



The

office

Mercenary

by Molly Burkhardt

**1.**

"In the beginning was Office Work. And Office Work was boring and without fun, so God created Man to do Office Work. But Man did not like the tedium of Office Work, so God created Woman to do it instead."

"Oh, Rae."

After a quick glance up, Raegan Mitchell returned to staring moodily at her soda and wishing it were a Long Island Iced Tea. "I can't help it, Jeri. I don't want to go back. I've only been gone an hour, and a week wouldn't be long enough."

"Is it Mina again? Is she still giving you a hard time?"

Rolling her eyes, Rae slumped down in her seat. "She certainly doesn't help. What I wouldn't give to wrap that woman's headset cord around her neck and pull."

Jeri snorted into her soda. "You shouldn't say stuff like that, Rae. At least not while I'm taking a drink."

Finally managing a half-grin, Rae looked up from her own glass. Her friend's eyes sparkled. Why wouldn't they? Jeri only had one annoying old bat to deal with at work. Just thinking of the several frustrations waiting for her back at the office stole even the half-grin from Rae's face. She checked her watch and sighed.

"I'm gonna be late."

Jeri's smile faded. "Maybe you can sneak in?"

"Fat chance of that. Mina guards the door like a proper moat dragon." Rae stood with a disgusted grunt. "Sometimes I wonder if she wants to eat me."

Chuckling, Jeri shouldered her purse and slipped two dollar bills under her glass. "Maybe you should ask her. Better yet, just tell her. Hey, Mina, eat me!"

"Oh, I'm tempted." Adding her own two bucks to the table, Rae followed her friend to the door. "If nothing else, it might shut her up. For a split second."

**2.**

"Rae-rae, you're late."

Closing her eyes, Rae resisted a witty retort and walked right by the receptionist's desk. A forty-something with bottle-blonde hair and narrow blue eyes, Mina Cole was the plague of Rae's working life, and she had no intention of acknowledging that plague and possibly making it worse.

"Did you have something more important than eating to do over lunch, Rae-rae? Is that why you're so late?"

Said as if she were running half an hour behind instead of a few minutes. And said as if a nooner were all that could possibly keep someone late over the lunch hour.

"Actually, Mina, I'm only five minutes late." *And yes, I was having hot, soul-scorching sex with a complete stranger that I ran into on the subway. If you'd like to see the bite marks and scratches, I'll be happy to throw off my blouse to give you the money shot.*  
"And no, I just got to talking with a friend and lost track of the time."

"A friend, huh?" Those icy eyes narrowed further. "Was this a *male* friend?"

She rolled her eyes. "No. Just an old friend from where I used to work." *Not everything revolves around sex, you old slut.*

"Hn." Tossing her bottle blonde hair, Mina returned her attention to her desk. "If you ask me, a little afternoon delight would do you good."

*I didn't ask you.*

"After all, you're almost thirty. You're not getting any younger. I suppose you could be considered pretty if you took off your glasses once in a while and quit wearing those terrible skirts, but--"

Rae tuned her out, forcing her attention to her own desk and computer. Mina would likely go on mindlessly insulting her for a good ten minutes, and she had better things to do than listen.

*An afternoon of quiet, please. Just one afternoon. I could duct tape her mouth shut, I suppose, but something tells me that would only slow her down.*

The image brought a smirk to her lips, though, and she logged in to her computer with less frustration than usual.

### 3.

"Ms. Mitchell?"

Her fingers stuttered, typing *investigated* with entirely too many consonants, and she scowled at the glaring typo before turning to scowl at whoever had caused it.

"I'm busy here--"

She stopped cold, her mouth hanging open. The gentleman was tall, dark, handsome,

and approximately her own age. As she watched, his smile faltered a bit, and she hastily straightened her own expression.

"Sorry, Mr...."

"Davis." He put out his hand, his smile rebounding. "Paul Davis, and I'm the one who's sorry. I hated to interrupt, but Heloise told me that you might have the Johnson file, and I need it for my brief."

But the mention of the useless old bat in the file room stole any idea of flirting that Rae might have entertained. Her scowl returned, and his smile again faded.

"You were misinformed. That file has been missing for weeks, and Heloise will blame everyone but God for its disappearance. I signed it back in last month and haven't touched it since."

He put up his hands in surrender. "Counter to your assumption, Ms. Mitchell, I wasn't accusing you. I'm just trying to track it down." He smiled again, the expression warm and charming. His eyes were a lovely dark brown. "Somehow, I doubt you could hide six banker's boxes worth of files in your desk."

She debated staying irritated but quickly gave up. Mr. Paul Davis certainly seemed nice. He must be new.

"Well, I'll admit that I'm space efficient, but even I can't stuff that much into four drawers and a knee-hole."

He laughed. "If anyone could, Ms. Mitchell, I imagine it would be you."

And then Mina strolled over, a steaming cup of coffee in her hand and an avid gleam of vicious interest in her eyes.

"Well, well. Mr. Davis, I see you've met our little Rae-rae. She's one of the newer members of our crew, though not quite as new as you."

Rae felt the grin on her lips wither. Mr. Davis's nice smile dimmed, too. Mina didn't seem to notice.

"I'm glad to see you two getting along so well." Icy blue eyes narrowed, the smirk sharp enough to etch glass. "To tell the truth, I'd just about written poor Rae-rae off as a lesbian."

*Oh, you vicious, dirty bitch....*

Mr. Davis's smile disappeared altogether, and he straightened. Rae closed her eyes for a moment, feeling all the color drain from her face. She was suddenly cold all over, her hands fisting on her desk.

*I could just bash her over the head with my computer tower. Staple her to death. Shove paper wads down her throat until she chokes.*

Mr. Davis cleared his throat, and she opened her eyes to see him shifting uncomfortably. He obviously wanted to say something, but before he could find his mental footing, Mina turned on her spike heel and sashayed to her own desk. She'd scored her point and had nothing else to contribute.

*If only I could pick up the copier and throw it at that stupid...hateful...gah!*

#### 4.

She didn't really mind working late. At least she didn't have to fend off co-workers after hours. Being blissfully left to her own devices was, however, the sole perk. Even overtime pay couldn't salve the sting of being told that Mina's unfinished work had become Rae's unfinished work.

*If the stupid slut would quit boinking the boss every afternoon, she'd have time to get her own work straightened out. But noooo.*

She had come by that disgusting piece of information one otherwise quiet afternoon, and the sight of her boss's narrow butt tick-tocking over Mina's pale, spread thighs on his massive desk had plagued her nightmares for a week. She'd thought of exposing her clandestine knowledge, of using it to her advantage somehow, but the thought of the media fiasco genie that might emerge from such a secret bottle kept her tongue in check.

Well, that and the fact that she couldn't imagine, even in her fondest daydreams, telling her imposing, steel-eyed boss that he'd been caught *in flagrante delicto* with the bottle-blonde, acid-tongued receptionist.

Numbers scrolled up her screen, her dry, burning eyes following them and checking totals. Accounting wasn't her job by any stretch, but Mina just couldn't seem to find the time to finish payroll this week, so there it was. She didn't want everyone in the building breathing down her neck for their paychecks, so she sucked it up and stayed late.

Three months. She'd only been working here for three months, but it felt like three lifetimes. Because of Mina. It was *always* Mina.

Sure, it was the monotony of data entry, the pitiful pay, the disdain from the long-time employees, and the expectation of cleaning up other people's messes, but behind all of the humiliation and tedium stood Mina.

She could put up with Heloise's incompetence because she didn't have to deal with it on a daily basis. She could ignore her boss's sniff of seeming disgust every time she requested office supplies. She could live with the gossip from the vicious chicken-yard

hens in the break room.

But she simply couldn't deal with Mina, whose desk was always a bare fifteen feet away, whose snide and cutting comments never ceased, who barely seemed to do five full minutes of actual work in a day.

*I could always tie her up with her network cable, staple her nose closed, and pour printer toner down her throat.*

The thought brought a smile, and she let her imagination wander to several such fates as the payroll figures scrolled past. She should probably be ashamed of such vivid, brutal, often homicidal thoughts, but they truly kept her sane. She could even smile at the hateful bitch, so long as she could picture the short-skirted hussy riddled with office supplies.

*Post-its. There's gotta be some way to shut her up with Post-its.*

But the image wouldn't come, and she was done with her fact-checking anyway. The totals all matched. All she had to do was hit "print".

And perhaps figure out a way to delete Mina's check.

## 5.

"And God, seeing His Creation of Office Work sullied by loafers and slackers, sent among the people an Angel of Termination, preceded by plagues of no coffee and stale donuts. And the Angel of Termination flew among the masses, taking the last-hired among the wage slaves. Only those who painted their desks with the blood of their highlighters were spared."

Jeri shook her head. "God, you're morbid today. Mina giving you fits?"

Rae shrugged. "No more than usual. This time, it's Heloise. I swear she's lost a file for every one of her eighty-three years, and she's blamed me for at least half of them."

"Why does your boss keep her on?"

Another shrug. "I have no clue. He keeps Mina around because they're shagging, but if he's boinking ol' Heloise..." She shuddered at the thought. "Now *that* was a hideous image."

"Yes, and thanks for it." Jeri winced. "I don't even know what they look like, but the picture in my head is...disturbing, to say the least."

Quirking a grin, she looked up from her plate. "Now you know why I entertain morbid fantasies instead of disgusting ones."

"I'll give you that one." Leaning back in her chair, Jeri frowned. "It's always the same, isn't it? No matter where we go?"

"Office politics, Jeri. It's all just office politics. We're paid more to learn the pitfalls than the job itself. I'd say we're all soldiers, but that's too noble for the crap we put up with as office workers." Her forehead creased in a frown more of thought than of frustration. "I guess we're more mercenaries, paid to do whatever our bosses tell us, even if that's just to get along with people who don't deserve it."

"Office mercenaries, huh?" Jeri smiled a bit. "It has a ring to it, doesn't it?"

She snorted. "I'd kill to be paid as well as a mercenary."

Chuckling, Jeri reached for her purse, signaling the end of their moment's respite. "If you killed to be paid, you'd be paid as well as a mercenary no matter what they paid you."

"Touché."

## 6.

"Do you have any skirts that aren't brown or black or that hang above the knee, Rae-rae?"

*Do you have any skirts that don't, Mi-mi?*

"I'm just saying that you're more likely to catch a man's attention if you show a little leg. You can't count on them to look beyond those glasses or your no-shade hair if you don't give them something else to look at. You just don't have enough personality to make up for your lack of looks."

*Oh! Paper cuts! I could use the Post-its to give you enough paper cuts to bleed you to death! I knew there was a way!*

"If you would just wear a little make-up, even. You just look so mousy. You need some color."

*You know, you're right. I could paint myself up like a whore and wear a miniskirt and boff the boss and get ahead in the world just like you, Mina. And yet you still only work fifteen feet away from lowly ol' me.*

"I bet even that new Mr. Davis would take a second look if you'd just make an effort."

"Mina, don't you have *anything* else to do?"

To her surprise, the hateful bitch actually poked up, offended. Icy blue eyes widened, painted lips thinning into a malicious line.

"Well, I *never*. I was just trying to help."

Gritting her teeth, she forced her first retort down. "I appreciate the...concern...but I don't need help. I just need a little peace and quiet to get this report finished."

"Are you suggesting that I'm interrupting you, Miss Important?"

*No, I'm suggesting that you're a motor-mouthed harridan who needs a Goo-Gone enema.*

"I'm just trying to concentrate, Mina. You leaning over my desk and telling me I dress pitifully and look about as appealing as a lump of clay isn't exactly helping me concentrate."

Mina's eyes widened further, and Rae had a blissful moment to imagine them falling out before the irritating hussy spun and left, slamming the break room door behind her.

"Well, that wasn't so hard. Why didn't I try that before?"

## 7.

"I need a word with you, Ms. Mitchell."

Of course. It hadn't taken Mina long to report her little insurrection to the boss. Rae was only surprised that the reprisal had waited until the next morning.

"Yes, Mr. Gaveneau."

"In my office."

She followed him down the lengthy hallway to his corner suite, already formulating her defense in her mind. Mr. Gaveneau was fifty-two, gym-athletic, and still had all his hair. Not an easy man to reason with. But that full head of hair was ghostly white and his face heavily lined, and she had no doubt that he would take his lover's complaints very seriously rather than risk losing her to some younger, less-lined business partner.

He closed the door behind them, then strode past her to the other side of his massive desk. He sat like a king in his throne and gestured for her to occupy one of the cushy leather chairs across from him. She did so, strangely calm under his steely, frowning scrutiny.

After all, she still had the lingering image of his bare butt humping over the very desk he now sat behind to keep her from being too terribly intimidated.



"Ms. Mitchell, I know you're new, but I've heard the disturbing rumor that you haven't made any friends here. In fact, it seems that you've gone out of your way to make enemies." He steepled his fingertips together, bracing his elbows on his throne's arms. "An office is like a complex machine, Ms. Mitchell, and it only functions when all the parts work together."

Rae nodded slowly, her hasty defense fleeing in the face of a new, rather impetuous plan. "And when all the parts are well-oiled, I presume."

His frown deepened, but he gave a single nod. "Goodwill between employees is that oil, Ms. Mitchell, and you have done little to create that with your coworkers."

"I hate to disagree, Mr. Gaveneau, but as far as I'm concerned, *money* is that oil. I don't know about anyone else, but I'm feeling a little rusty."

Steel gray eyes first widened, then narrowed. "I can see why I keep getting complaints regarding your impertinence, Ms. Mitchell. You have a very sharp tongue."

She leaned forward. "And you have a busy one, sir. Perhaps I should ask Ms. Cole exactly how busy it is." She smiled at his stricken expression. "If, that is, I can remove it from her throat long enough for her to answer."

*I didn't just say that. I can't have said just said that!*

His mouth opened and closed twice before fury filled his entire face. "You. Are. *Fired.*"

Her smile widened. "I don't think so, Mr. Gaveneau. After all, I doubt you want your business partners to know you're schtupping the help. And I very much doubt your wife would be pleased at the state of affairs." Feigning dismay, she put her fingers to her lips. "Oh! Did I say *affairs*? Freudian slip, I assure you."

Was she really saying these things out loud? Did the fear creeping in behind the rage in his usually indomitable eyes mean that she'd really said any of that?

"Get out. Now."

But his voice lacked power, and she didn't budge. Instead, she laced her fingers together in her lap and tilted her head to one side. She'd never felt so calm, so *assured* in her life, though she still couldn't quite believe that any of this was actually happening.

"So, since you obviously want to keep this machine of yours chugging along, I suggest you correct the rust that you've allowed to grow in my cogs by providing an extra coat of oil."

His eyes narrowed, some of his will returning. "Are you blackmailing me, Ms. Mitchell?"

"I'm perfectly willing to wear a shoe that fits, Mr. Gaveneau. Are you?"

She could practically see the wheels turning behind the furious, flustered gray of his eyes, and she mentally counted the moments as they passed. Any minute now, she would wake in her bed in her tiny apartment and laugh at herself for thinking she could get one up on her imposing employer.

Finally, his jaw squared and he met her gaze full on. "You will tell no one, even Mina, or I *will* fire you and take whatever heat you care to dish out. Understood?"

She shrugged. "That depends on how much oil you're willing to spread."

"Mercenary to the bitter end."

But unless she missed her guess, a reluctant, grudging admiration lurked in those steely eyes. A hard-ass always knows his own, after all.

"Fine." All business now, his poise returned. "Let's talk numbers, Ms. Mitchell."

## 8.

Obviously furious when Rae failed to return with a box from the boss's office, Mina slammed down her paperwork and glared for a long moment, icy eyes narrowed to slits.

"Problem, Mina?"

But Mina had nothing to say--at least, nothing to say to Rae. As the hateful slut stood and stomped by, headed toward the boss's office, Rae couldn't help but pity the man for the tongue-lashing he was about to receive.

*You should stab her with your nameplate, Gaveneau. Or maybe drown her in your wet bar's sink.*

Happy thoughts, those.

Smiling, she went back to work, still half-convinced that the morning's events had all been a dream. And if they weren't a dream...well, job security had taken on a whole new meaning.

## 9.

"You little *bitch!*"

Exquisitely manicured hands slammed down on her desk, knocking over her coffee mug

of pens. Rae didn't flinch, having expected some sort of explosion for the past hour or so. Instead, she idly envied those pretty nails, wondering if she could pull off that shade of red.

"I'm *talking* to you, damn it!"

Unconcerned, she lifted her gaze to Mina's furious, flushed face. The icy blue eyes had lightened until they were nearly white, the effect rather disturbing.

"Actually, Mina, you're *screeching* at me. Cursing, too."

"Shut up. Why aren't you fired yet?"

She shrugged, herding the fallen pens back into their mug. "I've done nothing wrong. You're the one cussing at a fellow employee, disturbing my work station, and disrupting everyone else."

"Bitch, don't play with me. There's no one here but us, so cut the shit. Why won't that old bastard fire you?"

Frowning slightly, Rae glanced past Mina's blocking body and realized that, indeed, the office was entirely too quiet. Where was everyone? Was it already lunch time? Jeri was expecting her--

A sharp slap startled her out of her thoughts, rocking her head to the left. The hateful bitch had *slapped* her!

Eyes wide and burning, she slowly returned her attention to the glowering, viciously smirking woman leaning against the other side of her desk. Her heart thudded in her ears, the sound echoing inside her head.

"*That* got your attention, didn't it? Why won't he fire you? Answer me!"

*Slapped me. That stupid cow slapped me.*

"I want you out of here. I don't care if you work harder than three people or not. You will turn in your resignation this afternoon or, so help me, I will slap the sense right out of your head!"

Her hand crept out of its own volition and wrapped around her stapler. Her eyes, however, never left Mina's flushed, furious face. She didn't look away even when the stapler smashed into the infuriating slut's cheek, crushing the jaw and several teeth in the bargain.

Mina *screamed* and keeled over, manicured fingernails scraping grooves in the desk's wood grain. Her clutching fingers caught ahold of a computer cable, and the monitor jerked backward off the desk, exploding as it crashed to the floor. Mina screamed again,

high and drilling, and Rae clapped her hands over her ears.

One high-heel-clad foot kicked up into view on the other side of the desk, the shoe flying off and landing with an absurd clunk in the center of her work space.

*What on earth?*

A smell struck her, then, both electric and sweet, like tin foil and burning meat.

*Burning meat...oh, God....*

She shoved to her feet--nearly faceplanting on her desk as her office chair scooted out from under her--and climbed on top of her desk, peering over into the smoke rising up from the floor.

But it wasn't the floor smoking. It was Mina.

Mina still screamed, her fist claspng the smoking, blackening computer cable, her eyes wide and her broken mouth gaping as she jittered and jived on the industrial gray carpet. The sickeningly sweet stench was worse here, and Rae pulled away, scooting backwards off of her desk, a hysterical giggle vying with wet heaves for control of her throat.

Mina was frying on the other side of the desk, being electrocuted by the broken computer monitor capping the one foot still wearing a shoe, and Rae could stop neither the laughter nor the vomit. She did both at the same time, puking and giggling until she nearly passed out.

The smoke filling the office loomed thick and noxious, and just before her knees gave out and spilled her to the floor, she realized that it wasn't just insane laughter and a puking fit making her light-headed. Something smoldered where Mina's body still convulsed, and Rae had no doubt that the something--Mina's clothes, the carpet, all that paperwork--would eventually catch fire.

She had to get out.

*I have to see her.*

She pulled her blouse's neckline up over her nose and stumbled around her desk, leaning heavily on it as her watery knees threatened to drop her. She pulled away from its support at the last moment, though, half-afraid that Mina's flailing foot would touch it and pass on the charge, electrocuting her, as well. Revenge from the grave, so to speak.

In all her fondest imaginings, she couldn't have drawn the picture that greeted her when she rounded the corner of her desk and stared down at the woman who had made her working life a hell. The bottle-blond hair smoked, singed almost black. The careful

make-up was ghastly on the bloated, charred face. Mina's short skirt and tight blouse had melted to her skin, the strange hybrid smoldering sullenly and reeking to high heaven.

Thankfully, though, the screaming had stopped.

The skin of the hand that still clutched the pulled cable was split and black. The flesh oozed and sizzled, as did the skin and meat of the monitor-capped leg. Rae stared, fascinated, for long moments, ignoring the occasional twitch from the ravaged body on the floor. As she watched, the carpet finally caught fire and smoke boiled up in a thick, noxious black cloud.

Her desk caught fire shortly after, and as the stacks of paperwork blazed up, fire alarms blared just overhead. She jumped back with a strangled little shout, nearly tripping over her own feet. The sprinklers activated a bare second later, and the combination of a cold dousing and the piercing wail of the alarms finally got her moving.

*The exit. In case of fire, head for the nearest exit. Avoid the elevators. Take the stairs. Stop, drop, and roll. Keep low to the floor. Oh, God, her clothes were burned into her flesh--*

She slammed face-first into the wall a good foot to the right of the doorway and her nose broke, blood instantly soaking her blouse. She might have preferred a slap to the face, but the pain certainly served to brush away both the low-level panic and the early effects of smoke inhalation.

*She did it to herself. I didn't do anything but brain her with my stapler. And she slapped me first, threatened me. No one in the world would blame me.*

Righting her course, she pushed through the door and stumbled toward the stairwell.

*I didn't kill her. She practically killed herself. She slapped me. I feel her handprint on my cheek. I ought to take a picture of it for proof. Maybe it'll bruise.*

Holding tightly to the rail, she thundered down the steps as quickly as she could without falling. The alarms weren't quite as strident in here, but her stuttering footsteps echoed strangely, sounding like someone following her.

*I didn't kill her. I slapped her with a stapler, for God's sake. I broke a couple of teeth. I didn't kill her.*

She practically fell into the panic bar on the emergency door at the foot of the steps, and the door canted away from her before she could set her feet. Throwing her hands out before her, she crashed to her hands and knees, her teeth clicking together right through her tongue.

The door rebounded off the brick wall outside and smacked back into her shoulder,

knocking her even further off balance until she was pinned half in and half out of the building. She tasted blood and giggled until tears rolled down her cheeks. Sirens wailed in the distance.

*I didn't kill her.*

Rae lay down, half on the concrete walkway and half on the cold, tiled floor. Blood filled her mouth and seeped out to join that still leaking from her nose. Exhaustion weighed her down, pulling her eyelids closed so that images of Mina's smoldering face could cavort more easily through her mind.

"I didn't kill her."

"Ma'am? Ma'am! Are you all right? Good God, what's going on here?"

She tried to say it again, to tell the frantic voice above her that she hadn't killed Mina, but she was just too tired.

## 10.

Her hospital stay lasted a week.

Police questioned her about what she was doing in the office during the lunch hour, but they accepted her response about not realizing everyone was gone until the deceased thoughtfully reminded her on her way to the break room. She told them that she had been in the bathroom planning to meet a friend for lunch when the fire alarm went off. She told them she hadn't seen a thing.

No one asked her why her purse had still been in her burnt-out desk drawer. No one asked why the hateful bitch had been at her work space. No one asked why Mina's jaw had caved in on one side. They assumed she'd bashed her head on the side of Rae's desk.

Rae didn't tell them any different.

Gaveneau, on the other hand, asked her outright on his only visit to her hospital room. "Did you have anything to do with it, Ms. Mitchell?"

She met his steely gray eyes easily. "No."

He studied her for a long moment, then nodded once. "I'll expect your resignation as soon as you're released."

"I'll expect a healthy severance package."

"Of course."

"Oh. My. God." Jeri's eyes widened so far that Rae feared they would simply fall out. "I almost can't believe it!"

"That's what happened. I'm not terribly proud of my part in it, but that's what really happened." She shrugged. "I didn't kill her, not really."

"No, you didn't. Not at all." Jeri shook her head, eyes still wide. "But...*wow!* It's just...it's crazy!"

Shrugging again, Rae toiled her spoon through her melting ice cream, not really hungry. Someone nearby had ordered a steak cooked well done, and it smelled disturbingly like Mina had at the last. All she needed was smoldering man-made materials to complete the mood.

She shoved the ice cream aside.

"What will you do now?"

"I already have a job lined up at another firm in the suburbs, thanks to Gaveneau wanting rid of me so badly. I have a little nest egg set aside now, too, so I don't have to start immediately if I don't want to. I'll scout some apartments closer to the new job this weekend and decide then. I really don't look forward to learning to tolerate a whole new set of crazy people."

Something in Jeri's expression caught her attention, and she frowned. "What?"

"Nothing."

Her eyes narrowed. That had been an awfully quick answer. Awfully vehement, too.

"Jeri? What's wrong?"

Jeri chewed at her lower lip, her eyes fixed on her plate. "It's just...nothing."

She remained still, staring at her friend until the silence became uncomfortable.

"It's stupid, Rae. I...I know you didn't...you know, *do* anything. But..." She shifted, glanced up for an instant, then clasped her hands in her lap and stared down at them. "It just sounds...so *mercenary*. Like he paid you to kill her, even though you didn't really do it."

Silence stretched out again, the seconds ticking into minutes before Rae spoke.

"I guess you could say that being the office mercenary pays a hell of a lot better than office work."

Jeri looked up, her gaze sharp. Rae smiled softly, the ubiquitous image of Mina's smoking, charred face burning in her mind. Perhaps Jeri saw it, too, because her expression eased and she nodded.

"Death to office work."

Rae's smile widened.

"In the end, Office Work was an offense to God, so He banished it to the farthest reaches of the Earth, leaving Man and Woman to more important concerns, like praising Him. And nooners."

Jeri had just lifted her glass to her lips, and the resulting snort nearly spilled the whole thing. She shook her head, her eyes dancing.

"Oh, Rae."

"I know, I know."

**END**