

PROLOGUE

November 19, 2018

Sheryl Simmons listened to the discussion with disbelief and increasing dismay. The board was discussing the candidates for CFO, and the words they were using, well, Sheryl hadn't heard words like that associated with a job candidate before. "Ruthless," "aggressive," "uncompromising": were among them. Were these the attributes that were valued at this level? It was her first board meeting; she wondered if it would be her last.

Two candidates were being considered. The first, Blake Jones, was a man with a great reputation who had worked at a competing financial-services firm. He was known in the industry as being decisive and fair as well as having a great deal of integrity. He had helped transform the accounting department at the other firm, creating better efficiencies and controls while retaining most of the existing staff. He was a great humanitarian and was very active in a large charitable organization that helped troubled youth. The

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second candidate, Layla Arch, was a woman who worked for the traditional bank Sheryl's company, The Diamante, used. She was relatively young to be in her position, and she was aggressive and hard-working. She had made some major changes at the bank a few years ago, sweeping out many of her old rivals and what she termed dead weight so that she could bring in a new, younger staff that followed her lead slavishly. Despite wanting another woman on board, Sheryl strongly supported Blake Jones. The morale in the company was already low and having someone like Layla Arch in a leadership role would only make things worse.

Listening to the others, Sheryl seemed to be in the minority. Most were praising the attributes of Layla and were happy that she was a female. They seemed to think it was a win-win situation: good for the company, good for the external image of the company in getting more women on the board. She wasn't sure what to do. Should she speak up? What would happen if she did? She had been so excited for her very first board meeting. Attending this meeting, *participating* in this meeting, was a pinnacle in her career. She wanted to savor it, but she was also aware of the pressure that came with her new role as the Chief Information Officer and board member of The Diamante, a boutique financial-services firm. In the fast-paced world of investment banking, there was rarely time to savor anything. The drive for more and better was never-ending, but she had never experienced it as much as in this conversation. Ruthless. Really? They wanted ruthless?

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At fifty, Sheryl was one of the younger people at the table, although she had more seniority at the company than most of her peers. She had worked for The Diamante for just over 15 years. She had been hired as a programming manager and risen through the Information Technology ranks with her strong technical skills, good business instincts, and ability to see the big picture. It didn't hurt that she was also good with people, despite being very focused and driven. She had been one of the first women to join the executive ranks of the company, and she was proud of her career and her contribution. Today, she knew that her career had reached a whole new level.

She had dressed carefully for the meeting. A dark blue suit with a fitted jacket and narrow knee-length skirt. A white blouse with an open collar. Her favorite pearls. She was dressed to project confidence. Her dark brown hair was carefully brushed into its sleek chin-length bob; the makeup around her large hazel eyes was light. She wore a neutral gloss on her lips. She knew that she looked the part of the successful and confident female executive. She fit in with the group in that respect. The question was whether she was as much of a fit in other respects. Could she be ruthless?

Nine other people, seven of them men, sat around the table, but Sheryl's attention was focused on Todd Fisher, her boss, the president and chairman of the board. Todd commanded the room. She watched as he skillfully guided the conversation, deflecting the concerns of some of the board

members while soothing and cajoling them. She watched him intimidate others with slight body movements and his eyes if they showed an inclination to oppose his point of view. He was clearly guiding the board toward Layla Arch, with the blatant approval of two of the outside board members – the two who had been added earlier in the year. She could almost see him preen under their admiring gazes.

Todd was younger than Sheryl, probably around 45. He had risen through the ranks of another, larger, investment bank and come to The Diamante several years ago as the Chief Investment Officer. It had been quickly apparent to all that he was ambitious and driven. He was only a few inches taller than Sheryl's five-seven and slight of build, but he carried himself with authority and seemed much taller and larger than he was. She guessed it was called presence. He was a good-looking man, with dark hair that had just a touch of gray throughout. His blue eyes were sharp and intelligent, but often cold. He was quick-witted and had a dry sense of humor and sardonic delivery that caught people off-guard. He was perceptive and insightful about people, which he mostly used to his advantage. He occasionally showed warmth and sympathy, if it didn't interfere with his ambitions. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Todd's ambitions were first and foremost, and no one had been surprised when he had been named President less than two years after joining the company.

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As Sheryl watched and listened to Todd and the others, Carl's words came back to her. Carl Schmidt, her mentor, former boss, and now friend, had stood with her only a couple of months ago and warned her, warned her about trusting this man, these men. His words ricocheted through her head as she wondered what she should say, what she should do. She felt uncertain and anxious. She didn't know who she could trust here in this room. Todd had treated her fairly during the short time she had worked for him, but she knew he had his own agenda. Don't trust any of them, Carl had said. What did that mean for her in this moment?

Sheryl could feel her tension rising as the discussion wound down and the vote appeared to be imminent. She still hadn't opened her mouth, still hadn't voiced her misgivings and her opposition to the candidate of choice, even though Sheryl had direct experience with her because of her interactions with the bank. She knew their characterizations of Layla as ruthless were accurate. Layla was ruthless, ambitious, and mean. Layla had played up to Carl and the other top executives, but she was inconsiderate and rude with staff and anyone she didn't deem important. No one liked working with her. Having her on the executive team would be a disaster in Sheryl's mind, but few of her colleagues seemed to see that. They were too busy praising her cost-cutting methods.

Sheryl did see two of her fellow executives blanch at some of the cost-cutting comments. Layla had apparently

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taken it upon herself to make cost-cutting recommendations in other departments in the bank, including IT and Client Services, and had somehow managed to have those changes implemented, though the department heads themselves had objected. Todd appeared impressed by this maneuver, especially since the new board members had been pressing him for more cost-cutting throughout the year. Maybe he figured someone like Layla could take some of the pressure off him, Sheryl thought.

Sheryl's gaze slid to Janine Sanders, the Sr. Vice President of Human Resources. Janine wasn't on the board, but she had been called in for this portion of the meeting to present the candidates. Janine was a few years older than Sheryl and had been at The Diamante about the same amount of time. Petite and thin with very short graying hair, Janine had a competent and professional appearance. Sheryl considered her a friend. Looking at her now, she appeared to be supporting Todd's position. Sheryl couldn't understand why. Janine had to know what a disaster Layla would be.

Sheryl's attention snapped back to Todd as he called for a motion to end the discussion. Sheryl took a deep breath, pulling herself together. For a moment, she pulled her focus inward, reaching for a place of peace inside herself, trying to calm her nerves and find an answer.

The voting began. Everyone voted for Layla Arch, although it looked like some of her colleagues were hesitant.

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Finally, it was Sheryl's turn. She knew she was expected to fall in line. She felt the pressure in Todd's gaze. Since she hadn't said anything in the discussion, her vote was already counted in his mind. She looked away, her mind spinning. Did she dare?

Still she hesitated. Everyone was looking at her now, most with impatience on their faces. She knew she needed to say something, but what?

She drew in a deep breath and cast her vote.

CHAPTER 1

Tuesday, September 11, 2018 – *Two months earlier*

Sheryl bent over the computer screen to more closely see the prototype Keisha Smith had developed. Sheryl was impressed. The new customer portal design was incredibly innovative. Looking at it, Sheryl was amazed that no one had designed that kind of functionality before. It was simple, elegant, and now that she saw it, an obvious improvement. She congratulated Keisha, who was a rising star on her team. Keisha's face lit up with the praise. She was a talented designer and programmer, but she lacked confidence and was hungry for feedback. Sheryl often wondered why.

Keisha was young, in her late twenties, and she was not only talented but also strikingly beautiful. Of mixed race, her tawny skin was an exotic backdrop to her dark, dark eyes and black wavy hair. She was a bit taller than Sheryl, with a willowy figure that Keisha showed to advantage in flamboyant and fashionable clothing. Her nose was straight and narrow, and she had full wide lips that smiled all too

infrequently. It had always seemed to Sheryl that Keisha hid behind her beautiful clothes and appearance, not wanting anyone to see an innate vulnerability.

“Wow, this is fantastic, Keisha,” Sheryl said. “It looks like it’s going to be great. Keep up the good work.”

Keisha flashed Sheryl a big smile. “Thanks, boss,” she said. Sheryl could tell Keisha was very pleased.

Sheryl straightened and started to leave the cubicle. The cubicles had walls that were just over five feet high, and matched the general décor of sleek, modern, and mostly gray. You could see over the walls when standing, but at least there was a little privacy when you sat down. Theoretically, lower walls helped collaboration, but, in reality, everyone wore headsets when they worked to block out the ambient noise. Most of the programmers listened to music or had noise-cancelling headsets. Keisha slipped hers back on as Sheryl started to leave.

Sheryl had taken only a few steps when a movement near the hallway caught her eye. At five-foot-seven, Sheryl could just see over the top of the cubicle walls, and she noticed a group of security guards in dark blue uniforms enter the wing, each carrying what appeared to be a stack of large white folders or envelopes. Sheryl watched, at first puzzled, then alarmed, as they fanned out across the wing. What were they doing? She hadn’t been alerted to any security issues.

One of the guards approached the area where Sheryl was standing, nodded politely, and proceeded to the cubicle next

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to Keisha's, which belonged to Tanya Kinder. The guard, a middle-aged woman who looked quite uncomfortable, put her hand on Tanya's shoulder and bent down to talk to her in low tones Sheryl couldn't hear. Tanya looked up in shock and started to stand, holding onto her computer mouse. The guard took the mouse out of Tanya's hand and shook her head, continuing to talk in low tones. Tanya looked panicked. She reached for her drawer ... the guard watched as she took out her purse and her walking shoes. When she started to open another drawer, the guard gently shut it and shook her head. The guard took Tanya's light jacket that was hanging on the back of her chair and handed it to her ... and then reached out her hand. Sheryl could see Tanya's hand shaking as she unclipped her employee badge and handed it to the guard. The woman carefully guided Tanya out of her cube and toward the door.

They were part-way down the aisle when Tanya turned and looked at Sheryl, the question clear on her face. "I'm sorry," Sheryl mouthed, trying to hide the horror she felt. "I'm sorry." She watched as Tanya's face crumpled and tears began. A few seconds later, she saw the anger start to rise. Keeping her face as sympathetic as she could, Sheryl met Tanya's angry and tearful stare. The guard intervened quickly, urging Tanya once again toward the door. Tanya turned and walked out with as much dignity as she could muster.

Sheryl moved into the hallway to get a better view. Across the wing, above the cubicle walls, Sheryl could see other

employees being ushered out by guards. The guards were stoic, but not unkind; they were firm in their duties. The affected employees were quickly and as quietly as possible removed from the floor. Most of them looked toward Sheryl as they left. She remained standing in the hallway outside her office, feeling more horrified and more saddened by the moment. She tried to return people's looks with sympathy and to express her sadness with her eyes and face, but she knew these people were hurt and angered by her betrayal, by the company's betrayal.

Other than the murmuring and the movement of the guards and their charges, the rest of the floor was silent. Most people were sitting at their desks, staring at their computer screens, probably praying they wouldn't be next. A few people boldly stood up and watched the proceedings, fear and anger on their faces. Even fewer pretended to work.

Sheryl hadn't known that security guards would be brought in. She hadn't known how inhumane and degrading the layoffs would be. Yes, she had known about the layoffs. She had been over the headcount and the necessary reductions with Carl, her boss, and Janine, but layoffs had never been handled like this before. She had expected to be involved in many of the conversations, as she had been in the past, gently breaking the news to the employees and giving them encouragement along with information about their termination packages. Who had decided to bring in security and just walk people out?

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Looking around, Sheryl noticed that Carl's door was closed. He was clearly hiding from what was going on. She wondered how her colleagues in other departments were handling things. Was this same procedure happening everywhere? What about the people who were working from home? She wanted to contact Janine, or Carl, but she didn't want to leave the floor, either. She didn't want to hide in her office and miss the chance to offer what sympathy and support she could. She also knew that everyone on the floor was watching her, to see how she would react ... to see how they should be reacting. Despite her embarrassment, shame, and anger, she wasn't going to hide.

Fortunately, it was over pretty quickly. There were enough guards assigned to the floor that only about two or three trips each were needed. Sheryl continued to stand and watch in silence, mentally reviewing the people who had been on her list. Of course, she had staff on the floor below this one, too. She could only assume the same thing was happening there. Most of the "removals" had been quiet and quick, although a few people argued about collecting more of their possessions. The guards were courteous, but implacable, so the arguments didn't last long.

Only toward the end did one of the employees get really upset and vocal. Sheryl started to move toward the man who was upset. It was Peter, a long-time staff member who was fairly close to retirement. The guard nearest Sheryl shook his

head and moved to block her path. "Please don't interfere," he said. "We have instructions."

"But he's one of MY staff members," Sheryl protested.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the guard replied. "You really need to stay out of this."

At that moment, she saw one of the Human Resources staff members hurry toward the guard and Peter. She spoke to them, and all three disappeared into the closest conference room, shutting the door behind them. Sheryl watched the room anxiously but didn't move any closer. Clearly, that wouldn't be allowed.

After about five minutes, the door opened. Peter walked out with the HR representative, got his coat, and left the floor with her, clutching a large white envelope in his hands. The guard stood nearby and followed a short distance behind, but he didn't talk to Peter again.

Suddenly, Sheryl couldn't take it anymore. She turned abruptly and went back into her office. She debated shutting the door but didn't want people to think she was shutting them out, so she didn't. She sat down and stared at her computer screen but didn't see it. Tears filled her eyes. She didn't know if she was angry, sad, horrified, or frustrated ... or really all of that. Worse, she didn't know what to do.

This was why she hadn't ever wanted to go into business, she thought frantically. She had been an Art History major, for goodness sake. She wasn't all about profits and losses and the bottom line. She was about people, wasn't she? She had

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taken a minor in programming, mostly to appease her father, although she had enjoyed the classes and the challenge of solving the puzzles of coding. It was the programming that had fueled her career. But this? This was crazy. She hadn't signed up for anything like this, even when she had decided to follow a management track.

After several minutes, she pulled herself together enough to see that her Instant Messenger icon was blinking. Running her hands through her hair, she leaned forward to read the message. It was from Carl, and it was brief. "Staff meeting at 11:30," it read.

She looked at the clock. It was 11:20 now. She'd have to get her act together in ten minutes. Emotional outbursts wouldn't be appropriate at the meeting.

* * *

Sheryl didn't make it to Carl's meeting.

She had just risen from her chair and gathered her notebook when Keisha rushed into the room, all but slamming the door closed behind her.

Her face was a mask of rage, and her make-up was smudged from what appeared to be tear tracks. She came to a halt in front of Sheryl's desk.

"This is bullshit," she hissed. Her voice was low but incredibly intense. She was trying not to be heard throughout the wing.

Sheryl took a step back in shock and a little intimidation.

“This is such bullshit,” Keisha went on. “I can’t even believe that you are still in this office. What are you hiding from? You should be hiding. Everyone in management should be hiding. How could you do this? You ought to be ashamed!”

Sheryl took a step forward again. She struggled to remain calm.

“Keisha,” she started.

“Don’t Keisha me,” the younger woman interrupted. “I don’t want to hear what you have to say right now. There’s NOTHING you can say that would make any difference whatsoever. I have never been as insulted, degraded, or upset as I am at this very moment. And that’s sayin’ a lot. I’m outta here. Leaving. Done. Finished. No amount of money is worth what you’ve put me and all the rest of your staff through today. None. I’m not going to tolerate being treated with such disrespect, nor should anyone else here.”

Shocked by the outburst, Sheryl just looked at her. She thought incongruently that Keisha was gorgeous in her rage. Her height and bearing made her look regal. Her short-sleeved black dress emphasized her slenderness and strength. Her jewelry was big, gold, and dramatic. She wore her hair down and straightened today; it skimmed her shoulders and framed her narrow face. The emotion on her face only intensified her beauty.

“I am quitting,” Keisha stated again emphatically, as if Sheryl hadn’t gotten the message.

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Sheryl cringed inwardly, although she tried to keep her face calm and sympathetic. She had been in Keisha's cubicle just hours ago, praising her work. Keisha was treated very well. In fact, she was on Sheryl's fast-track list for promotions and management roles.

"I'm sorry," Sheryl said. She had no idea what to say to calm Keisha down.

"You should be," Keisha snapped back. "Did you know all of this was going down today?"

"I did not," Sheryl responded firmly. "I had no idea that the guards were going to be brought in. I was just as shocked and upset as you are. You were with me. You saw that."

Keisha softened just the slightest bit. She admitted that Sheryl had seemed upset on the floor during the layoffs.

"I don't know what to say, Keisha." Sheryl decided to be honest. "I don't have any answers for you."

"I don't think there are any answers," Keisha said, but her voice was a bit calmer. "It was just wrong."

"Keisha," Sheryl started feeling defensive and a little angry at being attacked like this. "You know it's not that simple."

Keisha drew herself up even taller. "Yes, it is that simple. You are either right or wrong. And you are wrong. They are wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong." Her voice had regained its intensity. "You need to decide what side you are on, Sheryl, and you need to decide now."

With that, Keisha turned dramatically, her dress swirling around her legs. She marched to the door, opened it and walked right out. She vanished from Sheryl's view before Sheryl could even voice a response.

Bemused, Sheryl walked to the window. What is "that simple?" she wondered. She could see Keisha's point of view. She had certainly thought it was wrong when she saw the guards walking people out. She thought it was mostly wrong now, although she had heard of other companies that used this technique. The goal was to reduce the opportunity for theft and sabotage, at least that was the story she had read.

Sheryl was angry, too. She was horrified, upset, sad, frustrated, a little guilty, and a lot confused. Her thoughts and her emotions were in turmoil. No wonder Keisha's were. She guessed almost everyone was feeling this way. Keisha had just been brave enough, or angry enough, to voice it.

A minute or two later, she watched Keisha leave the building and head to her car. That was one advantage of having a view of the parking lot.

She felt a presence beside her. Looking up, she saw that Patrick Kerrigan had joined her. Patrick was Keisha's direct boss. He was a newly promoted Director, who was running the high-profile portal project for Sheryl. Keisha was a valuable member of that team.

"Is she okay?" Patrick asked. He was tall and lanky, in his mid-30s and had the red hair, blue eyes, and fair, freckled complexion to fit his Irish name. Patrick was very bright and

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intense about his work, yet he had a comfortable demeanor that usually put people at ease. Sheryl really liked working with Patrick. He got things done but with a minimum of fuss and bother.

“What do you think?” Sheryl asked with a sarcasm that she didn’t usually use in the office.

“Probably not,” he acknowledged. “Is she coming back?”

Sheryl looked at him, gauging how much to tell him. She was hoping that Keisha would calm down and change her mind. She probably had grounds to fire her now for insubordination and walking out, but Sheryl definitely didn’t want to go that route. She also didn’t want to put herself in the position of being forced to fire her if word of what Keisha had done got out. She trusted Patrick, but she didn’t want to put him in a tough spot either.

“I don’t know,” she finally said.

“We’ll never make the deadline if she doesn’t,” he said quietly. “We probably won’t make it even if she does.”

Sheryl turned to him, dismayed. “What? What does that mean? You know how important that deadline is.”

Patrick lowered his eyes. “I know. I thought ... well, I thought we could pull it off ... but I’m not so sure now.”

“Not sure or know?” Sheryl asked impatiently. This was the last thing she needed to hear.

Patrick paused, clearly embarrassed. “Know.”

“How bad?” Sheryl really didn’t want to know.

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“Bad. At least three months. Maybe more. If Keisha’s gone, definitely more.”

Sheryl reined in the bright flash of anger. Lashing out at Patrick right now wouldn’t help, although he would make a great scapegoat at the moment. “Let’s talk about this later. I’ve got enough to deal with right now. You better have some solid reasons and options.” Sheryl said tersely, resisting the urge to say more.

He nodded and left quickly, seeming to sense her anger and frustration.

Sheryl sat back in her chair and tried not to cry. As days went, this was one of the worst she had had. And it was not even noon yet.