

COOKBOOK HIJACK

The phone rang and Bobby's head jerked up as he snapped awake. He felt a hot pinch in the back of his neck and glanced guiltily at the dormant computer monitor. He snatched the receiver out of its cradle on the third ring and rubbed his sore neck with his other hand.

"Bobby Fraser," he snapped, trying to sound more awake than he felt.

"Someone to see you," said a bored voice. He could almost hear the receptionist roll her eyes. "Says she's got an appointment."

Click.

Bobby turned his head with the phone still held to his ear. His neck creaked and he winced and swivelled his chair to straighten his body. Judy's desk was near the door, only two cubicles away from Bobby's. She waved a languid arm in his direction and a small woman with bristly white hair grinned at him in recognition.

Mabel Berkley. Bobby felt his cheeks redden at the memory of his first meeting with Mabel two years ago. She'd just come from a dip in Cricket Lake and he'd been overwhelmed with embarrassment at the sight of the tiny older woman dripping wet in her bra and baggy shorts.

"Nice to see you again, sonny," Mabel said as she dragged over a plastic lawn chair she'd snagged from the waiting area near the door. She set it next to his at the desk and sat with a sigh.

"What can I do for you?" he asked warily.

"You're the one who asked for an interview."

"But that's not for two weeks, and with Dee." He'd recently seen Mabel and Dee on television, being interviewed as part of a special feature about a famous journalist who'd died in Cricket Lake. Bobby had sent Dee Berkley an email and made an appointment for a phone interview to discuss the impact of the death on their community.

Mabel waved away his protest. "Dee's much too busy with the café to deal with the media. Besides, I'm the official spokesperson for Voodoo Café, and Fiona happened to be coming to Vancouver for the day so I tagged along."

Bobby glanced to his left, where Tom and Lisa were grinning at his discomfiture. They didn't hold interviews in the office, as there were no spare rooms for privacy, only the dubious cover of their four-foot cubicle walls.

Mabel had also noticed their audience. She waved to them, to Bobby's dismay. They trooped over and leaned on the cubicle wall. Bobby tried to convey by eyebrow raising and eye rolling that he wanted them to leave, but they ignored him and focused on Mabel.

"So tell us why you're here," Lisa said.

"Well, Bobby is an old friend and he did such a good job of writing us up last time that we were excited when he called for a follow-up interview."

"Not exactly a follow-up," Bobby said, leaning back in his chair to keep everyone in sight. "I was interested in Tobias Greer, the journalist who wrote his memoirs while he was staying in your town."

"Isn't that the guy who traded himself for a bunch of hostages back in the eighties?" Tom leaned farther over the wall, making the flimsy partition teeter in its frame.

"What was he like?" Lisa asked. "I heard he was pretty hot, for an older guy."

"Hey, who's asking the questions here?" Bobby protested.

Mabel winked at Lisa. "Toby wasn't exactly my type, but he wasn't too bad to look at. He wrote a book all about his life while he stayed with us but it's not in the stores yet." She turned back to Bobby. "So go ahead and ask your questions."

"I just set up the interview yesterday! I haven't even thought about what I want to ask." Bobby wished the others would leave so he could deal with Mabel on his own.

"Bobby is mostly a sports writer," Tom offered helpfully. "He's used to talking to jocks so he'd need time to plan for a more sophisticated interview."

"Hey! That's not fair! No one here does spontaneous interviews. That's how we preserve the professional ideals of the trade." Bobby opened a drawer and took out a spiral notebook. He fished a ballpoint pen out of a mug that was missing its handle. Mabel waited expectantly. He couldn't think of a single question to ask.

Mabel leaned forward and patted Bobby's hand. "That's ok, sonny. I came prepared." She pulled a wrinkled brown envelope from her tote bag and slid the contents onto Bobby's desk.

Lisa leaned over the wall and snatched up the top sheet of paper. "Bacon and Egg Lasagna?" She grabbed another, while avoiding Bobby who was trying to stop her. "Taco Shepherd's Pie? These are recipes."

"They're all award winners," Mabel said proudly, handing Lisa two more pages.

"Wait a minute," Lisa said, laying the sheets side by side on another desk. "There are three different lasagna recipes here."

"This interview isn't about recipes," Bobby protested. "It's about Tobias Greer."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Mabel said as she sorted through the stack of papers. "It's about both. Toby said that everyone has a story inside them. He tried to talk me into writing my own memoirs but I don't have the patience for that. Dee suggested I write a recipe book instead." She handed another sheet to Lisa, who wrinkled her nose at the title.

"Strawberry Garlic Jam? Yuck!"

"The first version wasn't too popular," Mabel admitted with a grin. "I'd bought several flats of strawberries and three whole braided ropes of garlic, a couple dozen bulbs or so. I boiled the strawberries and garlic then mashed them up with some sugar." She laughed at the expressions on their faces.

"It took me nearly a year to finish off the two dozen jars by myself. Most people wouldn't even taste it. Then someone suggested I roast the garlic first and

add it to the cooked strawberries with some balsamic vinegar. Kinda fancy but tasted good enough to win this year's competition."

"I can't write a story about a cookbook," Bobby said and rolled his chair away from the desk.

"The paper's looking for more submissions for the new food supplement," Tom offered. "You could easily get that gig."

"I'm not a food writer," Bobby protested. "I write serious, informative essays."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Your last three interviews were with hockey players."

"Hockey is an important part of our Canadian heritage."

"Sure, everyone was dying to read your exclusive series on the Canucks' favourite video games." Tom ducked to avoid the pen Bobby threw at him.

"Boys, that's enough," Lisa said. She handed a page to Tom. "You'd like the Taco Shepherd's Pie. It's got lots of peppers and hot sauce in the meat and crumbled corn chips on top."

She turned back to Mabel. "Tell us more about your cookbook."

"Well," Mabel began, "I don't really have enough for a whole book. That's why I was glad that Bobby contacted us."

"I contacted Dee," Bobby muttered.

"Shh," Mabel and Lisa said together.

"Okay, so here's my idea," Mabel continued. "I thought you could write a series about our annual cooking contest, starting with lasagna."

"You want me to write a story about lasagna?"

"Not just any lasagna," Lisa said gleefully. "Bacon and Egg Lasagna!"

"I could help you write them, if that's the problem," Mabel said.

Tom snickered. "Come on, Bobby. Everyone loves lasagna."

"And bacon," Lisa added. "Look, they're all pretty easy to make from what I can tell." She thrust a page under Bobby's nose. "This one is layered with bacon omelettes instead of noodles. Oh god, that sounds delicious!"

"That's the fancy one that Fiona came up with. She made it up for those who don't want to use noodles. Mine is the one with hard-boiled eggs cut in half. You set them all side by side – flat part down – on the bottom of the pan and then add enough sauce to cover them. Then you put all your usual layers of noodles and cheese over that. The top layer is bacon, all woven together like a mat."

"You're making me drool. What about the third one?" Tom asked.

"That's Dee's low-calorie version. She scrambled the eggs until they were dry and fried the bacon to a crisp for crumbling. Then she just mixed it all into the tomato sauce and made regular lasagna with it. It's a little boring but cute with the two sunny-side-ups on the top for eyes and a strip of bacon for a smile."

"None of this has anything to do with Tobias Greer," Bobby complained. He stood up but Mabel's chair blocked the only exit from the tiny cubicle, trapping him where he stood. He dropped back into his chair with a sigh.

"So make the first installment about how Toby inspired me to share my creations and then just launch into the food." Mabel patted his knee and he banged his chair into the wall, making the partition teeter.

"If it's too much for you then I'll write it," Lisa offered. "I think it's a fantastic idea, but you're right about the style. You're more of a jock writer and might not have the right flair to pull this off."

Bobby glanced at Lisa suspiciously. She'd won two awards for her features on local artists and he'd studied every word, trying to figure out what made them so appealing. He opened his mouth with no idea of what he was going to say but Mabel beat him to it.

"Thanks for the offer, Lisa, but I want Bobby for this job."

"Could I copy some of these to try at home?"

"Sure, as long as you don't share any of the recipes until Bobby's published them." Mabel and Lisa gathered up all the loose pages and headed for the copy room, chatting about ingredients.

"So are you going to take on the assignment?" Tom asked as he picked up a stray page off the floor and set it on the desk.

"I don't think I have a choice." Bobby glanced at the page Tom had rescued, and groaned. "French Onion Soup Jello. This just keeps getting worse."

"Naw, it'll be great," Tom said and slapped Bobby on the back with a laugh. "Everybody loves jello."