

EXTRACT FROM *MEAT MARKET* BY DEE GORDON

FROM CHAPTER THREE: RITCHIE

“Ritchie, where have you been? Provident want confirmation of your agreed deal e-mailed before they’ll look at C.V.s.”

“Ritchie, I’ve got Len Baxter on the phone. He can’t make his interview this afternoon...”

“Ritchie, have you got anyone with travel experience? My client is getting desperado ...”

I’d only been out of the office half an hour. Jeez. “Sorry, Sue, no can help you with the travel body. What line is Len Baxter ...? Len, what’s all this? Medico are going to be really gutted... can’t you make an excuse? Some domestic crisis, toothache, migraine ...? Okay, cool, I understand. Well, when are you next out on the road, and I’ll see if Medico can see you then... tomorrow should be okay but I’ll ring you back ... yeah, not to worry ... at least we know that it will be easier for you to disappear for a few hours then ... or give me a couple of other options ... right ...I’ll be back to you in five.”

The Medico interview would take priority, then I’d send Provident that e-mail. I hadn’t believed Ellie when she told me how busy recruitment is, but ‘busy’ doesn’t even come close. Breathless is closer. There were always dozens of jobs available for us to fill, but we had to go and find them. Even the most loyal clients were unlikely to ring us - why should they, when agency after agency was ringing them offering candidate after candidate?

FROM CHAPTER SEVEN: SHIRLEY

It was time for my walkabout. I was thinking too much. I started with reception and the admin offices. Everyone was in front of a V.D.U. screen, but that was just a sign of the times. At least no-one was playing Solitaire, or at least not by the time I’d reached their desk. “Can I smell cigarette smoke in here?”

Denials all round. To be expected. Hypocritical of me to insist on a non-smoking office when I liked a cigarette myself, but London was becoming increasingly anti-smoking

these days and, as in everything else, we had to be seen to be giving a good example. I shook a finger at Lizzie, the Admin Supervisor: “I hope you all know it’s a sackable offence.” Not to mention that the Health and Safety Officer would be sniffing around soon.

My only other criticism was of the amount of filing piled up high. “How can you find anything in here? Look at this. P45’s, student forms, BACS printouts, timesheets, supplier statements. Get it sorted by this evening. It’s not temp payday and it’s not end of the month, so no excuses...”

These daily walkabouts tended to turn into carping sessions. But why not. It kept them on their toes. And it reminded me of the level of incompetence I had to rise above on a daily basis.

Next was the Fashion Division. Angie was not at her desk.

“Popped up to see Ritchie,” said Abigail protectively.

Interesting.

“How are the re-books going? Rosie is complaining her temps are down.”

“Is that true? Mine are up by seven so far, and I’ve had a placement, a temp to perm at Dorothy Parkin, plus we’ve got quite a few contract positions outstanding to start Monday, so they may well be considering temps at this stage. That’s why Angie’s gone on a recce - I never manage to wheedle applicants out of the other divisions, but she’s a whiz...” Abigail managed to tell me all this while chewing gum, manipulating her mouse, and flicking over the pages of the *Draper’s Record*.

“How’s the advertising going?”

“Okay. But it’s never enough. Or rather it’s never enough of what we’re looking for.”

I looked over at Julie, Fiona and Winston. They were all on the phone, but Julie met my glance and smiled grudgingly. We had crossed swords when she wanted to take three weeks’ holiday in one go and I’d refused. What was I running here? A charity?

FROM CHAPTER TEN: ELLIE

I buzzed down to Karen and she appeared in my office five minutes later, tight-lipped and stiff.

Her first words were: “It was that guy with the glasses, wasn’t it?”

“Sit down. Neil Harding. And yes, he did complain, if that’s what you mean.”

“But ...”

“Please, I don’t really want to hear it. There aren’t any buts. Everyone must be treated with consideration and warmth. Haven’t I told you that before? Hasn’t Shirley?”

“Even when they’re rude?”

“I can’t believe ...”

“He didn’t want to fill in a form. He said ‘I’ve got a C.V. here. Why should I have to fill in a form?’ He was aggressive. You know.”

“And you said?”

“‘I don’t make the rules’.”

“Isn’t that aggressive?” I leaned back, folding my hands over my stomach.

She bit her lip and looked down at her own hands, which were gripped together tightly.

“What is it, Karen? You were always bright and cheerful, just as a receptionist should be. You never used to sit in judgment. What’s happened?”

She sat and looked at me dumbly for a moment. She was deciding what to tell me. I could read it in her face. Then she slowly rolled up her sleeves. Her arms were covered in huge bruises. “This happened.”

What was she telling me? “I don’t...”

She proceeded to pull up her sweater so I could see the weals on her midriff, and then she lifted up her hair so I could see the cigarette burns.

“My God. Karen. My God.”

“Yeah. I haven’t had too much to smile about of late.” She was calm and collected, much more so than I was.