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### **A Day Late and a Dollar Short**

Rebecca executed a fancy stumble getting off the elevator, a real boogie featuring flailing arms, a high kick and a guy copping a look up her swirling skirt. *And here we go*, she thought, continuing on. Despite it all, she kept her head held high as she moved through the rows of cubicles and became aware that employees were milling about chatting and eating cake from paper plates.

“Becca! You should have gotten here ten minutes ago! Carla made pineapple upside down cake! For Marty’s birthday.”

Rebecca stood before them, staring at the now empty cake plate. “Happy birthday, Marty,” she said. Marty smiled and nodded, wiping his mouth with a napkin. He said, “We would have saved you a piece but we thought you were out today.”

“No. I was at a meeting.” Rebecca ducked into her office and closed the door. On her way back from the meeting she’d stopped to briefly browse a used book sale. If she hadn’t done that, she probably would have returned in time for cake. She glanced through her mail, then dialed her secretary on the intercom. “Rosa, when you have a sec can you come in? Provided you’ve finished your cake?” If she’d found something to buy at the used book sale it would have made missing the cake a little more tolerable.

“That was great cake!” said Rosa, entering. She actually patted her stomach.

“Remember for your birthday Carla brought in cheese cake?”

Rebecca consoled herself with that memory. That cheese cake had been heavenly. “I’ve got a couple things for you,” she said, taking out her portable Dictaphone. “Well, three. There’s a memo to file on the Hayes matter. A memo to Gerry on Hirsch-Parris. And correspondence to Stephanie Ferris that’s... Well, just get it started, it’s going to need a lot of work. Oh, on the last thing there might be some interference. I was dictating it on the street on my way here and there was some noise.”

She found the spot on the tape and played it for Rosa. “See?”

“Wow,” said Rosa. “What, did you walk through an avalanche?”

“Weirdest thing,” said Rebecca, leaning back and holding up the Dictaphone. “I was taking a shortcut through Seaver Street to cut over to Federal. There’s this old building, maybe eight or ten stories, they were doing some kind of work on the roof, I walked right by it. This huge pile of bricks crashed onto the sidewalk from the roof. Bricks everywhere.”

“Holy moly! Becca, you coulda been killed!”

“Hardly!” laughed Rebecca. “I was halfway down the block already. But they hit the sidewalk so hard a few of the bricks actually skidded right up to my foot!”

“Wow. Geez Louise, you coulda been right under them, you coulda missed it by seconds!”

“Whatever,” said Rebecca. “Listen, Rosa,” she said. “This isn’t a big deal but... Did you tell people I was out today?”

“Out? No one asked, but I woulda told them you’d be in around lunch, right around now. Why?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just curious why...” She didn’t want to say *why they didn’t save me a piece of cake*. “I just got the impression people thought I was out for the whole day, not just for the morning.”

“Oh. Well, they should have asked me.” She took the tape Rebecca handed her to be transcribed. “Okay, well, I’ll get started on this. And don’t forget, Liz is coming by to go over the H-P files with you any time now.”

Rebecca opened her mouth to say, “Liz must dream up ways to waste my time,” but caught herself just as Liz herself peeked around the corner. *That* was close.

She and Liz spent a tedious hour going through mounds of paper, jotting notes and conferring. At one point Liz clapped her hand to her cheek and stared open-mouthed at Rebecca. “You are *so* lucky you couldn’t be at the breakfast meeting with the McNally gang this morning!”

“It would have been better than the meeting I *did* get stuck at,” said Rebecca.

“No, really. Listen. Their finance guy? Derek Moss? He threw up.”

“Threw *up*? At the *meeting*? You’re kidding, right?”

“No. It hit him so fast he didn’t have time to run to the men’s room or even grab a waste basket. And get *this*, Becca! They had the conference room set up for ten people because Rosa didn’t have time to tell them you got called away to another meeting. Moss was sitting in the seat next to the one that would have been yours. *He would have thrown up on you!*”

“Wow. Is he okay?”

“Well, I guess so. But Brett, Sonia and one of the other McNally people said they were feeling lousy. Turns out those are the ones who had the lox that came with the bagels. Someone’s gonna talk to the caterer. They’re wondering about food poisoning.”

“Wow,” repeated Rebecca. “*I always go for the lox...*”

“Well, good thing you missed that meeting and got to come back to that delish pineapple upside down cake I heard about. Yum! Man, I wish Carla worked on *my* floor!”

Rebecca thought about the brief and ultimately pointless stop at the used book sale. Ten minutes. If that. *Five* minutes. What lousy timing. It was practically an *event* when Carla brought in one of her baked items. If she’d only remembered that it was Marty’s birthday and that Carla acknowledged *everyone*’s birthday with a homemade cake.

“Well.” Rebecca sighed and gathered up papers. “I guess we’re all set for now, don’t you think?”

“Looks good,” agreed Liz. “Any plans for the weekend?”

Rebecca groaned. “I suppose not,” she admitted. “I give up on that guy next door to me, Don.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember you mentioning him. It sounded like a sure bet he was going to ask you out. No go?”

“Who knows, but I’m giving up. Last night I was getting out of my car after work. He was just getting home, too. So we’re standing on the sidewalk, talking for a few minutes. Just casual, friendly. I *know* he’s single and by now he knows that *I* am. He’s kind of jangling his keys in his hands and he says, ‘So, want to come in and...’ I figure he was going to ask me in for an after-work drink or something. Then my cell phone goes off! And he says, ‘Oops, better let you get that!’ and he hustles up the sidewalk and into his house! What do you think of that?”

Liz groaned. “Easily defeated, this guy” she said. “Let’s a cell phone scare him away. You’re probably better off.”

“Probably. Okay, well, give me a call when you hear from Levinson, and I’ll start drafting the papers.”

After Liz left, Rebecca checked to make sure her red message light wasn’t blinking, then started out of the office. “She’ll be with you in just a moment!” she heard Rosa chirp to someone on the phone and she groaned. “I’ve been needing to go to the bathroom for the last half hour!” she complained. “Who is it?”

“It’s Bachman. And as for the bathroom, better use either the one on eighteen or the one on sixteen.”

“Huh?”

“Ours just flooded, maintenance is on the way. But Holly slipped in the water and twisted her ankle.”

“If it wasn’t for my freakishly strong bladder, it would have been me. Poor Holly! Well, let me take this call and then I’ll go up to eighteen.”

After the call and the bathroom visit, Rebecca returned to her office to find a couple other secretaries hovering around Rosa’s desk. The three of them turned to look at her. “Becca, on your way back from the meeting this morning, did you take the subway?”

“Yeah, just for a couple stops ‘cause I was feeling lazy. Why?”

“Which line were you on?” They peered at her closely.

“I took the D Express from Winter to State/Connect-E.” The secretaries gasped. “Why?” she asked again, and now the three secretaries were staring wide-eyed at her.

“Wow, Becca! You must have just missed it!” breathed Sylvie. “Someone said they heard on the news that some nut freaked out at the Winter Street stop this morning. He was rampaging around, shoving people off the platform onto the tracks!”

“My God! Was anyone hurt?”

“No, thank God. The incoming train managed to stop in time but the one in back of it rammed into it and the whole place is still a mess. Boy, were you lucky!”

Rebecca shook her head. “Wow, that’s awful. But no, I was probably already back at work by the time that happened. Or even still at my meeting.”

“You never know,” said Rosa. “The timing sounds like about the time you woulda been at that stop!”

Rosa could be a drama queen. But maybe she was feeling uncharitable because her secretary had not *somehow* managed to save her a piece of the pineapple upside down cake. She’d have to get past that. Rosa was a good secretary, but it wasn’t her responsibility to score cake for her.

“Well, just a good thing no one was hurt,” she said, and went back into her office.

She went through some more of the endless paper, made a few calls then looked at her watch. “That’s a wrap,” she told herself, just as her intercom buzzed. “Who?” she asked, trying not to sigh too audibly.

“It’s a Samantha Chang?” said Rosa, hesitantly. “Want me to take a message? I don’t recognize the name.”

Rebecca didn’t either, for a moment, then remembered. She and the woman across the street were only casual acquaintances, but for the hell of it they’d exchanged ICE (In Case of Emergency) numbers. “I’ll take it,” she said and pushed the blinking line. “Sam?” she asked warily.

“Rebecca, sorry to call you at work,” said her neighbor. “But I thought I’d give you a heads up. You know how it’s been in the papers, those killings, they think it’s all the same guy? Like, a serial killer or something?”

*What the hell?* thought Rebecca, and nodded before she remembered to speak aloud.

“Yes?” she prompted.

“I figured I’d call you before you got home so it wouldn’t be a big shock. The guy? He lives right next door to you. Don something? There’s a big police presence there right now. And the reporters are starting to show up. When you drive home from the station you might want to park away from your house and maybe go in the back door or something. To avoid the hubbub. It’s nuts out there!”

“Is this for real?” muttered Rebecca, paling.

“I know! I’m in shock! I’m still absorbing this. Did you ever talk to the guy?”

Rebecca decided not to admit she’d been angling for a date with him. “Not really,” she said. “But thanks for letting me know. I’ll park on Dodson, I can cut through on foot to my back yard from there.”

She gathered up her things, hands shaky and turned out her office lights. Normally she’d share something this juicy with Rosa, but she was feeling too queasy. Come to think of it, part of the queasiness probably was due to the fact that she hadn’t eaten all day. No cake, no nothing. She carried her coffee cup to the mini-kitchen to rinse it out for Monday. There was Carla washing off the cake plate.

“How was it?” beamed Carla, scrubbing away.

“How was...?”

“The cake. I haven’t made it before. It’s my aunt’s recipe. Was it good?”



Rebecca hesitated, then nodded. “Delicious!” she smiled. “Have a good weekend!”

She’d just hit the Down button for the elevator when she heard Carla calling her. For a wild moment she thought maybe Carla had saved one last piece of pineapple upside down cake and was going to present it to her. But no, Carla was hurrying up to her waving a sheaf of papers. “Becca, wait! You left these on the counter!”

“Oh, thanks!” Rebecca took the papers then both women jumped at the sound of a harsh clanging alarm coming from inside the elevators.

“Uh oh, somebody’s stuck,” Carla shook her head. They could hear angry yells and pounding coming from the stalled machine. “And on a Friday night, too! What a way to end the week. Lucky you just missed getting on there.”

“I know. It’s seventeen floors down but you know what? I’m taking the stairs.”

“I would,” approved Carla. “Who knows when they’ll get it fixed? I wouldn’t bother waiting”

Safe on her commuter train, calf muscles sore from the seventeen-floor trek, Rebecca hunted through her tote bag for anything to snack on, anything at all. The best she could come up with was a fortune cookie left over from the last time she’d ordered Chinese take-out. As she munched it, she thought about the pineapple upside down cake. What a pathetic substitute, this sorry, stale fortune cookie. She glanced at the ‘fortune’ printed on the little strip of paper: *Excitement and surprise follow you wherever you go!* She had noted on more than one occasion that she’d never gotten a fortune cookie that applied in any way to what was actually going on in her life.

It had started raining by the time she got off the train and looked out over the parking lot. Holding her briefcase over her head for protection she started out in search of her car.

“Rebecca!” Danielle and Jodie, two train acquaintances, were waving to her from nearby. They, too, had makeshift umbrella substitutes over their heads. “Any plans for the weekend?”

“Not really,” replied Rebecca, fiddling with her car keys. “All I can think about right now is getting something to eat. I haven’t eaten all day! They had a great cake at work for someone’s birthday and I missed it by minutes!”

“Oooh, that’s painful,” sympathized Jodie. “*Whoa!*”

All three women jumped at the unmistakable metallic crunching sound of a fender bender. It looked like someone had fishtailed on the slick pavement right into another car while exiting the lot. The drivers were out of their cars, both talking loudly at once.

“Well, could have been worse,” observed Danielle. “We should probably drive around and exit out the other side, stay out of their way. You two have a good weekend!”

“You, too!” chanted Rebecca as her friends went off in search of their own cars. About to open the door, she dropped her keys into a puddle. Bending over to pick them up she heard a sharp whooshing sound just over her head. “Huh?” she murmured, standing up. “Dear god!” She saw that one of the two men involved in the fender bender was now brandishing a gun. A posse of other commuters piled out of their cars and wrestled him to the ground while other bystanders frantically jabbed for 911 on their cell phones.

Rebecca darted into the driver's seat, slammed the door behind her and took a deep breath. What a day. Somehow both boring and vexing at the same time. She was so hungry, and somehow all she wanted to eat was pineapple upside down cake. But where would she get it? She supposed the bakeries were closed by now. She had bad timing. She'd swear that to anyone, her timing was the worst. "Just my luck," she muttered, as she pulled out.

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