

Mallory's Manly Methods by Thomas Keech

Excerpt

Chapter 1

"Look. I already did all those things you are talking about. I made sure the power is on. I made sure the cable is connected. I rebooted the whole system. And I already indicated all that on the customer problems website. None of it worked. That's why I'm calling you at Customer Assistance."

"No need to get testy," Mallory replied.

"I've been waiting on the line for 35 minutes."

"Let me put you on hold while I check your billing status."

"No! Wait"

Mallory clicked him off. He smiled to himself. His customer would now have to listen to a recording repeatedly telling him to hold while the UniCast Cable Company checked his account information. Mallory had no intention of checking the customer's account information. But he was now free to visit the break room for as long as he liked. He congratulated himself for not being a slave to the phone or to his idiot customers, and for striking another blow against Algonquin J. Tycoon.

Mallory put both palms on his desk, rocked his large, solid stomach forward and at the same time straightened his legs to kick back his roller chair into the cubicle wall behind him. He had perfected this energy-saving method of standing up over the last few months. His supervisor didn't seem to care that he had battered a hole through the fabric on his side of the partition. But, of course, Nell cared

Mallory knew the *thwack* of his chair on Nell's cubicle wall would bring her out. He didn't care. He didn't like Nell. She seemed to feel a special obligation to point out every way he failed to make the grade. Nell now stood in the opening to her own cubicle and tried to make eye contact as he made his way past her to the break room.

He had always been a little afraid of the unsettling looks she sometimes shot at him from behind those large, black, rectangular glasses. But he didn't think she was pretty enough to demand attention in that way. Any chance she had

of being attractive was sabotaged by those ropes of long, scraggly, black hair pulled back by that unattractive squadron of tortoiseshell barrettes.

“You know that gets on my nerves,” she hissed as he passed by. But he knew she wouldn’t yell. He doubted Nell had the self-confidence to confront him that way. He felt perfectly entitled not to return her look.

But she followed him to the arched entranceway to the break room, 27 cubicles and two turns away. She waited behind him until he had collected a cup of coffee and a cinnamon pastry from two of the machines lined against the wall. There were no windows in the break room. She sat down across the table from him.

She wore a white collared shirt and grey cardigan sweater, as if she didn’t want anyone to notice her figure. No one else was in the break room.

“Don’t you understand how nerve wracking that is, to feel your chair slam into my wall when I’m talking to customers?”

Mallory slowly pulled apart the two sides of the cellophane wrapper around his cinnamon bun and peered inside. His mouth was watering, and he wished he could take a bite before dealing with her.

“You’re not going to answer me?” She put her hands out flat, very close to the bun, and drummed her fingers on the laminated tabletop as if she were itching to snatch his snack away. Mallory pulled it back a few inches. Nell flinched. Then she smiled, as she had his attention. “I don’t understand you.” She was making an effort to talk calmly in the face of his silent glare.

Mallory broke eye contact, pulled the bun out of its wrapper, and took a huge bite, as if to say there wasn’t anything a woman could offer him right now that was better than a cinnamon bun. But he knew that wasn’t really true. In the fifteen years since high school, he’d been on a number of dates. He had even lived for a short time with a nice, tangy little piece who worshiped him night and day, until she didn’t. He never missed her now, except late at night.

“That machine coffee is awful,” Nell persisted. “Why don’t you join the office coffee pool? We brew our own. For five dollars a week you can have all the fresh brewed coffee you want.”

Since moving out of his ex’s apartment and his mother’s basement to an efficiency in Glenwood, Mallory had lived like he wanted to live and eaten what he wanted to eat. He

exulted in choosing his clothes and in keeping his flaming red hair, including his facial hair, however he wanted, without having to listen to the opinions of any women. He carried the twenty pounds he had gained since living on his own proudly. Rather than hiding his protruding belly with oversized shirts or camouflaging overalls, he belted his pants tightly in front, carrying his extra weight in front of him like a protective shield.

“Coffee pool? Waste of money,” he mumbled, avoiding her eyes. The truth was, he didn’t know how to brew coffee.

“We’ve been sitting in cubicles next to each other for three months and we don’t know anything about each other.”

What did she mean by that? A faint tremor emanating from somewhere behind that protective shield teased his eyes up to meet hers. The penetrating look she gave him was disconcerting, even from behind those big, square glasses. His rush of excitement was now tempered with a little bit of fear. This strange, mop-headed woman was coming on to him, he was sure.

“I like this job,” was all he managed to say. “You don’t have to meet the customers. You don’t even have to tell them your name.”

She nodded. “But sometimes you can help them. Sometimes they’re happy when it works. I like that.”

“Hmm.” Mallory had never had that experience. He believed his thinking was in line with the company’s philosophy – to assume that the customer was always wrong. There was nothing more tedious than walking the customers through the list of questions UniCast had created to make sure the company didn’t go to the expense of sending a technician to the home. But Mallory had found ways of using that list to his advantage. A good percentage of his callers hung up in frustration before supplying all the answers Mallory required – even though most of the information he asked for was already right on the screen in front of him. He also had a keen instinct for homing in on that one bit of information a customer hadn’t gathered in advance, thus requiring customers to search frantically through their papers while he ate his donuts in peace. And if customers were completely prepared and organized, or persistent, he could just cut them off.

“We’re all slaving away at just above the minimum wage,” he informed Nell now. “Just so Algonquin J. Tycoon can make millions. And what’s he doing with all his time? Searching the

corporate world for a merger that will throw all of us out of work completely.”

Nell’s look was puzzled. “I don’t know this Algonquin J. Tycoon.”

He couldn’t believe how stupid she was. Of course, Nell couldn’t be above average, or even average, if she was working here – unless she was trapped here, just like he was, by the billionaire titans running the whole economy.

“Algonquin J. Tycoon. You know. The man. As in, *stick it to the man.*”

“Oh. You don’t mean any real person.” She sighed like she was reconsidering the wisdom of talking to him at all. Mallory hoped this little conversational glitch would cause her to stop probing any further. But he was wrong. “You might want to talk to the people you work with here.” She caught his eye, and he could see she was a woman not easily deterred. “That way, you might enjoy being here more.”

“I have nothing to say to them.”

“There must be something. You must have opinions, at least.”

His opinion was she’d look better if she let her hair down. She could be pretty. She had smooth, fair skin, dark lashes. But she looked like she was clenching her teeth whenever she was talking to him. And the way she stared at him through those glasses was disturbing. Mallory had not asked any woman out for months. He saw women on Facebook all the time, chatting about their cats or their boyfriends or their stupid diet fads and exercise routines. Or posting semi-porno pictures of themselves on Instagram. Mallory preferred the real thing when he sat in front of his computer at night.

“I know it can be kind of lonely here,” she persisted. “Talking on the phone to angry people all the time, with no one to talk to yourself.”

She might be into him, he thought, but there was nothing sultry about the look in those piercing eyes. Manly Man said a woman will give off signs when she wants to be dominated, but Mallory couldn’t read any signs like that yet.

“There are meetings, meetings where people talk,” he contradicted her. At least, he’d heard announcements of meetings. He’d never been to one.

“Staff meetings, yes. I guess that’s better than nothing. But I think people should try to make personal connections at work, too. I mean, for example, you and I spend all day, every day, at workstations that are no more than six feet apart. Don’t you think it would be nice if we got to know a little bit about each other?”

She was into him, he was now sure, even though she was the last person he had ever suspected would be interested in him. He needed to let her know that was alright. He reached out and slid his fingertips lightly across her wrist. But she jerked her arm back, looking at him strangely. "Touch me again and I'll report you to Personnel!"

Mallory was humiliated beyond words, beyond even any rational thought. All he could do was flee. He quickly pushed his chair back, turned and escaped from the break room, propelling himself all the way back to his cubicle as fast as he could manage, swinging his protruding belly left, then right, almost as if he had two gimpy legs at the same time.
