

# OPTIONS

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## A FEW WORDS, FIRST

Someone once dared me to write this book. So I did. And, what happened next, happens to most authors. I couldn't get it published. I couldn't get an agent. So, I put the book away for thirteen years. Then one day in December 2008 I read an article in the National Post about self-publishing and a company called *Smashwords* (and *Smashwords* led me to *First Choice Books* the first printer of this book and now *iUniverse*, my current publisher). And that article got me thinking about resurrecting *Options*. Now, I'm anxiously awaiting to find out how soon I can say, "And the rest was history".

My mom and dad would be so proud of this published version.

Thanks to Dan Gathof for daring me thirteen years ago. Kudos to Deborah Cathcart and Roxanne D'Amico who helped me with proofreading and Sheila Purcell for her eagle eye. Thank you Kate D'Amico, for you know what! And a very special thanks to my son Jordan, who photographed and designed the cover.

I hope you have as much fun reading this story as I did writing it.

Ottawa, Ontario

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*For my husband, Darryl. My hero, my best friend, the love of  
my life. This one's for you Sifu.*



## CHAPTER one

The paramedics arrived at the reception about twenty minutes after I did. Evelyn had stopped breathing at this point, and I was sure I was going to throw up.

I had been working late in my office when the party noises from the boardroom down the hall had finally broken my concentration and started to bother me.

The company I worked for, TechniGroup Consulting Inc., or TGC for short, was holding a cocktail party for the latest company it had bought out, Marshton Systems. Marshton was the eighteenth company acquired by TGC in the last twenty-two months and each time an acquisition closed, we held a reception in the main boardroom a few days after the official closing. The acquired employees and select groups of TGC employees would rub shoulders, share war stories and embellish their work experience.

Each of these little get-togethers was a command performance if you received an invitation, but I tried at all costs to avoid them. I worked in the legal department at TGC where most of the legal work was done on the acquisitions, so by the time the party rolled around I had usually had my fill of the owners and executives of the acquired companies.

When the party sounds finally seeped through my closed office door, I reluctantly turned off my computer, made a weak attempt at tidying up the chaos on my desk and headed down the hall.

The boardroom was packed with about sixty people. The bullshit was flying and the smell of cigar smoke and scotch permeated the air. Office buildings in Toronto had been smoke-free for a few years but that didn't deter some of our folks from lighting up. Municipal by-laws didn't apply at TGC after hours. I eased in the door and surveyed the crowd before I tried to make my way through the crowd to the bartender on the far side of the room.

"Kate," I heard in my ear. It sounded like a whisper but could have been a bellow because of the noise level. I turned around and looked at Evelyn, whose cheeks were so red, she looked like she had a sunburn.

"Ev, what's wrong?" I asked. I had to raise my voice to be heard over the noise.

"I'm fine, it's just hot in here," she said. She waved her hand back and forth in front of her face and changed the subject. "Another good turnout. Amazing isn't it, how everyone shows up when there's free food and booze." We laughed.

"I need a soda water. Wait for me here and I'll be right back."

"Evelyn," someone to my left called out.

I turned around and watched Tom James dragging an unbelievably handsome man with him. The perfect specimen he was towing behind him was Philip Winston, the Third, Vice-President of Operations of Marshon Systems Corp., the company we had just acquired. Philip "don't call me Phil" Winston and I had spent a considerable amount of time together over the

last couple of weeks and I was less than enamoured with him. I started to push my way through the crowd towards the bar. Ev grabbed the back of my jacket and said, "Don't leave me Kate."

I turned around to her, smiled and said, "They're all yours, Ev."

I felt a wee bit sorry for Evelyn, having to put up with those two peas in a pod. Tom James, Thomas O. James on his business cards, was our resident Vice-President of Human Resources. If his life depended on it, he couldn't make a decision without forming a committee and I had nicknamed him our "Tower of Jell-O" to go with his initials. Tom was my leading candidate to be the poster boy for the Peter Principle.

Philip Winston on the other hand had impressed the powers-that-be in our organization. I was still reserving judgment but was certain no one would ask my opinion. Philip clearly wanted a job with our company so he was still on his best behaviour.

Physically Tom and Philip were very similar. Both were tall, dark and handsome, and they both obviously worked-out. I knew Tom didn't work out for the pleasure of it or because it was good for his health; Tom worked out because it made him look good. Philip on the other hand was rumoured to have had played college football in the U.S. and that could account for his good physique. Personally, I found it hard to believe that Philip would expose himself to something as physical as football because it might have marred his perfect image. Two peas in a pod. Nice suits, nice hair, great skin, great smell. Big deal. Where was the substance? I sighed as I thought about the possibilities of a guy with the looks and physique of Philip or Tom and the personality of, who? I'd have to keep looking.

I veered to the left to avoid a group of beancounters who were patting themselves on the back for closing the deal. Right, I thought. Those idiots couldn't close a door without direction.

I lifted my hand to wave to the Chairman's secretary across the room. Chris Oakes, the Chairman of the Board was flicking cigar ashes on the boardroom rug and I thought we'd be lucky if he didn't set the place on fire. As I watched in amazement, he casually put the lit cigar on the boardroom table, as if it was a large ashtray, and turned around to grin at one of the Board members. Idiot.

Christopher Oakes had very large front teeth and when he smiled, which was rarely, he reminded me of a beaver. There was something dark on one of his front teeth and I wondered if it was a leftover from breakfast or lunch. My stomach turned slightly at the thought. Being anywhere near the man usually made me nauseous because if his last meal wasn't stuck between his teeth, it was stuck to his face. Or his ear. Or his neck. It went without saying that a goodly portion of his meals became accessories to his wardrobe. Breakfast on his tie, lunch on his breast pocket.

Sometimes it wasn't food on his face or neck. It was toothpaste or shaving cream. I remember as a child watching my father shave and the very last step he took was to wash his face to get the shaving cream off. Dad would fill his hands with water and rub the water all over his face and neck. He did this a couple of times. On the off-chance there were traces of shaving cream left, Dad would get them when he towelled his face dry. This display of male ablutions has stayed with me all these years and I've been tempted many times to ask Chris if he'd like a live demonstration in the art of

cleaning one's face after shaving. The man had obviously never had a lesson.

Chris comes to the office every day with more than just traces of shaving cream on his face. Globules hang from his earlobes. Patches remain under his nose. Worse than the shaving cream though is the toothpaste which sits on top of the shaving cream. Chris either does not wash his face or he does everything in reverse order. The man was a slob of the first order. I've tried to describe this to people but no one believes me. Ask anyone at our office.

I finally made my way to the bar and shouldered my way through.

"Hey Mark," I said.

"Kate." He smiled. "Soda water with lime, right?"

I smiled back. Mark worked in the mailroom and was one of the few employees entitled to collect overtime pay. He volunteered to tend bar for these occasions because he could always use the extra money. And the tequila shots he snuck on the side were just an added bonus.

I tried my John Wayne imitation and leaned on the bar. It was hard to lean your elbow on anything and look casual about it standing up when you're only five feet tall. Actually, four feet, eleven inches but I tell everyone five feet. My mother used to tell me my grandmother was a legal midget at four foot ten, so I wasn't going to push it.

I was reaching inside my jacket to tuck my blouse back in when I heard a commotion on the other side of the room. I craned my neck and stood on tiptoes to see what was going on. The conversation level in the room had completely changed and I could now hear panicked voices.

I turned to Mark. "They've probably just realized they bought a dud of a company and Oakes is trying to sell it back to them," I said with a laugh.

Mark cracked up. His laughter was suddenly the only sound in the room and several people turned around and glared. I heard something about an ambulance on its way. Oh god, I thought. As much as I disliked most of our executives, I prayed it wasn't one of them. We couldn't afford any more valleys in the stock price. Illness in a senior executive was one of the things that would make the newspapers, and any publicity, good or bad, was something this company didn't need. Recently, any news, good or bad or indifferent about TechniGroup had put the stock into a nose-dive.

I pushed my way through the crowd to see what was going on and ended up having to hip-check a couple of people on the way. People stood around dumb and mute, probably thinking about forming a committee to figure out what to do.

I reached the front of the room and saw Vanessa Wright, the Chairman's secretary on her knees beside a body. Jay Harmon stepped in front of her and put his hands on my shoulders to stop me.

"Stay there, Kate," he said softly.

"Who is it?" I choked out.

"Just stay there Kate. It's going to be okay."

"Jay, what the fuck is going on? Who is it? What happened?"

"Kate, it's Evelyn. She started to choke and we can't revive her. Someone's calling an ambulance and they should be here soon. Just stay calm."

"Nuts," I yelled. "Who gave her nuts?"

"Omigod," said Jay. He turned around and grabbed the nearest person and ordered them to run to Evelyn's office and get her EpiPen.

Everyone in the office knew Evelyn had a severe allergy to nuts and for that reason all food brought into the office was nut-free. The caterers had specific orders. They weren't even allowed to cook with peanut oil. I looked at the credenza on the other side of the boardroom. It was piled with food. I started to feel sick to my stomach.

I knelt down beside Vanessa. "Vee, how is she?" I asked.

Vanessa had a panicked look on her face. "I don't know. She won't talk to me. Look at her face. I can't get her to respond to me," Vanessa whispered.

I turned around to find Jay in the crowd. He was right behind me. "Jay," I said. "Take Vee. Get everyone out of here so the paramedics can get through. Get Mark to go out to reception and unlock the main doors so they can come right through. And get everyone else out of here and give Ev some air."

I looked past Jay at the crowd standing around like a bunch of village idiots. My hand caressed Ev's forehead and I started to talk softly to her. "Come on Ev. Talk to me. It's going to be all right. Things are going to be okay."

I looked around in desperation for the employee who was sent to Ev's office for the EpiPen. He hadn't returned so I eyed the person nearest me.

"Come on people, don't just stand there. Go help find her EpiPen. Come on. Come on," I barked out like a drill sergeant. Three people ran out of the room. Two of them were members of the board of directors. Shit, I thought, those two couldn't find their way out of a paper bag.

Time was quickly running out and I knew that every second counted here. Ev had told me (and almost everyone in the office knew this) that speed was of the

essence if she ever had one of these attacks. I know it had happened once before but Ev had known what was going on at the time and had quickly injected herself.

The employee who had gone looking for her EpiPen ran back into the boardroom looking totally panicked.

"Here." He shoved the EpiPen kit at me. It was a long, tubular container with a yellow cap. I flipped open the lid, turned it upside down and the syringe containing the epinephrine slid out onto the floor and I quickly picked it up. There was something wrong with the syringe. Evelyn had showed most of us how to use the EpiPen, just in case we ever found ourselves in the God-forbid situation that we living right now. I held the syringe in my hand and stared at it.

"Inject her, Kate," Jay urged me.

And then I realized what was wrong. There was no blue safety release button on the top. Ev had drilled us and I remember distinctly her telling us, "yellow, blue, orange, click". Yellow cap on the outer tube, blue safety cap on the syringe, orange tip covering the needle which dispenses the magic, and click, the magic is dispensed. There was no blue safety cap. What did it mean? My brain was racing.

Fuck it, I thought. Maybe I was mistaken. I leaned over Ev and jammed the EpiPen into her left thigh. I waited for the click. Nothing. I pushed it harder. Again, nothing.

I looked at Evelyn and she didn't appear to be breathing. I put my ear to her lips. I'd seen that on TV. Just exactly what that was supposed to do, I didn't know but I had to do something. Jay quickly knelt down on her other side and started giving her CPR.

Mark came running in the room and announced that the paramedics had arrived. They pushed their way

through the door, one pulling a gurney and the other pushing.

"Okay everyone. Back up," the first one said.

The second one, a young woman about twenty-five got down beside Jay and said, "I'll take over. Tell us what happened." She started CPR on Ev.

Jay looked at me. For the first time in a long while, I was at a loss for words. Jay turned to the paramedic and said, "She collapsed. She wouldn't respond and she stopped breathing a minute ago. I started CPR. We think it might be something she ate. We know she has an allergy to nuts."

"Here." I held the Epipen towards the medic. "I don't know if it worked. There was no blue cap."

The other paramedic was the largest male specimen I had ever laid eyes on next to William Perry, The Refrigerator. His name tag said MARION O'LEARY. I bet the guys back at the stationhouse didn't tease him about his name. Marion ignored my outstretched hand and the Epipen. He was checking Ev's vital signs and started barking out questions. "Age?"

"Sixty-five," I responded.

"Any other known medical problems?"

"No," I whispered. I looked at Ev and thought I was going to throw up.

Jay stood up and stepped over Ev's legs. He took me by the arm and steered me through the boardroom door out into the hallway. I leaned back against the wall and dug in my jacket pocket for a cigarette. My hands shook as I lit up and blew the smoke in Jay's face. He was in my personal space and he deserved it. He gave a disgusted cough and backed-up. Under normal circumstances he would have started in on me about my smoking.

"Kate, someone has to call Danny," Jay said.

"I know," I sighed. Danny was Evelyn's son and the apple of her eye. He's forty-four years old and still lived with mama at home. I think he's a wuss.

Evelyn Morris is the longest standing employee at TechniGroup having started with the company as a receptionist seventeen years ago. She'd worked her way up through the ranks and was now in charge of the administration of the employee stock purchase plan, bonuses, executive incentives, and the one thing more powerful than sex in our company, stock options. It's an inside joke at our company that if you're married to a guy at TechniGroup who can't get it up, just start talking about his stock options and the guy could take on Hugh Hefner's harem.

Ev had been in many different positions after spending nearly ten years as the receptionist and most of her jobs had been within the finance department. Before stock options and the employee stock purchase plan, she had supervised the payroll department. Everyone thought her transfer to the new job was a step down but it suited Ev just fine. Theoretically she should be retiring soon, but our company has no mandatory retirement age.

I heard some activity inside the boardroom and eased over to the door. I didn't want to look.

The paramedics had finished strapping Ev on the gurney and were wheeling her out. The building security guard who had escorted them up from the lobby was leading the way and acting like the lead leprechaun at a St. Patrick's Day parade. He elbowed me aside. Officious bastard, I thought.

"Is she okay?" I asked. No one answered me. "Hey!" I grabbed the female paramedic's arm as she went past. She shook me off.

"Look," she said. "We're taking her to Toronto General. The doctors can fill you in."

We were racing down the hall. The security guard opened the glass doors at the reception and stepped back to let us through. The elevator was waiting and I tried to push on after the gurney.

"Sorry miss," Marion the Refrigerator said. He pushed the ground floor button and the doors closed.

I stood there shaking. Buck up, I told myself, Evelyn will be fine.

"Kate."

I turned around and there was my shadow. "Jay. I've got to call Danny. Will you come to the hospital with me after I talk to him?" I started back down the hall to my office to make the call.

"Sure," Jay called after me. "I'll meet you down in the lobby beside the elevators to the parking garage in five minutes. I'll just get my jacket."

I had no success in trying to reach Danny. The phone just kept ringing off the hook. After three or four tries, I hung up in frustration and headed for the elevator. I went out the back door to avoid the crowd in the boardroom and impatiently pushed the elevator button. I said a silent prayer for Ev in the elevator.

Jay wasn't downstairs when I got off the elevator. I looked at my watch and saw that it was almost eight-twenty. Come on Jay, I thought impatiently. I hung around for another five or six minutes and was about to leave without him when the elevator doors opened and he rushed off.

"Jesus Jay. Where the hell have you been? Ev could be dying."

I realized as soon as I said it, I shouldn't have opened my mouth. I felt like I had just jinxed the pitcher.