

Overdue for Murder Excerpt

Early on Saturday, I sat behind a folding table in the Pecan Bayou Mall with a banner behind me next to a second empty chair at a matching table to be filled by Vanessa Markham. Her table was identical to mine except for the fact that Vanessa had thought to bring a dark green tablecloth and decorate it with a coordinating grass-skirt garland. I sat behind a naked, melamine-topped, fake walnut table with no tablecloth and no coordinating garland. We were situated in front of some potted palms down the way from some of the other tables on the mall walkway.

I had surrounded my crocodile cake with some bright green recycled plastic grass from Zach's Easter basket to look like the raffia that had showcased the cake in the book. I had added a little blue cellophane wrap to serve as water, making him look like he was in a very shiny swamp. I placed my books on the corner of my table, covering up a nick in the fake walnut.

Vanessa also had a stack of books on the corner of her table. Her chick-lit book was titled *Girl Meets Fifth Avenue*. I was still trying to understand what distinguished "chick literature" from other types. It seemed to be books written for women by women. These books were funny, hip and usually dealt with women's issues like dating, marriage and all those things that make women eat an entire tub of popcorn at chick flicks. Vanessa's book was displayed in kind of a house-of-cards stack on her table. The cover was illustrated with an adorable cartoon portrait of a woman with a shopping bag. I had already seen her sell two books. If she hadn't been so very proud of herself, I would have bought her book myself. The clientele we wrote for were so different from each other. She attracted young twenty-something women who looked like they had just stepped off a display for fine ladies clothing. I garnered grandmothers and young mothers who looked like they were dressed for a long bus trip, with their purses slung across their shoulders and flat shoes, shuffling through the mall.

Vanessa returned to her table with a familiar pink-striped box of cupcakes. "Not for me, of course. My husband loves these things. A girl has to watch her figure." She gestured along her gym-tight body. Today she had on a navy blue form-fitting zip-up sweater with a white blouse underneath and black skinny jeans. On her feet were three-inch heels in black patent leather.

I examined her idea of "creative cooking." Instead of making a cake, she had chosen a Japanese theme with a rock fountain that trickled running water. There were sushi rolls planted around the fountain to resemble the greenery of the peaceful scene. It was so darn tasteful. The only problem was that the constant sound of running water was driving me crazy. I had already been to the bathroom twice. When Vanessa spied my little crocodile cake in the Easter grass she put her hand over her mouth as if it might be a bit of roadkill I had frosted.

"What is that?" she asked, looking at me as if I had an unsightly blemish that had just appeared on my chin.

"Oh," I said, looking down at the cake. "A crocodile."

"Really?" she asked, doubting my credibility. Just as I was about to explain to her what I thought of her sushi fountain, Martha Hoffman walked up to our tables, wearing an oversized sweatshirt that read, "So many books, so little time."

"Vanessa, darling, I just love what you've done showcasing the very essence of Japanese cuisine." Martha beamed. She picked up a copy of *Girl Meets Fifth Avenue* and started paging through it.

"You know I'll have to have a signed copy of your book for the library. The people of Pecan Bayou will be so surprised to know we have such a talented writer in our midst," she aid.

"I'll be glad to sign one for you right now, Martha." Vanessa reached for her rust-colored leather bag behind the table and took out a pen. "Do you want me to sign it with my real name or my pen name, Vanessa Scarlett?"

"Oh, well, you had better use your pen name. Not everyone knows you personally, as I do." She

said it as if she belonged to some elite private club. I had this strange feeling that if Vanessa Markham wasn't trying to get a copy of her book in the library, she wouldn't give Martha Hoffman the time of day. Martha didn't see that, though. The book nerd had finally been accepted at the cheerleader's lunch table. As Vanessa signed her book with a flourish, Martha's eyes drifted to my table and appraised my little crocodile cake. A weak smile my way was all she could muster. She didn't seem to want a copy of my book for her precious stacks.

Vanessa closed the book and handed it to Martha. "Now you just keep your money. My gift to you." Martha held the book tightly and puffed out like a little peacock showing off its plumage. It was all I could take, and besides, the running water was getting to me again.

"I'm heading off to the restroom. Will you watch my table?"

"Again?" Vanessa pouted. "If you must, but don't be gone too long."

I escaped from my post and walked down the mall toward the bathroom. When I came out, I strolled over to Pattie's booth. PattieCake's was in full glory with its pink-striped bunting. Pattie had brought along a high school girl to help her with sales today, and I counted at least twelve trays of cupcakes behind them. They were, by far, the most attended-to table in the mall, with people lining up to purchase Pattie's luscious creations.

Pattie pushed back a strand of hair as she pulled out a loaded tray and plucked out two pink cupcakes with wax paper. As if she could feel my eyes watching her, she glanced my way and upon recognizing me, rolled her eyes and smiled. Even here she was insanelly busy. She looked at me as if to say, "Sorry, I'm at it again." Once Pattie filled her orders, she said something to her helper and then came around to the front of the table.

"We decided at the last minute to pack up some cupcakes. Now I'm glad we did. How's traffic at your table?"

"Uh, quiet. Forgot my cupcakes." As if to further humiliate my little green crocodile, on Pattie's table stood an amazing tower of cupcakes. There were six levels, complete with a full-sized layer cake on the top. Each cupcake was frosted with a light yellow frosting, and on their fronts was a delicately sculpted Texas bluebonnet. It was a work of sheer artistry.

"Do you like it? I was up all last night finishing it."

"It's incredible." I answered, feeling as if I had just walked into the Sistine Chapel and decided to look up.

"How did your crocodile cake turn out? Did you get him to stick together?"

"Yes, but he's nothing compared to this. I suppose it doesn't help that I am right next to Vanessa Markham and her sushi fountain."

Pattie shook her head. "Really? A fountain of sushi? How very upscale of her."

"Yeah, well all she really had to do was buy the little fountain, buy the sushi and arrange it all, and yet it is still getting a lot more respect than my little crocodile."

"That's what Vanessa does best. She has an eye for putting things together. That's why she is a fashion writer," Pattie said consolingly.

I thought about the truth of that statement. "That's true."

"It kills me how some of us work so hard to create things and others just buy it and then take credit for it all," Pattie said. She glanced back at her booth and then back to me. "Come on, I want to see your cake and the tribute to rolled-up seaweed." We giggled and walked down the mall arm-in-arm. As we came near the Pecan Bayou Gazette tables, I saw Vanessa speaking to a man with jet-black hair wearing a very dark, very expensive suit. He didn't look like the kind of guy who would read *Girl Meets Fifth Avenue* or the fashion blog, but maybe he was gay or just interested in fashion. He reached out and put his hand around Vanessa's waist and pulled her close to him. He lowered his lips onto hers unaware of our presence. Okay, maybe he wasn't gay – and definitely not her husband.

"My, my. Look what we just walked in on," Pattie whispered. A clump of potted palms shielded them from sight for the rest of the mall walkers, but that only worked if you weren't walking up the

ramp like we were. As we came closer, Vanessa glanced our way and pulled away from the dark man. He also turned to face us and was even more gorgeous from the front. He had eyes that were nearly black, and when he smiled he revealed white teeth that were accented by the color of his skin.

"Well, I just wanted to tell you how much I loved your book," he said, although no one within ten feet believed him.

"Thank you sir, it's always nice to meet a fan." Vanessa blushed and the stranger walked away.

"Friend of yours?" asked Pattie. "Never saw him before in my life," Vanessa said, as if she were dismissing a waiter.

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