



Copygirl

By Anna Mitchael, Michelle Sassa



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So. You want to work in advertising. The glitz, the glamour, the cocktail-fueled brainstorming sessions and Xbox breaks. Sounds like a dream job, right?

Wrong. The reality can be a nightmare. There are five simple rules for succeeding in the ad world—and I think I've already broken every single one...

- 1) *Never let them see you cry.* Even if your best friend breaks your heart. And posts it all over social media.
- 2) *Be one of the boys.* And, if you were born with the wrong equipment, flaunt what you've got to distract them while you get ahead.
- 3) *Come up with the perfect pitch in an instant*—or have your resumé ready to go at all times.
- 4) *Trust no one.* Seriously. If you don't watch your back, they'll steal your ideas, your pride, even your stapler.
- 5) *Most importantly, don't ever, under any circumstances, be a CopyGirl.*

Trust me. I know...

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Editorial Review

Review

“Here’s what happens when girl power storms *Mad Men*...Wickedly funny and smartly sweet....A high-octane, electric look at Madison Avenue craziness from a pair who’ve been there and done that.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“*Copygirl* is my new girl crush. Always looking to discover more Cool Funny Working Girl Heroines. A great, great read.”—Lucy Sykes, bestselling coauthor of *The Knockoff*

“The authors paint an agency world in which you see... how the not-so subtle bro-ism of an ad agency starts to shut out women (and some men!)...A great ride.”—*Advertising Age Magazine*

“Downright fresh modern chick-lit...Filled with depth, honesty, mishaps, witty banter, and a colorful cast of characters.”—*Manhattan Book Review*

“A character readers will want to root for as she learns how to get her footing in a world that isn’t necessarily interested in helping her out.”—*Library Journal*

“This modern twist on *Mad Men* is engaging, interesting, and most importantly, funny as hell. *Copygirl* is the book that will turn your wine club back into a book club.”—Sarah Bird, author of *Above the East China Sea*

“We loved *Copygirl*—it bursts off the page with its witty narrative and sly observations.”—Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke, co-authors of *The Status of All Things*

About the Author

Anna Mitchael is a Louisiana-born writer who now lives on a ranch in Texas with her family, lots of cattle and a one-eyed dog. She is the author of a memoir entitled *Just Don’t Call Me Ma’am*, a monthly magazine column and a blog on positive living. She often writes about the modern female experience, hope, perseverance and the comfort of coyotes.

Michelle Sassa is a freelance writer who has created memorable ad campaigns for brands like Coca-Cola, Reebok and New York Road Runners. She lives with her husband and three kids by the Jersey Shore, where she is an avid soccer player, rock music aficionado, and disciple of stupid humor. *CopyGirl* is Michelle’s first novel.

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contents

cat lady

It's so hard to think when you have a gun pointed at your head.

"First thing tomorrow, you'd better show me genius," Elliott had warned us earlier. Then he followed up with his very favorite threat: "Remember, I can fill your seats in five minutes."

Come on, Kay, think. *Think*. THINK!

I just need *one* good cat food slogan. It's not like I have to find the cure for cancer or invent some dome that will let us live on Mars.

I type the first thing that comes to my head:

Here, shitty kitty.

And I am pretty darn sure that's not what Elliott has in mind.

Here, shitty kitty is what Johnjoshjay say every morning when they see me coming down the hall of cubicles that comprise our ad agency's creative department. *Here, shitty kitty. Here, shitty kitty.* The boys' club loves to tease me, and this gem is their favorite catcall. (Pardon the pun. Occupational hazard.) It's because I'm the copywriter on Little Kitty, get it? Oh so clever. In retaliation, I refuse to call any of them by their individual name. At least, not in my own head. They deserve one generic identity since they all dress like identical little hipsters: sagging jeans, designer sneakers, ratty but overpriced T-shirts, hats on backward until they come in the door and then drop them next to their computers along with their matching leather satchels.

Those poser suck-ups think they're so great because they get to work on Superfine sneakers and Atlantis—the urban clothing line out of Brooklyn. And I'm stuck penning print ads for "pussy food." Another one of their wink-wink witticisms. But I'm not going to let any of that get me down. After all, Little Kitty is our biggest account. The proverbial cash cow. Our bread and butter. Its big budget keeps the agency lights on, so keeping the client happy keeps my bosses happy. And tonight I plan on coming up with mad genius ideas that wow the Little Kitty execs, so that Ben and I can finally get the recognition we deserve.

Speaking of, where in Manhattan *is* my loyal work partner? I really thought he'd be back from the gym by now with the takeout dinner and brainstorming help he promised. My stomach swoons just thinking about my hunger . . . and, okay, full disclosure . . . thinking about *him*. As much as I want to nail this assignment, I secretly want to nail Ben even more. Cliché, I know. Girl copywriter falls for her hot art director partner. And it's quite possibly career suicide. But we've been a pair—in the work sense—since the second day of advertising school down in Atlanta, and now he's living with me, too. Granted, he sleeps on my couch, not in my bed like I wish. And, granted, the arrangement is temporary, just until he finds a place of his own. But whatever. The point is, he's totally grown on me, which is bound to happen when you spend almost all your waking hours breathing in someone's Axe body spray. Isn't there a name for that? The Axe Effect?

You see, in addition to the cohabitation, Ben and I work side by side *a lot*. That's because we're the lucky new junior team in the creative department of Schmidt Travino Drew & Partners, one of the edgiest advertising agencies in the entire country. We must have beat out like a hundred other fresh-out-of-ad-school copywriters and art directors to score this gig. Just like creative teams at other agencies, we get paid to come up with ideas together, then Ben makes the pictures and I write the words. But unlike other agencies, ours was just named *Advertising Age's* Agency of the Year so we're "a big fucking deal." Tons of people would kill to steal our jobs, a fact that our creative director Elliott feels he must mention every time he briefs us on an assignment.

Hence, the aforementioned gun pointing at my head.

I know Ben likes me—why else would he have wanted us to take a job together after ad school?—but I'm hoping when he sees the brilliant headlines I come up with to save our asses, he gets so excited that he wants to kiss me full on the mouth. I just need to start writing. Now.

If only I had my own muse, like Olivia Newton John in *Xanadu*, zipping around on her roller skates, feeding that musician guy all those big ideas. "Here, Kay," I can almost hear her saying. "Here are your award-winning headlines. Now put on these skates, hold my hand, and let's roll through this city like we own it."

Sigh. Good muses are so hard to find. Especially when you're starving. My last meal was the little white bag of candied cashews I snuck out for around three this afternoon, a poor substitute for lunch. Looking out the window now, I realize that, unlike me, all the sidewalk food vendors have gone home for the night.

That's a depressing thought . . . but what's not depressing is that here I am. In the middle of New York City! Well, okay, my office is in Chinatown, so technically that's the *bottom* of the city. And I didn't grow up far away, but still, this place is like a whole new world. Millions of people. Infinite possibilities. I like to look at the buildings and wonder who's still in them and who's like me—trying to prove that she deserves a place here.

What's the saying? *If I can make it here, I can make it anywhere*. For me it's more like: If I can make it here, I won't be broke on the next bus back to Jersey. I thought if Ben and I moved to this city together and worked our ad magic, we could take the town by storm. Can I—correction, can *we*—really make a name for ourselves here? And leave all the doubters in the dust? I really hope so. I also really freaking hope Ben gets back soon. Remembering there's a whole world outside these walls is making me feel more alone than I want to be. And after all, we are a creative *team*.

My phone pings with an incoming text, as if some muse has indeed heeded my call. Maybe it's my best friend, Kellie, phoning from halfway 'round the globe with one of her patented pep talks. I could use that right now even more than pad Thai.

Hey Kay, any progress on Little Kitty?

Nope, definitely not Kell texting to say she'll call me in five. It's Suit, the senior account planner, subliminally cracking his whip yet again. Like I don't know I have to present ideas to Elliott tomorrow morning. Like I don't know it's already 8:13 p.m. Why doesn't he just text me a picture of an Uzi aimed at my right cranial lobe?

Paranoid, I peer over my cubicle to make sure Suit isn't lurking somewhere nearby, waiting for me to get 'er done. Nope, no signs of life anywhere on this floor. He's probably out to a fancy-schmance dinner with that uber-beautiful girlfriend of his, the six-foot-tall glamazon who wore head-to-toe leather to the office Christmas party. I bet she's only with Suit because of his height. No way a girl like that is going out wearing flats. I'd dressed all wrong that night, as usual. My silky red top—which seemed retro when I bought it at an Atlanta thrift shop—was so bright that Elliott kept calling me Rudolph. To make matters worse, girls like Suit's gal pal were all over that holiday party—just like they're all over Manhattan—as if put here just to remind the rest of us we don't cut it. Though if Suit was with Leatherette tonight, I doubt something as banal as cat food could divert his attention for so much as a second.

More likely Suit went out with Elliott and his crew for one of their liquid dinners. They're probably at the Hole, the dive bar on the edge of Soho where someone from our agency or another can usually be found. Not that I asked for specifics. I'm just glad to get a few hours of quiet before they file back in here later, buzzed, to play a few rounds of *Call of Duty* on Elliott's Xbox under the guise that they're "working late."

The boys' club had even tried to peer pressure Ben into joining them tonight, though they know full well we're on a deadline. The deadline *Elliott* gave us. I overheard them all by the elevator—our sadistic creative director was being especially loud and obnoxious. Elliott's not used to being turned down when he extends an invitation, so he was riding Ben pretty hard about "which skirt he was going to wear to work out."

Obviously, Elliott is the ringleader of the bunch. They all call him "E"—like he's some hallucinogenic life of their party. And like the drug ecstasy, "E" is known for extreme moods—highs *and* lows. Behind Elliott's back, Ben and I call him E-hole.

His boy network is so notorious they even got their own special mention in the big "Agency of the Year" write-up in *Advertising Age* magazine. The article's exact words were, "The boys' club is alive and well at this downtown denizen of edgy advertising, thanks to Creative Director Elliott Ford and his testosterone-laden band of thinkers."

Testosterone indeed. There aren't many chicks here at Schmidt Travino Drew in general, and technically I'm the only one in the creative department. There's uber-bitch Peyton but she's a producer, which is more like creative support, so that doesn't really count, and then there's Gina, the creative intern who got promoted but everyone still makes her fetch coffee so she counts even less. I'm pretty damn proud of this seat I have, but I know that at an agency like this, there's a long line of people waiting to pull it out from under me. Probably why it's just me here alone in this ridiculous chrome and glass office space while the band of drinkers—I mean thinkers—"works" off-site.

Come on, Ben. Walk off that elevator and come to Kay—show your sexy self. Not that I have anything to show *him* yet, either.

I think I'll go ransack Elliott's office for glossy photography books that might spark an idea. He's got three whole bookcases crammed with them, and on his Lucite coffee table alone are two books full of Japanese anime, a book on street graffiti, as well as volumes devoted to black female nudes, tattoo art, art toys, burlesque dancers, and art inspired by classic 80s videogames. I hate being in this office, no doubt some Pavlovian reaction to constantly being zapped by my boss's sharp criticism, but oh I do love the Eames chairs. I drop myself into one and start flipping through one of the anime books, searching for visual ideas that might help Ben with Little Kitty's ad design. Just a few hours ago, he was sitting in this very chair while we were getting briefed. I smell the seat back and there's his scent, Axe Phoenix . . . mmmmm. I close my eyes and picture Ben's tall, broad frame, tight with muscles . . . his tousled, sandy hair . . . and those eyes of his, both playful *and* brooding. I conjure his hearty laugh—so thickly midwestern, like a warm bear hug that lifts you off your feet. Lord knows I could have used one after our shakedown today in this very office.

Ugh, that was soo embarrassing. Did Jayjoshjohn *have* to walk into Elliott's office right when he was telling us that he could find an addict on 8th Street who could do our job better than us? And then those numbskull idiots just go to the video games as if nothing is happening. And instead of actually giving us any creative direction, E-hole just shows all of them the new bug-sized camera he got straight from Tokyo for a small fortune. Or, as he not so humbly put it, "for more than any of you little people make in a month."

As usual, the guys rushed to huddle around E and ogle his latest toy. I swear, there's nothing that man loves more than having the technology that came out a second ago—or even better, hasn't been released to the masses yet.

"It's got a Carl Zeiss lens," Elliott bragged, "so the quality is insane. And it's the smallest camera in the world, so no one will ever notice it." Then he clicked a small button on his computer. "See, I filmed this two minutes ago."

Next thing you know, there I am, in horrifying close-up on Elliott's huge monitor, sweating golf-ball-sized bullets as he berates Ben and me for the last round of Little Kitty ads we'd done. My limp hair, flattened even more by stress. My left cheek indented the way it always is when I'm chewing on it. And I'm squirming like a shoplifter who just got busted wearing ten pairs of Vicky Secret undies under her jeans.

"Looks like Special K is having an allergic reaction," one of the Joshjohnjays quipped. And of course another one chimed in, "Allergic to the big dogs, little kitty?" Then they all burst out laughing . . . at my expense. It was my moment to shoot back some sarcasm and join in their reindeer games, but as usual my tongue was tied tighter than my Converse. Thank God for Ben—the mouthpiece of our team—and his effortless wit. He defused my humiliation with one of his goofy one-liners. "Wow, Kay, I never realized you had such nice pores!" A small victory in an afternoon of feeling like a total loser.

Ben might pal around with those guys every once in a while, but I just know that he would never let the boys' club change him. Ben is too Wisconsin. Too true to his roots. True to me, too . . . I hope. And one day, he'll want to take our partnership to a less professional, more horizontal level. I just know it.

A *click, click* sound snaps me back to reality. Elliott's bug camera! Where is it hidden? I hope it's not on! I scan high and low in Elliott's obscenely big office, feverish with panic. The darned thing could be *anywhere*.

Click, click. I hear it again.

What if Elliott and the boys are watching me right now, falling off their barstools? What if footage of me sniffing his Eames chair floods the morning e-mails? Something hits my foot, and I look down to see a wind-up robot, the source of the clicking noise. Whew! I must have inadvertently knocked it off the table.

I step over the toy, grab a few books, and hightail it out of there pronto. Navigating the row of cubicles back to my own, I notice a wind-up robot on Josh's desk, and then when I pass Jay's, there's another robot just like it. Hmmm. Have they always been carbon copies of each other—or did they become that way when Elliott, Fucking Famous Creative Director, hired them?

To Johnjoshjay, good ole E can do no wrong. I hate to admit it, but there *is* something magnetic about the guy. Luckily I'm impervious to his powers. Or maybe it's that he doesn't ever try to include me in the group with their high-end tequilas or trendy microbrews and whatever fads they "discover" in the pages of *Spin* and *Details*.

And it works for them. All they ever seem to talk about is gaming and indie music, yet they turn out award-winning ads for Superfine and Atlantis. Whenever I've seen them with girls (the few times I actually get to leave the office and have a drink at the Hole) I'm totally intimidated by who they bring around—the kind of women I always see on the street but never in the mirror: beautiful, confident, a few steps *ahead* of the conversation.

Ben can always tell when I'm feeling self-conscious, and when all the guys are hitting on these super-babes, he comes over and talks to me. But Ben has never—not once—made a move on me. I whine about it to Kellie whenever we talk. Maybe I should give her a quick call now. I know I'm procrastinating, but that's a necessary part of the creative process, right?

Back at my desk, I grab my phone and see there's a message waiting for me: Hey again. How is the cat writing going? Geez! That's Suit's third text tonight. No way am I responding. Does he really think I'm so incompetent that I need a babysitter to monitor my progress? I am totally going to ace this assignment. Correction—Ben and I are going to ace this assignment. And when we do, everyone can kiss our little kitties.

I look at the clock. Eight thirty. Ben should really be here by now. WTF? And WTF time is it in Paris? Ever since Kell moved there to study art history, I can't keep track of when she should be awake or asleep. Especially since she's leading the sort of fabulous life we both dreamed of since junior high, completely oblivious to the nine-to-five grind. It's probably pretty late in the City of Light, but at least I can leave a message. We haven't been connecting enough lately, something I'm quick to blame on the time difference and my work schedule, but truthfully, I haven't been trying that hard. It kills me to talk to someone who is always so damn happy when all I want to do is complain.

I speed-dial her mobile and prepare for the beep, but am surprised when she actually picks up. Even more surprising, I hear glasses clinking, and what sounds like a French rock band in the background.

"*Bonjour, mon amie!*" she shouts over the music, into the phone.

"Kell! I didn't think you'd be up! *Where* are you?"

"This supercool *boîte en Saint-Germain* with *mes amis* from *l'université*. Where are you?" She effortlessly mixes French and English in a Parisian accent I could never pull off.

I survey my cube, more a box than a *boîte*, and wince before admitting to her that I am again working late.

"*Mon dieu, Kay!*" Her French accent is so chic. "You make New York sound . . . *très* boring."

"I know . . ." I sigh, putting my feet up on Ben's desk. "It's just that Little Kitty is the client from hell. They want headline after headline after headline. I've only been at Schmidt Travino Drew for four months and I bet I've already written three hundred and fifty lines for them, promising everything from fewer hair balls to ten lives to taste that's 'fur-licking good.' Truthfully, maybe one hundred and twenty-five of these headlines have actually gone to the client. So far, they only bought and ran exactly *one*: '*Kiss your bad fur days good-bye.*'"

"MeeOWW!" Kell teases. "Kiss your bad ad days good-bye."

"I know. Genius, right?"

"Kay, maybe your pussy just needs to get out more, *oui?*"

"Ha-ha. You sound just like Jayjoshjohn. At least Ben's still on my team."

"How eez Monsieur Benjamin? *S'il vous plait* tell me he is working on top of you!"

Even though the office is empty, I rise to my feet and make a beeline for the ladies' room. After all, my partner will be back any minute.

"He went to blow off steam at the gym," I tell her once I'm safely tucked into the last stall. "The poor guy ran out of cat food ideas about a month ago. But when he gets back we're going to pull an all-nighter!"

"Ooh la la, Kay, how sexy." Her sarcastic tone suggests disapproval.

"He *is* sexy," I insist. "The way he looks at me when I'm sharing my ideas with him. And that mischievous laugh of his . . . Kell, when is he going to finally wake up and kiss me?"

"FaceTime," she demands, and after I tap the icon, I can see the beautiful, glamorous face of my oldest friend staring at me accusingly from the screen of my phone. I can also see that she's in the bathroom now,

too, so we can have some privacy.

Kellie drops the Franglais affectation to scold me. “No makeup? Kaykay, is that really the way to woo him? And let me guess. Baggy button-down? Not what a French woman would wear to an all-nighter.”

I look at myself in the mirror for the first time all week—limp, wheat-colored hair, pasty skin, ratty flannel shirt, and day-old jeans—and concede her point.

“I know. I know. But with these crazy deadlines, I’m lucky I have any clothes that *look* clean.”

“Purse. Now,” she orders, and I dart back to my cubicle as she launches into one of the speeches I so love her for, even when they’re more like bitch slaps. “Stop waiting for shit to happen and start making it happen, Kay. Ben already likes and respects you. He’s just waiting for you to give him a sign. *Tonight*, you are going to get your sexy on, a little eyeliner, some blush, perfume, and for the love of all that is good and inspired by *Vogue*, take down that ponytail and brush that mess.”

Safely back in the bathroom, I follow her instructions.

“Now unbutton your shirt. One more—and push those boobs up to the high heavens. It’s not called a *push-down* bra, for God’s sake.”

“You *know* I don’t have any boobs.” I try to effectively repackage what I’ve got.

“Kaykay,” she sighs. “Sexy is an attitude. You should see some of the ugly cows here in Paris who get hot men just by knowing how to flirt.”

“I’m more of an ugly giraffe.” I survey my boyishly stick-thin frame and the Adam’s apple bulging from my neck. I have to admit, though, my minor modifications have helped. A little. Maybe this could work.

“He’s bringing beer back, too, right?”

I nod.

“You’re going to actually drink one, maybe two. Screw worrying about ads and give your life a little attention. I want you to sit close, laugh at everything he says, touch his hand once in a while, and when the moment is right, I want you to bat your hazel eyes at him and lean in for a kiss.”

My eyes stretch to saucers.

“It’s time, Kay,” she insists. “The two of you have been working together *for years*.”

She makes it sound so easy. But then again, she’s always been the Laverne to my Shirley. I have doubts. I may not get to the kiss, but at the very least, I will flirt. Or listen attentively and not say anything stupid.

I hear footsteps in the hall outside and whisper. “Ohmigod! Kell. He’s back.”

“Go get him, *mon petit chou*. Send me a ShoutOut later with the details, *bisou bisou*.” She starts French-kissing her phone.

I tap end as I see an extreme close-up of her tongue, pierced with a silver barbell. Is that new? No time to find out now. I grab my bag and walk as calmly as I can back to my cube, cooing, “You better have brought spring rolls, Ben Wilder. And maybe some of your big ideas, too . . .”

I look up eagerly, offering Ben what I hope is a playful smile. Only it's not Ben. Standing in my cubicle is Suit. Damn! Ignoring his text messages obviously was not the right thing to do.

Suit. Suit. *Suit*, who none of us actually call by his real name. Seems that everyone around here gets an alias or alter ego. Which makes sense when you consider that advertising has got to be the fakest industry on the planet. But hey, kids, it's fun! You can wear flip-flops to work! Just don't expect to be liked for being yourself!

Usually I try to avoid Suit like the plague. Not because he is a strategic planner, a group notorious for siding with the clients. And not because he's so stuffy and polished in his crisp Robert Graham sports shirts, a blatant contrast to all of us laid-back creative types in our sneakers and jeans. No, I steer clear of Suit because he's always popping up when I think I'm alone, always sticking his head in my cube to check up on my writing. It's so passive-aggressive. *Just ask* when I'll be done, I feel like telling him, instead of acting like you care "how things are going."

And the guy notices everything—if anyone can figure out that I'm stalled, it's him.

"Bit of writer's block?" he says now as he lingers by the entry to my cubicle, nodding to my tote bag as I settle back into my seat. Is he insinuating that I'd left the office for a while? Passive-aggressive stalker!

"Just a bathroom break. I know we're on a deadline, but that's allowed, isn't it? Or do I have to pee in a bottle at my desk?" I don't struggle for words around him like I do around my other coworkers. Probably because he infuriates me like my older, holier-than-thou brothers used to, and I'm used to fighting back with *them* verbally. Plus, I'm not trying to impress him.

"Sorry. I just thought I caught a whiff of the perfume counter at Saks. It's going well, then?" Suit walks over to my computer screen. And that's when I realize I never closed my last Microsoft Word page.

"Here, shitty kitty," he reads aloud. That's all I ever did get around to typing. "Kay, as amazing as this little stroke of genius is, I don't think I'll be able to present it to the client. I do hope this is not the best of your work?"

"Oh, that?" I fudge. "It's a joke for Ben. He's coming back so we can mock up your lines. I've got pages and pages of winners."

Ugh. *Winners* is ad speak for the very best lines you've got. I hate it when I fall back on the clichés people throw around the office.

"Good to hear." Suit smiles, no doubt relieved. If Ben and I fail, he's the one who will have to tap-dance for the client.

"Can I see what you have?" he asks in a friendly tone, but deep down I know he's just being passively pushy.

Suit's job is to develop the winning strategy for clients and make sure we creatives stick to it. Because cat food is so competitive and the differences between the products are small, he has done a lot of work with the Little Kitty execs to figure out how to make them stand out. All those meetings have made him the agency's strongest link to the client, and that also makes him a favorite of Schmidt and Travino. Everyone else really likes him for other reasons that I'm not aware of. I've never spoken to him about anything except cat food. But I guess I can see why clients might find him charming. Ben said the guy's from somewhere down south. Alabama or Georgia or Louisiana or whatever. When you grow up on the East Coast, all those states kind of blend together.

“Where are you from?” I blurt out suddenly, anxious to avoid what he just asked me at all costs.

Suit’s eyebrows wrinkle up, then he smiles, thrown by the randomness of my question.

Kay, if this is how you play coy, you’ll never manage to seduce Ben tonight.

“New Orleans,” he’s saying. “It’s a little town in Louisiana; maybe you’ve heard of it.”

Duh, I know New Orleans. And of course I know Louisiana. Kind of looks like a boot. Or a flag. They had the horrible hurricane; it’s all coming back.

Don’t ask about the hurricane, Kay. You’re cooler than that.

“Mardi Gras!” I offer.

Um, better. Sort of.

“Yes, in New Orleans we celebrate Mardi Gras.” Now he is practically laughing at me out loud.

From nowhere, I remember him laughing at the Christmas party. I’d been surprised that someone so straight looking actually had a sense of humor. Suit would probably get along swimmingly with my brothers, the Wondertwins. Brett and Brian are both successful financial analysts, a fact that only fuels our mother’s belief that nothing *I* do is good enough. Thanks to Attila the Mum, I have no idea how to take a compliment, let alone believe one.

You were born bald, a scrawny little chicken. I used to scotch tape bows to your head so the nurses would know you were a girl, Mom loves to tell me in that I’m-just-kidding-but-I’m-not way of hers.

One bassinet over, there was a plump, pretty baby girl with big blue eyes and golden ringlets of hair. I told your father to switch name bracelets so we could take her home instead.

She always follows this dig with deep belly laughter and the occasional snort. It’s hard to be heard when you live with someone who’s in love with the sound of her own voice. That’s why I turned to writing. For as long as I can remember, it’s been my go-to medium for getting out the words I would warble if I tried to say them out loud.

You wanna be a writer? Why not just become a homeless person instead? Mom would say encouragingly .

But no matter what she thinks about my craft not paying the bills, I’d rather do this than work in boring old finance. Sure, she brags about the Wondertwins to anyone who will listen. But really, who cares if both my brothers own—not rent—apartments in Tribeca. Buy! Sell! Numbers. Yawn.

“So . . .” Suit is staring at me. Did I miss something he said?

“Yes?”

“I asked if you were going to join the party since you’re done here. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear lipstick.”

Shoot. I did miss something. Daydreaming. Another one of my fatal flaws.

“No party for me. Not tonight.” I was actually hoping for a party but I’ll be damned if I’m going to give the

slightest indication of that to Suit. Kellie is the only one who needs to know that. Some secrets are best kept in the ladies' room.

"Well, suit yourself," he says.

I look up to see if he could possibly be joking. But there is no irony in his eyes. In fact his eyes are unreadable. If I had to guess whether the guy was in a good mood or a bad mood, I might as well flip a coin. Nothing like looking at Ben; one second of eye contact and I know exactly what he is thinking.

Ah, Ben. Maybe Kellie's plan could work . . . We'll eat dinner, brainstorm a little, drink a couple beers. What did she say? That I should lean into his nose? No, duh, *lean in close*. Okay, I'll lean in close all night and then we'll go to the apartment to watch TV. This is when I usually fall asleep but maybe if I bat my eyelashes it will keep me awake *and* I'll look flirty, as a bonus.

"Ahem."

I snap back to reality, hoping to see that Ben has arrived. No such luck, still just Suit. If he weren't so relentless, I'd feel bad for the guy. It's not his fault he has to make sure us creatives actually deliver the stellar work he's promised to the client. Nor is it his fault when we'd much rather be fucking off than actually writing copy.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm just really focused on this assignment, not much for conversation tonight, I guess."

"Well, then we'll talk again in the morning. I'm sure we'll be the only ones *here*, judging from what's happening on ShoutOut." Then he turns to leave. Finally. His footsteps are so damn loud on the concrete, I am relieved when they get farther and farther away.

I turn to the computer, delete *Here, shitty kitty* and instead write *Meow*. I don't have the foggiest clue where this thought could be going. Yet.

Maybe I'll surf ShoutOut. Wait. What did Suit just say . . . ? What's on there? I guess I'll wait for Ben to check that out. It's our thing to take breaks for the videos and make fun of people together.

And he'll be here soon.

• • •

Any minute now.

Man, it would be awesome if there were just one cashew left in that little white baggie. Just a snack while I wait for Ben.

Since he is probably just about to show up.

And I don't want to be ravenous when he gets here. The point is to impress him, and I'm pretty sure Kellie would say that sucking down an oyster pail of noodles in five seconds flat is not an aphrodisiac for anyone involved.

Surely the white bag is around here somewhere, probably just stuffed behind the back of my laptop . . . no, not there. Maybe it fell on the floor? Rats, not there, either.

Ah! Must. Focus.

Okay, I'll just check my phone once more *to make sure* Ben hasn't called or texted to explain where he is.

Nope. Nothing. Just the same old, same old picture of me and Kellie that's been the background on my phone forever. It would be amazing if tonight went well. Then I could change my phone's wallpaper to a picture of Ben and me. And then he could come home with me for Easter and hang with my family and maybe for our summer vacation we could go to Europe or something . . .

I might be getting ahead of myself since it's only February.

But I do have my phone in my hand . . . and I could use just another couple seconds of procrastination . . . plus Suit's comment did pique my curiosity . . . so I tap the ShoutOut app on my screen. To this day I have never posted to ShoutOut—a social media network where people upload videos of themselves talking or doing stuff—but Ben and I check on what's happening there all the time. Once or twice he has suggested we do a video for the Schmidt Travino Drew channel, our agency's network, but I shut that down immediately—speaking on camera is not an activity in which the chronically shy excel.

As soon as the app opens, there are eight new videos to watch. I roll my eyes because one is from my mother. My brothers decided to set up a family network, probably so they could figure out the technology well enough to talk about it like experts—which is how they talk about everything. Why they taught it to our mother is totally beyond me.

Then there are two other videos from the network I'm on with my ad school class. Blah blah boring.

The next five are posted by E-hole. All in the last two hours.

What the hell could be happening at the Hole on a Tuesday night that's so interesting it needs to be filmed?

I choose the last video and immediately I see what's so interesting about their Tuesday night. For starters, they aren't at the Hole. Not unless the usual bartender Louie turned into Louise, lost thirty pounds *and* his shirt, and then spent about two grand at Agent Provocateur.

Those scumbags are at a strip club! While I'm at the office! And, ewwww. What exactly *is* that dancer doing on Elliott's pant leg?

Of course he has his new bug camera rolling, and from what I can tell, it's perched on top of E-hole's glass: The footage has the distinct point of view of a straw.

Joshjohnjay come into view, one by one. What a surprise! All with the same dopey looks of drunken glee plastered across their faces.

And there's Peyton, wearing knee-high black cat boots. Jesus, who invited her?

On second thought, they all probably invited her.

Peyton, Peyton, Peyton.

That bitch. I still am not over the first time I met her, when she stepped around me without even introducing herself so she could shake Ben's hand. I tried complaining about it to Kellie but that went nowhere. Leave it to Kell to ask if there was anything I didn't like about "this Peyton girl" besides the fact that she was eyeballing the guy I was eyeballing.

Her question completely offended me (I do more than eyeball the guy, we are friends and partners *and*

roommates), and so I promptly explained to Kellie that Peyton gives off the distinct vibe of being a girl who a) has a daddy-sponsored personal shopper at Barneys, and b) is from Oregon.

I happen to be aware that not only does Kellie detest spoiled rich girls, she also has a thing against Oregon that dates back to a really horrible family camping trip there in 1999 when it rained the whole time and Kellie's brother puked in her lap on the plane. These are the bits of information only a best friend would know, and know how to exploit. As planned, she promptly joined me in hating Peyton.

Just wait until she finds out that Peyton is at a strip club with the boys. This is worse—*way worse*—than putting shoes you couldn't pick out yourself on Daddy's charge card because you also can't afford to pay for them yourself.

Oh good, the camera is pulling out and wait . . . wait . . . wait a minute. That blue sleeve looks really familiar. I need Elliott to move the glass to the left a little . . . okay, yes, that way, Elliott . . . move it that way. There, perfe—

Ohmigod. Not perfect at all. That blue sleeve is familiar because it's connected to the face I spend almost every waking minute of my life about six feet away from.

How can this be happening?

Why wouldn't he have called to tell me?

Ben is at the strip club?

Holy shit, I need air. But more than that, I need to see what's going to happen next on the video.

Ben looks like he might be wasted. He's doing that thing where he throws back his head to laugh, and that's not really Ben. Ben is more of a low chuckler; he bows his head when he is going to laugh really, really hard. But his head is thrown back and now . . . wait . . . ohmigod, *that whore*. Why is Peyton walking up to Ben? Why is Peyton straddling Ben with her slutty boots? What is that in her hand—a shot glass? Why is she tipping that shot glass up to Ben's mouth?

I peel my eyes off the screen and frantically look around because I need to ask someone: *Why is Peyton tipping her mouth to Ben's mouth?*

I snap my head back so I don't miss a thing and . . . they are kissing.

Kissing in front of everybody in the creative department.

Except for me because . . . I'm still at work? Writing lines for cat food?

I know I should wait and see what happens next, maybe even click through another video. Who knows if they've been kissing all night. Maybe they've been kissing all month and I had my head buried too far in my stupid fantasies to see what was happening.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid* to think Ben would ever go for me over some girl like Peyton.

Flannel versus fabulous.

A girl who lives on paper versus someone who lives in the moment.

The list could go on and on. I would have been too nervous and worried and fearful—of what, I don't know—even to set foot in that place. But not a girl like her.

I swivel around so I can see out the window behind my chair. Usually I don't sit this way because it opens me up to a view of Joshjohnjay, but now it doesn't matter. It's starting to snow outside and I should be thankful that it's a beautiful night in the city, that I'm in a warm office, that I have a paycheck and an apartment, and that list could go on, too.

But I am not thankful, not for anything. The only thing I want is the one thing I don't have: Ben.

Oh shit. The tears are coming. I can feel the dull ache underneath my ears and that's the indicator that I have about four seconds to get out of here or else waterworks are going to erupt and *I will not cry* in this office. Even when it's empty—this is a no-cry zone. It's bad enough I have to menstruate here once a month.

I leave my computer with one word—*Meow*—still on the screen. I don't have time to pack it up. Instead I just grab my bag and run for the elevator. In the lobby I can hear the low-level ambient tunes that play around the clock. I'm pretty sure I recognize Coldplay chords. If Ben were here he would make a joke about how we only have a couple years left until our music is elevator music.

But.

Ben.

Isn't.

Here.

I'm jamming my finger on the down button, and the second the doors open I can hear footsteps coming down the hall from the other side of the building. It's probably Suit heading home for the night, and there's no way I can let him in the elevator with me. My four seconds are up and the faucet is about to blow.

I don't even have a Kleenex. My mother would be so appalled.

I jump into the elevator then reach for the close-door button and start pounding, pounding, pounding on it to *work, dammit!*

Finally the doors shut, probably just as Suit was showing up in the lobby, but I didn't bother to look because I couldn't have seen anything, anyway. The water that has been filling my eyes is now overflowing onto my cheeks and my chin—there's too much evidence of heartbreak, I can't wipe away the tears fast enough, and so I give up trying.

I lean against the wall of the elevator as it starts to move, and I close my eyes.

The last thing I want to see is the chrome reflection of a silly, silly girl who makes a living off words but refuses to see the writing on the wall.

find it in you

Surely there are worse places in the world to suffer major heartbreak than in the middle of a snowstorm in the middle of Chinatown. I could be at my parents' house. That would be bad. But at least I'd be warm, and

in the bed I grew up in, which doesn't actually sound all that terrible.

The Hole, on the other hand, sounds like a depressing place for the lovelorn . . . though at least they serve beer.

Maybe the middle of Chinatown *is* the absolute worst place to be, snow or not. Any other time, I'd catch snowflakes on my tongue, but my face is already soaked in sadness. Before I turn into a lyric from a Death Cab for Cutie song, I should get the hell out of here.

The agency is behind me, for tonight at least. Any second now Suit will probably be barreling through the front door. I bet he'd think it was amusing to see me in meltdown mode. Every person in that place has a sick, twisted sense of humor. Makes me think I should have taken a job at one of the agencies that wasn't quite *so agency*. An agency that's sweeter than Schmidt Travino Drew. Where everybody does detergent ads and the hottest conversation point is if moms prefer apple scents or floral scents to linger on their laundry. I've heard Midtown is full of places like that.

Sounds like a mental massage compared to my every day.

In the few months I've worked here, I've learned that Chinatown gets way empty at night—too empty for a girl who grew up in the suburbs to feel safe walking the streets alone. My favorite tchotchke store is shuttered up now. Just two days ago Ben and I had stopped in on our lunch break and I showed him the turquoise castle I've had my eye on since the first time I passed by. Eighty bucks seems like a lot for a piece that probably costs a dollar to make in China. But it's got a moat and a tower where you can really imagine a princess hanging out. I showed Ben the intricacies of the design and he picked it up and turned it over in his hands—for a split second I thought maybe he would buy it for me; wouldn't that have been sweet? Instead he said, "You have a great eye, Kay. You could be an art director and a writer."

Which I had also taken as sweet. Why? Because I told myself that's the ultimate compliment from an ad guy. And because, obviously, I am clueless.

I'm moving as fast as my sneakers will go, which isn't too fast with all the ice on the sidewalks. But I get past the shop; I cruise past the closed meat markets. The poor little pigs are probably still hanging in the windows, dangling from spindly legs tied with twine, but with the lights off you don't have to see any of those gory details.

I know I'm hungry because *pig* makes me think *bacon*, which makes my stomach cry out for attention.

The street level is dark but on the higher floors of the buildings there are lights on. I can imagine families sitting around with bowls of rice—who am I kidding, probably boxes of pizza—watching *So You Think You Can Dance*: the American dream. Not that I'm one to judge dreams, since in the last hour every one of mine has proven futile, infantile, and ridiculous.

Geez, Kay, stop it.

It's hard to be a writer during moments of despair. The English language has far too many words that describe failure.

Maybe food will help. There's a restaurant nearby that everyone has been talking about—a noodle shop purposely buried back here to keep tourists away. I decide to find it. Hopefully there's a bar where I can sit alone, cuddled up in my jacket. Warm, slippery carbs will solve my most immediate problem: starvation. After that I can start to deal with the fact that the one man I have ever loved in my life was just sucking face

with a coworker on ShoutOut. While at a strip club. On a Tuesday night.

Is this the sort of thing a person goes to counseling for? Or is it more of a Jerry Springer scenario? I'm just twenty-four. Came from a decent family. Got straight As in school. And while my apartment *is* smaller than a trailer home, I live above a wine bar, so that classes me up a bit. I'm not a scene from Jerry Springer, not yet, anyway.

Instead of turning on Canal I go straight and then take a right on a side street.

I overheard Elliott talking this place up to his boys the other day. "Noodles are the new thing," he declared. "People from all over the island are going to this place. You have to hit it before everyone finds out about it and it gets ruined."

Really more of a lecture than a recommendation. Elliott's little black book of tips on how to be cool. Rule 1: When the masses arrive, what was good is instantly gone. Rule 2: People who are part of the masses have no place at Schmidt Travino Drew & Partners.

Good news for me because I most definitely am completely, totally alone tonight.

Up ahead I see the glow of a restaurant open for business. There's one black town car lingering at the top of the block, and a cab stopped in front. For some reason I freeze when the taxi doors open, as if of all the restaurants in the whole city, one of the ten people I know is going to be getting out. But my brain is not functioning at 100 percent. Everything that used to make sense—Ben, work, what the hell I'm doing in New York City—it's all gone up in smoke. That I might happen to bump into someone seems totally rational.

Three girls and one guy spill onto the sidewalk. They are all laughing in that loud way that says they've already been drinking. I definitely don't know them, but I know their type. The girls are all dressed in knee-high boots with skinny jeans. Two have buns wrapped up on top of their heads, and the other has a braid that goes all the way down her damn back. In other words: stylish. The guy is paying the cabbie from a fat wad of bills he pulled out from his pocket. I can see pink cuffs barely peeking from underneath the sleeves of his designer suit.

I stop walking and tuck into the shadows of the building. I want to let their party of fun—I mean, four—get in the restaurant before I roll up.

What would Kell say if she could see me now? I should update her but I know she's going to want details. And that could take a while. I need to wallow just a little bit longer . . .

Okay, the party group is in so now's my time.

I throw my shoulders back and try to stand up straight, like my mother would tell me to do if she were here.

I haven't taken a look at myself since I was in the ladies' room at the office earlier, but at least then I put on lipstick; that's more than I do on a normal night. And it's so damn cold I can get away with leaving my jacket on. This will hide the stylish clothes I'm not wearing. One of these days, when I'm not holed up in the office, I really am going to learn to dress like a New Yorker.

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From reader reviews:

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