

4:00 p.m., Monday, August 10, 2015
Manhattan

Odell Moore stood alone, back against the wall. His broad shoulders sagged, his eyelids drooped, and the champagne glass slipped out of his grip, triggering an electric shock. His long fingers grasped for the stem just before disaster struck, spilling a few drops on the beige boardroom carpet. He was not in much of a party mood.

He studied the busy movements all around him. No one seemed to notice. Men and women of all sizes, ages, and colours, his army, reached for hors d'oeuvres from the floating silver trays offered by the wait staff. Some of the lawyers smiled on the way by, careful not to make too much direct eye contact. Odell nodded and tipped his flute. That was the Odell they'd come to expect. Alert to all contingencies. In control.

This was home base—central command—the offices of TGO, on Sixth Avenue, the focal point of the business universe. A hundred-hour-plus workweek, minimum. No complaints. TGO fed you and, if necessary, seduced and bedded you in order to service the clients and their enormous deals. No question this was home, though this was not family. This was better than family. And Odell was their leader.

The secret to leading an army, he thought, is not getting too close—too personal. The key to command is learning who you can trust and, more important, who you can't, an instinct developed early in life. His trust had to be earned.

Jackson Sherman had earned that trust. Busted his rear end on the last few deals for it. A solid associate. And the man could work a room. Waltzing across the boardroom floor, making small talk with the key senior lawyers. Could Odell call Jackson a protégé? Probably by now he could. He just needed to put some time into rounding out the younger man's potential.

There had to be at least forty lawyers milling around, congratulating each other on their successes, their voices growing louder as the bottles of champagne popped, fizzed, and emptied. The men had loosened their neckties and some had abandoned them altogether, though none would dare to attend a boardroom celebration, hosted by Drew Torrance, the firm's chair, without the unofficial firm uniform: the navy-blue or black suit, white dress shirt (though the truly daring wore powder blue), and gleaming shoes. The women wore their skirts or dresses two inches above the knee—no higher, their heels sensible and their toes anything but pointed.

The forty-foot walnut boardroom table in the centre of the room radiated distinction. At one end, copies of the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* had been opened to the business pages, praising Odell's efforts in putting together the transaction that was going to create hundreds of jobs in Mobile, Alabama. The veil of secrecy that had surrounded this legal transaction had finally been lifted. The troops no longer had to refer to the deal by its code name, though it was likely to be remembered as the "Bounty" deal whenever TGO lawyers got together to tell their war stories about how they had battled under Odell's leadership to get the deal closed against incredible odds and impossible stress.

Odell's team had been going hard for months and they deserved to celebrate. Let them have their moment, but right now he was exhausted. Immediately after closing the Bounty deal, he and Dee had rushed to Vegas to get married, followed by a weekend honeymoon in Paris. He had only ever been there on business and she had professed a love of the Louvre that she wanted to share. What better way to start the marriage? Then it was back to Manhattan to pitch the bankers on the next deal while she

headed to Mobile. Tonight he would be off to Houston. There was hardly a moment to breathe much less spend time with his bride.

At least today he could devote himself totally to work without guilt. She had insisted on visiting her parents by herself and breaking the news.

Jackson Sherman approached with a short blond woman in tow. They were both holding half-empty flutes.

“General, I want to introduce Betty Carolli. She’s one of our first-year associates. Did great work on Bounty.”

Odell extended his hand and smiled warmly. “An honour to meet you, Betty.”

“You too, sir—” Betty said.

“Call him General. We all do,” Jackson interrupted.

“General,” Betty corrected herself, “I just wanted to introduce myself and let you know how much it means to me to work on your deals.”

“Betty, if you’re working at TGO it’s because we see potential in you,” Jackson said.

The little fawn blushed. “Jackson’s been a real mentor to me. Anyway, I don’t want to take up any more of your time.”

Odell wondered if anything was going on there. In his experience, office romances never worked out well—particularly if one of the parties was married. It showed a lack of judgment and discipline. It also spoke to a person’s loyalty. Odell was probably reading way too much into a thirty-second encounter. In any event, Jackson seemed happily married. At least that’s what Dee had been telling him. Jackson’s wife, Emily, had befriended Dee just after she moved to New York. Strange how life coincidences worked.

Jackson desperately wanted to become a partner at TGO. It was obvious. His time would come. He had the tools: smart enough, trustworthy, great work ethic, and the ability to scheme. Odell made a mental note to speak to Jackson next week. He could even be given a lead role on this upcoming Houston deal.

The members of his team were a diverse group, but they had one thing in common: they put their personal lives on hold when they had to get a

deal closed. When he took on the Bounty deal, Odell had budgeted five months. Instead, it had dragged on for almost a year. The last three had wreaked havoc on his personal life—not that it had stopped him from getting married.

Odell had to hand it to Drew Torrance, holding court at the other end of the room. The old man knew how to run a law firm. He had a sense for the exact moment to say thanks to the troops so that they wouldn't mutiny.

The celebratory toasts began with a short speech by Drew. Odell feigned interest but his mind was elsewhere. The courtship had been a whirlwind, squeezed in between meetings with Senator Brabant. Odell and Jackson had flown down to Mobile to lobby the senator. Jackson's family was well connected to the community, and he had set up the meeting. Odell's mission was to convince the senator to back his client's plan to invest in an Alabama infrastructure project—Bounty. Nothing ever distracted Odell from his mission. At least until the night of the fundraiser at the senator's mansion when Odell caught sight of a woman sweeping down the staircase toward the onyx and mother-of-pearl checkerboard floor that was packed with the cream of the Mobile social set, armed with mint juleps and cheque books.

Odell had staked out the mystery woman, followed her out to the back lawn of the senator's estate, and struck up a conversation. There was a pace to cocktail party flirting that he had mastered. This time it had started well enough, but within a few moments she launched a counter-offensive to his charm. The usual weapons he utilized to advance were being neutralized by one sharp comment after another. Did she dislike him? He could usually decipher quickly and move on to the next. She was sending messages he was not able to decode. A first. But she was also not blowing him off. Her blue eyes measured every inch of him. Was he getting anywhere? The moment felt right to move into her space for the first kiss. She demurred, slipping just out of reach. Who was the cat and who was the mouse? He hadn't a clue. He was still suffering the bruise of the rejection, when she linked her arm in his and walked him around the estate and under the oak tree in the front yard.

“This is my favourite place in the world,” she said. Perhaps he had misread her. This might be the moment. She moved toward him, stared into his eyes, teasing him, then stepped back. The moment passed. He’d completely lost his way emotionally while she guided him toward the senator. She called him Daddy. It took her no time to convince Daddy to invite Odell for dinner the next evening and only twenty-four hours to set the stage for their first embrace. The first of many.

Later, during his lobbying efforts to sway the senator to support the Bounty acquisition, there was hardly a moment when Odell was not daydreaming about his encounters with Dee. If the senator had had even an inkling of what had gone on between them, the Bounty deal would have been as good as sunk. Eight million in legal fees at risk. Humiliation in front of the client.

But neither that risk nor the knowledge that Senator Brabant would never accept his only child having an affair with the descendant of a slave kept them apart over the following months. And now that the deal was done, allowing them to step out of the shadows and get married, he planned to take on the senator the way he took on a deal: with careful planning and a directed approach. Confrontation never bothered Odell. Not after his childhood. But he didn’t have time for that meeting yet, and Dee had said she would take care of it. She knew her daddy and was certain she could handle him. Odell had laid out a simple plan for her to follow.

He stepped out of the boardroom briefly and tried Dee’s cellphone. No answer. The third time in the past hour.

Odell stepped back into the room and was handed another champagne glass. Torrance was about to make another toast.

“Bravo to all of you and to your teamwork,” Torrance said, gesturing around the room with his flute of champagne. “The partners wanted to recognize the Herculean effort you all put in on Bounty.”

There were loud cheers and clinking of glasses.

When the din died down and the celebrations continued, Torrance approached Odell in the corner of the boardroom and put his hand on his shoulder. “Your team has really performed.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Drew.”

“I figure I owe you one. Bounty was our biggest deal of the year.”

Odell smiled. “If I land the Houston deal, you won’t be saying that for much longer. It also means you won’t see me at all until the year-end holiday party.”

“Not so fast. Bill Overton called me from the west coast this morning. There’s a takeover battle looming at Cypress Entertainment. If the buyer succeeds, Bill will lose his biggest client. He wants you involved immediately.”

A takeover battle for Cypress might go on for months. It would make handling the Houston deal simultaneously a real challenge, but not impossible, Odell thought. Dee was just going to have to understand that he might be tied up for a few months until the workflow ebbed.

“I can’t get to it until Friday. I’m off to Texas tonight. I’ll have Jackson organize the team to gather up all the materials and prepare a briefing memo.”

“Which one is he?”

“Jackson Sherman. Navy-blue suit and tan shoes standing beside the blonde. He was a real asset.”

“Yeah, but I hear you’re the one who came up with the genius tax angle to save the deal.”

“It’s just what I do.”

“And the lobbying you did with Senator Brabant? You know damned well that the deal would never have been closed without his support at the Senate Appropriations Committee. That was all you.”

“Jackson’s connections helped set up my relationship with the senator. I think he has partnership potential.”

“He’s only been with us for two years. Besides, eight years in practice is a little early for partnership around here unless your son is Jesus.” Torrance chuckled at his own joke. “Don’t worry, Odell. You asked me to speak with him and I will. It’s the least I can do for you.” He patted Odell on the back and headed over to chat with the head of the tax group.

It had been nine months since the cocktail party he’d attended at the senator’s estate. From the moment Dee glided down the staircase, his

personal life had rocketed up and down like a roller coaster. Because of the Bounty deal, Odell had to keep his distance from Dee. He couldn't afford to have a relationship with the daughter of the politician he was lobbying. Far too risky—TGO would never have withstood the scandal if the story got out that he was dating the senator's daughter—but it was a risk they both took. They should never have ended up in bed together, but they did for four months, again and again, and again. That was his problem with Dee. Every moment with her was unplanned, uncharted, unbelievable. Ethically improper, yet the longing for her when he travelled ate him up every night, and when he returned to her after spending a day in Washington with her father, they devoured one another.

He'd put the deal at risk by dating her surreptitiously. He'd deceived the senator about his intentions outside the confines of the deal. Had he deceived Dee about his own intentions? He still had not come up with a strategy to deal with Dee—he was still just getting to know her.

"My body clock is ticking," she'd whispered anxiously between the satiny sheets of the suite at the Paris Ritz, only two nights ago. "We'll have them close together. I want four."

The recollection triggered the same bout of dizziness he'd experienced when she'd first uttered the words. One more issue he figured they would talk about eventually. First she had to face the consequence of their impulsive marriage. Alone. Still no news. She should have called by now. Maybe she hadn't followed the plan he'd laid out to her on the flight home. Maybe he should have trusted his own instincts and insisted on accompanying her. The train in his stomach was barreling downward, out of control.

"To the General!" Jackson yelled from the other end of the table. "The paragon of thoughtful leadership."

Odell stood to acknowledge the toast and put on a smile. If they only knew.

4:00 p.m., Monday, August 10, 2015
Suburban Mobile, Alabama

Dee Brabant stepped out of the taxi onto the country lane, then slung the strap of the overnight bag onto her shoulder. The afternoon humidity, perfumed faintly by the late-season magnolias, greeted her like a familiar friend, escorting her toward the knoll. Halfway up the knoll, the gnarly oak tree, stooped with the passage of time, cast its shadows over the upper storey of the whitewashed house behind it.

Everything in its place, exactly where it had always been. Everything except Dee. She began the slow climb along the winding grey flagstones that she had skipped along a thousand times as a child. She paused under the tree and leaned against the trunk. Here, her life had been forever altered nine months ago. She closed her eyes, reliving that first kiss with Odell at this very spot. A soft breeze shook droplets of water, the residue of an earlier flash rainstorm, from the leaves onto her shoulders.

She hoped the storm clouds hanging over her head would pass as quickly. Momma probably thought she was still in Paris. Maybe she ought to have brought Odell to properly introduce him rather than go this alone. It wasn't as if he was a complete stranger. Daddy had worked with him for a few months, and Momma had met him here at the dinner with the Canadian ambassador last November. Still, she figured it would be better to break the news without Odell around. "Just stick to the plan," Odell had told her on the flight back from Paris yesterday. "Take them on one at a time. Stay calm. Let them react. They love you. Eventually they'll accept this."

She steeled herself, then continued on her way, waving to Henri, who had just stepped outside with a glass of lemonade on a break from his daily routine.

“Miss Dee. What a wonderful surprise! May I help you with your bag?” he asked, reaching out toward Dee’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Henri.” The bag was featherweight, but she did not want to offend him.

“Your father was detained in Washington over the weekend, though we’re expecting him to return home at any moment. Should I announce you to your mother?”

“Thanks, Henri, I’ll see myself in. I still remember where to find Momma at this hour.” Dee beamed at the man who had known her since the day she was born. His temples had greyed, but he and three generations before him had been in service to the Brabants since the estate was rebuilt in the late 1870s.

Dee made her way up the sweeping staircase, tracing the outline of the mahogany carvings with her fingertips. Reaching the landing, she stood for a moment and gazed out the picture window overlooking the front lawn. The thickened leaves of the oak tree below dominated the view. There was such a difference between what you could touch and smell outside and what you could see and feel inside, she thought. She shivered for a moment before turning to the left toward the alcove just outside the master bedroom. Momma was in her usual spot on the dark-chocolate settee, facing the vanity mirror, proudly erect, combing her long blond hair. Dee remembered the days when the colour was natural.

Momma could have been a beauty queen contestant. Probably still could be if there were such a thing for mothers in their sixties, although Dee doubted that ever would have appealed to Momma. A woman must have a purpose in life beyond pleasing a man, the lesson she had drilled into Dee, with the same determination she brought to every task, from tending to the gardens around the estate to supporting Daddy’s career. She might have been a success in business had she been born a generation later. Instead she’d stuffed her college business degree in a drawer

and played Sherpa on his climb from obscure small-town lawyer to the Senate.

Dee caught her mother's eye in the mirror. The same azure as her own. Same for the high cheekbones, the button nose, and the slight shoulders underneath her silk housedress, though Momma's lips were thinner. Dee's were a little plumper. Odell called them kissable.

"Darling, you're home. How was Paris?" Eleanor's reflection performed a motherly appraisal. "That's some bling on your finger! A new beau?"

Dee smiled. The next words stuck in her throat.

"Wait a minute... That's not your right hand," Eleanor said, rotating on the settee to face Dee.

"I have something to tell you, Momma."

Eleanor jumped to her feet and came rushing over. "Oh, my stars, would you look at what is sitting on your finger." She hugged her daughter close, then stepped back and reached for Dee's left hand. "My goodness, that stone is dazzling!"

"Not just a diamond, Momma." Dee bent her finger to allow a better view of the two slim gold bands, side by side.

"M-married... You're m-married? Who, when, for goodness' sakes, why? How could I have no idea?"

Dee was holding her breath. Her face felt flushed. Her tongue thickened like molasses.

"Dee. How could I have *no idea*?" The final two words were spoken slowly. Painfully. *No idea* hung in the air. Dee could feel the words encircling her neck—choking her. Cutting off the lifeline to her explanation.

"I'm sorry, Momma," Dee blurted.

"I thought we were close. Best friends, you called us." Eleanor took a step backward.

"We are, Momma. You don't understand."

"The most important decision of your life. You made it on your own."

"Exactly like you!" The words erupted from Dee's mouth in a high-pitched explosion, reducing to ashes what was left of Odell's plan.

Eleanor dropped her head and nodded. “You’re comparing me to Grandma?” She sighed, then lifted her head slowly and stared directly at Dee. “It wasn’t at all the same. My mother was certain that Edward would follow in his father’s footsteps. That he had already joined the Klan.”

“I heard the rumours in school,” Dee said. The girls in sixth grade could be cruel. Especially when you denied. They crushed your spirit once they sussed the bluff. “Did he?”

“How can you ask such a question?” Eleanor bristled and turned to look at the wedding picture on the vanity. “He was the love of my life. She forbade me from seeing him. We had no choice but to elope.”

“And you think I had a choice?”

“Every choice comes at a price.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grandma didn’t talk to me again until you were born. Do you *know* how many days there are in seven years?”

The question cut through Dee’s stomach like a knife. There was not a word to say.

“She finally called me up the day I brought you home from the hospital. ‘I forgive you,’ she said. Never asked whether *I* forgave *her*. Eventually I did, for your sake. Family is more important than principle. Sometimes you just need to swallow the pain.”

Dee wasn’t ready or able to swallow. She stepped forward and reached out, touching her mother’s shoulder. “Can you forgive me, Momma?”

A single teardrop rolled down Momma’s cheek. Dee could feel her own cheeks moistening. “I’m sure you didn’t mean to hurt me,” Momma said. “Neither did I all those years ago. It’s just—look at us. Two crying foolish girls.”

Dee reached into her purse for a couple of tissues and handed one to her mother.

“I always just assumed,” Eleanor said, dabbing at the corners of her eyes. “Long engagement, showers, parties, proper church wedding. We thought you were close with that banker in Montgomery a few years ago.”

Dee's eyes tightened. "Come on, Momma. By the second time I brought him for dinner Daddy had compiled a complete review of his finances. As if that was the only thing that should matter. He made it pretty clear that Maurice wasn't near good enough."

"Did you love Maurice?"

"I had just graduated college. I still had no idea what love was. I just knew I wanted children."

"And Maurice was divorced."

"What did that have to do with anything? It was supposed to be my choice in the end. My life. Not Daddy's."

"Your father knew what you couldn't see. Marriage is hard enough without beginning with a child from a previous marriage."

Dee dropped her head. "I was prepared to accept his daughter. She was only two at the time." Her eyes softened as she looked up into her mother's eyes. "Maybe I loved her more than I loved Maurice."

"So we weren't wrong."

Dee shook her head. "I should have known you were in on it. Right or wrong, I swore Daddy was not getting another chance to interfere in my life."

"I'm sorry, child. We have no right to interfere. If anyone should understand that, it's me." Eleanor lowered herself on the settee, pulling Dee down beside her.

"I'm so sorry I kept the courtship from you, Momma, but it was for your own sake."

Eleanor turned her head sideways, her mouth curling at the corner, as if she were evaluating how any secrecy could have been for her sake. "Does the man have a name?" Her eyes narrowed as the only plausible explanation hit her. The train of modern relationships had run off the tracks and into the bedroom. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't presuppose it's a man, should I?"

"No, no, no, Momma. Odell and I got married in Vegas, and then he insisted we fly to Paris for our honeymoon. He wanted us to experience *Mona Lisa* together. That's his nickname for me."

“Odell?”

“Remember Daddy’s fundraiser last November? You held a dinner the next evening. I had Daddy invite a man I’d met the night before.”

“Odell Moore? That handsome lawyer. You think just because of your father’s attitudes you had to keep him a secret from me?”

“There’s more to it than that.”

“Tall, dark, and striking,” Eleanor continued. “And those broad shoulders, just like your father’s.” Eleanor closed her eyes for a moment. “When I think back, that’s the way I remember your daddy when we first met. Except for the skin colour, of course. And that sexy moustache. A man you can melt right into and who’s built to protect you. Not that we Brabant women need protecting.” Eleanor laughed. “I suspected something was going on at the time but you never brought him up.”

Odell certainly knew how to fill out a dinner jacket. He had caught her eye the moment she came down the staircase that first evening. His dark skin separated him from virtually everyone else in the room who were not hired help. He didn’t seem to care, elegantly sliding in and out of conversations in the grand hall as if he were born a Southern gentleman. She caught his gaze more than once before she slipped out the door into the back garden. She hoped he would follow. He didn’t disappoint.

Five minutes later he’d approached. He said all the right words, asked all the right questions. Then he crossed into her space after the right amount of time and at just the right pace. Slow and easy. The experienced hunter. A specialist in catch and release. He smelled like intoxicating power, like a man used to having his way, from determining the moment for the first kiss to moving in for the kill. How best to handle him? She thought she knew the answer, keeping him off-balance when he made the first advance that first night and making him wait.

He admitted that he had come to enlist Daddy’s help in the Senate on behalf of a client. But he had followed her outside for an entirely different reason. Every time he smiled at her, another one of her sharp edges melted. No man had ever done that to her. She planned her counterattack around Daddy’s dinner with the Canadian ambassador the following evening.

She knew exactly when and where the first kiss would take place. She made Odell wait.

Odell came to dinner the next evening to woo the senator, but that was not the relationship Dee wanted Odell to nurture. The fireworks continued to explode between them. Right at the dinner table. Her hand rested on his knee under the table, and she leaned into him at every opportunity. There was nowhere for him to hide—that was part of the fun. She'd behaved like a teenager right under her father's nose.

"I recall that you were all over him during dinner," Eleanor said. "Did you think I hadn't noticed?" Dee shook her head sheepishly.

How much of what had followed could she reveal to Momma? She had never kept anything from her before, but the past months had been exceptional so that the confidentiality of Odell's business dealings could be protected. After months of a secretive long-distance courtship, Dee had given up her job at the art museum in Montgomery and moved to New York to live with Odell, telling her parents she was being sent to research the path blazed by Zelda Fitzgerald early in her marriage—the city was hoping to dedicate its own museum to her art. The story was almost true. Dee had intended to take advantage of her spare time in New York to research Zelda's life with Scottie in Manhattan and the landmarks she had painted in such surreal fashion in the early forties. It might make an interesting Ph.D. project. As it turned out, once there she'd spent more time researching her heroine than learning about Odell. He had been totally tied up with work, secretly shuttling between Daddy and his contacts in Washington by day and Dee for a late dinner and romantic interlude, when the deal permitted a night off.

"He's the one, Momma. But it didn't happen the way I always expected it would."

"It never does, except in the movies."

"Six weeks ago, he took a day off work and announced we were flying to Montreal to visit his mother. His momma is all he has. His sister, She-neitha, died a couple of years ago, and Marisol lives in a nursing home up in Montreal."

“She’s ill?”

“She’s not all there. And she’s a runner. Twice they found her wandering on the street last winter. The home is a spanking new tower in the centre of town, near a busy highway. She had no idea where she was. After the last episode, Odell hired attendants to be with her round the clock. He covers all the bills.”

Dee continued to tell her mother about the visit. When they’d arrived at the nursing home, Marisol was dressed in a peach chiffon dress cut off at the knees, bobby socks, and slippers that glittered. Her thick white hair was braided in a long ponytail that ran halfway down her back in a style more suited to a teenager. Her face was deeply wrinkled, her complexion slightly darker than her son’s, and her eyes sunken, but they brightened the moment Odell walked in the room. Odell brought a corsage to slip on her wrist. “That’s what Mum loves,” he told Dee.

Odell took a seat beside her on the loveseat in the one-bedroom apartment and she took one of his hands in hers. There were moments when she knew who he was, and others when she called him by another name. Odell played along, smiling, telling her he loved her, over and over again, even in those moments when she called him Roy. He didn’t want to confuse her.

She gave Odell a tender hug, then gently pushed him away and looked over at Dee. “Odell, it’s not polite to ignore the young woman,” she said. “Give her your seat. Come over here, sweetness, and let me get to know you.” Odell stood up, facing the two women. Marisol put her arm around Dee and squeezed.

Dee said, “It was like she knew exactly why I was there. ‘You know,’ she said, ‘he’s the spitting image of his father.’ She smiled but when I looked at Odell I saw his jaw clench and his eyes tighten. He marched out of the apartment and closed the door, leaving us alone.”

“His father is a sensitive subject?” Eleanor asked.

“They’ve been estranged for over twenty years. He won’t ever talk about him. Won’t even call him father. All he’ll tell me is that Isaiah is the reason why his sister Sheneitha is dead and his mother is like this.”

“So you had a few minutes alone with his mother?” Eleanor asked.

“At first she was completely lucid. ‘Take care of him, Dee,’ she said. ‘He spent his entire life protecting Sheneitha. And he always did as much as he could for me. Promise me you’ll keep him safe.’

“I nodded and she kissed me on the cheek.” That was just before Dee noticed the black amulet on Marisol’s neck and commented on it. It had been passed along from generation to generation, going all the way back to Africa when Odell’s ancestors were still free. Marisol promised to pass it on to her one day. Then she brought her wrist up to her nose and inhaled the corsage deeply. Her eyes hazed over and she smiled. “I hate to rush you, Sheneitha, but I can’t keep my beau waiting any longer.” Dee was still not certain who Marisol was talking to when she promised her the amulet.

Dee looked up at Eleanor. “Within a couple of minutes she was calling me Sheneitha. Marisol had run off again to some warm spot in her memories, where neither Odell nor I were going to reach her.” Dee had taken Marisol’s cold, frail hands in hers and kissed her fingers. “I know that, Mum,” she said.

Now, in the familiar comfort of her family home, Dee found the vivid recollection of that meeting just as upsetting as it had been at the time. “I could feel the tears burning my cheeks after I turned to leave. Odell was waiting for me outside. He wouldn’t speak so I just walked over and hugged him. ‘I did all I could,’ he whispered, ‘but it was never enough.’”

“Sounds like you’ve found the right man and he’s found the right woman,” Eleanor said, comforting her daughter.

Dee searched her mother’s eyes. “We got married in a private ceremony last week. No guests.”

“I wish I’d been there, if only to support you. How are you feeling?”

“My heart feels like a helium balloon that’s about to burst.”

Eleanor laughed. “You’re bringing back some lovely memories for me. Right back to my first days of courtship with your daddy.”

“I’m still floating.”

Eleanor reached out to caress Dee’s hand. “If y’all really love each other, you’ll never crash. It may get more normal, but it’ll only get better.”

“Daddy will be good with this, won’t he?” Dee asked.

Eleanor withdrew her hand and swept a few strands of hair behind her ears. “You’re his daughter, aren’t you?”

Dee nodded.

“And he always wants what’s best for you, doesn’t he?” Eleanor added. “Just be patient with him. You know your father.”

They heard the front door shut downstairs and Edward’s deep voice giving instructions to Henri about some service work that the Mercedes required. If he followed custom, he would appear in the sitting room in about five minutes armed with a couple of Absolut martinis, straight up, one with a twist and the other with three olives. Happy hour on the estate. Edward was back from Washington.

As he entered the room, he did a double take. “It seems I am short one drink. Dee, I can’t tell you how happy I am to see my two favourite girls together again. It’s been months. Did you just get back from Paris? Would you like a martini? Take this one. I can get myself another. It’ll take but a couple of shakes.”

“Daddy, slow down, I’m just fine.” Dee rushed over, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Whoa, honey. Let me put these drinks down before your daddy gives you a proper hug hello. To what do we owe the surprise pleasure of a visit from our favourite daughter?”

“You mean your only child.” She unlocked her embrace.

“The heir to the estate!” he trumpeted. They all laughed. “What are you two ladies cookin’ up?” he asked, leaning over to give Eleanor a quick kiss on the lips.

“Daddy, I have some news.”

“Good news, I hope.” He took a small sip of the martini.

Dee decided to launch right in. “Daddy, I’m married.”

Edward laughed. “Not to some Frenchman, I hope?” When he saw he was laughing alone, he cast a stern glance at Eleanor. She barely nodded at him. “Dee, stop toying with me. My heart’s too old to take this. Why’re you really here?”

She held out her left hand. The diamond sparkled and the wedding band sat quietly beside it.

“She’s not kidding us, dear. Sit down,” Eleanor finally said. “Take a deep breath. I know it doesn’t feel like it, sugar, but your heart’s still beatin’.”

Edward dropped into place beside his wife. “I can’t even begin to fathom who it is,” he mused aloud. “Just tell me it’s not that insipid Ferguson boy.”

“Daddy, it’s not Rodney. That was high school.” The very mention of Rodney Ferguson caused her to bristle. The prom datemare from hell. How could Daddy forget that he practically forced me to go with Rodney? she thought. A favour for the Sherman family, who, in turn, were doing a favour for the Fergusons. That’s the way it worked. And Dee was the victim. “Now *please* let me explain. I know it’s a surprise, but I promise you this is a man you know and respect.”

He stared dumbly at her. His full jaw slacked, and Dee could hear him breathing through his mouth. Long deep sighs.

“Daddy, you remember the fundraiser here last November. I met a man; you invited him for dinner with the ambassador the following night.”

“Yes, that Moore fellow. Dinner was a pretense as far as he was concerned. He used it as a springboard to lobby me about his client’s business issues. A snake charmer, that one, and a heck of a negotiator. He talked Congress into a two-hundred-million-dollar appropriation! What about him?”

“It’s him, Daddy. We’ve fallen deeply in love with one another.”

The senator’s face turned ashen. “This can’t be happenin’. You barely know him. He must be ten years older than you.”

“Don’t treat me like a child. I’m almost thirty-three.”

“He lives in damned New York. Did he manipulate you too?” The words poured out of Edward’s mouth like shotgun blasts. Sweat gathered on his brow.

Eleanor interrupted. “Easy, Edward, you’re not in the Senate. Calm yourself.”

“Don’t be telling me to be calm, woman. Not at a moment like this. I’m perfectly calm. I’m the picture of calm. It’s your daughter. She’s the one

in desperate need of our attention. She's gone crazy." He paused. "Wait a minute. Did you know about this, Eleanor?" His eyes had turned fierce.

"Do you think I would keep something like this from you?" Eleanor said with matching force. Her own eyes had narrowed in a manner that seemed unmistakable to Edward.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Edward turned back to Dee. "I know Mr. Moore is an impressive lawyer, and I can appreciate that he has made himself a success." Edward sounded a little calmer, almost matter of fact. Eleanor's influence. Perhaps all was not lost. Edward took a long sip of the martini. Dee glanced over at her mother and caught the slightest shake of her head side to side.

"Edward, perhaps you and I can speak for a few minutes alone," Eleanor said.

"No need, darlin'." Edward was smiling, but his dismissive eyes were sending a different message. "There is no room for *that* man in *my* family."

"In *your* family?" Dee asked. She could feel her cheeks begin to burn.

"I do not consider myself a bigoted man but there's no way under heaven that you could possibly have evaluated this decision clearly, Dee. He's a bewitchin' man, interested in you only until he gets what he wants. Mark my words. He'll take advantage of your trustin' heart, and he'll surely break it."

"Daddy, you don't—"

"I cannot abide this." The train had left the station and Edward was rolling. "And I will do everythin' under my power to undo the egregious error you've made with your life. It's not too late."

Dee crossed her arms. It was pointless to speak. She had expected a thunderous response. He continued talking but she was no longer listening. Odell's plan: "Wait him out. Don't interrupt. He needs to emote. Only then will he listen. When you finally respond, keep control of your own emotions. Wait for silence before you speak."

She took a deep breath. "Daddy, it's done and there's no undoing it. This is my life. I know it's all happened very quickly." Dee glanced over at Eleanor. "But Momma told me that when the day came, I would know."

Edward's face was now a deep shade of plum. "Know what? Did you learn nothin' living in this house?"

"You mean finding the right boy from the right family, so you could mate me with the right stud for the bloodline?"

Edward stepped forward into Dee's space. "Don't get cheeky with me. This is not a game, and we are not living a scene out of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*."

"Don't patronize me." Her fists clenched at her side.

"Patronize? This is the real world, not some fairy tale. In this world these types of marriages do not happen. You can't—"

"This marriage has already happened, Daddy," Dee interrupted, her voice a block of ice.

"This will never be accepted in our local circle. Oh yes, our friends and relatives will smile to our faces and tell us how fortunate we are to have our only child finally betrothed and isn't it just sooo wonderful. Then they'll return to their homes and wonder aloud to one another what you were thinkin' about, how you were plannin' to avoid the undercurrent of controversy that still underlies mixed marriages in our community. We're not like those fancy-pants Yankees who'll tolerate anythin'."

"Don't worry. I won't be around to embarrass you. I've already moved to New York where the 'fancy-pants Yankees' will accept me and my husband. And our children, whatever colour they happen to be." Dee rushed to cover her mouth. There was no putting the words back in.

"Enough." Eleanor's harsh tone silenced father and daughter immediately. "Too many words have been spoken already. You both need to take a break." Turning to Dee, she continued firmly, "Daddy's had a shock and needs some time for everything to sink in."

She glared at her husband as if daring him to open his mouth in response.

He turned on his heels heading toward the hallway with what was left of the martini. "I need to take a walk, if you'll excuse me."

Eleanor waited until she heard Edward's heavy footsteps making their way down the staircase. She reached over to Dee and wrapped her in

motherly tenderness. “This project may take us considerably longer than I might have guessed. Give him time and I’m sure he’ll come around.”

“Momma, I’m headed back to New York.”

“Weren’t you planning to stay over?”

“My plans have changed. I can’t stay here. Not now.”

“I understand. Let me work on him.”

“I had hoped to come back down with Odell next week.”

“We may have to put a pin in that for now.”

“Then let me know when you’d like to visit. I miss you.”

Eleanor sighed. “I will, and hopefully your father will have recovered enough to accompany me. Give him some time. You know the family history on the subject of race relations. There may be some deep issues he needs to work through.”

6:00 p.m., Monday, August 10, 2015
Manhattan

Jackson Sherman slipped out of the party at around six p.m. Waves of heat bounced off his office window but he felt nothing but the processed air conditioning of the glass and steel office tower, a champagne buzz, and the taste of success. Bounty would never have gotten to the finish line without him. It had also cemented his relationship with the General. The red message light on his office phone was flickering, and he shut his door before settling in behind the desk.

The artificial female voice on the message machine told him he had one unheard message. It might be important. He had heard rumours about a deal brewing in Texas. There were no secrets at TGO. The General might have thought no one at the firm was aware of what was going on in his personal life, but Jackson had been following closely. Emily was his eyes and ears. He hit the play button.

The voice was old and familiar with the powerful Southern drawl that Jackson had worked so hard to eliminate:

“Jackson. Did you know about any of this? I can only assume you did not. Because I swear if you did and been keepin’ it secret from me, I would find that un-for-givable. Your father and I have been close friends forever, and I would hate to think his son could betray me like this. It’s Edward Brabant. Please return the call as soon as you pick this up. I need your assistance. I am *beside* myself.”

The senator had finally discovered what Jackson had known for months—that his precious daughter had been having an affair with the lawyer who had been lobbying him. And now they were married. Odell had been careful to keep their relationship under wraps, having dinners where no one could recognize them. It was all so cloak and dagger. At least that's the way Emily had been describing it to him.

He'd noticed them slip out of the senator's house the night of the fundraiser last November. First Dee, then a minute or two later Odell followed, then he'd spied them linking arms out on the front lawn an hour later. There'd obviously been something going on between them after that event. When he'd discovered Dee was visiting Odell in New York, he'd arranged for Emily to befriend her as a fellow Southerner lost in the big city. They had bonded immediately and Emily became the pipeline of information about the budding relationship between the two lovebirds.

What to do now about the senator? The Brabants and the Shermans had been friendly for a century, maybe longer. He and Dee had known each other casually through their high school years. His father and the senator were golfing buddies. Without that connection, Jackson could never have arranged for Odell to meet Senator Brabant last November. That meeting had propelled Jackson's career at TGO. The General was a key to Jackson's immediate future and the track to partnership. On the other hand, having a connection to one of the most powerful senators in D.C., the ranking Republican on a number of committees, and possible next vice-presidential running mate in 2016, was a trump card that Jackson did not want to give up.

"Determine the threat and eliminate it." Those were the General's words. Jackson may not have gotten it exactly but he understood the gist. But who was the threat here? Was the senator going to expect Jackson to do something that might jeopardize his relationship with the General? Could he say no to the senator without killing this golden career goose? If the shoe were on the other foot, Odell would know instinctively what to do. But that was no help to Jackson now. He was on his own.

“Rely on your developed instinct when going into battle.” Another one of the General’s sayings. Something Odell had picked up from his mentor Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese general he was always quoting.

Jackson picked up the phone and dialed. He needed to buy himself a little time. Just a week.