

Me and You, Inc.

Me and You, Inc.

A Novel by Julie Kushner

Me and You, Inc.

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For my Mom, who taught me that a life lived on one's own terms is the most priceless gift you can give yourself.

Harley

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Before I was publicly traded on NASDAQ, I used to watch a lot of television . . . sitcoms, mainly. I liked the simplicity of them . . . the way everybody had gleaming white teeth, spoke in punch lines, and had only the kind of problems that could be solved in half an hour.

But if I'm being completely honest, I think the thing I liked most about sitcoms was that they always ended. The credits would roll. The theme song would play. And I would imagine the characters on screen exhaling a sigh of relief, because now they got to take a break . . . a break from having gleaming white teeth, and speaking in punch lines, and dealing with half-hour long problems . . . a break from being themselves . . . from living . . . at least until the next episode.

The day I discovered that my life wasn't a sitcom, I had an actual panic attack. I'm talking hyperventilation . . . stomach lodged in throat . . . head between my legs . . . the whole nine yards. The idea that you had to be YOU, every minute of every day, every second of every hour, until you died. . . that there were no breaks ever from the complexities and doldrums of life . . . not even when no one was watching . . . not even for commercials . . . was too much for my young mind to bear. There were just too many choices . . . too many tests . . . too many opportunities to screw everything up so royally that nothing in your life could ever be good again.

In that sense, becoming incorporated was oddly freeing. I no longer had to live in fear of screwing up, because I had turned over the reins to someone else . . . a group of someones, actually . . . all of whom were much smarter and more capable than I was, or so I thought. Before I knew it, I too always had gleaming white teeth, spoke in punchlines, and had problems that could be solved in half an hour. In short, I had become a character in my own sitcom; and, for the most part, it was awesome, at least as far as I was concerned.

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The only problem of course, was that unlike sitcom characters, I could never ever, under any circumstances, take a break from being me . . . because “Me” had become so much less about me, and so much more about Them . . . and because someone was always watching . . .

- *Harley Abel, Inc.*

(An Excerpt from The Incorporation Diaries)

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Chapter 1 – The Pink Shirt Contingency

“I would like to propose immediate removal of the pink shirt from wardrobe rotation. According to my analysis, six of the last eight times Mr. Abel has worn the pink shirt, our shares have substantially decreased in value. On average, Harley’s wearing of the pink shirt results in a loss of three-dollars per share. Compounded over a period of five years, that amounts to . . .”

“Pure correlative fallacy. There is no concrete evidence to suggest that it’s the shirt that’s resulting in the stock loss. I bet, if analyzed over a long enough period, a similar result could be found with the blue shirt, or the red shirt, or that hideous tie he has with the turtles running across it . . . In fact, I would like to propose that no one over the age of 10 should ever wear an article of clothing with amphibians on it.”

“Reptiles.”

“What?”

“Turtles are reptiles, not amphibians.”

“Can we get back to my point about the pink shirt, please? This chart clearly shows . . .”

“Oh, you and your charts! Ever since you took that Power Point course at the Learning Annex, you’ve somehow decided that everything is better with charts.”

“Everything *is* better with charts.”

“The fact of the matter is, Harley’s a 33-year old single man. If we keep putting him in pink shirts, investors might get the wrong idea.”

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“What wrong idea . . . that he has good taste? I can’t believe you are actually making the argument that just because Harley is a single man over thirty, who owns a pink shirt, people will automatically assume he’s gay. You are such a caveman.”

“You’re just mad because you were the one who bought him the shirt.”

“It’s an Armani!”

Having regularly attended weekly board meetings ever since he was nine years old, Harley Abel had long ago stopped paying attention to their content. He wasn’t always this way. Those first few meetings, he’d been extremely diligent, his tongue sticking ever so slightly out of the side of his mouth, as he struggled gamely to commit to memory the names, faces, and personal preferences of each of the Board Members who shook his small hand and greeted him as he entered the conference room. Yet, each time Harley thought he could successfully identify the men and women running every aspect of his life, inevitably one or two of them would be replaced by a stranger, forcing him to start from scratch. Eventually all those ever-changing names and faces melded together into an oddly comforting glob of bureaucratic obscurity.

Harley quickly learned that, by merely looking up and nodding his head in the direction of whomever happened to be speaking at the time, at random five-to-ten minute intervals, he was able to convey the impression that he was both interested and engaged. This impression was bolstered by the fact that Harley appeared to be taking copious notes at each board meeting, when, in actuality he was working on the *New York Times*’ Sunday crossword puzzle. For example, at this particular meeting, when Harley unconsciously pumped his first in triumph upon correctly determining that “Namibia” was the country that has two oryxes on its coat of arms, the female Board Member advocating against removal of the pink shirt from Harley’s wardrobe

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rotation took this gesture to mean that he loved his pink shirt, and supported her argument wholeheartedly.

(The truth of the matter was that Harley didn't give a rat's ass about his pink shirt, or any of his shirts, for that matter, provided they were hanging neatly over his mirror before he woke up each morning, which they always were.)

"Other items of business?" Rowan Mitcherson called out from the head of the long conference room table.

Rowan was the only member of Harley's board with whom he considered himself to have a personal relationship. (Though, truth be told, if "personal relationship" was defined by someone knowing by heart all the details of every single humiliating thing that ever happened to him, he had a "personal relationship" with all of them.) After all, it was Rowan who had first recruited Harley for incorporation all those years ago . . . Rowan, who, equipped with nothing but a few stuffed animals, a wipe board, and some crayons, managed to teach a nine-year old Harley the difference between a Bull Market and a Bear one . . . Rowan, who purchased Harley his first business suit, personal computer, briefcase and box of condoms.

Newspaper publications regularly referred to Rowan as Harley's "father figure," a term Harley used to worry would deeply offend his biological father, until he realized that the only part of the newspaper his *real* father ever read was the comic strip section. And as far as Harley was concerned, the papers got it wrong. To Harley, Rowan Mitcherson was the absolute antithesis of a father figure, in the sense that the President and CEO of Harley Abel, Inc. was everything his father was not: doting (though in an oddly methodical, almost clinical way), diligent, stern, and *smart*.

This is not to say that Bob Abel was stupid. (He wasn't.) He just simply didn't bother concerning himself with things that didn't interest

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him, like books, newspapers, the stock market, and Harley Abel, Inc. (He sure liked cashing in those dividend checks, though!)

“The Next Big Thing was up in the ratings again this week,” piped in a portly, bespectacled, Board Member with the worst comb-over in the history of comb overs. “10.5 million viewers, and up a half a point from last week in the demo, which is extra impressive when you consider that we aren’t even up to the semi-finals yet.”

The Next Big Thing was the reality talent show Harley Abel had been hosting for the past two years. When it first premiered, one of the trades referred to it affectionately as “*American Idol* on lithium.”

“I say we strike while the iron is hot. Get him doing promotions, hitting the talk show circuit, have him travel to the finalists’ hometowns. It did wonders for the share price last year,” offers the Board Member with the incomprehensibly large wart on his nose, which makes it both extremely uncomfortable and rather unpleasant to look him directly in the face for any extended period of time.

“We’ve gotta clear it with the Network first,” insisted Comb-Over.

“Not if we remind them that the continuance of their voting rights as shareholders depends on it,” retorted Warty Nose.

“All I’m saying is that . . .” Comb-Over began, only to be unceremoniously interrupted by Rowan.

“Moving on to merger opportunities,” intoned the CEO.

The statement was met with a chorus of groans throughout the conference room. Ongoing discussions regarding the upcoming, and highly necessary, merger of Harley Abel, Inc. with a female corporation not only consistently took up the most time and energy at each and every board meeting, they were also intensely acrimonious. Heated

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discussions inevitably ended in shouting matches, and, in three instances hospitalization of one or multiple board members due to fisticuffs, and, in one particularly memorable instance the way too accurate tossing of a pump with a six inch heel into someone's right eye.

"Daisy Barnes' people are still interested," piped in one Board Member. "I know you guys shot me down last time. But I think we're missing a really great opportunity here. "Her stock has shown significant growth in the past six months. We could really use the kind of momentum a corp like that could bring to the table."

"For the last time, Daisy Barnes is 85-years old!" Another Board Member retorted. "Why must you insist on marrying us off to someone old enough to be Harley's grandmother."

"She'll be dead soon!" The first Board Member replied. "We'll inherit everything! In five years, our profit margin will increase 20 to 30 percent. We could even consider a stock split."

"In the short term, maybe," the second Board Member persisted. "In the long term, Harley looks to investors like the kind of creeper who will marry an old hag for a paycheck, because he can't earn on his own. By the time she's dead, he'll be close to 40, a widower, and totally damaged goods. A re-merger is extremely unlikely . . . which means no cute kids to maintain the interest of the public, after he loses his looks, which will ultimately lead to Harley Abel, Inc. heading straight to bankruptcy in less than 20 years."

"Other options?" Rowan intervened, eager to keep this ship on course.

"I've always liked Madison Cain," offered the Board Member with curiously crooked mustache, which many other board members had long suspected was a fake that had been pasted on his face to make him look more dignified. "She's the right age. She's attractive, ambitious, comes from a good family. A girl like that could do wonders for the corporation's image and earning power."

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“No,” shouted out a few Board Members around the room, in unison, followed by an “Out of the question,” from Rowan.

“What’s wrong with Madison?” Fake Mustache asked defensively.

“She’s a *Cain*,” hisses one of the other Board Members discretely.

“So?” retorts Fake Mustache.

“Come on! Cain and Abel? We can’t have anybody referring to our merged corporation as Cain and Abel. The inference alone would bankrupt us among right-wing investors,” scolded the female Board Member with the extreme fondness for pink shirts.

“I’m not following,” Fake Mustache insisted stubbornly.

“*Cain and Abel*,” the female Board Member repeated exasperatedly, “the brothers in the bible who invented the concept of murder, because Cain threw a rock at Abel, out of jealousy? Haven’t you read the Old Testament?”

“The Old Testament . . . isn’t that a column in *People Magazine*?” Fake Mustache replied dryly. “So, she changes her last name to Abel, after the merger. I still don’t see the problem.”

“Ha,” a heretofore silent Board Member scoffed. “The youngest daughter of Albus Cain . . . a.k.a the Daddy Warbucks of human capital? She’d change her name over his dead body! In fact, in two of his other daughters’ marriages, the male corporations actually took on the *Cain name*.”

“I don’t understand why we don’t just marry Harley off to a non-corporation, like an actress or a super model or something,” piped

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in Herman Thurgood, IV, a young tycoon, who had recently inherited his position on the Board from his deceased grandfather, and who all the other Board Members hated with a passion because of it.

The statement was met with a violent response throughout the room, a chorus of glares and grumbles, angrily whispered conversations could be heard across the table. Herman, of course, like most people who are universally despised, was completely oblivious to the ire he had stirred up around him, just by opening his mouth, let alone for making a suggestion so outrageous and ridiculous to the rest of the Board that it verged on blasphemous.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s a no-brainer,” Herman forged on. “A non-corporate merger means no second Board to kowtow toward. We own them *both*, which means we get to control everything. It’s like marrying Harley off to a female version of himself.”

“That’s not how we do things around here, Herman,” responded Rowan, in a voice that managed to be equal parts patronizing and paternal.

“Well, maybe it should be,” replied Herman defiantly, causing the rest of the Board members to gasp in unison.

(As argumentative and disagreeable as the Board Members were with one another, it was an unspoken rule that every word that came out of Rowan Mitcherson’s mouth was immediately and universally agreed upon.)

Rowan, however, accepted the challenge unfazed. “Son, as someone who has been investing in and controlling human capital since before you were born, I can tell you that marrying off corporations to *civilians* not only does not work, it is downright dangerous. We wouldn’t want another Cardigan Corp. on our hands would we?”

The story of Cardigan Corp. had become somewhat of a cautionary tale among Board Members the world over, as to what

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happens when corporations marry outsiders, even though the event had happened long before most of the Board Members had been born, and no one could attest personally to its truthfulness. According to legend, Mr. Cardigan fell in love with an outsider, who systematically bankrupted the entire corporation, until its share price was worth peanuts. Once flush with cash and on top of the world, the Cardigan Corp. found themselves broke, virtually unemployable, and the laughing stock of the corporate world. The news reported that Mr. Cardigan and his wife both died in a freak tobogganing accident, while honeymooning in the Swiss Alps. But most investors suspected that the former Board Members of Cardigan Corp had them killed to avenge their murdered careers and now-worthless stock options.

“No, I guess not,” muttered Herman dejectedly.

“Any other suggestions?” Rowan inquired.

Two hours later, three board members were in tears, five had lost their voices from screaming, one was sucking on an asthma inhaler like it was a baby bottle, and another had to be excused because his heart monitor kept beeping. But still nothing had been decided with respect to Harley Abel’s merger . . .

“That was the last item on the agenda,” Rowan announced casually, seemingly unfazed by the chaos surrounding him. “Does anyone have any closing remarks before we adjourn until next week?”

“Yes,” announced the Board Member with the inhaler, deftly removing a piece of paper from his leather attaché case. “We received this memo from the *Today* show about Harley’s upcoming appearance in two weeks. Dear Members of the Board,” he managed to wheeze out between regular puffs on his inhaler. “In honor, of Breast Cancer awareness month, please make sure Harley arrives at our studios wearing a pink shirt.”

“Woo-hoo! Awwww yeah!” Harley exclaimed out loud.

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(He had just gotten the last clue, finishing the *Sunday Times* Crossword Puzzle for the first time in weeks. The female Board Member smiled smugly, making a note in her iPad to speak with Harley's stylist about getting him more pink shirts.)

Madison

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My father never believed in the concept of “play” as a children’s pastime. Pretending? Games? Horsing around? He found all of those typical childlike activities to be, not only a major waste of time, but also extremely counterproductive to the development of children into functional, successful adult corporations.

On our birthdays, my older sisters and I never received toys. Instead we got pint-sized business suits, pink brief cases, boring books, and instruction manuals for hobbies my father deemed appropriate uses for our free time: horseback riding, playing chess, fencing, ballroom dancing. It was all very Jane Austen.

My childhood wasn’t completely toy free, though. We had this tradition in our family where, every Christmas, we all went to the toy store together and got to pick out one toy that we could keep. It could be any toy in the entire store. Price was no object.

To this day, I still remember the toys I chose each year: a purple teddy bear when I was four, a bucket of colorful building blocks when I was five, a Barbie with brown hair like mine, when I was six, a Barbie Dream House with a pink corvette in the garage when I was seven. But of all the toys I chose, none was more memorable than the one I selected for my eighth birthday.

That morning, my father, sisters, and I piled into the back of the limo and headed off to FAO Schwartz. (My mother didn’t go with us. I don’t remember exactly why or what she was doing at the time, day trading, perhaps.)

I remember it was my first time visiting FAO Schwartz. In the past, we had always done our “Christmas Shopping” at the Toys R Us in Times Square. But then some homeless guy asked my dad for spare change while we were in line to pay; and he decided we could no longer shop for toys there, because, in his words, “that is where the hoodlums shop.”

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Since all of us girls were home schooled (at least up until college), and hadn't had a sanctioned excursion outside the house in weeks, we ran through the aisles of that toy store like game show contestants on a five-minute shopping spree. My oldest sister, Stella, having recently turned 13 and decided she was much too old for toys, promptly selected the most boring-looking board game on the shelf, and asked if she could select it as her "toy" and donate it to underprivileged children. To reward my sister for her generosity my father ended up donating 500 of that awful game to Toys for Tots.

(I, for one, thought this was patently unfair, since it meant my sister technically received 500 toys, while the rest of us only got one. But I held my tongue.)

Bella -- who was 11 at the time, and had recently discovered the wonders of French pastries from a well-traveled aunt of ours -- opted immediately for an Easy Bake Oven, the heat source of which she promptly had our father's mechanic jimmy with, so the small kiddie oven would heat up enough for her to make her soon-to-be signature eclairs and madelines. Perpetual mother hen, Ariella, then age 10, chose an ornate rolling baby carriage with a porcelain, blanket-swaddled, baby doll inside. For an entire year, she never let the darn thing leave her side, submitting it to five-time a day feedings, and twice daily wardrobe and diaper changes. (Had we not been home schooled, I strongly suspect this is the type of habit that would have gotten Ariella beaten up by her peers.)

As for me, my choice of toy that year was a bit less preordained. I struggled mightily with the decision, wandering up and down the aisles with a grim expression on my face, terrified that I might make the wrong choice and live to regret it for the rest of the year. After all, this wasn't just any toy, it was the toy that was destined to represent my place in the family for the next 364 days.

When I first came across the Batter-Up playset, my first thought was that it was a very efficient gift. After all, a single package contained

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not one, but three toys: a bat, a ball, and child-sized leather glove, thereby rendering it far superior to any of my sister's gifts (except for Stella, who technically received 500 board games, but that was neither here nor there). The fact that all of my sisters cautioned me so strongly against the playset, claiming it was a "boy's gift," made me even more determined to get it, desperate as I was that year to stand out as anything other than the baby of the family. Once I made my choice, my father deposited the set into the cart next to my sisters' toys without fanfare, and headed to the checkout counter.

Later that day, while my sisters were otherwise engaged, I donned my equestrian outfit (the closest thing I had in my wardrobe to a baseball uniform), headed down to my father's office with my Batter-up playset in hand, and asked him if he'd play with me. "I refuse teach my daughter to be a baseball player," my father said resolutely, without looking up from his work.

I nodded dejectedly, and turned to leave the room. But just as I did, he added, "But if she's interested, I'll teach her how to manage a winning team."

That winter, my dad spent an hour every Saturday morning teaching me the ins and outs of baseball statistics. From him, I learned about batting averages, ERAs, RBIs, runs scored, and runs allowed. I learned how to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various players, and why the strongest players weren't necessarily the ones who earned the highest paychecks. Together, we created a fantasy baseball league, and poured over the sports section eagerly to see how our team had performed, which, of course, was always spectacularly. It was the only time in my childhood I recall ever spending a significant time alone with my father, who seemed perpetually surrounded by business partners, employees, and various yes-men.

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To this day, it remains the best season of my life . . .

- *Madison Cain, Inc.*

(An Excerpt from The Incorporation Diaries)

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Chapter 2 – Fashionably Evil

“Kennedy Taylor wouldn’t know fashion if it crawled up her anorexic ass and died there,” Madison Cain proclaimed with a scowl, as she slammed down the latest issue of *Vogue*, which featured a no less than six-page spread on the ridiculously tall, almost supernaturally leggy, blonde designer.

“With all due respect, Ms. Cain, you might wish to refrain from discussing topics like your adversary’s possible eating disorder and anal penetration during your meeting with the representatives from Target tomorrow,” advised Madison’s newest handler.

(Amy Mathers was a recent Yale grad, and the daughter of a highly decorated Army General. The Board had hired because they believed her time spent growing up on various military bases amongst drill sergeants would serve her well in dealing with both the Corporation’s rigidly structured lifestyle and her occasional-verging-on-often violent mood swings.)

Truth be told, Madison never thought she’d care so much about securing an affordable clothing line. In fact, when her Board first informed her that they were in talks with Target to market less expensive (but equally stylish, of course) versions of some of her business wear, her initial response was, “But why? Isn’t the main draw to wearing *Madison-a-Porter* knowing that people who shop at stores like *Target* can’t afford it?”

Yet all that changed the second Madison learned that Kennedy Taylor, Inc. was also in talks to secure a Target line; and that, ultimately, the discount retailer would end up showcasing only one of the two Corporations’ clothing at its stores. If engaging in battle with your business competitors was a form of modern civilized warfare, then Madison Cain was Genghis Khan, and Target had just become China.

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The fact that the competitor in question just so happened to be Kennedy Taylor, Inc. was merely the match dropped casually onto the already-overturned tank of kerosene located inches away from the nuclear reactor that was Madison's mind. The two female corporations had a long and storied history with one another, one that made the Hatfields and McCoys seem like drinking buddies, and the Montagues and Capulets, like old family friends . . .

The feud started years earlier at an Intercollegiate Acapella Competition. Madison and Kennedy were both members of the same sorority (Pi Phi) but at different schools. Madison attended Yale, while Kennedy got *her* Board-approved Ivy League education at Princeton. By an unlucky twist of fate, both girls' teams had chosen as their final musical number the song that led the main characters of the film *Pitch Perfect* to victory in *their* acapella competition. Accusations flew, shouting matches ensued, and Madison and Kennedy, who had never met one another before that day (having only read about one another's stock performances in *Wall Street Journal*) ended up getting into a hair-pulling, teeth-gnashing girl fight, which littered the trade magazines the following day, and sent both Corporations' stocks into free fall for weeks. Not surprisingly, both teams ended up being unceremoniously disqualified from the competition as a result.

(As it turned out the fault lied with the Board Members of both corporations who, having learned little about how to win collegiate acapella competitions in business school, had each rented *Pitch Perfect* a month before the competition to get a crash course in the subject. Kennedy for her part, had initially wanted to pay homage to Miley Cyrus' controversial performance of *Blurred Lines* at the VMAs, but her Board (and her father) deemed the undertaking much too risky and strictly forbade it.)

Nonetheless, a feud was born, one that only continued to grow and fester, after the two Corporations graduated college and launched their own fashion lines within mere days of one another. Kennedy Taylor, Inc., a Beverly Hills-born socialite and notorious party girl,

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presented a trendy verging- on-deliciously tawdry clothing line that would fit right in at the exclusive, celebrity-frequented night clubs that dotted the Hollywood Hills. Madison Cain, Inc.'s East Hampton childhood was much quieter and more dignified. Her line consisted of mainly smart business suits with a fun fashion flare, and the type of classic understated dresses one could wear out to a nice dinner, or dress-up with jewelry and heels for black-tie charity event.

Prospective clientele for the two fashion lines were as different from one another as the two female corporations that developed them. But of course, they all shared one very important trait in common: they were obnoxiously and un-self-consciously rich.

Still, the two fashion lines would likely have gone on to lead completely separate and relatively successful existences, were it not for the two Corporations' almost compulsive tendency to trash talk one another in the trades at every opportunity. Madison Cain, Inc. referred to the *Kennedy Tailored* clothes as "uninspired, cheap-looking, street-walker wear, made for women who needed to overpay their stylists to get themselves laid, in a pathetic form of reverse prostitution."

Kennedy Taylor, Inc. referred to the suits of *Madison-a-Porter* (which, by the way is pronounced like the French, *pret-a-porter*, and not like the beer, or the guy who carries your luggage in hotels) as "the modern day equivalent of housecoats and muumuus, made for future spinsters, who just simply couldn't wait until they turn 70 to start looking like their grandmothers."

Fashion reporters loved it, of course, and exploited the Corporation's hatred of one another every chance they got, sometimes going as far as to manufacture nasty quotes from one Corporation, in order to get a rise out of the other. Writing about hem-lines, inseams and button collars had never been so much fun! The feud eventually expanded beyond the Corporations and infected the clothing buyers themselves, who took to calling themselves Madisonites and Kennedyettes. It got to the point where the surest form of social suicide

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(and a possible black eye) was coming to Madisonite-sponsored charity event wearing Kennedy Tailored clothing, and vice versa.

But unlike during their innocent days of frat-formal hopping, multiple choice test taking, and acappella competition competing, where the slightest indiscretion would result in a two-to-five point stock market loss, now the more the Corporations' fought with one another, the more their stocks *rose*, which only served to encourage their bad behavior more . . .

"I'll be a perfect angel, like I always am," insisted Madison completely without irony, as she tilted her head upward and allowed Amy to apply foundation powder to her face. "By the time I'm done with the suits at Target, they are not only going to immediately award me free-reign for my clothing line, they are going to petition the Pope to have me sainted. If there's anything I know how to do well its grease palms and talk business. I am, after all, my father's daughter."

Amy had a few choice responses to her charge's statement, but wisely chose to hold her tongue, as she had been trained to do. "Perhaps, now would be as good a time as any to review your Board-approved responses to Target's questions, during your meeting today," the handler suggested casually, as she tested two shades of lipstick on Madison's wrist, before ultimately deciding to go with the lighter shade.

Madison sighed in frustration as she examined her newly manicured nails. "I know . . . I know . . . be highly complementary. Tell them how much I love their store . . . it would be an honor to showcase my line there . . . I look forward to developing a working relationship with you . . . I have no qualms at all about selling cut rate versions of my \$1,000 suits at \$29.95 etc., etc., blah, blah, blah. I am a nearly 30-year old Ivy League educated, highly lucrative corporation, with an excellent pedigree, and a proven track record for success with every business opportunity my Board has ever asked me to undertake. Why does everyone insist on constantly reminding me how to do my job?"

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Amy steeled herself, knowing she was venturing into dangerous territory. The easiest course of action would be to agree with everything Madison said, stroke her ego, and avoid conflict at all costs. But the young handler knew full well that if anything went wrong during today's meeting it was *her* job (and rent money, and ability to eat meals that consisted of things other than Ramen Noodles and week old peanut butter and jelly sandwiches) on the line . . . not Madison's, who would continue to live in the manner to which she had grown accustomed with or without a Target line in her stock portfolio. With that in mind, she settled on the more risky and much less pleasant route: *honesty*.

"Madison, I'm not saying that you aren't brilliant at your job," Amy began tentatively. "You absolutely are . . . the best, hands down. There's no question about that."

Madison nodded approvingly. However, she had been in enough conversations like these to know when a "But" was coming. "Then what exactly are you saying?" She probed.

Amy took a deep breath before speaking. "Well, it's just that. Sometimes, when you feel as though your accomplishments have not been properly recognized, or that you are not getting enough respect you tend to lose your temper . . . and . . . say things that are not Board-member approved."

"Like the time I told Donald Trump he was much too rich to have such an unnatural looking toupee?" Madison inquired with a grin.

"Precisely," answered Amy, breathing a sigh of relief, having convinced herself that she had successfully weathered the storm.

"And the time I told Martha Stewart that her Christmas decorations were pedestrian, and the dinner she prepared was bland and lacked flavor?" Madison added sagely.

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“You really said that?” Amy asked incredulously. (That particular snafu had taken place before she’d been hired . . . thankfully.)

“Yes, I said it. And you’re right. It was because I lost my temper. But I have absolutely no reason to lose my temper today, because our presentation is genius. Our designs are spectacular. Everything has been planned out in advance down to the last detail. Nothing, absolutely nothing that is going to go wrong at this meeting today. Amy Mathers, we are going to win this account. And neither Kennedy Taylor, nor her asinine Board, nor anybody else is going to stand in the way of our victory,” Madison insisted, as she rose from the chair, and took a final satisfied glance at herself in the mirror, before allowing Amy to help her slip into her Burberry peacoat, and hand over her matching Burberry briefcase.

Amy smiled stiffly at her charge with more confidence than she actually felt. “Of course, Madison,” she said solemnly. “Everything is going to go perfectly today.”

Less than a half hour later, everything had gone to total and utter shit . . .

Things had started off fine. Madison began the meeting with the Target representatives on her best behavior. She was polite, charming, and even managed to be a bit self-deprecating, which studies have shown goes a long way toward appeasing those in positions of power. “I’ll admit, I know very little about what it takes to be cool,” Madison demurred, even going as far as to bat her eyelashes a bit as she spoke. “Target has cornered the market on that. But I truly believe that the sophistication of Madison-a-Porter clothing, coupled with the affordability and accessibility of the Target brand name are a match made in Heaven.”

Within minutes, the Target representatives appeared to be eating out of her assiduously lotioned, professionally manicured, and daily massaged hands. And when the time came for the representatives

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to review with Madison, the designs her Board had submitted the week before, Madison was just the right blend of deferential and enthusiastic. She expressed excitement went the representatives complimented her designs. (“Oh, I’m so glad you like it,” she cooed. “Between you and me, this one is my favorite too.”) She appeared flexible and open to any suggestions that were made, even the ones with which Amy knew she vigorously disagreed. (“Oh, you are absolutely right! Some faux fur on the collar would definitely make that jacket pop.” “No, of course, I don’t have anything against faux fur. I love animals!” “Yes, I do see why that price point could be considered a bit high by some of your more modest income earners. We could definitely make it work for under \$50.”)

Madison even successfully managed to hold her tongue, when one representative suggested that a piece about which she had felt particularly passionate be removed from the collection entirely. (“Oh, I’m not wedded to that pant suit at all. We just wanted to give you options. I can see why you might think it might come off as a bit mannish to some of your shoppers. My primary goal is to provide you with a clothing line you feel confident selling. If you don’t like it, it’s out. No questions asked.”)

The first sign of trouble occurred right when the time had come for the Target Representatives to review with Madison the final piece in the Corporation’s prospective *Madison-a-Porter* by Target collection. It was to be the *piece de resistance* of the entire line. Madison herself had spent entire days meeting with the designers to make sure that every stitch was perfect, every seam flawless, and that the design quality was impeccable. Though the dress had been created exclusively for the Target line, and the price point was 65% lower than any *Madison-a-Porter* dress found in the high end department stores, Madison was entirely convinced that it was the most elegant and beautiful item of clothing the Corporation had ever created.

As the president of Target flipped ever closer to the last page of the previously-submitted portfolio, Amy could hear the handlers

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simultaneously taking a deep intake of breath right along with her. After all, they all knew only too well that if the Target representatives had even one less than positive thing to say about this particular outfit, Madison would not be able to hold her tongue. In fact, they were quite certain that if anything less than total praise and admiration was heaped on this final design, World War 3 would erupt from Madison's mouth and level the entire room, until nothing was left of it but *or them* but blood and ash.

As it turned out, the handlers needn't have been so concerned about how the Target representatives would react to Madison's final and favorite design . . . because that design wasn't in the book at all.

"We must admit, we were very surprised by what we saw here," the Vice President of Target began solemnly, peering at Madison from over the top of his excessively thick reading glasses. "At first, we thought it must be some kind of mix-up. But when we spoke to Amy at your office last week, she insisted that, in fact, these were *all* your original designs."

This is it. I'm so getting fired. Amy thought to herself, as she felt the chunks of her hastily- chewed strawberry Pop Tart breakfast rise in her throat.

"I'm afraid I'm not quite certain I know to what you are referring," Madison replied levelly, as she turned toward Amy and gave her a look, which, if it had come with closed captioning, would have most certainly said, "If you've somehow managed to screw this up for me, I will remove your brain from your head and feed it to you morsel, by morsel, like Anthony Hopkins did to Ray Liotta in the movie *Hannibal*."

The Vice President of Target finally turned the portfolio to its final page, and gently pushed it toward Madison so that she could see it for herself. The human corporation's handlers discretely moved their chairs closer to the center of the room so that they could get a better

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look. The outfit staring back at Madison on that page was nothing like the design she created. In fact, it was nothing like any of her designs. *Madison-a-Porter* clothing had a signature look, muted tones, clean lines, conservative hems and skirt lengths. Everything was elegant and expensive looking.

The design that had somehow found its way to the back of Madison's portfolio was none of these things. It was brightly colored, busily patterned, loud, garish, and SHORT . . . so short that it made one of Madison's male handler's blush just looking at it. As Madison reviewed the piece of paper containing the garment that was somehow being passed off as her own, the look that crossed her face was one of pure horror. In short, she looked as though someone had just cut up her brains and fed them to her. "I'm so sorry, Sir. I don't know how . . . I didn't . . . There must be a reason why . . . I . . ."

For the first time in her 29.76 years on Earth as a living, breathing corporation, Madison Cain was at a complete loss for words.

"What you've produced here is quite shocking to say the least," admitted the President of Target, who, up to this point had been frustratingly silent, his face an unreadable mask of blankness. "It's certainly like nothing we've ever seen in your designs. To be honest, we aren't even sure it's business appropriate."

"I know," Madison said pathetically, her lip had begun quivering so much that Amy feared she might burst into tears. "And rest assured I will get to the bottom of this. This outfit most certainly does not represent the . . ."

"We love it," interrupted the Target President.

"Excuse me?" Madison sputtered dumbfounded.

"It's fresh, original, eye catching, and precisely what your brand needs to make it desirable for the young trendy consumer that is

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today's Target shopper," he continued. "Don't get me wrong, the other items you've showcased here today are lovely enough. But they're just so safe, bland, vanilla."

"Vanilla?" Madison whispered weakly.

"I want you to go back to the drawing board and give me twelve more outfits that are as fun and innovative as this," concluded the Executive. "If you can do that, I'm entirely convinced that *Madison-a-Porter* and Target are in the first stages of a long and mutually beneficial relationship with one another.

In the limo on the way back to the New York apartment, Madison was so livid, she couldn't even bring herself to form actual words. Her face was red, her entire body was clenched, and Amy was starting to worry that she might actually explode. "Who . . . did . . . *this?*" Madison seethed through gritted teeth.

Just then her cell phone vibrated. Though the message came from an unknown number, Madison recognized the sender immediately by the content of the message she received. Staring right back at Madison was Kennedy Taylor and a few of her sorority sisters, looking slightly older than they had when Madison had first tussled with them, but still entirely recognizable. All the girls in the picture were dressed in the same outfit . . . the exact same outfit that had somehow managed to find its way into the last page of the portfolio. Under the photograph was a message:

"Hope your presentation to Target was Pitch Perfect."

- Kisses
*Your Friends at
Kennedy Taylor,
Inc."*

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Madison immediately dropped her phone to the floor, as if it was a burning hot plate, and screamed so loud the entire limo shook. “That . . . that . . . BITCH!” She yelled nonsensically, as she grabbed the newspaper closest to her (the latest issue of the *Wall Street Journal*) and began aggressively ripping it to shreds page-by-page, it was an oddly effective technique she had picked up during one of the Board-mandated Anger Management classes she had been forced to take following the Martha Stewart debacle.

As Madison was contentedly shredding the business section she came across, of all things an article about Kennedy Taylor. “Multi-Million Dollar Fashion Corporation Mulls over Merger with Software Giant,” the headline touted. Beneath the print was a photograph of Kennedy with her arm wrapped possessively around male corporation, Chance Dalton, the latter was grinning smugly, while the blonde socialite was craftily planting a kiss on his cheek for the benefit of the cameras.”

Madison shook her head disgustedly. Of all the manipulative stunts this cheap excuse for a company could possibly pull, publicly presuming a merger with the most eligible male corporation on the East Coast truly took the cake. Madison was just about to delight in making confetti out of Kennedy Taylor’s face, and dumping her out the limo, when suddenly she was struck by a very big idea.

“Amy,” she said, her voice sounding unusually calming considering the seemingly hysterical state she was in just moments ago. “Get the Board on the phone. Tell them I’d like them to meet me at the Downtown Offices in an hour for an emergency meeting. It’s about my merger.”

Harley

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If my parents had bought me a bicycle, I would never have become incorporated. I recognize that this statement sounds ridiculous. But if I've learned anything in my nearly 34 years on Earth, it's that life isn't nearly as epic as we believe it to be.

In fiction, everything tends to be "preordained" and "fated;" as if the World has some Grand Master Plan for each and every one of its inhabitants. In the Land of Make Believe . . . TV . . . books . . . movies . . . there are always things like "foreshadowing," "symbolism" and "climaxes," which tend to imbue with meaning all of life's most cinematic events. But in The Real World, things kind of just . . . happen. And because of this, sometimes the most seemingly mundane events of your daily existence can ultimately end up being the most important.

Take me, for example. I grew up poor . . . not like Oliver Twist-living-in-the-orphanage "I want some more," poor. But definitely poor enough that I recognized myself as fundamentally different from my classmates in a socioeconomic context. I had four outfits that I wore to school each day interchangeably, while most of my classmates had 14 or 20. I packed for school a bag lunch of cereal and stale bread, while my friends counted out their lunch money in crisp dollar bills. I stayed home from school during class trips, because my parents never bothered to pay the stipend, or sign the permission slip in time, while other parents took off from work to chaperone. My mom, dad, and I lived in another family's basement, while most of my friends had their own houses, complete with backyards, swing sets, and mailboxes.

Not that I minded being poor, necessarily. I liked my life. I liked that I got to stay out late, even on school nights, and hang out with the older kids, playing basketball, hockey, soccer, or stick ball, when most of my friends had curfews, and strictly enforced bedtimes. I liked that my dad let me sneak a sip of his beer or whiskey sometimes, when his friends were over to watch the Big Game or play cards. I liked that my parents seemed so much younger and cooler than my friends' parents, even if they tended to treat me more like an annoying younger sibling than their actual son.

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I was a happy kid leading an unspectacular existence, who expected and required very little of life. I wanted for nothing . . . well . . . almost nothing.

I was around 8 or 9 years old when all the kids in class took off their training wheels and became the proud owners of “Big Boy” two wheeler bikes. Those bikes represented a key to the wider world beyond our back yards that us kids had just begun to explore: parks, ponds playgrounds, Post Offices, the local 7-Eleven, that corporate office park a mile down from my house, where all the adults could be seen emerging in their fancy suits to enter their overpriced motor vehicles. In short, bikes were Freedom, and I wanted a taste.

“Dad,” I began one night, as I helped my father clear off the table from one of his late night card games, “my birthday is in a few weeks. Can I get a bike?”

“A bike?” My father asked, emitting a belly laugh that made him sound a bit like the audio animatronic Santa Claus they put up in the mall every December. “Why on Earth would I get you a bike? Do your legs not work?”

I took that as a “No.”

But just because I couldn’t get a bike didn’t mean I couldn’t have my taste of Freedom. That summer when all my friends started taking daily rides down to the office park to check out all the expensive – looking cars, and the even more expensive looking people who drove them, I laced up my sneakers, and began running beside them. At first, keeping up with my two-wheeled friends seemed a virtual impossibility. Within minutes, I’d be gasping for air, my hands clutching my thighs for support, as my friends literally rode off into the sunset without me.

But I kept on running, dashing around the block a few times every morning before school, racing my friends at recess, taking on the

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bikes at night. Because the answer to my father's question was definitely "yes." My legs worked. My legs could be my bike. I just had to prove it.

Slowly but surely, I got faster. Running to the office park behind my friends on their bikes no longer made me so out of breath. And eventually, I wasn't running behind them, but alongside of them. Freedom was mine! "I didn't need no stinking bike."

"Do you know him?" My friend asked me one day, as I jogged across the office park.

"Who?" I asked breathlessly, as I slowed to a stop.

"That guy . . . the one in the brown suit and the bowtie. He's been here every day this week, leaning up against that Aston Martin taking notes. I think he's taking notes about you."

I cocked my head sideways and squinted in the sun at the guy to whom my friend was referring. He looked to be in his early 40's, but was dressed as if he'd stepped out of a 1920's gangster film. When he saw me looking at him, he stopped taking notes and pointedly stared at me. I lifted my right arm and waved, grinning goofily, as if this odd corporate stranger and I had been friends for years. He chuckled and waved back.

The following week, I came home from school to find that same man waiting on my doorstep. His name was Rowan Mitcherson . . .

-Harley Abel, Inc.

(An Excerpt from The Incorporation Diaries)

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Chapter 3 – Cinderella and His Fairy Godhandlers

“Geez, there is so much estrogen and desperation in this room, you could practically smell it,” mused Ryan Meeks, one of Harley’s handlers, as he leaned against the wall of the ballroom and surveyed the crowd.

“Actually, I think that’s just your cologne,” fellow handler Jill Abbott teased, punching her friend playfully in the chest.

“Too much?” Ryan asked nervously, as he not-so-casually sniffed at his forearm.

Jill squinted her eyes, and made her thumb and forefinger into the shape of a “C,” the universal sign for “just a little bit.”

Having failed to agree upon the top five candidates for Harley Abel’s merger, the Board ultimately decided to invite the top 250 single female corporations to a soiree at the Four Seasons, where Harley could “mix and mingle with them at his leisure.” Of those 250, only 226 had RSVP’ed in the affirmative, and yet as of Jill’s last head count, there were 352 females in attendance, which could mean only one thing . . . party crashers. “This place is like an episode of *The Bachelor* on steroids. I feel as though we just set the Feminist Movement back about 50 years,” Jill whispered to Ryan, careful to cover her mouthpiece when she spoke, so that Harley, who was wearing an earpiece in order to receive instruction from Jill could not hear her.

In the industry, events like these were commonly referred to as *Cinderella* Soirees, based on their similarity to the ball Prince Charming’s family threw in the famous fairytale to help their son secure a wife.

“OK, Harley,” Jill said, this time speaking directly into her mouthpiece. “You know the drill. It’s just like we practiced Take a lap around the room, smile, greet by name, and shake the hand of each and every woman, then circle back and begin a conversation with the first

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woman on our list. Don't be nervous. I'll be in your ear every step of the way. Are you ready?"

Harley glanced over at Jill from across the room and nodded vigorously enough that she could see it from her vantage point.

"Oh and Harley," Jill warned nervously, "Whatever you do . . . DO . . . NOT . . . DANCE."

"Why don't you want him to dance?" Ryan asked eyebrows raised.

He had just started the job about four months ago, after his last male corporation had suffered an untimely death (The poor guy had choked on a buffalo wing at a July 4th barbecue.), and was still learning the lay of the land.

"I'll show you," Jill said with a sly smile, as she pulled up a YouTube video on her iPhone and casually passed it over to Ryan.

Ryan started at the video blank-faced for a few moments, before nodding his head grimly. "Gotcha," he nodded, handing the phone back to his colleague. "Definitely, no dancing."

"352 females for one man, and I can't even get anyone decent to respond to my Match.com profile. I am clearly in the wrong profession," Ryan griped more to himself than to anyone else in the room. "So, who is first on the list?"

"Amara Anderson, Inc., age 25, deals primarily in high-end lingerie and sleepwear. She got her undergraduate degree at Brown, and her MBA at Dartmouth," Jill rattled off by memory.

"Which one is she?" Ryan asked curiously, eyeing the attractive females around the room for one that looked like an "Amara."

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Jill consulted her clipboard briefly, before scanning the perimeter for her target. “That one . . . by the bar with the long black hair and the green dress. The one that kind of looks like Megan Fox.”

Ryan located the woman in question, recognizing her instantly. “She’s a porn star,” he said tonelessly.

“What?” Jill exclaimed incredulously. “No she’s not! She’s a highly successful female corporation, who just so happens to sell a lot of thongs. Try not to be so judgmental.”

“She may be a highly successful female corporation, who just so happens to sell a lot of thongs,” Ryan admitted. “But she’s also a highly flexible pornstar.”

“Prove it,” Jill challenged.

Ryan took out *his* phone and pulled up a video on YouTube, which he then smugly passed over to Jill. The video was entitled *Jennifer’s Pussy*.

“Holy crap,” Jill nearly shouted, cupping her hand over her mouth when she realized how loud she was being. “How does she manage to get her leg over her head like that?”

“Hence the ‘highly flexible’ part,” Ryan added with a wink.

“Abort . . . abort,” Jill commanded into her headset. “Harley, do not speak to Amara. I repeat, do not engage with Amara. Head immediately to prospective merger candidate number 2. Do you copy?”

Across the room and heading for the bar, Harley could be seen shrugging his shoulders in confusion. But in a few split seconds he turned abruptly heading in the opposite direction of the Megan Fox lookalike / Thong Queen / Public Relations Disaster. Jill exhaled a sigh

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of relief, before turning toward Ryan. "I'm not going to ask you how you knew about that," she said wryly.

Now, it was Ryan's turn to shrug. "Hey, what can I say? Being knowledgeable is part of my job description, even if it means subjecting myself to videos with titles like *Jennifer's Pussy*."

"Yeah, and I'm sure you hated every second of it," Jill retorted with a smirk.

Two hours later, Harley Abel, Inc. had already mingled with about 35 female corporations, but was no closer to finding a merger partner than when he had started. The strain was beginning to take its toll on Harley, who had taken to stopping by the bar to refill his gin and tonic after every five candidates. By candidate 30, he was noticeably slurring his words. And when he reached candidate 33, Harley actually fell asleep standing up while the woman was talking. (Fortunately, the candidate was blind, so she didn't notice. Though she did remark over the peculiar buzzing sound in the room that just so happened to be the sound of her date snoring.)

"We gotta cut him off," Jill warned Ryan, who was currently leaning against the wall of the ballroom, and looked as though he was about to doze off himself. "We've got at least three more hours of this. And that's a conservative estimate. He'll never make it through all the candidates if he keeps drinking at this rate. Go to each of the bartenders, and tell them they have to either stop serving him entirely, or serve him virgin tonics."

Ryan nodded grimly. Having just listened to 35 of the most dull coed conversations he'd ever witnessed, he truly felt Harley's pain. Who could blame the guy for wanting to take a little cat nap? "Good lord, female corporations are *boring*," Ryan muttered, as he quickly scanned the ballroom for the location of each of the bars.

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“You’d be boring too, if you had an entire Board dedicated to ensuring that no aspect of your life was even remotely controversial,” Jill replied, feeling the subconscious need to defend her sex, despite the fact the women in the ballroom had less than nothing in common with Jill, who grew up with no less than six foster brothers, in a loud and boisterous blue-collar home where public humiliation was a foregone conclusion.

(Jill would never forget the winter when her brothers built a snowman in their front yard, and clothed it in her bras and underwear. She was still finding frozen blades of grass in her cleavage six weeks later. Or the time Jill’s siblings found out the name of the boy on which she currently had a crush, cornered him in the playground, and began singing “You’ve lost that loving feeling,” to him in a slightly disturbing, and off-key homage to that scene from the film *Top Gun*. Jill had no doubt that she would make for a terrible female corporation.)

“Oh, so you’re saying is that you find *me* interesting and intriguing,” Ryan mused with a wink.

Jill shook her head and laughed. Her colleague seemed to have a knack for infusing even the most mundane of statements with a heaping helping of sexual innuendo. He was very much like her brothers in that way. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” Jill retorted. “You’d make a positively thrilling female. Now hurry up, and get to those bars!”

Ryan grinned, as he sashayed to the bar, doing his best impression of a lady walking in high heels. Jill rolled her eyes and aggressively shooed him off, but she was giggling in spite of herself when she did so.

Five minutes later, Jill heard Ryan’s voice in her earpiece. But this time he wasn’t laughing. “Houston, we have a problem,” he admitted nervously.