

THROUGH THE RANKS

By Annie Warren



ILLUSTRATED BY CHARLES PITTS

A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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A Portentous Beginning

With a quiet “ahem”, Kathy Williams, CEO and owner of the company, called the board meeting to order. She was a long-boned, lean woman in her 50’s with light brown hair just beginning to show gray at the temples, which she wore in a sort of short, executive cut.

The board knew her as a no-nonsense woman at the meetings of the board but as a warm friend outside of them. The suit she wore was cut very mannishly yet her makeup and jewelry were feminine and emphasized the slightly below-knee length of her suit skirt and her high heels.

She was the guiding light behind *Lace to Cape, Women's Clothiers*, a company that marketed a complete line of women's clothes. As the name implied, their line went from the most intimate to the outermost articles of clothing. They ran specialty boutiques to fully-stocked stores of almost department store size.

With the attention of the board, she brought up the first order of business, the consideration of a possible addition to the board. His name was Daniel Dermot Dent. She called on C.J. sitting at her left elbow. “Since C.J. has done the research, I'll ask him first for a full report. C.J.?”

C.J. was the image of what a board member should look like with polished shoes, knife-edge pressed pants, white shirt with regimental striped tie, and neatly pressed suit coat. His grooming was perfect and if the voice was softer than you'd expect from such an image of “boarddom”, the words were clear and crisp.

“Very well, Kathy,” he addressed her, demonstrating the informality of the board despite the fact that the company they ran was worth billions. He turned to the board and continued.

“As each of you came in today, you received a copy of my report. Most of you have read it, so I shall only summarize the high points. Here's what I have found out about him.

“When he graduated from high school, he was awarded 'most likely to succeed'. He followed this up with a whirlwind college career, getting an MBA when he was just 20. He indicated to interviewers that he had surveyed the job market and found the best company to work for was ours.

“He was hired in a mid-level executive position in accounting. While there, he made several improvements in the system and expanded his influence and managed to cause another, uh, *improvement* in the purchasing department dealing with dresses and outerwear. He embarrassed Ms. Monial Brown, the department Chairman, in the

process by upsetting the normal order in her department. This was a violation of our business policy; however, having been working here for only a short time, I do not believe he was aware of the infraction until after it had been committed.

“It is obvious that he has a good mind; his school transcripts attached to the report corroborate that. On top of that, he is creative; his innovative efforts give ample demonstration of that, too. On the other hand, he is something of a maverick; his improvement, no matter how good, has been done ‘behind the system's back’. That he also plans well and follows through, more or less summarizes his character.

“It is my recommendation that he would make a very excellent addition to the board, if he enrolls in and successfully completes our basic training program.”

There were nods around the board. Kathy then opened up the discussion. “Well, you have heard the summary and read the report. C.J. has made a recommendation. There seems to be agreement and no one has yet said ‘NO!’, so let’s discuss what action we should take.”

The discussion went back and forth for some time. Some members extolled the basic program as character building, something the new member would need. Others stated that they thought that even that measure would not curb the egocentric personality that seemed to revolve around a drive to make his own *personal* mark. His basic creative nature and “fresh blood” was seen by some as a much-needed addition to the board and was hinted at strongly throughout the discussion. Others felt that strong egos are good only so long as they do not interfere with “business as usual” implemented through proper channels.

After an hour of discussion, it was put to a vote. The result was that he would be admitted to the board after undergoing the basic board training. Final entry to the board would be voted on at the end of his program. It was that offer or none at all!

As you can see, the matter of admission to the board was not taken lightly and, in this case, the results were not unanimous. But the decision *was* made, and Dent was invited in.

I had been waiting for a little over an hour. I was savvy enough to know that some of the things I had done, though ultimately good for the company, had rubbed some of board members the wrong way. It would take some appeasing on my part, if I got the chance, to soothe their hurt sensibilities. I had ideas and plans and I would not be able to realize them in the comptroller's office. I could not see them making me a department head where I had no experience. Being on the board, long a dream of mine as a measure of success, would give me the opportunity to at least propose to the power structure of the company things I felt would help the company. But *would* they put me on the board? The longer I had to wait, the poorer my prospects seemed to be. Finally, the doors opened and I was invited in.

Brought Before the Board

When I walked in, I was in for a surprise. It was not the stereotypically large, drafty hall with a board table two miles long and the chairman sitting on a raised throne at

the other end. I almost would have expected that with a company my research had indicated was rich. No, it was an ordinary meeting room with a simple wooden table around which about the twelve board members sat. Yes, the chairman was at the far end, but that was as close as it came to my expectations.

At one end of the table was an open spot with a chair to one side. I walked up to the table and stood, looking the CEO in the eye. She did not indicate that I should sit so I didn't.

"This, members of the Board, is Mr. Daniel Dent about whom we have just been speaking. Mr. Dent, this is the Board, but we won't stand on formalities at this time. Some members you know; the rest you may come to know.

"Since you came here, Mr. Dent, you have shown great promise. I must be honest, though and say that you have also shown a certain lack of respect for order, for consideration of your colleagues, and for the limits of powers that you're given. At the same time, you have shown a spark of creativity and acumen that does both you and your schooling well. Thus, we have had a hard time deciding just what to do with you." She smiled, still holding my gaze, then added, "Or *not* to do with you.

"I won't mince words, quibble over personalities, nor make any attempt to rein you in at your current position. We have a simple proposition to make to you. We would like to offer you a position on the Board of Directors, to sit with us in this board room to determine the future of the company."

I smiled as this was exactly what I had wanted to achieve when I joined them. I had pushed myself in school and had done all that I could in the company to forward my cause so as to become one of the rulers! I had maneuvered myself into a more advanced position in management when I was hired. I *had* made some mistakes, but they were evidently being overlooked because I had proven myself. This was to be my just reward. But, when I was just at the point of congratulating myself, she continued.

"There *is* a proviso. You must undertake a standard course of training. You started here relatively high up the chain of command. The training you will receive will acquaint you intimately with the various levels of employment here at the company. You have a minimum of approximately one year to accomplish this; however, it can take longer if you fail to learn the proper lessons at any level in the minimum time interval. The training is to be both on and off the job. You will live within the means of the level of employment you will be experiencing. You will be paid the salary of a member of the board during this period; however, you will only receive funds commensurate with the position you are holding at the time, less housing. The difference will be held in escrow pending the end of the training. Do you understand the basic concept?

I was a bit confused. "You mean that I will *not* be doing my current duties? And, what do you mean by 'living within the means'? *What* means?"

"You will start out in the warehouse, a relatively well-paid position, but well below your current salary. There you will learn how it is run by active participation. From there, you will be put in a junior stock clerk's position, a rather menial position. You will learn the clerk's duties and be paid a clerk's wages. You will learn to live on these wages.

We shall take over the payment of your current rent as you will move into our training rooms which are commensurate with your position and earnings. We have a series of housing facilities used specifically for this training plan. The rental fees for these will be deducted from your take-home pay as if you were actually living at that level and paying rent.”

“But what about my clothes, books, all the things I live with? What about my own money and stocks?”

“The rules you’ll receive, if you decide to follow this plan, will spell this out. I’ll answer the question now, though. In essence, you will have to abandon your old life style for the term of this training. We will supply all that we deem necessary. If you attempt to draw upon your funds without authorization, you will be removed from the program and the funds held in escrow will be forfeited along with your position.”

“If I understand you correctly, I can have a position on the board if I survive this ordeal? If I quit or try to use my own money or things, I’ll be booted out?”

“That’s somewhat colloquial, Mr. Dent, but, in essence, that is what will happen if you quit or fail the training. In addition, I will be forced to give you an unfavorable letter of recommendation, spelling out your lack of regard for your fellow workers and the limits of your power. It was decided by the board that your violation of good business ethics would be rectified by the training.

“One of the board members, Mr. C.J. Gray, at my right, will monitor your progress and guide you where necessary. You will turn to him for guidance or if you feel you need any of your old resources. Your stock portfolio will be handled by our stock advisors and we will guarantee that you will not lose any money. You should actually gain some under their expertise.”

I stood there for a few moments. This was not what I had expected. My momentary elation had deflated. There was no silver platter here. I had done great things for this company and they were rewarding me by putting me through the mill or turning me out with a black mark? Maybe I should go back to where I was and work more slowly up the ladder. Maybe there was an alternative?

“The program sounds interesting and quite challenging, but isn’t there another method?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Dent. I should have clarified before that all members of the board before you have either gone through the training course or have come to their position here by literally working their way up through the ranks.” She paused for dramatic effect. “The only alternative, as outlined before, is for you to seek employment elsewhere.” The effect was indeed dramatic.

“So, take the training or be fired with a black mark on my record, right?”

“I would say that that sums it up rather succinctly.” There was more of a pause as I pondered the options. When I did not reply immediately, she continued.

“We feel you could be a really valuable addition to our board, but it has to be on *our* terms. We know the value of this training and feel that you will benefit from it, if you

complete it. If you do not, well, as to paraphrase an old western, 'this company isn't big enough for the both of us'.

“Many companies have training programs at various levels, like you had when you came into the Comptroller Division. You took it and obviously learned from it. But now you have overstepped certain boundaries. You need to know the company in ways that only our ‘through the ranks’ method can give you in depth.”

I must have had a confused look on my face. Well, why not? I thought I was doing well; now they tell me I was doing TOO well and that they had this program to curb my thoughts, actions, whatever. I had lived in poverty in school and did not look forward to doing it again, even if only for a short period of time. Of course, if I quit with a black mark, I could be living in real poverty for an even longer time. Reading my confusion when I did not say anything, she looked at the board and went on.

“I can see that Mr. Dent is still confused. We have been at this for a while. Let's take a break and let him make his decision. C.J., will you stay here with him and answer any questions he may come up with? We'll take a twenty minute break.”

God! Only twenty minutes to make a decision that would determine a year's living or my whole career direction. It seemed like someone had rung a bell and asked for a decision before the sound had even died away. The board members got up and quickly exited, many glancing at me with mixed facial expressions. C.J. did not leave but walked up to me and offered me (finally) a chair to sit in.

Decision Time

He sat down next to me and looked at me as I sat there. Then he spoke up.

“Well, Daniel, looks like you are on the horns of a dilemma. Take the training, stay with us, come to the board, or leave and take your chances in a hostile market where letters of recommendation count for more than they're really worth! It's a tough choice, but one that Ms. Williams has offered to many people. Some on the board took it. Any that refused are long since gone. Some were as bright and ambitious as you are, so don't feel that we are picking on you. You just happen to be the next in line for making the decision.”

“She said that you'd monitor it. What did she mean by that?”

“I'll arrange the living quarters, clothing, pay, and all that goes into your living in a given position. Part of the deal is to give me a limited power of attorney so that I can monitor your finances, living quarters, etc. Here, you might as well look at the details.”

With that, he shoved a sheet of paper at me. I scanned it quickly; it said what I had already been told. When I looked up, I found him gazing at me, waiting for a reaction.

“Do you have any questions? If I were you, I'd take it.” He smiled just a bit.

I thought of my previous concerns and expressed them. “I don't want to go back into poverty. I make a good living and want to keep it.” As soon as I said this, I realized the folly of my statement, especially when he smiled. “Well, I *wanted* to keep it. This seems to be a no-win situation.” At this, he got serious.

“Perhaps at the moment. Stop thinking like the standard American businessman who looks only at the current state of the market and what profits can be made *now*. You can have your current opulence and more, *if* you succeed. If you want to quit the company, then go ahead. That, to me, is taking the easy way out.” He looked me directly in the eyes. “It will not be easy; however, it is doable as we all have been saying to you.” At this point, he smiled and added, “*I* made it.

“I was chosen as your mentor as I went through the program most recently and I’m closest to you in age. Imagine being tutored by old Mr. Page, or worse yet, by old Miss Holly. I won’t say they’re fuddy duddies; they have minds as sharp as razors, but their lives were quite different from ours when they were younger.” Again a warm smile. “I’ll try to help you when and where I can. Look, if you accept, you can back out at any time and have the same status as if you backed out now, only you’ll know more. There’s always the chance, depending on how far you go, that the recommendation will be withdrawn. The money will be there when you complete, but only *if* you complete.”

I had to admit he had sound arguments. He did look my age and dressed as sharply as I did, if not more so. With him as a guide, maybe it wouldn’t be all *that* bad, after all. We discussed it further until the board started wandering back in. To his credit, he stayed by my side even when the meeting was resumed.

“The meeting will again come to order.” There was a pause as one of the members stopped talking with another one and went to his seat. “The next order of business is the case of Mr. Dent.” She looked up at me. “And, will you tell the board of your decision, Mr. Dent?”

I had still been sitting, so I arose and addressed the board, looking briefly around the sea of faces of the members peering up at me from their seats. C.J. had been right. Being mentored by some of these would indeed be a horrible experience.

“Madam Chairperson, I have decided to accept the training. My basic research on the market showed this company to be a remarkable entity and I am not quite ready to give up working here. And besides, as you and C.J. have pointed out, I *could* stand to learn some useful lessons.” As I said this, I did a quick scan of the board and found a mixture of smiles and frowns. “Besides, to do otherwise at this time would be tantamount to committing career suicide. Your offering has the wolves behind me.” At this comment, some of them did smile.

I was not sure if what I did was right or wrong, but it had been done and, with a few more words about doing some paperwork that afternoon, I departed the room and C.J. went back to his chair in the boardroom.

I hadn’t been in my office more than ten minutes when a short man with a mop of unruly blond hair was announced and came into my office. He was there to measure me. *Measure me? For what?* He had the necessary tape and note pad. So, I was measured. From tip of toe to length of fingers, arms and legs, I got the most complete measuring I had ever had. He could have made a complete body stocking from what he got. He left and I tried to get back to work; mostly I just sat surveying my office waiting for the next step which came shortly, just after noon. I did not accomplish much that day. On the other hand, they had taken most of what I was to do away from me, anyway.

The paperwork I was given was, in essence, a contract. It stated in more legal terms what was to be done and what would not be done. It was in legalese and boring to read; I ended up doing a lot of skip reading. The grounds for my termination were spelled out along with methods of appeal and so forth. The actual positions were not spelled out, being left to the board to determine and for my mentor to spell out to me. The only two positions “nailed down” were the ones previously mentioned, the warehouse position, then junior stock clerk.

When I signed, I realized that it was really a fair document as far as I was concerned. I was not quite so willing to sign the power of attorney form, but it was necessary. That and some other papers that were less clear but deemed absolutely necessary were also signed, some, I confess, without having been read. I got quite tired of seeing the words “Agreement to!” “Agreement for disposition of office property in the event of termination”? Who cares? Or “agreement on physician's care for health and adjusting to work conditions and in the event of illness”? It looked as if they were going to manage the most minute aspects of my life. I should have known better, especially when it said that these associated papers would be null and void if I left the employment of “The Company”, but I signed.

Having worn out a good pen in signing, I went to my office to await C.J.

Now what do I do?

I didn't have to wait long before he came sauntering in with a small box. “Well, I see you have taken the plunge. Good for you! I'll bet you felt you signed your life away with that wad of paper. I know I did.”

“Those were my very words, ‘signed it away’. It's not like I had a choice if I want to stay working here, you know.”

“True, but it is not as bleak as you paint it. You had a challenge coming here, doing what you did. It was good for the company but you just did not follow established procedures. Not that you knew them, but it rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. You came closer to being fired than you may realize. You're a good man, Daniel. I'm glad you're not leaving. You've got talent and drive. You have much to learn, though and a year's time is not all that long.” He smiled.

“I hope you enjoyed the praise, because you may not get much of it in the future, if any. It's not going to be easy, but, as I said, it is doable! And now that I have given you your standard pep talk, the first thing to do is to pull out anything in your office that you'll want. Remember, you may not be back here for a year or so. To come here without me is grounds for termination.

“You must divorce yourself from your prior life in this office, but don't forget it. I'm sure you'll be back... in due time.” Then the smile again. “Okay, what do you want?”

Actually, there were surprisingly few items I did want. Several I chose and was asked, “And, what will you do with that?” Each time, I put the item back. I realized why he had brought such a small box; it was not even full by the time we left. As I took one look back, I wondered if I *would* be back. So many of the books and manuals on

my shelves were job-related. I had properly “broken in” my computer but I would not need it in the lower positions I was headed for.

As I made one last sweep of the office, he stopped me with an extended hand, “Oh yes, your keys?”

I looked up, surprised. “What do you mean? Why do you want my keys?”

“It's simple, Daniel. As of your signing the agreement for training, you no longer have that apartment nor that car nor do you have any *other* lockable property other than what we assign to you. Your keys?”

I dug out my keys and handed them to him. I felt like I had a hole in my pocket, like I had just surrendered a large part of my life. He put the keys in one pocket and drew out a simple key ring with three keys on it and gave it to me.

“What's this?” I asked, eyeing the keys.

“Your new apartment key, mail box key, and locker key for work. You'll see. And now, if you are done, it is time to go.”

When he closed and locked my office door using *my* key which he put in *his* pocket; a part of my life, a way of living that I had managed to get used to, closed with it. For how long? I wondered.

Leaving the building, I felt strange. I was still wondering when I'd be back or *if* I would be back. I felt akin to a new recruit in the army just leaving civilian life who had not yet started his military career. Like him, I was apprehensive; there was no knowing what was coming though I knew I'd have to comply.

We walked three blocks to a brick tenement. In the lobby, he stopped at the mail boxes. “See if the key fits.”

Just then, three men came down the stairs and stopped. Obviously they knew C.J., as the tallest, apparently the boss of the crew, smiled and spoke. “Well, hello, C.J. New bait for the fish?”

“Yup. Just starting. All ready, I assume.”

“You got it. Gotta go. See you later.” At this, C.J. just nodded and they left.

I looked quizzically at him, not knowing what that conversation was all about, then I remembered what he had originally asked me to do and scanned the boxes. There, at 264 was “D. D. Dent”. The key fit. When I opened it, there was an envelope inside that I pulled out. I was about to read it, but he led me up the stairs. There was no elevator, so we had to hoof it. I really did not like climbing two flights of stairs, but I'd survive.

Room 264 was an apartment with bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and living room. It was not as large as where I had been living, but it was adequate. I sat down on an overstuffed chair and pulled out the envelope and opened it. Inside was a diagram of the warehouse, including the locker section. There were also a list of safety rules, locations of stock and such. While I looked it over, he went into the bedroom, coming out shortly with a long terry bathrobe.

“Please empty your pockets and take off any jewelry. Pull out the money in your wallet and count it.” I did and he took all but 100 dollars, writing out a receipt for the

remainder and my expensive watch. When all was out, he told me to go into the kitchen, strip to the skin, put on the robe, then bring all my clothing back out. When I came out, he held a cloth bag that he must have had folded up in his pocket. He put all of my clothing in it. What I wore wasn't all that expensive, but was not cheap either.

When all was stowed, we took a quick tour of the apartment. There was a bit of food in the refrigerator but none in the cupboards. I saw that there was clothing in the closet and bed linen and towels in a bathroom cabinet. All seemed in order and he left.

Not really wanting to wear a robe, I went to the bedroom and pulled open a drawer. It had socks. I pulled out a pair and opened another drawer. It had shorts in it and I pulled out a pair. They were boxer shorts but of a slinky nylon. I looked more but they were all made of the same material. So, faced with limited choice, I put them on.

I'd never owned, much less worn, such a pair and they turned out to be quite comfortable. The undershirts were like a tank top, sleeveless and also made of nylon. They, too, were quite comfortable. From the closet, I picked a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of slacks. They fit although the pants had an elastic waist band and no belt. I looked at a pair of coveralls also been hanging in the closet; they looked like some kind of flight suit, being bright orange and, again, nylon. I felt this was going to be a comfortable uniform to wear. Besides, with not much money, I'd have to get food before clothing. Like my school days, I was back on a tight budget!

While wondering what to do, I found a notebook that C.J. must have left. I had not remembered seeing him bringing it in with us. I opened it and there was a second guide to working in the warehouse. The one in the envelope proved to be almost a duplicate, but more portable than this one and not as complete, a summary. He hadn't mentioned the guide, but I found it to be full of necessary information. How to check in, when to start, when to stop, when to eat. I ate a light supper while studying it. Again, like at school, I was studying out of books. Was life repeating itself for me?

An extra slip of paper stuck in the rules said that I was to report the day after tomorrow and that I had an appointment tomorrow afternoon for a physical and treatment. Treatment for what? I probably should have read it closer. I chuckled to myself; they'd probably give me rabies and flu shots and shoot me up for whatever diseases I might catch mixing with the common folk.

I reviewed. The day after tomorrow was work day. Tomorrow would be half a "free" day, for I would have to lay in some food. Thinking of other needs, I went looking in the bedroom. In a small drawer in a night stand, I found a simple digital watch and a wallet, empty of course. At least I'd have a place to put my money. With no car or checks to cash, I probably wouldn't have any need for a driver's license. In the closet, I found a pair of low quarters and work boots. Both looked quite used but serviceable. Putting on the low quarters, I found that they fit. The company was apparently quite thorough; rapid, too, considering how little time they had to get this place ready. Then, I remembered the men leaving as we came in. I guess we were almost too early with our arrival. I suddenly resented being called "bait", but there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.