



THE  
HAZARDS  
OF  
HUNTING  
WHILE  
HEARTBROKEN



## ONE

No kid dreams of growing up to become a headhunter. It doesn't rate up there with astronaut, veterinarian or firefighter, especially in the minds of the young and unstoppable.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to travel, paint huge canvases and study the old masters at some Italian art institute whose name I can no longer recall. My parents urged me to aim "higher." They dreamed of their only daughter studying medicine, or at least law, and preferably at an Ivy League school. We compromised. I won a scholarship to Princeton and declared myself an art history major. With a decade elapsed between me and college, I'm not remotely near where I expected to be by now, even though I've tried to do everything right. Maybe that's part of my problem. It's amazing how often "right" is mere shorthand for "safe." I am one of those women who is always doing what she's supposed to be doing, even though I see my closest friends taking chances, following their dreams and reaping the rewards.

Ten years ago, I was sure that by my late twenties, I'd manage or perhaps even co-own a prestigious gallery. I'd be married and devoted to my best friend, with whom I'd make an adorable baby at some hazy date in the medium-term future. We'd entertain interesting people in our fabulous but unpretentious loft. None of those things happened, even though I'm now two years, seven months and four days beyond thirty, single and earning my living by meddling with the careers of others. Yet I've never stopped and asked myself, *Zoë, is this the life you want instead?*

At least not until now.

Maybe it's bad karma to complain, since there are millions of people in this world worse off than I.

But still. I cannot believe this is my life.

In the middle of our routine pre-interview phone call, Niles Townsend informs me, “So they wanted me to, uh, you know, in this plastic cup, right there in the doctor’s office, and the special room they use is so close to the nurse’s station that I got stage fright.” I have no idea how to respond. Niles interprets my silence as permission to continue his tale of woe. “And then Susie, my wife, got hysterical, since they needed the sample, because she was ovulating.”

I glance down at the street as some woman about my age, who probably has the *exact* life she wants, steps into Valentino, her designer dog firmly secured under her arm.

“So that’s why I need you to cancel my meeting tomorrow morning, Zoë,” Niles says.

The word “cancel” snaps me back to the task at hand. I try to spit out a generic yet thoughtful response. “Niles,” I say gently. “We’ve been through this. Cutler and Boone was really excited about you, and more importantly, I think you’d be very happy there. But honestly, they’re beginning to find you a bit unreliable. If you make me cancel tomorrow’s meeting, that’ll make three times you’ve put this off. We need to make them feel like *you* want them. It’s kind of like dating that way.”

Niles sighs loudly into the phone. “I hear what you’re saying, but Susie’s eggs can’t wait. She actually called the doctor yesterday and asked if I should, err, bring my own materials tomorrow. You know, in case I get stage fright again. She thinks it might help, and her nurse actually suggested this magazine that...”

“Niles,” I snap, “Too much information!” What I want to say is, I’m not your therapist, I’m your headhunter, so kindly limit your remarks to your job search. But of course I can’t say that, because, as my boss frequently chirps, “That would upset Niles Townsend. And Niles Townsend is too important a client to be upset in that manner.”

I hear his mobile phone ring in the background. “I need to take this, Zoë. Go ahead and re-schedule this thing, okay? Thanks.” He’s gone before I can beg him to re-consider.

I peel off my headset, rub my temples and swivel in my chair. I flinch at the sight of Carol Broadwick storming through the bullpen towards my desk. She opens her mouth to say something, catches herself and asks me how I’m doing in a put upon tone, as if I’ve insisted on diverting her from important business. Carol views pleasantries

and small talk as a complete waste of time, but she's been making a limited effort since her latest consultant advised her to take an interest in her employees.

She does not care that I spent Saturday night eating chocolate in front of an infomercial for a handheld trouser press, until my friends stormed my apartment to drag me out. So I say, "Fine. Thank you for asking."

Before I finish getting the words out, she launches into a tirade. "I just hung up with the managing partner of Cutler and Boone. He wanted my assurances that Niles Townsend would be there tomorrow. Frankly, they were much hotter for the little creep before he started acting like the process was all about his *needs*. So I want you to remind him that it wouldn't hurt to show up a couple of minutes early and look like he's interested. But you know what to do." She gives me a fake smile and starts to turn on her Chanel heel to stomp away.

I decide to confess. If she hears it from me, she won't be blindsided by a call from a pissed off client. Which would put her in a fouler than normal mood, which in turn would wreck everyone's week.

"Wait a second," I say. "I actually could use your advice on this one."

She rotates back to face me, and I realize I've said the magic words. Carol's fearsome, especially if you don't know how to handle her, which normally involves the right cocktail of competence and deference, garnished with carefully timed reliance on her inestimable experience.

I give her the short version of my conversation with Niles. When her eyes begin to narrow, I reassure her that I did my level best to impress upon him the extreme importance of showing up.

"Let's call him together, and that way you can learn to sort these things out for yourself," she suggests with an indulgent smile. Ganging up on Niles over his procreative problems sounds unwise, but based on the garish way Carol has applied her eye shadow and lipstick this morning, she is going to have a manic day.

I'm not stupid enough to rush her inevitable meltdown. Or direct it at myself.

Instead I follow her couture clad form across the bullpen into her office. She installs me in one of her imitation Louis XVI chairs and I watch in mixed horror and admiration as she calls Niles and formulates a plan to save both his interview (as well as the company's six-figure commission) and his marriage. She makes it look so easy.

Though she's unbearable most of the time, there's a reason why she's the unchallenged doyenne of the city's recruiting world.

"Niles, we think you're great," Carol explains indulgently. "Everyone you met during the first round at Cutler thought you were great. Your client list is enviable, without question. But here's the thing. Cutler doesn't hire a lot of laterals. And you can't swear on a whole stack of Bibles that all your clients will go with you. I know it says here you have \$6 million in portable revenues a year, but realistically, I'm looking at this, and I think it might really be closer to \$2 million. So I'm thinking it might be better to not piss them off. And by that I mean you ought to act like you give a fuck."

She drums her manicured nails on her desk and I watch the overhead light sparkle off her huge diamond rings. Carol wears one on each hand, in honor of each ex.

The speaker phone crackles but Niles says nothing. Probably because Carol isn't wrong. Niles represents big banks that go through lots of mergers and take government money. It's not the most stable roster of clients.

Which is why he ultimately agrees to Carol's proposal. "My wife will hate it," he grumbles.

"She'll like the seven figure salary you'll bring home once you start at the Cutler firm. Zoë will be there tomorrow at 8:30," Carol announces triumphantly. She hangs up without giving Niles a chance to regroup.

The taxi pulls up in front of 311 Park as it starts to drizzle. I check in with the concierge and ride the elevator to the floor right below the penthouse. Niles is waiting, fully dressed in his suit—thank God—but pacing the Oriental carpet like a caged animal. "Good morning," he says, without making eye contact.

I remind myself this must be more embarrassing for Niles than it is for me. Not that it helps much. I can't bring my gaze off the floor as I hand over his fetish magazines—the ones I was foolish enough to purchase at my regular newsstand this morning—and the sterile cup I procured for \$1.99 at CVS last night.

Niles tells me to have a seat in the den off the main foyer. I park myself in the nearest chair and whip out my BlackBerry. The walls are lined with books, many of which might fascinate me under normal circumstances, but not today. I don't need to nose around and risk inviting elective conversation. Even before today, I was afraid of saying

the wrong thing to Niles. He's one of those men who holds forth with no filter, but acts annoyed if anyone beneath him, such as myself, presumes to question his narrative.

I suppose he's entitled.

Niles Townsend is a very successful forty-two year-old Yale-educated litigator, whose clients include some of the biggest household names in the financial services industry. To say he's uptight would be like saying it's a bit brisk at the North Pole. He wears three-piece suits with color-coordinated pocket squares, even on Fridays. He's on the board of the Episcopal Philanthropic Something-or-Other. He (and his wife) believe he could earn more at a rival law firm where there's no territorial senior partner to impede his ascension to the top of the litigation department.

Cutler & Boone is a perfect fit for Niles. I need to believe he wouldn't miss the possible conception of his child for a lesser law firm. Still, I have no idea how to act in this situation, so I perch uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa and pick up yesterday's newspaper from the coffee table.

Niles disappears down the hall for almost forty-five minutes. No, it doesn't just feel that way. What if he doesn't emerge in time for his interview? If he does suffer from impotence or performance anxiety, I'm unconvinced that a stack of magazines featuring garishly made up plus sized women who enjoy each other will cure him. But what do I know?

I consult my watch again. If he misses his appointment at Cutler & Boone after all this I might cry. Carol will lose it and perhaps even fire me in her frustration. I'd be totally screwed, a pariah with no job, no reference, no life plan. I start to panic. Should I check on his progress? I could send a text reminding him of the time. *No*, the little voice in my head screeches.

Finally Niles emerges with the cup. He's managed to lose the tasteful brown bag in which I delivered it.

"Susie said to tell you to put the sample up your shirt. It's not good for it to go below body temperature."

I suggested yesterday that perhaps Susie should carry her own damn semen. I was told that would be impossible; she had scheduled an acupuncture treatment to stimulate receptive energy in her womb or something like that.

Niles shoves the cup at me. I gingerly test that he's fastened the lid securely. He waits expectantly. I un-tuck my blouse and slip the warm

cup against my skin. It takes a phenomenal effort not to recoil. I know there's a layer of medical grade plastic between me and the semen, but still. Couldn't we have done this exercise last month, when we had that monster heat wave?

Niles, duly assured his seed won't suffer frostbite, grabs his briefcase and we ride down the elevator in excruciating silence. His car service is waiting, but he doesn't offer me, or his sperm, a lift, even though we'd pass the hospital on his way. Not that I want to spend more time with him. At least he'll be at Cutler's offices early.

Finally a cab stops and I slide in, cradling the cup like precious cargo. I'm afraid to take it out from under my shirt. What if they take its temperature at the clinic and find out I disregarded Susie's orders?

Today unquestionably marks a new professional low. Still, I remind myself how grateful I was when Carol plucked me out of the gallerina job from hell some three plus years ago. After the insanity of the art world, there's not much Carol can throw my way that I can't handle. In retrospect, she probably knew all along that if I could handle my boss at the gallery, where she was a frequent customer, odds seemed good that I could hack it at Broadwick & Associates. And while Carol's mercurial at best, at least she's never punished me for rain on her birthday. Nor has she ever forced me to return a latte because it wasn't frothy enough. Though I'm sure the thought crossed her mind after watching my former employer instruct me to do exactly that, on the fateful afternoon when Carol stomped into the gallery to pay six figures for an enormous orange monstrosity for her living room wall.

Given the state of the economy, I should be more thankful I have a job in the first place, and even more grateful that it's an occasionally lucrative one. The phone doesn't exactly ring off the hook with people wanting to hire me, like it does for rare superstars like Niles Townsend. But I still can't wrap my head around the fact that I'm in stop and go traffic with his sperm up my shirt.

I try to distract myself by calculating my share of the commission in the event that the Cutler firm hires Niles at a million plus a year. It's a masochistic pastime. Even if he gets through today, a hundred things could still cause the deal to implode. And even assuming I manage to earn this huge paycheck, most of it will have to be earmarked for rent. I'm still in denial about how much more expensive my life became the day Brendan, my former fiancé, moved out.

The cab lurches to a stop at a red light. The cup jabs against my stomach. I hold my breath as I double check the lid. I try to focus my mind's eye on the Jimmy Choo boots Carol pointed out to me on one of our recent "motivational walks." My boss adores material displays of success and expends a fair amount of energy trying to instill a similar ethic in all of us, so that we'll need to work harder to feed our spending addictions.

We finally arrive at the hospital. The cabbie gives me a strange look as I extricate myself from the car without removing my hand from under my shirt.

The hospital's elevator stops at almost every floor on the way up to the clinic on the 27th. I worry that the sperm might expire. When the receptionist finally whisks it away, I feel my whole body relax for the first time since yesterday afternoon.

It's a temporary sensation. In the cab on the way back to work, I contemplate the sickening possibility that I may have gone through this exercise for nothing. What if Niles, traumatized by the morning's events, bombs at his interview? It's not a far fetched worry, considering how my luck's been running lately.

A half hour later, I step off the office elevator at Broadwick & Associates to be greeted by Jessica, whose role here at the company is unclear, but who's been with Carol since she started twenty years ago. Carol semi-affectionately refers to Jessica as the Town Crier, a moniker the latter almost eagerly lives up to. Jessica has a pretty face attached to a giraffe-like body. Her legs are too long for normal-sized clothes, so her pants always hit above her ankles. I wonder why she doesn't wear more skirts.

"Someone's got a secret admirer," Jessica taunts in a playground voice. She's pointing at a tasteful arrangement of pink roses on the reception desk and waving a florist's card at my nose.

"Lucky Sibyl," I reply, assuming she means the receptionist, a doe-eyed twenty-two-year-old waif who garners more than her fair share of male attention.

"Not Sibyl," Jessica laughs. "You! Those are for you. And just look at the card." She hands it over. "Someone wants to take you on a da-ate."

I'm starting to seethe. "Who told you it was okay to read my mail?"

"It wasn't exactly addressed to you," Jessica pouts, and crosses her arms over her chest.

I read the envelope, and she's not lying. It's addressed to "The Beautiful Woman Whose Desk Faces Out the Fifth Floor Window (Madison side)." Unless the sender's blind, that has to mean me. The only other person whose desk faces out that window is Marvin, a middle-aged recovering lawyer with a growing paunch and a shrinking hairline.

I tear it open. "You've been looking sad lately. Drink? P.S. I'm across the street, one floor up from you." I flip the card over, hoping for more, but there's no name, just a 212 phone number.

I can't help it. I dash across the office to my desk and peer out. There's no one in the windows across the way.

Of course it's possible the florist made a mistake. Maybe the flowers and note were intended for someone else entirely. Somewhere, down the block, two nearly star-crossed souls have missed each other due to a mislabeled delivery. Some hapless man who made this bold gesture keeps pacing to his window, wondering why the object of his affections isn't even bothering to look at him. He's dejected, then despondent, then enraged. Maybe he'll get a gun and mow her down for ignoring him. I'll read about it on the front page of the *Post*, and somehow it'll be my fault, because I took delivery of roses intended for some other woman.

Jessica is squinting out my window like a sailor scanning the horizon for land. She's on her tiptoes, which makes her pants rise even farther up her calves. Finally satisfied that I wasn't lying when I said he wasn't there, she demands, "Are you going to go out with him?"

"I think it might be just the thing, you know, to get you out of your funk," adds Marvin, who lives for office gossip. "Are you sure you've never seen him?"

"I spend most of my time looking down at the street. And I'm not in a funk."

"Sure you are," Marvin cajoles, and the others nod their agreement. "Not that I can blame you. Anyone whose fiancé calls off the Wedding of the Year with less than a month to spare is entitled to a bit of a sulk. So are you going to go out with him?"

"Let's just watch and see if the mystery man appears," I say, with as much authority as I can muster. While I want to press my nose to the glass and stare up at the windows of 749 Madison until I spot signs of life (preferably hot, masculine life), I force myself into my chair, and try to look busy.

Of course I can't concentrate. My right brain is galloping at break-neck pace to places it has no business going and my left brain is powerless to stop it. What if everything, including my humiliation at the hands of Brendan, happens for a reason? Maybe I was supposed to waste my twenties in a holding pattern so I could meet the man of my dreams by virtue of coincidental office geography on this exact day. Maybe I needed the emotional scarring of a cancelled wedding to prove my worthiness for real love. I wonder what he's like. What does he want from life? Maybe we're each others' long missing puzzle pieces, meant to fit together. The little voice in my head shrieks at me to pull myself out of my death spiral into fantasy land and Get. A. Grip. She tells me he is probably horribly flawed. Socially inept. Whiny. Blighted by bad breath, ear hair and stooped posture. He's damaged, desperate and eager to blame a woman for his sexual deficiencies.

No. Life cannot possibly be so unfair that it would charge back and kick me again just as I'm working to pick myself up and dust myself off. I've been a good person. I don't deserve more rotten love luck. Isn't it enough that I got dumped a week before my wedding? Or that my first and only post-break-up Match date failed to mention he was quadriplegic—after he told me he enjoyed skiing and hiking, *and* arranged to meet me at a basement restaurant with no handicap access? Instead of bringing me out of my slump, that date sent me home panicked that I am a horrible person because I had the audacity to think, that no matter how angry the poor guy was at the world, I deserved a heads up on his condition.

I tell the little voice that there's no harm in nurturing a little hope. That shuts her up.

Oh please, I beg whatever higher power determines such matters, please let him be at least a little cute and a lot nice.