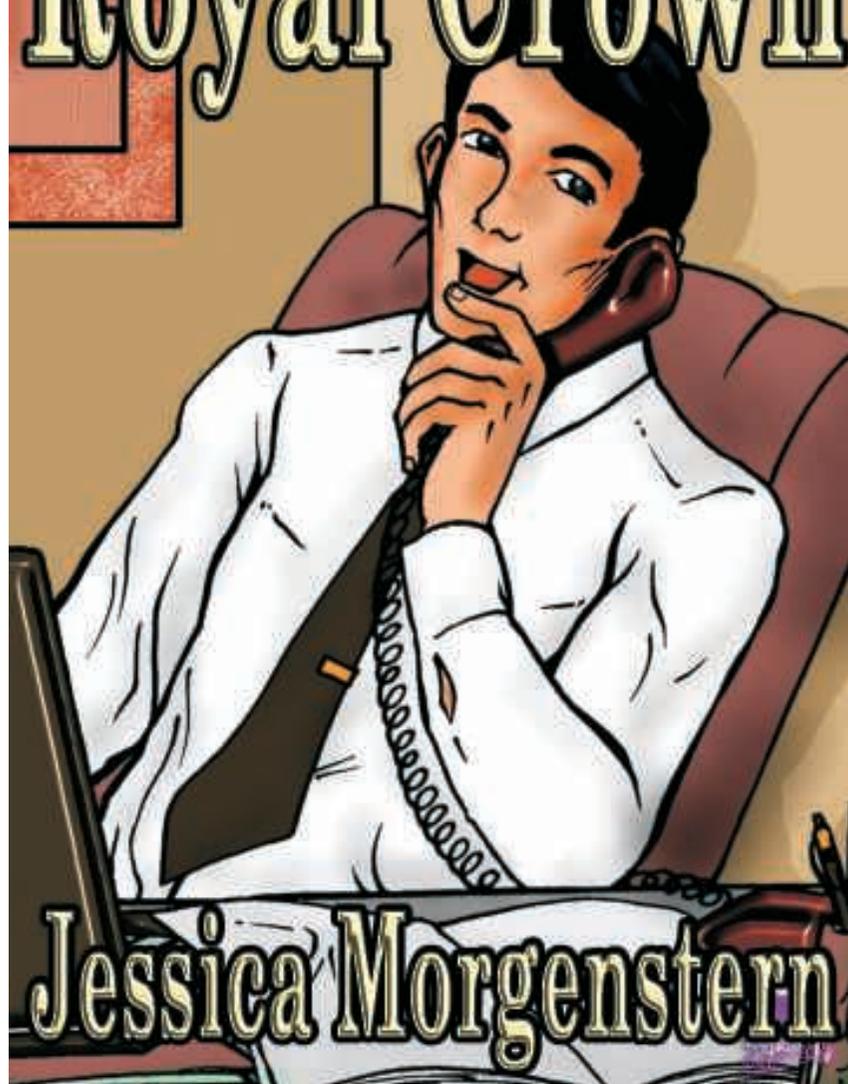


Joshua Royal Crown



Jessica Morgenstern



Copyright ©) 2014

Published by Mags, Inc

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotes contained within a critical review.

For information address

Mags, Inc.

P.O. Box 5829

Sherman Oaks, CA 91413

USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

www.magsinc.com

Joshua Royal Crown

by Jessica Morgenstern

My name is Joshua Royal Crown. Don't laugh! It was my mom's favorite drink, and since she married Joshua Crown, she just naturally dubbed me *Royal*. Thank God I didn't get her maiden name, Paddock! Imagine, Royal Paddock Crown! Mein Gott in Himmel!

I'm also happy my parents' surname wasn't Crush! Can you imagine a man or woman named *Orange* or *Pineapple*? Oh, the horror of it all!

Mom loved my middle name so much that until the day she died, I was *Royal* to her. I didn't mind that. After all, moms are moms and do as they please with their children.

As it was, I took a lot of razing when I was in school. After graduation, I enrolled in the state college where I took a double major, business and chemical engineering. That was fine, until I ran out of money at the end of my junior year. I went to work for TechEx, a chemi-

cal processing plant as a chemical trainee and I saved every dime I could so that I could return to college and get my degrees.

Then, a year later (on my twenty-first birthday), Selective Service (the draft) came into my life and I was given the debatable choice of *volunteering* for the U S Navy, or *enlisting* in the Marine Corps. I chose the Corps because I detested deep water! I spent the next three years as a Marine where my name came up again. It did calm down some after I graduated O. T. S.

You don't intentionally piss off a green-marine second looie!

In school, because of my middle and last names, I was nick-named *King Shit* and *Clown Prince* just to mention two of the more gross ones. About a hundred bloody noses later, those two stopped, at least to my face. A few wags in the Corps thought it would be funny to start in again, but several fights out behind the squad's barracks changed a lot of minds about the new, *soft*, O. T. S. candidate!

After O. T. S. I was just plain Second Lieutenant J. R. Crown and most people then called me either J. R. or Jr. or Lt. Crown. All were acceptable to me.

Being in the Marines was a blast! I saw things and places I never would have otherwise, Hawaii and the Philippines, for instance. Oh, yeah, I saw the jungles of Viet Nam too.

I was thinking of extending for another tour when I got shot in the ass, well, not really, close but no cigar. Actually it was in the crease between buttock and thigh and it hurt like Hell! Bad enough to be sent to recover in Okinawa. That was OK, but I was happier when I was sent Stateside and released from active duty. I was a captain with a chest full of medals. Big deal! A dollar bill and all those medals would buy you a cuppa coffee in just about any restaurant in the whole danged U. S. of A.! Or not. . .

Anyway, the upshot is, I limp slightly, even more so when I'm tired.

For awhile I was so shaky on my feet the D. O. D. gave me an electric chair. No, not that kind! This one had two bigger wheels in back and two smaller ones in front for steering. It had a huge battery under the seat and was controlled by a toggle switch mounted on an arm extension for my right hand. I got pretty good at driving that thing!

I kinda missed it when the doctors told me I was being *graduated* to crutches, then a two-wheeled walker, to a no wheel walker, to a cane, and finally they took the cane away too. Talk about strings attached! Cheap bastards. But, after three years of the Military, what else could I expect? Nothing!

And that's exactly what I got.

Still, it could have been worse, I might have had to use the damned electric chair for the rest of my life! Thank the Lord for small flavors!

Anyway, I went back home and found that during my absence, the plant had doubled in size, and not only that, there were now four branches to keep up with product demand.

My old job had been eliminated. That was before Congress passed a law *protecting* a Vet's rights regarding his old job, if he wanted it back!

I didn't. Not really. I now had enough money to finish my degrees and I went back to college instead of back to work. College life agreed with me for the most part. I had lost none of my capacity to absorb and remember what I read and heard in class, and as a result, I was on the Dean's List all the way, with the accompanying accolades associated with that honor.

During the last semester of my senior year, a job recruitment fair came to campus, and lo and behold, one of those seeking graduates to employ was my old nemesis, TechEx, looking for Executive Trainees to manage some of their newer facilities.

I ignored them, talking to every Executive and Chemical Representative except TechEx!

I should have saved my breath!

As luck would have it, while I was ignoring TechEx, TechEx was not ignoring me! My old boss, James Wyoming "J. W." DeKlerk, had seen my name on the roster of upcoming graduates and he took it upon himself to corner me.

"Mr. Crown, do you remember me? My name is James W. De. . ."

"I remember you, J. W. What do you want?" I asked coldly.

"My boy! I am surprised! I thought we had a good relationship built up between us after you worked for me some years ago," he blustered.

"That was before your loving company refused to reinstate me in my old job when I came home from the Nam!" I shot right back at him.

"I can't believe that!" he retorted in surprise. "Why, you were one of the best men I ever hired! Why didn't you come see me when you got back?"

"I tried. I called several times, but Bob told me you weren't interested. I even went to the place to see you and Bob just about threw me out. Now I admit, Bob and I were never friends, but since he is the boss' son, I figured he spoke for you. So, I said, 'to Hell with TechEx,' and I returned to college. Now I'll have my double degree in another week and I have all but promised Rub-R-Tech that I would go with them. They offered me 26K to start, periodic raises tied to job performance, a company car, full life, health and dental insurance, and a relocation allowance."

"Now, you listen to me!" he almost shouted. "You stay away from that fly-by-night outfit! Whatever they promised, I'll match and then some!" he continued to shout.

"Oh," I added, shoving the needle in further, "they promised me autonomy and complete freedom to do what they were hiring me to do."

"I can do that and more!" he roared.

"That means no interference from your son, Bob, at any time. If I go with TechEx, I will be responsible and report to one person and that person only, *you*. Is that understood?"

"Well, Bob is plant manager now. . ." he hesitated.

"Then you can take TechEx and shove it straight up where the sun don't never shine!" I yelled right back at him.

"Now just one God damned minute here. . ." he objected.

"No!" I cut him off. "I have no time for wannabes. . ." I snarled.

"Wannabes? Why you fucking up-start, I could buy and sell you a dozen times an hour for the next year and never feel a thing financially!"

I grinned. "Yep, you probably could, but you'll never get the chance to try!" I snapped angrily, turning away.

He grabbed my arm. "Now, J. R., let's not get hasty. I admit I'm a hard ass and even harder to get along with most of the time. . ."

"Yeah, I always wondered why Mrs. DeKlerk didn't throw you out years ago!" I taunted.

"Now you leave Lucy out of this!" he stormed.

"Sorry, I meant no disrespect to the lady," I apologized.

"J. R., let's stop fighting. Take a deep breath and think. You're too damned good to waste on Rub-R-Tech! Believe it or not, I always had big ideas for your future!"

"Yeah, under Bob's thumb? No thanks, J. W.! I will never work for that man under any circumstances, not then, not now and not never in the foreseeable future."

"OK, OK, you've made your point. I can see why Bob and you don't get along. You're both too fucking much alike! Hard headed! Stubborn! Opinionated! Total assholes!"

"I admit that I'm a total asshole because I do not have hemorrhoids!" I laughed.

"Geezums! Another out-of-work comedian!" he groaned.

"Ha ha!"

"Be serious."

"I am serious. I mean what I say, take it or leave it!" I retorted, turning to leave.

He was determined to get in the last word. "Everyone thinks you're a damned fool!"

I turned, smiled sweetly, "'Tis better to be thought a damned fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt!"

"Look, you opinionated jackass," he stormed, "come work for me. I'll give you everything Rub-R-Tech will give you and autonomy besides. But you *will* answer to me, understood?"

"I haven't said I'd go with TechEx. . ." I equivocated.

Except that we both knew I probably would! Eventually. . .

Why?

I don't really know, but that place had always seemed like home to me. I always felt at ease with everything, except Bob DeKlerk. He had been two years ahead of me in school, but he had been one of my enemies even then.

Why?

Because I dared ask Louise Winters for a date when he erroneously thought he had the inside track with her. Louise eventually married Bob's younger brother, Dave, whom she much preferred over the pompous, loud-mouthed Bob. Dave and Louise had been my classmates in high school too, same class even.

Bob hated Dave too.

Bob was one of those ninety-nine point nine percent of persons who are not complete assholes! He's a hem-

orrhoid and a complete bastard, no thanks to his parents, and works at it!

'Hunmph!' I thought. 'I should take the old man up on his offer just to piss off Bob!' Now that was something worth considering. . .

Anyway, my mind was made up for me by Rub-R-Tech when the contract they offered in written form did not match their oral promises. Gone were the insurances, gone was the salary to be replaced by something any non-degreed worker would accept, gone was the company car, gone was the relocation allowance. I laughed in their representative's face. "You, Sir," I told him coldly, "are a bare faced liar! Where are those benefits of signing with your company that you promised so eloquently during your recruitment speech last month?" I asked quietly.

"The economy! Growth, Sir!" he blustered. "Economic conditions dictate cut-backs. . ."

"Yeah, growth all right. Growth on the backs of unsuspecting peons. The rich get richer and the poor get even less. No thanks! Take your offer and shove it!"

"You'll be sorry!" he blustered. "I'll black list you and you'll never work in the chemicals' field again!" he threatened.

"Mister, if I ever hear that I have been black-listed, no matter who did it nor who does do it, I'm coming for you! And you will not like what I can and will do to you!"

I stood, ripped his contract in half and strode from the room.

I never heard another thing from him or Rub-R-Tech!

I went home and forgot all about chemicals, concentrating instead of the last paper I had to write for my communications class. Ms Anne Dawson was a harsh taskmistress, but I knew I'd get my usual A from her. And, when I got my transcript, she had given me an A+!

At any rate, at the graduation ceremony, J. W. DeKlerk was in the audience with Mrs. J. W. Lucy DeKlerk and after the ceremony, they came forward to congratulate me personally on my academic accomplishments.

"My, the last person I watched graduate with a perfect four point oh was my husband almost forty years ago. You are to be congratulated, Mr. Crown. Your parents must be proud indeed of your accomplishment," Lucy DeKlerk enthused with a happy smile on her ruby lips.

"Probably, if they were still living," I replied softly. Few people knew of their deaths.

"Oh, I am so sorry, Mr. Crown," she apologized. "I didn't know. . ."

"Thank you, Ma'am," I replied softly.

"All right, enough of this small talk!" J. W. interrupted. "Are you going to work for those crooks at Rub-R-Tech or what?" he demanded.

I cupped my hand behind my ear. "What?" I asked politely.

"Always with the wise cracks!" he burst out. "Can't you be serious once in your life?"

"I, Sir, am always serious!" I replied, drawing myself up in pretended outrage.

"Have you thought about what I offered?" he demanded, changing the subject.

"I didn't know you had offered Mr. Crown a job, dear," Mrs. DeKlerk commented.

"I did, but he's so fucking stupid he turned me down!" J. W. roared angrily.

"Watch your language, dear," she admonished quietly.

He blushed and I knew right then who ruled in that household!

To me, "Will you tell me what my husband offered you, Mr. Crown?" she dimpled.

"Yes, Ma'am," I replied. "When I told him what Rub-R-Tech offered. . ."

At the mention of Rub-R-Tech, she shuddered delicately. "Those charlatans!" she cried.

"Well, Ma'am, they offered me 26K to start, periodic raises tied to work performance, a company car, full life, health, eye and dental insurance, and a relocation allowance. They also promised me autonomy and complete freedom to do what they were hiring me to do."

She nodded. "That sounds reasonable, except for the salary" she murmured. "And what did my husband offer in return?" she inquired gently.

"He said he would match it and then some," I replied, "and I told him that if I did sign with him, I would be accountable to no one but him, and yes, before you ask, I do mean your oldest son, Robert DeKlerk. He and I have been at odds since high school and I do not wish to be in a subordinate position to that man. I can find work anywhere with my new degrees, so if I do not go to work for TechEx, there are those who will snap me up in an instant!" I sort of bragged.

"I'm sure," she agreed. "So, have you made a decision?"

"About. . ."

"Whether you'll go to work for my husband under the stipulations outlined, or whether you'll try another venue?" she answered.

"I have to admit, Mrs. DeKlerk, I always considered TechEx my home away from home when I worked there before, and if I would be answerable to J. W. himself, only, I think I might just as well stay put. After all, if I went someplace else, I'd have to break in a whole new set of associates. By staying with TechEx, I already know who and what to expect."

"Would thirty-two per be an adequate recompense?" she asked softly.

"Yes, Ma'am!" I replied with great joy.

"Splendid!" she crooned, holding out her hand. "Welcome to TechEx as our newest Executive Trainee, Mr. Crown!"

Dumbly, I shook hands with her. Without my realizing it, she had snookered me!

"You've made a wise decision, my boy," J. W. added. "I assure you, you will have no trouble from either of my boys! One addition, make your reports to Mrs. Winters. She is totally reliable and discrete to a fault. But you only report to her but are responsible to me. Got it?"

"Oh, Davey is fine. He was always friendly before. It was Bob who did not like me!"

"Nevertheless, if there is ever a conflict with either boy, come to me or Mrs. Winters instantly. You will always be invited into my office."

"Yes, Sir," I replied. "Thank you, Sir, and thank you, Ma'am!" I added to Mrs. DeKlerk

"Stop by the office tomorrow at your convenience and I'll have Mrs. Winters draw up your contract papers," J. W. offered. He turned to Lucy. "Dammit, Lucy, now we'll have to pay this damned jackass more than he's worth!" he grouched.

"Now, dear, remember your blood pressure," she cautioned. "We can well afford his salary. Besides, I think we can expect great things from Mr. Crown!"

"I hope you're right!" he conceded reluctantly.

Looking up at me, smiling coyly, Mrs. DeKlerk asked, "Have you made any special plans for tonight, Mr. Crown?"

"Why, no, not really. . ." I replied hesitantly.

"Then why don't you join James and me for dinner at our home?" she dimpled.

I could not refuse.

"I'd be delighted, Ma'am!"

She giggled.

"What's so funny, Lucy?" J. W. asked, puzzled.

"Oh, I was just reminded of an old joke."

"What joke is that?" he asked absently.

"What happened to the lightning bug when he backed into the electric fan?" she dimpled prettily.

"I haven't a clue. What?" he demanded.

"Why, he was de-lighted!" she trilled gaily.

"Good Lord, my own wife an out-of-work comedienne!" he groaned.

I was so surprised that I laughed right out loud!

2

"Mother!" Bob gasped. "Surely you didn't invite that upstart barbarian here for dinner?"

"Most assuredly, I did, Robert!" Mrs. DeKlerk retorted. "I am well aware of your animosity towards Mr. Crown, but he has been retained as an Executive Trainee by our firm and you will show him the courtesy he deserves, else you may leave this house immediately!"

"I'll be damned if I'll sit down with that worthless son of a bitch!" Bob raged.

"Very well, Robert, you may be excused." She turned away. "I trust you do not entertain similar sentiments towards Mr. Crown as your brother obviously does, David?" she asked.

"Of course not, mother! I always thought Joshua was a great guy!" David enthused.

"Yes, Mother DeKlerk, Mr. Crown is more than acceptable to David and me as a dinner companion," David's wife, Louise, added softly. "He was always such a gentleman when we were in high school!"

"He saved my bacon more than once!" David laughed.

"Oh? You'll have to tell me more," Mrs. DeKlerk prompted.

"Aw, you don't want to hear any of those old groaners, mom!" he protested.

"Oh, but I do, David, I really do!" she emphasized.

"Maybe later. . ." he equivocated.

"I shall hold you to that, my dear!" she promised with a note of finality in her voice.

"Hi, everyone," J. W. greeted as he strode into the library. "I just saw Bob tearing out the driveway like the sheriff was after him. What's his problem now?"

"He objected to our choice of dinner guests," Mrs. DeKlerk replied.

"Oh, is that all? I thought he might have had some bad news!"

"Good evening, father," David greeted.

"David," he acknowledged.

"Mr. DeKlerk," Louise greeted.

"Dad gum it, *dad!*" he yelped as a slow grin wreathed her lips.

She knew how to nettle him and get him to laughing.

"You little scamp! I ought to take you over my knee and blister that fat ass of yours to a fond fare-thee-well!"

"Oh, dad! You know very well that I do not have a fat ass!" She blushed prettily.

"I'll leave it up to David. Does she have a fat ass or doesn't she?" he demanded.

"No, dad, it isn't fat, but it sure is patable!"

"I shall speak with you later, *Mr.* DeKlerk!" Louise hissed.

"You're in for it now, boy!" J. W. laughed.

"Well, where's that guest of honor of yours, mama?" Dave asked. "It's after seven. . ."

The doorbell rang.

"Repent and ye shall be saved!" she trilled. "Will you answer the door, David, please?"

A moment later, I had entered the room and greeted everyone politely. Louise leaned up and let me kiss her cheek chastely.

"Good evening, Joshua," she greeted softly.

"Ouch! Can't you call me J. R. like everyone else does?" I complained.

"Why? Joshua is your name, isn't it?" she dimpled.

"You win!" I laughed.

"I usually do, Joshua," she trilled gaily.

"And you're even more beautiful than ever!" I quipped.

"You are too kind," she replied, lowering her head as she blushed with pleasure.

"Welcome, J. R." Dave greeted. "I see you haven't lost your way with women?"

"Is she still as stubborn and as opinionated as a blue nosed mule as she was in high school?" I asked, smiling.

"Oh, worse!" Dave laughed.

Louise shot a visible dagger at her husband. "I shall speak to you later, *Mr.* DeKlerk!"

"Yes, my dear, of that I am quite sure!" he smiled.

"Welcome, Mr. Crown," Mrs. DeKlerk greeted. "I am so happy you're here! Shall we go into the dining room? Mr. Crown, will you escort me?" It was not a request!

I carefully sat her in the correct chair, then moved to stand behind the only chair left, right next to Louise! As I hesitated, Mrs. DeKlerk rang a little bell, the door opened and two maids brought in food laden trays to begin serving each diner.

"Tell me, Joshua," Louise turned to me, "Are you home for good or do you have to go back to that awful place again?"

I laughed. "Nope, that's all behind me now."

"In more ways than one!" J. W. roared with laughter.

I blushed at the insinuation.

"Now, dear," Lucy DeKlerk cautioned, gazing at her husband with a gleam in her eye.

"Sorry, m'love," he half apologized. "But it was a funny place to get. . ."

"That is quite enough of that kind of talk!" she repeated quietly.

Soon, the guests settled down and began the business of eating the varied items set before them, until finally, J. W. pushed his chair back and declared, "If I take another bite, I'll burst for sure!" He burped loudly.

"Heavens!" Mrs. DeKlerk exclaimed. "That would never do!"

Everyone laughed good naturedly at this as one of the maids returned with a tray of iced desserts which she slid before each one.

In spite of his protests, J. W. pitched right in, devouring his with relish.

Later, we were all seated in the library with our after-dinner coffees, just enjoying one another's company and conversation.

"So, David," J. W. opened the conversation. "Any news yet?"

"News, father?" David asked, puzzled.

"Is your wife knocked up yet? Dammit boy, pay attention."

"Father! This is hardly the place," David objected.

"Well, are you or aren't you?" He glared at Louise.

She blushed. "No, dad, not yet," she replied hesitantly.

"Well, hurry it up! I want to be able to enjoy my grandkids while I'm still young enough!"

"Now, James, remember your blood pressure," Mrs. DeKlerk cautioned.

"Oh, to Hell with my blood pressure!" he exclaimed, turning to me. "Well, you've had a chance to

look the place over this afternoon. Any changes for the better you can recommend?"

I smiled. "Too early to tell, Boss man."

"Well, get cracking! I expect great things from a rah rah college grad!"

I held my cup high. "To rah rah college grads!"

"Hear, hear!" Dave applauded. "I'll drink to that!" He drained his coffee cup.

Soon, we three males were talking shop and Mrs. DeKlerk and Louise were discussing something else, and so the evening passed.

Finally, shortly after eleven, David and Louise said their good byes and I took my cue, leaving at the same time.

Driving home, I marveled at the difference between the old man at work and the pussy cat he was at home. Obviously his wife was the answer to that.

I smiled to myself. . .

3

"I tell you, the man is insufferable!" Bob shouted at his father. "No matter what I want him to do, he just gives me a pitying look and walks away! I am damned sick and tired of his insubordination! After all, I am the plant manager and the boss' eldest son. That ought to count for something around here!"

"Robert, I have told you a dozen times, Mr. Crown does not work for you. He works for me and he is answerable to only me," J. W. replied curtly. "Now, I don't want to hear one more word from you about him! What have you found out about the work slowdown in Detroit?"

"Union! OCW wants to unionize our plant there."

"Union! Damn the union! What are you doing to stop them?"

"I fired all the agitators and. . ."

"That will never work. All that does is make martyrs out of the fired men and turns the rest of the workers against us!"

"So, what would you have me do?"

"Nothing. I'm sending J. R. and old man Selfridge out to look the situation over and to take appropriate steps. They leave this afternoon.

"Selfridge? Why he's so old he has to have help wiping his ass in the morning!"

"You should be as active when you're eighty plus years old, my boy," J. W. replied.

"And that fucking Crown, what does he know about labor? I tell you, nothing!"

"Nevertheless, he's going and that's that," J. W. repeated quietly.

"Sum-na-bitch'n bastard!" Bob exploded vehemently. "Oh, how I hate that insufferable son of a bitch!" he added with a vengeance. "He's got to go!"

"No, Bob, he stays! And that's my final word!" his father replied heatedly.

"Christ on a fucking pogo stick!" Bob moaned in disgust.

4

I stood on the small stage in the break room as the milling, shouting workers raged around me. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Please, may I have your attention?" I called. Slowly, reluctantly, the noise abated. "Thank you," I responded. "Now, who speaks for all of you?"

"That would be me, Sir," a husky worker stood and stepped forward.

"And you are, Sir?"

"Jorge Henri Mergen, Sir."

"OK, Jorge, I'm asking you straight out, what's your biggest gripe about the company?"

"Sir, we have asked for safety guards on some of the more dangerous machines and all that fucking Bob DeKlerk said was, 'No!' The cheap bastard doesn't care about the four men in hospital right now with injuries that could have been prevented with proper safety shields."

"Jorge, I was unaware of that situation. I promise you this, *all* needed machine-guards will be installed before the end of this shift! Anything else?"

"Yeah, the union man says we ain't getting paid enough."

"I beg your pardon? Have you looked into that allegation? I can assure you, our wages are equal to or better than union scale. To be quite honest with you, if all we had to pay was union scale, we would save in the neighborhood of ten to twelve thousand dollars a week!"

"I don't believe it!"

"Have you seen the union pay scale schedule?"

"Well, no, but the union man has told us. . ."

"My friend, the union is interested in one thing and one thing only. They could give two shits less about safety measures or wages or hours worked or anything else. Their only concern is dues paying members in their union. They only want your money! It's as simple as that."

"You got proof of that?" the man demanded querulously.

"Yes, I do. If you will come with me to the paymaster's office, I will show you our pay scale and you bring the union papers so we can compare."

"We don't have any union papers," the man admitted slowly.

"Well, I do! Would you like to see them?" I challenged.

"Yes, Sir, I most assuredly would."

"Good. Pick two other men whom you feel are trustworthy and we shall go check out our wage scales against their wage scales."

"Yer on, Mister Crown!"

He turned to the crowd and pointed at two men. "You guys, come with me!"

And the five of us (Mr. Selfridge was with me) went to the paymaster's office where we compared union scale with company scale. We won, hands down, in all but one case, we paid floor sweepers ten cents less than union scale. But, since we did not have any men hired to be floor sweepers, the difference was moot.

"Well, gentlemen?"

"You convinced me," Mr. Mergen spoke.

"Then it would seem that the only gripe of any consequence is the machine-guards, is that right?" I asked.

"That and the guys who got hurt," Jorge replied.

"We'll take care of them and each one has his old job back when he returns, if he wants it," I promised, remembering my own experience.

An hour later, the machine-guards were in place, the union was history and I was on the phone reporting our success to J. W.

5

"It's some sort of trick!" Bob yelled at J. W. "No union gives up that easily!"

"This one never had the chance," I interjected, "the workers saw them for the money grubbers they are and voted against the union one hundred percent, 'No!'"

"What did you promise them, higher wages?" Bob sneered.

"No, Bob, all I had to do was agree to put safety shields on all of the more dangerous machines, some-



thing you denied some time ago, long enough for four good men to be severely maimed and hospitalized!"

J. W. stared at Bob, aghast. "My good God, son, is that true?"

"Hell, no!" Bob roared.

"Funny," I chuckled, "but I have a copy of the memo you signed denying any changes!"

"Fuck you, Crown! It's a lie! You'd do anything to discredit me!" Bob yelled in outrage.

"If this were 1875, Sir, I'd whip out my 45 and shoot you for calling me a liar!" I whispered menacingly.

"You've always tried to do me wrong!" Bob screamed. He turned to J. W. "Can't you see what this asshole is trying to do to us?"

"Now is not the time. . ." J. W. began.

"Now is exactly the time!" Bob shouted.

"When you get him straightened out, Boss, I'll be over in shipping. Mr. Selfridge and I came up with a better way of packaging product for shipment." And I strode from the room.

"And he's another one! That old man is always undermining me!"

"Mr. Selfridge has been with the company since the day I opened its doors and he has never been anything but a loyal employee. He's the most loyal man I have!" J. W. objected.

"But. . ." Bob started to object.

"Bob, I think it's time for a change of scenery for you. How does Homestead sound?"

"The new Florida plant?" Bob asked incredulously.

"Yep, it's state of the art and will practically run itself. It will require supervision, but the machines will do most of the work and they will run twenty-four seven three sixty-five if needed. All we have to do is keep an eye on everything and replace or repair as needed. Think you can handle that?" J. W. smiled at his eldest son.

"Hell, yes, pop! Just let me at it!"

"OK, now mind you, I don't want any superhuman results, just a steady flow of reliable product delivered promptly to our paying customers."

"I can do that, pop! Just let me at it!" Bob promised.

"OK, Bob, you leave in a week. I want you to go somewhere and rest, get yourself in the mood, as it were. Remember, I'm counting on you!"

"And no fucking Crown?"

"J. R. is needed elsewhere."

"Just as long as elsewhere does not include Home-stead, Florida!"

"You have my word, son," J. W. replied, hoping he would never have to send J. R. Crown to Florida to clean up after Bob!

'J. R. would never let me live that down!' he thought.

6

"So how's that new way of shipping product working out?" J. W. asked his new plant manager, me, Joshua R. Crown.

"Boss, you would not believe! With that new labeling and packaging machine, we have almost doubled assembly-line output. The vats are working three shifts trying to keep up. In fact, I warned Jonesy that we have to work Saturday and Sunday to keep ahead of orders."

"Time and a half for Saturday and double time for Sunday?" J. W. moaned. "You'll bankrupt me yet, dammit, boy!"

I laughed. "Hardly, you old skinflint! Those guys are working their asses off since you sent Bob to Florida! Hell, they even laugh and sing while they work now!"

"Hell, them Irishers always did sing!"

"Not with Bob around!" I retorted.

"Yeah. You know, it's a pity he has to be so damned stubborn. Must get it from his mother," J. W. mused.

I couldn't help myself, I laughed uproariously. "His mother? Like Hell! He gets it from you and you know it! Stop trying to convince me otherwise! I know different!"

"You don't know Jack Shitt!" the old man roared.

"I know when you're trying to shit me!"

"You still don't know Jack Shitt!" he repeated.

"Look, you want product out the door and more money in your pocket, or do you want to stay with a five day workweek and lose money hand over fist while our competitors move in to take up the slack?"

"Have it your own way, you obstinate s. o. b.! Damn, worse than a blue nosed mule!"

"Hee haw! Hee haw!" I brayed as I left his office.

"Obstinate jackass!" J. W. muttered to himself.

"Who, dear?" Mrs. Winters asked as she entered the office.

"That God damned Crown! He's the biggest pain in my ass I have ever hired!"

"Worse than you, J. W.?" she smiled benignly.

"If you weren't the best damned secretary in the world, I'd can your ass in a heartbeat, Harriet!" he blustered.

"What? And deprive yourself of my sweet disposition and calming influence? Not to mention that I own half of the company?" she chided gently.

"Damn! I should buy you out now, but then I'd have to tell Lucy why," he muttered.

"So, stop your caterwalling and let's get down to business. How's Mr. Crown doing?"

"That insufferable horse's ass? I'd like to kick his ass right up over his shoulders!"

"He's doing that good, eh?"

"Harriet, everything he does turns to gold! He and Selfridge have turned shipping up on its ear and they aren't done yet! Even the damned machines purr and bow low when he walks by. He's got some sort of magic touch about him."

"Good. Then I can raise him another hundred a week?"

"What? Hell no! He's already getting thirty nine thousand per annum! God, woman, are you trying to bankrupt me too?" he moaned.

"Now, J. W., you know that our gross income has doubled in the last six months and after all, it's only money. I have already announced a fifty cent raise for all hourly employees at all of our plants, and I signed your name to the order too!" She smiled brightly.

"That's forgery!" he yelled.

"Yes, it is," she agreed.

"And blackmail!" he moaned.

"All too true," she agreed again sweetly.

"It's criminal too!" he shouted.

"Well, yes, in a way," she agreed.

"And where do we get all this wonderful money you're giving away so cavalierly?" he demanded.

"Why, from your share of the profits, of course!" she dimpled.

"My share? Why *my* share. . ."

"Hush, J. W., before you have a heart attack. Remember your high blood pressure."

"Screw my blood pressure! I won't have it!" he roared.

"What we should be looking at is why Homestead is losing money. We have lost six of our biggest customers in the past month and no explanation why," Harriet mused.

"I'm sure Bob's right on top of things," J. W. blustered.

"Yes, I'm sure of that. . ." Harriet smiled knowingly.

"Dammit! I won't have it!" he repeated.

"Won't have what, dear?" Lucy DeKlerk asked as she entered.

"This woman is trying to bankrupt me!" he thundered.

Lucy raised her brow at Harriet who nodded, smiling brightly.

"Hi, Lucy," Harriet greeted. "You're right on time."

"I'll on time you. . . you. . . *liberal!*" he shouted.

"Calm down, dear, take a deep breath, then tell me the problem," Lucy smiled

Ten minutes later, the two women were talking to one another calmly while J. W. sat in his office chair and wondered how they had turned the tables on him.

From anger to agreement and he didn't know how they had done it.

But, they did.

And they had!

All at once, fifty cents meant less than nothing!

"Now, Joshua wants to give a company party to thank all our loyal employees for their vastly improved production over the past year and I think it's a grand idea. Why, do you know that employee turnover has been at its lowest this past year than it ever has been! In fact, since we have been working three shifts and some of those shifts seven days a week, we have gained employees in every department.

"We now have sixteen trucks delivering our product on time, double what it was just six months ago!" Lucy enthused.

For a moment, J. W. had to think. 'Joshua? Who in Hell was Joshua?'

"Who in Hell is Joshua?" he demanded just before he remembered. "Oh, him, J. R."

"That's the one," Lucy laughed. "Oh, we were so lucky he chose to come with us instead of that other horrid company!"

"I should have let him go there!" J. W. grouched.

"Now you don't believe that for one single minute!" his wife corrected, smiling knowingly.

J. W. laughed. "You know me too well, Lucy."

"Anyway, he wants to give the employees a party and I think Christmas would be perfect. What do you think, Harriet?"

"I think it's a wonderful idea!" she exclaimed excitedly.

"Just one damned minute here," J. W. interrupted. "How much is this going to cost me?"

"Oh, we'll keep the cost down, dear," Lucy soothed.

"You damned well better or it's coming out of your household allowance!"

"Good. No more honey for your pancakes, oleo instead of butter, skim milk because it's cheaper, baloney instead of hamburger, two day old bread, no more cookies or banana cream pies, not to mention chocolate pies. A wise decision, my dear!" she smiled wistfully. "Oh, there are so many ways we can economize! You can do the lawn mowing and trim my roses so we won't need a gardener. I can do the cooking and cleaning, thereby saving the expense of maids and a cook. And you can drive your own car, thereby saving the expense of a chauffeur, and we could move into a smaller house and cut down on. . ."

"Now wait just a gol' dern minute," he blustered.

"No, my dear, as head of the household, your word is law, and we lesser peons must obey," she teased.

"Now cut that out, Lucy DeKlerk! You're not a peon. . ." he objected.

"Then stop treating me like one!" she stormed angrily.

"Why don't you shut up while you're almost even?" Harriet laughed. "Go any further and you will jam that foot even further down your gullet!"

"He doesn't need any help," Lucy commented with a soft smile. "He does that very well all by himself!"

J. W. groaned. "I don't get no respect around here, not even from my own wife and beloved secretary!"

"Now you are being maudlin!" Harriet laughed. "Beloved? Really, J. W.! I expect better of you than that!"

"He gets that way every once in a while," Lucy laughed.

"What we should be worrying about is Hom. . ."

A soft knock at the office door interrupted their banter.

I stuck my head inside. "Boss, turn on channel five on your teevee."

"Why? What's going on?" J. W. demanded.

"Just turn on the damned teevee!" I hissed.

7

As the teevee came on line, they heard, "One of the worst explosions in South Florida history! The devastation is horrific. Debris for miles around. No word on casualties as yet, but as near as we can learn, there were no survivors at the blast site!

"I repeat, it's one of the worst disasters in South Florida history!

"The vast TechEx plant is no more. All that's left are a few steel girders standing guard!"

"Oh, my God, Robert!" Mrs. DeKlerk gasped and fainted dead away.

"Good God!" J. W. murmured as he sank into a near-by chair, listening even as the inane comments went on and on and on, seemingly forever. . .

"I'm sorry, J. W." I tried to console the desolate man.

"Not your fault, Son," J. W. replied. "Would you get tickets for Lucy and me to fly down to Miami? And make some sort of hotel reservations in the area too?"

"Sure, Boss, I'll take care of it. You just take Mrs. DeKlerk home and keep her calm."

"Keep her calm? Hell, man, can't you see? She's the calmest of us all! She's out cold!"

"Yes, Sir, but when she comes too, she's going to need your love and support."

"You're right, Son. I always knew there was a damned good reason why I hired you in the first place!" he sighed.

"Yeah, right, now get your fat ass out of here and tend to Lucy! Hear?"

"Yes, Sir," the shocked man replied.

Once gone, I called Dave and when Louise answered, I asked, "Has Dave seen?"

"Yes, he knows. He's standing in the hallway, stiff as a board and I can't move him. Can you come over and help me?" she begged.

"Surely. J. W. didn't say, but I have decided to close the plant completely for three days. If we lose any customers, we'll never feel it. You know we, Bob and I, were never. . ."

"Bob hated you, Joshua."

"Yes, I know, but just because he was an asshole doesn't mean I have to be one too. Do you want to fly down to Miami with J. W. and Lucy?" he asked.

"Oh, Joshua! That would be so thoughtful! Can you do that?"

"If I can't, no one can!" I bragged. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"The front door is unlocked so come right in."

"See you then."

Harriet spoke, "That's a marvelous thing you're doing for my Davey and Lucy."

"It's the least I could do. Now, I'd better get cracking if I'm going to keep my promise to Louise."

"Yes. You be careful. We've lost too much all ready!"

"I'll be careful, Harriet."

She caught my arms, leaned up and kissed my lips gently. "I love you!" she whispered.

"I love you too, Harriet," and as soon as I said it, I knew that it was true. I did love this woman!

Twenty minutes later, I walked through the wide open front door of Dave and Louise's home where I found it was just as Louise had told me. Dave was standing at the bottom of the stair, his one foot on the first step, his hand on the railing, frozen in place.

"God, the Nam all over again!" I croaked, remembering. . .

"Oh, I am so glad you're here, Joshua," Louise cried as she slid into my embrace, her face against my shoulder as she cried.

I patted her back and held her tightly while she cried until finally, her tears dried and she looked up at me.

"God, you are so beautiful, Louise," I whispered. Her eyes closed and her lips parted slightly, her warm breath caressing my face. Slowly, inexorably, my lips met hers and I kissed her with all the pent-up fervor of years of denial.

"Just kiss me, Joshua! Oh, just kiss me!" she begged. "Please?"

Her hands went around my neck and she held my head tenderly as she returned my kiss with every ounce of her being.

Finally, "Oh, Joshua, why didn't you ask me before you left for the Marines?"

"Because you were dating Dave and I would never interfere with another man's woman!"

"But I wasn't his woman until after you left. I thought you didn't love me, didn't want me!"

"I never wanted anything more in my entire life, but it was not to be, and now that you're married to Dave, he's too fine a man to screw over!"

"Bob would have had no problem," she snapped.

"I am not Bob," I reminded her.

I disengaged her from my arms and went to help Dave. The man was like a robot as we helped him up the stairs and got him laid out on the bed.

"Thank you, Joshua, I could never have done it by myself."

"You should get some sleep yourself, Louise. Your Florida flight is at 7:00 in the morning and the plane will not wait."

"I wish you were coming with us."

"No, I have to stay here and run the plant. Besides, it would be blatantly hypocritical for me to express grief for a man who hated me as much as I detested him."

"I suppose," she agreed sadly.

"You want me to stay with you until you fall asleep?"

"Would you? Oh, you are such a comfort to all of us, Joshua!"

I walked with her to the guest bedroom and watched as she took off her dress, shoes, nylons and slip, standing before me in a scanty bra and even scantier panties before gliding between the sheets.

"Lie with me until I nod off?" she asked in a very small voice.

"I shouldn't."

"Come on, no one will ever know. Besides, I need the comfort."

Reluctantly, I lay down beside her, my arm around her shoulders, her head against my chest, her soft breath tickling my chest hairs.

Finally, she slept and I extricated myself carefully so I wouldn't waken her. I looked in on Dave and found him sleeping peacefully, his body relaxed, the stiffness gone, his breathing deep and regular.

I figured Dave was going to make it.

Early the next morning, I was with the DeKlerks, J. W., Dave, Lucy, Louise and Mrs. Winters who was going with them.

"Take good care of the plant while we're gone, Son," J. W. told me for the fiftieth time.

"Yes, Sir. You just take things easy down there and if you need me, just call and I'll be on the next flight," he promised.

"You always were a good boy, Son," J. W. was almost crying.

I was glad when the plane was airborne.

Back at the plant, I posted the news of the plant's closing for three days in memoriam of Robert DeKlerk and tried to bring some sort of order to my mind. While I was good at the day to day plant operation, I had seldom been privy to the paperwork and I found it to be very daunting. Mrs. Winters' secretary was a great help and soon had me straightened out. Within a few hours, things were all straightened out and the girl was fielding questions from concerned customers.

Most understood. Some didn't.

A surprise visitor was Mr. Selfridge who came right to the point, pulling no punches. "I saw the teevee reports and there was no reason for that blow-up! Young Bob never had a lick of sense when he was a kid and he damned sure didn't have it down there! When all gets said and did, mark my words, it'll be because he tried to hurry things along, cutting corners, using inferior materials, just like he did here. The thing was, he never got caught here! There was always



Harriet and Lucy to keep him in check, but down there, he just run hog wild and killed hisself into the bargain! God, I hope the old man don't find out, but how can we stop him?"

"Mr. DeKlerk is in pretty bad shape. I doubt he will even go to the plant to check it out."

"We can only hope. It'd tear his heart out to learn the truth about his Bobby boy!"

I immediately called Florida and told Lucy, Harriet and Louise to keep J. W. and David away from the explosion site at any and all costs. They promised they would try, but then they asked why. I hated to lie to them but I did. "Because I don't want him having another heart attack. I've seen pictures of the place and it's pretty heartbreaking, so keep him away."

"Thank you, Joshua," Lucy whispered as she hung up.

"You're welcome," I whispered, tears flowing unashamedly down my cheeks.

The DeKlerks were gone for a week, but Mrs. Winters flew back after three short days in Florida. She said she didn't like the heat, but I knew she was more worried about the plant than the Florida mess.

"Josh, it was horrible!" she wept. "Gone! All gone! There wasn't one whole thing left!" She buried her face in my shoulder and cried as if her heart would break.

"It was all covered by insurance, wasn't it?" I asked gently.

Her head moved up and down against my chest. "But we lost it all, just because of Bob!"

"Now you don't know that for sure," I tried to soothe her.

"Oh, but I do. I saw the invoices for some of the things he had ordered and none of them met our specifications, not one! He pocketed all that extra money!"

I bent and kissed the top of Harriet's head. "You don't know that, Harriet!"