

# PRIMETIME PRINCESS

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## CHAPTER ONE

Let the games begin.

Rosie Butler, my twenty-eight-year-old, überorganized assistant, stands at my desk dressed in a taupe Ann Taylor pantsuit, her butterscotch hair tucked neatly under her chin. Rosie's eyes are riveted to her phone sheet.

"The *Lethal Stilettos* notes meeting was moved to three. So now you have two back-to-back pitch meetings. One with Fox, the other with Warners," says Rosie. Despite the hectic pace, she remains cool and collected. "The *Of Course She's Alive* dailies are on your iPad. The producers think they suck and want to fire their director and hire the one you suggested. Standards has an issue on *Bunnies*; the actresses need to wear nipple covers. The female studio exec on *Alpha Male* wants to cast the guy from *Glee* in the role of Coach Bob Knight. The writers are freaking out and begging you to call that woman, whom they referred to as a first-class...well, you know."

As Rosie rambles on, I lean forward in my chair and recall the party my girlfriends threw when I landed this job three years ago. They presented me with the two stainless steel balls carefully displayed on top of my desk in a diamond-patterned

black silk box. Inscribed on the front is “Now you have four.” They remind me to stay strong and confident.

“Oh, and I reordered your stationery. It’s under the *Variety* on your desk,” Rosie continues as she watches me gather my shoulder-length dark-brown hair and clip it into a high ponytail. “I like your new Buddy Holly–style glasses. But you still look like Zooey Deschanel in *New Girl*.”

“It could be worse,” I say.

“The critics think she’s adorable.”

“Well, thanks. But I don’t really want to be adorable at thirty-five years old,” I say, tossing aside the *Variety* and opening the box. Neatly engraved across the top of the sheets is ALEXA ROSS, VICE PRESIDENT, COMEDY—HAWKEYE BROADCASTING SYSTEM.

Rosie continues, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “When Zooey wants to look serious and sophisticated, she puts on glasses, too.”

“The difference is I need them.” I smile as I tuck my white silk blouse neatly into my black pants. I take a deep breath and sit up straight in my chair. “OK, please tell Molly to join me in the pitch meetings. I’ll look at the dailies in a second. Ask standards to come by after my staff meeting, and please let the writers know I’ll take care of the issue on *Alpha Male*.”

As Rosie exits my office, she reminds me that the staff meeting starts in ten minutes.

I pick up the *Variety* and gasp when I see the headline, “Jerry Kellner, VP at Tiger Films, Ousted For Inappropriate Behavior.” Everyone’s known about Jerry’s so-called inappropriate behavior, but no one’s reported it. Not me. Not any of his other assistants or subordinates before or after. Whoever

finally did ought to be enshrined. She managed to do what others, including myself, could not.

But the great news is Jerry Kellner's no longer a part of my life. I'm no longer his secretary, slave, glorified assistant, and doormat. That was a bad time, some ten years ago. Back then, I was younger, inexperienced, and eager to please. There were times when I wasn't sure I'd make it out of that rut. But I did.

All the vivid memories of my past come flooding back this morning as I read that headline.

*"Hey, Lexican, don't move! Going right for the center. OK, here it comes. Yeaaaaahhh! Right between the bodacious ta-tas. Hey, where's my chai latte? Sweetheart, I don't see it. Man, you have a great ass."*

Jerry Kellner's voice was like nails on a blackboard. It still reverberates in my head, even though I don't work for that shithead anymore. All the crap I put up with hoping that someday he'd promote me.

*"Listen baby," he continues, "I think I'm gonna get the drama gig at Fox. You wanna join me?" He leaps to his feet and then turns serious. "If you come with me, I promise, and I mean that, Lex, I promise I'll make you a star."*

A star. I peer out the third-floor window of my office in Burbank at the wraparound views of the Hollywood Hills and San Fernando Valley. I shudder when I think about those days. I was just three years out of college. I was desperate to move up and out, wondering what the heck I went to college for when all I was doing was schlepping coffee and crud. And yet whenever Jerry sensed I was about to bolt, he'd skillfully dangle that carrot, which I fell for more often than I'd like to admit.

But, hey, I had a job in Hollywood. I was the envy of all my pals. My job would put me on the executive track. I was

working for the up-and-coming Jerry Kellner. I was in a highly sought-after position. At least that's what everyone told me.

As I get my notes together for the meeting, my eyes wander around the collection of framed articles, ratings, letters, and awards that adorn the walls of my handsomely appointed executive office, underscoring years of accomplishments.

The Woman of Vision Award I received last year for excellence in programming, the Face of the Future Award from Women in Media, the Creative Achievement Award from the Producer's Guild. And then there's the framed ticket to the Wimbledon Finals, which I attended last summer. What a thrill to sit in HBS's seats on center court, just a few rows behind the royal box. Who ever dreamed I'd be living this life? I take a breath and smile. I made it. The hard work has definitely paid off.

What's with you?" asks Sylvia Radamacher, my colleague from advertising sales who just arrived from New York. She brushes past Rosie and sees me staring out the window. Colleagues always seem to wander into your space when you're picking your nose or adjusting your thong. It's never when you're speaking with confidence, making a deal, or looking important and busy.

Clad in her usual black Armani pantsuit, she throws herself on my new white Ralph Lauren Olivier sofa—something I managed to buy off craigslist and, amazingly, not get killed in the process—and plunges a hand into my bowl of M&M's, or as she calls them, "stress meds," tossing her newest Louboutins aside.

Sylvia is petite, stylish, and no-nonsense. A fast-talking, highly confident New Yorker. I often wonder if she ever second-guesses her decisions like me.

“I’m-only-here-for-the-day-got-to-get-back-to-Manhattan-I-have-a-zillion-meetings-at-McCann-over-some-problem-with-GM-not-wanting-to-sponsor-*Wild-And-Wearry*-the-new-crappy-reality-show-Pete’s-team-developed-with-a-bunch-of-felons-speaking-of-which-please-don’t-give-me-any-stupid-comedies-to-sell-this-year-OK?” Sylvia can spew an entire run-on sentence without taking a single breath.

If she weren’t one of my closest friends, I’d throw her out of my office for suggesting any of my shows are stupid. But I like her spunk and envy her strength and determination. Her stint as an attorney got her a consulting gig on *The Good Wife*, which led to a job in finance and, eventually, ad sales, where she’s the lone female.

Sylvia sells our shows to advertisers, and believe me, that’s no easy task. We creative types have a hard time selling our shows to our mothers. But Sylvia has real balls. Guys grab theirs when she walks by. I have fake balls—the ones on my desk, and the others I figuratively strap on every morning and pray stay in place. But mine don’t put the fear of God in men the way hers do.

Maybe because I was an assistant, I empathize with their plight. I’m ridiculously careful about asking for coffee. Sylvia, on the other hand, often pushes past Rosie without even a nod and shouts, “Rosie. Coffee. Black,” whips her way into my office, and slams the door. It sends shivers up my spine. I always apologize for her behavior by bringing Rosie an exquisite array of scones the next day.

I pull myself together, grab my copy of *Variety*, and quickly stuff it in the trash.

“Oh, I just read that Jerry Kellner was fired. I should be thrilled,” I say, tossing my glasses into my purse. “He finally

got his. But it brought back awful memories. I hate the guy. Being fired isn't enough. I want him dead."

"Oh God, get over it, Alexa, it's ancient history. Wasn't that the guy who made you schlep his stool?"

My mind drifts back to the many times I raced through traffic nearly killing myself to do some crazy errand for Jerry.

"Yup. Tearing through West Hollywood in my Volkswagen Jetta, trying to get to the lab at Cedars-Sinai at precisely eight o'clock to deliver his specimen, which was sitting in my cup holder."

"God, I can't believe that," says Sylvia.

"I remember him saying, 'I shit right into that little plastic bottle, and by the way, I don't need the container anymore, you can have it.'"

Sylvia scrunches her nose as if the bottle's within reach. It took weeks to get the stench out of my car. She leans forward, picking through the M&M's for the red ones before tossing them into her mouth.

"Jerry ended up at Fox, and I dutifully followed him there. When I asked for a staff position, he looked me in the eye and shamelessly asked what he'd get in return. I said loyalty and hard work. I'll kill for you. The next day he hired his friend Alan and shoved three scripts in my face, requesting my notes that he'd present as his. And like an abused wife, I stayed. But when Alan hired Irena Valenzuela, a popular Brazilian ex-porn star, to be his assistant, Jerry stole her and fired me."

"Put a fork in him. He's done. No one will hire him. Besides, you're way beyond him. Your shows have won Emmys. And so far your comedies have opened well. You're doing great, Alexa."

I know I've done well here and am very proud of my achievements, but I still wish I were a little more like Sylvia, whose confident demeanor is both daunting and intimidating.

Rosie flies through the door. "Alexa, here's your report. The meeting's right now in Chester's office." She looks at her watch and points to the door. I quickly gather my things as Sylvia grabs a new handful of M&M's and we wave good-bye.

Chester King is the CEO and president of Hawkeye Broadcasting System. He's a handsome dude in his fifties. He must've been some looker in his day. Everything about Chester is grand. He's got a wonderful dimple, sexy blue eyes, and a head full of salt-and-pepper hair. His office is sparse and cold. Perhaps due to his upbringing in Minneapolis, it's literally a constant fifty degrees, and if anyone has a problem there are spare jackets in his closet. The temperature doesn't adjust, you do. It's cold, but Chester isn't. The strokeman on the Yale crew, he went on to become the youngest general manager at a Boston TV station. A gregarious divorcé, he doesn't do Hollywood parties, but he does do the girls. He produced a bunch of TV shows in the nineties and made a boatload of money. He's been very successful, as indicated by the vast collection of brass and metal trophies that adorn his office. All intended to intimidate his guests.

Ten male coworkers and I travel to Chester's office for our daily afternoon senior management meetings. In the center of his office is a gigantic Frank Gehry desk made out of cardboard, yet strong and big enough to land a plane on. We all sink into our black leather boxy chairs, which surround a considerable marble square coffee table stacked with scripts, DVDs, and books. Some of us boast about last night's ratings, while others hide in humiliation. Our meetings are a

mix of sparring, fighting, whining, and arguing, mostly about scheduling, promos, time periods, and deals.

This is the meeting of the minds. The bigwigs who plan and decide what America will watch on HBS. The heads of comedy, drama, reality, daytime, casting, promotion, business affairs, scheduling, research, and publicity are all here. We're the chosen ones. Generally, there's a lot of anxiety and tension and a fair amount of Xanax and Prozac, and a good amount of Red Bull. This is clearly the meeting of bulls and bullshit.

But I'm feeling really good today. Two of my shows opened well. I'm finally able to take a breath and enjoy my accomplishments. Sylvia's right. I'm not going to let those bad memories of my years working for Jerry diminish the success I'm enjoying today.

As we file into Chester's outer office, waiting for his assistant to give us the all-clear signal to march on in, there's a lot of chatter about the headline in *Variety*. The guys are curious about what led to Jerry Kellner's termination. This is not a conversation I want to engage in, so once we get the signal to enter, I do.

There's a new face in the room today. That of Frank Barnsworth, CEO and chairman of Hawkeye Industries. Hawkeye Broadcasting System is but a pimple on an elephant's ass in Frank Barnsworth's world, which also includes movie studios, hotels, telcos, and other travel- and entertainment-related businesses. Barnsworth runs his empire out of his home state of Iowa.

We stop dead in our tracks. We've never met this guy. However, this little gimmick isn't lost on anyone. Keeping us off guard is part of Chester's management style, along with

pitting us against one another. Chester believes competition and adversity lead to great results.

“Alexa, will we have any winners this year? Gonna hit anything out of the park?” Barnsworth bellows as I enter the office. This is a man who doesn’t mince words. Clearly not a Hollywood guy, as no one is that direct here. Hollywood is oblique, indirect, circling, game playing, *never* a direct question or answer. Before I can even form a reply, he stands up and shakes my hand vigorously, as if we’re old friends.

“I’m very happy to finally meet you, Mr. Barnsworth,” I say respectfully. I’m actually scared shitless, as I hear this guy terminates and exterminates with ease. Yet all I can think about are the flats I should have worn instead of the heels, because I’m towering over this little man like the jolly green giant. I start to perspire. I know that within seconds, the bronzer from yesterday’s spray tan will be dripping into my eyes and on my clothes. I didn’t know I’d be shaking hands with God today. I’m suddenly a wreck, thinking about unimportant things like why didn’t I wear my suit? Should I secure the top button on my blouse, or will that look obvious? Didn’t I remember what I learned from John Molloy’s *Dress for Success*? The one day I need to look the part, I’m wearing a white blouse and black jeans. Oh God, how can I not have a blazer?

These meetings are Darwinian. The ones who yell the loudest get heard the most. It’s truly survival of the fittest. This isn’t great for me, because testosterone frequently wins over estrogen. Often, I scream, “Hey, it’s *my* turn, I have something to say.” There’s a moment of silence, I jam in my point, but within seconds I’m silenced. It’s clearly a guys’ world at HBS.

But today is different. My male colleagues are lovely and deferential. I have to blink twice to make sure these are the

same assholes I work with every day. As Sylvia says, “If it were up to them, they’d hire all guys.” We refer to these meetings as “dick dances,” a subliminal exercise guys engage in. Ever since I heard that phrase I can barely sit in a meeting without wondering which dick has the best choreography.

“So, Alexa, are the shows funny?” Mr. Barnsworth asks again. I guess I’m in the hot seat today.

“Well, Frank, Alexa is actually doing a great job,” Chester interrupts as he pulls a piece of lint off my pants and pats my knee. “We premiered a few comedies prior to the official opening of the new season, and they’re performing quite well.”

Although I appreciate the compliment, I’m not thrilled that Chester came to my rescue. This creates tremendous conflict because I can speak for myself, and I also don’t believe he’d pull lint off one of the guys’ pants. This subtle gesture exemplifies the world I live in. I struggle with the appropriate response to these actions. Do I slap his hand away or play the role of damsel in distress? Neither. Instead, I ignore the whole thing and move on.

I came on board three years ago from Morgan Studios. While there, I developed the comedy *Everyone’s Entitled to My Opinion*, based on a popular Israeli show. It became a pretty successful comedy series on ABC and stayed on for a couple of years until it was canceled for being too smart. Yes, I swear that’s what the ABC executive told me when it was canceled. “We don’t do smart, Alexa, we do funny.” But, hey, I got a show on the air, which is no easy feat. I celebrated for days.

Morgan Studios was not in the comedy business. They were known for drama programs. During my interview at HBS, Chester was impressed that I managed to get a comedy series on the air. He said I was tenacious and had good commercial

instincts and an eye for talent, so he hired me as head of comedy here. I was ecstatic. However, on my first day I overheard his assistant say that despite my great credentials, Chester also liked my boobs. What a surprise. I'm sure it wasn't the first time these double Ds have opened doors.

"Let's roll the promos, boys," Chester continues.

And with that, Steve Hansen, a surf bum who got lost on his way to the big breaks at Trestles and wound up in a suit in Burbank as the head of marketing and promotion, inserts a DVD. We're showing Barnsworth a sixty-second reel of highlights from our new shows, most of which will debut next week, the third week in September, when the official HBS television season begins. Suffice to say it's a torturous time. We all act as if we have the greatest shows, and by the time they hit the air, we actually believe it. But every year it's the same scramble. And if the shows fail, we fail.

Sixty seconds go by in a blur. The silence has us sitting unnaturally still. Finally, Barnsworth nods his approval and we can all breathe again. There's a little more discussion about the new season, then Barnsworth announces he'd like each of us to participate in an HBS-sponsored mentoring program tutoring a student. He abruptly wishes us good luck and we're dismissed.

"What the fuck is he doing here today?" asks Steve disdainfully as we pour out into the hallway.

"It can only be one thing: he's looking to fire someone," suggests Mark Winslow, the nerdy and ever-so-serious head of business affairs, who's often blamed for making a good or bad deal. "Barnsworth doesn't appear for no good reason. This doesn't feel right." Mark is the glass-is-always-empty member of our executive team.

Network execs fear losing their jobs because the ax can fall at any time. So it's a bit disconcerting when the CEO decides to make an unscheduled appearance. It definitely has us on edge.

It reminds me of the first day I joined the network, when a producer referred to me simply as Christmas help. "Welcome to HBS, Alexa. Don't get too comfortable, you're just here temporarily." Nice.

But the truth is that producer was wrong. So far it's not been a temp job. I've survived several TV seasons and am quite proud of what I've accomplished here. We're not there yet. HBS is still behind the other broadcast networks, but we're gaining, and my contributions have helped considerably.

As I stroll down the hall back to my office, I reflect on the fact that I'm doing well and feeling pretty darn good. This is a tough job with a lot of pressure. But my track record is solid and the future is bright.

However, as I open the door to my suite, I'm stunned to see Chester standing in my office. How the heck did he beat me here? Oh my God, something's up. The mountain never comes to Mohammed. I clench my teeth and prepare for the worst as he waits for me to come inside. As I enter, the door swings shut.

"Alexa, I know what you're thinking. Relax, you're not being fired."

"I'm not?"

"You're doing a great job. And we definitely want to keep you. Your shows have done quite well, and you're a very capable executive. In fact, Barnsworth wanted me to tell you that."

I'm sweating bullets.

“He thinks we ought to consider adding four more comedies to the four already on the schedule. It would certainly increase revenue. So I expanded the budget. Let’s add some more development.” Chester lights a cigarette, despite the fact that it’s against the law to smoke inside a building. But Chester’s above the law.

“That’s great, Chester. I’ll get on it right away.”

He turns to leave.

“Oh, forgot one thing,” he says as he reaches for the door, “Barnsworth wants his sister’s husband’s cousin on our team. Because you’ve had such great success, he wants him under your supervision. His name is Jerry Kellogg or something. The guy just got canned. But he’s yours now. Make it work.”

And with that, Chester flicks his ashes on my fluffy white carpet, wishes me a nice weekend, and is gone in a flash.

Some days I just want to curl up and cry.

Today is one of those days.