



THE COWORKER



NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**FREIDA
MCFADDEN**

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Cover design by theBookDesigners.

For Sheldon

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Prologue

ONE DAY EARLIER

To: Seth Hoffman
From: Dawn Schiff
Subject: IMPORTANT

To Seth,

A sensitive matter has come to my attention that I must discuss with you urgently. I would like to request a scheduled meeting with you in your office at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Dawn Schiff

To: Dawn Schiff
From: Seth Hoffman
Subject: Re: IMPORTANT

Okay, sure. Come by my office.

To: Seth Hoffman

From: Dawn Schiff
Subject: Re: IMPORTANT

To Seth,

I would prefer to have a scheduled appointment to ensure that you will be present at the time of the meeting, and that we have adequate time to discuss some potentially upsetting information that I feel compelled to share with you. I do not wish to have an in-depth discussion interrupted by a prior commitment, or worse, arrive at your office only to find you are not there at all. I would feel much more comfortable with a scheduled appointment. I can check your calendar and cross-reference it with my own, and come up with six potential appointment times in the next 48 hours when it would be convenient for both of us to meet, and you can highlight two of those times that work best for you, and we can agree on a final time that is mutually convenient.

Sincerely,

Dawn Schiff

To: Dawn Schiff
From: Seth Hoffman
Subject: Re: IMPORTANT

How's tomorrow at 2?

To: Seth Hoffman
From: Dawn Schiff
Subject: Re: IMPORTANT

Here are the details for our scheduled meeting:

Location: Seth Hoffman's office

Time: 2:00 PM

I have added it to my calendar.

Sincerely,

Dawn Schiff

Part I

Chapter One

PRESENT DAY

NATALIE

DAWN ISN'T at her desk this morning when I walk into the office, which means the world is coming to an end.

I'm joking. Obviously, the world is not coming to an end. But if you knew Dawn, you would get it.

For the last nine months, Dawn Schiff has occupied the cubicle next to mine at Vixed, the nutritional supplement company where we both work. You could set your watch by her routines. 8:45, she's at her desk. 10:15, she takes a bathroom break. 11:45, she goes to the break room and has her lunch. 2:30 is another bathroom break. And at five o'clock sharp, she shuts down her computer and leaves for the day. If there were some sort of apocalyptic event in which all timepieces in the world were lost, we could all get back on schedule just by watching when Dawn went to the bathroom. Down to the *second*.

I usually arrive at work somewhere in the thirty-minute window between eight-thirty and nine. Well, nine-ish. If all the stars align, I make it by 8:30. But even though I swear I put my keys in the exact same place every day, on the table right by the front door, sometimes during the night they get up and walk away somewhere. And then I have to look for them.

Or else I hit traffic. So much traffic. Dorchester Avenue is a parking lot during rush-hour.

This morning, the lights were not in my favor, but the traffic was sparse, so at ten minutes to nine, I step into the large office space that

houses Vixed. I walk through the rows of identical cubicles stuffed into the center of the room, my red heels clicking against the linoleum floor, the fluorescent lights flickering above my head. As I pass by Dawn's cubicle on the way to my own, my hand already raised in greeting, I stop short.

The cubicle is empty.

As strange as Dawn's schedule is, it's even stranger that today she isn't following it. I can't help but think that Dawn's absence must signify something ominous. After all, Dawn is never late. *Never*.

"Natalie! Hey, Nat! Guess what!"

I rip my eyes away from Dawn's cubicle at the sound of Kim's voice. She's skipping down the aisle of cubicles, her tanned face glowing.

Kim Healey is my best friend at work, which sadly means that she's my best friend in general since work has increasingly become my entire life. She got back from her honeymoon two weeks ago and has the most spectacular tan as well as highlights in her formerly dark brown hair—she even still smells slightly like sand and sunscreen. She looks fantastic and I'm so happy for her. And I'm only like ten percent jealous. Really—I genuinely wish her all the happiness in the world, as I said in my slightly drunken wedding toast.

I rake my eyes over Kim's black and white patterned Ann Taylor dress, noting a telltale bulge. "You're pregnant!" I gasp.

The smile instantly drops off her face. "*No*. I'm *not* pregnant. Why would you say that?" She tugs at the tie cinched above her waist. "Do you think this dress makes me look fat?"

"No! Oh, Kim, of course not!" In my defense, the way she said *guess what* really made it sound like she had a baby announcement. Women my age seem to be announcing pregnancies left and right lately—it seems like the only exciting news anyone has to share—and she *did* recently get back from her honeymoon. "Not at *all*. I'm so sorry I said that. I just thought..."

Kim is still tugging at her dress self-consciously. "You must have said that for a reason."

I mentally smack myself in the head. "I didn't—I swear. And anyway, *everyone* puts on a couple of pounds on their honeymoon. It totally suits you."

But she isn't even listening. She's too busy craning her neck, trying to look at her own butt.

I clear my throat. "So, um, what did you want to tell me?"

"Oh." She manages a tiny smile, her initial enthusiasm dampened. "The T-shirts came. I put them in the conference room."

Ooh, that *is* good news! I follow Kim to the conference room, and sure

enough, there's a slightly dented brown cardboard box waiting in the corner. I run right over and pry open the flaps. "Did you look?"

"I sifted through. Didn't do a full count."

I rifle through the box stuffed with T-shirts and pull one out. It's teal in color, and all the necessary information is there. 5K charity run. Benefiting cerebral palsy research. The shirt in my hand is a medium, and it looks about right. I was nervous about the timing—the T-shirts were supposed to arrive last week, and it's already Tuesday. The charity run I'm organizing is on Saturday.

"They look gorgeous, Nat," Kim breathes. She has been such an amazing cheerleader in organizing this run—I couldn't have done it without her. "We can pass them out later in the morning, when everyone is here."

I nod, relieved this is coming together as planned. "By the way," I add, "do you know if Dawn called out sick?"

Kim holds a T-shirt up to her chest, smoothing it out over her abdomen, which still looks a bit like a baby bump to me. "No. Why?"

"Well, she's not here."

"So? She's running late."

"You don't understand." I drop the T-shirts back into the cardboard box. "Dawn is never late. *Never*. Not once the whole time she's worked here. She's always here at 8:45."

Kim looks down at her watch and then back up at me like I've lost my mind. "So she's twenty minutes late. So what?"

It's strange behavior for Dawn. On top of that, there's something else I haven't shared with Kim. Yesterday afternoon, Dawn sent me an odd email asking if I could talk to her at the end of the workday about a "matter of great importance." But I was out on a sales call most of the afternoon, and when I got back to the office, she was already gone.

A matter of great importance. I wonder if that was about...

No. Probably not.

"I hope she's okay." I shake my head. "Maybe she got into a car accident."

Kim snickers. "Or maybe she was finally committed."

"Stop it," I murmur. "That's mean."

"Come on. She's a weirdo and you know it as well as anyone. You're the one who has to sit next to her."

"She's not so bad..."

"Not so bad!" Kim bursts out. "It's like sharing the office with a robot. And what's with her obsession with turtles? Like, who is that into *turtles*?"

Okay, I'm not going to say Dawn isn't a little strange. Or even very strange. There are times when people at the company make fun of her behind her back. And yes, she does like turtles more than any fully grown adult rightfully should. But she's a very nice person. If they got to know her a little better, they would be nicer to her.

Not that I know her very well. I always meant to ask her to dinner sometime, but I never got around to it. A couple of weeks ago as we were riding down in the elevator on Friday evening, I casually asked her if she had any plans and she looked shocked by the question. *Just having dinner at home. Alone.* I would have asked her to join me for dinner, but I was meeting my boyfriend, and it would have been weird if she tagged along.

I'm going to invite her out to dinner. For sure. Just as soon as the 5K is over.

"Anyway, I better get back to work." Kim glances down at her watch. "I'm not Miss Saleswoman of the Month like somebody else here..."

My cheeks color slightly. My sales are admittedly better than anyone else at the company, but I work my butt off for it. "You got married this month. You have an excuse this time for the low sales."

"Yeah, yeah." Kim shrugs because she doesn't really care that much. Her new husband is loaded. At some point in the near future, she'll be pregnant for real, and when that happens, she'll quit and never look back. "Anyway, good luck with the T-shirts. I'll see you later."

After Kim takes off, possibly in the direction of her cubicle, but more likely in the direction of the break room to get her third or fourth cup of coffee of the morning, I close the flaps of the box of T-shirts and head back to my cubicle. When I get there, I notice something on my desk that I hadn't seen before.

It's a turtle figurine.

It's small—no longer than the length of my index finger. It's green and blue in color, the geometric patterns on its shell shining in the overhead fluorescent lights. Its head is lifted, and its beady black eyes stare up at me.

A while back, Dawn excitedly presented me with a turtle figurine for my cubicle. It was so sweet of her, and I felt terrible when the turtle she bought me toppled to the linoleum floor and shattered into a dozen tiny pieces. But that turtle was never replaced. And it was different from this turtle on my desk right now.

I pick up the turtle figurine and roll it between my fingers, feeling the smooth surface. What is this turtle doing here? Who put it here?

Was it Dawn?

But it couldn't be. When I got back to the office yesterday at the end of the day, she was already gone. And she doesn't seem to be here yet. So how could she have put this turtle on my desk?

When I rest the turtle back on my desk, there's a stain on my fingers. Something dark red rubbed off on my hand when I picked up the turtle. I stare down at my palm, trying to figure out what I just touched. It can't be paint, since the turtle is green. Ketchup?

No, it couldn't be. It's too dark in color and not sticky with sugar. And it doesn't have that sweet smell. It smells almost... metallic.

What *is* this stuff?

As I'm examining the dark red material that has caked into the grooves of my fingerprints, I am vaguely aware of a phone ringing nearby. Coming from Dawn's cubicle.

I return to Dawn's cubicle, hovering by the entrance. It's still empty. Is it possible she came in earlier this morning and is in the bathroom or something? She must be here, and she must've been the one who put this little turtle on my desk, even though her jacket isn't hanging on the back of her chair. And her computer screen is dark—no screensaver, just black.

The phone on her desk is still ringing. Usually, the caller's number flashes on the screen, but it's not this time. It's a blocked number.

I snatch the phone off the hook. It isn't my job to answer her phone, but if she is out sick today, I could at least try to take care of any issues that have come up. I'm sure Dawn would do the same for me. She always tries to help other people, almost to a fault.

I wonder what it was she wanted to talk to me about yesterday. A *matter of great importance*. Coming from Dawn, that could mean just about anything, from a dirty milk carton in the fridge to a terminal cancer diagnosis. There's no reason to worry.

"Dawn Schiff's desk," I answer.

There is silence on the other line. It almost sounds like ragged breathing.

"Hello?" I say. "Is anyone there?"

More silence. Just when I'm about to hang up, two words are spoken in a tortured female voice that send an icy chill down my spine:

"Help me."

And then the line goes dead.

Chapter Two

I STARE at the dead receiver, a sick feeling growing in the pit of my stomach.

Help me.

It sounded a lot like Dawn, although I can't be absolutely sure from just two words. But whoever it was, they sounded hysterical. Panicked.

Help me.

And then the dead line, which has now turned into a dial tone.

I toyed with the possibility that something was wrong when Dawn was late this morning, but I didn't genuinely believe it was anything serious. Was I wrong? Has something terrible happened to Dawn?

Is she in danger?

I reach into my purse for my phone. I select Dawn's name from my contacts and click on her number. It rings several times and then I hear the monotone of her voice:

You have reached the cellular phone of Dawn Schiff. I am not available to answer your call at this time. At the beep, please leave your name, a callback number, an alternate contact number, and your reason for contacting me.

I decide against leaving a message. Instead, I shoot off a text message:

Hey Dawn, everything okay?

I watch the screen, waiting for the little bubbles to indicate she's typing. They don't appear.

I've got to do something. I've got to talk to Seth.

Seth Hoffman has been the manager of the Dorchester branch of Vixed since before I started working here. Seth and I have an understanding—he gives me a long rope, and I kick ass at sales. It's nice having a boss who

isn't up in my business all the time about every penny I spend on my customers and makes me account for every nanosecond of my time. I'm sure it would be different if I didn't get results, but Seth trusts me.

I rap on the door to Seth's office, which is already partially ajar. He does have a secretary, but she's sort of the secretary for everyone, and she doesn't monitor who goes in and comes out of his office. So when he calls out for me to come in, I go right on in.

When Kim and I started working here, we used to giggle about how cute our boss was. Seth is now in his mid-forties—fifteen years my senior—but he's got a youthful look. He has lines around his eyes that crinkle when he smiles, a sprinkling of gray hair in his temples that suits him, and while he always wears a tie, it's never quite cinched all the way to his throat.

"Hey, Nat," he says when he sees it's me. "What's up? Everything okay?"

"Not exactly..." I hover in front of Seth's desk, wanting to share my concerns with him, but not wanting to sound like I'm overreacting. "Did Dawn call out sick today?"

His dark eyebrows shoot up. "No. She didn't. Why? She's not here?"

Like me, Seth must know that Dawn operates like she's controlled by a master clock. "I haven't seen her."

"Huh," he says.

Damn. I had been hoping she had called him. Told him she had a sick grandma and she wouldn't be in for the day. "I called her and she didn't pick up. And also..."

He frowns. "Also what?"

"Dawn's phone was ringing and I picked it up. And the person on the other line said, 'Help me.'"

Seth nods. "Okay, so what did they need help with? Did they need information on one of the products? Was it a customer complaint?"

"No, you don't understand. It sounded like they were in trouble and needed help. I... I think it was Dawn."

"So... she's having car trouble or something? Did she tell you what she needed help with?"

"No..." I squeeze my hands together. "She just said 'help me' and hung up."

"Oh." The expression on his face betrays a distinct lack of concern. He doesn't look even the slightest bit worried. "Well, just call her back and ask what she needs help with."

"I have. She's not picking up."