

"The man's successor to *Sex and the City*."

—Dan Wakefield, author of *Going All the Way*



A NOVEL BY ROBERT MANNI



THE GUYS' GUY'S GUIDE TO LOVE



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

For Mom and Dad

Thanks for everything . . . the conceiving and the believing.

“The rock’s easy, but the roll is another thing . . .”

–Keith Richards



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I gave myself ten years to be writing this passage and I do so with appreciation and gratitude for the many people who have supported me. I believe that we all come from the same source and that this story is ours to share.

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ONE LOVE!



CHAPTER 1

B^{uzz~} Max Hallyday sat at a small table in the Peninsula Hotel's rooftop bar, ignoring the iPhone zitting in his pocket. He gazed beyond the tables of fashionably dressed women sipping brightly colored cocktails and looked deep into Manhattan's canyon of gleaming skyscrapers.

Buzz~

It's probably Veronica, he thought, but he couldn't answer. No time for another fight. His new client was minutes away, and he needed to be at his best.

Buzz~

Max drummed his fingers on the table. *What if that is the client? Better take a look.* He yanked the phone from his pocket and saw Veronica's name. Before he could stop himself, he pressed the button, opening her text message.

Need 2 talk.

He flinched. *Hey! What's up?*

Confused. Something's wrong.

?

With us.

Max's face tightened. *Us?*

We want different things. U r holding on 2 the past.

What past?

Ur old job.

Max shot up and began snaking his way through the maze of tables. *Felt bad leaving Goodson. I'm at HHI now . . . right?*

U r not sending right signals. Goodson Advertising—not hot.

What do u mean?

I booked u up 4 ur new job.

And I'm here! Max hit send and ran his hand through his choppy black hair. He glanced sideways and noticed he was precariously close to the ledge.

R u? U complain. I need more.

More what??

More of everything.

Max frowned. *Everything?*

Need U to take charge.

Max scoffed as he typed. *Take charge of what?*

Us, the agency . . . everything.

I'm on it!

R U? Not good at this.

Max frowned again. *Good at what?*

Can't do this anymore . . .

What r u saying?

Max—I'm sorry. B strong. GTG.

As the screen turned black, Max clenched his jaw. He kicked the short wall, and then stared down at a battalion of taxis racing down Fifth Avenue. For a fleeting moment, he imagined himself sprouting wings and floating off into the blue. But he knew there was no escape. He checked his watch. No sign of his client, Layla Korindopolos, but she was sure to arrive any second.

He waved, and then blurted something to a waiter about water. A glass was in his hand almost immediately. Max took a long drink and trudged back to his seat. It was a brilliant, cloudless afternoon in May with the sun glistening off the apex of the Chrysler Building. New York City was majestic and beautiful.

At thirty-six, Max was still a young man. He was hungry, optimistic, and unwavering in the pursuit of his dreams. But Veronica had blindsided him. She was smart. And successful. And so damn seductive. How could she do this? Beads of perspiration appeared on Max's forehead. Hearing laughter erupt from a table of women to

his right, Max swung around, wondering what was so funny. When the women stared back, he caught himself and feigned a smile and a halfhearted wave. *Pull it together*, he thought. *Your client will be here any minute*. Then he remembered that he'd invited his best friend, Roger Fox, to join them. *Dammit. He's already a handful on his own*.

A moment later, Max recognized Roger ambling through the entrance. As always, Roger appeared rakish and cool, stylishly attired in a tropical-weight gray suit and a lavender silk tie. His lean athletic build, hazel-green eyes, squared jaw, and self-assurance were magnets for the women celebrating springtime at the rooftop oasis. The Cheshire Cat grin that spread across his suntanned face only added to Roger's good looks. Heads turned as he sauntered through the crowd. Max shook his head and wondered what it would be like approaching life so effortlessly—putting in half the effort, yet receiving twice as much in return. Life seemed too easy for Roger.

Roger spotted Max peripherally, of course, but with the precision of a submarine's periscope, he swiveled his head, scanning for potential conquests. At ten o'clock, a statuesque brunette and her two friends—locals, probably married. At two o'clock, though, three well-heeled blondes. He checked their hair, dresses, bags—definitely out-of-towners looking for action. He steered a course to Max's table by way of the blondes.

"Max," he called, pausing long enough to receive admiring once-overs from all three women. Then he joined Max.

At six-foot-four, he towered over his friend, now slumped in his seat at the small round table. Roger pulled up a chair and studied Max's face.

"Hey, *amigo*. What happened? You look like a member of the Addams Family," he said, patting Max on the back. "C'mon, is this how Hornsby Hammerhead's newest VP mans up for his new client?"

Max balled his fist and met Roger's knuckles head on with a meaty thud. "I'm okay. Tough day, that's all. I just need to clear my . . ."

"Good, because, baby, it's springtime," Roger crowed, waving his hand at the now crowded space. "Check out this talent. We need cocktails," he added, signaling a waiter with two long fingers. When he ordered gin and tonics, Max waved him off and asked for water.

Roger tapped his foot and surveyed the scene. "Talk to me about

Peacock Beverages and this client of yours. What's this about healthy booze?"

"It's like I told you. Peacock is launching a new line of spirits. They're infusing vodka, rum, and gin with herbal extracts, botanicals, and all-natural flavors."

"Cool. I never realized vodka and rum were good for you."

"Good for you or not, I've tasted them and they're going to be huge."

"So what's the plan?"

"It's simple. You're here to talk about sampling ideas—that's all. I want Layla stoked about her products and fired up about investing in our advertising. They're putting a pile of money behind the launch and there'll be plenty to go around. But first, I need her committed to a new campaign. When the time's right, I'll make sure you get a shot at selling her ad space in your magazine. Just not now—got it?" He took a deep breath and drained the glass of water.

"Sure. So is she . . . ?" Roger asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, Layla's attractive, very put together, but more important, she's a pro—intelligent, without the drama."

"Perfect. Then what's not to like about the new gig?"

"I'm still torn about leaving Goodson," Max said, checking his watch.

Roger shook his head. "Please, not this again."

Max put up his hand. "Henry Goodson let me do my job. It was about results, not process. HHI told me I could manage my business, but they sold me a bill of goods. I know it's a global conglomerate, but advertising is supposed to be fun. I deal with so much bureaucracy, it's like I'm working for the DMV," Max said.

"You gave Henry Goodson's agency seven good years. Now you're making big bucks. That's all that matters."

"I like the money, but I'm not going to sell my soul to get it. I need to handle things on my own terms. At Goodson, I ran my game," Max said, leveling his eyes on Roger's suntanned face.

"Wake up and smell the vodka, dude. You're forgetting that Goodson Advertising doesn't pay that well. And Henry didn't always come through with our bonuses."

Max looked down at his empty glass. "It's a small shop. Henry did

what he could for us. Remember, he cut you a break when you got busted nailing that intern on the roof deck.”

Roger shrugged. “Do you want to be the guy who devotes his career to shilling Bobalooie Bubble Gum? HHI’s the hottest agency in New York—probably the world—and liquor advertising is cool. We’re—I mean, *you’re* going to make a killing when these cocktails take off.”

“I hear you,” Max said, “but I’m slammed. No time for anything but work. Like tonight—Cassidy and I have our meeting for The Children’s Literary Club of New York. I’d like to be there. And I’m so exhausted I can’t find time to work on my stories.”

“Cassidy can handle the club. And once you come to terms with your new gig, you’ll have plenty of time to write about Peter Rabbit or whatever. It’s game on, dude.” Roger took another swig from his drink. “Here, you’re all sweaty,” he added, holding out a damp napkin that he unwrapped from under his glass.

Max shook his head.

“A round of golf this weekend will get your head right.”

Max didn’t respond.

“What’s with you?”

Max handed Roger his phone. “See for yourself.”

Roger tilted Max’s iPhone to block the sun’s glare and began reading. “Order me another,” he said, shaking his glass so the ice tinkled. His eyes lingered on the screen after he read the message thread a second time. When the waiter arrived with his drink, Roger handed the phone back to Max.

“Wow. That’s cold,” he said. “A kiss-off by text. *Ouch.*”

“Yeah. I know Veronica comes on strong, but I gave her space. A lot of good that did me.”

“Strong? V’s a super Type A. She’s got that Westchester meets Upper East Side thing. She’s got it all, but thinks she’s falling behind.”

“She’s from Ossining,” Max said, glancing toward the entrance.

“Whatever.”

“Okay, maybe I was hooked on her looks and the sex, but I never tried to change her.”

"Hmm, I can see how she could be addictive," Roger said, stirring his drink. "Maybe being so available was the problem."

"Huh?"

"When guys try too hard, it shows. Chicks are hardwired to smell fear. And desperation's a major turn-off."

Max shook his head incredulously. "I wasn't desperate. I was paying attention."

"Okay, you paid attention, and went shopping, and watched Kate Hudson movies together. And how did that work out?"

"Thanks for the pep talk," Max said, seeing Veronica's text flash through his mind. "So, not being available is the key to success with women?"

"That's the tip of the iceberg, Max. It's going to take a special woman to understand a guy like you."

"As opposed to understanding the guy who doesn't stick around long enough to rumple the sheets," Max offered.

"*Amigo*, I *know* women."

"How much can you know? You're a wham-bam machine."

Roger shook his hand. "I love women and I get what they're looking for."

"Let's have it."

Roger cleared his throat. "Women are drawn to the rugged individualist."

"Like Mr. Brawny, the paper towel guy?" Max cracked.

Roger laughed. "If you were really paying attention, you'd know women go for dudes with the kind of self-assurance that says they really dig the girl, but can live without her. *That* drives women crazy."

Max looked across the city skyline. "Maybe. I'm just not feeling it today."

"You'll be fine after you let Veronica go. Who knows? Maybe you'll get another shot at the title."

"Think so?" Max asked, turning back to the table.

"Probably not," Roger chuckled.

"I'd like to go to my happy place now," Max said, dryly. "You know, since Veronica's so high on herself, Cassidy calls her Victoria."

Roger chuckled. "No question, the girl is lingerie model material."

"Yeah, but there's pressure dating a woman with her looks. The

last time we were makin' it together, I almost wish I'd known it really was the *last time*." He tilted his chair back. "Would you want to know if it was the last time you'd be making love to the most beautiful woman you'd ever been with?"

Roger furrowed his brow. "As long as the sex is awesome, who cares? Men and women spend way too much time analyzing one another. Remember that," he said, gesturing at Max.

"Are you knuckle-wagging me?"

"I am, *amigo*. Now, pull it together. This is business, not a Deepak Chopra conference."

"There's my client," Max said, wiping his face and motioning toward the entrance, as an immaculately dressed woman with handsome Mediterranean features strode through the door. She had shoulder-length, raven-black hair, highlighted by subtle shades of red. Her curvaceous figure was wrapped in a white tailored Gucci suit accessorized with a matching handbag and an oversized pair of white- and gold-framed sunglasses.

"Not bad," Roger said. "Legs aren't that long, but . . ."

"Chill."

"Built kind of low to the ground . . ." Roger clicked his teeth. "She's no thoroughbred, but *damn* she's stacked."

"We're not betting on her in the third race."

Layla Korindopolos was the daughter of Nikola Korindopolos, the notorious international business mogul. Despite her privileged life, Layla was a sharp-minded and capable marketer. Max respected her and knew that her being tabbed to direct the rollout of Peacock Beverages' new line could result in Layla securing an increasingly powerful position in an exploding category.

"Whoa. Impressive rack," said Roger.

Max shot him a look. He smoothed his suit and straightened his cobalt-blue tie, remembering that it was a gift from Veronica. She said it matched his eyes.

"Ms. Korindopolos," Max said. "It's great to see you."

"Max," she said, taking his hand confidently and smiling. "How are you? And, please—it's Layla." She looked around the crowded scene and took a deep breath that swelled her breasts. "Such a gorgeous day."

Roger was stealing a peek at her cleavage when Max turned to him.

“Layla, this is Roger Fox. Roger, this is Layla. Roger works for *Plates* magazine. I’ve asked him to join us. Roger’s got some interesting ideas for sampling your products.”

Layla removed her glasses and studied Roger through dark, almond-shaped eyes. Roger broke into his most disarming smile and placed his left hand over hers during the introductions.

“It’s my pleasure . . . Layla.” He slipped his business card into her hand and added, “Can we offer you a cocktail?”

“Of course.”

As Layla inspected Roger’s card, Max searched for the waiter. It was time to take charge of the situation before Roger forgot whose client they were entertaining.

“I called earlier,” Max said. “The hotel carries all of Peacock’s products.”

Layla nodded her approval. “Good. I’ll have a glass of Chardonnay. Gentlemen, order as you please.”

“I’ll go for another Tanq—” Roger began, before Max kicked him under the table.

“Two Peacock gin and tonics,” Max interjected. “Roger loves Peacock gin. Isn’t that right, Roger?”

“Absolutely. Did you know that the bar at *Plates*’ gourmet kitchen is fully stocked with Peacock’s line?” Roger asked.

Layla smiled. “You gentlemen have excellent taste. Roger, I’m sure you’re an expert on the city’s restaurants. Tell us what’s new.”

Taking his cue, Roger showed off his acumen about the latest trends in New York’s constantly evolving palate, sprinkling his gastronomical recitation with the first names of a select group of its best-known chefs. Once he’d secured her attention, he leaned in and whispered the secret to his favorite dish—the plum-sake-poached torchon of foie gras and coriander-anise-crust, seared big-eye tuna served at the Biltmore Room on Eighth Avenue.

“Sounds delish,” Layla said.

“It was, but sad to say, they closed awhile back. Tough business, restaurants.”

Max let Roger prattle on, grateful for having a moment to think,

before his phone buzzed. He slid it onto his lap and opened a new text from Veronica.

Thinking about b 4. Sorry baby. Didn't give u a chance—need 2 talk.

Max took a slow breath. *With client.*

Want 2 hear ur side . . . no promises.

Max smiled inside. *C u at 8?*

K. No later. U like surprises, right?

Of course! B there at 8 sharp.

U better . . .

Max tucked the phone away. By now, Roger and Layla were discussing the merits of gourmet food trucks and Asian tapas.

"Why don't we have dinner at the Chambers Hotel?" Roger asked. "The hostess is holding a primo table for us at eight. It's on *Plates*."

Max did a double take. "I'm sure Layla has plans, Roger. Plus, Town closed in November."

"They've opened a new place. Different menu every night. You'll love it. They even have steak, Max," Roger said with a smirk.

"Oh, I love farm to table. Great wine list, too," Layla said.

Max hesitated. "I have someplace I . . ."

"This sounds like fun," Layla said. "I had to reschedule dinner with my father, so I'm game. I'll be in and out of the office with field sales starting tomorrow, so tonight is a good time to discuss our launch strategy. I have news on the budget, too," she added.

Max squirmed. Between Layla, Veronica, and Cassidy's book club, he was about to be triple-booked.

"Are you sure? I'm not certain they take reservations, and I wouldn't want you to have to wait. You know how the traffic gets when . . ."

"Max, please," Layla said with a laugh. "I'll be fine." She turned to Roger and smiled. "Thank you, Roger. It would be a pleasure to join you gentlemen. Shall we go?"

Max looked over at Roger, now grinning innocently. Layla excused herself to make a phone call.

"Nice going," Max said.

"She has good news on the budget."

"Let's just go," Max responded resignedly.

Roger shrugged. While exiting, Max waved Roger and Layla ahead, telling them he'd catch up. He slowed down to call Veronica.

No answer. He pursed his lips and dialed Cassidy Goodson. Moving faster to keep pace, he was short of breath by the time she answered.

"Max? Is someone chasing you?" Cassidy asked.

"Very funny . . . something's come up."

"I thought you'd be here by now."

"We're having dinner with my client . . . so I can't make the reading."

After a long pause, she said, "Serena can cover for you—for the third time."

"I'm really sorry," Max said. "You know how it is with clients."

"I do know," Cassidy replied. "I'm tap dancing and spinning plates getting this magazine launched. Talk about pressure."

"I knew you'd understand."

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

"No, no, I'm late, that's all."

"Is this about Ms. Victoria?"

"It's *Veronica*. Why do you keep calling her that?"

"Because she's all about the garters and teddies."

Me too, he thought.

"Hey, are you still there?" Cassidy asked.

"What?"

"Have you considered what we talked about?"

"The men's column? It's like I told you—women don't want to hear the real truth about guys. We're not very interesting. We can survive on ketchup, toilet paper, ESPN, and a six-pack. How exciting is that?"

"You said the column was a great idea. And I told you that you can write whatever you want, as long as it's about guys."

"I'll think about it."

"You owe me for being a no-show again," she said. "I've got to go set up the tables now. Sorry you can't be here."

As soon as he hung up, Max felt like kicking himself—disappointing Cassidy had become a habit. But he knew she had things under control. His phone pulsed. *Veronica*.

U call?

Yes—B4.

I've been trying on a few little things . . . all black.

Max tightened his grip on the phone.

Something unexpected has come up.

Oooh, tell me more.

The client. Taking her to dinner.

Her? Dinner?? Where???

From Peacock. Some new place in the Chambers Hotel. Roger's here.

Chambers Hotel?

Yes.

I want 2 go there.

We will. Promise.

I need action, not promises.

Max hurried to catch up to Roger and Layla, who were already standing at the hotel's entrance. As Max approached, a pitted-faced man in a dirty raincoat staggered toward Roger and Layla. Layla leaned back when she caught a whiff of alcohol on the man's breath. He started to show her an umbrella—a tattered version of the second-rate kind New Yorkers buy on the street when caught in a sudden downpour. Roger stepped between them.

"Excuse me, sir," the man mumbled. "Want an umbrella? It's going to rain."

"It is?" Roger said, looking up. The skies were clear, with the exception of a small cloud to the west. After a quick side glance to make sure Layla was watching, he said, "Well, we better buy an umbrella then. How much?"

"Five bucks."

"I only have a ten."

Max rolled his eyes as he took in his friend's performance.

Roger pressed the bill into his palm and the man's face lit up. "Good evening," Roger said, before glancing at Layla, who smiled as the man shuffled away.

"Shall we?" asked Max as he held the door open for Layla. As she swished into the lobby, Roger admired her backside. He shot Max a quick nod toward her direction, eyebrows raised.

Max rolled his eyes again and reached for his phone. Roger flicked Max's shoulder, whispering out of the side of his mouth, "Put that away and join the party."

"Yeah, yeah," Max said, following Roger inside.

They passed the hotel's intimate bar and descended the steps to a dining room anchored by a large communal table. Roger whispered something to the pretty Asian hostess. She tossed her hair back and laughed, leading them toward a relatively private table in the back.

"I love the energy," Layla said, facing the bustling scene. Max peeked at his phone again. Veronica had aborted their last text message. He tapped her number again. No answer. Roger pointed out the ladies room to Layla and held her chair.

Once she was a few tables away, Roger turned to Max. "Will you stop with the *Angry Birds* already? You've got a smoking hot client here and she deserves a little TLC from her agency. How about we show her a good time and then sell her something?"

"That was Veronica sexting me."

"I thought you said it was over," Roger said.

"Maybe not."

"Well, if she hits you up again, tell her *mañana*. Or better yet, let me talk to her."

"Don't think so," Max said.

"Then hand me that wine list," Roger said, proceeding to flip through the pages. After closing the leather-bound book, he signaled the sommelier and quizzed him relentlessly before settling on a high-end Napa Chardonnay and a rare vintage Bordeaux.

Max heard his phone beep. Veronica again.

"Hey, she's on her way back," Roger warned. "Shut that down."

"One sec," Max said, desperately working his fingers across the keyboard.

Remember that black bustier and thong? The one u said made my tits look enormous?

Of course!

Then y aren't u here?

Trying. Need more time.

The black heels with the ankle straps?

B there by 10.

Taking me 4 granted?

9:50.

*I need someone who does whatever it takes. Let Roger deal with the client.
Leave now.*

9 on the dot.

Don't bother. This isn't working.

Max's face flushed. Roger poked him under the table.

Max slipped his phone back into his jacket pocket. They stood when Layla returned, her lips now shimmering with gloss. Beads of sweat reappeared on Max's temple, and he was sure Layla was staring at them.

"Max," Layla said, touching his arm lightly. "Are you all right?"

Max straightened his tie and assured her that he was fine. Roger gave Max a get-it-together-now face when the menus arrived. When the headwaiter descended on the table, Max tried to listen, but he didn't hear a word about the specials.

Roger peppered the waiter with detailed questions about the ingredients used in the foie gras terrine appetizer. Layla listened intently and savored her wine before deciding on the cod with chamomile, fennel, and ramps. Roger ordered the swordfish and stared Max down when the waiter turned his way.

"And you, sir?"

Max hadn't opened his menu. "Sirloin. Medium rare."

"No sirloin this evening, sir. We do have a steak frites."

"Fine. And I'd like a salad with . . . whatever dressing."

"We actually have a few variations today . . ."

"Surprise me. I love surprises. I've been getting them all day," Max said, forcing a smile.

"Have you told Roger about our new line?" Layla asked, eyeing Max curiously.

"Just the highlights," Max said. "What's been written about them in the trades. I thought that since we're here and Roger works for a new epicurean magazine, it might be a good time to brainstorm ways for sampling your line and matching the products with food."

Roger tapped his foot, eager to chime in. "*Plates* would be honored to introduce your products into the city's top establishments. We can develop a range of terrific recipes for drinks, dinners, and desserts, too. Do they have a name yet?"

“Well, there’s one we’re considering. These spirits are very elegant—great packaging and a frosted bottle. It’s been difficult to come up with a name that captures how precious they are. But we need to make a decision very soon to stay on schedule. We’re considering *Holy Spiritz*. What do you think?”

“*Holy Spiritz*? I love it. A blessed choice,” Roger said.

Max cleared his throat and gave Roger a quick, sharp glance. “*Holy Spiritz* is provocative, and certainly worth considering,” he said, steepling his fingers. “But do you think it might be a bit strong? There could be PR issues with consumer advocacy groups. Layla, would you allow my team to develop a list of potential names that are similar and still supportive of your strategy, but sound less ecclesiastical? We’ll conduct the research and, of course, include *Holy Spiritz* in the testing. We want the strongest name recognition for your brand and a smooth, successful launch without the potential for negative press.”

Max held Layla’s gaze across the table and watched the corners of her mouth slowly turn upward. “That’s exactly the kind of thinking I want from my agency. Excellent, Max. You’re right. The branding process needs to be handled with the utmost care.” She turned to Roger. “Could you pour me some wine? I’d like to try the Bordeaux.”

Roger barely avoided knocking the bottle over as he reached out to fill her glass. Max looked over at Roger, who feigned a smile back.

“I’ll have more wine, too,” Max said cheerily, holding out his glass.

Roger filled it dangerously close to the brim until Max held up his hand.

“One more thing,” Layla said, swirling the deep red wine. “I’d like the agency to develop the ad campaign concepts while I’m out next week.”

Without a name for the brand? Max thought. When he saw the unwavering look on her face, he said, “Of course. I’ll ask our teams to put together some directional ideas.”

“I want real campaigns, not rough ideas. We need a quick turnaround. Can you do it?”

“Definitely.”

“Good. I have some ideas, but I’ll set the budget after I see the work. I think your agency will be pleased.”

Max nodded. After finishing his wine, he excused himself from

the table. Inside the men's room, he leaned over the sink and splashed cold water on his face. The color was finally returning to normal. He dried off, took his phone out, and tried contacting Veronica again—first by phone, then text, and finally e-mailing her. No answer. By the time he'd plodded back to the table, his insides were gurgling and his stomach was raw. The moment he sat down, the waiter slid a platter of steak frites under his nose.

Roger continued pouring it on for Layla, reeling off potential food and liquor matches for her new products: a Vietnamese vegetarian medley paired nicely with the vanilla bean and aloe infused rum, and the lobster ravioli with a pink sauce made from crème fraiche and strawberry vodka. Max sighed. His client was charmed by Roger's performance, and Max wanted to get her out of there. Right now.

As Roger guided Layla through the dessert menu, suggesting more eclectic ideas that paired food with her products, Max excused himself again. He stepped into the foyer to call Veronica. It was after ten. He held out hope that she was still decked out in lingerie anticipating his arrival. No response. He put the phone away. *It was over.* Max dragged himself back to the table where Roger and Layla were laughing with the waiter as he tried valiantly to field Roger's endless questions about today's desserts.

"Can you tell us something about the breed of cows used in making the curds for the various flavors of ice cream? Are Holsteins favored in a particular climate or season?" Seeing Layla's smile, Max was comforted that at least his client was enjoying the show.

"I'll have the milk bar crack pie," Max said, yielding to the waiter's recommendation when it was his turn to order.

Over espressos, Roger continued working Layla, piling it on even more than usual. After requesting the bill and a second espresso, Roger waxed on, ignoring the check. Ten minutes later, Max finally picked up the tab and frowned at Roger, who avoided making eye contact.

Outside, Max flagged down a taxi for Layla while she stood by, still laughing with Roger. It was approaching midnight and Max was ready to crash. As he held the cab door open for her, Max noticed the man who had sold Roger the umbrella leaning against a building, guzzling from a bottle wrapped in a paper bag.

Roger said, "Layla and I can share the cab."

Max tightened his grip on the door handle. "Aren't you going west, Roger? Layla lives on the Upper East Side."

"We're fine, Max," Layla said.

"Then please, take this one," Max said, smiling tactfully and air kissing Layla on both cheeks. He glared at Roger as he cut in front of Max and slid into the back. The moment the door closed, the taxi bolted into the night.

Roger maneuvered his long legs in the backseat. He shifted his body, facing Layla as they pulled up to the tall, black cylindrical building at the corner of 66th and Second Avenue. Roger leaned in carefully, making warm, steady eye contact.

"I really enjoyed tonight, and I'd like to help with your launch any way I can," he said. "Why don't I set up a dinner and give you a more personalized introduction to the *Plates* experience?"

The driver looked back in his mirror.

"Well, that's quite an offer," she said. "You certainly appear to be an expert in your field."

"I do my best," he said earnestly. "How should I contact you?"

Layla stepped out into a light rain. She automatically tucked her bag under her arm, looked back, and said, "Google me, Roger." She smiled to herself as she walked away.

When the next cab pulled up, it was drizzling. Max climbed into the backseat and hit Veronica's speed dial again, but his call went directly to voice mail. He slumped back, staring through the grimy window as the taxi rumbled to the West Side. Fat raindrops began splattering the street as the lights of the city flashed by the window, wet and weird on the glass.

Max sighed. "Shit, it's only Monday."



CHAPTER 2

Cassidy Goodson and her friend Serena de los Reyes emerged from the depths of Brooklyn’s Borough Hall subway station into a perfect Sunday afternoon. They’d just finished a marathon yoga session at Serena’s studio in Park Slope, and Cassidy’s fair skin glowed.

“You’re still upset,” Serena said, studying her friend’s face.

“I can’t help it,” Cassidy responded, adjusting her yoga mat under her arm. “He’s working so hard in a new job and she nukes him with a *text!*”

Heads turned at that remark, not that Cassidy, in her faded jeans and tight T-shirt, wasn’t already getting her share of looks. With her lean frame, light brown wavy hair, and pale blue eyes, she had the all-American appeal of a leading actress on a sitcom—the kind of woman mothers hope their sons will bring home for Thanksgiving dinner.

Serena, wearing one of the boho-styled ribbed tanks she sold in the boutique adjacent to her yoga studio, also turned heads. This afternoon, her jet-black hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. Her baby-blue top and matching track pants showed off her athletic curves as the two women strolled along Montague Street.

Entering Noodle Pudding, they were greeted with smiles from the staff and were seated immediately at a table by the window. Cassidy had been away on business for Serena’s birthday, so today she was treating her best friend to lunch at her favorite Italian bistro. Following another endless winter, the restaurant doors had been swung open, letting in a light breeze that circulated a scent of fresh pesto

throughout the room. Cassidy balanced her tortoiseshell glasses on her nose and took a cursory glance at the specials board. She didn't open the menu, reaching for the breadbasket instead.

"That class was awesome," Serena said in a velvety voice that carried a hint of an accent.

"I still can't keep up with you," Cassidy said, shaking her head.

Serena looked up when she heard Cassidy snap a semolina breadstick in half. "God, you really are upset. You're eating carbs."

"I can't help it. She's unbelievable," Cassidy said.

"Who?"

"Victoria."

"Veronica," Serena said, rolling her eyes.

Cassidy shrugged.

"Listen," Serena continued. "Maybe she's got the looks and the smarts, but some women are never satisfied. When the time comes, she'll go down hard."

"I know, but it bugs me that she's still pulling her shit and getting away with it," said Cassidy. "What's happened to her since we worked at *Face Front* is amazing. We were a kick-ass team."

"Look, nothing's happened to her. She is what she is. She's got the bitch gene programmed into her DNA."

Cassidy half-nodded. "Yeah, but she helped me get transferred into editorial."

"Come on, girl. We've been over this. Someone who can sell the way you can should know why she was pushing you out of her department."

"But I wasn't a threat, and you were running the show. You taught us everything."

"Didn't teach her to sleep with the publisher. Or to screw me out of my job."

"But look what you've got now—a great business, without the nonsense," Cassidy said, now flipping open her menu. "She just pisses me off."

Serena unfolded her napkin. "Are we going to order, or just bitch about the bitch?" She waved, and a waiter came by, scribbled their orders, and retreated to the kitchen.

"So, how do you like the new neighborhood?" Serena asked.

"Feels like home already. I mean, it's only three blocks from my old place, but the view of the city's awesome. Now, if only I could find time to invite people over and enjoy it."

"Like a hunky guy?" Serena suggested, laughing.

"I'm so crazed at work, that's the last thing I need."

"Maybe it's the only thing," Serena said.

"And you?"

"There's no one in the pipeline right now," said Serena, pulling off a piece of fresh bread after the salads arrived.

"I know. It's too bad that men act crazy around you."

Serena laughed. Although it had been two years since they worked together at *Face Front* magazine, the two women had forged a strong, lasting friendship. They both preferred the relative tranquility of Brooklyn's picturesque brownstones and tree-lined streets to living in the maddening buzz of Manhattan.

Three days ago, Serena turned thirty-eight, but she maintained the exotic look of a former fashion model with her dark, smoldering eyes and flawless caramel skin.

Serena watched Cassidy poking at her salad. "God, you really are upset over this. Max is a sweet guy, but considering the company he's been keeping, maybe he had it coming. You know, a very smart woman once said, 'The only thing worse than a man you can't control is one that you can.'"

"Whatever, but I don't like her hurting him. Let's hope what goes around . . ." Cassidy's voice trailed off as the entrees arrived. "I'm taking him kayaking on Tuesday."

"Oooh," Serena said, arching an eyebrow. "Romance on the high seas."

"Oh, no," Cassidy said. "We tried romance before. Remember? I ended up crying into my Krispy Kremes for a week."

"He just couldn't deal with dating the boss's daughter. But you're both free and single now, and you work at different companies."

"Yeah, and we're also friends now. And I like that. Besides, I've got this magazine to launch."

"A magazine can't give you what you need, girl," Serena said, grinning. "Why don't you stop over at his place, loosen his belt, and see what happens?"

Cassidy pointed her fork in Serena's direction. "Max had his chance. He needs to decide what he wants and go after it. He gets so close to putting it all together and then something always happens."

"One thing you don't want happening is him getting back with *Victoria*," Serena said, her eyes narrowing as she twirled her pasta.

Cassidy half-smiled. "Veronica. After what she put him through, he's got a bad case of the New York City guy virus: emotional unavailability." She held out her goblet of Barolo and Serena clinked it with her sparkling water.

"Enough about them. How's the magazine? What did you finally name it?" Serena asked.

"*My Radiance*. And I'm doing everything I can to set the bar higher than reporting on starlets dancing on tables in their bras and panties," Cassidy said with a chuckle that revealed her dimples. "But there'll always be the obligatory celebrity features. Young Hollywood sells."

"Why don't you create your own celebrities?" Serena suggested. "Find experts on things that interest women."

Cassidy's face brightened. "That's what we're thinking. There are plenty of smart women we can showcase. And I want articles about men, too, and from their perspective. Like a guy shooting from the hip about how men lure us to bed or how they feel about getting dumped by someone like Victoria. Women might like a peek into a man's world, even if it is kind of weird."

"A regular guy's perspective."

"We'll demystify the species, assuming we can refer to men as a species," Cassidy mused.

"Personally, I don't see guys being all that mysterious, but you might be on to something. You're going to need the right male voice—someone who'll tell women why guys ask for your number and say they'll call, and then don't. Not that it's ever happened to me," Serena said, smiling. "What about Max? Doesn't he write stories?"

"I've asked him, but he told me that if he revealed men's inner secrets, he'd have to kill me," Cassidy said.

"Too bad. Maybe when his head clears, he'll change his mind."

"If he ever gets over her."

"Make him get over her," Serena said, picking up her menu. "I want something chocolate."

Cassidy sighed as the waiter took their plates away. Her phone rang, so she unzipped her tote and reached around inside. Too late. A beep sounded when the call went to voice mail. She listened to the message as Serena scanned the desserts.

"Hmm, flourless chocolate cake or chocolate panna cotta?" Serena asked herself aloud.

Cassidy dropped her phone. The color had drained from her face.

"What's wrong?" Serena asked.

Cassidy fumbled for the phone and threw it into her bag. Her eyes darted to the door. "That was Beth Israel hospital. It's my Dad—his heart. He had chest pains and they rushed him to the emergency room. Here . . ." She tossed some bills on the table and grabbed her mat. "I've got to go."

"I'm coming, too," Serena called out, following behind her. The two women rushed outside and jumped into a cab waiting at the light.



CHAPTER 3

“So, you got voted off the island,” Roger said, leaning back into his leather chair. He was using his Sharpie to tap the opening riff of “Honky Tonk Women” on his coffee mug. “You knew what you were getting into. Veronica’s a barracuda gnashing through a school of minnows. Give yourself credit. Most guys don’t have the balls to date a woman like her. And you survived.”

“Right,” Max said into the phone from his office across town.

Roger closed his door and switched on the speakerphone. “I’ve been worried about you, *amigo*.” He took a sip of his latte. “So, have you heard from . . .”

“Layla?” Max replied.

“Ah, no. Veronica.”

“Oh. We talked . . . a little. Like I told you, she says we need distance. I’m still not sure what happened.”

“Did you ask her what she wanted?”

“Maybe she wants a rugged individualist,” Max said.

“*Thattaboy*,” Roger declared. “*Amigo*, you can’t win with chicks like Veronica. They go all out trying to change a dude into their ideal mate. Then, after you’ve morphed into the submissive pussy you thought they wanted, they dump you. They know that the alpha male of their dreams would never put up with their self-loathing. This is tricky shit, so stop beating yourself up. Plus, women in the big city have busy lives. They don’t have much use for us guys except when they snugg in front of the tube or get horny.”

"At least I don't need batteries," Max laughed, shaking his head.

"You need to keep moving. Let's try something new to take your mind off your mistakes."

"Gee, thanks, coach."

Roger ignored him. "How about knitting? There's this joint downtown where the chicks hang out to stitch and bitch. We can take a class."

"Do the alpha dogs knit?"

"Yes, *amigo*. It's about gravitas, and taking risks, and not giving a shit. When those needle-clacking lonely hearts see two studly guys practicing their art, they'll be all over us. You can knit Uncle Roger a sweater."

"I don't need to purl a pair of cabled booties to meet women."

"But you need to if you want to get laid," Roger said. When Max didn't respond, Roger added, "So what's new at Hornswoggle? Are they still working you like a farm animal?"

"Well, I have a new boss. I haven't met him yet, but he sends me dozens of e-mails every day. I'm constantly revising my revenue projections for him instead of building Layla's business."

"Just ignore him and do what old Henry Goodson taught us. 'Own the client relationship.' Then the new *el jefe* can't fuck with you. Plus, you already have both hands full with Layla, and that ain't bad."

"This guy has already fired two senior account people and hasn't replaced them."

"More opportunities for you to shine," Roger said. "That's why they're paying you the big bucks. My bankroll didn't make weight until I left Goodson."

"Maybe this is my wake-up call. At Goodson, I ran the business and we produced great creative. That reminds me, Henry's still in the hospital."

"That's too bad," Roger said. "Henry's a good dude." He checked his watch. "Hey, *amigo*, I need to finish a few things before I head up to the stadium. Sorry about your ticket. Clients again. I'll make it up to you. Promise."

"Of course," Max said evenly.

"I'll represent for both of us tonight. *Ciao*."

Max strolled down the hallway and overheard a group of colleagues fretting over an impending crisis on a new brand of potato chips. He smiled to himself, wondering what kind of calamity could possibly be looming for bags of salty snacks. Moving at a crisp pace, he nodded to the eager smiles and “hi-how-are-you’s” from the fresh-faced account coordinators penned in the rows of cubicles leading to his office. Max liked these energetic young workers, knowing that many of them had been handed their entry-level positions by virtue of being the spawn of a client or an agency business partner.

Since taking the job, Max had witnessed an underlying sense of paranoia from his peers that permeated even the most mundane day-to-day dealings. When he’d ask a fellow account director about their business, the answer was served up mannequin-like, in the same flavor of vanilla.

“Things are great.”

“My client is so awesome.”

“They loved our ideas.”

The transparent “I love my job” mantras that HHI’s employees parroted sounded like they were read from cue cards. And Max understood. There was always the possibility of being overheard—or worse, being wrong. During departmental meetings, Max listened to the politically charged agendas of the top executives. This was a dramatic change from the weekly free-for-alls at Goodson. As the leader of his team at Hornsby Hammerhead, Max constantly encouraged his staff to introduce fresh ideas, but his subordinates offered little and waited for him to lead the way. It was safer to agree, even if they secretly believed he was wrong and hoped he’d fail.

Max plopped down in his chair, opened his calendar, and fluttered his lips with a long exhale. He was slammed for the entire week through seven o’clock Friday evening. Foremost in his thoughts was Kent Gloss, Hornsby Hammerhead International’s newest Executive Vice President, and Max’s new boss. Gloss had recently joined the agency under a fanfare of press, following his meteoric rise at a rival shop. He’d built a reputation around a bare-knuckled management style and an impressive record of new business wins, and was considered one of the top young rainmakers in the industry. He was also notorious for manipulating the media. He’d been dogged by rumors that he often leaked

negative information about the competition—inaccurate reports that weren't debunked until after the damage had been done. But he kept winning new business and that was all that mattered.

Gloss called meetings when it suited him—at any hour, on any day. He phoned executives early Sunday mornings and arranged conference calls for Saturday afternoons. He was a brash Brit in his early forties who was driven to succeed at any cost. In his current state of mind, Max was apprehensive about meeting Gloss the next morning. At six forty-five, Max shut down his laptop and then lost himself in the crush of people on Madison Avenue.

As he walked down the fourth floor corridor of Beth Israel Medical Center, Max heard laughter emanating from the room at the end of the hall. When he reached the doorway, two nurses stood giggling next to Henry Goodson's bed. Henry was propped up, holding court with the women. The Yankees game flickered silently from the television perched across the room.

"So you're telling me that no one's ever drunk champagne from a bedpan?" the man with the gentle eyes and white goatee asked. The women broke into laughter again as one of them placed a dinner of steamed chicken with brown rice onto Henry's plastic tray.

Seeing Max at the doorway, Henry raised his arms in a welcoming pose. "Ladies, this is Max Hallyday, one of New York's top account executives. Max, say hello to my guardian angels."

The two middle-aged women smiled broadly as they greeted him. After exchanging pleasantries and refilling Henry's jug of water, the nurses waved goodbye and returned to their rounds. Henry looked up warmly as Max approached. Despite his sallow complexion and confinement to the hospital bed, Henry's eyes were clear and blue like his daughter's.

"Good to see you," Henry said. "How's the job?"

"Fine, fine. How are you feeling?"

Henry was spry and congenial at sixty-three years of age—a runner who, until recently, had still been logging fifteen miles a week. A survivor of the Sixties, he'd seen it all and experienced more than

most. When it came time to make his mark on the system, Henry had emerged from the fray with his values intact and a thriving creative business.

"I'm doing okay, son," Henry replied in a measured, much-less-animated tone than usual.

Max studied his eyes. "Take your time and get well."

"They need me back at the agency," said Henry, catching his breath. "I want to get my ass out of here by the end of the week. I'm feeling much, much better."

Max looked around the drab hospital room. "So business is okay?"

"We're fine. Losing good people like you creates challenges, but we'll survive," said Henry, shifting his pillows beneath him. "This new job will be great experience for you. You can learn a lot at HHI. I see they've hired Kent Gloss. Smart."

"You know Gloss?"

Henry nodded. "I know of him. Despite what you may have read, he's a juggernaut for new business. He must be highly intelligent, and from what I know about his tactics, I wouldn't want him sniffing around my accounts," he said with a slight smile.

Max ran his hand across his mouth and took a seat.

"You look a little tense, Max. How about some prune juice?" Henry said, holding out a paper cup. "That'll loosen you up."

Max smiled. "I'm fine. Really."

"I hope so." He bumped his fist against Max's knee. "You know how valuable you were to me. I can't pretend otherwise. You did a great job managing the bubble gum . . ."

"Bobalooie."

"Right, you made a nice profit for us on that account, and it's keeping us afloat."

"Just doin' my job."

Henry waved dismissively. "You did more than your job. You put your heart into your work, and I'm not sure you know that. You built solid relationships—that's what counts. But, advertising's all about change. We'll keep growing. That's as soon as I get myself out of here," he said.

"You'll be home soon," Max said quietly, picking up the remote control. "Watching the game?"

"Of course. You don't think I was really listening to you? Turn up the volume."

Max smiled and clicked to the Yankees–Red Sox game. Yankee Stadium was sold out and the fans were fixated on this latest chapter of their rivalry. The moment after Mark Teixeira tied the score by depositing Josh Beckett's pitch into the right field bleachers, Max's cell phone lit up. He checked the number. It was Roger, calling to rub it in about attending the game. Max beamed when he heard the crowd's roar in the background.

"Red Sox suck!" Max barked into the receiver. "What's up, man? Hell of a game." He covered one ear, barely making out his friend's voice over the din of the stadium.

"Dude, where you at?" Roger yelled.

"With Henry. We're watching the game in his room."

"Tell him I said hi, and that he needs to get better right away. Sorry you couldn't make it. We're having a blast," Roger said.

When the crowd quieted down, Max heard a woman's voice in the background—and he froze. *No*, he thought. *It couldn't be.*

Roger said, "Hold on, the beer vendor's here." Max thought he heard the same woman's voice again before Roger returned and said, "Hey, dude, A-Rod's up. I need to see this. I'll call you tomorrow. *Ciao.*"

After Roger hung up, Max stared at the television, perplexed. Before replacing the phone in his leather jacket, he considered calling Roger back, but instead dialed Veronica's number. His call went to voice mail. He clenched his jaw while plinking out a text message.

V, it's Max. Just checking in 2 see how u r doing. What's up? He waited, never taking his eyes away from the message panel. When he was about to close the phone, she replied.

Hey! What's up?

Where r u? He hoped his intuition was wrong.

At the game.

Max felt his face turn red. He banged the railing on Henry's bed, causing the older man to sit up abruptly.

"Sorry, Henry. I can't believe they called that pitch a ball." *Glad u r having fun*, he typed. *Am I interrupting?*

There was a long pause. *With friends. Glad u r okay and not mad.*

Of course not. I'M SO FUCKING HAPPY!

???

Sorry, just wanted 2 say hi. Take care.

Max closed the phone. After some more small talk, Max made Henry promise him a speedy recovery and then said his goodbyes.

Back in his apartment, Max's mind flashed between images of his ex cavorting with his best friend and thoughts about his brief relationship with Cassidy. Seeing Henry in bed with a failing heart was depressing. Max grabbed a beer and dropped onto his couch. *Was I too abrupt with Cassidy? What was so wrong with having a relationship with the boss's daughter?* Henry had been cool about it. Max thought that he had cut off something that felt good, without really giving it a chance. But, he had made a choice—the hot girl, the hot gig. *Too late to go back now*, he reminded himself.

When his radio alarm blasted him out of bed at five fifteen, Max dragged himself to the bathroom and fired up the shower jets all the way. This was a key meeting that required focus. Aware of Gloss's powerful position, Max wanted to be viewed as an indispensable member of his team. He wondered if Gloss would want him working on new business. Under normal circumstances, a new hire like Max would be given time to get his account running smoothly before being pressured into additional duties. But nothing at HHI was "normal circumstances."

While toweling off, he couldn't shake his discomfort with his new agency. The environment seemed toxic—maybe too toxic—but for now, Max was determined to make it work. After forty crisp push-ups, he quickly dressed, and with his hair still wet, tore open a Clif Bar on his way out the door.

Max didn't waste time searching for a cab. Like any savvy New Yorker, he knew that when it rains, taxis vanish like dreams. The E train was almost empty when it pulled into the 34th Street station. Max sat alone, attempting to translate the Spanish language ad for a roach control product. When he exited the subway, his blazer and pants were damp and his stomach was knotted up. But when he

entered HHI's world headquarters, Max rolled his shoulders back and reminded himself that he was a vice president at Manhattan's hottest advertising agency.

Studying his face in the mirrored walls of the elevator, he saw how it was changing from boyish good looks to a more chiseled, masculine countenance. He tugged down the lapels of his jacket. This was his moment to shine. When the elevator doors slid open to the thirty-eighth floor, he walked confidently toward the corner office.

Gloss's stone-faced assistant inspected him and then traced his finger down his planner. "Hmm, I don't see anything. Oh wait, here it is." He buzzed his superior. "Mr. Hol-i-day. Yes, he's late. Shall I send him in anyway?"

Max glanced at his watch. Six thirty sharp. He narrowed his eyes. "It's Hallyday, by the way," he said as the assistant gestured toward the door.

Kent Gloss was seated behind a large desk in the far corner of the spacious room. Thick curtains were draped across the windows, rendering the office dark except for a small lamp glowing on Gloss's desk. An oversized framed print with THINK in bold letters hung directly across from Gloss on an otherwise bare wall. Gloss was hunched over his speakerphone in the midst of a caffeinated rant. His buzz cut compensated for a dramatically receding hairline and flecks of gray at the temples, and his sharp, pointed features were restrained behind black-framed glasses. He was stylishly dressed in a tightly-buttoned black suit. Sensing Max's presence, Gloss turned and pointed to the chair in front of his desk. Max slowly entered the office, listening to Gloss's call.

"Yes, Crimmins, the information I gave you is one hundred percent accurate. Another scoop for you, mate," Gloss said sharply. "Now, about those seats for the Dalai Lama benefit in September. Yes, you heard me correctly. First row for His Holiness." He examined his cuticles while listening to the voice on the other end of the line. "Blast it, Crimmins! It's three months away. Get them." Gloss frowned, hanging up the phone. "Bloody trade press." He looked down and scribbled some notes.

His Holiness? Max wondered, glancing around Gloss's office. Its sheer size and the furnishings were impressive. There were two

sets of handcrafted miniature soldiers displayed on a table adjacent to Gloss's massive desk. One of the armies was British. The other appeared to be Huguenots. Max ran the tip of his finger over the helmet of one of the soldiers. He looked up to find Gloss sizing him up from behind his desk.

Gloss was thin, but wiry, and his movements were rapid and bird-like. His stare was intense, reminding Max of a crow. Gloss reached his boney white hand across the desk. Max shook it, searching Gloss's hard black eyes for something to read in them, but they were blank.

"Don't touch those," Gloss scolded, nodding to the toy soldiers.

"Oh, sorry. They're cool."

"Yes, they are. So Holiday, you're the new man on Peacock."

Max wasn't sure if this was a question. "It's Hallyday," he replied.

"Of course. Let's not waste time then. I have a hard stop at seven," Gloss said, leaning back in his chair. "All right—the drinks sector is expanding rapidly and adding these supposedly healthy ingredients is fucking brilliant. Right, mate?"

"Yes, and we're working on new campaigns . . ."

"I know," Gloss said, waving him off. "I've had a look at the ideas. Not a bad start, but you need to buckle down."

Max was surprised Gloss had already reviewed his account's creative work on his own. As he watched the impassive look on the Brit's face, he knew that connecting with his new boss and developing a rapport with him was going to be a challenge. Gloss wanted something, and it wasn't about becoming Max's new friend.

"I see you have a solid background in the sweets sector, Holiday. They tell me you doubled the billings with your client at Goodson."

Max smiled tightly and shifted in his seat.

"You're aware that HHI will benefit greatly as soon as we establish a presence in the category?"

"Sweets?"

"Yes, Holiday. Sweets. We need a confectionery account, and with your experience, you're the man to go get it. Any ideas?"

Max braced himself. "Tooka Wooka Inc. might be in the market for a new agency."

"Tooka Wooka is shite. They only spent a few million last year. How's your relationship with Bobalooie?"

"They have a long-standing partnership with Goodson."

"How solid can it be after their top account man left the agency, eh?" Gloss asked, getting a cocky tone. "I checked the figures. You did some job there and *your new agency* can use revenues like that."

"I don't think Bobalooie's looking to change agencies."

"Don't you agree that having our resources at their disposal would benefit them? We can do it all for them—the adverts, PR, digital, social media. One-stop shopping."

Max wasn't enjoying Gloss's line of questioning, but there was truth in what he was suggesting. Bobalooie's management had not been pleased about Max's departure and they made sure that Henry became aware of their concerns. They didn't have time for loyalty.

"Holiday, I know you're a company man. And I'm sure you don't wish anything negative for your former agency. But you're on my team now. And I have to feed our shareholders and their bloody bottom line or we're all fucked. I can see you're busy with Peacock, but I need more from you. I want that Bobalooie account in this agency by the end of the year. Right?" He glanced at his oversized watch. "Bio break, mate."

Max's eyebrows shot up. He hesitated, unsure how to respond.

"The *loo*, Holiday," he said dismissively. "Now—think about what we discussed and get started. I want that bubbly gum account in this agency. Oh, by the way, welcome aboard, mate. Cheers," he said, rising from his chair and herding Max out of his office.

Thanks for reading

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