



Miss-Adventured by Wren Kenny.

Chapter 1

Monday, June 27, 07:15 a.m.

“Eek, Brynne!” Lauren hollered not paying attention to the coffee splurting over the edges of her coffee press. “You look like the thirteenth runner-up in the Cave Troll Beauty Contest. You’re not going to work like that, are you?”

Brynne yawned and refilled the kettle.

“Do I look like I lived the ‘full-festival-experience?’”

“And then some.”

“I needed a bath when I arrived home, and went to bed with my hair wet.”

“Then you haven’t brushed your hair yet?”

“I did,” Brynne replied. She’d grown accustomed to Lauren’s insults dressed up as observations. “I was going for the Amy Winehouse beehive look.”

Lauren took the wet cloth she’d used to wipe the spilled coffee and dabbed it under Brynne’s eye, “The mascara is supposed to go on the lashes, darling.”

“I know, but one of the other cave trolls jumped out of the mirror and jabbed me with the mascara wand. She didn’t want me to slip under the wire and capture twelfth place. Now shove off and let me make my coffee.”

Brynne opened the lid on the container holding her Prince of Darkness decaf and stared into a vast pit of emptiness. Her head pounded. Her ears rang. She couldn’t act as the demilitarization zone between her two work colleagues without a decent cuppa. She needed coffee STAT.

“Crap. I’m already late.” Brynne’s barely opened eyes registered the time on the clock.

“When are you going to tell me about the weekend? How was Rhys’ band?”

“Amazing.” Brynne rooted through the pile of lost shoes by the door searching for the missing mate to her sandal.

Lauren handed Brynne her sole mate. “Promise me you’ll tell me all about it tonight.”

Sore and tired from the non-stop crowd smunching over the weekend, Brynne walked to Clapham Underground Station with the speed of a turtle on tranquilizers. She glimpsed the Costa Coffee across the road in her rear view vision and pined. Not worth the risk. Office tension escalated on Friday when she left before lunch. She’d planned a stealth exit, but Mare protested, “You can’t have time off yet. You just started.”

Of course, Phillip helpfully informed Mare, “Brynne’s brother bought her tickets for Glastonbury. His band flew in from Vancouver, and they’re playing on the John Peel Stage.” Mare’s face tuned to Jealous FM and Phillip gleefully chalked up another victory against Mare where Brynne unwittingly ended up on his side.

Amidst the throng of other Monday morning Underground commuters, a student pushed himself forwards and whacked Brynne in the face with his rucksack.

“Ouch,” she yelled, but he didn’t hear her because his earbuds were shoved too far up his ear canals. She fingered through her bag and touched the gift her brother slipped her last night. New headphones. She’d need these today.

“The job is interesting,” she’d told her brother, “and my boss is lovely, like Ned Flanders with an English accent sort of lovely, but Phillip and Mare. Yeesh. They thrive on conflict. Working with them is like buying ocean view property only to discover your neighbours on either side are arseholes. Phillip treats me like I’m the territory he can’t wait to stick his flag in, and Mare has tiny dog syndrome. She woofs technical terms she knows I haven’t learned yet to intimidate me.”

“Declare your desk the neutral-zone.” It was trademark Rhys to pepper his suggestion with a Star Trek reference. “And if that doesn’t work, use noise cancelling headphones.” He bequeathed Brynne the state-of-the-art pair he used in the studio. It wasn’t a huge sacrifice since he’d probably be gifted a better pair before he returned to Vancouver. But the headphones, the free tickets to Glastonbury, and the company amplified the distance of the ocean between them.

Brynne switched to the Victoria Line. Moments after the train swooshed away from the platform, an announcement came over the speaker: *The next station is Vauxhall. Service on the Victoria Line will terminate at Vauxhall due to a passenger incident. Please use alternate routes and mind the gap.*

Passenger incidents were serious. A few years ago a poor woman’s scarf was caught in the closing door of a train on the Picadilly line and she was dragged along the platform by the train. Brynne prayed it wasn’t a person falling onto the tracks, or worse, a terrorist attack like the one at Parsons Green Underground Station last year. “God be with them,” she mouthed as she started the journey out of the bowels of London to the surface. Once outside, Brynne

remembered there was a Starbucks right outside Vauxhall station. Though she could probably catch a bus, if she walked the eighteen minutes across the bridge to MI5, she'd have enough time to finish the coffee. Mare had had an entire weekend to build up her wrath. If Brynne were fifteen minutes early or fifteen minutes late, the intensity wouldn't change.

A long queue snaked out the door of the Starbucks. Brynne queued anyway and searched her map app for alternate coffee sources. She was an adept spatial thinker, a requirement, given that she worked in Geographic Intelligence. "Hello!" There's a café right around the corner. The Cock-a-Doodle Brew. What a stupid name. She bolted around the corner, opened the door of the café and let the exquisite aroma of roasted coffee swaddle her senses. Above the door a fake rooster crowed three times. How did the employees endure that all day long!

Roomy and rustic, the café had old photographs of London on the walls. There were several chairs and tables, and in a corner were velvety overstuffed seats near a fireplace. A few businessy types sat alone at tables for two reading the *Times*, and three customers stood in the queue. If they didn't order frou-frou drinks, this shouldn't take too long.

The first customer, a young bloke wearing a mix of too much aftershave and body odour, finished paying and moved aside to await his drink. Next stood a man with salt-and-pepper hair, possibly in his late forties. His mobile rang. He hurriedly pulled it out of his coat pocket. A small piece of paper dropped on the floor. He rushed out of the café. If Brynne ran after him, she'd risk her spot in the queue.

Brynne picked up the paper. A prescription. But this doctor skipped the three-hour seminar on "How to Make Your Handwriting Completely Illegible," a required course in medical schools the world over. The script confirmed her guess at the man's age: Patrick Lakeman—

Viagra. She fought off calling out to him, “Hey, you—yes, you over there—did you drop your prescription for Viagra?”

A pensioner dressed in an expensive coat she might have borrowed from the Queen approached the counter.

“Just a pot of tea, dear,” the older lady ordered. The cashier, an Asian woman in her thirties with multiple piercings, asked, “Black, green, white, chai, berry, herbal infusion, bubble, or jet tea?”

“Plain old English tea, please, dear.”

“Earl Grey, English Breakfast, Irish Breakfast, or Masala Chai?”

“English Breakfast will do.”

“Milk, steamed milk, cream, whip, no whip, soy milk, low-fat soy, brève, or foam with your tea?”

“Just milk, please,” the woman said, sounding overwhelmed.

The barista handed her a paper cup with scalding hot water and a tea bag.

“The milk and sugar is on the trolley next to the wall.”

Brynne moved forward. A coffee snob since her formative Frappuccino years, she spoke fluent coffee talk.

“Quad-shot decaf Americano with room, please.” She hesitated. “Wait. Sorry to be a bother, but how strong is your decaf? Maybe an extra shot.” The man who had joined the queue behind her took a deep breath of impatience.

“Would you like to taste it after four shots?” The barista’s smile reached over top of Brynne to the customer behind. Mr. Big Breath. “If it’s not strong enough, we can add another.”

“Lovely. Thanks,” said Brynne. “No, wait! I’m running late. Four shots will be fine. Do you have cream instead of milk?” The other barista, a mid-thirties lady with pink and purple streaks in her hair, bent down and pulled out cream from a fridge under the counter. The secret cream vault. She poured it quickly and handed it to Brynne. Par for the course, it was overfull.

“It’s definitely decaf?” Brynne always used this three-word security check.

“Yes.” A hint of I’d-rather-be-helping-the-man-behind-you simmered in the barista’s voice.

“I’m not high maintenance, really. It’s a medical issue. No choice.” Leaded coffee irritated Brynne’s bladder, burning every time she had to wee for the next two weeks.

Fumbling in the big black cavernous hole of her handbag for the first legitimate form of payment she could find, Brynne emptied the contents all over the counter. From behind, she heard Mr Big Breath.

“I’ll pay for your coffee.” His full-bodied, dark-roasted voice didn’t sound frustrated. She tucked her hand into the side flap of her bag and pulled out her bank card, announcing—as if this were an occasion as momentous as a once-per-century lunar eclipse—“Found it!”

Brynne punched in her PIN number and said, “Thanks for the offer,” without turning around.

Walking forwards while looking backwards, she tried to check him out. Did the looks match the sexy voice? Tall and smartly dressed, only his back was visible.

“Ou-ou-ouch!” Nuclear hot coffee spilled all over her hand. “Coordination 101” and “Looking and Walking in the Same Direction” were two classes Brynne missed in primary school. In these, she lacked in every way. Her long glance backwards paired with her hurricane-force speed forwards meant not only did she scorch her hand, but she didn’t see a small coffee

display in her path. Her foot hit the cardboard display box with full force, sending her lunging through the air with handbag and coffee still in hand.

The woman who preceded her in the queue failed to see a body flying towards her. Instinctively, Brynne changed trajectory, or she'd land on Mrs. Too-Many-Choices-O'Tea. Pulling right, she averted an imminent collision. She thumped on her backside with an enormous wallop. At least half the remaining coffee fell toward her and spilled down the front of her blouse, burning her left breast.

Brynne whimpered, too hurt to conjure any volume. She suppressed tears and examined her blouse. Thankfully, most of the coffee landed on her bra, the padding helping to protect the delicate skin. But the burn! It stung! The flouncy material of her skirt rode up the back of her legs and torso, exposing her unmentionables. She was in too much pain to bring herself into an upright position and pull the skirt back down her legs. Directly above, she heard the voice of Mr Big-Breath.

“Are you all right? That was quite a fall. Did you burn yourself?”

Brynne detected a Northern accent.

“Can I help you up?”

“I need to sit for a minute,” she winced.

“Let me see if I can get you a cold cloth, or maybe some ice?”

From her present vantage point, only his feet and part of his trouser leg were visible. He had good taste in shoes, wearing cognac-hued brogues that appeared to be high quality. (Her mother always told her, “Quality Shoes Equal a Quality Man.”)

The cognac brogues with the northern accent brought her a wet cloth, bent down and handed it to her.

“I’d offer to hold the cloth or apply some ice over your burns and wipe off the stains, but given the location, you might think me rather forward.”

Whimpering a small laugh, she returned, “Thanks for the chivalry.”

He bent down closer. She continued to wipe her blouse, smarting each time she dabbed the cloth on her burns. When she finally looked up, she took in his chiselled features and dark hair and tried not to gasp or look star struck.

Could it be? Get out of town! I, Brynne Howell, am being helped by a hot dwarf! But this man was taller than two dwarfs.

His deep voice, smooth as dark chocolate, coupled with the bluest eyes she’d ever seen—it had to be Dawn French’s husband on *The Vicar of Dibley*, and Thorin Oakenshield himself. Richard Armitage. *You could put your armitages around me.*

Brynne mentally skimmed through his filmography. Perhaps he had a meeting at MI6 to get tips for another spy role? This gracious man in front of her held her gaze as if no one else mattered. Her bra singed to her chest. The older woman spoke to him and he turned away. It clicked this might not be Richard Armitage. He was younger. No sign of a wedding band, whoever he was. If she ordered him as a coffee, he’d be a tall, single, extra hot!

He turned his attention back to Brynne.

“If you hold the ice over your chest with your right hand, I’ll treat your burned hand until you’re ready to get up?”

“Thanks,” she bleated. He gently placed a cold cloth on her hand.

“Don’t feel pressured to get up. When you’re ready,” he soothed.

This worked out advantageously for him. Her skirt had relocated to the northern hemisphere of her body and each time he glanced down at her hand, he had a front-row seat to her knickers. After a time, he held her right hand and pulled her up with a firm grip.

Brynnne stood, unaware part of her skirt was tucked into her knickers. Inconspicuously, he touched her waist and released the skirt. Feeling it move, she gasped, “How embarrassing! I’m mortified.”

“Don’t be,” he said softly. “You avoided landing on someone——and at your own expense, I might add.”

Taken aback by his observation, her eyes searched his. He leaned in and winked, “Your secret’s safe with me.”

When her face finished melting, she smiled. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“Well, I’m always glad to assist damsels in distress who need their chests wiped and skirts adjusted,” he grinned.

Something about his manner put Brynnne at ease, despite her embarrassment. But why did this happen in front of Mr. Tall, Please-Please-Please Be Single, Extra-Hot?