

SANDIE JONES

THE TRADE OFF

PAN BOOKS



First published in electronic format 2023 by Pan Books

This paperback edition first published 2024 by Pan Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan

The Smithson, 6 Briset Street, London EC1M 5NR
EU representative: Macmillan Publishers Ireland Limited,
The Liffey Trust Centre, 117–126 Sheriff Street Upper,
Dublin 1, D01 YC43

Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5290-8781-9

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



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For every woman within these pages

PROLOGUE

‘You’ve got a nerve showing up here,’ he hisses, coming to an abrupt halt beside me as he leads the mourners back up the aisle. Every sinew in his body looks to be on full alert, twitching against the fabric of his black suit. Even the stiff white collar of his starched shirt is flexing with the rhythm of the involuntary throbbing of his neck muscles.

My pulse quickens as I look at him. Tiny pinpricks of sweat instantly jump to the surface of my already tingling skin. I’d naively believed I could attend and leave unnoticed; pay my respects and go. Or, at the very least, get out of the church before he realized there was a traitor in their midst.

But I should have known I wouldn’t get away with it. I don’t deserve to.

My eyes smart as I look at the laughing photo atop the coffin, my ears unable to drown out the poignant words of Bette Midler as she sings about the wind beneath her wings.

‘I . . . I’m so sorry,’ I stutter, as he stands there,

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unmoving, his eyes seemingly burrowing into my soul, as if wishing it were me in that wooden box.

‘Get out,’ he barks. ‘If I ever see you again, I swear I’ll . . .’

He launches himself towards me and I flinch, instinctively holding my plastered arm across my broken ribs protectively.

But just before he reaches me, someone pulls him back. ‘Leave it,’ says the woman. ‘You’ll get your chance. But now is not the time or place.’

He sucks in the raging spittle from his lips, but his eyes stay focused. It’s only when I follow his manic glare that I realize he’s talking to the person standing right behind me.

1

Jess

‘So, what would you bring to *The Globe*?’ The revered editor of the country’s top-selling newspaper is perched on the edge of his desk, making himself at least two feet taller than me as I sit before him.

‘Er, I’ve got lots of ideas,’ I say, desperate for saliva to moisten my mouth. ‘I’m a team player, my research skills are exemplary and I’m eager to learn.’

He exaggerates a yawn. ‘Bor-ing.’

I shift in my chair, fearing I’ve blown the only chance I’ll ever get to learn from the best.

He looks at me with even less interest than ten seconds ago. ‘That’s what every kid who comes through that door says, and it’s why they all leave the same way – without a job.’

My throat clenches and my head throbs as I search desperately for something more exciting to offer.

‘You’re going to have to sell yourself,’ my boss at the local newspaper that I work on had advised. ‘Max Forsythe is a man of great means, but he has exceptionally high standards. That’s why I’ve recommended

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you for the position, as much as it will pain me to lose you.'

'Well, I must be exactly what you want, otherwise I wouldn't have got this far,' I say to Mr Forsythe, squirming in my seat.

He looks at me with an amused expression, his interest piqued.

'And what is it I want?' he asks.

'Me,' I say resolutely, whilst trying to quash the colour that I can feel flooding my cheeks. 'You must have approached the *Essex Gazette* for a reason. A million junior reporters would kill for this opportunity if you'd advertised it, but you didn't. Why not?'

My ears grow hot as I pretend to be the person I think he wants: assertive, driven, hungry, not afraid to step out of my comfort zone.

'I need someone I can trust,' he says, getting up and walking round to his side of the desk. 'And your editor seems to think I can trust *you*.' He narrows his eyes as he sits down and looks at me.

I nod and swallow, conscious not to break eye contact, because I imagine he's someone who can tell a lot from the way you look at him.

'It's a whole different ball game to working on a local rag,' he says. 'There's no such thing as office hours; you work until the paper's put to bed, until I'm happy with every single word and picture in it.'

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I nod fervently before pulling back, not wishing to come across like an over-excited puppy.

‘And then you’ll go straight out and get me stories for the next edition.’

‘OK,’ I say, unable to stop myself smiling at the thought of me and my notepad venturing out onto the streets of London in search of the next big exclusive. ‘I can do that.’

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ he asks, changing tack abruptly.

‘Erm, well . . .’ I stutter, taken aback, unable to see why that’s relevant.

Mr Forsythe’s eyes are wide with anticipation, making me feel as if my answer’s the difference between me getting this job and not. But something in the way he’s looking at me makes me think it’s not just the job at stake here.

‘Well, yes, actually I do,’ I lie.

For some reason it makes me feel safer; gives me a false sense of security.

He can’t hide his disappointment in my answer. ‘Shame, it would be a whole lot easier if you were single.’

My hackles stand on end in sudden indignation. Is he suggesting what I think he is?

‘Do you live together?’ he asks, seemingly oblivious to my discomfort.

‘Well, yes . . . we . . .’

‘Are you faithful to him?’ He asks the question without even looking at me.

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I instinctively pull the coat on my lap tighter to me and reach for my handbag, from where it sits on the floor. I want to turn round to check that the almost deserted open-plan newsroom I'd walked through, to get to this office, still has a few people milling about. But I don't want to show my nerves and make him think he's got the upper hand. Though I almost laugh at my own naive thoughts. Of course he's got the upper hand; he always has – he's one of the most powerful men in media.

'I don't think that's a question I need to—'

'It gives me an insight into who you really are,' he says, cutting me off.

I straighten myself up, hoping it will strengthen my resolve.

'My personal relationships have no bearing on my suitability for employment,' I say, desperately trying to keep my voice steady.

'Well, they do if it stops the man employing you from getting what he wants,' he replies, looking at me suggestively; daring me to ask him to quantify what his statement actually means. Though I know he'll only deny what we both realize he's implying, if I challenge him.

The phone on his desk buzzes and I'm grateful that the tension is broken, but as soon as the tightness in my shoulders begins to dissipate, his assistant sends me into free fall again.

'I'm about to leave,' she says through the intercom. 'Is there anything you need before I go?'

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He raises his eyebrows at me in question, and I want to scream at her, 'Yes, take me with you', but my lips feel as if they've been glued shut.

'Is anyone else still here?' asks Max, looking out through the glass walls of his office.

I follow his gaze to the fifty or so desks that stretch out across the floor, desperately wanting to see activity, but even the harsh strip lighting that had shone so brightly when I arrived has been reduced to a low-level night light.

'Only Bill on the back bench,' says the voice through the intercom. 'But I think he's packing up as we speak.'

'Thanks, Gail,' says Max, smiling and widening his eyes. 'I'll see you in the morning.'

I go to stand up. 'Thank you for your time,' I say. 'I really should be going as well.'

He looks at his watch. 'Why? Do you turn into a pumpkin at nine thirty?'

I force a smile, but alarm bells are going off inside my head. When Gail told me it was a 9 p.m. interview or nothing at all, I'd not even questioned it. Max Forsythe had a daily newspaper to run, a nightly deadline to meet; I was just ridiculously grateful for the opportunity. But now that tomorrow's edition has been put to bed and I'm sitting here, alone with the man whose reputation precedes him, I wonder whether he has me down as being *too* eager to please.

'Sit down, relax,' he says, walking over to the drinks

trolley, which I'd assumed was merely for show. 'I only mention it because not many relationships survive this newsroom. You need to be sure that yours is strong enough.'

'Women can work hard *and* hold down a relationship,' I say.

'Good to hear,' he says, lifting a cut-glass decanter in mid-air. 'Now, what can I get you?'

'I'm fine,' I say tartly, still standing with my coat over my arm and wondering if I have time to catch the same lift as Max's assistant. 'I'm not much of a drinker.'

He smirks. 'Not even when we've got something to celebrate?'

If that's his way of telling me I've got the job, I'm no longer sure I want it.

I shake my head. 'Not even then.'

'A word to the wise,' he says, taking a sip of his drink. 'You'll be nobody's friend if you abstain. People won't feel like you're one of them. They'll have their guard up. And that'll get you nowhere. *But* if you can perfect the art of making them believe you're drunk when you're actually stone-cold sober, it could put you at quite the advantage.'

He smiles, more to himself than to me as he warms to his theme. 'In fact if you're able to pull that off, it could set you head and shoulders above the rest. While all my other journalists are matching their marks shot for shot, line for line, *you* could be getting the story.'

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‘I’m not sure that sounds like me,’ I offer, still unsure what he’s suggesting.

‘Do you *want* to be a journalist or not?’ he asks, moving towards me, invading my personal space.

I force myself to stand firm, not to allow my feelings of intimidation to show.

‘Well, yes, but . . .’

‘Then you *have* to get used to being in uncomfortable situations, because no story worth having will come your way without you being backed up against the wall, having your loyalty questioned and your ethics challenged. If you’re not prepared to be put under that kind of pressure, then you either get out now or you find a way to fake it, because I don’t need a rookie-shaped liability around my neck.’

‘Are you offering me the job?’ I ask.

‘Only if your moral compass is pointing as far north as it appears to be,’ he says with a smile, moving back to his desk.

It’s then that the penny drops. ‘Was . . . was that some kind of *test*?’ I ask, feeling relieved and foolish at the same time.

‘I need to know that your core values are gold-standard,’ he replies. ‘That your sense of what is right and wrong is imbued in your very being.’

I nod enthusiastically.

‘Because it’s time that tabloid journalism cleaned up its act.’

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‘I won’t be trading my morals for a byline,’ I say, a coil of excitement swirling in the pit of my stomach.

‘Then I think we’re going to get along just fine,’ he says, finishing off his drink in one. ‘Now, as much as I’d like to sit here and discuss the merits of your morality all night, I have a prior engagement with the prime minister.’