Sensible Shoes

Excerpt

“Tess, can you come here a second? I have an opportunity to discuss with you.”

*Lord, help me.* *An opportunity. Those are never good.*

Heaving a huge sigh, I left my gray cubicle at the *Dallas Tribune* and rounded the corner, entering my boss’ slightly bigger gray cubicle.

“You bellowed?” I asked, comfortable enough with our boss-sycophant relationship to tease her a little.

Ruth Wiseman grimaced as she did often. She was short and stocky, with a shock of over-dyed red hair and huge black glasses perched on her generously proportioned nose. The lack of a cigar hanging from her lips was the only thing distinguishing her from a mob boss. New Jersey-born and bred, she was all about the newspaper, but in spite of her gruff exterior, she had the proverbial heart of gold.

I liked to think of Ruth as a burnt marshmallow— hard and crusty on the outside with a gooey, sweet center. She would have hated the comparison.

“Tess, sit down.”

*Yet another bad sign. Sitting means explanations. Explanations mean convincing. Convincing means bad news.*

“What’s up?” I ventured.

“Well, I’m sure you heard Sylvia is leaving.” “Yes, getting married. Again.” Sylvia wrote the fashion column for the paper. She was flashy and buff and sexy and fell in love with all the wrong men.

“Right, and Bruno wants to take her back to Brazil to meet his family. She’ll be gone several months.”

A creeping dread spread throughout my nervous system. “And?”

“And I want you to take over her column until she gets back.”

The creeping dread wrapped its tentacles around my throat and squeezed really hard.

“You want me to write the fashion column?” I squeaked. “What about the Home & Garden column? I’m starting the series on grubworm eradication.”

“Summer’s almost over, Tess. This is the perfect time for your column to take a little hiatus.” Ruth smiled as if she were handing a sucker to a small child.

“And just skip the fall Harvest Season? We always do a big story on the many ways to use gourds. You want me to ignore that?” I implored, clutching at editorial straws.

“If you’re worried, we can rerun last year’s columns for a while. Not much changes from year to year.”

“My God, Ruth, have you completely forgotten about the pumpkin shortage last fall? I was working day and night.”

The look she gave me made it clear she saw through my lame argument. She was right; the Home & Garden column almost wrote itself. I even had enough free time recently to put notes together for a book on environmental gardening. Although I’d probably never write it, the idea nudged me once in a while. But to walk away from gourd season for fashion? No one could ever think that was my career path.

I leaned in a little closer to Ruth, trying for intimacy and understanding on a woman-to-woman level. “You must be kidding. I can’t write the fashion column. Look at me.”

When the paper had loosened its dress code years earlier, I switched from shorter skirts with jackets and three-inch heels to longer skirts with tunics and comfy crepe-soled shoes. Since then, I had eased into comfier leggings and long, boxy tunics in an array of reliable colors. But lately I noticed everyone wearing short, summery dresses and strappy sandals showcasing painted toenails and tiny toe rings.

I sighed and glanced down at my unadorned feet, ensconced in sturdy red flats that made a patriotic picture with my navy leggings and flag-waving white tunic. The only person in the building who was less a fashionista than I was Ruth, who now leaned back in her chair, fingers tented in front of her scowling face.

“Tess, Tess, I’m not expecting you to write like Sylvia. I’m not even expecting you to write about fashion. What I have in mind is a column to women, for women, about women. Real women. Like one of those influencers on the Internet. You know…funny, wise, poignant, and… relevant.”

The creeping dread, now fully formed, tossed a grenade into my stomach. She might as well have asked me to write like Shakespeare. “You want me to be funny, wise, and poignant and…relevant? Are you insane?”

Okay, I may have stepped over the line with that last bit, because Ruth’s face twisted a little in the ominous way I had seen so often just before she pounded her fist on the desk. “Just write the damn thing, Tess. I don’t care if you’re funny, wise, poignant, or what was the other thing?”

“Relevant,” I murmured.

“Relevant, for God’s sake. Just do it. I need a column for the women’s page starting next week, and you’re it. Write about what you know. Family. Food. The laundry.

A library book. You’ve got family. You’ve got laundry. It’ll be a cinch.”

“But—”

“No buts. Just do it. It’ll be good for you. You need to get out of your rut.” She turned her attention to her computer screen.

As if in a trance, I rose from the chair and turned to leave. “Oh, Tess?” She said, without looking at me.

“Yes?” *Maybe she’s changed her mind; she saw my outfit, and she changed her mind.*

“Happy birthday.”