

Tricked

A Novel

By

Cynthia A. Minor

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To Dock and Dallin

Who inspire me

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Too many lives have touched mine in ways yet to be examined in spaces too small to contain. Each is owed my unfailing gratitude for this or that. My anemic attempt to recognize you falls short of my intent to keep your contributions to my life alive forever in words.

My grandmother's glorious gift of story telling still rings in my imagination. Funny aunts and uncles turned the colors of my world from shades of gray, brilliant in the sunshine of their laughter. Steadfast parents provided the platform for success. My prayer partner Dawn's devotion over a lifetime of consistent encouragement and belief is priceless. Sharon and Desi kept me laughing and believing. Stigler kept me digital. Gail kept me sane. And Ms. Anna Connor, whose single joy seemed to be throwing me out of her library, while inspiring me daily to write with passion, read the great works, steward the incredible power of words and learn the undying wonder of literature, your significance cannot be calibrated. Thank you.

Finally, how does one thank love? Neither measurable nor quantifiable, it flows unending from sources known and unknown, seen and unseen. God. Husband. Daughter. Family. Friends. Teachers. Loves. Life.

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PROLOGUE

To Whom It May Concern:

Grief and greed take many forms in their quest for relief. Satisfaction. Peace. Closure. Either, if denied, converts ordinary behavior into extraordinary compromise. Whether turned inward, vanquishing your soul; or outward, corrupting the souls of others, when they have finished their tattered collaboration, what is left? Pain. Regret. Anger. Sadness. Danger. Death.

Charles Roberts and Edward Jacobs are the only living founders of Roberts Jacobs & Pellman International, the richest securities and brokerage firm in America. With prime seats on the New York Stock Exchange and a network of offices from New York to Tokyo, RJP leads the world in, among other things, forecasting financial trends, coordinating corporate takeovers, setting the economic pace of the nation, and influencing the market with such vigor, only the very elite qualify as employees or clients. I work in the Dallas office. It houses the office of corporate counsel where all international securities transactions for RJP's wealthiest clients are evaluated. Joshua Pellman is my boss. He is dead.

Prior to his death, he was asked to give the most potentially lucrative speech of his career. He'd share revolutionary theories for protecting global economies from what he believed were new forms of economic chicanery. The most knowledgeable financial leaders, brokers, traders and economists of our day salivated for invitations to the event. Not so coincidentally, he'd also roll out a new wireless digital security system with customized protection and detection devices, to guard against the implementation of those very theories.

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The device provides indispensable assistance to securities watchdog agencies protecting the market from international criminal activity. Pellman owned all intellectual rights and with RJP as the exclusive distributor, and a point or two thrown in for me, there would be too much money for us to count.

Internal security was high. Corporate spies hovered, willing to kill to get their hands on it. Everything was hush hush. Even I didn't know every integral component, which was odd since lately I'd become Pellman's intellectual confidant. He seldom kept anything from me. Yet, I knew it would send the economic world and financial markets spinning. Our market value would skyrocket. What a ride it will be!

The night before he left for a brief but tragic vacation, Pellman dropped by my home. He handed me a folder containing a series of notebooks, disks, and a large envelope marked 'CONFIDENTIAL.' "I cannot emphasize the degree of discretion you must use to protect this. Under no circumstances are you to let this information out of your sight or possession. Do not open these packages until or unless you hear from me. Matters of national and international importance are inside. I trust you completely. Please keep them safe until I see you again."

"OK. Have a great trip," I said in an assuring manner, determined to read everything when I got back from a date I made earlier that day. "I'll call you later," he said as he drove away. He never did.

At his sad but brief memorial service, I noticed his wife Darla exiting one of the many limousines lined up in front of the church. Clay Sims, the new President-Elect was at her side. She saw me and began waving, motioning me to come near. I'd avoided her since learning of Pellman's death. Grief and anger gave me particular trouble drawing back debilitating veils of pain and loss. I was destroyed. Joshua Pellman recruited, hired, trained and mentored me.

My loss eclipsed anything she or anyone else could have possibly felt that day. We shared no sick or scandalous closeness. A basic understanding of numbers provided us a binding

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commonality. Unambiguous respect. Fervent esteem. Fierce competition. Zeal to be the best. He understood my mind. I understood his. Now suddenly I was point person in charge of his looming legacy. Alone.

RJP was suddenly chaotic since Pellman was key to luring and retaining our most lucrative clients. All eyes focused on me. My leadership. Knowledge. Ability. Had I learned enough? Could I replace the irreplaceable? I was confused. Lonely. But at the same time, I was determined. Confident. Prepared. Undeterred.

As I reached Mrs. Pellman, she pushed by Clay Sims who won the presidency in a squeaker two weeks ago. RJP was a major fundraiser for his campaign and Pellman was his economic advisor. Key RJP staff played major roles in his election. There was talk that he'd name Pellman to a cabinet post, but I knew he wouldn't take it. Not enough money.

Sims was Pellman's roommate at Harvard. They were closer than brothers and kept each other's secrets. He often reminded me, "There are no real secrets, just truths waiting to be revealed."

As Sims' lead economic adviser during the campaign, Pellman outlined the hotly debated Sims' economic policies and provided great answers to key economic issues facing the nation. Pellman wrote it. I humanized it. Sims memorized and parroted it. Masterfully. We were all excited because the win promised to translate into huge numbers and greater influence for RJP.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed RJP's VP of PR. During the campaign he took a leave of absence to work as Sims' media advisor. He was pegged to become White House Press Secretary. He and Sims worked together for years prior to his association with RJP. As mastermind of Sims' blistering media attacks, his scorching advertising campaign struck with deadly precision. Laden with fear mongering and half truths, they were cruel. Indefensible. Dirty. Destructive. They worked.

Mrs. Pellman grabbed my hands as she pressed a small key into my palm. Her reddened green eyes spoke sadness. Desperation. Fear. Danger. She obviously didn't want anyone to

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notice the exchange, so I slid into her trembling arms, pushing the key deep into my pocket. “It opens something in Joshua’s Washington office. He said that if there’s information you need and if you can’t find answers anywhere else, you’ll probably find the answer there...in time,” she whispered. Then with a pleading stare, “He told me to tell you if anything ever happened to him, you must use this. He said trust no one...but your own instincts. He always said you were very special. To him. To both of us. Brilliant is how he described you. Until today, I was jealous of those words. I no longer have room in my heart for hating you.” Why should she hate me? “You need to be as smart as Joshua always said you are. My hope is that you’ll forgive me one day. That...you’ll...forgive...us all...remember...for all our sakes, remember everything. Above all else, remember Joshua loved you. You were the daughter he...we never had.” She held me tightly. “Be careful darling.” Then she kissed my cheek.

Tears broke my vigil of indifference. Before I could begin asking the thousand questions bombarding my intellect, the press of mourners, reporters and secret service agents surrounded us, lifting and carrying her into the chapel and pushing me aside. Clay Sims looked deeply into my eyes as if searching for something. He took Mrs. Pellman’s arm and whisked her away. She glanced back, as I silently acknowledged her instructions.

Touched that Joshua would leave me anything, confused about the mysterious message, stunned that he cared so deeply and sadder than most, I joined the others inside the church.

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CHAPTER ONE

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

The train to New York was stuck just outside Philadelphia. There was no sense panicking, so I closed my eyes and let my mind wander to my finals. My future. The luncheon. The prize. Pellman. I had every intention of meeting him today.

I read everything he'd ever published. Reviewed every commentary he'd ever given and researched all databases containing references to his work. No one ever knew that while I was a TA at Wharton, I cleaned out a file cabinet that belonged to legendary 'Professor Emeritus' Leonard Jackson, who won the Nobel Prize for economics 40 years earlier. He taught Pellman international finance at Harvard. Everyone was eager to take his class and his sudden death and disappearance shocked our academic community. Dreadful and mysterious.

His estate requested his papers. Dr. Stovall, head of the department, asked me to do the job. To my delight, inside a dusty box at the bottom of a cabinet was a paper Pellman wrote years ago. He received a 'D'. The professor's comments were brutal. I surmised the only reason he hadn't received an 'F' was because the paper was written with exemplary style and clarity. I had to read it. I did.

Keeping a watchful eye on the door, I sat on the floor behind the large desk inhaling the essay. I cruised through about twenty pages before I decided to make a copy. Somehow the paper slid into my backpack. Completely distracted by my discovery, I managed to get back to the boxes just as an instructor

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peeked her head into the room. “Anything interesting in there?” she asked. “Nope. I’m not defiling, I’m boxing,” I smiled.

I’d take the paper. Copy it. Return it. No one would know. It would be back among the mountain of other papers, notes and books before anyone would miss it. But after I finished reading it, I decided no one in Jackson’s estate knew it was there. He left no heirs and everything would probably go to some dusty archive. That would be tragic. After all, this wasn’t his paper. It was Pellman’s. It should belong to someone who appreciated Pellman’s analytical talents. It should belong to me.

Finding this treasure was the greatest thrill of my Wharton experience. It was what finding ‘Lucy’ must have been to the archeology students who discovered her remains in Africa. A rare dig. Significant find. Historic moment. Evidence of his innate genius. It was mine. It wasn’t stealing. Not really.

Later in my room I deliberated the essay’s possibilities, pondering what financial and legal impact Pellman’s hypothesis would have on global economics. The young lawyer in me delighted in the number of federal and international laws his hypothesis violated. Its fatal simplicities made me smile. The applications were elementary and highly improbable. Still, I couldn’t help being impressed with Pellman’s seamless greed. Brilliant design. Flawed execution. Legal disregard. Numerical excellence. The flaws made the paper important. I spent the remainder of my stay at Wharton resolving them.

When the train finally chugged forward, I looked at my watch. I’d still get to the Plaza in plenty of time. RJP International sponsors an annual essay competition for MBA students. Candidates are selected from the top business schools in the country. Essays are submitted from a choice of three topics having the same general theme. Winners of the local contests are entered into regional competitions. Regional winners are automatically entered into the national contest. RJP brings all regional finalists to New York City for its annual charity luncheon. That’s where the winner is introduced to a hungry financial industry. The winning

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student receives a certificate; a plaque; \$85,000.00 cash and the certainty of employment. I was a regional finalist.

Penn station was packed with morning commuters. I raced from the train, jumping into the first empty cab. "Take me to the Plaza!" I ordered, looking through my resumes and checking for writing samples and letters of recommendation. The taxi stopped abruptly. "What happened?"

"President's in town."

"Is there another route we can take?"

"This ain't no helicopter lady. When he moves, we move."

The cabbie pulled out a newspaper and began reading. I took a deep breath settling into the backseat. Time ticked slowly as the morning crowd marched by. Just as I was about to tell the driver that I would walk to the hotel, traffic moved and the cab jerked forward. We arrived at the Plaza without further incident.

"Good morning. I'm Ms. Pichon from RJP's public relations department. We've been anticipating your arrival and welcome to the Plaza. The other candidates arrived last night. Your suite is on the 6th floor. Room 610. Will you need assistance with your bags?"

"No. Thank you." She handed me a folder and a key.

"The luncheon will be held in the Grand Ballroom. You are to meet your party over there," she said pointing. "The elevators are to your left. Have a pleasant stay and if you need assistance during your visit, we are at your service. You should be downstairs in 30 minutes. Don't be late. Again, the elevators are to your left," she said pointing.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure."

I hurried into the room. Changed clothes. Looked in the honor bar. Freshened my makeup and I called Iris. No answer. We planned to see each other later that evening. I grabbed my resumes, pushed my hair around and rushed downstairs. The other students were instantly recognizable. While introducing ourselves, a perky lady who I suspected of having had too much caffeine approached rapidly. She rattled off names, instructions and information, while

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handing each of us nametags. She took off toward the ballrooms at a sprinters pace. We followed. “Do not approach head table guests. If someone approaches you, that’s OK. This year the winner will make a one or two minute speech. Not one second more. Any questions? Good. Remember two minutes only. You may order one bottle of wine for the table. Any additional alcohol is not covered. Everyone here is over 21, right? Good. You may hand out resumes when the luncheon is over, not before. Any questions? Good. Please pin the nametags on your left lapel. Those of you with family here today, they will be seated at tables 80 and 81. You will be seated at table 2. Any questions? Good. Remain with the group until the luncheon is over. Your seats are pre-assigned. You will find cards on the table. The cards have your name. The card will be in front of your plate. Do not change seats before the luncheon is over. Any questions? Good. Are you having trouble with your pin?” She asked heading straight for me, ripping the pin from my hand. “I’ll help you with that.”

I gently grabbed her hand as she lifted my lapel. “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d prefer a lanyard or a badge clip. Is that possible?” I smiled. I wasn’t putting a hole in my new silk suit.

“Not a problem. I’ll be right back.” She turned and walked past a series of tables, barking orders to people who quickly dispatched themselves to do her bidding. We watched in bemused amazement. “She must be important,” one of the students whispered. We joined in commenting and laughing about her rapid-fire instructions. She returned, securing the necklace around my neck. “Good luck,” she whispered to each of us, with winks of approval as we entered the room.

As we made our way to the table, I studied the crowd. They studied us. Over 800 people filled the bustling room. Standing. Laughing. Talking. Hugging. Smiling. Where were the black faces? I knew they were there. Somewhere. Silent. Supportive. Influential. They were my family for the afternoon.

We were seated in the most splendid ballroom imaginable. Iris would love this. Everything was golden. Huge, colorful, fragrant flower arrangements decorated the tables. Sparkling

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chandeliers and long tapered candles made everything and everyone glisten. Porcelain. Linen. Crystal. Real silver. A golden chord held the napkins in place. Even the trim on the luncheon programs were gilded and tasseled. The programs included a picture and bio of each contestant. A list of head table guests. Corporate sponsors. Menu. Mission. Short excerpts from our essays.

Today Florida A & M takes its rightful place among schools recognized for cranking out top level economic graduates. I was the only African American raised by a single parent. HBCU grad. Female and fabulous. I felt tremendous. Pride added two inches to my stature. I sat up straight, silently thanking God for this invitation to the campy club where talent and education dance with opportunity and success.

Glancing around the table, I realized these boys were very smart. Intense. Ambitious. The newness of their suits whined as we engaged in small talk about our papers. Our futures. Our lives. The winner would land a prime position with any firm on Wall Street. Which in our young minds was about one block away from Easy Street.

Bits and pieces of conversation about their papers whetted my inquisitive appetite and sparked my interest. Our commonality transcended our papers. Schools. Prestige. Race. Sex. Politics. Status. Each paper contained creative concepts premised on precise economic theorems. Even so, my chances of winning seemed to diminish with each revelation. Not because my paper lacked precision, but because its themes were primarily centered around a theory of using quantum mathematical manipulations of economic sequential formulae to secretly purchase and sell international science and technology securities, undetected. I named the process, "Distributive Loss."

Since every dimension of modern life involves aspects of science, technology or chemical based products, the owners of those companies are critically influential. With uses too numerous to list and too vast to conceive, they ultimately decide who benefits

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from their use or misuse. Fundamentally deciding who lives and who dies. Who wins. Who loses. What if a small group cornered the market on biological, genetic and chemical technology, with a few pharmaceutical stocks thrown in for good measure? What if no one could discover their locations or identify their motives? What if it became impossible to trace them at all? What might they do with such power? Monitoring exists, but what about the co-signs? Suppliers. Haulers. Distributors.

Although my essay wasn't fact-based, I explored in vivid detail how manipulating these securities could be used as the ultimate weapon. Loss. Simply put, by denying access to beneficial chemical and technological products while manipulating them at will could be devastating. Everything we use is touched by chemicals and technology. The basic nature of man, greed. Power. Fear. And the redistribution of international wealth makes the impossible seem at least relevant.

Winning the regional contest vindicated me, especially after the tremendous fight I had with my economics professor, who reviewed all RJP Essay submissions from Wharton. His comments included Outlandish. Impossible. Garbage. He ordered me to a meeting. He huffed. I puffed. An impasse. I assured him that not one word would be changed. He assured me he wouldn't submit it as written. "I'll submit it without your endorsement." He believed me. "You wouldn't dare," he snarled. "I'll submit your preposterous paper under protest but I also plan to write a letter to the Dean and the Chairman of the department reflecting your insubordination and insolence."

Too smart for his bluff, I understood his need to maintain at least the aura of control. I left the meeting without saying another word. When Dr. Stovall passed me in the hall two weeks ago, he asked me to step into his office. "You won the regional competition." As a craggy smile broke across his stony face, he said, "We haven't had a winner in a long time. I'd like to discuss your theories in more detail before the end of the semester. Congratulations. You'll probably receive the letter in two or three

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days. They inform the schools first. I just thought you'd like to know." He offered his hand. I shook it. "You're my best student."

"Thank you. I appreciate this. No hard feelings?"

"None. You stood your ground and you were right. That takes guts."

"Thanks Dr. Stovall. You taught me to fight for my position and that's what I did."

"I taught you well."

"You did indeed," I smiled too.

That was as close to an apology as I could expect. Professor Stovall was an erstwhile adversary. World known for his encyclopedic knowledge of economic impacts on financial systems, he taught Pellman at Harvard and spoke highly of him during many lectures. There was no need to gloat. As worthy a foe as he'd been, he'd become an invaluable friend. I never mentioned our fight to anyone. He'd be here today. Wharton bought two tables.

My delight swelled as I scanned the dais. There he was. Joshua Pellman. He looked more like a movie star than an economist. Tall. Tanned. Lean. Important. His face was strong. Charismatic. Confident. Rich. Cool. Everybody was trying to see him. Touch him. Know him.

Turning my attention back to my tablemates, I noticed Ross Bennett from Stanford. He'd already made millions developing new technologies in sound automation for music recording studios. A studio was not considered state of the art unless it had a Bennett system. He was in the process of designing a device he claimed would revolutionize music distribution, but wouldn't give further details. "You see, I really don't care anything about winning this award. I just like meeting new people...like you." He was flirting. "And I never miss an opportunity to network with rich people who trifle in the money game," he whispered, showing a perfect smile and suave demeanor. I detected a slight accent.

He was cute and must have thought the same about me since he asked for my telephone number back in Pennsylvania.

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Uncharacteristically, I gave him mine and I got his. Networking starts right now.

Wine was ordered and everyone was excited. Happy. Anxious. We all enjoyed the program and delicious lunch. Halfway through a slice of the most stupendous chocolate mousse cake with strawberries and whipped cream ever made, the Master of Ceremonies took the microphone. Not one of us paid the least bit of attention to the speeches or remarks. Then like thunder, “The winner of this year’s RJP Essay Competition is from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and Florida A&M, Ms. McClain Summers! Come up here Ms. Summers! Dr. Stovall where are you? I know you’re out there somewhere? Give her a hand everyone!”

What?!! No way! I won? The boys at the table jumped from their chairs. Cheering. Clapping. Smiling. Ross pulled me from my chair, pushing me toward the stage. A bright light lit the way. I licked what was left of the whipped cream from my lips, hoping some lipstick was still in tact as I drifted through a gauntlet of praise and applause. People were standing. Clapping. Yelling.

Unlike my tablemates, I hadn’t prepared a speech. I hadn’t looked through the New York classifieds to find an apartment and I didn’t want to be a broker or blow an artery as a financial banker. I wanted to work where the action was. I wanted to combine law and money in a way no one else ever had. I wanted to be a player. Where my decisions would make markets soar like fireworks or tumble like dominoes. People who made those decisions on a daily basis were in this room cheering for me.

Flash bulbs nearly blinded me as my hero rushed toward me, raving about my paper and my potential. “You’re fantastic. You’re brilliant,” he smiled, handing me the check. The plaque. The certificate. Joshua Pellman was hugging me and shaking my hand. He pulled me closer as we posed for a variety of photographers. I was standing in the grip of the man I knew only from books. Papers. Magazines. Television. Reputation. I was so excited about being near him, I became instantly stupid. Tongue-tied. Impotent. He was beaming as though he’d known me my

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entire life and all I could manage to whimper was an anemic “Thank you.”

He pushed me toward the microphone where words spilled from my mouth that came from somewhere other than my head. I can’t remember one word of it but I must have been eloquent because the room erupted in applause again when I’d finished. Some luncheon guests wiped their eyes, but I couldn’t tell whether their emotional outburst was from hysterical laughter or if they were actually touched by something I said.

I descended the platform into the waiting arms of financiers and elite brokerage house representatives. Investment bankers. Recruiters. Managers. They cornered me with offers. Barely able to make it back to the table, I stuffed cards and congratulations into my pockets along the way.

Expensive champagne arrived. We had our own celebration. Ross bought it. He had style. My fellow contestants hovered around me like gracious losers at a beauty pageant. Reading the certificate. The plaque. The check. Some nice. Some pissed. All surprised. Then without missing a beat, they scattered working the room like seasoned politicians. Compelled and certain to find their bright futures and lucrative destinies in this golden room.

When the luncheon was over, I was surrounded again. People wanted my resume. Room number. Telephone number. Address. Interviews. Dinner. Drinks. Either. Both. Me. I took pictures with people I didn’t know. I spoke with presidents and CEO’s of major trading houses about great opportunities. My favorite math instructor from FamU surprised me and came to represent the university. Dr. Stovall and many other instructors smiled and nodded from across the room. Today they were all beautiful.

Winning the RJP award was equivalent to winning the Hiesman. The Lombardi. National championship. I was the number one pick in the first round of the draft. The key difference, the work was a lot harder and salary cap a lot lower. My credentials were excellent. My essay would be published in the

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Wharton Business Review and I was a double threat, having earned both an MBA and JD. This win confirmed my analytical and writing skills, and I was a diversity director's dream. Black. Female. Smart. Confident. Competent. Ambitious.

My mother said, "Beauty can be a curse. It's never enough. You've got to be smart. The best. The brightest. Give the brightest light with the lowest heat. They may forget your smile, but they'll never forget your ability to think." I always remembered her words. She said them every chance she got.

Two RJP representatives approached as the waiter offered me another piece of cake. They'd be my escorts for the rest of the afternoon. "I'll have it delivered to your room and congratulations Miss," the waiter offered as the duo rushed me into a large black limousine. Then we headed into the tangle that is New York City traffic.

Travis Dixon, the CEO and director of the New York Stock Exchange met us at the doors and gave me a personal tour of its impressive offices. Later, I walked through RJP-New York, a marvel of technology and wealth. They'd keep me overnight. The team interview process would begin the next day.

After meeting the New York brass, a limo took me back to the hotel. I called Iris again. No answer. Where was she? I called Ross to tell him that I couldn't join him for dinner. Just as his telephone rang, someone knocked at my door. "These are for you." The bellman bowed presenting me with a glorious bouquet of four dozen perfect white roses, decorated with fabulous white hydrangea. The card read, "Congratulations! I had to leave. Ring me when you think of me. You're beautiful. I think I've fallen in 'like' with you. Enjoy the day. Ross." I rushed back to the telephone to call my mother. She was thrilled. I told her about my wonderful day while eating the most wonderful chocolate mousse cake with strawberries and whipped cream ever created.

Three different RJP executives took me to dinner and a Broadway play that night. I did everything right. I dressed right. I laughed at the right times. I ate with the right cutlery. I stayed away from discussions of politics. Religion. Sex. I reiterated my

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good points and sold myself. One omission of protocol involved batting my eyes at a fine brother looking at the marquee outside the Helen Hayes Theatre. I don't think they noticed. Neither did he.

After lunch the next day, I had the customary job offer. No decisions would be made until after graduation. So I thanked them for everything and left for Pennsylvania.

Bright daylight collapsed into a damp misty afternoon as the train slipped the grasp of Manhattan. Thoughts of how instructors complimented my ability to quickly understand complex economic theories saturated the moment. They encouraged my incessant inquiries, rewarding my work with high marks. High hopes.

Exceptional professors at FAMU, took exceptional interest in my goals and aptitude. They shared today's joy. Dr. Leo Kennedy, head of the science department convinced me to study finance or math. "You have a head for numbers. Your only interest in science centers in the mathematical components. If you really want to excel, focus on numbers. They'll never fail you." I appreciated his advice and my love for analytical theory became all consuming. Math instructors respected my ability to grasp and grow. I was diligent. Driven. Focused. A hard worker. I constantly pushed my intellectual limits. And theirs.

Considering the dynamic effect this award posed for my postgraduate career, I leaned the seat back pulling my coat over my legs. Thoughts bounced around in my brain as my head bounced gently against the window.

Pellman and I spoke briefly after the luncheon. He read my paper and said "I like the way your mind works. It reminds me of someone." I worried that he noticed similarities my paper had with his. Interestingly, by the time I returned to the hotel last night, he'd delivered a note offering me a position at RJP Dallas.

My ambition and ego could tolerate nothing less than the best. He was the best. His ideas and slashing style were thrilling. I like thrills. Although routinely recognized for his brilliance, he had equal repute for being utterly impossible to work with. I could take that. By the time the train lurched before arriving at the Philly

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station, I'd decided to begin my career at RJP Dallas. Under his tutelage and leadership I'd be a strategist. Financial wizard. Player. Superstar. Gambler. That meant RJP. That meant Dallas. I'd never been to Dallas and the only thing I knew about the central Texas town was that it was where President Kennedy was assassinated.

Walking through the station, I plotted my future with each excited step. If I applied the same work ethic in Dallas as I had in school, I'd do well.

Sharon pulled to the curb. I dashed from the protection of the covered doorway and into the warm car. My incredible day was as exciting to her as it was to me. The sign of a great friend. In 90 days, I'd be a Texan. YeeHiii!!!

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CHAPTER TWO

RJP's executive training course began exactly 90 days after graduation. I notified RJP New York and others that I'd accepted a position with Joshua Pellman. Needless to say, they understood.

Having learned to never take the first offer, I negotiated an additional \$25,000.00 to the generous six-figure salary he offered. Additionally RJP would pay off my student loans. First six months rent. All moving expenses. Vest my retirement in five years and I'd share in the profit structure of my department if we outperformed other RJP divisions proportionately. He agreed. You can negotiate anything. My mother taught me that.

I finished my finals, graduated with honors and attended Dr. Stovall's retirement dinner. After taking both the Pennsylvania and New York bar exams, I left Philadelphia for the last time.

Papers. Books. Maps and brochures arrived at my mother's house in Milwaukee. Included in the *mélange* of literature, was a textbook and syllabi outlining the first five chapters I had to read before the first class.

With \$45,000.00 to put into Ross Bennett's IPO, I'd invest the rest in high yield bonds and a savings account. Mother gave me her four-year-old Volvo, deciding it was time for a SUV. She surprised me with four extremely expensive outfits and a new brief case. She drove all the way over to White Fish Bay because she believed they sold better things than the stores downtown. She was determined I would start my career dressed for success.

Boxes, holding precious bits and pieces of my life were neatly packed into the car. I kissed my mother in an awkward

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goodbye and got into the car. She showed no signs of despair at my leaving, and went back into the house before I drove away.

As I reached the O'Hare tollbooth, I thought how funny it was that my life fit so well on the backseat of a car. Clanking coins hit the metal counter, lifting the gate to my new life in the world of international finance. I followed the signs toward Little Rock.

The next four and a half years rushed by quickly. Flourishing under Pellman's tutelage, I played the corporate game of musical chairs with precision and daring. I spent less time than any junior executive in required areas of RJP protocol, mastering each financial and legal endeavor with such haste that supervisors grew intimidated by my proficiencies. They passed me from position to position so quickly that within eighteen months I was working directly with Pellman as his Assistant Director of International Financial Development.

This was novel. Revolutionary. Unheard of. They even canned my predecessor so that I could fill his position. Pellman put me in charge of monitoring the activities of our senior NASDAQ analysts and key international scientific forecast managers too. Six months later, he promoted me to Manager of International Scientific Equities Worldwide.

My quick instincts and focused ability to do in depth research became highly respected by our New York and European staffs. We traded no less than \$27,000,000,000.00 on a bad day. My staff forecasted all research and development science related chemical, pharmaceutical, and technology securities, IPOs, and secondary offerings. I also sat in on critical high yield structured leveraged buy-outs. Pellman required my input on cross border trading problems and, he gave me additional responsibility for monitoring our Western European markets. Office drums banged out that I'd soon be monitoring the Asian markets too. I eagerly anticipated the challenge.

About two years later, Josh, (he recently told me to call him that) told me to bring all concerns or problems I encountered directly to him. He was fatherly and frank. His critiques useful and instructive. Proud of each accomplishment, he never took credit for

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anything. He admired my work ethic. I admired his. “You’re just like me with better legs,” he mused. He was wrong. I was more than that. My mind was a sponge thirsty for knowledge. His. My ego was eager for approval. My ambition primed for success.

No mistakes were permitted. Those who worked under my supervision were held to the same standard. Consequently, my division became the most productive component of RJP and we received sizeable bonuses after quarterly reviews. It wasn’t long before applications for openings in my department tripled.

Headhunters with ridiculously lucrative offers from revered finance houses consistently raided my department. It was a standing joke around the office. Their tempting recruiting tactics provided constant water cooler banter but my loyal staff typically rebuffed their inducements, eager to learn. Earn. Grow.

Friends in New York approached me with ideas of starting a small boutique type firm, specializing in research stocks. It sounded like a good idea, but I was happy at RJP. My salary paid me more than I ever thought possible. I was rich. My bonuses made industry history and the benefits package was among the best in the business. That spring my retirement vested and absolutely nothing could pull me away from Joshua Pellman. Not yet.

My friendship with Ross was solid. He was invaluable for digging up useful information with extremely interesting details on people’s financial, personal and private interests. We were good friends. Nothing more. I was happy to keep it that way.

At precisely 10:45 a.m. Josh called me into his office. Gushing with praise and albeit politically incorrect, I gave him a tremendous hug for being selected to present a speech at the World Economic Symposium in London. Additionally, it was a prime opportunity for RJP to articulate plans and specs for his new market security device.

Being asked to deliver this address was perhaps the highest single honor an economist could receive, other than the Nobel Prize. He already had that. Josh thanked me, and immediately began discussing work he needed me to do.

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I sank into the red leather club chair in front of his desk, retrieving the pen I kept tucked in my hair. I took notes. Pellman leaned back rattling on about how his partners were initially against hiring me. There was a message in this diversion.

“Eddie and Charles threw serious road blocks up against hiring you. But I knew you were the woman for the job and probably the smartest person here, besides me of course,” he smiled walking toward the windows where he surveyed the Dallas skyline.

“You’ve shown them what you’re made of, and I’m proud of you. Much to their surprise, they’ve found your work superb. They tried everything in the book, fair and unfair to trip you up.” I knew it. “Your aptitude is unchallengeable.” He returned to his desk, perching himself on the arm of the huge leather chair he called ‘mission control.’ “They brag that you’re one of kind. RJP is fortunate to have you.

Anyway, we all know how excited you are about this London presentation. Unfortunately, after a protracted and heated fight with my partners, we’ve agreed that Todd Winston will travel with me instead of you.” He sat in the chair, spinning from side to side. “You’ve been there for me with every important speech since coming aboard. I’ve depended on your insight. Intellect. Analysis. Research. Skills. But they believe...we believe someone else should have a chance to work on important RJP presentations.”

He walked toward his private bar area. “Would you like some water?” I shook my head no. “You’ll need to double check Winston’s work. Teach him how I like presentations made.” He sat again. “This may lead to another Nobel,” he laughed.

Racist was my first thought. I saw his mouth moving, but anger struck me stone deaf. I was crushed. Winston goes. I stay. Now I’m responsible for teaching this bimbo. Teach him what Pellman likes and show how to make presentations. Am I supposed to feel good because they think I’m one of a kind? Is that a compliment? Who came up that that?

Residual sensibilities I’d done everything to repress snapped into full alert. They dusted off their weapons and prepared

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for battle. I wanted to tear that office up. Tear him up. The first sign of rage burst in. Sweat formed on my nose. I quickly slid my hand across the bridge. Never let them know you're angry.

All the money I'd made them. The loyalty. Dedication. Sacrifice. The only negative thing anyone ever put on my reviews was that I worked too hard. I planned to fix that as soon as Pellman shut up. Winston would be on his own. I wasn't going to show him diddly.

My hearing returned when Pellman inquired about the independent research I started. I hadn't told anyone about it. How did he know?

The research centered on inconsistencies I noticed in the foreign banking patterns of four major clients. They had important global chemical holdings, but I was unable to identify them. Curiosity caused me to speculate how they had such lucrative holdings when no one knew who they were.

"I want you to stop the research you've been doing and concentrate on the new files I put on my desk this morning." The second signs of this apocalypse stood straight up. Shock turned to anger. Anger became fury. Fury was about to get him hit. Just as I opened my mouth to declare war, he said, "Thanks McClain...I'll talk to you later," then spun around and began speaking into his dictation machine.

Oh no he didn't just dismiss me. Still fighting against the riot that was just about to break out in these plush surroundings, I rose from the chair and turned toward the door.

Not going to London would be a major blow. Everyone knew I was supposed to make the trip. Failing to join Pellman would be a signal the corporate piranha would interpret as permission to attack.

With each step I sunk deeper into the plush carpet, fighting back tears of red hot anger. "Suck it up. Suck it up," I commanded myself. Not one tear would stain my new yellow suit. The headhunters were on my speed dial. Today was their lucky day.

Then Josh said, "I'm leaving tonight. I've always wanted to

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ride the rapids. I'll be back in one week and I'm depending on you to take care of everything while I'm gone...Like you *always* do."

Typical. I never turned around. "Oh...by the way, did I mention we're promoting you to Vice President and General Counsel of International Markets & Scientific Technologies?"

"What?!" I shrieked, spinning around. His eyes twinkled.

"Gottcha!" he laughed. "You've got to loosen up McClain! You have absolutely no sense of humor, and you work much too hard," he laughed. After all, you'll be starting your new position.....,"looking at his watch, "Immediately..... like right now...pack your glad rags Ms. Summers, you're going to London. I couldn't make such an important presentation without my number one man. I had you going with Winston didn't I?" he laughed, wiping tears from his eyes and walking from behind the desk. "That was pretty good," he howled. "You should have seen your face," he laughed falling into a chair, trying to gain his composure. "You'll need to cover the Evans merger next week in San Francisco. Donahue was supposed to do it, but his wife is having a baby. I'll be on a raft in Colorado freezing and getting wet! So its up to you. Details on the London speech are on your PC. Clean it up. Do the outlined research and when I get back, we'll make the final changes. I couldn't be more proud of you, even if you were my own...."

I didn't hear the rest of his sentence. Tears of disappointment had quickly turned to joy. I fell into his arms and gave him another hug. He hugged back. Today I was his partner. His equal.

"Did you tell her yet?" RJP partners who'd flown in from around the world peered from behind the adjoining conference room doors.

"I did," Pellman smiled, leading me into the conference room where the partners had convened to welcome me to their status.

Champagne corks flew just as loudly as the congratulations that filled the room. "You earned this McClain. You really did. I'd

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like to take credit for your success here, but I can't. You have a great mind and you're not afraid to use it. You're a winner and I'm very proud of you."

"Here! Here!" the partners agreed.

Pellman sat on the edge of the conference room table applauding me. The other partners joined in. Unlike the first time we met, I was now standing next to a peer. A peer who knew me. My ambitions. My goals. My curiosities. He steered me in the right directions. Backed my decisions. Respected my instincts and demanded respect from those who questioned my talents or my place. "I hand picked her. She's my protégé."

This promotion had additional significance. It was redemption from the barbs of peer managers who thought I didn't have the "right attitude" for the power that came with my status. They complained behind my back that I blurred the lines between support, housekeeping and executive staffs. That's white-folks 'code language' for the workplace caste system they cherish. It keeps the boundaries of socio-economic and educational bigotry alive. Those brave enough to comment out loud asked, "Why do you associate with employees who are not your peers? What could you possibly have in common with them?"

Incapable of understanding that my interest in the doorman was just as intense as my interest in Reynolds, Jacobs or Pellman was inconceivable. Such closeness shouldn't be shared with porters. Valets. Clerks. Deliverymen. Janitors. Runners. I insisted on lunching with them at least once a month and I couldn't wait to tell Gerald and Jack about my new position.

With unlimited access to everyone's office, Gerald was the most important man in the RJP building. He moved virtually unnoticed from office to office. When we discussed complicated economic theories, he understood their complexities better than any UT and Ivy League executive trainee. I often wondered why he never went to college. He never told me. I never asked. He was a friend and the inner office mailman, who hung out with the maintenance people.

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Amazing things wind up in the trash. They watched my back and kept me current with internal office politics. I helped get their kids scholarship money and jobs with friends around the country. They also kept me grounded with arms full of home grown wisdom. Tomatoes. Greens. Peas. Humility. Acceptance.

Gerald and I met when circumstances warranted, usually at the Donut Shoppe on Lovers Lane at 5:30 a.m. If he had special information to share, he'd place an empty donut bag in my garbage can. It was our signal that he had something good to share. After reviewing the information, I'd go into meetings with brilliant initiatives, plans, and answers to problems, issues and questions yet to be made public, as though I was a fly on the wall. Too fast to swat.

Jack was my best friend. He never needed an excuse to celebrate, and today was no exception. He cancelled his afternoon appointments and made lunch reservations.

The promotion was also a reward for the many days I felt isolated on 'Black Island', where my presence was tokenized; my proficiency seen as a series of fortunate flukes; and my abilities constantly questioned. Of course there were those who thought and will always believe that I was 'doing' Pellman which accounted for my place on the fast track. Sheer envy motivated their whispered attacks. It was implausible to them that Pellman and I had mutual respect for the slippery slopes of international law and finance. We also had an unqualified respect for each other.

Adept at recognizing and deciphering economic trends, we loved riding the cutting edge of financial forecasting, wanting to be the first with vital new information and mind splitting market analysis. We worked late into the night, many holidays, and most weekends preparing reports and projections that made the firm rich and our clients richer.

Some believed I was merely a sell out. The 'white man's plaything.' They had no idea that my ultimate goal was to learn as much as I could and execute my plans. Those plans included a vested and insured retirement. Capital. Contacts. Clout. There was

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no better education than the one I was taking advantage of at RJP while establishing credibility. Expertise. Knowledge. Reputation.

Early in my career I understood that before you make waves, make a very big boat. Those who upset the waters while sailing turbulent seas in rafts, inner tubes or canoes usually sink. Alone.

Others thought I was too young. Too inexperienced. Too green and too Black. They said I was “too personal with the minority junior executives” and that made other ‘JE’s’ feel that they wouldn’t receive similar attention from me. Further, my reviews tended to show bias. Ain’t that a blip?

Always the consummate professional, I was thorough and available. Sacrificing any semblance of a personal life, I attended firm functions. Entertained clients. Amused partners. Nothing and no one interfered with my goals. My work.

Honorary mention goes to RJP’s obvious racists who didn’t believe anyone of my hue no matter how proficient, should have her hands on anything other than a mop, a rag, or a white man’s dick.

CHAPTER THREE

Raul recognized me instantly. I was late. He waived me to the front of the long lunch line. “Beautiful day Ms. Summers. Your party has arrived. Henry will direct you to your table.”

“Hi Raul. Have I told you that you’re the best Maitre’ D in Dallas?”

“Every time you come in.”

“It’s true.”

“Thank you and thank you so much for getting my son that scholarship to UT.”

“He got the scholarship. I just gave someone his name.”

“Whatever you did, I want you to know that my wife and I appreciate it very much, and we’ll never forget your help.”

“Just tell your son to make the best of this opportunity and pass his good fortune along.”

“I will. Have a fantastic lunch.”

“I always do.”

I looked around as the waiter led me through the crowded eatery. He was there. I hoped I’d see him again. He saw me too. I paused briefly at the dessert cart, looking down at my left calf, cocking my head to the side. My hair fell gently over my eye. When I slowly raised my eyes, he quickly diverted his glance. “Um-hmm,” I thought. “Made ya look.”

Jack waved from our favorite table near the windows. I waved back, quickening my pace. Rapid conversation harmonized effortlessly with melodic tunes the piano player looped gleefully on the grand piano near the bar.

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Cheyenne's was like a cattle baron's convention. Lawyers. Bankers. Politicians. Business people. Corporate ranchers. Financial wizards and moguls cut mind boggling deals here. Politicians emphatically argued right and left wing platforms. Dilettante socialites laden with status bags from upscale boutiques commiserated about their loveless marriages, cosmetic surgeries and designer gowns. Rich old men with beautiful young women bred for pampering dotted the landscape. Then there were those like Jack and me, ambitious misfits nudging our way into this zoo of excess.

Jack leapt from his chair and kissed my cheeks when I reached the table. "Girl, I'm so happy for you," he gushed.

Draping myself elegantly across the chair, I crossed my legs striking a mean pose. A stream of sunlight bounced across the fresh cut flowers and white table linens, providing the perfect up lighting for my bright yellow suit. "What you doing? Where is he?" Jack whispered, easing back into his chair.

Jack and I came here to celebrate high points. The high points were coming more frequently. Today was no exception. "I was introduced to my new suite of offices by the company's interior decorator. There's a huge decorating budget. Ordinarily she'd get the job, but I explained that no one could decorate my suites but you."

"You got that right Miss Thing. That's my girl!" he laughed, rushing around the table to kiss me again.

"Champagne! Let's have the best they have. Give me that wine menu. You got your credit card?" he laughed.

"Is he looking Jack?" I whispered.

"Where? Who? Is who looking?" Jack whispered, craning his neck, turning around.

"Don't look!" I snapped.

"If I don't look, then how do I know if he's looking? Who's he?" he asked.

"Just don't be so obvious."

Jack surveyed the room like a lighthouse in the fog. He knew my taste. "I hope you're talking about that beautiful man

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over there in the charcoal silk and cashmere suit, he hasn't stopped looking. As a matter of fact I think he's looking at me," he cackled that ridiculously infectious laugh and began waving at the beautiful stranger, mouthing a kiss.

"Stop Jack. Are you crazy?! What's wrong with you? Let's go!"

"Go? What you mean go!? Go where? I'm *go* get me something to eat. I'm hungry. You might as well calm your little narrow behind down and eat too. You gettin skinny and you work too much. Don't nothin but a dog want a bone. Eat some fat. Get some fried chicken, some dumplins, French fries or something. That man ain't leaving. He got here right before you did. I saw him when he came in and he *is* cute. Probably gay."

Jack picked up the menu just as the waiter arrived giving the luncheon spill about today's specials. While Jack paid close attention, I peered over my shoulder. His face was 40ish. Two other distinguished looking men were at his table. They stood when a fabulously well-dressed, beautifully altered older woman approached the table. She kissed one of them and sat. When he sat, his napkin dropped onto the floor. When he reached for it, our eyes momentarily met. Never breaking my pose, I spun around and perused the menu.

Jack ordered the most expensive champagne in Cheyenne's inventory. We babbled about my new corner office in the executive suites my staff would occupy. That's when I noticed a bruise on Jack's left cheek. "What happened to your face?"

"I was looking for something at the store. I reached up on a shelf and some boxes tumbled down. One hit me in the face." I rubbed my hand across the bruise.

"Do you realize that you've been tripping over things and falling off stuff a lot lately. You need to see one of those inner ear people. Maybe your equilibrium is off. I'll make you an appointment with my doctor and I'm going to buy you one of those step ladders from that catalog you love so much too."

"You go buy me more than that!" he howled. "You ain't getting off that cheap. I've got a list baby! By the way...where

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were you last night? I called you about three times. I started to come up there, but I was too tired and my face hurt too bad.”

“None of your business.” I usually told Jack everything, but kept some of my business to myself. The waiter returned with our salads.

“None of my business? Pay attention to me...he’s still looking and pass me the salt. What you mean ain’t none of my business? You musta forgot who you were talking to. I want to know where you were.” Jack asked defiantly.

“I was out. Stop eating all of that salt. You’re gonna get high blood pressure. Do I have to tell you everything? You’re worse than a boyfriend Jack. Why do you always have to be in my business? Just eat and leave me alone.”

“What would you know about a boyfriend?” Jack laughed out loud. “Why don’t you go over there and introduce yourself to the man?”

“I can’t do that?”

“Why not?” Jack looked at me inquisitively, cutting into the steamy loaf of crusty bread. “I thought you women were suppose to be liberated. Waiting to exhale and all that kind of sh...stuff... pass me the butter...y’all go hold your breath til you drop dead that’s what’s go happen.” Jack laughed so loudly that the people at the next table turned around wanting in on the joke.

“Jack, you know I’m not waiting to do anything. Stop putting all of that butter on that bread and stop being so country! That’s not the problem.” “Then what’s the problem?” He smeared more butter on his bread taking a big bite.

“I wouldn’t characterize it as a problem. It’s a mystery. The more I have, the more I want. That includes men. It’s like pantyhose.”

“Pantyhose?” Jack almost choked. “What the hell are you talking about?” Jack poured spicy Italian dressing over his salad and began munching vigorously while I tried to explain.

“I’ve had better, so now I want better. That’s how I feel about men too. Does that make sense to you?”

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“Hell no,” he said sucking the salad greens from his teeth.

“Jack...you know what I mean. There are lots of men out there. Good men. But for some reason good isn’t good enough. I don’t want drug store stockings when I can have...what’s the best brand? My point *is* that although the cheaper brands serve the same purpose, they just don’t have the same allure. Same fit.”

“Is that how you determine whether a man is right for you? If he fits like an expensive pair of stockings? Girl, gimme that liquor. Don’t you drink one more sip of that champagne. You drunk and talkin crazy.” Jack laughed heartily, moving the champagne flute out of my reach. I laughed too.

“I’m not drunk Jack and I’m also not explaining myself very well. I don’t want to eliminate men over esoteric qualities, but before I get a chance to evaluate them, they eliminate themselves. I’m too independent. Aggressive. Smart. Ambitious. Not available enough. Not helpless enough. Not stupid enough. Not desperate enough.

I just can’t seem to find one who.....”

“Doesn’t sag at the knees?” Jack was cracking up.

“Whose man enough to be comfortable with all the women who live inside me.”

“Now you’re talking. I know what you mean girl. Do you think Mr. Thing over there can deal with the Cybil in you?”

“I ain’t Cybil, but I sure do like the package.”

“I heard that! I like the package too and I bet he’s just my size. You better ask somebody.”

Jack and I laughed joyously. Perhaps I was a little tipsy. Our waiter returned with our entrees. After eating enough for an army, Jack summoned the waiter for our check. “Hey good looking. We’d like our check please. Give it to her. I need my money.”

“Can I interest you in dessert?” the waiter pulled the dessert cart to the table. “Only if you can fit on one of those little plates,” Jack flirted. The waiter smiled.

“No thank you,” I interrupted. Champagne always made Jack whorish. “May we have the check please?”

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“Your bill has been taken care of.”

“By whom? Raul?”

“No, the gentleman over there paid the check with his compliments to the lady,” he said pointing. Jack and I looked at each other. We were deliciously shocked.

“He’s got class girl. Obviously he’s been watching you too. Maybe he thinks you fit like a good pair of draws,” Jack giggled, leaning back in the chair. “Work it right baby. Remember what Uncle Jack taught you. Reel that big fish in,” he whispered.

He was consumed in conversation at his table. I pulled a note pad from my handbag, wrote a quick note thanking him for the offer to pay for our lunch. The waiter delivered it to our benefactor. With racehorse like speed I fixed my lipstick and dusted my nose. Just as I returned the gear to my bag, a warm hand touched my shoulder.

Steel gray blue eyes that sparkled like sunlight on snow stared down at me. “Hello.” His face was amazingly young and much better looking up close. An engaging aristocracy filled our space. His casually intense carriage signified nobility.

Impeccably groomed. Perfectly dressed. British. Tan. Wealthy. He was out of place, but I was glad he was here today.

“Please...sit,” I offered.

“Thank you.” He sounded the way you’d expect a British gentleman would.

“Thank you for offering to pay our bill, but I can’t let you do that,” I said in my best professional voice.

“She can’t, but I can,” Jack interrupted. “My name is Jack Prescott. I like men.” Jack offered his hand and the stranger shook it. “Jack! Please excuse him Mr...”

“My name is Ian Lawford, and you are...”

“I’m McClain Summers.” He took my hand and allowed his lips to brush my knuckles.

“I’m very pleased to meet you. I was wondering, and I know it’s terribly forward of me to inquire, but would you consider joining me for supper this evening?”

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“Supper?”

“Yes supper,” Jack piped in. “That meal uncouth people like you call dinner. The meal you don’t eat between lunch and breakfast.” I kicked Jack under the table. “Ouch,” he squirmed.

“Mr. Lawford, I don’t typically go out with men I meet under such circumstances. I don’t know you and I’m completely capable of paying my own bill. My friend and I...”

“Ms. Summers, please allow me this great pleasure. I assure that I am completely harmless and paying your luncheon bill is the first of many meals I’d like to share with you. I must insist that you join me...please.”

“Insist?”

“Yes...I’ll be awfully disappointed if you say no.”

“I’ve already made plans for tonight.”

“Break them.”

“Break them?”

“I won’t take no for an answer Ms. Summers. I never do.”

“You never do?”

“Will you stop repeating everything the man says?” Jack interrupted. “He said break the date. Go to dinner. He insists. Don’t say no. What’s the problem? He think you skinny too. That’s why he wants to feed you,” Jack translated. I glared at him.

Ian’s magnetism ricocheted throughout the room. People stopped eating and watched this spectacle. My curiosity couldn’t resist his invitation. “Will this dinner be worth my while Mr. Lawford?”

“I certainly hope so and Mr. Prescott, I hate to contradict you but I think Ms. Summers looks perfectly lovely as she is.”

“I’m intrigued,” I cooed.

“No. What you are is very very beautiful and you must call me Ian.”

“Thank you ...Ian.”

We agreed he’d pick me up. He repeated the hand kissing stuff. Jack and I stood.

“Ian.... what.....?”

“7 sharp. Until tonight.”

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Jack and I made our way to the elevators. Ian and half the restaurant watched our departure. When the elevator doors slid shut. Jack screamed, “Jack Pot!!”

“Who is he? I’m not going.”

“What you mean you not going?”

“There’s something spooky about him.”

“Spooky? I don’t know who he is, but I thought he was charming, all that hand kissing and take charge stuff. You the spooky one...talking bout men like pantyhose. Now that’s scary! Don’t tell nobody else that OK? You smart Cheeks, but sometimes you can say some wild sh...stuff. You want to wear the expensive brand. Why wear the drug store kind? Good gracious! They all run! You a trip. Now what you go do? Miss Don’t Want To Wear No Cheap Stockings? Boom! There he is! If I thought he rode both sides of the pony, you wouldn’t have to worry about Mr. Ian Lawford. I wouldn’t be trippin. You work with money...but I know money!”

“You do?”

“Yeah baby! He’s money!”

We laughed. Jack tipped the valet, pointed his Porsche toward my office and sped down San Jacinto Street. I considered Jack’s convoluted points as he fired up his cell phone, dialing frantically. He was right. I wanted this kind of man and now that he’s shown up, I’m scared.

“Hey Cliff. How you doing? Did you get that stuff I sent you? No problem man. I was glad to do it. Look, this hag has a date tonight with James freakin Bond. He’s rich, British and reeks of class and money. I need the most elegant little black dress you have, shoes, jewels, everything...uh huh...8 narrow. The look has to scream ‘what you see is under no circumstances what you get...at least not before you pay a whole lot of money for it,” he cackled. “Can you pull something together? Yeah, she’s still caught between a 4 and a 6...she said 6, but the cow wears a 4. OK. OK! Pull some things out for me and I’ll come by in about a half an hour. Thank you darling.”

Cynthia A. Minor

Jack whipped out his notepad and began writing, driving with his knees. It was one of his many personality quirks. He documented everything. “Hello Romeo? Oh...Hi Kevin, is Romeo there? No...no...just ask him if he can squeeze the diva in this afternoon...He can?...About two thirty? Tell him hair. Manicure. Pedicure. Waxing. All of it. We’ll see him then...huh?...OK. Yeah, he knows how Miss Thang is. Soft. Classy. Sexy. No Kevin. Kevin I ain’t coming to your party. I don’t know. I don’t care. Kevin...I’m hanging up. I’m hanging up.”

“Why do you treat him like that? Isn’t it obvious that he likes you?”

“Chile please...”

“Jack, don’t you like Kevin a little? He’s always so kind and charming. He’s cute too.”

“I didn’t say that I didn’t like him and he’s cute. I just don’t want him to like me.”

“So how do you let him know that you don’t like him back?”

“Easy. I tell you to fuck off!”

“Jack!”

“I’m sorry baby. Excuse me. I know you hate cussing, but Kevin makes me sick with all that switching and shh...stuff. Gets on my nerves. Now shut up and let me make this last call. Hey Butch, yeah this is Jack. Please run a Ian Lawford. You go have to look international. He’s taking out my baby and if he don’t start nothin won’t be nothin. OK, get back to me fast. All I know is that he’s loaded. Yeah man, thanks.”

Jack pulled in front of my building. He wrote out the afternoon’s itinerary, we kissed and he yelled through the window, “I’ll pick you up in an hour. Have one of your minions drop off your car. Don’t be late. See ya!!”

“OK Jack. I love you!”

“I love you too baby. Just think, you could marry James Bond and y’all can put me up in the manner to which I aspire to become accustomed. He’s got lots of rich friends over there in

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England who need their castles and flats redecorated. Baby I know money!” We both laughed and Jack sped down Elm.