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Wife in the Fast Lane

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Extract

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PART 1

Working Girl

We're in for a Rough Ride

'Look for Highway 380. That's our exit,' Katherine said.

'I'm looking, I'm looking. According to this map, we have a ways to go.' Christy checked her watch again. It would be close. If they could keep up this speed and not get lost, they should make it with just enough time to change their clothes. '*There it is! There it is!* Get in the right lane.'

'Jesus, you said we had a ways to go.' Katherine swerved and the Taurus careened across three lanes, miraculously avoiding at least five collisions and inspiring a cacophony of horn-honking. '*Oh my God,*' Christy said as she covered her eyes and ducked. Katherine was silent, intent on getting them to Menlo Park before two. When their plane had landed in San Francisco, more than an hour late, they'd called the Steiner McClane office. The meeting couldn't be postponed. Mr Roche was booked solid, then leaving for Europe on Monday.

'Good thing it stopped raining.' Christy had the habit of pointing out the positive whenever things got tense. Katherine preferred working up a good head of steam.

'Oh no, *no, NO,*' Katherine said, spying the traffic

ahead. In seconds, they slowed to a complete stop. 'How much time do we have?' she asked.

Christy checked her watch. 'Thirty-two minutes,' she reported, biting her lip.

'You know, Chris, maybe Baby G Sports wasn't meant to be. It could be a sign,' Katherine said.

'It's *not* a sign. There's an accident ahead. See those flashing lights?' Christy climbed into the back seat and unzipped her suit-bag. 'I'm getting dressed. So *when* we make it, I can run in.'

'Good idea. With this traffic, it could take us half an hour, maybe more.'

Christy shook her head as she unbuttoned the Chanel jacket. 'I still can't believe you made me spend five thousand dollars for this suit.' The thought of the amount made her sick.

The cars started moving again. 'Trust me, Chris. You have to dress like you don't *need* the money or you won't *get* any. Steiner wants to turn us down, just like those other firms did,' Katherine said. She sounded like she knew what she was talking about.

'Do you really believe they're gonna decide based on our outfits? What if they think we're *wasting* money?'

Katherine locked eyes with Christy in the rearview mirror as she spoke. 'Chris, very few women ever get seen by these guys. Our performance has to be perfect or it's over. Could you have won the Olympics in a pair of Hush Puppies? *No.* This is the same thing.'

'*Watch out,*' Christy shouted as Katherine barreled into the back bumper of a Cadillac changing lanes in front of them.

'*Shit!*' Katherine yelled. '*Did you see the way that asshole cut me off?* He never *signaled*!' She pulled over to the side of the road, behind the Cadillac, and stopped. A red-faced man leaped out of the luxury sedan and inspected the damage, then began screaming and raging, waving his hands wildly in the air.

'Why didn't you slow down?' he ranted. 'For Christ's sake, couldn't you *see* I was pulling over?'

Christy was overwhelmed by a sudden and profound sadness. Is this it? Is this how the story ends? In her mind, she saw her fledgling company's life flash before her eyes: the first meeting around the dining-room table; the moment Sasha, queen of hip-hop, bounded on stage in a pair of Baby G's; herself and Katherine collapsing in laughter the next day as the orders poured in.

'I *did* signal, dammit,' Katherine was saying. '*Look!* My light's still blinking.'

As they argued, Christy came to a decision. She stuffed her laptop and a pair of heels into her backpack. She put on her running shoes and slipped out of the car.

'I'm outta here,' she shouted.

Katherine checked her watch. 'You have fourteen minutes.'

Back on Track

Five minutes later torrential rain slashed down against the asphalt highway. Then it lightened up. Then it poured again. Christy kept moving. A little water can't slow me down, she thought, imagining herself at the Olympic Trials, her father cheering her on. Christy threw her whole body into the run, head high, chest out, legs burning, heart pounding. She picked up the pace, flying over wet gravel, broken glass, cigarette butts. From the Sandhill Road offramp she put on her finishing kick, sprinting the last four hundred meters to Steiner McClane headquarters. Soaked to the skin, she stopped to catch her breath under their arched entry. Her legs were trembling, not used to running hard anymore. She couldn't believe how winded she was and vowed to add interval work to her training regime. Okay, you look like hell. You feel like hell. But you're on time, she thought.

Walking inside with less than a minute to spare, Christy caught the eye of the receptionist. The woman was pretty, perky, and athletic, which seemed to be the prereq at these West Coast firms. She gave Christy a look of confused recognition.

'Hi, I'm Christy Hayes.'

'Oh my goodness. The bathroom's in there,' the receptionist said, pointing toward a door. 'In case you want to, ah, freshen up.'

'Thanks.'

'Bill's running about ten minutes late, so take your time.'

In the bathroom, Christy looked in the mirror. She pulled a brush out of her dripping bag. Doing what she could with her hair, she left it wet and loose. Using Kleenex, she wiped the mascara stains off her face. She blotted her suit with paper towels and changed into her heels.

Christy took a deep breath, and walked back to the reception area. She looked around for the first time. The place felt like a modern cathedral, all glass and soft cream carpets. Unlike companies housed in New York skyscrapers, this was all on one floor. In California, power could spread out instead of stacking up.

Two dozen trim men dressed in office-casual took note of her arrival. As Katherine said, not many women made the grade to get a meeting with this legend of venture capital. And Christy was a girl you couldn't help but notice, even soaked through – a trim brunette, shoulder-length hair, long defined legs. So far, she hadn't met a man who could quite deal with her looks, her obsession with work, and her athletic notoriety. Everyone assumed that men were falling all over her, but in fact, the only ones she ever saw were her employees and accountants. A few weeks shy of her thirtieth birthday, though, she remained hopeful.

Christy was sure that her future husband wasn't among

these timid gatekeepers. She had imagined venture capitalists as adventurers, but from what she had seen, they were more like sheep. Nobody wanted to say 'yes' until the guy down the block did, and then they got into a competitive feeding frenzy. So far, no one was willing take a chance on Baby G, and now it all came down to this last hour to make Steiner McClane believe in them. *Her.* She realized she would be alone today. No Katherine with her brilliant mind and intimate understanding of the numbers.

'Bill will be ready in five. Would you like something to drink?' The receptionist walked Christy over to an open kitchen full of yogurt, fruit, candy bars, and bottled iced teas with Zen-looking labels. Christy grabbed two bags of peanut M&Ms – when nervous, she was helpless in the face of sugar. She hoped Bill's delay would give her time to scarf down both bags.

A tall, lanky guy in khakis walked up and introduced himself. He didn't need to: Bill Roche, venture capitalist par excellence, one of the few who had achieved name-recognition status in the wider business world. He was thin and wiry in that healthy California way. He looked like someone she might actually like to get to know, not like the other bean counters she had met this week.

'Christy Hayes?' he said, shaking her hand. 'Did you fall in a lake?'

Christy laughed, relieved that Bill had a sense of humor. 'No, we were delayed flying in. Then I ended up running here when our car got stuck in traffic. Sorry I'm such a mess,' she said, looking down, suddenly mortified.

'Not at all. I'm impressed that you ran to make it. Lucky

for you we don't make investment decisions based on appearance,' he laughed.

'Of course you don't,' Christy said. 'That would be nuts.' She wished Katherine had heard him say that.

'I've been looking forward to meeting you, Christy. What you've accomplished is really something. Hopefully, we can help you take it further. Let's go to my office and talk.'

Christy had the strongest surge of hope since leaving New York a week ago. She floated down the wide, cushiony breezeway to a large, open room, all tropical greenery outside the glass. Bill motioned for her to sit at his small conference table made of beautiful inlaid walnut. She switched on her laptop, which remained absolutely mute. Her panic rose as she tapped the keys. Nothing. She tapped harder. Water began to seep from the case onto the table. The black screen stared back at her. Usually she did the vision thing while Katherine presented the numbers and fielded those questions. Today she was on her own. No Katherine. No numbers. No safety net.

Slowly, Christy closed the laptop. Her panic was giving way to the same adrenaline she used to feel at the starting line of a race. Just as she was poised to take off, Bill said, 'Stop! Let me call an associate in to join us. Then I want to hear your story, start to finish.'

In walked a familiar face, and, sad to say, a familiar body. David Baum. He had been with an investment group Christy met with three years ago, just as Baby G was getting off the ground. Like the others they approached then, no one at David's firm would back a girl Olympian trying to break into the competitive world of athletic footwear, and

Christy was treated dismissively at each meeting. But she and David had connected. A hot romance ensued. She had fallen hard for him, and it seemed mutual. They alternated between New York and San Francisco on weekends and became familiar faces on the red-eye. But in the end, Christy couldn't build a company and keep a bi-coastal relationship going. She ended it badly, as she did many personal things in those early days of struggle, just for lack of the energy and time to do it right.

Now David and Christy looked at each other. She blushed, and he, smooth as all bankers, moved to cover his emotions. *Dammit*, of all the pitch meetings in all the towns in all the world, he has to walk into mine, Christy thought miserably.

But she composed herself quickly, and she told Bill and David her story. How they had gotten started using Christy's commercial endorsement money to stake the company; their market victories; the opportunities for growth. Bill asked completely different kinds of questions than the other bankers they'd met. He wanted to know how Christy handled disappointments, to hear about the mistakes they had made, things they usually kept under wraps in these gigs. He asked about the toughest decision she'd had to make, and she told them about the time their fall line came in from the manufacturer with a small defect in the architecture of the sole of their flagship model. They decided to pull the shoes, even though it almost put them out of business. Christy felt that Bill understood what it was like to be an entrepreneur; to be lost much of the time, but to have the kind of grit that keeps you going anyway. Christy could feel she was in her zone. She was

known for her power of persuasion – part passion, part looks, part vision. She hadn't felt it with the other venture sheep this week, but with Bill, this High Priest, she was soaring.

Just before the meeting ended, David pulled his lean, athletic frame up and excused himself for another presentation, suggesting to Bill that they talk later. Christy shot him a pleading look as he stood to leave. She could read nothing in his eyes, even though he was looking right at her.

Bill spent twenty more minutes with Christy, and she could tell he was going to say 'yes.'

'Christy, it was great to meet you,' he said. 'I was *really* impressed with your presentation. I just want to get David's take. It's good that you two know each other. Personal references are everything with us.'

Christy smiled weakly and swore herself to chastity for life, or at least to dating only gorgeous waiter-actors unlikely to show up when her entire future was on the line. She hoped with all her heart that David would act in the interest of the firm – and not hold their failed relationship against her.

Christy shook Bill's hand and headed for the exit. She grabbed a few more bags of M&Ms as she passed the kitchen. She had kept Bill interested for over an hour. He was known for his short attention span. Anything over thirty minutes was considered a done deal.

When Christy finally emerged, Katherine was waiting outside the office in their rented Taurus, with its crushed left hood. As she got in, Katherine gave her a look that Christy instinctively understood. 'Yeah, I think we have a

real shot. I do.' She gave Kath the blow-by-blow as they drove off toward San Francisco. 'Bill was great; he was really excited about our business.'

'Christy, what is it?'

'Well, um . . . there *was one thing* . . .'