

Meryl McQueen

# Wrapped

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*To my parents, for showing me the world*

“Well, that’s just great,” she said, glaring at the dripping skeleton in her hand. “Fifteen minutes in New York and someone’s already stolen my umbrella.”

Andrea Carole sighed and examined the substitute the unknown thief had left in place of her eight-dollar street seller special. Its spokes were bent and rusted. When she pushed the automatic open button, the umbrella shaft creaked and collapsed. In contrast to the one that she had deposited at the door, its poor cousin was torn and smelled of mildew. She had beaten a rival passerby to the last one from a sidewalk vendor just as it started to rain. There was little hope of finding another in the six blocks between lunch and her hotel.

Shaking her head and muttering under her

breath, Andrea looked at her watch. She still had twenty minutes. She trudged away from the rectangle of light at the front door and returned to her uncleared table. As she had suspected when she discovered this place on her first day wandering the city, the food was spectacular. The décor and the service, less so. But with nasi goreng to kill for, and green tea by the bucket, this Indonesian dive had turned out to be the perfect place for lunch and a private pep talk before the big interview. The umbrella was a minor snag. No big deal.

Andrea swirled the last mouthful of steaming tea in the miniature white cup. Taking a compact from her slim black briefcase, she appraised her reflection and nodded. Her wide, freckled forehead was framed by shoulder-length red hair, deepened from childhood pumpkin to a few shades shy of auburn. She tucked a fleeting strand behind her ears. When Andrea stood to pay the check, her expensive pinstripe suit fell softly against comfortable hips, a discernible waist, and narrow shoulders.

At twenty-three, five foot two in square heels, Andrea Carole was full-figured and self-assured. Feet firmly on the ground, pennies in her pocket, and eyes on

the clearing sky, the young woman opened the tinkle bell door and stepped outside. The noise. It was the noise that mugged her first, before the rising heat, the blur of pedestrian traffic, or the stench of week-old garbage.

Having lived all her life in rural Ohio, even the insistent crowding of Cornell's campus had seemed oppressive when she had arrived as an undergraduate. Before receiving a full scholarship to study economics and math at that Ivy League mecca, Andrea Janice Carole had traveled farther than Lewisburgh on four occasions: twice to Columbus, for the junior high state chorale competitions; once to stay with distant cousins in Cincinnati, when her baby sister had pneumonia; and once to Philadelphia with her mom, for Andrea's sixteenth birthday.

Andrea smiled at the last memory. She and her mom had enjoyed every stolen moment of that day in Philly. They had ditched her dad's dented, grunting pick-up truck in a downtown garage and spent six fantastic hours wandering through the art museum, the Liberty Bell Center, and Independence Hall.

Although Andrea knew they could not afford it,

mother and daughter had afternoon tea in high-backed embroidered chairs in the garden terrace restaurant at the Sheraton. They covered their laps in linen napkins. Over two-and-a-half hours, they guzzled platters of warm scones anchored in double-clotted cream with fig jam, date syrup cake, and gallons of Earl Grey. Her best birthday ever, even when the waiter and the maitre d' in coattails sang at her mother's request.

Back in the early summer, post-downpour funk of New York City, the new graduate wrenched herself free from the memory. Holding her breath, Andrea scuttled down the side street and turned left into Madison Avenue. Better already. Securing her briefcase across her body with the leather shoulder strap, Andrea covered the three blocks to the office with ten minutes to spare. Two-twenty. Perfect.

First Delaware Credit Marseillaise (FDCM) was located in the Met Life building across from Madison Square Park. Built in 1929, the structure still embodied an air of the flight before the fall: originally designed to rise one hundred floors, the Depression stopped construction at thirty. Striding through the revolving doors, Andrea recited the architectural history to

herself. Seeing it in person instead of in print, she gawked at the domed ceiling, pink granite floors, and gold-vein marbled walls.

“Hey, lady, watch where you’re going!” a Lycra-clad courier yelled as he bumped past her, swinging a bulky package under one arm and jogging to the security desk.

“Sorry!” Andrea called after him, but her voice was lost in the echoing height of the entry.

“Sorry,” she said again, wondering how she had arrived here. Here, at one of the largest international financial institutions in the world. Andrea Carole, self-proclaimed Ohio hick chick, with a four-generation heritage of grain farmers on her father’s side and a battery of rural schoolteachers in her mom’s family. And there she was, cum laude from one of the best colleges in the country, eighteen drafts of her resume, a breezy campus recruitment meeting with the ‘FDCM,’ and an invitation to a second-round interview at the firm’s New York headquarters.

The endless bank of elevators reinforced the story of an unfinished skyscraper. Thirty sets of doors opened and shut, one for each floor of the building.

Although it was after the midday crunch, dozens of people scurried in and out of the elevators like mice on a mission. Each one of them displayed prominent photo ID, their password to the secrets of high finance.

Staring unabashedly at the strangers who inhabited this palace of wealth creation, Andrea whistled low. “And the A plus for fashion advice goes to roommate extraordinaire Kirsty Lynne Bechtold,” she said quietly, transferring her briefcase from shoulder to left hand and smoothing her suit’s lapel.

Her best friend had taken them ‘corporate closet shopping’ just before graduation. Kirsty’s advice had been right on. This season, the uniform for women in the banking domain was definitely pantsuits, pinstripes, and matte black, blunt-toed shoes. She fit right in.

The security guard was friendlier than she’d expected. Her plastic black-and-white nametag told the world she was Doris. The middle-aged woman with close-cropped gray hair and a silver-capped front tooth took Andrea’s driver’s license.

Doris grinned. “You in New York lookin’ for a job, honey?”

“Yeah, I mean, yes. I’m interviewing with First

Delaware this afternoon,” said Andrea, practicing her assertive eye contact and smiling back.

“Well, good luck to you,” said the security guard, handing her a visitor’s pass and pointing to the dotted line for Andrea to sign in.

“You go right on up there and let ’em know that you are here to make them waterfalls of cashola. That should make ’em hire you, right quick.”

Doris leaned out of her green leather plastic swivel chair behind the desk, and said softly, “Now me, you wouldn’t catch me hangin’ around with these sleazebag money grabbers. Most of ’em would as soon shoot you as say good morning, though of course there are exceptions. Nope. I’ve got a good man, and grandbabies who adore me, and my flowers in the yard.”

Settling back, Doris continued, “But like my mama said, there’s as many lives in the world worth living as those who would aspire to greatness. You go on now, to your life of greatness, you hear?”

With the older woman’s odd encouragement bouncing in her head, Andrea found elevator number six and allowed it to carry her steadily to the fourteenth

floor. A receptionist greeted her before the doors clicked shut at her back. Andrea was in.

“Good afternoon. You must be Ms. Carole. I’m Jenna. Mr. Perkins won’t be too long. Can I get you a cup of coffee or tea while you wait?”

And so the fragile mating dance between applicant and employer began. At the inner door of the high priest’s sanctuary, a temple to all things financial. Andrea swallowed her snort and joined in.

“Yes, I’m Andrea Carole,” she said. “Nice to meet you, Jenna. No, thanks, I won’t have anything to drink. Do I need to fill in any paperwork?”

Jenna frowned slightly and waved her hand. “Oh no, nothing like that. We have your file from the campus recruiter: let’s see, resume, transcript, reference letters.”

With all the power in the world, Jenna the receptionist thumped shut the manila folder that outlined Andrea’s life. Or lack of life, Andrea acknowledged to herself, wondering for the tenth time how her limited experience might hurt her chances.

Jenna was still talking. “Nope, looks like everything we need is in here. Don’t be nervous. I’m

sure you'll do just fine."

Fifteen minutes passed. At two-forty-five, Jenna took a phone call and shrugged in Andrea's direction.

"Yes, of course," Jenna breathed into the receiver. Balancing the phone between chin and ear, she reached for a pen and jotted notes on a Post-It.

"Cancel the three-thirty, no problem. Would you like me to reschedule, or will Marilyn do that for you? Okay, fine. See you soon."

"That was Mr. Perkins," Jenna said to Andrea. "He called to say he's really sorry for keeping you, but he'll be down any minute now. He's canceled his three-thirty—you'll have plenty of time for the interview. A full hour of his undivided attention."

Andrea wondered how Jenna managed to make that sound like a threat, and hoped the receptionist wasn't channeling her boss's attitude. Wiping oozing palms on her pants, Andrea rehearsed answers to the likely behavioral interview questions. Without seeing the words, she thumbed through the latest issue of *Architectural Digest* on the chrome-and-glass coffee table. She waited.

Daniel Perkins, senior analyst, was not a healthy

man. At forty-eight, he carried sixty pounds extra around his waist. His belt slid further under a swelling belly every year, and he had lost most of his hair. What was left lay glued to his skull like a comatose rat, dripping with sweat despite the artificial air-conditioned chill. His office drawer was a self-contained pharmacy: rainbow bottles of medication for gastro-reflux, headaches, sinusitis, eczema, and athlete's foot jostled each other for front of the house. The last label was ironic—Daniel Perkins had never been an athlete, and his only hustle was to catch the last train home to Long Island at the end of a wheezing, shuffling, physical struggle of a day. Five days a week, fifty-one weeks a year.

Daniel Perkins, senior analyst, was a brilliant man. He spoke six useful languages fluently: besides English, there was French, German, Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic. He had left Santa Fe for MIT at fifteen, and jetted through a double computer science/economics master's degree at Harvard before he decided to make avalanches of money in banking. First Delaware had been his first choice, although Deutsche Bank still tried to poach him every few years.

He married his high school sweetheart at twenty-four, made a million the year after that, and bought a five-bedroom contemporary overlooking the ocean. Marilyn had settled easily into the life of East Coast society wife and mother, ferrying their three sons through two decades of lacrosse practice and school drama productions. Daniel had missed most of those. The boys were all in college now, two at Yale and the other at Brown.

Daniel Perkins was an impatient man. One of the associates had screwed up a major client's second quarter earnings forecast, and then disappeared on a three-day vacation to Bermuda without leaving a contact number. As his boss, Daniel had to salvage what he could from haphazard spreadsheets and a desk full of scribbled calculations. Well, that kid could kiss his future good-bye, thought Daniel, slapping the elevator button and scowling at himself in the fuzzy mirror that lined the cubicle. His desk would be spotless by the time he dragged his tanned youthful self back to the office on Tuesday. Pity, too—had promise, that kid. Well. There were others. There were always others, lined up six deep knocking at FDCM's hallowed gate

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