

Chapter 1

MON 20-AUG-2001

08:35:27

How many of you are employees of CommuniLink?"

About half of the 275 people crammed into the lunchroom raised their hands. The man who asked the question, chief executive officer Hank Pauley, scowled from the lectern.

"How many of you are employees of Synergy Systems?"

A few wavering hands peeked above the still rows of heads. Hank's scowl deepened.

Behind Hank, a row of vice presidents shifted in their chairs. One of them, a tall and lanky man with a helmet of stiff yellow-blond hair, sat rigid with his face in a grimace. A vice president next to him sneered, "I guess everybody didn't get the e-mail." The tall man's expression tightened.

Hank tried one more time. "Now, how many of you are employees of our brand new company, eUniLink?"

Most of the employees sprung to their feet and erupted into cheers.

Hank smiled broadly, as did most of the vice presidents seated behind him. The vice president with the stiff hair kept grimacing.

In the middle of the fourth row, Lucy Merriweather stood up with the group. She opened her mouth to join the cheer, but stopped. She looked around at those who weren't standing, the same ones who raised their hands declaring themselves as CommuniLink employees. She sat down before the rest of the group finished cheering.

Hank's voice lifted with enthusiasm. "I want to share with you our vision of our unified company. This merger isn't just a bringing together of two companies, Synergy Systems and CommuniLink. It represents a new genesis, leveraging our individual strengths to synergize into a new paradigm that will empower us to reach the top of our industry."

Lucy barely listened to Hank's words. The energy of the room disturbed her. Those who had cheered the new name of the company listened to Hank attentively. Those who didn't sat sullen and silent. She also found herself disturbed by the vice president with the stiff hair and tight expression.

A man next to Lucy slumped his head forward and went to sleep.

"I want to assure you," Hank continued, "That the former Synergy Systems and the former CommuniLink will be equal partners in our new organization."

A woman in front of Lucy whispered to her neighbor, "If we're equal partners with Synergy, why does he say their name first?"

"And I also want to assure you that there will be no layoffs."

Most responded to Hank's announcement with muffled cheers or relieved sighs. The former CommuniLink employees remained silent.

Hank finished his speech. "We want to make eUniLink a world-class place for everyone to work, where you are all respected, and where you have the opportunity to do your best. Working together, we can make our new company a tremendous success."

Again, the audience was divided in their response. Most exploded in enthusiastic applause. The hostile ones remained silent. But everyone left the lunchroom as quickly as the narrow rows of seats and the two sets of double doors would let them.

Lucy stayed, watching the mass of people fleeing around her. She picked out pieces of conversations. One woman talked about her lunch plans. A man talked about how he repainted a bathroom over the weekend. She caught a tiny bit of "What kind of idiots do they think we —" before the person dissolved into the crowd.

She leaned back as the Facilities crew coiled the speaker cable and started folding the chairs.

When I accepted this transfer to southern California, they didn't tell me things were like this. What did I get myself into?

She was startled by a loud snore. The man seated next to her was still asleep.

09:11:01

Lucy went to her car and got her box of personal belongings. When she arrived at her office, two of her new employees were waiting there.

One of them was a short man with a gut that cascaded over his baggy corduroy pants. On his owl-like face, he wore round-framed glasses with smudged thick lenses and a scraggly goatee that had a few crumbs left over from something he ate.

A tall, stout woman folded her arms below her large, bullet-shaped breasts. Her bangs arched over her forehead.

Both of them wore polo shirts, CommuniLink polo shirts.

The man lumbered toward Lucy. "Here, let me help you."

"Thank you." She handed him the box. "Please be careful. There are fragile items in it."

"Sure," he replied.

The woman kept her arms tightly folded.

Lucy turned the door handle. It was locked, and the door had no place for a key.

"Use your employee badge," he said. "The Synergy people just put all these offices on cardkeys."

"It wasn't like that at the Seattle office. Wonder why they did that here."

The woman grumbled, "So they can lock your office immediately when they lay you off."

"That's not our intention." Lucy kept her voice calm and positive.

The woman didn't respond.

Lucy fished the badge out of her purse and slipped it around her neck. She gave the badge a quick swipe over a black box next to the door. The light on the top of the square turned green and the deadbolt unlocked with a muffled click. Lucy opened the door all the way until it engaged with the doorstop. The man carried Lucy's box into the office and placed it on her desk. Lucy and other woman followed him in.

“By the way, I’m Peter Vadic, one of your Quality Assurance testers.”

He thrust out his hand to Lucy. She accepted his handshake, even though his palm was oily.

“I’m Lucy Merriweather, your new manager.”

“Yes, we know,” the woman croaked.

Lucy offered her hand and a cordial smile. “What is your name?”

“Martha Meyerson. I’m also a QA tester. That is, if you still plan to keep us around.” She gave a brief shake and a fake chuckle.

Lucy’s smile faded, but she quickly recovered it. “Of course I do. I read a lot about CommuniLink in the trades. Your products have always gotten great reviews, and you have a great reputation for quality and performance.”

“That’s right,” Peter chimed. “We work very, very hard to make our products the best.”

Martha rolled her eyes.

“I’m glad, because I’m looking forward to your continued good efforts.” She turned to Martha to try to reassure her. “There’s a lot that all of you from CommuniLink can teach us who came from Synergency Systems.”

“Well,” Martha sighed, “We’re glad to have you on board, Ms. Merriweather —”

“Please, it’s Lucy.”

Martha wrapped her hand around Peter’s forearm and tugged him towards the door. “C’mon, Peter. We should be working very, very hard to make Lucy happy.”

“Thank you both for your help.”

Before Lucy finished, Martha and Peter had already left. They were still in Lucy’s earshot when Martha blustered, “That was over the top, even by your standards, Petey.”

“I’m just trying to be nice.”

“The only time you’re nice to managers is at review time.”

Lucy shook her head and walked around her new desk. She turned to the window at the back of the room. The blinds were shut tight. She turned the wand to open them and found her view blocked by a monstrous black

SUV parked outside her window. Behind the SUV was the brown of scorched dry rolling hills and a sky fouled with smog.

Lucy sighed. *Well, I'm here. Might as well make the most of it.*

She open the box. On top were her most cherished possessions. They were the first things she put on her desk when she arrived at a job and the last things she put away when she left.

The first was an oak-framed picture of her seven-year-old daughter Melody. She had light brown hair like Lucy, but with green eyes. Lucy set it on the corner.

The second was a small clay figurine of a bird that Melody made for her in school. Lucy placed it in a prominent position in the center of her desk.

The third was a faded pastel coffee mug with a line of scripture wrapped around it, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." – John 13:34." She held the mug aloft, read the passage silently, and smiled.

"Lucy."

She looked up. An imposing figure emerged through the doorway. It was the person she remembered from the company meeting, the one with the stiff yellow-blond hair and the rigid face.

She set the mug carefully on her desk and moved towards him. "You must be Jake Bosch." She offered her hand.

"We are very glad to have you on our team." He clasped her hand firmly and forced a small smile at her. The tension in his grip advanced up her arm. She withdrew her hand slowly.

"Thank you. I'm glad to be here." She noticed the hesitation in her voice.

"I trust your move went well."

"It did. Thank you."

"I've heard a lot of good things about you." As he spoke, he glanced at her desk, surveying the box of her belongings and the items she set out. "Clara, your boss in Seattle, said you did an excellent job running the QA department there. They were very productive, very thorough."

"I had a great team."

He looked up with a jerk. "What do you know about Herman Bartleby?"

"I remember seeing his name on the org chart, but I haven't had a chance —"

"He wasn't at the meeting."

"He wasn't? Is there a problem?"

"It is my understanding that he doesn't attend company functions."

"I didn't think it was a requirement to attend company functions, especially if the project schedule didn't allow for them. It wasn't in Seattle."

"It is here. As you can see, Lucy, we're not getting a lot of cooperation from the employees of the former CommuniLink."

"There does seem to be some resistance."

Jake's facial muscles relaxed slightly.

"But isn't that natural for a merger?" Lucy asked. "We've all been through them. We all know how hard they can be."

"There's something about CommuniLink." His voice rumbled with disgust as he uttered the company's name. "Everyone says how great their products were, but they were undisciplined. They lacked the critical mass and marketing acumen to be a winner in their market space."

"Even so, is it a wise idea for us to run roughshod over them? Shouldn't we be trying to build a team with them? Combine our market leadership with their talent?"

"Our job is to make sure that they adhere to our way of doing things."

He rested his hand on top of the figurine that Melody made for her. She repressed a gasp as he lifted it from the desk. He rotated it in his fingers, studying every curve.

"As I recall, one of the things Clara commended you on is your loyalty. You've always been a team player."

"My loyalty is to my company. And my team."

She firmly raised an extended hand to him, a gesture to return her precious figurine.

"Remember where your loyalties must lie, Lucy."

He dropped the clay bird into her palm. She quickly shielded it with her fingers. He clasped his hand tightly over hers.

"I am depending on you, Lucy. Don't disappoint me."