

# FAT PROFITS\$

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This is a work of fiction. Characters, corporations, institutions, and organizations in this novel are the product of the author's imagination, or, if real, are used fictitiously without any intent to describe their actual conduct.

Dedicated to my son, Ben...  
May you learn from my journey that  
reaching your dreams is always possible,  
but rarely easy.  
Discover *your* dreams,  
work hard, and make them come true.  
Love always...  
Dad

# ONE

**IFM's Corporate Hangar  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Wednesday, June 2  
5:15 A.M.**

**T**HE REAL RULES of business are unwritten. Navigating corporate America's cutthroat game of politics and power-mongering requires keen instincts, and though only thirty-one years old, Becky Clausen was a savvy player. Or at least she thought so.

Today's game was an urgent, hush-hush trip to Washington, DC. Becky and four of her coworkers had been summoned for a crucial job. Some old research had just resurfaced that could derail the FDA approval of Redu, a key ingredient in International Food & Milling's biggest new product launch in years. But no matter what happened, Becky knew she would come out on top. Three months prior she had been promoted to Director of Health and Nutrition for IFM's domestic Food and Beverage

divisions as a reward for her outstanding performance. She was in the fast lane, and her first trip on the corporate jet proved she was making it.

Becky arrived at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport at 5:15 a.m., but struggled to find IFM's corporate hangar and executive lounge. Dawn had broken, but with only a glimmer of daylight in the sky, it took several drive-bys along a deserted stretch of road to finally see the discrete, unlit International Food & Milling sign hanging on the chain-link fence securing the building. Upon entering the driveway, she buzzed the office to announce her arrival, then a large, metal gate lumbered open, rolling sideways.

After parking her car, Becky grabbed her bags and walked into the hangar's lounge, only to be disappointed by the absence of any executives she could chat up. Determined to build her network, Becky quickly toured around the building and managed to meet the pilots for her flight. She wanted to know them. Becky had plans to be a frequent flier, and it always made sense to grease the skids.

In a matter of minutes, Becky learned all about Jim Donns and Mark Jonicus. Combined they had been flying for the company for over forty-four years. When Jim started, IFM only had two corporate jets. After eight acquisitions and impressive growth, IFM's fleet now numbered twelve jets, more than their archrival, Nutrisense, the largest food company in the world. These and many of IFM's other corporate toys were thanks to Aidan Toole, its CEO. He had the biggest ego on the block, and materialistic symbols like planes and a lavish headquarters helped him compensate for still being number two to Nutrisense and for the unsophisticated reputation of IFM's hometown, Minneapolis.

"So give me the scoop, guys. What are the rules on board this jet?" Becky asked. "This is my first flight, and I don't want to screw it up."

"Rules? No rules. Just relax and enjoy the flight."

"Come on, how does it work? Who sits where? Is there food on board? Who serves it?"

“Calm down,” Jim laughed. “There are no assigned seats, but the most senior people usually sit toward the back. And don’t worry, there’s always some food. You don’t think IFM would let anyone starve, do you? Morning flights usually have catered plates with fresh fruit, a bagel, and yogurt. And of course there are always IFM snacks, cereals, candies, juices, and soft drinks.”

“Is there a flight attendant?”

“Not unless Mr. Toole is on board one of our larger jets for a longer flight. It’s all self-serve. Usually someone junior ends up seated toward the front and passes back the food and drinks.”

Becky had no intention of doing anything menial, so like any meeting, getting the power seat was crucial.

“How about cell phones? Can we use them?”

“Well, the FCC and FAA say no, but we sure won’t be policing that. We’re up in the cockpit. But watch out for the reception. As soon as we get up around twelve thousand feet, you’ll start losing your signal.”

Within thirty minutes, all of the passengers had arrived. Craig Bonesteel, Derrick Bates, and Ginny Lawrence were Becky’s counterparts. As Directors of Health & Nutrition at IFM, they each managed a portion of the company’s vast \$98 billion food empire. Although they weren’t lawyers, they ensured all IFM businesses complied with food handling, packaging, and marketing regulations. The fifth and final passenger was Vicki Trease. She was the lawyer of the group and headed up IFM’s Legal and Regulatory team.

As they crossed the hangar, Becky quickened her step so she could board first. According to the pilots, the plane was a Citation III. It was IFM’s oldest and smallest jet, but to Becky it was a whole new class of living. Adorned with cappuccino leather seats, plush satin tan carpeting, mahogany cabinetry, and six personal flight entertainment systems, the jet smelled of luxury and excess. Becky jockeyed herself into the rear of the plane, settled in, and then immediately got to work on her cell phone. After all, there was no better way to show off her newfound importance than to make a few phone calls from the corporate jet.

She decided to call Andrew Hastings, the Marketing Manager for Uncle Chuck's new, healthy line of B-Lean salty snacks. It was too early for him to be at his desk, so a voice mail would have to suffice.

"Hey, Andrew, this is Becky. I'm heading out of town for an urgent meeting. Keep this to yourself, but we've hit a real snag. Some old research just surfaced that may cause a big delay for Redu and your B-Lean Snacks lineup. I'm taking the corporate jet to DC for a strategy meeting with our legal team. I'll let you know more when I can. Please, keep this quiet."

Craig Bonesteel couldn't help overhearing Becky.

"What are you doing, Becky?"

"Oh, just updating the team a bit. We have some crucial deadlines in front of us, and I don't want us to be caught holding the bag."

"You're crazy! Chloe just reminded us again yesterday not to leak a word to anyone about the trouble with Redu until we've come up with a plan to handle this mess."

"I know, I know," Becky said in a dismissive tone. "Let me worry about how I handle it."

The jet engines had started and the plane quickly taxied into position. Everything seemed to happen so much faster on the corporate jet. No security checkpoints, no lines to board, and before Becky knew it, the plane was streaking down the runway, its nose quickly lifting into the air.

As the plane gained altitude, Becky saw Lake Nokomis below and then moments later Lake Harriet. Then, when the plane banked to the south, she spotted her neighborhood and remembered she needed to call her husband. It was a few minutes after six and Bill was undoubtedly up with the girls by now. A faithful and dedicated househusband of two years, he managed the home since Becky was working ten-hour days and weekends as she rose up the corporate ranks of IFM.

"Hey, hon, how's it going?"

"Ah, good here," Bill replied. "Lizzie and Maureen are up, and

I'm just getting breakfast ready. So where are you now? It sounds awfully noisy."

"I'm flying high. Right over our house in fact! Honey, you wouldn't believe this. It's so cool. You can bet not just anyone gets to take a ride on the corporate jet."

"That's great, Becky." Bill said smiling, genuinely proud of his wife. "You've worked so hard for this. You deserve it and a lot more. Want to say a quick hello to the girls?"

"Sure, put them on. Oh, one sec though. I realized on the way to the airport that I left some papers I need on the nightstand. Could you scan and send them to my gmail address? I need them for my meetings, and Chloe would kill me if she knew I left them at home."

"Tell that boss of yours to just relax. She has you so scared. You've barely said two words to me about this crazy project."

"I know, I know. But I've told you, this is IFM's biggest new product initiative ever."

"Blah, blah, blah. I'll get your stuff to you. Don't worry. Love you. Here are the girls."

"Cool, put them on speakerphone." The phone made a click, and Becky's voice jumped up an octave. "Hi, sweeties. Mommy is in a cool plane flying on a trip for work."

The noise and commotion of the kitchen buzzed in the background and nearly droned out the faint sound of the girls.

"Hi, Mommy. Can you see any birds?"

Becky strained to hear her daughter Maureen's voice. Just a month shy of five years old, Maureen was a typical first-born child—reliable, conscientious, and she didn't like surprises. Lizzie, on the other hand, was her mischievous, rule-breaking three-year-old. Bill and Becky kept hoping Lizzie would calm down as she got older, but she showed no signs of easing up any time soon.

"No, no birds, but I could see the lake a minute ago. I was right over our house."

"Wow. Can you see me, Mommy? I'm waving..."



“Yes, yes, honey . . . I can see you. But where’s Lizzie?”

Becky waited for a response but could only hear the buzzing of the speakerphone and some crackling noise as the signal began to fade.

“Can you hear me? Kisses to both of you. Mommy loves you up to the sky.” She waited again but could only hear static. “Losing the signal here, Bill.” More static. “Okay, bye.”

After hanging up, Becky took a brief moment to look out the windows. The plane had completed its turn southeast, and acres of corn streamed below as far as the eye could see. It was tough leaving Lizzie and Maureen overnight, and she knew it would get worse when they got older and needed more quality time with their mother. But Becky didn’t want her mind to go there now. Instead she settled in for the flight and turned on her laptop.

As she started to dig into her e-mails, the plane groaned and listed to the left as an ever-so-slight aroma of something burning wafted through the cabin. At first Becky cast it off, unwilling to appear as an unseasoned traveler. She glanced over to the in-flight monitor that was tracking their progress to DC. Everything seemed fine. But just as Becky started to refocus on her work, the plane groaned again and shook, and her nerves got the better of her.

“What’s happening?” Becky exclaimed, reaching her arms into the air looking for a call button.

The other passengers shared Becky’s concern. They were just doing a better job of staying calm.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Craig replied. Becky stared at him briefly, not knowing whether to trust his opinion.

The plane rocked again, this time much more severely than before, and now the screen for her in-flight monitor went dark. Becky looked around in a panic. It wasn’t just her monitor. The whole cabin had lost power.

Just as she was going to announce her latest discovery, alarms sounded and flashed in the cockpit.

## *FAT PROFITS*

“What the hell is happening?” she cried, looking out the window for clues.

Suddenly, the plane dropped rapidly with a violent plunge from the sky, and Becky’s laptop flew through the air and slammed into her forehead, knocking her out. The chaos continued briefly as blood started to drip into her eyes. Then, the plane exploded and the sky glowed with a blazing, intense red light.

Chunks of metal and bodies blasted out concentrically toward the horizon, then fell to the earth far below.

Yes, everything happened faster on this corporate jet.

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