

a work in
DEVELOPMENT

a novel



• book two of the work in progress series •

K.A. ROSS

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Chapter 1



IF ANY OF THE OTHER WOMEN STUFFED AROUND THE CONFERENCE TABLE KNEW how clichéd my life had become, I'd be mocked for the rest of my professional career.

I stared at the clock on the wall, mesmerized by the ticking of the minute hand. The urge to sneak away made my knees bounce under the table; I felt like I was in high school, about to play hooky to meet my crush behind the bleachers.

Seated across from me, Maya winked a warning. The action was so odd it caught my attention, and I realized I'd started drumming my hands against my knees. I stilled, glancing at Anita as she talked her way through the PowerPoint presentation on projected third-quarter book sales, thankfully still ignorant of my wandering mind.

I winked back at Maya, grateful for the intervention, and refocused my attention. This was not the time to look bored in front of Anita. But once I was back and fully present in the meeting, the room started suffocating me while the clock continued slugging its way to the end of the day. Everything pushed too brightly against my senses. Whether it was the headache-inducing fluorescent lights, which Anita never dimmed (she claimed it helped keep us awake for our weekly Monday afternoon meeting), or the shine off the table's plastic veneer. Or even the waft of Maya's hairspray still doing its job, keeping her bleached blonde waves bouncing over her shoulders this late in the workday.

I loved my work and colleagues. A very important fact that I had to remind myself of whenever they got in between me and being able to go see

Daniel. Though today, they weren't the only reason I couldn't do just that. Nope. The main reason was currently flying into JFK on an airplane.

I swallowed a sigh, which reversed course and hiccupped out of my mouth before I could stop it.

"Sorry," I squeaked among the chorus of giggles around me.

Anita's lips pursed sideways. I couldn't tell if she was fighting a frown or a smile. She caught my glance at the clock again and stared right at me, her black, straight-cut bangs matching the sharp angle of her white collar. Lucky for me, it was a smile that finally broke through her lips.

"Anxious to get out of here to see your 'quarterback crush'?" Coming from Anita, the question was both a rebuke and a tease.

Maya—lounging back in her chair with the top two buttons of her shirt unfastened, in stark contrast to Anita's high collar—jokingly said, "If by quarterback you mean a man-bun-wearing accountant."

I fixed Maya with a playful scowl. "You offer your opinions very decidedly for so lowly an intern."

Maya chuckled and shook her head, her large turquoise earrings swinging from side to side. I loved Maya's oversized jewelry. It spoke to her personality of confidently trying out things that she hadn't grown into yet.

"If you have an issue with my lowly intern manner, then I suggest you take it up with my mentor. She's always encouraging me to speak up."

I bowed my head. In a wobbly voice, I whispered, "*She lowered her eyelashes in acknowledgement—*"

"Don't start that!" Anita warned even as her smile grew into the largest grin I'd seen her wear today.

"—*having been bested by her own apprentice and chastised, yet again, for narrating herself.*"

Fighting against her grin, Anita reined in the renewed laughter bouncing off the walls in our tiny conference room by holding up a hand. Like the clothing she wore every day, Anita championed precision. So, while I would normally push her boundaries a bit more with additional narration, I reminded myself again—for the what? Four-hundredth time?—that today was not a day to push Anita's buttons.

I obligingly shut my mouth and sat a little straighter, hoping again that Anita would notice I'd stopped wearing my typical book-humor shirts and was

dressing a bit classier, if a bit more confining. The dress slacks and long-sleeve blouse only amplified the warmth in the small room.

Though, I chided myself, I doubted what I was wearing would matter to Anita if she kept catching me daydreaming about Daniel. Usually, I didn't at work. (Okay, that was a lie. But at least I didn't think about him *as much* as I had found myself doing this past week.)

Anita clicked the controller in her hand, and the projection screen faded to black, reflecting the harsh track lighting hanging from the ceiling. Rubbing her hands together, then placing them on the table, Anita signaled that while teasing me had been a fun diversion for everyone, it was now time to get back on topic.

“Ladies, I cannot reiterate this enough. This is a very important week. Miss JoJo Aldar will arrive tomorrow—Nellie, did you frame her latest cover and put it on the wall?”

I nodded, mentally high-fiving myself. “Right next to the others, like you asked.”

I'd had to rearrange all the frames on the lobby wall. Anita wanted it clear to anyone who entered our agency's office that *Miss JoJo Aldar* shined as our top author. Her fans loved her pen name. But for those of us behind the scenes who'd made the mistake of not using the full moniker in her presence? Not so much.

Anita ticked off a checkbox on her list before addressing us again. “Everyone must be on their best behavior. I am . . . aware that Miss JoJo Aldar doesn't inspire that. So please also be on your best *hidden* behavior. I will be dealing with her personally. We'll be in my office for most of her meetings. Hopefully that will minimize exposure and decrease the amount of time anyone else will have to interact with her.”

Nothing would ever convince me Anita cared for her people more than her willingness to take all the hits from Miss JoJo Aldar. The shared glances and sighs of relief around the room confirmed my coworkers' agreement.

“That means,” Anita's tone sharpened, “no calling her ‘*The Invasive Species*.’ Right, Nellie?”

My heart skipped a beat, but Anita's returning smile told me she was just issuing the meeting's final tease.

My shoulders sagged, and I covered my face in theatrical horror. “*She promised to never again use that well-deserved nickname. At least not out loud,*” I

narrated.

Low chuckles echoed around the room. I wondered if Anita was aware that “*The Invasive Species*” was an update from Miss JoJo Aldar’s original nickname: “Cash Cow.”

I dropped my hands. “Apologies. I’m done narrating for the day.” *Until I get out to my car.*

Anita graciously tilted her head in appreciation. Maya caught my attention and grinned at me.

Maya wanted to be hired full-time for the same reason I’d started dressing better and stopped pushing my luck with excessive narrating in front of Anita: a higher wage. And for our love of books, of course, but nothing said we couldn’t ask for a higher salary for that love. Maya knew I’d been dreaming of buying a house, and making a good impression at work was an excellent first step to that goal.

Anita tapped a pen over the last item on her list. “One final thing, everyone. Can we please take down the List of Clichés?”

A mixture of groans and sighs reverberated around the tiny room. I shifted in my seat. I should be joining the protest to keep Anita from taking an eraser to our list on the markerboard in cubicle city. It had been my idea, after all.

“Puppy dog eyes’ just hit number one last week,” Maya groaned.

Throughout the week, we’d all put up the most common clichés we’d found in the books we were reviewing. Then every Friday, I arranged for a lunch-hour dessert potluck, during which we’d all vote on the top three clichés. We’d joke and debate, over chocolate and caramel, how to say something without using common or hackneyed terms.

I wanted to keep the List of Clichés but didn’t want to risk publicly disagreeing with Anita. So I pressed my lips together even while cheering on everyone else’s objections in my heart. Two of my submitted clichés, “hearts hammering” and “butterflies in the stomach,” had just made the list, after all.

This time, a resigned frown instead of a grin crossed Anita’s face. I could tell she was weighing an action she disagreed with against demoralizing her employees right before a high-stress visit. Her goal was to make her agency the most desired agency for literary talent. Attracting bigger authors meant attracting bigger contracts, which meant more money for all of us. It was a

worthy goal, even if it meant constant bowing to our temperamental top-selling author.

“All right,” Anita conceded, making a final check on her paper. “We’ll table this until after Miss JoJo Aldar’s visit. If all goes well, maybe the list can stay.”

I mouthed, “Huzzah!” at Maya, who raised a silent fist in victory.

“Is there anything else?” Anita sighed. “Any last-minute items before we adjourn?”

Maya’s raised fist transformed into a waving open palm.

“Yes, Maya?”

Uncharacteristically, she hesitated and struggled to swallow.

“Hey, this is our work family,” I gently reminded her. “All questions welcome.”

Maya’s look of embarrassment had everyone leaning forward in their seats.

“It’s just . . . I’m having a brain cramp.” Maya bit her lip, creating a small stripe in her lipstick. “The manuscript I’m reviewing—the new romance? Well, the main character’s husband died, and all the other characters keep referring to him as an ex-husband. But they weren’t divorced, so is ‘ex-husband’ the right phrase?” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I can feel the judgment of all you English-grad professional agents boring into me.” Maya cracked open one eye and looked at me. “Nellie? How does everyone refer to Luis?”

All grins dropped, and Anita’s pursed lips produced an undignified squeak.

To quickly defuse the situation, all I had to do was let everyone know I wasn’t offended by the comment. Maya hadn’t meant any harm by it. We could move on.

I opened my mouth only to find that Maya’s innocent question had morphed into a blade that pecked at my chest like a rabid chicken.

I’d become so used to the generalized numbness that any reminder of Luis’s death usually caused that the pecking pain momentarily transported me back two years ago. I blinked to keep the memory of flashing lights and sirens out of my head.

Two facts hit me. One, every moment I delayed would shoot Maya’s and everyone else’s anxiety through the roof, which meant endless questions, condolences, and apologies.

Two, I needed to head all that off. Now.

Maya coughed out a “Nellie, I’m so sorr—” at the same time Anita’s said, “I’ll explain after—”

I laughed and waved my hands. “It’s okay.” Almost shouting to be heard, I repeated, “It’s okay. Really! Maya, please.” I reached across the table.

With embarrassment shining in her eyes, Maya took my hand.

“It was just a slipup. Don’t feel bad. And the answer is ‘late husband.’ You can ask me anytime.”

Hoping my reassuring smile wasn’t too big, I made brief eye contact with each woman around the table, ending with Anita. “It’s *fine*,” I stressed the last word before appealing to Anita’s time-keeping side. “And it’s about quitting time for everyone anyway.”

Maya squeezed my hand before leaning back in her seat. Anita nodded in agreement and stood to signal the end of the meeting. In what had to be an effort to regain our usual office cheer, Anita descended far enough to tease me one final time. “At least Nellie can go see her quarterback/accountant now.”

That earned me several pats on the back from everyone filing out of the room. I stopped to hug Maya as she reached me. I had to make sure to stamp out any of her lingering guilt.

“I’ve been meaning to thank you again,” I said.

She raised a brow.

“For helping me brainstorm how best to describe Daniel’s brown eyes.”

I’d used cocoa when I’d first met him but hated how clichéd it was. Maya had recommended the word *sepia*, which covered a broad range of rich brown tones. She’d told me sepia was named after the brownish ink that came from cuttlefish, only her mid-western accent had transformed her *t*’s into *d*’s. I heard *cuddlefish*, which further endeared the term to me. I’d looked at the different tones that sepia covered, and one definitely matched how Daniel’s brown eyes melted into black the closer you got to the iris.

Maya returned the hug with a second blubbered apology. We shared a quick laugh that I hoped doubled as an unspoken agreement never to bring the Luis thing up again.

Arms linked, we headed back to our desks, where Maya grabbed her purse and turned to me. “I’m just glad you get to go see your Prince Charming now. Or is he your knight in shining armor?”

“Either one is a cliché worthy of the list.”

Rolling her eyes, Maya saluted and waved goodbye.

I logged off my computer, hoping to leave soon. Not even the pile of fresh submissions sent by hopeful authors over the weekend could tempt me to stay. The manuscripts could wait; I could not. Plus, I had a hunch my review would crush some dreams. Something I always *hated* doing.

I'd just snagged my keys when Anita stopped by my cubicle. My palms started sweating. I prayed she wouldn't ask me about the List of Clichés.

Anita smiled politely. "You know I can't show favoritism, but are you still planning on submitting your résumé for the senior agent position by Thursday? The position requires a finer ability to juggle film rights and some very opinionated authors."

I nodded, excited by her interest. I immediately pictured the restaurant I'd planned to take Daniel to if I got the job. I blinked. I really needed to get a handle on how badly my mind had started wandering lately. Especially now that it was happening in front of someone I needed to impress.

"Yes," I said. The word sounded too much like a bird's chirp.

Anita patted my arm. "I'm glad you came back to work for me. You bring a cheerfulness and levity to the office that I don't. It's a good fit. Though"—she held up a hand—"I can't play favorites."

"I wouldn't ask you to," I assured her.

Anita gave a satisfied nod, then hesitated. "May I ask why you started the List of Clichés? Aren't you the one who always says stories don't have to be perfect to be loved?"

Too eager to defend myself, I held up my hands. "I'm not bagging on the use of clichéd phrases—"

"Authors use certain tropes and phrases again and again because readers can relate to them and often gravitate toward them. It's not fair that clichés get such a bad rap in the literary world, seeing as they are so accurate."

I must have been making a face. Anita immediately backtracked.

"I'm sorry, dear. Of course you know that. You're a phenomenal junior agent. It's just that I worry this focus on clichés will lean the agency more toward technical checkbox writing instead of prose from the heart."

I quickly took over. "I don't mind clichés. I really don't! They're fine. I use them all the time. It's impossible to catch all of them anyway. I just think . . ." How could I say this? "We use them too often instead of saying what we really mean."

I half-shrugged and watched Anita closely to see if my explanation would satisfy her. The way her mouth held a straight line said, *Nope. Sorry. Try again.* Or maybe my desperation to get promoted was acting like a magnifying glass, amplifying her reaction, making it seem like she was disappointed when, hopefully, she really wasn't.

Anita sighed, and I sensed a change in topic.

"Didn't you say Luis's grandmother was flying in from Venezuela this week?"

I barely managed to corral a surprised gasp from ramming its horns into my lungs. "*Abuelita* Luisa?"

I had no memory of telling Anita about Luisa's trip. But somehow, I had.

Well, *that* had been a lapse in judgment.

"You'd mentioned she was flying in from Venezuela and would be staying with you and Juanita for a few weeks."

Indeed she was. Luis had been her namesake and favorite grandson after all. She'd never miss the event this Saturday. At the thought of my late husband, something stabbed inside my chest again. I pretended to scratch an itch over my heart to lightly massage it.

In case Anita's next question was about why Luisa was coming, I fudged the truth. "She's coming because she hasn't been here in a while, you know? She just misses us."

"Does Juanita have any big plans for her visit, then? Heaven knows, I've been married twenty-three years, and when my mother-in-law flies in, I still deep-clean the entire house."

Oh yes. My mother-in-law did have big plans for her mother-in-law's visit. Ones I wouldn't be sharing with Anita. "Juanita and Luisa are very close. I'm not sure what all is planned, but," I laughed in my best I'm-not-avoiding-the-question way, "I know for sure that there will be food."

What a bunch of half-truths and lies. Luisa would not approve. But Luisa's plane hadn't landed here yet.

Anita patted my arm again and followed me when I moved toward the entrance, her heels clicking decisively on the tile. She would be very bad at hide-and-seek.

Holding the door open for me, she said, "Well, whatever your family has planned with Luisa, I hope you get through it okay."

I thanked her, and the door whooshed shut behind me. Anita couldn't have known, but I wasn't the one who needed help getting through this week. It was Daniel.

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