

## Work It, Baby

June 2020 - Part One

Allison Meriweather, fashionista extraordinaire, award-winning designer, modeling agent, and head of one of the most prestigious fashion magazines in the world, was livid. Her non-dairy matcha latte was cold. Again.

Heels clicked as she strode angrily to her mahogany desk and rammed her elegantly manicured fingertip into the intercom button. "Terri, you absolute imbecile! Get in here this moment," she rapped out, glaring at the door as if to skewer the hapless assistant at the desk outside. Damn it all. Not even her idiotic secretary seemed to know - or care - about getting her what she needed. Hmm, maybe it was time to demote this nincompoop too...

"Well, you've fucked it up again, Terri," she seethed the moment the door opened. So what if anyone else was outside listening to her tirade? The little cretin deserved a bit of public humiliation. "How many *damned* times must I tell you that my latte has to be at *least* one hundred and sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit?"

Terri, a slender young blonde in a crisp blouse and navy slacks, stood before her, head lowered to endure the assault. It was nothing new, to be honest. Meriweather was an absolute diva, as everyone knew, and Terri hadn't expected anything less when she had taken the job three months before. She'd been called every name in the book, logged more hours and run more insane errands than in all her previous jobs combined, and even dodged a few handbags, magazines, and shoes lobbed her way when Meriweather's temper reached its infamous "nuclear meltdown" point.

But today... Today it was all about to change.

Once the woman had paused for breath after a hysterical demand for a new latte, Terri raised her head and, heart pounding, looked her boss square in the eye for what might have been the very first time. "I'm sorry, Allison," she enunciated quietly, reveling in the taste of every syllable that rolled off her tongue. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

No one had ever dared to call Meriweather by her first name, let alone refuse her anything. Though momentarily stunned by her assistant's astonishing words, it didn't take the businesswoman more than a few seconds to recover her poise - or what she thought of as poise, at any rate. "Why, you little *bitch*," she hissed, gesturing toward the door like some overacting cinematic villain. "Get out of my office and never darken my door again, you fucking little piece of shit. You're sacked! You're fired! You'll never find another job in this industry again. I'll-"

"Actually, you won't," Terri retorted, as the door opened and six other young women filed in amid the rustle of cloth and the quiet click of heels. All were models, employees of Meriweather's, and judging by their faces every single one of them meant business. "All of us have something to discuss with you, Allison. And I'm afraid you simply won't have time to deal with much else for quite awhile... Perhaps even for the rest the day." She smiled softly. "You see, there's this little matter of the Neville contract, and some mysterious stock transactions over the last few years..."

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It was all quite clear, really. As Terri explained to their boss, the FBI, SEC, and GAO were all very interested in some decidedly unusual transactions that had been transpiring within and amongst the multiple fashion companies for whom Meriweather served as CEO, member of the board, advisor, etc., etc. Thanks to Terri's efforts and those of several private investigators, the details were all falling into place - unfortunately enough for Meriweather - and it would be a miracle if the ensuing trial for insider trading and corruption wouldn't send her to prison for years.

But, Terri assured her gaping boss, no one wanted things to go that far. They, decent individuals that they were, didn't want to see Meriweather's stellar reputation sullied with such disgrace any more than she did. And so, they were prepared to offer her a deal. "It's really quite simple," Terri smiled disarmingly. "You're a lovely and attractive woman, and we're sure you could take your place as a model just like any of us..."

Her accomplices assented, their grim expressions reflecting the hard truth of their own experiences with this woman. Oh, they knew her well from the occasions when she would come down and order them about the mock-up runway like cattle. Disregarding even the protests of the designers and artists, she would berate them, belittle them, force them into humiliating and impossible positions, all in pursuit of her idiosyncratic vision of "fashion"...

Meriweather was among the wolves now, and she knew it. But, clever businesswoman that she was, she also knew that there was little chance of escaping. Terri couldn't possibly be bluffing, not with the amount of detailed information she'd already mentioned. No, those damned investigators knew or were about to know everything - and frankly, Meriweather hadn't a leg to stand on.

"So we've taken the liberty of arranging an 'out' for you," Terri reassured her. "All we ask is that you experience the sort of life that we models do! We've found a perfect modeling agency for you out in sunny Malibu, and we'll make sure you can slip off discreetly until this all blows over." Her smile

grew wider as she watched the hunted expression in Meriweather's eyes. "Don't worry! The cover story to the press will be that you're off to a meditation retreat to gain fresh inspiration. No one will bother to check, and meanwhile we'll put the investigators off on the wrong trail. What's not to love?"

"Oh, maybe you're worried about taking orders from someone else?" cut in Nora, a stately brunette whose hair had been bleached and frizzed beyond recognition (for fashion, of course). "I'm sure that'll be hard for you, *Allison*. But at the end of the day, you have to decide: do you want to take orders from a modeling coach or two? Or would you rather be ordered around by, oh, I don't know... *a prison guard*?"

Meriweather resisted, understandably enough. She tried the explosive response first: fuming, raging, and shrieking that this was all a setup, that she would show them, that they would all end up in jail before her. When that produced only laughter and knowing smirks, she resorted to the pleading tack: bargaining, asking sweetly if there wasn't another solution, assuring them that there had to have been some misunderstanding... Then came the sullen, passive-aggressive approach: they were just a bunch of conniving young women after her position. They'd see how far backstabbing and spying got them. At least *she* had a clear conscience...

Oh, the gales of feminine laughter that greeted her ears smarted even more than did the signing of her new modeling contract. For of course she signed the proffered forms - including the press releases stating Ms. Meriweather's intentions to "take an indefinite leave of absence for personal enrichment". She *had* to sign them, beaten as she was. And when push came to shove, she reflected with a sudden, painful flash of self-knowledge, it was her reputation that mattered above all else. These ungrateful bitches might as well do anything with her, so long as the Meriweather fashion empire remained convinced of her greatness. So long as her image remained intact...

"Thank you *so much* for doing business with us!" Terri effused as she shuffled the sheaf of waivers and contracts in her hands. "Now, then. A few of us will stay here and help you prepare for your move to Malibu - which, after all, will be taking place before you know it. In the meantime, I will be attending to a few matters regarding these forms..." She sauntered leisurely toward the door through which, less than an hour before, she had stepped as a nervous subordinate. God, she was the boss now, at least of Meriweather - and how incredibly good that felt! Now, if only the bitch knew what was brewing for her in Malibu...

"Oh, and don't forget your latte, *Allison*," Terri called over her shoulder with a knowing wink. "It would be a shame to let it go to waste."