

*“A woman has got to love a bad man once or twice in her life
to be thankful for a good one.” – Mae West*

THE HUNTING

By Kerry Peresta

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PROLOGUE

There is just one man at the bar, sitting in the darkest, most lonely corner of it, nursing a drink. I gaze around the room, looking for the mystery man I'd arranged to meet. I order a glass of wine as I wait and move toward the empty stools. Maybe he's running late.

The bartender works his way over, stops in front of me and smiles.

"What'll it be tonight, Izzy?"

"A pinot, I think. Do you have Bearboat?"

"Yep." He plucks a bottle from the shelves behind the bar, deftly uncorks, and pours. "Give it a sec, Izzy."

I nod, wait impatiently for the wine to breathe. Turning the stool around, I scan the bar in case the man appears. After a few minutes, I swirl and sniff, then sip. Heaven in a glass.

The man who had been sitting alone at the far end of the bar pushes off his stool and walks toward me. My eyes lock on his face as he emerges from the dark. The scene unfolds eerily, like something from an old Hitchcock movie.

I clutch the stem of the wine glass like a security blanket and lift it to my mouth. The disgust I feel spikes as he pulls out a stool and sits beside me. The stench of cheap cologne curls up my nose. He must have freshened it since our meeting at the office. I still feel the sting of his words.

"Understandable that you are upset, Izzy. We need to clear the air, I think."

I turn my head toward him, my lips a firm line. "I agree," I spit out. "But this is not the time. I'm meeting someone in a few minutes. So can we talk about this at the office tomorrow?"

Twin rows of perfectly straight, white teeth blaze through the dim lighting. "Nope. We're gonna talk about it right now. Who you waiting for, by the way?"

"My business. We've had this discussion."

His grin does not diminish by a single kilowatt. "Yeah. We have. However, the discussion is ongoing." A beat of silence, then he continues.

"Dreamsicle."

The dread starts at my toes and slithers the entire vertical length of my body. My brain, a hiccup or two behind the dread, snags the realization I've been had. An impromptu prayer pops into my head before I can argue with myself that it never works

I turn to him, my tongue finally loosed, mad as hell. "You? *You*? What are

you thinking? This breaks every privacy law ever legislated, for Pete's sake! This is . . . this is . . . *unspeakable!*"

The smile falters, then disappears. His eyes, in the murky light, are unblinking. Reptilian.

"Izzy, you and I have some business to process together." His lips press close to my ear and he whispers, "For Chrissakes, you treat me like a leper. It's going to stop. *Now.*"

My hand reaches instinctively to cover my ear and he backs away. The moistness of the whispered words lingers. I rub my ear and put my hand back in my lap.

My hand still clenches the stem of the wine glass. I am afraid I will break it, so I unwrap my fingers, nestle the globe instead, and drink. The glass makes a soft clink when I set it down. I focus my eyes behind the bar. My mind spins furiously. Doesn't this fall under the realm of predatory? How does one go about proving it?

CHAPTER 1

Izzy

I tell myself the late night had been worth it. The date had turned out to be a disaster, I'd missed my alarm this morning and my kids had been upset and snarky before they'd left for school, but let's look at the bright side. I can cross one more guy off the list.

Dabbing concealer on the dark half-moons under my eyes in morning rush hour traffic, I strive, but fail, to keep my Honda in the lane. I ignore the angry honks of startled motorists, and correct my course with one knee. I screech into the *Sentinel's* parking lot a few minutes late, swipe on tinted lip gloss as a final nod to looking presentable, grab my purse and speed-walk into the building, hoping my hair is not sticking out in all directions.

The ancient elevator in the lobby, a dubious attempt at historic preservation in the heart of downtown Chatbrook Springs, creaks from the third floor to the first when I push the button. The doors take a full four seconds to open. I wonder, as I step in, why I don't just run up the stairs to save time. Leaping out of the elevator before the doors fully open, I toss my purse on my desk conveniently located exactly two steps away, and thread my way through the maze of cubicles to the corner conference room.

"Hey, Iz!" My assistant yells at me across 20,000 square feet of industrial carpeting divided into two workspaces by a wide strip of ugly linoleum. I spin around on one foot. He lifts a fresh ad proof he has retrieved from the production department, unfurls, and points to it.

I squint at it, and him, nod vigorously, then lift my hand in the classic thumb-and-forefinger circle, which translates as *Go ahead and clear it*.

The other assistants sprinkled throughout the room smile at the exchange, glancing at each other and the moon-faced clock on the wall. I huff an exasperated sigh. Single parents have a little more to do in the mornings than some people.

A recently hired young assistant with a shocking splash of orange in her hair approaches, her hand motioning me closer. "Just so you know, Phil hasn't made it in yet," she whispers. She smiles, winks, and continues to lay piles of advertising proofs on the desks of appropriate sales staff.

I smile at her. "Thanks, um . . ."

"Amy," she finishes. She tilts her head in the direction of the conference room door. "Better go on in before he gets here. Most everyone else is already in there."

I enter the conference room quietly, thinking the world needs more Amys. I leave the door ajar for Phil, and look for a seat.

“Izzy!” I squint at the back row where a hand is wagging to alert me to an available spot above the heads of the twenty-five-ish salespeople already seated. Heads bob up, note my arrival, shout out a few *heys* and *good mornings*. The room smells of freshly starched shirts, coffee, aftershave, intermingled perfumes.

The door abruptly opens, and Phil, the Advertising Director of the *Chatbrook Springs Sentinel*, strides into the room, a laptop under one arm. I scurry toward the hand that is still wagging at me and plop down. “Barely made it this time, Izzy,” she murmurs, grinning.

“Yeah, whatever. Didn’t even have time to get coffee.”

“Why would you want to?” she says, acknowledging the consensus that the *Sentinel’s* coffee – though free – is completely disgusting.

“Right,” I say. “You’re absolutely right. Habit, I guess.”

Phil scans the room with managerial eyes, quickly digesting who is in attendance and who is not. Woe be to those who are not, his eyes say. His mouth is a tight line, which tells me the sales meeting is probably not going to be a pleasant experience. He punches his laptop to life, and a PowerPoint slide appears. He nods to one of the front-row sitters to turn off the lights, then turns toward us.

“Good morning, people!” We respond with the obligatory pleasantries. He continues, “Got some trending information and some demographic research fresh from the statistics department.” He walks around the conference table at the front of the room to stand before us, his wide-legged, hands-clasped-behind-his-back stance familiar. He wears the manager’s uniform: heavily starched, expensive white shirt, fashion-forward tie, suit trousers. His suit jacket, I know, has been carefully placed on a hanger in his office closet. Office casual is not tolerated at the *Chatbrook Springs Sentinel*, a respected and award-winning newspaper.

The conference room holds forty standard vinyl and metal chairs, eight around a wood-veneered conference table reserved for senior sales team members or visiting associates from different departments. The remaining chairs are pushed together in four tidy rows of eight each, facing the conference table.

I’m glad I am in the back row, because I am having trouble keeping my eyes open. Maybe I can slouch down and get a nap since Phil has doused the lights. My stomach is queasy, compliments of the two large glasses of wine I’d had last night, and I am not in the best mood.

Phil turns, retrieves a pile of booklets, and passes them to a couple of salespeople in the front row, indicating everyone is to receive a copy. With a flick of his index finger, charts appear on the dry erase board attached to the wall which doubles as a handy presentation screen. Phil pulls a laser pointer out of his

shirt pocket and a green dot hovers uncertainly over a series of brightly colored, vertical rectangles.

“This is where we were last year.” The green dot slides to its neighbor rectangle, a shorter vertical. “*This* is where we are this year. The booklets you’ve just received are filled with statistics and results of demographic studies of our primary circulation area.”

He pauses as we leaf through our booklets. “Use it on sales calls when you reach out to your clients, or develop new relationships.” His face flits through several expressions, none of them encouraging, and he continues, “*Don’t* let your clients tell you their advertising budgets are going to online media, *prove* to them that print is doing just fine! Yes, our circulation is dropping, but we’re still the best bang for the buck! Talk about our credibility. Focus on the integrity and reputation of printed media. An online presence is cheap for a reason! In order to work, it must be augmented with print.” He slides his laser pointer back into his pocket, turns toward us, and assumes the commander-in-chief stance.

“Augment, people. Augment! That’s the word of the day.”

I open one eye and try to ignore the strings of saliva that punctuate his more aggressive assertions.

“Look, people, the newspaper is not going away,” he continues. “We are experiencing a hit from all the web options out there, and maybe we have to adapt to a changing marketplace, but we can’t just *roll over*. Our web packages are an excellent value. Sell your customers into our online product and the print product. He grazes each face, his expression somber. “Comments? Suggestions? Questions?”

I fidget in my chair, uncomfortable with the pressure I feel in these blasted sales meetings. I glance around the room at the white cinderblock walls bearing posters that supposedly motivate: *Every no gets you closer to a YES!* and *Successful people never quit. They make mistakes, but they keep moving!* I can’t help but grin every time I read them. In light of three failed marriages, I have adopted them as personal mantras. Like last night. The guy was a huge *no*. However, every *no* gets me closer to the big *Yes*.

My neighbor pokes me in the ribs. “Izzy, pay attention!” she whispers. “Phil is looking straight at you!”

I sit up, force my eyelids fully open, and stare back. He gives me his patented hairy eyeball, then continues an energetic narrative, the green dot whizzing over several pie charts depicting missed sales goals by month. They are super-sized on the screen, as if his words have been spat out in bright colors and shapes. I glance at the associate sitting next to me. She stifles a giggle. The sales team is nearly immune to Phil’s haranguing, and we simply hang on until

the bitter end. I smile back at her and roll my eyes.

Phil concludes the meeting with a litany of barely-disguised threats if we are unable to meet our monthly quotas and attractive monetary incentives if we do. I perk up a little at the ‘monetary incentives’ part, and glance at a large, wooden plaque on the wall beside the posters.

Across the top, *Salesperson of the Year* is engraved in gold, and underneath are twelve slots reserved for names of team members that have won monthly quota sales contests. Eight of them are engraved, four are not. Two slots, January and June, bear my name, Isabelle Lewis. If I win one more month, I might be in the running for the biggest monetary incentive of the year.

I’m not ashamed to admit it. I am all about monetary incentives.



After the sales meeting, we single-file out, chat briefly, and within ten minutes are in our cubes perusing the newspapers folded neatly and laid on our desks each morning by our assistants. I am eyeing my grungy coffee mug and thinking about filling it when my landline rings. I do not recognize the number. It is a little early for clients to start calling.

“Izzy, *Sentinel*.” I am curt, perturbed that my morning newspaper-and-coffee-time has been interrupted.

“Hey, gorgeous!” a breathy voice whispers.

My body tenses. It’s the man I met last night, I think. “Umm, hey there . . . aaah . . .” I try to remember his name, already forgotten. It had been quite the forgettable experience.

“Jacob!” he asserts.

“*Jacob*, yes, how are you today? Thanks again for last night, and don’t worry about the little . . . thing – ”

“Yeah, that was weird, so terribly sorry about that, really, I thought I had paid that ticket, and oops!” His laughter creaks like a rusty hinge. “Figured I’d make it up to you. When are you free again?”

“Listen, um, Jacob . . . I am pretty busy right now with kid activities and the job, and I don’t think, um, that I should – ”

“Hold on a minute!” Jacob said, his voice becoming louder. “Already deciding not to get to know me because of one incident? You are not serious! I thought you were different, Izzy. I *explained* to you what happened.” He is nearly shouting by the end of this little rant.

“Your face went white as a sheet after you read the note, or ticket, or whatever it was,” I respond, my mind clutching at phrases that will placate. “I

thought you might be addressing some, um, issues, and that it may not be the best time for us, to, ah, go forward.” I cover my face with my hand, and hope no one is listening.

“It must be really great to be able to figure a person out in one meeting! I am sick of arrogant witches like you!”

I hold the phone away from my ear and stare at it, like it’s the phone that is crazy instead of the man. Who talks to a woman this way after one really lousy, ill-fated, date? After his car being towed, the grimy cab transport home at an ungodly hour, and a mystery note at the curb, did he really think I’d be overjoyed to go out with him again?

My cubicle-mate, Winston, eases into his desk beside mine in our pod, his hand holding a fresh mug of coffee. He notes my expression with raised eyebrows. I glance at him, and put the receiver back to my ear.

I take a minute to gather my thoughts, and listen to Jacob’s agitated breathing on the other end of the line. How do I manage to get myself in these situations?

“Well, maybe I’m *not* so different from the other arrogant witches you have met,” I say. “Good thing you won’t need to be seeing me again.” I quietly put down the receiver as he hurls further invective, his voice receding until there is blessed silence.

I force the call off my radar and focus my attention to the top of my desk where a pristine, freshly printed newspaper awaits my scrutiny. I unfold it, smooth the pages, and open to “Main News.” The pungent scent of ink on newsprint blooms.

I think for the thousandth time how great it is to have a job that actually *pays* me to drink coffee and read the paper every morning before I go out on sales calls to see my clients. Ostensibly, the paper is there so that I can make sure my ads have printed correctly, that no typos have slipped through and that they are placed in the correct section. Unostensibly, seasoned sales reps like me mainly drink coffee and enjoy scanning headlines and catching up on local news.

Winston bids me a chirpy good morning over the eight-inch pod-divide. He then places his reading glasses on his nose, smooths his tie, licks his thumb, and neatly turns the page of his newspaper.

I adore my pod-mate on several levels. For starters, he convinced the *Sentinel* to hire me when I was a desperate, newly divorced, broke, single mother of three young children eleven years ago when my first marriage died. He convinced upper management to hire me on sheer gut instinct, because at that time I had very little sales experience. I will *always* love him for that.

Winston has clear blue eyes, a closely trimmed white goatee that matches closely trimmed white hair, a penchant for bursting into songs he has written, and a light-hearted disdain for management.

“And how are we this fine day?” he asks.

“I’m fine, Winston. What’s happening in your world today?” I take in the pert bow tie that matches both his sport coat and the lanyard around his neck that holds his reading glasses. A driving beret hangs from a corner of his cubicle.

Winston turns another page, sips coffee, flips his glasses off his nose, and graces me with a distinctive knowing smile. I find Winston’s expressions entertaining. This one is vintage Sean Connery. He leans toward me on one elbow.

“Have you heard?” he whispers.

Winston’s voice tends to get hushed when he has juicy information. Must be really juicy this morning, I can barely hear him. “No! What?”

“Phil hired a new Retail Advertising Manager. He starts next week.” He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms.

“No kidding!” My mind careens through best- and worst-case scenarios around the implications, and I am silent a few beats.

“It’ll be okay.” Winston has an eerie ability to read my mind.

“Yeah, whatever,” I say, disgusted. “Last time this happened, look what we got!” I nod toward one of the manager’s offices that line an exterior wall.

Winston shrugs. “In God’s hands.” Winston is a Baptist, and his references to God always perk me up.

“Right. Okay. Well, who is it? Do you know anything about this guy? I’m assuming it’s a guy. . . ?”

“I do. Matter of fact, I used to handle his account many moons ago.” He pauses to let this sink in and strokes his chin dramatically. I cross my arms over my chest and give him a *c’mon, c’mon. c’mon*, stare.

“The man of the hour is none other than the infamous Birdie Costanza. Used to be one of our biggest clients, and a pain in the butt. His advertising budget was huge, though, so management put up with him. Then he left Georgia to open his own business, but it apparently didn’t work out. He needed a job, we needed a retail sales manager.” Winston shrugs, elbows bent and tucked to each side, palms upward. “*C’est la vie*,” he says.

I think a minute. “Wasn’t he in manufacturing or something?” Winston nods. The smile remains on his face, his eyes glued to mine. He sips more coffee. “Then he has *no* advertising experience?”

“Bingo.”

I shake my head in dismay, thinking about the tenacious and multi-tentacled *good ole’ boy* network the *Sentinel* routinely taps into. Not an excuse for hiring a manager with no advertising experience.

“What’s he like?”

Winston cocks his head, then wags it side to side. “You don’t want to know.”

“Oh, great! You’re kidding, right?”

“I could be wrong. People change.” He stretches both arms out, then pulls them behind his head, entwines his fingers, and stares at the ceiling.

Having achieved twin goals of dropping a bomb *and* planting unsavory gossip-nuggets, Winston resumes reading his paper and sipping his coffee. His face is implacable. I give him my best consternation look, stew for a minute or two, decide to drop the subject.

As I try to pull up my calendar on my desktop to review scheduled client meetings, I hit all the wrong keys, and have to start over.