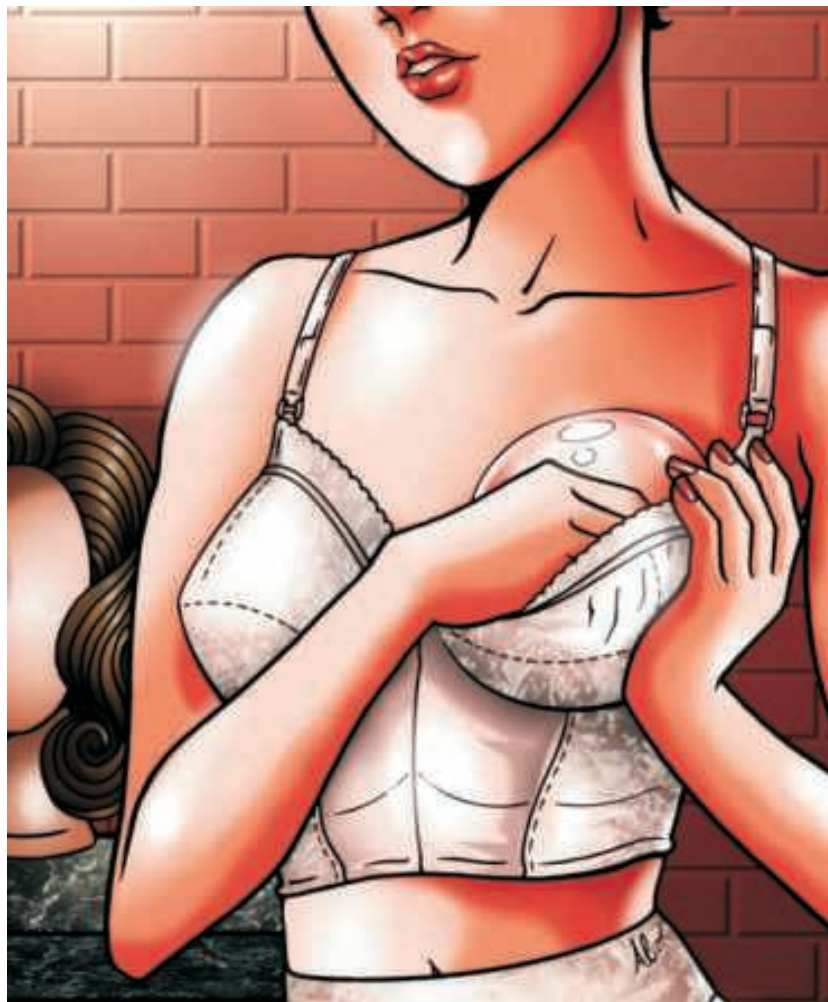




Reluctant Press presents:

INCOGNITO *For Life*

Norman Way



A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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Reluctant Press TG Publishers

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INCOGNITO FOR LIFE

By Norman Way

I stopped running at my usual spot and sat down on the bench. I bent down and tightened my shoelaces. There were a few ducks on the lake. The ice was gone but there were still a few patches of snow left here and there thru out the park. The air was still a bit chilly for April. Winter had stalled out and wasn't quite ready to leave us just yet. Upstate New York could be like that.

I sat there for a few more minutes contemplating things. I was just about to finish my second year of college. I liked crunching numbers ever since high school. Manufacturing had been on its' way out since the eighties and high tech had too many ups and downs since their bubble burst in the early nineties. Opportunities in accounting and finance hadn't always been the best but with my dad in the banking business I had an inside look and felt it would be a good fit for me as well.

I spent the last two summers working in the bank where my dad worked. I wasn't really crazy about being a junior teller but it was a start. My personal interest was in auditing, forensic accounting or maybe international finance, though that would require more schooling than just a four-year degree.

I stood up and did a couple of squat thrusts and some knee bends. I held my arms out and did some windmills and then dropped to the ground and did some pushups. I got back up and started running again. I felt good. Not just physically good but good over all.

I was fairly bright so my studies had not presented much of a challenge to me. I had coasted easily thru high school and the college curriculum hadn't slowed me down at all. While some of my classmates dropped out and others struggled a bit I was able to grasp things quickly and after taking my finals next month I was confident that I could maintain

my 4.0 average. My excellent time in the mile run and cross-country assured me a place on the track team.

I had enjoyed running since I was a child. I never liked to run the short distances in the dashes but preferred the mile run. I liked “the solitude of the long distance runner” It was a way for me to clear my thoughts as well as exert myself in getting the occasional frustrations of life off my chest. I always felt better after a run and a hot shower. The physical demands of a long run “cleaned my mind” just as the shower cleaned my body.

I was always thin. “Lithe” was one of the coaches descriptions and I guess it fit me best of all. I tried lifting weights but the results were disappointing. I kept working out on the stationary bike and treadmill in the basement in addition to, weather permitting, my jogs around the lake in the adjacent park.

I arrived back home and checked the mail. I tossed the junk mail away and took my fathers mail into his small office off the dining room. I set them on his desk and went into the kitchen. It was just after four. I peeled some carrots and potatoes, then added them to the roasting pan. The beef roast was nearly done and in another hour so would the vegetables.

“Bankers’ hours” are a joke to most people. Unfortunately for the people who work in a bank they are not so funny. My father had spent many Saturdays like today working to finish whatever needed to be done. His salary divided by the hours he put in was a lot less than most people think.

I went into my bedroom and undressed. The hot needle spray of the shower felt good and I felt genuinely refreshed as I put on clean clothes. I watched part of a football game and then after turning the oven down at five I opened a bottle of beer and read the paper.

Things had been really falling apart in the financial world the last couple of months. My father had been at Manhattan Trust almost thirty years so I wasn’t concerned about it affecting him so much as other families in the area.

It was just before six when the doorbell rang. I looked out the front window and saw a police car parked at the curb. I felt my pulse jump as I walked to the front door. When I opened it I faced two police officers.

“Max Landon?” the one in front asked.

“Yes, I am Max Landon,” I answered quickly with a dry mouth.

“I am sorry to inform you that your father, Richard, died about an hour ago. I need you to go to the morgue and identify his remains.”

He had spoken his words in a matter of fact tone with out displaying any emotion. My heart was pounding and I felt like my knees were going to give out.

“Alright, I will go right down,” I answered him in a shaky voice.

I closed the door. I couldn’t imagine what might have happened to him. I turned the stove off, took the roasting pan out of the oven and set it on top of the stove. After putting on my jacket and stocking cap I locked up the house and drove down to the hospital’s morgue.

After identifying myself I was shown his body. He looked like he was sleeping. A calm, peaceful sleep, like I had seen him so many times at home when I had gone into his bedroom to wake him. This time of course he would not be waking up. I turned to the detective standing next to me.

"That is my father, Richard Landon. What happened?"

"We don't know exactly. The janitor found him slumped over his desk and called 911. Until we get the autopsy results we can't say,"

I nodded and signed the papers for the autopsy.

"Thank you Max, we will notify you when you can have your father's body for burial.

I left the morgue and drove home. The house had never seemed so empty. I cut off a piece of the beef roast and put it on a plate with some vegetables. While it heated in the microwave oven I poured myself a glass of cold milk. I ate everything though it had no taste to me at all. After putting the leftovers in the freezer I did the dishes.

There were a lot of things running thru my mind as I sat down at his desk and began drawing up a "to do" list. We had no relatives here and my fathers' sister was in a nursing home in Schenectady. I called them to notify her though she wouldn't remember her brother now that Alzheimer's had taken her mind.

When I finished the list I went into his bedroom and picked out a suit, shirt and tie the undertaker would need. I placed them in a box and then proceeded to box up the rest of his clothes to take to the thrift store. I wanted to keep busy with things. I called a local funeral home to make arrangements once the autopsy had been completed. The funeral director said he would see me Sunday afternoon at two pm.

Sunday morning my father's boss called and we arranged for a time for me to come down and fill out the paperwork for the life insurance and pension monies. I went to the funeral home that afternoon and planned a modest funeral for Friday of the next week hoping that my father's body would be released by then.

I stopped for a burger and fries on the way home. After eating I began to pack up the rest my father's things. I had done the same when my mother died unexpectedly only three years ago. My dad had simply said "you take care of it." Except for the family album there were no mementoes. I kept a picture of the three of us at my high school graduation as well as 8X10 individual pictures of both of them. Everything else was boxed up for the thrift stores. I drank half a bottle of wine before going to bed to help me sleep.

My classes on Monday and Tuesday seemed longer than usual. I still hadn't heard from the police about my dad's body by Wednesday's meeting with my dad's boss. I signed all the papers and got the checks from his salary and pension money. The life insurance check would not come until they got the death certificate listing the cause of death.

Thursday afternoon the detective that I had talked to at the morgue was waiting for me when I got home from school. I unlocked the door and we went inside. He took a seat on the couch while I hung up my coat. I sat down next to him and he looked at me with a serious look on his face.

"Did your father have any enemies?" he began.

I was quite surprised at that question as I knew my father had been well liked by many people not only as their banker but his involvement in many civic affairs.

"I don't think so," I answered. "Why would you ask something like that?"

"The autopsy report states that a chemical substance was found in his blood. Your father was taking medication for high blood pressure and this stuff apparently accelerated his heartbeat enough to give him a heart attack or possibly a stroke. There was barely a trace of it in his blood. In fact the pathologist almost missed it."

I was stunned. I couldn't imagine why anyone would want to kill my father.

"Did your father gamble or have debts or obligations that he wasn't able to meet?"

"I haven't gone thru all his papers yet but to answer your question, no I don't think so. He was always conservative with money and so was mom. I am too for that matter."

"I see. Do you know anything about your fathers' work?"

"He had been with the bank a long time and at one time or another had worked in just about every department. The last six years or so he had been in audit. The last year or two he was working more directly with the main bank in Manhattan with international accounts."

"International accounts? Like what exactly?"

"I really don't know. I guess you would have to talk to his boss about that."

"Ok. I appreciate your time Max, again my sympathies for your loss."

He got up and I walked him to the door.

The phone rang and the coroner was on the phone. I could now take my dad's body to the funeral home. I thanked him and called the funeral director to pick up the body. The funeral would now be on Sunday instead of Friday. I was looking forward to putting all this behind me.

That night as I consumed some more of my fathers' wine I wondered about the detectives' question regarding his work. Was he killed over money laundering? Was a drug cartel responsible? Maybe terrorism was involved? I couldn't begin imagine what was going on here. I finished the wine but it didn't help me very much in getting to sleep.

The funeral was very nice. There weren't many people there that I knew. A few of my classmates and some from the track team came to pay their respects. The audit department was small so there were only a few people from the bank but the other employees had sent a very nice bouquet of flowers.

I returned to school and things got back to normal. I received the check from the insurance company and deposited it in my account. I took the last of my exams just before Memorial Day weekend. Instead of coming straight home I stopped off at a college hangout for pizza and beer.

I got home about seven that evening. I immediately sensed something was wrong when I entered the kitchen. It was one of those gut instinct things that you can't explain. With my heart pounding I walked into the living room. Everything seemed to be in order.

I walked thru the dining room to the entrance to my father's office and surveyed the mess before me.

A tornado couldn't have done any less damage. It was like the whole office was turned upside down. I turned around and walked to my bedroom, and then into his. Once again the room had been torn apart. I checked the basement but everything was ok there. I called the police and sat down on the sofa to await their arrival.

The officer was just finished taking my report when the same detective I had talked with earlier showed up. Standing behind him was a woman in a dark blue pantsuit. They both had those grim looks on their faces as they came up the walk. They showed the other cop their ID's and walked in the house.

"Detective Broderick what are you doing here?" I asked politely.

"This is agent Louise Jackson of the FBI. She will be assisting me in this investigation," he replied.

I couldn't image why the FBI or a homicide detective had been notified of this. Things were getting stranger by the day and I was getting concerned that somewhere down the line I was going to be involved more than I wanted to be. My mind was racing with all kinds of possibilities as I led both of them to my father's office.

"Do you know if anything is missing?" agent Jackson asked.

"No. I haven't touched anything. The bedroom is messed up too. I wanted to wait until the cops showed up before I did anything."

"I'll take the bedroom," Detective Broderick said as Agent Jackson began sorting thru the mess.

"Max. Why don't you have a seat in the living room and try to relax until we're finished?" He said as he walked past me to my fathers' bedroom.

I walked back to the living room and sat down on the couch. I turned on the TV and tried to get interested in the movie but finally shut it off. I got the paper from the front steps but about halfway thru it I tossed it aside. The pizza and beer had made me a bit sleepy. I was hoping this would be over soon so I could clean up and go to bed.

When they were both finished they stood over me as they removed their latex gloves. Detective Broderick spoke first.

"After you have everything back in order make a list of anything that is missing or you think is missing. Don't leave anything out, no matter how trivial."

"Another thing," interrupted agent Jackson, "If you notice anything unusual let me know right away."

"Unusual?" I asked. "Like what?"

"A car in the neighborhood you don't recognize. Someone walking around here or maybe someone you see at the grocery store and then later at the mall or pharmacy. Like you are being followed or watched"

"Why would they be interested in me?"

"We don't know, yet."

“Do you know something about my father that I don’t? Am I in any danger?”

“We don’t know that either but we will be in touch. Remember now, anything unusual.”

They both turned and walked out the door. I sat there a few minutes trying to get my pulse down to a more manageable level. I was now more concerned than ever. I consumed more of my father’s wine and took a hot shower. Between the shower and the alcohol I was finally relaxed enough to fall asleep.

I spent the next morning going thru the office very carefully. I looked thru my fathers date book but couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary. After lunch I went to the bedroom and spend several hours there without finding anything either.

I had everything back in order so I decided to water the plants before planning my next move. The last plant was the one hanging from a chain in the window. I moved his chair over so I could stand on it to reach it.

It was much lighter than the others and as I stepped down on the floor I saw that it was a plastic flower. I set it on the desk. For whatever reason, and I don’t really know why I pulled the plant up. Just underneath was a computer disk in a plastic cover. I removed it and put the plant back in the pot and hung it back up again.

I pushed the chair back to his desk and sat down. I booted up his computer and put the disk in. A pop up asked me for a password. I knew there was no way to guess what password my father might use so I simply put the disk back in the case. I called Agent Jackson and left a message for her to call me.

I spent the rest of the day packing up more of my fathers’ things. I made two trips to the local thrift store and when I got back from the second trip the answering machine was blinking. Agent Jackson left a message for me to call her back.

I called her number and she answered right away. I told her about the disk and she gave me the address of the building where her office was located. She offered to buy lunch as well so I agreed to meet her the day after tomorrow.

I spent the next day inventorying the furniture. I decided not to keep anything and rent a furnished apartment. A realtor friend of my fathers came up and appraised the house. I signed the contracts and he left. I did a walk thru and satisfied myself that everything was in order for an estate sale. I would keep just my clothes, some bedding, dishes and my exercise equipment.

I met Agent Jackson at the restaurant around the corner from the FBI offices. She seemed in a good mood as I handed her the disk.

“Call me Lou,” she said as we went inside.

We sat in a booth and the waitress brought us a menu.

“Is there anything more you can tell me about what my father might be involved in?” I asked.

“No, I am sorry but the investigation is continuing,” she replied.

“Will I ever know what is on that disk?”

"Probably not. We are pursuing a number of avenues and I am not at liberty to reveal any of them at this time."

The waitress came back and we placed our order.

"I understand you are working this summer at the bank under one of their apprenticeship programs?"

"Yes. I start in about two weeks. Until I found the disk I was planning to spend it getting rid of my father's things and getting the house ready for sale."

"What does your work there involve?"

"I am a junior teller but I hope to use my education to do what my father did. I like the audit department."

"What about the international end of things?"

She surprised me by this question as well as the fact that she was expressing interest in what I was going to be doing.

"I don't know about the international end of things as that takes more education than my four years would give me and it is very hard to get into."

The waitress brought our orders. As we eat she continued to pump me about my knowledge of the banks operations, particularly what, if anything, I knew about my father's dealings. I stayed focused on eating my lunch and answered her questions as honestly as I could. We finished up and left the restaurant.

She walked up the street to her office building while I walked around the corner to where I had parked my car. As I did so the cold steel of a gun muzzle pressed against my neck.

"Keys!" said a low voice as I was pushed against the building's wall.

I held out the keys in my right hand.

"Which car?" the voice demanded again.

"Black Mustang, over there." I pointed up the street.

"Run around the corner, NOW!" he screamed and gave me a push.

I ran back to see Agent Jackson just opening the door to the office building. She saw me coming and stopped with a puzzled look on her face.

All of a sudden there was a loud bang behind me. I turned around and saw pieces of metal flying out into the street. Agent Jackson ran towards me. She caught up to me and we both ran around the corner. There was a fireball where my car used to be. Sirens wailed in the distance.

The fire trucks arrived and shortly the fire was out. There wasn't much left of my car or the guy who was trying to steal it from me. When I was finished being interviewed by the police Agent Jackson gave me a ride home. I had come within an eyelash of being killed and I was now more concerned than ever. What had my father been involved in that would get him and nearly me killed?

I invited Agent Jackson in but she declined. The next morning I explained what had happened to my insurance claims agent. He cut me a check for the car's wholesale value. It wasn't much but I was in no position to negotiate. I could drive my dad's old Buick until I was settled.

There were several visits from realtors that week with prospective buyers but still no offers. I cleared out his computer and then donated it to a Senior Learning Center since I was using a laptop for school.

I began to take more notice of people around me. I made it a habit of checking my rear view mirror more frequently. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. But I wasn't sleeping well most nights. I finished the last of the alcohol my father had. Some nights I just took a couple of aspirin to help me sleep.

Another month went by. I was enjoying my job at the bank. I began to relax a little more. There were several more visits to the house by realtors but no offers had been put forth. Between getting my father's retirement, final paycheck, life insurance, and my car settlement I was in no immediate danger of insolvency by any means but I wanted to get rid of the house and move to an apartment before winter set in and I would be faced with those high heating bills.

I had not run in the park for about two months but used the treadmill in the basement. I was a bit unsure of running by myself. I guess I was afraid that at some point I would be accosted by another jogger or perhaps shot from a distance by whoever was behind all this. I decided to play it safe and stay home most of the time. I truly missed running thru the park but better safe than sorry.

I had a month left before college would start. I would be a junior this year. My summer job at the bank was good experience but relatively boring. I wanted so badly to be doing other things. Things I thought were much more important than being a teller. That would have to wait however, as now my career was not my only concern.

The weekend before I was to register for school I thru caution to the winds and ran in the park. It was a great feeling to be out in the fresh air. The warm breeze felt good as I ran along the lake's shoreline. I stopped at my usual spot and bent down to re-tie my shoe-laces.

Behind me there was a loud "THWACK". Startled, I turned around to see a section of bark from the tree behind me had broken loose. There was no one around but on closer examination I saw a small round hole in the center of the area where the bark of the tree had been broken away. I took out my cell phone and called Agent Jackson.

She arrived along with a police cruiser. One of the officers took a jack knife out of his pocket. He dug the slug out and handed it to Agent Jackson. She drove me back to the house and we went inside.

"Have you gotten any offers on the house?" she asked.

"No. I guess things are pretty tight in the housing market here or maybe getting the loan is the hang up."

"Well you are going to have to move. Whoever is doing this knows you pretty well. Have you noticed anything unusual in the people around you like we asked you to look out for?"

I shook my head.

"Has your investigation turned up anything?" I inquired

"No. The guy who tried to steal your car was an ordinary street punk. He had quite a rap sheet. It was one of those "wrong car at the wrong time" type of things. He sure paid a high price for trying to steal your car."

"Look I don't mean to complain, I mean I know you and the cops are doing all you can but I can't go on like this. I am not sleeping well and I have lost some weight too."

"So I have noticed. Actually I was on my way up here to talk to you about a solution when I got your call. It would involve some sacrifices on your part."

"What sort of sacrifices, I mean I have been thru quite a lot lately. There's the mysterious death of my father, the break in, two attempts on my life, to say nothing of the cops or the FBI's inability to make any progress as to just who or what is behind this. I feel like I have a bulls' eye on my back.

"I understand. Now I have a proposition for you that may solve both your situation and your father's murder. It won't be easy but based on the education you already have and the fact that you are a thin young man with a very clear complexion I think we could kill two birds with one stone."

"Well I am about at my wits end. Let's hear it and what does having smooth skin have to do with it?"

She smiled at me and had this funny look on her face. I wasn't sure what she was about to propose but I felt I had no choice but to hear her out. I mean what did I have to lose? I had nearly been killed twice, could it get any worse than that?

"Whoever is behind this knows you and enough about you to keep you at risk. Now if you were to somehow "disappear", so to speak, you would be off their radar until we can get a handle on who they might be and why they are after you as well as what your father has to do with all of this."

"You mean like witness protection?"

"Not exactly."

"Then WHAT exactly?"

"You could stay in the New York area, attend school and still work in banking, just as somebody different."

"You mean sort of in disguise?"

"Yes."

"If I am still in the area, still going to school, and still working in the local bank, how long will it take for them to put two and two together and still find me? The house is not sold yet, and I will be in an apartment when it does, so just what did you have in mind?"

“Don’t take this the wrong way but you are a slim young man with feminine features. You have small hands and feet, a very clear complexion, very little facial and I would guess body hair as well, correct?”

I was quite surprised at this as I had never considered myself to be effeminate in any way. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be a part of whatever she was about to suggest.

“Are you suggesting I live as a woman?” I asked.

She looked directly into my eyes. She was smiling as she spoke to me.

“I will help you with your clothing, wigs and makeup. It’s not like it will be forever. Once I assist you thru the transformation process you will be seen as a young woman not a young man. The one place they would not be looking for you is in an apartment building for women only. Your schooling can continue but you will come to class as a woman. Similarly your apprenticeship can continue but you will be coming to work dressed as a female. They simply will not be looking for a woman.”

“You make it sound so plausible but I don’t know anything about being a woman. I mean I date women occasionally but I never thought of trying to look or act like one. Once in high school I and two other guys dressed like a girl group from the fifties for a gag at a homecoming party. That was one thing but trying to pass myself off 24/7 and actually live as a woman is a whole other thing.”

“To be truthful I think you would do quite well. I would see to it that before you “crossover” you would be adequately prepared to live and work as a woman. No one will know except you and me. Remember they are looking for a young man not a young woman.”

I shook my head. This seemed a little too weird. The idea that with clothes, make up, and some instruction I was suddenly going to be seen and accepted as a young woman was a bit of a stretch. My whole life had been spent as a male. To “unlearn” that and conduct myself like a female seemed an almost impossible task.

I had seen impersonators once in New York’s Greenwich Village. They were very feminine men to begin with. Even without glamorous dresses or costumes and makeup, just dressed in women’s casual clothes, they would be seen by the general public as women.

In a nightclub setting they were as pretty and as feminine as any female performer. But this was not a show I would be putting on temporarily. I was going to have to live this way all the time and I wasn’t sure I wanted or could do this as a lifestyle.

“No, I don’t think that is an option,” I replied honestly.

“Well ok. It was just a thought that might keep you alive.”

She got up and left. I got a call from a real estate that afternoon and made plans to go to the library that evening so the agent could show the house. I kept my eyes peeled as I drove to and from the library but it appeared that I was not being followed.

That night I stood naked in front of the full-length mirror on my closet door. I did the “tuck” and imagined myself as a female. I leaned in to look more closely at my face. Agent Jackson had been right. I had very little body and facial hair. Once I shaved myself smooth and applied makeup I guessed I would probably look ok.