

# SKIPPER'S REVENGE

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## **Skipper's Revenge**

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## C H A P T E R 4

“Where are the trees going to be planted?” Vicki asked while she repeatedly cut minuscule pieces off the coffee cake that sat on my kitchen counter.

“Just cut a real piece. Collectively you end up eating a full piece anyway,” I observed.

“True, but if I do it this way, I think I’m eating less. So, where are the trees going?”

“I don’t know. I guess some park or something. I’m just in charge of registering H2O people and getting the rules out,” I replied, taking the knife from her hands and dramatically cutting one thick slice for myself.

“There are rules?” she inquired.

“Well, more like guidelines about the prizes.”

I had never been to the Bridesmaid Ball, but based on the award categories (Dress from Hell, What Were They Thinking?, Best Retro Tux, and Most Outrageous Gown), it appeared that attendees would be rewarded for donning the most irksome wedding-attendant attire ever constructed. I explained the concept to Vicki, and her eyes widened with excitement.

“Oh my God! You should wear my bridesmaid dress from Calla’s wedding. You’d be sure to win.”

I had planned to wear one of the synthetic, pastel nightmares from one of the four weddings in which I had dutifully served as a bridesmaid. However, I could not argue that the dress Vicki referenced was indeed one of the most hideous items ever created.

Vicki had gone a little batty while in law school, becoming involved with Quinn, an aspiring playwright who always wore black sweatpants and a turtle-

neck. And I'm not using the adverb, "always" lightly; he arrived at her law-school graduation wearing them. Personally, I love sweatpants. They look fabulous on gym teachers, the track team, and Richard Simmons. However, they should not be worn out of the gym, especially if you are a man, and they are three sizes too small, which seemed to be Quinn's problem. His sweats were so form fitting that his genitalia seemed to be doing their own performance art. No matter how hard you tried not to look, you just couldn't ignore it. Wally argued that one could perhaps understand the need to wear such tight pants if the wearer in question was exceptionally endowed. Yet, based on several sideways glances, this did not seem to be the case for Quinn. As a result, the entire family referred to him as Baryshnikov behind Vicki's back. Luckily, they broke up a month after her graduation, before he completely brainwashed her. She escaped with only a mild case of vegetarianism and newfound respect for living simply and serving the vagrants of society as a public defender.

Shortly thereafter Vicki developed a great affinity for guinea pigs, after one of her clients, accused of stealing an unmarked police car, brought one to trial, unbeknownst to the court. Vicki failed to get the charges dropped, and he was convicted. The police department, who were filing his personal effects, found his guinea pig, Mr. Fatboy, in a coat pocket. The bailiff called Vicki from the precinct, asking what he should do. She drove down to the jail, and it was love at first sight. At the time of his adoption, Mr. Fatboy hardly lived up to his name. His skeleton could be easily seen under his fur, but luckily Vicki's vegetarian-friendly fridge contained nothing but vegetables, fruit, and cheese—a veritable guinea-pig smorgasbord. Soon Mr. Fatboy was ... well, fat.

Vicki met Calla, an organic farmer from Leesburg, Virginia, on her first day volunteering with the Greater Metro Guinea Pig Rescue Association. At adoption days, they wore T-shirts emblazoned with the words I'm a Pig Lover in hot pink, ironed-on letters. They quickly forged a friendship, and when Calla got engaged a year later, she asked Vicki to be in her wedding, which was later featured in *Organic Life* magazine.

According to the article, most wedding and bridesmaid dresses are constructed of synthetic fabrics that are petroleum-based and made from nonrenewable fossil fuels. It stated that even conventional fabrics such as cotton and wool should not be used, because of the numerous chemicals applied to them during the manufacturing process. Thus, to obey organic etiquette, Calla's bridesmaids wore gowns made of hemp that had been dyed using pomegranate juice, and instead of flowers, they carried bouquets of mixed herbs. Their jewelry included tiaras molded

of 100 percent beeswax. Just remembering the dress from the time Vicki tried it on for me made me feel itchy.

“I thought I read in the article that all the bridesmaid dresses were going to be recycled into a wedding quilt.”

“Calla doesn’t know this, but it got too complicated for me. The place that recycles them requires you to return the dress in a certain type of paper mailer that is sealed with beeswax ... yadda, yadda, yadda. I just kept it.”

“Sounds perfect. I’ll take it.”

Vicki promised to drop it off at my apartment the next day. She lived only a few blocks from me. I saw her often, sometimes too often. Had we not been related, we would not have been friends. She was often exhausting to be with, always looking for an opportunity to debate a cause or take an opposing position. An innocent mention that the Potomac River looked particularly picturesque would inevitably give way to Vicki’s monologue about how polluted the waterways around D.C. and Maryland had become. Over the years, I had learned to choose my words carefully and not provide her with these segues. However, one topic was constantly a topic for debate: my relationship with Ken.

## CHAPTER 5

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Working at H2O presented one problem. And it was a big problem: my boss. Cliché, I know, but I truly could not stand him. He was an idiot. And I was not alone in this thinking. The entire staff thought he was an idiot. Thankfully, I had a “commiserator,” Carlita, who handled all the benefits and compensation for the firm. Carlita and I were from completely opposite ends of the spectrum. I hailed from a small town. She had survived a childhood in the “hood.” She clawed her way through college and graduate school and had risen above what I surmised to be a difficult life. She was brilliant, genuinely brilliant. However, she had not completely escaped the hood, as evidenced by her frequent exclamations of “Girl!” and “Oh, no, I don’t think so,” along with her “mmmhumphs.” Carlita was a master at communicating through a sound or a look, and I adored her.

Despite our differences, we became instant friends. When I was arguing with my parents on the phone about borrowing \$3,000 from them to help with a down payment on a condo, Carlita grabbed the phone and said, “Dr. and Mrs. Sheehan. Hi. Listen, your baby girl is no spring chicken, and it’s time she settled down in her own space. You’ve got her beat down. She’s your baby; you gotta do her right.” I think my parents lent me the money because they were unsure of how to respond to such a plea.

Carlita was not much older than me, but she was years wiser, which I attributed to where she grew up. She never recounted tales of her youth. All I knew was that her father was in jail, and her mother was dead. Despite what I imagined was a wretched childhood, she was the most warm and positive individual that I had ever known. Her one quirk was that she talked about sex incessantly—the sex she’d had, the sex she hadn’t had, the sex she was going to have, the sex she

wanted to have. This type of conversation was not shared with anyone but me, which I viewed as a compliment, as well as a constant source of entertainment. I would frequently lecture her on the impropriety of her comments, citing the sexual harassment section of our employee handbook. Her response always remained, “You’re just jealous, cause you ain’t getting it good from the professor.”

Carlita was always “watching my back,” but mostly she was watching Blair Davis. Blair was one of the most successful lobbyists for the firm, and Carlita despised her. I admit that I didn’t love the woman—she was, after all, a Barbie—but I didn’t associate with her much, so it really wasn’t a problem. I did see her often, though, as HR resided on tenth floor east and the lobbyists’ offices resided on tenth floor west. Blair had ruffles of raven hair that framed a face worthy of any fashion-magazine cover. Carlita didn’t like her, because Blair called her frequently, peppering her with questions about 401K plans and whether her benefits covered facials and such. Blair never could figure out the forms and would ask questions such as, “Why is it a mutual fund if I’m unmarried?”

“I am going to 401Kick her little ass if she calls me one more time,” Carlita said one afternoon after a particularly busy day educating Blair. She pumped some mist from a small canister and wafted it toward herself.

“What are you doing?” I inquired.

“It’s aromatherapy from Franklin Covey. It’s supposed to keep me serene.” Carlita closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. I believed Carlita was single-handedly keeping Franklin Covey in business. She possessed what seemed like every item of their Successories line.

“Is it working?”

Carlita exhaled slowly. “I cannot let that girl get to me.”

It was clear that Carlita’s spray was not keeping her serene, since she practically tackled me at the office holiday party to alert me that Blair was talking to Ken.

“Paige, girl, I don’t trust her as far as I can throw her. Noooo nooo nooo. You better get on out there. I’m sure she’d be more than happy to stuff her stocking with him.”

“I’m not worried. Not a bit.” I shrugged it off without another thought. Ken was a true intellectual, and when I did interrupt their interlude, the first words out of his mouth were “Please do not leave me alone again with these people. Your firm seems to love fruitcakes, and I’m not talking about what’s on the buffet table.”

My department *was* fruity. For starters, there was Kulfeen, our compensation specialist. She was from the Ukraine and had come to the States when she was nineteen, at which time she married someone twenty years her senior. Carlita suspected that Kulfeen had been a mail-order bride; the details surrounding her betrothal were fuzzy.

Kulfeen had what seemed to be some kind of a supernatural knowledge of spreadsheet applications, but she was a bit of an odd duck. I often wondered about the extent of her deprivation growing up in the Ukraine. She would hoard things—trivial items like boxes of pens and legal pads. She became practically orgasmic at events like our annual benefits fair, when the HMO providers gave out stuff like stress balls and letter openers. Her appreciation for handouts also extended to compensation. I believe she saw herself as a kind of a Salary Santa Claus, handing out big fat compensation packages to all the boys and girls. Unfortunately, she was frequently reprimanded by our boss for being too generous with recommendations.

I found Kulfeen fascinating and was constantly trying to determine if her foreign behavior was because she was strange, or simply foreign. It was a never-ending question. For Christmas, Kulfeen presented the entire office with tiny picture frames in the shape of a cow. Inside was a glamour photo of her wearing a gold lamé turban. It was without question the most bizarre gift I had ever received. Carlita and I weren't certain if it was meant to be a joke, so we erred on the side of caution and formally thanked her. Carlita later told me that she placed the picture along with all her family photographs at home. When people inquired about it, she explained that Kulfeen was an African queen. Surprisingly, very few questioned her about it.

Fruitcake #2 was our payroll administrator, Brian, who loved loved *loved* his job at everyone else's expense. He was a real type A. Once I borrowed his three-hole punch and forgot to return it. He wrote me a long email about the importance of being respectful of other people's possessions. Shortly thereafter he brought in a label maker and put his name on every supply in his office. His stapler, his tape—even his trash can was labeled.

Brian was tolerable but also had an annoying penchant for abbreviating names. It was quite remarkable actually. Even if you thought your name could not be abbreviated, he would find a way. Carlita was Car, of course. Kulfeen was Feen. And although it seemed impractical to abbreviate my monosyllabic name, he did. For months he referred to me as P. Eventually, this somehow evolved into PIP, which also stood for our internal probation process, the Performance Improvement Plan. The only plus to working with him was that he was a

die-hard gardener on the side and frequently brought us fruits and veggies from his garden. It was like having a personal farmer's market.

Mike Hanley, Fruitcake #3, was our recruiter. He was madly in love with Blair Davis since the day he recommended that the firm hire her. If he wasn't in his office, you could always walk down the hallway and find him loitering just inside her door. If you questioned him about it, he would make up some lame-ass excuse about needing her expertise on a lobbyist-related job description. The word was that Mike was married to a witch of a woman who called a hundred times a day. He always seemed completely stressed and nervous, and would often work late—even when H2O was not hiring. Carlita and I suspected that he just didn't want to go home. Overall he was a good guy with questionable taste in women.

Last and not least, there was Perry, our boss, the King of Fruitcakes, director of HR and Doctorate of Philosophy in Human Factors. Carlita researched human factors on the Web and discovered it was related to psychology and product design. Ergonomics was a subfield, which explained why Perry equipped the office with \$100 mouse pads and futuristic chairs that forced good posture.

I prided myself on getting along with my co-workers, but Perry and I were often at odds with one another. He was completely tactless and frequently made inappropriate comments. Unlike Carlita, Perry's comments were not meant to entertain.

The staff and I discovered it was his connections, and not his qualifications, that had gotten him the job. One of the founding partners, Paul Houston, had been a childhood friend of Perry's back in Oklahoma. When Mr. Houston's brother went to Vietnam, he served in Perry's platoon, and Perry saved his life. The rescue was not from enemy fire, but from an orange slice. Mr. Houston's brother was choking on it, and Perry administered the Heimlich maneuver. I learned this background info the hard way. I had gone to Mr. Houston questioning Perry's ability to run the department and was served the entire story. Mr. Houston had ended the discussion with, "Perry is a great man. A little unorthodox, but a great man." I wanted to argue that a great man does not always translate into a great HR director, but I knew the point was moot. Of course news of my tattling wound its way back to Perry, and our relationship had been strained ever since.

I returned from getting my midday snack to find a yellow sticky note from Perry. My primary issue with Perry was that he could not seem to communicate through any other means besides the yellow Post-it note. Occasionally he would switch to neon green, but he never changed the cryptic, gruff-sounding messages:

“Need to talk to you ASAP,” or “Problem!” or my personal favorite, “Must talk.” The one decorating my computer screen that day simply read, “Important!!!”

Wow, I thought. *Three exclamation points.* In the beginning, Perry’s urgent messages would send me into a panic. Over time I realized that his definition of urgent and important issues usually meant that a ream of paper was missing, or one of the attorneys had gone to a prohibited Web site. In the three years I had worked for Perry, I had become extremely adept at waiting until the very last possible moment to respond to him. Eventually I would make the long walk down our hallway to his office. It always felt as if I were being called to the blackboard when I didn’t know the answer.

“Perry, you wanted to see me?” I chirped.

Perry shuffled some papers around his cluttered desk and under a pile of folders found his dry-erase marker.

“Voila!” he shouted as he held the marker up to show his discovery. “Shut the door, Paige.”

I quietly closed the door, sat down, and prepared myself for the day’s critical, heart-stopping issue.

“We’ve got ourselves a problem on the sixth floor ... a paralegal,” he began. “Some Russian guy named Klavic. His co-workers say that he has severe BO.”

“As in body odor?” I asked.

“Yeah, you know. Those Slavs take showers like once a month.”

“Well, I don’t think we should make generalizations, Perry. And he’s Russian, not Slavic.”

Perry gave me the warning finger, the “don’t mess with me” finger. He then quickly brought out his small whiteboard and scribbled the plan of action like a coach during half-time. Perry loved his dear whiteboard. Hence the excitement after finding his long-lost dry-erase marker. Personally, I have a three-person minimum before breaking out the whiteboard. But Perry would frequently whiteboard just for me. It was as if he thought I could not grasp anything without visuals. With his green marker, he wrote,

*Euro’s BO*

*Talk with his manager.*

*Notify employee.*

*Follow up in two weeks with co-workers.*

Then at the very bottom, Mr. Post-it wrote his tagline:

*Communication is the key.*

“Who’s his manager?” I asked, pulling the cap off my pen as I prepared to write.

“Holden,” he answered, leaning back in his chair and revealing a small triangle of skin above his belt, which his shirt strained to cover.

I rolled my eyes. *Just my luck*, I thought. “I’ll talk to him first thing on Monday.”