

CHAPTER ONE

Grinch

Karen. It's not a hard name to remember, yet the barista at Starbucks decides to write a different name on my drink order. This small act of ineptitude leads to some confusion as I wait with the throngs of fellow caffeine seekers for our drinks to be ready.

While we wait, we are treated to the cheery sounds of Mariah Carey screeching one of her godawful cheery Christmas tunes. The music is turned up so loud that the green aproned employee calling out names has to scream so he can be heard over the self-proclaimed Queen of Christmas belt out, "All I want for Christmas is you." Seriously, all I want for Christmas is for it to be over already. I can't take the long lines, the false gratitude, and the intense pressure to buy those thoughtful extra special gifts for people I barely know—that includes family.

"Erin?" shouts a green aproned employee.

When no one comes to claim the steaming cup of salvation being offered from the altar of overpriced java, he ups the volume screams the name like a deaf kid who

got separated from his mother while she shopped the intimates section at Sears. Of course he has to scream—anyone would have to over Maria’s piercing vocals, but in addition to “Erin” he shouts, “Double half calf venti almond with extra foam.”

Good God, that’s my order. I see no one else going to claim it so I close my eyes, take a deep breath to center myself, and approach Mr. Green Apron. Through a clenched jaw I say, “My name is Karen.”

Green apron turns around to confirm with the barista that it’s indeed my drink in his hands. Upon confirmation, he offers an apology and I grab the drink and walk out the door.

My blood pressure is already raised and that was only my first significant human-to-human interaction this morning. If I were an optimist I’d say it could only get better from here, but I’m not—I know there are plenty of forthcoming opportunities for the day to go sideways.

Like the other pedestrians crossing eighth avenue on west twenty-first street, I stare at my phone and, since I’m not paying attention, I don’t notice the dog I’m about to walk into until it’s almost too late. Fortunately, catastrophe is averted and both Karen and K-9 are unscathed.

The dog, a golden retriever who looks to be healthy, is wearing a set of reindeer antlers and doesn’t appear to belong to anyone in the area. I continue walking west and it follows me. Now, I don’t like dogs, but dogs like me and I’m worried that this one will follow me through Chelsea until I get to my office at twenty-first and tenth.

When I get a “Don’t Walk” signal at ninth avenue, the dog stops right next to me. I look down to see if it has any tags and it takes this as an invitation to stick its nose up my

crotch. Whoa buddy, we just met and I'm not that kind of girl, you gotta buy me dinner first, or at least compliment my hair—if it only knew how much I spent to keep the grays out of my curly brunette hair.

Once we get a “Walk” signal, I see a guy walking towards our direction who he appears to be shouting something as he bobs his head around; either he's shadow boxing or looking for something—I'm hoping it's my new four legged crotch diving friend. As we get closer to him, I can make out what he's saying, “Jingle.” He's a full ‘shout over Mariah a Starbucks’ volume, and the dog hears him and runs towards him.

Once I get close enough, I see that he's cute, very cute and I'm glad I'm having a good hair day—I feel like Kelly Lebrock in those old Pantene commercials, don't hate me because I'm beautiful.

“I take it this is your dog?” I make the first move because I've learned that some guys are too intimidated by my Nancy Kerrigan-esque beauty to make the first move. That's a joke, I'm not that conceited—if I were, I'd have picked a more relevant celebrity to compare myself to. That said, in 1994, I was approached by a casting agent, who happened to be visiting his daughter on my college campus, about playing the former Olympian in what he said was going to be a straight to video movie. I told him I'd consider it, but later heard through the grapevine that the guy made low budget skin flicks. Had I followed up, I just might have been in Baton Babes on Ice.

No, I made first contact because I'm a confident woman who can't afford to wait for a guy to start a conversation.

“Yes. I'm sorry if he bothered you, he darted away as I

was putting is leash on.”

Now we are standing face to face and I see that he’s probably around my age, maybe a little younger, and has rugged features, as if he’s used to working outside—he stands out like a sore thumb here in Chelsea where any manual labor done by the boys on these streets is purely by mistake.

“I’m Noel,” he says while offering an outstretched hand. I shake it and our eyes meet—damnit he has blue eyes, my downfall.

“Karen,” I reply. His hand is calloused, as if he’s used to working with them. I can’t take my eyes off his blue daggers. God help me.

“Is there any way I can thank you for finding Jingle over here? I don’t know what I’d do without him, he’s my service dog. The Army gave him to me when I came home from the middle east.”

So that’s it, he’s a veteran, though my bullshit detector is now humming—I’ve never heard of a Golden Retriever being a service dog, except, of course, in Fairfield County, Connecticut, but we are in Manhattan. Plus, the dog doesn’t seem to like him, it’s kind of like they just met.

“It was really nothing, I only ran into him a block east of here.” I decide to let my curiosity into his breed of service dog slide because I really have to get to work. “Look, I apologize, but I have a morning meeting I need to get to.”

“Well Karen, maybe you can help me with something.” He ignores my attempt to cut our conversation short, I wonder if that’s an indicator of interest or if he really needs something. I guess I’ll stick around for a minute and find out.

“What’s that?”

“Do you know anyone who’d want to go on a road trip from here down the east coast and spend Christmas in Florida?”

The blank expression on my face must have given away my shock at being asked such a question.

“I knew it was a long shot, but you see, I’m fulfilling a promise I made to the guys under my command overseas. Once they heard I was getting discharged in November, they asked me to deliver some letters and gifts to their families. Since my parents have passed, and I have no siblings, I thought it would be a great way to spend the holidays. I just delivered the first one here in New York, but because of Jingle over here, I can’t fly from city to city playing Santa for my guys, as airlines are tightening up rules around service animals. Plus, I’m a little low on funds—the Army doesn’t exactly overpay its officers.”

Am I being Punk’d? Is this guy for real? Who the hell does this? It sounds like the plot of one of those terrible Hallmark movies—this is right up Tom Cavanaugh’s alley! I wonder who would play me, maybe Candace Cameron Bure. She pumps out like eight of those movies a year—she’s the Octomom of Hallmark.

If you want to know why I know so much about Hallmark, I’ll tell you—I was engaged to a guy who was a Christmas nut. It’s all we watched between Thanksgiving and Christmas. The things you do for love.

“I admire what you are doing, but I don’t know anyone who has a car here in New York, let alone someone who’d be up for a coastal road trip this close to Christmas.” This guy’s probably insane, blue daggers notwithstanding.

“Well, I knew it was a long shot but give me your

number and I'll text you so that you have mine, you know, just in case you think of anyone."

It dawns on me that this guy may have made up this entire story just to exchange numbers, if so, he's a smooth operator.

"Okay," I acquiesce and give him my number. Once I get his, I store him in my address book under Sade.

"Good luck, Noel."

"Have a great day, Karen," he says while a wide smile on his face. Jingle adds a bark to complete our goodbyes, though I wonder if it's a cry for help. I leave G.I. Joe and Jingle behind and walk a block over to my office.

Well my second human to human interaction wasn't so bad—it certainly helped me forget about the nonsense at Starbucks. Let's see if that lasts when I walk into work.

Hey NY! has become one of the most popular resources for what's hot in news, food, and entertainment in New York City and, at forty-four, I'm the oldest person on staff—all of my colleagues are thirty-five or younger with the vast majority being under thirty. These generational differences lead to friction; the kids don't understand why I do things such as come in on time and chose to talk on the phone over electronic forms of communication and I don't understand why they have to celebrate every little thing that happens in each employee's life—the office literally bought a cake for a twenty-two year old who rescued a dog from a shelter. As of yesterday, eight employees had "Who rescued who" stickers on their laptops. One actually purchased a savings bond in the dog's name, I shit you not. I'm not sure how they managed to do that without a social security number, but I also didn't care enough to ask.

I oversee the site's gossip column—it's my job to know who's doing what and who's doing who when it comes to anything celebrity in NY, which is pretty awesome not just because I get to meet a ton of A-Listers, but because most of my work day is actually spent outside of the office; it's hard to be in the know about celebrity gossip by sitting behind a desk all day. I have a strong network of sources who I meet with throughout the day and an equally strong nightlife routine that has helped me deliver the goods.

I'm particularly excited about one piece I'm working on—a big time actor's phone was recently hacked and there are pictures with him ploughing his nanny. With my own eyes I saw them in a very compromising position—I believe it's called *Splitting the Bamboo* in Kama Sutra terms. Hey, don't judge me, I was given a copy as a gift for my bridal shower, not that I ever got a chance to try it out—my would be husband left me at the altar. So much for the fairy tale Christmastime wedding he always dreamed of. Sorry for the digression, I have a lead on getting an interview with his first nanny to see if this is a habitual behavior or a one off—my bet is he's a repeat offender, I always pegged him as a dirtbag.

As I walk in through the doors of my building, I'm greeted by the friendly face that of Paul Burns, security guard extraordinaire. Paul greets everyone who walks through the door by name with an enthusiasm that rivals only that of a college kid going door to door selling magazines so that he can earn enough money to go on spring break in Panama City. Well, I've been to Panama City and the nickname Redneck Rivera is spot on. My advice, up your game, sell more magazines, and save up for Cabo.

“Good morning Ms. Grant. How was your weekend?”

“Too long, Paul,” I reply as I wave my badge over a card reader. Once the security gate opens, I walk through and head towards the elevator bank.

He starts to laugh as if I replied with a joke. Actually, I’m serious, the weekend was too long—I’m a workaholic if there ever was one, particularly this time of year where work diverts my attention from everything Christmas. Oh, if it isn’t clear yet, I hate Christmas.

I don’t keep it a secret that I hate Christmas. I trace my hatred of the holiday back to when I was four years old, as Christmas Day 1978 was the day my father decided it was a good time to leave the family. Michael Grant was a motivational speaker who got caught motivating Holly, his secretary, on his desk during an office holiday party. My mother was tipped off to his infidelity on Christmas Eve that year and offered dad an ultimatum—the secretary or her. When I woke up Christmas morning, dad was gone, having effectively chosen Holly Bush over my mother—I know what you are thinking, that can’t be her real name. The truth is, I have no idea what her last name is, but Bush works, don’t you think?

Now, I associate every image of Christmas with the breakup of my family and the end of my engagement. This includes the red cup I’m holding in my hand—I’d cut Starbucks out of my life during the holidays, but I’m an addict and addicts are just fine rationalizing their behavior. I’m no different, but I’ll reinforce that I drink my Starbucks in spite of the red cup, not because of it. I’d change my name to Scrooge and move to Pottersville if there was such a place—seriously, it looks like a lot more fun than Bedford Falls.

The elevator drops me off on the fifth floor and I walk into the open space that is the *Hey NY!* office. Aside from Mandy Murdock, our twenty-eight year old fiery red headed editor-in-chief, I'm the only one here.

The social guide she started as a college student at New York University caught fire and she's now at the top of New York's thirty under thirty list for entrepreneurs. We don't see eye to eye on everything, but I have a lot of respect for Mandy and try to mentor her whenever I can.

She encourages public debate in the office and constantly reinforces her personal philosophy that we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously. As such, everyone is called by a nickname; hers is Ginger due to the color of her hair and mine is Grinch, for obvious reasons.

"I can always count on you to be early, Grinch," she doesn't look up from her laptop when she speaks to me. As she reads whatever is on her screen, her lips are pursed together in a scowl, making me wonder why her resting bitch face is in full force so early on a Monday.

"You know what they say, Ginger, early to bed and early to rise, makes a woman healthy, wealthy, and wise."

She looks up and I can tell she is clearly confused and I realize that she likely has never seen the movie *Airplane*, from which I just quoted.

"Movie quote, *Airplane*."

"My dad loves that movie," she replies and then offers, "you want a coffee?"

I hold up the red cup with the name Erin printed on it. "Sure, but I never have a second cup of coffee at home."

"*Airplane* again?" she asks.

"Bingo."

"Walk with me to the Keurig, there's something I want

to talk about before we meet as a team.”

She’s strictly business this morning so I know something’s up.

We walk across the office towards our small kitchen area and Ginger dumps the coffee in her mug and gets ready for a refill.

“I loved the piece you did on Ariana Grande’s breakup with Pete Davidson. He’s a fucking weirdo, I don’t know what she saw in him.”

Amanda swears. A lot. I’ve encouraged her to clean up her language as the workplace should be more professional, but she doesn’t listen to me on that particular issue. Fuck her if she won’t take my advice.

I know, though, that she doesn’t really want to talk gossip so I push her towards being direct. “Cut the bullshit, Ginger. What’s going on?”

“I’m making some changes to *Hey NY!* and on one of them impacts you. That’s what I’m going to focus on during the Monday morning meeting.”

“What kind of changes?” I ask.

Shit, am I getting fired a week before Christmas? I mean, I would totally believe that and it would fit perfectly with my hating Christmas narrative, but it would totally suck as there aren’t a ton of jobs out there for anyone over forty—and I’m not what you might call independently wealthy. I need this job.

“I’ve taken on a new investor who wants to see us run more human interest stories about New Yorkers. We’ve decided to make a pivot with the gossip column, so instead of writing about celebrities fucking, we want you to uncork the stories of everyday New Yorkers.”

It’s hard to hide the disappointment from my face and it

feels like an eternity passes before any sounds come out of my mouth.

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“Consider that a challenge, an opportunity for you to live your own truth.”

Live my own truth? What the fuck is she talking about?

“Seriously, I’d be happy for you to take it on a trial basis. If it doesn’t work out, then we can talk options. Sound good?”

Where the hell do millennials get their management skills from, *Leadership for Dummies*?

“Yeah, Ginger, sounds great. Thanks for thinking of me.”

Mandy smiles and walks away to greet the employees who just came in off the elevator. I’m left wondering how the hell I am going to pull this off.