

# PRECIOUS THINGS

*He discovers value beyond triumph and success*

A Novel By  
JB Gatling

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# Dedication

*The influence of ancestors*

*What is to give light must endure the  
burning.*

---Eleanor Roosevelt

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*Part One:*  
**Stones In the Crown**





# Chapter One:

## Long Island, NY

KYLE LEANED BACK IMPATIENTLY in the moonlit darkness. He remained concealed behind the east-facing overhang of the boathouse next to the camp's creaking floating docks. In front of him the edge of the ink blue sea pulsed softly beneath the large fleet of neatly tied sailboats.

*Sail Shape* camp was otherwise quiet at one-thirty in the morning with summer insects tucked in and muzzled until dawn.

Having already removed a set of oars and three life jackets, Kyle waited for his friends.

Finally hearing faint footfalls from the trail that passed several feet beyond his location he whistled softly; Alan and Skip soon joined him.

"What took you guys so long," he said?

Before they could answer he grabbed the oars and tossed the life jackets at them. They fell in behind as he led the way down to the rowboat.

"Sorry Kyle" Alan's reply was barely audible.

"I was up and ready, but it was only twelve o'clock. I blew it trying to get some extra sleep."

When he stopped Kyle turned and looked at Skip who had yet to say a word.

"I'll bet Alan woke you up twice, Skip," he said to the yawning teenager.

“Yeah, I think he did.”

“But I didn’t forget the swag bag,” he proudly announced as he slipped an old backpack from his shoulders.

They gingerly boarded and pushed off. Within fifteen minutes they entered the salt marsh area that opened to a lake; cabins dotted the gently slopping hill that rose beyond the far shoreline.

Kyle would never forget his chance discovery of the place three years earlier when he was exploring the coastal areas during his afternoon duty-off period. He couldn’t have imagined before then that an entire camp, a camp full of fascinating girls, would be so close to *Sail Shape*. And who would have believed that he had spent time alone that afternoon with one of them, the intelligent and beautiful Brooke Saunders?

Both he and Brooke had agreed after their first time together that secret meet ups were the only viable approach. It made sense because once alerted, adults at both camps would have shut down the relationship that they’d developed and very likely would have taken much more drastic action.

They were the same age and while people would later say they were from entirely different sides of the track, they had a common passion. Meeting together in the wee hours was the only way to safely share it.

During that summer and each summer thereafter, Kyle made three or four secret trips over to see her.

Brooke would always recruit two or three younger girls from her camp to join in with them. They had to have special character traits that convinced her they were able to flourish within a multi-cultural experience and master the skills to fit in. Kyle did the same with boys from *Sail Shape*.

Most importantly they each stressed to their younger charges the necessity for strict secrecy, always reminding them of the danger and reprisal that everyone could face if secrecy was compromised.

As Kyle pulled strongly on the oars over the final yards, he remembered that this would be his last run over and that college next month would end their three-year relationship. All he could think about was how much he would miss Brooke.

“Kyle?”

Alan was speaking quietly from his facing seat at the stern.

“Tell me again why this thing has to be so secret?”

Kyle looked at him.

“There’s a complicated answer and one that works at two in the morning.”

“The last one is short and sweet—we keep this thing under wraps to protect the lives of everyone involved and we never take chances, period.”

Aware of history, Kyle said it knowing that he wasn’t exaggerating.

Alan seemed to accept the justification while Skip appeared to have fallen back off to sleep.

As they drifted silently into the dinghy dock Alan yanked Skip’s arm; his head snapped up.

“Sometimes the ends justify the means,” Kyle added quietly as an afterthought.

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Brooke Saunders would not see Kyle or anyone else at her camp during the early morning hours as had been so carefully planned. She was over one hundred miles away being watched by a pair of Pinkerton security guards. Her father had arranged for them to remain all night outside of her bedroom suite at his Park Avenue penthouse.

Her forced helicopter ride earlier that day over the entire length of Long Island had been traumatic. Yet now sitting helplessly alone in the dark and waiting, was far more stressful.

From what little she’d learned at camp before being interrogated and hustled away it was clear that the cover had been completely blown from the secret rendezvous by Shelley, her flawed recruit.

What irked Brooke more than anything was that she should have seen the entire disaster developing much earlier and put a stop to it. From the moment that Shelley had expressed more than casual interest in what Kyle physically looked like as well as in intimate details of his personal life she should have recognized that she made a bad pick.

Curiosity blossomed into obsession when Shelley ignored the established protocol and contacted Kyle independently with a racy email about her yearnings to be paired with only him during the pending get together. Brooke finally took strong action. After they quarreled and Shelley angrily accused her of trying to keep Kyle all to herself, Brooke removed her from the group.

What she hadn't been able to figure out was how much detail Shelley had revealed to camp authorities about the activities.

When the director and her senior staff summoned Brooke into the office the initial line of questioning was vague and borderline salacious. Yet they didn't tip their hand and expose how much they really knew. It was as if they were holding back because they were not sure about key facts. Brooke didn't care; she let them guess and told them nothing.

Nevertheless, Kyle's arrival at the camp docks in the still of the night would confirm what every leader assumed the secret activity to be—an enormous and dangerous breach of camp security.

The underlying assumption behind those beliefs was revealed moments before her father's security detail escorted her to the helipad. She overheard an old staff counselor gloat about having accurately predicted the entire disaster decades ago when the town ignored the objections of many residents who didn't want inner city ruffians in the camp neighborhood under any circumstance.

Brooke shuddered at the recollection and instinctively reached for her cell phone; but it had long before been taken away.

Kyle and his friends were on their own. She could only pray that his intelligence and instincts would allow him to evade whatever trap had been set.

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Kyle signaled for them to follow him down the path through a large grove of oak trees. They kept very low after turning down a narrow connecting trail that circled around the lake with only waist high shrub cover. Within minutes they approached the

cabins that revealed themselves behind an open field strewn with wildflowers. Kyle knelt and looked in that direction for several minutes. The cabin area appeared to be more shrouded in darkness than he remembered; perhaps a safety light had blown.

Otherwise, things seemed the same as always.

They crossed the fragrant field on hands and knees as the rustic collage of buildings loomed in front of them. Everything was quiet; the thought crossed his mind that maybe things were a little too quiet. He paused once again and observed for another several minutes before finally heading to the supply shed far off to the left. Skip and Alan stayed close.

As they silently approached the building Kyle was certain that he saw a momentary glint of light reflecting from beneath the window of a cabin thirty yards to the right. It was an unfamiliar marker.

Sensing something, he abruptly stopped and looked over at the other buildings once more. That's when he realized what had been bothering him; there were no signs of life anywhere. No clothing had been left out to dry; no boat shoes or other objects were arranged around the stairs; and none of the usual sounds of heavy slumber induced by a long activity-filled day were heard.

He swiveled around and quickly gestured for Alan and Skip to turn back. Confused by his signal, they froze.

Seconds later three large LED light panels hidden by the police fired up with blinding brightness. A deep amplified voice ordered them to place hands behind heads and lay face down on the ground.

Skip looked around furtively after the demand, trying in vain to wipe the glare from his eyes. Alan jerked his head at Kyle and silently moved his mouth. Then his hands shot straight up in the air as he peed his pants.

Skip had instinctively started to back away in the direction from which they'd come. The booming voice ordered him to halt. Instead, he panicked and bolted away from the light while ripping off his backpack.

Kyle always believed that he did that so he could run faster to the boat; police claimed he was reaching for a weapon.

Before he had retreated twenty feet deafening shots rang out.

By then Kyle had dropped onto his stomach. He stared up with his hands clasped behind his neck and heard the sizzling ordinance streaking overhead.

Each bullet struck true, jerking Skip's body into a lifeless pirouette before he collapsed.

Alan had stopped screaming by the time he was dragged to his feet and handcuffed but he continued to stare at Skip's crumpled body. The image of his best friend, lifeless and still, would remain with him throughout his life.

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As Brett Howard approached the parking area, he remembered his last visit to the same city hall complex three decades earlier. In the face of stiff resistance to the construction permit for his camp and to everyone's astonishment but his own he had won; *Sail Shape* was born.

That triumph seemed long ago.

After circling the large parking lot three times he found a single space in the last row of the auxiliary section. By then he was highly agitated.

Ten minutes later and still walking he wanted to know why in God's name were a dozen or more yellow school buses parked so much closer than he was; shouldn't they be out somewhere dropping off or picking up kids?

Finally spotting the green space in the distance that fronted his destination, he saw what appeared to be extensive lines of demonstrators, four or maybe six rows deep. They were organized in a wide rectangular pattern, almost sentry-like, at the base of the open staircase that ascended to second level entry doors. Some of them were holding signs.

Great, a picket line he grouched out loud while seeing no way through the blockage; just what I need, city workers wanting more benefits and cash.

Yet he didn't hear chanting or shouting coming from the protestors.

As he moved closer, he saw that the throng consisted almost entirely of students, high school age and even younger. And they

were moving but very slowly. Heads were down and hands were clasped in back as if they were collectively contemplating something profound. Stick-mounted signs were randomly spaced throughout. Written on them were the names of New York City public schools, the roughest ones.

He was about to circumvent the assemblage following the lead of others who were also blocked when the human tide slowed to a halt. Silently on each side of the dense rectangle a narrow corridor opened through which he alone was allowed to pass. He walked past dozens of bowed heads.

On the other side and without answers he climbed the stairs. Halfway up he finally saw it set off by itself on the very top step—a brown wooden casket draped in white. Skip's name and birth and death year were sewn into the material in large lavender letters. Glossy cutouts of sailboats were attached to every side.

The shrine's personal impact on Brett was immediate; it caused an overwhelming sense of loss, failure, and guilt. It made him easily remember Skip's face from among the hundreds of other campers that were registered for that same summer session. And he distinctly recalled the teenager's casual disjointed manner but also what a nice kid he was.

After entering the building, he looked back down at the students for several minutes. He recognized more than a few of his summer campers among them.

The vast collage of idealistic faces made him remember a similar group of young people from long ago on a college quad in California who were eager and hopeful and innocent as well. He had tried to help their cause, to lead them at that time, but he couldn't save them all.

Suddenly he understood the entire connection that was staring back at him. It was more than the obvious one that the students were there to raise awareness, empathy, and social action over Skip's death—a mission dramatized by the coffin. There was another crucial one—*Sail Shape* still mattered and that as its founder and leader, he still mattered.

Leaving the window, he continued down an empty corridor. Along the way his mind flashed back to the boisterous army of

*Sail Shape* believers that thirty years ago had packed the hearing room before he and his team arrived.

With no similar effort to turn out parents, friends, and supporters this time he didn't expect any allies today. The bottom line that everybody knew was that the camp would be found guilty of allowing young men to trespass onto private property. That transgression and not Skip's death had dominated the headlines since the police shooting.

He paused for a moment before the tall composite door. After checking his watch and fastening the middle button of his snug fitting suit jacket he stepped inside.

Besides the stenographer, chairman, and four council members elevated in the front, two-dozen spectators were seated around the spacious hearing room. They quietly signaled that they were on his side as he made eye contact.

"Mr. Howard, sit down."

Without looking up he recognized the irascible voice of Dan Quigley, the very same chairman despite the passage of thirty years.

He listened to Quigley's dry reading of a prepared statement, zoning out while appearing to pay attention. It was all political theater anyway he reasoned. His lawyer had assured him that the expected negative ruling today would start the appeal process and that *Sail Shape* had a decent chance at winning.

Hearing Quigley wrapping up he reached into his briefcase and removed the document that held his version of reality. All he had to do was stand up and submit it to the stenographer; nothing more was needed.

But he strongly felt that something more was very much necessary although he had kept that conviction close to the vest. He didn't believe that his well-meaning attorney could understand how deeply he had been offended back in the day by the gavel-wielding chairman's crassness and naked prejudice.

Because of that he was convinced that he needed something extra to counter Quigley's self-righteous attitude, the one he had arrogantly displayed when he had tried his best to prevent *Sail Shape* from ever being born.



As luck would have it, he happened to remember the newspaper coverage about the drug bust involving Quigley's fifteen-year-old grandson. It happened almost ten years ago. Despite being caught red-handed selling hallucinogenic drugs to classmates, the young man received no jail time and a suspended sentence. Later he went on to finish college and graduate school.

Brett made the connection between the grandson and *Sail Shape* because Quigley and his oldest son, the boy's father, had donated fifty thousand dollars back then to several traditional prevention-based treatment programs. They had tried to keep it anonymous, but he had been able to confirm through his contacts that it was their money.

That secret cash symbolized the hypocrisy that had dampened his efforts to expand *Sail Shape* over the years. The entrenched establishment at times opposed him vociferously, yet the minute there was trouble with young people in their own ranks they went about funneling dollars to a select group of safety net programs. But rarely were programs like his on the receiving end of those dollars.

Were race and class he asked and not for the first time the real reason that solutions like what he offered were resisted? On how many occasions had he proclaimed in public meetings that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure; often it had fallen on hostile ears. As he'd gotten older, he had grown more conservative and at times he had buckled when facing stiff pushback from the opposition.

He'd been too damn constrained and too passive in his advocacy, he admitted.

In fact, after the bruising Chicago camp opening years ago, backing out when opposition from the other side hardened had become his *modus operandi*. His usual excuse for doing so was that he could more efficiently deploy his resources elsewhere.

But retreat had cost him at least four camps around the country over the years; they were facilities that never got constructed even though the needs in the communities he had planned to serve were most acute.

Quigley finally finished and was pointing at Brett with his index finger.

Ignoring the insult Brett stood up and left his prepared remarks on the chair. He was determined to change the dynamic.

He was going to talk about the power of prevention and the value of investing up front to keep kids on the right path. And he would list the many benefits that *Sail Shape* had brought to the table in Long Island and at all the camps across the country.

After admitting that a grave mistake had been made in the supervision of his Long Island campers, he would apologize and commit to strengthening procedures and personnel. He would also place the entire event within the context of the young people that both camps serve and remind the council that despite the deceit, as far as anyone knew no harm was intended or caused by the actions of any of the teenagers involved.

Then he was determined to expose Quigley's ancient animus and bias; first by pointing out that *Sail Shape* was the kind of program that would have prevented his grandson from pushing drugs within blocks of today's hearing. *Sail Shape*, he would add, was a prevention-based program deserving of support rather than scorn.

He would hear the gavel banging loudly after that and endure the drubbing from Quigley's irritating voice accusing him of being out of order.

But maybe his two-dozen supporters would vocally object to such treatment and let their loud disapproval be heard throughout the hearing room.

After order was restored, he was determined to confront Quigley—while shocking the four unwitting council members—about his secret and hefty financial gifts to programs in the area with very similar goals to *Sail Shape*.

What was it about those programs and their leadership that earned the chairman's respect and generous dollars he would ask and when would *Sail Shape* ever receive equal treatment rather than discrimination?

## Chapter Two: London

“JOSHUA, WE REALLY MUST DO SOMETHING big to mark this milestone. It can’t just be our usual end of year celebration. This is number ten you know, an entire decade; that’s a significant amount of time.”

“We’ve also had our fifth high honors class matriculate out to university. Not just to Cambridge and Oxford as you are aware, but to several other top-rated schools.”

He looked back at her with a neutral expression, not wanting to be enlisted into something for which he was not ready.

Mirra kept going.

“Look sweetheart, I accept that you like to keep a low profile, I respect that love; I really do.”

“I know it’s because the last thing that you want in your life is to emulate the overly famous Brett Howard, but remember, he is your dad.”

She saw the momentary frown skirt across his face; she had gone too far.

“That’s all today for my amateur psychoanalysis, I promise,” she said before quickly trying a different approach.

“But remember, the celebration would be for all our kids, including their heroes, the graduates. What better way to inspire the younger ones to keep excelling than for them to rub shoulders with the pioneers?”

She kept advocating; her breathing was hardly affected by the brisk pace they were laying down on the jogging trail.

Occasionally her enthusiasm grated on his nerves; she could be relentless at times.

“And you know what else,” she persisted, “I’m also sure that every one of the graduates would travel back for the event.”

Mirra was certain because she had secretly polled them and gotten everyone’s pledge.

They were running through the far northwestern turn in Hyde Park approaching Kensington Palace. Mirra’s effortless strides were in sharp contrast to Joshua’s military-like cadence. As always when they completed the turn the spirit of Princess Diana was omnipresent. Despite her long-ago death she continued to attract scores of floral bouquets and hundreds of gifts and artwork from adoring fans. Dozens of admirers were there again today, solemnly sitting on the well-tended lawn across from the palace grounds.

Passing the familiar scene so often over the years, they barely noticed the trove of items and humanity rimming the black gold tipped gates that walled off royalty.

There's was another typical civil dawn run, the kind of workout they loved within the shelter of the lush six-hundred-acre urban respite. A bonus for their conditioning was the occasional appearance of mounted riders from the dozens of equestrian trails that laced the park. Mirra enjoyed those moments even more than him and on occasion she would turn on her sprinter’s speed to challenge one of the horses, holding her own for at least twenty-five meters.

“It’s very important, I hear you and I completely agree,” he said slightly out of breath.

“I really don’t want to slight the kids either. Tell you what; we’ll mark it with something special. But we need to figure out a way to do that so the press doesn’t get hold of the thing and turn it into something it isn’t supposed to be—a media circus revolving around our lives.”

Mirra frowned. She would never understand his reluctance to take the rightful credit that he deserved. After all, when he

launched the student warehouse he did so entirely with his own money, and he continues to finance the vastly increased operations to this day. They were tutoring close to three thousand poor and disadvantaged students every year. Most made their way from very difficult situations to after school warehouse programs.

She remembered his mention of the word warehouse years ago when she first met him; she didn't get the connection at all between the name and what he was trying to achieve. But later when he was actively recruiting her to come on board in an executive role, he explained that he was determined to build a deep bench of talent, a warehouse of gifted and motivated kids.

"Well lover you know my feelings," she said.

"You take no credit for the success while you're spending a small fortune keeping the whole thing going. And there's no legacy there yet. If you dropped dead tomorrow, how would it all carry on without you?"

"If I dropped dead tomorrow, or even right now given this pace," he said grimacing, "you'd take over everything. You're pretty much my legacy, you know that."

It reminded him how isolated he'd become from his family and friends back in the states. Mirra really was the one who would carry on in his absence, not that he was planning to retire from the field anytime soon.

As they approached the last stretch of the run, he raised the arc of his arm and shoulder motion higher hoping to get more lift from each stride.

And he cut his talking short to focus on breathing.

Mirra looked at him again shaking her head. She remembered the first time she laid eyes on him. She was a newly minted graduate with a doctorate in education administration at the time. She had arrived in London from Jamaica years before to complete an arduous PhD program. Barely surviving on the last of her scholarship money she had nonetheless allocated some of it to attend a wealth-building seminar for recent graduates. Even without a job in the works she was optimistic that sound investment advice would pay ample dividends after she landed something; it had.

Joshua was one of three bankers that presented. Unlike the others he'd struck a chord in her as she listened. When he was winding up, he reminded them that there was more to life than the proboscis against the grindstone; he smiled when he said it. He finished on a more serious note by admitting that he wanted to live his own passion and live to uplift the passions of others. He hoped that each of them would do the same during their careers.

It was a memorable talk; she was impressed.

Later she learned that he had already sketched out the early outlines of the warehouse concept, but there was no brick and mortar yet and no students.

The best part of the whole thing, her falling in love with him, had happened weeks after she joined the fledgling warehouse team. It was an intense time; they worked shoulder-to-shoulder planning, buying real estate, outfitting the building, sourcing staff, and recruiting students.

"You look a bit winded my love," she said, poking him. "I would challenge you to the last half K back home, but you might very well take a pass on that, right sweetie?"

To answer he veered quickly left through the trees, pounding his way down a slopping shortcut trail with the hope of building a lead to hold her at bay.

Joshua lingered; he enjoyed a long hot steam shower in preparation for the upcoming stressful slog at his London equity-trading firm. It struck him that many of his fellow owners would simply retire to their private library that morning to run their operations remotely. All it took was a six-figure investment in the latest technology. But he was never tempted; he headed to his closet.

His group at the Fleet Street shop included forty high-octane stock traders; he had hand picked and hired each one. To him they were like family, and he remained the only owner to appear in the pits with his traders from time to time where fortunes were made or lost in lightening fast deals.

Most owners in his circle frowned upon his chummy practices with his employees. The London elite had always shunned rubbing shoulders with the up and coming.

But on more than one occasion his humor stoked by his morning run had broken the grinding pressure in the pit, allowing his team to stay loose and sharp and score big wins. He liked to think that part of the recipe that allowed them to outperform the larger blue blood outfits year after year was greater teamwork with his crew fueled by a sense of mutual respect and shared purpose.

Before showing up today though he had another matter to attend.

After grabbing his leather satchel, he closed the fifteen-foot mahogany doors behind him. The nearby idling Jaguar quietly eased in front of the broad whitewashed steps just as he reached the bottom.

“Good morning Mr. Howard,” the driver said, keeping his eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror.

“I received your earlier text about the extra first stop, Mr. Howard.”

The thought occurred to Joshua that it had been five years almost to the day since he was fortunate to hire Harold away from a soon-to-retire investment banker. And it had almost been that long since he had stopped urging Harold to call him by his first name.

“Good morning, Harold,” he replied cheerfully as he settled into the plush rear seat.

“Yes, the syndicate offices on Bainbridge. I should be out again by nine, but I’ll text you if it looks like an earlier end.”

“Very well Sir.”

Harold launched them into London traffic. After twenty minutes spent skirting through narrow urban city streets, they arrived at the motor route where he quickly muscled the stretch sedan into the far-left lane. They maneuvered around cars, buses, coaches, and motorbikes.

Although Joshua had lived in the London for a dozen years, he continued to experience the latent anxiety that they were clamoring ahead on the wrong side of the road.

He reached for the console telephone to relieve the tension.

“Hi darling, I suspect you’re still in the shower washing that lovely hair of yours. I forgot to mention that I want to stop in on the ex pat dinner at Grosvenors this evening just to log some face time with U. S. bankers. Cocktails at nineteen thirty; will likely stay for no more than one hour. Please meet me there after that hour and plant a big kiss on my cheek as I make my excuses for an early departure. Love you love. Text me if you can’t make it, please. And by the way, nice final sprint this morning on your part. I believed for a moment that I had you beat this time; what a foolish thought. Ciao.”

His extra stop was of an entirely personal nature. A life-long passion, competitive sailing, was front and center. The stakes couldn’t have been any higher and today’s meeting was a critical planning tipping point because the America’s Cup was being contested in San Francisco in two years.

He and his fellow investors had plunked down twenty million pounds plus a hefty bank note in pursuit of the prize and were keen to wrest the Cup away from the wealthy American defender. But the final choice of the challenge crew and the selection of racing captain had yet to be determined.

Given the size of his own seven-figure stake as well as his long racing experience Joshua was determined to convince the other investors that he should be the captain of the syndicate’s challenge boat.

There would be opposition; he had anticipated it. Most would fall into one of two camps—investors that believed the syndicate should hire a full time pro or those that wanted a skipper who had competed at a high caliber during the previous Cup race.

Even though he’d never skippered in a race for the Auld Mug before Joshua was certain that he stacked up in experience against any full time pro because he’d been sailing and racing since childhood. Though still an amateur under racing hierarchy’s strict classification scheme, he believed that he had the necessary skills to be successful.

Deep in thought he gazed out at London’s drab class B commercial buildings. His mind harkened back to the first time his father pushed him out alone into that clear lake in Albany, NY. After the firm shove, Brett had patiently watched from the



shore as he drifted away—Joshua was alone in his boat, a wide-eyed youngster in early panic mode. Then his father shouted at him to bring his boat back in using the sails just like they practiced.

Piece of cake he probably thought at the time after he snapped out of the momentary paralysis.

Worry about the approaching meeting intruded on his nostalgia.

He grew more convinced that notwithstanding the ultimate decision about a skipper a wildcard at the meeting might be discussion around the disposition of the crew and the ultimate quality of teamwork and leadership to yield a tangible advantage. He figured that he might have the edge there.

Months ago, the syndicate recruited the potential crew and backups. They hailed from all over the globe, each of them hungry to be a part of the winning boat to beat the Yanks. Good men all he believed, and he had raced with them on many occasions during the dozens of shakedown training regattas over the past several months. They had responded well to his helmsmanship; that could also weigh in his favor verses bringing in an outsider.

In the end he knew that he needed to see how it all flowed at the meeting, so he dampened down his adrenalin level, saving it for his ten-minute pitch in front of his peers.

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“You look lovely and sexy this evening, sweetheart.”

He said that as he held Mirra’s hand high up above her head within his own. His eyes were drawn to her tall athletic figure that braced a form fitting black pantsuit. Curly natural hair framed her nutmeg brown oval face and large expressive eyes.

Responding to his compliments, she twirled gracefully like a dancer. Posing, she struck a wide-legged model’s position, hands on hip, shoulders back.

“My dear,” she said, mirth in her voice, “you know that flattery like that is completely unnecessary if you want to get intimate with this package later.”

She quickly flashed her engaging smile.

It was the same buoyant spirit that had often lifted him up during his times of loneliness in London. In fact, over the years they each had become a de facto emotional support to one another in lieu of distant and disengaged family.

“And by the way lover,” she said, moving closer after glancing around.

“How did it go at the syndicate this morning? Will you be the racing captain?”

He answered her quietly because Cup preparations were guarded like a military secret not only in London, in all the cities around the world where challengers were prepping.

“It was a partial,” he said.

“Most of the other private investors backed me at the meeting. But one big bank held out and pushed for a pro. I really think they have one in the wings, probably a nephew or son. I’ll get to the bottom of it though. So, it’s a stand-off for now.”

He hugged her around her waist and drew her closer, gently squeezing the air from between them

“It’ll come down to a couple of possibilities,” he said.

“One, an on-the-water race off against the best skipper the bank can put up or two, I’ve got to kick in another million pounds or so to increase my investment percentage to where I can elbow them aside.”

Mirra frowned for the briefest moment before smiling.

“Then I suspect that I know how that will unfold my love, you’re going to race and kick the want-to-be skipper in the knickers. Am I right?”

“That’s one more reason that I love you, Mirra. You can discern what’s best for me; even sometimes before I’ve finally decided what course to take. And yes, I’m leaning in favor of doing some knickers kicking as you say quite soon out in the English Channel.”

At home later that evening Joshua sent a text message to his favorite warehouse student, an east African orphan and computer savant named Jemal.

He authorized him to research the identity of the bank's skipper as well as to compile a backgrounder. But he admonished his young protégé to keep the research confidential and untraceable.

The last thing Joshua needed at this stage was the embarrassment that would attach to him from a blown snooping operation with his fingerprints all over it.

They stayed awake later than usual that evening enjoying each other's company within the secluded dimmet in the master suite. Gray staccato shadows played on the walls as rich fragrance of sage wafted from a jade incense holder.

He snuggled closer, pressing himself against her while feeling her bare back and smooth buttocks warm his chest and groin. His free hand rested lazily atop the mounded slope of her hip.

His lips brushed her ear ever so lightly when he whispered that her idea to host an anniversary party at the warehouse was a fabulous one and that they should plan the event as soon as possible. He followed with a kiss to her cheek.

She reached back for his face and brought it gently to rest in the cradle of her neck, holding it there with a light touch.

She replied softly that it would be a grand time, one that they would always cherish.

Feeling his urgency, she shifted to face him, meeting his embrace with her own.