



It All Started To Go Wrong

When you wear fishnet stockings to the grocery store, people tend to stare. Women look at you like you're affiliated with the sex trade. Men pretend they're not staring, doing so all the while. It's probably because they're thinking the same thing.

The last time I wore fishnets to the grocery store was weeks ago. It was then I met the man who changed the course of my life. Because of him, I'd traded in the title of senior buyer of ladies' designer shoes at Bentley's New York to become the trend specialist at Tradava, the family-owned retailer in Ribbon, Pennsylvania. I'd given up an apartment in Manhattan to buy the house where I grew up. And now, because of him, I sat in a police station explaining my actions to a homicide detective.

I still couldn't pinpoint exactly when it all started to go wrong.

A week earlier . . .

I changed clothes six times, then ultimately settled on the fashion uniform of black: satin motorcycle jacket cinched at the waist over a lace camisole, pegged pencil skirt, fishnets, and stilettos. Elsa Klensch meets Catwoman. Patrick, the fashion director and my new boss, was bound to approve. I topped off my look with a finishing blast of Aqua Net, powered up with coffee and a donut from a newspaper kiosk by my house, and headed to work earlier than I remember ever going to work before.

I arrived at Tradava and followed a trickle of other early employees into the building. A petite Latina woman in an oversized pink sweater and black leggings struggled to carry a box through the door marked "Loss Prevention."

"Let me help you," I called out. I raced forward with my arms out. The woman pivoted and I grabbed ahold of the other side of the box just as she was about to lose control. She inched her way backward and together we got it through the door.

"Set it on the floor," she said. We both bent down, her in the manner the How to Lift Properly posters advised and me in a way that would surely make my back stiff in an hour.

The box thumped onto the exposed concrete floor. The woman straightened up and smiled. “Thanks,” she said. “That box just about killed me.” She studied my face. “Are you a vendor? Let me get the sign-in log.”

“I’m Samantha Kidd,” I said. “Patrick’s new trend specialist. Do you know if he’s here yet?”

“He’s here, but he didn’t say anything about you.” Her brow furrowed, and she picked up the phone and dialed an extension. When no one answered, she hung up.

“He’s not in the office. You’ll have to sign in like a visitor.”

“But I’m not a visitor. I’m staff. Today’s my first day.”

The friendly vibe we’d had after I helped her with the box that almost killed her had waned, but she *did* seem conflicted. “Do you have ID?” she asked hopefully.

I reached into my handbag and pulled out a quilted leather wallet, then held it open to show my driver’s license through the plastic window.

“I meant a store ID.”

“No. Not yet.”

“That’s a New York license,” she observed.

“You’re right, I just moved. But it’s me, see?” I held the wallet up to my face and smiled at her in the way only a half crazy person brimming with caffeine and adrenaline over starting a new job might.

The woman reached her hands up and gathered her long, wavy, brownish-orange hair on top of her head then wound it around several times until it resembled a doorknob. She pushed the sign-in log toward me and held out a red ballpoint pen. “I’m sure you’ll get it all straightened out today.”

“Right,” I said. Look at me, already making friends! I signed my name with a flourish then added *Trend office, 7:37*. I put my wallet back in my handbag, hopped out of the way of a flatbed filled with merchandise and headed into the store. Aside from security and shipping, the store was quiet.

I wasn’t a morning person. It was day one of a new job and a new life. Full of potential. My early arrival had less to do with my natural inclinations and more to do with my need to make a good impression. I was determined to be the best trend specialist Patrick had ever hired.

I wandered through the shoe department on my way to the elevators, pausing by a round marble fixture that displayed a purple suede platform pump. My index finger traced over the black and white designer label that decorated the sock lining.

“Of all the shoes, in all the stores, she had to walk up to mine,” said a husky voice behind me. I turned and faced the man whose name was stitched onto that label. The man I’d once fantasized about during a layover in Paris. The man I’d almost kissed after a business dinner that involved a good deal of Sauvignon Blanc and a serving of lemon meringue pie. My judgment is not to be trusted around lemon meringue.

Nick Taylor was a shoe designer. His showroom was charged with electricity, hot looks, and devastating style. His shoe collection wasn’t bad, either. He was one of the few people I thought I’d miss after leaving Bentley’s, that is, until I caught him flirting with the buyer from Bloomingdales and realized the only special thing we had was a gross margin agreement.

“You’re a long way from New York,” I said. “What are you doing at Tradava?”

“Same thing as you, probably.”

“I doubt that. I’m here to start a new job.” I cocked my head to the side and crossed my arms, the plum-colored laptop bag that hung from my shoulder now banging against my hip.

“First day? Let’s get you into practice.” He stood directly in front of me and held out his hand. “I’m Nick Taylor. Shoe designer and all around good guy.”

I pursed my lips and took in his dark curly hair and his brown eyes, the exact shade of the three root beer barrels I ate in the car after finishing the donut. I met his outstretched hand with my own.

“Samantha Kidd. Former shoe buyer. Former angry New Yorker.” I pumped his hand twice to emphasize the word ‘former.’ “Current trend specialist for Tradava on the cusp of a new life.”

He pulled me in, converting our handshake to an embrace. I lost my balance and fell against him. “I thought I might never see you again,” he whispered in my ear. “So, Tradava?” He looked to his left and right as if making sure no one was listening. “From the big city to the small town. I knew you’d land on your feet, but I didn’t expect you to land here.”

“You make it sound like I vanished into the night,” I replied, blowing at a strand of hair that had gotten stuck in my lipstick. My cell phone buzzed from the depths of my handbag, and I pretended not to hear it.

“You did vanish in the night. Out of my life, out of my dreams . . .” He reached out an index finger and freed the lock of hair. A trace of red lipstick transferred to his fingertip. “And now I find you haven’t even missed me. That hurts.”

“So you took it upon yourself to stalk me. Good to know.”

“C’mon, everybody needs at least one stalker in their life. It’s good for the ego,” he said.

Nick Taylor had captured the eye of more than one female at Bentley’s, and rumors of his love life often permeated the otherwise work-heavy market weeks. More than once I’d wondered what would have happened if I’d given in to my post-pie impulse to kiss him after that innocent business dinner last May.

“You didn’t answer my question. What are you doing at Tradava this early?”

“I have some outstanding business with the shoe buyer,” he said. “The only time he had available was this morning.”

“Did security make you sign in?” I asked, nodding toward the back hallway.

“Sure. They make everybody sign in before the store is open.”

The elevator bell sounded. The doors attempted to open, then jerked shut. Nick stabbed the button with his index finger, and the doors repeated their spastic motion. I had the other option to take the stairs but with a breakfast of highly concentrated sugar, fat, and root beer barrels coursing through my veins, which wasn’t going to happen.

The doors jerked open again, and I jammed the laptop between them. They beat an irregular rhythm against the plum nylon case but left a resulting opening large enough for my fingers. By now I had exerted more energy than I would have on the stairs, but I was determined to get on the thing.

I quickly changed my mind.

In the elevator was a well-dressed man. His jet-black hair was held perfectly in place with pomade, and his mustache was neatly trimmed. He wore a taupe suit with a violet windowpane pattern, a brown and purple paisley ascot knotted around his neck, and a crisp white shirt that no doubt had been laundered and starched by a team of

professionals. Even though his body lay crumpled on the floor, the shirt was barely wrinkled.

Patrick.

My new boss.

I yanked the laptop out from between the doors. When I stood back up, the room spun. I lost my grip on the computer bag. It fell from my shoulder and landed on its side.

My knees buckled, and I followed the laptop to the floor.

Is He Dead?

When I opened my eyes, I was sitting on the sofa in the shoe department leaning against Nick. I blinked several times and tried to focus. My fishnets had torn over my left kneecap, so I crossed my legs to hide the tear. A pile of catalogs and magazines sat on the table in front of us. After spelling out V-O-G-U-E, I figured the worst had passed.

Nick pulled his cell phone away from his ear. "Are you back?"

"From where?" I asked, confused by more than his question. "What happened?"

"You passed out when you saw Patrick's body."

"Is he—he's dead?"

He nodded. "I couldn't find a pulse."

"Did you call nine-one-one?"

He nodded again. "Take a couple more minutes to relax. You went down like a ton of bricks."

Considering I was on a sofa about twenty feet from the elevator doors, the analogy was more humiliating by the evidence that he'd probably carried me to my present location. Mental note: lay off the donuts.

"I'm fine now," I said, feeling anything but.

The second elevator bell rung, and I turned back around. The doors slid open, and a thin woman in a navy uniform stepped out. She carried a collapsible gurney under one arm. She stopped in front of the elevator with Patrick's body and inserted a key in the control panel. Her hat was low on her forehead, obstructing her face. The reflective letters EMT on the back of her nylon jacket were more jarring than white shoes after Labor Day. I wondered how long it had taken her to get there, which made me wonder how long I'd been lying on the floor like a ton of bricks.

"It's my first day. If I'm going to be late, I should call someone." I rooted around in my handbag for my phone.

The EMT adjusted the bill on her hat. She coughed twice. "Today's your first day?" she asked in a scratchy voice. "What department?"

"His," I said, pointing toward the elevator. Reality hit like that cliché ton of bricks Nick had introduced into our conversation. I turned to Nick. The room spun again, and I leaned down, dropping my head between my knees.

“You go in and out fast, don’t you?” Nick asked. His hand, warm through the fabric of my jacket, gently stroked my shoulders. I’d never fainted before in my life.

The EMT stared at us for a couple of seconds then knelt on the floor. She grabbed Patrick’s ankles and pulled them so his body was straight. It looked like too big a job for one person, and I stood up. “Do you need help?”

The EMT didn’t answer. She log-rolled Patrick’s body onto the gurney. She snapped one end up, then came around and raised the other to make it level. She rolled it into the elevator that she’d arrived on and jabbed a gloved finger at the control panel.

“Wait! The cops are on their way. They’ll want to talk to you or find out about the cause of death.” I looked at Nick. “They will, right?”

“Heart attack. Textbook.” She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose like a foghorn. “I’m taking him out through the sub-basement. They can talk to me there.”

“Nine-one-one routed the call to you that quickly?” Nick asked.

“Nah, he must have called us from his office.” She held up a cell phone then put it in her pocket and coughed again. She tossed a brown sheet over Patrick’s body, covering the cuff of his taupe and violet windowpane pants and his purple cashmere socks. Until he was covered, I hadn’t been able to look away, and I knew, long after he was wheeled off, his image would stay with me.

I turned back to Nick. “I should tell security.”

“They know. They let me in,” said the EMT. She kept one hand over the elevator door to keep it open.

“The executive office, then.” I dialed zero on the phone that sat in the middle of the shoe department. Several rings indicated the operators had no reason to show up hours early as I had. “There has to be someone around here. I’ll go to the executive offices and let them know.”

“You’ll have to take the stairs,” the EMT said. “I’ll have the elevators tied up for a while,” She turned the key on the control panel and the doors closed.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” Nick asked. He looked concerned.

This wasn’t how my life was supposed to start over, but Nick didn’t have to hear that. “I’ll be fine,” I said. “But I should notify someone.” I turned toward the hallway through which I’d come.

“Hey Kidd,” Nick called after me, “Do you want me to come with you?”

“No. I mean, I can do this myself. Keep your appointment.” I found the stairwell and started climbing.

Nick followed me. Halfway up the third flight, his footsteps stopped.

“You said you’re working in the trend office, right?”

“Yes,” I turned to face him, but he was looking down the stairs.

“They’re on the seventh floor,” he said.

“I know. I already told you I can get there myself,” I said between short, shallow breaths. My thighs were starting to burn, and I needed a gulp of air. Mental note: reintroduce exercise into my life.

“I’m going back to the shoe department to wait for the cops and let them know what we saw. I’ll send them up when I’m done.” He jogged down three steps, turned back in my direction, and jogged up five to where I stood. “Only five more flights, then your heart rate can go back to normal,” he whispered in my ear. Without a trace of breathlessness, I noticed.

“Four and a half,” I said.

“Good to see you again, Kidd, even under these circumstances,” he said, then jogged back down the flights we’d already covered.

I scaled the rest of the stairs and only barely avoided hyperventilation before entering the trend offices. Fluorescent tube lighting illuminated the space and cast distorted shadows on piles of notebooks, slides, and posters. Two desks were covered with action figures, fabric, colored markers, drawings, and a few other items I didn’t recognize. Posters of Marilyn Monroe dabbing on perfume, Warhol’s tribute to Jackie O, and a concert poster of Madonna lined the walls. I wasn’t sure what I’d expected of Patrick’s office, but eighties pop culture wasn’t it. My interviews had taken place on the phone and outside of Tradava, and I was starting to think Patrick wasn’t at all what he’d seemed when someone cursed behind me.

I turned around. A green-eyed blond man stood in the doorway. His skin flushed red against a glowing tan.

“Did you say something?” I asked.

The stranger scratched the side of his head and left a chunk of hair sticking straight out above a wireless earbud. “I didn’t realize anybody was here.”

I sat down at the desk with the Wonder Woman action figure. “I’m Samantha Kidd. The new trend specialist.” I waited, wondering if he was going to say anything. “Today’s my first day. And you are . . .?”

He leaned against the doorframe and smiled casually. My first impression was skateboard dude, but he had an air of maturity lacking in the guys I watched on ESPN extreme sports. His scruffy hair seemed more chlorinated than salon-dyed, and his Eighties concert T-shirt looked like it came from a pricey vintage-reproduction store. Either that or the laundry pile, I couldn’t tell which.

He remained silent, with a lopsided smile on his face, while I tried to find a spot for my handbag. I finally leaned it against my ankles and folded my hands. I was on edge already, and his presence unnerved me even more. I didn’t know where I should be, what I should be doing, or to whom I should be talking.

“Don’t you need to be getting to your department?” I asked.

“I can’t get to my desk right now,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“You’re sitting at it.”

“Isn’t this the trend office?” I hopped out of the chair as if it were wired with a shock device. The chair knocked over my bag. Four tubes of near-identical pink lip-gloss rolled out by my left foot. I bent down to collect them and felt my skirt split over my right hip.

“No, that’s down the hall. This is the visual office. I’m the manager. Eddie Adams.” He pulled the Bluetooth device from his ear and tossed it onto the desk. It rolled in a semicircle until it bumped into Wonder Woman’s red and white boots.

“I’m sorry. I made a mistake,” I said. I looped my handbag over my arm.

Before I had a chance to leave, we were interrupted by an exotic blend of black pepper and hyacinths. A reed-thin redhead in an off-the-shoulder leotard, black harem pants, and geometric earrings swept past us.

“Patrick?” she called out. “Patrick?”

“Patrick isn’t with us,” I said tentatively. It was an understatement, to say the least.

The woman disappeared into an office further down the hall. Moments later she returned to the hallway, stopping by a small desk. She flipped through a couple of cards on a Rolodex with one black fingerless-gloved hand while the other hand fiddled with one

of her earrings. Her designer hobo bag overflowed with files and fabric swatches. She ran her fingertip along the card in the Rolodex, then left the desk and approached me.

“When Patrick gets here, tell him we’re overdue for a meeting. The competition is right around the corner. I need to know where he stands.”

I studied her face. Her red hair was bone straight, cut into an asymmetrical bob. A smattering of freckles peeked out from under a dusting of powder. She looked more effortlessly stylish than I had in any of the five outfits I’d considered wearing on my first day.

“Patrick isn’t here,” Eddie said.

“Never mind the message. I’ll call him later.” Before I could tell her that her efforts would be wasted, she left. “Do you know who that was?” I asked Eddie.

“One of the Patrick parade. There’s a steady stream of designers coming in and out of here all day. Write ‘Red was here’ on a message pad, and he’ll either figure it out or she’ll come back.”

I picked up a pen. I even went as far as writing the R from Red, before I set the pen down. “I’ll be right back.”

I left the office, hoping to find Patrick’s visitor and let her know what had happened. I wasn’t sure where I was going, but halfway through the lingerie department, my cell phone screen lit up with an incoming call from the number I’d avoided earlier.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Samantha Kidd?” said a female voice.

“This is Samantha,” I replied.

“This is Brittany Fowler. From Full Circle Mortgage? We reran your mortgage application this morning, and there’s a problem. It seems you don’t work for Bentley’s New York anymore?” She had a way of ending her sentences with questions that made me want to answer automatically.

“I changed companies. I have a new job. At Tradava, in Ribbon, Pennsylvania.” I said, slowly circling a fixture of nightgowns. “Someone from the store was supposed to fax a letter to you a couple of days ago.”

I’d been so wrapped up in impressing my boss at the new job that, for the last couple of hours, I’d forgotten about life outside of Tradava. Even though I gave my notice to

Bentley's I still cited them on the mortgage paperwork. Gray area, I'd figured, since I knew I was about to start a new job. Seems gray was not the mortgage lender's favorite color.

"Hmmm," she said, in a tone that suggested she wasn't happy with my answer. I reached the end of the fixture and headed toward a display of pantyhose. "How long have you worked there?"

"I just started today."

"Perhaps we could clear this up now if I could talk to your supervisor?" she asked.

"That's not going to work. He can't verify anything." I heard a sound behind me and turned. Eddie stood next to the nightie fixture with a middle-aged man in a baggy, western-cut suit.

"That's the woman you're looking for. That's Samantha Kidd."

The man stepped forward, and I stepped back. He scowled. "Ms. Kidd, I'm Detective Loncar. Get your things and come with me."

Mixed Up

“Detective?” I repeated. My cell phone fell to the carpet.

The man in the suit stepped forward and showed me a badge. “Ms. Kidd, I have a few questions about this morning. It’s important we talk. Now.”

“Can we talk here?”

“No.” He turned on his heel, took a step, then turned back to face me. Red-faced, I scooped the phone from the floor and hung up on the mortgage company. I returned to the trend office for my handbag and followed the detective out of the store. Employees milled about the parking lot. The humiliating walk past people I hadn’t yet met would be hard to overcome. It was like the first day at a new high school; No matter what I wore tomorrow, I’d never get another chance to change this first impression.

“Do you want me to follow you somewhere?” I asked.

“I’ll drive,” the detective said. He unlocked a sedan and held the door open.

It was hot. I unzipped my satin motorcycle jacket and exposed the black lace camisole I wore underneath. When we arrived at the police station, I followed the detective through the front doors, where a small group of cops eyed my Aqua Netted hair, my camisole, and my torn fishnets. I zipped my jacket back up and dealt with the sweating.

In a small office, with dirty windows and a checkerboard linoleum-tiled floor in shades of gray, gray, and gray, Detective Loncar grilled me “Ms. Kidd, what were you doing at Tradava this morning?”

“I work there. I’m about to work there. I just moved back to Ribbon.”

“You’re new in town?”

“Not new-new but new by your standards.”

“And you’re new to Tradava?”

“Yes, though technically I haven’t started working there yet.”

He made a note on a lined notepad. Pieces of torn-off paper stood out at a jagged edge from the binding. I leaned forward to read his handwriting upside down. He shifted the notepad so I couldn’t.

“Tell me about this morning.”

“What do you want to know?” I asked. I wasn’t trying to be flippant. I was scared, which, I’ve learned, prompts me to act unnaturally obtuse.

“What did you see?”

“Patrick, in the corner of the elevator.”

“Patrick who?”

“Just Patrick. He only has one name. Like Cher.”

He stared at me. I fought every instinct to look away. “What else?”

“An EMT arrived in a separate elevator. She took him out of the store through the sub-basement.”

“How do you know that’s where they went?”

“That’s where she said she went.”

“Did you follow them?”

“No, but it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

He made another note. “Did you notify security?”

“No, the EMT did.”

“Did you call nine-one-one?”

“No, Nick did.”

“Who is Nick?”

“Nick Taylor. He was there too.”

“Does he work for Tradava?”

“No. He’s a shoe designer.”

“And he was with you?”

“He was with me, but he wasn’t with-with me. Did you talk to him? Did he tell you about me? We should have planned this better.” I uncrossed my legs, revealing the tear in my fishnets. My left leg started hammering the floor, and I crossed the right leg over it to keep it under control.

“Planned what?”

“This morning. I mean, this. Now. Not this morning. We didn’t plan anything this morning.”

“Ms. Kidd, do you and Mr. Taylor have a history?”

“Yes, well, not a history-history, but I know him.”

“And do you know what Mr. Taylor was doing at Tradava this morning?”

Nick had said he had a meeting with the shoe buyer, but I had no evidence that was true. And it seemed Loncar didn’t like that I’d blanketly accepted what the EMT had said,

so to show I was paying attention, I simply said, “No.” The detective waited for me to elaborate. I didn’t. I was mixed up, and the answers to more than one of his questions eluded me.

“How did you get to the trend office?”

“I climbed the stairs.” He glanced at my feet. “Yes, in these shoes,” I added.

“Why?”

“Because they go with my outfit.”

“Why did you climb the stairs?” he repeated without missing a beat.

“Because that’s where I was supposed to be.”

“The job you claim you were about to start.”

“I don’t claim it, it’s true. Ask Human Resources.”

“Mr. Adams told us he never saw you before this morning when he found you at his desk.”

“I didn’t know it was his desk. I’d never been there before.”

“But you claim you were supposed to be working there.”

Ah, we were back to that.

“Ms. Kidd, can you tell me anything else about this morning?”

“What exactly *did* happen this morning?” I asked. The detective didn’t answer. “I can’t help you with details. I always thought I worked well under pressure, but, um, I passed out.”

“Do you have a habit of passing out?”

“No. I don’t know. I mean, not usually, but I’m not in the habit of finding my boss dead in an elevator. This is unfamiliar territory for me.”

He leaned back in his chair and flipped the pen upside down. He tapped the end of it on the table in front of him. *Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.*

Our conversation continued in circles, arriving close to where it had started. Nowhere. Despite a month of the kind of planning that filled notebooks by day and Post-its by night, I was about as far from my new life fantasies as I could have been.

“Why am I here? The EMT told me Patrick had a heart attack. She took him out of the store through the subbasement and said she’d talk to you there.” Detective Loncar sat very still. After an awkward amount of time, I started to count. He shifted his weight when I hit seventeen but didn’t speak until I reached twenty-two.

“Ms. Kidd, there was no EMT. There was no body. You keep telling me a man died, but we don’t have a corpse. You’re here because I heard about a nine-one-one call from Tradava, and when I got there, I found out you’re the only person who was at Tradava who has no reason for being there.”

“What about Nick?”

“This Mr. Taylor you mentioned?”

“Yes, him. Did he tell you why he was there?”

“For now, let’s focus on why *you* were there.”

“I work there!” I said.

He didn’t have to say it this time. I knew what he was thinking.

Despite my forthcoming attitude, I left as in the dark as when I arrived. Three missed calls on my phone from the mortgage company. Their messages nagging at me like a bad song I couldn’t get out of my head.

It was after eleven when I returned to Tradava. All the energy I’d put into impressing Patrick was gone. Ever since our first meeting in the parking lot outside of the store, I’d been looking forward to working with him. But now that would never happen.

Eddie met me before I reached the entrance. “You want to tell me why you left here with a detective?” he asked.

“Patrick,” I said.

“Patrick isn’t here.”

“He’s not going to be here. Ever. He’s dead.” I didn’t care Eddie was a relative stranger. I had to tell someone. Complete silence. They’re right about that pin drop thing. And then—

“Patrick? Dead? How? Where?” A gust of air lifted his blond hair straight up, and, for a moment, made him look like a startled chicken.

“In the elevator. Didn’t you notice they were out of service when you got here?”

“I take the stairs.”

Great. I needed comfort food, and this guy was probably going to bust out in yoga moves in the middle of the parking lot.

“How about we get out of here, and you tell me what’s going on?” he asked.

Crowds of people milled around the store entrance and pieces of their conversation floated to my ears. *Who’s she? Some new girl.* I hurried in my stilettos to keep up with

sneaker-clad Eddie and separate myself from the staffers eager to gossip. For the moment, “some new girl” hadn’t been identified, though by the way a few of the associates looked at me, torn fishnets and all, I was climbing the list of candidates. By the time we returned, that phrase would probably be embossed on my nameplate.

“I’d rather not walk through the store again today. Not until everybody leaves.”

“Even if you wanted to, you can’t. The police made us all leave the building. Come on,” he said and led the way to a Volkswagen Beetle.

I followed Eddie to a diner that sat at the edge of the mall parking lot. Minutes later, Eddie bit into an egg-white omelet while I considered whether or not my stomach could handle the four pieces of bacon I’d ordered.

“I can’t believe he’s dead,” I said as I lined up the strips of meat.

“Have you known him a long time?”

“No. Why?”

“You sound, I don’t know, shaken up.”

“He’s Patrick. He was very influential in the fashion industry.”

“You sound like he meant something *to you*.”

“He did mean something to me. He was my boss.”

“Today’s your first day.”

I didn’t know how to explain the Starting Over Plan to Eddie. How do you tell an almost stranger you voluntarily gave up a coveted, high-profile job in the fashion industry because you weren’t sure that’s what you wanted out of life? That you had done your job so well you became the problem solver for everyone, but when your problem became the fact that you weren’t happy, you had no one to solve that problem for you? That when your parents announced they were moving to California, you did the craziest thing you’d ever done and put in a bid on your childhood house without telling your family you were the buyer? It sounded nuts to me. I couldn’t imagine what it would sound like to him.

An all-consuming sense of what-have-I-done kept me silent while Eddie flagged the waitress down for more coffee.

“I don’t know where to start,” I said.

“Start at the beginning.”

While ‘the beginning’ was slightly ambiguous in terms of my life, I needed to talk to someone. I gave Eddie the highlights of the morning and wrapped up my story with a

vague comment about the position of Patrick's body. My cell phone rang, and I recognized the mortgage officer's number. As I weighed the pros and cons of answering, the waitress returned to our table.

"You two work over there, right?" She tipped her head toward the window that faced Tradava. Eddie nodded. She topped off our coffee. "Crazy what happened this morning. A couple of officers said a call came in about a dead guy in the store, but when they went to check it out, there wasn't a body. Crackpot nine-one-one call, they thought."

"There was a body," I protested for the second time that day. "He had a heart attack." Like the detective, she didn't seem to believe me. My phone stopped ringing, and I dropped it back into my handbag. "I'm not making this up," I finished.

"Sounds fishy to me." She rubbed the back of her hand across her forehead. "Think what you want, but I bet there's more to this story than any of us know."

"Like what?" I asked.

She set the coffee pot on a nearby cart and put her palms face down on the table. "Routine heart attacks don't make bodies disappear. If you saw someone take a body out of the store, then I'd be willing to bet somebody was trying to hide something. Nothing routine about that."

"Are you saying you think Patrick was kidnapped?"

"I'm saying I think he was murdered."

(End of Sample)