

CHAPTER ONE

Some days are better than others.

The Universe can be random that way. Some even might call Her ornery. Perverse, perhaps.

She does seem to have a propensity for singling out poor souls and picking on them for no good reason.

It happens to everyone, no one is immune.

Today, Steven Savitch, a fairly ordinary man with a disposition that more often than not leans toward optimistic, even cheerful, is one of the unfortunates tapped to endure this indignity.

Clue number one that the day is not destined to go his way? The alarm fails to roll him out of bed at six sharp. The blaring horn feature on his phone does this every single morning. It is an annoying sound, designed to warn folks of imminent nuclear war or an unfriendly alien invasion. But Steve thinks nothing of it other than that he must have muted his phone and forgotten about it before going to bed.

It is not the first time this has happened. It is, however, the first time his inner clock has failed him in quite a while. He does find that curious, but not necessarily indicative of what awaits him in the coming hours and days.

That bit of bad luck is quickly followed by the water in his shower barely heating up to lukewarm due to a faulty heating element in his water heater. It might have been replaced a month or so ago, when he first tipped off the building manager to the problem, but, well, the maintenance crew has been busy. If he doesn't make some calls today and insist that the matter be taken care of, tomorrow his shower will likely be ice-cold. He taps a reminder in his phone to do just that, and very nearly drops the thing into his toilet.

Again, not the first time.

"Mother of—" He nicks himself shaving right on the chin. And those little cuts always sting like a bitch, don't they? And bleed. Boy, do they bleed. Everywhere. After frantically rifling through his cabinets and drawers, he ends up slapping a dab of toilet tissue on the wound so he can finish dressing because his handy-dandy Nick-Stick is MIA.

A rare late-spring downpouring of rain hinders his drive into work, turning a ten-minute jaunt into a forty-minute exercise in frustration. Half of that time is spent in the drive-through line at his Starbucks. Parents hit the place as soon as they drop their children at school, and Steve knows to get there before those hyenas descend. Twenty cars in front of him, all ordering specialty hand crafted, mocha-choka, skinny, extra frothy, flavor of the month cappu-whatevers, when one man just needs a strong black coffee to go, go, go.

He finally pulls into the parking lot of his clinic, Excalibur, only to discover that a dark blue BMW occupies his personal parking space. He glares.

“Really? Freaking hell, Leslie! Look! My name! That’s my name! Right there!” he rages out loud to an audience of none. Sure enough, there is a plaque designating the prime location as his. It might as well not be there at all for all the attention paid to it.

As he makes a loop around the lot, looking for another spot, he hits a deep pothole filled with, and therefore camouflaged by, water. His small sedan bounces and jerks, and the result is that he spills his still-too-hot-to-sip morning joe all over the front of his white button-down. Searing pain momentarily robs him of breath, and he squeezes his eyes tightly shut as the shock of it rolls through him.

“Hot! Oh shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!” he shudders and roars, alternately sucking in his breath and blowing it out. Yes sir, that is going to leave a mark.

Damn it.

“Get it together, Savitch. Come on!” Deep breath in. Deep breath out. He repeats the exercise a few times to square his Zen.

He looks everywhere but cannot find his umbrella, the compact black one he keeps stashed under the driver’s seat for just such occasions, and for the life of him, he does not remember moving it. Nope, it’s not in the glovebox, either. At this point, he can either make a run for it or try and wait out the worst of the cloudburst. He checks his watch. He is already later than he’d intended, and he has appointments to keep.

As he steps from the car into a white sheet of cold, driving rain, he drops the phone that he’d placed on his thigh, and then promptly forgot about, into a shallow river of water rushing across the asphalt.

“No!” It takes three attempts before he swipes the device out of the ruinous deluge.

When Steve finally makes it through the front door, he is soaked to the skin and shivers from the sudden onslaught of air-conditioning. Patricia, his receptionist, and right-hand woman, insists on keeping the thermostat at a setting more appropriate to a slaughterhouse meat locker than a weight loss clinic. Looking left, he notices a pile of moving boxes by the door.

Patricia eyes him from her post. “You’re wet. And late.” She hardly recognizes the man in front of her.

“You think?” Steve returns, dripping all over the floor.

“Boss, we got problems.” The woman is a master of understatement. The tone of her voice is enough to draw his complete attention, but before she can elaborate, Brad saunters down the staff hallway carrying a large cardboard box. The man is tall, tanned, and buff in the way men dedicated to physical fitness tend to be. The box could weigh a hundred pounds, but he handles it like it’s no more cumbersome than a bag of pretzels.

“What’s this?” Steve wants to know, as he runs a hand over his hair to dispel some of the water.

“Great things, my man, great things,” Brad replies with his white, megawatt smile. “Come with me. I’ll tell you all about it, while I finish up. I have some more packing to do.”

“Packing? Where are you going?” Steve eyes the other man’s perfectly styled, sun-streaked golden brown hair, then looks out the front windows. It has been raining all morning. How does he...

“That’s what we need to discuss.” He sets the box on the floor next to the others and pivots on his sneaker to go back the way he came.

Steve follows him, leaving a slippery trail in his wake. He grimaces as the soles of his wet shoes squeak against the freshly waxed terrazzo. Every step grates on his already frazzled nerves.

Once they are at Brad's office, Steve is momentarily shocked out of his discomfort by the bareness of the room. "You're quitting?" he demands in disbelief.

"Resigning," Brad counters, "Big difference."

"But why? *What?! Oh.* This is a prank." It must be a prank. They have been friends since they were kids. The suddenness of this slams Steven a little sideways, and his natural reaction is to think he did something wrong.

"A prime opportunity, my friend," Brad insists instead. "Kent offered me a partnership in a brand-spanking new, bank-just-approved-the-loan, state-of-the-art gym! Can you believe it?" He stops putting the last of his desk into a plastic tub and looks up with a big, goofy grin on his face. "I'm an honest to God owner of a gym. Well, half owner." And he is just fine with the half part of that equation.

It takes Steve a moment to recognize the name. "Malibu Kent?"

"He's in Venice." Brad scowls. "Look. It's LA, okay? Los fucking Angeles. I'll be working with thin, fit people, who are actually serious about being thin, fit people. It's my dream, Steve!" His expression loses some of its cheerfulness. He knows this leaves his buddy in a lurch, but it is not like he was given much notice either. "You won't have any problem replacing me. I can even make some calls if you want." Brad can name a dozen trainers off the top of his head who would kill for a gig like this. Patricia will be buried in applications.

Steve throws up both hands, palms out in a universally recognized conciliatory gesture. "Hey! I get it. You gotta follow your dreams."

"Exactly! You did and look at you."

"Yeah. Look at me." Steve's lack of enthusiasm fails to register in Brad's single-track, already occupied mind. "Let me know if you need some help with this stuff. I'm going to go get dry."

"Thanks, man. Can always count on you."

Steve plods on to his own office but hits a wall before he can reach sanctuary. Leslie Anderson Mankowitz Curtis Lockerby Willet Stone is a woman of mature years and substantial girth. The string of last names came from five, mostly successful and happy, marriages, and the girth was a by-product of much the same, or so she claims. She has been a regular at the clinic since Steve first opened his doors a decade ago in a not-so-glamorous part of town.

"Look what the cat dragged in," she whistles, taking in his near-drowned state.

"Why is your Beemer in my space?" he wants to know, trying to look stern, but not quite pulling it off.

"Because it was raining dogs out there and your space is closest to the front door." Isn't it obvious?

"Perks of being the owner," he mumbles. "You here for therapy?"

"Oh boy! Nurse Laurel put me on the scales, and now she's cranky with me. She sent me straight to Dr. Beth!" Leslie ducks her head in contrition as bright pink flags stain her pale cheeks.

"We don't get cranky with our clients. You know that. I imagine it was just a small relapse. You'll do better." He is almost convinced that Leslie comes to the clinic as much

for the camaraderie as she does for weight management. It is a rare day that she does not show up for one reason or another. However, that reason rarely involves a treadmill.

She offers up a small smile in gratitude. "I suspect your optimism might be misplaced. The holidays do me in." She blames her grandkids. It's their fault, truth be told. But what can she do? She loves the little stinkers.

He pats her gently on the shoulder as he maneuvers around her. "I have all the faith in the world in you." He means that. "Stop beating yourself up. And stay out of my parking space."

At the end of the hall, he ducks into his office, closes the door, and begins to strip down to his drawers. Even his boxer briefs are uncomfortably damp, and he contemplates shucking them off, too, and just riding out the rest of the day commando. Before he can arrive at a decision, his door opens without warning, and Patricia enters, holding a stack of papers clutched against her bosom.

She ignores his nakedness and announces, "I brought the mail."

"Jesus! Can't you ever knock?" He turns his back to her.

"Knock. Knock. There is a letter here from the state," she says, cutting to the chase. She has already opened it, of course, and read the whole thing. Twice. "They say they are canceling our funding. Cutting us off at the end of the quarter. So, of course, there is a follow-up letter from the bank, as our lien holder of record. They ain't happy. Bankster Garrett has been calling all morning. He thinks you are avoiding him. You should probably get him on the phone asap." Patricia is a stoic. Nothing ruffles her feathers. Drama is not something she tolerates well. That she came back to give him this news herself, first thing in the day, means it must have rattled on some level.

"What?!" For his part, Steve is completely floored. "Give me that!" He snatches the letter from the top of the stack and reads it. "No, no, no! They can't do this!" He reads it again. It seems they are, in fact, doing this.

She closes the door the rest of the way and pulls off the navy-blue track suit hanging on the coat hook and snorts. "Cheap bastards won't fund public schools without bitching about it and pinching every damn penny 'til it squeals. What makes you think they're going to throw fat people a bone?"

"I can't believe it! This is almost a third of our budget. We'll go bankrupt. Stop calling our clients fat people." Feeling poleaxed, he leans against his desk for support and tries to think. Surely there is something he can do, some sort of appeal he can file.

Will the bank call in his loan? The possibility of default suddenly looms large.

He can't lose his clinic. It is his entire world.

"It's fat discrimination, that's what it is. I read all about it online. Don't just stand there in your skivvies. Do something. Call somebody. I'm too old to go out job hunting, Steve." She almost looks disgusted. At him!

"Get out! Hey! Leave my sweats! I need those!" He grabs his clothes and shoos her toward the door. All he needs now is a sexual harassment lawsuit, never mind that she was the one who barged into his office.

Patricia stops at the threshold and pokes her head back in. "One more thing." She hesitates then says in a low whisper, "Weasel is here."

"No." Whatever color remains in his cold, clammy complexion fades out entirely.