

## FINANCIAL ATTRIBUTES

Margaret lay in his arms. She was saying something about when she was a grammar school teacher. Her voice sounds like a mosquito buzzing past my ear, thought Pierce.

"And then Father forbade me to see him so I had to sneak out to meet him," said Margaret while trying to position her head so that the wrinkles on her face looked softer.

Pierce gave her a pat on her shoulder to let her think he was listening. Just lying on these Egyptian cotton sheets makes my job worthwhile, he thought. At the foot of the bed was a silk robe waiting to engulf his body in bliss; there were suede slippers waiting for his feet-softer than a baby's skin.

"Back then a lady did not ask a man out. It just was not done. So I had to wait and wait and wait," she said. Her voice sounded husky from years of smoking cigarettes.

"Too bad." Pierce shifted his weight on the bed but could not get comfortable. Her head felt like a huge boil on his arm. He thought if he could squeeze it and release the pus it could just fade away.

He continued assessing his good fortune: Expensive cologne, custom made suits and designer shirts and shorts and food.

Ah, the food.

Pierce remembered his extended belly from malnutrition; eating stale bread with mayonnaise for dinner; and he and his brother stealing from the corner fruit stand. I can get the chef to make anything I want. His favorite dish was anything with meat. He licked his lips remembering last night's masterpiece of beef and sauce with the foreign name.

This is the best job I've ever had. None of those other old women were as rich as Margaret. I'm a lucky man. In three, four years I can retire.

"Finally he got a message to me to be ready at 3:00 AM. Father slept soundly." She covered her mouth with her hand so she wouldn't cough on him. "I've been cigarette-free for 3 weeks now," she said.

"That's good." Pierce hoped he sounded interested. He avoided looking at the veins in her hand. They were like worms. He felt like squeezing them too. I wonder why women talk so much, he thought. Pierce was annoyed that her chatter interrupted his daydreaming just at the moment when he could feel the rumbling of the jet taking him to

Madrid for breakfast then to London for lunch and maybe Greece for dinner. When your insides are only 28 years old, you can eat anything, anywhere, anytime, he thought.

Margaret's voice got through again. "... left me at the altar. Jilted. I was jilted. I still think about him" She wiped away tears before they could fall on Pierce.

If someone had asked him, he would not have been able to tell how Margaret began talking about being a schoolteacher and finished by crying. At least I don't have to travel with her since I'm not required to take her out in public, Pierce thought.

"You fall asleep?" Margaret nudged him.

He had to shake himself in order to get back to where he was supposed to be. "Yeah, I must have dozed." he said.

"I can't do all the talking, it's your turn." Margaret touched his face. "Tell me how you got that scar."

Pierce ran his finger back and forth along the scar running from his right ear lobe across his cheekbone and ending at the side of his nose. Pierce wasn't going to tell her the truth; that a jealous woman attacked him with what he swore was a samurai sword but was really a switchblade. That woman cut his face so badly that he needed 46 stitches to close the wound. Now I know how fast a senior citizen can move, he thought. He saw the scar as a war wound--sustained while he battled for the right to see other women.

"I got it in a gambling disagreement," he said. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You never want to talk so lets settle tonight's arrangements. You will spend the night. No excuses this time. I insist."

There was no way he could protest. He gazed into her eyes with what he hoped was a sexy look and said, "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I'm all yours."

"Don't mock me," she said. "I know who I am just as we both know what you are. Turn out the lights. It's time to earn your pay."

Pierce did as he was told.

"I saw you with her one afternoon. I was peeking from her bedroom closet. Have you ever been in it? It's as big as a department store," said Gloria. Her eyes widened as she thought about it.

"Spying is part of your job?" asked Pierce. He was hoping to have Gloria too. He liked juggling a few women. I'm following in your footsteps Pop, he thought.

"It wasn't on purpose. I'd just finished lining-up her shoes and was about to leave when you two started up. So then I couldn't leave." The dimples in her cheeks appeared as she grinned in embarrassment.

"How did I look?" He sucked in his already flat belly and puffed out his chest. Gloria adjusted her eyeglasses and looked him up and down as if she were searching for the appealing part of Pierce. "Not as good as you seem to think"

"Your kidding," said Pierce, genuinely surprised. "I'm the best looking specimen you've ever seen."

"Specimen is what you are. You should be under a microscope-cut, diced and sliced."

"Naughty, naughty girl. Why did you watch?"

"Just curious I guess. I wanted to see what it's like, having sex with an old woman. How can you do it? She could be your grandmother. You are disgusting." Her glasses slid down the bridge of her nose whenever she talked. She'd wait until they reached halfway to the tip before pushing them back up.

"Sometimes I disgust myself. But it's all for a worthy cause. You know? My bank account?" Pierce looked at his watch. "I have to go. Margaret is expecting me in 5 minutes." He showed Gloria two rows of white teeth along with his puffed out chest and said, "Keep looking. You know you like what you see."

"Your 'charms' won't work on me," said Gloria. The look on her face told Pierce that she meant what she said. "I need this job to help pay my college expenses. I'm not going to lose it because of you. Besides, I like my boss. And she pays well."

"That she does," he nodded in agreement. "But I have to work harder than you to earn my pay."

"I can get Gloria on my side. She likes me," said Pierce.

"You'd better keep your hands off of her. Remember who is feeding your bank account." Jake ran his hands up and down the lapel of his brother's jacket. "Top quality," he said

"It will be good to have someone on the inside to help me."

"To do what?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe tell me where she hides the family jewels."

"Doesn't Margaret give you more money than you can spend? Isn't that enough for you? You want to steal from her too." Jake scratched the hairs growing from his chin.

"No, no, no. I have to find a way to get Gloria to spend time with me.

"Is it hollow in there?" Jake tapped his brother's head a few times, with his knuckles, to hear if it was full or empty. "Have you forgotten so quickly how you got that scar?"

Pierce caressed the scar as he did a dozen times a day. "No, little brother. Every night, just when I close my eyes, I see that blade coming towards my face ." He didn't tell his brother that Gloria did not like him even a little bit. But there is no woman, on any continent, who can resist me. At first they all say no, he thought.

Pierce said, "Nothing like that will happen again. I keep everything separate now. I have a system. Plus, I won't be working like this for a long time." He got his address book from its hiding place behind his brother's bookcase. Looking at all those books gave Pierce a headache. Pop hated books too. He and Pierce thought that maybe Jake had a different father

"Jake you keep reading your books while I make all the money," he laughed.

"I hope this system is good. When I saw your bandaged face in the hospital, I thought you had lost an eye," said Jake.

Pierce didn't want to hear another lecture. "Do you want to know about my system?" he asked.

"I've been searching for that book. Can I touch it? " Jake plucked at his chin hairs while looking over his brother's shoulder trying to read a page. "You must be doing something right," he said.

"I've listed all the females I know. See the columns for times and dates? No more mix-ups leading to body wounds and stitches for me."

Pierce read some of the entries out loud; "Crystal 4 stars; Jennifer 3 ½ stars; Kathy 5 stars. You see here, I wrote Gloria with a question mark."

"All those women?" Jake's mouth was open and his hand was suspended just below his chin.

"Now I'll add Margaret's name. Can't give the old girl a zero since she pays the bills." He wrote: Margaret 1 star; "For being female," he chuckled. Then he wrote: 9

stars. "For her financial attributes." Pierce laughed so hard that he had to stop to breathe. He waited for his brother's approval of how he put those two words together.

Jake didn't give it. He walked away sucking his teeth.

"You're not the only one. I saw a man coming out of her room," said Gloria.

"Maybe you need a new pair of glasses. There is no one but me in or out of Margaret's room."

"He's young too. Maybe a little older than you."

"You seem pleased to tell me this."

"You seem worried to hear it." Gloria took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"Seeing him one time does not mean anything".

"Did I say one time?"

The scar was itching but he didn't want to rub it in front of Gloria. .

"She's waiting for you in the living room," said Gloria "I think she has a surprise for you."

Pierce wondered why Gloria should look so pleased. The surprise was for him, not for her.

"There is a way to solve this," said Margaret

She thinks soft lighting will help her look good. It doesn't work. It just makes me look better, thought Pierce as he entered the living room

"Did you talk to Gloria?"

"She told me you have a surprise for me. The diamond cuff-links?" Pierce had been waiting for the right time to remind her about them.

"I have a solution," said Margaret.

"I didn't know there was a problem."

"Oh there is. I like both of you. Which one shall I choose?" Even though she had given up cigarettes, Margaret moved her hand as if she was holding one.

"Gloria said she saw a man in your room?"

She put a lozenge in her mouth to stop an attack of coughing. "He's like you," she said.

"You want to replace me? I give you all the affection you want." The scar was

twitching as if it wanted to speak for Pierce. "You don't need anyone else," he said. "We get along."

"You are right. I get what I pay for. Just don't call it affection."

Is she going to ruin my plans for early retirement? I need more time, he thought. "I treat you right," he said "Why do you need him?"

"Pierce, you find me appealing? You can't live without me?"

"Yeah. I like being with you."

"Well then, my choice is made. Will you take my hand?" she said. She put her left hand to her mouth to stifle a cough. She extended her right hand to Pierce, as if for a handshake.

He avoided looking at those veins that looked like worms as he placed his hand in hers. Margaret smiled. "I thought you had more of a brain. What does it mean when a lady offers her hand in\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blank?"

Pierce was mystified. Deep thinking did not come easily to him so he was pleased to shout "Friendship," as if he were on a game show and the answer revealed itself to him in time to win the prize.

Margaret shook her head. "No," she said. "I'll give you a hint. Get down on one knee and ask for my hand in\_\_\_\_."

Pierce tried not to understand what she wanted. He told his brain she means something different from the answer travelling towards his lips.

"Now Pierce I know you're not smart but neither are you dumb.

"Marriage?" whispered Pierce. "Marriage?" He let go of her hand. His chest sunk in far enough to meet his spine. His shoulders lifted up to meet his ears. His arms extended as if to receive a heavy load. "You want me to marry you?"

Margaret clapped her hands. "Good solution?" she asked.

Pierce let out a groan.

"You are showing me just how appealing I am to you," she said

"I have to think about it," he said.

"You have until this time tomorrow. I want you to be sure. I will not be jilted twice. You may have the night off. My love."

Pierce passed Gloria in the hallway. If he had looked at her, he would have seen a

smile on her face showing dimples deeper than a well.

Pop never had a situation like this. All the times we gambled and played with women to make easy money, none of them wanted to marry Pop.

"You have choices. Marry her and throw away your precious book. Or give it to me," said Jake as he licked his lips.

"My book is not going anywhere," said Pierce.

"Marry her and live a life of luxury," continued Jake.

"And wait for her to die? For how long?"

"Or, don't marry her and become an upright, upstanding citizen of the human race," said Jake.

It seemed playing with his chin hairs worked. Pierce noticed that his brother's goatee had grown a lot in a short time. "I had it all planned. I was going to have enough saved to retire on my next birthday."

Pierce slapped his forehead with his hand. "Idiot, idiot, idiot," he said, and slapped himself some more.

"Who?"

"Me," said Pierce. "I'm an idiot. Every piece of jewelry she bought me is in her house." 'Leave it here,' she said. 'If you take it to your place it might get stolen.' You can't trust a woman. Why did I listen to her?"

"Karma rules," said Jake.

Pierce opened the front door to leave. Before he closed it, he heard his brother say, "Don't expect me to be your best man."

Pierce climbed into the Lexus that Margaret leased for him. He thought about life without the car (he was just about to get the latest model) and all the things he enjoyed. He imagined those diamond cuff links--that probably cost more than a house, sitting comfortably on his shirtsleeves. My clothes fit like a second skin. I smell better than any man alive. I could start over, he thought. No, I can't. Margaret has more money than a Saudi prince. I would never make this much again. He took his book from his shirt pocket and caressed it.

This goes back behind Jake's bookcase. With that cough, she probably won't live

much longer. An idea to buy her a dozen cartons of cigarettes entered his mind. If someone had been in the car with him, they would have seen the blood under his skin washing the look of guilt from his face. He shook his head to send that idea away. She does have my jewelry in her house. I have to get it. I earned it. Marriage isn't so bad, he told himself, especially if it ends in a hefty divorce settlement. Then I can retire.

Yes to marriage, no and maybe, were fighting in his head. 'Yes' was about to win but it made his scar itch. 'No' would not give up even as it made his scar throb.

Pierce started the car and drove towards Margaret's house. But he took the long way to get there.