## HR Conferences Can Be Murder

Ellen stood third in line for the hotel registration counter.

"First floor!" The woman at the counter shrieked at the clerk. "I've got to be on the first floor!"

Then she shouted into her smartphone, "Don't come up. I know I shouldn't have taken it. It was stupid. I'll return it when I get back Tuesday."

*This is going to take a while,* Ellen thought. She listened to the bubbling fountain which should have helped the environment be calm and peaceful.

The two people ahead of her turned to each other and rolled their eyes. She recognized one from a previous Arizona Human Resources Healthcare Association conference.

Ellen looked at the woman at the counter now waving her arms. Her left arm came close to the tall brown vase of sunflowers and white daisies on the counter. The clerk pushed it away as he continued to talk to her.

"Ma'am, as I've said several times, only those with state-issued disability tags or identification cards get rooms on the first floor. I can put you on any other floor. Take your pick. Three through seven. Two has only ballroom and conference rooms," he added.

"Outside entrances and an outside staircase," she yelled.

"Yes?"

"That's not safe. Things could get stolen."

"Ma'am, I have a growing line of guests to register. Please step aside and consider your options. I will register you when you choose. I will ask the security officer on duty to talk to you about safety." He paused. "Do you want me to call the security officer?"

"No. I guess if I can't have the first floor then I'll take the top floor."

"Fine, ma'am." He swiped the credit card that she had put on the counter and made notes from her driver's license. He handed them back and after a few more clicks on the keyboard he printed a page and put it into a beige folder with *Welcome to Scottsdale's Wonderland Hotel* on the cover. He handed it to her, pointing out her room number on the inside.

"Thank you, Ms. Valiente. Welcome to the Wonderland Hotel. Enjoy your stay. The elevators are to your right. Next please."

Ellen scrutinized Ms. Valiente. That was the name of the woman who'd been selected for the Human Resources Director job at the Sanidad Municipal Hospital in Flagstaff. The job she'd applied for.

Ms. Valiente hefted two yellow suitcases and started toward the elevator bank. Ellen watched her enter an elevator and the door closed. It was only a three-day conference. Ms. Valiente must like to change clothes.

Soon it was her turn to register. The clerk assigned her a room on the seventh floor and then she was on her way up in an elevator. Maybe she'd have a good view of Camelback Mountain.

She unpacked her things, retrieved ice and scrunched her bottle of Trader Joe's merlot into the ice bucket. She'd enjoy a glass and her view later.

Ellen left her room to register for the conference and get dinner. She'd driven to Scottsdale from Mesquite right after work to avoid driving into the setting sun. She'd almost succeeded.

She walked down the outside staircase in the hot May air enjoying the exercise and the fading sunset.

Her stomach rumbled reminding her that her lunchtime apple and chunk of sharp cheddar cheese was a long time ago. She turned to enter the second floor and hoped there weren't too many ahead of her.

She saw Wilson Stanford talking to a short, dark-haired man by the fire exit on the opposite wall. Wilson was the HR Director at Mesquite Hospital but she didn't recognize the man with him. There were several new HR Directors around the state that she didn't know. She hoped to meet some of them at the conference.

She walked toward the registration table. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Wilson gesture toward her and the man's gaze followed the arm. Wilson talked with the man for a few more minutes then walked toward her with a portfolio under his arm.

She waved at a couple of people she knew and stopped when she recognized the last person in line. Ms. Valiente. Was she destined to see her everywhere at this conference? One good thing. She'd soon learn if this was Alandra or someone else. The two women stepped up to the registration table together. Ellen heard Wilson's voice.

"Ellen, Alandra, great to see you both here."

Both women turned toward the voice, then each other.

"Ellen?" she asked. "Would that be Ellen ... Baldwin?"

Ellen had started to sign in. She finished her signature and felt an internal heat rush which matched the heat in the hallway. Was the air conditioning working?

She thought had come to terms with not getting the job, but had not expected to encounter Alandra so soon.

Ellen took a deep breath, "Yes, I'm Ellen Baldwin." She looked at Alandra. "And, you are...?"

"Alandra Valiente," she said. "Hello."

"You don't know each other?" Wilson asked.

"Now we do." Ellen smiled and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Alandra."

Alandra looked at the hand. "I thought fist bumps were in style now. Germs, you know."

Ellen withdrew her hand and felt heat rise up the back of her neck. "Not a problem.

Can't be too careful about germs." Her back was damp.

She turned to the registration table, picked up an agenda, information about restaurants in the area, and a cordovan leather envelope portfolio with the Association's logo that matched the one Wilson carried. A piece of paper with a large H on it fluttered to the floor. What—whose -- was that? She forgot it as she felt the smooth leather of the portfolio. Very nice this year.

"See you all later," she said and walked away. She could feel eyes on her as she walked to the staircase on her way to dinner.

She had a stuffed chile relleno and black beans in the hotel restaurant. It was perfect, creamy cheese in a fresh chile pepper and the beans were nicely spiced. She looked over the conference material, finished dinner, and took the elevator to her room. She prepared for bed,

had a glass of wine and a square of dark chocolate then slid into surprisingly silky sheets forgetting to set the alarm.

The next morning she wakened late. She'd wanted a walk before the conference opening session, but there wasn't time now. Maybe a walk to Wendy's for lunch despite the heat. Tomorrow she'd get up earlier, take a walk and schmooze at lunch.

When she'd signed up for this conference she'd hoped to be attending it as the new HR Director for the Sanidad Municipal Hospital. She'd been working on mental acceptance to not getting the job but wasn't ready for emotional acceptance yet.

After a breakfast of huevos rancheros and tortillas that tasted like homemade, she headed to the ballroom and the plenary session.

The conference theme was *Where's HR in HealthcaRe?* That was fitting. Sometimes she wondered where HR was in healthcare as she listened to program directors talk. Too many HR staff wondered when they'd get the respect they thought they deserved and too many department managers wondered when HR would understand what they did. Some never saw HR as valuable to the organization. But Ellen believed that there were fewer HR Directors in healthcare that didn't know their business.

She found a seat. Soon Annabelle Richards, the conference chair, began the session. What's new in HR? Where is HR in healthcare these days? How do you keep your department up to speed in these changing times and keep employees' enthusiasm fresh? That's going to be our concern these next few days. In workshops and breakout sessions we'll talk and share ideas.

Ellen saw Alandra sitting a couple of rows ahead.

Annabelle finished her speech. Ellen picked the breakout session on self-development. She had to spend some time thinking about herself. Like the airline attendants said she needed to put on her own oxygen mask first. She couldn't think about staff development until she got a grip on herself.

She walked to the breakout room, surprised to see Alandra in the hall talking with the man who'd been with Wilson. The room was small and stuffy. Didn't they expect a large group? Was that man from Sanidad? She stopped thinking about it as the session started. She listened, made some comments and some notes about on-line classes and thought about her job.

After the breakout session she went to her room for her walking shoes to go to Wendy's. She picked up a bottle of water. It was going to be hot outside. That same man who'd been with Alandra got into the elevator with her. They reached the ground level and she went outside. She checked the map. Wendy's should be to the right. She frowned and turned the map around. Or was it the left?

Wilson came up beside her. "May I join you?"

"Don't you want to know where I'm going?"

"I figure fast food. It's lunchtime."

"Wendy's. But I can't tell from this map which way to go. I was just going to ask the doorman. You take a look."

Wilson studied the map then handed it back.

He pulled out his smartphone and in moments declared, "to the left."

They walked by an old VW van which looked out of place parked along the hotel walkway. She recognized Bobby Martinez in the passenger seat but he didn't look at her. Rosa's brother. Her secretary's brother. He'd been a frequent office visitor as he seemed to depend on Rosa. He'd been a volunteer in HR last summer after he graduated. She kind of liked him, but wished he'd get his act together.

Rosa had been trying to get him away from the Hermano Cartel. They were seriously into drug and human trafficking and always in the news.

Ellen and Wilson walked on. Bobby? Well, he must not be out of the cartel, she thought. The flying H on the side of the van marked it as a cartel vehicle.

Where had she seen that symbol recently? She couldn't remember but knew she had. They walked on to Wendy's.

"Rumor has it that you wanted the Sanidad job," Wilson said when they were settled with their lunches. The air-conditioning cooled their hot, damp skin.

"Yeah, but that didn't happen. I'm not going to ask how you heard," Ellen said as she took a bite of chili. Crazy to eat something hot.

"Sorry. I want your job. If you got Sanidad, that is," he said taking a bite of his sandwich.

"My job?" she said draining her water cup.

"I've worked with Southwest before, in Colorado, I get their focus. More security with them, too," he said, finishing his lunch.

"I didn't know that you worked for them," she said, gathering her trash.

They left Wendy's. As they arrived back at the hotel the van drove away. She went to her room, wiped her face and neck and replaced her make-up and shoes.

The afternoon session focused on engaging employees and how the HR staff could support managers. Not much new until the speaker shifted to problem solving. She described how some eastern hospitals had used TV show formats for brainstorming.

Maybe this is what she'd need to help revive her own creativity and enthusiasm. Although her hospital, Ocotillo Community Hospital, had been sold to Southwest she hoped they could still do some things of their own. She joined in the brainstorming session to understand how it worked. Kind of fun.

That evening she attended the banquet, sat with friends and found herself buoyed by their enthusiasm. Creamy guacamole and chips, lobster and brie chile rellenos, duck taquitos, pinto beans, Spanish rice, and cinnamon chocolate bread pudding with Aztec coffee completed the menu. All perfectly done for more than two hundred guests. Wonderland Hotel had their food service down right. Ellen wondered what role HR played at the hotel. She'd been impressed with everything so far.

When the last speaker finished, the evening broke up with most going to their rooms. Back in her room she realized she hadn't seen Alandra at the banquet.

Early the next morning she walked as planned. So much cooler than at noon.

Later, as she reached the second floor she still didn't see Alandra but it was time to stop thinking about her. Yesterday she'd made inroads into emotional peace with the fact that she didn't get the job. She was now thinking and planning how to work in the new corporate culture. She decided to see if anyone from HR at any of the Southwest hospitals was here. Maybe spend some time with them. She'd get together with Wilson back in Mesquite.

The plenary session hadn't started. She walked over to the registration table and picked up a current registration list.

She scanned it and found two HR Directors from Southwest hospitals. She didn't know either but would find them.

Surprised, she saw a contingent descending upon the registration table. Who were they? One of the group snatched up the registration lists and turned to the clerk, Louise, talking rapidly. Louise pointed to someone in the ballroom through the door behind her. The group moved en masse into the ballroom.

Ellen slipped her copy of the list into her portfolio then walked to the table.

Louise looked down, into the ballroom and back at the table.

"Are you okay?" Ellen asked.

"What?" she responded.

"Everything okay, Louise?" Ellen asked.

"Oh, my God, no!"

"What's the matter? Can I help you?"

Louise put her face in her hands and mumbled, "I don't see how."

"Here, let me get you some water." Ellen hurried into the ballroom and poured a glass of water at the beverage station. She saw that the group had cornered Annabelle.

She walked back to Louise who now had a small crowd around her.

"Excuse me," Ellen said. "Here's water, Louise." She set the glass within Louise's

reach.

Everyone was talking. No one was listening.

"So, what happened?"

"I saw the security staff heading this way with the police."

"Somethin' bad's happened?"

"I heard someone staying here was killed."

"Someone here at the conference has been killed?"

"Who was killed?"

"Are you sure?"

"Who?"

"I don't know," Louise squeaked. "Stop. Just stop. I don't know anything."

More arrived adding to the chaos at the table.

Annabelle came out of the ballroom and called out, "Stop. All of you. If you're

registered for the conference come in and take a seat. If you're not, then get registered first."

She looked at Louise.

"Are you okay to finish this?"

"I can help her," Ellen said.

"Okay, thanks, then you two come in."

Almost everyone filed into the ballroom leaving just a few latecomers who hadn't registered. Louise and Ellen registered them and handed out conference materials.

Louise shoved the box of materials under the table, left a sign-in sheet with a note for any stragglers, walked into the ballroom with Ellen and they sat at the back.

A woman was speaking and another was holding an enlarged drivers' license-type photo. Ellen turned to Louise. "That's Alandra Valiente. Was she killed?"

Louise shrugged her shoulders and tapped an index finger on her lips requesting that Ellen stop talking.

They listened as the speaker said, "Alandra Valiente was found in the pool this morning, deceased. We've got the registration lists and will be talking to each of you who are registered for the conference. If you think you might know something, see me, Detective Anderson, or Detective Carson who is holding her picture. We'll leave our numbers with Ms. Richards."

Detective Anderson looked over at Annabelle. "Your conference will continue?" Annabelle nodded, her mouth a firm line. "But, ladies and gentlemen, don't leave this conference until we've talked to you. Does anyone have any questions?"

"How was she killed?"

"Do you have any suspects?"

"Has her next of kin been notified?"

"Should we be worried about ourselves?"

Detective Anderson said, "I can't tell you manner of death that's for the coroner, and next of kin are being notified as we speak. We have no suspects. As for your own safety, you should exercise normal precaution. Lock your doors, don't go with strangers, and don't flash money around. The hotel security staff is here to ensure your safety."

He pointed to a woman and man by Annabelle. "Here are two members of hospital security. If you have any issues, contact them immediately. They are at extension 5555. Rob, Joanne, any comments?"

Rob said, "Call us if you see anything unusual. The extension forwards to our cell phones. We want you to feel safe." The pair stepped back.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen. Would anyone who knew Ms. Valiente step over to the right and see Detective Carson, please? We'd like to talk to you first. And anyone who thinks they might have any information about what's happened whether you knew her or not. Any questions?"

The room quieted and Annabelle walked to the podium.

"Thank you Detectives Anderson and Carson, the Arizona HR Healthcare Association will help in any way we can. I'm sure our conference participants will too. Alandra was a valued member of our Association."

The detectives left the stage and joined the group of conference participants who had formed a ragged group to the right.

"Before we resume, let's pause for a moment of silence for Alandra."

Ellen and others bowed their heads then raised them when the gavel sounded.

Louise said, "Valued member? I guess that's the politically correct thing to say, but Alandra was a real pita to Annabelle."

"PETA," Ellen said. "What does the ethical treatment of animals have to do with anything?"

"No, pita, p - i - t - a. Pain in the ass," Louise said. "She called Annabelle and complained a lot and asked so many questions about HR. I don't think she was happy."

If she had so many HR questions Ellen wondered how she'd gotten the Sanidad job.

She was saved from responding as Annabelle waved to Louise, swirled her hand in the air which must mean return to the registration table. Louise left.

Ellen watched Wilson walk to the detectives. Maybe he'd known Alandra better than she thought.

The morning speaker began talking, trying to get everyone's attention. Finally Ellen found herself paying attention. The topic was developing flexibility in your staff to meet change successfully. She and her staff would definitely need to increase flexibility as they were absorbed into Southwest.

The HR role as seen by Southwest was leaner at the local levels. Many functions were centralized to their corporate offices. She needed to talk to those two HR Directors and find out what had happened at their hospitals.

The presentation ended and Ellen rose for the breakout session.

"Ms. Baldwin?" She'd been so absorbed she hadn't noticed that Detective Anderson was beside her.

"Yes?" Ellen said.

"Could we talk, please? Just through that door."

"Yes, of course." Ellen turned and walked toward the door. She thought that saying *not right now* wouldn't work.

She stepped into the small room and was assaulted by the smells. Too many bodies with too many fragrances had been in here.

"I'm Detective Anderson and this is Detective Carson. We'd like to talk to you about Alandra Valiente. You know Ms. Valiente was killed?"

"Yes, I heard you speak earlier."

"How well did you know Ms. Valiente?"

"I didn't know her."

"You were seen talking with her last night at the registration table."

"We arrived at the same time. That's when I met her."

"Didn't she get the job you wanted?"

"How – what does –"

"Just answer the question, please."

Ellen shifted in her chair. Not many people knew that. At least she didn't think so. She thought of Wilson and now wondered how he'd heard.

"Ms. Baldwin? An answer?"

"I applied for a job. She got it. Yes, I wanted the job, but I don't want it anymore."

"How did you find out she got the job?"

Ellen paused. She took a deep breath. "I was interviewed. After a month I hadn't heard so I called to talk to the HR Director. I wound up talking to the Acting Director who told me that Ms. Valiente had been selected for the job and would start June 1. That's how I found out."

"Then what did you do?"

"Nothing. There wasn't anything to do."

"Why are you here at this conference?"

"I signed up for the conference months ago. I belong to this organization. I'm the HR Director at Ocotillo Community Hospital in Mesquite. These conferences are held every year. It's the best opportunity to meet everyone face to face."

"Did you have a disagreement with Ms. Valiente when you met her yesterday?"

"No."

"Maybe about the job?"

"No."

"Tell us about meeting her, Ms. Baldwin."

Ellen paused to remember. "When I walked up to the registration table she was already in line so I was behind her. An HR Director we both knew, Wilson Stanford, saw us and came over. That was when we introduced ourselves. I finished registering and they were still talking when I left. It was just a few minutes. That's it."

"If this association is so small why didn't you know her?"

"I think there are about three or four hundred members. We're open to all sizes of medical practices, not just hospitals. I'm acquainted with maybe, about half of the members. I didn't know her. New HR Directors are introduced at each conference. I don't remember attending when she was introduced. There was no reason for me to know her unless we interacted for a business reason. Which we didn't."

Detective Anderson looked at her. "Do you have any further comment on this matter, Ms. Baldwin?"

Ellen sat for a moment. "I checked into the hotel right after she did. I heard her yell at the table clerk and someone on her phone."

"What did she say on the phone?"

"Something like, 'don't come up here, I'll take care of it.' That's all I remember."

"Anyone one else hear this?"

"I think so." Ellen gave her the name of the person who was in front of her in line.

"All right, we'll check it out. Are you staying for the whole conference?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't leave without checking in with us."

Ellen had a sudden thought. "Am I a suspect?"

"Let's say you're a person of interest. One of a few who spoke with her shortly before her death. Someone who lost a job to her and then just happened to meet her here at this HR conference."

"What? You can't be serious. You think I'd kill someone over a job?"

"People have killed for lesser things. Good-bye, Ms. Baldwin, keep in touch." She turned away.

Ellen rose and left the unbearable room.

Back in the ballroom she found an empty chair.

She remembered that the only two who were close by when she met Alandra were Wilson and Louise. It couldn't have been Louise who talked to the detectives.

She headed for the elevators and saw Wilson talking to that same man. She didn't want to talk him. She went out the front door and saw the van again. Was Bobby back? What was he doing here?

In a few minutes she went back inside and took the elevator. On her floor she paused when she saw the yellow crime-scene tape around a door a few away from hers. That must be – have been -- Alandra's room. She looked down and saw the pool also surrounded with the tape. She must have gone over the rail. Ellen shivered despite the heat. She walked down to Alandra's room and stood in the doorway. The phone message light flashed. She looked left and right but no one else was in the hallway. The flashing light called to her. She took a step toward it and then another. She stood with her right hand over the phone, lowered it to just over the receiver, curled her fingers and slowly lifted it, and put the receiver to her ear. She pushed the message button.

Alandra, she heard, someone's coming up for that money. You shouldn't have taken it. The boss isn't happy and says you're gonna pay for stealing it.

Ellen replaced the receiver, slipped out of the room and went to her room to think about what she'd heard. Then she thought about her fingerprints on the receiver. She turned to go back in but heard the elevator stop. She hurried back to her room, opened the door and stepped in. The air conditioner hummed. Bobby stood in the corner.

"Bobby! What are you doing here?"

"Don't scream, Ms. Baldwin. Don't scream. Please."

"What do you want? Why are you here?"

"My 'sociate in the – in the cartel -- I - I -- think he did somethin' to that woman – that mujer. He's a sicario – hitman."

Ellen looked at him thinking back to phone message.

He went on, "Woman you was talkin' to. Her brother's a lugartenientes – lieutenant in – in the cartel. She stole a shitload of cash from him. Sorry."

"Sicario talked about her the whole way from Mesquite like she was just a mujer – no one's sister. Delivered weed to that guy you were with yesterday. Delivery's my job but he wanted to do it. I think he's tryin' to figure out who the mujer was – the target. Said his contact pointed at you, but I told him that was crazy. Someone doesn't like you much, Ms. Baldwin."

Ellen sat on the bed. This was a lot to take in.

"What did he talk about," she paused, "what guy did you deliver weed to?"

"Don' ask. I don' know about the guy. No big shot. Not important."

"But it is. Are you going to the authorities? That woman, her name was Alandra, was killed by your ... ah... friend ......associate .....the hitman."

"Not my friend. My 'sociate. We jus' work together."

"Why are you here?"

"Like I said, I wanted t' tell you, be careful around that guy. He's a bad one."

"Bobby, when are you going to get out of that cartel?"

"There's only one way out."

"But if all you do is delivery, can't you—", Ellen trailed off and both were silent.

"Thanks for coming, Bobby."

"Don' tell Rosa."

"You've done a brave thing coming to me .... I won't tell Rosa but I've got to tell the detectives. They think I pushed her over."

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter why. But, thank you for telling me all of this. And you're sure the hitman delivered marijuana to that man – didn't just go and talk to him?"

"Yeah, sure." Bobby seemed surprised. "Took a package into the hotel, came back with cash. Guy's on delivery back in Mesquite."

"Delivery?"

"Regular weed delivery. I gotta go, Ms. Baldwin."

"Is the hitman here now?"

"Yeah, we stayed to find the cash that the mujer took. Wasn't in her car."

"Won't the police have taken it?"

"Got it las' night. We've jus' hung around 'cause her brother wants to know what the police're doing. Gotta go now, back to Mesquite."

He went to the door. "Take care yourself, Ms. Baldwin."

He opened it and Ellen saw the dark-haired man standing there.

"Let's go Bobby."

The color faded from Bobby's face. "Sure."

Ellen watched the pair walk to the elevator, worried about Bobby.

She closed and locked her door, called hospital security and waited as her call was connected to the cell phones.

"Rob, Joanne," she began as soon as the ringing stopped not knowing who she was talking to. "This is Ellen Baldwin in Room 726. I need to talk to Detectives Anderson or Carson about Alandra Valiente but I'm afraid to leave my room."

"Sure, Ms. Baldwin. They're using our interview room. We'll tell them as soon as they're done," Rob said.

"Could you interrupt them? I -- I – This is pretty important. I know who killed Alandra – Ms. Valiente. And he might know that I know."

"Right away. Lock your door."

"It is."

Moments later someone knocked on her door and Ellen looked through the peephole to see Wilson Stanford. She backed away.

"Ellen, are you in there? You might be at risk. Someone – Just let me in. We can call the police; I'll stay with you 'til they get here."

She was silent. The knocking turned to pounding.

"Ellen, damn it, I know you're in there. Open the fricking door."

Ellen lifted the receiver from the phone and called security again. She listened to the clicks and Rob answered.

"This is Ellen Baldwin," she whispered. "Wilson Stanford is banging at my door. Is someone coming?"

"They're on their way. Stay away from the door."

Moments later she heard footsteps clattering on the floor.

"Why are you here?" she heard Detective Anderson ask.

"Just wanted to be sure Ms. Baldwin was okay."

"You come with us," Detective Carson said. "Detective Anderson will check on Ms. Baldwin." Footsteps faded then Ellen heard a knock on her door.

She checked the peephole then opened the door for Detective Anderson.

"So, what do you have for us?" she asked.

Ellen told her about Bobby's visit including that Wilson might have bought marijuana while at the hotel.

"Yes, we checked Ms. Valiente's phone calls and got a tip about a duo that came over from Mesquite. You have good connections, Ms. Baldwin. Mind sharing?"

Ellen shook her head.

"Well, take care of yourself. Enjoy the rest of your conference. Hope we don't see you again while you're here."

"Okay, thank you."

They left and Ellen sat, taking a few deep breaths. She was ready to get to the rest of the conference and initiate Southwest relationships. She was glad she'd still be at Ocotillo. There were things she hadn't finished and now she was ready to take on a new challenge. She wanted to develop some programs for at-risk youth. Bobby had something to offer. She wanted him and others like him to have an opportunity. Maybe Southwest would be interested in making Mesquite a better place and they had more resources. Maybe it could be a corporate-wide program. Just think what they could do.

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