

*Jonathan Black, ruler of his Wall Street trading desk is replaced by a computer. Concurrently, the FBI starts investigating him for insider trading. The agent coerces him to work several stings, including insider trading, mortgage fraud, jury tampering and a Ponzi scheme. Blackie tries to hide his insatiable money need from her. Lives are at stake.*

## **The Assignments**

by P.T. Dawkins

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P. T. DAWKINS

# THE ASSIGNMENTS

A novel



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## Chapter 1

I grimace when I see her anywhere near my trading desk.

“Good morning Blackie, how was your weekend?”

Deidra’s voice is pure as if she’s never screamed out a single word in her life. She sashays across the room in a blue business-like skirt with a white blouse and a scarf, as if ready to pose for one of those model magazines. Her dark red nails match her lipstick. She must use a tanning machine. I can’t imagine how much time she spends on that big jet-black hair. Most female traders I know put theirs in a ponytail at work.

That’s my point. She glams-up every day. It’s all wrong. Why spruce yourself to mud-wrestle? The traders sit at identical, adjacent workstations. There is little space and no walls. Soon after the market opens at 9:30 a.m., it’s a scene of messy hair, rolled-up sleeves and undone collars. No one gives a shit how you look. They all understand, once they put their headset on and their butt in a chair they are to produce trades. When an order comes in, they shout out the name and the size. By the end of a busy day, half of them are hoarse. There’s the constant hum and heat from the equipment and the smell of too many bodies close together. After a while, they stand up to stretch because the chairs kill your back. Don’t you dare miss a trade because you’re in the can. Somebody comes by with coffee and the lunch cart.

I’m studying the three large LED monitors, each flashing arrows, symbols and headlines in white, red, green and yellow, giving me valuable market insight.

That’s the only reason any of us are here.

She’s waiting for my response. I don’t acknowledge her. I’ll never understand why some people can’t figure out what’s important. If this woman replaced her hair dryer with a computer screen and studied the overnight news instead of filing her nails, she could get a jump on the competition. I wonder how many times I’ve told her that—enough so I won’t again. That she’s standing next to me wasting time is a clear sign she still doesn’t get it.

I suspect Deidra and I are close to the same age. I’m thirty-two. Over the years, I’ve picked up wrinkles and extra belly roll because I

sit all day. Yes, there are things called gyms. Once the market closes, I've no energy for that; I am done like dinner, put a fork in me.

"Blackie?"

Does she think I didn't hear her? She should know better than to come between my screens and me as I prepare for the market opening.

I scowl at her.

"Deidra, one of us is working. See if you can figure out which one."

My voice sounds like sandpaper compared to hers. She makes a feeble, gasping noise and shuffles over to her workstation, where she should have gone first. Now, just because she's a woman, don't jump to conclusions. I will work with anybody: female, male, white, black, if you're green and from Mars, it's the same to me. But, if you want to talk to me when I'm on the desk it better be about a trade. Besides, I'm not a person you can just walk up to and flap your gums for no reason. Don't bother me with the weather, politics or what an over-paid professional athlete did or didn't do. I couldn't care less how your night was or whether you got laid.

Understand this. We sit on a trading desk not at a birthday party. We're here to help our clients buy and sell stocks. What we do is cutthroat; the rest of Wall Street does the same thing. We fight for every single transaction. When you miss one, that commission goes into someone else's pocket. You can never get it back.

My former boss hired and trained me. Without warning, at forty-four years old he keeled over. This business can take its toll. I thought it sucked, but it got me promoted. He was a weak manager anyway and didn't run the ship as tight as he could. Soon after I was in charge, I fired two deadbeats, and with Deidra, I'd have had a hat trick, but I can't touch the beauty queen. Every time I try, the Human Resources department—HR—says I have to train her and give her a fair chance. I keep saying, "Impossible. You can't teach a sense of urgency. We'd be doing her and us a favor." They keep saying, "Do it."

This job requires you to read people, listen between the lines. When I speak with a customer, my view on the market's direction, a news flash or the president's latest tweet isn't important. Only the client's opinion is. I hear their tone of voice. Do they sound unsure? I

try to figure out which way they are leaning, never forgetting they are all, always motivated by greed or fear. You can't believe everything they say because there's more bullshit than on a farm. Sometimes, the customer is trying to screw you into doing a losing trade at the wrong price, maybe to cover a mistake he made. If he has paid us lots of commissions, I let him.

Trading takes the strength to rely on your wits because when the shit hits the fan, it's more-often-than-not pointing at you.

My team doesn't like me. Ask out of my earshot, and stand back. They will call me every name in the book. I'm OK with that. We aren't here to make friends. They should thank me; I trained them. They're now in a league with the best traders on Wall Street.

My phone bank contains sixty clear plastic buttons, all direct lines to our customers. One lights; it's our biggest client. It's only 9:15 a.m., which is odd for him since trading hasn't started yet. He usually waits until the market opens. I punch it.

"Blackie here."

"Blackie, it's Rocky. We have a huge stock holding for sale. I wanted to show it to you first."

## Chapter 2

Something is wrong.

Rocky's the head trader from Futuretime Investments. He is honest, but no one ever admits up front to a broker he has a "big block" for sale. The more shares he must sell, the lower the price he'll get. He's looking for the highest amount; I want to pay the least. He isn't interested in doing me any favors, so he shouldn't tell me the truth right away, if ever. We all play in a big game of Liar's Poker. He knows all this, so what's he up to?

In addition, him saying, "I wanted to show it to you first" makes me nervous. If he isn't lying about the size, he might be about my exclusivity. He could have already shopped the holding to several other brokers, who either passed or offered him too low a price. Now he's trying to trick me. But, if I ask him if that's what's going on, I am in effect calling him a liar. He will hang up and cut us off from any commissions for months to teach me a lesson... even if I'm right. No one enjoys being caught lying.

"It's a large holding, and the stock trades by appointment—an illiquid position. We try to avoid these investments, but a junior portfolio manager bought the pig. The price crashed. Instead of admitting that he screwed up and dumping it, he bought more trying to average down. I showed him the door. We're not happy that we still have his mess and want to get rid of it. We won't give it away though. I'm being straight up with you, Blackie. I haven't shopped the trade around. The entire position is yours if you want it."

The story sounds legitimate. He didn't mention the name yet.

"And, your research analyst has a *Buy* recommendation on the company."

Analysts and I aren't friends because they don't understand trading. They study their books in fancy schools and then come to Wall Street wearing expensive suits, thinking they have it all figured out. But, they never got their hands dirty. They write fancy research reports that impress many people but not me. Their MBA degree stands for masturbating asshole. Every single one of them should work for me first.



So, Rocky shouldn't try to interest me because we have a *Buy* opinion. I want to ask him, "If it's such a hot-shit investment, why did you fire your guy?" That would get me cut-off too.

"What's the name?"

"Just between us girls, right?"

"Always, man."

"XZY Conglomerates. One million shares."

I hope he didn't hear me gasp through the phone. What a huge trade for such a low-volume stock. It could take weeks to sell it while the share price continues to sink. He is well aware he has a stone around his neck.

Now I know why he called me first. He knows I can handle it.

"Let me make three calls. I won't show the size, only the name."

"Come right back."

I push other direct lines.

"Blackie here. Where are you on XZY? Our analyst loves the company. I could be in touch with supply."

Everyone responds the same.

"It's not a main-line name with us. We might have an interest at a discount."

After my three calls, I have potential orders for three hundred thousand shares. I have to hurry. In another minute, Rocky will worry *I'm* shopping *his* block and give the business to someone else. If I buy the entire position, I'm at risk for seven hundred thousand shares—worth almost twenty million dollars. Every single penny less in our selling price cost me seven thousand dollars. I could offer to take a piece of his holding, but that doesn't solve his problem; he might do the whole trade elsewhere. My other option is telling him I'm not interested at any price. Only weak traders pass like that.

I remind myself of the age-old line; some of your best trades are the ones you don't make.

I'm grinding my teeth. I love this. Without 100% certainty, I will go with my gut and take on positions with warts. Our analyst's *Buy* opinion doesn't influence me, but it might other people. My three calls to potential buyers were positive. A few more big sales by the entire team, and we could move the monster fast. My instinct is flashing a

warning light, but as much as any other trader I trust Rocky. He doesn't screw us too often. Besides, he's paid us buckets of commissions this year so if I have to eat a little on this one, that's all right.

I bid him seventy-five cents below market. It's a big discount, which I doubt he'll accept. The words are scarcely out of my mouth when he says, "Done!" We now own his one million shares of XZY.

The question is, for how long.

"EVERYONE GET OFF YOUR ASS. FIND ME BUYERS FOR XZY! ONE MILLION SHARES. LET'S GO!"

This is when the action starts. Your pants are at your ankles when you own such a huge position. My team kicks it into high gear. They fish for buyers while staring at their blinking screens. Their arms always move, faster when a client gives them an order. It reminds me of that cartoon where the octopus is a traffic cop.

My first calls are to confirm that the three firms I talked to are still interested and, thank God, they are. Seven hundred thousand to go. Everyone is on the phone.

"Blackie, I'm done on fifty thousand!"

"FUCK YOUR FIFTY! FIND ME MORE BUYERS!"

My armpits drip. My heart wants to jump through my shirt.

"Good on a hundred!"

"Down on seventy-five!"

Then Deidra pipes up.

"Blackie, I've sold five thousand shares."

Oh my God, just fucking shoot me, but I don't have time to deal with her now.

"Sold eighty!"

A headline flashes across the newswire: Middle East Explosion!

"COME ON, YOU ASSHOLES, HURRY!"

I pound the desk, and a cup of pencils falls over. I swipe them away with my arm, and they hit a few people. The orders come in slower. Everyone on the street has seen the news. It's a big distraction. There is an agonizing silence.

"Blackie, Acme Management takes two hundred!"

I always keep the tally in my head.

“WE’RE DONE!”

There are high fives and shouts everywhere. My guys, working together, are awesome. Everyone busted their ass, and in the space of ten minutes, we found a home for one million fucking shares. The trade will appear on the tape with our number on it. Wall Street traders will notice that Bryson Securities—that’s where I work—crossed a million shares. They’ll say it’s a huge transaction for a small firm. That’s fucking right! We made a small profit. Rocky and I are both happy.

I wipe my forehead with my sleeve and let the buzz settle down. When I was younger, I did not understand there was such a thing as Wall Street. I love this job and will never quit. If my voice goes, I guess I’ll have to stop, or I might die right here wearing my headset.

There are worse ways to go.

### Chapter 3

“Morning, Blackie, which way is the wind blowing today?”

Next day, the chairman wanders out around 9:25 a.m. to ask about the market. He always comes up with some meaningless phrase like, “*How big are the waves?*” or, “*How heavy is the rain?*” Anybody else bothers me five minutes before the open I would rip them a new asshole. For him I smile and make up a throwaway response. He writes the checks.

“It looks flat. There was a second explosion in the Middle East, but no one seems to care.”

I believe he respects what I do. He may not like me either, but, when the chips are down, he always has my back. He nods his head in agreement to my answer.

“We put up a million XZY yesterday.”

“All right then, good. Steady as she goes. Keep an eye on your capital.”

I stare at him as he turns away. He ignores a huge trade but tells me to watch my capital? *Steady as she goes?* He’s watched too many *Star Trek* movies.

As he’s walking back, I sort of yell out,

“Aye aye, Captain.”

It’s a killer line. Half the guys are choking themselves because he is the big boss. You can laugh with him but not at him. He could snap his fingers and fire us all in a heartbeat.

He normally smiles at my jokes but not today. Instead, he turns around, takes two steps and gets right in my face.

That isn’t a smart thing to do, I don’t care who you are.

“Hey, Blackie, when did trading become funny? I’m sick of your flippant attitude. What we do here is serious, using real money—mine—to do your trades. The slightest mistake could cost millions. So, climb off your high horse, smarten up and pay closer attention.”

He lingers for a second looking around the room like a lion that just roared, reinforcing that he’s the chief in charge here. What a joke.

Then he turns and wanders over towards his office to do whatever it is a chairman does.

Well, fuck me. Are you kidding? Who crapped in his Cheerios? I'm trying hard not to yell back. There are so many thoughts circling, my head might explode. He is explaining the realities of a trading desk? Flippant attitude! Where the hell did that come from?

All my guys sit with their mouths half open but not for long. It takes one look, and all heads turn towards their screens. I put my headset on like normal, but I can feel my heart pounding.

His words make no sense. The worst part though is he took me down, showed me up in front of my team, on my desk. We will have a chat about that later. But, across the floor towards where his office is, he is standing there, arms crossed and glaring at me. Why hasn't he gone back inside as he always does?

## Chapter 4

**D**on't you dare show up late for work, not even one minute.

A trader's day begins before they arrive because they listen to the business channel on their train ride in. They'd better have their butt-in-chair at 7:30 a.m. The market opens for trading at 9:30 a.m. A good trader starts their preparation well before then. They dig deeper into any newsworthy stories and scan the morning research so they can ask the analysts questions during their daily presentations. If they're any good, they make their first round of calls to important clients as early as possible, because that's what our competitors do.

Once on a call, if a client asks, "What's your view about the overnight story," whatever it is, you're dead if your answer isn't on the tip of your tongue. You might as well grab a bullhorn to announce you either haven't heard the news or don't care. He'll wonder what else you missed. Since ten other dealers are working him for commissions, he'll hang up and take a call from the competition before you realize it. And, you cost my desk money because you weren't ready. I won't stand for it.

So, explain how anyone is ignorant enough to show up forty-nine minutes late.

Deidra comes in during the research meeting and saunters to her station. She parks herself as if it's a normal day and unloads shit from the leather sack she carries. I doubt there is anything of use in there. She should add a watch.

It is a good thing she sits as far away from me as possible because my jaws are aching from clenching. Since an analyst is presenting, I have to wait. The other traders ignore her and pay attention to the speaker, but the meeting will end soon enough. They all know what is to follow.

The analyst finishes and leaves so I control the desk again. All phone lights are un-lit. No one is calling clients yet because my guys are waiting until I am done with her. They don't want their customers to overhear our dirty laundry.

“Blackie, you might as well stop staring. I’m late, but it isn’t my fault. I hit a traffic jam, which made me miss my train. Besides, you’re lucky I’m here at all. I’m coming down with something and had a horrible sleep last night.”

The pressure builds right between my eyes, and my throat feels like it is swelling. This is where I get into trouble with HR because I don’t treat everyone with kid gloves. If you give this job the respect it deserves, I’ll do the same with you. Making it worse, Tinker Bell is giving me attitude. I am *lucky* she showed up?

“Deidra! Thank God, you made it.”

She says nothing, ignoring me! It’s as if someone is banging a big drum between my ears.

“What was that you said, Deidra? You didn’t sleep well last night! You poor thing; how terrible for you.”

At this moment, she should act like a trader and cut her losses before they get worse. If she yelled out, “Blackie, I screwed up. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again” or some other such shit, what could I say then? But, she doesn’t. Instead, she keeps arranging her pile: a yellow pad, pencils and a calculator. She still hasn’t turned her head my way.

“And you still found the strength to come in. Wow, this is fucking inspirational. You’re a wounded soldier, fighting to the end for your troop, what an awesome moment. It makes you want to put your hand over your heart.”

The others are listening but not looking. One or two hide their grin, which is smart, because this isn’t fucking funny.

Then it hits me. She doesn’t care about the situation she has created, is ignoring me and thinks if she waits long enough, I will move on to something else or take a call and leave her alone. She picks up her headset.

“YOU IDIOT, PUT THAT DOWN.”

I can see her hands shaking as she does. Even the chairman warned me. After I lost it on someone once—I stood on my workstation and screamed my ass off—he yelled at me saying if I ever did something like that again, he’d fire me on the spot.

But, this is important.

“What time is it, Deidra?”

“Blackie, I told you—”

“WHAT TIME IS IT?”

She still won't look at me, which drives me crazy! I want to throw my coffee cup at her and yell, “Hey pea-brain I'm *talking* to you!”

I'm standing so I sit down and count to five. When I speak next, I make sure I am calmer but definitely loud enough for everyone.

“Let me help you, Deidra. You were almost an hour late. You won't need your headset today. I called all your clients before the morning meeting started and, no thanks to you, captured two trades. If you call these people now, the only thing for you to talk about is why you can't drag your ass out of bed on time. That would make you and the rest of us look like a bunch of amateurs. I won't allow you to embarrass yourself or this firm. So go home and work on your hair. Try again tomorrow.”

Now she does turn my way. Her eyebrows shoot up. Her teeth are showing as if she is getting ready to bite something. Is she kidding?

“Blackie, those are my clients! You have no right.”

I lean forward towards her, across the desk as far as I can to stare her down. The cord on my headset stretches. I throw it off. The guy next to me pushes his chair from his station. I try to hold it in.

“Funny, they liked to talking to me. I told them you called in ill. If you're not sick, I am... of you! You're done for the day. Go home.”

Now her voice is soft.

“Blackie, why are you doing this?”

“There you go, mean old Blackie is at it again. Hey, I have an idea! Since you can't call clients, and you won't leave, do something useful; go buy us all a coffee. But, be careful. You had a hard time making it to work, so don't get lost. Try to get back before the market closes. I'll take double cream and sugar... and throw in a jelly doughnut.”

This time the other guys laugh aloud and yell out their orders. Her face screws up. Her knuckles are white.

“Blackie, you can't treat me like that. I am a professional trader and...”

Her voice is like fingernails scratching a blackboard. I can't stand it anymore. She picks up her headset again. In four steps, I am in her space. She cowers as if I will hit her. She shouldn't. I would never



strike a woman... ever. Instead, I take it from her, yank the cable from the earpiece and throw both parts on her desk.

“Now will you leave?”

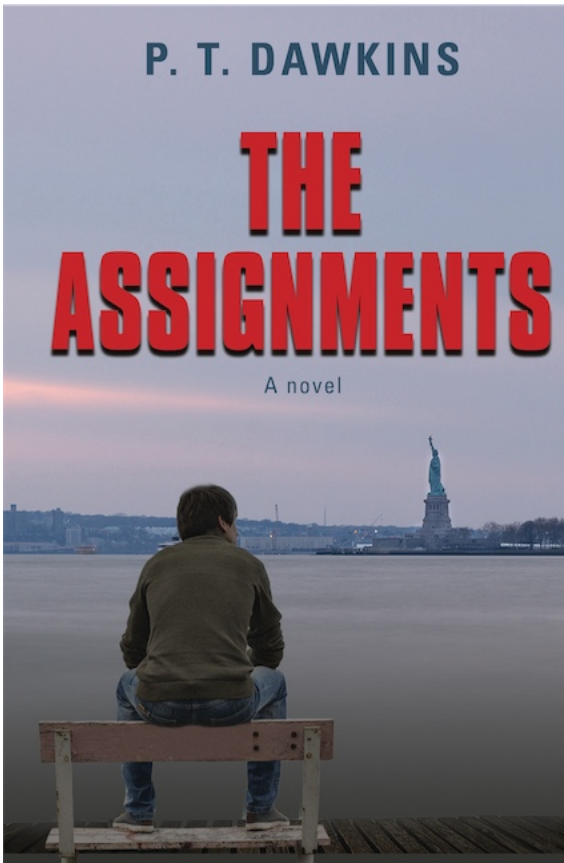
As I walk to my chair, I hear her shoes clicking on the floor mixed in with her sniffing. She’s crying over that? It’s another sign she is wrong for this job. You need backbone to trade. She was born with the silver spoon in her mouth. I doubt she’ll show her face in here again, at least I hope she doesn’t. If she manages to, she should thank me. I gave her a valuable lesson.

Then she mutters just loud enough for me and everyone else.

“You’ll pay for this.”

What? When I look up she’s almost out the door. I’m about to run after her, when I spot the chairman standing by his office. He must have watched the whole thing. Now I see what’s going on. She noticed he was watching and hammed it up for him. I don’t give a shit. I’ve made lots of people cry.

But, she’s long gone. He’s still standing there, scanning back and forth, as if he is looking for something.



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