

# Mission Improbable

Carrie Hatchett, Space Adventurer #1

J.J. Green

**This novel uses British spellings.**

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## Prologue

On caterpillar tracks, the mechanical alien trundled to the ocean’s edge, where a sluggish liquid flopped onto the sand, withdrew and flopped again, under a deep violet sky. The alien inserted a tube beneath the ripples. Suction commenced, accompanied by a low vibration. As the extracted liquid gurgled and slurped, the mechanical alien transmitted a message to central command: Operation progressing satisfactorily.

Unnoticed, in the glimmering darkness beyond the shoreline, a wave appeared. Unnoticed, the wave approached slowly, silently, stealthily. Unnoticed, it loomed like a predatory beast. With a dreadful, dull splash, the wave fell. When it withdrew, the sand was bare.

Central command’s communications went unanswered. It never heard from the mechanical alien again.

## Chapter One – Through The Glowing Green Mist

Carrie Hatchett's interviewer, Ms. Bass, had no eyebrows. Or, rather, she had pretend eyebrows. About halfway between the naked ridges where her natural eyebrows once grew and her hairline were two thinly drawn, semi-circular lines. A cloud of bouffant grey hair circled her head.

Carrie watched the pretend eyebrows to see if they moved along with the rest of Ms. Bass' face, but they did not. No expression seemed to register on them. They were independent, only supervising the action going on below. Carrie was sure of it because she watched for several minutes while Ms. Bass' voice droned in her ears.

But then a sharp frown drew the eyebrows down until they were almost within a natural distance of her eyes.

"Ms. Hatchett? Ms. Hatchett? Did you hear what I just said? Are you listening?"

Carrie, startled, forced her gaze down to Ms. Bass' face, and flinched at her stony look. "What? I'm sorry? What did you say?"

"I said, your CV doesn't mention any call centre experience."

"That's right, I've never worked in a call centre." Carrie fidgeted. The rent on her new flat was expensive. She needed this job. And she wanted it. For once in her life, she was going to be a success. She was determined.

Ms. Bass lowered Carrie's CV to the table. "You are aware the position you're interviewing for is *supervisor* of a call centre?"

"Yes."

"But you've never worked in a call centre before?"

"No."

"Ms. Hatchett, do you even know what goes on in call centres?"

"People..." Carrie recalled the office cubicles she had passed when she came in, which had been full of people wearing headsets, speaking into microphones, and watching computer screens. "...take calls?" She twisted a ring around her middle finger. She should have done some research before coming to the interview, but she had been busy unpacking and getting Toodles and Rogue settled into their new home.

Ms. Bass sighed and leafed through Carrie's CV. She frowned. "What's Bagua Zhang?"

"It's a martial art. I'm a—"

Waving a hand to silence her, the woman cleared her throat. "So, you've worked in a florist's, been a professional dog walker, spent a summer selling ice-cream and worked as a..." She removed her glasses and squinted, moving the paper away from her face. "A birthday telegram girl?"

"Yes, but the clean kind. You know, teddy bears, rabbits, Disney princesses, that kind of thing. Not the..." Carrie swallowed. "...the other kind." She pulled her skirt closer to her knees.

Ms. Bass locked eyes with Carrie for a silent moment, then placed the CV on her desk. She picked up a checklist and began ticking boxes.

“You don’t suffer any chronic illnesses, do you?”

“No.”

“Mental illness? Depression?”

“No.”

“Good. That’s very good.” Ms. Bass nodded. “We have enough of that around here as it is.”

She ticked a few more boxes. Carrie leaned forward to read the list, but Ms. Bass curled the paper up and away from her, smiling tightly. “Excuse me a moment.” She got up from her desk, taking the checklist with her, and went to her office door. She peered down the corridor towards the chairs where Carrie had sat, alone, while waiting to be called in. She left, leaving the door ajar, and a moment later her shrill voice echoed up the corridor. “No one else applied at all? Not even a phone call?”

Carrie couldn’t make out the reply but she soon heard footsteps thumping closer. Ms. Bass entered, sat and put on her glasses. Gathering up the papers on her desk, she fixed Carrie with a glare.

“When can you start?”

Carrie’s mouth fell open. “You mean I’ve—?”

“Yes, yes. What’s the earliest you can start? Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Yes, I think I can start tomorrow.”

“Good. Nine o’clock. I’ll put you on the day shift, but we’re open twenty-four hours and at other times you might have to do the evening or graveyard shift. Okay?” It was more of a challenge than a question.

Carrie opened her mouth.

“We can sort out the details tomorrow. See you then, Ms...Ms...” Ms. Bass stood and held out her hand.

“Hatchett.” Carrie shook the offered hand.

“Ms. Hatchett. Welcome to the team.”

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As she finished unpacking that evening, Carrie could see Toodles and Rogue were as excited about her new job as she was. Toodles was, admittedly, hiding under the bed and throwing out her claws to scratch Carrie whenever she walked too close, and Rogue was sitting in the corner of the living room staring gloomily at the wall, his normally waggy tail motionless, but Carrie could tell that, deep down, they shared her happiness.

She removed newspaper wrappings from some glasses and put them away in a kitchen cupboard before starting on her mugs, bowls and plates. The kitchen in her new flat was a little poky and the door of the cupboard under the sink was stuck, but the flat would have to do for now. Maybe after a while working as a...what was it?...call centre supervisor, she would get a raise or a promotion and she would be able to afford a better place.

She tried the cupboard under the sink again, but the door would not budge. She would have to speak to her landlady about it.

*A fresh start in a new area and, within a week, a new job.* It was more than she could have hoped for. Just a couple of weeks ago, when Barry had dumped her, she’d never imagined she would get back

on her feet again so quickly. *Huh, Barry! What a loser.* She was better off without him. She would email him tonight and tell him her good news; then he would see what a mistake he had made.

It'd been a such a shock when he said he wanted to split up. Everything had been fine between them, then suddenly, goodbye Carrie. She never listened to him, he'd said. Never took any notice of anything he told her. It was like living with a brick wall. Carrie shook her head. *What a load of rubbish.* She might lose track of the conversation sometimes, but everyone did that.

Carrie put her saucepans, frying pans and baking trays in a cupboard and flattened the empty cardboard box. She nodded to herself. Yes, Barry was an idiot. She would soon find someone new. There was that employee at the call centre who'd given her a wink when she walked past. He was gorgeous, and friendly. Maybe he was single. She would have to find out more about him tomorrow.

All the cardboard boxes in the kitchen were empty so Carrie went to check the rest of the flat. She saw a small unopened box in the bedroom. Toodles' claws flashed out as she passed the bed, but she sidestepped just in time.

"Toodles, sweetiepie, did you miss Mummy?"

Carrie opened the box. Inside were a bottle of washing up liquid, scourers, a plunger, washing up brushes, spray cleaner and cloths. Everything that should go under the kitchen sink. She would have to force that door open.

On the way back past the bed Toodles caught her, raking three long scratches through her tights.

"Ow! Toodles, that really hurt. Don't be cheeky." Carrie squatted and peered under the bed. Baleful orange eyes glowed in the shadows. "You're a very naughty girl sometimes, did you know that?" As Carrie reached towards the cat, her claws made another lightning-fast appearance, and Carrie snatched her hand away. A hiss was followed by a guttural, whining growl.

Squinting into the darkness Carrie said, "Okay, so you want to be alone for a little while. I can see that. It's a new place and you're feeling vulnerable. I get it." She stood and picked up the box. "Barry doesn't know what he's talking about. I do listen. I do hear what people have to say."

After returning to the kitchen, Carrie pulled with all her might at the stubborn cupboard door, but it would not budge. She opened the other cupboards, but they were all full. She frowned at the box of kitchen stuff. It was so annoying. It was the last box, and if she could just put the contents away she would be finished.

Rogue clattered into the kitchen, barking, his paws slipping on the tiles. Carrie smiled. Her lovely handsome dog was feeling better already. Then she noticed what he was barking at. The cupboard door under the sink was glowing, a green pulsating light. Her hand went to her mouth. "Oh no. Rogue, what is it?"

Toodles' catty whine from the bedroom joined Rogue's deep-throated woofs, creating an escalating cacophony until, with a bang, the door flew open. Carrie jumped. Rogue whimpered and fled, his tail between his legs. Toodles' whine stopped. A vivid green glow shone from the cupboard, bathing the kitchen in an eerie light.

Her heart in her mouth, Carrie stumbled back towards the kitchen door, intending to follow Rogue's hasty retreat, but after a moment she hesitated. Her breathing slowed, and her head tilted to one side. She took a step towards the cupboard, and another. Bending down, she peeped inside.

Green mist swirling in a lazy spiral filled the space. She crouched closer, gazing at the mist. It

looked like an emerald Milky Way set in motion, its centre disappearing into infinity. Carrie couldn't figure out what it was. A gas leak? Something supernatural? She stuck out her nose and sniffed. The mist had no smell. A sudden thought occurred—maybe she could ask for a rent reduction? Swirling green substances in cupboards were definitely an inconvenience, especially when they frightened her pets.

As her hair began to lift and pull towards the open cupboard, Carrie wondered briefly what it might mean, before she was sucked, head first, under her kitchen sink.

## Chapter Two – Nature Calls

Carrie slid face downward across a smooth floor until the top of her head encountered a wall, bringing her to an abrupt halt. “Owww!” She pulled herself into a sitting position and rubbed her nose and head while she blinked and looked about.

She could remember Rogue barking, Toodles yowling and a glowing green mist that sucked her into a cupboard and... She looked around again. The creamy white ceramic floor she had slid along rose seamlessly into walls and a ceiling, as though she were inside a roofed coffee cup. Behind her, the place she had entered through was now smooth and whole. She searched the area, running her fingertips over the surface. There was no sign of an entrance, and the green mist had completely disappeared. Stepping back, she peered left and right. The corridor was curved like a tunnel and led away on either side of her, lit by a soft glow which seemed to have no source.

Carrie smiled and nodded confidently. “I get it. This is a dream. I must have fallen asleep. Shouldn’t have had that half bottle of wine after dinner.” She shrugged. “Oh well, might as well follow it through.” She pointed at the either end of the tunnel alternately, mouthing an old nursery rhyme, before settling on one and striding away.

Curved recesses that Carrie assumed were doors of some kind lined the tunnel walls, apparently randomly along the sides, floor, and ceiling. Bordering each recessed section were long lines of symbols, some black, some raised, and some flashing intermittently. Pressing on the recessed areas and the symbols caused no reaction, Carrie discovered. She frowned, wondering when she would wake up.

Walking farther, she found that new corridors opened in the tunnel walls, and she followed them randomly. They all seemed identical but for the symbols along the edges of the recesses. She examined them closely and found that no two sets of symbols were the same. The only factors linking them were their positioning in the corridors and their utter lack of any apparent meaning. There was nothing she remotely recognised. She began to take a dim view of her subconscious for coming up with this stuff.

As she wandered along, a nagging ache in her lower regions alerted her to another reason she needed to wake up. The after-dinner wine she had drunk had made its way through her body and was now asking to be released. Carrie stopped and closed her eyes before quickly opening them wide. “Damn. Why can’t I wake up?” She began marching in small steps. “Come on, dream, be over.” She increased her pace, hoping her dreaming mind would supply an exit.

She stopped. There it was, unmistakable, the symbol to answer her prayers. Towards the top of a recess was a black circle above a triangle with a rectangle below. She had found the women’s toilets. Her sleeping mind must have put the symbol there as a way to leave her dream.

Reaching up, Carrie thumped the symbol and stood back expectantly. The recess didn’t open nor move even slightly. “Oh, come on.” She scanned the rest of the meaningless signs and pressed them up and down the line randomly, then in sequence, then in patterns. She tried hitting them hard and pressing them gently. “Open up! I want to wake up now. I need to spend a penny.” The motionless face of the recess seemed to mock her. “Now you’re being really annoying.”

She drummed on the symbols, the walls, the recess, and the floor until, an uncomfortably long time

later, she gave up. Up and down the corridor all was still and silent. This dream was crazy. She vowed never to drink after dinner again. And maybe even before dinner. Or while eating.

Wondering what to do next, she rested her hand against the recess. As her palm made contact the barrier disappeared, sending her tumbling through an open entrance.

Her knees struck the floor and she threw her hands out while screwing her eyes shut against a glaring white light, much brighter than the soft glow of the corridor. She opened her eyes a slit, then immediately closed them again. Her dream had turned into a nightmare. Her brief glimpse had told her she was in a cream ceramic room, and at its centre squatted a large, bronze, hard-shelled, many jointed, bug-eyed *thing*. Carrie swallowed and, with a sense of inevitability, looked over her shoulder towards the opening she had fallen through. It was no longer there.

“Wake up now, please,” she squeaked. Squinting ahead once more, a faint hope formed in her. Maybe the creature wasn’t alive? Maybe it was a statue?

Ten pairs of legs started simultaneously into motion. The thing scuttled towards her, and Carrie scuttled backwards on hands and feet, never taking her eyes from the monster, until she reached the corner of the room. “Dream be over, dream be over.” She pasted herself into the unyielding wall. The huge bug approached, dripping mucus from its jaws as they opened, the claws at the ends of its legs tapping against the ceramic floor. When its head was a short distance from Carrie’s face, the creature stopped. She was entertaining a fleeting thought that there was a tiny, remote chance she wouldn’t be eaten, when another set of jaws, smaller, sharper and infinitely more vicious, appeared from the gaping maw.

Carrie closed her eyes and waited for the end, wondering if it was possible to feel pain in dreams.

“Thank you for coming. Would you please take a seat?”

## Chapter Three – The Bug

Carrie's eyes snapped open. Knife-edged mini-jaws were inches from her face. Her terrified expression was reflected in each of the creature's hundred eyes. Drips of mucus spattered on the floor, and steamed.

"I—I'm sorry?" asked Carrie.

"Would you like to sit down?"

She peered to either side of the bug. There didn't seem to be anyone or anything else there. There was only one conclusion possible: It had to be the ravening monster of her dream speaking.

Carrie took a shaky breath. "But...I am sitting down."

"Are you?" The bug blinked, a tiny transparent membrane flashing over the surface of each of its eyes. "I always get humans confused with squashpumps. I suppose my proximity is making you uncomfortable, too?"

"Y—Yes, it is, actually. And if you wanted me to take a seat, I'd need a chair."

The creature scuttled backwards to the centre of the room. Carrie's rigid muscles eased and she exhaled through pursed lips.

"I apologise," said the bug. "I am new to this. I would appreciate it if you do not mention anything to my superiors."

"Umm...no, I won't. Don't worry." She checked around quickly for signs of more massive insects.

"Thank you." The bug squatted on its ten pairs of legs, their joints rising higher than its body. Its head twisted until it was perpendicular to the floor. "I understand you are here to interview for the position of Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer."

"No." Carrie wedged her back into the corner, which seemed the safest place in the circumstances.

"No?" the creature emitted an intricate, musical clicking. "That is incorrect. See, your application is here."

"Where?"

"Whoops, there I go again. I forgot humans cannot see in that wavelength. I will read it out to you."

"W4M Carrie, 23 YO." It paused, clicked, and continued, "*New in town, AL, PIS, GSOH, SD, NM, NS, WLTM S VGL man with SI (martial arts and pub quizzes) for FTA poss. LTR.*"

Carrie's flush reached the roots of her hair. "That's my—my ad on a dating website. How did you get hold of it?"

"You are mistaken. This is not an advertisement. This is an application in transgalactic code. Translated into English it says, *I would like to apply for the position of—*"

"No it doesn't." Carrie leapt to her feet, her fists clenched at her sides. "It doesn't say anything like that. It's a lonely hearts ad, and you've no business—"

"But how did you correctly find and identify this interview room?"

"I didn't know it was an interview room. I wasn't even looking for an interview room. I needed to...I

thought it was the—”

“And you bear the wounds of previous encounters in this line of duty.”

“No, I don’t, I..what?” Carrie glanced down at her body, and back at the creature. A hundred bug eyes were swivelled in the direction of her lower leg. She turned her foot to see what the bug was looking at. Toodles’ scratch marks ran down her calf to her ankle. “That was my cat!”

“Cat. A cat is another Earth animal. Am I correct? So you were not engaged in resolving a conflict between species, you were fighting with this animal—”

“No, I wasn’t fighting with her. She’s my pet.”

“Pet. A pet is an animal that lives with a human. So you were fighting with your pet...Why are you living with an animal that attacks you?”

“I told you, I wasn’t fighting with her. You’ve got it completely wrong. Oh...” Carrie grabbed her head in both hands and slumped down to the floor.

The creature made its clicking noise. “I believe you are expressing signs of agitation. Have I done something incorrect or inappropriate? Please do not tell my superiors. This is the third duty I have been assigned to. If I fail in the proper execution of my tasks in this position I will be terminated.” The thing retracted its internal jaws as its head returned to a horizontal position, and drooped.

“But...” Carrie sighed and rolled her eyes. “Oh, all right. Let’s get it over with.” This dream was becoming weirder and weirder. She wondered if the wine she had drunk had been off. “Let’s do the interview, then.”

The razor jaws popped out again, and Carrie sat upright, but the creature began talking about boring, political stuff and places and warring factions she had never heard of. She relaxed and lay on her side. Resting her elbow on the floor and her head in her hand, she soon zoned out. Occasionally, the bug would ask a question and she would answer yes or no, as the mood took her.

“Are you familiar with the cultural customs of the Inner Sect of Mantrikees?”

“Yes.” Carrie yawned.

“Would you mind undertaking missions that may expose you to threats to your personal safety?”

“No.”

As the interview continued the ache in her bladder grew and she tried again to figure out a way to wake up. Her arm began to twinge, and she adjusted her position. She could now see behind the giant bug’s shining bronze carapace. There was something there. It was a handbag, sitting in the middle of the floor. A gorgeous designer handbag. She sat up. “Excuse me, what’s that?”

The creature’s monotonous drone ceased, and its ten pairs of legs scuttled as it turned round to the bag. It hooked a leg through the strap, lifting the bag, and turning back, tossed it so that it landed with a thunk and a jingle at Carrie’s feet. Inside the open bag were strange devices, some of which blinked with tiny electronic lights.

“This is a Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer’s toolbox.”

“*Toolbox?*”

“Disguised as a portable Earth receptacle so that it may be carried around at all times in case you are assigned to assist in a transgalactic intercultural community crisis when you are not at home.”

Grabbing the handbag in both hands, Carrie lifted it to eye level and gazed at it. The material was thick and expensive and the design was finely stitched. “It’s beautiful. What is it, Louis Vuitton, Dior,

Ralph Lauren?” If only she were not dreaming.

The creature clicked, seemingly unsure what to answer.

“So,” said Carrie, “if I do this transgalactic liaison thingy, I get to keep the bag?” There was no harm in asking. She began to hope, crazily, this was not a dream after all.

“The bag’s contents are indispensable to the performance of your duties in the role—”

“I’ll do it.”

“But the interview is not yet concluded.”

“I know, but I really need to...” She crossed her legs and riffled through the strange implements inside the bag. “Anyway, you know, I’d be really good at...whatever it was you were talking about. And...wait a minute, shouldn’t there be a screwdriver thingy?”

“I am unfamiliar with the English vocabulary item, screwdriverthingy.”

“It opens and locks things. Turns stuff on and off. Does whatever you need it for, really.”

“There is an articulated transmitting infrared—”

“Never mind. If I can have the bag, I’ll do it.” The creature’s inner jaws were paused open. “Or,” continued Carrie, wagging a finger, “I might have to have a word with your superiors.”

The bug’s jaws clicked shut. “You also need a uniform.”

“Uniform? Oh, you mean like a costume? Cool.” Carrie imagined herself in something black, with a mask and a cape; a long, flowing cape that billowed out behind her as she flew— “What are *they*?”

A section of wall had opened behind the bug, revealing a long rack of fluorescent orange jumpsuits ranging from toddler size to what looked like collapsed parachutes. “These are Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officer uniforms.”

“But they’re, they’re...Why are they that horrible colour?”

“Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officers—”

“Don’t you have a shorter way of saying that?”

“No. Transgalactic Intercultural Community Crisis Liaison Officers must stand out in conflict zones to avoid...”

But Carrie wasn’t listening. She strode over to the jumpsuits and hastily pulled two or three out to hold up against herself. Her bladder nagged. She found a uniform that was about her size. It was a bit small but she was on a diet so she should be thin enough to fit into it within a couple of weeks. She shook her head. What was she thinking? This was a dream, for goodness sake. “Now, where’s the way out?”

“But...” said the bug.

“Or,” said Carrie, drawing her brows into what she hoped was a stern frown, “should I speak to someone about how you began the interview by frightening the life out of me?”

Behind the huge insect, a circle of swirling green mist appeared. Carrie pushed the orange jumpsuit in with the weird devices, put the bag on her shoulder and went towards the mist. The bag felt solid and heavy, as though it were real. “Thank you very much.” The coiling mist began to lift her hair. “What do I have to do in this job?”

“As a neutral, independent, disinterested member of an alien race, it will be your duty to mediate between disaffected populations to solve political and territorial disputes—”

“Like a space detective? Great.”

“No, not remotely like a space—”

“Okay, bye, thanks,” Carrie called as the mist took her.

## Chapter Four – Dave

Carrie rubbed her eyes and yawned as she entered her kitchen the following morning. Though she had taken Rogue for his morning walk, the fresh air hadn't fully woken her. Toodles wound herself around Carrie's legs, meowing. Rogue thumped his tail on the floor and drooled.

"All right, all right, wait a minute." She went to the cupboard that held Toodles' and Rogue's food, but stopped midway across the room. Something was out of place. She pivoted on one foot to look more closely at her kitchen table. After pushing her knuckles into her eyes again, she blinked hard. On the table sat a gorgeous designer handbag, half open. A bright orange jumpsuit trailed from it and there were strange, electronic devices visible inside.

Carrie staggered a few steps and gripped the counter top. Her dream. It was the bag from her dream. But if it was really here, then...? Her eyes turned to her under-sink cupboard. She squatted and tugged the handle. The door was still stuck fast. No green glow, no mist, but the handbag was here, and there was no other explanation for it nor for the weird objects it contained.

Standing and looking through her kitchen window, she saw that outside the world seemed pretty much as she remembered it. The sky was grey and the day drizzly. Three floors below, cars and buses were passing and children were trudging to school. Two huge dogs were taking their owner for a walk. Could there really be inhabited planets and alien races and spaceships and all that stuff?

She shivered and rubbed her arms. If that giant bug and everything it talked about did exist *she* was not going to have anything to do with it. What was it the creature had said the job was? Space detective, that was it. She would probably have to go among aliens like that insect. No way. She was going to start work today as a...a call centre...thingy, and be normal. She was also bent on making a success of her new job. She was nearly twenty, and much too old to be drifting from one temporary position to another. This time, she was going to forge a career.

She gasped. She had forgotten she was starting work today. She looked at the clock. It was half past eight and she had to be there by nine. Grabbing tins of pet food, she hastily opened them and spooned the contents into Toodles' and Rogue's bowls. After rinsing the tins she threw them in her recycling box and turned to leave, but on the tabletop the gorgeous bag seemed to be tempting her. *Why not?* She thought. She doubted the alien bug could come after her for it. The space under her sink was far too small. It would never fit through, and she had travelled through the mist to reach the bug. Aliens were probably forbidden by some galactic treaty from coming to Earth and scaring people.

Tipping the bag's strange contents onto the table, she quickly transferred the essentials from her old handbag into it. "Bye, Toodles, bye, Rogue," she called as she closed the door to her flat.

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"Nice bag."

Carrie was passing through the cubicles on her way to her new desk when the good-looking guy spoke to her. He was sitting in the same place, headphone and mic on. Carrie grinned at him and hoisted the bag higher up her shoulder. He was right. It was a nice bag. A very nice bag. She smiled at the other workers, but they ignored her. Her smile fell. Oh well, it would take time to get to know everyone.

“So, this is where you sit.” Ms. Bass motioned towards a clean, bare cubicle at the back of the room. It looked fresh and new, as if no one had stayed in it very long or made it into a personal space. Carrie sat down and was unable to resist swiveling her chair right around, catching hold of her desk to stop herself as she completed her circle.

Ms. Bass’ eyebrows rose higher. She plonked down the large file she was carrying. “Your main responsibility is to deal with customer issues and complaints. All the procedures are in here.” She tapped the file with a long, French-manicured fingernail. “You must become thoroughly acquainted with them. Luckily for you, Friday mornings are usually quiet, so you should have time to familiarise yourself a little with the necessary information before the first complaint comes in.”

Carrie looked from the thick file to Ms. Bass. “That’s all I have to do? Deal with complaints?”

“You must address the customers’ issues according to the manual. To the letter. Do you understand?”

Carrie frowned. “Do you get a lot of complaints?”

Ms. Bass rolled her eyes, and left.

Swivelling her chair around again, Carrie noticed a young woman watching her as she spoke into a mic. Carrie smiled and waved, but the woman turned to her screen. Carrie sighed and pulled herself closer to her desk. She opened the file. The contents page was all but incomprehensible. She flicked through the thick wad of paper. *In the event of a faulty T-flange*, one page read, *complete form 167F. Include the date of purchase and the date the customer first noticed the fault. Tick the relevant boxes.* Listed below were a range of noises a faulty T-flange might make, including whining, grinding, squeaking, and clunking. Carrie’s shoulders sagged as she turned more pages. They were all similar: extremely long, detailed forms to complete and complex procedures to follow. What on Earth did this company sell?

Carrie gradually became aware of someone standing on the edge of her vision. The young woman who had caught her eye earlier was nearby, her jaws working on a piece of chewing gum.

Holding out her hand, Carrie said, “Hi, I’m—”

“Complaint, line five.” The woman turned on her heel and walked away. Carrie’s hand flopped to her side. A complaint? She had to get on it right away and make a good impression on her first day at work. She scanned her desk, but she had no telephone or headset and mic like everyone else. How was she supposed to...? She saw the woman had returned to her desk and was idly holding up a receiver while chatting with her colleague in the next cubicle. Hefting the complaints procedures file into her arms, Carrie went over.

“So I said to her,” the woman said to her colleague in the next cubicle as Carrie took the receiver from her, “do all the teachers get fined when they go on strike, then, and I have to take time off work to look after Eddie because he can’t go to school?”

Carrie held the receiver to her ear. Handel’s Messiah was cut short as the woman pressed a button on her keyboard.

“Hello?” said Carrie. A stream of loud curses spewed from the receiver, and she jerked her head away. When the stream slowed to a trickle, she tried again. “Can I help—?” More curses followed, some of which were new to Carrie. She attempted to make eye contact with her work colleague in hope of some information or advice, but the woman was deep in conversation about the pros and cons of taking children out of school during term time. Cradling the receiver between her shoulder and neck, Carrie opened her file and scanned the pages while listening for a mention of something even vaguely familiar in the customer’s rant, but she couldn’t recognise anything. She tried once more to interrupt, but the man was so irate she couldn’t break into the flow of words.

Carrie’s heart sank. She wanted to do a good job, but how was she supposed to help if the customers wouldn’t listen to her? And the instructions in the file were complete gobbledygook. It didn’t take long for her to grow frustrated and bored. “Thank you, sir. We’ll deal with that at the earliest opportunity,” she said, and slammed the receiver down.

Her colleague paused in her conversation. “I don’t think you’re supposed to—” But Carrie was already returning to her desk.

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By ten, Carrie had dealt with four complaints in a similar way. Maybe she was not *exactly* following procedure, but when she had more time to learn the ropes she would improve, she was sure. *This job is a piece of cake*, she thought, and as she had that thought, she noticed that cake was being shared around the office. Everyone had put their customers on hold and they were all chatting and eating.

No one had brought her any cake. Carrie swivelled her chair round to face her desk and buried her head in her file, trying to pretend she hadn’t noticed what was happening.

“It’s Jerry’s birthday today,” said a male voice. “I thought you might like some cake.” Carrie looked up. It was Mr. Handsome, plate and fork in hand, smiling at her.

“I’d love some,” said Carrie, accepting the plate and immediately forking a piece of rich chocolate cake into her mouth. “Oh, this is delicious,” she said, spitting crumbs.

“Yes, Mary made it. She does a lot of baking.”

“It’s wonderful.” *That was so nice of him to bring me some cake*, she thought. *He must have seen I was left out*. The man propped himself on her desk, and her heart lifted.

“How are you getting on?” he asked.

“Oh, fine.” Carrie paused. She chewed and swallowed. “Well, actually, I tell the customers we’ll do something soon and hang up.”

The man laughed. “That’s one way of dealing with complaints, I suppose.”

“I’m trying my best, but what else can I do? I’ve no idea where all those forms are that are mentioned in my file, and I don’t know what most of this stuff means. In fact, I don’t know what *any* of this stuff means.”

The man waved dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. No one from higher up ever said as much, but I think the idea is to frustrate the customers so much they give up complaining. The last person who took the job didn’t last more than an hour. He’s the reason you don’t have your own phone.” He nodded at a dent in the wall.

Carrie's eyes widened. "He threw it at the wall?"

"Maintenance haven't got around to supplying a new one. It might take a while."

"Doesn't matter. I can use all of yours. It isn't like I'm on the phone for long." She shoved another large piece of cake into her mouth. It was delectable.

"I'm Dave, by the way."

"Carrie."

"Nice to meet you, Carrie." He stood to leave.

"Hey, Dave, I'm new in town. I don't suppose, tonight, maybe...?"

"Oh, you're having a housewarming?"

Carrie closed her eyes as she ate the last mouthful of sweet, moist, crumbly cake. She nodded absently.

"Sure, I'll come over. About seven?"

"Mmmm..." Carrie sighed in satisfaction and sucked chocolate cream from her teeth. As Dave left, she realised he had agreed to a date. Her first day at her new job was getting better and better.

A few minutes later the gum-chewing woman arrived to take her plate.

"Thanks," said Carrie. "Wait a minute. Can I ask you something?"

The woman paused, holding the plate in midair.

"That guy, Dave, is he, you know, attached?"

"Don't know. Don't think so."

"Oh good. He's gorgeous, don't you think? And he's got great taste in clothes."

The woman smirked. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but thought better of it, and walked away laughing.

## Chapter Five – Date With Disaster

Three large glasses of wine supplied Carrie with plenty of Dutch courage by seven o'clock that evening. She'd been very forward in inviting Dave to her place almost as soon as she met him, but why waste time? A guy like that wouldn't be single for long. You had to take your opportunities when they appeared or miss out.

It was also silly of her to invite an almost complete stranger into her home, but she didn't think the kind of men her mother warned her about offered you cake at work.

She was pouring herself a fourth glass of wine when the doorbell sounded. Swaying slightly, Carrie held the door open for Dave. He was carrying a bottle and had changed from his work clothes into a casual jacket, black T-shirt and close-fitting jeans.

"Hi, Dave." Carrie piped. She cleared her throat. "Hi, Dave, come in."

He handed Carrie the bottle and looked around as he entered the hallway. "Am I the first to arrive?" He took off his jacket and hung it on the hat stand.

Closing the door, Carrie thanked him as she took the bottle, then said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Am I the first arrival? To your party?"

"Party?"

"You said you were having a housewarming."

"Did I?" Carrie thought back. Her mind was a little foggy, but she was quite sure she hadn't said that. Why would she invite other people to come between her and this handsome hunk? "Err..." She didn't know what to say.

"Oh, it looks like there's been a misunderstanding," said Dave. There was a pause. "Maybe I should—"

"Oh, don't go," exclaimed Carrie as Dave took his jacket. "You've only just got here. I'm sorry, I probably wasn't clear at work. First day nerves or something."

Dave grimaced. "Sorry, Carrie, but I think maybe you've got—"

"Can't you stay a little while? I'm new in this area and I don't know anyone." Carrie winced at the whiny tone in her voice.

Hesitating, Dave said, "What's that scratching?" The noise was coming from Carrie's living room door.

"Oh, that's Rogue. He wants to say hello."

"You've got a dog? Great! Can I meet him?"

Carrie opened the door, and Rogue bounded out, leapt up and began licking Dave's face as though he were a long lost friend.

"Get down, Rogue," said Carrie. "Dave's a guest. Be good." The dog dropped onto his hind quarters and wagged his tail furiously.

Dave was looking closely at the dog's face. He swallowed hard. "Wow, he's..."

"I know! He's so handsome, isn't he?"

"Well, I'm not sure...I'd go quite that far. I mean, he's very...what I mean is..." Dave was watching

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