



## JUDE DEVERAUX

FOREVER

Darci looked over the job application again, checking that she'd been absolutely truthful on every line, with no imagination added. Her mother said that Darci's imagination was like a family curse. Must have come from your father's side of the family, Jerlene Monroe would say whenever her daughter did something she didn't understand. Whoever he may be, Uncle Vern could be counted on to add under his breath " then there'd be a fight. When it got to the part where Uncle Vern was shouting that his niece wasn't full of imagination but was just a plain ol' garden variety blankety'blank liar, Darci would silently leave the room and open a book.

But now Darci was in beautiful New York City, she had a fabulous college education under her belt, and she was applying for what had to be the best job that anyone had ever seen. And I'm going to get it! she said to herself, closing her eyes for a moment as she clutched the folded newspaper to her chest. I'll apply my True Persuasion to this and I'll be sure to get the job, she thought.

You okay asked the young woman in front of her in what Darci recognized as some type of Yankee accent.

Wonderful, Darci said, smiling. And you Feeling like an idiot, actually. I mean, can you really believe this thing she asked, holding up the same newspaper that Darci was clutching. She was a tall young woman, much taller than Darci, and, compared to Darci, she was downright fat. But then people were always describing Darci as scrawny. She's 'fashionably thin,' her mother would say. Jerlene! her sister, Thelma, would snap, you ain't never fed that girl nothin' but Jel'O and sugar cereal. She's probably starvin' to death. This statement would produce a lot of anger from Darci's mother, then a torrent of words about how hard it was to raise a daughter singlehandedly. You ain't raised her; the neighbors has, Uncle Vern would say; then the fight would escalate.

Now Darci smiled at the woman in front of her. I think it's a miracle, she said. Darci was pretty in a fragile sort of way, with wide-set blue eyes, a tiny nose, and a little rose'bud mouth. She was only five'feet'two and weighed so little that her clothes always hung loosely on her. Right now, her little black skirt with the shiny seat was fastened at the waist with a big safety pin.

You don't think you're really going to get this job, do you the woman in front asked.

Oh, yes, Darci said, taking a deep breath. I believe in thinking positively. If you think it, you can achieve it, is what I truly believe.

The woman opened her mouth to say something; then she gave a sly smile. Okay, so what do you think the job is, exactly It can't be sex because it pays too much money. I can't imagine it's for running drugs or that they need a hit man, because the announcement is too public, so what do you think they really want

Darci blinked at the woman. Her aunt Thelma had washed Darci's only suit in

soap powder that she'd bought on sale, then had taken it out of the washer before the rinse cycle began. Saves money that way, Aunt Thelma had said. Maybe it was cheaper, but now the dried soap in the fabric was itching Darci's bare arms inside the unlined sleeves of the suit, as her pink, ruffled blouse was sleeveless. I think someone wants a personal assistant, Darci said, not understanding the woman's question.

At that the woman laughed. You really think that someone is willing to pay a hundred grand a year for a PA and that you are going to get the job because you...What Because you believe you're going to get it

Before Darci could reply, the woman standing in line behind her said, Give her a break, will you And if you don't think you're going to get the job, then why the hell are you standing in line

Darci didn't approve of cursing, not in any way, and she meant to say something, but the woman three down in the line spoke up. Does anybody here have any idea what this job is about I've been waiting for four hours and I can't find out anything.

Four! a woman several people ahead said loudly. I've been here for six hours!

I spent the night on the sidewalk, a woman standing half a block ahead yelled.

After that, all the women began to talk to each other, and since the line was nearly four blocks long, that made quite a noise.

But Darci didn't participate in speculating on what the job was really for, because she knew in her heart, in its deepest part, that the job was for her. It was the answer to her prayers. For the last four years, all through college, she'd prayed every night for God to help her with the situation she was in with Putnam. And last night, when she'd seen this ad, she'd known it was the answer to her prayers.

Sure has your qualifications, Uncle Vern had said when Darci showed him the ad. His face was twisted into the little smirk Darci had come to know too well.

I'll never understand why your mother let you choose that highfalutin fancy school, Aunt Thelma said yet again. You coulda gone to a secretarial school so you could get yourself a real job " not that you'll need one after the weddin'.

I . . . Darci began, but then she'd trailed off. She'd long ago learned that trying to explain was useless. Instead, she just let Uncle Vern and Aunt Thelma run down; then she went to the converted closet in their apartment that was now her bedroom and read. She liked to read nonfiction because she liked to learn things.

But Uncle Vern had been right: The ad was written with Darci's qualifications in mind.

PERSONAL ASSISTANT No computer skills necessary. Must be willing to travel, so no family attachments. Must be young, healthy, interested. Starting salary \$100,000 a year, plus medical, dental.

Apply in person, 8:00 A.M. 211 West 17 Street, Suite 1A.

What d'you mean that she's right for this job Aunt Thelma had said last night. It says 'no family attachments.' If it's one thing Darci's got, it's family.

On her mother's side, Uncle Vern had said, smirking.

Aunt Thelma wasn't a fighter as her sister, Darci's mother, was, so she just tightened her lips and picked up the remote control on the TV and switched from the Discovery Channel program that Darci had been watching to QVC. Aunt Thelma knew the life stories of all the presenters on all the shopping channels. She said that the shopping channels made her feel at home even in a place as big and busy as New York. She'd often told Darci in private that she should never have left Putnam, should never have married an ambitious man and moved all the way to Indianapolis ten years ago. And when, three years ago, Vern's boss had asked him to go to New York to supervise a crew of lazy welders, Thelma said she should have refused to go with him. But she had gone and she'd suffered through every minute in the city she detested. Now, waiting in line, Darci tried not to listen to the angry words that were floating around her. Instead, she closed her eyes and concentrated on the image of her being told that she had this perfect job.

As the day wore on, information trickled down the line. Once they entered the building, they were allowed into a waiting room, and, finally, they were allowed into the interview room. There was a heavy wooden door leading into the interview room, and it became known as the door. As for what went on inside that room, they heard little, probably because no woman wanted to jeopardize her chance at such a great job.

It was nearly four P.M. when Darci was at last allowed inside the building. There was a woman standing in front of the doorway into the waiting room, and she only allowed into the room exactly as many women as there were chairs. Hours ago everyone in the line had seen that men weren't really being considered for the job. The men would go up the stairs, but they'd go back down just minutes later.

Told you, a woman near Darci said. Sex. This is for sex.

And what do you have that's worth a hundred grand a year a woman asked, holding her shoe and rubbing her foot.

It's not what I have so much as what I can do with it.

Done with it, more likely, someone else said loudly, and for a moment Darci thought there was going to be a fistfight. There would have been had those words been said in her hometown of Putnam, Kentucky, but she'd learned that Northern women fought with words rather than fists.

Be a lot kinder to punch 'em in the nose, her mother had said after she'd heard a couple of Yankee girls arguing.

Next! the woman said sharply as the wooden door opened and out came the young woman who had first spoken to Darci while they were in line. Darci looked up at her in question, but the young woman just shrugged, as though to say that she didn't know if she'd done well in the interview or not.

When Darci stood up, she suddenly felt light-headed. She hadn't eaten since she'd left Uncle Vern's apartment early that morning. I want you to have a good, solid breakfast, Aunt Thelma had said as she handed Darci a PopTart and a plastic cup full of warm Pepsi. Fruit's better for you than those cereals your mother gives you. And you need caffeine and sugar and somethin' warm inside you when you go job huntin', she'd said kindly.

But now, when Darci stood up too quickly, the breakfast seemed a long time ago. She took a couple of deep breaths, put her shoulders back, and, controlling the urge to reach inside her jacket and claw the itchy place on her shoulder, she walked through the open doorway.

One side of the room was lined with windows so dirty she could barely see the building across the street. On the floor under the windows was a messy heap of metal folding chairs, most of them broken.

In the center of the room was a big oak desk, the kind that all used-furniture stores seemed to have an unlimited supply of. A man was sitting behind the desk on one of the metal chairs, and to his left, off to one side, sat a woman. She was in her fifties, dressed in a pretty twinset and a long cotton skirt, and around her neck and on her hands sparkled gold and diamonds. She had a perfectly ordinary face, one that no one would notice in a crowd, except that she had the most intense eyes that Darci had ever seen. Now, as she watched Darci enter the room, those huge brown eyes didn't blink.

But after only one glance at the woman, Darci looked away, because the man behind the desk was the most gorgeous person she'd ever seen in her life. Oh, maybe he wasn't movie-star beautiful, but he was the kind of man that Darci had always liked. For one thing, he was older, at least in his mid-thirties. You can't get a father by marryin' one, her mother had said more than once, but that didn't stop Darci from being attracted to men past thirty. Past thirty and they may as well be past seventy was her mother's philosophy, but then Jerlene's boyfriends seemed to get younger every year.

Please have a seat, the man said, and Darci thought he had a lovely voice, deep and rich.

He was a tall man, at least he looked as though he would be tall if he stood up, and he had beautiful black hair, lots of it, with wings of gray above his ears. Like a lion's mane, she thought, staring at the man with her eyes so wide open they were beginning to tear. But she didn't want to blink in case he was a product of her imagination and didn't really exist.

Besides his beautiful hair, he had a strong jaw with a lovely square chin with a little cleft in it (just like Cary Grant, she thought), small flat ears (she always noticed men's ears) and deep-set blue eyes. Unfortunately, they were the eyes of

someone who seemed to be carrying the weight of the world. But then, maybe he was just tired from asking so many women so many questions.

May I see your application he asked, holding out his hand to her across the desk.

May I Darci thought. Not Can I but a proper may, as in asking permission. With a smile, she handed the paper to him, and he began to read it as she sat down. While she was waiting, Darci tucked her hands under her knees and began to swing her legs as she glanced about the room, but when she looked at the woman to the man's left, she stopped swinging and sat still. There was something about the woman's eyes that were a bit unnerving. Nice day, Darci said to the woman, but her face gave no indication that she'd heard Darci, even though the woman was staring at her hard.

You're twenty-three the man asked, drawing Darci's attention back to him.

Yes, she answered.

And college educated At that he looked her up and down, and his eyes said that he didn't believe her. Darci was used to that. She didn't quite understand it, but it often happened that people looked at her machine-washed suit and her fine, flyaway hair and thought that she didn't look like a college girl.

Mann's Developmental College for Young Ladies, Darci said. It's a very old school.

I don't think I've ever heard of it. Where is it It's anywhere, actually, she said. It's a correspondence school.

Ah, I see, the man said, then put down her application.

So tell me about yourself, Darci.

I'm from Putnam, Kentucky, and I've lived there all my life. I'd never been more than fifty miles out of Putnam until two weeks ago when I came here to New York. I'm staying with my aunt, my mother's sister, and her husband, until I can find a job.

And what do you want to become when" He stopped himself, but she knew he'd been about to say, When you grow up The smallness of her often made people mistake her for a child. And what did you study to be

Nothing, Darci said cheerfully. I studied a little bit of everything. I like to learn about different things. When neither the man nor the woman responded to this, Darci said meekly, I know nothing about computers.

That's fine, the man said. So tell me, Darci, do you have a boyfriend

Alarm bells started ringing in Darci's head. Had she given herself away already Had this beautiful man seen that Darci was attracted to him Was he thinking that he wasn't going to get a worker but some love-struck girl mooning over him all day

Oh, yes, Darci said brightly. I'm engaged to be married. To Putnam. He's'

The same name as your town

Yes. Putnam owns the town. She tried to laugh in what she hoped was a sophisticated, big-city way. Although Putnam's not much to own, what there is, belongs to Putnam. Or to his family, anyway. All of them own it, the town, I mean. And the factories, of course.

Factories How many factories

Eleven, twelve, she said, then thought. No, I think there're fifteen of them now. Putnam's father builds them at a prodigious rate.

'Prodigious,' the man said, then bent his head down, and Darci wasn't sure, but she thought he smiled a bit. But when he looked back up, his face was once again solemn. If you're to marry a rich man, then you don't need a job, do you

Oh, but I do! Darci said fiercely. You see' she began, but then she broke off and caught her lower lip between her teeth. Her mother was constantly warning her not to tell everybody everything there was to know about her. Leave some mystery, her mother said. If there was ever such a time, Darci was sure that now was the time to leave a bit of mystery. And maybe it wouldn't hurt to add a little imagination. Putnam won't inherit for years, so we have to make it on our own. I came here to New York to earn as much as I can so I can return to my beloved home and marry the man I love. She said all this in one breath, while behind her back, the fingers on her right hand were crossed.

For a while the man looked at her hard, and she stared back at him just as hard. As for the woman, she had neither spoken nor even blinked as far as Darci could tell.

If you're in love with a man, you won't be able to travel. And if you have relatives here in New York, you'd miss them if you were away for weeks at a time.

No, I wouldn't! Darci said too quickly. But she didn't want the man to think that she was an ungrateful person, certainly not after all her aunt and uncle had done for her.

They, uh . . . she began. They have their own lives, and as much as I love them, I think they'd do quite well without me. And my mother has...What could she say That her mother had a new boyfriend twelve years her junior and she probably wouldn't notice if Darci fell into a hole My mother also has her own life. Clubs, charities, that sort of thing. Could Putnam's Spuds and Suds be considered a club

And your young man

She had to think for a moment to know whom he meant. Oh. Putnam. Well, he has lots of interests, and he, uh...He wants me to have a whole year of She almost said freedom, which would have been close to the truth. He wants me to have a year to myself before we begin on our lifelong journey of love together.

Darci thought this last was a rather nice turn of phrase, but she noticed there was a teeny tiny curl of the man's upper lip that made him look as though he were going to be ill. She wasn't sure what she was doing wrong, but she knew that she was blowing this interview. She took a deep breath. I really do need this job, she said softly. And I'll work very hard for you. She knew that her voice was pleading, almost begging, but she couldn't help herself.

The man turned to the woman who was sitting slightly behind him. Do you have what you need he asked, and the woman gave a tiny nod. As the man turned back to Darci, he picked up her application and put it on top of a pile of others. All right, Miss, uh'

Monroe, Darci said. No relation. When the man looked blank, she said, To the other one.

Oh, I see, he said. The actress. He didn't pretend to think the joke was funny but kept his solemn expression. As you have seen, we have many applicants, so if we'd like to

interview you again, we'll call you. You wrote your telephone number on here

Oh, yes, but don't call between eight and ten. That's when my uncle Vern watches TV, and he....Her voice trailed off. Slowly, she stood up, then paused as she looked at the man. I do need this job, she said again.

So do they all, Miss Monroe, the man said, then looked back at the older woman, and Darci knew that she'd been dismissed.

It took all her willpower to keep her shoulders erect as she left the office and looked into the hopeful eyes of the women sitting in the little waiting room. Like all the others she'd seen leave the office, she shrugged in answer to their silent inquiries. She had no idea how she'd done in the interview. Once she was on the street again, she opened her handbag and checked her wallet. How much food could she get for seventy-five cents Sometimes the greengrocers would charge her very little for bruised bananas that they couldn't sell.

With her head up, her shoulders back, Darci started walking. Maybe she was going to get the job. Why not She had all the qualifications, didn't she They wanted someone who had few skills, and that certainly fit her. The spring returned to her step, and, smiling, she began to walk faster, occupying her mind with planning what she'd say when the man called and told her she had the job. That's how I'll act: gracious, she said aloud. Gracious and surprised. Smiling more broadly, she picked up her step. She needed to get home so she could apply her True Persuasion to this problem.

Adam signaled to the woman at the door to hold the applicants for a while. He needed to stretch and to move around. Walking to the windows, he clasped his hands behind his back. This isn't working, he said to the woman behind him. We haven't found one woman who's even close to being right. What do I have to do, canvass the elementary schools

The last one was lying, the woman behind him said softly.

Adam turned to look at her. That one The little Kentucky hillbilly Poor thing. That suit she had on looked as though it'd been washed in a creek. And, besides, she has a boyfriend, a rich one. Is that what she was lying about Those factories she says his family owns He probably has a twenty-year-old pickup with a gun rack in the back.

She was lying about everything, the woman said, staring up at Adam.

He started to speak, but he'd learned long ago that Helen used her mind and abhorred normal human ways of communication " which meant that she hated to talk. Many times she'd said to him, I told you that. Afterward, he'd racked his brain until he'd finally remembered that she had indeed said one short sentence that had told him everything. But now Helen had repeated this one sentence, so he knew it was very

important. Tired as he was, he nearly leaped across the room to grab the girl's application off the top of the stack and handed it to the woman. Staring into space, she took the paper and ran her hands over it, not reading it, just touching it. After a while, she smiled; then the smile grew broader.

She looked up at Adam. She's lying about everything there is to lie about, she said happily.

She doesn't have a boyfriend, no aunt and uncle Doesn't need the job Exactly what is she lying about

Helen waved her hand in dismissal, as these questions weren't important to her. She's not what she seems, not what she thinks she is, not what you see her as.

Adam had to work to keep his mouth shut. He hated the convoluted, cryptic talk of clairvoyants. Why couldn't the woman just say what she meant

Helen, as always, read Adam's thoughts, and, as always, they amused her. What she liked about him was that he wasn't in awe of her abilities. Most people were terrified that clairvoyants could read their innermost secrets, but Adam was trying to find out his own secrets and those of others, so she held no fear for him.

You want to tell me what you're really saying he asked, glaring down at her.

She's the one.

That undernourished waif The Mansfield girl

Puzzled, Helen glanced down at the paper. 'Darci T. Monroe,' it says. Not 'Mansfield.'

It was a joke, Adam said, knowing he'd not be able to explain. Helen could tell you what your dead grandfather was doing at any given moment, but he doubted if she'd ever watched a TV show or movie in her life.

Taking the application from Helen, he looked at it, trying to recall all that he could about the tiny girl who'd sat before him just minutes ago. Since he'd seen hundreds of women today, they were all blending together in his mind. Small, delicate, with an air of poverty hanging about her. But, still, she was a pretty little thing, like some tiny bird. A goldfinch, he thought, remembering her blonde hair that hung limply about the shoulders of her cheap suit. She'd had on sandals, no stockings, and he remembered thinking that she had feet the size of a child's.

I'm not sure' he began as he looked up at Helen. But she had that look on her face, the one that meant that she was in a semitrance as she looked deep into something. All right, he said with a sigh, out with it. What're you seeing

She will help you.

Adam waited for the woman to elaborate, but then he saw the smile play on her lips. Lord help him! It was clairvoyant humor. The woman was foreseeing something that amused her. From his experience this could mean something as good as winning the lottery or something as bad as being

stranded in a snowdrift for three days. As long as everyone survived, Helen thought that such miserable experiences were amusing. In fact, any adventure that one survived delighted her. So who needed movies and TV when such things were running through a person's head That's all you're going to say Adam asked, his mouth set in a firm line.

Yes, Helen answered; then she gave one of her rare full smiles. She's hungry. Feed her and she'll help you.

Shall I name her Fido Adam asked, trying to be nasty, but his tone just made Helen smile more as she stood up.

It's time for me to go to work, she said, for she spent the darkest hours of every night in a trance looking at the lives and futures of her clients.

For all that she annoyed him, Adam felt a sense of panic as she was about to leave. Are you sure about her She can do this Will she do this

Helen paused at the door, and when she looked at him, her face was serious. The future is to be made. As it stands now, you could fail or succeed at this. I won't be able to see the out'come until you're there with this Mansfield girl and'

Monroe, Adam snapped.

Helen gave a bit of a smile. Remember. You must not touch her.

What! Adam said, aghast. Touch her Do I look desperate That poor little girl She probably grew up in a sharecropper's cabin. What was that school she went to Mann's something or other Touch her! Really. I'd rather' He stopped talking, because Helen had left the room, closing the door behind her, but her laughter wafted about him. He'd never before heard her laugh.

I hate clairvoyants! Adam said when he was alone; then he looked down at the application again. Wonder what the T stands for he thought, shaking his head in dismay. Today, every time some gorgeous, long-legged beauty from South Dakota or wherever had walked in, Adam's heart had nearly skipped a beat. If she was the one, then he'd be spending day and night with her, sharing meals, sharing what might become an adventure, sharing.... But, each time, after the beauty had left the room, he'd looked at Helen, and with a mocking expression, for she'd seen every one of his lascivious fantasies, she'd shaken her head no. No, the beauty was not the one.

But this one! Adam thought. This Darci T. Monroe ' no relation to the other one " didn't look strong enough to help him accomplish anything. Maybe it was true that she was, well, physically qualified " he could certainly believe that " but how could she ...

Oh, the hell with it, he said, then picked up the phone and called the number she'd written on the application. As the telephone was ringing, he thought, I still have two weeks. Maybe someone else who has the proper qualifications will show up, he told himself as a woman's voice answered.