

Crystal@citybornsouthernliving.com

4,700 words

Blue Bird

by Crystal J. Gibson

The sun was beginning to come up to reveal the beautiful cityscape as Courtney poured her third cup of coffee. She spent the night in the office to finish the Jackson family's project, the largest account her company had landed since opening last year. Richard Jackson, the grandson of the late real estate mogul Steve Jackson, has taken over the estate since his father passed away. He has been groomed since grade school to take over the family business, so he brings his son to every meeting to make sure the family tradition continues.

They have an apartment building down the street from Courtney's company that was recently renovated and needed a designer to bring life back to the building. Promotions have started to go up around town about the grand re-opening of the apartment complex to draw in more interested tenants. The design has to make them feel welcomed and people need to be able to see themselves living there with their families.

As Courtney added the finishing touches to her presentation; her assistant Tiffany calls into her office. "Good morning Courtney! Mr. Jackson is here, should I send him back?" Smiling from the boost of energy from Tiffany's tone, Courtney replied, " Good Morning! Yes, please do. Thank you."

Tiffany walked Richard and his 6 year old son down to the office at the end of the narrow hall behind her desk. Courtney was sitting behind a large table that faced a television screen mounted to the wall. A large window behind her showed off the

impressive 15th floor corner office city view. Luckily, the sky was clear and Richard could see his apartment building from the office when he walked in.

"Welcome guys!" Courtney said as she stood up to greet Richard and his son. She waved to Tiffany to let her know she would take them from there. She pulled the two chairs facing her on the other side of the table back for them to sit down. She walked around to the other side and directed their attention to the view of the apartment building.

"We're just days away from the Manors grand opening and I want to walk you through the design virtually to make sure everything is the way you want it." Courtney sat down across from them and turned towards the TV with her virtual design displayed. As she moved throughout the space virtually, Richard's son commented a few times regarding things he didn't like. He didn't like the color on the walls, the pictures used, the color of the hardwood floors, and the shape of the light fixtures. Coming from a 6 year old, Courtney brushed off the comments and kept going through the design.

"So Richard, how are you feeling? Are you happy with the design?" Courtney asked confidently. "We can't open with the place looking like this. I'm sorry but Sean has a lot of concerns around the design choices here that need to be changed. I'd like you to make the changes that he suggested. How long do you think it will take?" Richard said. Courtney didn't take

notes from Sean's feedback because she wasn't taking him seriously. A feeling of panic came over her as she realized she was losing this account. She can't afford to change everything and be able to pay her staff for the additional time.

Courtney's phone vibrated on the table, "One moment guys, I need to take this." She walked out of the office and towards the front desk. Her husband was on the other end of the phone, "Hey, where were you last night?" Realizing she never called home to let him know she wasn't going home yesterday, Courtney took a deep breath and said calmly, "I was at work babe, sorry I forgot to call." Annoyed by her nonchalant tone he said, "I thought something happened to you last night! Here we go again, you don't care about anyone but yourself. I don't know how you do it."

"Do what?"

"Forget it, you don't care anyway. I'm going to stay at a hotel, call me when you have some time on your schedule to talk about our marriage."

"But Mike, I..." the phone hung up before she could think of a response.

Tiffany heard the whole thing but pretended to not notice Courtney's red face when she approached the front desk lobby to grab a tissue. Courtney fixed her perfectly tailored black suit jacket, wiped imaginary lint off of her skirt, then walked back into her office to finish her meeting.

Sean was complaining about being hungry and Richard was finishing up his notes for Courtney to review. "Sorry about that guys, now where were we?" Richard looked up from his notes and slightly smiled, "I've got to get this boy something to eat, here's the notes for you to review. Let me know if you can make the updates by the end of today. That'll give me enough time to consider alternatives if needed based on your feedback." Courtney glanced at the long list and said, "Absolutely, I'll be in touch. Enjoy your lunch guys!"

Courtney fell into her office couch as soon as she heard the front door close behind them in the lobby. Tiffany came in the room and sat next to her with a basket of fruit snacks from the front lobby. She handed Courtney a bag of snacks as she opened one for herself. "Was it that bad Courtney?"

She nodded, "Girl..." the phone rang and they both rolled their eyes. Tiffany got up to answer the call, "Court Design, how can I help you?" she grabbed a notebook because Courtney wasn't in any condition to speak right now. The caller hung up with Tiffany after providing their information.

"Who was that Tiffany?"

"Your son's high school attendance office again, they said he missed his morning classes today. Probably another mistake but he's going to need a letter to excuse the absence to avoid violating the limit of allowed days out of school."

Courtney sighed as she remembered that he needed a ride

from her that morning because his car was broken. Since she didn't go home, she forgot all about it. Looking through her phone, there were missed texts from him asking for a ride to school today that she missed. Her complete focus was on the Jackson account that she more than likely will lose today. She texted her son back a quick sorry note. He gave her a one word response, "sure." Like he always does when he's not interested in hearing her excuses.

"That reminds me, I have to go pick up Emma from daycare today. Do you need anything else before I go?"

"Aww baby Emma, give her a hug for me. I'll see you tomorrow Tiff."

Tiffany gave her a hug and left the office.

Courtney sat at her desk to prepare for the disappointing call she needed to make about not being able to make the adjustments for the Jackson estate. The long list of updates left behind were impossible, most of them would take her team months to complete. She's already slightly over budget for this project, additional time and work work would take her company under.

As she turned her chair to look out the window behind her, a drawer stopped her chair from turning around all the way. The right bottom drawer under her desk was slightly open with paper hanging out of it. She opened the drawer to throw out the clutter. Sitting on top was the a old flier from her grand

opening last year. The flier read, "We're Open For Business! Let
Court Design Make Your Space Home."

Looking in the bathroom mirror covered in steam from his shower gave him an excuse to stay secluded for a few more moments waiting for it to clear.

The counter was covered with ashes surrounded by empty red cups and bottles of half drunken liquor around double sinks. Richard's maid knocked on the door twice to check on him. "Give me a minute - I'll let you know when I'm out!" He whispered loud enough for her to hear him but not so loud to make his pounding migraine worse.

While the steam was clearing out, he walked through his large attached closet to find something to wear. While looking up at the clothes hung up, he noticed his assistant already placed his outfit in the middle of the room. Everything was curated in his life, the only time he forgot were days like this. When he spent the night pretending to be a normal person, partying with people who had no idea of the lifestyle he had to deal with everyday.

They made him feel regular but then they leave.

The maids clean up and the assistance curate the perfect life they were paid to keep in place for his family. People are usually escorted out of the house before he wakes up and his 6 year old son Sean is called over from his residence next door at 8am daily for breakfast. "It's 7:30a do you need anything before breakfast sir?" His assistant asks through the other side of the closet door. "No, I'm good," Richard said as he put his clothes

on and walked back into the bathroom to check his face.

The bathroom door opened, "I said I was" He yelled before noticing that the woman walking in wasn't his maid or assistant. It was one of the women from the party last night. "Hey, can I use the bathroom?"

"Yea sure. Let me get out your way."

"Thanks, Morning," she said smiling as she closed the door in his face.

Richard looked at this maid who was standing in the hall next to the bathroom door with her cart waiting to clean. She was as confused as he was. She shrugged her shoulders; then walked the other direction towards the other rooms down the hall to start her morning cleaning routine.

After a few moments, the door opened and the woman walked out and towards his bedroom. As she walked down the hall she said, "That was a wild night, you should have made them clean up before telling them to get out your house last night." He followed her, still not remembering the details of the night.

"Crazy, how you end up stayin?"

"You asked me to. You don't remember saying.... Tiff, please stay here. Please Tiff....how could I say no to that?"

Richard sat on the corner of the bed watching her gather her purse preparing this leave.

"Are you staying for breakfast?"

Something about this woman made Richard not want her to

leave. She felt safe and familiar.

"I wish, have to pick my daughter up from my mother's house before work. Your son is waiting for you at breakfast. It was fun last night. Let's just keep it at fun. I'll see you around."

Richard nodded his head in agreement to appear cool, saying "Right, see you around. I'll walk you down."

"That's okay, I know my way out Richard. Call me later, my number is in your phone."

Tiffany walked out the bedroom and walked downstairs towards the front door as Richard stood at the bedroom door watching her leave.

"Sir, Sean is in the kitchen waiting for you at the table," his assistant yelled up the stairs.

"Okay, tell him I'll be there in a minute."

Richard walked back to the bathroom, which was clean of all evidence of his party the night before. Looked in the clean, clear mirror and realized how aged his facial features were starting to appear in the reflection back to him. "I'm too old for this," he thought as he stared at the gray hair starting to take over his beard.

When he made it to the kitchen table, Sean was almost finished with his pancakes. Richard just grabbed a muffin and coffee before getting into the back of the car with Sean as their driver took them downtown to the Court Design office. On the way there, Richard sent a text to Tiffany asking when he can

see her again.

It took about 30 minutes to get to the office and no response from his text. Sean was full of questions about the apartment building and what we wanted to make sure they walk away from the meeting with. His son was exactly like his father and grandfather, completely consumed with business. Richard was good at keeping things maintained but they were always focused on how to make things better. How to take things to the next level.

The passion skipped Richard and got into his son somehow.

Richard was focused more on his personal life. Being happy was something on his mind lately and the woman in his house that morning was heavy on his mind.

They arrived at the office, went up the elevator, and walked towards the front desk where they were met by the woman he was thinking about.

Both shocked, they kept the fact that they knew each other quiet.

"Hi, Courtney is expecting you guys. I'll let her know you're here."

"Thank you!" Said Sean.

Courtney told Tiffany to go ahead and walk them back.

After walking them back, Tiffany went back to her desk and returned Richard's text.

"Hey, I'll meet you at your place after I drop my daughter

off at home tonight."

"Cool. Okay see you then," he text-ed back as he smiled.

Richard was so excited, he didn't hear most of the conversation. He just knew Sean didn't like it, so he left Courtney with a list of things to correct based on Sean's feedback, which he trusted because it was like his grandfather speaking through a 6 year olds body.

The club was about to close.

Tiffany finished dancing with the guy who was watching her the whole night before finishing her drink and leaving out with her girls. As they walked towards the parking lot she heard a deep voice yell, " Come with me. Let's keep this night going!"

She gave her girls that look they knew too well. Tiffany gave her friends a quick hug and walked back towards the club entrance door to meet the man wanting to continue his night with her.

As soon as she reached the door, valet pulled his car up with two other women in the backseat. She turned around to look for her friends but they were gone already. "Who are they?" she asked.

"My friends asked if they can ride with us to the house. Everybody is already there - we're late, let's go."

"Rich, let's go!" the girls in the back screamed as Tiffany rolled her eyes and sat in the passenger seat. Valet closed her door and he sped off before she could get seat belt on.

A few moments later, they pulled up to a large gate with a intercom. "Open up!" the guy yelled. A bell quickly buzzed and he drove through the gates down a winding dark driveway towards the largest house Tiffany had ever seen in her life.

"You live in a damn castle?"

"Nah, it's just where the party is. Relax." He said as he parked the car and leaned over to give Tiffany a kiss.

The girls in the backseat went quiet as Tiffany looked back at them with a big smile. She waited for him to open her car door and they both walked into the house as the girls in the back followed in behind them.

The house was full of people but the guy Tiffany was with made her feel like she was the only person who mattered to him in the room. They had a few drinks and danced for some more songs. She learned that his name was Richard, he has a son, and this place was his. He lied to her just to get her to come into the house and spend time with him.

She liked that he told her the truth.

As the night went on, they both were starting to fall asleep on the front room couch. Richard, walked Tiffany upstairs to his room to sleep in the bed and he slept in the room next door.

Tiffany woke up early in the morning confused by where she was. Her clothes were on which was a relief. She got up to use the bathroom and there he was. Richard.

"He probably doesn't even remember my name," she thought as she asked him to use the bathroom.

The expression on his face told the whole story, he had no idea who she was. She was just another girl he brought home from the club. Tiffany was so embarrassed because she violated her rule of not spending the night. Especially with someone like this guy.

She finished up in the bathroom and quickly grabbed the her things from the bedroom to leave. He stopped her in the hallway to offer breakfast but she made up a excuse to get out of there quickly.

Tiffany called a taxi to meet her at the front gate. After taking the longest morning shame walk down that driveway to meet the taxi; she had about 30 minutes to stop by her apartment to change clothes and get ready for work. She picked her daughter up from her mother's house, dropped her off at daycare, then headed to work.

Walking into the office, everyone was welcoming her back. She was out on a leave of absence for a three months after a hysterectomy surgery. She decided to take her vacation right after the surgery to celebrate her new life without pain. As soon as she got the green light from her doctor, she partied every night. Coming back into the office was a big dose of reality that she had spent months avoiding.

"Welcome back Tiffany!" her boss Courtney yelled as she peeked out of her office. "Thank you Court! Glad to be back!"

She sat down at her desk in the front to look over the schedule for the week. Tiffany started to sign on to her laptop when the elevator doors opened.

Richard and his son stepped out and walked towards her. "We have an appointment with Courtney, is she available?" the little boy asked.

With a brief hesitation, Tiffany asked them to wait for a moment while she checked with Courtney. She walked back to her office, then signaled for the guys to proceed down the hall for their scheduled meeting. Richard looked as shocked as she did but they both didn't want to create an awkward scene.

Tiffany sent him a text when she got back to her desk. She believes in fate and hopes he does too.

Courtney put the flier back into her desk drawer and smiled as she turned her chair around to admire the cityscape.

The phone rang.

"Hey, I've got a flat tire. Can you please pick up Emma from daycare. I can text you the address. Just take her to your house and I'll get her after the roadside guys get here and fix my tire. Can you please?"

"Of course, on my way!"

"Thank you!"

Courtney hung up, grabbed her purse and ran out of the office to pick up baby Emma.

In the car, she thought about that flier and how things started.

At first, most of her clients were family friends or someone her husband would refer to her from his job. They would meet with her for a free consultation to discuss their design plans, review her fees, and sign a contract if they wanted to work with Courtney. She was a one woman business which worked well for her at first. Jobs were coming in slow and never overlapped until a few months before she put in her notice at work. Six large jobs came her way in one month and she had to make a decision between her job and business because this would require her full time attention in order to make this work. Her husband reassured her that leaving the corporate life behind was best, "It'll always be there if you need to go back," he told

her the day she signed the contract for the sixth job that month. The money from those jobs were more than what she was getting paid; it was a risk but she was going to go for it.

Courtney was the risk taker of the family. When she was in grade school, her teachers offered a program that allowed children to go to school and live with a family overseas. She begged her parents to let her participate when she was just 10 years old. Worn down by the begging, they let her do the 2 year program in Switzerland. After the program, Courtney couldn't stop thinking about the woman's home she stayed in. She was an interior designer and allowed Courtney to spend most her time with her when she wasn't in class. Courtney helped the woman, acting as her assistant, and learned how life could be designing spaces for a living. This was the first time she had seen a woman own her business and live her life on her own terms. She made her own schedule, chose the clients she worked with, and negotiated her own pay.

When she got back home, her focus all the way through the rest of school and into her first job was to someday have a life like the woman she watched for a few months in Switzerland. Although the woman was the polar opposite of Courtney from the outside looking in, she could see herself in the short skinny pale blond haired, blue eyed woman who put so much more thought into her designs than her own fashion. Courtney's dark skin and tall curvy frame was an asset to her that she used to set

herself apart from others in her field. In college, she would present her designs with tall poster board and strut back and forth as she described each part of her work as if she were telling a fascinating story. You would think there was music playing behind her as the rhythm of her words fit perfectly with the beat of her heels clicking against the floor as she switched to different parts of her design presentation, back and forth she walked in front of her admiring class. She used her body and sound to draw people into her work which no one else was doing at the time.

Courtney has been talking about this dream since she met Tiffany and promised to bring her into the company when she made enough to do so. Like everyone around Courtney, Tiffany wanted to just be apart of the big plan because the vision was too clear and specific to not happen. Her passion for design wasn't as strong as Courtney but she learned how to be extremely organized and business oriented from her community college courses . Marketing, economics, and finance were Tiffany's favorite classes so Courtney felt like she was the perfect person to work with because they complemented each other.

Courtney's phone rang right when she got back in the car from picking up baby Emma from daycare.

"I've got her girl, don't worry. Did they fix your car yet?"

Tiffany paused for a sec, "Thank you. Yep they fixed it. Um ... your son called me - Mike was in a car accident. Meet me at the hospital"

"What!?!? Okay I'm on my way!" Courtney yelled as she drove through a red light.

When she pulled up, Tiffany and her son met her at the front door.

"What happened?"

Her son put his head down and walked back towards the building.

"He's been quiet since I got here," Tiffany said as she took Emma out of Courtney's car.

Courtney went inside the hospital to get more information about what happened to her husband.

The nurse sat her down in the lobby and explained that he was in a car accident with her son. A deer ran into the road and hit his side of the car, he lost control and smashed into a wall. Her son had minor bruises when he arrived - her husband is in surgery for serious injuries. She's optimistic about his recovery but won't know for sure until after the surgery.

"I'll wait here, you can go ahead home. Sounds like Mike

will be here for a while."

"I'm not leaving you, my mom is on her way to pick up Emma," said Tiffany.

Courtney's son asked if he could go with Tiffany's mom. "Of course, you should get some rest. You've had a long day," Courtney said while giving him big hug.

After Tiffany's mom picked the kids up, they went into the lobby to wait for updates on Mike.

"I can't believe this is happening, man I wasted so much time," Courtney said as she wiped tears from her cheeks.

Tiffany opened her purse and pulled out her stash of fruit snacks from the office to share with Courtney.

She moved to the seat next to her and handed her a bag, "Don't beat yourself up, this was a accident."

"I remember on our honeymoon, we said anytime we see a blue bird that's God reminding us to think about how much we love each other. That helped me through so much, all those tough times. There wasn't a day that went by that I didn't see a blue bird. Thinking about our love helped me through so much until..."

"Until what?"

"I let this company take over my life. I was always in the building and if a blue bird was around when I was out, don't think I would have noticed. Mike tried to keep us together. I always thought there would be another time to connect but that

time never seemed to happen," said Courtney.

"Excuse me, I have an update on Mike. Can you please come with me?" says the nurse.

Tiffany gives Courtney a hug before she walked out in the hallway with the nurse.

She came back in the waiting room with eyes full of tears.

"He's going to be okay. I can go back and see him in a few minutes. He's not awake yet - I want to make sure I'm right there when he wakes up. Thanks for waiting with me Tiff. I really needed you here."

"Thank God! I'm going to head home, let me know if you need anything. I'm here for you," Tiffany said as she picked up her purse to leave.

After a few weeks, Mike was still in the process of recovering from his injuries. He needed around the clock assistance along with physical therapy. Courtney wouldn't leave his side.

She would need to pick between her business and taking care of her husband. Her son started to open up more about his feelings about the accident while he helped her take care of his dad.

While Mike slept, she checked emails and made a few phone calls. Courtney knew this wouldn't last long.

She found a drafted email that she never sent to Richard

before the accident. After reading it over, she went ahead and hit send. Shortly after, he responded.

Sorry to hear about your husband. I think you had everything ready to go before all this happened. Tiffany reached out and we're all set to open up in a few days. Thanks again for all your help. My wire should hit your account soon too. Let me know if there's anything else we need to do on our end. Best Wishes, Richard.

Courtney quickly checked her account and his payment was there. Enough to sell her business and stay home with her family for a while.

A year later, her family attended Richard and Tiffany's wedding.

The newlyweds, who bought Courtney's business, had blue birds released at the end of their wedding after vowing to always keeping each other first.