

OH, HOW CHARMING!

Lizzie Krum

I look down at the photo in my hand. Hot tears stream down my face, my fingers rubbing the red and black decorative ribbon that is with the photograph. He looked so genuinely happy. I don't need to flip it over to see the scrawling writing scratched into the back; this day isn't one I'm likely to forget for some time. Even though it was almost a year, it feels like a lifetime ago since I was that innocent, that open, with Uncle Murph parading me around.

The thing about my uncle was that, as much as he hated nepotism and didn't want anyone to think he had any part in advancing my career, he was also as much of a proud papa bear as my own father. When I arrived at the party, I had barely gotten my cup of punch when he had spotted me and hauled me over to one of the department heads for a meet and greet. Then, he linked arms with me and introduced me to other members of the management staff, but never as his niece, of course. It was, after all, a work function.

By the time he was dragging me over to the head of accounting, I was tired, hungry, and felt that nothing could surprise me. That was, until the numbers man turned around at my uncle's cheerful call.

"Foley! How good it is to see you! Are you enjoying yourself?" Uncle Murph asked as we planted ourselves before the slender figure.

Uncle Murph gave a well-rehearsed chuckle, "You'd be right. Jean did all the decorating and planning this year. Usually, she just does our personal parties, but since Mrs. Partridge retired, there was no one to plan the party, so Jean said she would take over."

"Your wife has excellent taste, sir. It feels like a family Christmas," he nodded to me, smiling with those shimmering green eyes. I was grateful to my uncle for having a fixed pattern of conversation. It was hard not to stare at the man before me, so I kept trying to find other places in the room to find interesting.

"As it should! This company was built on family values, after all," Uncle Murph went on. I was tracking his words in my head, but it was hard to focus on them. This Foley man was smirking a bit like he knew what was going through my head. In an attempt to hold my ground, I took a sip of my drink. Uncle Murph was coming to the

end of his little speech and it would be my turn to speak anyway, "It has always been my goal to stay as close to the foundational roots as possible."

On cue, I added, "The company may change and grow, but the values remain. People come first." I gave a little nod to Foley and tried to keep my cheeks from turning pink under his gaze. I wasn't really sure how one would go about doing that, but I was trying anyway.

"Quite right! The people always come first."

Before my uncle could continue, Foley held up his hand and interjected, "Speaking of people, would you care to introduce me to your beautiful companion?"

This seemed to please Uncle as he began beaming again, "Of course. W.H. Foley, this is Casey Jackson, one of our bright, new recruits! She's got a lot of exciting ideas for our marketing department. Casey Jackson, this is one of our accounting managers, W.H. Foley. He got hired here two years ago and has worked his way up the ladder to a management position, making him our youngest department manager at 25; a position he has held for a year now. And he's almost as brilliant as you," my uncle nudges my arm with his elbow and smiles proudly at me.

I hold out my hand, "It's nice to meet you Mr. Foley."

His hand envelopes mine in warmth, "Likewise, Miss Jackson."

I couldn't help but imagine how warm his embrace would feel. What was I, a teenager? I did my best to hold myself together, "Please, call me Casey."

Uncle Murph patted Foley on the shoulder, "Yes, this young man is one of the best numbers people we've ever had."

"You've said that to all your accountants."

"You're much more than an accountant, Foley. You're an excellent manager and people person. I don't think Foley has ever met anyone he couldn't charm. Everyone likes him."

I didn't need my uncle to go on about Foley's abilities, I believed him wholeheartedly. After all, the man had just charmed me. I felt an almost magnetic draw to him, especially when I looked into his eyes. I don't really remember what my uncle was saying anymore because I was caught in those green eyes.

Aunt Jean had come up to us at some point to take Uncle Murph away for some party business. I remember that she almost called me Casey-Cat, a childhood nickname one of my cousins had come up with, and Uncle Murph stopped her pretending she was about to say the wrong last name and reminding her that my last name was Jackson. I don't think Foley noticed too much, but if he did, he didn't have a chance to ask because Uncle Murph took her hand and went to do

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whatever it was that they were doing.

I was happy to have some one-on-one time with Foley. We chatted about work for a bit. It was a casual conversation and I was grateful he didn't ask about my family. My hair kept getting in my face, and I kept brushing it aside. This was a new sensation as I usually didn't mind having my face slightly covered up. For some reason, I wanted him to see all of me; perhaps to gaze into my eyes the way I was gazing in his.

I was in the middle of talking about a small marketing job I had before coming here when he interrupted me, "I don't mean to interrupt, but do you need a hair tie or something?"

"Oh, well, I—" before I could finish, he had taken my smaller hand in his and guided me to a conference room, where the decorations were being stored. "What are we doing in here?"

He was going through one of the boxes, "Well, if I can find some ribbon, maybe we can take care of that hair."

"Oh, you don't have to do that."

"No, it's alright," he turned around with a red and black ribbon and took a step closer to me, "Here, this should work."

"It doesn't exactly go with my dress," I replied as I smoothed out a wrinkle in the lavender fabric with my hands.

"Think of it as enhancing your outfit, rather than being a clashing color. Here, let me," He walked behind me and started fixing my hair.

"You really don't have to do this. I can do my own hair."

"I don't mind. I used to do my sister's hair when she was little. You don't have to repay me if you don't want to."

"But I want to."

"Then tell me why Mr. Murphy is so fond of you," he gave a chuckle.

"He seems to believe I have a lot of potential. When I met with him after I got hired, we talked about my marketing position and my ambitions. He seems to believe I could rise to a management position fairly quickly here, which is why he invited me to the party tonight."

"Ah, I was there once. He introduced me to everyone right before I had a meeting with them, so that helped make the presentation easier," I could feel his fingers running through my hair, lacing it between his fingers. The movement was mesmerizing and the rhythm that he worked at seemed to dull my senses.

"Yeah, that's kind of the situation I'm in now. It's nice to know I'm not the only one he's done this with. Did you feel more confident going into the presentation?"

"Confidence wasn't the issue; it was understanding who I was talking to. Once I knew that, the presentation was a breeze. It's how I was able to increase productivity and eventually gain the position I

have now. I don't want to stop here though. I've actually been talking with Ken about the marketing department."

"Ken, as in, Mr. Thompson, my boss?"

He chuckled, "Yes, your boss."

I smiled, "He's retiring soon, which would leave his position empty. Mr. Murphy said they're looking for someone with gumption to fill his place. They want to promote from within the company."

"Yeah, I heard that," he paused, "Is that the other reason you're here? To campaign for that position?"

"Not campaign necessarily. I'll let my work speak for itself."

"You're relying on your work to help you stand out? That doesn't exactly scream gumption."

I didn't like that he had stopped moving my hair. I wanted him to continue, to finish whatever he was doing, "My ideas will speak to that."

Foley chuckled again, but this time, it felt like he was mocking me. I didn't like being treated like a child, so I told him my ideas. I don't even remember when he started working on my hair again, just that when I finished speaking, he was in front of me. Those eyes were gazing into mine and he gently wrapped a small stray hair around his finger to form a little curl, "Now you look absolutely gorgeous."

Those words made me blush. They still do, but for a different reason. The photo was taken later in the evening, but when I got home, I kept the ribbon, like some dumb little schoolgirl. It isn't the only ribbon I have from Foley either. Like this black silk ribbon and the black ribbon with red polka dots.

See, after that night, we seemed to run into each other all over the office and again at the company New Year's Eve party. He had pulled it out of me that I was single and so he brought me a bouquet of red roses wrapped in black ribbon. We chatted about personal things, about work and projects we were doing.

The visits didn't stop in the New Year. He would stop by my office to talk, mostly vent about work. It was sweet and comfortable when it was just the two of us. I worked late in the day, and that was usually when he would come around. Especially on Friday evenings, when everyone else left as early as possible.

After two weeks of being back to a normal work schedule, he noticed how I liked to set deadlines for myself. As I approached a self-made deadline for research on one of my gumption ideas, he showed up at my desk with a set of sketching pencils, wrapped in a black bow with red dots. He acted as a sounding board when I processed the information, but he was being an excellent listener.

About a week before Valentine's Day, the same week that my

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research was complete and I was preparing to draft my idea, Foley sent me an email asking me to go to lunch. We had done this a couple of times, had lunch at a restaurant during working hours. This time, his email was more formal, addressing me as Miss Jackson rather than Casey, and he asked me to bring my project's budget items. I just assumed he wanted it to appear to be a work luncheon rather than pleasure, in case anyone saw it.

I accepted his invitation, and, on my lunch hour, I drove to the other side of town to meet him. I brought the requested materials so that if anyone saw me, I could say it was a work meeting. Perhaps it would have been fitting to have worn a trench coat and dark glasses. Alas, I did not have the foresight to create a moment for my future self to laugh at if I ever do laugh again.

During our luncheons, I tried to talk about personal stuff as well as work. While he was reading over my initial draft, I decided to try, "So, what does the W.H. stand for?"

Either he heard me and was ignoring me, or he was so engrossed in my report that he had become deaf to the world around him. I reached my hand out and put it on his arm, "Foley?"

He barely looked up from the document, "Hm?"

"What does the W.H. stand for?"

"Oh," he glanced up, "Wilder Huxley," and his head bent down again.

I remember letting out a small laugh, "I can see why you shorten it to W.H."

He gave a small nod and absently said, "The midwife who helped deliver me thought that I had a dangerous look about me or something ridiculous like that. My mom thought it was funny, so she named me Wilder, which means a wild animal, and Huxley, which has a couple of meanings attached to it and one of them is mischievous or something equally idiotic."

"Well, I think they've got a little bit of charm to them. At least the mischievous part," I smiled at him, but he just nodded and kept reading. At that moment, I was ready to leave. I remember feeling frustrated, I remember having a desire to grab the report and walk out. I was so tired of not knowing what exactly this thing was. All I ended up retracting was my hand and my attention. I began looking around the room and seeing possible bachelors sitting by themselves or in groups having lunch and reading a paper or discussing work. A conversation with them would be more engaging than the one I had with Wilder.

Then I felt his eyes on me. I looked back to him and he commented, "This is a good report."

“I can tell.”

He seemed to tense up a little and he put the documents aside, “I’ve been paying more attention to it than you and that is not fair to you.”

I didn’t say anything.

Wilder reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small black box, “I wanted to make this a special moment, and I’ve gone and made you upset.” My eyes flickered down to the box and he smiled, “I know Valentine’s Day is a week away, but you’ve been working so hard to get this report done, I wanted to give this to you now.”

He placed the box on the table and pushed it over toward me. I picked it up, pulled loose the small red ribbon, and lifted the lid. A teardrop ruby on a gold chain lay inside. I was breathless, “It’s beautiful Wilder.”

He flinched but held his little grin. He stood, took the necklace from my hand, and then secured it to my neck. The rest of lunch went rather smoothly, for him, as he wine and dined me, then took his copy of my report with him.

My phone buzzes on the coffee table. Uncle Murph is on his way over. I take a deep breath and put the memorabilia back in the box before moving in front of the fireplace of my living room. I take a sip from my glass of wine and then lift the photograph one last time.

Hot, angry tears stream down my cheeks. “You have no idea what’s coming,” I say as I crumple the photo in my hand. Into the fire, it goes. It warps and cracks and gives off a small blue flame.

Next are the ribbons and then the little black box. I wipe my tears away and take a deep breath, “Time to break free of this stupid, strings-attached bull shit.” I toss the ribbons and box into the fire and watch them burn. A sense of freedom comes over me. After another sip of wine, I take off the necklace, the only real item I ever got from him. I hold it over the fire, and it shimmers in the light.

A swift knock on my door interrupts me and I quickly pull my hand back, standing to answer the door.

“Is everything alright Casey-Cat? You look terribly upset,” Aunt Jean says with a hand outstretched to my elbow. Uncle Murph is right next to her, looking equally concerned.

“No, everything is not alright, but I hope it will be soon.”

“I don’t understand,” Uncle Murph replies.

I stand to the side and they enter my house. After I close the door and invite them to sit down, I decide to start with an apology, “I’m sorry for asking you to come here so late and for what I’m about to discuss because it is work-related, but it couldn’t wait until tomorrow.”

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Uncle Murph shifts on the sofa, his back straighter and his face more alert, "Alright."

I take a breath, before sitting down in the chair across from him, "The meeting that Foley set up with you and Ken for a new marketing campaign was done under false pretenses. The work he would present to you as his is actually mine, and I can prove it."

Uncle Murph studies my face, then asks, "How do you know about his meeting and what it entails?"

"The printer in our area wasn't working, so I went next door to accounting to see if I could use one of theirs. One of the accountants told me that I couldn't use the check printer and that the other printer was being used by Mr. Foley to print off documents for his big meeting tomorrow with Ken and the other upper management staff. She said it was some big thing that Mr. Foley has been working on, hoping to get a promotion.

What you might not know is that we have been in some sort of dating relationship, and I thought I would be kind and take him his papers, maybe offer some encouragement for his presentation. When I saw the documents on the printer, I knew exactly what they were and when I took them to him, he said he was just making edit suggestions for me. I may be naïve, but I am not an idiot."

"Your proof?"

I motion to the files stacked on the side table, "Those are all the hard copies of my project along with my project journal where I tracked all of my progress and thought process. There are electronic copies that are stamped with times and dates that I can guarantee he does not have. I can also guarantee that his version is not to par with mine; not by a long shot."

Uncle Murph picks up the files and starts going through them. After some time, Aunt Jean looks between us and then asks, "What is it that you want dear?"

"Professionally, I want credit for what is mine."

Uncle Murphy meets my gaze, "And personally?"

"Personally?" I pause, thinking of all the possible things I want to do. I settle on, "a fight. I want to run my version against his and prove that mine is better. Not to him, but to you, Ken, and everyone else at that meeting."

"Will you be ready by tomorrow?"

"Yes sir."

My uncle smiles proudly at me, "The meeting is at 1pm, sharp. Is there anything you need to help you prepare?"

I pull the necklace off the table and hold it against the firelight, "The name of a good jeweler."

The next day, I get to the conference room a few minutes early. I'm setting up my presentation when I hear a confused male voice come from behind me, "Casey?"

I turn around and see him standing by the door, "Hello Wilder."

He flinches again and I can see the panic in his eyes as he hurries over toward me, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to pitch my marketing campaign idea against yours," before he can speak, I loosen my purple scarf from around my neck, "Man, it is warm in here."

His eyes are fixed on my neck where a sapphire heart rests against my skin. I smile as sweetly as I can, "Do you like it? I think it's perfect for me."

"What happened to the ruby?"

I shrug, "Turns out it was a fake." Uncle Murph and other members of the management staff start filing in. As I go over to greet them, I spot the look on Wilder Foley's face. Now I know what a snake charmer looks like when their snake has bitten them.