
Are You Trying to Bribe Me?

“**M**y God, I was getting ready to send out a search party,” declared Katie as her husband Gavin came through her office door. “I thought the meeting would have been over an hour ago.”

Gavin came over to Katie’s desk so he could lean down and kiss her before answering.

“It was. I’ve been talking with Frank.”

“Why?”

Gavin looked amused. “Why was I talking to Frank?”

“Well, yes. He doesn’t usually have that much to say.”

Gavin’s face clouded over a bit. “He might have a problem.”

Frank Matchus was the manager of Danvers Industries’ Tampa operation, where one of the company’s most popular products was manufactured and shipped. Katie’s grandfather, Douglas Danvers, CEO of Atlanta-based Danvers Industries, was retiring in two weeks after almost forty years as head of the company, and Gavin Kerr, his new son-in-law, would be taking over. Gavin had chaired this afternoon’s meeting, which had included several off-site managers.

For many years it had been assumed that Katie would

succeed her grandfather, but in the end, she'd decided she preferred to stay in Product Development, where she could use her creative side. Grandfather considered her decision a win-win for Danvers. His granddaughter was highly creative and had recently won a prestigious award for her work on a new product line, while Gavin, a Scotsman who had only been in the Atlanta offices for a little over a year, was the finest young executive he'd ever known. The family business would be secure in Gavin's capable hands.

"Tell me over dinner," Katie said now as she started gathering her things. "I'm starved."

Gavin chuckled. As far as he could tell, Katie was always starving, not that her body showed any signs of her eating habits. She'd inherited her grandmother's slim build, but she readily admitted that someday it might turn on her and make her pay for the biscuits, hush puppies, Chinese dumplings, and pecan pie she so loved.

"Where do you want to go?" Gavin asked as he watched her retrieve her shoes from under the desk.

"How about the cafeteria? I could use some fried chicken."

"Did I hear correctly?" responded Gavin, his eyes twinkling. "I don't believe I've ever seen you eat meat when we go there. Usually you pick a very strange assortment of peripheral items."

"Peripheral items?" Katie turned and looked at him in disbelief. "Who calls food dishes 'peripheral items?'"

"I think it's an apt description," Gavin replied a tad defensively. "Deviled eggs hardly fall into the category of main dinner items."

"Good. Next time we go to a regular restaurant, I'm going to order my main dish and then say, 'And for my peripherals, I think I'll have rice and asparagus'. What do you want to bet I get a very strange look?"

Gavin shook his head. "Are we in sassy overdrive tonight?"

Katie ignored the remark and announced she was ready to go.

“We have both cars here,” she remembered as they arrived in the parking area. “Do you want to take mine and leave yours here?”

“I think not.”

Katie’s long history of driving violations, mostly for speed, was a source of friction between her and both her grandfather and now Gavin. As Gavin had pointed out to her on several occasions, if her name weren’t Danvers, she would have been fired long ago for her role in almost single-handedly keeping their company’s fleet insurance rates at an astronomical level.

“My car’s more fun than yours,” she argued with a mischievous smile on her face.

“I suppose that depends on your definition of fun. My car is certainly better behaved than yours. Except for the two times you drove it, it’s never had a problem. Imagine that.”

Katie stopped by her eye-catching Sakhir Orange BMW M4. “So, my car, right?”

“Keep walking.”

“My spirits need a lift. Your boring black car is like a funeral.”

“Poor baby. I thought you were starving. You’re wasting time standing here lobbying for a lost cause.” He walked ahead a couple paces and hit the Unlock button for his own car. “Coming?”

Katie glared after him. “You know, at this rate, your behavior is going to reach forty before you do.”

“Which, incidentally isn’t until next year. Are you trying to hurry it?”

“I’m trying to keep you from acting as old as Grandfather.”

“Going for a death-defying ride in your little orange rocket will certainly age me faster than driving a sedate black car would.”

“Cluck-cluck!”

Gavin turned and looked at her seriously. “Come on, Katie. It’s time to go put some food in you. Your hunger is sending your mouth into dangerous territory.” He opened the passenger door of the shiny black BMW 6-series Gran Coupe and waited.

“Are you practicing your command style?” Katie teased him, not moving.

“Unless you want to *feel* my command style when we get home, it’s time to get in.”

Katie’s face turned to a scowl.

“Very nice, Mr. Kerr. When you can’t get your own way, you threaten.”

Gavin continued to stare at her. “I’m not joking anymore, Katie. Let’s go.”

Katie considered briefly making a stand, but she knew she’d lose in the end, and she really was starving, so with a look worthy of any disgruntled five-year-old, she climbed into his car, put her computer case on the floor, and crossed her arms.

“Let’s go, Napoleon.”

Gavin closed her door and then came around and got behind the wheel. As they left the parking area, he glanced over at her briefly. “You need to choose another figure, lass. I have at least thirty centimeters on Napoleon.”

Katie sighed. “How about Hitler? How tall was he?”

“I don’t know.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes before Katie spoke again. “You know, people here don’t talk in centimeters.”

“I’m well aware of that, but I learned centimeters, and I know you understand them.”

“Do you know how much thirty centimeters is here?”

“Yes.” He sounded impatient.

“Really?”

“Katie, if we’re going to spar with each other all evening, I’m going to take us home instead of to the cafeteria.”

“But I’m starving.”

“Then discipline your mouth. Promise it dessert or whatever is required. I’d like to have a pleasant dinner, not a verbal tennis match.”

Katie sighed. “I don’t know why you’re so grumpy tonight. Frank must have dumped something big in your lap.”

“Frank’s not the problem right now.”

“Well I’m certainly not. I’m just a sweet little thing who never says ‘boo’.”

“Maybe not, but you say plenty of other things.”

“Why, Gavin Kerr,” she intoned in her best Southern drawl, “I do believe you’re not being a gentleman. Whatever shall I do with you?”

“I can think of a few things,” he replied, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Your mind is in the gutter again.”

“You don’t know that. I didn’t specify.”

Gavin was thankful they reached the cafeteria just then. He sincerely hoped that a tray full of mismatched dishes would distract Katie from her mission, which seemed to be to annoy him. Was she just feeling antsy, or was she looking for attention? At the rate she was going, she might get the kind of attention she didn’t want.

“SO TELL ME ABOUT FRANK,” said Katie once they were seated with their food. She’d been delighted to see there was plenty of fried chicken left, which she paired with mac ’n cheese, collard greens, carrot slaw, a huge biscuit, and key lime pie. It was the most normal meal Gavin had ever seen her choose there and reminded him of the Sunday dinners her grandmother put out that never contained fewer than several thousand calories.

“Frank has a problem, but to tell you the truth, he’s not

exactly sure what it is,” started Gavin once he’d tried a bite of his own Veracruz pork chops. “It’s very strange. There are small discrepancies popping up in different places, but when he tries to track them down, he gets nowhere.”

“What kind of discrepancies?” Katie might have her ‘livewire’ moments, as Gavin sometimes called them, but she had an excellent business mind and had been part of the inner workings of Danvers ever since getting out of school.

“He’s having a hard time putting his finger on it. Production, shipping and billing don’t quite mesh, but when he looks at each individually, everything is as it should be. That’s what he wanted to tell me. There may just be some errors that got into the system and are working their way through. He’s not totally sure there is a problem, but he wanted me to be aware that he’s keeping a closer eye on things than usual.”

“Is someone stealing?”

“Not that he can find, and he hasn’t had any problems of that type before. It may be something as simple as transposed figures or some other silly error.”

Katie buttered half of her fluffy biscuit and took a bite. “Mm-m. That’s good. Do you want a bite?” She seemed to have forgiven him for refusing to ride in her lethal little car.

“I have plenty here, thanks.”

“You don’t have any bread.”

Gavin accepted the offered biscuit half and took a big bite. He’d discovered that it was frequently easier to just sample whatever she was offering than to have an extended discussion about it.

“It’s very good, but your grandmother’s are still better,” he announced once he’d swallowed.

“Of course they are. I didn’t mean this was better.” She finished the rest of her half biscuit and then returned to the subject of Tampa. “Has he had Luke look for the problem?”

Luke Danvers, IT Manager in the Tampa office, was Grand-

father's only other grandchild and a source of heartbreak for his grandparents. Luke's father, Grandfather's firstborn, had been the heir apparent in the business, but almost twenty years ago he'd died in a skiing accident, leaving the family devastated and a gaping hole in the business hierarchy. Katie was only sixteen at the time, and Luke was nineteen.

Katie's father, the second-born child, had chosen to not enter the family business and was a widely acclaimed international photographer. When her uncle had been killed, only she and Luke were left as possible heirs to the company, and all eyes had immediately turned to Katie. From early on, it had been obvious that she'd inherited the family talent for business.

Luke, on the other hand, was seen as a weak link. From the time he was young, he'd been in one scrape after another, causing his parents much grief. They'd done everything they could for him, but he'd been asked to leave school after school, and by the time he was eighteen, he'd accumulated a long juvenile record of mischief and misdemeanors. If trouble were around, Luke would find it. While both his grandfather and father had been hard working, Luke himself exuded a sense of entitlement, and when Katie became the heir apparent, he turned nasty.

Luke was clever enough and had finally managed to earn a couple degrees, but he carried his status as family black sheep like a chip on his shoulder. Grandfather always hoped he'd turn himself around, and when he married a woman from Tampa, he was put in charge of the Information Technology Department in the offices there.

Gavin had only been with Luke on a few occasions, but each time he'd gotten strange vibes from him. Luke saw Gavin as an outsider, so there was resentment there in addition to his sense of entitlement. It was a difficult situation, with Luke a Danvers but not really Danvers quality.

"He hasn't brought Luke in yet," replied Gavin now. "Since he's not sure what, if anything, he's dealing with, he's trying to

keep it as quiet as possible, and if he does really have a problem, he doesn't know who it might involve and so doesn't want to tip off anyone."

"If there's something going on, I'd look at Luke first."

Gavin looked surprised. "Are you serious or just taking a poke at your cousin?"

Katie shrugged. "I don't know. Probably a little of both. Luke's always been a problem, but he's never done anything really bad in the company. He resents Grandfather, but he's always been pretty nice to Grandmother."

Gavin nodded. He hoped he wasn't going to have a sticky family situation on his hands.

"You should tell Grandfather what Frank said," Katie continued. "I know he's almost retired, but he'd want to know what's going on."

Gavin shook his head. "I'd rather keep him out of this right now until we know something more definite. It might turn out to be nothing."

"He'd still want to know."

"Katie, your grandfather is almost eighty-three. It's time he stopped shouldering so much responsibility. If I think there's something he needs to know, I'll tell him, but right now, let's not worry him before we need to."

Katie looked unconvinced, so Gavin threw in a completely unrelated sweetener. "How about a foot rub when we get home?"

She giggled. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"I don't know. Is it working?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm trying to bribe you."