Karma & Diamonds

Sneak Previews from

Book 3 - Diamond Revealed

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Enter Tractor Man

Several months after that conversation with Gina in the cafe bar behind Liberty of London, I had the misfortune, or so I thought, of being shuttled off for a work assignment to dreary, cold, rainy old Germany. What could there possibly be for me in Germany?

I'd notched up hundreds of thousands of air miles travelling for work over the last few years, and would have been much happier focusing on the banks in the City of London for a change. Reluctantly, I found myself in the basement of a globally known bank in Frankfurt. I say reluctantly because this opportunity seemed like one that would suck up a whole lot of time and energy and give back little, if anything at all.

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In my work, I would often be asked by large companies to give detailed solutions for how I would solve specific computing related problems for them. Typically, they wanted the response yesterday. This meant weeks of working day and night, and weekends, with up to twenty or so experts based in the UK and at our offices in India. It was my responsibility to manage the team and ensure that everybody did what they had to do. Even though my colleagues, some of the best in their field, had strong and differing opinions about what should be done, I would have to ensure that everything came together seamlessly in the end. Even though we had to give it our best every single time, we knew full well that, more often that not, we would not win the work. That was just how things went in our industry, but we had to play the game anyway, if we wanted any chance of being able to win maybe just one of the next contracts.

This assignment smacked of being that kind of a wild goose chase, and I had other ideas of where I could better fulfil my multi-million dollar annual business target.

So, here was I in this by-invitation-only gathering, in the windowless basement of this big bank in Frankfurt. Dark when we arrived in the morning, it would already be dark when we would leave in the evening. My lack of

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enthusiasm plummeted even lower as I looked around the room. As usual, I was among just three, possibly four, token women. A sea of podgy, middle-aged men, around fifty of them, surrounded us—mostly from Western Europe and all dressed in cautious grey or depressingly dark suits.

This was far from my idea of a good time. A sense of loathing overwhelmed me as I realised that I had little choice but to be cloistered among this seemingly boring bunch of blokes for three whole days. Possibly even evenings, depending on what conversations the client needed us to have with each other about their requirements. Something about the gathering felt as forced and awkward as it did surreal. It was as if things, and these people, could never quite gel, being competitors at each other's throats. And yet, at the same time, I had a strong feeling that there was also a sense of destiny pervading our space.

My lack of enthusiasm remained unchanged as I walked around the room, going from business suit to business suit, shaking hands, and introducing myself and my company. The customary formality at such events greeted me, and being one of the few young women in a room full of dreary men, the odd—usually clumsy—flirtatious remark camouflaged as friendliness was to be expected.

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In the large auditorium, also in the basement, we sat in semi-circular rows of ascending seats, just like in a cinema. Only we were not watching an exciting movie with a hunky lead actor, but listening to unending hours of people droning on and on. First, the client's team, over three or so hours, explained why we had all been summoned there, what their problems were, what they wanted to do about it and how we, the 'service providers' could help. They left us more confused than when we had arrived. Then, each of the twenty-five companies, who had been specifically chosen to be invited to these sessions, had to do a presentation in front of everyone else, saying who we were, why we were the best ever in the history of computing and why the client should work with us.

I listened to the presenters attentively, pen poised on note paper to jot down any significant points that might be useful to discuss later but my note paper remained blank. That is, apart from writing down the name, an oddly long European one, of one particular man. He seemed to give the impression of being someone with a quiet temperament, yet he had a commanding air about him that made me want to pay attention. It wasn't so much that his presentation was perhaps the most crisp, sharp, and relevant so far, but more because something intrigued me about him. Something told me that there was more, much more to him than met the eye. There

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was something about him that made me want to like him immediately.

In our type of business circles, however, if there was one thing that I had learnt again and again it was this: you could trust no one. I had a lot of experience of guys who gave the impression of being friendly, or even of being a friend but with almost every one of them, something happened which had me regret my trusting them. The friendly, likeable ones were the worst, snakes pretending to be delicate caterpillars or sharks pretending to be dolphins, and in this gathering, which dangled the promise of a massive contract, there were likely to be many such snakes slithering and sharks circling.

I had to be careful of how to go about conducting myself among this bunch, especially with this guy. He wore a tailor-made, checked, autumn-palette wool-silk blazer, sporting the latest trend in oval leather elbow patches, worn with perfectly creased, dark brown trousers. All very trendy in the shires of Europe, I felt sure, yet it made me think of an upmarket farmer with a tractor. I started thinking of him as Tractor Man. I decided that I should be careful of Tractor Man. He gave the impression of being a calm, friendly, clever, what-you-see-is-what-you-get type, but I would bet anything he was one of the snakes in the grass here that I had to watch.

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Coffee break followed Tractor Man's presentation. Almost everyone rushed out of the auditorium to get their caffeine fix in the large room just outside, while the few others fled upstairs and out of the building desperate for a smoke. I wanted to get some fresh air, but needed caffeine and a sweet more.

Just as I was walking out of the auditorium and over to the buffet tables that held fresh pastries and hot drinks, a man with a German accent strutted over cockily and asked, "You must be from one of zoze Indian IT companies, *ja*?" I told him I was and he asked, "Did you come all ze way over from Bangalore for zis meetings?"

"No," I replied. "I'm from London."

"Oh, you changed flights at London Heathrow?" he asked, puzzling me as to why this was so important to him. "Zaz muss have been a very long journey vor you."

"Oh no, it was very short. I'm *from* London," I said. "As in, I've lived in London most of my life." I'd noticed that people outside of the UK did not seem to make any distinction between Indians from India, British Indians, Indians born and bred in America, and so on. We were all just Indians, riding around on camels and elephants, living in shacks and begging at street corners

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and now, we were also doing IT work and taking away local people's jobs to call centres, also housed in roadside shacks, in Bangalore, of course. I almost felt like saying that I had parked my elephant at Terminal 5's longterm car park and wondered if he would get the joke.

"My naam ist Wolfgang," he said, arrogant as a crocodile. He gave me some long, important sounding title and told me the name of the company he worked for. "*Ja*, okay. Wiz hotel are you staying at? Perhapz we can discuzz the possibility of working zoegetter, over dinner, *ja*?" He gave me a cheesy broad smile which told me that the last thing he wanted to do was to discuss business.

"Thank you," I said, "that's a great idea." Then, turning around to find my colleague, I called out to him, "Suraj, can you please come over?" When Suraj joined us, I said, "This is Wolfgang," and I told Suraj where this guy was from. "Wolfgang has very kindly extended an invitation to us to discuss the possibility of partnering with his company on this project. I've already committed to being at another meeting. Why don't you two have a chat over dinner this evening?" Wolfgang's face turned red with rage as he mumbled some excuse that he had to rush off to make a call and would catch up with us later.

"Blimey," Suraj said, "like a little lamb to slaughter. You did that pretty deftly."

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"Oh, yes," I replied, amused at the arrogance of some men. "I've had many a year to hone that craft."

Suraj joked, "There shall be no love in this basement, then." I threw him a sharp sideways glance, making daggers of my eyes.

After I'd picked up a light-as-a-feather, hot Brussels waffle with a fine dusting of vanilla sugar, I poured myself some coffee. Just then, a blond, muscular Dutch man in a dark grey suit, and almost twice my height, came up to me. "Hello, er …" He bent over—almost doubling towards me as I turned to face him—and tried to read my name badge, "Er, Sameetaa. That was a wonderful presentation you did earlier this morning. I thoroughly enjoyed it. You're such a good presenter."

I looked at his name badge and, being as diplomatic as I knew how and trying not to laugh, I said, "I'm glad you liked it, Kees." Tractor Man, who was standing just behind Kees, overheard Kees' compliment to me, turned around, and looked at me with an expression of laughing bewilderment. He made a face at me that expressed the question, "What presentation?" because it was my colleague Suraj, and not I, who had presented on both our behalves.

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Not being able to help myself, I looked at Kees with a straight face and said, "What did you like about it, Kees, more specifically?"

"Oh, you're just very good. You came across very beautiful, I mean, beautifully," Kees replied in an Amsterdam accent.

And there you have it. Snake disguised as caterpillar, number two already, and just five minutes into the first break, I laughed to myself. And two and a half more days to go. I managed to dismiss Kees eventually, after a few more minutes of useless, inauthentic banter. Tractor Man came over. "Well, that *was* a wonderful presentation you did, Smita." He laughed. "When do we get to see you in action again?"

"Haha," I said. "I really enjoyed it, too. Next time, when I *actually do* get to present, perhaps it will be just as memorable."

"You must get guys hitting on you all the time at these events." The cup he was filling with hot tea kept sliding out of his hand as he looked at me. He was clearly nervous as he spoke. I noticed that I found his nervousness sort of endearing, but then rejected it out of mind and did my best not to let him see it either.

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Yeah, yeah, whatever … and you're no different. I wrote him off, like I did all the others, usually with good reason. Being one of the few women working among largely alpha males, I had come to be disdainful about how often men underestimated women in business, even in these modern times, still relating to them as a sex object first. In my yonder years, I used to lash out infuriated when encountering sexual inequality or harassment at work. Then, I learnt to hide my fury and instead, seethe with frustration in private. Now, after some twenty years of realising how the minds of men worked and having become more secure in myself, grounded in a deeper confidence, I tackled these things very differently. You could say with less force and more power.

"Hmmm … I haven't noticed," I replied dismissively, thinking that he was dangerously close to trying to chat me up himself.

Tractor Man and I bantered a bit about the client, then I asked, "So, are you any the wiser about what they want? I thought I had a good understanding when I arrived, having read the thick pile of documents they sent us, but now I'm really confused."

"You and me both! Though I think it's a good idea to start looking around for companies to partner with.

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This programme is way too big for any one company to handle. You watch, before the day's out they'll be telling us to group up with a few other companies to do the work jointly," the tall Tractor Man said in perfect English, spoken with a soft accent that wasn't obvious enough to place.

"By the way, I'm James," he said, flashing a charming smile. He gave me a friendly look. I didn't buy his friendly act one bit.

Meanwhile, I tried not to look self-conscious about the fact that, for some bewildering reason, his was the only name that I had written down during those uninformative and boring presentations.

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