

JULIA

COVER TEXT:

Julia is odd. Julia is misunderstood. Julia is brilliant and determined and confident.

After a cruel cancer killed her mother, Julia focused on living. After a cruel corporation destroyed her beloved father, Julia focused on getting even. Somehow, she would make them pay. But she was poor and living on her own. Her only weapon was her strength, her belief in herself and her ability to design clothes that fascinated and bewildered a fashion industry that wasn't ready to accept her. She threatened them; they wanted her stopped.

She could choose compromise. She could adapt and comply. But Julia... chose Julia.

This wild romp through adversity and triumph takes you along for the ride from high school to the board room, through loyalty and betrayal, from the depths to the heights, and through love and loss.

CHAPTER ONE

The tall young man got out of the cab at the corner and pulled his scarf tighter around his neck. He felt, more than noticed, the cold gray sky that peeked between the pillars of the concrete canyon.

“Hey! You want your change?”

As he was about to turn back to the cab driver, he stopped short. There was a woman about his age standing about five steps away, looking up.

“Keep it,” he mumbled, distracted.

I love rich people, the driver thought as he pondered how many long-necks he could buy with an unintended \$60 tip.

The man raised one eyebrow as he side-stepped closer to the building to get a better view of her. ‘Stunningly beautiful’ didn’t fit. ‘Eccentric’? Not quite... well, sort of. He usually could place people in boxes with a quick glance, but he wasn’t easily finding a stereotype that fit her. With her round white face, pink-purple lipstick, and dead black hair, he could maybe lean toward ‘punk’. He shook his head: the pink shirt that might almost pass for traditional—but not really—screwed that perception up pretty well. It was the strangely patterned, oddly colored, over-sized scarf and the oddly-cut multi-leathered jacket hanging almost provocatively over the concoction that made him cock his head.

The man took a step closer—the building was his destination as well—and stopped, still fully engaged. The needle was climbing past ‘interest’ and creeping closer to ‘fascinated’ as he studied her further.

The ragged, torn, and apparently dirty jeans didn’t bring him back to ‘punk’. ‘Unkempt’? No. It wasn’t; there was an odd sense of orderliness. He chuckled when he got to the black cowboy boots. They matched her hair, true, but they looked very much like his own.

Now, the soft stove-pipe hat? Aside from the fact that it framed her face elegantly, it didn’t seem to fit... but then, it did. He shook his head again and realized that more than her clothes had grabbed him. Bearing? Pride? Strength? Determination? Anger?

The extraordinary woman stood firmly, looking up at the office building as if it were a dragon to be slain.

The woman swung her eyes toward him just as the taxi’s tires hit the water behind her. When they met his, it almost took his breath away. The needle immediately swung fully past ‘fascinated’ and well into ‘wow’.

CHAPTER TWO

Julia stood on the sidewalk in front of the old office building in which, shortly, she would face her destiny. The cold drizzle was forcing most people to hurry past her into dry shelter, but she didn't notice; she wasn't most people. She looked up at the sign: 'Ralsting Clothing Corporation' and pulled in a sharp breath. *Prepare*, she thought. *Get strong*.

So many emotions coursed through her as she studied the granite façade on 38th Street: anger, fear, hope, to mention a few. She saw the man moving toward her, perhaps studying her, out of the corner of her eye but didn't turn toward him.

Behind her, she heard the taxi rush past and sound of the tires hitting the pool of water by the curb and imagined the beginning of a splash. Part of her mind considered the consequences of not moving, but most of her just instructed the water to fall short.

That wasn't true: Most of her was thinking about how she got here, about the long path of bumps and thrills, tears and joy. Julia shuddered slightly when the last eight years flashed past her mind, painful visions of her mother and her father. It was her father who ultimately drove her to this place.

Julia noticed that the man had now appeared at her side, and rotated her eyes toward him. Then she felt the hand grab her arm and gently push her forward, away from the water leaping over the curb. It did fall short after all.

“Almost got you,” a strong male voice said.

Julia slid back to the present. She was still standing in front the corporate headquarters of Ralsting Clothing, her target—her destiny, or her destruction. “Oh, thanks,” was the best she could come up with.

“Not a problem.”

A little rain drained off of the brim of her hat as she turned her head and focused. She saw a face that was handsome, rugged, gentle, strong and about six or seven other descriptors that seemed to fit. His dark eyes were set into a squarish frame that held a rich, full smile near the bottom and a disrupted tangle of almost-black hair at the top. Whatever it was, it took her next breath; she couldn't move. Or think. Her insides seemed to turn to mush.

The man returned her gaze and gave up trying to classify her. It didn't matter, anyway. He was instantly captured by her eyes: deep, dark, crazy green, set in her face like emeralds on a china plate. But, there was something deeper in them, something like a beam, a tractor beam that was pulling him in.

The woman wore an intensity that could have been frightening to the viewer—unless it wasn't. And to him, it wasn't. It was then that he recognized her.

“You can get pretty soaked if you're not careful,” he said, trying to break the joint trance. *That was lame*, he thought, but it parted her lips. The slight smile that followed moved his heart into a higher gear.

CHAPTER THREE

Seven years earlier

The front door slammed, startling Julia, pulling her concentration away from the modeling doll she was dressing and the outfit she had been sketching and the 12th grade Social Studies book she was avoiding. “Daddy?”

“Julia?” Harry called from the foyer of the tiny gray row house on a tiny gray street in a tiny gray part of town where Julia was growing up.

At 17, she didn’t have her pink-purple lipstick or strange, dead black hair or mysterious way of looking through you yet. That would come. It would grow from the seeds about to be planted.

“Julia?” Harry called again.

Julia knew his frame of mind just from that one word. Her father had four or five different ways to say her name, and this was the worst. She put down her ‘tools’, as she called them, pulled her homework back in front of her and went to find him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as she sat down at the aluminum and green kitchen table where her father had taken refuge, from what, she didn’t yet know. “You want some tea?”

He looked up. His eyes were moist. “Sure, honey.”

She knew something was very wrong, but didn't want to press; Harry would talk about it when he was ready. Scooting the chair back, she got up, gathered the necessary items and put the water on to boil.

"Remember the company I showed the ManBag to a couple years ago? Ralsting Clothing?"

"I think so."

"Yeah, remember they threw me out? They made it clear they didn't think it was a fit for their company. 'Nobody would buy it', they said."

"So? That's happened before." She hesitated before adding: "a lot."

Harry reached into the pocket of the suit coat that was too many years old and faded and too loose on his diminished frame. He pulled out an article he had cut from a magazine. "It seems as though they thought it was good enough to produce." As he handed crumpled paper to Julia, his tired, wrinkled eyes followed her.

After she had sat back down, she felt the heat on her face. "This is your design! How could they do that?"

"That's what I asked your uncle last month."

"What did he do?"

"He called them."

"And?"

He shrugged. "Like always. 'You don't like it? Sue me'." He slumped even further into his chair.

"Can Uncle Jesse do anything?"

"I don't have anything that proves I gave it to them first. I threw it all out. I was pissed."

"But they made it."

Harry's head lowered. "I guess they liked it after all."

"Uncle Jesse's got to do something!"

As her father shook his head, a thin lock of hair fell over his ear. He left it there; it didn't seem to matter. "Jesse's afraid all he did was give them notice that I intend to sue."

"So sue!"

"It's not a case Jesse thinks he can win. They know I don't have the money or the time to sue. And they have the money to crush me in the end anyway."

There was a long pause before Harry spoke again, but when he did, it was more of a sigh. "Jesse even thinks they might sue me."

"For what?"

"Patent or copyright infringement or something. Just to keep me shut up. I can't defend myself. Jesse's people don't work for nothing."

"So you're fucked?"

His head jerked up. "Julia! Language!"

She smiled and leaned over to him, putting her hand lovingly on his arm. "Daddy. I am who I am."

Harry Cohen's face cooled, and he smiled weakly as he looked into Julia's bright green eyes, the eyes he had loved desperately since he first saw them seventeen years before. He released another long sigh. "And that's okay, girl."

The whistle of the kettle broke the moment and Julia got up to finish her tea-making. When she looked back at her father, she saw a man who was so sad, so defeated, so beat-up. Her heart ached, and she wished there was something she could do. There wasn't. He had worn failure like a coat for most of his life, and he didn't seem to be able to take it off. Maybe it stuck to him, or maybe he stuck to it. Julia would probably never really know what drove the man.

She brought the full cups to the table and sat again.

"I'm tired of getting fucked," Harry said, softly, staring blankly at the cup in front of him.

Julia's laughter started quietly in her chest, small, unsure, controlled. But as she replayed his statement over and over, it grew, finally bursting out of her mouth. "Harry! Language!"

Something came into his face, changing it from a mask to that of a human. It slowly morphed into a laughing face and soon they were howling. It didn't last long, and when they calmed down, she put her hand on his cheek.

"You're a success to me, Daddy," she said. "I'll always be there for you. I won't let them hurt you."

An unreadable and disturbing expression came over his face, which was quickly replaced by an even more unreadable and disturbing expression. "I can't drag you down, Julie."

Harry shook his head and raised his eyes to hers. Something in the unexpected depth of expression and words caused Julia to choke back a gasp. What did she see? Fear? Despair? "You won't, Daddy," she said as confidently as possible.

"I'll never change. I'll always screw things up, and you will always be there for me."

"I will."

"I know. And that's not right."

That cut through her. Although she didn't know why, she was frightened.

When Julia could hear his steady snoring, she finally relaxed. The thin walls of the cheap house didn't do much to hold back secrets. Harry's sniffing and soft cursing had kept her up most nights, as did the happy, hopeful bustle of paper as he drew yet another invention idea. Sometimes

when it was quiet at night, Julia would creep out of her room to find him. Usually, he was in the small garage, tapping or cutting or screwing together yet another prototype of an idea no one would ever find of interest. His intensity and concentration would always impress her as she watched him through the window. Whether it was the muggy and desperate heat of summer or the bitter cold of a northern New Jersey winter, he would apply such focus that she wondered if something had snapped in his brain and he had entered another dimension. In a way, he had.

The job at the hardware store barely paid for food and utilities, but he didn't see their conditions; he didn't see that she didn't have enough money to buy the kind of clothes the other kids in her school could afford. He was a blind optimist, not seeing that all of his inventions were flawed in some fundamental manner. And he didn't see that people weren't rejecting him. From his stories, she could see that most of them just truly didn't see the value in his ideas. It wasn't him; it was the idea that failed.

But separating the two was not something Harry could do. The failure of his grand ideas was his own failure, and he internalized each rejection which sliced away bigger and bigger pieces of his once proud character.

Julia thought back over the years.

"Look at this, Jules!" he had cried with enthusiasm.

Julia remembered that line vividly; it happened so often. Every grand idea started the same way.

"Listen," Harry had said once. "I saw a woman walking her dog in the rain and tripping over the leash. What if we attach the leash to an umbrella that she wore on her head? It would rotate with the dog and never get under her feet. And it would keep her dry. What do you think? Who wouldn't buy that?"

To Harry, each one was the million dollar idea he was waiting for. To Julia, they were mostly dumb. But she hated to deflate his balloon. He was happy and excited when he escaped in his workshop to work on a new idea.

“Look at this, Julia,” her father would say as he presented a prototype of another stupid idea. His face was so bright in those moments. “I’m making a purse out of a pig’s ear.”

Why anyone would want a purse made from pig’s ear was something she never understood; she just assumed he had left something out of the cliché. But that was her dad, never completing very much of anything to a level anyone seemed to care about. He never saw it, of course. On one hand, he just blamed it on the executive that had agreed to hear him out. On the other, it seemed like he expected, almost welcomed, rejection, like he needed it to complete the comfortable vision of himself as a failure.

Julia came back to the present and got out of bed. Her own challenge for the weekend hadn’t even begun, and she knew at least she could start sketching—she could always escape into her drawings. *We both have our own refuge*, she thought.

She sat down next to the table that held the sewing machine. Along with the iron, those were the only things her mother had left her when she died one year before. Well, there was another thing she left: *hope*, she thought as she snapped on the light. *And purpose*.

“You’re different from anyone else, Julia,” Sarah Cohen had said as she lay dying in the hospital. “Embrace that, girl. Make me proud. Always believe in yourself and...” She hadn’t finished the sentence— cancer finished

her first. But Julia knew what she meant, of course, and would never forget.

“I will, Mom,” she had said to unhearing ears.

Julia switched on a light and looked at the pile of clothes she had found at the Goodwill store, clothes so ragged that they gave them to Julia instead of trying to sell them. She stood and picked out a few of the more tattered things, placing them on her bed.

Although she didn't fully understand, there were more complex things driving her. The other girls in school would point and giggle and whisper, loud enough for Julia to hear, that her clothes were old and torn. *Was she too poor to buy new ones?* said one girl. *No, I think she's too stupid to know the difference,* said another. Then they would laugh. Julia tried to rise above it, but no amount of pride and confidence could overcome the pain. They were right, of course: She *was* too poor to afford new ones. And that's another thing that pushed her forward.

Julia shook her head and refocused on her own issues, putting away the vision of the girls in school. They were the stupid and shallow ones. She had tools, weapons they didn't know about.

Things started to change by early spring of her senior year. Over the last two months, she had made and worn four outfits, and a few comments had been overheard: “That's pretty cool. Where did she buy that?” was the best, best partly because it came from ‘Miss Popular’ who wouldn't be caught dead saying anything positive to Julia's face. That encouragement

helped her continue—not that she really needed encouragement, but it was welcome.

It was Saturday and, as usual, Julia jumped out of bed early. Saturdays offered a blank canvas, the beginning of two days without conflict or pressure. Her pencil flew over the paper as she looked at the new pile of shabby clothes laid out on the bed then back to her paper. After a half-hour of this, she sat back and smiled. “Yes. I like it.”

The humming of the sewing machine was a tonic that could always soothe her demons. It was her mother softly singing a Beatles song to her when she couldn’t sleep, her father laughing when Julia said something funny, an audible barrier that kept the bad things out.

She quickly put on the new outfit and stepped to the mirror. Gone were the holes and threaded ends of two random skirts and three unmatched blouses she had found at Goodwill. In its place was a unique blend of patterns and textures, colors, and prints: a new dress, perfectly tailored. She studied her creation and thought she could see her mother’s smile in the mishmash of flowers and stripes.

Of the two main challenges she faced, the first—*inventing and making the outfit*—was the easiest. The second, and most daunting, was acceptance. The few overheard positive comments were inspiring, certainly, but it wasn’t getting her any farther. *Farther toward what, exactly?* She had asked herself that question every day. Being ignored and belittled by just about everybody in school... well, her stomach knotted up at that. But the bigger question was *why?* Yes, she was poor while most everybody else seemed to come from financially secure families. Yes, she was overweight, not by much, but even a

little bit was unacceptable in that micro-society. She wasn't pretty, but, if her mother was right, Julia had an 'unusual quality' that was better than pretty. She was able to smile when she pictured herself; so it couldn't be that bad.

Unfortunately, the small-minded girls in Madison High looked down on kids who couldn't afford new clothes every week, and they didn't seem sophisticated enough to understand 'unusual' from 'ugly'. Although she tried to convince herself that social acceptance didn't matter, it did. That's why every positive overheard comment stuck to her like a bright yellow smiley face sticker.

Why her father insisted on sending her halfway across town to go to a school where she didn't fit in had been a question he couldn't answer. Julia just assumed he wanted to appear much more prosperous than he was. Sadly, she understood it; that was Harry.

Julia stood at the mirror, pleasantly excited for the debut of her new outfit at school Monday. She could picture in her mind the smiles as her classmates evaluated her clothes. Her heart speeded up as the images unfolded like a happy movie in which they immediately saw her as a visionary and someone to respect and admire. In her mind, they started to accept her. The end of the movie had her crowned Home Coming Queen and waving to the... *Cut!* She immediately stopped the film. *That definitely will NOT happen.* However, whatever did happen would certainly be pleasant. She just knew it.

But what Julia couldn't have foreseen—what really awaited her Monday—would not be pleasant.

CHAPTER FOUR

Julia saw the admiring looks, the half-hidden glances and the widened eyes as the girls reacted to her new outfit and her heart did pump a little faster with every positive input.

Then... the big one: Shelley Douglas stopped her in the hall. “Where do you get your clothes?” she asked as her bright blue eyes approvingly scanned Julia’s creation.

Julia almost fell down as her knees weakened. *‘Perfect Shelly’ likes it?* A few seconds passed before Julia could speak. “I make them myself. I just can’t find anything cool enough at the stores. And they are one-of-a-kind.”

Through Julia’s mind flashed an image that her father had often painted, one in which executives were laughing as they rejected him once again. So, of course, she expected a negative comment.

What she got would carry her on a cloud for the rest of the day. “Very cool. I really like them. Can you make me something?”

Her suddenly pumping heart almost took her breath away. *What?* Julia had not anticipated having such a strong physical reaction, and she hoped Shelley wouldn’t notice that her smile was trying to reach her ears, and her legs seemed to have grown about 4 inches. But she was able to control herself. “Sure. I’d love to,” she managed to get out without slobbering.

They agreed to get together the next evening after school to discuss what Shelley had in mind.

Julia almost ran home from the bus stop. She saw her father's beat-up Corolla in the driveway and crashed through the door, bursting with excitement to tell him about her day. As she skidded into the kitchen, she saw papers on the table. There was a letter from Uncle Jesse's law firm on top and under that a few papers held together by a blue banner; she'd seen one like it before: it was a legal document.

"Daddy?" she shouted. "Where are you?"

After hearing no answer, she sat down to read the letter.

Harry. I told you it was not a good idea to challenge Ralston Clothing. Enclosed is the Summons I expected. They are suing you. In short terms, it claims that you are trying to infringe on their patent for the 'ManBag'. It reads that you have made, and are making, claims to their competitors that you hold the rights to the design. They claim that his has delayed the product launch to distributors and that they have suffered the loss of potential earnings because of it. And they are right. You did.

Again, Harry, as usual, you have never filed any formal papers for copyrights or patents or anything. And you told me you burned all the documents that could support your position. You can't go around screwing up a company's business like that. You can't prove they aren't justified.

Young George Ralston stole your idea, I get that. And he is very determined to shut you up. Unfortunately, your defense that 'he's an arrogant prick' will not stand up in court. I'm afraid that the way the suit is written, you will lose. Unfortunately, it will cost money to go through the motions and limit the damage, but damage there will surely be.

I'm sorry, little brother, but some day you have to grow up and stop chasing vapor.

Sincerely

Jesse Cohen, Esq.

Julia's heart had turned cold, and her body felt empty. She set aside the letter and looked at the document itself. After scanning it, the message became quite clear: Ralston Clothing was suing Harry Cohen for patent and copyright infringement and was asking for one million dollars in compensation.

Her brain felt like hot lead. *Those bastards! Harry invented the ManBag first! Maybe a judge would think it was 'frivolous',* she thought; it was a term she had heard on *Boston Legal*. But Uncle Jesse didn't seem to think so. Harry couldn't afford to fight, but if he didn't, he would spend the rest of his life paying off the judgement. It was so fucking unfair!

Julia sat back and considered the future. She would have to help, of course. That means getting a job, a real job, and leaving her dreams to die. The pit of her stomach turned hard and tears threatened to roll. She felt like a little kid again, weak and helpless. And lost. If she couldn't create fashions, who was she anyway? It had come to define her.

"Daddy? What the hell is this crap?" she yelled to the rest of the house. Again, no answer.

Julia pushed the legal paper aside to reveal another letter.

My dearest daughter:

If you have read the documents on top of this letter, you'll understand my frame of mind. I just can't handle it anymore. Jesse is right. I'll never stop chasing things that will never be caught. I will never be the man I want to be and I can't find a way to live with the man I am.

Julia's breath stuck in her throat, and her heart suddenly hammered in her head. *No, no, no.*

This suit will ruin me. In a way, it already has. And it will ruin you, too. When your mother died, I just lost whatever strength I had left. Now, it's gone.

Please, no. Julia started sobbing. She knew what was coming.

You said you would always take care of me like your mother did. I love you for that, but this law suit will crush you, too. I can't allow myself to hold you back. In your heart, you must understand why. You would always put me before you, and that will cripple you. You have so much in you, so much drive and talent and power. You have to fly free, honey. I can't be an anchor. For once, I'm going to do the right thing.

The house is paid off, and I have never touched the \$50,000 from your mother's insurance policy in the bank. I knew that someday you would need it all. It is in an account in your name now. I am crying too hard now to finish typing what I need to say, but I think you know how much I love you. It's in the spirit of that love that I give you your freedom. I know you will come to understand this. Somehow. Some day. Please try. I love you more than you can know.

Your father.

Harry Cohen

P.S.: I am upstairs in my room. This was probably another stupid decision, but I don't have the strength to find another way. Please understand. I am at peace now, and I hope you will see that, too.

And please call my brother. He'll help you with the arrangements.

The building pressure finally broke: Julia exploded when she finished. "Please, NO!" she shouted as she leaped from the chair and ran to the stairs.

She slid to a stop at the doorway and saw Harry Cohen lying still on his bed, hands crossed peacefully, an empty prescription bottle lay nearby. Through the distortion of tears, Julia studied her father... she thought she saw a slight smile on his face. She was trembling and grabbing for breath as she moved to the bed and knelt, taking his cold hand in hers. So many scrambled thoughts darted around in her brain but soon the pieces began to assemble themselves. Over the next five trembling minutes, she just stared at her father's calm face, the face she had loved deeply since she could remember anything. Maybe he was at peace. He deserved that.

Through the crushing grief and anger that had consumed her, a solid thread bubbled up that supported her, and maybe hardened her. Harry was right: She would have lost herself to protect him. Julia knew that in his own typically strange way, he saw this as truly the last act of unconditional love. And Harry knew she would come to understand that someday.

Julia heard her mother's words in her father's voice: "Make me proud. Always believe in yourself."

"I will, Daddy," Julia whispered to the unhearing ears.

CHAPTER FIVE

Uncle Jesse insisted on paying for the casket and funeral, which was much appreciated because Harry had only Julia left \$956 in his checkbook. But he forgot to get her signature on the authorization card, so, for four days, she had no money.

Jesse embraced Julia for a long moment as they stood in dark drizzle watching the preacher-for-hire, his job of handling the grave-site duties done, hurry to his car. No one came. Harry, for understandable reasons, had no friends.

“I have to go, kiddo,” Jesse said, softly. “Busy time for us and...”

Julia raised her eyes to his. “I understand, Uncle Jesse. You don’t know how much I appreciate you coming right away. I don’t know what I would have done.”

Jesse put her head back on his chest with his hand. “Don’t tell Laney, but you’ve always been my favorite.”

Julia chuckled. “She knows.”

Jesse laughed softly. “Probably. Anyway, we’re an hour away. I think that relic of your Dad’s will make it that far.”

He backed away, took her face in his hands, and looked deeply into those deep green eyes. “You have any questions, or need money, or whatever, you call. Your Dad and I always promised each other that we’d care for the kids if one of us died. I mean it, girl. I’m here for you. Understand?”

“I know. I won’t hesitate. I promise.”

“Okay. You should have access to the savings account tomorrow, so just pull over what you need to live on. It’s not very much, so...”

“I know, Uncle Jesse. Be smart.”

He pulled her in for a goodbye hug. “I’m not worried. Just be who you are. Don’t wish for what somebody else has or who they are. They’re no better than you. They just got theirs first. You’re the smartest and most sensible kid I’ve ever known.”

“Well, compared to Laney...”

He backed away a step and laughed. “Don’t get me started. Goodbye, sweetheart. Please call.”

“I will. Say hello and thanks to Becky.”

Julia turned away and headed to the car. It would take many months to recover; she knew that. As she had progressed through the five stages of grief over the last six days, she knew that Acceptance would eventually come. As those feelings fell away, though, another emotion started to emerge and get ever stronger.

Revenge.

George Ralston killed her father. That feeling would never fall away, and it would come to take over her thoughts, ever so slowly. She felt it harden her. And it would come to drive her.

Nobody at school knew the truth about Harry’s death, and they, mostly kids she really didn’t know, were all very considerate and compassionate and respectful. Two weeks before, it would have buoyed her spirits immeasurably to have such attention, but, now, it didn’t seem to matter much. She had changed during the past week. She wasn’t a kid anymore.

It wasn't hardness; it wasn't deadness... she actually didn't know what to call it.

Her pledge to Harry was the same as the one she had said to her mother: *I will make you proud*. For her father, though, it had a different meaning. It was a promise to be successful where he couldn't. There should have been a second part of the pledge: *I will make this right*.

She caught up with Shelley Douglas in the hallway after school. "Shelly?"

"Julia," she said as she faced Julia. "I heard about your father. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"Thanks. It'll take a while, but I'm getting better."

"Can I do anything?"

Julia tried to act as if it hadn't been on her mind. "Actually, yes. I have to keep busy—all the adults say that, at least. But I think they're right. I'm all alone, and the house gets really scary when I stop to think about it."

"That really sucks."

"Yeah. So, I don't want to stop long enough to think about it. I was hoping we could talk about making you that outfit you wanted. I really need the diversion."

Shelly brightened as she pushed her long golden hair back behind her ear. "Absolutely. I was hoping you'd still be interested. Thanks for bringing it up. I have cheerleading practice tonight, but I'm good for tomorrow."

"Cool. Do you want to get together at your house? I have a car now."

"Let me write down the address."

Julia was glad Shelley didn't want to go to her house. Having people suspect she was poor was one thing, but letting them into the nightmare of her private environment was quite another.

Julia thought she had driven onto the set of a movie as she wound up the curving driveway and around the impeccable landscaping to the pillared house. She started to feel ashamed as she parked next to the Mercedes.

But then she didn't. Uncle Jesse's words came back to her. *They're no better than you. They just got theirs first.*

She straightened as tall as she could and proudly walked to the door. *I have something that they will never have. I'm Julia Cohen.*

The process Julia created on the fly in the session with Shelley would serve as the methods she would use to create outfits for six other 'rich kids' before her senior year ended. They leafed through every magazine Shelley had and identified prints and colors and styles that appealed to her. Somehow, from the enormous volume of data inputted, a design emerged.

After some rough sketches, Shelley was so excited that she literally ran to the kitchen to show her parents.

"Wow," her mother said as she reviewed the drawing. "This is outstanding!" Not knowing who Julia was or where she came from, she turned to her. "I love it. What house are you with?"

Julia had no clue what she meant, but some instinct was triggered. "Julia."

"That's new? I've never heard of it."

Out of the corner of Julia's eye, she saw Shelley's impish face developing a conspiratorial grin. She kept quiet.

"We are a new house, ma'am, and I'm glad you like it."

“I do,” she repeated her eyes scanning the page. “It really is Shelley. How long does it take?”

“A week. I’m excited to see it on her, too.”

Mrs. Douglas put her hand to her mouth and wrinkled her brow. “I have to clear something this expensive with Raymond.” Then she raised her head and her voice. “Raymond? I need you!”

Julia didn’t understand at first what was happening, but she heard a muffled acknowledgment in the distance, followed by footsteps.

Mrs. Douglas turned back to Julia. “How much?” Then her eyebrows raised and she stuck out her hand. “Oh, my. Shelley didn’t introduce us. I’m Barbara Douglas.”

Julia clasped the woman’s hand. “I’m Julia.”

“Well, it’s great to meet you. So, you’re the owner? You’re so young.”

Julia didn’t know what to say, but she could feel her heart swell. “Yes, ma’am. I am.” *How good that felt. How right.*

“Make sure I get your card.”

Julia’s mind was spinning, trying to assemble all the jumbled pieces of amazing input she had taken in. “I ran out. I’ll give you one when I get new ones. Sorry.”

“Not a problem. So, how much?”

How much was probably the only thing she hadn’t thought through. It seemed surreal that somebody would see enough value to pay her. *Did you hear that, Harry?* She said to herself.

She said the first number that came into her mind. “\$500.” *Why* it came to her mind would be a mystery.

Barbara Douglas jerked her head back, and her mouth formed a perfect “O”. Julia’s heart sank. *Oh, God. It’s too much! Who the hell do you think you are, Julia?*

Julia almost said \$250, but didn’t.

“Never mind, Ray,” Mrs. Douglas shouted.

Fuck! Fuck!

Then the lady smiled. “I don’t need Raymond for that. Done. Let me know when you can fit it. We’re excited, right Shelley?”

Shelley was trying to contain herself from laughing out loud and shared a smile of secrecy with Julia. “I am. Let’s go upstairs and get some measurements, okay?”

When they finally collapsed on Shelley’s bed, they started laughing hysterically.

“You didn’t tell your mother?” Julia said through gasps.

“Oh... my... God! I thought I’d bust something. No. She doesn’t know you go to school with me.”

“And I didn’t know I’d charge her. I can’t believe I said \$500!”

“That’s our secret. You have to understand something, girl. That’s a woman who doesn’t see anything wrong with paying \$2,000 for a house dress. She’s paid \$600 for faded jeans with holes torn in them.”

“What?? You’re freaking serious?”

“Like a heart attack. You could have asked \$1,000.”

That shut Julia up, and she just stared blankly at Shelley for a full minute. “Don’t lie to me, Shelley.”

“I’m serious. You know that clique I run with?”

“Yeah.”

“All of our parents are like that. That’s their weekly alcohol budget. It’s disgusting. Just dust money to them.”

Julia tried to absorb a world in which \$1,000 was dust money. “But, you seem really nice.”

That stopped Shelley. “I *am* really nice, I think. Having money doesn’t make you not nice.”

Julia tried to recover. “I don’t mean it that way. I mean...”

“You mean not ‘stuck up.’”

“Right. Exactly.”

Shelley slid up against the pillows and pulled her legs up tight. “To be honest. I don’t feel like those other girls. I try to fit in, but they are really phony.”

Julia nodded. “I see that, now that I’m getting to know you.”

“When I graduate, I’m going to college, but then I’m leaving.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know. But I’m not going to stay in this glass ball. I’m not going to marry a lawyer and pop out two and a half kids and live in a house my folks bought for me. That’s not me.”

Julia didn’t know how to say it, but the time felt right for some honesty. “You know I’m poor as a church mouse, don’t you? I mean... really poor.”

Shelley pulled her legs up tight to her chest and smiled. “Listen, girl. I don’t mind. I don’t care. You’re a whole lot more interesting than those Barby dolls I hang out with.”

“Thanks.”

“And, hey, you just earned your first \$500. You’re not poor anymore!”

It took a little more time to process that.

Julia found the material for Shelley’s outfit at the Goodwill store—although she was not ready to share that secret with her client. When it was debuted, it was the hit of the school. In the next two months, all five members of the ‘clique’ and two of their mothers ordered a custom-made ‘Julia’ original. Julia had earned her first \$4,000.

Shelley and Julia were now ‘Besties’, a term Julia seems to have made up.

A week after graduation, Julia was invited to a pool party at Shelley's house. Although she was a minor celebrity, she was still an outsider, and some of the more snooty girls avoided her. That was just fine with Julia. And Shelley.

As the party wrapped up, Shelley and Julia wrapped themselves in a beach blanket, curled up in lounge chairs and watched the crew clean up the mess.

"I was thinking," Shelley said.

"Why does that frighten me?" Julia replied.

"Ha ha. Anyway. What are you going to do now?"

Julia put her head back and looked at the stars for a long minute. "That's the question of the day. Or lifetime. The fact is: I have very little idea. Now that I'm out of school, my market dried up, as they say."

"May be not." Shelley leaned over and pulled out a box she had hidden under her chair. "I got something for you."

"Why? You didn't have get me anything."

"Well, I did. Open it," she said as she handed it to Julia.

As the lid came off, Julia caught her breath. Inside were about 100 deep purple clothing tags. Embroidered on them in gold were the words:

JULIA ORIGINALS

Tears came unexpectedly to Julia's eyes and she choked out "Oh my God, Shelley. They are..."

"Beautiful, aren't they? That's a Lithos Pro font. It literally took me half a day to decide. You like them?"

Julia couldn't easily identify the feelings, but whatever they were, they forced tears to run down her cheeks and her heart to beat faster. "I... Nobody ever got me anything so perfect."

Now, Shelley was crying, too. "We're besties. And I think you're a freaking genius. You have a future in this."

You have a future in this. Julia would remember those words through the thick and thin of what was to come.

CHAPTER SIX

Julia heard another taxi approaching. So did he.

“Let’s get you inside. You don’t want to be wet, or late.”

She was staring. Whatever miracle had made those eyes reached into her. The tension and hardness that was preparing her for the coming confrontation suddenly drifted away. Forcing words to form, she said “okay” and let herself be guided to the revolving door and into the warm and dry lobby. Forcing her eyes away from the man who had just stirred up her insides was difficult. She scanned his features and, as usual, analyzed them for balance and composition. It was perfect; it was like he had stolen his nose from a statue of a young Paul Newman.

“You’re Julia, right?” he said as he shook the water off his leather jacket. “I heard you were coming.”

She didn’t think she could be knocked further off balance. “Oh, ahh. Yes. I’m sorry,” she stammered. “You know me?” Then she put out her hand; too quickly, she felt, too awkward, then tried to pull it back but decided it was appropriate after all then extended it once again. *Stupid. Jesus, girl. Get a grip!*

He laughed gently as he finally snagged her wandering hand. “Yes. I’m Peter Ralsting.”

At the sound of his name, her eyes flew open, and she jerked her hand back abruptly. Now, her mind was fully scrambled; her blood had frozen.

He must have noticed the fear or anger or whatever it was cross her pale face. “Take it easy. I’m George’s younger brother. I’m not him.”

It was 26-year-old George Ralsting who had taken control of the company when his father died almost ten years before. It was young George who decided that her father’s ManBag was a great idea after all. It was young George who decided that her father didn’t deserve to be a part of the decision to manufacture and distribute the product. It was young George who decided that Harry didn’t matter and caused his death. And it was young George who waited upstairs. Although he didn’t know it, the meeting would be pivotal. Either Julia would force him to make it right, or he would crush Julia’s dreams.

But, as hard as she looked, she didn’t perceive anything evil in Peter’s face. On the contrary: it was a warm and beautiful face, one that couldn’t belong to an immoral bastard. Could it?

When she started to reply, she realized that the breath had started, but she had no idea what words would escape. However, as usual, she just let whatever come out, come out. “Your brother is...” Further words didn’t form. The beginning was far less elegant than she had hoped for, so she stopped.

“An arrogant prick?” Peter offered.

Julia cocked her head as if she hadn’t heard him right.

“A dickhead? A selfish asshole?” He paused. “Am I getting close?”

Something finally escaped. “Keep going,” she said. “You’re on the right path.”

Peter laughed fully. “I could, but he’s still the boss for now.”

That caught her attention. “For now?”

The smile fell away from his mouth, but not his eyes. “Long story. Maybe you should go up first. Don’t want them to get the wrong idea. I’m always late anyway.”

Once again, she had to extricate herself from his eyes to focus on speaking. “Good idea. I’ll see you upstairs, then.”

He turned toward the coffee stand and her heart quickened as she watched his broad shoulders as he walked away. *OMG*, she thought.

As the elevator door started to close, she saw him turn around to catch another glimpse of her. He smiled when he realized she had noticed. Just that gesture did something to her insides again. *OMG*, she thought once more. *What the hell is this?*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Summer kept going and she lost all contact with the girls from high school. She really didn't care. Shelly kept sending her other rich friends to her and things were rolling along nicely.

The phone now sat on the kitchen table; to Julia, it felt like an office. When it rang, it startled her. She answered after four rings, being distracted by a new idea, a more formal pants suit for Shelley. "Hello?"

"Hello," the woman's voice said, hesitantly. "Is this... I don't know... Julia Originals?"

Julia didn't know exactly how to answer, but *yes, I suppose it is*, came to mind. A small flash of pride, for some reason, crossed her as she pondered what people in the 'real' business world would do. *How may I direct your call?* No, that just didn't seem right.

"This is Julia." Simple.

"Oh," the woman sounded surprised. "I'm glad I got you directly. Are you in a meeting or do you have a minute?"

Julia was totally unaccustomed to whatever proper procedures the woman expected. *Honey, just be you. That will always work.* Her father's words entered her, and she relaxed.

"Sure. How can I help?"

"Great. This is Nicki Spencer's mother. You made her a summer dress a few months ago."

Oh, yes. Stuck up Nicki Spencer. She had finally succumbed to peer pressure and joined the other members of Shelley's clique before they all went away to their fancy schools.

"Sure. How is Nicki?"

"She's great. We loved that outfit. Very different. I was wondering if you have any ideas for something similar in a fall dress, but for a more mature woman. I'm 42."

Julia was trying to visualize Mrs. Spencer. *Was she the fat one?* It wasn't clear what was meant by 'mature woman', but, upon further consideration, Julia decided it didn't matter. 'Custom Designers' had to serve their clients, whether young and thin or old and fat.

"Of course," she started. Where the rest of the sentence came from, she wasn't quite sure since she actually had nothing else to do at the moment. "We're just finishing up some projects now, but I could get together late next week. How's that?"

"That would be great." Mrs. Spencer sounded excited. "We're popping over to Paris for a party this weekend, so next week would be fine. I thought I'd have to wait."

Julia tried to imagine a world where people 'popped over to Paris for a party'. She couldn't. "Existing clients always have priority." *Where did that come from?*

"Is Thursday afternoon good, then?"

[More backstory. She starts to grow and build a small business and gain a reputation for designing odd but appealing clothes for women young and middle-aged. Mrs. Spencer becomes a good client and friend.]

CHAPTER EIGHT

Julia resumed reality as the elevator started up. She shook her head to get the distraction of Peter’s eyes out of her head. All the fears and uncertainty flooded back, and she had to refocus on the mission. *Harden, girl! Get it together! Go over the plan!*

Young George Ralston had killed her father; at least that is how the story in her head had developed. In a way, it was true, but Harry killed himself because he couldn’t handle one more disappointment—she knew that intellectually. If it hadn’t been George Ralston, it would have been somebody else; Harry Cohen had reached the breaking point. But she wasn’t going to be in a conference room with somebody else. She wasn’t giving somebody else an opportunity to grab the worm, hook and all. All of her hate and visions of revenge had decided to settle into the visage of George Ralston II. He deserved whatever came to him.

She felt the coldness return. Her armor and sword were reforming. Whether she could deliver the death-blow was another question. She didn’t have many weapons. As usual, all she really had was herself.

The elevator bumped to a stop. In those frightening few seconds before the doors would open to the most critical scene she would ever play in, she hardened herself even more. *I am invincible! I have what they want, and they will crawl to me to get it. Then, they’ll be crushed when I turn the tables. They*

will pay for their sins; they will beg for forgiveness and to make restitution. They want me? They'll have to crawl over nails to get me.

As the doors started to open, Julia took a deep breath and envisioned the conference room. In her mind, it was packed with people in suits holding the pictures of her outfits. Behind the eager executives would stand manikins all dressed in her creations. A presentation board would stand at the end of the table, just behind George Ralston, whose face was the definition of contrition and compliance... and defeat. All the lines on the board were curving up.

Then the begging would begin.

Julia swelled with anticipation and pride as she removed her hat and was led to the door of the place where her blows would be struck, where her sword of vengeance would plunge.

It would be... empty. The room was empty.

Almost.

A bored and colorless young woman sat in the middle, looking over a catalogue which definitely did not have a 'Julia Original' logo on the cover. She didn't even rise as she glanced up and pointed to a seat.

Suddenly, Julia felt like a nine-year-old child, deflated and disemboweled, like a balloon whose closure had come loose.

"I was asked to find out what you wanted," the woman said.

With a fallen mouth and leaden limbs, Julia fell into an overstuffed chair that might have cost more than the car she had just been able to afford.

Her brain was gasping for breath. "What I want?" Her voice got louder as the hurt grew. "What I want?"

"Yes. You're..." she checked a notepad, "Julia Cohen. I'm Margaret Poulski, assistant to our Director of Creative.

Julia felt the rush of heat grow on her cheeks. “I submitted my new line of fashions to Mrs. Soranno months ago, and she called this meeting!”

“She’s a colleague of mine; also an assistant. I haven’t seen your work, and Mrs. Soranno hasn’t mentioned what the meeting was about. She had to go to St. Louis yesterday. I’m sorry nobody called to cancel.”

“We were going to talk about acquiring the line!”

The drab woman coughed up a condescending laugh which sounded like the Wicked Witch of the West to Julia. “We don’t buy any outsider’s fashions. We only handle what our own people design and...”

“And your lines are crap! Mrs. Soranno liked my fresh ideas. I was going to present them to the board today!”

Margaret laughed again and scanned Julia’s outfit. “We sell mainstream fashions, Ms. Cohen. And we certainly don’t take chances with unproven designs. Certainly nothing... provocative.” She waved her hand as if to dismiss any viability or credibility.

“But she...”

“As far as Mrs. Soranno is concerned, sometimes she wanders off the reservation. Mr. Ralston manages to bring her back to color inside the lines properly, though.” The woman chuckled as if the analogy was brilliant.

Julia could barely think through the crushing sense of disappointment. “Where are all the pictures and drawings and samples and outfits I sent her weeks ago?”

“They must be in the store room. Now that you mention it, Soranno did mention that. I’ll have someone find them.”

“The store room?” She hadn’t thought the humiliation could get deeper.

“They are somewhere, I’m sure. Maybe the basement.” The woman looked at the wall clock and started to rise.

“There’s a board meeting scheduled for now, so we have to leave the room. I’ll call maintenance.”

As the woman reached for the phone, the door opened. Peter walked in and looked around. Julia could barely see him through the tears that were forming.

“Where is everybody?” he asked. “Wasn’t the board meeting for 10:30?”

The woman said something into the phone and hung up. “Mr. Ralston set it for 11:00, sir. Something about the only way you’d show up on time,” she said then turned to Julia. “If you wait in the lobby, someone will bring your material to you. Thanks for coming in, though. It was a pleasure to meet you. I wish you luck.”

Julia didn’t know what to say. The devastation seemed complete. She wondered if this was how her father felt so many times when he was rejected.

The Cohen curse. *Who the hell did I think I was?*

Peter sat down next to her and put his hand gently on her arm. “You don’t look so good.”

Julia could only shake her head.

“What happened?”

She wanted to crawl into Peter’s arms and disappear. Words wouldn’t come.

“Soranno told me that you were coming up.”

Julia pulled her eyes up to his. “She did?”

“Peter,” the woman broke in, her voice sounding frightened and tense. “Mr. Ralston will be here shortly. Ms. Cohen has to leave.”

Without looking up, Peter responded with a smile. “Go fuck yourself, Margaret.”

The gasp of horror seemed loud enough to rattle the windows. “Well, I never...” she started.

Peter nodded, never taking his eyes from Julia's. "And you probably never will, either. Give us a minute."

If it were a play, the director would have called it a 'huffy exit, stage right'. After slamming the door, Julia and Peter were alone.

"What did she say? Where is your portfolio? I saw it. I really liked your work."

"You liked it?" She let herself be captured by his eyes. It lifted her. Then she fell again. "In a fucking storeroom. In the basement."

"Ouch. That hurts. Your stuff was awesome."

She brightened again, just a bit. "You're not just saying that, are you?"

"I really mean it. It's just not for this company. Not a fit. What did you think you would accomplish today anyway?"

"I was going to slay the dragon today." She choked back a sob. "It..."

"Stepped on you instead?"

Through the cloud of anger and despair, she found a short laugh and a thin smile. "More like a fire-breathing fart."

His grin widened, exposing teeth which were like a perfect set of Chicklets. "Fuck 'em."

Just as she was going to ask another question, a door opened. George Ralston entered.

"Peter. Get your bimbo out of here. We have a meeting."

Some of the old Julia flowed back from wherever it had hidden in the last five minutes. She stiffened, stood and approached the man—the arrogant prick, the selfish asshole—who had killed her father. "I'm not a bimbo."

He waved his hand. "I truly don't give a shit. Just get out of here."

Julia pulled herself tight and leaned closer, eyes hardened and intense. "I'm Julia Cohen."

She thought she saw a flash of recognition, and maybe fear, cross his eyes as he recoiled slightly. “So?”

“You don’t remember?”

George thought for a moment. “Oh, yeah. You sent us a portfolio. It sucks. You wasted your time. I think I told them to throw it out.”

She had never truly understood the phrase ‘seeing red’ until that moment. “Do you remember the ManBag, you arrogant shit?”

“I beg your pardon? What the hell...”

“Did that suck, too?”

The intensity in Julia’s eyes backed George up a step, but his brain was scrambling to make connections. “It didn’t sell, if that’s what you mean. I think you should leave before I call security.”

“Do you remember who invented it?”

“We did. Peter, get this bitch out of here.”

Julia felt Peter’s hand close around her arm. “Come on, Julia. Let’s go.”

Julia let him pull her away, but her eyes were still locked onto George, her heart was now pumping with anger. The scene in her house many years ago replayed in her mind, the legal papers; the desperate letter of a defeated man, the empty bottle of pills. All of the hate and resentment and frustration fused into a laser beam aimed at George. He felt it and flinched.

Peter grabbed her hat and led her out of the conference room and to a couch at the far end of the lobby. Julia was trembling, almost panting. “Sit down. Take a long breath. Slow down.”

She tried.

“Now. What was that all about, Julia?”

It took a minute, but Peter didn't press. He let her collect her wits.

Finally, she looked at him. "He killed my father, but he won't kill me. He won't defeat me, either."

"Whoa." Peter's head jerked back. His eyebrows had flown halfway up his forehead as he looked for an explanation in Julia's penetrating green eyes. Quit unexpectedly, he was suddenly lost in them. Even with the running mascara and tightness, she had the most engaging eyes he had ever seen, deep, endless, wise and proud and vulnerable at the same time. Then he shook his head and refocused on her words. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Julia finally managed to catch a solid breath. "It's a long story," she said as she let herself be absorbed into him.

The moment was broken by a man in a blue uniform who had just rolled a laundry bucket full of clothes and drawings out of the freight elevator.

