

# LEADING **MAN**



# 1

(2005)

The knocking began at two in the morning. Three sharp raps, a few seconds of silence, then three more. I crawled out of bed, grabbed a fluffy robe from the bathroom—“Grand Hotel d’Angkor” it said in gold lettering on the breast pocket—and opened the door.

Nobody was there.

I didn’t know a soul in Cambodia, certainly not anyone who’d pay a visit at this late hour, so I figured some other hotel guest must have mixed up a room number. I slid back into the comfy king-size bed with the eight-hundred-thread-count sheets, slipped on the eye mask from the minibar, switched off the light, and drifted back to sleep. A few minutes later, though, the knocking started again. Three raps, silence, three more. I headed to the door again. The hallway was still empty.

I don’t believe in ghosts, but if any place seemed likely to be haunted, it was this hotel in Siem Reap. The village itself was straight out of a Children’s Fund late-night TV spot. It was made up mostly of crumbling clay shacks and

muddy streets, and the surrounding jungle was littered with unexploded land mines left over from Cambodia's on-again-off-again civil war. Beggars were everywhere, many of them small children. Buddhist monks in flowing orange robes flocked to the area too, drawn by the Zen magnetism of the nearby Temple of Angkor Wat, the super-sacred eight-hundred-year-old Buddhist shrine located a few miles down a dirt road. But smack in the middle of this twelfth-century landscape, sticking out like Lady Gaga at an ashram, was the five-star Grand Hotel d'Angkor, a colonial palace that had been catering to rich European tourists since Cambodia had been a French outpost back in the 1930s. This was about as far from Western civilization as you could get—in Siem Reap, elephants were still considered a form of mass transit—yet the doormen at the Grand Hotel all wore dainty white gloves.

I had ventured into Cambodia feeling like Captain Willard on the Nung River, in search of DeeDee Devry, the blond movie starlet famous for her in-your-face acting style, stunning violet eyes, and tumultuous private life. DeeDee—or Double-D, as she was nicknamed by the Hollywood press—was in Siem Reap shooting a high-concept action picture called *Time Tank*. She was starring as a U.S. Army tank commander in Afghanistan who takes a wrong turn into a temporal vortex that sends her and her vehicle hopscotching through portals in time and space. Think *Band of Brothers* meets *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*. At one point in the script, there's a stop in medieval Indochina, where DeeDee's character is wor-

shipped by the Khmer natives, the old blond-goddess-in-the-jungle routine.

Technically, I was a member of the Hollywood press, although I didn't spend a lot of time in Hollywood. My job was to fly around the world, interview movie stars and other celebrities, and write about them in the pages of *KNOW* magazine, the much-venerated, widely read news weekly headquartered in New York. It was a preposterously glamorous gig, the sort of jet-setting occupation a shallow Matthew McConaughey character might have in a cheesy romantic comedy—until McConaughey's character falls in love in the second act and learns the greater bliss of settling down with a regular girl like Kate Hudson. Only I was stuck in my second act. I was in my thirties and was unable to fall in love. The way things were going, I'd end up as Matthew McConaughey for the rest of my life, and nobody wants that.

It didn't matter what sort of girl I dated when I was back home in the United States—the punky music publicist with prematurely blue hair, the sexy sculptress who made spooky artwork out of glass eyeballs, the struggling actress who was so superstitious she dealt herself tarot cards before every audition—I always ended up running away. My intentions were honorable. I would go into each new romance with an open mind, hoping this would be the one that would stick, but it never did. Sooner or later, I would find deal-breaking flaws. A cackling laugh. Thick ankles. Loud chewing. And that was it, I would bolt. I knew, of course, I had plenty of

flaws of my own, much worse than unshapely ankles. But I couldn't help myself.

Lucky for me, though, there was one type of relationship I was really good at—the kind I had with megafamous strangers. Who cared that I couldn't fall in love? Jack Nicholson knew my name! At least he did for the ninety minutes I spent with him in one of his mansions on Mulholland Drive. Who needed real intimacy with real people when fake intimacy with celebrities I would never see again was so much easier, so much fun? Unlike relationships with the unfamous—which often involved inconvenient emotions like longing or remorse—my relationships with stars were totally feeling-free. The rules of engagement were simple: I'd sit down with someone I'd never met and politely ask him or her invasive questions that would never come up in casual conversation—“What's it like getting busted with a hooker in your car?” “Why do people think your husband is gay?”—while the stars tried to charm and disarm me, revealing as little about themselves as possible. It was both an intensely personal and completely counterfeit form of communication. It's not how human beings are wired to interact. I loved it. To me, it was an entire romance, from seduction to betrayal, compressed into a single deadline.

And now I was in a hotel room in Southeast Asia, trying to get some sleep before meeting with yet another international superstar. Only some joker kept rapping on my door, then vanishing into thin air. I sat in bed and thumbed through some magazines. When I got bored with that, I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. There

were only two channels to watch in Cambodia, even at the Grand Hotel. One was broadcasting the *Asia Business Report* from Hong Kong. The other was airing a rerun of *Ally McBeal*. I killed a half hour watching Calista Flockhart dubbed in Taiwanese. When it was clear the knocker was not going to return, I switched off the light and curled back into a sleeping position.

A few minutes later, the knocking started again.

The Temple of Angkor Wat, where *Time Tank* was filming, is one of the most mystical places on Earth. It's an immense pile of ornately sculpted sandstone edifices that have been baking and crumbling in the scorching Cambodian heat for eight centuries. Its smooth stone floors are worn and cracked, and entire sections of the monument are missing, snatched away by Western tomb raiders a century ago. But its five gigantic pinecone-like spires remain untouched by time. They tower over the jungle skyline like an ancient, unsolved mystery—beehive hairdos of the gods.

When I arrived on the set the following morning, it looked as if a real army had invaded. Truckloads of video equipment had been unloaded, huge camera cranes had been erected, and trailers and tents had popped up all around the shrine. The scene they were shooting involved DeeDee's character being chased through the temple by outraged Khmer warriors, who had finally discovered that their new goddess was a mere mortal after all. To escape, she would have to jump from a twenty-foot wall into the

jungle below (landing on an air mattress just out of camera range). On the screen, the leap would make up maybe three or four seconds of footage. But it would take all day to film.

There are rules when a journalist visits a movie set. You don't just waltz past the cameraman and start chatting with the stars. There are protocols to follow, pecking orders to observe. For starters, there's always a chaperone, or "unit publicist," to escort the press around the set. On *Time Tank*, that was Katherine Fust, a slightly discombobulated English woman who was having a tough time adjusting to the sweltering Cambodian climate. "I should have stayed in London," she complained, wilting in her Marks & Spencer safari outfit. "I could have been working on a Brendan Fraser movie!" Another rule: the star always sets the time and place for the interview. And the bigger the star, the longer the wait. In Cambodia, for instance, I figured it would be at least a couple of days before I'd get to sit down with Double-D. Meantime, I'd hang around the set, talk with the director and the lesser actors, and observe the actress at a discreet distance, until she summoned me to the interview. At least that's how it usually worked.

I had been on the set for only a couple of hours, just long enough to find a shady spot inside the temple where I could sit on the cool stone floor and close my jet-lagged eyes, when Katherine came rushing up to me. "I've been looking all over for you!" she said, sweaty and out of breath. "DeeDee wants to meet you. She wants to get a look at you before your interview. Which, by the way, she wants to do tomorrow." Katherine pointed to a lone can-



was tent pitched about fifty yards from the temple, near the edge of the jungle. “She’s in there,” she said. “She’s waiting for you. Now.”

She was wearing a skin-tight tank commander uniform—in the world of *Time Tank*, the U.S. Army issued camouflage hot pants—with pneumatic enhancements that kept her magnificent chest cantilevered in front of her torso like the guns of *Navarone*. Strapped to a holster around her slender waist was a pair of pistols that looked like they could take down a rhino. But the costume was the least dazzling thing about her. Those eyes! Those lips! Those . . . eyes again! She was so gorgeous, so stunning to behold, I almost didn’t hear what she was telling me. “There’s a scorpion in here, is that going to bother you?” DeeDee was saying, as if apologizing for not tidying up before guests arrived. “He was over there,” she said, nodding toward some sound equipment in the corner of the tent. “He must have moved. But he’ll turn up eventually.”

In magazine profiles, DeeDee was frequently described as “an old soul,” which is Hollywood-speak for someone who’s packed a lot of fast living into a very few years. Like a lot of kids born into the business—her dad was Leon Devry, the 1970s B-movie producer who gave David Lynch and Tim Burton their first crew jobs, and her mom was Yvette Vickers, the *Playboy* centerfold-turned-horror movie actress—she had a bumpy upbringing. Alcoholism, cocaine abuse, Vicodin addiction. And that was just middle school. As talented and committed an actress as she was—her portrayal of Tricia Nixon in the HBO drama

*First Daughter* won her a much-deserved Golden Globe—she couldn't seem to step out of her own way. Married and divorced twice—both times to the same rock musician—she hit bottom at twenty-six, with a public mischief arrest when police found her at five in the morning wading naked in the fountain in front of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Now, at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, she was finally clean and sober, and making a comeback with a movie about a time-traveling M1A1 Abrams battle tank.

As I had my getting-to-know-you meeting with the actress inside the scorpion-infested tent, I kept flinching, imagining the tickle of arachnid feet on my skin. I wondered if DeeDee was testing me with this scorpion mind game, or if she really could be that blasé about deadly arthropods. I decided it was probably the latter. If you were to draw a Venn diagram of “Hot” and “Crazy,” Devry would occupy the intersecting space smack in the middle. “You know,” she said, staring at my face, “you look a little like Paul Newman. Has anybody ever told you that?” Sadly, no, nobody had. Probably because I looked nothing like Paul Newman. With my shock of reddish brown hair and cornflower blue eyes, I was more like Alfred E. Neuman. But this was an old trick movie stars played on journalists. It was intended to flatter and ingratiate, the way politicians sometimes repeat a person's name after being introduced. Kirsten Dunst once told me I looked like Paul Bettany. Ashley Judd, weirdly, said I reminded her of her cat. But DeeDee took the game a step further. She leaned forward, pinched my chin between her thumb and forefinger, and moved my head around as if examining a farm animal. “Your eyes,” she finally decided, “are definitely

Newman's. But you have Leo DiCaprio's chin." Then she flashed her famous DeeDee Devry grin.

The meeting lasted only a few minutes, until a production assistant peeked into the tent to announce that they were finally ready to start shooting the jump. For the next couple of hours, I watched the actress perform acrobatics in hundred-degree jungle heat. She dove off the temple wall (with body cables supporting her) over and over again, executing a perfect rolling landing every time. I couldn't take my eyes off her. And I wasn't the only one. Off in the distance, a line of orange figures stood atop another of the temple walls. Even the monks had come out to watch the blond goddess in action.

That night, the knocking started earlier, at about midnight. Again, there was nobody at the door. I threw on some clothes and headed to the hotel lobby.

"A knocking sound, you say?" asked the attendant at the front desk. He was a Cambodian man in his sixties with a French accent, and silver, slicked-back hair. A little gold nameplate on his jacket said "Nhean."

"Yeah, like somebody's at the door, but then nobody is," I explained.

"A knocking but with nobody there," Nhean repeated, as if he was having trouble understanding.

"Yes," I said. "I'd like to change rooms, please."

Nhean consulted his computer for a few moments, then frowned. "I'm so sorry, monsieur," he said. "We are completely filled. With all the movie people from Hollywood, we have no rooms left." He shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, has anybody else complained about knocking?” I asked. I was thinking that a mad late-night knocker might be running amok in the hotel, and that I was just one of his victims.

“Not that I am aware of,” Nhean said. Then, after a pause, “Would you like me to accompany you to your room so that I can hear this knocking for myself?”

I shook my head no, yawned, and turned around to head back to my room. That’s when I heard the jazzy tinkle of piano keys coming from the hotel lounge—the Elephant Bar, it was called, presumably because of all the polished tusks adorning the walls—and decided to pop in for a nightcap. Even at midnight, the place was hopping, with a dozen members of the *Time Tank* crew drinking and laughing as they lazed in oversize wicker armchairs and sofas. I spotted Katherine Fust drinking by herself in a corner of the bar. As a rule, I don’t fraternize with unit publicists—they’re usually too worried about saying something that could end up in print to be any fun as drinking buddies—but that didn’t turn out to be a problem with Katherine.

“I hate my job,” she said the minute I sat in the wicker chair next to her. “I hate my life.” I took a long sip of my Airavata cocktail (a specialty of the Elephant Bar, made with rum, coconut juice, pineapple, and lots more rum) but I knew I’d need several more to catch up to Katherine. The publicist was smashed. “I’m sick of movie sets,” she went on, not caring, or even much noticing, that she was talking to a journalist. “I’m sick of movie stars! Do you know what I had to do today? I had to find chocolate-covered Peeps in Cambodia. You know, those marshmal-

low candy things? One of the producers read somewhere that our leading lady is a freak for them. The fat fuck producer comes up to me and tells me that it's absolutely essential—those were his words, *absolutely essential*—that we have chocolate-covered Peeps in DeeDee's trailer by tomorrow. But guess what? There are no fucking Peeps in fucking Cambodia! As far as I can tell, there's no marshmallow-type candy of any kind in this whole fucking country. I had to call Los Angeles and have them put a box on a plane to Siem Reap. It's going to cost the production three thousand dollars. And you know what? I bet DeeDee doesn't even like them. I bet she's never even eaten one. But I'm going to get fired over fucking Peeps."

"I hate Peeps" was the most sympathetic thing I could think to say when Katherine finished talking. I had mostly stopped listening, anyway, and was concentrating instead on a pretty brunette at the bar, noticing how one strap of her camisole top was slipping down her slender shoulder. It's not that I didn't feel for Katherine. I knew she had one of those jobs that sounded great on paper—travel to exotic places with movie stars!—but in reality led to a slow corrosion of the soul. I had one of those jobs, too. But I was still jet-lagged and groggy, thanks to the knocking that was keeping me awake, and I didn't have the energy to cheer up a drunken publicist I barely knew. I was about to make up an excuse to get up from my chair when Katherine let out an enormous hiccup. "Fuck," the publicist said. Then she slumped down in her chair and passed out cold.

I thought about striking up a conversation with the brunette I'd been eyeing but a curly-haired guy in his

twenties sat down next to her and they promptly began making out. I decided to return to my room. As soon as I got back I crawled into bed and was just about to switch off the light when a revelation hit me: the knocking occurred only in the dark. Whoever or whatever it was that had been banging on my door—a ghost, a prankster, a drunken hotel guest—it never happened when the lights were on. I tested my theory by switching off the bedside lamp. Sure enough, within minutes, the rapping resumed. When I turned the light back on, it stopped. I began to formulate a plan.

I put the bathrobe on again and headed back to the lobby. I borrowed a flashlight from Nhean—he didn’t seem surprised to see me—and returned to my room. I turned off the light and waited in the dark. When the rapping started, I turned on the flashlight. Just as I’d hoped, it wasn’t bright enough to chase away whatever was making the noise. I listened for a while, noticing how the rapping got louder and louder. I tried to follow the sound to its source. It was definitely coming from near the door, but, weirdly, from my side of it. And from above. I slowly raised the beam of light up the wall to the ceiling, until I saw . . . a small spotted lizard poking out from behind a light fixture. I stared at it for a few seconds. It stared back at me. Then it opened its mouth. Out came three sharp gecko barks that sounded exactly like someone knocking on a door.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” I said.

“Knock, knock, knock,” the gecko repeated.

I rushed back to the hotel lobby one more time, excited to tell Nhean about my discovery. Also, I needed someone

to come to my room to remove the lizard. “It is considered good luck!” Nhean explained after he heard the story. “It is a good sign to find one in your room!”

“Good luck?” I asked.

“Also, they eat the mosquitoes,” Nhean said.

“What about the luck?” I asked.

“We call them Chhin Chhos,” Nhean explained. “If you listen to what it is saying, you will have good luck. It is trying to tell you something, monsieur. But you must listen.”

“Oh really,” I said, a little sarcastically. I was starting to suspect that Nhean was pulling my leg. “And what would a lizard be telling me by making knocking noises at one a.m.?” It was a rhetorical question, but Nhean answered it anyway.

“I don’t know, monsieur. Maybe it is saying, ‘Wake up!’”

The next morning, DeeDee was shooting a scene in which she’d row a small canoe around a moat protecting the temple. In point of fact, there actually were ancient trenches surrounding the shrine, but most had been bone-dry for centuries. Thanks to Hollywood magic—a fleet of water-pumping trucks—it took only a couple of days to get them filled up again.

Amazingly, it was even hotter on day two of my set visit, and Katherine the publicist looked even more miserable. “I could be in Prague right now,” she complained, fanning herself with her safari hat. “I could be working on a Johnny Depp movie!” Remarkably, she didn’t seem

to have any memory of our conversation in the Elephant Bar the night before.

To help people deal with the heat, production assistants handed out bandannas that had been soaking in tubs of ice water, which the film crew tied around their foreheads like little air-conditioning units. It made the set resemble a Bruce Springsteen look-alike convention, but I joined in and put one on, too. Even DeeDee seemed to be melting in the heat. When she climbed out of the canoe after she finished filming her rowing scene, I spotted a few dewy drops of perspiration rolling down her neck toward her cleavage. The actress whispered some words to her director, then, surprisingly, headed straight for me. More celebrity interview convention: stars don't directly approach reporters on a set. If they want to talk to one, they send a publicist or some other underling to beckon him. But this star took matters into her own hands. "I'm almost ready for our interview," she said as she wrapped a chilled bandanna around her brow. "Why don't you meet me in my trailer in about twenty minutes? It's air-conditioned. It'll be more comfortable."

The air was cooler in the trailer, that much was true, but it was hardly more comfortable. On the contrary, I'd never perspired so much in my life. When I arrived at DeeDee's Star Waggon twenty minutes later, as requested, the actress opened the door wearing nothing but a sheer, soaking-wet bedsheet. "Just stepped out of the shower," she explained. "Hope you don't mind." She sat down on a sofa inside the trailer and crossed her legs, the soaked sheet falling open to reveal a stretch of upper thigh. Then



she smiled and offered to answer any question I cared to ask, once I regained the power of speech.

There were three possibilities for what was going on here. One, the star was trying to seduce me. I thought this highly unlikely. After all, I was a lowly reporter, one or two notches above grip in the social hierarchy of a movie set. Two, the actress was cynically attempting to manipulate a member of the press by using her body as a distraction and diversion. I thought this a distinct possibility. Or three, DeeDee was simply a free spirit who didn't care that the air-conditioning in her trailer was making her nipples stand out under the translucent bedsheet like No. 2 pencil erasers. That was plausible, too.

I did the best interview I could under the circumstances. But it took all my concentration just to maintain eye contact, let alone remember my questions. I asked the star about her latest tattoo ("My body is my home—I like to decorate it," she answered). I asked about her second split from her first husband ("It's true what they say," she said, "divorce is more wonderful the second time around"). At one point, I noticed a shark tooth pendant on a thin gold chain around her neck, so I asked about that. "This," she said, "is my good luck charm. I never take it off. I feel *nude* without it." She thrust out her chest to offer a closer look, all but smothering my face in her décolletage. "Don't you think it's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?" she purred. I tried to answer, but all that came out of my mouth was a plaintive squeak.

Later in the interview, though, after my breathing returned to normal, something even more surprising hap-

pened. I found myself fixated on parts of DeeDee's body that weren't erogenous zones. Oddly, I found myself staring at her arms. They were, I couldn't help but notice, veiny. You sometimes see it with weight lifters and body-builders—low body fat and excessive working out make the veins expand to pump more oxygen to the extremities. DeeDee had obviously been overexercising. She had blood vessels as thick as Twizzlers bulging from her elbows to her wrists. Smaller capillaries made unsightly blue spiderwebs on her biceps. Frankly, it was a real turnoff. Also, what was up with that birthmark on her hip that I could almost see peeking through the wet bedsheet? Or was that another tattoo? Either way, I found it strangely repulsive. How come I hadn't noticed any of these things before? Okay, I knew how come, but now that I had noticed I couldn't stop looking.

Yes, that's right, I was alone in a trailer with a beautiful, nearly naked movie star. I was being shown skin not meant for mortal eyes. I was living the fantasy of a million male moviegoers. And what did I focus on? The same thing I always focused on whenever I found myself attracted to a woman—her flaws. Her big, veiny, deal-breaking flaws. "What the hell is wrong with me?" I wondered as I stepped out of DeeDee's trailer an hour later, gasping for air and soaked in sweat.

## 2

I wasn't born an intimacy-phobic, fame-obsessed a-hole. Nobody ever is. It requires a powerful transformative event to do that sort of damage to a man's psyche. In this case, the story begins with a lifelong love affair with a superhero.

I adored Johnny Mars from the moment I laid eyes on him. Of all the eighties action stars of my youth, he was the one I idolized most. I would have given anything to be him, or just a little bit more like him. Sardonic and suave. Dashing ruthlessly. A smooth maneuver around every danger, a clever comeback for every situation. Who could forget his classic line in *Give Me Death*, delivered in his trademark growl, just before his famous FBI agent character, Jack Montana, blows away the bad guy on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial ("Glory, glory, hallelujah, douchebag!"). Or that scene in *Live Free or Kill*, when Montana pushes an assassin out of the landing-gear hatch of Air Force One ("Have a nice flight, dickweed!").

I couldn't forget them, but then I was still a twelve-year-old boy long after I grew up.

And then Johnny Mars stole my girlfriend.

If this book were a movie, right about now everything would get all wavy as we dissolved to a flashback of New York City circa 1994. Dennis Franz is baring buttocks on *NYPD Blue*. Kurt Cobain is making flannel a fashion statement. Rudy Giuliani is cracking down on jaywalking during his first term as mayor. And I, a rookie reporter in my twenties, am heading for a newsstand near the subway entrance on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village, just as I did every morning on the way to work. We are approaching the precise moment in time when my world shatters. The moment I learn that my girlfriend—my true love, the woman I planned to marry, the one who was supposedly spending the summer redefining the role of Anya in a production of *The Cherry Orchard* at the prestigious Concord Theater Festival up in Massachusetts—has left me for the movie star I worshipped throughout my childhood. And adulthood too.

My first clue came from the *New York Post*. As you can imagine, it was subtle. MARS OVER THE MOON! announced a headline on Page Six, above a picture of the hulking actor with his arm around a woman who looked amazingly like my own beloved Samantha. According to the article, the forty-two-year-old superstar had fallen for my twenty-four-year-old girlfriend during rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard*. Mars was always trying to prove that he was a real actor, capable of playing parts that didn't involve battling parasailing terrorists over the Grand Canyon, so he had muscled his way into the part of Lopakhin in

Concord's production of the Chekhov classic. According to the *Post*, Samantha and Mars had been a "hot item" for several weeks, which would explain the recent lack of phone calls from Sammy. Still, I figured this must be a mistake. I bought a copy of the more reliable *Daily News*. There was an item in that paper too. Mars, it said, was "swooning" over his new "gal pal," and was planning on moving her into his Upper West Side penthouse when the festival ended and the couple returned to New York the following week. Getting desperate, I purchased *The New York Times*. Even the Old Gray Lady was spreading the news. A profile of Mars in the Arts section included a reference to the fact that "Mr. Mars" had become "romantically involved" with one of the actresses at the festival, "a Ms. Samantha Kotter, originally from Westchester."

Suddenly, it seemed like the asphalt on Sixth Avenue had turned to rubber. My legs went wobbly and my heart started pounding, and there was something wrong with my stomach, too. I felt like I'd been whacked in the gut with a large carnival mallet.

Samantha and I had been childhood sweethearts. We met in seventh grade when Sammy spotted me on the playground and introduced herself by whipping a snowball at my head. "Hey," twelve-year-old Samantha said as she watched me brush the stinging ice from my eyes. "You're standing on my snow."

"Your snow?" I replied, confused, mostly by the fact that a girl was talking to me.

"I was going to build a snowman where you're stand-

ing, but you've ruined the snow. You got your footprints all over."

"It's not ruined," I argued, stepping gingerly from the spot. "You can still make a snowman."

"Well then," Samantha said, "you'd better help."

And so it began, our decades-long love affair. From then on, Samantha would have an above-the-title role in my life. She would become the first girl I took to the movies. The first to hold my hand. The first to let me kiss her. Every first there was to have, I had with her. Every second, third, and fourth, too.

By our early twenties, we were living together in an L-shaped studio on the fourth floor of a rent-controlled apartment building on a cobblestone street in the West Village. It had a refrigerator that gave an electric shock whenever you touched its handle, and the walls would shake whenever a truck rumbled past the window, but I loved the place. In the morning we could hear birds chirping outside. At night, we could hear the *cloppity-clop* of police horses on the cobblestones—and also the screeches of transsexual hookers from the nearby Meatpacking District. A freshly minted journalism degree in hand, I had landed my first magazine job. Each day I would jump on the subway uptown to Fiftieth Street, and all but jog a couple of blocks to the glass tower where *KNOW*'s headquarters were located, on the top floor overlooking Times Square. As a new staff writer, the junior-most scribe, I had a small windowless office next to the men's room. But it was my own office all the same, with my own name—Maxwell Lerner—stenciled on the door. When I first stepped inside and sat down behind my desk (my

own desk!), I knew exactly how Melanie Griffith felt at the end of *Working Girl*.

Samantha, meanwhile, was busy auditioning for acting roles. At twenty-four, she was a walking David Hamilton photograph, a fresh-faced poster child for natural beauty, with big brown doe eyes and a mane of silky brunette hair that dangled just above her waistline. She was also a gifted actress and singer. Still, at first the only work she could find was in a children's theater in Murray Hill. Every night she would arrive back home with her face smeared in clown paint. I would huddle with her over the bathroom sink and gently remove her makeup. Sometimes I'd make jokes about the rubber clown nose.

"Maybe you could leave this on tonight," I teased, arching an eyebrow.

"Acting is so glamorous." Samantha ignored me, staring dejectedly at her reflection in the mirror. "My next part will probably be a dancing cupcake."

"You'd make an incredibly sexy cupcake," I said, nuzzling her neck, getting clown paint all over my chin.

"You don't get famous by playing cupcakes." Samantha sighed, examining her teeth in the mirror.

Then it happened: Samantha got her big break in *The Cherry Orchard*. And she headed up to Concord for the summer, where she finally got famous, although not exactly for her acting. I couldn't believe how ironic it all was. When I first learned that Samantha would be sharing the stage with Johnny Mars at the festival, I couldn't have been more thrilled, and made several unsubtle hints about wanting to meet the guy whose action figures I'd obsessively collected as a kid. Sammy was not as impressed. "I

might as well be doing Shakespeare with Arnold Schwarzenegger,” she complained. “Or Molière with Sylvester Stallone.” By the end of the summer, Samantha had apparently had a change of heart. She was now Johnny Mars’s number one fan. And I hated his guts.

I got a dollar’s change from the newsstand guy on Sixth Avenue and looked around for a pay phone. There was no answer when I called Sammy in Concord—just her normal, faithful-sounding voice on the answering machine—so I hung up and continued on to work. I spent the morning sitting at my desk staring at the wall, absorbing the hit I’d taken. During my lunch break, while poking at my uneaten sandwich in a deli, I told my coworker and soon-to-be best friend, Robin, what had happened. A lot of clever wags worked at *KNOW*, but Robin, the receptionist, was the wittiest of them all. She was a pretty Italian girl with soulful green eyes and long dark hair—sort of like Mona Lisa’s younger, lesbian sister—but she had all the sensitivity of an insult comic. “Wow, that’s rough,” she said. “How can you compete with Johnny Mars? He’s rich. He’s famous. He’s beloved by millions. He’s so handsome even *I’d* consider sleeping with him.” She paused for a second. “Are you going to eat that pickle?”

Of course, Robin was right. I couldn’t compete with Johnny Mars—as his number one fan for years, I knew that better than anyone. But that’s not what hurt the most. What stung worse was the fact that I learned the details of my cuckolding from the newspapers. Losing a girlfriend to a celebrity wasn’t just humiliating—it was *publicly* humiliating. Everybody knew about it. That evening, when I returned home after work, even my landlady



made a point of stopping me at the stairwell to giddily show me the item on Page Six linking my former soul mate—her ex-tenant—with a movie star. People can't help but be excited when somebody they've known in their everyday lives suddenly becomes famous, even if it's just for dating someone famous. It's the fairy tale, and you can't help but root for fairy tales. To my landlady, hell, even to me, it made Samantha loom larger than life, lifted her into a VIP world full of stretch limos and film premieres and paparazzi flashbulbs. And I, the unfamous, heartbroken ex-boyfriend, had been left behind, my nose pressed up against the window just like everyone else's.

Samantha must have known that I had learned about her and Mars. Paparazzi shots of the two of them had even made the local TV news that night. There were several messages from Sam on the answering machine when I entered my apartment. "Are you there, Max? I really need to talk to you." I listened to Sammy's voice on the tape as I stared at a pair of her crumpled pantyhose at the bottom of our closet. "I'll be back in New York in a couple of days," she said, "but I really need to talk to you now. I'm so sorry. Please call me back, *please*."

I didn't call her back. Instead, I unplugged the phone and turned off the answering machine. I had asked Robin not to tell anyone at the office, but the story was everywhere, and I was sure the other *KNOW* writers had already propped a cardboard Johnny Mars standup in my chair, and had plans for plenty more jokes designed to remind me that the woman I loved was now sleeping in a movie star's bed. *KNOW* writers were clever that way. So for the next few days, I called in sick, stayed home, and

tried to cheer myself up. I destroyed old photographs with a Magic Marker, drawing villainous mustaches and devil horns on Samantha's face. When that didn't work, I tried throwing out her stuff, the acting books and bottles of moisturizer and whatever clothing she hadn't taken with her to Concord. But some things I just couldn't part with, let alone deface. There was a photograph of Samantha at sixteen, a big, sweet grin on her face as she stood in a snowy patch of woods wearing the too-large fisherman's sweater I had given her for Christmas. I put the cap back on the Magic Marker when I came to that picture. And there was that green ceramic turtle Samantha had made in a fourth-grade pottery class that she kept on our kitchen table—I couldn't bring myself to destroy that, either. It was just two pinch pots stuck together with a dollop of clay for a head and a slot for saving coins on top, but I really liked that turtle.

Samantha and I fell in love at such young, impressionable ages, it seemed to me as if we had molded each other out of clay. My values, my tastes, my fears, my dreams—Samantha was there, at ground zero, to help form them all. Sure, we had our spats. Samantha sometimes complained that I was self-centered and self-involved. She was right, of course. I was a guy in my twenties. “You don't *listen* to me,” Samantha complained one night as I was reorganizing my CD collection. She'd come home upset about a bad audition—at least I think that's what she was upset about—but I was too preoccupied trying to figure out where my new Deep Forest album belonged, in the World Music section or Ambient Dub, to pay much atten-

tion. “Max, you’re always in your own universe,” Sammy complained. “Doesn’t it ever get lonely in there?”

My forgetfulness about birthdays and anniversaries became a running joke between us. But the longer it ran, the less funny it became. When I did remember, I put a lot of thought into the gifts I gave Sammy—just the wrong sort of thought. I never stopped to ask myself what she might want but instead got her presents I thought she should have. Or that I thought *I* should have. I’ll never forget the bewildered, disappointed look on her face when she tore open the wrapping on a Christmas gift to uncover the laser disc box set of the complete *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* TV series. What girl wouldn’t love thirty hours of a vintage spy show produced for twelve-year-old boys in the 1960s? “It’s so great,” I said, trying to cheer her up. “Really, you’ll thank me later.”

Even worse than buying her thoughtless presents, or forgetting her birthday altogether, or the time I decided to boycott Valentine’s Day (a sham holiday concocted by the greeting card industry) was the fact that it never crossed my mind for a second that any of this stuff mattered. I was so certain that Samantha would love me forever, that she was the girl I was destined to marry and grow old with, that I ended up taking her totally for granted. No wonder I didn’t notice the warning signs that were, during those final few months, flashing all over the place. When Samantha waved away my idea of taking the train up to Concord for a weekend visit, it didn’t occur to me to be suspicious (“Rehearsals are so boring,” she told me. “Besides, we wouldn’t have much time to spend together—we’re work-

ing round the clock”). The fact that Samantha’s phone calls had dwindled from once a day when she first got to Concord to once a week, to none, didn’t register as a red flag with me, either. Even if I had noticed, the idea that I might lose her, that she might be falling for someone else, was utterly unthinkable. There was nothing on Earth I was more sure of.

Until I read in the papers that I had it all wrong.

A few days later, I plugged my phone back in. It was time, I decided, to face the music. The phone rang almost immediately, but it wasn’t Sammy. “You’re coming tonight, right? You *are* coming.” It was Robin calling; she was talking about a *KNOW* party that was being thrown that evening.

Every couple of months, *KNOW* threw a promotional event at one of the hot New York nightclubs. This was back when subscriptions were booming and the magazine industry was still in a partying mood. It was also the tail end of the clubbing era, when places like Nell’s and Limelight were still so cool even people who lived on the Manhattan side of the bridges and tunnels would wait on line to get in. The lines were especially long when *KNOW* threw a party, with mobs of photographers pushing at the doors to get in. (Guests at *KNOW*’s bashes ran the gamut from supermodels to secretaries of state.) Best of all, the magazine’s staffers had insta-passes to the center of the bacchanal. We got to stroll past the crowds, pinch the noses of the gorillas guarding the velvet rope, and saunter straight on into the club. Still, I wasn’t feeling much like socializing.

“Oh c’mon!” Robin moaned into the phone. “It’ll be

fun. Maybe you can steal some movie star's girlfriend. I hear Jim Carrey might show up tonight. You can leave with his plus one."

The idea of going home with anyone other than Samantha made me sick to my stomach. Not that I could get a movie star's girlfriend to talk to me, let alone leave a party with me. But I couldn't stay holed up in my studio apartment for the rest of my life. And I knew Robin wasn't going to take no for an answer.

There was a guy playing show tunes with a pair of spoons and some water glasses—*KNOW* always arranged "kooky" acts to entertain its guests—as well as about three hundred revelers drinking and dancing. The club was in an ancient brick building on Twenty-fifth Street—a century earlier, it had probably been a textile factory filled with child laborers—that had been gutted and converted into a multilevel hipster paradise. Every dimly lit floor was decorated with pool tables and leather Le Corbusier loungers.

Jim Carrey wasn't there, but I spotted a slew of other, lesser celebrities. I saw Jeremy Irons chatting with Gary Sinise at the bar. I saw Linda Evangelista and Helena Christensen scarfing down shrimp at the seafood buffet. I saw Kyle MacLachlan and Dan Hedaya standing on the same line for the men's room. Years later, after I became a more seasoned entertainment writer, I'd attend Hollywood parties that would make this one look as lame as a *Real World* reunion. But at the time, a close encounter with any celebrity, even Dan Hedaya, seemed new and

exotic to me. It was at this party, and others like it, that I first came to the realization that the famous were different from you and me. In fact, I began to suspect that they weren't even the same species. They seemed to exist in a whole different dimension, a mesmerizing, alien world filled with bursting flashbulbs and bustling red carpets and vastly superior bone structure.

The world Sammy had just moved into.

I wandered through the club, observing famous creatures for a while. Then, at the bar, I ran into Ernie Moore, one of the few stars at the party I actually did know. I had interviewed the intense young Method actor just a month earlier, over lunch in SoHo, for a 150-word article on a Montgomery Clift bio-pic he was about to start shooting. It was my biggest story at *KNOW* so far; mostly I'd been getting assigned fifty-word obituaries on retired financiers and diplomats for the Endings page. But when one of the entertainment writers got stomach flu, I was asked to fill in at the last minute, like an understudy getting a big break. There wasn't enough light in the nightclub to read a wristwatch but, true to form, Moore was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses. "Hi!" I said, extending a friendly hand. "Nice to see you again." Moore peered over his eyewear. "And you are . . . ?" I'd yet to learn this cruel lesson: No matter how many hours you spend with a celebrity, no matter how many glowing things you say about them in print, they almost never remember you. To the famous, journalists are as nameless and faceless as the back of a cab driver's head.

This seemed like a good time to make my exit. I was

looking around for Robin to say good night when the crowd started to surge and thicken. Suddenly, I found myself pressed in among a sea of bodies. The doorman must have lost control, because photographers had broken the barricades and were now inside the club, elbowing through the masses with their clunky cameras. Slowly, I started working my way toward the exit, trying not to think of headlines like NIGHTCLUB CRUSH KILLS CELEBS (AND OTHERS). But just as I was about to make my getaway, I spotted the one celebrity I really didn't want to see. It was Johnny Mars, grinning and nodding to the throng as his bodyguards cleared a path in my direction. Hanging on his arm was the one person I didn't want to see more—Sammy. I had to get out of there, but the paparazzi were going wild setting off an explosion of blinding camera flashes. I was trapped by the crowd, being swept ever closer to the hot new couple.

Sammy spotted me before I could get away. I saw her whisper something in Johnny's ear and slip out of his protective circle toward me. "I'm so sorry, Max," she said, grabbing my arm to keep me from running away. "I know I should have told you earlier. I tried to tell you so many times." She squeezed my wrist and looked for any sign of understanding. "It wasn't like I planned it," she said. "It just happened. He kept sending me these flowers, and then . . ."

Had I been given the chance, I like to think I would have responded maturely. It's possible Sammy and I might have cheerfully clinked martini glasses and merrily chatted about old times, like characters in a Noël Coward comedy. Then again, I might have reacted more like

Brando in *Streetcar*, tearing at my T-shirt and bellowing at Samantha with brutish contempt. I'll never know. Before I could utter a word, a bunch of photographers popped up out of nowhere and started snapping Samantha's picture. "Johnny's looking for you," they badgered her between snaps. "Who's this guy? Why are you talking to him?" When it became clear the photographers weren't leaving, Samantha gave my arm another squeeze, mouthed the words "I'm sorry," and turned to rejoin her movie star boyfriend. For a minute, one of the paparazzi continued shooting pictures of me. Another pap grabbed him by the arm. "Forget it—he's nobody," he said over his shoulder as he ran after Samantha.