been thinking about trading in my well cared for but tired looking Honda Civic for something befitting a (future) junior exec. I've done the math, and I can afford a car payment and not have to subsist on Top Ramen pilfered from the break room. I could do something else with the money, like up my 401(k) contribution, but a new car is something every Los Angeleno recognizes as a marker of success.

All that is left is for me to figure out what kind of car I want and, of course, for Bert to give me my promotion so I can actually afford to do more than just look.

I nibble on a strawberry Pop-Tart, sip my Diet Coke, and flip through the brochures, taking full advantage of a rare lull when I don't have to see to anyone's needs but my own. I've almost forgotten what this feels like.

"Oh, crap!" I say as I catch sight of the time. Bert will be pulling into the parking lot by now and will expect a memo regarding this morning's meeting on his desk by the time he gets here. Not wanting to waste a perfectly good Pop-Tart, I take one last savage bite just as Kyle Martin walks in.

Kyle Martin, the thirty-two-year-old Hollywood wunderkind and the new vice president of Corporate, is the anointed golden boy of Belmore. He's been with the company six weeks, having come on board after Belmore absorbed his production company and its roster of successful mass-market romantic comedies; guy-friendly, smart action flicks; and wide-range TV shows. More important, Belmore bought Kyle's heat and cachet. He's a man on the move, and it was

really no surprise when Walter Belmore, owner and soul of Belmore, named him to such a power position, making him the youngest vice president in Belmore history.

The only higher office Kyle can aspire to would be that of president, but Walter Belmore shows no inclination to make room for anyone at the very tippy top. Not even for Kyle, who is liked by all, even by those sworn to hate him.

Even before Kyle moved into his renovated office on the twenty-fourth floor, factions formed around and against him. Bert is firmly in the Kyle camp, even though he's told me more than once, "A guy that young and that good-looking doesn't get to where he is as fast as he has without either screwing his way there or screwing people over." I haven't bothered to put this bit of Bert wisdom into my notebook.

Judging from Kyle's self-assured saunter, none of the tension swirling around him seems to bother him.

"What's a beautiful woman like you doing hanging around in this dungeon? You should at least have a window, something nice to look at." He says this in a way that makes me think he's not talking about windows. I lost mine when Bert's new wife redid his office, but I doubt Kyle Martin would be impressed by this piece of information.

"Sorry?" My eloquence is reinforced by a piece of Pop-Tart breaking off and plopping itself onto my lap.

"That looks good, Raquel," he says, looking right at me. "Is it?"

The gossip has it that Kyle's marriage to an aspiring actress is over. His assistant, Marisa, a former model who wised up and learned the ins and outs of every Microsoft program in existence, told Jessica, assistant to the vice president of Cre-

ative, who told me that he asked for his mail to be forwarded to a sexy high-rise condo not too far from Belmore. My eyes dip to his left hand to see that the ring has indeed come off.

“Sorry?” I repeat. It’s as if I’ve forgotten every other word in the English language except for this one.

“You are Raquel Azorian, correct?” He leans in, closer. I can feel heat radiating from under his bespoke suit. Or maybe it’s just coming from me?

I nod and straighten up, determined to ignore the stain that is sure to be setting into my skirt.

Once he’s gone I’ll dash into the ladies’ room, scrub the hell out of it, and smile stupidly at myself in the mirror because Kyle Martin has taken the time to shine his golden ray of attention on me. All the girls at Belmore, and that’s what we turn into when Kyle is around, have a crush on him. Having Kyle this close makes me giddy, a feeling I thought I’d left behind once I got serious about my future at Belmore. I can’t help it, though. Kyle is what my mother would consider a catch as well as a member of the small fraternity of good-looking redheaded men that includes Eric Stoltz and Ewan McGregor, both celebrity crushes of mine.

“Raquel Azorian. PowerPoint and memo mistress extraordinaire,” he continues. “Bert’s unacknowledged right-hand woman and Cris Fuller piss-er-offer.”

I say nothing. Officially my only function is to be Bert’s assistant. I coordinate his appointment book, sign his holiday cards, and answer his phone. Anything else I do for him is between the two of us.

“Shopping for a car, Raquel?” Kyle asks, leaning a hip

against my desk and pinching the brochure out of my suddenly pliant hand.

“Yes.” At least it wasn’t another “sorry.”

“Let me tell you something, Raquel. There’s nothing sexier than a beautiful woman behind the wheel of a fast car.” He looks at what Honda has to offer and frowns. “You don’t seem like the type of woman who’d drive such a boring car.”

“Maybe I am,” I blurt out, finally managing a multiword reply. I clear my throat and try again. “Sometimes dependable wins over fast and fun. A woman can tell the difference between the two, and a smart one will always go for stamina over flash.”

He chuckles and sifts through my pile until he gets to the VW brochure. He opens it to a picture of a cherry red convertible Beetle. Stepping behind me, he sets it on the desk, a hand on each side of me.

“Now this is the kind of car I see you zipping around town in, Raquel,” he says, his minty breath close to my ear. “Breaking hearts at every intersection.”

“Who says I can’t do that behind the wheel of a Honda?” He’s messing with me, and it sort of pisses me off in a squirming in my panties kind of way.

He leans in closer to me so our faces are only an inch apart. “I think you’ve broken plenty of hearts, Raquel.”

Before I have a chance to answer, Bert skids to a stop just outside the door with Cris Fuller hard at his heels. His tie is askew, and his shirt has ridden up on his stomach so his undershirt is exposed. He fills the doorway, so Fuller is forced to bob his head around the available space to see what’s happening.

“Kyle! Raquel? Why didn’t you tell me Mr. Martin was here?” Bert is wheezing, obviously having made a dash from the elevator. Someone, most likely Fuller, alerted him that somebody important was in his office.

“I. He. We.” I’m back to single-word replies.

“Raquel was just giving me an update on what’s going on in the marketing department.” Kyle walks over to Bert and claps him on the shoulder hard enough so Bert stumbles back into Cris Fuller. “Hey, Fuller, didn’t see you lurking back there. Let’s grab an empty conference room and talk about *Twin Tales*.”

The three of them walk out, and I lean my elbows on my desk, my face buried in my hands. My skirt can wait. Right now I don’t think I can stand up without wobbling.

“Raquel?”

“What!” My head snaps up like a firecracker has gone off under my ass.

“We’ll talk horsepower another time.” Kyle gives me a wink and disappears again.

I blink a few times to refocus my eyes and try to slow down my thumping heart. I tally up how many times he’d said my name—eight, no, nine, and my last name twice. He called me beautiful and paid me a professional compliment.

Kyle Martin has noticed me. *Me*. He’s seen beyond my sexless A-line skirt suit, boring makeup, uninspired hairdo, and flirted with me. And I held my own. And, even better, he doesn’t like Cris Fuller any more than I do.