

Social Media Central – Kevin Klehr

Chapter Two

My landlady, Mary, wore a revealing white dress as she sat in front of her outdated computer. With her best years behind her, the frock could not save her fallen breasts from pressing against her desk for more support.

One of her cats clawed at her bare feet, meowing as if it hadn't been fed for days. Before Mary noticed I was in the room, I went to her kitchen to find food. All I found was milk. A gluggy white custard splattered from the carton with a smell that could strip paint off a wall. I ran the tap and washed the evil mess down the sink.

"Who's there?" Mary yelled.

"Only me." I came out of the kitchen. "Have you fed your cats lately?"

"I think so. Do they look hungry?"

"One of them was scratching at your feet a moment ago. Didn't you feel it?"

She looked around. I pointed to the ginger furball that had wrapped itself around my legs.

"Oh. I'll feed them in a second. I'm just looking through Tammy's wedding photos."

"Have I met Tammy?"

I peered at the screen. A man sporting shoulder pads danced with a woman wrapped in a dress so tight, it was begging for mercy. Both looked like casting rejects from a 1980s prime-time drama about rich oil barons. As Mary flipped through the images, I noted the guests were more engaged with their screens than the couple who brought them to this moment. But at least a few paid the bride some attention by snapping her picture.

"I'm sure I haven't met her," I said. "How do you know her?"

"We chat online all the time."

"Yes, Mary, but how did you meet?"

"Right here, on Social Media Central."

The reddish feline pawed at my jeans. "Don't you think it's time to feed your cats?"

"In a moment." She closed Tammy's social page and looked at the newsfeed of a handsome man thirty years younger. In the reflection from the screen, I could see her smile like a child who'd discovered ice cream, followed with concern as if the treat had melted. "Tayler, how did you get into my apartment?"

"The door opened when I knocked. You know, you really shouldn't leave it

unlocked.”

“I didn’t mean to. Why are you here?”

“It’s rent day.”

“Is it Wednesday already?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll leave the money on your dining table.”

“Okay.”

I left and climbed the stairs, returning shortly with some leftover chicken I was saving for dinner. As I walked in, Mary danced in stilted moves as if she was communicating in Egyptian hieroglyphics to the delighted gent on her computer. She swung her head toward the door, and our eyes met. Hers widened.

“Oh, Tayler, have you met Bernard?”

I waved at the screen. “Hi, Bernard.”

“Hi, Tayler” came the voice from the tinny speaker.

“Tayler’s my tenant. He’s lived above me for years.”

“And how do you know Bernard?”

“Social Media Central,” they both replied.

I accidentally bit my tongue.

“Bernard is a...um, what is it you said you were, Bernard?”

“A dentist.” He flashed his pearly whites.

“I see,” I said. “Are you going somewhere tonight, Mary?”

“No.” She looked puzzled.

“It’s just that you’ve dressed up.” With her face turned from the screen, she scowled at me. I handed her the plate of chicken. “This is for your cats.”

“My cats? Why would I need chicken, Tayler? I have plenty of food for my dear little ones.”

“Tayler’s right,” said Bernard. “You look radiant this evening, Mary.”

“Really? Oh, it’s just something I threw on. I wanted to look nice for my friends. At my age, I don’t get a chance to throw on a frock anymore.”

“Then maybe we should do dinner together?”

“Yes, we could mirror meal.”

“Mirror meal?” I asked.

“Really, Tayler, you’re so out of touch.”

“How about steak, mash, and gravy?” Bernard asked.

“Yes, I can make that. I’d light candles but I don’t think my camera works that well with mood lighting.”

“That’s fine. I’ll bring the music. I’ll make up a special playlist and stream it through as we eat.”

“Then it’s a date. How does seven p.m. tomorrow sound?”

“I can’t tomorrow, my love. I have another appointment.”

“Not another woman?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m overdue with my taxes, so I’m linking up with my accountant in the evening.”

“We can have a late supper.”

“No, let’s mirror meal on Friday. That way we both won’t be dateless over the weekend.”

“Sounds perfect.” She placed the plate of chicken next to the computer. “Tayler, why is your mouth open like that?”

“Sorry, I’m in shock. Let me get this straight. Instead of going out for dinner, you’re both cooking steak and mashed potato and eating in front of your computer screens. Oh, brother. Let me take an educated guess. You two have never met face to face.”

“Tayler, don’t be so rude,” my landlady said.

“That’s okay, Mary. My son, Mike, is just like Tayler. Out of touch with technological trends. No offense, Tayler.”

“None taken.”

“Mary, my darling, I have to go. Tammy is trying to get my attention.”

“I was just looking at her wedding photos. Put her through. We can both talk to her.”

“I can’t really do that. She’s marked her contact request as *private*. Between you and me, I think she married prematurely. There were already problems in their relationship, but she went ahead with the ceremony anyway.”

“I understand, my darling.” Mary lost her smile momentarily. “I’m looking forward to Friday.”

“So am I, my love.”

“Bye, Bernard, until—” Her cyberboyfriend disappeared. “Oh, damn these bad connections. The government needs to get this right.”

I placed my hand on her shoulder. She didn't respond. "So was it love at first sight?"

"Not quite." She seemed oblivious to my sarcasm. "But I knew there was a special connection the first time we video chatted."

"Has he met the Amazing Twenty?"

My hand slipped from her as she stepped forward. "Tayler, *he* came up with the name. Without him, I wouldn't have met the others."

"Has he got legs?"

"Tayler!"

"I'm just asking. I mean, have you ever video chatted with him doing anything other than sitting down?"

"I think so. Hmm." She rested her finger on her chin. "Oh, Tayler, why can't you just be happy I'm in love?"

"So, Bernard is the reason the Amazing Twenty exists. How did you find him?"

"We told you. Through Social Media Central."

"Yes, but through which application?"

She beamed.

"Oh I see. Through *Lover Net*. Does he blog about his pursuits?"

"He used to."

"Does he blog about you?"

"Sort of. He calls me *the sophisticated lady* in his posts."

I tried to keep a straight face.

"Oh, Tayler, don't rain on my parade just because I have someone and you don't. Love will tap you on the shoulder one day. Isn't that what I always say to you?"

I missed the landlady I used to dine with—the woman whose wisdom had turned to mainstream quotes since she discovered Social Media Central. I wanted to say, "Step into the real world," but there was less and less real world to step into.

I eyed the untouched chicken next to the beast that had taken her soul. Some of her cats were gazing at it too, while Mary swayed, blissfully unaware of their hunger.

I grabbed the plate, headed for the kitchen, and pulled out various unmatched bowls. The pets purred desperately as if I was their savior. When I bent down to place their dinner on the floor, the card that fashion blogger had given me slipped from my shirt pocket. Once again I noticed the bold lettering stood out against the richly colored background. I picked it up and held it while the cats devoured their meals

like addicts.

“Mary,” I called, “do you know Madeline Q?”

“Everyone knows Madeline Q.”

“I don’t.” I joined her in the living room where she was already hard at work moving her mouse.

“Anyone who knows anything about anyone, Tayler, knows who Madeline Q is. She’s a fashion blogger. Why do you ask?”

“I met her today.”

Her eyes widened. “My dear, you’ve met royalty.”

“From what country?”

“No, no, Tayler. She’s a social media celebrity. Don’t you know anything? She hangs around with the cream of the cybercrop.”

“The cybercrop? Is that what you young kids are calling it these days?”

“My god! The person who gives me rent met Madeline Q, yet he has no idea who she is. What’s that in your hand? Is that her card?” I showed it to her, but she started reciting the phone number so I pulled it away. “You have to ring her. Bring her to your apartment. I’ll pay for the redecorating.”

“I’ve lived there for years, and you’ve never offered to fix the place up.”

“That’s because you were a no one. Now you’re a someone.”

I chuckled even though her comment made me sad. I glanced at the card. “Wow, Mary. Glad you think I’m worth knowing. Like old times, isn’t it?”

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. I left and skipped up the stairs. The moment my door was closed, I leaned against it, pulled out my phone, and dialed Madeline Q’s number.