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Written by Harlan Coben

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Play Dead

HARLAN COBEN



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Prologue

May 29, 1960

It would be a mistake to look directly at her when she spoke. Her words, he knew, could not affect him; her face and body could.

Sinclair turned and gazed out the window as she closed the door. It was a warm day, and outside he could see many of the students lazing in the sun. A few played touch football, but most just lay on blankets, couples cuddling close to one another; opened text books sprawled near them, ignored, giving the illusion at least that they had actually planned to study.

A flash of golden highlights drew his vision toward a head of blonde hair. He turned and recognized the pretty sophomore heartthrob from his two p.m. class. Half a dozen boys surrounded her, all battling for her attention, all hoping to draw her brightest smile. A stereo from one of the rooms blasted Buddy Holly's final single across the commons. Once again, he looked at the attractive blonde who was not one-tenth as striking as the brunette standing behind him.

'Well?' he asked.

From across the room, the stunning beauty nodded and then realized he was still not facing her. 'Yes.'

He sighed heavily. Below his window, a few of the boys moved away from the blonde with dejected faces, as though they had been eliminated from a competition which, he guessed, they were.

'You're sure?'

'Of course I'm sure.'

Sinclair nodded, though he could not say why he did so. 'What are you going to do?'

She stared at him in disbelief. 'Correct me if I'm wrong,' she began with blatant annoyance, 'but I think you might be involved in this, too.'

Again he nodded for no reason. On the commons, another boy had been thrown from the ring, leaving only two to battle for the blonde's potential favors. He turned his attention to the touch football game and watched a pass float slowly through the humid air. A bare-chested boy extended his hands. The ball spiraled toward him, bounced off his fingertips, and landed on the ground.

Sinclair concentrated on the game, feeling the boy's disappointment, trying his best to ignore the power she wielded over his mind. His eyes inadvertently shifted back to the blonde. A winner had been chosen. With down-turned eyes, the runner-up stood and sulked off.

'Will you please turn around and face me?'

A smile played on his lips, but he was not foolish enough to turn around, to expose himself to her devastating weapons, to allow her to cast her sensual spell over him. He looked down at the young man who had captured the blonde. Even from his window on the second floor, he could see the hunger in the boy's wide eyes as he moved in to claim his hard-sought prey. The boy kissed her. His hands began to wander.

To the victor goes the spoils.

He diverted his attention toward the library, feeling as though he were invading the young couple's privacy now that their relationship was getting somewhat physical. He put a cigarette in his mouth. 'Get out.'

'What?'

'Get out. Do whatever you please but I don't want you here anymore.'

'You can't mean that.'

'I can.' He lit the cigarette. 'I do.'

‘But I was going to tell—’

‘Don’t tell anybody anything. It’s already gone far enough.’

There was silence for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was pleading, the tone strumming at his nerves. ‘But I thought . . .’

He inhaled deeply on the cigarette as though he wanted to finish it in one puff. From the commons, he heard a sharp slap. The blonde had halted the young man’s hormones as he tried to slip past the innocent groping stage. ‘Obviously, you thought wrong. Now get out.’

Her voice was a whisper, ‘Bastard.’

He nodded yet again, but this time he was in full agreement with what had been said. ‘Just get the hell out of my office.’

‘Bastard,’ she repeated.

He heard her slam the door. Her high heels echoed against the wooden floor as the most beautiful woman he had ever known headed out of the ivy-covered building.

He stared out the window at nothing in particular. His vision unfocused, and his world became a blurry mass of green grass and brick buildings, his mind racing with a series of what-ifs.

Her face swam in front of his eyes. He closed his eyes, but the image did not fade.

I did the right thing. I did the right thing. I did the—

His eyes flew open. Panic filled him. He had to find her, had to tell her he did not mean any of it. He was about to swivel his chair, turn, and run for her when he felt something metallic push against the back of his head.

A coldness rippled through him.

‘Bastard.’

The gunshot shattered the still air.

June 17, 1989

Laura opened the window and felt the gentle tropical breeze refresh her naked body. She closed her eyes as the palm trees' cool wind made her skin tingle. The muscles in her legs still quaked. She turned back toward the bed and smiled at David, the man who had put her legs in this precarious position.

'Good morning, Mr Baskin.'

'Morning?' David repeated. He glanced at the clock on the night-table, the day silent except for the crashing of the waves outside the window. 'It's well into the afternoon, Mrs Baskin. We've spent almost the entire day in bed.'

'Are you complaining?'

'Certainly not, Mrs B.'

'Then you won't mind a little more exercise.'

'What have you got in mind?'

'How about a swim?'

'I'm spent,' he said, sprawling back against the pillows. 'I couldn't move if the bed was on fire.'

Laura smiled seductively. 'Good.'

David's eyes widened with awe as she slowly strode back toward the bed, remembering the first time he had seen that body, indeed the first time the world had seen that body. It was almost a decade ago and a full eight years before they met. Laura had debuted as a seventeen-year-old cover girl on *Cosmopolitan* wearing a – ah, who the hell saw the dress? He had been a junior at the University of Michigan at the time and he could still

recall the way the mouths of every member of the basketball team dropped when they saw the issue on a newsstand in Indiana before their Final Four game.

He feigned panic. 'Where are you going?'

Her smile grew. 'Back to bed.'

'Please, no.' He held up his hand to ward her off.

'You're going to put me in the hospital.'

She kept walking.

'Vitamin E,' David pleaded. 'Please.'

She did not stop.

'I'm going to scream rape.'

'Scream.'

His voice was barely audible. 'Help.'

'Relax, Baskin. I'm not going to attack you.'

His face registered disappointment. 'You're not?'

She shook her head, turned, and began to walk away.

'Wait,' he called after her. 'Where are you going?'

'To the Jacuzzi. I'd invite you to join me but I know how tired you are.'

'I feel a second wind coming on.'

'Your powers of recuperation are truly incredible.'

'Thank you, Mrs B.'

'But you're still out of shape.'

'Out of shape?' David repeated. 'Playing against the Lakers isn't this exhausting.'

'You need to work out.'

'I'll try harder, Coach, really I will. You just tell me what to do.'

'To the Jacuzzi,' Laura commanded.

She threw a silk robe over her shoulders, partially covering the gorgeous figure that had made her the world's highest paid fashion model up until her early retirement four years ago at the tender age of twenty-three. David slid out from under the satin sheets. He was tall, a shade under six-five, which was on the short side for a pro basketball player.

Laura eyed his naked physique admiringly. ‘No wonder they say you’ve revolutionized the game.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Your ass, White Lightning. Women come to the game just to watch it wiggle down court.’

‘You make me feel so cheap.’

David filled the circular tub with hot water and turned on the jet streams. He uncorked a bottle of champagne and lowered his muscular frame into the water. Laura loosened her robe and began to take it off. Talk about paradise. Everything was perfect. The phone rang.

Laura rolled her eyes. ‘I better get it,’ she said reluctantly, retying the silk cord and heading back into the bedroom. David leaned back, his legs floating in the water. He felt the warm streams massage his aching body. His muscles were still sore from the rugged play-offs even though they had ended almost a month ago. He smiled. The Celtics had won so it was a good ache.

‘Who was it?’ he asked when she came back in.

‘Nobody.’

‘Nobody called us in Australia?’

‘It was just the Peterson Group.’

‘The Peterson Group?’ David repeated. ‘Aren’t they the company you’ve been trying to get to carry the Svengali line in the South Pacific?’

‘The same.’

‘The company that you’ve been trying like hell to set up a meeting with for the past six months?’

‘You got it.’

‘So?’

‘So they want to meet with me today.’

‘When are you going?’

‘I’m not.’

‘What?’

‘I told them I couldn’t meet with them while I was on my honeymoon. My husband is very possessive, you know.’

David sighed out loud. ‘If you blow this opportunity, your husband is going to kick your ass. Besides, how are you going to support him in the style to which he’s become accustomed if you blow big opportunities?’

Laura’s robe fell to the floor and, though he had seen her body so many times since they fell in love two years ago, he still found himself gaping. She joined him in the tub, her eyes closing as she released a long breath. David watched the water surround her breasts. Her black hair cascaded down her shoulders, framing that incredible European-exotic face.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, opening her sparkling blue eyes with flecks of silvery gray. She gave him a look that could slice through solid steel. ‘I promise you’ll be well taken care of.’

He shook his head. ‘What happened to that business-first bitch I fell in love with?’

She placed her foot between his legs, probing. ‘She loves it when you talk dirty.’

‘But—’

‘Forget it, Baskin. I’m not leaving my husband for even a moment.’

He groaned. ‘Look, we have three weeks together. If I spend twenty-four hours a day with you for three weeks, you’ll drive me nuts. For my sake, go. Go to the meeting. You’re already getting to be a pest.’

‘Smooth talker. No wonder I fell for you.’ She leaned forward and massaged his powerful legs. ‘Did I ever tell you that you have great legs?’

‘Frequently. And what’s with all the compliments? You trying to give me a swollen head?’

Her foot circled and then rested against him. ‘Feels to me like I already have.’

He looked properly shocked. ‘That kind of language from last year’s businesswoman of the year? I’m stunned, ashamed . . . and aroused. Mostly aroused.’

She moved closer to him, her full firm bosoms pressing against his chest. ‘Why don’t we do something about that?’

‘Only if you promise to meet with the Peterson Group afterwards.’

Her lips found his ear. ‘Sometimes I don’t understand you,’ she whispered. ‘Men are supposed to feel threatened by a woman with a career.’

‘A very successful career,’ he corrected proudly. ‘And if I was one of those men, you would have dumped me long ago.’

‘Never,’ she said softly, ‘but if I do go, how will you keep yourself occupied while I’m gone?’

He cupped her buttocks in his strong hands and lifted her on top of him, his lips inches from her nipple. ‘I’ll shoot some hoops,’ he said. ‘Like you said before, I’m out of shape. Do you promise or not?’

She felt his breath on her skin. ‘Men, They’re always using their bodies to get their way.’

‘Promise?’

His hardness was just below her. She ached for him, her body quivering. She was barely able to nod.

He lowered her onto him. She gasped and then cried out, wrapping her arms around his head. Her body rocked back and forth, her fingers digging into his hair, clutching his face into her breasts.

Laura rose from the bed, gently kissed a sleeping David, and showered. She dried off her long, supple legs and began to get dressed. She wore very little make-up, just light touches around the eyes. Her olive complexion did not need cosmetics to enhance its God-given glow. Laura put on a gray professional suit bearing her Svengali label and buttoned her white blouse.

Laura was full-breasted – not what most would consider huge but when she first began modeling ten years ago, she

was considered almost too large for conventional modeling, except bathing suits and face shots. Her agency wanted her to strap down her chest during runway events, which Laura would not do, comparing it to asking a man to tie his testicles against his inner thigh. But once she appeared on *Cosmo*, nothing could stop her career. Laura was the face and body you could not see enough and along with some of her colleagues like Paulina Porizkova and Elle Macpherson, she helped bring cleavage back into style – if indeed it had ever really been out.

David stirred, sat up, looked at his wife of four days. ‘The transformation is complete.’

‘Transformation?’

‘From nymphomaniac to business barracuda. I feel sorry for this Peterson fellow.’

Laura laughed. ‘I shouldn’t be more than an hour or two.’ She put on her earrings and walked over to kiss David. ‘Will you miss me?’

‘Not even a little.’

‘Bastard.’

David threw back the blankets and stood. ‘You kiss your mother with that mouth?’

She glanced over his rugged build, shaking her head. ‘Incredible,’ she muttered. ‘You expect me to leave that body for even a little while?’

‘Uh-oh.’

‘What?’

‘Problem in the transformation, Captain. I still sense a few molecules of the nymph hidden under the business facade.’

‘You sense right.’

‘Laura?’

‘Yes?’

David took her hand. ‘I love you,’ he began, his eyes misting over. ‘You’ve made me the happiest man in the world.’

She hugged him, her eyes closing. 'I love you too, David. I couldn't live without you.'

'Grow old with me, Laura, and I promise I'll always make you happy.'

'You've got a deal,' she said gently, 'and you better stick to it.'

'Forever,' he said.

Laura kissed him then, not realizing that the honeymoon was over.

'G'day, ma'am.'

'Good morning,' Laura answered the receptionist with a smile. They were staying at the Reef Resort Hotel in Palm's Cove, about twenty miles from Cairns, Australia. The private resort was a quiet slice of Eden, a secluded paradise overlooking the Pacific. They were hidden within the century-old palm trees and lush bush of tropical northern Australia. Take a boat out in any direction and you would be mesmerized by the rainbow colors of Australia's Great Barrier Reef, nature's most exquisite masterpiece of jagged coral and exotic marine life, an underground park that man both explored and preserved. Travel in any other direction and you would be wandering through green rain forests with cascading waterfalls, or the beginning of Australia's famed outback region. It was like no other place in the world.

The receptionist's voice was heavy with an Australian accent. 'Your taxi should be here in a few minutes, ma'am. You and your husband enjoying your stay?'

'Very much so.'

'Lovely here, ain't it?' he said proudly. Like most locals, his skin had a bronze-to-red tone from the constant exposure to the sun.

'Yes, it is.'

He began to tap his pencil on the desk, his eyes darting

around the sun-drenched room. ‘Do you mind if I ask you a sort of personal question, ma’am?’

‘I guess so.’

He hesitated. ‘Your husband I recognized right away from the telly. Even in these sticks we get some of your important basketball games – especially the Boston Celtics. But, ma’am, you also look a might familiar. You used to be on magazine covers or something, right?’

‘Used to be,’ Laura responded, amazed at both how widespread certain publications were and how far the average person’s memory stretched. Four years had passed since Laura had been on any magazine covers, with the exception of last November’s *Business Weekly*.

‘I knew I’d seen you before. But don’t worry, ma’am. I won’t let on. No way I’m going to allow anyone to disturb you and Mr Baskin.’

‘Thank you.’

A horn honked. ‘That’ll be your taxi. Have a good one.’

‘I’ll try.’ She left the lobby, greeted the driver, and sat in the backseat. The air-conditioning was at full blast, making the car almost too cold, but against the outside sun, it was a most welcome change.

Laura settled back and watched the tropical foliage merge into a wall of green as the taxi sped toward town. Every once in a while a small building would pop out of the natural habitat but for the first ten minutes of the ride, they were only a few hidden bungalows, a post office and a grocery store. She gripped the briefcase that contained the catalogues of all the latest Svengali products. Her right leg bounced up and down restlessly.

Laura began modeling when she was only seventeen. Her *Cosmo* debut was followed by *Mademoiselle* and *Glamour* covers in the same month, and then *Sports Illustrated*’s annual swimsuit issue made her name somewhat household. The cover photo was taken during a

sunset on Australia's Gold Coast about 500 miles from Palm's Cove. In the photograph, Laura was wading knee-deep in the water, her eyes staring into the camera as she pulled back her wet hair. She wore a black, strapless one-piece that molded to her curves, her shoulders bare. It ended up being the best-selling issue *Sports Illustrated* ever had.

From there, the amount of covers and layouts grew along with Laura's bank account. Sometimes she appeared on the cover of the same magazine for four or five months in a row, but unlike other models, there was never a backlash to too much exposure, never an overkill. The demand did not let up.

It was all very odd. As a child, Laura had been fat and unattractive. Her classmates had teased her mercilessly about her weight, about her stringy hair, about her thick glasses, about her lack of make-up, about the way she dressed. They called her names and taunted her with the painful insults of cruel children. Their oral barrages never slackened or let up. In the cafeteria, in the hallways, in the schoolyard, in gym class, Laura's classmates were relentless in their savage attacks upon their defenseless victim.

They made her childhood a living hell.

Sometimes, a group of the really popular girls would beat her up in the woods behind the schoolyard. But physical abuse never hurt little Laura as much as the cruel words. The pain of a kick or a punch went away. The cruel words stayed with her always.

In those days, Laura would come home from school crying to a mother who had to be the most beautiful woman in the world, a woman who could not understand why her baby was not the most well-liked girl in her class. Mary Simmons Ayars had always been unusually gorgeous, had always been popular amongst her peers. Girls had always wanted to be her friend; boys had

always wanted to carry her books and maybe hold her hand.

Laura's father, her dear, sweet father, would be heart-broken over the situation. It tore at Dr James Ayars's stomach to see his daughter spend every night crying alone in a corner of her darkened bedroom. He too tried to help, but what could a father do in a situation like this?

Once, when she was in seventh grade, Dr Ayars bought his daughter an expensive white dress with a designer's label on it. Laura loved the dress. She was sure that it was going to change her whole life. She looked pretty in it. Her father had said so. And Laura was going to wear it to school and all the popular girls were going to think she was pretty too. They would all like her – even Lisa Sommers, the prettiest girl in the class. They would ask her to sit with them during lunch instead of by herself in the back of the room. They would ask her to play hopscotch with them during recess instead of making her stand away from them where no one would talk to her. And who knows? Maybe Lisa Sommers would invite her to go over her house after school.

Laura was so excited she could hardly sleep. She got out of bed very early the next morning, showered, and put on her new dress. Her older sister Gloria, who was really popular with the boys, helped her get ready. Gloria brushed Laura's hair out, curled it, and even added light touches of make-up. When Gloria was finished, she stepped back and let Laura look at herself in the mirror. Laura tried to be critical but she could not help it. She looked pretty.

'Do I really look okay?' she asked her sister hopefully.

Gloria hugged her and stroked her hair. 'Just perfect.'

When she came down to breakfast, her father smiled. 'Well, well, just take a look at my little princess.'

Laura giggled happily.

‘You look lovely,’ her mother added.

‘The boys will be fighting in the playground today,’ her father chipped in.

‘Do you want me to walk you to school?’ Gloria asked.

‘That would be great!’

Laura beamed with joy as she headed to school with Gloria. When they reached the edge of the playground, Gloria turned to her little sister and gave her another big hug. Laura felt warm and secure in her sister’s arms. ‘I have cheerleading practice after school,’ Gloria said. ‘I’ll see you at home later tonight, okay?’

‘Okay.’

‘You can tell me all about your day then.’

Laura watched her sister start walking down the hill toward the high school. Then she turned and faced her own schoolyard. Laura could not wait to hear the comments of her peers when they saw the new Laura. Finally, it was going to be her day. With a deep breath she crossed over to where her schoolmates were playing.

The first comments came before the bell. ‘Hey, look! Tubby Laura is wearing a new *tent!*’ Cruel voices came from everywhere. ‘She looks like a great white whale!’ ‘Hey, Four-Eyes Fatso, since you’re wearing white, we can use you as a movie screen!’

Lisa Sommers walked up to her, looked her up and down, and then held her nose. ‘You’re disgusting!’ she shouted with glee.

And the cruel laughter. The cruel laughter that scraped at Laura’s young heart with a jagged piece of glass.

She ran home with tears streaming down her face. She put on a brave face and tried to hide the rip that Lisa Sommers had made in her new dress during recess. But parents are very sensitive to the pain of their children. When her father found the torn dress, he was furious. He burst into the principal’s office to report what had happened. The girls responsible were punished.

And of course, that only made the popular girls hate her even more.

During her anguished childhood, Laura studied as hard as she could. If she could not be popular or even liked, at least she was going to be smart.

And she had Gloria. Laura often wondered if she could have survived those long years without her only two friends: her school books and her older sister Gloria. Physically, Gloria was the buxom bombshell all the high-school boys lusted after. But she was also big-hearted and kind to a fault. When Laura felt the world was coming to an end, Gloria would comfort her with warm words and warm hugs. Gloria would tell her that everything was going to be okay and for a little while, everything was. Sometimes, Gloria even canceled dates with boys just to stay home and console Laura. She took Laura to the movies or to the big department stores or the park or the roller rink or wherever. Laura knew that she had the greatest sister in the whole world. She loved Gloria very much.

That was why Laura had been devastated when Gloria ran away from home and came very close to committing suicide.

Laura's physical metamorphosis took place in the summer before her junior year of high school. Yes, she exercised. Yes, she started to wear contact lenses. Yes, she dieted (stopped eating actually). But that would not have been enough to explain the change. Those things may have accelerated the process, but the transformation would have occurred anyway. It was simply her time. She suddenly blossomed and no one in her school could believe their eyes. A little while later, a modeling agency spotted her and she was on her way.

At first, Laura could not believe she was beautiful enough to be a fashion model. Fat, ugly Laura Ayars a fashion model? Uh, uh. No way.

But Laura was neither blind nor stupid. She could look

in a mirror and see for herself what everyone else was talking about. She soon got used to the whole idea of being attractive. By some queer twist of fate, the homely child had turned into a high-paid supermodel. Suddenly, people wanted to be with her, to dress like her, to be her friend. Just because she was now physically appealing, those who had wanted to spit on her and tease her thought she was something special. Laura became more than a little suspicious of people's motives.

Modeling was easy money for Laura. She made over half a million dollars when she was just eighteen. But modeling was not an occupation she particularly enjoyed. While the hours were at times grueling and tedious, the work was never what she would call demanding. There was little challenge to be found in posing for a series of snapshots. It was downright boring actually. She wanted to do something more but the world seemed to have forgotten she had a brain. It was all so ridiculous. When she was ugly with glasses, everybody thought she was a bookworm. Now that she was beautiful, everybody assumed she was an airhead.

Laura did not do many location shootings in those days – just the one in Australia and two on the French Riviera – because unlike many of her colleagues, she did not leave school. It was no simple task but she managed to finish high school and graduate from Tufts University four years later. Once Laura received her degree, she was ready to take on the fashion and cosmetics industries. The industries, however, were ill prepared for her onslaught. June 1983 marked her last cover appearance on a women's magazine as Laura retired from modeling at the ripe old age of twenty-three. She invested her substantial earnings to develop her own concept, Sven-gali, a company for the woman-on-the-move, blending practical, intelligent and sophisticated looks with the feminine and sensual.

The slogan: Be your own Svengali.

To say the concept caught on would be the fashion understatement of the eighties. At first, critics scoffed at the model-playing-business-tycoon's success, claiming it was just another in a series of fads that would disappear in a matter of months. Two years after promoting women's clothes and cosmetics, Laura expanded into casual shoes and fragrances. By the time she was twenty-six, Svengali had gone public with Laura the majority stockholder and Chief Executive Officer of a multi-million-dollar conglomerate.

The taxi made a sharp right turn. 'Peterson's office on the Esplanade, right, missy?'

Laura chuckled. 'Missy?'

'It's just an expression,' the cabbie explained. 'No offense meant.'

'None taken. Yes, they're on the Esplanade.'

Copycat corporations began to crop up like so many weeds beside her thriving flower. They were all vying for a slice of the profitable Svengali business, all searching for the secret of Laura's success. But like so many other bothersome weeds, they were pulled out of the corporate world before they could truly take root. Laura's close administrators knew the secret that competitors sought, the aspect that made Svengali unique: Laura. Her hard work, determination, brains, style and even warmth steered every phase of the organization. Corny, yes, but also true. The woman was the company.

Everything had gone according to plan – until she met David Baskin.

The taxi slowed to a stop. 'We're here, luv.'

The Pacific International Hotel in Cairns was not far from the Peterson office. It was near the center of town and across the street from the Marlin Jetty where most of the sightseeing and diving boats set sail. The hotel was a

popular vacation spot, ideal for those who wanted the tropics of Australia but did not crave absolute seclusion.

But the occupant of room 607 was not here to vacation.

The occupant looked out the window but did not notice or care about the breathtaking beauty. There were more important things to worry about. Awful things. Things that had to be taken care of no matter how tragic the consequence. Things so horrible that even the occupant of room 607 had no idea of their full scope.

And they had to be taken care of now.

The occupant turned away from the breathtaking view that past visitors had gazed upon for countless hours and walked toward the phone. There had been very little time to plan. Now, as the occupant lifted the receiver, there was a moment to wonder if there was another option left open.

No. There was no other option.

The occupant lifted the phone and dialed.

‘Reef Resort. Can I help you?’

The occupant swallowed away the terror. ‘David Baskin please.’

The meeting droned on steadily. The first two hours had moved smoothly enough and the deal was nearly set. But now they were getting down to details and, as usual, a few snags tangled up the works. Laura eyed her watch and realized she was going to be back later than she originally anticipated. She asked if she could use a phone, excused herself and dialed the hotel. When there was no answer in their room, she asked to be transferred to the front desk. The same receptionist was on duty.

‘Your husband went out a few minutes ago,’ he informed her. ‘He left a note for me to give you.’

‘Could you read it to me?’

‘Of course. Would you hold on a second?’

She heard the phone being dropped heavily to the wooden desk and then the sounds of somebody stumbling around echoed into the receiver. 'Here it is.' Paper was unfolded. Hesitation. 'It's . . . it's rather personal, Mrs Baskin.'

'That's okay.'

'You still want me to read it?'

'You already have,' Laura replied.

'True enough.' He paused and then, reluctantly, he read David's words. 'Stepped out for moment. Should be right back.' The receptionist cleared his throat before continuing. 'Black garter belt and stockings are on bed. Put them on and wait for me . . . my, uh, my little sex kitten.'

Laura stifled a laugh. 'Thank you very much. Would you mind giving my husband a message when he gets back?'

'I'd rather not, ma'am. He's rather large, you know.'

This time she did laugh. 'No, nothing like that. Just tell him I'll be back a little later than originally planned.'

His voice was relieved. 'I can do that,' he said. 'Yeah, sure, no worries.'

Laura replaced the receiver, took a deep breath, and returned to the negotiating table.

Two hours later, the deal was set. The few minor obstacles had been removed and soon, department stores throughout Australia and New Zealand would be inundated with Svengali products, maybe even before the Christmas season. Laura sat back in the taxi's plush cushion and smiled.

So much for business.

By the time the taxi dropped her in front of the hotel, night was beginning to settle in, snatching the spare rays of the sun that still lighted Palm's Cove. But Laura was not tired. Business rejuvenated her – business and the

thought that David was only a few feet from where she now stood, waiting for her . . .

‘Mrs Baskin?’

It was the receptionist. She walked toward the desk with a bright smile.

‘Another note from your husband.’

‘Would you like to read this one to me too?’ she asked.

He laughed and handed her an envelope. ‘I think you can handle this one all by yourself, thanks anyway.’

‘Thank you.’ She opened the sealed envelope and read.

LAURA,

BE BACK SOON. WENT FOR A SWIM IN THE OCEAN. I WILL LOVE YOU FOREVER. ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT.

DAVID

Puzzled, Laura folded the note and went to the room.

The black stockings were on the bed.

Laura slid them over her ankles and then slowly rolled them up her slender legs. She unbuttoned her blouse and removed it. Her hands reached behind her back and unclasped her lace brassiere. It fell forward and slipped down her arms.

She strapped on the garter belt and attached the stockings. She stood and looked in the mirror. Then she did what few people who beheld such a magnificent sight would do.

She laughed.

That man has made me completely loony, she thought with a shake of her head, remembering what a different person she had been before David entered her life two years ago. Thinking back, Laura recalled that she and David did not hit it off right away – to be more precise, their first meeting had been about as romantic as a two-car accident.

They had met on a humid Boston night in July of 1986

at a gala black-tie party for the Boston Pops. The place was packed. Everyone who was anyone in Boston society was there.

Laura hated such events. She especially hated the reason she attended them (she felt she had to) and she hated the phony smiles and the phony lines everyone handed out. Even worse were the men who showed up for such functions – cocky, persistent and overbearing neo-playboys with egos that were nearly as vast as their insecurities. She had been hit on so many times at these things she felt like a stubborn nail jutting out of a piece of plywood. Over the years, her manner of dealing with such approaches began to border on the rude. But at times, only a cutting phrase could slow down a charging bull.

Laura had built a wall around herself – more like a fortress with a shark-infested moat. She also knew that she was developing a reputation of being a ‘cold bitch,’ a woman who ‘knew she was hot and thought her shit didn’t stink.’ This reputation was well-known and also, in her mind, untrue. But Laura did little to discourage it since it helped keep some of the animals at bay.

At this particular party, she had been standing a few yards away from the buffet table, watching with disbelief as the well-dressed patrons attacked the food like the poor in Bangladesh. That was when she turned away and bumped into David.

‘Excuse me,’ she said without looking at the man.

‘Grim sight,’ David replied, motioning toward the ravenous savages at the buffet table. ‘Welcome to Day of the Locust.’

She nodded and began to walk away.

‘Wait a minute,’ David called after. ‘I don’t mean to sound like a groupie but aren’t you Laura Ayars?’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘Allow me to introduce myself. My name is David Baskin.’

‘The basketball player?’

‘The same. Are you a basketball fan, Miss Ayars?’

‘Not in the least bit, but it would be impossible to live in Boston and not hear your name mentioned.’

‘I blush in modesty.’

‘I’m sure you do. If you’ll excuse me . . .’

‘The brush-off already? Before you go, Miss Ayars, may I just say that you look enchanting this evening.’

Her voice was tainted with sarcasm. ‘Original line, Mr Baskin.’

‘David,’ he replied calmly. ‘And for the record, I’m not handing out lines.’ He paused. ‘May I ask why you don’t like basketball?’

Typical jock, Laura thought. He thinks that the planet Earth could not possibly spin without grown men grunting and sweating while running back and forth in a meaningless wave. This guy shouldn’t take long to get rid of. He’s probably not used to carrying on a conversation that involves complete sentences.

‘It’s inconceivable, isn’t it?’ she began. ‘I mean, it must be impossible for you to imagine a thinking person who doesn’t enjoy watching illiterate men whose brain capacity is in adverse proportion to their height try to jam a spherical object through a metallic circle.’

His expression did not change. ‘Aren’t we a little cranky today?’ he replied. ‘And all those big words. Very impressive. Have you ever been to the Boston Garden to watch the Celtics?’

Laura shook her head in mock self-pity. ‘I guess I haven’t really lived yet.’ She looked at her watch but did not even see the time. ‘My, my, time does fly. I have enjoyed this little chat, but I really must be go—’

‘We don’t have to talk about basketball, you know.’

The sarcasm was still there. ‘We don’t?’

His smile remained unfazed. ‘No, we don’t. Believe it or not, I’m capable of discussing matters of greater

substance: economics, politics, peace in the Middle East – you name it.’ He snapped his fingers and his smile grew. ‘I have an idea. Why don’t we talk about something really intellectual – like modeling! But no. I mean, it would be impossible for you to imagine a thinking person who doesn’t enjoy watching people whose brain size is in direct proportion to their body-fat level try to look as much like a mannequin as humanly possible.’

For a moment their eyes met, and then Laura lowered her head. When she looked up again, David was smiling in such a way as to soften his words.

‘Lighten up, Laura,’ he said gently, an expression she would hear so many times in the future. ‘I wasn’t trying to do anything but talk to you. I’ve read a lot about you and Svengali – yes, some basketball players can indeed read – and I thought you would be an interesting person to meet. I wasn’t looking for anything else but with your looks, I’m sure you think this is just another line. And I don’t blame you. Maybe it is.’

He bowed slightly and began to turn. ‘I won’t bother you anymore. Enjoy the party.’

Laura watched him walk away, hating herself for being so defensive, for not trusting the motives of even one man. He had spoken her mind as though her forehead was a window in which he could see her thoughts. But even so, this man would be all wrong for her. A jock? Forget it. She decided simply to push David Baskin from her mind. Strangely, she couldn’t do it.

Back in Australia, a near-naked Laura leaned over and reached for the clock.

10:15 p.m.

The sound of the bush penetrated through the darkness that had blanketed her window. If it were anybody else but David, she would be seriously worried. But David was a superb swimmer, a near-Olympic participant, and more to the point, he was masterfully

unpredictable, always throwing a surprise at those who knew him, always tossing an unexpected curve into life. And this was one of the reasons the sports media loved him so. He was the player whose locker the reporters rushed to after a game, the man with the perfect quote for the morning edition. He was the polite-yet-cocky superstar who always managed to live up to his off-color predictions.

Laura threw a blanket over her body. The night air was cool, tingling her nerves as it gently caressed her skin. Hours came and left, taking with them the excuses that had staved off Laura's panic and dread.

She got dressed at half past midnight and headed down to the lobby. The same receptionist was still on duty and Laura wondered if he ever slept.

'Excuse me,' she began, 'have you seen my husband?'

'Mr Baskin? No, ma'am. Haven't seen the mate since he went swimming.'

'Did he say anything to you before he left?'

'Not a peep, ma'am. He just handed me the key and that note I gave you. He didn't even look up.' The receptionist saw the worried look on her face. 'Has he not shown up yet?'

'No, he hasn't.'

'Well, now, I wouldn't worry too much about that. Your mate has got quite a reputation in the papers of being a bit of a wild one. He'll be back by morning.'

'I'm sure you're right,' she said, unconvinced. She considered looking for him but realized it would serve no real purpose except to satisfy her need to – in her mind at least – do something beside sit in their suite. But the reality was that a lone American strolling through the Australian bush in complete darkness hardly constituted a competent rescue party. More likely, David would come home while she was busy getting lost in the wilds.

Laura went back to her room, firm in the decision that she would not panic until morning.

When the room's digital clock read 7:00 a.m., Laura officially began to panic.