

CHAPTER 1

Teresa

She was from a poor rural area in the Midwest and was the only child of a single mother who had essentially no education and who worked as a waitress. They lived in a mobile home in a trailer park. The boyfriends her mother chose to be with were shiftless, worthless, brutal men who never stayed long. The girl was fat and ugly, which spared her from casual rape at the hands of one or another of her mother's useless boyfriends.

She knew she was different. At school, in pure subjects like mathematics, she was outstanding. One of her teachers knew of her sorry home situation and tried to help. He coached her and managed to get her into a private high school on a scholarship based on her very high SAT scores.

Again at high school, she was outstanding in academics but was shunned as poor, fat, ugly, and from a trailer park. In spite of her tears, her loneliness, and her unhappiness (or maybe because of it), she won a scholarship to Harvard. The situation was the same there as it had been all her life; she was still fat, lonely, and unhappy. Instead of being outstanding, she was now only very good, very near the top of the STEM classes but not quite at the top. She thought maybe business would suit her, so she took additional courses in that field. She found no extracurricular activities at school that welcomed her or excited her. Studying was what had gotten her where she was, so studying was what she did.

By chance, she noticed in a university newspaper an advertisement for an English romantic poetry course to be held in Luxembourg that summer, to be hosted by Neil Munro, the former heavyweight champion of the world.

It seemed rather strange, but as she had never been to Europe and knew nothing about romantic poetry, she applied for and was surprised to obtain a scholarship that would let her attend the Luxembourg course. She had applied for some summer internships but, as she had no influence, had received no offers. The scholarship would pay the cost of the course and the travel, leaving her a little to live on. She contacted the organization in Luxembourg and found that relatively cheap accommodation could be had in a student's residence. She had nothing to go home to during the summer recess, except possibly the most menial jobs, so she shrugged her shoulders and went to Luxembourg. Romantic poetry sounded silly, but why not?

It was not difficult to find the classroom that was, well, signposted in English. Upon entering the class, she found the same people she had left behind in Boston. They were pretty, well-groomed, and well-dressed. The only male present was a young man who was very handsome in what she imagined to be a Gallic way.

A big man strode into the classroom and introduced himself as Neil Munro. She had read a little about him before she left the US and knew that he was the former world boxing champion. Other than some thickening of tissue around his eyes, there was no evidence of his former occupation. The lecture was very different from what she had been expecting. She had in fact no idea what to expect but assumed it would be some sort of critical theory, which was increasingly being pushed in US universities. It would likely consist of decrying romanticism. Munro recited from memory poems that he grouped into life, love, and death. She found herself listening with some amazement for the first time to the great poems of the past that told of the pathos and tragedy of love found and lost, and of hope and despair. She forgot for a few minutes her ugliness, poverty, and obesity. She forgot she was the ugly duckling amid the swans.

At the end of the lecture, Munro was surrounded by the thirty or so members of the audience. He disengaged them gently, indicating that there would be a cocktail party that evening and that they should speak to his assistant, Raoul, the Frenchman, about the details. She knew that the clothes she had, while acceptable for dressing down at a US university, were not really what she imagined European cocktail party clothes to be, and she did not have enough money to buy anything more appropriate. On his way out the door, Munro saw her standing unhappily alone as the others clustered around Raoul. He bent over her and quietly asked, "You have a problem?"

“Yes, money.”

“Come with me and tell me.”

She went with him as he drove back to his office through heavy traffic. He listened silently while she told him of her scholarship and how she had found Luxembourg much more expensive than she had thought.

“I don’t have appropriate clothes for tonight, and I can’t afford new ones. Can I get a job?”

“Why are you so poor?”

She found herself trusting the man for no clear reason; perhaps it was the afterglow of the lecture—the incredible language that she had no idea existed. She told him of the trailer park, the single mother, and the lousy boyfriends. She told him that she was smart and had gotten out of that dead-end existence on scholarships and that she was a science major and was good at math and had some business experience.

“If you are good at math and know business, let me see if I can find you a job to help you with your expenses. The woman I am taking you to is not a pushover, and she will expect hard work, if she has any for you.”

Munro took her to a building that looked traditional and ancient on the outside but was ultramodern on the inside. An elevator took them to a third-floor office. A receptionist showed them into a minimalist but very well-appointed inner office. The woman behind the desk looked up. She was of a certain age but was impeccably groomed and strikingly handsome. She smiled at Munro but did not get up.

“This is Manon,” said Munro, introducing her. “She is the boss! Manon, is it possible for you to find this girl a job? She is here from the US for my poetry course on a scholarship and is a bit short of cash. She studies at Harvard on a scholarship. She says she is good in STEM and promises to work. If you can help her, Manon, I would appreciate it. If not,” he said to the girl, “I will see you tomorrow, and we will try again. You will have to excuse me. I have to get back to work.” He turned and left the office.

“So you have done some math and accounting courses,” said the woman in slightly accented English. “Any business?”

“A little.”

“I have just received information about a company and its financials for the last ten years. They are in those boxes. The records are an absolute mess. Can you sort it out into some sort of form that makes sense? I want to know if it is worth buying. But looking at this mess, who knows? It is an English firm, so the documentation is all in English. Do your best to

systematize the information. Take the boxes. My secretary will show you an office. I will see you in the morning at 8:00 a.m. I am sorry, what is your name?"

"It is Teresa O'Toole."

"Well, Teresa, do your best."

She was shown to a small cubbyhole of an office on the ground floor. It had a very plain large desk, with a typewriter and a calculating machine. As the door closed, she set to work. Manon had been correct. The information was all over the place. She began to slowly systematize it. After a few false starts, she decided how to lay it out. She had noticed a water cooler outside the door of her office and had been shown where the washrooms were. She began at three. At five thirty, Manon's receptionist put her head around the door and told her she and most of the staff were leaving for the night. The elevator and the door to the stairs were keypad entry, so all she had to do when leaving was close the front door, which would lock itself.

She worked on. She was jet-lagged and was starving, but she knew this was a test. All her life, she had faced tests and had overcome them. Using her brains and hard work, she had climbed out of a trailer park and into Harvard. Some picayune company's financial screwups were not about to stop her. She finished at nine and was about to leave when she heard the front door open then her office door, and Manon appeared.

"Still here?"

"I have just finished."

"*Oui?* And?"

"A good prospect. Good domestic growth. Good product. They would do better with better management, and I don't see why they should not sell internationally."

"Buy or forget it?"

"Buy!"

"Show me."

It did not take long to show the salient features. "Bring it to my office, and we will go through it again." They did so. Manon sat back and congratulated her. When she found out that she had not eaten, she took her to a nearby restaurant. Being late at night, it was very high-class restaurant that was about to close. The woman seemed well-known and was immediately shown to a corner table. The *maitre d'* was most solicitous. Conscious of Manon's slim figure, she tried to eat lightly. She needed some help with the menu, as the English terms were not clear.