

Chapter 1 – The Deal

'Guess what?' Edith Armstrong could hardly contain her excitement, her face beaming, eyes wide, eyelids fluttering.

The three senior editors, all women, looked at their chief editor with blank expressions across the expanse of the polished boardroom table.

'Guess?' repeated Edie, her arms now outstretched, palms up, index fingers touching thumbs like an Indian goddess – not that Edie Armstrong could ever be mistaken for a goddess. Although tall and slim, chief editors of major New York publishing houses didn't get to that position through divinity or good looks. This 40-something professional had the temperament of a prize fighter and the scars to prove it. 'We have signed...' she spoke slowly, drawing out each word, hands still held aloft as the fingers opened and closed to each syllable.

The senior editors all seemed to be mouthing her words in the hope that they might guess what she was going to say before she said it.

'We have signed...' she repeated slowly, 'Ja...'

The three women on the other side of the table were now smiling with anticipation, their eyelashes beginning to flash and imitate Edie.

'Ja-mes Ray-mond.'

The three shrieked aloud and together, then abruptly stopped.

'James Raymond? *Look Back to the Future* James Raymond?' asked Gloria, the fiction editor who was also the older and most experienced of the three – and heir apparent to Edie's throne.

'The one and very same,' said Edie. 'We have enticed him away from Prime Seal and he now belongs to us, McMahon Martin Publishing.'

'What did that cost?' Gloria's face had drained of joy.

'It started as a thee million, three-book-deal.'

Gloria whistled long and soft in amazement.

'But we didn't pay that,' added Edie.

'Thank God for that,' said Laura the non-fiction editor who was as tall as Edie and as world-wise.

'This is not to go outside this room,' said Edie in a confidential voice. 'It was a five book deal.'

Dora the editor of children and young adult books began to nod her head as if wisely agreeing with Edie.

'A five book deal,' repeated Edie slowly, 'for five point five million. One mil in advance for each book and five hundred thousand to Prime Seal to release James from his contract.'

Dora's nodding head stopped with a jerk as she sucked back a breath in shock then started to gasp with an open mouth.

'Five and a half million?' repeated Laura.

'Why did we pay that?' asked Gloria, her tone cold.

Dora was now coughing uncontrollably.

'I know it's a lot of money...' said Edie defensively.

'And a lot of books,' said Gloria, 'from someone who hasn't had anything to say for ten years.'

Dora was now becoming distressed with her incessant coughing.

'*Look Back to the Future* was big,' said Edie.

Gloria lent over and slapped Dora on the back, the palm of her hand making a loud smack as it whacked against the thin fabric of the expensive blouse. This mother superior type behaviour did not distract Gloria from her commentary. '*Look Back to the Future* was huge, but that was a decade ago. Then nothing.'

The slap had worked. 'Thank you,' gasped Dora between gulps of air.

Edie was now nodding her head. 'But now, he has a new manuscript and...' The head movement seemed to be reinforcing her words. 'And, these things take time but it is now finished and this will be his first book with MMP.'

'Is it any good?' asked Dora who had now regained her composure.

'It's fabulous,' said Edie.

'Another *Look Back to the Future?*' asked Laura.

'Better. Called, *Deferred Hope*.

'You've seen it?' Gloria's look was that of a cold unbelieving inquisitor.

Edie paused and her lips parted before she spoke.

'Well, no, not yet but I believe it's marvellous.'

'Says whom?' asked Gloria. Edie didn't seem to want to answer, so Gloria answered for her. 'Jim Raymond?'

'Well he should know,' said Edie.

'That remains to be seen,' said Gloria. 'Some authors only have one decent book in them. They then spend the rest of their careers running around in ever decreasing circles waiting to be re-struck by lightning. What's his agent's view?'

'Steve didn't even mention the manuscript, I heard it all from James. In confidence.'

'Not from his agent?' Gloria's eyes narrowed as she spoke. 'Doesn't that sound a little strange to you Edie?'

Dora's breathing had returned to normal but she was now waving her hand in front of her face like a fan.

'Stop it Dora,' commanded Gloria.

She did, abruptly.

'No,' said Edie. 'Not strange.'

'Edie,' said Gloria, her voice a little softer. 'If his agent was keeping a completed manuscript under wraps while negotiating a five million dollar book deal, doesn't that seem a teeny bit odd? What's Steve Best get, ten, or is it fifteen percent of the deal? Wouldn't he want to drive the price up?'

Edie lifted her chin in defiance and shrugged her shoulders.

'So,' said Gloria. 'Who was the editor?'

Edie remained silent.

'It has been edited, hasn't it Edie?'

'No.' The voice was low but audible to all.

'Oh fuck.' Gloria's face seemed to set like concrete. 'Rule 1 of Publishing 101, never accept an author's opinion of their work, only the editor's.' Gloria was now swinging her head from side to side in a wide arc of disbelief. 'Geeze Edie, what have you done?'

'Not just me,' said Edie. 'It was the board's decision too. They approved the deal.'

'I'm sure they did but I bet it was on your recommendation. They've never seen an unedited manuscript in their lives, they don't know good from bad, potential from drivel, that's our job.'

Edie's defiant chin continued to point as she spoke. 'Besides, we have taken him away from Prime Seal. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall when Alli Rampart found out.'

Gloria's head stopped its radar like scans so she could eyeball Edie. 'Is this what it's really about? You getting one over Allison Rampart?'

Edie didn't answer, in fact she seemed oblivious to the concerns and astonished looks of her colleagues, as she looked out over the New York skyline and touched the single strand of pearls around her long neck. What they couldn't see was her grin, which was as wide as Mr. Carroll's Cheshire cat. She had one up on her archrival Alli Rampart and she wanted to savour this moment for as long as she could.

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Three blocks away on 8th Avenue, behind a wall of glass that looked out over the same grey Manhattan skyline, another meeting of editors was in process. The Chief Editor of Prime Seal Books, Allison Rampart and her three senior editors were just as animated but their meeting was lubricated with the sparkle of champagne.

'And,' said Alli, as champagne spilt from her overfull glass. 'We not only got rid of that liability,

that disaster area called James Raymond who has given us nothing of literary merit for over ten years, but they paid us half a million for the privilege.' More champagne spilt from Allison's glass as tears of joy started to run mascara tracks down her cheeks. 'And,' she said with difficulty as she tried to speak between fits of hysterical laughter. 'They paid five million for a five book deal. Can you believe that?'

The laughing howl filled every corner of the large room, a hilarity that comes from the bottom of the stomach to consume and shake the body from the inside out.

Then suddenly Allison's face contorted as she let out a high pitched, 'Ooooh.' She looked down and placed the palm of her hand on her stomach. 'Oh, no.'

'Alli, what is it?' called one of the concerned senior editors, fearing she was witnessing a heart attack from the colour in Allison's flushed face.

Allison slowly lifted her gaze to her colleagues. 'I think I may have wet myself.'

The room was silent but only long enough for Alli to put the champagne to her lips then burst out laughing again.