



The Player (The Moorehouse Legacy)

By J. R. Ward

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A powerful man finds the one woman who completes him. The second *Moorehouse Legacy* novel from *New York Times* bestselling author J.R. Ward writing as Jessica Bird. *Ruthless* might as well be Gray Bennett's middle name. When the renowned Washington, D.C., insider talks, powerful people listen. But Gray hasn't come home to Saranac Lake to play politics. Or play at all. A tragedy has brought Gray Bennett back to face everything he thought he'd left behind. Including the most unlikely of women. The mousy redhead who used to run around the Moorehouse B and B—the one he never noticed—is now all fiery hair and lush curves. But sweet Joy Moorehouse is too innocent for a cynic like him. So Gray won't let himself lay a hand on her...until the night he can no longer resist the woman she has become. That's when he discovers a secret that leaves him gasping for breath—and wanting more. A reader-favorite story originally published as *His Comfort and Joy*.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Terrific...explosive...exciting.... Ward has outdone herself." -Publishers Weekly on *Lover Enshrined* (starred review)

"Jessica Bird gives us a romance of rare depth, humor and sensuality." -RT Book Reviews on *Beauty and the Black Sheep*

"Dramatic, edgy and intense, this story has a larger-than-life, dark hero who takes the sweet heroine (and the reader) to some exciting places." -RT Book Reviews on *His Comfort and Joy*

"Jessica Bird's *A Man in a Million* features a larger-than-life, irresistible hero and an equally complex, intriguing heroine. Top-notch." -RT Book Reviews

About the Author

J.R. Ward is a #1 New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of erotic paranormal romance who also writes contemporary romance as Jessica Bird. She lives in the south with her incredibly supportive husband and her beloved golden retriever. After graduation from law school, she began working in healthcare in Boston and spent many years as chief of staff of one of the premier academic medical centers in the nation. Writing has always been her passion and her idea of heaven is a whole day of nothing by her computer, her dog and her coffee pot. Visit her online at www.JRWard.com.

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The boat's engine throbbed as Grayson Bennett kept the *Hacker* at a low speed and close to the lakeshore. The antique, thirty-foot craft was his pride and joy, a relic of the Great Gatsby era of lake life. Made of mahogany and varnished to a shine so bright it could hurt your eyes, the *Bellitas* was indeed a thing of beauty. And she was wickedly fast. The long, thin design provided three discreet seating areas, marked by contoured banquettes in dark green leather. The massive engine, capable of shooting the boat through the water at speeds of sixty miles an hour, took up a good six feet of space in the middle.

He would miss her when he put her up on blocks for the winter, and the time for her yearly hibernation was coming fast. He could feel it in the air.

Even though it was the middle of the day, September was cool in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York. To take the edge off the chill, he was wearing a windbreaker and his only passenger, aside from a big, very happy golden retriever, had on a thick sweater.

Naturally, the dog had plenty of insulation.

Gray looked across the seat at the woman who stared at the cliffs they were passing. Cassandra Cutler's thick red hair was secured at her neck and her green eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. The frames covered up the dark circles of her exhaustion, too.

No doubt she saw little of the rocks and pine trees, he thought. Life had to be an inconsequential blur for

someone who'd become a widow only six weeks ago.

"How're we doing?" he asked his old, dear friend. She smiled slightly, a tense expression he knew she worked at. "I'm glad you pestered me to get out of the city."

"Good."

"I can't imagine I'm enjoyable company, though," Cassandra said.

"You're not here to perform."

Gray focused on the lake ahead as the silence was filled with the sound of the boat's deep-throated engine and the lapping of water against the wooden gunnels. Sunshine glinted off the mahogany, flashed over the tops of the gentle waves, brought out the vivid blue of the sky and the dense green of the mountains. The air was so clear and clean that when he breathed deep, the inside of his nose hummed.

It was a perfect fall day. And he was about to shoot the hell out of his quiet enjoyment.

When they'd left his estate's boathouse, he could have taken them in any direction. To the south, where they could have danced around a thicket of small islands. Across to the west to see some of the other big stretches of property.

But no, he'd chosen the north where sooner or later the old Moorehouse mansion would appear. White Caps was a big white birthday cake of a house, perched on a three-acre bluff. Once the family's lavish private home, it had been turned into a bed-and-breakfast by them when their money had run out.

But he wasn't going to look at the property.

When the bluff appeared in the distance, his eyes narrowed. The long rolling lawn, which drifted from White Caps' porches to the shore, was a dazzling green. Oaks and maples framed the house, already turning colors from the frosts that came at night.

He couldn't see anyone and he looked harder, even as he started to turn the boat around.

Cassandra didn't need to get anywhere near the Moorehouse place. Her husband's sailing partner, who'd survived the yachting accident, was recovering there with his family. Gray wasn't sure she knew that or whether she'd want to see Alex, but he wasn't inclined to take a chance at giving her another shock. She'd had enough bad surprises lately.

Cassandra's voice did not break his concentration. "My husband liked you, Gray."

"I liked Reese," he said, looking over his shoulder at the house, eyes searching.

"But he thought you were a dangerous man."

"did he?"

"He said you knew where most of the bodies were buried in Washington, D.C. Because you'd put a lot of them in the ground."

He made a noise in the back of his throat and continued to stare as White Caps grew smaller.

"I've heard it from other people."

"Really."

"They say even the President is wary of you." He glanced back at the house again. "Loose talk. Just loose talk."

"Considering the way you're looking at that mansion back there, I'm not so sure." Cassandra tilted her head to the side, regarding him with steady curiosity. "Who lives there? Or more to the point, what do you want that's in that house?"

When Gray remained silent, Cassandra's dry chuckle floated over on the breeze. "Well, whatever it is, I feel sorry for the poor thing. Because you look like you're on the hunt."

"Hold still or I'm going to stick you," Joy Moorehouse said to her sister.

"I am holding still."

"Then why is this hem a moving target?" She shifted back onto her heels and looked up at her work.

The wedding gown hung from her sister Frankie's shoulders in a graceful fall of white satin. Joy had been careful with the design. Too many frills and excess fabric wouldn't pass muster. Frankie thought blue jeans were formal as long as you wore them with your hair up.

"Do I look like I'm in someone else's dress?" Frankie asked.

"You look beautiful."

Frankie laughed without bitterness. "That's your department, not mine. I'm the plain, practical sister, remember?"

"Ah, but you're the one getting married."

"And ain't it a miracle?"

Joy smiled. "I'm so happy for you."

Everyone was. The whole town of Saranac Lake was thrilled and they were all coming to festivities that were taking place in about six weeks.

Frankie lifted the skirting up gingerly, as if she might hurt it. "I have to admit, this thing feels good."

"It'll fit even better when I finish the alterations. You can take it off now."

"We're done?"

Joy nodded and got up from the floor. "I've basted all around the bottom. I'll stitch it up this evening and

we'll do another fitting tomorrow."

"But I thought you were going to help out tonight. We're catering Mr. Bennett's birthday party, remember?"

Joy almost laughed. She'd have better luck losing track of her own head than forgetting where she was supposed to be in another couple of hours. And who she would see.

"Remember?" Frankie prompted. "We're going to need you."

Joy made busywork putting her sewing kit back together. She had a feeling her excitement was showing on her face and she didn't want her sister to see it. "I know."

"The party could go late."

"It doesn't matter." Because it wasn't as if she'd be able to sleep when they got back home.

"I don't want you slaving over this dress."

"And you're getting married in a month and a half, so I have to get the thing done. Well, unless you fancy yourself heading down the aisle in your underwear, a sight I'm pretty sure Nate would prefer to keep for his eyes only. Besides, you know I love doing this, especially for you." She turned around. Her sister was staring out the window, absently stroking the gown. "Frankie? What's wrong?"

"Last night, I asked Alex to walk me to the altar."

"What did he say?" Joy whispered, even though she knew getting their brother to the ceremony at all was going to be tough.

"He won't do it. I don't think he wants the attention to be on him." Frankie shook her head. "I can't force him to be by my side. But I really wish...hell, I wish Dad were going to be with me. Mom, as well. I wish they were both still here."

Joy took her sister's hand. "Me, too."

Frankie looked down at herself, her brown hair falling forward. She gave a short, awkward laugh that Joy knew meant she was changing the subject. "I can't believe this."

"What?"

"I don't want to take this thing off. It's so gorgeous."

Joy smiled sadly, thinking that with each stitch she put into the gown, she was trying to make up for everything her sister had done for her. God, all those sacrifices Frankie had made to become a parent too soon. The work on the dress seemed like a pitiful exchange.

"Here, let me undo the buttons in the back for you."

When Frankie stepped out of the pool of satin, Joy swept the dress into her arms and carried it over to her worktable. Her bedroom was small, so between her sewing machine, her mannequin and the bolts of fabric

against the wall, space was at a premium. Thank God she only had a twin bed.

Over the years she'd patched and repaired countless ball gowns for their grandmother at her little makeshift sewing station. Emma Moorehouse, better known as Grand-Em, suffered from dementia so she was prone to irrational obsessions. And given that she'd once been a wealthy young lady of fine breeding and reputation, she felt uncomfortable if she didn't look her best for the parties she was certain were just about to start every moment of the day.

Except there were no parties. There hadn't been for decades.

With the declining fortunes of the Moorehouse family, there was no money to replace either the lifestyle or the luxury their grandmother had once known. But Joy was able to keep the Golden Era illusion alive by maintaining the forty- and fifty-year-old ball gowns. In doing so, she helped Grand-Em to find a measure of calm.

And discovered a passion for clothing design in herself.

"We've got three rooms filled this weekend," Frankie said as she pulled on khakis. "Which means the leaf peepers are showing up on schedule."

The White Caps mansion had been built by their ancestors at the turn of the nineteenth century and back then, it had been one of many Moorehouse real estate holdings. Now the ten-bedroom house was all that was left of a once mighty fortune.

In the eighties, their mother and father had turned the place into a bed-and-breakfast. Following their deaths a decade ago, Frankie had struggled to keep the business going, and it appeared that they'd finally turned a corner. The B&B was on the upswing, thanks in large part to Frankie's fiance, Nate Walker. Nate's fine French cooking had made White Caps a destination and his timely investment in the business had pulled them out of a debt spiral.

"So, about tonight." Frankie shoved her feet into a pair of beat-up sneakers. "Spike's going to mind the store here with George on backup. Nate, Tom and I are going to head over to the Bennett kitchen in another hour or so. Can you get there about five?"

"No problem."

"Thank God, Alex is willing to watch Grand-Em. Have you told him what to expect?"

Joy nodded. "I think he'll be okay and Spike's here if she gets really agitated. Fortunately she's been quieter now during evenings."

Stewarding Grand-Em through her delusions was usually Joy's job, but they needed all the hands they could get for the party.

"I'm so glad Gray gave us this chance," Frankie said, drawing her hair back. "He's a good man. For a politician."

He's not a politician, Joy wanted to say. He's a political consultant who specializes in elections.

But the correction might get her sister's attention and Joy was careful about keeping her obsession with Gray to herself. Sharing pipe dreams was almost as futile as having them in the first place.

"You're awful quiet, Joy. Are you sure you want to come tonight?"

"I'm just distracted." By the fact that she was going to get to watch Gray for three, maybe four, hours. And that maybe she'd get a chance to talk with him.

Although the exposure probably wasn't a good thing. After so many years of pining for the man, lately she'd been trying to let the unrequited fascination go. She was going to be twenty-seven soon, for heaven's sake. Living in the fantasy was getting old. And so was she.

"You don't have to come, Joy. I could have one of the waitresses sub."

"I want to," she said firmly. Sort of.

Because he was going to look so good tonight. Gray-son Bennett always looked good. "You work too hard," Frankie said. "So do you."

Frankie shook her head and then stared long and hard across the room. She'd worn glasses until recently, and without the lenses, her eyes seemed bluer than ever.

"You know," she said casually, "I was talking to Tom yesterday. He was asking a lot of questions about you. He's a really nice guy."

Tom Reynolds was the new line cook who'd been hired to help Nate and his partner, Spike, in the kitchen. And he was a nice guy. With a nice guy's sweet smile. And a nice guy's gentle eyes. And a nice guy's polite manner.

Except Joy liked what Gray had. The power. The charisma. The promise of breathtaking, hot sex.

Which probably would have shocked her sister.

If Frankie was the practical one, Joy was supposed to be the prim, protected youngest. Except she was getting bored with being good, especially whenever Gray Bennett came to mind.

Which, in spite of her resolve, was about as often as the grandfather clock downstairs spoke up.

Basically, every fifteen minutes.

"Maybe you and Tom should go out sometime," Frankie said.

Joy shrugged. "Maybe."

As her sister left the room, Joy sat on the bed. She knew her fixation on Gray was unhealthy. Getting tangled up in fantasies about some man she saw maybe five or six times a year was ridiculous. And it wasn't as if he encouraged her. Whenever Gray came up to the lake in the summer and she ran into him in town, he was always friendly. He even remembered her name. But that was as far as it ever got.

Well, except in her dreams. Then it went a whole lot further.

In real life, however, the attraction was totally one-sided. She was pretty certain about how Gray perceived her and it was just what she thought of Tom, the line cook. Nice. Sweet. Young.

Completely unremarkable.

And the truly pathetic thing was, even though she knew all that, even though she wanted to forget about Grayson Bennett, she still couldn't wait to see him tonight.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sam Grimes:

Reading can be called brain hangout, why? Because while you are reading a book mainly book entitled The Player (The Moorehouse Legacy) your thoughts will drift away through every dimension, wandering in each and every aspect that maybe not known for but surely will become your mind friends. Imaging each word written in a e-book then become one web form conclusion and explanation that will maybe you never get prior to. The The Player (The Moorehouse Legacy) giving you an additional experience more than blown away your mind but also giving you useful data for your better life in this particular era. So now let us demonstrate the relaxing pattern the following is your body and mind will likely be pleased when you are finished studying it, like winning a. Do you want to try this extraordinary spending spare time activity?

Carroll Torres:

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