

Chapter 2 Excerpt

“Great shoes!” the coffee barista called to Anna as he balanced a tray of mocha samples. The morning skyway crowd surfed around him.

Anna smiled as she glided toward LaSalle Plaza in her red leather heels. They looked ridiculously ashy and stood too high to be practical, especially on this long walk from the car. But they served an important purpose. Anna’s first boss always talked about his “Superman Suit”—his most expensive, tailored three-piece he wore when he needed to feel invincible. These shoes did the same for Anna. They also boosted her to a shade under six feet—tall enough to loom over most female colleagues and stand eye-to-eye with the men.

She sped up to keep pace with the other professionals teeming in the second-story skyway. The eight-mile network of glass walkways connected Minneapolis’s office buildings, restaurants, and theaters, shielding pedestrians from extreme summers and brutal winters. Anna appreciated the protection on this chilly February morning.

She slipped past a line of people at the muffin shop and then slowed to admire her destination. Straight ahead, the twenty-two-story tower with blue-tinted windows acted like a divining rod. She nodded at the shoeshine guy in the doorway and stepped into the BSI lobby. Morning light poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows as Anna’s authoritative heels echoed on the marble floor. She took a deep breath to calm her exuberance. *First day on the job.*

Rumored to receive 5,000 résumés per month, BSI had its pick of prospective employees. Landing an interview was tough—getting a job, damn near impossible. But Anna didn’t base her professional plan on impossibilities. She built her goals on determination, persistence, and Alissa—Anna’s freshman-year roommate and one of the metro’s top headhunters. Alissa called Anna a dear friend. Anna called Alissa when she needed to move on. According to the carefully mapped, patent-pending Anna Reed Career Trajectory, this occurred every 3.2 years. Approximately.

“May I help you?” the receptionist asked.

The lobby looked fresh and well funded. Anna could smell the lilies in the enormous vase on the table nearby. A far cry from her previous employer, a once-promising tech startup that lacked an actual business model, BSI had called her up to the majors.

“I’m Anna Reed. For Kari Fisher, please.”

The receptionist smiled, despite juggling a headset call, three flashing phone lines, and an open laptop. “One moment, please.”

Anna strolled to the windows, feeling the caffeine from her latte kicking in. *This job is going to rock. Carole can go to hell.*

Carole—a hot mess with a chronic antacid habit—had hired Anna at the tech startup. When Anna submitted her two weeks’ notice, Carole shook a few Roloids straight from the bottle into her mouth. “Why become a small fish in a big pond?” she asked while crunching the chalky tablets. “There’s so much opportunity here.”

But Anna saw through the underhanded tactic to get her to stay. The company had just agreed to an ill-advised buyout, and layoffs would surely follow. Anna prided herself on reading the chessboard and staying one step ahead of the fray. Any time things got complicated—bad bosses, restructures, layoffs—she found a way to make a clean exit.

Kari Fisher—who did double-duty in HR and as a change manager for the senior VP of Operations—burst through the glass double doors and tripped as she crossed the lobby.

“Great to see you again. So great.” She tugged on her crooked hair barrette, attempting to right her falling brown curls.

Hard to fathom how someone so disheveled and distracted could be the direct line to Lyle Kirkland, Anna’s new boss. Still, if he could put up with her, so could Anna.

“Thanks for skipping orientation and jumping in. It’s been crazy,” Kari panted.

Anna grinned, noting Kari had missed a button on her blouse, causing a gap that revealed her gray sports bra.

“Your parking pass worked okay?”

Anna started to respond, but Kari had already spun around and trekked back toward the employee entrance. Anna clicked after her, taking care to land every step. Her kick-ass heels functioned well on modular carpet or hardwood but created one hell of a risk on marble tile. She didn’t want to pull another Bambi. Last month, her stilettos had disagreed with a restaurant’s slick floor, turning Anna into a flailing

baby deer on ice—limbs splayed, skirt up, Spanx exposed.

“You’ll get your workspace and laptop later.” Kari nudged Anna to turn le at a hallway intersection. “Our schedule today is packed! So packed. We’re already late for PMO.”

Anna weaved around employees, trying to stay alongside this tiny sandstorm.

“Oh, and don’t forget to TEPIL your time today.”

“TEPIL?” Anna asked. “I’m not familiar with—”

“Silly me. It’s our Technology-Enabled Productivity Increment Log. Great system Synerpoint built for us. You know them? One of the ‘big six’ consultancies.” Kari’s short legs continued churning, and she tapped Anna’s shoulder to turn le again. “Anyhoo, we got rid of timecards—thank God! Now we use TEPIL to bucketize our work and track productivity in fifteen-minute increments. Just choose one of the fifty-six sanctioned workplace activities from the drop-down menu.”

Anna couldn’t help but smirk. “Sanctioned workplace activities?”

“So great, right? For today, you can TEPIL your time under code 249: Training, Learning, and Self-Advocacy.”

Kari stepped onto a waiting elevator and punched the button. “Cafeteria is on the fifth floor. Company store, too. Great place to pick up a BSI T-shirt or umbrella.” She put a hand on Anna’s arm, her eyes wide. “Ooh, and be sure to check out the store’s new spa services. Today is Massage Monday. TEPIL that as 298: Employee Wellness. Last week was Wax-It Wednesday! Got a Brazilian. Not gonna lie: I’m still tender. So tender.”

Anna wrinkled her nose at the unusual employee perks. *What ever happened to gym passes and free pizza?* “So how did you TEPIL that, if you don’t mind me asking.” She chuckled. “Landscaping and Grounds Maintenance?”

Kari continued ticking o today’s to-do list. “Gotta get your security badge, too. Can’t get back in the tower without it.” She tugged on the laminated card clipped to her waist, flashing the image at Anna. The ID photo featured the same striped shirt, the same I-just-woke-up hair. The plastic card snapped back on a retractable cord.

“The most important meeting you have today is in Loni Anderson.”

Anna chuckled. "With Loni Anderson?"

"In," Kari corrected, lowering her voice to a raspy whisper as they stepped onto their destination floor. "It's a conference room. For a meeting about Optelligence."

"Optelligence?"

Kari nodded. "Top-secret strategy. Total game changer. It's why you were hired. Kirkland's the exec sponsor, and he needed a comm pro."

Anna straightened her shoulders and smiled. She wanted to inquire further, but Kari threw open the door to a room full of people, mid-discussion.