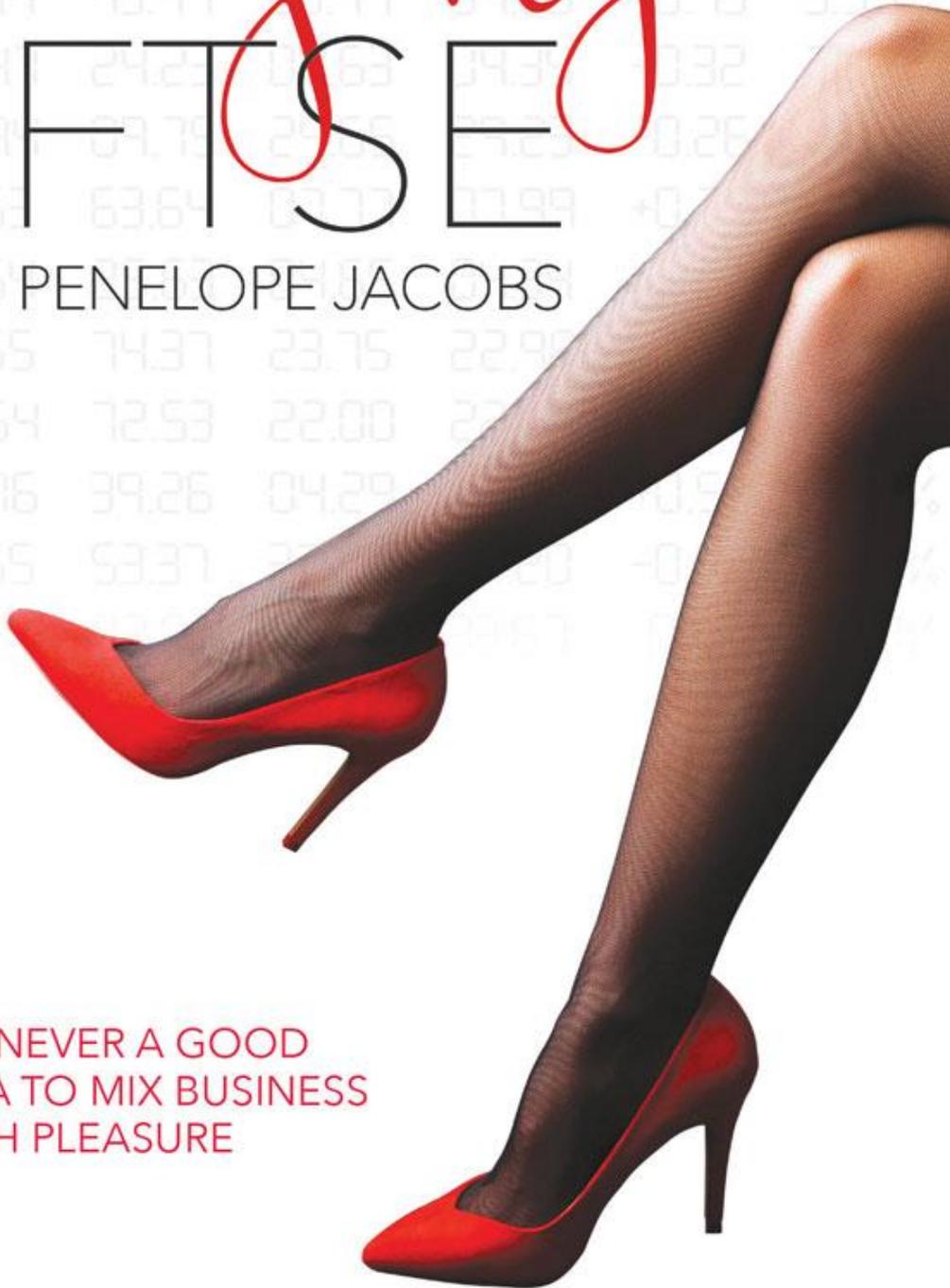


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# Playing

# FTSE

PENELOPE JACOBS



IT'S NEVER A GOOD  
IDEA TO MIX BUSINESS  
WITH PLEASURE

# Chapter One

She left without waking him.

Reaching the office an hour later, Melanie pushed through the metal turnstiles and darted into an empty lift. On the fourth floor, she swiped her card at the double doors and stepped inside the trading floor.

Would she ever get used to this place, to this mass of men? The longest hundred feet in the world. But this was her first week at work and it was vital she didn't show her nerves. Melanie lowered her head to avoid all eye contact.

"Hey, baby." Probably the same man as yesterday, but it was better not to look. What a creep. Why couldn't he leave her alone?

From the same area, another one of the traders called out. "You're late today, sweetheart. What happened?"

Melanie blushed, but straightened her back and pretended not to hear.

"We like naughty girls," said another.

Melanie kept walking. Was it that obvious that she hadn't been home the night before? Perhaps the crumpled suit betrayed her. She cursed herself for being so irresponsible.

"She's playing hard to get." The first man again. "Don't worry, sweetheart. We don't bite."

"Speak for yourself." A different man. "She's just my type."

Melanie threw him a cutting glare. Such a low-life. What were these men doing in a place like this?

Twenty feet further and another whistle. Impossible not to notice the laughter when the first man shouted, "We'll be waiting for you later, baby."

She quickened her pace, desperate to get to the other side. Thank goodness she wouldn't have to work on that floor. It was a relief she had chosen a job in research instead of sales.

"Sorry I'm late." Melanie slid into her seat.

The tutor at the end of the table scowled. "This training programme is not an optional part of the job. In case you're wondering, I've already reported you to HR. Not a great start, young lady."

"I'm really sorry." Melanie gulped. "It won't happen again." If only she could think straight. How could she have messed up her career already, especially when she'd worked so hard to get the job? Her bloody brother. The night out had been his stupid idea. Why the hell had he left her alone with Max, anyway?

From her bag, the mobile vibrated loudly. Probably a text from Max. She'd have to respond later. Gorgeous though he was, it was the last thing she felt like dealing with.

Melanie glanced across the table at Jenny, who winked back. Immaculate, perfect Jenny. A stark contrast to her own clammy state.

That next hour passed in a blur of pounding nausea. When the break arrived, Melanie succumbed to the anaemic offerings from the coffee machine. Sipping reluctantly, she closed her eyes, praying for the pain to pass. It had been such a fun evening, but sangria had been an awful mistake.

"Good night?" Jenny sidled up to her.

"What do you mean?" Melanie took a step back. Not the time to start discussing her sex life.

Jenny grinned. "You're wearing the same clothes as yesterday, so I assume you had fun."

"Jesus," said Melanie. "I'm in deep shit, and you're making a joke of it."

"Relax." Jenny put a hand on her shoulder. "I told HR your brother was in hospital and it was an emergency. They totally swallowed it."

Melanie laughed for the first time that morning. She looked at her new friend with relief. "You're amazing. Thanks...but what about the tutor?"

Jenny raised her eyebrows. "That dumpy woman just now? She's irrelevant. A nobody in the back office. Trust me."

“Really? Are you sure?” How did Jenny know all this? It was only their fourth day in the office.

“But much more importantly, how was last night?” asked Jenny.

Melanie took another sip of coffee and frowned. “If you must know, I can’t remember much. Just that my head hurts like hell.”

“Hilarious,” said Jenny. “What’s his name?”

Melanie looked away, with fragments of the night jumping into her head. Flashes of the bar, the taxi, entering Max’s apartment. But not much else. She’d never had a one-night stand before. At least, not one where she’d blacked out. “I never said there was a man involved.”

“Isn’t there always?” said Jenny.

“No, actually. My twin brother took me out to celebrate our birthday. Got carried away.”

“Yeah, I forgot,” said Jenny. “Happy birthday. Sounds like it was amusing anyway.”

“Far too amusing.” Melanie rubbed her head. “Won’t be doing that again.”

“Don’t say that. I think it’s fabulous.” Jenny paused. “Would you like to hear about my night?”

“No. I mean, of course, but not right now.” All she wanted was a decent coffee and an aspirin.

“Of course you do.” Jenny waved at the man in the corridor. “Josh was amazing.”

“What?” said Melanie. “Don’t tell me you slept with him.”

“Sure, why not? He was good. Really good.”

“Are you mad?” Melanie stared at her friend in bewilderment.

“Why are you being so sanctimonious all of a sudden? You’re the one that still stinks of alcohol.” Jenny laughed.

Melanie took an instinctive step backwards. “That’s not the point. Why are you mixing business with pleasure? It’s the first basic rule of the workplace.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Jenny. “He’s from the New York office. We won’t see him once the training is over. Just a bit of fun.”

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When they returned to the room for the next class, Jenny grabbed her arm. “Wow. Look at that woman. I wonder who she is.”

Melanie recognised her immediately. The one who had interviewed her six months previously. She’d thought about her often. Mostly in a cold sweat. “Victoria Something. She’s a sales woman.”

“How do you know that?” said Jenny, with her eyes still fixed on Victoria.

“I met her at my final interview. Complete cow.” Understatement of the century; the bitchiest woman she’d ever met. It made her shudder to set eyes on her again.

“She can’t have been that bad, if you got the job.”

“Luckily she wasn’t the only one there,” said Melanie. “Her colleague must have liked me. I’d have been finished otherwise. Do you know what she said to me?”

But Jenny wasn’t listening. “Check out her clothes. That’s got to be Chanel. And love the shoes. Louboutin for sure. Maybe you can introduce me later.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Melanie. Not a chance. She wanted nothing to do with the woman. They sat down in silence and waited for the class to begin.

A few minutes later, Victoria put down her BlackBerry and faced the ten graduates at the table.

“For those who don’t know me, I’m Victoria Parker. Director in Equity Sales.”

Jenny leaned forward to listen. She would be working in the sales team and, apart from the wardrobe tips, this would be an important presentation for her.

“Just like you, I joined as a trainee,” said Victoria. “Seven years ago.”

So she was around thirty. Already a director. How the hell had she managed that?

Victoria drew a circle on the whiteboard. “Stockbroking is very straightforward. Here in the middle is the fund manager. Our client. That is all that matters. Some of you will write research, some of you will sell those ideas to the fund manager and some of you will trade the stocks. But never forget that we are always working for the clients. They provide the commission that pays our bonuses.”

Jenny called out, “Any tips on starting out?”

Melanie glanced over at her friend, willing her not to ask any more questions.

Victoria stared at Jenny. “Put your head down and work like hell.”

“Can you be more specific?” asked Jenny.

“For starters, you’ll have to be at your desk by six and when you make your morning call to the fund manager, you need to sound intelligent. They don’t want to speak to a dumb blonde.”

“I’m not a dumb blonde,” said Jenny, clearly smarting from the unexpected abuse.

“I’m not suggesting that you are.” But the woman’s smirk indicated otherwise. She hadn’t taken her eyes off Jenny. “Be aware that this job is demanding and the graduate drop-out rate is high. Especially among women.”

Josh raised his hand. “Can you tell us about these clients, the investment managers? What do they look for, and how do you identify good stock ideas for them?”

Victoria turned to him with a perceptibly warmer tone. “Start slowly. All the fund managers are different, and they all need a distinct service. Figure out what type of investments they are looking for and, most importantly, which of our own research analysts are any good. Never promote crappy research. God knows we have plenty of that too.” She paused and looked around. “A huge part of the job is to differentiate between our good analysts and those who are totally useless. Who’s going into research?”

Melanie raised her hand reluctantly.

“Yes, I remember you.” Victoria glared at her.

Melanie nodded her head in acknowledgement, but said nothing. Why was the woman still being so aggressive? Was she a complete psychopath?

“Let me give you a tip,” said Victoria. “You know absolutely nothing right now. And you’re not useful to anyone. Don’t expect to be taken seriously by the sales team until you’ve shown you understand the companies you write about. We won’t want your opinion for a very long time.”

“Thanks,” said Melanie. What a bitch. Nothing had changed since the interview.