

# Code Red

By Amy Noelle

The Writer's Coffee Shop   
Publishing House

First published by The Writer's Coffee Shop, 2013

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Paperback ISBN- 978-1-61213-149-8  
E-book ISBN- 978-1-61213-150-4

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the US Congress Library.

Cover image by: © Depositphotos/vectomart Cover design by: Jennifer McGuire

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# About the Author

Amy Noelle is a thirty-something single woman with two cats, Lily and Logan. Though she contends that she is not a crazy cat lady, she freely admits to being a crazy football fan. You can find her glued to the couch every fall weekend, cheering on her Seminoles and Buccaneers.

After attending Florida State University for two years, she transferred to Northern Illinois University and graduated in 1997 with degrees in Journalism and Political Science.

She was born in the Azores Islands, Portugal, and lived as a military brat from the west coast to the east coast of the United States, though she's found her permanent home in Tampa, Florida, for the last decade.

Besides football and writing, her other loves are television, movies, the beach, thunderstorms, and her family and friends.

Dedicated with love to my parents, who believed I could do this; to Angela, who read and guided me through every word; and to the fandom, who supported and encouraged me and made this possible.

# Prologue

2005

"I'm going to go bake some cookies!" I called to my roommate Jen as I grabbed the cookie dough out of our mini-fridge. Damian was studying tonight, and I thought I'd surprise him with a little something sweet since he was working so hard. It had been only a day since I'd seen him, but already I missed his dark eyes, his sexy accent, and his talented lips. Maybe I could convince him to take a study break.

"Yum. You better give me some. They can't all be for your boyfriend." Jen peered at me from the bedroom. "Please, Nic?"

"I'll bring you some. Be back in a bit."

We were on the fifth floor of the dorm. The little kitchen was down on the third floor, and since I was lazy and carrying frozen cookie dough, I took the elevator. As I headed down the hallway, the door to my left swung open.

"I'll see you later, angel."

I knew that voice. My heart pounded. I turned my head, and there he was. My boyfriend, Damian, was coming out of some girl's room, his clothes freshly rumpled. It didn't take a detective to figure out what he'd been doing, especially since the girl was wearing nothing but a skimpy robe, her blond hair tousled.

"Will you see her before or after you see me?" The words came out of my mouth before I even knew I was speaking.

Damian turned, and a look of panic flitted across his face but it was gone in an instant and the charm was back.

“Nicole, my angel, I’ve missed you.” The accent. The dark, soulful eyes. The pouty lips. I was ashamed my heart beat faster as it always did when he looked at me like that. No. No way.

“How many angels do you have, Damian? Me, this girl, and who else?”

“Please, my heart, don’t look at me like that. You know I love you.”  
The blond girl gasped.

“What? Damian, what’s going on here?”

“Don’t you get it, honey?” I asked. “He’s doing you and me and God knows who else. Gonna help the girl understand, Damian?”

He smiled and held a hand out to me. I thought about smacking him in the face with the cookie dough, but that wouldn’t have been fair to the cookie dough. It hadn’t done anything wrong. Besides, I needed it, especially now that I found out my supposed boyfriend was a lying, cheating asshole.

“My lovely, we didn’t agree to a commitment. I love you both! You have no complaints, yes?” That sexy accent wasn’t so sexy when he showed what a moron he really was.

“You told me you loved me, and I was the girl for you.”

“You told me that, too.” Blondie was glaring at him now, and Damian wisely took a step back. Maybe he wasn’t such a moron after all.

“And so you are, my sweet girls. I have a sweet tooth, as they say, yes?” To think I was going to feed it cookies. That sickened me.

“Indulging in too many sweets can give you a cavity. And they can hurt. Shall I show you how much?” I took a step toward him and he stepped back again, holding up his hands.

“Nicole. Mandy. Please, ladies, don’t you see we could have a lovely relationship?” That did it. I raised my arm to throw the cookie dough, but Damian turned and ran down the hall. One look at Mandy told me she was about to lose it. Me, too. I ran toward the staircase and didn’t stop until I got to my room. Jen was in the shower, and I was grateful I didn’t have to talk to her. I threw myself down on my bed, buried my face in my pillow, and cried.

I'd believed him. Every word out of his rotten, lying mouth had been designed to wrap me around his finger, and I'd fallen hook, line, and sinker. How could I have been so stupid? How could I be that girl who fell for the pretty face and didn't see the rotten core?

I was a smart, independent woman who didn't need a guy to make her happy. So why was I crying over him? Why was Mandy doing the same? He didn't deserve our tears. He deserved a kick to the balls and for me to e-mail every female on campus telling them what a lying, scheming rat he was.

Screw this. I sat up and wiped the tears off my face. I wasn't going to cry over him, and I wasn't going to let Mandy do it either. I grabbed the cookie dough off the bed and headed back to the third floor where I knocked on Mandy's door and braced myself. She opened it, still in her robe. Her face was as red and splotchy as mine likely was.

"Don't you dare shed another tear over that two-timing wannabe Casanova." She sniffled, and I held out my hand. "Nicole Magette, ex-girlfriend of the Greek asshole." She managed a sigh as she squeezed my hand. "Mandy Hawkins, same." "How long were you with him?" I had to know. But why did I care? He was history now. "Three weeks. You?"

"Two months." So I won. Or lost, depending on how you looked at it. I should never have trusted a guy that beautiful.

Mandy looked like she was going to cry again. That was unacceptable. "Take a shower, get dressed, and meet me in room six-seventeen."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to bake us these cookies, and we're going to get shitfaced."

"Really? You don't want to hit me, or something?" Her big blue eyes widened and she looked frightened. I thought about agreeing just to mess with her, but even I wasn't that much of a bitch.

"Did you know he had a girlfriend?"

She shook her head. "Of course not!"

"Well then, I'm not going to hit you. Now, do you want to come to my room and talk about how men are assholes, or not?"

She smiled for the first time since learning that Damian was a lying, cheating dick. "Can I bring my roommate?"

"The more the merrier."

"Thanks, Nicole. You're being amazingly cool about this."

I wasn't cool, but I was glad she thought so. I gave her a wave and headed off to bake the damn cookies. As soon as I was alone in the hallway, my eyes began to sting. My chin started quivering, and I pressed my fists to my eyes. I wasn't going to waste my tears on him. Or on any man. Not ever. Love was just a fairy tale and I hated fairy tales.

When the cookies were done I headed upstairs, retrieved them, and knocked on my friend Kim's door on my way back to my room. "What?" she asked, a book clutched in her hand. "I'm studying."

"Not anymore. You're coming to my room and getting wasted with me, Jen, and Damian's other girlfriend and her roommate." I walked away as she gasped and yelled my name. I knew better than to turn around. If she wanted the details, she'd have to come to my room and curse men with me. I smiled in satisfaction when her door clicked shut and I heard her footsteps following me back to my room.

Ten minutes later, I had just finished telling Kim and Jen my story when there was a knock on my door. I opened it to the now-dressed Mandy and her roommate.

"This is Ashley," Mandy said, and we all introduced ourselves while I got out the shot glasses and the tequila.

"Why aren't you kicking her ass?" Ashley asked me, and I laughed as I poured our shots.

"Mandy didn't dick me over, Damian did." I raised my shot glass. "To no more gyros," I said, offering my first toast. Mandy snorted with laughter. We slammed several shots and ate my awesome cookies. Then Jen turned on the television, and I glared at it. "A Few Good Men? As if there are any!"

"Hell yeah," Mandy slurred. "Men lie."

"They do, they definitely do," Ashley agreed. "There was this guy in my Spanish class. I thought he liked me, but he just liked my notes."

I nodded and glanced at the screen as Jack Nicholson went off yelling about the "Code Red."

"You know what? That's a good idea," I said.

"What is?" Kim was annoyingly sober, probably because she'd soon be heading back to her room to study. Overachiever.

"A Code Red. We should have that."

"You want us to kill Damian?" Jen asked, horrified. "I love you, Nicole, but I'm not killing a man for you."

I laughed myself silly while the other four stared at me as if I were losing my mind. They didn't get it. I was drunk, sure, but I was thinking clearly. And I wasn't murderous.

"No! Our own version of the Code Red. See, I figured it out. The problem is that Damian was just too good-looking."

"He was." Mandy sighed, looking dazed and dreamy. "Those eyes . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, don't start rhapsodizing over the asshole. We're both going to need a damn STD test thanks to him."

She looked sick now. "Oh, crap."

"Exactly. I'm over it. I don't want to deal with guys like him coming around and sweeping me off my feet and then making me feel empty inside when I catch them coming out of some girl's room."

Mandy teared up again. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"I'm not blaming you. I'm blaming me. I knew he was too good to be true, and I let him in anyway. Never again."

"So what does this Code Red entail?" Kim asked.

I grinned. Finally, a good question. "Simple. It's a support system. Any time one of us encounters a guy who's dangerous, one who could tempt us and make us forget what jerks they are, we call in the others for reinforcement, who will come running and make sure we don't give in to temptation."

"It's not a bad idea," Jen said, loyal as ever.

"I don't have time for men anyway," Kim added. "I'm in."

"You know I'm in," Mandy said, her tears spilling over.

Ashley chewed the inside of her cheek. "What if I want the guy?"

"Then you don't call a Code Red, obviously. That's the beauty of the system. You only call it if you don't want to fall for the guy."

"Okay. Sounds good to me, if only to keep Mandy away from the creepers." She wrapped an arm around Mandy's shoulders. "She's susceptible to anyone with a pretty face."

So had I been, once. But no longer. "So it's settled. We'll get each other through with our hearts intact. Agreed?" "Agreed."

Code Red established. It would keep us safe.

# Chapter 1

“Here’s to ex-boyfriends,” Ashley said, holding her margarita aloft.

“Here’s to suddenly fat ex-boyfriends who may or may not be living with their mother,” I said as I clinked my glass with Jen’s.

“Seriously, Nic, was he really fat?” Mandy asked and leaned forward. “He’s gained at least fifty pounds since college and, unless cougars have severely lowered their standards, the woman he was with was his mother.” I smiled. Maybe I should feel bad that Damian had let himself go. He’d been so gorgeous once upon a time. Jet black hair and eyes so dark and deep I thought they could look into my soul. What I should have seen was that his soul was just as black as his features. So was his heart. It was too bad he’d been banging half our dorm, which I discovered after I sent a mass e-mail. Mandy and I were in good company. We could have formed our own sorority of girls screwed and screwed over by Damian Hallas. His name was Damian, for crying out loud. Like that kid from *The Omen*. I should have seen it coming.

“Did you say anything to him?” Kim asked as she brushed back her long black hair. She could have been Damian’s sister with her dark hair and eyes, though unlike him, she wasn’t evil and hadn’t lost her looks.

Of course other things had changed since we’d graduated four years ago. Mandy, once so heartbroken over Damian-the-cheater, was already a mother. Kim and Ash were

married and settled down. Only my best friend and former roommate Jen and I were still single.

It was rare for me to have much of anything to contribute to our bi-monthly dinners that wouldn't get me that pitying "you have no life" look. I was enjoying this moment quite a bit.

"Of course! I walked right up to him and yelled, 'Damian, is that you? You haven't changed a bit!' He turned red and said, 'Nicole Magette, how is it you are even more beautiful now than you were back then?'"

That had been a shock. I hadn't been sure he'd remember me, but he'd taken my hand and, while his looks certainly weren't as devastating as they'd been in college, his eyes were that same deep black that looked right through me. For one brief moment, I'd nearly forgotten everything he'd done and kissed him then and there. It was strange how easily I'd slipped back to the moment I'd met and been captivated by him. Until his mother butted in. Thank God for her.

"Tell me you didn't sleep with him," Jen said, her light blue eyes pleading.

"Of course I didn't!" I'd only thought about it for about thirty seconds while I was hypnotized by the past.

"You must admit, he fits your criteria now." Kim grinned. "He's not better looking than you anymore, and he's apparently a loser who lives with his mom."

I tossed my balled-up napkin at her, and she batted it away. Sadly, she had a point. Ever since I'd had my heart broken, I'd avoided good-looking bastards like Damian. Nerdy, dorky, and loser guys were a lot easier to hook up with and walk away from.

"We can't all find perfect husbands like you did," I said. Kim's husband Brian was smart, successful, handsome, and completely devoted to her. If I didn't love her, I would hate her for being one half of a perfect couple.

"Sure you could. There's this guy Brian works with . . ."

I tuned her out. There was no way I was doing the whole setup thing. Every single one of them, with the exception of Jen because she knew better and had her own issues with men, had tried to hook me up with someone they or their husbands knew. It always failed spectacularly and made for a world of awkward when I inevitably ran into the poor guy again. No thank you.

"She's not even listening," Ashley said. "She's completely useless. I don't know why we bother trying." This was nothing new. Ashley and I had always been antagonistic toward one another, probably because we had similar stubborn personalities.

"You know," Kim said, "it would be one thing if you actually gave these random guys a chance. But you purposely hook up with men you have no intention of having anything more than a one night stand with." I raised an eyebrow, and she sighed. "Nic, you need more in your life than your cats." She was still arguing, but I could hear the defeat in her voice. She was giving up, for now. Good. She almost never let things go. She'd keep going until you gave in and did what she asked. If our group had a leader, it would be Kim. She was the type who'd always been on the student council, and I had no doubt she'd make partner in her advertising firm. She was whip-smart and relentless. But for once, she wouldn't get me to see things her way. I really didn't need more in my life than my cats. Taken together, they were the perfect male. Winchester, a fat orange tabby named after my TV boyfriend Dean Winchester from Supernatural, loved nothing better than to curl up and snuggle with me. Huntington Peabody the Third—a handsome, sleek, black cat—was moody, unpredictable, and insanely possessive of me. He loved me and only me, and he tended to attack any male who dared come into my home. Since I was generally one and done when it came to guys, this wasn't a bad thing. My suitors usually left satisfied, and with some kind of mark from Hunt. Win all around.

"I'm perfectly content, thank you very much," I said and shot a look at Jen. They didn't tend to bother her about men since she'd gotten screwed over by David Thompson. Or was it Tommy Davidson? She'd fallen for Mr. Wrong, moved him into her apartment, and came home one day to find everything she owned gone. The cops had informed her David had several aliases and several girls he'd pulled the same move on in the past. That was two years ago, and she hadn't dated since. Nobody pushed her like they did me. She was still hurting, and all of us felt protective of her. I'd gotten into more than one verbal smackdown with men who wouldn't leave her alone.

"One day it's not going to be enough," Mandy said and glanced at her watch. "Don't you want what we have?"

Did I want to go home to a screaming baby and a clueless husband who'd already called four times to ask how to do the simplest of tasks? No, I really didn't. But Mandy handled it with a smile. I was pretty sure she loved being needed, in a way none of the other guys she'd dated ever needed her.

My friends acted like we were forty-six, not twenty-six. I had plenty of time. I had my cats to keep me company and BOB, my vibrator, to take care of business when there was no man around. As long as I had batteries on hand, I was good to go. What more did I need?

"So, how's work?" Jen asked to change the subject. She hated it even more than I did when they went off on the man tangent.

Kim beamed. "I got a new account yesterday. I can't say the name, but suffice it to say that a certain god of shoes and I will be working together very closely."

“God of shoes?” I asked. “You mean N—” Kim shushed me. “This is major! Congrats, Kim.”

“Thanks! How about you? Written anything scintillating lately?”

I rolled my eyes. I had the most boring job on the planet, but it served two purposes: it paid the bills, and I got to wear comfortable clothes to work, rather than dressing up in designer duds and shoes that would require I see a podiatrist in a couple of years. At least I was sort of using my journalism degree.

“Technically, I’m a writer,” I said.

Ashley laughed. “Technically, you’re a technical writer. Though I am having some trouble with my vacuum. Do you know what might be causing it not to suck properly?” she asked, giggling away.

I flipped her off. “Not everybody needs to write a national column or a bestseller to be successful,” I said. Teaching someone how to use their vacuum or microwave wasn’t the most exciting of professions, but there was some nobility in it. If a person didn’t know how to use a microwave without reading the instruction manual, well, maybe they shouldn’t own one, but I felt like what I did was useful, even if it was mind-numbingly boring.

“Besides,” I said, “you know all about sucking properly.” Ash choked on her margarita. “Or maybe not. Poor Rick.”

A round of raucous laughter erupted, and Ashley turned bright red.

“Rick has no complaints,” she said. “You’re so crude, Nic. You should have been a guy.” I’d thought that more than once or twice myself.

“Your vacuum probably needs to be cleaned out. Hair as long as ours tends to get wrapped around the brush. Take some scissors and cut it off. That’s the easiest way to remove it.” I demonstrated by wrapping my long, dark blond hair around my finger.

“See? My job can be useful.”

Ashley nodded to humor me.

“Anyway, work’s okay. Pro-Tech has some suit from New York coming in with a major project that’s very hush-hush.” I shrugged. Usually when we got something like that, it was for an electronic device of some sort—a phone or video game, and something I wasn’t involved with. I knew how to turn on my television and set my DVR, and that was about it. My boss knew better than to stick me with that kind of project.

“Sounds exciting. Maybe you’ll finally get to write about the TouchPhone,” Mandy said. “The TouchPhone doesn’t come with a manual.” I patted my purse where my beloved phone resided. “You just turn it on and go to town.”

"Sounds like your sex life," Ashley said, and we all giggled again.

"You forgot send him on his way when you're done with him."

"Yep, you should be a man." Mandy tossed some bills on the table. "I need to get home to the baby." Her son was nearly six months old, and I had a feeling nights like this would be few and far between once he was mobile. She was doing well with the stay-at-home mom thing, although I couldn't imagine it. She'd been quite the party girl in college. We'd had similar tastes in men and lifestyle until Kurt came along, swept her off her feet, married her, and knocked her up. Babies and men weren't high on my priority list. Then again, not much was. I preferred it that way.

"Yeah, it's time," Ashley said, and the rest of us piled all our money together.

I pushed my margarita away. I'd had enough and wanted to be sober for the ride home, even if I was taking the El. I loved living in Chicago and not having a car or, more importantly, a car payment.

We stood and made our way to the exit. Hugs and cheek kisses were exchanged before the girls got into their cars and drove away. Jen and I walked to the El alone. She leaned her head on my shoulder. "That's getting more and more painful."

"They have different lives than we do. It doesn't hurt. It's just not the same," I said. She stood up straight and eyed me suspiciously. "It doesn't bug you that they're all paired off with babies and mortgages and all that grown-up stuff?"

I shrugged. "Not really. Do I hope to have that someday? Yes. Well, maybe not the baby." Kids terrified me, if I was being honest. Especially babies. They looked at you like they knew every single awful thing you'd ever said, done, or thought about doing. "But I don't want it right now. I'm having fun just the way I am."

"Solitude and empty sex with losers?" she asked in a snarky voice.

I sighed. "First of all, I don't have sex all the time, and rarely with a full-on loser. Just with guys who aren't very good-looking. They're grateful for the attention. Very grateful, if you get my drift." I wagged my eyebrows and she laughed and nudged me. "Second of all, I like being alone. If you can't enjoy your own company, how can other people enjoy you?"

"Nobody enjoys me," Jen said.

I slipped an arm around her. "That's not true. I enjoy you. You're pretty, smart, and sweet. If you want what they have, you need to let down your guard. Hell, tell Kim to hook you up with that guy she was droning on about setting me up with. You have to put yourself out there if you want someone, Jenny."

She shook her head, and her brown hair tumbled over her shoulders. "I don't know how anymore. It's been too long."

"I'll help you," I said and squeezed her shoulder. "We'll go out next weekend and I'll show you how it's done."

She laughed. "I didn't say I wanted one of your easy ugly guys. I want quality. I want someone like . . ." She frowned.

"David. Or the David you thought you knew. I get it. You know, there are good-looking guys out there." I even got hit on by some of the cute ones. Just because I preferred guys who weren't devastatingly handsome didn't mean I couldn't get one if I wanted to. I just didn't, thanks to demon Damian.

"He asked for my number, you know," I said as we walked into the EI station. "Damian?" she asked and her jaw dropped. "Did you give it to him?" I laughed. "No, I gave him the number to my gyno." She snickered. "You're crazy, Nic."

"I'm not going to lie. Fat and aged or not, I was still thrilled he wanted to spend time with me. For just a moment, he was the guy that made my tongue tie in knots and my heart pound. He's got those same eyes and that same voice that did me in seven years ago."

"He was sexy as sin," she said with a sigh. We swiped our cards and pushed through the turnstiles. "Why do we have such bad taste in men?"

"We both got burned, then we both got smart. I don't think that constitutes bad taste," I said. My taste now was different, but it worked for me and I didn't get hurt.

"No." She shook her head. "We both closed off. You may go out and get laid, but you don't put your heart on the line any more than I do. What happened to us? We used to be fearless."

I wasn't afraid. I was just . . . disinterested. My heart was my own, and I was happy that way. "I'd say we both prove that women don't need men to be happy."

"Do we?" Jen asked. "We're both headed home at nine o'clock on a Saturday night to empty apartments."

"Mine isn't empty."  
She laughed. "Cats don't count."  
"Says you."

My train pulled up and I gave her a quick hug. "Maybe we're just meant to be a different kind of happy. Or maybe you need to make some changes. Either way, I'll help you work on it."

I stepped onto the train and waved as she shouted, "Maybe we both need to!"  
No, I was just fine. My life was easy and uncomplicated, just the way I liked it.

# Chapter 2

“What are you looking at?” I asked Hunt, who’d hopped onto the vanity and was studying me with his greenish-gold eyes.

“It’s the skirt, isn’t it?” I tugged at the black skirt and frowned when it kept riding up past my knee. This was why I didn’t wear skirts and dresses. You didn’t have to worry you might have a Sharon Stone moment and unintentionally flash the new Suit from New York. And since I didn’t live my life like the movies, which was a damn shame, it was probably for the best that I kept the goods covered.

“I’m trying too hard, aren’t I? He’s just some guy. He isn’t the boss.” Hunt stuck a leg straight out and began cleaning himself. “Nice. I’m going to take that as approval of my outfit. There’s nothing wrong with dressing to impress.” I finished putting on my makeup and smoothed out my olive blouse that matched my eyes. Now, hair up? No. That was too much effort. I needed to offset the skirt and shoes. Not that I was wearing heels. I wasn’t a lunatic. But dress flats were still better than my usual sandals or black sneakers. I ran my fingers through my long, brownish-blond hair and exited the bathroom where I was immediately accosted by Winchester, who wound through my

legs, purring like there was no tomorrow. When I bent to scratch his head, he amped it up a notch. "I know, breakfast time. How could I forget?"

I went into the kitchen and refilled his dish. He'd have no qualms about taking me down if I ever thought about leaving without feeding him.

"You're such a pig," I said as he knocked me out of the way. Hunt appeared from out of nowhere, his black tail swishing. He shot me a look before knocking one treat out of the bowl and eating it.

"I guess I'll be going now." They studiously ignored me as I got my bag and slipped on my black flats at the door. Typical men. They had what they wanted, and I was no longer of interest to them.

I shook my head and headed out to catch the train. Didn't want to be late today, just in case Mr. New York had already arrived to send heads rolling. My boss, Chris, was being uncharacteristically buttoned up about it, when he was usually very laid-back, easy to laugh, and willing to let a girl leave early if she had her day's work done.

The guy sitting across from me on the train kept looking at me through thick glasses that kept slipping down his nose. Had I hooked up with him? He sort of looked like my type, but I didn't remember him. Maybe I'd just seen him when I was out somewhere. Or maybe my picture was on an easy lay website. I had hooked up with a few computer guys in my time.

When the El got to my stop, I stepped past glasses man and glanced at my watch. Ten minutes until work started. Perfect. I strolled the half block to my building and arrived just as the elevator opened. Red-letter day for me. I hit the button for the fourteenth floor and exchanged smiles with an older lady who requested the twentieth. Perfect again. My stop was first.

The doors opened and I walked down the hall and entered office fourteen twenty-three. "Who are you and what have you done with the real Nicole?" Andrew asked the instant he laid eyes on me.

I smacked him with my purse and walked to my desk, which was across from his, and said, "I notice you aren't trying to pass off black jeans as business casual today."

"I don't do that." He shot me an injured look. He definitely looked more put together than usual, in khakis and a red polo.

"Yes, you do," Angie said and shook her head, her blond ponytail bouncing. "And she," she said, pointing at me, "wears black yoga pants she pretends are dressy but may as well be pajamas."

I laughed. "Like you can talk, Mrs. Suit." She was wearing a new gray jacket today.

"I always dress like this," she said haughtily.

"Yeah, when you're headed to court to fight another speeding ticket."

She huffed and straightened her jacket. "Lead foot or not, unlike you heathens, I dress well every day." She did, really. She always wore nice blouses or sweaters and skirts and pressed pants. I often looked like a college student next to her. I didn't even own an iron. That's what unwrinklable fabrics and dry cleaners were for.

"True. But you don't usually wear the jacket," Andrew said. "You look like my wife."

"Thank God I'm not," Angie said.

I laughed and set my bag down, then sank into my chair. "Where's Leese?"

"Right behind you," she said, and I jumped and turned to scowl at her as she sat down next to me. She was also in a skirt but, unlike mine, hers was super short. I gave her a look, and she shrugged. "He could be hot."

Lisa was twenty-two, fresh out of college, and made no bones about wanting a man.

"What if he's not even a he?" I asked, because really, we didn't know. We'd just been informed that "someone" from the New York office was coming to work on a special project and hopefully wasn't firing everybody. But I was getting a bit nervous since we all were dressing better and showing up on time and everything.

"I don't, but it never hurts to be prepared." She took out her compact and touched her face to make sure it looked perfect, then ran her fingers through her short-cropped brown hair and nodded. "Good to go."

I shook my head and logged into my computer and pulled up my file for the Micro5000. I was happy because I was nearly done with the manual, and a quick glance at my e-mail showed I had nothing pending. Maybe I could go home early while everybody freaked out about the Suit some more.

"How was your weekend?" I asked the group as I typed up the dos and don'ts of microwave usage.

"Jeannie's team won their soccer tournament." Andrew said, sounding every bit the proud father he was.

"That's great."

"Tom and I finished our deck! We're almost done with the whole house," Angela said. I smiled. "You're going to have to throw a big party when it's finished."

“Count on it! The kids are dying for it to warm up so they can use the pool again. We’ll have a pool party.”

I resisted rolling my eyes but just barely. Oh, joy. Screaming children. Just the kind of party I had in mind. It felt like ages since I’d been a kid. Maybe I was forty-six.

“What did you do? Supernatural marathon?” Lisa asked.

I shot her a withering look. I’d watched a few episodes on Sunday, but I did have a life. “I had my Saturday night get-together with the girls. Shopped. Ran into an ex and had him panting for me. So, not much.”

Lisa’s golden eyes widened with interest. “Panting as in you did him, or panting as in you let him think you’d do him?”

“The latter.” I smiled proudly. I wasn’t about to tell her Damian was no longer the sexy guy I’d once dated. There were some things coworkers didn’t need to know, especially coworkers that were cute as a button and über competitive.

“When are you seeing him again?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t decided if I’ll give him a chance, yet. He’s going to have to work for it.” He’d have to work really hard, because my gynecologist doesn’t give out patient information.

“Nice,” Lisa said. “I went out with Matt on Friday and Randy on Saturday.”

I couldn’t even remember who Matt or Randy were. She rotated through men more often than I did. I should introduce Lisa to my friends. They wouldn’t judge me so harshly if they knew her.

“Good morning, everyone.” Chris stood smiling at the head of our cubicle area. He was wearing a gray suit and a blue-and-gray-striped tie. His thinning gray hair was combed over this morning. I bit back a laugh. Was he trying to look “dapper”?

“I’m glad to see you all dressed up,” he said as he eyed me. Rude. “Mr. Daniels won’t be here for a few hours yet so just work on your existing assignments, and we’ll have a meeting when he gets here.”

“I’m almost finished with Micro,” I said. “What’s next?”

He smiled. “You’ll see soon enough. Just e-mail me the file when it’s done, and keep yourself occupied until this afternoon.”

He left before I could ask him to clarify, and I scowled at his retreating form.

“Oh, poor baby gets to play this morning. Why are you pouting?” Lisa asked. She had a point.

Within the hour, I had the Micro5000 file done and sent to Christopher for his viewing pleasure. Then I opened my e-mail and deleted the spam that still leaked through despite the filters. Apparently our IT department couldn't keep the Viagra and penis enhancement ads from hitting my inbox. I never should have made out with Murray the techie at the Christmas party last year. He was still carrying a grudge that I didn't sleep with him, and my inbox was suffering as a result. I narrowed my eyes at the e-mail informing me there were plenty of forty-plus Asian singles in my area. Asshole.

I logged into my personal mail so I could send a message to Jen. Chris practically gave me permission to dick around for a few hours, and the porn filters were strong here, so really there was nothing else to do.

*Jen,  
I'm bored. Entertain me.  
Nic*

I fired it off and grinned when I got a response within a minute. My girl was always on her e-mail.

*Nic,  
I'm not bored. I'm busy. Entertain yourself.  
J  
Sheesh.  
So you're "J" now? You can't even be bothered to write three little letters? You wound me, woman, you really do.*

All right, no Jen, no porn, I'd already watched SportsCenter this morning and my Cardinals were continuing to lead the Central division. Living in a city full of Cubs fans was awful, but at least I got to lord over them that I rooted for a winning team. Lovable losers? Who wanted to root for a team of losers?

My e-mail dinged, and I opened it.

*If you're bored, you should go play with BOB. Or better yet, get a real boyfriend so you can bother him all day instead of me.*

Why was she dissing on BOB? A battery-operated boyfriend was way better than a real one. I grinned because suddenly I knew a good way to pass the time, but not by using BOB. It wasn't like I carried him to work with me. Her thinking I might was a bit disturbing. Me wishing I had was a lot more disturbing.

I hit reply.

*Reasons why BOB is better than a real boyfriend:*

- 1. He hits the right spot, accurately, each and every time.*
- 2. He is always ready to go. If his battery is low, a quick change can equal hours of fun. A real boyfriend requires rest and recuperation.*
- 3. He doesn't expect me to cuddle or talk to him after he's fulfilled his purpose.*
- 4. When I'm not in the mood, he sits quietly in the drawer and doesn't bother me.*
- 5. When I am in the mood, he's right there ready to fulfill my needs instead of out with the guys or doing shit for his mother or something.*
- 6. He's not too small, not too big, and if he was, I wouldn't have to pretend he wasn't to spare his feelings. I'd just replace him with a more fitting model and there'd be no fuss about it.*
- 7. He doesn't have to lie to get me into bed.*
- 8. He doesn't care if I look like shit. He performs regardless.*
- 9. He doesn't say he loves me and*

"Excuse me."

I jumped. The voice behind me was smooth and masculine and unfamiliar. Across from me, Angela's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Oh, shit. It was the Suit. Had to be.

I turned slowly and the first thing I saw was a watch. An expensive-looking watch. A Rolex, or a very good knockoff. Next was a crisp, white shirt and a black jacket that stretched over what appeared to be a rather broad chest, upon which sat his burgundy tie. Finally, there was a very amused pair of bright blue eyes and a killer smile.

He was hot. His dark brown hair was a little long and fell over his forehead, which only made his eyes pop out more. His jaw looked strong and sexy and bitable. Plus, he had a little bit of stubble on his cheeks and chin. Handsome was too pale a word for him. I would have to think for a while to come up with something fitting.

Lisa whispered, "Oh, God," and I nodded mutely. God was definitely involved in the creation of this man.

"Hi," he said, holding out a hand to me. A long-fingered hand. I commanded myself to take it and fortunately my body followed my orders. His grip was light, and I was pretty sure I was sweating and grossing him out, but he didn't show it. He continued smiling at me and making my heart pound.

"I'm Josh Daniels, from the New York office. I managed to get on an earlier flight. Is Christopher Price available?"

Why was he asking me? Didn't he know I'd been struck dumb from the instant I saw him?

"Sure, he's expecting you. His office is that way." I pointed and tried to sound confident. At least if he fired me, I probably wouldn't care because he was too handsome to get upset with.

"Thanks. And you are?" he asked, still holding my hand. Or was I holding his? Oh, no, was he trying to get away from me and I was holding onto him like a little kid with an ice cream cone? Then again, I did want to lick him.

"Nicole Magette," I said, after a few tries. My tongue didn't want to work. At least not to form words.

"Nicole. I've heard a lot about you. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Me too," I replied automatically. He released my hand and I tried not to be sad about not touching him any more. I failed.

"I'll see you in a bit," he said before walking to Chris's office and knocking on the door. Suit was a perfect thing to call him because he was born to wear one.

"Lucky bitch," Lisa said, keeping an eye on the door Josh had disappeared into.

"What? Why?" I asked. Because I'd touched him? Then yes, I was a lucky bitch.

"You heard him. You're working with him."

How did I miss that? "I am?"

"Why do you think Chris hasn't given you an assignment yet? He's your assignment. I hate you."

I turned blindly back to my computer and saw the e-mail I'd been working on when he appeared behind me. Had he seen it? I was going to die. I was going to have a heart attack, which was embarrassing at my age, but maybe Josh could give me mouth-to-mouth.

I had a big problem. I could not, I would not, be attracted to a coworker. That was just asking for trouble. I had to get through this day and Jen would make me forget all about Josh with the sexy suit and sky-blue eyes. And the dimples. Oh, God, he had dimples. I hadn't processed it before. He was imprinted in my mind now, and I needed to get him out.

I didn't bother finishing the list of BOB's merits before robotically hitting send. Then I drafted a message to all four of my friends. Nothing in the body of the e-mail, just the subject line: CODE RED.