



SCISSOR LINK



GEORGETTE KAPLAN

CHAPTER 1

“OVER THERE, WHAT ABOUT HER?” Regan asked with the proxy desperation of the married friend.

Wendy glanced over, feeling like she needed binoculars to see through the strobing lights and the mist that was rolling around like the Hound of the Baskervilles was about. Yeah, she was cute. Black, with a modest afro, about Wendy’s age, maybe a little older, pushing thirty. Dressed not too shabby, but not trying too hard either.

“Okay,” Wendy said. “I’m going to try to psychically implant in her mind a desire to come over here and make the first move, while she tries to do the same to me. Brace yourself. Psychic combat on this level can be a hard thing to watch.”

“Or you could just go over and talk to her.”

“No, no, this is the lesbian way. Loser has to speak first. It’s a time-honored tradition.”

Regan sighed and sipped her drink empty. “Well, you have me as a wingman. How does one lesbian wingman? Do I just go over there and loudly mention how hot and single you are?”

“You’re my sister, so no, that would be creepy.”

Not that either of them needed a reminder. Five years older, and infinitely more mature, Regan looked like the finished model of what some sculptor was trying to do with Wendy. She was several inches taller, with long, limber legs and yoga-tightened arms, and the fashion sense of a swan turned into a human. Her face was narrow and elegant, (whereas Wendy’s was round and ‘cute’), with a pert nose, high cheekbones, long dark hair that obeyed her will out of loyalty to the crown. A face made for rouge and eyeliner and smiling. Her eyes were a piercing shade of blue not found in nature, while Wendy’s were an unremarkable brown. Wendy didn’t consider

herself unattractive unless she was on her period; Regan just looked like some ethereal elf queen or something. It made Wendy want to start an Instagram account: *My sister wearing white and quotes from Tolkien.*

Wendy looked at herself in one of the many mirrored surfaces that composed the bar. She liked the way she looked, she did: sweet and natural, and she fashioned herself a little mischievous, even with eyebrows that she couldn't quite bring herself to love (after all, they might've been proof her mom fooled around with Peter Gallagher behind Dad's back). But one day of looking like Regan, and she would have no problem finding someone. And she could wear a corset, just because.

Regan jostled her again. "You're feeling sorry for yourself again, I don't know why. You have a great job, you're young, you're pretty—who cares if you have a girlfriend?"

"That's good, let me down easy."

"Oh, you're a pill."

"A pill with a great job." Wendy toasted it. "Great job."

Wendy Cedar worked for Savin Aerospace, a small but lucrative company that built helicopters for military and civilian use. Her job was in Safety & Risk Management. She worked as an intern directly under her manager, Donnie Parsons, whose job (and thus Wendy's job) was to collate the various findings of safety experts within the department and submit a recommendation on the technical risk margin (TRM) up the ladder.

"It pays well," Wendy reasoned.

"Not when you're an intern."

"So I used the wrong tense. It *will* pay well. It's important work."

Wendy grumbled the way she did when the person she was arguing with was right. Successfully distinguishing between a design flaw and random chance within the testing apparatus could mean millions of dollars, not to mention lives. So she tabulated and calculated, took one memo and ground it down to its essential points and wrote it out again in the proper formula and passed it on to another department. Six years for a Master of Science in Engineering and she double-checked figures. It was frustrating.

"Fine. I won't be frustrated with my boring, monotonous, grindstone job—"

"That everyone does as an intern," Regan finished with her, singsong in the way all sisters were when they got a chance to torture their siblings.

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“What did you think, that they were going to let you build a Heli-Carrier fresh out of college? Or—” Regan gestured around in the impressed-with-herself way all mothers had when they stumbled on a teachable moment “—that the perfect woman is just going to fall into your lap while you sit at home wondering which crappy horror movie Netflix should shoot into your eyes next?”

“I know that was meant to be discouraging, but all I can picture is some kind of *Die Hard* situation where terrorists have taken over my building and some lady cop is crawling around the air vents in a tank top.”

“Terrorists haven’t already taken over your building? How do you explain the rent?”

“You’re the one who took me out. I could be getting my money’s worth right now, working on my bike or something.”

“I don’t think ‘money’s worth’ and ‘your bike’ belong in the same sentence.” Regan took another sip, then slapped her empty glass down on the bar. “If you didn’t want to go to a gay bar, then why’d you let me take you out? We could’ve gone to a cheese-making class.”

“Do they let you eat the cheese?”

“Yes!”

“You’re right, we should’ve gone for that.” Wendy tried to signal the bartender, who was gazing soulfully into a soft butch’s eyes, getting ready to give her a free drink. Christ, if Wendy worked here, she’d be doing better. “You wanted me to meet someone. Your idea. I blame you. My plan was working perfectly.”

“What was your plan?”

“I grow old, I die, in heaven I get married to Tallulah Bankhead.”

“Or you could use Tinder.”

“I’m not using Tinder,” Wendy said definitively. “If I get murdered by a psycho, I want it done the old-fashioned way.”

“Would you listen to yourself? I would never have gotten married if I had your attitude.”

“Maybe it’s your fault. Maybe you’re giving everyone unrealistic expectations. They look at you, they think ‘hey, it could happen’, then they look at me.”

“No one thinks I’m prettier than you. We’re two tens.”

“I look like Megan Fox about to sneeze.”

“You do not!”

Wendy grinned. “I look like the face Megan Fox used to have before the face Megan Fox used to have.”

“I think you’re pushing the Megan Fox thing too far.”

“I look like...shit.” After a moment’s hesitation, Wendy had one. “I look like the Megan Fox who would actually end up with Shia LeBeouf.”

“Now you just sound depressed. Do I have to take away your razor blades?”

“I need those to shave my legs. ‘Cause hair actually grows on my legs, unlike yours.”

“It’s a genetic disorder, I didn’t ask to be born with it, and it actually slightly raises my risk of leukemia. But come on, it’s not like people can tell the difference.”

Wendy could barely hear her. The music was too loud. Wendy was far too young for the music to be too loud for her. But she didn’t know if the current music would be safe at any volume; even with the volume turned all the way down, it might irritate dogs. It was loud, repetitive, and not much more than a beat when you came right down to it. Sounded like one of those comedy sound effect CDs being played inside a washing machine. Dubstep. What the hell was a gay club doing playing dubstep? The gays had David Bowie! You’d think people could take some pride in it.

And the lights were flashing, and there was some kind of mist being sprayed around and all in all, she’d have preferred it if someone changed the flickering lightbulb (oh, those were strobe lights), put on some damn pop, even Taylor Swift, and maybe just served coffee. Heck, she didn’t care how cliché she was. Tea. She’d take tea.

She knew that wouldn’t exactly make for much of a nightclub, but how was it only nightclubs had ended up being gay? Couldn’t there be a gay martial arts dojo? Gay bookstore? She could meet people like in a Meg Ryan movie.

Gay arcade! She didn’t care if no one went to arcades anymore, she would stay there all day playing *Time Crisis*, and when the only other lesbian who liked light gun games and *Street Fighter* came in, she would marry her.

Lesbian movie theater for showing lesbian movies. Shit, though—once they’d shown *D.E.B.S.* and *Imagine Me & You*, who would come? Maybe

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if it was winter, some hobos would sneak in for the central heating. Not if they were showing *Bar Girls*, but otherwise...

The bartender picked then to set a tequila sunrise in front of Regan. "From the lady in the back."

They both looked over. It was from the woman with the afro. She waved and flashed a smile. Wendy groaned. It was a cute smile. Yeah. Wendy wouldn't mind playing *Time Crisis* with her.

"Get up," Regan stood, gripping the drink.

"What is this?"

Regan pulled her to her feet. "I'm being a wingman."

"Oh God no—"

Regan gripped Wendy with a bouncer's hold on her upper arm and ushered her toward the cute girl. She worked out surprisingly often. Had a weight set where other housewives would have a sewing room.

"Sit down beside her," Regan ordered. "Don't think. Just sit."

"Abort. Abort. Abort—"

Regan stranded Wendy on one side of the cute girl, setting her drink down on the bar between them. "Hi!" she said brightly. She could talk to strangers as easily as a normal person might talk to a stray kitten they found on the road. "Thank you *so much* for the drink. I'm Regan."

"Alice," the cute girl said. Shit, she had a British accent. "I didn't know you needed a stunt double."

"This is my sister, Wendy."

"Oh," Alice said, her face doing some maneuvers it didn't seem to be cleared for. "I'm not really into that. Don't get me wrong, if I could be into that, you two would certainly have me into it."

Regan let out a deep breath, and Wendy was somewhat gratified by her frustration. Even her sister wasn't good at the lesbian dating scene. "I'm married, actually, but my sister here is single! Very single."

Wendy elbowed her in the ribs. "Thanks, sis."

"So, married—" Alice said. She sounded deep in thought.

Wendy supposed she would have to be, to get the conversation back on some kind of track.

"Do you and your wife...like to party, say?"

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“Married and straight. Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom.” Regan straightened and looked around theatrically. “Oh good, no takers. Last time I did that, the whole club came with me.”

“She thinks she’s funny,” Wendy told Alice. She gave Regan a look. “I’m gonna tell Keith you turned that one down,” she stage-whispered.

“Don’t you dare.” Regan headed off.

Alice picked up the drink she’d bought Regan and sipped.

Wendy wondered if that was a good sign. *You know, a good sign, like sitting in silence with someone who wanted to fuck your sister.* “So,” Wendy said, “you looking forward to the next *Star Wars* movie?”

“Excuse me?” Alice replied.

“*Star Wars Episode 8*. Rian Johnson’s directing it? He did *Looper*, *Brick*, *The Brothers Bloom*... Some people say Rey is going to go Dark Side, which I think would be really cool, because then maybe Finn—”

“I don’t watch *Star Wars*.”

By the time Regan came back, Alice was long gone.

“You know we have pretty much the same genetic code?” Regan asked. “I’m not sure how you can mess up with someone who’s already into you on a genetic level.”

Wendy held up a finger. “I opened with *Star Wars*,” she said defensively. “Not *Star Trek*. Not *Farscape*. Not *Stargate*. *Star Wars*. If she’s not into that, what’s she into? What’s that leave? *The Fast & the Furious*?”

* * *

Well, Wendy had wanted to pay her dues. She just didn’t think dues had included making coffee runs because her boss insisted on Starbucks, even though she’d worked there in high school and honestly, the stuff in the Savin Aerospace break room was exactly the same. She could even do the little leaf in the foam if he wanted. No, that would be too much brownnosing.

She walked through the lobby on autopilot, appropriately enough, flashed her identification to the security guard and then swiped her pass for good measure, then headed to the elevator bank where she would swipe her pass again because if someone wanted to steal industrial secrets, by God, they would use the stairs to do it.

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And it was there, waiting for her elevator, that Wendy saw the most beautiful woman in the world.

The most beautiful woman in the world was standing there, at the elevator beside Wendy's, waiting for her car to arrive. And just by standing there, she appeared to Wendy more *vibrant* than her immediate surroundings; a whole different species from everyone else embroiled in the drab rat race. Her clothes seemed more fitted on her, a second skin: gray on white, a midi skirt bridged to black high heels by a length of stockinged calf that seemed shockingly naked—unarmored, really, especially in comparison to the black leather gloves that shrouded her hands.

But it was her face that nearly overwhelmed Wendy. The rest of her was all tight control, humming power in deliberate muscle, all sorts of things projecting and drawing in. And then her face was stone. Square, symmetrical, with a neat point of a chin, light pink lips, a pert nose and smooth cheekbones cutting into that white-gold tan of hers. And reigning over it, a pair of Wayfarer eyeglasses, black and sturdy and somehow timeless. More than anything, Wendy wanted to see what that cool, composed face would look like with the iota of remove that the glasses provided gone.

Wendy stared. How could she not, it being so important to her to find out how a person could *look like that*? People weren't supposed to look like that, right? Maybe Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Angelina Jolie in *Gia*, but not just a *person* at Wendy's *job*, where she worked, like, how was that fair?

The woman noticed she was being stared at. She looked at Wendy and Wendy looked away. Because staring at people was creepy and rude and wrong, even if you thought they might possibly be a Greek goddess seeking out the Chosen One. She felt the woman's eyes on her; a quick, appraising scan. She really wanted to look back. She really wanted to make crazy-mad eye contact, even if it might cause spontaneous human combustion. She took deep breaths and wondered if the woman was still looking and hoped she wasn't looking and hoped she was. Could she still feel herself being stared at? Was it just wishful thinking? Maybe she should flash the most beautiful woman in the world and see if she reacted. *No Brain, bad idea, get it together or I'm punishing you with shots.*

Her elevator arrived. Wendy stepped inside the glass capsule, pressed the button for her floor, and reminded herself that no one has a heart attack in their twenties. It was passé. The elevator car rose, climbing steadily up

the building's atrium, and Wendy casually looked around as if that hanging scale-model F-14 that she passed every day could take her mind off possibly seeing a Terminator (indeed, a Terminatrix) built to be able to both seduce and destroy any human resistance.

And Wendy saw the most beautiful woman in the world *again*, in the elevator beside her, and if seeing the most beautiful woman in the world once was shocking, twice in one day was getting into *Die Hard* sequel territory. How many times could one man run afoul of independent gangs of terrorists? How many times could Wendy abruptly want to volunteer for sex slave duty?

Wendy was not an unintelligent woman. She wasn't MacGyver or Machiavelli, either. While a quick-thinker, she was more likely to come up with the proper tip in a few seconds than any sort of master plan. So Wendy was a little proud of herself for coming up with this scheme: she would get out her phone and call someone as she looked at the most beautiful woman in the world.

She called Tina Thuy, whose number was labeled BFF in her phone.

"I am so gay," she said, right off the bat. "Holy shit, am I gay. I am just... I'm even gayer than previously expected. I didn't know my gay could go that high, but it can, and it has."

"Good for you." Tina punctuated her reply with a yawn. Working from home meant she didn't have to know if time had letters other than P.M. "Are you coming out again? Do people do that? Like a second wedding?"

"No, I'm just *really fucking gay*."

"Because if you can come out again, don't throw anything at the clown this time, he meant well—"

"I'm not coming out again! But I feel like I should, because if I was at a hundred percent gay before, now I'm at two hundred percent!"

"What, did Donald Trump make a pass at you?"

Safely on her phone, Wendy looked over into the other elevator. It was still rising with hers, and the most beautiful woman in the world was still the most beautiful woman in the world. The way she stood, *God*, all power and control and just a little slinky, not at all like a man but maybe kind of macho? It was the way Xena would stand. Or the way a female director of the FBI would stand as she gave orders to Agent Scully—that was a happy thought.

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“I’m looking at a woman who is, like, *unfairly* sexy. She’s overloading my gay circuitry. My homosexuality is not rated for this level of hotness in a woman.”

The most beautiful woman in the world made a minute adjustment to her wavy platinum hair. A chic short cut, side parted, with the fringe windswept. It reminded Wendy of the ropes on a cat o’ nine tails. Not because it was stringy or anything, just in that there was something coiled there, something with an edge of threat.

“I think I just came,” Wendy said.

“Wendy, doll, how much does this call cost after the first minute?”

“You’re making light of a deeply spiritual experience I’m having with my gayness. I’m at the mecca of my homo right now.”

“All right, take a picture, I need to see her.”

“No! That would be creepy—”

“You’re the one staring at her and wondering how her hair smells.”

Wendy raised her hand to her mouth. “Oh God, I bet it smells amazing.”

She had just been thinking that it was even more unfair that their elevators had come up together for so long, submitting her to more and more of the sight of the most beautiful woman in the world. It was like being forced to stare at the sun. But then Wendy’s car arrived at its destination, and the Khaleesi’s kept going: up and up and up, far out of sight behind the opaque ceiling of Wendy’s elevator.

Then the doors of Wendy’s elevator started to close again, having apparently opened, and she got out. “So,” she said into the phone, “I’m just gonna...weep somewhere. Curl up on the floor. Pray for death. My heart’s broken. Business as usual.”

“Wendy’s got a girlfriend, Wendy’s got a girlfriend—” Tina chanted, singsong.

“Please don’t joke about that. It’s...too soon.”

* * *

The food court in Savin Aerospace was about the size of a high school gymnasium. It boasted several restaurants in kiosk form: McDonald’s, Chick-fil-A, Popeyes, Starbucks, even a Dunkin’ Donuts and a recent strain of artisanal offerings. Wendy told the girl at Smooth Runnings, the smoothie place, to blend her something surprising and promised to drain

the whole thing in fair trade for neglecting her StairMaster. Anything that tasted this bad had to be *great* for her.

The food court was pocketed between the building's atrium and exterior, wrapping around half of an entire floor. There were three big TVs in the room's corners: one along the white walled expanse where the restaurant business hadn't yet expanded (Wendy guessed they were trying to figure out how to park a food truck there), and the last corner of the room taken up by a Dairy Queen that only offered desserts.

Each TV was tuned to something different, and the quadrants of the room formed factions as carefully chosen as a favorite Star Trek captain. At the northeast corner, opposite the empty one, the TV played MTV11—the MTV that still played music. At the northwest corner, the TV played the Game Show Network, which occasionally tempted Wendy when something from the seventies was on. And at the southwest corner, there was a TV showing films from the Silent Movie Channel.

Trust a bunch of engineers to game the system. With their petition successful, they basked in the comparative quiet of orchestral music and either read their tablets or did incomprehensible things with their phones. One of this crowd was Elizabeth Smile. If someone had told Wendy that Elizabeth had worked out a way to go for a PhD on her smartphone, she would've believed them.

With her chic ensemble and glamorous makeup, the executive assistant looked more like a model doing a 1950s-themed photoshoot in their office. And was so out of Wendy's weight class that she felt abashed to look at her, as if she'd been caught doing something wrong like participating in the office sport of 'Look At Elizabeth.'

Nonetheless, Wendy pushed past it, sitting down across from Elizabeth. "I'm looking for a woman."

Elizabeth scantily looked away from her smartphone. "I like where this is headed. I can work with this."

"An older woman. Seems kinda dominating, tightly wound, position of power, but you just *know* she's worn a strap-on? Like, you want her to sneer at you while she wears Gucci and shoves a file folder into your arms and says 'Fix it!' in a really tense voice?"

"So, like a MILF?"

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Wendy scoffed. “I actually don’t like that acronym, that’s a straight man acronym, and lesbians were into older women before it was cool. And they totally diluted the brand anyway, because it used to be just cougar, if a lesbian were in charge, it would’ve stayed at that, but there are leopards and pumas and jaguars and black panthers. I would’ve had sex with Helen Mirren before I saw her in a bikini!”

“So you’re looking for Helen Mirren?”

“No, she’s a lot younger, forties, aging like a Spielberg movie. And, uh...” Wendy held circled fingers in front of her face. “Glasses.”

“Oh, is that what glasses look like?” Elizabeth set down her phone. “Sounds like Janet Lace. You’ve heard of her?”

Everyone had heard of her. Janet Lace was the rising star of the company’s production division, no pun intended. She’d flown jets, not just approved overhauls for them. She knew the product line inside and out, could take apart a turbine and put it back together. If Janet’s flight got delayed at the airport, she could probably get it working again with a thump of her fist.

“That’s *her*?” Wendy boggled. “I thought she would be, you know...less like the teacher in a Van Halen video.”

Elizabeth’s phone dinged and she picked it back up, instantly engrossed in something it displayed. “What do you want with her, anyway?”

“I’m in love with her. I want her to quit playing these games and make me an honest woman.”

“Is that even possible?” Elizabeth replied.

“Tell me everything about her. How high are her heels? Where was she born? How many adopted kids does she want? Is she okay with friendly back massages—”

“Would you like me to tape her sleeping, too?”

“I’m not stalking her. I’m just making sure she’s not a serial killer or anything.”

“Well, I don’t think she’d be too happy about me writing a Wikipedia article on her, given that she’s my—”

“Hold up,” Wendy said.

Donnie Parsons had just come through the door.

Every time she saw him, he reminded Wendy of one of those yapping little dogs that were bred to fit into the purse, much the way rich people had to be bred not to find them annoying. He was a pretty normal boss—

Wendy thought she could've met much the same if her job were delivering pizzas or serving up fries—but he wore his goatee in the Frank Zappa style. It was doing a lot to ruin a hairstyle that Wendy had previously found pretty inoffensive.

“Duty calls,” Wendy said. “My lunch break’s almost over.”

“Oh, come on, sit and gossip, this place could use an office romance to spice things up.”

Wendy stood. “I’m in love with keeping my job.”

“It’s an unhealthy relationship. Your job doesn’t pay you.”

“It’s called an internship.”

“It’s called slavery.”

“Get out, it’s not like they whip me.”

“They make you wear heels.”

Wendy shrugged and hurried over to the line at Subway’s, where Donnie was looking at his watch. “Mr. Parsons, hi, one second of your time?”

“Cedar,” he replied, managing to fit ‘you again’ between the letters. “It’s lunch. Eat something.”

“I had a power bar,” she replied. “Listen, you remember telling me to submit the TCB report?”

“I remember it still not being done.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing, I still haven’t gotten the proper numbers back from R&D.” Wendy tried to diffuse her aggression with a slightly confused laugh. “I can’t submit a report about their findings without their findings, you know?”

“You have their findings,” Donnie interrupted, shuffling forward in line. “I uploaded them all onto the cloud myself, and I know you have access—”

Wendy had to dodge a stanchion to keep up with him. “I do, yes, but the findings aren’t...” Wendy struggled for the right word “...exhaustive. I really need more information for the TCB report.”

“Just put the report through, they’ll clear it up somewhere above your pay grade, same as always.”

“Yeah, but here at my pay grade, it’s my job to clear it up now—”

“Cedar. It’s Friday,” Donnie interrupted. “Do you really want to hold everyone up and make a bunch of people, including us, work on the weekend just so we can dot a few I’s?”

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Wendy stopped moving to avoid colliding with the line to McDonald's, formed on her side of the stanchion rope. "It's not the weekend for three hours yet. I'm sure with your help, we can get what we need from R&D, finish the report—"

"I'm a busy man, Cedar. I have better things to do than hold your hand while you do your job. Send the damn report before you cost us all our weekend. You don't want that, do you?"

"No, sir."

Donnie was at the front of his line. "Good. Now get out of here, I don't know what to order."

"Sweet onion chicken teriyaki," she told him, then hurried off to figure out why she'd said that.

CHAPTER 2

WENDY DID NOT WORK ON Sundays, but she'd been called in, and as an intern, she wasn't expected to have a life. So, since her usual commute was only on weekdays, she hired an Uber, did her best to learn Greek to hold up her end of the conversation, and went into the deserted weekend workspace. Blank, flat monitors; some noisy grinding sort of janitorial work being done; and no one presenting themselves, no matter how many doors Wendy knocked on.

This meant she had the kitchen all to herself, and Wendy thought to put on a pot of coffee for when the others arrived. She also thought to have a sip of fresh coffee, made the way she liked it, instead of the indignities to which her co-workers subjected the coffee beans. Selecting her favorite roast from the cupboard in the break room, she set about cajoling the coffee machine into doing her will. The machine, for its part, kept hectoring her to connect to it with an app on her presumed smartphone. This would tell her when her coffee was done if she forgot how to tell time.

Wendy did not forget how to tell time. It was exactly seventeen minutes after she'd shown up when she heard the dogged footsteps of Donnie Parsons, along with a clearer, more intently pitched noise. Heels on linoleum, striking with a determined repetition. Like Wendy imagined a thief would use as he worked on a safe with a chisel. *Click, click, click, click.* Rapid succession, but not rushed. Purposeful.

Donnie came in followed by Janet Lace, and if Wendy didn't fall in love at first sight, or even at second sight, she was definitely ready to fall in love.

"Wanda! Did you send a *memo*—" Donnie began, and his pinched voice was as shocking to Wendy as having a water cooler explode in her face.

Janet silenced him with a wave of her hand. Her nails were quite short, black, neat little claws on slender fingers.

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Wendy stared at them and was very hopeful.

“We apologize for our lateness.” Janet’s voice was clear, restrained, powerful. It seemed perfectly suited to that set of lips. “Traffic,” Janet concluded; not apologetic, but with a slight growl like a mine threatening to cave in. An expression of anger toward the obstacle that had robbed her of her punctuality. “You know who I am,” she stated by way of introduction.

Wendy nodded, trying to keep phrases like “Mrs. Wendy Cedar-Lace” and its variations indoors rather than out.

“It’s fine. The traffic. Not that the traffic is fine, I’m sure it’s very bad if it delayed you, but you being delayed by traffic is...” Wendy got through all that in one breath. Upon the next breath, she reconsidered. “Coffee?”

“Wanda!” Donnie insisted, his voice pinching in harder than ever, one of those submersibles that went too deep and was imploded by the pressure.

Janet strolled past him—she walked like a woman who did everything at a stroll—and wordlessly communicated to Wendy a question of where the mugs would be. Wendy gestured to a cupboard and Janet opened it up, fetching out a black mug with one sly finger.

“Her name is Wendy,” Janet said. When her voice cooled, it was rich as chocolate. “It’s on the memo. Which you did send, yes?”

“Yes.” Wendy nodded. Then she moved hurriedly out of the way as Janet went to the coffee machine behind her. “I assume—I mean, I pretty much know—yeah, you’re here about the TCB memo? To upper management?”

“My memo!” Donnie said. He nearly squeaked. “To my upper management!”

The sound of coffee cascading into a cup cut through him like a knife into butter. He seemed to sputter at every little mitosis in Janet’s cells, which was Wendy’s first real indication that Janet was as important as she assumed. Of course, she just *was* important to Wendy. Anything else would be like looking at the Pope and saying ‘what’s with the dumb hat?’

“Donald, please.” Janet seemed infinitely concerned with the aroma of the coffee she was pouring, and not at all interested in the meeting she was attending. “If it’s anyone’s upper management, surely it’s mine. I am assistant vice president, after all.”

“Yes, miss, ma’am, of course, you are, of course, I just mean—” Donnie stopped and cleared his throat. “It’s my office’s responsibility to send out all communiqués, *with my express permission*—” He eyed Wendy like she

was something he'd stepped in, and he was wearing really nice shoes. "Not hers."

"Yet she does work in your office, yes?"

"It was my project, yeah," Wendy answered.

Donnie took being cut out of the conversation as if it were his father's will. "It was not your project, it was mine. I *assigned* it to you, you were supposed to bring it back to me."

"For a rubber stamp," Wendy retorted.

"For my *approval*. As your boss—"

"This is very good coffee." Janet had taken a sip. "You made it?"

"Yes," Wendy said, flustered by the recognition. It suddenly felt like a long time since anyone had really noticed her. "I'm glad you—"

"Company beans?" Janet asked.

Wendy tried her best not to preen. "I bring some from home."

"Tastes expensive." She pursed her lips to underline the hint of approval.

Wendy restricted herself to only quasi-preening motions. Her main imperative was not playing with her hair. "Well, everyone here works really hard, and no one likes the coffee you can make with the, uh, provided beans."

"So you buy coffee for everyone?" Janet asked.

"Just the people who want to use it." Which was everyone, Wendy thought, but also thinking that would sound too full of herself to say.

Janet favored Donnie with a look. "How much does she make?"

"She's an intern." Donnie managed to make it sound like something for which you could be deported to Australia.

"That doesn't answer my question," Janet said, with another sip.

Donnie took a breath. "We don't pay our interns. Especially not when they take it on themselves to deny approval to multimillion-dollar contracts integral to this company's—"

"I thought we suspended the unpaid internship program." Janet set down her cup of coffee. "The Old Man himself wanted it done away with. Said that even if we just want someone to make paper airplanes, we should pay for the paper airplanes."

Donnie waved his hand as if some insidious smell was making an attempt on his nostrils. "That's in the Chicago division, this is New York."

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“Do people in New York not like money?” Janet asked. She pointed at Wendy. “Is this some kind of Amish woman, doing her work out of Christian charity?”

“I really don’t need the money.” Wendy tried to smooth over the defensiveness she saw on Donnie’s face, the rampant disapproval she saw in Janet’s eyes. “I’m doing this for the experience, to learn the trade—”

“Well, I do need the money,” Donnie interrupted. “And I’d rather not be out of the job because this company has no new helicopters to produce!”

“He does have a point about needing money. Ms. Cedar, please do tell us why you want to cost your company hundreds of millions of dollars?”

“To save us billions in lawsuits!” Wendy gritted her teeth. She knew people would be mad, but after they saw the problem, how could anyone not take her side? She grabbed a stack of napkins and, taking a pen from her pocket, began to sketch out a diagram. “Look, this is the swash plate, right? Two plates connected to each other. The upper part moves with the rotors, spinning them, while the lower part is stationary and moves under the pilot’s control to direct the helicopter.”

Wendy stopped drawing and blotted up the napkin. The diagram wasn’t really helping. She regretted not taking more art classes in college, if not the additional hundreds of thousands of dollars that would put on her tuition.

Janet crossed her arms. “Please assume that the executives at a company that manufactures helicopters know how a helicopter works.”

“Yeah, right, sorry—but this is very important. The scissor link connects the two, right?”

“Ten seconds,” Janet said.

“Scissor link connects the two, allows them to move somewhat so that the pilot can control it, but restrains excessive movement so that the helicopter doesn’t—well, worst-case scenario, crash.”

Janet raised an eyebrow on the word ‘crash.’ “Ten more seconds.”

“So the scissor link has to be about the *most* durable part of the helicopter, otherwise it won’t stay in the air. We have to know it’s rated to withstand the stresses the rest of the helicopter takes, if not more.”

“And Mr. Parsons here assures me it will.”

“The *tests* assure you it will,” Donnie said, seeming very pleased to correct her.

Wendy threw her hands up. “Maybe! Here’s the—” She paused on the ‘fucking’ she so dearly wanted to say “—the thing, though.” Grabbing another napkin, Wendy wrote ‘20,500 feet’ in big letters. “That’s the service ceiling of our last chopper. Here’s the service ceiling for our new chopper.” She wrote ‘25,000 feet’, nearly taking up the entire napkin. “The air pressure at 20,000 feet is 13.74 inches of mercury. The air pressure at 25,000 feet is 11.10. Less air pressure means less resistance.”

“The rotors move through the air faster,” Janet surmised. “And are the scissor links rated for that speed?”

“*I don’t know!*” Wendy cried. “I e-mailed R&D, asking them for their stress test findings at 11.10 inches of mercury. They would only give me the rankings down to thirteen inches of mercury. So maybe the scissor link will be just fine, or maybe it’ll fly apart.”

“Those findings are classified,” Donnie said.

“From who? We’re the same company.”

“You can’t expect to have the clearance of a DARPA-certified asset—”

“I expect to be given the resources I need to do my job.”

“It’s my job!” Donnie insisted. “R&D says it’ll be fine, it’s our job to approve the specs, that’s what we do!”

“We stop helicopters from crashing. That’s what I do.”

“Do you have a contract?” Janet asked.

“What?”

“What?” Donnie echoed.

Janet picked up her coffee again. “With your internship. Do you have a contract guaranteeing you a position at the company once you’ve finished the program? That if there’s an opening, they won’t just hire someone else off the street instead of giving it to you?”

“Well, no,” Wendy admitted. “But I’m pretty sure—”

“Ms. Cedar,” Janet interrupted, then held a moment’s silence while she sipped her coffee again. “We are under a deadline to submit a proposal for the Navy contract. If we don’t have a project drawn up and green-lit by that time, ipso facto, we won’t get the contract.”

“If the prototype crashes, we won’t get it either.”

Janet nodded. Then she folded her hands together, ringing her fingers around the warm coffee mug, and Wendy had the unmistakable impression of a snake coiling up. And the equally unmistakable desire to feel that snake

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around herself, squeezing tighter and tighter... “All right, I think I’ve heard enough. Mr. Parsons, please deal with the situation as you see fit.”

“Thank you,” Donnie said. “Now, if we’re through wasting time, Ms. Cedar, your services will no longer be required. Please clear out your desk and turn in your security badge. It’ll be expected within the hour.”

“But you can’t fire me,” Wendy protested, giggling a little at the nervous absurdity of it. “I’m—”

“Don’t waste your breath trying to save your job,” Janet said. “Or volunteer work, as the case might be. Regardless, I would like to hire you for a position in my division.”

“What?” Wendy asked, followed by Donnie again repeating the question at a higher pitch.

Janet looked from one of them to the other. “I have an opening. I have Wendy here, who’s done conscientious and professional work despite the pressures put on her. If she were working at another company, I wouldn’t think twice about snatching her up. And I’d usually offer her twice her pay, but since she isn’t making anything, that’s not really possible. Oh well. We’ll hammer something out.”

“You’re just going to promote her?” Donnie demanded. “Someone who’ll question your authority? Someone who won’t follow orders?”

“How do you think I got promoted?” Janet asked. “Now, please see to it that R&D sends over the stress test rankings for 11.1 inches of mercury to *my* department. We wouldn’t want to miss the deadline, after all.”

It was then that Wendy Cedar fell hopelessly in love.

* * *

That afternoon, Wendy skipped down to her sister’s house in the suburbs to do her laundry. Regan’s place was a neat little stucco thing, short and plump, and so lovely it looked more like a gingerbread house than anything else.

Regan graciously took the laundry basket and while the machine worked, Wendy went out into the front yard to wait on the swing.

Keith was mowing the lawn, wearing jean cutoffs and a muscle shirt that showed actual muscle, and he gave Wendy an impeccably neighborly nod and smile as she loitered.

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When Mac brought her his basketball for a game with the hoop up above the driveway, Wendy agreed to shatter the domestic tranquility. “Okay, Ewok,” she said, “we’re gonna practice some free throws. You know free throws?”

Mac nodded. He had Keith’s eyes and Regan’s hair.

Wendy shot and felt like a badass as it swished in.

Mac ran, impressed, to retrieve it.

“All right, now you do it,” she said.

He shot, and managed to brush the hem of the net before the basketball hit the garage door and rebounded.

Wendy caught it before it went into the street.

“You’re taller than me,” Mac complained. “It’s not fair.”

“Oh yeah?” Wendy got down on her knees and shot again. The ball wobbled on the rim for a moment, but went in. Wendy smiled smugly in the way only someone who was a badass to a seven-year-old could.

“Your arms are bigger than mine!” was Mac’s follow-up.

“Joke’s on you, I’m a lesbian, my people are very into big arms.”

Mac rolled his eyes.

Wendy wondered when Regan was going to teach the Ewok respect for his elders already. “Fine. Bring it in. I’m gonna make this shot lying on my belly.”

Mac returned the ball to her. She did not make the shot lying on her belly. “Let’s see you do it, smart guy.”

After retrieving the basketball once again, Mac got down beside her and tried to shoot. The most he managed was to get the ball to roll all the way up the driveway to the garage door.

When it rolled back, Wendy caught it and had another try, just as Regan wandered out the front door with a tray of lemonade in hand.

“Finding a way to play sports lying down,” Regan said. “I’m impressed.”

“I thinking of calling it Wii Sports. Is that taken?”

Regan brought the tray over to Keith, who paused the mower to take a grateful swig and give her a kiss on the cheek. Wendy shared Mac’s sense of ‘oh, come on’. Then she rolled over and sat up as Regan brought the lemonade to her.

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“Hey,” Regan said, “I know it’s short notice, but Keith and I won this radio contest for a vacation in Hawaii. It’s just three days over the weekend, so do you think you could watch Mac while we’re gone?”

“Yeah, no probs.” Wendy tried to Harlem Globetrotter the basketball on her finger, without much success. “My man Mac and I will play co-op, a little *Gears of War*—or I don’t know, something rated Teen, whatever. Is he old enough to watch R-rated movies yet? I mean, old R-rated movies, like *Friday the 13th*, where they’re so tame they’re basically a seventies PG?”

Regan sighed and Indian-sat, balancing the tray on her lap. “We’re not going to Hawaii.”

“You’re not?” Wendy replied.

Keith stopped the lawnmower. “We’re not?”

Regan looked over her shoulder. “No, honey, I was proving a point.”

“So we didn’t win the contest,” Keith reiterated.

“No, we didn’t.”

Keith moved to pull the ripcord again, but stopped with it in his hand. “Wait, did we lose or have they just not announced the winners yet?”

“We didn’t enter the contest.”

Keith pulled the ripcord, getting the lawnmower to fizzle but not turn over. He let go of it instead of giving it another pull. “Well, why didn’t we? I would love to go to Hawaii!”

“There is no contest!”

“What is going on with this family?”

“Just...finish mowing the lawn,” Regan said. “It’s a sister thing.”

“That’s what you said about why we couldn’t get a clown for Mac’s birthday.”

“It’s for the best,” Wendy assured him.

Regan took the basketball from her. “Hey, Mac, could you go play somewhere else for a little bit? Your Aunt Wendy and I need to talk.”

Mac took the basketball and tried to spin it on his finger as he walked away, with even less success.

Wendy swiped a glass of lemonade from Regan. “You know, if you want to go to Hawaii, you can probably go to Hawaii. It’s really not that expensive as long as you clear your cookies before you go to the airline website, because they will jack up the prices on you—”

“This isn’t about Hawaii. It’s that my sister is in the prime of her life, I just asked her to spend the weekend looking after a seven-year-old, and you agreed to it without thinking.”

“I know, I’m a wonderful sister.” Wendy ran her fingers through her hair with care, as if taking pains not to dislodge her halo.

“Wendy! You have no social life.”

Wendy sighed. “I have Tina. And very many Tumblr followers. Some of them even reblog my posts. And if this is about the girlfriend thing, look—”

“It’s simple,” Regan insisted. Then, God help the single, she started counting on her fingers. “Step one, you put yourself out there. Step two, you see something you want—a career, a relationship, whatever—*you go after it.*”

Wendy waved her hand in the air. “Okay, maybe it’s that simple in Straightland, which is admittedly most places besides San Francisco, but I don’t have it so easy. Pussy in Straightland, it’s a seller’s market.”

“Trust me, it is *not.*” Regan set down the tray, then checked automatically to see if Mac was in earshot of a conversation about the market value of pussy. He wasn’t. “I see plenty of twenty-something straight women in therapy and relationships aren’t easy for them, either. All the good men are either married or gay.”

“You’re married,” Wendy pointed out. “Look at him, he has...*arms!* He’s mowing the lawn! What else can you ask for? You have the perfect relationship.”

“It’s nice,” Regan admitted. “But I got in on the ground floor; I’ve been dating him since elementary school.”

“Exactly my point. How many gay women do you think went to our elementary school?”

“Suzie Mendler.”

“What, really?” Wendy’s face went blank as she helplessly reviewed every interaction she’d ever had with her. Not so much as a high sign.

“Yeah, she came out last year, it was all over her MySpace page.”

“Well, MySpace, of course I didn’t hear about it.”

Regan reached out to take Wendy’s hand. “Wendy, you are my sister and I love you and I promise, it doesn’t matter to me whether you’re straight or gay or bisexual or a furry.”

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“I can’t believe that’s what comes fourth for you.”

“Sure. The point is: I just want you to be happy with whoever it is that...makes you happy! Whoever that very lucky person is! Or whatever kind of animal they pretend to be.”

“No, it’s fine,” Wendy told her. “And it’s not like there’s no one—”

Regan reared up, crossing her arms. “Oh, so there’s someone?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“That’s literally what you just said.”

Wendy mouthed ‘fuck’ and drained her glass of lemonade dry. When she finished, Regan was tapping her fingers on her bicep, patiently awaiting an explanation.

“You know,” Wendy said, “you really should get a shorter basketball hoop, he is a small child, he cannot throw a ball that high. In fact, you might want to give up on basketball altogether, see about raising a jockey.”

“Don’t change the subject.” Regan laughed. “I’m doing your laundry, c’mon, you owe me.”

Wendy groaned and lay back, pillowing her hands behind her head. “She’s this...co-worker in my new department and she is very...cool.”

“Oh, so she’s laid-back, kinda Zen, like a surfer, that’s good.” Regan crossed her fingers. “Like goes with like.”

“No, I mean she’s a little frosty, on the outside? Tightly wound? You’d like her.”

“Okay then, a bit of a Type-A personality, something of a realist to keep your dreamer ass grounded. Excellent.” Regan held her two index fingers apart and then brought them together. “Opposites attract.”

“Also, she’s an alien from the Omega Theta galaxy and she feeds on human brains.”

“Does she want children?” Regan asked without missing a beat.

Wendy unspooled her leg to kick at her sister.

“Watch it, watch it—” Regan scooped up the tray. “You’re gonna spill my lemonade. It’s all organic, you know.”

“It’s made from lemons, water, and sugar, what else would it be?”

“C’mon, c’mon, your office crush, she’s Type-A, what else?”

Wendy bit her lip. It almost ached to think of Janet. A good ache, but if she let herself forget that, it was almost certainly not going to happen.

GEORGETTE KAPLAN

Well, let Regan think it was possible, at least. She deserved to live in hope for a few more years, at least.

“She’s passionate...very passionate. Powerful. It’s all interior.” Wendy tapped between her breasts. “In here, you know? But you can tell it’s there. Just looking at her, you can see that she’s all...” Wendy shook her head. “She’s just amazing.”

“You know what you should do?” Keith said. He’d finished mowing. “You should get one of those side-cuts. Those look great!”

“They *do*,” Regan agreed.

Groaning again, and only partially because of exercise, Wendy got to her feet. “Do you two mind planning the grand seduction without me? I think my clothes are done, so I should probably get going.”

Regan picked up her glass and handed it to her. “Take one for the road.” Then she lowered her voice. “And by the way, I was with Keith when he went through puberty. I’ve put in my time.”

CHAPTER 3

WENDY LIKED HER NEW WORKPLACE in the Efficiency Optimization Department (a title so relentlessly buzzworded she was surprised that there were actual plaques with it written down in the right order). The carpet was thick and decadent, the lighting bright and full and mainly suborned by the giant windows that had most of the floor sunlit. There were no cubicles either. Her office space was the space in an office. It wasn't in the corner or anything, but there was something psychologically soothing about being able to close a door behind you. Went back to the primitive hindbrain; being able to hide from dinosaurs or something. If dinosaurs hadn't been able to open doors. She would have to ask a paleontologist or something.

She was just getting her desk moved into when something went *thunk* in her headspace and made her think, *Fuck, T-rex!*

It was a vase. Not even a particularly reptilian vase, just a normal vase with a few pansies in it that Janet Lace had set on the upper portion of her desk.

"Housewarming gift," Janet explained, making minute adjustments to the flowers until they looked fit for van Gogh to paint. "How are you finding your new 'digs,' so to speak?"

"It's very...windows," Wendy replied, nodding to hers. "And everyone's very well-dressed."

"We have a group discount at my tailors," Janet explained. "It's all right if you don't want to go," she added insincerely.

"Those are really nice flowers," Wendy said.

"They're from my garden. Funny how I killed them just so you could feel welcome here."

"What?"

Janet sidled down onto Wendy's desk in a way that made Wendy resolve never to put pictures of her family—okay, cat—in that space. "I

would just like to say something to clear the air. Efficiency Optimization is my department, you are my subordinate, and I absolutely believe in an open-door policy. You did exactly the right thing back at Safety & Risk Management, keeping the company from making a costly mistake. That being said, this is still my department; I am in charge, and I like control. So if you're going to go over my head, you should be damn sure you're right, or I'll pull you like a weed. Like a fluffy little dandelion."

"I...don't want to go over your head," Wendy said. Her voice sounded as if it was sweating.

"That's good." Janet sounded as if she was commiserating with Wendy. "I don't want to pull you like a weed. So do your job, follow my instructions, and I promise I'll take care of you. But always remember who's in charge. All right?"

"Yeah."

"I think you're going to fit in well around here. I think you're the kind of employee I like to have." Janet reached over and picked up a snow globe from the cardboard box Wendy had been unpacking. "I like this. What is it—Hoboken?"

"Yeah, my dad got it for me on a business trip. You might know him, actually, he's—"

Janet set the snow globe down by her vase. "I think it would look good here, don't you? Well, I'll leave you to it. And remember, don't hesitate to come see me if you need anything. I like to keep my employees happy."

"Yes. Thanks. I'm very happy." Wendy smiled for Janet.

"You have a nice smile," Janet told her, and left.

Wendy waited until her new boss was gone, then moved the snow globe a half foot away from the vase. She nodded in satisfaction—it looked much better there.

* * *

At night, the office shone white. The big windows turned black, the absence of sunlight throwing a pall over the floor, even with the lights still blazing away. The furnishings, the load-bearing pillars: all shades of white. Even most of the computers were gray, save for the monitor screens themselves. Coupled with the oppressive darkness, they seemed to brighten to a spectral glow, overwhelming any variety in color, any knickknacks that

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might've introduced a different hue. Coupled with the desertion of the 9-to-5 crew—which technically should've included her—Wendy felt like she was on a literal ghost ship, sailing dark waters, maybe taking flight among clouds in a starless sky. Outside the window, her floor was too far off the ground to see anything but the distant, rolling hills outside the city. Not a light among them.

The mood it put Wendy in pleasantly reminded her of her teenage goth years, and she abandoned her cramped yet cozy office to sit out on the main office floor with her laptop, finishing her work under a nice massage from the AC unit that never quite reached her workspace. On the far side of the elephantine room, the lights were on in Janet's office. They burned like a private moon.

Wendy typed away, sending e-mail after e-mail to wait for morning in sleeping in-boxes. She felt a sense of communion with Janet, working this late. Despite the difference in ages, in position, they had the same drive, or so Wendy fancied. They wouldn't quit until the work was done, exceptionally so. Being the best was their reward.

And so was explicit validation and approval. No one said the best couldn't be self-aware.

She looked up from her laptop, some reptilian brain impulse driving her head up. She saw that the lights to Janet's office were off. The communion vanished, replaced with a stark fear of being caught...doing what? Working late?

"Interesting attire for a janitor." Janet Lace was standing right next to her.

Wendy turned her head, saw a tower of nylon-encased leg, goddamn *leg*, and looked back at her laptop. Felt like she was back in high school, trying not to get noticed staring at the head cheerleader.

"And I didn't know defragmenting hard drives was part of your duties."

Wendy forced herself to look up. They were co-workers. All she was doing was talking to a co-worker. "I was just finishing up."

"Everyone else went home four hours ago. That's not finishing, that's working. And if you like it so much, there's always tomorrow." Janet offered her hand.

Wendy took it, maybe a little too quickly, or maybe a little too slowly—weird to think of Janet Lace as someone you could touch, no matter how

casually. Janet helped her to her feet, Wendy shutting the laptop and tucking it under her arm. Now she was face to face with Janet, and Janet was taller than her. By a few inches. High heels. Wendy wore sneakers.

“You’re here too,” Wendy pointed out.

“I’d never ask an employee to do something I wouldn’t do myself. Speaking of, since you’re up...” Janet brought a dossier out from her briefcase, and Wendy could do without the image of Janet’s fingers sliding over glossy black leather. At least, she could do without it until she was alone. Very, very alone. “Your new in-pile.” She handed a dossier to Wendy, thick and heavy. “I’ll expect it to be done with your usual alacrity.”

Usual alacrity? So she was usually...alacritical? That sounded like praise. But what the hell was alacrity?

“Of course,” Wendy said. “I’ll get right on it. With lots of alacrity!”

Janet rolled her eyes, a little fondly, Wendy thought. “*Tomorrow*. When you’re fresh and well-rested. A good sleep cycle is something you don’t appreciate until it’s gone.”

“I went to engineering school. I don’t remember what one of those is.”

Janet smiled in commiseration and Wendy felt like she’d won the lottery. *We have something in common!*

“Well, we’ll just have to see about getting you to mind your bedtime, won’t we?”

Why had God put sweat glands on Wendy’s thighs? It felt like a monsoon season in the backs of her knees. Was that normal? Maybe she had a gland condition.

Wendy clutched the dossier tight to her chest, bundled with her laptop—hugging them, really. Was this what getting the team captain’s letterman jacket felt like? “It’s not my bedtime just yet,” Wendy said, because a demon had suddenly possessed her and someone with a voodoo doll of her stuck a needle into the ‘say stupid shit’ part of her brain. “Why don’t we get a drink?”

Janet blinked, a bit like a particularly lazy lizard might.

Wendy found that hot. Slightly frightening.

Then Janet’s head tilted forward, her glasses catching a beam of light and becoming two brilliant oval jewels, gleaming too bright to be looked at directly. “I think you’ve misunderstood our relationship,” Janet said, her voice affectless.

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Wendy said, “Oh,” and would’ve liked to be anywhere else. In a split-second, she thought of all the ‘anywhere elses’ in the world, from North Korea to the South Pole, and decided that all of them were better than here.

Janet raised her hand and pressed two fingers, fore and middle, into Wendy’s chest. “I think you’re going to make a fine employee. I appreciate the contributions I foresee you making to this company. And I recruited you in that expectation. But we’re not friends. I’m not your mentor. I’m not some sister helping you out of feminist solidarity. I’m your boss, you are my subordinate, and our relationship—our *working* relationship—is strictly that.”

She went on from there, trying to let Wendy down easy—as easy as she could, anyway. But Wendy wasn’t listening anymore. She’d seen what was on Janet’s left hand.

There was a very good reason why Janet had not fallen hopelessly in love with her as well. She had already fallen hopelessly in love.

And, naturally, Janet had married him.

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SCISSOR LINK

BY GEORGETTE KAPLAN

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