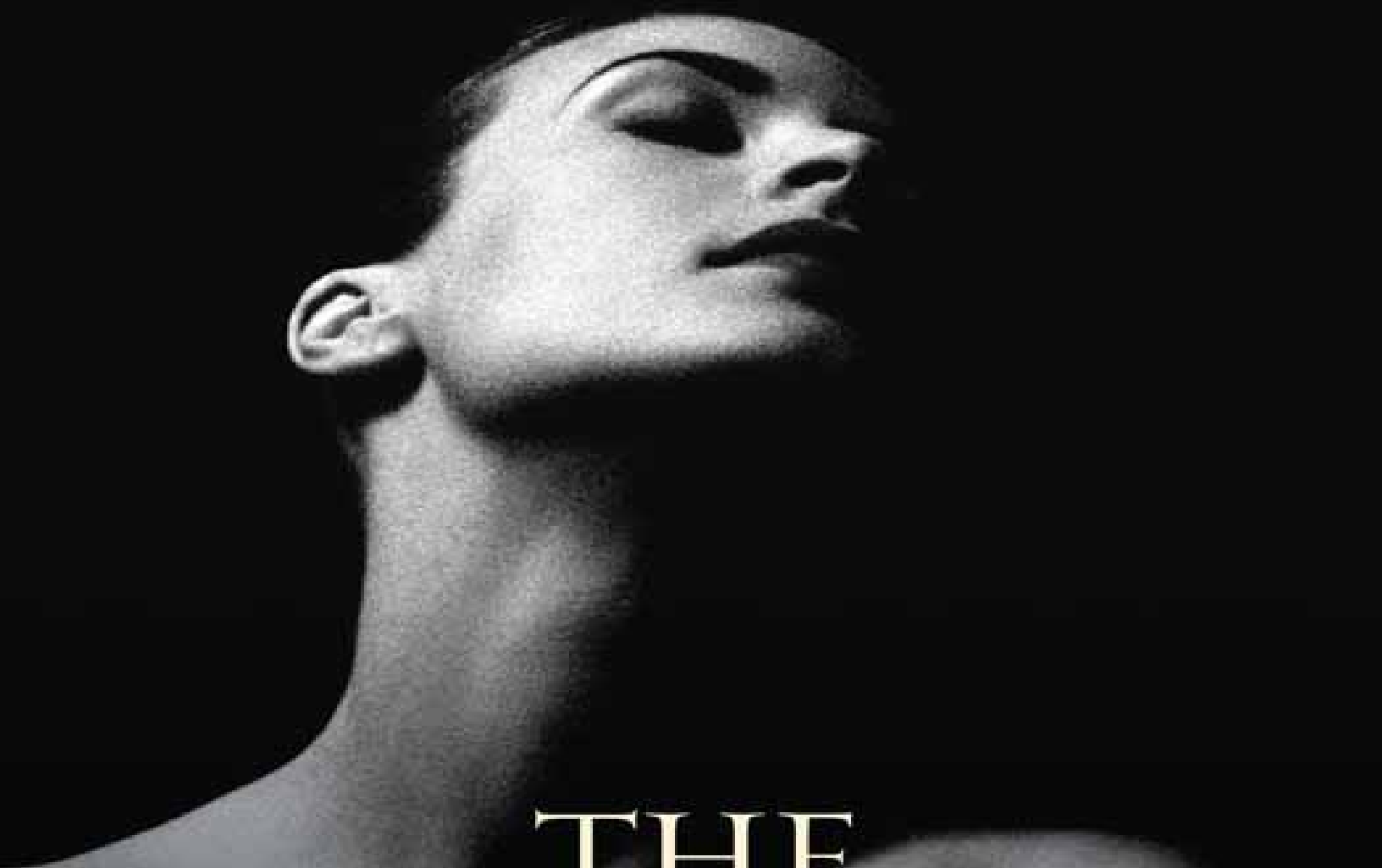


SIDNEY
SHELDON



THE
BEST LAID
PLANS

The Best Laid Plans

Sidney Sheldon

 HarperCollins e-books

This book is dedicated to you

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1

The first entry in Leslie Stewart's diary read:

Dear Diary: This morning I met the man I am going to marry.

It was a simple, optimistic statement, with not the slightest portent of the dramatic chain of events that was about to occur.

It was one of those rare, serendipitous days when nothing could go wrong, when nothing would dare go wrong. Leslie Stewart had no interest in astrology, but that morning, as she was leafing through the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, a horoscope in an astrology column by Zoltaire caught her eye. It read:

FOR LEO (JULY 23RD TO AUGUST 22ND). THE NEW MOON ILLUMINATES YOUR LOVE LIFE. YOU ARE IN YOUR LUNAR CYCLE HIGH NOW, AND MUST PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO AN EXCITING NEW EVENT IN YOUR LIFE. YOUR COMPATIBLE SIGN IS VIRGO. TODAY WILL BE A RED-LETTER DAY. BE PREPARED TO ENJOY IT.

Be prepared to enjoy what? Leslie thought wryly. Today was going to be like every other day. Astrology was nonsense, mind candy for fools.

Leslie Stewart was a public relations and advertising executive at the Lexington, Kentucky firm of Bailey & Tomkins. She had three meetings scheduled for that afternoon, the first with the Kentucky Fertilizer Company, whose executives were excited about the new campaign she was working up for them. They especially liked its beginning: "If you want to smell the roses..." The second meeting was with the Breeders Stud Farm, and the third with the Lexington Coal Company. Red-letter day?

In her late twenties, with a slim, provocative figure, Leslie Stewart had an exciting, exotic look; gray, sloe eyes, high cheekbones, and soft, honey-

colored hair, which she wore long and elegantly simple. A friend of Leslie's had once told her, "If you're beautiful and have a brain and a vagina, you can own the world."

Leslie Stewart was beautiful and had an IQ of 170, and nature had taken care of the rest. But she found her looks a disadvantage. Men were constantly propositioning her or proposing, but few of them bothered to try really to get to know her.

Aside from the two secretaries who worked at Bailey & Tomkins, Leslie was the only woman there. There were fifteen male employees. It had taken Leslie less than a week to learn that she was more intelligent than any of them. It was a discovery she decided to keep to herself.

In the beginning, both partners, Jim Bailey, an overweight, soft-spoken man in his forties, and Al Tomkins, anorexic and hyper, ten years younger than Bailey, individually tried to talk Leslie into going to bed with them.

She had stopped them very simply. "Ask me once more, and I'll quit."

That had put an end to that. Leslie was too valuable an employee to lose.

Her first week on the job, during a coffee break, Leslie had told her fellow employees a joke.

"Three men came across a female genie who promised to grant each one a wish. The first man said, 'I wish I were twenty-five percent smarter.' The genie blinked, and the man said, 'Hey, I feel smarter already.'

"The second man said, 'I wish I were fifty percent smarter.' The genie blinked, and the man exclaimed, 'That's wonderful! I think I know things now that I didn't know before.'

"The third man said, 'I'd like to be one hundred percent smarter.'

"So the genie blinked, and the man changed into a woman."

Leslie looked expectantly at the men at the table. They were all staring at her, unamused.

Point taken.

The red-letter day that the astrologer had promised began at eleven o'clock that morning. Jim Bailey walked into Leslie's tiny, cramped office.

"We have a new client," he announced. "I want you to take charge."

She was already handling more accounts than anyone else at the firm, but she knew better than to protest.

"Fine," she said. "What is it?"

“It’s not a what, it’s a who. You’ve heard of Oliver Russell, of course?”

Everyone had heard of Oliver Russell. A local attorney and candidate for governor, he had his face on billboards all over Kentucky. With his brilliant legal record, he was considered, at thirty-five, the most eligible bachelor in the state. He was on all the talk shows on the major television stations in Lexington—WDKY, WTVQ, WKYT—and on the popular local radio stations, WKQQ and WLRO. Strikingly handsome, with black, unruly hair, dark eyes, an athletic build, and a warm smile, he had the reputation of having slept with most of the ladies in Lexington.

“Yes, I’ve heard of him. What are we going to do for him?”

“We’re going to try to help turn him into the governor of Kentucky. He’s on his way here now.”

Oliver Russell arrived a few minutes later. He was even more attractive in person than in his photographs.

When he was introduced to Leslie, he smiled warmly. “I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m so glad you’re going to handle my campaign.”

He was not at all what Leslie had expected. There was a completely disarming sincerity about the man. For a moment, Leslie was at a loss for words.

“I—thank you. Please sit down.”

Oliver Russell took a seat.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” Leslie suggested. “Why are you running for governor?”

“It’s very simple. Kentucky’s a wonderful state. We know it is, because we live here, and we’re able to enjoy its magic—but much of the country thinks of us as a bunch of hillbillies. I want to change that image. Kentucky has more to offer than a dozen other states combined. The history of this country began here. We have one of the oldest capitol buildings in America. Kentucky gave this country two presidents. It’s the land of Daniel Boone and Kit Carson and Judge Roy Bean. We have the most beautiful scenery in the world—exciting caves, rivers, bluegrass fields—everything. I want to open all that up to the rest of the world.”

He spoke with a deep conviction, and Leslie found herself strongly drawn to him. She thought of the astrology column. *“The new moon illuminates your love life. Today will be a red-letter day. Be prepared to*

enjoy it.”

Oliver Russell was saying, “The campaign won’t work unless you believe in this as strongly as I do.”

“I do,” Leslie said quickly. Too quickly? “I’m really looking forward to this.” She hesitated a moment. “May I ask you a question?”

“Certainly.”

“What’s your birth sign?”

“Virgo.”

After Oliver Russell left, Leslie went into Jim Bailey’s office. “I like him,” she said. “He’s sincere. He really cares. I think he’d make a fine governor.”

Jim looked at her thoughtfully. “It’s not going to be easy.”

She looked at him, puzzled. “Oh? Why?”

Bailey shrugged. “I’m not sure. There’s something going on that I can’t explain. You’ve seen Russell on all the billboards and on television?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s stopped.”

“I don’t understand. Why?”

“No one knows for certain, but there are a lot of strange rumors. One of the rumors is that someone was backing Russell, putting up all the money for his campaign, and then for some reason suddenly dropped him.”

“In the middle of a campaign he was winning? That doesn’t make sense, Jim.”

“I know.”

“Why did he come to us?”

“He really wants this. I think he’s ambitious. And he feels he can make a difference. He would like us to figure out a campaign that won’t cost him a lot of money. He can’t afford to buy any more airtime or do much advertising. All we can really do for him is to arrange interviews, plant newspaper articles, that sort of thing.” He shook his head. “Governor Addison is spending a fortune on his campaign. In the last two weeks, Russell’s gone way down in the polls. It’s a shame. He’s a good lawyer. Does a lot of pro bono work. I think he’d make a good governor, too.”

That night Leslie made her first note in her new diary.

Dear Diary: This morning I met the man I am going to marry.

Leslie Stewart's early childhood was idyllic. She was an extraordinarily intelligent child. Her father was an English professor at Lexington Community College and her mother was a housewife. Leslie's father was a handsome man, patrician and intellectual. He was a caring father, and he saw to it that the family took their vacations together and traveled together. Her father adored her. "You're Daddy's girl," he would say. He would tell her how beautiful she looked and compliment her on her grades, her behavior, her friends. Leslie could do no wrong in his eyes. For her ninth birthday, her father bought her a beautiful brown velvet dress with lace cuffs. He would have her put the dress on, and he would show her off to his friends when they came to dinner. "Isn't she a beauty?" he would say.

Leslie worshiped him.

One morning, a year later, in a split second, Leslie's wonderful life vanished. Her mother, face stained with tears, sat her down. "Darling, your father has...left us."

Leslie did not understand at first. "When will he be back?"

"He's not coming back."

And each word was a sharp knife.

My mother has driven him away, Leslie thought. She felt sorry for her mother because now there would be a divorce and a custody fight. Her father would never let her go. Never. *He'll come for me*, Leslie told herself.

But weeks passed, and her father never called. *They won't let him come and see me*, Leslie decided. *Mother's punishing him*.

It was Leslie's elderly aunt who explained to the child that there would be no custody battle. Leslie's father had fallen in love with a widow who taught at the university and had moved in with her, in her house on Limestone Street.

One day when they were out shopping, Leslie's mother pointed out the house. "That's where they live," she said bitterly.

Leslie resolved to visit her father. *When he sees me*, she thought, *he'll want to come home*.

On a Friday, after school, Leslie went to the house on Limestone Street and rang the doorbell. The door was opened by a girl Leslie's age. She was wearing a brown velvet dress with lace cuffs. Leslie stared at her, in shock.

The little girl was looking at her curiously. "Who are you?"