

CHAPTER ONE

Answering Machine

Counting hundreds of dollar bills, rolls of quarters, dimes, nickels, and a fistful of loose change correctly was turning out to be a daunting task. As the clock ticked along, the store phone rang. I answered.

“Aye, listen, I’m comin’ to Charlottesville right now. Could you tell me where you guys located at?” Someone spoke in a strangled tongue.

“Yes, sir. We are in the mall.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

It was eight o’clock at night. ElectronicsHut was supposed to close at nine.¹ The lights from the flatscreen TVs skipped on the walls and the grey carpet floor. Jazz played on the home theater system. I stood in the middle of the store, leaning on the counter under the bright fluorescent lights, and looked at everything that surrounded me—radios, antennas, cameras, cables, routers,

1. To protect confidentiality, I have changed the names of my workplace and of my colleagues and acquaintances.

scanners, printers, computers, speakers. I was the person in charge of everything in the store for the next hour. Cindy, my boss, a short-haired blonde with average build and big eyes, had left a few minutes ago, telling me, "I'm going home. You'll close today." She knew I was not comfortable with the idea.

"You need to learn to start closing the store on your own. You've been working here long enough," she had told me. "Have a good night. You'll be fine."

Tonight was my first closing shift on my own. I felt nervous. Nervous about not being able to answer a customer's question, not being able to find a product, not being able to handle an irate shopper. Also, I was not sure about counting the money in the cash register at the end of the day. Being responsible for someone else's money made me nervous in general, but being responsible for counting American money, matching the total in the cash register to the one on the computer, and taking thousands of dollars of cash to the bank at night made my misery a hundred times worse.

I had recently arrived in the United States from India, and was still learning American ways. People rolled their eyes when I stared at the coins in my hand, trying to tell a dime from a nickel in an effort to come up with the right change for a donut at a coffee shop. Embarrassed, I'd put the whole chunk of change on the counter and let the cashier pick.

A few minutes later a man wearing a checkered flannel shirt and a pair of light blue jeans walked in with a crumpled plastic bag in his hand. He set it on the counter and pulled out a telephone answering machine.

"It don't work no more. I want my money back," he said in a gruff tone. I knew from his voice that he was the one who had called a few minutes ago. The machine looked worn out. There

was no box for it. I asked him if he had the receipt. He pulled out a slip. The print was barely readable. I checked to see the date of purchase. The machine had been bought seven months ago.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but I can’t give you the money back. This is past the return period.”

“Are you shittin’ me? These are supposed to work for a long period of time, not just a few months. C’mon, man, give my money back,” he barked.

I didn’t know how to react. He reeked of alcohol. He was solidly built, with rough stubby knuckles. He seemed to be in his mid-thirties but had several teeth missing. Numerous thoughts flashed in my mind. In my last job in India, if someone wanted to see me at work, they first had to go through the security guard outside the building, then if the guard thought it was okay, he would let them into the receptionist, who would in turn let me know that there was a visitor. Someone who stank of alcohol and talked in an abusive manner would have never gotten past the burly guard.

But I was not in India. I was standing in front of a drunken man in America, and he was being rude and asking for his money back for something well past its return date. Seven months ago, when he’d purchased the machine, I had no idea that I’d be dealing with an asinine man in Virginia over a product that I didn’t know existed.

A part of me wanted to toss his answering machine out the door, rip the sales receipt into pieces and shove it into his stinking mouth. But my job was to treat this guy with respect, talk to him in a professional manner—and, at the same time, not agree to return his money. If I tried to raise my voice, there was a good chance that the customer could hurt me, even pull a gun. If I gave his money back, it was likely that I could lose my job.

I took a deep breath and said, "Sir, I am very sorry, but I can't return your money."

He gave me a cold stare with his hazel eyes and said, "How many gas wells do you own?"

"Excuse me?"

"Tell me, how many gas wells do you own?"

This was the first time someone had ever asked me whether I owned gas wells. I didn't even know what that meant. What did the answering machine have to do with gas wells? I didn't have the faintest clue. I saw saliva frothing around the corner of his quivering lips. He didn't seem like he was going to leave the store without giving me a hard time.

"Let me talk to your manager," he cried.

"She's gone for the night, but she'll be here tomorrow."

He turned around and stomped his feet and let out a few expletives. Then he grabbed a pen from the counter, looked at my nametag and wrote my first name down.

"What's your full name?"

"Deepak Singh."

"I'll be back tomorrow," he pointed at me with the pen.

"Sure."

He put the machine back in the plastic bag and left.

A little after nine, I locked the door to make sure the day was over.

By the time I got home, it was almost ten. My wife and I ate dinner in silence. I could tell she knew I was upset about something and that I didn't feel like talking.

Just when I lay on my bed and closed my eyes, my house phone rang. It was about eleven. No one called me at that time of night except my parents, from India. I answered the phone. To my surprise, it was Cindy. "Deepak, sorry to bother you

at this time of the night, but do you know anything about Fallujah?”

At first, I couldn't decide if I was dreaming about work, or if it was really Cindy on the phone.

She had called my home a few times to ask me to come in earlier or to work on my day off because some other employee hadn't shown up, or to ask me where I kept a certain product, or a document that she needed.

It took me a few seconds for her question to register. I said, “What are you looking for, Cindy?”

“Fallujah—do you know where it is?”

“Fallujah? No, I don't know, Cindy. But sounds like it could be somewhere in the Middle East.”

She cackled and said, “I knew you would know.”

“Okay, but why do you ask?”

“Oh, I'm sittin' here watchin' Fox News, and they're talkin' about a suicide bomber who blew himself up in a busy market there.” I kept silent. “Hello, you there?”

“Yes.”

“Anyway, I'll let you sleep. Oh, by the way, how did last hour go at the store?”

“Do you mind if we talk tomorrow, Cindy? I am very tired.”

I laid back in bed and closed my eyes again. I tried to imagine what it might be like for average Americans to work in a retail store in a foreign land without a good grasp of the local language or accent. I tried to picture an educated American working in a corner store in small-town India, selling turmeric, cardamom, cloves, aniseed, peppercorn, cinnamon, fenugreek, mustard, coriander, saffron. And what if this was the only job he could get, even if he had no experience or desire for it, but couldn't quit and return home? How would he fare? How would people treat him?

Then I thought of the time back in Lucknow, when a white American friend of mine asked a cycle rickshaw puller to let him pedal it for a short while. He did that because it was exotic and fun. People stopped to gape at the tourist, a tall man with long hair, pedaling a cycle rickshaw in the place of a scrawny, dark-skinned Indian man. For my friend, it was an adventure of sorts, but the poor Indian man carried people around town, rain or shine, to make sure his family could eat.

I wished working in retail in America were fun and exotic and only lasted for a few minutes—and that I didn't have to depend on it for a living.