

Intrigue, espionage, and romance based in San Francisco,  
California.

By Secrets Served

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# **By Secrets Served**

**Joy Travis**



## **Dedication**

To Stephen, who has my whole heart for my whole life.



## Chapter One

*Michele Hunter stared at the stainless steel lettering above the swooping reception desk in a desperate attempt to quiet her racing heart and calm the nervous quivering in her stomach. It was a technique she'd used successfully in previous anxiety-producing situations. The steel material was repeated on the base of the large, curved desk and nicely complemented the dark granite surface. The overall effect was simultaneously elegant and modern befitting the firm's image. Kane, Walters, Fields, and Kane was a powerful law firm situated in the heart of San Francisco's financial district. Its reputation was steeped in tradition and innovation. Its contingent of attorneys, paralegals, and support staff sprawled over three adjacent floors of a building registered as a national landmark. Though the vast reception area and nearby administrative offices were hushed, Michele could sense the feverish pace in the very air she breathed.*

It was her second visit to the 19<sup>th</sup> floor. Her first trip, two weeks prior, was devoted to pre-screening by a junior member of the human resources department and completing a battery of tests. She knew she was lucky, damn lucky, to be called back for a formal interview with the hiring manager. The first meeting had ended with a gentle warning that the firm rejected more than ninety percent of applicants.

Though her mouth and throat were parched, Michele resisted the temptation to lick her lips. She had taken special pains with her appearance that morning and didn't want to muss the carefully applied layer of lipstick. Distractedly, she smoothed the fabric of her most conservative outfit with damp palms. The ensemble she'd selected consisted of a simple charcoal-colored sheath with a matching jacket. Low-heeled pumps in a matching shade effectively hid the silver toe rings. She'd reduced her usual collection of earrings to a small pair of silver hoops and a tiny sparkling stud. Three earrings instead of the typical seven or eight. The ankle bracelet and thumb rings had also been left behind. The unruly waves of honey-hued hair were pulled back into a tight French braid. Her makeup was subtle, limited to a soft dusting of blush across her high cheekbones and the tip of her delicate nose. Thick



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dark lashes framed her wide, unusual eyes. Eyes that frequently caught first-time onlookers by surprise. Neither blue nor brown, they were violet in color.

The clicking of high heels on the marble floor roused her from concentration on steadying her nerves. A stern-looking woman approached with a file folder tucked under her arm. "Ms. Hunter?" the woman asked.

"Yes, that's me," Michele replied softly.

"I'm Stephanie McMillan. Thank you for coming." Michele rose and shook the extended hand. "Please follow me." Michele retrieved her purse and matching portfolio and trailed after the tall woman. The sounds of their footsteps were quickly muffled by deep, cranberry carpet. Michele followed the woman through a bewildering maze of offices and cubicles until they reached a corner conference room. The hiring manager gestured towards a round table where a pitcher of water and tumblers sat on a lacquer tray. Declining an offer of coffee, Michele gratefully accepted a glass of water, sipping it cautiously to avoid leaving lipstick traces on the crystal. She crossed her legs and watched as Stephanie instructed an invisible assistant to hold her calls. A whispered argument ensued. Michele suppressed a smile and pulled a note pad from her briefcase, arranging it and a pen on the table.

"Sorry about that," Stephanie smiled weakly as she sank into the chair opposite Michele's seat. "My admin is a bit of a control freak." Opening the file folder, the woman spoke rapidly. "Your scores are most impressive, Ms. Hunter."

"Michele, please."

"Mmm, yes, Michele. Pretty name."

"Thank you."

"Your data entry and transcription results place you in the highest percentile of recent applicants," Stephanie McMillan continued. "And the results of the Caliper exam indicate your personality fits well with the job requirements." Bouncing a pencil idly between her manicured fingers, the woman scowled. "I am concerned, though, about your work history. To call it, uh, a bit spotty, is an understatement." She glanced at Michele. "We're looking for stability in our employees. The pace around here is insane. It's my job to keep turnover at a minimum."

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Michele swallowed hard to dislodge the lump in her throat. "I can explain," she said firmly.

Stephanie leaned back in her chair and rested her elbows on the padded armrests. "Please do."

With a deep breath, Michele swiftly outlined the past several years of care taking for her invalid mother. "I'm not looking for sympathy, Ms. McMillan," she commented. "Mother was very proud. And stubborn. She refused to allow me to move her into a convalescent home, though she would have received better care than what I and a parade of visiting nurses could offer. There were times her illness made it impossible for me to be away for extended periods. I needed to keep my schedule flexible. So I've worked for numerous temporary agencies." She took another sip of water. "It's always been a dream to work for a firm like yours. I'm eager for stability, too."

"You use the past tense when speaking of your mother. Is she?"

"Yes. She passed away about six weeks ago."

"Please accept my condolences."

"Thank you. It was a blessing, really." Michele shuddered slightly. "She's free of pain now." Michele paused, "Look, I know that legally there are things you can't ask me. So let me volunteer a few statements. Number one, I'm not married or engaged. I don't even have a boyfriend. I am, uh, unencumbered, for lack of a better word. I'm not afraid of long hours or hard work. Number two, I catch on fast. Though I'm inexperienced with the types of routines a firm like yours has, I know I'll pick them up quickly. And thirdly, I love the law. I know it sounds weird, but I honestly find the entire industry fascinating. I plan to eventually pursue a law degree, though I'll go to night school so it won't interfere with my duties. I really want this job, Ms. McMillan. I promise you won't regret it if you give me a chance."

A small smile flickered around the hiring manager's lips. "Stephanie. Nicely stated, Michele. You've done your homework, at least where employment law is concerned."

Michele grinned, "So I didn't come across as desperate or pathetic?"

Stephanie chuckled, "A little desperate, perhaps. Not at all pathetic. I like your spirit. God knows you'll need it here." She flipped through a stack of papers. "Based on my initial review of your file, I was planning

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to offer you a position in our clerical pool. It's entry-level, and damned hard work." Narrowing her brown eyes, Stephanie studied Michele's features. "But you're probably overqualified for that. It may be a stretch for you, but I'd like you to consider the position of assistant to one of our associates in the International Law division."

Michele's heart soared. A full-fledged assistant's position! It was more, much more than she had dared hope for. "I'm listening," she said breathlessly.

"I don't suppose you're bilingual?"

The heart began to descend from its heights. "I, um, mess around a little with Spanish, but couldn't honestly say I speak it very well."

Stephanie shrugged. "No matter. The ability to speak a foreign tongue is desired, but not a requirement for this position." She smiled mysteriously. "It might be better that you *don't* understand another tongue. Rumor has it every other word out of Duvall's mouth is a profanity anyway."

"Duvall?"

Stephanie nodded. "Jean-Luc Duvall. One of our newest associates. Brilliant, to hear the partners talk about him." She leaned closer and grinned, "I could lose my job for telling you this, but he's also a huge pain in the ass. You look up demanding in the dictionary; there's a picture of this guy. He's burned through three assistants in the past eight weeks. Drives them nuts." Sinking back into her chair again, she looked at Michele quizzically. "I have no idea why I said that. Very unprofessional."

Michele smiled, "I appreciate your candor, Stephanie. And you can trust me. I won't blab." She hesitated, "If he's truly brilliant, then I could learn a lot from him, right?"

"One would hope so, yes."

"Then I'm definitely interested. Demanding doesn't scare me. I've spent the last seven years caring for the most demanding woman on the planet, rest her soul. This Duvall guy will be hard pressed to outdo my mom."

"As I said, I like your spirit." Stephanie scribbled on a scrap of paper and pushed it across the table. "This is the starting salary."

Michele gulped. "Looks fair to me."

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“And you’ll be eligible for our full benefit package once you complete the thirty-day introductory period. How soon can you start?”

“Is this afternoon soon enough?” giggled Michele.

Stephanie laughed. “Let’s make it Monday. I’ll need you to sign the permission for a background check and all that good stuff, but I don’t anticipate any problems. Unless you hear from me over the weekend, please plan to be here at eight. You’ll spend the first three hours in orientation and then get to meet the infamous Monsieur Duvall.” She extended her hand again. A warm handshake sealed the deal.

Michele practically skipped through the concrete canyons of the city by the bay on her way back to the train station. She climbed the metal staircase leading to the upper level of the crowded commuter train and plopped onto one of the imitation leather seats. Plucking a cell phone from her purse, she punched in a speed dial code and grinned. The train lurched away from the station. “Char? Meet me at Jangles tonight at six, girlfriend. Drinks are on me.” She left an identical message for Juanita.

Charlene and Juanita were Michele’s best friends and the core of the support system she had relied upon during the long, dark years of her mother’s illness. She’d met Charlene in second grade and they’d been like sisters ever since. Juanita was adopted into their exclusive club when she transferred into their homeroom the middle of their freshman year of high school. Anticipating the cheers she was confident would erupt when she shared the news at their favorite local pub, Michele’s grin broadened. A job, she thought. A real job. Making more money than I ever dreamed. Digging once again into her purse, she used the tip of her slender index finger to press the tiny buttons of a calculator. Wow, she mused. Six months at this pay rate and I’ll have all the outstanding medical bills cleared. And I should be able to sock enough away to pay for the first semester’s tuition by spring. Unbelievable. Mom always told me to hang onto my dreams.

She leaned her face on the cool glass of the window and sighed. The grief over losing her mother was fresh and raw, and tinged with guilt every time she rejoiced in her newfound freedom. Freedom from constant worry; from all night vigils; and from tending to the intimate needs of the human body that embarrassed her mother and made Michele

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feel awkward. A blessed freedom from watching her mother suffer and diminish slowly before her troubled eyes. The mother she missed most desperately had disappeared years ago, long before the relentless disease ravaged her body and mind, transforming the gentle, caring woman who had raised her into a bitter, miserable shell. Wish you were here, mom, she thought fervently. Wish you were here to celebrate with me.

Michele clambered down from the train and jogged across the parking lot to the spot where she'd left her car. She pumped the accelerator three times, crossed her fingers, and turned the key in the ignition. She knew it was a silly superstition, but those rare times she failed to use that exact routine were the times the unreliable sedan would refuse to start. A new car, too, she thought with a wry grin. Or at least a newer model used one. She patted the dashboard of the twenty-year old Mustang affectionately. Don't worry girl, she thought. I'll find you a good home.

She glanced at her watch. Four-thirty. Just enough time to zip home, change, feed Cocoa, and head back to town to meet the girls. Maybe we'll even splurge tonight and order dinner instead of relying on the free appetizers provided during happy hour.

She crossed El Camino, the main street stretching the length of the peninsula, and began to wind her way through the quiet residential area towards the Los Altos hills. Heading further west, she turned off onto a narrow, twisting road and climbed, passing large, secluded lots and ridiculously expensive homes. The road veered sharply to the left. Stopping at an enormous iron gate, she rolled down the window, reached out, and entered a series of numbers onto a touch pad. The gate opened noiselessly. The curving driveway led to a huge Mediterranean-style mansion, the home of her mother's best friend. Michele steered off the driveway onto a gravel path and parked in front of what was originally the caretaker's cottage.

The vast lot was covered with trees, carefully manicured lawns, and intricately designed gardens of flowers. The park-like setting had been home to Michele and her mother for three years, ever since the co-payments and uncovered portions of the medical treatment forced them to sell their modest house in nearby Mountain View. The Cunninghams,

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Diane and Carter, had dismissed the feeble protests offered by Margery Hunter and offered the cottage for as long as she and Michele wanted it. Margery stubbornly insisted on paying rent, though Michele knew the monthly amount was far beneath the market rate.

She loved the little cottage nestled beneath a pair of gnarled and twisted pepper trees. Indulging her inner child, she liked to pretend it was something out of a fairy tale. Constructed of white clapboard with a steeply pitched roof, the gables were trimmed with gingerbread reminiscent of the Victorian “painted ladies” in San Francisco. Dark blue shutters framed the large windows. A miniature backyard was encircled with a white picket fence. Baskets of colorful impatiens hung from chains on either side of the front door. Wind chimes dangled from the porch eaves, tinkling softly in the breeze.

Inside, the cottage consisted of two small bedrooms, a bath, and large combination living and dining room flanked by a tiny galley kitchen. The furnishings were simple but comfortable. An upholstered sofa bed and matching chair surrounded a low coffee table. Twin floor lamps, one on either end of the sofa, provided reading light. A portable television and stereo system rested on a sturdy bookcase situated between two tall windows. A folding table and two wooden chairs served as both her dining room and office, one leaf reserved for her laptop computer. The printer rested on an orange crate on the floor. A long counter separated the kitchen with its apartment size appliances from the rest of the room. The bedrooms and bath were accessed from a short hallway. A Dutch door, a rubber doggie door installed in the lower half, led to the fenced-in backyard.

Michele whistled when she opened the front door and was immediately rewarded with the soft slap of rubber. Cocoa, her chocolate Cocker Spaniel, tore into the room, skittering across the highly polished oak flooring and sliding on a throw rug. Michele giggled and knelt to hug the quivering mass of soft brown fur. Wriggling from nose to tail, the dog extended its pink tongue and applied a series of sloppy kisses to her owner’s smiling face. “You miss me, girl?” asked Michele, stroking the happy creature. Cocoa yipped and raced to the kitchen, her long tongue lolling as she tilted her head expectantly. Michele laughed and rose to her feet. “You don’t miss me, you just want to eat, don’t you?” Another

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yip and the tail moved even faster. The sound of dry food crunching echoed through the cottage as Michele entered her bedroom and stripped out of her business clothes.

She frowned while scanning the contents of her closet. Dressing quickly in a pair of faded jeans and sweater, she planned her weekend. A trip to the thrift store first thing in the morning. If she was lucky, she might be able to find a few outfits suitable for the high-profile company she was about to join. Relegated to steno pools and call centers during the series of temporary positions, she'd been able to get away with a casual wardrobe. Based on her two visits to the 19<sup>th</sup> floor, the dress code at Kane, etc. was much more formal.

She slipped her feet into a pair of sandals, wiggling her toes and smiling when the toe rings twinkled in the fading sunlight streaming through the sheer curtains. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she fastened the chain of silver bells around her ankle. Earrings were inserted into the empty holes. Slim silver bands were added to her index fingers and thumbs. She tugged the quartz crystal out from beneath her sweater and rubbed it between her fingers.

Michele dispensed another hug, a special doggie cookie, and exhortations to be good to Cocoa before returning to the car and driving back towards town. After the thrift store, she mused; I'll spend some time at the Stanford law library. It won't hurt to brush up on the basics of international law, an area she knew nothing about.

Jangles was a popular hangout for young professionals. Though early, the pub was already crowded and noisy. Michele plowed through groups of milling customers and secured a high table near the jukebox. Stealing a third stool from another table, she perched on the high seat and hooked the heels of her sandals over the rung at the base of the stool. Spotting Charlene's mop of bright red curls bobbing through the crowd, Michele raised her arms and waved them frantically. "God, it's a madhouse in here," her friend said breathlessly, hugging Michele tightly before taking her seat.

"I think there's a playoff game tonight," Michele commented, jerking her head towards the big-screen television at the other end of the room.

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“Marvelous,” Charlene said dryly.

“So we’ll have a quick drink and go somewhere else to grab some dinner,” replied Michele, flagging down a server and ordering three glasses of the house Chardonnay.

“Dinner? What’s the special occasion?” asked Charlene, her green eyes dancing.

“Let’s wait for Juanita. She’ll be pissed off if I tell you first,” Michele grinned.

The final member of the trio arrived just as the wineglasses were placed on the tiny table. Juanita’s black eyes snapped as she raised her glass. “What are we toasting?” she asked.

Michele grinned. “My new job!” The three women clinked their glasses together. Shouting above the din, Michele hastily filled them in on the day’s events. Charlene swung her eyes to the front of the pub and glowered when a particularly raucous cheer rose from the gang crowded in front of the baseball game. Chugging her wine, she suggested they go to Mario’s for pasta. “Can’t hear a damn thing over the racket,” she complained. Michele and Juanita agreed, emptying their glasses. Michele tossed a few crumpled bills on the table before they clawed their way through the mob.

The October evening air was soft and mild while they walked the few blocks to their destination. Strands of tiny white lights circling the trees lining both sides of the street twinkled merrily.

Michele’s heart was filled with affection for her friends as she listened to them argue over the merits of the night’s specials. The two women had seen her through dozens of tough moments, especially in recent months. The trio shared everything, from each other’s clothes to their dreams and hopes. Charlene and Juanita knew everything there was to know about Michele. Well, almost everything. There was one secret she had deliberately kept locked away. A secret she couldn’t bring herself to verbalize. It was too intimate and embarrassing. Charlene and Juanita merely thought Michele’s current unattached status was the result of the devotion to her mother. Both of her friends dated casually and seemed in no hurry to settle down. They didn’t realize that even if Michele had carved out time for a boyfriend, it was doubtful she would pursue a long-term relationship. Michele distrusted men in general, a fact



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she found difficult to understand but one that plagued her nonetheless. It was, no doubt, related to the abandonment by her father when she was a toddler. The abandonment had embittered her mother. The bitterness had seeped into Michele's vulnerable consciousness. The result of that event, combined with her focus on learning and the subsequent illness, led to her current status. At the age of thirty-two, she was still a virgin. And often thought she'd always remain untouched.

She tossed her wavy blond hair, loosened from the snug braid she'd worn earlier, as if to chase the inappropriate thoughts away. This is my night to celebrate, she scolded silently. Now is not the time to try and figure out why I'm so down on men.

Slurping strands of steaming linguini, Michele repeated her story and patiently answered the battery of questions volleyed by her best friends. "What's the guy's name again, the one you're going to work for?" mumbled Charlene, chewing on a slice of garlic cheese bread.

"Jean-Luc Duvall."

"French?" Juanita asked.

"I presume so."

"Sounds dreamy," sighed Charlene. "Jean-Luc. I bet he's a hunk, too."

Michele giggled nervously, "Doubtful. From what little I know, he's apparently a real s.o.b. Besides, I'm there to work, not trawl for a man. Office relationships are a major no-no."

Charlene and Juanita exchanged a sly wink. "Then we'll just have to get busy and fix you up with someone. Sounds like you'll need some r and r to offset the pace."

With a casual laugh, Michele drained her wineglass. "Don't bother. I'm planning to go back to school in the spring. With the hours at Kane, et al and night classes, I'll have no time for a social life." Deftly, she changed the subject to safer territory, outlining her shopping plans for Saturday.

"Check out the new career closet in Palo Alto," Juanita suggested. "They even have designer labels at really good prices. It's a couple of blocks off University Avenue."

"Thanks, Nita. I'll include that on my itinerary."

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The remainder of the evening was spent sharing juicy tidbits about their other friends and making plans to rendezvous for brunch and a hike through one of the local preserves on Sunday.

Michele's spirits were high when she climbed into bed, Cocoa's warm body curled against her hip. A job, she smiled. A real job. No, a career. Finally, I have a chance to do something with my life.

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