


*The Devil in the
Junior League*




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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the
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The Devil in the Junior League

Chapter One

THE JUNIOR LEAGUE of Willow Creek, Texas, is *très* exclusive, one of the oldest and most elite women's societies in the country. And we work hard to keep it that way. Outsiders need not apply.

I know it sounds terrible. But really, if I don't explain everything exactly, in all its unvarnished truth, how will you ever understand how it was possible that I got myself into what I now call the "unfortunate situation" and how all the gossip about *moi* got started.

So yes, it's true that we at the Junior League of Willow Creek are all about being made up of the *crème de la crème* of society. Do you believe the richest of the rich in Texas would donate money, weeks on their sprawling ranches, or lunches in their elegant mansions to just anyone? I think not. And how do you think we raise all those bundles of money that we turn around and give away to the needy?

From the above-mentioned rich.

I am Fredericka Mercedes Hildebrand Ware, and despite the antiquated sound of my name, I'm only twenty-eight years old. My friends call me Frede—pronounced *Freddy*. My husband calls me "Fred."

I like to think of the collective members of the JLWC as a sort of female Robin Hood (though better dressed since, God knows, not one of us would be caught dead in tights) who cajoles money out of her rich husband and indirectly out of his rich company as she lies in bed at night rubbing her perfectly manicured toes up against his leg.

It goes something like this:

Laying the groundwork.

"Sweetie, if Basco, Branden, and Battle donates a trip on their private jet for the League's Christmas Fair Silent Auction, whisking the lucky winner away to Aspen for a week of skiing, I'm sure it would be one of the top money earners, if not the top earner at the Fair."

Framing the competition.

"Of course you heard, didn't you, that Robert Melman has offered up his company yacht for a Caribbean cruise? Mindy Melman, bless her heart, gloated all through the last General Meeting when she got to announce the news."

Closing the deal.

"You know it's tax deductible, sugar. And after Basco got in that tiny little tiff with the State Bar Ethics Committee last month, I'm certain if the firm donates to a charity of our stature it will certainly give Basco a big gold star. Besides, you remember, don't you, that the Ethics Committee chairman is Jim Wyman, Cecelia Wyman's husband?"

Sex follows some of the time, though the donation is guaranteed.

To be completely honest, not every member is married, and certainly not every member of the JLWC is fabulously wealthy. Mind you, no one is headed for the poorhouse—well, maybe a few are who invested badly, pretended they had more than they did, or got tangled up with nasty habits that cost *beaucoup* amounts of m-o-n-e-y to support. And really, who wants that sort of member anyway, so the sooner they get to the poorhouse and can't pay their dues, the better. Why prolong their misery, I say.

I know, I sound even worse than terrible now, but truly, it's the charitable thing to do to give a gentle nudge out the door so they don't keep spending what they no longer have in an ill-fated attempt to save face.

As I mentioned, the JLWC is made up of the *crème de la crème* of Willow Creek society, no question, but within the League, there are different tiers.

Tier One: Wealthy members with socially prominent names, which trumps . . .

Tier Two: Members with socially prominent names but no significant wealth, which trumps . . .

Tier Three: Members with m-o-n-e-y but no name.

To secure a place at any level in the JLWC, a woman's reputation must

be beyond reproach, she must gain the full endorsement of six members in good standing who have known her for a minimum of five years—be they active members or “retired” members called “sustainers”—and pass the interview process with the membership committee. It’s not so unlike the president of the United States trying to get an appointee approved by Congress.

You are probably wondering where I fit into this caste system. It just so happens that I’m one of the few members with my own wealth and my own good name, which is how I get away with having a j-o-b and no one blinks an eye.

Yes, a job.

You see I own an amazing art gallery with a full-time staff that thankfully does most of the work. I provide the good taste and the (endless stream of) funding. I feel it’s my duty to support poor starving artists (as long as their art is fabulously chic and never tacky), plus the write-off makes my husband and accountant beyond happy.

To put me in an even higher stratum, my husband is Gordon Ware, the youngest son of the Milburn Smythe Ware family. You may have heard of him.

The Wares have a fine old Texas name, even if they no longer have the fine old Texas wealth their patriarch gained when he struck black gold in his backyard at the turn of the last century. Sometimes I think Gordon has never gotten over this, and if everyone didn’t say that I was the most beautiful woman in Willow Creek—which isn’t entirely true since Anne Watson is a former Miss Texas . . . though she is in her thirties now—I would fear my husband married me for my bank account.

Even though the wealth is mine, Gordon manages it, which means I still do the toe dance to convince him that “our money,” as he now calls it, is put to good use.

Not that anyone I know ever discusses the toe dance. How could we since we at the JLWC never talk about sex. Instead, my friends and I talk about the usual:

1. Their kids because their husbands never listen
2. Trends in hair, clothes, and household staff
3. Who is losing or has lost their m-o-n-e-y

We have a few other topics that we discuss regularly, which need a bit more explanation:

1. Anna—the type of anorexic woman who swears she eats everything in sight, but darn it all, just can't gain weight. I say it would help if she stopped sticking her finger down her throat so she can maintain her size-four figure.
2. Blue Light Special—having nothing to do with Kmart. In this case, BLS would be those unfortunate souls who bleach their teeth so white they look blue. This sort of woman is usually seen with a cup of coffee in her hand at all times, only drinks red wine, and more often than not comes from places like California.
3. BJ—stands for “breast job,” not “blow job,” since Junior Leaguers really aren't the blow job sorts. Too messy.
4. Jolie—fake lips.
5. NC—a person with No Class, pronounced *Nancy*. Using it in a sentence would go something like this: “There's a Nancy with a Blue Light Special, a really bad BJ, and Jolies the size of inner tubes.”

Next comes our favorite topic, Categories of Men. There are three varieties:

1. Rich, good-looking men—otherwise known as “Pay Dirt,” because just about every rich man in Texas has made his money from oil, land, or cattle
2. Poor, good-looking men—commonly referred to as “A Shame”—for the waste of good looks
3. Poor ugly men—well, frankly, why bother giving them a name

I can just hear all those feminists in the blue states having a fit over the things we talk about, not to mention the *modus operandi* of using our wiles to get donations from our husbands. As it turns out, it was some of those feminist types who threw very public fits, forcing the Ju-

nior League's national office to establish democratic guidelines for admission.

Texas has not succumbed, with varying degrees of success, and still fights against weakening our exclusive ramparts just as our ancestors fought against the Spanish, the French, and eventually the Union Army. In the Lone Star State it is still easier to gain entrance to the Governor's Mansion than it is to gain membership to the Junior League of Willow Creek.

Now, rest assured, the Junior Leagues in Texas, and even the JLWC, have complied to the letter of the new law by removing the age-old blackballing process, and applying "democratic" standards for admission. Perhaps those standards are a tad on the high side (see above) and only the most prominent women in town can meet them. However, if standards are met, she's in. I swear.

It's all very democratic. How can we be blamed if a woman hasn't known six JLWC members for a minimum of five years who would be willing to put their reputations on the line to get her in?

I've ruffled feathers, I know. But really, I had to give you a little background so you can fully appreciate how the Junior League of Willow Creek works and how the "unfortunate situation" got started.

What amazes me is that on the day my life went awry, I woke up in the most *fabu* mood. I got out of bed early and all of the sudden I realized I felt queasy. Sick! Me!

Excited, I dashed to my marble bathroom—a luscious room that I dare say is bigger than most every home on the wrong side of the Willow Creek railroad tracks—leaned over the commode and managed to gag a time or two. Okay, I didn't actually get sick, but it was close and I was elated. Morning sickness!

As further proof of my delicate condition, my always flat stomach was puffy—from pregnancy, I was certain, not from the five pieces of double chocolate fudge cake I'd had the night before due to serious depression over my lack of *petit* Fredericks or *petite* Frederickas.

I didn't need any other proof. After six long years of trying, six long years of, first, spontaneous sex, then charted sex, followed by every sort of fertility treatment known to man, I was pregnant. The toe dance had finally worked for more than a donation.

Which was why I was distracted that day at JLWC headquarters

when I was attending the New Projects Committee meeting. Only the executive members of the committee were in attendance that day as we tried to determine which new project we should select for the coming fiscal year. I'm not sure I could have taken the entire group of eight and their gossip disguised as important news. While I'm all for gossip, it can make meetings drag on for ages, and that day—chop, chop—I was in a hurry.

"Frede, how many applications for funding have we received?"

This from Pilar Bass, head of our committee.

I had known Pilar most of my life. In first grade she and I started a little group of best friends. We swore we would be friends to the end. But schoolgirl promises have little to do with reality—at least that was what Pilar said, a realist, I realize now, even back then at the ripe old age of six.

As it turned out, she was right. She and our devoted little group fell apart our sophomore year of high school. Every time we see each other now we pretend we didn't spend every Friday night sleeping over at each other's houses, freezing each other's training bras, sharing secrets and clothes, or pricking fingers to become lifelong blood sisters.

In high school Pilar was voted Best New Debater. I was voted Most Beautiful. By the end of our tenure at Willow Creek High, she was president of the Debate Team, I our Homecoming Queen. After high school, she made the mistake of going up north to college, then took a job in New York City. By the time she returned to Texas they had managed to take quite a bit of the Texas out of the girl.

She came back to town wearing boxy black clothes and glasses. Out with the contact lenses, in with the horn-rimmed, thick-framed spectacles that . . . well . . . by Texas beauty standards turned her into a spectacle. And the hair. Does anyone in New York really think all that flat hair is attractive?

But I digress.

As an adult, Pilar had become an ambitious Leaguer, approaching every issue like a savage corporate warrior and trying everyone's last nerve. She had forgotten that it was possible, and decidedly more desirable, to wrap one's true feelings up in "bless your hearts" and "aren't you sweets." She'd forgotten that ferreting out true meaning from words swathed in smiles was an art form—Texas girls learning the skill just like

they learned the waltz for their debutante balls. She had become direct, forgetting the rules of acceptable behavior that were learned like secret handshakes, passed down from generation to generation.

Now, don't misunderstand, it's not that Texas women don't have opinions or share them. We do. It's just that we wrap them up in honey and smiles and hugs until a sharp rebuke can feel like a compliment, the true meaning not sinking in until later, hitting like a left hook to the jaw. As the saying goes, a Texas woman can tell you to go to hell, and make you think you're going to enjoy the trip.

"Frede, are you listening?" Pilar asked, her tone grating, her perfectly straight, blunt-cut black hair swinging militantly across her shoulders.

No didn't seem like the perfect answer. (See above reference to rules on acceptable communication.) Besides, truly I was distracted. While I was certain I was pregnant I had no official confirmation. The second I could slip away from the meeting I would, skipping the practically required after-meeting lunch at Brightlee, the Junior League tearoom. Everyone would expect me to be there for the rest of the afternoon. By leaving early, I would be free of interference, phone calls, or demands on my attention. I could go home to use the Clear Blue pregnancy test I'd picked up at the drugstore on my way to the meeting.

Not willing to share any of that, I scrambled around in my brain for some snippets of the conversation that might have sunk in.

Pilar sighed. "I asked how many applications for new projects we've received."

"Oh, yes, of course." I adjusted the cream-colored cashmere sweater that draped elegantly across my shoulders, then pulled out my personalized FREDE WARE notepad and scanned it. "We've received twenty applications, only sixteen of which included a detailed proposal. When it was all said and done, I narrowed the running down to five."

An ominous moment of silence passed.

"You narrowed it down?"

Her tone was imperious and the other girls of the New Projects Executive Committee came to attention then pressed back in their straight-backed chairs. Gathering myself, I glanced from face to face of our little group. There was Lizabeth Mortimer, who was thirty-two if she was a

day, though she swore to anyone who would listen that she was twenty-eight. Unfortunately for her, she had been a senior at Willow Creek High School when I was a freshman, and I knew for a fact she wasn't twenty-anything. But the thing was, she had been dating that cute Ramsey boy who was only twenty-six, and really, what woman wants to be older than her beau. That is, unless she's forty and catches a twenty-six-year-old, in which case I say, *Brava!*

The other woman present, besides yours truly, Pilar, and Lizabeth, was Gwen Hansen. Actually it was Gwendolyn Moore-Bentley-Baker-Hansen. She'd been married and divorced three times, was approaching forty and the Sustainer years, when members of the JLWC are forced from an active role to one that is more supervisory. We all knew she had slept her way through Willow Creek and never would have gotten into the JLWC if she hadn't already been a member when she decided to turn sex into a sport. Just as with those Supreme Court Justices, it's *très difficile* to get a woman out once she's in, short of having her head for the poorhouse.

Unfortunately for the JLWC, Gwen had more money than even *moi*, so we had resorted to trying to get her married for a fourth time in hopes that she would settle down.

As to Pilar and her ominous glare, she didn't make me nervous. What was she going to do? Kick me out? Me, Frede Ware?

She might be ambitious, but everyone who was anyone knew that I would no doubt follow in my own mother's footsteps and one day become president of the Junior League.

I smiled at her with the patience of a saint. "Pilar, sugar, if you want to take the applications and go through them yourself, fine by me." I retrieved the Louis Vuitton messenger bag I had bought especially for this committee, and retrieved the stack of official forms and thick stacks of detailed proposals.

When I extended them to her, she sniffed. "Fine, we'll consider the five."

I swear I didn't gloat. I simply began my little talk with a graceful smile.

"Maurice Trudeaux's wife sent in a form requesting we start a sculpture garden around Maurice's work."

A heavy sigh of boredom shimmered through the group, and Lizabeth and Gwen resumed their glossed-over stares.

Maurice Trudeau might be one of Texas's finest sculptors, having trained in Europe, but he was short and not particularly blessed in the looks department. It didn't matter that Trudeau's *Pietà* was one of the most exquisite, and had been on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At least, it didn't matter to the other members of the committee. I, on the other hand, cared a great deal, and as president and owner of Hildebrand Galleries (not to mention with my degree in art history from Willow Creek University), I felt it my duty to give opinions on all things art related.

"His work is simply perfection. A true Texas gift. His wife says we could get the garden started with a hundred thousand dollars and ten to twelve volunteers."

Pilar was scribbling as fast as she could on her own (boring spiral) notepad.

"Next on the list," I went on, "is a horse camp for autistic children. Ten thousand. While I love the idea of helping autistic children, I don't think we could get the twenty volunteers needed to staff it from within our membership. All that mucking out of stalls."

The women murmured their agreement.

"Project number three is an after-school tutoring program for underprivileged children in South Willow Creek which needs thirty thousand and eight volunteers.

"Number four is a physical fitness program for a senior citizens' community that needs sixty thousand and ten volunteers.

"Lastly, we have a request for two fabulous, brand-new neonatal machines for St. Bethany Hospital, and five volunteers. Each machine costs a hundred thousand dollars. It fits our profile best, plus, Margaret James has been hounding me every day since she's the one who is ringleading the project. If the League agrees to the proposal, she and her husband will match our funds."

At the mention of Margaret's name, the not-so-young-but-sweet Lizabeth stifled a laugh (barely), Pilar pressed her lips closed in distaste, and our very own Gets-around Gwen got a superior look in her eye. Margaret's reputation was worse than Gwen's, though it had nothing to do

with sexcapades. Also unlike Gwen, Margaret was bending over backward to redeem her sullied reputation after her husband had gotten crossways with the law.

Fortunately, all had been straightened out and he had gotten little more than a slap on the wrist. Unfortunately, he had done the most NC sort of thing by hiring the infamously vulgar attorney Howard Grout. I had never seen the lawyer and I hoped I never would, but I heard he was the worst sort of hound dog, was said to be wild, wore gold chains and tasteless clothes, and had *beaucoup* amounts of new m-o-n-e-y. In short, he was the worst sort of cliché.

He was also my neighbor.

I lived in The Willows of Willow Creek, an exclusive gated community. About two years earlier, Howard and his flashy wife bought the old DuPont place next to mine, which was bad enough. But then they immediately tore it down and proceeded to build the most disreputable foreign-looking, palacelike structure, which had outraged the neighborhood.

"Enough, ladies," Pilar said, breaking into the gossip that had erupted in our ranks. "While I think all the projects are worthy of attention, each one is similar to something we are already doing. Frede, I want to go over the entire group of applications, after all. In fact," she added, with not a little smugness, "I have an idea of my own that I think we should pursue."

Lizabeth and Gwen sucked in their breaths. I went very still as Pilar considered me through her horn-rimmed glasses, but I wasn't about to be undone by a blue-state convert. I simply smiled and handed over the stack.

"You are so completely right, sugar. You should go through the files." I gave Pilar a sympathetic look. "I'm sure you have plenty of time to do your work and mine too. And no doubt you have a fabulous idea."

Or not. Everyone knew that Pilar was not an idea woman.

I stood and blew kisses all around. "Ciao, girls. I have to dash."

"What about lunch?" Lizabeth asked, recovering from her shock.

"Sorry, sugar. I have some unexpected business to take care of."

I made my escape and my heart beat in time with the click of my Manolo flats (stilettos are *très* NC and no one would be caught dead wearing them to a committee meeting) as I hurried across the parking lot