

CHAPTER 1

“Welcome to the dark side.”

Diane Martineau smiled as she said it, but still, those were her words. It was my first day in the Toronto office of the international public relations agency Turner King, and I was already tired of hearing my new profession linked with Lucifer, lord of the underworld. The general manager released my hand and waved me into a chair as she climbed up into hers. She was petite, *très* petite. I put her at barely five feet. In her mid-forties, with shortish dark brown hair, she wore a simple, even drab, tailored black pant suit with a white collarless “top.” In the clothes context, I was uncomfortable with the word “top.” It didn’t spill naturally from my mouth or, for that matter, from almost any guy’s. And to be clear, I don’t really know what “tailored” actually means, but the jacket curved in at the waist. When she was seated, her tiny black shoes dangled an inch off the floor, leaving her marooned a good two feet from where she

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wanted to be. No matter. She convulsed twice, her feet flipping up and torso snapping forward, to propel her chair across the black marble floor, gliding perfectly into position. “Docking procedure” may be the better way to describe the manoeuvre that rolled her up to the streamlined chrome and glass desk that would not have looked out of place on the bridge of a Federation starship. I half-expected an order to lay in a course for the Vega system. She caught my stare.

“I know. It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?” she said, running her hand across the gleaming elliptical surface. “The jackass before me was into sci-fi and spent an obscene sum redecorating before New York toasted him last year. Now I’m stuck with it.”

“Well, it’s a little much, but hardly a firing offence,” I replied, my mouth working faster than my brain. She smiled again and I exhaled.

“There were other factors,” she said. “Anyway, it’s nice to have you at TK, David. We’ve got something big going on and your background should put you in the middle of it. So you’re going to hit the ground running.”

“Well, I guess that’s better than just hitting the ground. I think. Um, you do know I’ve never worked at an agency before, right?”

“Ah, but you *have* spent three years working the press gallery for the Science and Tech Minister. That makes you valuable to us on this big pitch, particularly your work with the Canadian Space Agency,” she replied. “Don’t worry about life in a PR

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agency, we'll show you the ropes and try not to let you hang yourself in the first few weeks."

"So, is there anything I should know before, you know, hitting the ground . . . running?"

"Oh, there's a ton of stuff you should know, but like most big, unwieldy, hidebound global PR agencies, we have no well-established and effective orientation program to bring you into this foreign land in a logical and orderly fashion. So you'll get the same treatment everyone else gets. I'll introduce you around, then we'll throw you in the deep end and occasionally toss you an anchor to see if you can adapt and evolve. We'll know pretty quickly if you're going to survive. You'll know slightly sooner, if you're as smart as we think you are."

"That's very comforting," I said. "I'm not sure Darwin would be pleased to see his theory exploited in this way."

The GM leaned towards me, her forearms resting on the cool glass next to a clean steel tray of some kind that I thought might be for serving drinks or cheese. Upon closer inspection, I realized it was actually a MacBook Air computer. I'm not sure I'm as smart as they think I am. But I sure wanted one of those.

"Just before our walk-around, let me offer a few words of advice that you may or may not need to hear." She stared me down, so I stared right back. "In the early going, listen more than you talk. Your nice-guy personality and the chemistry you should be able to establish with colleagues, clients, and new business prospects will take you further than almost anything else. It's one of the

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reasons I hired you. But we also need you to think, write, and speak with clarity and conviction. If necessary, you can fake the conviction part till it comes, but the clarity needs to be there right out of the gate. Clients deserve your best advice, particularly when they learn your billing rate is \$225 an hour. Thankfully, the age of spin is over, or at least on the wane. So always tell the truth and do the right thing, but with care and sensitivity. The idea is to keep the clients for as long as we can. You probably already know this, but at TK, the centre of the universe is New York. When our arrogant U.S. colleagues deign to acknowledge our backwater existence up here, they invariably believe they're far ahead of us—a dubious conclusion when most of them have their heads stuck well up their own arses. So beware. Finally, we exist to make money. We must make money. This desk won't pay for itself." She patted it respectfully. "So always, always use PROTTs to track your time daily on client projects."

I made it almost to the end.

"PROTTs?" It sounded like the intestinal strife tourists suffer after a two-star Mexican getaway.

"Public Relations Online Time Tracking System. Use it, or there'll be no invoice to send at the end of the month—and your tenure with TK will be very, very short."

I nodded. She then reached under some papers on her desk, pulled out one of the most outrageous pairs of glasses I'd ever seen, and put them on. Think 1970s Elton John, with a dash of Dr. Seuss. I'm not sure I can even describe them, but words like

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“fluorescent,” “creepy,” and perhaps even “exploding” would only tell half the story. Her specs looked like a bizarre little abstract-post-modern sculpture, with corrective lenses. Since it was my first day at a new job, I managed to keep that observation to myself. Unfortunately, the look on my face was still shouting “Just what exactly is resting on your nose instead of glasses?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to my eyewear,” she said with a smile. “It’s kind of my thing. I find it adds a few inches to my presence and makes a very personal fashion statement.”

Fashion statement? More like a declaration of war. But I suppose there are worse vices than bizarre specs, though very few that are quite so . . . visible. She then slid forward in her chair, made the perilous descent back to the floor, and glided out of the room, dragging me in her wake to circumnavigate the TK offices. Over the next hour, we met the seventy-five PR pros who were now my colleagues.

Diane introduced me to the creative director, several designers, the consumer products team, the health care/pharma team, the issues and crisis team, the government relations unit, the market research department, the digital and social media group, the financial services team, the technology team, and what she referred to under her breath as the “office overhead,” including accounting, IT, the mailroom, and human resources.

Almost everyone wore black. I’d missed the agency dress code memo and was attired in one of my standard-issue Parliament Hill grey suits. I looked a little out of place, perhaps even from

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another planet. I took off the tie halfway through our tour and stuffed it in my pocket. Even though everyone seemed friendly, with some veering dangerously close to bubbly, I forgot each person's name the instant Diane uttered it, probably because I was still searching for adjectives to describe her glasses. Towards the end, she could see that I was reeling just a bit from the tour.

"I know it's a lot to take in on the first pass," Diane offered. "But it's important to accept that the modern PR agency is a universe unto itself. It is a hydra. When the economy is booming, the multiple heads actually work with one another and sometimes even like one another. But in bad times, it's every head for itself, and decapitations are common," she explained.

I'd heard the word "silos" used to describe the various groups inside an agency, but "hydra" works, too, I guess.

"One last stop," Diane added as we walked into a nice office with lots of glass. I could see people bustling along Bloor Street, ten floors below us.

"Amanda Burke, meet David Stewart."

I stepped forward to shake hands with a tall, lean, very attractive blonde woman, dressed in, yes, a black dress. She was tall to begin with and gained more altitude with four-inch heels that tapered nearly to pinpoints. Diane stayed back a ways so that she wasn't speaking directly into Amanda's shiny belt.

"Amanda runs the corporate comms group and is just back from two weeks in France." She turned to Amanda. "Welcome back, Amanda. This is David's first day."

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“I wasn’t aware we’d hired anyone new,” Amanda said without looking at me. “I’ve been trying to get approval for a new hire for months.”

“I would have involved you in this had you been here, but New York and Washington have really been putting the screws to us to deliver on Project Crimson, and David brings some expertise to the table that is really going to help us win.”

“I’ve got Crimson well in hand, Diane, and I told my team about it last week from Provence. We’re all pumped about it, whatever it is. We’re good to go, and I think adding a new player at this late stage is a bit of a risk to the chemistry.”

I can’t always tell the difference between *concerned* and *pissed off*, but with Amanda, the distinction was quite clear. I just looked around the office, moving my head casually, trying not to acknowledge that Amanda considered me an unwanted, unnecessary interloper, or perhaps even unfit for continued life.

“Calm yourself, Amanda. You’re running the Toronto end of the Crimson show. David will report to you on a trial basis. If we don’t win Crimson, you can keep him – or he can report directly to me until we find the right place for him.”

The voice inside my head was screaming “Hello, I’m standing right here!” but I kept my yap shut and continued my careful examination of the wheat-coloured carpet.

“Diane, I don’t think it’s too much to ask that I be involved in hiring new members of my own team.” Amanda still hadn’t even looked at me. Yes, wheat was the right description.

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“Under normal circumstances, you’re absolutely right. But we’re being squeezed by D.C. and New York and you were away. I had to move. Let’s keep our eye on Crimson right now. We can talk more about where David lives afterwards,” Diane said, signalling that this part of the conversation was over. “David will participate in the briefing and brainer this afternoon and we’ll finally all know what we’re dealing with. See you then.”

Diane handed Amanda my resumé and then caught my eye and cocked her head towards the door. The meeting was over. Amanda was just standing there looking like the victim of a purse-snatching. Our eyes finally met as I turned to follow Diane back out into the corridor. I offered what I hoped was an apologetic shrug before I was out the door.

“That went well,” I ventured when we were down the hall a ways. “She’s clearly been waiting her entire career just for me to arrive.”

“Don’t worry about Amanda,” Diane replied. “She’ll warm to you. She’s a real pro, works very hard, and is very good at her job. But she also has a bit of a control problem. I’ve heard some of her colleagues refer to her as ‘Commanda.’”

“Nice. So is someone going to tell me what Crimson is all about before I’m supposed to hit the ground running?”

“We won’t know much until the briefing this afternoon, but I do know the potential client is NASA.”

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I had just moved back to my hometown of Toronto after three years on Parliament Hill. I'd headed up to Ottawa right after earning my Honours B.A. in the history of science from McMaster University. I'd always been a space nut, so I wrote my thesis on the societal impact of the manned space program, covering the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions. I had no idea what my degree was preparing me for, but nearing the end of my fourth year, the planets seemed to align. My thesis supervisor passed my name along to a contact in Ottawa on the political staff of the Minister of State for Science and Technology. They were looking for a communications assistant to handle liaison between the minister's office and the Canadian Space Agency. Because I could write and was familiar with such space terms as "escape velocity," "perigee and apogee," "orbital decay," and "angle of re-entry," I got the job and moved to the nation's capital.

When I started, I knew next to nothing about dealing with the vipers' den of the Parliamentary Press Gallery. I've always believed that you learn much more from your mistakes than from your victories. Let's just say that I learned a lot in those early months, and I learned fast. I liked my minister but I didn't see very much of her. My role was a little ill-defined at the outset but I found my place eventually. I was one-third intermediary between the media and my minister, and two-thirds the minister's eyes, ears, and sometimes voice, in our dealings with the Canadian Space Agency. The CSA was an arm's-length but publicly funded agency of the federal government responsible for developing and guiding our

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indigenous space program and our key space partnerships with NASA, the Russians, the Europeans, the Japanese, and the Chinese.

I had a blast. It was right up my alley. I seemed to be able to get along with nearly everyone and managed to navigate the labyrinth of international relationships that fuelled space diplomacy. I'm still amazed just how far you can go relying only on curiosity, writing skills, manners, and the ability to connect with different people. It kept me moving up the ladder for three years, until my mother's cancer returned.

My father died of a heart attack five years ago, shortly after my mother's first brush with breast cancer. She recovered, from the cancer at least. I'd come home on summer vacation and some weekends to try to do my part and stay connected, but my older sister, Lauren, shouldered most of the burden. Then six months ago, what we thought had been defeated returned with reinforcements, and the siege began once more. Siege was an understatement. My mother's lungs were so riddled with the invader that surgery was not even in the play. Despite my sister's protests that she had everything under control, I resigned from the job I loved and moved back to Toronto. I'd been feeling guilty for three years about my rather carefree existence in Ottawa while Lauren looked after our mother. Now there really wasn't much time left.

My job in Ottawa had been all-consuming, so I was still very much single. It was hard to sustain a meaningful relationship while working in the pressure cooker of national politics. I did have a few less-than-meaningful relationships during my time on

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the Hill, but they were mercifully short. On a more positive note, I'd banked a whack of dough. Within a week of moving back to Toronto, I made a down payment on a condo across the road from the St. Lawrence Market, on Front Street. It was built in the eighties, a few years before developers discovered that people were prepared to live in 575-square-foot condos. So my unit was 1,120 square feet with a spacious living room and bedroom, and a den of sorts that I turned into a library. As something of a bibliophile, I had collected many history books about science and the space program, lots of novels, and dozens of volumes related to Sherlock Holmes, including several editions of the stories and novels themselves. I loved Arthur Conan Doyle's writing and the characters he immortalized in what were arguably the most famous tales in the world. I often tried to think like Sherlock Holmes when faced with complex problems in my own life, but found I could seldom rise above the Hardy Boys.

When unpacked and settled, I was very happy with my first stab at home ownership. It was only a block from one of Toronto's most beautiful bookstores, and it took me just a ten-minute subway ride north to reach the family homestead near Yonge and St. Clair.

Did I mention that my sister is a saint? Like most saints, she was still single at twenty-eight, and worked part-time at the Deer Park branch of the Toronto Public Library. Most of the librarian stereotypes fit, but not all of them. Lauren moved back into the family home when the cancer moved back into our mother.

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Taking care of someone in the final stages of cancer is not a great gig. It leaves next to no time for anything else. When I first visited my mother after moving back to Toronto, I was shocked to see the deterioration since I'd last seen her, two months earlier. She was gaunt and weak, seemed resigned to her fate, and hoped it would come sooner rather than later.

My sister kicked off the visit by chewing me out a bit for abandoning my dream job in Ottawa just to assuage my guilty conscience. I tried to argue that I was acting responsibly and that she deserved help with Mom's care. She snorted a saintly snort. She was so good with Mom. While I flailed around cracking jokes and dodging the big malignant elephant in the room, Lauren knew just exactly what to do, what to say, when to stay, and when to leave.

There were about eight people in the boardroom and, it sounded like, plenty more on the speaker phone when we gathered at 2:30 p.m. for the conference call "briefing and brainer." After Googling "brainer," I'd learned that it was PR agency slang for "brainstorm." Got it. I sat down in one of the few remaining plush leather chairs and rolled as far away from the centre of the action as possible while still staying in the boardroom. Several of the folks I'd met earlier in the day on my little tour nodded to me. I nodded back. Diane sat at the midpoint of the boardroom table. Amanda was right next to her, staring into the

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speaker phone as if it were a crystal ball. She looked a little tense, which for all I knew was how she always looked.

A voice boomed through the static on the line at ear-bleeding volume.

“Okay, let’s get started!”

I had an inkling Amanda was startled by the voice by the way she jerked her whole body up and off the chair, before placing her hand on her sternum and breathing heavily. Diane calmly leaned over the speaker phone and dialled back the decibels to prevent any further hearing loss among the Toronto team.

“Hi, Crawford. It’s Diane. Go ahead. We’re all assembled here in Toronto,” said Diane.

“New York is all set, too,” piped in another disembodied voice.

“Okay. Thanks for coming together on this, everyone. For those of you I haven’t yet met, I’m Crawford Blake, GM here in Washington. I’ve got with me several of my very smart colleagues. We’ve got New York on the line and Toronto, too. Rather than taking the next twenty minutes for round-table introductions, let’s just introduce ourselves when and if we have something to say. This project, when we win it, will be led out of D.C., with Toronto handling the Canadian component. New York will be hovering around the edges to help out, but it’s really a D.C.–Toronto play.”

I’d never heard of Crawford Blake, so I pulled out my iPad and Googled him as his pronounced southern drawl draped itself over the meeting. According to the bio that appeared on the TK site,

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Crawford Blake, forty-one, was a Washington insider who had worked for three Republican congressmen and served a stint at the Republican National Committee. He was born in, yes, rural Mississippi and had earned a law degree from Alabama State next door. I tuned back in.

“Let me walk you through pretty well all the information we have on this opportunity and you can all hang on to your questions till I’m done, if you don’t mind. Okay. Because of a contact of mine on the inside, we’re one of three multinational agencies invited to pitch for a nice little project . . . with NASA. Yep, *the* NASA. So rule number one is that none of us ever, ever, cracks a joke that includes the line ‘*Well, it’s not rocket science.*’ At NASA, everything is rocket science and they take it very seriously. Here’s the deal in a nutshell. To try to tackle our mountain of debt, this Republican Congress, bless their hearts, is threatening to turn off the funding tap to NASA, and to many other outdated and unnecessary agencies. And do you know why they feel comfortable telling NASA where they can put their precious space station?”

Nobody said a word, which was just fine with Blake because he seemed to like owning the floor.

“I’ll tell you why. The public no longer cares about space exploration. NASA has been polling for more than fifty years. Back in the early sixties, when we were racing the Russians to orbit and then to the moon, the average American was obsessed with space travel. Nobody went to work when there was a launch. We were

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glued to our radios and TVs. I'm just barely old enough to have hazy memories of the late Apollo lunar missions and I can tell you, this country was moon crazy. Our family would gather around the TV in the rec room and watch for hours on end. With that kind of public support, Congress kept sending bigger and bigger cheques to NASA and felt good doing it."

Blake paused to catch his breath, but only for a moment.

"Well, my friends, times have changed. Citizens no longer care. A *Simpsons* rerun now draws a larger TV audience than a shuttle launch. In fact, one of the key tracking questions NASA has been asking Americans since the start of the shuttle program in the early eighties is whether you'd rather watch the launch of the shuttle on TV or go out for lunch. The lunch option wasn't even on the landscape until the mid-nineties. But it's definitely on the scene now. In the latest tracking study, for the first time in over thirty years, the majority of survey respondents would rather go out for lunch than watch a shuttle launch. I kid you not. That single finding has pushed NASA off the deep end. Hence their call to us."

"Crawford, Diane here again. Can I just ask whether the public opinion trends are the same here in Canada?"

"Good question, Diane. NASA didn't care much about Canada until you all built that funky mechanical arm for the shuttle. So the polling sample has only covered Canada for the last decade or so and your numbers have also been steadily decreasing, but they're not on as steep a decline as here in U.S. of A. That's one

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of the reasons NASA wants this to be a continental program. So here's the challenge, put as simply as I can. We need a big-ass PR program to rekindle the public's passion for space flight. We've got to arrest the free fall in our citizens' interest in, and support for, NASA and the important work it does on behalf of all Americans . . . and you all freezing up there in Canada, too. And we'll make a pile of dough while we're doing it."

This guy and his ignorant cracks about my fair country were starting to get on my nerves.

"I'm just about done, but we don't know which other two agencies we're up against, nor do we have any sense of budget for the program, but NASA has their ass stuck between a rock and a very hard place. So I say we go big but not too off the wall. This is still a stodgy group. We've got about two weeks to pull this off. We're pitching NASA here in Washington on the twenty-third and they want a joint American-Canadian team. Okay, I'll shut up now and throw it open for initial ideas."

I'd been watching Amanda for much of Blake's briefing. She was not hard to look at, quite the opposite in fact, and I was intrigued by Diane's description of her as a very dedicated employee who was consumed, perhaps even defined, by her job. She looked like she was dying to say something, anything, just to get into the mix. There was a brief lull after the boss had stopped talking. Cue Amanda.

"Um, it's Amanda Burke here in Toronto. Knowing only that NASA was the potential client, my team has gathered and analyzed

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the last three years of NASA media coverage here in Canada, including mentions of the shuttle program and the International Space Station. The amount, tone, and placement of the coverage are heading very much in the wrong direction. Even in the social media space, ahhh . . . no pun intended, NASA is not a big topic of conversation. I think we need a more creative, more robust, and more sustained media relations effort to reanimate the public's interest.”

She actually had quite a lovely voice.

Her comment triggered a full discussion about what might be done to generate more media coverage. Ideas came thick and fast, including astronaut media tours, more IMAX space movies, weekly news releases, allowing reporters to follow rookie astronauts through their training, even building a mock-up of the space station and touring it across the continent. True to Diane's suggestion, I just listened, but I was not particularly impressed with what I was hearing. It all sounded to me like a bunch of tactics in search of a strategy. I turned my mind to what I thought was really being asked of us. But the unexpected sound of my own name brought me back to the discussion.

“It's Diane again here in TO. Sitting very quietly here in our boardroom this afternoon is the newest member of the TK Toronto team, David Stewart. This is David's first day – he has just joined us fresh from the political staff of the Minister of State for Science and Technology, where he handled media liaison and the government's relationship with the Canadian Space Agency. Even

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though I suggested he just listen today, I'm going to put him on the spot.”

Great, just great. There was a sudden drought in my mouth. Here I am, minding my own business, trying to get the lay of the land in this strange new world, and all of a sudden, Diane decides to toss me my first anchor. With nowhere to hide, I shuffled my chair up to the board table as a condemned man might climb the scaffold stairs.

“David, you’ve been listening to the ideas fly back and forth, but you’ve kept your own counsel so far,” Diane commented. “Given your experience and expertise, are we on track?”

All eyes in the room and all ears on the speaker phone turned to me. What to do, what to do. My heart rate soared. I’ve often heard that in moments of high stress, everything slows down, the fog clears, and the perfect response comes into sharp focus. Yes, I’ve often heard this – I’ve just never actually experienced it. I knew what I had to do. It was obvious. The path of least resistance was simply to leap on board, ingratiate myself with my new colleagues, build a bridge to Amanda, and support the heavy media relations play being proposed. Yep, all aboard the bandwagon.

“Are we on track? Well, we’re on *a track*, I just don’t really think it’s the right track” were the words I heard coming out of my mouth.

Bandwagons were usually easier to board. I had somehow missed the big fat open door and managed instead to throw

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myself under the back wheels. By the looks I was getting in the room, no one would be helping me back to my feet.

“What do you mean we’re not on the right track?” snapped Amanda. “We’ve just kicked around dozens of great story ideas here. The media will be lapping it up.”

Now that I was out on the limb, it was time to reinforce my branch and hook up a safety line.

“I have no doubt that we could generate a giant stack-o-coverage, but NASA is asking us to re-engage the public, not manufacture news clippings,” I explained, not yet knowing exactly where I was headed, other than being ostracized, isolated, and perhaps even unemployed. “More articles and news items will not re-animate the average citizen’s fascination with space exploration.”

“Okay, new guy, what will?” Amanda threw down the gauntlet.

At that point, I had nothing to lose.

“Well, if we want the public to care about space, we’ve got to put the public in space, literally. So we run a contest to send a citizen up to the space station where they won’t just be PR ballast but will actually have a role in the mission,” I said, my words only a hair behind my thoughts.

“We promote it heavily through the social media platforms and use some of the good ideas already discussed to drive some media coverage. But the storyline is about the possibility that you or your next-door neighbour might be heading into orbit. Another

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shuttle mission to the International Space Station is no longer news. But put a plumber from Edmonton or a nurse from Montreal on board and then you've got a big story, real news."

I decided to quit while I was behind and shut up.

"NASA will never go for that," Amanda interjected. "There's no way we can . . ."

"Whoa, whoa, Amanda," Crawford Blake leapt in. "This is a brainer, honey, so our standard rules apply. There is no 'bad idea' in a brainstorm. We want the team to get creative, so go easy on—" I heard someone on the line prompt him with my name. "— David. It's his first day, after all."

Amanda's face flushed.

"Of course, Crawford. I was just mindful of our time and the need to move us forward," she explained. She looked at me as she said it and nodded. I gave her my best "No worries" look while she responded with a very convincing "Thanks, jerk" expression.

The brainer continued with other ideas advanced and discussed, most of them back in the realm of traditional media relations. I eased myself away from the table and returned to quiet mode. After another thirty minutes or so, the flow of ideas had dwindled to a trickle, so Diane took the reins.

"Crawford, I think we've got some good stuff to work with here. I assume we'll handle blowing out a Canadian approach here and your team will do the same for the U.S. market there. Then we'll bring them together."

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“My thoughts exactly, Diane,” he agreed. “But let’s stick to what we do best, driving earned media coverage. In my experience, the NASA guys are very conservative and easily spooked.”

Amanda caught my eye again, this time with what looked like “nannannaboobo” plastered all over her face.

“Just one more thought from north of the border,” Diane added. “I’d like David Stewart to flesh out his contest idea a little more and throw together a few slides. Then next week at our status meeting he can walk us through it before we decide on what to include in the final deck.”

“Up to you, Diane.”

Ten minutes later I was back at my desk in my very own cubicle when Amanda Burke arrived like an Exocet missile, only more explosive. In the classic power play, she placed her hands on my desk and leaned down from above before unleashing her tirade. She was no longer using her “lovely voice.” Rather, she spoke in a crazed whisper that carried only four cubicles away in every direction.

“Thank you for shitting on my plan from a very great altitude!” she hissed. “Don’t you ever do that again in a boardroom packed with people, let alone with Blake and Diane right there, too. You made me look stupid and I’m running this program, not you. You come here with your vaunted political experience and think you’re something special. Well, I couldn’t care less if you

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were actually the minister and not just his lowly media lackey. NASA is my ticket so you'll have to earn your way onto the team. And after today, you're beginning the race well behind the starting line."

"Her" was all I said.

"What?" she snapped.

"You said 'his lowly media lackey' but I was 'her lowly media lackey.' Our Minister of State for Science and Tech is a woman."

"Oh."

"And I'm sorry about what I said. Diane threw me under the bus. I wasn't expecting to be called upon and when I was, all I had was my gut reaction. I had no time to shape it or frame it in a way that didn't appear to, as you so elegantly put it, 'shit on your plan from a very great altitude,'" I explained. "But even though I regret what came out of my mouth in the heat of the moment, it is what I believe. I know your approach will net us the coverage, but unless there's a new and bigger story angle in the play, I don't think we're going to move the needle. I'm very sorry my view emerged in the way it did. But it is what it is."

I spoke quietly, trying to lower the temperature in the room, and smiled once or twice for good measure. To my surprise, Amanda collapsed into the tiny guest chair in front of my desk, which meant it was partly outside my partitioned space. She closed her eyes and rocked slowly.

"God, I am such a bitch," she whispered.

This little sliver of vulnerability caught me off guard.

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“Umm, no you’re not,” I cut in. “You were justifiably upset at the new guy who, you know, had just shit on your plan from a very great altitude.” I smiled again and she stopped rocking and lifted her head.

“David, Diane likes to test new people by putting them on the spot. It’s her way of seeing if you can handle the heat. She did the same thing to me when I started. I didn’t fare much better. I might have warned you,” she conceded. “But I was a little stressed with Diane second-guessing me and gushing over you.”

“Look, Amanda, I’m just trying to survive my first day in a new job. I have no agency experience. I had to Google the word ‘brainer’ this morning. I don’t even know where the washroom is around here.”

Now she actually did smile.

“Okay, fine. I was just taking my paranoia out for a little run,” she replied. “But NASA is mine. You can work on it, but I’m running it. Clear?”

“It’s all yours,” I agreed. “By the way, can you show me how to record my time in PROTTs or whatever the hell it’s called?”