

I don't cover soft news. Stories about lottery winners, runaway brides, weight-loss secrets, or how to beat speeding tickets are given to reporters with a talent for covering these gentler topics. A kind of talent I don't have. Give me a high-speed car chase down the 405 freeway during rush hour, an out-of-control brushfire threatening multimillion-dollar homes in the Hollywood Hills, or a bank robbery shootout with police, and I'll turn in a story that'll keep viewers glued to the TV news instead of their smart phones and YouTube.

So after forty-eight hours of covering a commuter train collision that had killed twelve and injured at least another six, I couldn't believe the story I was being assigned. "A Los Angeles resident called to tell us she found a big stack of cash on her front porch this morning," the Channel Eleven news editor, David Dyal, said in the morning assignment meeting. "She thinks it came from a Good Samaritan and is giving us an exclusive on the story."

I assumed he would gesture toward Laurie Evans, the fresh-out-of-journalism-school reporter with a pixie haircut and perfect white teeth who recently had filed a highly emotional report on dogs wearing Halloween costumes. But his finger was pointing at me. "Yours, Kate."

Or at least that's what I thought he'd said. But he couldn't have. Not with the death toll mounting on the train wreck. He was staring right at me, so maybe he was expecting an update. "Actually," I told him, "I'm working on an angle that the train engineer may have been texting minutes before the Metrolink crash."

The room went silent, and all eyes were upon me. Every reporter was thinking the same thing. *Don't question David's assignments, because you'll pay for it—forever.* You may get what you want in the short term, but in the long run, you'll find yourself covering the new dog poop ordinance in Pacoima or the city landfill briefings.

"One of Mel Gibson's sons was injured in the train wreck, so Susan will take over the Metrolink story," David said, running his hands through his unruly black hair.

I glanced over at Susan Andrews, the former Miss Texas reporter who covered celebrity stories and scandals. I couldn't tell whether she was gloating over her assignment or if an overzealous doctor had pumped too much filler into her lips.

Assignment meetings are held in the Fish Bowl, a glass-enclosed conference room in the back of the newsroom, and they are always chaotic and loud, with several discussions going on at once. Most reporters multitask at the meeting, tapping out their required news tweets, catching up with news online, and sometimes even talking on their cell phones. Today was no exception.

"This Good Samaritan story sounds more up your alley, Ted," I called across the room, trying to be heard over the din and motioning to the reporter in the corner who was texting on his BlackBerry.

"I'm covering Palmdale's new ordinance requiring homeowners to keep an attractive front yard," Ted answered.

*Ouch.* I wondered what Ted had done to warrant such cruel and unusual punishment, but then I remembered that his report on baby smuggling last week was so poorly written that he must have thought grammar was an award given to pop music artists.

On the whiteboard on the front wall of the conference room, David tracked all the stories for the day under four columns: Follow, Top Story, Breaking News, and Other. Most of the time, you'd find my name and assignment under Breaking News. But today, under Other, he scribbled my name and "Good Sam."

"Kate, all yours," he said, with that silly grin he always had when he was handing out crummy assignments. "Think of this as a twenty-four-hour break from your usual death, destruction, and weeping-survivors stories."

I didn't want a break from the Bummer Beat. I'm one of the best at covering tragedy, and I'm able to get interviews and shots that others can't. I get them first and I get them on deadline. I had no business covering a soft story like this one.

"Make it interesting, Kate, and we'll run it as the kicker before sports," David said, rolling up the sleeves of his white oxford shirt.

"I can already hear the sound of millions of viewers switching channels," I grumbled.

"You'll be thanking me later for this assignment. Trust me."

I'm not good at trust. Trust can break your heart, and if you happen to be one of the victims of the stories I usually cover, trust can kill you.

As I headed to the news van, I had no idea that my life was about change forever. Sometimes the most important moments in your life can only be seen in the rearview mirror.