

The Limit of Her Tether

by Tamar Love

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Stepping onto her front porch, Nancy Johnson surveyed the world around her and smiled. It was going to be a wonderful day. Dew glistened like tiny jewels on the neatly mowed lawn, birds sang in the jacaranda tree, and her Double Delights were just beginning to bloom, unfurling soft, perfect crimson and titanium rose petals. They must smell heavenly, she thought. After her walk, she'd stop and take a quick sniff.

She strode down the driveway at a brisk pace, tying her hair back in a scrunchie and taking the deep, cleansing breaths she'd learned in her yoga workshop. *Namaste*, she thought, *peace be with me*. At the end of the drive, she slid on her headphones and pressed the play button on her Walkman. The Spice Girls exploded into her ears: *let me tell you what I want, what I really, really want...* She gave a little skip and swung her arms in a series of moves left over from her days as a cheerleader. She was feeling a little frisky today. She stepped down the block in time to the music, *if you wanna be my lover...* shaking the last of the tension out of her arms and hands, trying to achieve the perfect power stride, exactly halfway between a walk and a run.

She'd been up until two AM working on today's presentation, but the meeting this morning would be top-rate, thanks to her four-color presentation packets and slides. Although it was a little soon in her career to be taking a big jump like this, she knew she was right to go after Norel & McTeague—a big account, even by her firm's standards. The only drawback was time; if she landed it, she'd have to spend longer hours at the office. She hadn't been home much as it was, and she felt a little apprehensive at placing the extra strain on Stan, but he would just have to be okay with it. He'd worked the same hours when he was getting started at the law firm. Besides, marketing was a competitive field. Even if managed healthcare wasn't glamorous, it was a good foot in the door to some of the high-profile agencies she

eventually hoped to work for, and she needed every brownie point she could muster is she wanted that corner office.

She knew she'd get there—she offered a good package: she was pleasant yet assertive, had lots of initiative, and she worked hard and was willing to do just about anything—and she made sure the higher-ups knew it. Sure, she was smart, but so was everyone these days. You had to have a little something more if you wanted to be successful, a little charisma and a nice way of shooting people down. And, most of all, you had to be a team player, you had to know how to get along with everyone and control every situation. Perception was everything—if the team was happy with you, you were a great employee. And great employees got promoted.

She checked her pulse. A little low for halfway through her walk—she could do better than that, even after a late night. She sped up. It was really important to stay in shape. “Big tits and strong thighs make a woman wealthy and wise,” her college roommate had always said. Well, her tits might be small, but they were firm, and her thighs were like cords of wood. She ran her hands down her hamstrings, loving the taut bunching near her gluts. She had no proof that her looks had gotten her that promotion six months early, but they certainly hadn't hurt.

“Morning,” she called to Missy, her neighbor two houses down. Missy was an at-home wife who liked to do her power walking early, before her husband left for work, so she could spend the rest of the day with her toddler doing gosh only knew what else—baking and volunteer work, probably. Honestly, she didn't know what the woman did for fun—maybe watched soaps or something? She'd try to remember to invite Missy along the next time the girls went out for drinks—she was probably starved for a little excitement.

“Nancy, how are you?” Missy stopped and turned off her Walkman. “It's been ages since we've talked. How's Stan?” When she smiled, little dimples formed in her cheeks.

“Stan's great, Miss,” Nancy said, castigating herself for having said hello. “He's putting in those hours at the law firm, you know.” She just didn't have time this morning for small talk.

"Fred, too," Missy said, waving her hand as though they shared some little secret. "Some nights he works so late, he just stays in the city. it's easier." Fred was clearly having an affair with his assistant. Women like Missy never knew until it was too late.

"I guess it's the same everywhere these days," Missy continued, "everyone's so focused on their careers, they just don't seem to have time for their families like they used to." She looked down at Nancy's flat stomach. "I'm sure glad I can stay at home with little Bradley. You just don't know how important it is for a toddler to have his mother around—"

Nancy checked her watch. Darn it, she thought, she was late enough. She really didn't have time for this.

"—daycare just isn't good enough." Missy paused and looked at Nancy, oddly, as though she was waiting for her to say something. Nancy couldn't imagine what that might be, so she smiled and started to try to extricate herself. But before she could open her mouth, Missy said, "Say, Nance, do you want to come in for some herbal tea?" she sounded a little hesitant, which was unusual for her. Missy was pretty straightforward, if a little sugarcoated. "I have some homemade blueberry-peach scones in the oven," she said, "and I bet Bradley would just love to see you. There are a few things I'd love to talk to you about, too—"

More useless marketing advice for Missy's failed catering business, no doubt. "Sorry, Miss," she said, holding up her wrist and pointing at her watch, "Got to get back early today. Big meeting this morning. Maybe some other time?"

"Oh," Missy said, obviously disappointed, "but—"

"Bye, Miss!" Nancy called over her shoulder, "Talk to you soon!"

She crossed the street and rounded the corner. Mrs. Ellsby, the neighborhood widow, was in the front yard watering her azaleas. Nancy shot her a bright smile and waved hello. It was smart to get in good with the older people in the neighborhood. If Stan had his way, they'd be needing a babysitter sometime in the next few years and she'd be darned if she'd trust her kids with some bratty teenager. Mrs. Ellsby waved back, and called out something that Nancy couldn't quite make out, something about

a litter of kittens. Oh well, no time. She'd make a point of dropping off some cookies or something this weekend.

Approaching her house again from the south, Nancy noticed a woman in a big hat standing in front the house, staring at something in the yard. Christ, was that Missy again? She slowed down, hoping to avoid another pointless conversation. No, it was just one of those new renters from across the street. She wished someone would just buy the darned place. For three years now different renters had come and gone, one set after another, with their poorly behaved children and their clunky trucks, devaluing property for everyone on the block, adding nothing to the neighborhood but noise and clutter. Now there was this new family. Gosh only knew what problems they'd cause.

She bent over, feigning a hamstring stretch. She hated those syrupy little pleased-to-meet-you chats. There was no point to it all, really. Why bother to get to know someone who was just going to move away in six months? She didn't even know this one's name. Beckman or something like that. She picked up the paper from the Sandersons' lawn—they never read it anyway—and flipped it open. Nothing but scandal on the front page, not even news. She risked another glance at her house. The renter had crossed back to her own side of the street and was chaining her dog, a freakishly large cocker spaniel, to a spike in the lawn. She checked her watch—good golly, if she didn't hurry, she really would be late.

She hit the rewind button on her Walkman and chugged the last of the water from her sipper. Good walk, Nance, she told herself, walking up her driveway, way to go—and she froze. There, four feet away from her prized Double Delights, square in the center of her lawn, sat a fresh, steaming pile of brown, runny dog poop.

She whipped her head around and stared at the renter, who appeared to be doing some gardening, her dog yapping and running back and forth on the lawn, testing the limits of its tether. The woman looked up and saw Nancy staring at her and smiled. "Good morning!" she called over, "Fine weather we're having, isn't it?"

This was beyond belief. This woman had let her dog poop on Nancy's lawn, and she hadn't cleaned it up. Now she sat there smiling and waving and shouting hello, as

if everything were perfectly normal. *What a rude*—Nancy felt her face flush scarlet. She was tempted to run over there and slap the renter across the face and tell her what she could do with her dog, the filthy—she caught herself again and forced herself to stay calm. Take a deep breath, she thought, *namaste*. There was no reason to get upset—just because someone else was rude, that didn't mean that she had to be; she was stronger than that. She stood unmoving until she had control over her breathing and her emotions. *Namaste*, she thought, you stupid bitch, giggling in spite of herself. She stopped when she realized the dog poop would only get cleaned up if she cleaned it, and she trudged into the house for a wad of paper towels.

On the train home from work that night, Nancy fumed. The presentation had been a total disaster. The client hadn't been impressed by her materials and Ted Underhill, the new Director, hadn't been the slightest bit supportive. After the meeting he'd suggested that if she wanted a more professional look, she might try farming out her graphics next time.

"Jeez, Nancy," he'd said, "Four-color pie charts are so early nineties. I'm surprised at you." He'd put his arm around her shoulder and walked her down the hall, speaking slowly, as if she were a retarded four-year-old. "You know, a little pizzazz really goes a long way with new clients. You've got to wow them. Shake them up." He'd given her shoulders a predictable little shake. "Give them animated graphics, movement, maybe some 3D effects," he'd said, punctuating each idea with a flourish of his hand. "You might have some great data, but data isn't information unless someone reads it, you know. And no one's going to do that if your presentations are bogged down by outdated techniques."

When they reached Nancy's office, he'd stopped and given her a little pat on the arm. "Why don't you stop by Multimedia and talk to Bob? I'm sure he could give you some good, solid pointers." He'd winked at her then, a lascivious little gesture that'd turned her stomach. "But you were great," he'd said. "I could see McTeague getting very interested in our firm the minute you walked into the room." He winked again and left her there, so angry she could barely contain her rage. She'd closed her

office door carefully behind her, then sat on the floor and punched the seat of her chair, over and over again, until she was able to regain her inner peace. She'd sat on the floor with her eyes closed for almost twenty minutes, until her breath was even and she felt calm enough to be around people again.

If this job weren't so important to her, she would have told Underhill where he could shove his advice, and his condescending little pat. Her graphics had been fine. If he hadn't made such a big deal out of the whole cutting-edge thing, McTeague would have thought her work outstanding. She could tell he was interested in her ideas. As it was, Underhill had asked him to come back next week for another presentation, promising him he wouldn't believe his eyes.

"Big jerk," she muttered. The woman sitting next to her on the train looked up and frowned. Great. That's all she needed—to start talking to herself like some street person. She shut her mouth and opened a presentation folder, pretending to be immersed in the exciting 3D graphics Bob had worked up for her.

She'd been so excited when Ted Underhill came on board from that huge firm in Chicago. She'd pegged him right away as the easiest kind of VIP to manipulate: a traditional guy who'd call his assistant a "secretary" and pat her on the ass when she did a good job—an overgrown frat boy who cared more about his golf handicap than meeting deadlines or working up budgets. She'd have no problem working him. All she had to do was smile, dimple up and agree with whatever he said—the more she fed his over-inflated ego, the better he'd be for her career.

But today had really thrown her. She hadn't expected Underhill to turn on her like that. She figured that with all the flirting she'd been doing, he'd regard her as an ally, a partner in crime. Instead, he'd turned her into the company scapegoat. What had she done wrong? She thought back over the last few days, and it occurred to her that he might have gotten slighted at her polite refusal to have lunch with him last Monday. Darn it, she'd been working on the presentation—didn't he know that? How was she supposed to a good job if she was taking time out for lunch, even with a Director?

Oh well. She'd have to try harder, that was all, turn it up a notch, wear more short skirts, be a little friendlier—more of a team player. She laughed quietly. Guys like Underhill really responded to friendliness. The trick was to get him in her pocket without actually sleeping with him. Whatever the case, it was going to be a rough week. She sighed and stared out the window, mentally counting the stops to her station.

Once she was in her car, she sped the rest of the way home, not caring if she got a ticket. What she really needed was a hot bath, a massage and some quiet conversation over a glass of wine—although she dreaded telling Stan how her presentation had gone. He'd seen how hard she'd been working and had been really excited for her. There was no way he'd understand the real reason for her failure, and if she told him, he'd go ballistic. He was so protective. She smiled at the thought of him taking out Underhill—would he use his skinny little lawyer fists or an Uzi? No, she couldn't tell Stan. Besides, corporate etiquette dictated that one take care of these little messes on one's own, without making a big fuss. She sighed. Maybe it would be better if Stan were still at the office when she got home. She saw her massage flying away on little feathered wings, and giggled again. Hearing herself, she made a note to take a personal day when this was all over. If she wasn't careful, she was going to crack.

Pulling into the driveway, she saw Stan's car wasn't there, and breathed a half-hearted sigh of relief. Then she checked her watch and was surprised to see it was almost ten. How irritating. Surely he should be home by now? Oh well, she'd have that bath, and maybe open a bottle of Merlot. No dinner, though. Her stomach was still in knots. She tuned off the ignition and grabbed her briefcase, locking the car behind her. After the bath, she'd watch a little TV and try to stay awake until Stan got in. It had been at least a week since they'd—

She couldn't believe it. Another pile of dog crap sat in the same place, smack in the middle of her lawn, just like it had that morning. She clenched her fists, adrenaline pumping through her veins, and felt her face go scarlet with anger. How dare that woman? After the dirty looks Nancy had shot her while cleaning up the mess this

morning, Nancy had been certain the woman would have gotten a clue. Instead, here was another disgusting pile of renter-dog feces. Of all the nerve.

Rowr, rowr, rowr. Nancy jumped and spun around. What the heck? What was that noise? *Rowr, rowr, rowr.* It was the dog, chained in front of the renter's house, howling like a trapped wolf. *Rowr, rowr, rowr.* Was it barking at her? "Shut up!" she shouted, but the dog only howled louder—*rowr, rowr, rowr*—mocking her, Hi Nancy! Like the little present I left you? "Shut up, you stupid fuck!" she yelled, and clapped her hand over her mouth, her eyes bulging in horror. Had she said that word aloud? *Rowr, rowr, rowr.*

Something in her that was weak, something that had been over-strained by the day, and by Underhill, snapped, and she felt the white-hot anger wash over her unchecked. She picked up a rock and flung it at the dog, who began running back and forth across the lawn to the limits of its chain, barking louder: *rowr, rowr, rowr.* She could swear it was laughing at her. He sat down and lifted his head to the sky, howling even louder. Lights were beginning to come on up and down the street, but the renter's house remained dark. She pictured the renters, alone in the dark, hunkered down by the living room window, holding their hands over their mouths, laughing their butts off. "Shut up!" she screamed. She picked up another rock and hurled it at the house, missing the dog again but denting the mailbox. "Hey!" someone shouted, and Nancy turned and ran back into her house, the dog barking fiercely behind her.

The next morning before her walk, Nancy dawdled in front of her house, hoping to catch the renter in the act. The dog had barked all night long. Stan, who'd finally gotten home shortly after midnight, hadn't seemed bothered by it. In fact, he'd told her she was being a little paranoid. "But Stan," she'd said, "that woman let her dog crap on our lawn, and she didn't even have the decency to clean it up. She just stood there and waved at me while I cleaned it up for her. And then she let it go there again! Shouldn't they have that dog out in back or something? What if it gets loose? Shouldn't we say something?" But Stan had refused to do anything, saying that if it bothered her so much, she should be the one to harass their new neighbors. "But it's illegal, isn't it? To let a dog just crap where it wants and then not clean it up?" Stan had

just turned off the light and rolled over, telling her he was exhausted—*he* was exhausted? What about her? He'd slept like a rock all night, even though the dog had howled and howled for hours. She'd finally dropped off to sleep around four, and now she was cranky and mad.

After fifteen minutes, she gave up. The dog was nowhere to be seen. Maybe the woman had heard Nancy yelling last night and had taken the dog to crap on someone else's lawn. Maybe the damned thing had choked on its leash and was at the pet morgue, waiting for an autopsy. Whatever the case, she couldn't wait forever. She needed her walk and she refused to let someone else's rude dog spoil her day. She set off down the block, singing with the Spice Girls, trying to force a little joy back into her morning.

Twenty-five minutes later, walking back up to the house, Nancy was not surprised—no, she was almost relieved, really—to see another pile on the lawn. So this was going to be a regular thing. She smiled. At least she knew what to expect. The renter, of course, was not in sight. Her blinds were pulled, and her car was gone, but the dog was there in the yard, chained to the spike. I'll get you, she thought, stomping up the driveway for paper towels. You just wait.

Later that morning, she sat at her desk muttering while she stapled together prize packs for the company scavenger hunt she was sponsoring. She'd collected a number of vouchers for local business services, like Sally's Nails and the Executive Barber, and she was arranging the vouchers in a fan, like a construction—paper turkey, and stapling them together at the base. But the stapler wasn't heavy enough for the job, and it kept jamming and twisting in her hand. She'd just driven a staple into her index finger when she heard a knock at the door.

"Hey, Nance?" Underhill opened the door and poked his head in her office. "Got a minute?"

"What's up?" She said, pulling out the staple and sucking on her finger. She hated being called Nance. It sounded like white trash. She pulled her finger out of her mouth and stared at it. Had it stopped bleeding already?

"Well, there's this situation I wanted to run by you." He closed the door and parked himself in her conference chair.

"Sounds serious." The blood was beginning to well up again, so she stuck her finger back in her mouth and sucked.

"Yeah, well," he said, staring at her a little strangely, "I was going over your presentation yesterday with Cooper-Smith, and he had an idea he'd like me to run by you."

"And what's that?" she asked. She checked her finger again; it was still bleeding. Dammit, on top of everything else she was probably a hemophiliac. She sucked harder, applying pressure with her tongue.

Underhill leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and stared at her intently, as if transfixed by her. He was such a freak. "No big deal. He wondered what would happen if I went over your materials with you before your second try next week."

Oh my God—he had been asked to monitor her work, she thought, digging the nails of her free hand into her thighs. "And why's that, Ted?" How completely humiliating.

"Well, I guess he doesn't want there to be a third try," Underhill gave a weak little laugh, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. Was he sweating? "Can't blame him, really. This is an awfully big account."

"Really." If she limited her responses to one-word answers, maybe she wouldn't detonate. She realized she was still sucking on her finger, and took it out of her mouth. Underhill visibly relaxed, leaning back in his seat and toying with his wedding ring.

"Aw, c'mon, Nance," he said. "Be a team player." He winked. "Tell you the truth, I'm looking forward to it. You're a smart girl with a great future. I'm happy to help you however I can." He smiled, "It could be worse, don't you think?"

He was really unbelievable. But she'd been dealing with guys like Underhill her whole life, guys who liked to 'help' her with things. "Of course, Ted," she smiled, showing her dimples. "I'm looking forward to it, too. I could really use some input from a seasoned vet."

"Now that's what I like to hear." He stood and opened the door. "It's all about working as a team, Nance. Don't forget that." He winked again, closing the door behind him.

"Don't fucking call me Nance," she growled at the closed door. She held her breath and tried to count silently to ten: *one, two, three*. When she got to four, she picked up the stapler and threw it at the wall, where it exploded, denting the wall and showering chunks of staples to the floor. She took another deep breath, pulled a box of Godiva from her desk drawer and tossed a coffee truffle into her mouth, closing her eyes as the chocolate melted on her tongue. It would be okay. She'd manage the situation. Guys like Underhill couldn't beat her. She was stronger than he was. She was better.

That evening, Nancy took off a little earlier than usual, determined once again to catch the renter's dog in the act. After the day she'd had, she was in the mood to kick a little ass. When she pulled into the driveway, the dog was gone and her lawn was mercifully clean. Hallelujah, she thought, maybe she's had the thing put down. She dashed into the house to change her clothes and grab a book. She would set up camp in the front yard, wait for the bitch to come by with her nasty little mutt, and then she'd have a conversation with her about responsibility, yes she would, and about respecting other people's property. She would politely ask the renter to please shut the dog up, to keep it in the backyard so she could get a decent night's sleep and to clean up its crap. She threw on her sweats and grabbed her Grisham novel. Racing to the backyard, she shouldered a lawn chair and pushed open the side gate.

It was too late. In the few minutes she'd been in the house, the dog had been and gone, leaving behind his signature pile. She stood in front of it, despondent. Was she ever going to win? She looked up and down the street. Where the hell had they gone, anyway? It had only been a couple of minutes! Surely they hadn't had time? The renter's car was in the driveway, the living room window blinds were closed and the dog was nowhere to be seen. The dog must be in the house, she thought, she must have taken it right into the house after it was done. She dropped the lawn chair and began to laugh, imagining the renter's furtive glances, her whispered urgings to Muffy

or Fido, be quick now, sweetie, the bad lady is coming back soon... She imagined the sly, triumphant smile on the renter's face as she darted back across the street into her rented house, locking the front door, peering out from behind the louvered slats of the blinds, waiting for Nancy to re-appear, and rubbing her hands together like some evil scientist, in eager anticipation of Nancy's fury.

Well, she had another thing coming. No renter would see her lose her temper. She did not air her dirty laundry in public, during the light of day, like some common street person. Choking back a low moan, she walked quickly to the house, managing to get the front door closed behind her before she collapsed onto the floor, put her face in her hands, and started to cry. She tried to find her center, tried to find that island of strength within her, but all she could grab hold of was nothing, and silence, and more nothing. Namaste she whispered into her cold hands, but the word, too, was empty.

The rest of the week was hell. Stan was working on a big case and kept later hours than usual, coming in at one or two o'clock every night, exhausted and incommunicative, barely managing to grunt hello at her before he fell asleep. Their sex life, irregular in the best of times, had become non-existent, and Nancy was really feeling the tension. Underhill was on her every day, looking to set up meetings, poking his head in and winking his smug little smile at her. She kept up the nice-girl act, smiling and reassuring him that everything was coming along fine, when all she really wanted to do was hurl her new stapler at his head. She'd be damned if she let this guy get to her. She would work late, get those pointers from Bob in Multimedia. She'd wow them with her cutting-edge graphics and Cooper-Smith would be so happy he'd come all over McTeague.

It didn't help that every morning and every night a present waited for her on the front lawn. She'd tried everything: setting her alarm an hour early, staking out the front yard from her kitchen window, coming home at odd times in the evening. Nothing worked. The shit still appeared like magic, and all night long the damned beast howled like it was being murdered. She could handle Underhill's unwanted

advances and she could deal with Stan's silence and late hours, but the dog was beating her.

The neighbors were acting strangely, too. The Murrays next door were avoiding her, she was sure of it, and Mrs. Ruth from down the street kept giving her odd, meaningful looks when she walked by. Even Mrs. Ellsby had stopped shoving kittens at her. It was as though there had been some neighborhood meeting to which Nancy had not been invited, a meeting at which the neighbors, in one improbably united stand, had decided to shun her—for what reason, Nancy couldn't imagine. She'd always been perfectly lovely to all of them. Maybe they'd heard about her war with the renter and hadn't wanted to get involved. Maybe they'd seen her, the one time, hurling rocks at the renter's house. Maybe they'd noticed her staking out her own yard and thought she'd gone mad, but were too polite to say anything about it. Whatever. Let their lawns get shit on every day, and see how they liked it. At least she was behaving with dignity and grace. Well, she was trying.

Missy was the only constant, hiding behind her awkward, timid little smile, offering her home-baked scones every morning. Sooner or later, Nancy would have to eat one. If she didn't, she'd have no friends at all in the neighborhood, and the last thing she wanted to do was to move.

She'd finally started wearing earplugs to bed at night and storing old Safeway bags by the front door. Every morning before her walk, she stuffed one or two into her fanny pack, trying to put out of her mind the inevitable moment when she would feel the handful of shit, warm and soft, through the thin plastic bag. No wonder people ignored that law whenever they thought they could get away with it. Touching that stuff, even through a protective layer, was disgusting. But it was, after all, the law. She sighed. She was becoming a responsible owner, and she didn't even have a pet.

By Friday, she'd settled into a routine: get up, take out the earplugs, put on her workout clothes, grab a few Safeway bags, walk for twenty-five minutes, pick up a hot handful of fresh dog shit, take a shower, go to work, and hide from Underhill. The presentation was Monday, and they hadn't met to go over the slides. She kept hoping

that if she continued to side step him, she wouldn't have to deal with him. He hadn't actually said or done anything inappropriate, but she knew it was just a matter of time.

She'd told Stan that tonight would be an all-nighter, and not to expect her until late. She'd spent all day working on the presentation, cluttering it up with pointless interactive crap and 3D garbage. She thought her data was hopelessly lost beneath all that technology, but Bob from Multimedia had been ecstatic with the results. "No way they're going to be able to ignore this baby," he'd said, gnawing on a pizza crust. "They're going to think the sun rises and sets on your interactive ass." Personally, she thought the whole thing looked incredibly tacky, but if Underhill wanted cutting edge, that's what she'd give him.

A rap sounded at her door, and she looked up. Speak of the devil.

"You've been avoiding me, Nance," he said from the doorway.

"Now whatever gave you that idea?" she said, winking at him. God, would she be glad when this project was over.

"Gosh, I don't know." Was that sarcasm? "What say we meet up at seven to go over the final slides?"

"Sounds great, Ted," she said. Wonderful. An evening alone with Underhill. Well, she supposed he'd finally get his chance to make a pass at her. The creep. She shuddered and barked into the intercom, "Bev, you there?"

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson." Nancy sighed, annoyed. No matter how many talks about teamwork she'd had with her assistant, Beverly insisted upon calling Nancy by her last name.

"Get me the Dine11 menu." It was going to be a long afternoon.

Hours later, Nancy looked up with irritation at the rap on her door. Christ, if everyone would just leave her alone, she'd be able to finish this damned presentation for once and for all.

It was Underhill. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "How are things coming along?"

She looked at the clock. It was almost eight. Wow. The afternoon had really gotten away from her, and the thing wasn't half done. She smiled and pushed her hair

behind her ears. No reason to let him see her worry. "I'm fine, Ted, just putting a few final touches on it." She prayed he wouldn't ask her to run the presentation for him.

"Great," he said, coming into her office and closing the door behind her. "I thought we could celebrate." He pulled two bottles of beer from behind his back. "I hope you don't think this is inappropriate," he said, "but this account is going to be huge for us, and after the work you've put into this presentation, I think you deserve some kind of celebration." He twisted off the bottle caps and tossed them into the trashcan next to Nancy's desk. "Now, I know you weren't thrilled by the response to your first try, but I really admire the way you've updated your skill set under pressure. You're going to knock their socks off at the meeting tomorrow, Nance." He handed her a beer.

"I hope so," she said, getting a little nervous. What if he did want to run through the presentation? What the hell was she going to show him? She quashed the thought. If he wanted to run the preso, he wouldn't have brought beer. He was just here to make that pass he'd been dying to make. She buttoned up her jacket and assumed her most severe expression. No reason to lead him on. Not tonight.

"To a great partner," he toasted, "and a real asset to the firm." He took a swig of beer and grinned at her.

"Thanks, Ted," she said, taking a small sip. She had to be polite. "I really appreciate all the help you've given me."

"Now," he said, setting down the bottle, "let's talk about taking things to the next level." He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, grinning.

There was nothing else to do but nip this in the bud in the nicest way possible. "There is no next level, Ted," she said firmly. "I'm married, remember?"

"What?" he said, sounding surprised. "What does that have to do with anything? I was talking about a possible pro—"

"Please," she said, holding up her hand, weary with the game already. "I'm sorry, Ted," she said, "I like you very much, and I respect you as both a man and a manager, but I just cannot afford to play around at work."

Underhill just stared at her. "But—"

"I mean," she continued, "I understand that with the long hours we all put in, it can be difficult to have a social life outside the office, but I really feel as though you should redirect your attentions on someone else, someone who isn't married." She did not look at his own wedding ring. No need to be judgmental.

"Nancy," Underhill said, looking dazed, "I don't know where you got the idea—"

There was no way he was going to talk his way out of this one. She could definitely handle Underhill. "Ted," she said firmly, "I really—"

"No," he cut her off, "listen to me, Nancy." Underhill was starting to sweat a little. "I consider myself a mentor to you, nothing more."

Right. A mentor. She stood up and smoothed her skirt. "I think you should leave, Ted, before this goes any further." She moved past him to open the door.

"Look," he said, "you've got the wrong idea." And he grabbed her arm.

She spun around, the white-hot rage coursing through her. How dare he touch her? She shoved him against the wall with both hands and shouted into his smug face. "You keep your hands off me!" She enunciated each word with her finger, stabbing his chest, "You don't get to touch me, Ted Underhill!" She stared directly into his eyes, and did not like what she saw there—confusion, anger, and was that pity? The sound of her ragged breathing filled the otherwise quiet room, and she dropped her hand, wiping her mouth with the back of it, and retreated to the far side of her desk. She began gathering up her papers, her hands shaking. *Namaste*, she thought, *peace*, *Nancy*, *peace*.

Underhill was looking at her like she was insane. "You crazy bitch," he said. "You need some serious therapy." He walked to the door, slowly, like he'd hurt something.

She straightened her suit jacket and gathered up her presentation materials. "I think you'll understand," she said levelly, once more in control, "if I just finish this up at home." He stared at her from the doorway, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. "I'll see you at the meeting tomorrow," she said. "Let's just try to forget this happened."

"I can't fucking believe you think I wanted to screw you," he said, and slammed the door behind him.

She was surprised to see Stan's car in the driveway. Thank God he's home, she thought, I could really use a little support tonight. She didn't know if she should tell him about Underhill's behavior. They usually shared everything with one another, but she was afraid of what Stan would do if he found out what Underhill had tried to do to her. And lately, they hadn't really talked much at all. She made a note to do something about that, something nice, a surprise maybe. And then Underhill's smug, fat face swam back into her mind, and she felt herself get hot again.

On the way home, she'd lost it completely, driving too fast and nearly killing herself speeding through a yellow light. Why did men have to act like that? Had they learned nothing in the last two decades? It was hard to believe that kind of sleazy behavior could still exist in the corporate world, but apparently Ted Underhill was a poster child for sexual harassment. And this lame bullshit about him wanting to be her mentor. Nancy pushed that thought aside, and promised herself that she'd have a word with Human Resources tomorrow; better it come from her mouth than from Underhill's. But that was behind her now. Tonight, she'd concentrate on Stan, on their life outside of work.

The entryway was dark and she fumbled around for a few minutes before she could see. He must have gone to bed early, she thought. She didn't blame him. He'd been working so much this week—she'd barely seen him. She walked down the hallway to the bedroom and opened the door, turning on the light.

Stan was on the bed, naked, his face buried in Missy's crotch. Missy screamed and clamped her legs together over Stan's head, holding her hands over her breasts. Nancy stood still, waiting for the shock to hit her. But it didn't. All she could come up with was some sadness, and a little bit of weary resignation. Just one more thing to deal with, she thought. But this time, all alone. She felt tears rising, and pushed them down, willing herself not to cry, not to let them see her break.

Stan dragged his head free and jumped out of bed. "I thought you were working late," he said, frantically pulling his boxers over his dying erection. "You said you were working late."

She felt strangely calm, as though she was watching the scene from outside of it. She felt a wonderful sense of peace wash over her, almost as though she was bathing in a cool pool of water. "Well," she said, "I suppose this was to be expected." She walked over to the closet and began pulling out clothes. There was nothing to do but get the hell out of there. They could sort the rest out later.

"Nancy, please," Stan said, holding his arms out, palms up. "It's not what you think." He looked pathetic and weak, like an adolescent boy who'd been caught masturbating.

"You had your face in her cunt," she said sweetly, willing the tears away, reaching under the bed for her suitcase. "What am I supposed to think? You lost your watch?" Missy covered on the bed, weeping. "Oh, be quiet," Nancy said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

"It's just that you've been so distant lately," he said, buttoning his pants. "It's like you haven't even been here." He was still, and looked at her. "I got lonely," he said in a soft voice.

That sweet note in his voice almost broke her. She paused by the door, her head down, and thought about their years together. They'd gotten through a lot—grad school, no money, relocation—but then she heard Missy cough and sniff, and she looked at her, weeping, red-faced, scrambling to find her clothes, and she knew she could never forgive him for this. "I was lonely, too, Stan." And she knew her marriage was over. She picked up her suitcase and shut the door quietly behind her.

Outside, she closed her eyes and breathed in the cool night air. Namaste, she told her clenching stomach, peace. This was just a minor setback. She would make things work, with or without Stan. She released the long breath and smiled in the darkness. She would be fine. She pulled her keys out of her bag, moving quickly, hoping to get checked into a hotel room before her control slipped, and she began bawling like a baby. Then, as she unlocked the car door, her foot came down in a fresh, steaming pile of dog shit.

"But—" she stared down at her pump, at the loose crap squelching up around it. "I don't—" Why was the shit on the driveway? The shit was never on the driveway.

The shit belonged in the middle of the lawn, four feet away from her Double Delights, not here on the driveway, next to her car. She looked at the brown runny shit covering the sides and toe of her pump. After all of it, today, Underhill, Stan, she couldn't deal with this too, this pile of out-of-place shit, here, in this new location.

"That is unacceptable!" she shouted. "This will not happen!" She would teach those renters a thing or two, right now, right fucking NOW. She ran down her driveway, into the street, and twisted her ankle, lurching forward and landing facedown on the asphalt, chunks of gravel digging into her palms and knees, her crap-covered shoe flying off and clattering somewhere behind her. She breathed shallowly, felt the soft recoil of her breath against the asphalt, and closed her eyes, waiting for the rage to subside. *Namaste, namaste*. The rage did not wash away; it unwound and expanded, like a ball of tightly woven twine, unraveling, blossoming into sheets and sheets of fabric, fabric made from sharp glass instead of cloth. Nancy stood, watching it, feeling the rage build and build inside her. When it reached its limit, she exploded, pulling herself up, standing erect in the middle of the street, teetering on one heel. She threw her head back and let out a long, loud howl, like the renter's dog, like the end of the world, like the end of Nancy Johnson. She began to laugh, a deep hollow, sound that echoed up and down the street, and pushing her hair back and straightening her skirt, smearing it with blood and gravel, she ran, akimbo, up the renter's driveway.

The house was dark and closed, the dog nowhere to be seen. She picked up a rock and threw it at the door. "Come out of there!" she rasped. There was no answer. "You come out now!" They were in there, she knew it, in there laughing at her with the damned dog, covering its mouth with their renter hands, muffling its cries so she would think the house empty, think no one was there to answer for the crime.

"Come out now!" she howled, "now!" But no one answered. She kicked off her other shoe, picked it up and threw it, breaking the front window. "Come out and face the fucking music!" But the house remained dark.

She limped to the middle of the lawn, dragging her twisted foot behind her, yanking up her skirt and pulling down her pantyhose. "This is where the shit belongs!"

she screamed, feeling herself break, fragmenting into a thousand thin, shiny splinters of glass. She squatted on the lawn and squeezed hard, laughing and crying as justice slid out of her, into a neat pile square in the center of the renter's lawn. "Goddamned fucking renters," she said, laughing, and fell forward, collapsing onto all fours, her face pressed to the soft, cool, wet grass.

Up and down the block around her, in the calm suburban night, doors began to open.