

I scrambled beneath the humbling granite archway that framed the Canadian National Museum's staff entrance, water dripping from me as if I had just slipped out of the shower. The quivers that waved through my body triggered an uncomfortable realization, not that I was cold from my drenched state, but that I'd transitioned into the first stage of chocolate detox. I hadn't had a crumble of the substance for at least eighteen hours.

The tinted glass of the door before me mirrored a startling reflection – “harrowing” would have been a kind descriptor. The morning had started as a good-hair day, but the flash-flood rains that had caught me sans umbrella put a different spin on the do. So not fair. Why was it that Audrey Hepburn looked positively radiant after being soaked in a torrential downpour in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*? I looked like *Breakfast at Wal-Mart*. Mind you, I didn't resemble Audrey Hepburn at the best of times except perhaps for the dark, doe-like eyes I shared with the Hollywood icon.

I tilted closer towards the glass, raised my index fingers to the corners of my eyes and elongated the fragile skin upwards planing out the subtle crow's feet. Maybe I did have a bit of Hepburn going on. The image grimaced back at me. Who was I kidding? The Hepburn I was channeling was Katharine when she was fished out of the Ulanga River in *African Queen*.

“Are you going inside or are you planning on staring at yourself all day?”

Embarrassed that my self-deprecation had been interpreted as vanity, I rotated towards the person with the after-hours-club voice. The young woman I faced sliced away any traces of my self-esteem in a nanosecond, bulldozed past me, and vanished behind the second set of doors.

I mustered a handful of dignity only to lose it after slipping and lurching on the stone floor opposite the security control room. Through the triple-glazed, bullet-proof glass, there was a beehive of activity. Security command central was crammed full of people, and I discerned

guards who didn't usually work the morning swing. The news must have broken over the weekend. But I had eyeballed all the dailies before stepping onto the subway – *The Globe*, *The Post*, *The Star* and even skimmed the free Metro paper, but none referred to the disappearance of the porcelain Tang horse from the Chinese gallery the previous Friday.

One more set of doors steered me to the main security checkpoint where a boyish newbie guard was planted behind the counter of black polished laminate. I instantly dove into his eyes. Emerald green pools like that are a rarity. The combination of those eyes with his dirty blonde faux bed-head was an irresistible combination. His neck was a tad thick, but I suspected there was a body-builder's frame hidden beneath the uniform.

“Good morning.” I hoped my voice would drown out the sound of my heart palpitating.

“Good morning, ma'am. Looks like you forgot your umbrella today.”

Ma'am? Seriously? Clearly my cougarishly-tight skirt wasn't fooling anyone. “You can call me Kalena. And I suggest you drop the word ‘ma'am’ from your vocabulary, at least around here.” I was doing him a favour. He could lose his head if he used that term on one of our resident feminazis.

“Uh...noted. My name's Marco...Marco Zeffirelli.”

“Like the director?” Franco Zeffirelli's screen version of *Romeo and Juliet* was my all-time favourite version of the story of the star-crossed lovers.

“I thought the Museum Director's name was Carson James.”

“Never mind.” Eyes you could lose yourself in – yes. Knowledge of Italian film directors – no. I plunked my purse down and rummaged for my ID badge. No point asking a keener if he'd swipe me through. “What's going on in the control room?” I scrounged deeper into my bag with the fervour of a manic dog trying to surface a buried bone.

“They caught the guy that stole that horse.”

“Are you kidding?” So far I’d found a bottle of dark plum nail polish and some rogue shavings of chocolate in my bag. I licked my fingers.

“Oh, I wouldn’t kid about a thing like that. It’s only my third day on the job.”

“Sooooo, who was it?”

“One of the contract construction workers. Have you found that ID yet, ma’am, I mean, Kalena?”

“How did they catch the guy?”

“Seems he was a suspect in the theft of that small Group of Seven painting from the Art Gallery a couple of months ago? They’ve been keeping an eye on him. The perp’s a total amateur.”

“Why do you say that?”

“International art thieves go for big ticket items. Like that opal collection that went missing from here.”

“That was almost thirty years ago.” My eyebrows arched into an unnatural point. Was this kid even born when the gems went missing from the Canadian National Museum? “You seem to know a lot for someone who’s been on the job for only three days.”

“Personal interest of mine, art theft, that is. The crime’s second only to drug trafficking. About \$6 billion worth of art is stolen every year.”

“Who knew?” I spied the woman who’d almost bowled me over moments earlier as she whizzed through the corridor bordering the rear of the security desk.

“By the way, do you know the woman that came through here just before me?”

“The one who’s a lead singer for a death metal band?”

I tried to suppress a chortle, but failed. “I think you profiled that one pretty accurately.”

“It’s not a profile. I saw her front a band a couple of months ago. She’s the new IT Help Desk person – still has her temp badge. Doesn’t really have customer service written all over her, if you ask me.”

Finally my fingers landed on a familiar plastic shape. I whipped my hand out of the bowels of my purse as though withdrawing it from an alien’s guts. Out fell my BlackBerry as well as heaps of gold foil wrappers that feathered the security log book.

“Ferrero Rochers for breakfast again?”

I budged my head towards the nauseatingly familiar voice and was walloped by a blast of Gucci cologne. “Good morning to you too, Richard.” I scooped up the week-old chocolate wrappers and with a deft sleight of hand they disappeared back into the depths of my bag.

“That’s a great suit, sir. Is it Cavalli?” said Marco.

“Who are you?” said Richard.

“My name’s...”

“It was a rhetorical question.” Foam was forming in the corner of Richard’s mouth. “I didn’t really expect an answer.”

Marco’s face soured. Poor kid. Nothing like being verbally bitch-slapped first thing on a Monday morning.

Richard Pritchard was my former boss and current Director of Exhibits and Programs. When he was recruited to head the division in which I’d worked for almost fifteen years, it was as if a gnarly chunk of metal had been thrown into a finely tuned piece of machinery. I fled the toxic environment as quickly as possible and joined a newly created department called Museum Consulting Services.

Richard slid back the finely-woven sleeve of his jacket and eyed his Movado. “Running right on time as usual, I see.”

I elevated onto my tiptoes and transfixed my gaze to Richard’s forehead. “If I were you, Richard, I’d request a refund for the Rogaine. I really don’t think it’s doing the job.”

Richard whipped up his hand, skimmed over the peach fuzz at the front of his skull and immediately dropped his arm as if all life force had been drained from the limb. Blood slowly rose up his neck and began flushing his face from the chin up, like red-tinted mercury rising up a thermometer. I dipped my chin and turned my face sufficiently to give Marco a discreet you-owe-me-one wink. He responded with a Cheshire grin.

“You might be interested to know I’m meeting your boss and Brenda in twelve minutes and fifty-six seconds,” Richard said, “and we’re expecting you to take notes.”

“I’m aware of that,” I said, sporting a saccharine smile.

“You must be telepathic then seeing as Stewart and I arranged this meeting minutes ago.”

“Please don’t spit on me.” With the palm of my hand, I swiped my cheek. “Stewart sent me a text.” I grabbed my BlackBerry from the counter, slid my thumb over the dead battery indicator light, and waved it past Richard’s face as though swatting a fly.

“You’d better hurry—”

“Yes, I’d better.” I swiped my ID card through the electronic reader releasing the lock and cycloned my way through the doors to the curatorial centre where the Museum’s offices and collections are housed. Richard bellowed something after me, but it was lost in the wake I left behind.

With determined grace I circumnavigated the first corner, ensuring I was out of Richard’s sightline, then idled at Information Technology’s door. Through the window I spotted the overly-

made-up death metal vocalist. But there was no time to waste. If memory served me well, there was a chocolate bar stashed in my desk. There was still time to inhale it before the meeting with Richard.

I sprinted through a maze of hallways like a thoroughbred bolting for the win, past Carpentry and Taxidermy, and galloped past the Museum's own weapon of mass destruction, the daunting fumigation chamber used to exterminate insect stowaways catching rides on incoming artifacts and animal specimens. My high heels tap-tapped against the worn tile floor, mimicking the sound of machinegun fire. I rounded the next bend with an indelicate skid almost colliding into a technician from the Egyptian Department. Planted in the middle of the narrow corridor, she was talking to the Museum's chief librarian, Walter Pembroke. They hovered over a cart of small mummified creatures – probably cats or baby crocs.

“Doh! Sorry about that,” I said and swerved around the pair and barreled onwards.

“Kalena, have you returned *The Art Paper*?” Walter hollered.

I decelerated to a trot. *The Art Paper* was the museum and art world's answer to an entertainment rag reporting on who bought what for how much, exposing galleries that had inadvertently purchased forgeries, and headlining the most recent museum thefts. “Soon, I swear.”

Parting my way through a last set of doors, I emerged into a public gallery lined with boulder-sized rocks, minerals and gems to whose beauty I had long become desensitized. I came to a slow halt, panting as though I had just climbed the stairs of the CN Tower. A sign with the words ‘Museum Consulting Services’ finely etched into a brass plaque hung on the stone wall at eye level. Home at last.

The Department was the brainchild of my boss, Stewart Anderson, who had modelled it after a local private firm that provided consulting services to museums internationally. Stewart persuaded the Museum's new Director and board of governors that a consulting branch within the institution could offer expertise on everything from designing a new gallery to building a museum from scratch, and turn a much needed profit for a Museum whose funding sources were increasingly shrinking. He was given carte blanche on the condition the new Department earned enough to cover all salaries and operating costs and made revenue to spare.

Stewart knew I had been integral in developing another Museum department from the ground up, and he wanted someone who could produce administrative protocols and maneuver with ease through the Museum's tangled bureaucracy. He was relying heavily on me and our senior consultant, Brenda Lockhart, to achieve the Department's mandate. And all of us bore Atlas's burden daily.

I twisted the doorknob to the office with the tremble of a heroin junky plummeting from a high. "Hey, Brenda."

"Morning," she said, without releasing her stare from her computer monitor.

I whipped off my soggy plaid trench and set my purse down beside the picture of my cat. Sweet old thing had died shortly after my second husband moved out. She had been as brokenhearted as I was. I flung open my desk drawer. Where was that chocolate bar? Crap. I had forgotten I had consumed it as an afternoon snack on Friday. Chocolate withdrawal was obviously affecting my memory. What the hell was I going to do? I couldn't go to a meeting with Richard while in this fragile state and risk coming undone in front of him.

"Were you at the gym this morning?" Brenda tilted her head upwards at a newsroom-like row of clocks labeled London, Lisbon, Hong Kong and Toronto. The time for Toronto read 9:25.

“No. I woke up too late for my body combat class this morning. My alarm clock’s messing with me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Honestly, there’s something screwy going on with the volume on my radio alarm, and I didn’t hear it go off. Anyways, have you talked to Stewart yet?”

“The usual crack-of-dawn briefing.” Brenda typed so furiously I thought her keyboard was going to split in half. “Don’t worry. Stewart loaded up at Heathrow with Thornton’s including your favourite chocolate-smothered toffee.”

“Awww, really?”

“You know he always does. You can pick it up when you see him. He called down a few minutes ago and said he needs you in his office prr-onto.”

“I know, I know. I ran into Richard on the way in, and he told me we’re meeting. Said I was supposed to take, uh...notes, as if suddenly I’m uh...a... secretary or something.”

Brenda swiveled around in her Herman Miller and peered at me suspiciously over the rim of her round metal-framed specs. With her banged bob of red hair and her penchant for wearing flats and skirts whose hems fell below the knee, she reminded me of a 1920s flapper. “Richard’s neurons are misfiring again. Stewart didn’t say anything about me joining the hot air fest. But you better do something with that hair of yours. Freakishly scary.”

I whipped a mirror out of my purse. “Oh, give me a friggin break.” Between the rain and the mad dash from the staff entrance I had a veritable vermin’s lair on my head. “I can’t believe people I work with have...uh...seen me like this.”

Brenda hopped to her feet as though she’d been auto-ejected from her chair. “You’re exhibiting symptoms of fuzzy brain. You haven’t had any chocolate yet today, have you?”

“I thought I had a candy bar in...uh, my desk—”

“Just coif the do, and I’ll be right back.”

By the time I had stroked a comb through my unnaturally blond hair and twisted it into a stylish updo worthy of a television commercial for a miracle hair clip, Brenda returned with a tin of Harrods’ cocoa and a spoon. She pried the metal lid off and scooped out a heaping portion of the posh British blend. “Go ahead. You know you’ve done worse.” She forced the spoon into my hand, and I downed the dry cocoa like an obedient child.

The instant the rich powder hit my tongue I felt a warm, steady rush invade my body like an electrical current moving in slow motion towards my extremities. The body shudders subsided, and my hands steadied. When I returned to Planet Earth, I stepped towards Brenda to give her a hug, but she backed away and raised her hand.

“Don’t mistake my actions for some kind of team effort. Now get the hell out of here.” She cracked a sliver of a smile, grabbed the backs of my shoulders and sent me flying out the door. “And don’t you dare tell anyone about what I just did for you. It would ruin my reputation around here as a hard-nose.”

“I signed a confidentiality agreement when I was hired, didn’t I?”

“Right.”

“Hey, do you know anything about those opals that were stolen from the Museum?”

“There’s no time for chitchat.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, God, that was like decades ago. It happened during the staging of a special exhibition. The cops never caught the thief, but the opals turned up years later in a market in Hong Kong. Now get your ass upstairs.”

Brenda was right. There was no time to lose, and I broke the land speed record hightailing it to Stewart's office in the executive's suite on the third floor. As I was about to tap on the doorframe, Stewart spotted me.

"Come in, come in." Stewart's prematurely silver beard and hair gave him a bit of a jolly Santa vibe. He was a gentle giant who probably could have been an awesome football player had it not been for the total lack of aggression in any cell of his body.

"Welcome back, Stewart." I suddenly sounded raspy. Damn. Some of the cocoa I had knocked back was lodged at the top of my esophagus.

"Thank you. It's good to have my land legs for a while."

My eyes darted around the room. "I see you've rotated your art again. Just how big is that, heh, African collection of yours?" I counted on a few more coughs to clear my obstructed throat.

"According to that lovely wife of mine, too big."

A giggle got trapped in my throat and came out as a cough.

"Are you all right? Shall I get you some water?" said Stewart.

I gestured no with my hand. "Richard will be here any second...and I have a confession. I had a bit of an ugly encounter with him at the staff entrance. He brings out the worst in me," I said like a Janis Joplin sound-alike.

"He does have that effect on people. But you have to learn to separate the persona from the position. He is, after all, a senior manager. And this meeting we're about to have, if Richard ever makes an appearance, is at Carson's request."

Odd, I thought. Rumour had it that the Director and Richard were on the outs lately. Richard must have grovelled his way back into Carson's good graces. Before I had a chance to speak further, a thundering knock startled both of us.

"Hello." Richard wriggled his thick form through the partially open doorway. "I took the liberty of inviting someone else to join us." He forced the door wide open to expose Veronique Bouvier, Richard's embarrassingly inept sidekick and Head of Exhibits. She was the personification of a French Poodle. Tall with lanky limbs, she always wore Nehru-collared suit jackets with faux-fur cuffs. To this kooky wardrobe staple she regularly paired an Hermès scarf snugly wrapped around her head as if attempting to hold in her melting brain. Her mousy brown locks erupted into curls above the designer bandana.

"*Bonjour*," Veronique said.

"Is there anyone else hiding out there?" Stewart said.

"*Mais, non*. But where's Brenda?"

"She's working to deadline on a study for a planetarium in Lisbon," said Stewart.

"But..." spluttered Richard.

"I can't afford to pull her away for anything right now. Luckily we have Kalena on our team."

Richard and Veronique shifted their scrutiny towards me just as I declined my chin, hoping to dislodge the cocoa from my throat.

Veronique spoke up. "But we need someone with Brenda's—"

"Veronique, let's get on with this. I'm meeting with the Director in fifteen. And your tardiness has already cost us some time," Stewart said.

Veronique withdrew into pout mode, and Richard seized the lead. “Veronique and I have been approached by the San Francisco Museum of Art and Science to host *Treasures of the Maya*. The last venue on its tour pulled out at the eleventh hour, and they’re seeking another institution to round out the tour in this part of the continent.”

Aware that the Museum had not presented a blockbuster of this magnitude for several years, my jaw almost unhinged. The sudden intake of air resulted in a silent burp, and a powdery brown vapour escaped, forming a small dark cloud in front of my face. I fanned the cocoa haze as unobtrusively as possible, but detected Stewart peering at me from the corners of his eyes. He abruptly clapped, spooking us all and attracting the full attention of Richard and Veronique. “Yes. *Treasures of the Maya*....currently packing in huge crowds across the States.”

I massaged my irritated throat. “But what does this have to do with Museum Consulting? Why aren’t you taking this to the Exhibits Planning committee?”

Richard white-knuckled the arms of his chair. “It would be impossible to mount this exhibition through normal protocols given the time constraints. But Carson’s keen to bring the show here at any cost, and your operation can bypass the Museum’s bureaucratic encumbrances.”

“Clever.” Stewart inhaled deeply. “And what about admissions revenues?”

“The profits will cover all your expenses, and a percentage of the net will go into your coffers for future endeavours. It’s a win-win situation for everyone.”

Stewart drew his palms together in prayer position and rested his bearded chin on his fingertips. I knew he was analyzing the scheme faster than a team of consultants and had likely worked out some rough profit margins.

“*Exactement.*” Veronique’s penchant for haphazardly tossing in French phrases as a way of reminding everyone she was the daughter of French diplomats annoyed me to the nth degree.

“One of the exhibit’s signature artifacts is the oldest piece of chocolate in the world,” said Richard.

My eyes expanded to saucer proportions. The oldest piece of chocolate – how cool was that?

“But the big ticket item is a magnificent gold jaguar mask,” said Richard.

Big ticket item? Wasn’t that the phrase Marco had used earlier?

“You’ve piqued my interest.” Stewart sank back into his chair. “And I presume the SFMA knows nothing of our recent security breach? Otherwise they would demand extraordinary insurance coverage negating all profits.”

“The Tang horse? No,” said Richard. “The incident has been fully cloaked. It’s one of the advantages of having a Director who was a former media mogul. He’s managed to gag the papers, and with no insurance claim having been filed, there’s no public record of the pilfering. As far as those who know anything about it, it was a temporary displacement.”

The activity I witnessed in the security control room was making more and more sense. Cover-up was the operative word.

“But we need an experienced person to manage mounting the exhibit. If Brenda is *occupé*, perhaps—”

“Kalena will direct the project,” said Stewart.

“Who?” Did I hear him right?

“This is no time for modesty, Kalena. Your administrative experience in Exhibits combined with your history background will be invaluable. And you do share a love for

chocolate with the Maya.” Stewart winked. “More importantly you have a record of expediting difficult tasks.”

“Kalena?” Richard was a ghostly beige.

“You can count on me.” I sensed beads of sweat forming in my armpits, but Richard had pressed the wrong buttons, and I wasn’t about to back off.

“I must cut this short now,” said Stewart. “Carson is booked with back-to-back meetings, and I can’t keep him waiting.”

Richard and Veronique leapt from their chairs like school children who had been dismissed from class. The two exited the office, and Stewart closed the door behind them. “It’s time for you to spread those wings of yours.”

“Yes, sir, but I’m not sure I –”

“We’ll talk about this further after I’ve cleared up some critical matters. Geoffrey’s flying in tomorrow, and I have some major number crunching to perform before his arrival.”

“Geoffrey’s coming to town?” I felt a tingling in my sacral chakra. The debonair Geoffrey Ogden, Stewart’s former school chum, ran our London office.

“He’s just met with the Lisbon clients and is coming to meet with Brenda and me.” Stewart reached into his desk drawer and gently flipped a bag of Thornton’s chocolate-smothered toffee into my palm.

“Thanks, Stewart.” I clutched the foil pouch to my breast.

“You’re welcome. I hope this keeps you out of the cocoa provisions.”

I felt my cheeks turning pomegranate. “Won’t happen again.”

“I’ve never seen anyone exhale a cloud of chocolate vapour before.”

“I have a reasonable explanation – sort of.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it another time.” Stewart thrust the door open. “Grab that copy of *The Guide to Travelling Exhibitions* – second bookcase on the right, third shelf down. And get any relevant literature from the library as soon as you can.” Stewart vanished into the hallway before I could draw another breath.

I snatched the book and a dog-eared photo of Stewart and Geoffrey slipped out. Stewart looked quite the nerd in head-to-toe Tilley gear. He was voluminous and pasty in comparison to the trim and sun-kissed Geoffrey as they stood in front of the cliff-embedded Treasury of Petra in Jordan. They were *The Odd Couple* of business partners. Stewart had grown up in a small farming community outside of Toronto while Geoffrey hailed from upper-crust Brit stock. Last I heard, Geoffrey was dating a super-model or was it the Parisian architect of the moment?

I tipped the photo inside another book and decamped with the Thornton’s toffee in hand. But I wondered why Richard had approached Stewart with *Treasures of the Maya*. His explanation seemed prefabricated, and I wasn’t buying it, especially since Richard had made no secret of his opinion that our department was doomed to failure. As I cruised back to the office, the phrase “big ticket item” kept playing in my head like a bad song you couldn’t forget.