

THE
PROFESSIONAL

Robert Ledford



After losing everything in his life that matters, Houston Thomas is hitting the reset button. The Professional is a satire about redemption and life in corporate America.

The Professional

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First Edition

Cover design by David Averdick

Dedicated to Brian,
without whom this book
would have never been
written

Chapter 1

No one truly appreciates the great moments in life until they hit rock-bottom. Before everything fell apart, I remember thinking that depression was for people with either a chemical imbalance or no backbone; a made-up word used by psychologists to take advantage of the deluded masses. I believed that until the things I valued most in life were gone.

The beginning of my downward spiral was the day my fiancé dumped me because she found out I'd knocked up another girl right about the same time she got pregnant. That led to her stepfather firing me from my dream job, which coincided with the economy falling apart, something my father put squarely on the shoulders of Barack Obama. Then, my other baby mama's husband who'd originally agreed to adopt and raise my bastard child decided the baby no longer was a responsibility he was willing to undertake so I was stuck paying child support on not just one child but two. With little in the way of savings, no income, and a depressed job market, I didn't have many options.

My older brother reluctantly agreed to take me in. Rob and I had lived together on several occasions over the years, but he was quick to remind me that he was now married with a baby on the way. The old bachelor pad where the beer had flowed and the television was tuned to ESPN twenty-four hours a day had been replaced with bottled water and romantic comedies. The agreement was that I'd have my life together and be living in a place of my own by the time the baby was born. Actually, that's what his wife Amanda says. Rob said he was tired of taking care of his kid brother, and that I need to be gone as soon as possible, preferably yesterday.

After several months of searching unsuccessfully for a job, I let my sister's husband talk me into interviewing at the call center where

he was a manager. A few weeks later, I found myself surrounded by college students and soccer moms answering questions about products I'd never used before. Unlike the spacious office I'd previously enjoyed I now sat at a long table with nothing in front of me but a telephone and a computer. Not only that, I was wedged between a three-hundred pound woman who should have been working for the circus and a college kid who thought he was Don Juan. He had a gift for charming girls who were slightly overweight, and between listening to the fat lady crunch handfuls of M&Ms and the constant flow of girls standing in my personal space I was one migraine away from killing everyone in the building. Fortunately, one day on my way home from work I got a call from a number I didn't recognize.

"Is this Thomas?" a male voice asked.

"This is Houston Thomas," I answered.

There was a pause and then I was asked for about the millionth time in my life, "Your first name is Houston?"

I could have given him the spiel I'd long earlier perfected about how my father had named me after the city in which I was conceived, and I couldn't use my middle name of Hornsby because it was shockingly more obscure than my first, but instead of explaining, I simply said, "That's right."

"My name is Jim Wallace with Ferrell Hinkman. I saw your resume online and was calling to see if you were available to come in and interview for our open financial advisor position."

I didn't know anything about the company or what went along with being a financial advisor, but it automatically beat to hell my current position. "Yes sir, absolutely," I said, maybe too quickly.

"Does Friday work for you?" he asked. "I know it's only two days notice..."

"Friday is great," I interrupted. "Tell me the time and place, and I'll be there."

He gave a dry chuckle that might have been patronizing. "Ten o'clock on Friday?" he asked.

"Ten works for me, Jim. Is there anything I should bring?"

"As long as your resume is up-to-date, nothing else is necessary."

"It is. See you on Friday."

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There was a short delay. “Do you know where our office is located?” he asked.

If I hadn’t been driving with one hand and holding my cell phone in the other, I’d have smacked myself in the forehead. “Sorry, no I don’t,” I said.

“We’re in the Crescent building on Walnut Street in downtown Cincinnati. Are you familiar with the location?”

“Yes, sir. Right next to Fountain Square.”

“That’s correct. We’re on the twenty-fifth floor. Park in the Fountain Square garage and bring your ticket so my assistant can have it validated.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Look forward to meeting you, Jim.”

“You as well, Houston. I’ll see you Friday.”

The next two nights I spent almost all my non-working waking hours online researching Ferrell Hinkman and the responsibilities that went along with being a financial advisor. I didn’t find out much beyond the obvious, that it was a financial firm primarily focused on helping people make investment decisions. I’d worked at an investment company for five years but had only done customer service. I had problems figuring out my own 401k, so I was hardly qualified to advise people where to invest theirs.

I called into the office Friday morning complaining of a tummy ache, put on my only suit, and drove the ten-or-so miles from my brother’s place in Northern Kentucky to the Crescent building Downtown. I arrived a half-hour early and after checking in with Jim’s assistant sat down to wait.

There was a lot of foot traffic, middle-aged white males and a few females walking purposefully like they were on their way to somewhere important. I said hello to several and other than a vague nod from an attractive blonde I was largely ignored.

Admittedly, I’m not the best-looking guy in the world, but they walked past like I was holding a tin cup. If I had to come up with a description of myself, I’d say I’m on the good-looking side of average; a half-inch over six feet with brown hair, blue eyes and at age thirty-two I still get carded once in a while.

It was almost ten-thirty when the girl who checked me in came from one of the outer offices, scanned the waiting area, then walked over to where I was sitting.

“If you’ll follow me,” she said, saying it like she was letting the janitor know where to find the cleaning supplies. She started walking before I made it to my feet, and I had to hurry to catch up. Once we got to Jim’s office she pointed and then was gone.

“Hi, Houston,” he said, coming around the desk to shake my hand. “Sorry about the wait. I had a conference call that was supposed to end at 9:45 and ran over. I hope Natalie made you comfortable.”

“She couldn’t have been nicer,” I said.

There was a small table in his office and instead of returning to his desk, he took a seat in one of the plastic chairs and motioned for me to do the same. He was wearing a dark suit, his jacket hanging carefully on a coat rack in the corner. Instead of a belt he was wearing suspenders designed with what at first glance appeared to be cartoon characters, a sharp contrast to the expensive haircut and wire-rimmed glasses. He wasn’t short or tall, fat or thin, young or old. His defining characteristic was the ability to be utterly forgettable, the kind of guy you could sit next to on a cross-country flight and then not recognize if you ran into him a few hours later at a hotel bar.

“Tell me about yourself,” he said, steepling his fingers.

I always looked at a job interview like a first date. If you wanted to get your hands on the goodies, it was necessary to make the person across the table feel more clever and funny than they ever considered themselves to be.

“If I had to use one word to describe myself, I’m an achiever,” I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. “Everything I do, my goal isn’t just to be successful, I want to be the best.”

“Achiever,” he said, nodding thoughtfully. “Tell me about that.”

As was expected, I used practically every cliché imaginable and we went back and forth as I made up one story after the next, describing all my fictitious successes. He went along with it, jotting things down on an eight-and-a-half by eleven notepad.

The interview lasted the better part of an hour and a half, and once it was over I felt good about my performance. I’d managed to sound

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confident but not egotistical which isn't easy. I asked a lot of questions, getting him to discuss his thoughts on the position; nodding like he was making profound observations even when it contradicted something he'd said earlier.

"You'll hear back from me by this time on Monday," he said. "Did Natalie take care of your parking?"

"We were so busy making small talk, it completely slipped my mind." His forehead puckered. Obviously that wasn't something often said about Natalie. "Have her stamp it on your way out," he said, shaking my hand before returning to his desk. I waited a moment, thinking he'd walk me out, but once it became clear I was on my own, I opened the door.

"Do you want this closed?" I asked.

"If you would," he said, looking up briefly before turning his attention back to the computer screen.

Natalie wasn't in the waiting area when I got there, and I was a few seconds away from paying for my own parking when she breezed through the door, the unmistakable whisper of bare thighs rubbing together as she approached.

"Jim said I need to validate your parking," she said, clearly annoyed.

She plucked the ticket from my hand and placed it in a small vanilla-colored container the size of a Sucrets box, pushed down, and shoved it back at me before quickly turning to walk away. She was hardly a dazzling beauty; about five-feet six, and a hundred and sixty pounds with chocolate brown eyes and dark hair a little longer than shoulder-length. She had a lumpy face, and it was hard to see where her chin ended and neck began. I had to hand it to her, though; the girl had the attitude of a super model, acting like a perfect ten even though she couldn't fit in a size ten.

I walked through the office double-doors and waiting for the elevator was the same girl who'd given me a nod in the reception area. She was staring straight ahead, acting like she didn't realize I was there.

"I like your earrings," I said.

She gave me a quick peek out of the corner of her eye before bringing up a hand to touch one of the diamond studs. "Thank you."

"Sorry, I'm forgetting my manners," I said, switching my leather-bound folder from my right hand to left and then extending my right hand. "Houston Thomas."

After looking at my hand for a long moment, she finally shook it, her handshake cool and firm. Our eyes met, and I have to admit I was smitten. She was a little less than medium height; blonde, with eyes the same color as her hair. The tailored suit she was wearing must have set her back a couple grand, and it was money well spent.

"Sara Long," she said.

"Is that Sara with an 'ah' or just an 'a'?" I asked.

"Just the 'a'," she said, looking at her watch.

"Nice to meet you, Sara without the 'h'. Have you worked here long?"

"About five years," she said, refusing to make eye contact.

Most people would have taken the hint and stopped trying to make small talk, but figuring out when to keep my mouth shut had never been a strong suit. "If you don't mind my asking what do you do here?"

"Vice president of compliance," she said, still no sign of interest.

"Wow, I'm impressed!" I said, taking a half-step backward. "Have you done that since you started or..?"

Sara looked at me with an agitated expression. "I just remembered there's something I left at my desk," she said, turning to walk away.

The elevator door opened right about the time she disappeared, and I couldn't help but wonder if my skills were slipping. I took the elevator to street level and instead of going to my car, I walked to the Starbucks two blocks away, ordered my customary mocha, and headed to Fountain Square which was a stone's throw from the coffeehouse.

It was late-May and cool for the Ohio Valley, about sixty degrees. The clouds blocked out the sun, and the wind made me grateful I was wearing a suit jacket. There were only a few people scattered around the Square, and I took a seat at one of the small green tables.

The Square held sentimental value for me, both good and bad. Three years earlier on the day before Valentine's Day, I'd proposed to my girlfriend on right about the same spot where I was currently sitting.

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Instead of getting down on one knee I pretended to break things off, and instead of crying tears of joy she announced she'd been knocking boots with some other guy. At the time I'd been devastated, but it didn't take long to realize that forever with that particular girl would have meant a lifetime of misery. I was getting up to leave when an attractive brunette a few tables away briefly made eye contact before returning to her paperback.

"Hi, do you mind if I sit?" I asked her, pointing at the chair to her right.

"I'm waiting for someone," she said, eyes on her book.

I was far enough away to avoid her personal space but close enough to smell her perfume, a pleasant floral scent. "Completely understand," I said, putting out both hands placatingly. "I just wanted to say you have the prettiest eyes I've seen all week. That's it; didn't mean to bother you."

She looked up just long enough to roll her eyes. "That might be the dumbest line I've ever heard," she said.

"That bad?" I asked, sitting down at the next table. "Any suggestions for the next time I run across a gorgeous brunette with almond-colored eyes?"

"You're really getting on my nerves," she said. "Will you leave me alone please?"

I shrugged. "Had to give it a shot," I said. "I meant what I said, though. Have a great day."

She gave me the kind of sucker's smile usually reserved for waiters and bellhops. "Goodbye."

Yup, I was definitely losing it. That was the key to meeting women, though; the willingness to make a fool of yourself and the confidence not to care. I walked to my car and drove home. The responsible thing would have been to go into work, but I'd had enough of Gumbel Inventories to last a lifetime. Depending on what happened Monday, there was a chance I'd answered my last question about dental floss.

I got home a little before one o'clock and after changing into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt drove to my parent's house. I started to turn the car around when I saw my sister's car parked in the

driveway, but Mom waved from the front porch. I gritted my teeth and braced myself for the inevitable. I was the third of five kids, and Hannah was quick to point out that I was the textbook definition of a middle child. She wasn't as quick to acknowledge, however, that she was the big sister from hell. The single thing that gave her the greatest pleasure during our childhood was making me cry, and she did it very well.

Hannah was waiting when I walked through the front door, a fist against her hip. "Why aren't you at work?" she asked. Her husband Jeff had gotten me the job and it made her even headier with authority, something I would have wagered was impossible.

"The next day you go to work, I'll explain why I didn't."

Hannah had stopped working six weeks after she'd given birth to her son, Toby. She was now a stay-at-home mom and spoiled Toby rotten. The kid was the biggest brat I'd ever seen. His two favorite activities were climbing on top of anything he could find and saying "no" to whatever any authority figure told him to do.

"At least I don't have to cry to my sister about how I can't get a job," she said in her boo-hoo voice.

"Did I ever tell you my theory about why Toby climbs on top of everything?"

She shook her head, lips in a thin line. "Explain how you calling into work for no reason somehow leads to Toby."

"I'm serious," I said. "I think I got it figured out."

"Maybe you should figure out your own kids, assuming you know which is which."

"Any idiot could tell my kids apart. Not all boys have girly hair like little Toby."

"At least Toby has hair," she said, looking pointedly at my hairline which over the past couple of years was slowly creeping back toward my ears.

"I think Toby proves something that's been troubling scientists for centuries," I said. "Seriously, it's DNA, and it one-hundred percent proves nature trumps nurture. The boys in Geneva are going to be calling any day now to present me with the Nobel Prize, this is that groundbreaking."

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“The Nobel Prize isn’t given in Geneva, moron. You’re the only person I know who needs to read an encyclopedia before he insults someone.”

“The reason that kid climbs on top of everything in sight is because Jeff wants to climb on top of the highest building he can find and take a flying leap, smiling the whole way down because he’ll never have to wake up with you next to him again.”

“You get any further behind in child support, you’ll roll over and see the guy in your cell that just made you his new girlfriend.”

Mom walked in, a reproachful frown on her face. “Enough,” she said.

“There are worse things than being some bad man’s girlfriend. Jeff has my sympathies.”

“I said enough,” Mom said, raising her voice.

“Sorry, Mom,” I said, properly chastised.

I could see Hannah weighing the option of defying our mother or getting in the last word. I gave her a big smile which must have made the decision easy.

“How many other bastards do you have running around, all the nasty skanks who have mercy-screwed you since your balls dropped?”

“Are you going to let her get away with that kind of language?” I asked, looking helplessly at Mom, waiting for what I hoped would be a legendary butt-chewing. Instead she was unsuccessfully trying to hide a smile.

“She knows it’s true,” Hannah said.

“You showed mercy to at least three of my friends in high school, and it’s not like I was Mr. Popular back then.”

“Next one leaves the house,” Mom said, pointing at me and then Hannah.

Hannah and I traded glares before both of us broke up laughing. Sarcasm runs deep in our family, and the only two certainties are that we’ll tear down walls to be there for one another if anything goes wrong and rip each other to shreds at every opportunity.

“Amber still not talking to you?” Hannah asked.

“Let’s just say I’m not expecting a birthday card.”

Hannah smiled, a tender smile. “She’ll give you another chance.”

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“You think so?”

“Baby daddies are always first in line.” She poked me softly in the chest. “You’re a good guy. Show her you’ve changed and she’ll take you back.”

Part of me thought that might be true, but she seemed to despise me a little more time our paths crossed. “The day that happens I’ll agree to be Toby’s godfather which would almost make getting her back not worth it.”

She laughed. “I’ll hold you to that,” she said. “Toby needs a godfather.”

Saturday morning I got out of bed early to pick up Summer, the daughter of my ex-fiancé who’d kicked me to the curb when she found out I’d not only been sleeping around but had managed to get the other woman pregnant, a married woman no less. Seeing Amber always made my chest hurt; a reminder of the life I could have had if I wasn’t a first-class idiot.

Amber was a stunner; about five-feet seven with hair the color of root beer and dark, almost black eyes that could best be described as bewitching. She’d started dating again; some pretty boy accountant, and knowing she was with another guy drove me nuts. To her credit, she never rubbed him in my face and went out of her way to make sure the dork wasn’t around when I picked up our daughter. I got to her condo at five minutes after nine and took a little satisfaction that his car wasn’t parked in the driveway.

“Hey,” she said, eyebrows raised. “I thought we agreed you’d call before you decided to stop by.”

“Sorry, it must have slipped my mind,” I said, giving her an appraising once-over. “Something’s changed. Have you done something different with your hair?”

She gave me a patronizing smile, much heavier on the patronizing than the smile. “It’s called just getting out of bed and not brushing it.”

“I like it,” I said, leaning down to pick up the diaper bag sitting inside the front door. “You should wear it like that every morning.”

She rolled her eyes, the corners of her mouth not turning up. The one thing I’d been able to do while we were dating was make her laugh, but she didn’t think I was funny anymore.

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“If you’re going to take her out for ice cream, make sure she wears a bib,” she said. “Last time you brought her home she had it from head to toe, and I couldn’t get the stain out.”

The one routine I had with the kids was taking them to Wendy’s for a Frosty immediately after picking them up. Their mothers might hate me, but Summer and Jackson would be all smiles when I came to the door because they equated “Daddy” with “ice cream.”

“She was wearing a bib,” I said defensively. “I can’t help it she inherited her old man’s eating habits.”

Once again she didn’t smile. “Just make sure,” she said, then looked at the clock on her living room wall. “I have to get ready. Call before you bring her home, okay?”

“You and Wonder Boy got a wine-tasting this afternoon?” I asked.

“What I do is none of your business,” she said, eyes flashing.

“Probably be a lot of fun,” I said. “Maybe you can add a little excitement by doing some long division after you hit the art gallery.”

“Goodbye, Houston,” she said, getting Summer out of her crib.

The second I stepped onto the porch she slammed the door shut. Every time I went to her house, I’d give myself the same speech about not getting personal, but it never worked. It wasn’t lost on me that what I’d said had pissed her off and made her dislike me more.

“Never could figure out how to keep my mouth shut,” I muttered.



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