

The
HUMILIATION
Of
CLAUDIA



Carmenica
Diaz

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First edition published 2005.
Second Edition 2007

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1. Rajani

I felt triumphant as I walked through the glass entry doors, buoyed by victory and smiled at Cherry, the receptionist.

‘Congratulations Ms Somerset,’ Cherry called as I strode past. I gave a gracious wave, walked into the inner office as Maurice, the Managing Partner stepped from his office to greet me.

‘Claudia,’ he smiled broadly, ‘congratulations.’

He was immaculate in a three piece pin-striped suit and a white shirt that was so bright one almost had to squint against the light. His cologne was subtle and the tie was perfect so I knew his wife had selected it for him.

Maurice pecked my cheek and I grinned. ‘Thank you.’

‘This is a fine way to begin the week. A superb piece of work, the client’s happy and we make money – rather a lot of money! You’re gaining a rather splendid reputation in the legal community.’

‘Thank you again. It was an interesting case.’

‘Congratulations, Claudia,’ Ben called from his office and I waved to him.

Ben looked so sexy with his suit coat off, shirt sleeves rolled up and a pencil behind his ear. *Big strong hands and steel grey hair, perhaps I should give him a few signals? I haven’t had a man for a while.*

‘We’ve already had enquires from potential clients,’ Maurice enthused. ‘You’re going to be a busy girl. I’ve organised champagne in the conference room at five to celebrate. Well done.’

Maurice walked off and I watched him talk to Mary, his secretary before vanishing into his office.

One day, I thought, I’ll have an office like that!

‘Congratulations Ms Somerset,’ Tim said shyly as he walked by me.

Tim was a young man who had joined the firm just six months ago and had fallen for Roberta, one of the secretaries. The office girls were agog with the office romance especially as Tim and Roberta were getting married in a few weeks time.

‘Thank you, Tim and all the best for the wedding.’

Peter and Roger, the senior partners also congratulated me and several of the junior solicitors softly applauded me as I walked towards my office.

I smiled at Louise, my secretary and slumped into my office chair, kicking my shoes off and rubbing my toes through the nylon of my hose.

‘Everyone’s talking about it, Ms Somerset,’ Louise said, grinning broadly, ‘everyone is so proud.’

‘Thanks Louise,’ I said, looking through the open door at the pink dress in clear plastic that was hanging on the wall behind her desk. Louise was one of Roberta’s bridesmaids and there had been momentous discussions on the style and colour of the dresses. ‘Any messages?’

She consulted her pad. ‘Solicitors from the Justice Department wanted a chat so I squeezed them in at four thirty. And Roberta wants to know if you’re coming to the Girls night on Friday?’

Being the only female Barrister had its disadvantages. The blokes all went to the Bachelor night and bonded, probably did deals while I was supposed to go with the secretaries and the girls from the typing pool to giggle at some overweight male stripper! ‘I think I’m busy,’ I lied, ‘a family thing I can’t get out of.’

‘Oh,’ Louise said, looking disappointed, ‘that’s a shame.’

‘I know,’ I shrugged, ‘but families can be difficult...’

‘I know.’ Louise rolled her eyes. ‘Poor thing.’

She left and I began to massage the cramped toes of my left foot. The high heels were Italian, outrageously expensive, uncomfortable in the narrow toes and the stiletto heels were downright dangerous to walk in.

I always insisted on wearing the best and being at the height of conservative fashion. It was costly but I always created a good impression in my designer skirts and jackets which showed off my figure in a restrained manner. I saw many a Judge’s eyes pop a little when I walked into the courtroom.

Of course, it didn’t work on the female judges – Emily Wilkinson always scowled at me and made it all very difficult for me but, thankfully, female judges were few and far between.

I spun my chair around as I continued to massage my toes and watched the drizzle run down the window glass.

Although I knew I should be looking through files for tomorrow's appointments, I resisted. I was mentally exhausted and I had one appointment in fifteen minutes and then a few celebratory champagnes.

Funnily, the idea of the champagne didn't excite me and I dreamed of my soft and warm bed. I had worked all through the weekend and even though it was Monday, I was already exhausted.

A tap on the door, I spun around in the chair and saw Louise in the doorway. 'Your four thirty appointment is early; do you want...?'

'Yes,' I said, slipping my shoes back on, 'I'll see them now. Did you offer a tea or something?'

Louise shook her head. 'Didn't want anything.'

I nodded, Louise stepped back and ushered a woman into my office. The woman was about my age but we could not be more different. I was blonde with fair skin and considered by many to be a statuesque beauty. She, on the other hand was dark – obviously Indian or of Indian descent – a little shorter but wore comfortable court shoes which made her appear shorter and was dressed in a plain charcoal business suit – knee length skirt, jacket and blouse. She peered at the world through black rimmed sensible glasses which gave her a serious, almost bookish air.

‘Hello,’ I said with a smile, ‘I’m Claudia Somerset. Please sit down.’ I looked at her a little more closely. ‘Have we met?’

She smiled thinly and nodded. ‘I’m Rajani Patel. I was assisting the Prosecutor in today’s case. Congratulations on your win.’ Rajani inspected me, her dark eyes appearing large through the glasses.

I vaguely remembered some Indian woman seated at the Prosecution’s bench and pasted another smile, trying to be the gracious victor. ‘Thank you, it was a difficult...’

‘Does it bother you that your client was guilty and yet you freed him on a technicality?’

I blinked at her calm words. ‘The law *is* technical and the court decided my client was innocent...’

‘Correction,’ Patel said calmly, ‘the court said a mistake had been made in the Prosecutions case and some evidence was inadmissible. That does not mean your client was innocent.’

‘The result was appropriate,’ I said coldly. ‘What is it, *exactly*, that I can do for you, Ms Patel?’

‘It’s *more* what I can do for you. You might wish to shut the office door.’

‘Whatever for?’ I said coolly, tapping my long finger nails on the top of the desk.

‘The matter I wish to raise with you is of a private nature. However,’ she shrugged, ‘if you have no secrets from your secretary, I am happy to discuss the issue. Tell me, do you remember Tom Effingham?’

‘Tom? Yes,’ I said slowly, ‘I dated him a few times...’

‘He was *my* boyfriend until you sashayed in, wriggling your bottom, displaying your legs and bosom. Do you feel any qualms when you use your sexuality to seduce men and influence judges?’

‘I think,’ I said icily, ‘it is time for you to leave...’

‘How long did you stay with Tom – two weeks? I was with him for almost six months until you decided you wanted him. He was devastated when you threw him aside and he ran away to Canada.’

‘I see no benefit in discussing this,’ I said as I tried to remember how long I had dated Tom. *Was it two weeks?* He became boring after a while and I tried to remember how I had broken it off.

‘You think you are *so* successful,’ Rajani calmly continued, ‘but it is always easier for an Anglo, especially one that looks like you and is happy to display her body. It is much more difficult for me – people whisper and call me Paki behind my back. Anglos cannot tell the difference between those from India or Pakistan – but I am still successful in my own way.’

‘I’m sure you are,’ I said coldly, standing to indicate the meeting was over and gestured at the open door. ‘I’d like to say it’s a pleasure meeting you but that would be a lie...’

‘And you are very good at lying, aren’t you?’ Rajani said blithely, opening the folder that had been resting on her lap. ‘I would rather like to discuss the matter of Colleen Stevenson.’

Her words assaulted me and I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach.

‘Who?’ I said weakly.

Patel smiled at me impassively and those big dark eyes seemed to bore into me. ‘Are you sure you don’t wish to shut the door, Claudia?’

Mutely, I walked to the door and smiled nervously at Louise who was seated at her desk and obviously chatting on the telephone. ‘No calls, thank you,’ I said shakily and shut the door.

‘I don’t know what...’ I tried to bluster as I sat behind my desk but Rajani smiled coldly.

‘We both know you do, Claudia.’

I felt a flicker of fear at the way the woman was calmly treating me, the way she confidently used my name and her cold but condescending eyes – dark eyes that suddenly appeared to be a little predatory.

‘I...’ I spluttered weakly but she ignored me, reading from the file.

‘Colleen Stevenson, born in Liverpool on the 15th December...’ She looked up and smiled. ‘When is *your* birthday, Claudia?’

‘I’m guessing you already know it’s December 15th...’

‘How interesting; Colleen was a bit of a lass, wasn’t she? I see she was arrested and convicted for possession of narcotics and suspicion of possessing narcotics for purpose of sale. And what’s this? Convicted for soliciting; Colleen was a prostitute?’

‘Look...’

‘Very ingenious of you to change your name and your background so you could start again, have a clean slate, so to speak. Colleen Stevenson morphed into Claudia Somerset who sailed through University apparently and graduated with Honours. And then you’re the youngest woman called to the Bar? Extraordinary - a script from Hollywood!’

‘I don’t know what you’re playing at...’

‘I’m not playing, Claudia,’ she said mildly. ‘I have all the evidence here,’ Rajani said, patting the folder, ‘and copies elsewhere. Lot’s of lovely documents and photographs. The photographs from the police files are very grainy but it is plainly you. Time to confess, Claudia!’ Rajani said evenly and I swallowed. ‘It was you wasn’t it, *Colleen?*’

I stared at her calm dark eyes for a long moment and then looked down at my desk.

‘Yes,’ I whispered, ‘it was me.’

‘You didn’t answer my earlier question. Was Colleen a prostitute, Claudia? Were *you* a prostitute?’ Rajani smiled slightly.

‘No,’ I protested, ‘I had a lot of money on me and the police thought I had more than the value of the drugs so they slapped me with prostitution...’

‘How thorough of them,’ Rajani cut me off and smiled coldly. ‘We are rather old fashioned in this country, aren’t we? A Barrister can not practice if he or she has been convicted of a felony. I imagine the glorious career of Claudia Somerset would implode if this

information was made available to the Bar Association, the police and the media?’

My stomach churned at her relentless words.

‘You would be disbarred immediately, sacked from this firm and probably charged with perjury for lying about your past in official documents of the court. I suppose a number of your clients would also be involved in mistrials as it could be claimed you weren’t able to rightfully represent them. It would be a divine mess, wouldn’t it?’

I gritted my teeth and tried to outstare this calm dark woman but she would not be deterred.

‘And then there would be the question of your degree. How did you graduate with Honours? Did you sleep with *all* of your professors? Or was it just furtive blowjobs in the tutor rooms?’

‘What do you want?’ I muttered.

‘Whatever I want,’ Rajani said steadily as she closed the folder.

‘How much...’

Rajani laughed as she stood up.

‘I don’t want money, Claudia. That is so short sighted of you. Here.’ She dropped a card onto the desk. ‘This is my address. Be there at seven tonight. If you arrive at one minute past seven, I will distribute the evidence immediately. Believe me, in this age of electronic mass communication, I only have to press the send button once!’

Jumping to my feet, I desperately asked, ‘I’ll pay...’

‘Weren’t you listening? I’m not here to blackmail you for money. I want something far more worthy.’

‘What?’ I asked weakly.

‘You’ll find out tonight. I’ll leave the folder for you to look through but if I were you, I’d be very careful with it. It would be so unfortunate if it fell into the wrong hands.’

Rajani smiled and calmly opened the office door. ‘Is your firm celebrating your momentous victory?’ she asked in a polite and somewhat conversational tone. Louise turned to look at us and smiled.

‘Yes,’ I replied in a small voice.

‘Champagne all round, I expect. Enjoy it but don’t linger. It would be simply awful for you to be late for your seven o’clock appointment.’

Rajani stepped through the door, smiled at Louise and paused. ‘That is a lovely dress,’ I heard her say, pointing at the bridesmaid’s dress.’

Stunned, I numbly groped my way back to my desk and collapsed into my seat.

I thought it was all in the past! All gone and long forgotten!

My fingers trembled as I opened the folder and winced as my younger self sneered back from the police photographs. Taking a deep breath, I tried to rehearse excuses, reasons, anything for when it all came out but knew there was no excuse.

That Indian bitch was right! I would be disbarred, my job would vanish, I could no longer afford my house,

car – anything! And I would face public ridicule and, worse, prison!

I sat there for sometime, staring at the photos, my mind racing with possibilities, searching for a way out but, I realised, there was no easy way out of this!

‘Excuse me, Ms Somerset,’ Louise ventured, ‘but Maurice wants you in the conference room.’

‘All right,’ I said slowly, sliding the folder into a drawer and carefully locking it.

‘Are you alright, Ms Somerset?’ Louise asked, concerned.

‘Yes,’ I said softly, feeling my forehead, my stomach doing somersaults, ‘I’m just worn out; it’s been a terrible day.’

Maurice gestured at me with a champagne glass, smiled and announced, ‘here she is – the scourge of the Police Prosecutor’s Department!’

Everyone burst into applause and I willed a smile to my lips, accepted a glass of champagne and accepted hugs, pats on the shoulder and small kisses as I walked through.

‘Well done,’ Ben said with a smile and I looked into those twinkling blue eyes. ‘Quite an accomplishment.’

‘Thank you,’ I said softly.

He leaned closer and I could smell his cologne. ‘I’ll have to keep an eye on you; you are a lady with exceptional talent.’

An hour earlier and I would have lapped up the compliments, flirted with him and probably ended with him in my bed. Now, I was sick to the stomach and just wanted to get out of there; run away to my bed where I could feel safe and warm.

You can never feel safe and warm again! A cruel mental voice reminded me again of my situation and I felt my lips tremble. *Don't cry*, I warned myself, *don't let on to anyone! Act – just like you've always done!*

'I heard you were fabulous, Ms Somerset,' Tim said, his face a little pink and I guessed he had a glass or two of wine or beer before I arrived.

'Thank you, Tim,' I said as Roberta appeared, slipped her arm protectively through Tim's and smiled at me.

Women are very protective when another female, especially one they perceive as predatory, appears near their man. The gloves are off, sweet smiles with firm, possessive grips and the poor men have no idea what's occurring right before their very eyes.

'Roberta,' I said sweetly, even though my stomach was churning with the thought of the seven o'clock appointment, 'everything in order for the big day?'

'Yes, all under control. You can't come to the Girls night?' She feigned disappointment and I tried to appear vaguely distraught at the loss. Roberta was always the smart one.

'I'm *soo* disappointed,' I smiled falsely, 'but I have a dreadful family function.'

‘Really? I always thought you were an orphan?’ Roberta smiled brightly. There was the evidence that she was, indeed, the smart one in the typing pool, the one to watch and Tim was putty in her hands.

‘That’s true, Roberta,’ I said evenly, ‘but I still have distant family who seem to take an interest in me.’

‘How nice.’

‘Claudia!’ Maurice appeared and steered me towards the male partners, ‘time to celebrate with the big boys!’

He winked and I smiled weakly as he guided me towards Ben and the other senior partners, Peter and Roger were also there, holding glasses up in a mock salute and I suddenly thought how tiresome it all was. I had to get out; had to run as I had bigger problems. Suddenly, the *great* celebration seemed fake and insincere and I didn’t want to be there anymore.

Excusing myself, I slipped into the ladies bathroom and stared at my reflection in the wall mirror. My mind was reeling and my stomach turned over and over.

What was I going to do? That Indian bitch was going to reveal my past; it’s over! Unless I persuade her not to! Money! What can I give her? What does she want?