

## CHAPTER 2

“How are you feeling?” I was sitting on the edge of my mother’s bed, exercising my gift for creative questions.

The twilight angled into the room through the west-facing window. It took her a minute to focus on who had spoken. Her face was still puffy – a remnant of the steroids she’d taken earlier in her treatment. A few wisps of hair still clung to her head. She’d long since abandoned the wig.

“Not quite myself.”

My mother has a way with understatement. I barely recognized her. She only faintly resembled my mother. Not only does cancer take so many lives, but it so often makes its victims seem like different people near the end, which is precisely when you want them to be just the same as they’ve always been.

“How is the new job?” she breathed in a voice I could hardly hear.

“Oh, my first day went very well. I managed to offend the woman I report to and alienate the entire team I’m supposed to work with

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to make outer space cool again. The big boss, who is actually quite tiny, wears glasses that could be on display in the Museum of Modern Art and likes to toss grenades to the new kids to see how they'll react. Oh, and my office, at least for now, is a tiny cubicle amidst a half-dozen web designers in an area they call 'the pit.' Other than that, I love it."

"Good boy. And what did you do with *your* grenade?"

"Well, instead of playing the game and deftly reinserting the pin, I just kind of held it where it would inflict the most carnage and waited until it detonated," I replied. "But afterwards, Amanda, you know, the woman I report to and offended, paid me an unexpected visit and we at least began to remove the bigger pieces of shrapnel."

I waited for another "Good boy" before realizing she had drifted off to sleep. Lauren bustled in with a tray.

"Mom, I've got a boiled egg for you and . . ."

"She's just fallen asleep," I said, trying to keep my voice down.

"I know, David. But she really needs to eat to keep up her strength. She has to eat."

I had blundered into a deeper topic than what my mother wanted for dinner. She surfaced again.

"Thank you, but I don't think I can handle food right now."

"Mom, I know. But you need your strength if we're going to beat this thing," Lauren persisted, handing me the tray to hold.

"Honey, please . . ." Mom began, but faltered.

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Lauren leaned over her and began to rearrange the pillows to prop her up a bit. Mom allowed her to do this, but she didn't seem eager to venture much off the horizontal.

"Umm, Mom, why don't you just sit there and I'll help you devour this egg." I slid closer and picked up the spoon. Mom crossed her arms in slow motion as a final defence, but allowed me to feed her the egg.

"I promise not to make choo-choo train noises."

Mom fell asleep almost immediately after swallowing the last mouthful. I took the tray and dishes downstairs. Lauren was sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the wall, nursing a coffee.

"Was this a good day or a bad day?" I asked as I loaded the dishwasher and returned the tray to its spot on top of the fridge.

"They're all pretty much the same now," Lauren replied. "She hasn't been downstairs in two weeks and I don't think she'll ever be back down here. She'll never sit in this chair, or turn on that stove, or curse the toaster . . ." She stopped in mid-sentence and I saw that she was about to lose it.

"I know. But at least she doesn't seem in any pain," I offered. What a weak-assed response.

"Yeah, some consolation. What a bastard of a disease that the best we can say about it is that she wasn't in much pain as it took her."

Lauren lifted herself to her feet, dumped her coffee in the sink, and went upstairs to her room.

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I don't think I'd ever heard my sister use a word like "bastard." I tidied up the kitchen, looked in once more on Mom, deep in sleep, and left.

I spent the next two days at the office thinking through my Citizen Astronaut contest idea and pulling together a few PowerPoint slides to bring it to life. Despite how much derision it attracts, I actually like PowerPoint, if it's done well. I'd learned the hard way from a senior civil servant in Ottawa how to make the most of the ubiquitous presentation software after he'd pulled me aside following a briefing I'd given early in my tenure in Ottawa. I'd just learned how to animate PowerPoint slides, and I was smitten. When I'd learned that I could liberate, choreograph, and even provide a soundtrack for my bullet points, I seemed to lose any sense of judgment and restraint. In short, I suddenly felt like George Lucas and went hog-wild. Fortunately, the minister didn't attend that particular briefing or my humiliation would have been complete.

It was a presentation on the Canadarm, the mechanical appendage that the Canadian Space Agency built for use on the space shuttle. I considered it an extraordinary achievement and wanted an appropriate measure of drama and gravitas in the presentation. So I developed a background template for the slides that featured a space shuttle along the side, its cargo bay doors open and the Canadarm extended, poised for duty. This left the

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central zone of each slide free and clear for titles and bullet points. I thought it was masterfully balanced. Then, newly initiated into the glories of custom slide animation, I did my thing. It only took me about six hours to transform what had been five flat slides into a full-on cinematic assault on the senses. Throughout the process, the famous white Hollywood sign kept popping into my head.

When the lights had dimmed and my colleagues had settled around the boardroom table in the minister's office, I stood with the remote control in my hand. I casually explained that I had just "thrown together a few slides" and hit the button to summon the first to the screen. The shuttle first slid into orbit on the edge of the slide. Then as the theme music from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, blared from my tiny and tinny laptop speakers, the Canadarm extended, reached into the shuttle's cargo bay, pulled out the logo for the Canadian Space Agency, and slowly positioned it below the footer line in the bottom right-hand corner of the slide, before the arm retracted to its original position. It was awesome. It was brilliant.

In terms of informing my audience, it was a disaster of epic proportions. It wouldn't have been so bad had I not programmed all five slides to do the same thing. After that opening, I doubt the audience even noticed that each bullet point "launched" from the bottom left-hand side like a text rocket, complete with blast-off sound effects, before settling into its rightful position in the middle of the slide.

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Those enduring that first presentation so long ago were polite and said nothing about my special effects, except for that one senior civil servant who took pity on me. His first words after our colleagues had rushed from the boardroom were “Houston, we have a problem.” He proceeded to teach me a little about the principles of graphic design and slide composition. He concluded with advice on the restrained and strategic use of animation so that it actually enhanced the delivery of information, rather than distracted, confused, or even frightened the audience. After we’d gotten to know each other a little better, he thoughtfully suggested I donate my original Canadarm PowerPoint presentation to the CIA to assist with the interrogation of reticent prisoners. I saw the light and never again abused the power in PowerPoint.

I kept my contest slides simple, with few words, but solid visuals. I used shots of a shuttle launch, the interior of the International Space Station, a demographic cross-section of Canadians, a few mock headlines that I hoped we might see (e.g., “Citizen Astronaut Contest launched, Canadians get on board!”), as well as a photo of a recent news conference held in the same venue in which I was proposing we announce the contest, the Ontario Science Centre. Steadfastly static bullet points filled in the blanks so that all of the major elements of the program were duly explained. I liked it. Then again, at one time I’d liked my Canadarm presentation, too.

We all reconvened in the boardroom Thursday morning. I hadn’t had a chance to share my presentation with either Diane

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or Amanda beforehand, but they didn't seem too perturbed. I figured they considered my idea a long shot, likely to be cut early on anyway. A laptop was set up and plugged into the projector. Then we waited the compulsory ten minutes it took to fiddle with the laptop settings so the entire slide was visible on the screen. After several bad experiences with computers and projectors, I had revised the tech industry's soothing promise from "plug and play" to "plug and plague." It never seemed to work the first time.

Amanda walked us through a more traditional-looking slide deck with the standard communications program headings, including Background, Goals, Strategic Considerations, Strategy, Target Audiences, Key Messages, Tactics, Measurement, Timelines, Team, and Budget. My mind was drifting after the third slide. Sometimes a bit of "custom animation" would be welcome to keep you awake. As expected from the last meeting, this was strictly a media relations play with lots of solid and creative thinking to drive coverage. Beyond the ideas advanced in the earlier session, the creation of a travelling Canada in Space Museum exhibit that could tour the country was proposed. I liked the idea but still believed that at best, there was really only one media hit per outlet in each city. It seemed like a big investment for a few clippings.

Amanda went on to describe setting up a news bureau of sorts to develop and pitch story ideas on a sustained basis. This would be staffed, nearly full-time, by a team of four in our office, with others contributing potential stories as well. The social media

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team proposed setting up a “NASA in Canada” blog, Facebook presence, YouTube channel, and Twitter feed. I tried to make up the ground I’d lost in the last meeting by adding a few thoughts and tweaks to some of the stories and commending my colleagues on the others. But I mostly kept my head down in the meeting. Finally, a junior account coordinator blurted out that we should create a NASA mascot, kind of like the San Diego Chicken, so we could tour him/her/it around the country visiting schools, hospitals, and malls. We hemmed and hawed, then killed the mascot idea after what I thought was a surprisingly long discussion.

Finally, at some unspoken signal, two hours in, the meeting just seemed to end. I still wasn’t that impressed with what we’d pulled together but I was keeping quiet. I was also still digesting the proposed budget for the Canadian program – just over one million dollars.

“Okay, folks, I think we’ve got our plan and I think it’s solid,” Amanda declared. “It may not push the leading edge of creativity, but it will get the job done for a very conservative client. I think it’s what they’re looking for. I’m going to revamp the deck to include the new ideas we’ve just discussed, and put it to bed. We owe it to the D.C. office by close of business today so it can be blended with theirs. Nice work, everyone.”

I was still fingering my keychain flash drive where I’d stored my contest slides. I wasn’t inclined to say anything given how I’d messed up my first meeting, so I didn’t. But Diane did.



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“Just before we break up, David, will you present your contest idea now that you’ve fleshed it out a bit?”

I watched people sag back into their chairs.

“Um, sure, Diane.”

I really didn’t want to get into this, as the plan seemed to have been finalized already, and everyone was keen to get out of there. But I slid my flash drive into the laptop, dragged the file onto Amanda’s desktop, and a moment later had my first slide on the screen. I was more nervous presenting in front of my new colleagues than I thought I’d be. My start was shaky, but after zipping up my fly, things seemed to run more smoothly. I confess, I really liked this idea, even though I had just blurted it out at the previous meeting without the benefit of actually thinking it through. But even after a few days of kicking it around inside my head, I was more committed to it than before. Since Yuri Gagarin first left our atmosphere and found himself floating in the great black void, there has always been a mystique about astronauts. They aren’t like other humans, but exist on a higher plane. They went into space, while we stayed on Earth to cut the lawn and mind the kids. But the Citizen Astronaut contest finally broke down that barrier and allowed at least one mere mortal Canadian to fly with the elite astronauts. It stood historical convention on its head. And it was this unique shift that I hoped might mobilize a nation, if I could only mobilize a boardroom first.

I spoke for about ten minutes as I walked through my slides.

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There was a beginning, a middle, and an end to the presentation, and I seldom found myself reaching for words after the first slide or so. Out of the corner of my eye, I'd seen both Diane and even Amanda nodding with approval, or perhaps with early-onset Parkinson's. When I actually lifted my eyes to look at Amanda, she immediately stopped nodding and gave me a look that seemed to say "Wrap it up, pal, time's a-wasting."

"So coupled with the comprehensive earned media and social media campaign to get the word out, I think there are literally millions of average Canadians who would love to fly on the shuttle and spend a few days floating around the International Space Station, even throwing up in zero gravity, a near certainty for a considerable number of astronauts. And I don't think we'd have any trouble generating entries. It's big and bold, and I believe nothing short of this will meet the challenge NASA has given us. Here endeth the sermon," I said as sat back down.

There was a long pause, and I waited for Diane to announce that she wanted my idea added to the deck before it was sent to D.C. Nope. She was waiting for Amanda.

"Interesting idea but I don't think so," Amanda began. "It's soundly conceived, but we have to be realistic and not push them too far. These are very risk-averse people, according to Crawford. We can't afford to scare them off. If we presented this, we'd blow way over on the crazy-o-meter. Think of the liability issues of sending Joe Public into space. It's a non-starter. Nice effort, but a non-starter."

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That hurt. But I wasn't done yet. I looked towards Diane in the hope that she'd overrule Amanda. But she was just looking serenely across the table into space. Okay, now I was done. Diane finally broke the silence.

"Okay, so that's it then. Nice job on developing the idea, David. With a different client in the chair, I think it could have worked," she said as she stood. "Thanks, everyone. Amanda, you can tie it up with a bow and send it off to Crawford."

A minute or two later I was licking my wounds in my cubicle when Diane stuck her head in.

"Don't be bummed at what just happened. That was an impressive performance for an agency tenderfoot. I liked what I saw, so don't stop doing that," she said. "Also, I think you should try to get to know Amanda a bit better. It'll help both of you."

With that, she was gone, and I could turn to Google for a definition of "tenderfoot." I found it in less than three seconds. "A newcomer not yet hardened to rough outdoor life." I could live with that. The NASA deck was still in front of me and with not much on my plate, I idly flipped through it. Something caught my eye and gave me a second reason to leave the pit and head over to Amanda's office on the nicer side of the floor.

"Hi," I said after I'd stood in her doorway for a few seconds without catching her eye. I startled her and she jerked just a bit, then tried to cover it up. Jumpy.

"Oh, David. You know you really shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

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She sounded annoyed.

“Sneak up? I just walked down the middle of the corridor in broad daylight and stopped right here in your doorway. You were clearly focused on your work. Next time I’m going to start calling your name gently when I’m getting close.” I smiled as I said it.

She’d returned her attention to her laptop by this time.

“I just didn’t hear you, that’s all,” she snapped.

“Well, I guess I walk softly. Diane says I have tender feet.”

Amanda didn’t get it. Now she looked annoyed, too.

“So, David, what’s up? I’ve got a lot going on right now.”

“Has the NASA deck gone to Washington yet?”

“I was just about to push the button. Why?”

“Check out page six, in the capabilities section. There’s a mention of GM when I’m pretty sure you mean NASA.”

A deep furrow immediately appeared in her forehead as her eyebrows came together in the shape of a capital M. For most, it would have been a lowercase m, but she had very athletic eyebrows. Quite striking, in fact. She abused the wheel on her mouse trying to find the offending slide, and then leaned in closer to read. I heard her sharp intake of breath.

“Shit! I was just about to send this. I would have looked like an idiot in front of Blake,” Amanda said as she corrected the line.

“No harm done. How did you manage to type GM instead of NASA?” I asked, genuinely curious.

She flushed a bit.

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“I started with an old credentials deck from a pitch last year to GM, just for the capabilities section. I thought I’d caught all the references, but one slipped through. You can’t even trust PowerPoint’s ‘search and replace’ function. This would have made me look so sloppy and unprofessional.”

“Whoa. Someone else would have caught it before the actual presentation. No harm done. No big deal,” I said.

“No big deal?” she asked, giving me her best “Are you on crack?” look. “David, we don’t get the chance to strut our stuff with the Washington office very often. Crawford Blake could well be the next TK president, and he’s tough. Impressing him can have a real impact on your career. So screwing up in front of him is not on my agenda. Having him discover a stray GM in the deck is almost worse than NASA finding it!”

I just barely stopped myself from backing out of her office. She was so seriously intense. I found my hands in the air as if she were holding me at gunpoint.

“Okay, I got it. I’m glad we found the mistake so that no careers were ruined by an evil Detroit-based multinational.”

Fortunately, I had stumbled across her well-hidden sense of humour. She softened and even smiled.

“Sorry, David. I’m mad at myself, not at you. I can’t abide carelessness in myself or in others. I read this deck a hundred times and never caught it.” She paused, then looked at me again as I lowered my hands, no longer under the gun. “Thanks, David. You saved my bacon.”

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I thought I might as well strike while the bacon pan was hot.

“So, umm, speaking of bacon, does anyone eat lunch around here?”

She thought about it for a moment, weighing the question.

“Lunch, lunch. That’s the midday meal, right?” she asked.

“So you don’t eat lunch very often?”

“I hardly ever have time. But I didn’t think we’d have this deck done by now. So as soon as I’ve yanked GM out of it, I think it’s ready to go. Give me ten minutes to draft the email to Crawford and I’ll meet you in the lobby. I think I’ve got half an hour before my next meeting.”

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I stopped in to see my mother on the way home from the office, but she was asleep. I offered to stay the night and let Lauren have a night off and sleep at my place. In her mind, it wasn’t even an idea worthy of consideration. Lauren seemed locked into her role. I truly wanted to do more, but almost felt like I was trespassing on her turf. We talked for an hour or so, and she let me make spaghetti for us. Then she sent me home so she could get some sleep herself. Mom usually needed her help a few times in the night and Lauren was paranoid about sleeping right through.

I loved my condo. I still got a little thrill from stepping through the door. I’d become a little fanatical about keeping it neat. I lay down on the couch and didn’t even turn on the TV. I realized I wanted to show off my new place to somebody, perhaps to

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anybody. I wondered about knocking on my neighbours' doors and introducing myself but thought that might seem a little odd. While I've always been quite happy in my own company, it occurred to me that perhaps I might be a bit lonely. With all that was swirling in my life, I didn't think I'd freed up enough time in my schedule to be lonely.

My twenty-minute lunch with Amanda had gone well, for the most part. When she'd finally hit Send on the NASA deck, she seemed to lighten up and loosen up. At lunch, I'd learned that she was a couple of years older than I. While I'd been working on Parliament Hill, she'd already been in the trenches at TK for a few years, working insane hours and never saying no to work that came her way. As she explained between forkfuls of a limp salad in the little restaurant in our building, an agency is like a marketplace. Work flows down to those who do it well, do it on time, and do it without complaint. If you look around almost any large PR agency, the junior staffers who are swamped tend to be the good ones, the "keepers." But those who can always be found with time on their hands usually have that extra time for a reason. They've already been tried by the senior consultants or account directors above them, and somehow fallen short. Missed a deadline, missed a meeting, or missed the point. So, repeat business dries up. It's not good news if most others at your level in the organization are crazy busy, and you are not.

Amanda had climbed up the ladder she'd mentioned earlier faster than most. And why not? Why wouldn't Diane promote

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Amanda quickly for good performance if it meant TK could get a higher billing rate for her? But from my agency rookie perspective, it seemed to put a lot of pressure on Amanda to keep up the pace of her progress. I made some dumb throwaway comment about shooting stars burning out. Not a good idea, but we got past it. Despite several attempts, I was unable to discover whether Amanda had anything else that occupied her life beyond Turner King. With half a salad still left to eat, Amanda had dashed back upstairs for her 1:30.

I dragged myself off the couch and into the library and pulled down from the shelf the Sherlock Holmes story collection entitled *His Last Bow*. It included one of my favourite stories, “The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans.” I’m not sure why I was drawn so often to this story. Perhaps because it’s one of only four Holmes stories that featured Sherlock’s older brother, Mycroft. Or it might also have been because the missing plans in the mystery are for a submarine. This probably appealed to my interest in the history of science. Whatever the reason, I often reread Sherlock Holmes stories before heading to bed, and this tale more than some of the others. The writing was so good and it was just very cool to be reading the very same words that were first published back in 1912, as the Holmes canon was winding down.

I finished the story and flipped through a few other Conan Doyle books on my shelf, including the second Holmes novel, *The Sign of Four*. I always seemed to gravitate to a line Holmes



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utters in this story: “How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?”

I fell asleep in the library shortly thereafter.

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D.C. in early March was mercifully less humid than in the dead of summer. I'd been to Washington a few times while working for the minister. On our last trip, a year earlier, we'd toured the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum. What an amazing place. I remember just staring up at the *Wright Flyer* hanging in the lobby. The sight of it above so transfixed me that I walked straight into the wheelchair of a senior citizen from Baltimore and nearly tipped her into a rack of museum maps. It wasn't quite an international incident, but my minister did speed away from the scene, leaving me there alone to make my apologies. There were no broken bones, and after we eventually staunched the bleeding, the poor woman was actually quite nice about it all. I'm sure the museum staff would have been relieved to know that I'd have no time for a return visit this trip.

There were three of us from TK Toronto heading south for the NASA presentation. I figured my Ottawa stint on the Canadian Space Agency file would punch my ticket to D.C. and I was right. Diane called me a couple of days earlier to let me know I'd be on the pitch team. Diane, Amanda, and I would be the Canadian contingent joining six D.C. TK folks and one

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from New York. Ten people seemed like a big team, but this was a big opportunity. I sat between Amanda on the aisle and Diane in the window seat, which left me feeling mildly trapped. I think Amanda could probably have kept the Air Canada 767 aloft with tension alone. I wondered if she was a nervous flier, yet she was still rigid and morose back on land at the Dulles baggage carousel.

Diane went in search of a washroom, while we waited for the bags.

“Are you all right, Amanda?” I asked. “You seem a little preoccupied.”

“Of course I’m all right. I’m just getting myself psychologically ready to present with Crawford,” she explained. “They say you only get one shot with him, so I want to make it count.”

“With ten of us on the team, I’m worried that he won’t even notice us,” I replied. “He’ll certainly remember Diane’s glasses, but after seeing them, I can’t imagine he’ll have any sensory capacity left to remember us.”

A slight smile threatened the corners of her mouth.

“I know what you mean,” Amanda said. “I thought that security guy was going to confiscate them as an unidentified and suspicious object.”

“Yep. He seemed quite shocked, perhaps even repulsed, when she actually put them on her face.”

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After we checked in to the Washington Plaza on Thomas Circle NW, we cabled it over to the TK office on 14th Street NW for the rehearsal at 2:30 p.m. The vast lobby was all marble and glass, with an Amazonian receptionist in a futuristic booth in the centre. There was actually more glass than I thought.

“Are you all right?” Amanda asked as I bounced my face off the very clean and clear plate glass door.

“I did that on purpose, just to break the tension,” I explained. “And perhaps my nose.”

I recovered and nonchalantly opened the door while enduring the most unspeakable pain I’d ever experienced. The three of us approached the receptionist with my eyes still streaming.

“Sorry about the door,” the receptionist said in greeting. “I usually prop it open to avoid such collisions. You must be the team from the great white north. Welcome to TK D.C., I’m Cheryl.”

“Hello, Cheryl. I’m Diane, the TO GM. This is Amanda Burke, account director, and finally, with the red nose and teary eyes, David Stewart, senior consultant.”

I waved and wiped my eyes. I’ve never understood why your eyes water when you hit your nose. Why doesn’t your nose run?

“Just have a seat and I’ll alert the corner office that you’ve arrived.”

We all sat down and I turned to Amanda.

“Okay. When you’re feeling nervous before the presentation tomorrow and you need something to lighten the mood,

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just think of my nose and that glass door over there, and you'll be fine."

By the time we all heard footsteps coming down a very long corridor behind Cheryl's command post, I could finally see straight again and my eyes were no longer swimming.

"All hail Canada and welcome to Washington!"

We all heard the southern drawl before we laid eyes on the D.C. GM.

"Diane with the fancy glasses, how are you, darlin'?"

"Always great to see you, Crawford. You're looking as tanned and relaxed as ever," replied Diane. "Don't you do any work around here?"

"Not if I can help it," Blake answered. "You know that."

"Crawford, this is the designated account director on the NASA pitch . . ."

"I know who this is. Amanda Burke. It's so great to make your acquaintance at last. I've been so impressed with your leadership on this so far and you look just as I pictured you in my mind's eye."

In the charm department, Crawford Blake was very well-endowed. He kind of made me queasy. Amanda wasn't expecting this southern gentility assault and seemed to succumb to an anxiety aneurysm of some kind. She searched first his face, and then the floor for the words she needed.

"Well, umm, thank you and it's great to meet you too . . . umm . . ."

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I was standing right next to her and without moving my lips I whispered his name and hoped he hadn't heard.

“. . . yes, Crawford. It's great to meet you Crawford.”

Diane jumped back in.

“And Crawford, this is our new guy, David Stewart, who knows the Canadian Space Agency inside and out.”

“Well, well, now that's the kind of insight we need on this pitch. I figure the NASA boys will be mighty impressed with the depth of our team.”

I just nodded and shook his extended hand, which was big and surprisingly sweaty.

We were escorted to the boardroom, where the rest of the NASA pitch team was gathering. Introductions were made and the bonding began. Amanda had regained her poise and personality and even managed to direct several complete sentences in a row to Crawford, who claimed the big chair at the head of the gigantic polished boardroom table. Lovely, shiny table. I was dying to launch myself headfirst down the length of it in a great slide for life but thought it might not leave the best first impression. Oh yes, and Amanda would probably have had a coronary. Diane was occupied explaining the artistic antecedents of her pair of glasses to two younger TK D.C. fashionistas. Eventually the kibitzing died away and Crawford took control.

“Okay, team, let's get this done,” he began. “Let me start by saying that it is wonderful and rare to have the opportunity to work with our colleagues in the land of snow, slush, and ice

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hockey up there in the province of Toronto. I really must get myself up there for a visit sometime. I welcome the three of you to our warmer climes and hope that we'll have many more chances to work together after we win this thing tomorrow."

We nodded and smiled. Something about this guy was rubbing me the wrong way, but it was hard to cut through the bonhomie to get to what was really bugging me. It was probably just the standard American ignorance of Canada – a very old story. I bet I could name all fifty state capitals, yet I doubted Blake could identify even a handful of Canadian provinces. I decided not to test my theory right then, as Crawford still had the floor.

"We have a truly great opportunity tomorrow to land one of the biggest and most prestigious clients we've ever had at Turner King. NASA is a household name in both our countries and around the world. Their achievements in the last half century have shaped our nation. Regrettably, their influence appears to be waning. Our job is to restore the lustre to NASA and bring the people back to marvel at its miracles. I guarantee you that NASA is as straitlaced an organization as you're ever likely to encounter, and they can be easily spooked. So let's keep it real tomorrow and not scare them with ideas that are too far out there. I've seen the deck and it's a winning presentation. So let's divvy it up and make sure everyone has a piece. If you're in the room tomorrow, you're going to be saying something."

We spent the next few hours mapping out the presentation and then running through it once as if we were in NASA's boardroom.

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It was my very first rehearsal for my very first TK presentation. So this was how things worked in the agency world. I admit, I was impressed. But I was also a little concerned about the budget. All elements of the proposed program had been painstakingly budgeted according to the various hourly rates of the professionals involved and the anticipated time required. The North America-wide program came in at just under five million dollars in fees, before expenses. Then in the meeting, Crawford arbitrarily upped the number to six million to ensure we weren't shortchanging the agency. Six million bucks in fees for a year-long continental program still seemed like a lot of dough to me. Then again, we were pitching NASA, famous for purchasing a nineteen-million-dollar toilet for the International Space Station, so perhaps we weren't out of line.

Here's how the show was set up for the following morning:

- 9:00 Crawford Blake would open and introduce the team before waxing eloquent on the challenges NASA was facing.
- 9:10 Diane Martineau would add the Canadian perspective on NASA's challenge and outline the goals of the North American program.
- 9:20 A TK D.C. research consultant named Bridget and I would be up next to outline the public opinion landscape in the U.S. and Canada and identify the strategic opportunities it revealed.

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- 9:30 Amanda and her D.C. counterpart, Michael Crane, would then summarize the program and what results were expected.
- 9:45 A couple of TK D.C.'s top social media gurus would then explain how tablet and cellphone apps, Facebook, Twitter, and blogger outreach would support the media relations play.
- 9:55 Finally, two TK measurement experts (one from D.C. and the other from New York) would describe exactly how we were going to evaluate whether we'd been successful in achieving the program's goals.
- 10:00 Crawford would zip through the estimated budget before opening the floor for questions. Then we would all try desperately to perform as well during the Q&A as we had in the actual presentation.

We ran through our parts once and tweaked the slides a bit. Crawford and Diane left after their parts to have dinner together. After that, Amanda finally seemed to be back in her element and jumped right in the middle of it all. She was still uptight, bossy, and domineering. But without her, the Canadian angle on the plan might well have disappeared. By early evening, we were just going through the motions. Amanda said it was time to quit rehearsing before we became too practised. We needed to leave some adrenalin in the tank for tomorrow. Interesting. I was learning a lot.



## TERRY FALLIS

When we left, Amanda rushed ahead to open the glass door for me in the lobby. I played my part and stepped very gingerly through the opening with my hands held up in front of my face. For the first time, I heard her laugh. It was nice to see little pieces of the unguarded Amanda surfacing. It seemed she felt good about the NASA presentation.

That night in my hotel room, Google and I dug a little deeper into Crawford Blake. Beyond what I'd learned about him earlier, I discovered that he'd been a baseball star at his rural Mississippi high school. He played third base, the hot corner, and swung a heavy bat. Blake helped lead the team to a state championship in his senior year. The stuff of American dreams.

Just before shutting down, I put my time into the tyrannical time tracking system, PROTTs. Too bad the time wasn't billable, but we were still in pitch mode.