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CHAPTER

The FedEx envelope for Taylor Zobrist arrived a little before 10 on Thursday morning. Taylor's assistant, Amy Grow, saw who it was from, stood immediately, made her way through the long maze of cubicles to her boss's office, and opened the door. Taylor looked up from the papers in front of her and made her irritation clear as she tucked a wayward strand of shoulder-length auburn hair behind one ear.

"I know you said no interruptions this morning," Amy explained, as she put the envelope in front of Taylor. "But I thought you'd want to see this right away." She pointed to the sender's name.

Taylor looked, and nodded slowly, but her heart had begun to race. "Thanks, Amy," she said coolly, watching to make sure Amy closed the door behind her.

Alone, she looked at the name again: Dieter Wilkins, New York, New York. Dieter Wilkins, Vice President of New Product Development for Carter-Crisp Foods—and her boss. The man hadn't been seen in over a week and if senior management knew where he was—if the rumors of his sudden

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resignation were true—they weren't saying a word. She picked up the envelope, sat back and, for a moment, just held it.

It had been a week of crazy days and late nights for Taylor, working like mad to finalize an important project for Dieter. It was the first major presentation that she'd been asked to make since joining Carter-Crisp Foods almost three months earlier as the director of marketing research and strategy development, and she knew that it had to be good. But making a good case to Nathan Goodrich, the company's president, for why the last two product-line introductions had failed, wasn't proving easy—or palatable.

No matter how she combined, organized, or emphasized the data, she still came to the same conclusion: The product lines—specially seasoned pretzels five months earlier, and gourmet popcorn only seven weeks ago—had failed because of Nibblers, Carter-Crisp's major competitor. With suspiciously flawless timing, Nibblers had introduced its own new lines of pretzels and popcorn just weeks before Carter-Crisp had.

For years, Carter-Crisp had enjoyed a substantial speed-to-market advantage over Nibblers when it came to introducing new products, and with annual sales at \$800 million as compared with Nibblers' \$30 billion, Carter-Crisp was more agile. Nothing added up, and for the hundredth time, a single, disquieting thought occurred to Taylor: Nibblers had a mole inside Carter-Crisp Foods. And for the hundredth time she chided herself for her cynicism, a mood she found herself retreating to with increasing frequency since her husband's death.

Taylor opened the package from Dieter Wilkins, hoping he had the answer she'd been looking for. Inside an envelope with her name and the word *confidential* stamped in red ink, was a single sheet of paper with a typed note on it.

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Taylor:

I have resigned from the company. And, if management does what I think they'll do, you'll be my replacement. Unfortunately, I won't be around to help you through the transition, as I've left the country.

I've set up an e-mail account for us to communicate privately, but don't try to access the account from the office or your laptop. Go to the library on LaCienega or to Kinko's in the mall—anywhere you can get public access to the Internet. There'll be a message with more information waiting for you.

E-mail account: sedonawaitley@yahoo.com

Yahoo ID: sedonawaitley

Password: sedona

Destroy this note, and if anyone asks about the FedEx package, tell them it was a market research report from the advertising agency that I forgot to give you before I left. Check the e-mail message as soon as you can.

Good luck,
Dieter

Taylor folded the note in quarters, stuffed it and the envelope in her purse, and left her office.

"I'm taking an early lunch," she told Amy, hoping her anxiety was not obvious on her face. May 2, and already Los Angeles was too hot. Taylor perspired under her silk suit.

Amy raised her hand as the phone rang. She picked it up and then punched the hold button. "It's Martha Johnson," she said, "Nathan Goodrich wants to know if you can come to a meeting in the boardroom at five-thirty this afternoon."

"Did she say what the meeting was about?" Taylor asked and pictured Goodrich's administrative assistant; tall, thin,

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and tight-lipped. "Forget it. Just tell her I'll be there. I'll be back in an hour to finish up the presentation. Find out if the graphics department can have everything ready by four o'clock."

Taylor headed for the stairway and Beverly Boulevard. She didn't like feeling out of control, and Dieter's secretiveness made her feel just that way. Part of her—the no-nonsense, action-oriented part—wanted to walk into Nathan Goodrich's office right now, show him Dieter's letter, and ask what was going on. However, the other part—her more curious, less confident side—wanted to follow the thread to wherever it might lead.

In times of uncertainty, Taylor's mind always turned to what was most certain and precious in her life, her children, Kate and Jeremy. As she walked two blocks down Beverly Boulevard to LaCienega and entered the Beverly Center mall, she thought about how vulnerable they'd all become since Jack's death. But intrigue was intrigue, and a healthy dose of curiosity was fine. Taylor assured herself as she went into Kinko's Copy Center; she'd see what Dieter had to say.

A Kinko's clerk escorted Taylor to one of the computers and logged her on. When he was gone, she typed in *www.yahoo.com* on the address line and waited for the web site to come up. Nervously, she looked around to see if anyone was watching, but the store was empty. Next, she clicked on the Check Mail icon; entered in the user name, *sedonawaitley*; and then typed in the password, *sedona*. There was one e-mail message in the inbox from Dieter Wilkins and she opened it.

Taylor:

Sorry for the clandestine routine, but after you read this you'll understand why. Goodrich and the rest of the management team think I've gone to work for Nestlé in Rio de Janeiro, but

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I haven't, though I am in Brazil. I don't want anyone to know where I am, at least not until this whole thing blows over. People inside Carter-Crisp are passing information about new product development efforts to the competition. I know it sounds like a convenient excuse for the past two failures, but it's the only way Nibblers could have beat us to the market twice in a row. The numbers you've been working on should be evidence enough by now. I don't know who they are, but I suspect a handful of people inside Carter-Crisp and Nibblers are trying to sabotage the company's financial performance in order to force the Carter family to sell. This is the only explanation that makes sense. I'm sorry I can't say more, but please be careful. If you want to contact me, use the e-mail address attached to this message, but don't write it down—memorize it. And when you're done, erase the message. I don't need anyone tracking me down through my e-mail address, and you certainly don't need anyone knowing that you're communicating with me. Good luck, Taylor, I'll try to help you any way I can.

Dieter

Taylor read the message two more times, then erased it. She knew from experience, conducting her home-based consulting business, that e-mail was far from private. When she looked at her hands poised over the keyboard, she saw that they were shaking.

Out on Beverly Boulevard again, Taylor took the long route back to work, knowing that a good walk always helped her think straight. Dieter's message had confirmed what she'd already suspected: that Carter-Crisp's new lines had failed because of inside information. It was troubling, to say the least, and she sensed that Dieter wasn't telling the whole story.

Standing in front of Carter-Crisp's gleaming corporate headquarters, Taylor hesitated for a moment and thought of

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Jeremy and Kate. It would be easy, maybe even smart, to simply not go back, to step away from all this. But Taylor Zobrist was not a woman who frightened easily or who backed away from a challenge. She'd survived Jack's death, and she'd worked hard to get where she was. As she entered the building, her only plan of action was to remain flexible.