

Chapter One Excerpt

Chapter One

Not Necessarily In That Order...

"Why is my life so damn complicated?" Victoria asked herself as she steered her car past her circular driveway, toward the car pad in the back. She turned off the engine and sat for a few minutes, reflecting on the last twelve hours of her day. Work and men, not necessarily in that order, had thoroughly wrecked her nerves.

She grabbed her handbag, leather attaché and umbrella from the passenger seat, took a deep breath, and readied herself for the cold Atlanta rain that had been falling all day. Looking overhead at the evening sky, Victoria could see that it was just as unsettled as her mood. She stuck out one leg, planting her size-nine, black Ferragamo onto the cold wet pavement. "*Damnit, it's days like this that I wish I'd never turned the garage into a home gym,*" she cursed, quickly pushing her umbrella open as she made a mad dash for the door. She fumbled with her key until it slid into the lock.

"Home sweet home," she said aloud. Each time Victoria walked through her door she felt an immediate sense of comfort. After patiently saving money, buying high-end furniture, scouring antique stores, and then garnering her treasured finds in a storage unit she'd rented, Victoria had finally found her dream home. This month made one year since Sherry Smith, realtor extraordinaire, had led her to 1701 Summerset Lane.

"Sherry, this house is beautiful!" Victoria had marveled, pulling her long black hair behind her ear as she and Sherry approached the large Tudor style house.

"I came by first thing this morning to check it out for myself," Sherry smiled, flashing her perfect, cosmetically whitened teeth. "This home is a lovely split level with three large bedrooms, including a luxurious master suite. There's even an extra bonus room that'll be great for a home office. And you'll just adore the large kitchen, living and dining room, which are perfect for entertaining. Believe

me, this house is *you* dear," Sherry gushed, already calculating her sizeable commission.

Things had been very different twelve months ago when Victoria walked into her dream home—out of a recent nightmare. And as she replayed today's events in her mind, she had a funny feeling that her life was about to take an unusual turn. Her day began with an interesting twist when Ted Thornton knocked on her office door.

Warm Cinnamon Sugar...

"Hi Ted, how are you?" Victoria smiled, startled to see him as she looked up from the stack of papers on her desk.

"I'm well, thank you," he smiled back, allowing his eyes to quickly dart over both Victoria and her office.

Ted Thornton had been hired at ViaTech seven months ago. Lamar Williams, Founder and CEO of the company, had successfully wooed him from Asco Systems, one of their toughest competitors. Lamar was retiring next spring, and had handpicked Ted as his successor to run the company he'd built from a small storefront into a telecommunications powerhouse. Ted was well known and highly regarded throughout the telecom industry, which made Lamar confident in his choice of the man he both admired professionally and respected personally. It was even rumored that Ted had negotiated a deal to become part owner of the privately held company once he assumed the permanent CEO position next spring.

For a man of forty-five, Ted looked younger than his years. He was very handsome...one could even say outrageously so. His ocean blue eyes, tall, lean body and confident allure attracted all the women at ViaTech, many of who boldly flaunted themselves in his direction. He could have his pick, but he was careful, never giving them so much as a second glance. His nonchalance served to make him even more intriguing to his many admirers, particularly since it was no secret that his marriage of over twenty years was about as sunny as London in the fall.

"Victoria, do you have a minute?" Ted asked.

“Sure, have a seat,” she said, motioning to the chair in front of her desk. Victoria had only seen Ted twice in the seven months he’d been with ViaTech. Their first encounter had been during her human resources department’s senior management meeting. He’d only been with the company for less than a week, and no one had expected him to attend department meetings so soon, or without warning. He had come in, stayed for a few minutes, then left as suddenly as he’d entered.

The second time was two months later when he’d requested individual meetings with senior staff in the Atlanta headquarters office. Their meeting had gone well. They’d started out discussing business strategies and ViaTech’s future, then shifted to a more casual conversation; his adjustment from L.A. to Atlanta and her preference of Atlanta over her hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina. They even touched on their personal lives. Nothing too deep. Just nice get-to-know-you questions—Where did you grow up? What are your hobbies and interests? Their meeting ran well over the scheduled thirty-minutes, and even Jen, Ted’s personal assistant, had said that was a good sign because Ted Thornton wasn’t a man prone to wasting time on idle chatter. But up to this moment, Victoria hadn’t heard from him since that day many months ago.

Now, he was standing in her office and her mind raced to figure out why the hell he was there. She knew it wasn’t every day that the acting CEO just happened to pop in for a visit. Victoria watched as he pulled out one of the leather chairs in front of her desk, unbuttoned the jacket of his gray, custom-made suit and took a seat. Even though most telecom companies practiced a relaxed dress code, ViaTech employees, save for the engineering and manufacturing team members, dressed like Wall Street investment bankers. *He’s very handsome*, Victoria thought to herself, watching him settle comfortably into the chair.

“You have an incredible office,” Ted observed, surveying the room. “The way you’ve decorated with art on the walls and plants all around, it feels more like a room in your home than an office at work...and it smells good too.”

Victoria smiled. “It’s my job to make our employees feel comfortable when they come to me with problems or concerns, and I believe a welcoming environment helps to foster that.” Although she appreciated his discerning eye and obvious good taste, she thought it was an unusual observation to make, given that most of the men at ViaTech could care less about her office’s décor and had never commented on the fragrant smell that filled the room. But she noticed that Ted had taken in every detail.

"I like your style, Victoria," Ted smiled.

"Warm cinnamon sugar," she spoke up.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That's what you smell, it's warm cinnamon sugar potpourri."

"Ahh...very nice," Ted paused, giving himself a moment before proceeding with the speech he'd been rehearsing for days. "Victoria, as you know, ViaTech is the number two telecom company in the region. But our goal, and my plan, is to make us number one. The only way to hit that target is through the strength of our human capital. Only the best and the brightest can lead this company forward."

Victoria nodded in agreement, but wondered where he was going with the conversation.

"Five years ago the executive management team developed a highly selective year-long mentoring program to identify individuals who show great leadership potential. You're familiar with the program, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm very familiar with the Executive Mentoring Program. Our department handles the announcements." *Who doesn't know about EMP?* Victoria thought, letting out a frustrated sigh—but only in her head.

The EMP nominations for the upcoming year were due to be announced next week. Victoria was sure that Patricia Clark, the senior director of compliance, would be nominated from their department for the prestigious honor. But she couldn't figure out why Ted had come down to her office to share that information.

"Then all that's left to say is congratulations, Victoria. I'd like to personally nominate you for the program," Ted smiled.

Victoria sat in stunned silence. At thirty-three, she was one of the youngest senior directors in the company. She'd started in the marketing department when she came to ViaTech six years ago after leaving Queens Bank. But after working for a short time in the all-white, male dominated department, the only upward mobility she saw available required a willing libido; which for her was

out of the question. So when the HR department posted an internal search to replace the director of employee relations, Victoria seized the position. A few years later she was promoted to senior director. She excelled in her job, which was a piece of cake compared to the rigors of having worked for Queens Bank. In return for her hard work, ViaTech rewarded her with a handsome salary, bonuses, and perks.

But despite her corporate success, Victoria longed for something else entirely. Her plan was to leave ViaTech next summer and do what her heart had been calling her to do for as long as she could remember—open her own event planning and catering business. She'd started Divine Occasions a year ago, shortly after she bought her house. Slowly, she'd begun to build a client roster and was putting plans into motion to run her business full-time. Being nominated for EMP was the last thing she'd expected, or wanted for that matter.

"Ted, I'm...um...honored. I really don't know what to say," Victoria stammered. She came from behind her desk as Ted rose to his feet on her approach. She sat down in the chair beside him, crossed her long legs, and quickly tried to organize her thoughts.

Ted carefully inspected her from the top of her head to the tip of her pointed toe shoes, all done so smoothly she didn't even notice. Her silk blouse, slim fitted skirt, and double strand pearls and matching earrings gave her a decidedly feminine look he loved. "Just say you'll accept my nomination," he encouraged.

"Well, it's just that I'm really shocked by this...I wasn't expecting it at all." Victoria's mind raced. All she could think about were her plans to leave ViaTech.

She knew that start-up costs for her business would be high, so she'd decided to work until next June so she could stash extra money under her belt before fleeing the corporate dungeon. Victoria knew that her father would gladly give her as much financial backing as she needed, even without presenting the business plan she'd been working on for months. His guilt, if for nothing else would dictate that. But this was something she wanted to do on her own. So instead of accepting his money, she planned to apply for a low-interest loan just like any other bank customer. Besides, she knew that her cousin Jeremy who was now helping to run Queens Bank, which her father owned, would probably demand a perusal of her business plan. In Victoria's opinion, Jeremy was a first-class asshole.

She knew she had to ease out of the EMP nomination without giving away her plans. Her father had taught her the golden rule of corporate America—never let them know all your business!

Ted sensed her trepidation. “Victoria, you seem a little hesitant?” He was trying to figure out why a go-getter like her wasn’t jumping at the golden opportunity he’d just laid before her.

“Actually, I am. The truth is, I have a lot on my plate right now.” She could see the surprise on Ted’s face, but she continued. “It’s just bad timing. I believe in giving one-hundred percent, and if I don’t see that it’s possible for me to do my best, I don’t commit. That’s why as much as I’m flattered by the nomination...”

“Victoria,” Ted interrupted, “I understand your concerns. And yes, committing yourself to this program will require extra hours and projects, in addition to your normal workload. But I’ll see to it that you have the support and resources you’ll need.”

Ted hadn’t planned on Victoria turning him down, and now he was scrambling to convince her to accept his nomination. He’d been looking for a way to spend time with her since the first day they met. But without a legitimate work related project, the acting CEO couldn’t spend leisure office time with one of his many employees unless there was a damn good reason.

Initially, Ted questioned his decision for choosing Victoria. Was it because he was attracted to her, or because she deserved to be in the program? In the end he realized it was both. Her outstanding reviews, high praise from the executive team, and her record of achievement made her a prime candidate. And an added bonus was that he would finally be able to spend time with the woman he’d been thinking about and desiring from afar.

“Ted...again, I appreciate the consideration and vote of confidence. But as I said, it’s bad timing.”

“I must say, I’m disappointed.” Ted leaned back in his chair, quickly plotting his next move. “The nominations won’t be finalized until next Friday. I’d like you to take a week and think it over,” he asked, masking his desperation. He stood and buttoned his suit jacket, signaling that he was about to leave.

Victoria rose on cue. "All right, I'll think about it," she said, even though she knew her answer wouldn't change.

As she watched him walk out of her office, she could feel there was something arrestingly different about him. He wasn't like most executive types she knew. He seemed familiar, almost like she knew him, even though this was only their third encounter.

Just as she returned to her desk to finish her paperwork, Denise, her administrative assistant, walked through the door. She stood there, arms crossed and staring. "Girlfriend, what kind of excuse are you gonna come up with for not accepting that man's EMP nomination? Telling him you can't dedicate one-hundred percent is some bullshit that ain't gonna fly."

"Have you been out there listening?"

"Absolutely. You know I gotta get the 411," she grinned.

Victoria pictured Denise standing outside her door with a glass cupped to her ear like a detective in a 1960's spy movie. Denise called Victoria by her given name in the presence of their colleagues, but when they were alone she affectionately referred to her as "Girlfriend."

Denise was impeccably dressed, well-organized, and knew her job inside-out. She was an unabashed woman who could read you like last week's news, yet be gentle as a lamb when the occasion warranted. There were three things about Denise that were constant; she always smelled of Chanel No. 5, her pretty, apple-shaped face always boasted a smile, and she always shot straight from the hip, never sugar coating anything. She had an Associates degree in Administrative Office Technology and a PhD. in common sense. She was sharper than a J.A. Henckles carving knife, and Victoria relied heavily upon her insight.

"Denise, why didn't you tell me that Ted Thornton was coming to my office? I was completely caught off-guard."

"Sorry. He must've come by my desk while I was in the copy room," Denise said, handing Victoria a thick stack of papers. "When I came back your door was half-closed. I was going to come in and see what was going on, but then I heard you two talking, and well...I listened because Mr. Thornton never comes down to anyone's office," she said, placing her hands on her ample hips.

"I'm shocked. I just knew that Patricia had the nomination in the bag, at least that's what she's been telling everyone. Can you imagine how embarrassing it's going to be for her when she finds out that she's not one of the ten nominees?"

"That's *her* problem. This is one time she can't throw her legs open to get what she wants. That woman is so shady, I wouldn't trust her with the keys to the shit house."

"Damn!" Victoria laughed. "You're right about that. But seriously, Ted Thornton can give me a week or even a month, I'm not going to change my mind."

"And you shouldn't. You've put your dream on hold long enough. You have to make yourself happy, Girlfriend."

"Tell me about it. I'm tired of running my business on the side and trying to maintain this job at the same time. It's really taken a toll over the last year. I just wish I'd had the courage to make this decision sooner," Victoria lamented.

"Things don't always work out the way we want them to. Things happen over time, not overnight."

"Yeah, that's true. And it's time for me to stop letting other people's expectations and my own fear impede my happiness," Victoria said with confidence, thinking about the sacrifices she'd made to please others; like when she wanted to attend culinary school after high school graduation.

She could still hear her father's words ringing in her ear. "No child of mine with a near-perfect SAT score is going to school to learn how to cook and throw parties for a living. What kind of profession is that anyway? Your mother and I want so much more for you. Who knows, maybe one day you'll take over the bank," he'd hinted.

"But Daddy," Victoria challenged, "event planning and catering can be a lucrative profession, just like any other service...like the bank. Besides, I'm good at it. Look how well the homecoming party turned out that I planned. Everyone said it was the best party Alexander Prep has ever seen!"

"Planning a homecoming party in a gymnasium, and mapping out your future are two entirely different things," her father cautioned. "Victoria, you're my little

Queen, and it's my responsibility to make sure that I prepare you for the real world."

After months of arguments and listening to her mother's pleas of intervention, Victoria appeased her father. She enrolled at Spelman College, majored in finance, and minored in coordinating birthday parties, graduation celebrations, and any other kind of festive event she could plan. After graduation, she went on to earn her MBA from Wharton, her father's alma mater—again, obeying his wishes. She'd surprised herself when she discovered that she actually enjoyed the curriculum, knowing that her training would come in handy one day when she started her own business. But in the meantime, she put her dreams on hold and went to work at her father's bank, which he'd named in honor of her and her mother—his two Nubian Queens.

Victoria focused on marketing and community relations at the bank. She planned and executed promotional campaigns, community outreach events, and employee programs. She frustrated her father by doing what he called "fluff work" instead of digging into the "meat" of the bank—dealing with operations and finance. After they butt heads one too many times, Victoria decided to leave. She dusted off her resume and started looking for a new job. Within a month she landed a position with ViaTech. She packed her bags and moved to Atlanta, putting her back in the city where she'd gone to college and had grown to love.

"Girlfriend, you know I got your back and your front, whether I'm helping you with memos here or planning a party with Divine Occasions," Denise said.

"Thanks, you're such a good friend."

"No need to thank me, you're my girl. Now, you better get ready for your lunch date with Mr. Might-be-Right."

"I just hope he's Mr. I-Am-Sane! I'm really not up for any drama."

"This is your first date in over a year. Just be positive. You know that saying...we get back what we bring forth."

"Preach, Oprah," Victoria teased as they broke into laughter.

You Like Adventure Don't You?...

I hope he's gonna be worth me getting out in this cold rain, Victoria thought as she glanced at her Baum & Mercier dangling from her wrist, and realized she was running late for her lunch date.

"Victoria, I know you'll love him," her friend Debbie had said with enthusiasm. "Vincent is tall, handsome, and *really* nice. Now, he's a little on the shy side and doesn't talk a whole lot, but he's very sweet. And oh yeah, he's a consultant. I know you two will hit it off!"

Debbie and her husband Rob had met Vincent a few weeks ago at the gym, and she thought he'd be perfect for Victoria. Debbie Long was a professor in the art department at Emory University, and one of Victoria's closest and dearest friends. They'd been roommates in graduate school, helping each other labor through insanely demanding course work. But after a semester of Probability and Statistics, Debbie decided that business school wasn't for her. She changed her major, breezed through the History of Art curriculum, then accepted a faculty position at Emory. When Victoria had moved back to the area, Debbie was thrilled that they were in the same city once again.

Victoria was both nervous and excited as she turned her silver Audi into the restaurant's parking lot. This was truly out of character for her. She'd never been on a blind date, let alone agreed to go out with someone she'd never even spoken to over the phone. Debbie had set up everything because she was afraid that if left to Victoria, the date would never happen. She knew her college buddy would just find another excuse for not getting back into the dating scene, and Debbie thought it was high time her friend jumped back in with both feet.

Boy, this is a nasty day. But at least it's Friday, and who knows...this lunch date might be the beginning of a good weekend. Just think positive, Victoria encouraged herself, walking into the restaurant with a spring in her step. She shook out her umbrella, ran her fingers through her long, silky mane, and looked around for Vincent. Debbie told her that he'd meet her at the hostess stand, so Victoria knew that the first tall, handsome, black man she saw standing up front would be him. She saw a man coming toward her.

"Whassup baby, you must be Victoria. Damn, a sistah's fine!"

Oh my God. How does this man know my name? Victoria wondered.

"I'm Vincent Frank," the man said, extending his hand. "I been waitin' about ten minutes, but now I see it was well worth it," he grinned, looking Victoria up and down like she was an item on the menu. "C'mon baby, let's get our eat on." He motioned for Victoria to walk in front of him as they followed the hostess back to their table.

Victoria was in shock and had to remind herself to breathe. The hostess seated them and gave Victoria a look that said "*you poor thing*" before walking away.

"Well, well, well, I hit the jackpot witchu' baby. Debbie said you was beautiful and all, but you know how some white folks be thinkin' that just 'cause you a sistah, that you all exotic and shit. So they think you look good, know what I'm sayin'? But baby she was right about you...you a stone cold killa!"

Victoria bristled at his words, feeling as though the air had been sucked out of the room. *Breathe, breathe*, she told herself. Vincent was talking, his lips were moving, but she couldn't hear a word he was saying. She was too busy trying to process the visual before her eyes. He was wearing two-tone alligator shoes and a green suede pantsuit. A playboy bunny medallion dangled from a thick gold rope chain around his neck, so big she could have snatched it off and started a game of Double Dutch. His gold tooth was centered in the front of his mouth, and each time he smiled it gleamed against the flickering light of the votive candle on the table. When he lifted his hand to stroke his goatee, Victoria nearly choked at the sight of his large, diamond encrusted gold watch, accented by a gold nugget ring on his pinky finger. The crowning touch were his two-carat diamond studs, blinging loud in each ear. Victoria stared at him, feeling faint.

She thought about Debbie's description of Vincent, and so far she was only half right. She'd said he was tall, handsome, shy and educated. *He's tall and cute, in a slick bad-boy, hustler-on-the-street kinda way. But he's definitely not shy, and he doesn't sound educated. Come to think of it, Debbie never mentioned where he went to college?*

Victoria had just assumed that because he was a consultant, he must have an MBA and work for one of the major firms. Her mind was swirling with confusion.

Snap, snap! Vincent popped his fingers, breaking Victoria's trance. The server was standing at the table ready to take their order.

"Hey baby, I know you captivated and all," Vincent smiled, using his hands to showcase himself like a game show prize, "but let's get some drinks goin' on."

"What will the lady have to drink?" the server asked.

"I'll have a glass of Pellegrino, please."

"I like a woman who ain't afraid to get her drink on durin' her lunch hour. You like adventure don't you?" Vincent winked.

"It's not alcohol, its sparkling water," Victoria blinked with disbelief.

"Oh, you a sophisticated sistah," he grinned. "I'll have a Bud."

Oh My God! I'm gonna kill Debbie! Victoria repeated in her head. But wait...slow down. Maybe I'm being too judgmental. He's not the kind of guy I usually go for, but maybe I should give Vincent a chance.

"Yeah, I think we gonna hit it off real nice, know what I'm sayin'? You tall, dark and luscious and I'm the real deal. You lookin' at a total package right here baby," Vincent said, making a fist and pounding his chest.

Can this get any worse? Victoria was beginning to think that her first impression had been right on target.

"I usually date redbones, but you look so good I'm willin' to make you the exception 'cause that body is tight. And I love a sistah wit' good hair all down her back," Vincent grinned. "Yeah, I can tell it's real. It ain't no weave, that's all you baby...you the shit, you know that?" Vincent smiled, licking his full lips. He leaned against the side of the booth, pleased with himself, like he'd just given Victoria a real compliment.

Did his simple ass just say what I think he said? This fool is clearly hauling around a heavy load of plantation luggage! Victoria was pissed. "I didn't know you had a hair and skin-color requirement, or was that a back-handed compliment you just slapped across my face?" she said in her best *go to hell* tone. Vincent's complexion was the color of light caramel, sufficiently qualifying him to pass the dreaded brown paper bag test.

Vincent threw his hands up in surrender. "Whoa, whoa, baby girl. You fine as hell, no matter what the color. I'm just tryin' to be real about my shit. I usually date light skinned babes, know what I'm sayin'? But wit' all that junk in yo' trunk, a brothah's got to get wit' that!"

Okay, this jackass has lost his damn mind! Victoria tried to restrain herself by taking another deep breath. She cleared her throat before she spoke. "Debbie gave me the impression that you were...well...not as *extraverted* as you appear to be," she said, struggling to hold back her displeasure.

"I like the way you use them big words," he smiled as Victoria's eyes bucked wide at his statement. "Well, you know how you gotta play the role wit' white folks, talkin' all proper...like you sound. You know, make'em feel comfortable and what-not. But witchu'...you family, I can be myself, know what I'm sayin'?"

What the hell? Okay, that's it! Victoria looked at Vincent with near disgust. She was ready to leave, but being a human resources professional she had to know what reputable firm was foolish enough to hire the asshole sitting in front of her.

"Tell me, Vincent...what firm are you with?"

"Oh, I work for my family's company."

"And that would be?"

"Franks' Pest Control," he said with pride.

Victoria looked puzzled. "But Debbie said you told her that you're a consultant?"

"Yeah, I am. You see, I go to a client's house and evaluate what kinda pest or rodent problem they have and then I consult wit'em on how to treat it. Know what I'm sayin'...I'm a consul'ant, baby."

Oh, Hell No! Victoria couldn't take it any longer. Vincent's racial snides, profanity, misrepresentation and flashy jewelry had all pushed her well beyond her limit.

"Mr. Frank, my name isn't baby, it's Victoria...Ms. Small to you." And with that, Victoria grabbed her belongings and started to slide out of the booth.

“Where you goin’?” Vincent asked with surprise.

“Anywhere you’re not!”

“I can’t believe you snooty, educated bitches! Y’all sistahs always cryin’ the blues ‘bout how you want a good black man, but when you get one you can’t handle us. Don’t know how to ‘preciate a good brothah. I got a good job, ain’t got no kids, ain’t never been arrested, and I got a top of the line Sentra parked out front...fully loaded. I got females sweatin’ me left and right tryin’ to get wit’ this,” Vincent said loudly, pounding his chest again.

People sitting at the surrounding tables and booths began to look in their direction. Just then the server came back with their drinks as Victoria pushed past him and stood. “Your stupid ass is crazy,” she hissed, just loud enough for Vincent to hear.

“Go ‘head then, step off. I’m tired of dealin’ wit’ sistahs that be trippin’ anyway. That’s why I’m get me a white woman. They know how to ‘preciate a good man,” Vincent sneered, taking his glass of beer from the server’s tray.

Mortified, Victoria let out a small gasp. She looked over her shoulder and saw a gray-haired older white woman put her hand to her mouth in shock. She wanted to grab her glass of sparkling water and throw it in Vincent’s face, but instead she simply held her head high, walked away and never looked back. The server just stood there—speechless.

Isn’t It Incredibly Cool?...

“What were you thinking, setting me up with that jackass?” Victoria asked Debbie, speaking into her hands-free headset as she drove back to work.

“What’re you talking about? Vincent is a really sweet guy.”

“Yeah, about as sweet as strychnine! He was putting on an act for you. He’s not shy at all. He was just quiet around you so you wouldn’t find out how crazy he really is.”

“I don’t get it...what did he do to make you so upset?”

“Well, for one thing he was wearing a green suede pant suit, and tons of jewelry. He looked like a reject from a low-budget rap video.”

Debbie shook her head on the other end of the line. “God, Victoria. You’ve always been picky as hell when it comes to clothes and men. Loosen up why don’t you?”

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Victoria nearly screamed. But what did she expect from a woman whose wardrobe consisted of tie-dye shirts and broomstick skirts. Debbie was a free spirit and liked guys with an edge. She’d stunned her family and friends when she settled down and married a guy as straight-laced and normal as Rob. The truth was, the only reason Victoria had agreed to the date was because Rob had given Vincent his stamp of approval. Victoria loved her friend, but she knew that she and Debbie had very different tastes.

They were complete opposites. Victoria was tall, African-American, and refined. Debbie was short, Caucasian, and a wild, artsy-fartsy kinda gal. Victoria wore heels, while Debbie wore Birkenstocks. Victoria ate Sushi, while Debbie preferred Ramen Noodles. Victoria sipped mocha lattes, while Debbie drank hot water and Valerian Root. But over the years they’d become as close as any blood sisters could be.

“When I met him he was wearing the cutest t-shirt and shorts,” Debbie countered, trying to defend Vincent.

“That doesn’t count. It’s hard to foul up workout gear!”

“Okay, so what if he’s not the best dresser? You can’t just throw out the baby with the bath water!”

“Debbie he had a *gold* tooth.”

“I know, isn’t it incredibly cool?”

“I don’t believe you just said that,” Victoria strained. She had one hand on the wheel and the other on her head. Things like this brought up their differences. To Debbie, a gold tooth was *incredibly cool*. To Victoria, it was the equivalent of the grim reaper’s kiss of death.

"Victoria, I think you're overreacting. You need to be more open-minded."

Victoria ignored her statement. "Debbie, he was loud, obnoxious and completely uncouth. But I've saved the best for last. Let me tell you the absolute *worst* part of this bullshit date, and the real reason why I'm so upset! That idiot told me he was making an exception by going out with me because he normally only dates light skinned women, but because I have a nice ass and *good* hair, I get a pass. Then he told me that he puts on his "good guy" act for white folks...like you...to make *y'all* feel comfortable with his stupid ass," Victoria huffed. "I should've walked away when I first saw him, but *nooooo*, I was trying to be *open-minded!*" she shouted, ending her tirade.

"Oh shit," Debbie whispered in a low voice. "Victoria, I'm so sorry. I had no idea Vincent was like that. I guess I made a terrible, terrible mistake."

"I can't believe Rob thought that asshole was cool. He usually has better judgment about people."

"Well, actually...um...he and Rob only played basketball one time. Vincent's in my aerobics class, and honestly, he seemed so nice. When I found out he was single I immediately thought about you. You know, because it's been so long since you've gone out with anyone. Not since..."

"Don't say his name," Victoria snapped.

"I wasn't going to...Victoria, you're my friend and I care about you. It's been a year..."

There was a silent pause.

Debbie was one of the most sincere and caring people Victoria knew, and was sensitive to a fault. She knew that her friend meant well, and she felt bad for yelling at her. "I guess I should've talked to that fool myself before agreeing to go out with him. And you're right, I do need to start dating again, this just wasn't the guy to do it with," she said, softening her tone.

"I'm really, really sorry," Debbie apologized again. "So...do you forgive me? Are we cool?"

"Yes, I forgive you. And we're always cool, you know that."

"Good," Debbie breathed with relief. "Hey, are you still meeting us at Sambuca tomorrow night? You better say yes, I'll even buy all your drinks...it's the least I can do."

Damn, I forgot about tomorrow night, Victoria sighed to herself. She'd promised her friends she would join them, and she knew that if she bailed out once again she'd never hear the end of it. "It's time for you to start going out again," she could hear them saying. So in spite of her reluctance, she told Debbie she would be there.

After ending their call, Victoria pulled into the ViaTech parking garage and headed into the building. She tried to brush off her frustration as she rode the elevator up to her office, but all she could think about was the name that Debbie had almost called out, and the pain that still lingered from the man tied to it.

The Nerve...

Victoria sat at her desk and checked her email as she filled Denise in on the details of her horrifying lunch date.

"Girlfriend, tell me you're lyin'!" Denise said, shaking her head.

"I lie to you not."

"Humph, that's a damn shame for anyone to act that way. His attitude was loud and wrong. My grandmother always said to stay clear of people with two first names...can't be trusted."

Victoria nodded, but then frowned as she read her most recent message. "I just got an email from Patricia. This woman is so obnoxious."

"What does it say?"

"Brace yourself for this," Victoria said as she read the email aloud.

Date: Friday, October 1, 1:02 pm
From: patricia.clark@ViaTech.net

To: victoria.small@ViaTech.net
Subject: URGENT: SME Report

I want to make sure you have the SME report on my desk before the Wed. Oct. 6, deadline. I need to get started on this project ASAP, as my workload will increase once the EMP nominations are announced. Naturally, my nomination will dictate that I spend the majority of my time on program related issues. Make sure you get this to me on time.

PC

Patricia Clark had always considered herself a perfect ten. She loved her creamy porcelain complexion, super thin body, and Angelina Jolie-like lips. She thought her only shortcomings were her small eyes, outlined with crow's feet, and her slightly wrinkled neck, announcing her membership in the forty and over club. That notwithstanding, her crowning glory was her platinum blonde hair, compliments of L'Oréal, and her big boobs, compliments of Dr. Jerry Steiner & Associates Surgical Center. *What more could you ask for?* was her attitude. She didn't have a college degree, but she'd managed to work her way up the corporate ladder with what she called "friendly ingenuity," or sleeping her way to the top, as everyone else accurately pinned her tools for success.

Patricia had it in for Victoria from the first day they met. When Victoria turned in her reports, her work was error-free, which made Patricia suspicious. She believed that Victoria was getting other people to do the work for her. *How else could she do such a good job?* she often thought, discounting the fact that Victoria held an MBA from one of the top business schools in the country. And she didn't understand how Victoria could work twelve-hour days and still find time to bake homemade treats to bring to the office. Everyone loved Victoria, and Patricia couldn't stand it.

"The nerve," Denise fumed. "Like she's even being considered for EMP. I wish you would accept Mr. Thornton's offer just so I could see her shit a brick. She's more fake than those flotation devices she masquerades as breasts. She's one sneaky bitch. I'm telling you right now, you gotta watch her."

Victoria knew Denise was right. That's why she decided she would come in this weekend and work on the SME report to make sure it was ready in time for the Wednesday deadline.

And that was how her day had gone...so far.