

*He attacked everything in life with a mix of extraordinary genius and naïve incompetence,
and it was often difficult to tell which was which.¹*



Chapter One

Profile on Computer Industry Executive Adam LeGrande

*The world according to Adam LeGrande –
the youngest person ever to head a Fortune 500 firm.*

Business Today, May: When Adam LeGrande graduated from MIT with a doctorate in computational research, he was still unable to drive a car, cast a vote, or even enter one of the many local college bars. That's because he was only sixteen. By the time he revolutionized the worldwide computer banking industry at twenty-five, he was old enough to consider any and all adult pursuits but far too busy. LeGrande Inc. has skyrocketed onto the business scene making LeGrande, at twenty-eight, the youngest person ever to head a Fortune 500 company. With a net worth estimated at over \$13 billion dollars, LeGrande surpasses Bill Gates' estimated net worth at the same age and has earned the distinction of being number five on the Forbes 400 list of wealthiest Americans. Certainly he has earned the right to the title 'Computer Whiz and Financial Genius' ...



¹ Douglas Adams, 1952-2001

“Sir, your eleven fifteen is here. And, if I might be so bold as to suggest, you should run a comb through your hair and straighten your tie.”

Adam looked up at Miles standing in the doorway of the study. His *butler*. How ridiculous was such a thing in this day and age? Personal assistant: yes. Executive secretary: yes. Senior aide: yes. But *butler*? NO. Were he carved from, marble Miles’ appearance could not have been more precise and perfect: tall and thin, gray hair precisely combed, black butler suit absolutely lint free, and an expression completely void of emotion. At Adam’s nonresponsive gaze, Miles reached up a white-gloved hand and gestured to the top of his head letting Adam know just exactly where the offending hair was.

Glancing at his Blackberry, Adam read, *Kathryn McFadden, Advancement Corporation, 11:15*. He looked up at his butler/personal assistant/chauffer/chef ... and sighed. What Adam wouldn’t give for a few, brief moments of normalcy in his miserable life. Miles was still waiting. Miles would wait, unperturbed, probably for hours. In the battle of wills, Adam always lost the daily waiting games they played. Something he was willing to concede – at least for this moment – however, he would go out fighting. “What’s she look like, Miles? Is she hot?”

“Sir, it would be highly inappropriate for me to respond to that question.” And they both knew it. In the end, both knew that the question was not asked so much for the gleaning of information as for the annoyance factor.

It had been a long, boring morning and there was every sign of it being a long, boring afternoon and night. Everyone was always trying to grab a piece of the pie that was Adam LeGrande: family, friends, colleagues, enemies, and even strangers. As Miles would probably never say, one must take one’s opportunities to enjoy one’s self when one can. “Why’s that, Miles? What’s the harm in letting me know what I’ve got to face for the next hour? Is she a dog with a capital ‘D’? So ugly even her own mother doesn’t acknowledge her? Or maybe she’s middle of the road, so if I had a few stiff drinks in me I might even manage to entertain something more than just a professional encounter.” Adam threw down his pen, put his feet up on the desk and laced his hands behind his head, suddenly enjoying himself immensely. “Or, now here’s the dream scenario: she walks in with a skirt up to here and a neckline down to there, with drop-dead gorgeous legs and a mouth to die for. She saunters over to my desk, leans over, and says, ‘Honey, I’ll do anything to get you to buy into this deal.’”

Adam gave Miles a wolfish grin. Who the hell cared if he was too stiff to join in the fun? “Come on, Miles, why can’t you just play along for once and have a bit of fun? What’s so inappropriate about that?”

Miles never rose to the bait. Ever. But Adam was a competitive man as well as eternally optimistic. Plus, sometimes Miles had a quick comeback. As he did today. “It would be inappropriate, Sir, because Ms. McFadden is directly behind me and can hear every word we’re saying.” Without an ounce of condescension, he inclined his head, turned, and walked out of the doorway. Leaving one very annoyed young woman standing in the doorway. A very attractive and annoyed young woman: long, dark brown hair carefully twisted up to look businesslike, dark brown expressive eyes narrowed with blazing anger, and a figure that was absolutely and completely wasted

as it currently was wrapped up in a boring dark blue suit. She was much closer to dream scenario than Adam ever could have hoped.

Crap.

Adam hastily stood up, adjusted his tie and made quick efforts to smooth down his ever-uncooperative hair. Walking from behind his desk he turned on his 'sincerely apologetic' smile (he had a million of them) and extended his hand to the furious woman glaring at him from across the room. "Ms. McFadden, please forgive me. It's been a long morning and there seems to be no end in sight. I'm so terribly sorry for my inappropriate behavior." He stopped, hand extended, and waited.

He knew she had to accept his apology even if she didn't mean it. It was a known fact that people's tolerance factors were significantly higher with the wealthy and powerful. And that was he: Adam LeGrande, also known as 'Boy Wonder of the Computer Industry' or something like that. Whether she needed his wealth, his power, or probably both, she was going to have to suck it up big time and get over his admittedly atrocious behavior. It was definitely not the first time Adam had behaved appallingly and people had had to get over it and for sure it wouldn't be the last. He mentally shrugged; might as well get some benefit out of the mind-numbing expanse of his life.

But Ms. Kathryn McFadden surprised Adam by looking him directly in the eye, ignoring his outstretched hand, and saying, "So, what category do I fit into? I'd like to hear, since your ... butler ... was too polite to say and we both know that you have no such qualms."

That was another thing about being rich and powerful, you didn't have to apologize more than once. Nor did you have to continue to be polite if that didn't seem to be working. "Well now, Ms. McFadden," Adam said, as he pretended to study her intently, "you've put me on the spot. Normally, I don't share that opinion, but since you've asked me ..." He took a step back and brought his hand up to his chin, frowning intently. This might be fun. He motioned that he wanted to walk around her. "Do you mind?"

If it were possible for steam to come out of her ears, it would have. She was speechless with fury as he leisurely walked around her, checking her out from head to toe. Stopping in front of her with his hands on his hips Adam shrugged, "You're definitely not in the dog category. But I must admit, you're not in the dream scenario either." He gestured with his chin. "Skirt length, etcetera. The suit's abysmal. Does nothing to compliment what I suspect to be a sumptuous figure. But you are clean, tidy, well put together ..." He sighed and shook his head in mock disappointment for opportunities lost.

"So I'd just better make sure you don't get near any alcohol and we always stay in professional settings," she ground out through gritted teeth.

Adam nodded and smiled an insincere smile. He had to give it to her, she was quick on the uptake. "Yeah, exactly."

Kathryn shook her head, turned, and walked out of the office. What?!

"Hey!" Adam followed her out into the hallway. "Where are you going? Didn't you want to meet with me?"

She stopped, paused, and then turned and walked slowly back towards him. A nice package, he thought. Very nice. Kathryn studied him for a moment, her brown eyes attempting to perhaps

read his mind. Fat chance. “Yes, I wanted to meet with you,” she said quietly and Adam realized that he liked the smooth sound of her voice. A little bit husky, a little bit sultry. Of course it could be the blazing fury that was still simmering just below the surface that made it sound so interesting. “I heard that although you are ruthless with your competitors, very recently you’ve been open-minded and interested in new business ideas. I understand that within the last year, on at least four occasions, you provided venture capital funds for start up companies that banks refused to back. I had hoped that you would listen to my presentation and recognize the potential opportunities for both yourself and the people I represent. I wanted to find someone with the same enthusiasm I have for taking nothing and making it into something. Lastly,” she took one step closer and lowered her voice, as if she were going to share something vastly important. Intrigued, Adam leaned forward. In a husky whisper she said, “I prayed, that for once, I would encounter a businessman who thought more with his heart rather than his ...” Kathryn seemed to catch herself, cleared her throat and took a step back. With a deep sigh filled with regret, she smiled sadly and said, “I must be slipping. It’s been a long time since I’ve been so incredibly wrong about someone. At least I always learn from my mistakes. Goodbye, Mr. LeGrande.”

Adam was still standing in the empty hallway looking at the closed front door when Miles spoke from behind him. “Sir, I’ve brought you some iced tea and a turkey sandwich.”

Adam turned and looked into Miles’ expressionless face. “I really blew that one, didn’t I?”

“I’d say so, Sir. That’s why I’ve brought you the wet cloth.”

Sure enough, carefully folded next to his glass of iced tea was a damp cloth. While Miles did not partake in verbal exchanges it did not mean he kept his opinions to himself. Far from it. Miles was a master at getting his complete, unabridged message across in the face of sometimes stunning adversity. Sighing, Adam looked directly at his accursed butler, “Okay, I’ll bite. Why do I need the wet cloth, Miles?”

“For the egg on your face, Sir.”

Adam gave him a pointed look. “You could have clued me in. Given me a high sign. Done something. *Anything.*”

“I don’t *do* ‘high signs,’ Sir. Perhaps, in the future, you will strive to remember that you are a professional and, as such, you should strive to maintain a higher standard for yourself in all aspects of your life.”

“As you do, Miles?”

Miles gave him his standard bland look. “*The superior man is modest in his speech but exceeds in his actions.*”² When all else failed, Miles had a million and one absolutely infuriating quotes to throw when the time was just right.

Adam took the tray with more force than was required, unwilling to enter into a battle he knew he could not win. “What’s next on the schedule?”

“I will have the car out front for you at twelve-thirty. You have a one o’clock at Capital Investments’ headquarters to discuss the Dylander merger, followed by a four o’clock meeting with

² Confucius, 551-479 BC, *The Confucian Analects*

John Mercantele. That meeting must be over by five-thirty so that you can return home and get dressed for the black tie affair at the Wickfield Country Club. Cocktails are at seven o'clock and you must be there promptly so you can meet Mayor Willoughby and discuss the new computer system that has just been approved by the town council."

"So let me get this straight, Miles. I'm Fortune 500's number five wealthiest American and by their very words a "computer whiz and financial genius" but you've got me scheduled to personally help to set up a no-nothing town's computer system? Isn't there something very wrong with this picture? Don't I have a company - called LeGrande Inc. - that employs hundreds of people to do just this? Aren't I supposed to be resting on my stunning collection of laurels now, in the twilight of my amazing life, instead of doing things I did *before I finished junior high school?*"

Miles meticulously removed the food, drink, and damp cloth from the tray Adam held, initiating the waiting game once again. Adam felt a wave a hatred for the man so strong he could almost taste it. "It is a worthy cause that you should be proud to be involved in, Sir. Just like the other small venture capital opportunities that you backed recently."

"That you nagged me ceaselessly to take on." Miles made no response. As usual. "That's what brought Ms. Kathryn McFadden to my door you know. Heard I was turning into some goody-goody save the world kind of guy."

"She impressed me as a stunning judge of character, Sir. I don't believe she would be so horribly mistaken."

"I've got a capable staff to handle the mayor's little computer project, Miles. I'll tell Mayor Willoughby that tonight at cocktails."

"She is depending on you to select, advise, and direct said new system. It was a significant victory for her that she was able to get this new budget passed. She wants her first year in the mayor's office to be stellar and is smart enough to recognize the key roll you will be able to play in that. Your willingness to *personally* assist her would be another noteworthy success on her part."

Adam grinned, his mood taking an upswing. "Was there a compliment for me in that last sentence, Miles? Ready to acknowledge my clout and substance out there in the world?"

As Miles walked sedately away, Adam heard him say, "*Conceit is God's gift to little men.*"

At precisely seven o'clock p.m., Adam stood in the main entrance of the cocktail area at the Wickfield Country Club. When was the last time he had worn comfortable clothes? It was particularly cruel that the more successful he became in business the more often he was forced to wear uncomfortable clothes, like this tuxedo with its bow tie and cummerbund. Adam shifted in the dress shoes and resisted the urge to stick his finger into his collar and pull.

"Adam! On time as always!" Adam turned and looked into the smiling eyes of Mayor June Willoughby. She barely came up to his shoulder, but every square inch of her was always busy, always moving, and always planning. With a conspiratorial wink she said under her breath, "I'm so glad you're willing to do this, Adam! Thank goodness for Miles, huh? You know, I've tried unsuccessfully to steal him away from you on more than one occasion. His loyalty is phenomenal."

³ Bruce Barton, 1886-1967

She was only half-kidding. Adam knew that she'd offered Miles an astronomical salary to come work for her. When Miles had told him, Adam had enthusiastically offered to pack Miles' bags and drive him over to her office personally, but no such luck. "It has nothing to do with loyalty, June. He's found the perfect prey to torture. He's just got me well trained and is loath to have to start on a new victim."

The Mayor laughed, thinking he was kidding. "You must pay him tremendously well."

Adam shrugged. Far be it for him to go into the boring details of his life that included one annoying butler of whom he was unable to rid himself. He hated this polite conversation crap he was always required to dish out at business functions. Politeness was so not part of his structural make-up. Why not just get on with what needed to be done, okay? "Sometimes it's not about the money," Adam murmured under his breath. Sometimes it was more about making a point.

June laughed as if Adam had just told the most hysterically funny joke. "What a sense of humor you have!" Helping herself to a glass of white wine from a waiter, she launched into business mode, tucking a lock of short gray hair behind her ear. Gold hoop earrings dangled in her ears and her blue eyes were bright with eagerness. "I'm riding on a high right now with the budget passing by such a wide margin. I really want to show everyone that I know what I'm doing, or that I know the right people to help me when I don't. Everyone's watching: those who love me want to keep smiling like proud parents and those who hate me can't wait to yell, 'See! I told you she'd screw up!' That's where you come in. We have a tremendous opportunity to revamp the entire computer system throughout the township - do you know that there are at least five secretaries still typing on IBM Selectrics? I don't know what's more frightening, that or the fact that the people using them don't want to change." She shuddered and then rolled her eyes. "Here's how I see it. You know what's out there and how much things are going to cost, you understand budgets and politics, and Miles assures me you're comfortable working with small, start-up organizations. I figure with you taking the lead on this, even if the company we've hired is without any kind of reputation - good or bad - that you'll be able to keep a handle on everything -"

Completely perplexed, Adam stopped her mid-sentence. "Wait, June. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I suddenly have no clue what you're going on about. I know about the new computer system and I think I understand my role in all of this. But I don't understand what company you are referring to, and I am confused with your reference about me being comfortable working with small, start-up organizations. Can you back up a bit and fill in the blanks?"

The Mayor gave Adam a puzzled look. "I explained this quite thoroughly with Miles. You see, I'd like to kill two birds with one stone. So, in redoing the computer system, I thought I'd also grab some extra political points and use a new, woman-run, start up company here in town to do the grunt work. The fact that the company is an unknown is where you come in. Any risk will be nullified with your expertise and supervision."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing and it was impossible to keep incredulity out of his voice, "June, I've got my own company to do the work you're describing! That's what started all of this for me. I've got well-qualified people working for me now with experience in consulting, financial planning, and business development. Above and beyond the fact that you're asking me to

assist a competitor, why would you think I'd be in anyway interested in assuming such menial responsibilities?"

June laughed again uproariously. "Why Miles and I discussed all this! First off, this small company is in no way a competitor with your organization! It is so small, so new, so untried that this opportunity within the township is its first major job opportunity. Miles and I talked about how it would almost be a mentoring situation where you could help, advise, and encourage this new company." She lowered her voice and stepped closer, "While at the same time gathering your own collection of political points to be stowed away for the future. Miles said that lately you've been interested in "helping out the little guy" for want of a better term. You've done it a few times before in the past year, so I thought this would just be another golden opportunity for you. Don't you see? Big, bad, business guy goes out of his way to help small, struggling, woman-owned business through its first major job. It's a win-win situation for both of us all around." June gave him a big, slow wink.

Finally. At long last. Now it all made sense to Adam. So that's where Miles was headed. Always looking out for the underdog, just so long as in the end it benefited the primary objective: LeGrande, Inc. Adam took a sip of his wine and gazed out at the collection of elegantly clad people. So Miles had political aspirations for him now. It wasn't enough that at sixteen he'd graduated with highest honors from MIT with a doctorate in computational research in economics and management science. Nor was it enough that at twenty-five he turned the entire economic community on its head when he developed a computer system that revolutionized the financial structure of every banking organization in the world. Or enough when at twenty-eight he had brought LeGrande Inc. into Fortune 500's "Top 100 Fastest Growing Tech Companies".

It was never, ever enough. More power, more money, more influence. More, more, more ... It was so not fun anymore. He snorted to himself. Who was he kidding? It had *never* been fun, but for a period of time it had been ... challenging. Now it was ... a hamster wheel he couldn't get off. Keep running, Adam. Keep impressing, Adam. Keep going, Adam ...

So, here Adam was at thirty-two: bored and jaded. He'd been there, done that, and (eye roll) was so not interested anymore. Lately, Miles had been encouraging him to get involved in civic duties, charitable organizations, and venture capital opportunities. That must be what June meant about "comfortable working with small, start-up organizations." Hence the disastrous meeting with Ms. Kathryn McFadden of Advancement Corporation this morning and this "win-win situation" now between him and Mayor Willoughby. What had Miles said? *Make all you can, save all you can, give all you can.*⁴ Yeah, that was it. Apparently, making it into the political arena was where they were headed now. Jeeze. He'd really become complacent. He hadn't seen any of this coming.

"Well, Adam? What do you say?" June took a sip of her white wine, smiled, and waved to a group across the room.

God, he was tired. He looked down into June Willoughby's blue eyes and sighed. "I'm going to pass, Mayor. I've got a lot on my plate right now and just don't have the energy or, quite

⁴ John Wesley, 1703-1791

frankly, the desire to do this right now - the whole babysitting, hand-holding thing. If you want the job done - quickly and efficiently - without fuss or bother - you know where I am and my company can be in and out in no time. But, otherwise ...” He broke eye contact and looked out across the room again and right into the stunned big, brown eyes of Ms. Kathryn McFadden. Looking extraordinarily lovely, too, in a long-sleeved black velvet gown with her brown hair curled and clipped back off her face. Yes, quite lovely, indeed.

The Mayor was talking to him and he’d missed most of what she’d said, “... answer just yet. I’ll give Miles a call tomorrow and maybe we can sit down and talk about this in more detail.”

Oh yeah, that’s a great idea. Give Miles a chance to come up with some quotes about political suicide and lack of initiative. Don’t think he’s heard all of those quotes yet. June had stopped talking and followed Adam’s obviously preoccupied gaze across the room. “Why, what a coincidence, Adam! That’s Kathryn McFadden! She’s the one that sold me on using Computer Dynamics when we redo the township’s computer system. She’s head of a company called Advancement Corporation whose sole purpose is to help women succeed in business. She’s quite a dynamo – sold me inside of thirty minutes. Her reputation is excellent – puts her money and her time where her mouth is, stays visible and available throughout every project and is quite, er, well, what’s the best way to say it? Honest, no,” she shook her head, frowning, struggling to find the right word, “principled, no, reliable, no ...”

Adam broke his sustained eye contact with Kathryn to turn and look at the Mayor. “What are you trying to say, June? You’re making her sound like she’s a saint or something.”

June chuckled. “Oh, no, she’s not a saint. She’s just one of those,” she leaned forward and raised her wine glass so that no international spy ring could read her lips, “born-again Christians.”

Kathryn stood and watched Adam walk toward her. The look on her face would have discouraged a lesser man. So, let’s bat for 1,000 here on this miserable day to top all miserable days, his head said. “Hey, Ms. Kathryn McFadden. Imagine meeting you here.”

“You’ll have to pardon me if I seem rude, Mr. LeGrande, but you’re standing next to me drinking alcohol and this is a decidedly unprofessional situation. For my own safety and the sensibility of all the others I must end this ... conversation.” Kathryn turned and began to walk away.

Before he could think it through Adam grabbed her arm, halting her departure and spilling her drink down the front of her dress. Absolutely perfect. “Oh, damn, I’m sorry Kat-, Ms. McFadden.” He reached into his pocket. “Here, take my handkerchief.”

Kathryn stared at him for brief moments, looking at his one hand still clutching her arm and his other extending his handkerchief. “Look, Mr. LeGrande, if it makes you feel any better, I’m over this morning’s ... catastrophe, okay? I’m willing to move on and forget about you and LeGrande Incorporated, so you can relax. You owe me nothing whatsoever, and I’ll do my best to stay out of your way from now until the end of time. If you’ll let go of my arm, you can keep your handkerchief and, hopefully, we can both go ahead with a relatively disaster free evening.”

Adam was exceptionally good at many, many things, but conversing personally with a woman had never been one of them. If he couldn’t dazzle with math facts, business ideas, or

computer innovations he was pretty much at a complete loss. And in cases in which being human was required, Miles usually did a thorough job of initial prepping. Tonight had been business, not pleasure: do his business song and dance with the Mayor, have a sustained period of visibility, and then split. But here, trying to talk to the beautiful Ms. McFadden in her luscious black velvet gown – stain or no stain – it suddenly seemed as if pleasure should be first on the agenda. The catastrophe train was screaming downhill ready for its second grand stop of the day. Quick, think.

He pocketed his handkerchief and released her arm, but before she could turn and walk away he said quickly, “Tell me about Computer Dynamics. I hear you’re hoping to do the new township computer system.”

Kathryn stopped a waiter walking by, put her drink on his tray and helped herself to a napkin. “Why?” she said as she wiped her hand and the front of her dress. She avoided making eye contact with him, scanning the room, probably for an escape route. But at least she was still standing there talking to him.

“June Willoughby says you’re a dynamo. Says you sold her in less than thirty minutes on Computer Dynamics. You were scheduled for an hour with me this morning. I’m intrigued about what you could have sold me in double the time.”

Kathryn sighed and turned to glance at him briefly. It seemed to cause her physical pain. “June Willoughby operates on a different plain than you do. I’m not so sure comparisons are possible.”

“Different meaning she’s a woman and I’m a Neanderthal.”

That got him a slight smile, but still no eye contact. “You said it. I didn’t.”

“She spoke very highly of you.”

Kathryn nodded, seemingly pleased. “That’s good. I work hard at the image I project and the impression I give. A lot of people depend on me to be successful in what I do.”

“So, since I missed the full length tour this morning – my mistake entirely – give me the fifty cent tour and tell me, in a nutshell, what you do.”

“In a nutshell?” At last. She turned and gave him her full attention. Great mouth ...

He smiled his “I’m really, honestly, completely sincere” smile at her and nodded.

She narrowed her eyes slightly, not in the least fooled. “I help make people’s dreams come true,” she said with an absolutely straight face and then turned and walked away.