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THE TAXI PULLED UP in front of the agency, and a tall, elegantly dressed woman got out, and without a word to the cab driver, stalked across the pavement towards the glass doors of the building, which slid silently apart as she approached. Before he drove off (it was an account booking) the driver noted the good legs in sheer black stockings, above very high heels, which were his last glimpse of his fare as she disappeared inside the premises. It was only afterwards that, questioned by the police as to his movements on that fateful day, he had cause to remember this.

In the mirrored lift ascending to the fourth floor, Cassandra Callander considered her reflection with a critical eye. Had her lipstick bled? She leant towards the glass, narrowing her gaze, the better to discern if there was any trace of 'feathering' along the edges of her lips. But it seemed Chanel cosmetics had a staying power commensurate with their price. The slight flush on her otherwise pale cheeks — brought about by the very good lunch she and a client had just enjoyed at the firm's expense — displeased her, however. Surely one glass of wine (all she ever allowed herself when meeting clients) shouldn't have had that effect?

Her frown deepened the sharp line between her threaded and pencilled brows. For an instant, until she smoothed the frown away, she looked all of her fifty-six years. She'd have to cut out wine at lunchtime in future, she thought, moving away from the mirror. At once, her reflected image resumed the appearance of a woman fifteen or even twenty years younger. Decades at the top of her profession had given her a lifestyle which had enabled her to preserve the illusion of youthfulness. Iron discipline — gym workouts three times a week and a strictly controlled diet — did the rest. She

hadn't eaten carbs in years. Now it looked as if alcohol would have to go the way of bread, potatoes, pasta and rice.

The lift doors opened. Cassandra's office — set apart from the central open-plan area where the assistants and secretaries sat — was at the far end, which meant she had to walk the full length of the floor in order to reach it. She'd chosen this arrangement, of course: it enabled her to keep an eye on what her underlings were doing. The other agents — there were four — had offices to one side of the central area; these glass-walled cubicles were noticeably inferior to her own in size and furnishings.

As she swept across the carpet-tiled floor, which crackled with static at her passing, she saw, out of the corner of her eye, that Peter Formby had risen from his desk and was trying to attract her attention with an ineffectual wave. Cassandra ignored him. Couldn't he see she had things on her mind? He'd actually followed her out of his office and halfway to her own before she deigned to notice him. 'Cassandra, I...'

'Later, Peter.' She reached the door of her office. 'Any calls?' she said to the temp — Emma, wasn't it? They were all called Emma. Unless it was Charlotte... The girl, Emma or Charlotte, rose from her desk, where she'd been eating some disgusting concoction in a plastic tub. 'Yes... Um,' she said, still masticating. 'There was... um... that call from New York you were waiting for.'

'It's too early for New York,' snapped Cassandra. Although she knew it wasn't all that early. She didn't need to glance at her watch (a diamond-studded extravagance from Tiffany's) to know that it was past five o'clock. 'And open the windows, for God's sake,' she added viciously, annoyed at having missed the call. 'It gives a bad impression to clients, having the office stinking of food.'

'Yes, Cassandra,' mumbled the girl. 'Sorry.'

'Well, you'd better come and give me an update on the Solomon & Sinclair call,' said the agent, in a kinder tone. 'And bring me a coffee, will you? Black, no sugar.' The last girl had been 'let go' for forgetting these essential facts too many times. Cassandra couldn't bear sloppiness. She went into her office, and, having removed her coat to reveal one of her signature black dresses, accessorised as always with a diamond brooch in the shape of her initials, sat down at her desk, and powered up her laptop.

At once the wallpaper, showing an aerial view of Manhattan, popped up, and with it, the usual folders of documents. Cassandra clicked on the email icon, noticing as she did so that there was a red number indicating more than a hundred unread emails, indicating

that emails had been received, but not opened. What the...? Her scowl deepened. It should have been Emma/Charlotte's job to check through these, saving those worth drawing to Cassandra's attention, and removing the rest — to be answered later, or deleted (Cassandra neither knew nor cared which it was). Evidently it hadn't been done — or hadn't been done thoroughly enough... Just then, the girl appeared in the doorway. 'I got your coffee.'

'Put it down, then.' Honestly, where did they get these girls from? Each one was more useless than the last, for all their private school education and Oxbridge degrees. Cassandra herself had never been to university. She'd started on the ground floor, as a secretary (she'd been Carol Callander in those days), and worked her way up, the way you had to then. It was what had given her her grit and determination — the toughness that had helped her to survive. Oh, she knew what was said about her — 'Ice Queen', 'ballbreaker', and worse. It was what people — men — always said when a woman made it to the top of her profession. Well, let them say it. She had no use for failure and weakness... 'Oh, for God's sake!'

Because as Emma (call her Emma) went to put down the plastic cup of coffee, her hand trembled, so that some of the scalding liquid slopped over the rim onto the spotless glass surface of the desk. A few spots fell on Cassandra's Armani-clad lap. 'Look what you're doing, can't you?' She didn't need to raise her voice — she could see by the other's look of terror that the reprimand had gone home. 'Just leave it,' she said coldly; then, as the girl slunk towards the door: 'Hang on a minute. I haven't finished. You were going to tell me what Solomon & Sinclair had to say...'

'Yes... I... I'll just get my notes...'

'Before you do that, there's one other thing. Why haven't you deleted these emails... or whatever it is you do with them?'

'I... I thought I had.'

Cassandra turned the screen around. 'You obviously *haven't*. Look at them all! You know I can't be expected to deal with all this rubbish.'

'It's not...' The girl's voice tailed off, as she met the agent's furious gaze. 'Not rubbish? Of course it's rubbish. Time-wasting rubbish, from needy, desperate people with nothing better to do than clog up my inbox with their pathetic offerings.'

'But they're writers,' said the girl — which was brave of her, considering. She hadn't worked at Winters, Powys and Morley long enough to know the kind of response such a remark would provoke.

She was about to find out. 'Writers.' Cassandra's voice was dangerously quiet. Absent-mindedly, she dabbed at the spots of coffee on her skirt. 'Oh, they're all *writers*.' The word was said with withering contempt. 'Or they'd like to be. The thing is, Emma...'

'Emily.'

'Emily, then. The thing is, *wanting* to be something and actually *being* it are two different things, if you get what I'm saying?' Emily nodded. 'Good. Glad you're with me so far. Do you know, *Emily*, how many writers WPM took on last year, out of the hundreds — no, thousands — who emailed us during those twelve months?'

Emily opened her mouth to say something, but Cassandra got there first. 'Six. That's all. Six writers, out of all those hungry thousands.'

'Yes, but...'

'Yes, but what? I suppose you're going to say that somebody had to read their submissions first. But actually that's not the case. Of those lucky six, two came to us from other agencies, because we offered them a better deal, one was recommended by his American publisher, one had won a prestigious short-story prize while still at UEA, one was already famous as a TV presenter, and one — just one, mind — came to us through the tried-and-tested route of submitting a manuscript. And even *she*,' said Cassandra, with grim satisfaction at proving her point, 'is the daughter of one of our directors. So you see, Emily, what people *think* is the way to get published and the reality are very different things. Now, about that New York call...'

'What about talent?' said Emily (who perhaps had more of the famous 'grit' than Cassandra had given her credit for). 'Doesn't WPM *ever* take on people who are just, well, good writers?'

Cassandra considered the question. 'We like to think *all* our writers are good,' she said, after a moment. 'That is, they're good *because* they're our writers, if you get my meaning.' She smiled, and her scarlet lipstick, softened by the steam from her coffee, found its way into the tiny lines around her mouth. 'Whether any of them can actually *write* is another question. But then, they don't really need to be able to write, once they're on their way. Editors and — at a pinch, a "good 'ghost'" — can supply what they lack in literary dexterity. But you know all this, surely?' she said, giving Emily a hard stare. 'Otherwise what are you doing in this job?'

'I sometimes wonder,' said the girl coolly. And before Cassandra could think of a suitably crushing retort, she was out the door, letting it swing shut behind her. *Well, of all the...* The door opened

once more, but as Cassandra drew breath to give the kid a piece of her mind — *If that's your attitude, I can tell you there are plenty of others who'd kill for your job* — she saw it wasn't Emily, after all, but Jeremy Pye. 'Got a minute?' he said, insinuating his long, sinuous body into the room, and collapsing elegantly into the black leather-and-chrome Eames chair that was usually reserved for Cassandra's clients. 'Since you ask, no,' she said coldly, but he paid no attention to this rebuff. 'Old Hunter's on the warpath. Thought I'd let you know.'

'Sweet of you, Jeremy. But what makes you think I've the slightest interest in what Paul Hunter has to say?'

'Because it concerns you, that's why.' Pye reached out a hand towards the adjacent bookcase, a floor-to-ceiling structure on which the recent works of some of the agency's more prestigious clients were displayed, and extracted a volume. The latest Jonathan Hauptmann. He began to leaf through it. 'Is this any good?'

'I haven't read it. What do you mean, it concerns me? I haven't set eyes on Hunter for weeks. The last time was at the directors' meeting — and even then he was late... and drunk, as I recall.'

'That's as may be,' said Pye. 'He's still out for your blood, Cassie dear.'

She hated it when people took liberties with her name. 'I can't imagine why, Jemmie dear. Maybe he doesn't like the fact that I'm a woman, and better at my job than he is? And now, if you've nothing more to say, I do have to get on with some *work*...' Where's that girl got to, she wondered. Disappearing, just when she was wanted... 'He says you're destroying the agency he built up,' said Pye, still idly turning the pages of the Hauptmann. 'God, these Yanks never write a short book when they can write a long one, do they?'

'What are you talking about?' she said, although she knew very well. Her fellow agent yawned, brushing a lank black lock from his pallid forehead. 'I mean, who has *time* to read a tome like this?' he said, returning *Disunited States* to its shelf. 'Not I. Or, not unless someone's paying me a *hell* of a lot to do it...'

'You know perfectly well I wasn't referring to the Hauptmann,' said Cassandra, her patience wearing thin. 'You said Hunter thinks I'm destroying the agency...'

'Well, you are, aren't you?' was the bland reply. 'Or remaking it in your own image, anyway. Hunter said you'd sacked half the clients — some of our best writers, he said — without consulting the other directors. And it's true, you know. You did.'

‘They were dead wood,’ said Cassandra. ‘If a client can’t pull their weight in today’s marketplace then they’re no good to us. You know that, I know that, and Hunter should know it, too. We’re running a business — not a home for retired novelists. Is that all he had to say?’

‘He said you’ve sold out to the Yanks. More than half our intake of new writers are Americans, he said. It’s changing the whole culture of WPM, he said. We’ve just become a subsidiary of the New York agency, he said.’

‘What of it?’ said Cassandra. She was bored with this argument, which had been raging for years in the publishing world — ever since the Orison Prize had made the decision to accept submissions from the United States. ‘We’re too parochial, in this business. We need to change with the times. Besides which, America’s a much bigger market than the UK. We need to be a part of it, if we’re to survive. Hunter’s a businessman. He should understand all that.’

‘He’s saying he’s going to get you removed from the Board, for bringing the agency into disrepute,’ said Jeremy Pye, with evident satisfaction. ‘By getting rid of some of our best “names” — his words not mine — you’ve opened the floodgates. Clients are deserting us in droves...’

‘Only the deadbeats,’ said Cassandra scornfully. Pye raised an eyebrow. ‘Linda Holyoke isn’t a deadbeat.’

‘She’s sixty-five, if she’s a day. And when did she last have a bestseller? *Cries from the Heart* came out ten years ago.’

‘Morgan Truelove’s stuff still sells pretty well.’

‘Yes, but it’s so last-century. Carefully crafted novels about the human condition... What people want is larger themes. Big stories, about issues that matter.’

‘Funny,’ said Pye, levering himself up from his semi-recumbent position, as he prepared to make his departure. ‘I’d never thought of you as an “issues” girl.’

‘I’m not,’ said Cassandra crisply. ‘But these are the stories that are selling right now. Human stories. Hard-hitting. Visceral. Stories of struggle against adversity, written by people who’ve had first-hand experience of it. Not tales of middle-class angst, set in North Oxford.’

‘Wow,’ said Pye. ‘Remind me to get you to do the blurb when I write *my* novel, won’t you?’ This was a standing joke. Pye had supposedly been writing a novel for the past decade. Since not a page of this work had ever been seen by her or anybody else at the agency, Cassandra had become convinced that this was just another

of his elaborate teases. 'By the way,' he said, turning as he reached the door. 'You might have told me that you were going to terminate Susanna Winslow's contract. I had her in my office this afternoon. Crying her eyes out.'

'She isn't one of yours, is she?'

'You really can be a heartless bitch, Cassie. No, she isn't "one of mine"' — he made air-quotes — 'but since her actual agent wasn't available...'

'I was in a meeting.'

'...and because I've got a kind heart, I took her in. Gave her a cup of coffee and a shoulder to cry on. You know,' he said, by way of a parting shot, 'I wonder if you haven't made a mistake, letting her go. Her books aren't full of fashionable "issues" — for which God be thanked — but they *do* have a following. *Come to Dust* was shortlisted for the Orison, you know...'

'That was five years ago. She's written nothing since.'

'She's *writing* something, though. Some people take longer to finish than others. We can't all bang out a book a year.'

'Five years is too long between books,' said Cassandra brutally. 'We've a business to run. Or *I* have, at least.'

'Hint taken. And I've delivered my warning.' She looked at him. 'Just watch your back,' he said.