**Dinner at Joanne's**

1 It was snowing heavily, and although every true New Yorker looks forward to a white Christmas, the shoppers on Fifth Avenue were in a hurry, not just to track down the last-minute presents, but to escape the bitter cold and get home to their families for Christmas Eve.

2 Josh Lester turned into 46th Street. He was not yet enjoying the Christmas spirit, because he was still at work, albeit a working dinner at Joanne's. Josh was black, in his early thirties, and an agreeable-looking person, dressed smartly but not expensively. He was from a hard-working family in upstate Virginia, and was probably happiest back home in his parents' house. But his demeanor concealed a Harvard law degree and an internship in DC with a congressman, a junior partnership in a New York law firm, along with a razor-sharp intellect and an ability to think on his feet. Josh was very smart.

3 The appointment meant Josh wouldn't get home until after Christmas. He was not, however, unhappy. He was meeting Jo Rogers, the senior senator for Connecticut , and one of the best- known faces in the US. Senator Rogers was a Democrat in her third term of office, who knew Capitol Hill inside out but who had nevertheless managed to keep her credibility with her voters as a Washington outsider. She was pro-abortion, anti-corruption, pro-low carbon emissions and anti-capital punishment, as fine a progressive liberal as you could find this side of the Atlantic. Talk show hosts called her Honest Senator Jo, and a couple of years ago, *Time* magazine had her in the running for Woman of the Year. It was election time in the following year, and the word was she was going to run for the Democratic nomination. Rogers had met Josh in DC, thought him highly competent, and had invited him to dinner.

4 Josh shivered as he checked the address on the slip of paper in his hand. He'd never been to Joanne's, but knew it by reputation, not because of its food, which had often been maligned, or its jazz orchestra, which had a guest slot for a well-known movie director who played trumpet, but because of the stellar quality of its sophisticated guests: politicians, diplomats, movie actors, hall-of-fame athletes, journalists, writers, rock stars and Nobel Prize winners – in short, anyone who was anyone in this city of power brokers.

5 Inside, the restaurant was heaving with people. The head waiter at the front desk looked at Josh as he came in.

6 "Can I help you?"

7 Josh replied, " Yes , I have an ..."

8 "Excuse me, sir," the head waiter interrupted as two guests arrived, "Good evening Miss Bacall, good evening Mr Hanks," and clicked his fingers to summon another waiter to show them to their table.

9 "Now, sir ...," said the head waiter. "... do you have a reservation?" He shrugged his shoulders. "We have no spare tables whatsoever, as you can see."

10 "I'm meeting a Ms Rogers here tonight."

11 The head waiter looked at Josh up and down, and asked, "May I have your name?"

12 Josh told him, and although the waiter refrained from curling his lip, he managed to show both disdain and effortless superiority with a simple flaring of his nostrils.

13 "Let me see," said the head waiter. "Well, yes, we do have a table for a Ms Rogers, but will she be arriving soon?"

14 Josh had encountered this doubtful treatment before but was not intimidated.

15 "I'm sure she will," said Josh. "Could you please show me to her table?"

16 "Come this way, sir." The head waiter led Josh through the restaurant to a table at the back, and pointed.

17 "Thank you. Could you get me a Martini, please?" said Josh. But the head waiter was impatient to go back into the heady swirl of New York society, everyone clamoring, or so it appeared to him, for his attention.

18 The table was close to the bathroom and right by a half-opened window, apparently positioned where an icy breeze from the Great Lakes, passing down the Hudson Valley, would end its journey.

19 Suddenly there was a moment's silence in the restaurant, only for the noise to resume as intense whispering.

20 "Senator Rogers!" said the head waiter. "What a great honor it is to see you at Joanne's again!"

21 "Good evening, Alberto. I'm dining with a young man, name of Lester."

22 The head waiter blinked, and swallowed hard.

23 "Yes, senator, please come this way," and as Senator Rogers passed through the crowded room, heads turned as the diners recognized her and greeted her with silent applause. In a classless society, Rogers was the closest thing to aristocracy that America had. Alberto hovered for a moment, then went to speak to a colleague.

24 "It's good to see you again, Josh," said Rogers. "Let's have something to eat, then I'd like to talk to you about a business proposition."

25 Alberto returned, bent half double in almost laughable humility.

26 "Senator, as this table is so cold , so uncomfortable, I was wondering if ..."

27 Senator Rogers waited and then said quietly, "Go on."

28 "I was wondering if you'd like a better table, in the middle of the restaurant, so you have a better view of everyone." So everyone has a better view of you, he might have said. "You'll be much more comfortable, and ..."

29 Alberto paused. Senator Rogers looked around.

30 "I agree, this isn't the best table in the house. But you brought my friend here, and I guess this is where we'll stay. We'll have my usual, please."

31 After two hours, Rogers and Josh got up to leave. There was a further flurry of attention by the staff, including an offer by Alberto to waive payment of the bill, which Rogers refused. As they were putting on their coats, Rogers said, "Thank you, Alberto. Oh, have I introduced you to my companion, Josh Lester?" 32 A look of panic, followed by one of desperate optimism flashed across Alberto's face.

33 "Ah, not yet, no, ... not properly," he said weakly.

34 "Josh Lester. This is the latest recruit to my election campaign. He's going to be my new deputy campaign manager, in charge of raising donations. And if we get that Republican out of the White House next year, you've just met my Chief of Staff."

35 "Absolutely delighted to meet you, Mr Lester, a real privilege, I'm sure. I do hope we'll see you both again in Joanne's very soon," said Alberto.

36 The Senator looked at Alberto.

37 "No, I don't think that's at all likely," replied Senator Rogers.

38 Rogers and Josh stepped out together into the cold night air. It had stopped snowing.