



MIKE WELLS

PASSION,
POWER
&
SIN

BOOK 1

Passion, Power & Sin

A Series

Book 1

by

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For Luba

If you want trouble...find yourself a redhead.

—Anonymous

Book 1

Prologue

The private superyacht *Alana* sliced through the waters of the Mediterranean Sea like a glittering knife blade.

The 300 million euro ship was a floating city. It housed two swimming pools, a sports complex, a movie theatre, and dozens of elegantly furnished staterooms. The magnificent vessel was in constant motion crisscrossing the Mediterranean, making infrequent, short stops at Nice, Corfu, Venice, Monaco, and Barcelona. At each port, the finest food stocks and wines were brought aboard, handpicked by the ship's world-class chef.

The owner of this incredible vessel pledged allegiance to no country, believed in no political party, and prayed to no god. Although he boasted staggering, self-made wealth, he was known to no kings or popes or presidents.

He was an enigmatic recluse, a living ghost.

The yacht was his refuge, a movable island that insulated him from the ordinary humanity, a humanity that he expertly manipulated for his own selfish purposes.

He prayed to no god because he was a god himself.

* * *

Ricardo Maya stood on the uppermost deck of the *Alana*, his perfectly-fitted linen suit fluttering in the breeze. The late afternoon sun cut across the bronzed features of his face.

One deck below, a half dozen young girls were reclined around the swimming pool in chaise lounge chairs, stark naked. All were of centerfold quality, their oiled bodies glistening in the afternoon sun.

But today Maya did not even notice the girls. His mind was occupied with his latest financial scheme. The results of six months of arduous, painstaking work would all come together in the next few days, the "harvest", as he thought of it. Maya had no doubt that everything would go well, as always. But he was still on edge.

Sergei, his bodyguard and personal assistant, stepped up to him. The Russian was built like a refrigerator packed with sand.

"Sir, we will arrive in Marseilles in one hour."

Maya turned to him. "Everything is in order?"

"Da," Sergei said. "*Vsyo v poriadke.*"

Maya nodded approvingly. Sergei was the most reliable man he had ever known. And he was the only person Maya truly trusted.

Now, Maya could make out the port of Marseilles. The brilliant white dome of the Notre-Dame de la Garde basilica was barely visible. At this distance it was little more than a white dot on the hill overlooking the port.

"I had better make my preparations," Maya said.

A solemn glance passed between the two.

Sergei offered him his strong hand. "Good luck, sir."

Maya touched his shoulder. "Thank you, my old friend."

The harvest was the last and most dangerous step of the operation. They both knew that if Maya was caught, it would be during the next few days, when he collected his accumulated funds.

It was one of the only times Ricardo Maya ever went ashore.

* * *

A few minutes later, Maya was in his elegantly-furnished stateroom, methodically packing his bags. He removed his Patek Philippe watch and his gold Cartier necklace—there was no place for such flashy items in his travels. In one bag he included a wide array of outfits, some formal and some casual. In the other were a variety of disguises.

When he was packed and the ship was anchored, he was transported to Marseilles' Vieux Port in a sleek, quiet speedboat. Dressed casually in slacks and a sport shirt, he waited for the right moment and joined a group arriving on a ferry from Barcelona to go through Passport Control. From the port, Maya caught a taxi to the Saint-Charles Railway Station in the center of Marseilles, where he took a Eurostar train to Paris. In the Gare du Lyon station, after making sure he wasn't being followed, he entered a handicapped restroom.

When he emerged, he was no longer 42 year old Venezuelan-born Ricardo Maya, the reclusive billionaire. He was now 63 year old, gray-haired and stooped Antonio Fabreze, an Italian-American restaurateur on his way back to Italy to spend time with relatives.

Hobbling along with a cane, he took a train to Zurich and then caught an Alitalia flight to Venice, staying overnight in a modest hotel near the train station. After another identity transformation he became Eduardo Sanchez, a 48 year old Spanish real estate agent with a friendly smile and a spring in his step. He took a train to Bucharest, Romania, his final destination.

At 9:00 a.m. the following morning, in yet another persona, Maya arrived at Bucharest Stock Exchange, ready to bring his plan to completion.

He made small talk with the other excited stockholders who had just arrived. They all held large numbers of shares in DRR Minerals, a small mining company that was listed on the Bucharest Exchange. According to rumors, the firm had discovered a massive gold vein in one of its Brazilian mines, and its stock price was skyrocketing.

Ricardo Maya smiled. He chatted among the investors and sought out others who had not yet heard of DRR Minerals, spreading the rumors as far and wide as possible.

As he watched the stock price soar in response to these rumors, he wondered which of the men and women around him would die.

* * *

Late in the day, shortly before the market closed, DRR Minerals announced that no gold vein had been discovered, and that the rumors were false.

The stock price dropped like a rock.

An investigation was launched by local regulating authorities into insider trading and a possible "pump-and-dump" scheme.

The DRR Minerals stock price continued to plummet until it was only worth a few cents per share.

* * *

During the following days, several suicides occurred.

In New York, a top plastic surgeon took a fatal overdose of morphine. The note to his family simply said, "I have made a terrible mistake."

In Perth, Australia, the senior partner in a law firm blew his brains out with a revolver.

In Dubai, United Arab Emirates, a middle aged advertising executive leaped to his death from the top of the Burj Tower.

All of the victims had invested their entire life savings into an obscure mining company called DRR Minerals that was listed on the Bucharest Stock Exchange.

* * *

The following week, Ricardo Maya was back aboard the *Alana*, seated at the massive mahogany desk in his stateroom. Above him, perched atop the ship's bridge, was a huge satellite dish that beamed vast amounts of data between the Cray supercomputer three decks below and a private geosynchronous communication satellite that Maya had put in orbit himself.

He had just totaled up the numbers from his 17 offshore and three Swiss bank accounts. He smiled with a deep sense of satisfaction as he gazed at the final figure on his screen.

The total was \$353 million greater than it had been before he had left for Bucharest.

At times like this, Ricardo Maya marveled at his own genius. The scam was elegant in its simplicity, yet so broad in scope it was virtually undetectable. No one would ever have the perspective to "connect the dots," as the Americans liked to say. His operation was like a drawing made on the Earth's surface that was so large it only made sense when viewed from space.

Who would ever have enough distance to see the big picture and put it all together?

No one.

Maya opened the file that contained the news clippings that the onboard Cray computer had gathered from all over the world. He skimmed through them, one by one, his face expressionless. As he read, he experienced a kind of morbid curiosity. What kind of people would take their own lives, he wondered, because of a mere financial setback? Such weaklings. Such a senseless waste of human life. Yet Maya felt no remorse. In his opinion, these fools got exactly what they deserved. Was it his fault they were gullible enough to believe in fairy tales? To believe in psychics who could predict the future?

Better luck in your next lifetimes, he thought dryly, as he closed the file.

Maya rose from his desk and straightened his tie, studying his lean, toned form in the mirror. He smiled at himself, and his reflection smiled back, his bleached teeth a brilliant white.

He thought of the gorgeous young girls who were waiting for him one deck below, and he smiled again.

It was time to celebrate another victory.

Chapter 1.1

Five months later

New York City

For 24 year old Heather Bancroft, living in Manhattan was a dream.

She floated along Fifth Avenue in her chauffeur-driven limousine, peering out the heavily tinted windows at the sorry sea of humanity that shuffled along the sidewalks. It was sad. All those poor people struggling to make ends meet.

What Heather loved most about New York were her weekends. On Saturdays, she would go shopping at Tiffany's and Oscar de la Renta and Akris. In the evening, she might take in an opera at the Met, viewing the performance from her private box seat, or attend a special art exhibit open only to VIPs at the Guggenheim, or perhaps just have a quiet dinner at The Four Seasons or La Grenouille with a few of her close friends.

Sundays were reserved for fitness, nature and relaxation. She would have her French cook prepare a gourmet picnic lunch and, as she sipped Dom Perignon and nibbled on beluga caviar, she would watch the sailboats lazily float across the lake in Central Park. Later, she would have an extra-long workout with her drop-dead gorgeous personal trainer, Hans, and then have a sauna...and perhaps he would give her a massage...

Of course, Heather had to work for a living, too.

She was president of her own world-famous PR firm.

No, wait...it was a world-famous fashion design firm.

Or, no...real estate.

Heather came to a stop and she gazed up at the office building where she worked.

Her feet ached from the 40 block walk from Lower Manhattan.

* * *

"You're late," Rita snapped.

"I'm sorry, but there was a long line down at the café and—"

"Business starts at nine a.m. sharp, Heather. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Sorry," she muttered. She handed over the soy decaf cappuccino, extra hot, that she had to carry to Rita every morning.

Rita squeezed the cup to test the temperature, then cautiously took a sip.

"This isn't soy."

"I asked for soy."

"Well, it *isn't* soy. Can't you do anything right?"

Heather didn't respond. She had grown accustomed to this treatment.

She carried the other cup of coffee—a skinny hazelnut latte with an extra shot—to Kevin, her "other" boss, then zigzagged back through the maze of desks and cubicles that composed the guts of Potter Public Relations. Founded by Stanley Potter, the company had prestigious clients spanning the globe, in industries ranging from cosmetics to real estate to computers. The firm occupied the entire 17th and 18th floors of the building.

Heather's tiny cubicle was wedged between the kitchen and a copying machine. She had a B.A. in Public Relations from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her job title at Potter was Junior Account Executive.

In reality, it might as well have been Junior Gofer. As in "Go for this, go for that." Her main duties were running errands, compiling mailing lists, making photocopies, and bringing Rita and Kevin their coffee.

In some ways, moving from North Carolina to New York last year had been a disaster. She and her mother had been having trouble making the payments on the house, which had been in the family for 80 years. Heather had hoped that by moving here she could earn a much higher wage and send money home.

But that hope had been naïve. Now she couldn't even afford to ride the subway or a bus, even in the pouring rain. It had taken Heather six months just to find this job. To survive during that dry spell, she'd ended up waitressing and selling every item she brought with her from North Carolina that was of any value—first her desktop computer, then an expensive sewing machine that had been her high school graduation present, and, finally—her last remaining "luxury"—a smart phone. When she had at last gotten the job at Potter Public Relations, she was thankful, even though the pay was lousy and the workload horrendous.

Now, her mother's house was about to go into foreclosure, and there was nothing she could do about it.

* * *

When Heather came into work the next morning, she found the entire 17th floor deserted.

She heard Lisbeth's tea kettle whistling in the kitchen and stuck her head in the door. "Hi. Where is everybody?"

"You haven't heard, luv?" Lisbeth was a whip-thin British woman, the administrative assistant for Heather's section. She was also the company gossip. "ReikerApps had a glitch in their new software package—it's gone tits up. The whole bloody department's gone round to their offices for an emergency press conference."

Heather felt like a fool, standing there holding the two cups of coffee for Rita and Kevin. She thought that one of them could have had the courtesy to call her and tell her not to bring it.

Just as Heather sat down in her cubicle, her phone started ringing.

She picked it up, thinking it was probably Kevin or Rita calling to make sure she was overloaded with grunt work while they were out saving the day.

"Stanley here, Heather."

She was silent. Stanley? She didn't know anyone named Stanley. Then it hit her—it was Stanley *Potter*, the president of the company! He hadn't said a word to her since the day she was hired.

"Yes, sir." Heather said, sitting up straighter in her chair.

"We've had one goddamn disaster after another this morning. Somehow, we have a photo shoot scheduled with Windsor Properties at 10 o'clock that we didn't know about. The contracted crew is over at the construction site right now—photographer, models, a catering truck, the works—all standing around scratching their asses, not knowing what to do."

"Oh," Heather said. She wasn't sure what this had to do with her.

"Do you think you could go over there and handle the shoot?"

"Me?"

“Yes, you. You can drive a car, can’t you?”

“Of course I can drive.”

“Good. Take the company Mercedes. You can get the keys from my PA.”

The line went dead.

* * *

Ten minutes later, Heather was in Potter’s Mercedes, racing down 2nd Avenue towards the Holland Tunnel. She had never driven in New York before, and that alone was a challenge. Her palms were sweating all over the leather steering wheel.

This is the chance you’ve been waiting for, she kept telling herself excitedly. She had asked Rita and Kevin several times to give her more challenging work, but of course those requests had fallen on deaf ears. But now that this opportunity had dropped right into her lap, she found herself lacking confidence. She had been doing grunt work for so long she had begun to believe that she wasn’t worthy of anything that required more brains. What did she know about photo shoots? She had never even been to a photo shoot, let alone managed one!

You can handle it, she assured herself again, a bead of sweat running down her back. *Stanley Potter wouldn’t ask you to do it if he didn’t believe you could handle it.*

* * *

When Heather reached the construction site entrance in New Jersey, a crowd of scruffy-looking protesters was milling around the chain-link fence, carrying hand-made signs condemning Windsor Properties. The company was building a gigantic shopping mall at this location and, according to the protestors, spoiling the environment. The dispute was frequently on the news, the usual fight between the environmentalists and the construction companies. Potter Public Relations had been hired to help quell it.

Heather was cleared through the security checkpoint and followed the gravel road around to one side of the expansive hole that had been dug in the ground. She pulled up to a spot where a dozen cars and vans were parked. Iron girders were already going up. The din from jackhammers and machinery was ear-splitting even with her car doors and windows shut.

She was thankful she was well-dressed today. She was wearing a navy Armani suit that she had bought at a used clothing shop. Her hobby was fashion design, and she had fitted the suit to her slim figure herself. Heather was a redhead, with long, naturally wavy hair, a wide, sensual mouth, and soft, azure eyes. Dark blue looked good on her.

She glanced at her face in the rear view mirror, checking her makeup. *I look way too young*, she thought.

She quickly pinned up her hair.

Better.

Heather’s legs felt rubbery as she climbed out of the car. She made her way to the area where the photo shoot was set up. As she did so, there were several subdued whistles from construction workers who were standing on girders several stories up, watching her.

“Lookin’ good, baby!”

“Nice calves. Do you work out?”

Heather ignored the comments and continued on.

There were several reflective umbrellas set up and two cameras on tripods. An arty-looking man with a gold earring sauntered up. He looked past her, as if he thought she might be someone's assistant. When he saw that she was by herself, he said, "Jill?"

"Heather." She offered her hand. "I'm covering for Jill today."

He frowned. "Where's Jill?"

"She had an emergency," Heather said vaguely. Jill was one of the VPs at Potter—apparently this account was so important that she handled it herself. That only made Heather more nervous.

"Well, it's about time somebody got here," the photographer said irritably. "I'm Dominique." He motioned across the set. "All the models are standing around here wondering what the hell to do..." His voice trailed off. "Aren't you a little young to be handling this?"

"I can handle this just fine," Heather snapped. "Can you please fill me in on what you and Jill planned?"

"She wants some positive shots of the men at work to show how building a mall is good for the community, that it creates jobs, and so on, to counter the complaints about corporate greed and environmental damage."

"Got it." Heather took a step forward but Dominique stopped her. "You have to wear one of these," he said, handing her a yellow hardhat and donning one himself.

Heather walked over and looked at the models. The men were supposed to be construction workers, but most of them had the sleeves of their denim shirts rolled up to reveal their biceps, and some of their jeans were so tight they might have been spray-painted on. It was obvious that most of them were gay, and very proud of it. Heather was appalled.

"You guys are off the mark," she called to them. "This isn't a men's deodorant commercial."

Some of the male models glanced over at her. They were standing in loose groups, casually chatting with each other—some were smoking, others had their yellow hardhats casually pushed back on their heads.

Heather moved closer and motioned to one of them. "Roll your sleeves down...and you"—she motioned to another one—"cover up your stomach! Don't you get it? You're supposed to look like real workmen, not Chippendale models!"

The men started paying more attention, muttering to themselves as they rolled down their sleeves and straightened their hats.

Except one man.

He was standing next to three attractive young women, with his back turned to Heather. The girls were laughing at whatever he was saying, all three looking like they were hanging on his every word.

"Excuse me, I'm talking to you," Heather said, trying to keep the edge out of her voice.

The man slowly turned around. Now she could see why the girls were hanging on his every word. He was gorgeous, with ice-chip blue eyes and luxurious black hair that was swept back down to his collar. His yellow hardhat was tilted back at a rakish angle. He gave Heather a lazy smile and slowly took her in, his eyes starting with her pumps and moving up her body, coming to rest on her face. From the way he looked at her, he clearly was not gay.

Heather felt herself blushing.

"Do you want to work or not?" she snapped.

He glanced around uncertainly, then pointed at his broad chest. “Me?”
“Yes, you.”

Dominique said, “Heather—”

“Let me handle this.” She motioned to him—she had to establish her authority. “Button up your shirt! And get that gold pen out of your pocket.”

He cracked a smile. “Yes, ma’am.” He gave a little salute.

The girls standing around him giggled as he followed her instructions.

Heather turned away, struggling to control her temper.

She spent the next few minutes arranging the models around the set, having them pick up tools and pose without looking like they were posing, telling the photographer the kind of impression she wanted to make.

The good-looking black-haired model continued to annoy her, barely following her instructions, chuckling every now and then and glancing at the female assistants, who seemed thoroughly amused by his antics. The man behaved as if the entire photo shoot was a joke. Heather was tempted to fire him on the spot and report him to his modeling agency, but she didn’t want to create a negative atmosphere.

After taking pictures for nearly an hour, Heather was satisfied that they had plenty of shots for Jill to choose from.

“That’s a wrap!” Dominique called out, and his assistants began packing up the equipment.

As soon as Dominique walked off, the troublesome model sauntered over to Heather, giving her his lazy smile again.

In a husky voice, he said, “You and me should get together sometime, sweetheart. I’d sure like to know you better.”

Heather could stand it no longer. As there was nobody around to hear, she said, “You are a disgrace to your profession,” and sharply turned away.

She got into the Mercedes, rattled by the encounter. She didn’t know why the man got under her skin so much.

He sauntered over to a Jaguar convertible and climbed inside. The top was down. He tore away through the gravel, his hair blowing in the breeze.

Modeling must pay a lot better than public relations, Heather thought bitterly.

* * *

Just as Heather started the engine of the Mercedes, another car came rushing into the lot, slamming to a stop in the gravel.

It was Rita.

She threw her car door open and marched over to the Mercedes, her heels crunching through the rocks. Rita was in her mid-thirties, was tall and a bit lumpy, with dyed black hair that had fallen prey to far too many perms. When she walked, she always leaned forward on her heels, as if she was about to fall over.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she said, as Heather rolled down the car window.

“I—Mr. Potter asked me to come handle the photo shoot.”

“You?” Rita cackled. “You don’t have a clue about photo shoots! You should have called me.”

“Mr. Potter said—”

“I’m your *line manager*, you little fool! You report to me, not Stanley Potter. We have a chain of command in our firm, in case you didn’t know. You don’t even fart without asking me first.”

Rita turned sharply and walked up to Dominique. “Get that equipment back in place!”

He looked confused. “We already wrapped.”

“Well that’s too bad,” Rita said, “because we’re doing the whole shoot over again.” She glanced over her shoulder, giving Heather a withering glance. “And we’re going to do it right this time.”

* * *

When Heather got home from work that day, she was exhausted and depressed. Rita’s words were still echoing in her ears.

You don’t have a clue about photo shoots...I’m your line manager, you little fool!

As she was unlocking the door to her apartment, she was surprised to find Percy, her roommate, opening it for her.

“Hey, Carrot-top,” he said.

Percy had a low level job in the account department of one of the largest investment banking firms on Wall Street. He was still wearing his business attire, his white shirt in stark contrast against his black skin. He and Heather had met freshman year at Chapel Hill and had been friends ever since.

Heather said, “I thought you had a date with Jason, or Jacob, or whatever his name was.”

“We had a spat,” Percy sniffed. Then he noticed the look on Heather’s face. “Bad day?”

“The worst,” Heather muttered.

“Well, it’s about to improve one thousand percent.”

Heather was surprised. “What are you talking about?”

Percy pointed towards the dinette table. There was a long white, rectangular box laying on it.

“Flowers?” she said, brightening.

“There’s a card,” Percy said, with a smile.

Heather pulled the envelope from the box. Her name was written across it in a script that was somehow flamboyant and sloppy at the same time. The card was cream-colored and the paper looked expensive.

She opened it with growing excitement, delighted by such an unexpected turn of events.

She couldn’t imagine who would have sent her flowers. Some secret admirer at Potter? A handsome executive from the 18th Floor who saw her in the elevator every day and couldn’t muster up the nerve to speak to her?

With charged anticipation, she opened the card and started reading.

Heather,

I’m sorry for how I acted at the photo shoot today. My behavior was inexcusable. Will you forgive me? I’d love to take you to dinner and explain.

David

(a disgrace to my profession)

Heather stared at the last line in disbelief.

“*Him?*” she yelled.

Percy’s smile faded. “Who’s ‘him’?”

Heather could only see the color red swirling before her eyes.

She picked up the box of flowers, and she slammed it down into the trash can with such force that the cardboard split open, with rose stems jutting out at crazy angles.

“How dare that obnoxious man send me flowers!”

* * *

David called once that night and three times the next day.

As it was finally the weekend and Heather was exhausted, she had planned to read a book and work on a new dress design, which always relaxed her. The first two times David called, she hung up without saying a word, angry that he had interrupted her. On the third call, she lost control.

“How the hell did you get my address and phone number?” she demanded. She knew that Dominique certainly didn’t have it, and that no one at Potter would give it out.

“I’m very resourceful,” David said smugly.

“So am I. If you call me again, I’m going to report you to your local police precinct and get a restraining order.”

Heather slammed down the receiver.

Percy gave her a curious glance. He was at the dinette table, his textbooks spread out, studying. He was ambitious, already getting his master’s degree in actuarial science at Columbia.

“Man, that guy really gets under your skin, doesn’t he?”

Heather stood there, shaking with anger. “Percy, that man is *exactly* the sort of male I despise.”

“Right. A drop-dead handsome lady killer.”

“He is!”

Percy chuckled. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

“Look, Mr. Shakespeare, if you think I would go out with such a loathsome creature, you’re badly mistaken.”

* * *

When Sunday passed without hearing from David, Heather finally thought she had gotten rid of the pest.

On Monday morning, Heather hiked the 40 blocks to work, as usual, in the pouring rain. She found herself in a gloomy frame of mind, dreading seeing Rita again, and wondering why the only men she ever attracted were either losers or jerks.

She stopped in the lobby to fetch Rita and Kevin’s coffee, mentally cursing both of them as she did it, and wondering why she put up with being treated like a galley slave.

As soon as she came out of the café with the two coffees in her hands, she trotted towards the elevator bank. The doors of the farthest lift were just closing.

“Hold the doors, please!” she called, rushing ahead.

When she dashed inside, she found herself looking straight into the face of David, the obnoxious model.

For an instant, she thought he was stalking her...but then she saw that standing close beside him, holding the doors, was Stanley Potter.

The two men seemed to be together.

David was wearing a perfectly-fitting business suit that looked just as expensive as Potter's. The elevator smelled of fine cologne.

"Good morning, Heather," Potter said politely, releasing the button. The elevator doors closed. Potter glanced at David, then said to Heather, "This is David Windsor, Vice President of Windsor Properties. David, this is Hea...wait a minute, you two must know each other from the photo shoot..."

There was an awkward silence.

"Yes, we met briefly," David said, smiling pleasantly at Heather. "I have to tell you, Stanley, this young lady did an excellent job handling that shoot. I was impressed."

Heather's face flushed. She gave an uneven smile. David gazed back at her, a playful look in his eye.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, David. Did you know I handpicked Heather to work for us?"

"Is that so?"

"Yes I did. She's very resourceful, a wonderful addition to our team."

Heather glanced up at the emergency escape hatch. If she could have leapt up and crawled out into the elevator shaft, she would have. Her mind was racing, trying to make sense of what had happened on Friday. Why hadn't David told her he was the VP of Windsor Properties? She had made an utter fool of herself!

Heather turned and faced the doors, certain that her face was beet red. It seemed like the elevator took forever to ascend.

Finally, it reached the 17th Floor. Heather wasted no time in getting off, nearly spilling one of the coffees all over her blouse.

She forced herself to turn and smile at the two men. "Have a good day."

"You, too," the two men said in unison. There was a twinkle in David's eyes. The doors quietly shut as the lift headed up to the 18th Floor.

* * *

Heather sat in her little cubicle, fuming. She was horrified by the way she had acted at the photo shoot—she had bossed David Windsor around like a peon. *Button up your shirt! And take that gold pen out of your pocket!*

But how was she supposed to have known he was the *client*, for god's sake!

"Hi," a deep voice said from behind her. It made her jump.

David Windsor was standing there, gazing down at her with his ice-chip blue eyes.

"What can I do for you?" she said coolly. He was so handsome she had trouble speaking.

"Have dinner with me."

"I—I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I...we can't date clients."

David laughed. "This isn't a Hooters restaurant, Heather. Anyway, you don't even work in the real estate department."

She glared at him. "Why didn't you tell me who you were at the photo shoot?"

"You didn't give me a chance," David said, raising his hands helplessly. "You rolled over everybody like a bulldozer."

"I did not," Heather said, blushing.

“Yes you did. And by the way, that’s a compliment. I meant every word I said to Stanley. You were very impressive, coming in cold and taking charge of all those guys like you did. I enjoyed it.” Lowering his voice to make sure no one could hear, he said, “It really turned me on, seeing a beautiful young woman order a bunch of men around like that.”

Now Heather was sure her face was beet red.

David said, “I’ll meet you over at the Lindy’s on the corner at five-thirty. We’ll have coffee and go someplace better from there.”

He gave her another heart-stopping smile and walked away.

* * *

David Windsor turned out to be charming, witty, and intelligent. Heather met him at Lindy’s for coffee with every intention of stopping him in his tracks, but within a few minutes she found herself helplessly falling under his spell. He radiated an animal magnetism that she found irresistible.

He took her to a quaint French restaurant on the upper west side. He seemed to know everyone on the staff, and he was obviously well-liked.

Heather was surprised to learn that although he had grown up in New York City, David had gone to Stanford University and then had remained in California, spending the past nine years in Hollywood, trying to make it as a movie actor. He had only moved back to New York last year.

“All I could ever get were crummy parts in commercials. I finally realized my dad had been right all along, and I moved back to join the family business.”

“That must have been hard for you,” Heather said sympathetically.

David shrugged. “Yeah, he enjoyed saying ‘I told you so.’ He hated the whole Hollywood thing from the start—he hates California in general, he’s a real button-down East Coast type. He didn’t give me one penny of support the whole time I was out there. I had to wash dishes, park cars...I even resorted to giving tennis lessons just to make ends meet.” David paused. “But I know I’m boring you stiff talking about myself. What about you? What brought you to New York? And why don’t you speak with a Southern drawl? Stanley said you’re from North Carolina, but you sound like you’re from the Midwest.”

“My father was from Chicago, so I had a mix of accents when I was growing up.” Heather smiled. “I can tawk just lak Gomer Pyle if it pleases ya.”

David winced. “Don’t. I like you better the other way.”

Heather switched back to normal. “Some people make assumptions about your intelligence based on your accent, so when I’m ‘up North’, I drop it.”

* * *

They had a long, slow meal. Heather told David a lot about herself, about growing up in the South and her impressions of Manhattan. David listened closely and seemed genuinely interested in everything she said.

She did not mention the real reason she moved to New York or the problem her mother was having with the house going into foreclosure. He was from such a wealthy family that she felt embarrassed to tell him that.

“You know, Heather,” David said, pouring her another glass of the expensive Chardonnay he had chosen from the wine list, “I have a confession to make. The reason I acted like such a prick at that photo shoot was that I went there with every intention of sabotaging it.”

“What do you mean?”

“My father,” David groaned. “When I agreed to move back to New York and work at the firm, he told me I would have complete authority over the Jersey shopping mall project. ‘It’s your baby, David. You call the shots.’ What a joke! The man is a hopeless control freak. He can’t let go of anything.”

“It must be hard to work with your father—I’m not sure I could have worked with mine.”

“I’ll give you an example,” David said, motioning to her. “He thinks we should do a lot of PR to counter those environmental protesters who are against building the mall. My point of view is that I don’t think we should do a damn thing. We performed all the necessary environmental studies, filed all the proper documents, and our construction project was approved. I say let the protesters protest. The noise will gradually die out. Trying to counter them just creates more controversy and adds fuel to the fire.” David paused, one eyebrow raised. “You’re a PR expert—what do you think?”

Heather was flattered that he’d asked her opinion.

“Well,” she began carefully, “I’m hardly a PR expert yet, but I think either strategy could work, either yours or your dad’s. It’s hard to predict which way would be better—there’s a luck factor involved. You might very well be right that the protesters will just lose steam on their own if you don’t try to fight it. Sometimes a ‘play dead’ strategy is the best possible approach.”

David smiled. “You’re my kind of girl, Heather.”

She laughed. “What kind is that? The kind who always agrees with you?”

“No. The kind who’s a knockout but who also has a brilliant head on her shoulders.”

* * *

When they left the restaurant, Heather’s impression of David Windsor couldn’t have been more different than it was when she had first met him at the photo shoot.

He was interesting and unusual, nothing like the shallow womanizer she originally thought he was.

He started driving uptown. He had mentioned that he lived on the Upper West Side.

Heather began to worry that he might ask her back to his apartment. “I really should be getting home now.”

“So soon?” David said, glancing at his watch. “It’s not even eleven.”

“I have to get up very early.”

“Me, too, actually.”

Heather lived in a section of the Lower East Side known as Alphabet City, where the streets were named A, B, C, etc. Heather lived on Avenue C in a badly rundown, prewar apartment house.

When they approached the intersection, David said, “Where’s your building?”

“Just over there,” she said, gesturing vaguely. She didn’t want him to see the shabby dwelling. “You can drop me in front of that newsstand.”

He stopped the car. There was an awkward silence. David looked over at her, then took her hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. “I’ve had a wonderful time, Heather.”

“Me, too,” she said sincerely. She let go of his hand and took hold of the door handle. “Thanks so much for dinner, David, it was fantastic.”

He smiled, looking pleased. "Now do I have permission to call you?"

Heather hesitated. "Well, I guess you can if you want."

"No restraining orders?"

She laughed, but felt herself blush. "No restraining orders."

David looked like he was about to lean over to kiss her but she quickly opened the door and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Bye."

* * *

The next morning Heather was in a blissful, dreamy state. The 40 blocks she had to walk to work passed under her feet like velvet.

When she arrived at the office, she beamed as she handed Rita and Kevin their coffees and wished them both a wonderful day.

They were both baffled.

Heather found it difficult to concentrate on her work. She kept thinking about David, dinner with him last night, the things he had told her, the things she had told him, playing it over and over again in her mind.

But as lunch time approached, she began to come back down to reality. David Windsor was devastatingly handsome, well-educated and intelligent, and came from an old, wealthy New York family.

Heather knew she was pretty, but on a scale of overall attractiveness, she wasn't in his league. David may not have had the talent to become a Hollywood movie star, but he certainly had the looks. She was just a relatively plain, middle class girl from North Carolina with a lousy, low-paying job, just like thousands of other young women her age in this city.

David Windsor could have any girl he wanted.

So why is he interested in me? she thought.

Heather half-wondered if it could be her naturally red hair. She had learned at a tender age that certain males were obsessed with redheads, to the point of it being a fetish. When she was 13 and some distant cousins came to stay for a couple of weeks, one of the boys constantly stared at her hair. Every few mornings she found that her hairbrush had been miraculously cleaned.

But David didn't seem preoccupied with her hair, or with any particular aspect of her body.

On her lunch break Heather spent some time searching the Internet, seeing what else she could find out about him, but there wasn't any information. There were quite a few David Windsors in the world. As she began to grow tired of searching, she realized there was someone right here in the office that would probably have the scoop on him.

Heather went into the kitchen and found Lisbeth sitting at one of the tables, drinking tea and reading a British tabloid on her laptop.

Heather quietly poured herself a cup of coffee. She would have to be very careful about this.

"Lisbeth?"

"Yes..." she said distractedly.

"Do you know anything about David Windsor?"

Still reading the tabloid, she said, "He's a client, the Vice President of Windsor Properties. He's in charge of that shopping mall project in New Jersey."

"I know that. I meant, do you know anything about him on a personal level?"

Lisbeth glanced sharply at her. “Why do you ask, luv?”

Heather could almost see radar-like antennae extending from the woman’s head, the ends quivering in anticipation of picking up new data.

“A friend of mine and I ran into him the other night and he was hitting on her,” Heather said, trying to sound casual. “She’s not sure whether she should go out with him or not.”

“Oh.” Lisbeth glanced at the door. Lowering her voice, she said, “Well, you know I’m not one to gossip, especially about clients...”

“Of course not.”

“Well, this is only second-hand information, luv, and you have to promise not to repeat it...”

“I promise.”

“I hear that the bloke fancies anything in a skirt. He’s only been back from California for a year and from what I know he’s already slept with half of Manhattan.”

Heather turned away, slowly ripping open two packs of sugar and dumping them into her coffee. She didn’t take sugar in her coffee.

She could feel Lisbeth’s gaze boring through her back. “Where did you run into him, luv?”

“Lindy’s,” Heather said, keeping her voice even. She composed herself and turned towards Lisbeth again.

Lisbeth studied her face, the antennae quivering. “Well, if *I* were your friend, I would stay away from David Windsor. That is, unless she just fancies a casual shag. With all his conquests, I’m sure he’s bloody good in bed.”

* * *

Two days later, Heather went out with David again. They went dancing, and he took her to three of the most exclusive clubs in New York.

She ignored Lisbeth’s advice, telling herself the gossipy Brit didn’t know what she was talking about and that the information was not reliable. Lisbeth was clearly jealous.

Nevertheless, Heather fought off David’s advances, as well as his attempts to lure her back to his apartment.

They were soon seeing each other a few times a week. David played tennis at his parents’ club on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but he and Heather were together virtually every other evening that they both had free.

David showed her all over the city, taking her to the finest restaurants, to Broadway plays, to museums, to the opera, to concerts in Central Park. Going out with David made Heather feel glamorous and more confident. She loved New York, but having grown up in a relatively small city, she had always been a little intimidated by The Big Apple. David cruised through the metropolis like he owned the place. And he was clearly pleased to have Heather on his arm. He proudly introduced her to everyone he knew.

David was a sharp dresser, and he wore a lot of jewelry. Normally Heather didn’t find this attractive in men, but for some reason the expensive gold watches and bracelets and necklaces suited him, looked sexy against his tanned skin.

Dating David was almost like the fantasy she had of living the super-wealthy lifestyle when she walked the 40 blocks to work every morning...

Only it wasn’t quite the same fantasy. The considerable amount of money they were spending together was David’s, not hers. In the fantasy, Heather was

earning the money for that high lifestyle herself. She had never been keen on marrying a wealthy man, wary of the financial dependency that would create. Some of her friends wanted this, and she didn't judge them for it. It just wasn't Heather's way.

The fact that she had not gotten around to telling David that her mother's house was on the verge of foreclosure also bothered her. Heather kept planning to tell him, but somehow the right moment for her to say, "By the way, David, my mother and I can't pay the rent on our house back in North Carolina and it's probably going to be repossessed by the bank" never came up.

The other problem, of course, was what Lisbeth had told her. As much as Heather wanted to dismiss it, the words gnawed away at her.

...he's already slept with half of Manhattan.

...the bloke fancies anything in a skirt.

...with all his conquests, I'm sure he's bloody good in bed.

Heather kept telling herself that it was only natural for people to think badly of David simply because he was attractive and rich and tended to be flirtatious.

But there were some subtle and not-so-subtle signs that what Lisbeth had said might be more than idle gossip. There were almost 10 million people in New York City, yet it seemed like everywhere she and David went they ended up running into some person that David knew. Some female person who happened to be young and gorgeous.

"I grew up here," David said, as if that explained it.

Even though Heather had a wonderful time with him, she tried her best not to let herself get emotionally involved. She repeatedly told him that they were just good friends.

* * *

Exactly one month after the first night they had gone out, Heather knew she couldn't dodge David's advances any longer.

"Did you know this is our one month anniversary?" he said, just after he picked her up to go to dinner.

"Is that so?" Heather said, feigning surprise.

"That's right. Our first date was exactly one month ago today."

She supposed it was a miracle that he had gone out with her this long without sleeping with her. He had probably broken some kind of record. She half-wondered if David was still going out with her just because of the challenge—a girl had finally come along who didn't immediately tumble into bed with him.

David didn't bring up the issue again during dinner. But after they left the restaurant, he started driving uptown and they soon passed the street they should have turned down to go to Heather's apartment.

"David, I'm not going home with you."

"Don't be like that, Heather, we've been dating for an entire month, for God's sake."

"We're not 'dating,' David, I already told you that. We're just good friends."

"Yeah, right." He continued driving uptown.

"I'm not going to your place, David."

"Well, then let's go to your place."

"It's too hard to find parking around there. Besides, my roommate is probably home, and he's trying to study."

“Your roommate,” David muttered. “How do I know you don’t have a husband squirreled away in that apartment?”

“Percy is gay, David.”

“Yeah, that’s what you keep saying.”

“David, please turn the car around.”

“I just want you to give me one good reason we can’t go over to my apartment, Heather. Just one good reason.”

“I don’t want to spend the night with you. That’s reason enough.”

“Who’s asking you to spend the night? I just want to go have a drink—you haven’t even seen my place. You’ll like it. It’s very cozy.”

“I’ll bet. Thousands of New Yorkers say so.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means.”

David looked frustrated. He pulled the car over and stopped.

He gazed at her a minute, with a hurt-puppy-dog expression, then suddenly leaned over and kissed her on the mouth. She half-resisted.

He slid his hand up her thigh.

“Stop it!” she said, pushing him away.

He wiped his mouth, looking humiliated. “You don’t find me attractive…”

“Of course I find you attractive.”

He looked surprised. “Then what’s the problem?”

Heather gazed out at the traffic. “My god, do I have to spell it out for you?”

“You’re wrong about me, Heather. Totally wrong.” He raised his hands in the air. “Okay, I admit it, I’ve been a player. But I’ve changed.” He reached over and tenderly touched her hand. “*You’ve* changed me, Heather. I’m crazy about you! I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. Do you think I’d be spending every single day with you if I wasn’t in love with you?”

“Does this angle usually work?”

“Heather, you’re merciless! Give me a chance, will you?”

She finally turned and looked into his eyes. He seemed halfway sincere.

“Heather, give me the benefit of the doubt. Please? Is it that big a risk for you to take, after spending so much time with me?”

She looked down at his chest, his hands...the powerful sexual attraction to him had always been hard to resist. She was sure that Lisbeth was right about one thing—he was probably a skillful lover, with all his experience.

He’s reached his breaking point, she thought. He’ll dump me if I don’t sleep with him tonight.

Heather supposed she should have been flattered that he’d worked so hard to try to get her in bed, with all the choices he had, and had waited four entire weeks. Twenty-eight whole days. It really must have been a record for him. At least this way the relationship would end pleasantly. He would be victorious and he could freely move on to his next conquest.

“All right,” she said. “But just for one drink.”

David smiled.

* * *

David had a plush, two-bedroom apartment that overlooked Central Park, with a private garage and a doorman.

When they stepped inside, David took her hand and led her directly to his bedroom.

She didn't resist.

He made love to her as if she were a virgin, undressing her slowly, paying attention to her every whim, kissing her all over her body, making sure she was aroused. When he entered her, he was somehow both brutal and tender at the same time.

She enjoyed it immensely, but she felt emotionally detached—her body took pleasure from it, but that was all. In her heart, she felt nothing.

They had sex three times. Finally, just after two a.m., they both fell asleep, spent and exhausted.

* * *

Heather slumbered so deeply that when she woke up, she couldn't place her surroundings. The silk sheets, the expensive paintings on the walls, the sleek furniture...

Then she remembered: she was in David's bed...

She reached for him, but he wasn't there.

Of course he wasn't there.

She pulled the covers around herself and looked around the room. Where was The Note? The hand-scrawled paper that would say, *Sorry, got called into work, but last night was fantastic! There's some yogurt in the refrigerator. Make sure you lock the door when you leave.*

But there was no note on her nightstand, or the nightstand on his side of the bed, either.

Keeping the covers pulled around her, Heather got up and moved about the large room, checking the dresser and mirror. Nothing.

Maybe he had taped it to the door, or it was in the kitchen...

At that moment, she heard a faint click.

The bedroom door handle was turning slowly.

Heather nervously backed away. The door quietly swung open.

David was standing there in a blue kimono, balancing a tray between his hands. "Oh, you're up!" He smiled. "You were sleeping so sweetly I didn't want to disturb you."

Now she could smell vanilla in the air. On the tray was a vase with a pink rose sticking out of it.

"I made you French toast with strawberries...fresh squeezed orange juice...bacon..."

Heather was flabbergasted.

David made her get back in bed and set the tray across her lap, then kissed her on the head. "If you don't have any plans, I'd like us to spend the weekend together. There's a great new Picasso exhibit at the Guggenheim, and after that ..."

Chapter 1.2

I'm the luckiest woman in the world, Heather thought, as she got out of bed and steeled herself for another day of low-level, mind-numbing work.

She may have been broke, she may have had a terrible, thankless job, but she was in love with David Windsor. And as far as Heather could tell, David Windsor was in love with her as well.

And, somehow, that would eventually make everything right.

It had only been two weeks since she had spent the night with him for the first time, and last night he had dropped a kind of bomb on her, a very pleasant bomb.

He wanted her to meet his parents!

He had actually gotten serious about her, something that she never dreamed would happen when she first went out with him.

David had suggested this meeting just after they had finished dinner and had gotten in his car.

Heather's first reaction had been fear, even though he had made it all sound very casual.

"But doesn't it seem too soon?" she said. "We've only been dating for a little over a month."

"Six weeks," David said. "By the time next Sunday rolls around, it will be seven. Anyway, this is no big deal, we'll just drop by for dinner. I bring lots of my friends home for dinner on Sundays, it's a kind of tradition, very laid-back."

As informal as he made it seem, Heather had a feeling that the meeting was a test to see if she passed muster with his family. David claimed that he didn't care what his parents thought of his friends or girlfriends, but it was obvious that he did care, at least to some extent.

"I don't know, David...we come from very different backgrounds. I'm not sure your parents will be very impressed with me."

"They have money, Heather, but they aren't snobs. They'll like you just fine, trust me."

"But I'm just an ordinary girl. I come from a regular, middle class family."

"Don't you think I know that?" David squeezed her hand. "It's one of the things I love most about you."

Heather frowned. "You love me because I'm middle class?"

David laughed. "In a way, yes, I do. I really can't stand those stuffy New England debutantes I grew up with around here. You have both feet on the ground, Heather. You know what real life is. I've never liked people who live in plastic bubbles, who use their money to insulate themselves from the world."

That's certainly not my problem, Heather thought.

David had finally convinced her it would be all right. Today was Monday, and the dinner was still six days away, but Heather was already nervous. *What should I wear? What should I say when I meet them? What should I tell them about my family?*

The issue that really bothered her, deep down, was the situation with her mother's house. She didn't mind him knowing that she was poor—he knew that already—but not being able to pay a mortgage was worse than poor, in Heather's mind. It was being in debt over your head. It was having things that you owned and loved yanked away from you because you could no longer afford them. It was shameful and humiliating.

Heather didn't feel comfortable with his parents knowing that about her, and her mother. She was afraid she would look like a gold-digger, as if she had latched onto David to get herself and her mother out of financial trouble.

As she was taking a shower, she decided to call Bill Edwards before she left for work. Bill Edwards was the family attorney, the one who was supposedly trying to stall the foreclosure on the house. She wanted to check and see if there was any news.

But Edwards beat her to it. As soon as Heather came out of the bathroom, the phone rang.

When she heard Bill Edwards' voice, she knew he had bad news.

"I hope I'm not calling too early," he said, "but I wanted to catch you before you left for work. You asked me not to call you at the office—"

"It's okay." Heather's mouth was dry with anxiety. "What's going on? My mother's okay, isn't she?"

"She's fine." Edwards hesitated. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this over the phone, Heather, but I just found out that the foreclosure filing was officially processed late Friday afternoon."

Her heart sank. "Which means..."

"Which means the foreclosure is official. Your mother's house will be put up for auction in thirty days."

"Thirty *days*?" Heather gasped.

"I'm afraid so."

"Isn't there anything you can do?" she said desperately.

"I'm afraid not, Heather. We've exhausted all the possibilities. We're at the end of the line. At this point the only way to save the property is to pay off the total amount due. If it's any help, that can be done right up to the day of the auction."

"How much would we have to come up with?" Heather asked, knowing it was a pointless question.

"Let's see, with principal, interest, collection fees..." a calculator clicked in the background. "...the total comes to just a little over two hundred thousand dollars."

Two hundred thousand dollars. Heather and her mother had about as much chance of coming up with two hundred thousand dollars as they had in winning the New York State Lottery.

Edwards said, "You need to talk some sense into your mother, Heather. She's in denial. I can't reason with her. She needs to voluntarily move out in the next thirty days or she'll be forced out. Evicted."

Heather winced at the word. "Okay, I'll talk to her," Heather said glumly.

After she hung up, she just sat there at the dinette table, thinking.

Percy came out of his bedroom a few minutes later, looking sleepy. He was dressed for work. He stopped at the kitchen door. "Good morning. Who was on the phone?"

She told him, and related what Bill Edwards had said. She did not mention the exact amount of money they would have to come up with to pay off the loan. It was too depressing.

"That sucks," Percy muttered, shaking his head. "Bankers are all a bunch of heartless bastards." He looked at her sympathetically. "I wish there was something I could do, Heather. You know I'm happy to give you the money from my student loan—I don't need it."

“I really appreciate that, Percy, but it won’t help.” He had offered this money before, and she was deeply appreciative of the gesture—he was a wonderful friend. But it was only \$8,000. “It’s a drop in the bucket compared to what we owe, unfortunately.”

Percy sighed. “I’m sorry, Heather, I really am.”

* * *

As Heather got ready for work, she found herself becoming angry with Bill Edwards, the bank, her mother, her deceased father, and everyone else who had anything to do with the situation with the house. Especially Bill Edwards. She had paid the man a lot of money to get her and her mother out of this situation, but it seemed like he treated it all so casually, just one more home foreclosure.

Had Bill Edwards really gone the extra mile for them?

Heather wondered.

She decided that she had no choice but to go down to North Carolina this weekend and talk to both her mother and Bill Edwards and see what else could be done. Surely there was some option besides coming up with all that money.

She borrowed Percy’s laptop and found some cheap tickets to Raleigh on a flight that left Saturday morning and a redeye flight that returned Sunday night. She would be dead tired all day Monday, but at least she wouldn’t miss any work. She had already used up her scant five days of vacation trying to deal with this situation and she was sure that Rita wouldn’t let her have any more time off.

But that meant she wouldn’t be able to meet David’s parents.

“Damn it,” she muttered. But it couldn’t be helped.

She picked up the phone and called David, hoping to catch him before he left for the office. Percy was half-watching her while she talked, standing at the living room mirror, putting on his tie.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said. “Did you sleep well?”

“Not nearly as well as I sleep with you.”

Heather smiled. He always said the sweetest things. “David, something has come up.” She told him about having to go to North Carolina.

“Oh? What’s going on?”

Heather glanced at Percy. “It’s my mother...she’s not feeling well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, honey. I hope it’s nothing serious...”

“No, but she might need some tests, and it’s hard to get her to go to a hospital.” Heather hated lying to David, but at least what she said was half-true. Her mother really wasn’t well and hated hospitals.

“Heather...are you sure you’re not just putting off meeting my parents? I told you that you have nothing to worry about—”

“It’s not that, David. Honest. I really do have to go home this weekend.”

David chuckled. “Maybe you’ve got a high school sweetheart squirreled away back home?”

Heather laughed. “That’s not it, believe me. We can meet your parents the next Sunday night, I promise.”

“Well, if you have to go you have to go...”

“Sorry to change plans like this.”

“No problem, honey, it can’t be helped. I hope your mom is okay.”

After she hung up, Percy was eyeing her.

“Don’t give me that look, Percy.”

“David has to find out sooner or later, Heather. I think you’re making a mistake not telling him about the house.”

“Well, I don’t agree with you. There’s still a chance that this problem can be worked out, somehow.”

“How?”

Heather smiled wryly. “Maybe I’ll win the lottery.”

* * *

As soon as Heather arrived at work and had taken Rita and Kevin their coffee, she settled into her cubicle to print out the boarding passes for her flight home.

When she opened her email, she was about to click on the confirmation message from the airline when she noticed another message above it that had just come in.

The odd subject line of the message caught her attention.

From Your Friend in Need, it read.

Curious, she clicked it open.

Dear Heather,

I was born with a most unusual gift. For reasons I cannot explain, I must now share this gift with some deserving person.

That deserving person is you.

On Sunday, Spain will win the World Cup.

I hope you use this information to your advantage.

I remain,

Your Friend in Need

Heather stared at the strange letter.

Your Friend in Need.

Yeah, sure you are, she thought. Your friend in need. Wouldn’t it be nice if some benevolent stranger would just drop out of the sky and solve all of your financial problems for you?

Heather deleted the message without giving it another thought, and she printed out the boarding passes.

* * *

To save money, she walked to the Port Authority Terminal on Saturday morning and then took a bus to Newark Airport.

During the flight, she read through the official foreclosure letter that she had received in the mail. She felt sick as she skimmed through all the legalese—it was impossible to understand. Years ago, her father had put the house in her name as part of some silly tax shelter scheme that hadn’t worked. So, officially, it was her house in Raleigh that had gone into foreclosure, not her mother’s house. This has wreaked havoc on her personal credit, but up to this point she still had her credit card.

She wondered how long that would last.

When she stepped out of the Raleigh-Durham Airport, the heat and humidity hit her like a brick wall—she had almost forgotten how hot North Carolina could be in June.

Heather had one of her friends meet her at the airport and drop her off at home.

She found herself standing in front of the tree-shaded antebellum house where she had grown up, in the Historic Oakwood section. She had been home at Easter, and the dwelling had looked meager then, and it looked even more meager now. The white paint was peeling on the porch columns.

Heather unlocked the front door with her key. “Mother?”

The inside of the house was cool and quiet, the only sound the faint ticking of the clock on the living room mantle.

“Mother?” Heather called again.

Still no response.

Feeling a little uneasy, Heather walked through the kitchen to the back door. Her mom was probably in the greenhouse.

Heather spotted Alicia Bancroft through the windows. She was wearing her gardening apron and gloves. Two of the cats were splayed out on the concrete of the greenhouse, at her feet.

“Why Heather!” Alicia gushed, and then looked confused. “Honey, I didn’t know you were coming.”

Heather hugged her. She drew back, looking Heather up and down. “Look at you, you’re skin and bones! You’re not getting enough to eat up there in that awful place!”

“I’m fine, Mom. I came here on short notice because we have to talk about the situation with the house.”

“The house?” Alicia said vaguely, and then turned to her flowers. “I want you to look at these chrysanthemums. Aren’t they coming along wonderfully?”

“Yes, they’re very nice, Mom. But—”

“And the roses! Have you ever seen such beautiful roses, dear? Last year they weren’t nearly as robust—”

“Mother, you’re going to *lose* this house. Do you understand? You have to move.”

Alicia looked indignant. “I’ve lived in this house my entire life, dear. I was *born* in this house.”

“That doesn’t matter, Mother! This is a legal issue. You’re not entitled to live in a house forever just because you were born in it.”

“Well, I’m sure Bill Edwards has an ace up his sleeve somewhere. He’s a very good lawyer.”

“He doesn’t have an ace up his sleeve, Mother. I talked to him a few days ago. And this came in the mail.” Heather pulled the official letter from her purse. “The house has gone into foreclosure, do you understand? There will be an auction in three weeks. Unless we can somehow come up with two hundred thousand dollars before then, it will be sold off to the highest bidder.”

“You worry too much, darling,” Alicia said, barely glancing at the letter. “Everything will work out. It always does.”

Heather watched her mother prune the roses. Bill Edwards was right. She was in total denial about this. She was showing signs of dementia, Heather thought, or maybe Alzheimer’s, but she refused to admit it or go to a doctor.

“Don’t you *get* it, Mom? The sheriff is going to drive up with a court order and force you out into the street. You *have* to go live with Estelle.” Estelle was her mother’s half-sister, Alicia’s only living relative who was at all close to the family.

“Estelle and her husband don’t want me there,” Alicia said, clipping another rose. “And I don’t want to live in Chicago. You know I dislike those big Northern cities so.”

She suddenly turned and looked at the back of the house. “I could never move from here,” she said, her eyes misty. “If I leave this house, I’ll die.”

Heather felt a painful twinge in her heart. “You will not die, Mother. Don’t talk like that.”

* * *

Bill Edwards reluctantly met with Heather later that afternoon, but it was a waste of time. He reiterated what he’d told her on the phone. When she pressed him to rack his brain for any other possible solution, he got mad.

“If you don’t like the job I’m doing for you, then find yourself another lawyer.”

* * *

Heather spent the rest of the weekend trying to talk some sense into her mother, but it was an exercise in frustration. On Sunday morning she went horseback riding with a friend from high school who owned two beautiful palominos. Heather had always loved horses, and living in Manhattan and being nearly broke, she had few opportunities to go riding anymore.

On Sunday night, Heather decided to drop the foreclosure issue and just spend a few pleasant hours with Alicia. They went to a Tex Mex restaurant her mother liked and sat on the veranda. It was hot outside, even in the evening, but the fresh air, compared to the dusty atmosphere of Manhattan, was rejuvenating.

While they ate, Heather had to raise her voice a few times to be heard. There was a crowd inside the restaurant watching a game on the big screen TV in the bar.

Just as Heather and her mother were finishing their meal, there was loud cheering from inside—it sounded like everyone was going crazy.

Curious, Heather got up and peered inside.

Most of the patrons were young men, and many looked Hispanic. A soccer game had just ended on the TV, thousands of fans pouring out into the field. All the young men in the bar were slapping each other on the back, whooping, jumping up and down.

“What’s going on?” Heather asked.

A young, olive-skinned man grabbed her and kissed her.

“Spain just won the World Cup!”

Chapter 1.3

Heather flew back to New York in an agitated state, the young man's words reverberating in her ears.

Spain just won the World Cup!

The prediction in the strange email she had received last Monday morning had come true.

It's just a coincidence, she told herself. Probably some kind of scam.

When she got back to her apartment, she was wired from the flight, and she had trouble sleeping. She kept thinking about the last line of the message from the "friend in need." *I hope you use this information to your advantage.*

How could I have done that? Heather thought.

By placing a bet on the game, of course. There were lots of ways—New York City was full of bookies.

A critical voice in her head started yammering away.

If you would have placed a bet on that World Cup championship, you could have made a lot of money! You could have used that money to help your mother!

Shoulda, woulda, coulda, Heather thought. I could have lost a lot of money placing a bet like that, too!

When she went to work the next day, she was tired and irritable. Except for spending a little quality time with her mother, the trip to Raleigh had been pointless.

As soon as she had taken Rita and Kevin their coffees, she settled into her cubicle and checked her email.

Heather jumped a little when she saw a new message in her inbox.

From Your Friend in Need, the subject line read.

Glancing up again to make sure Rita wasn't around, she opened it.

Dear Heather,

I hope you used the information I gave you to your advantage.

On Friday, Hector Gonzales will win the presidential election in Ecuador.

I remain,

Your Friend in Need

Heather stared at the screen.

On Friday, Hector Gonzales will win the presidential election in Ecuador.

"Morning, luv," Lisbeth said from behind her. "Fancy a spot of tea?" Heather quickly closed the window on the screen. "No, thanks, I had coffee."

Lisbeth studied Heather's face more closely.

"You look like you just saw a ghost, luv." She peered curiously at Heather's computer screen.

Heather smiled nervously. "Just an email from an old friend."

Lisbeth nodded. Heather could tell she wasn't buying it.

"Anyway, there's a fresh kettle of Earl Grey in the kitchen."

* * *

During her lunch break, Heather researched how she might place a bet on the upcoming election in Ecuador. She had heard that the sports betting websites

allowed you to place bets on elections and other non-sporting events, but she wasn't sure if you could place a bet on an election in a small country like Ecuador.

She felt a growing excitement but tried to fight it. *I'm just doing research*, she told herself. She ought to at least find out if it was possible to bet on an election in another country.

Doing the research was nerve-wracking. Everyone on the 17th Floor passed by her cubicle on the way to the kitchen, and her computer screen was in full view. She opened a half dozen windows on her screen containing her media lists, and made the sports betting site windows very small, making sure to quickly hide them whenever she heard someone coming.

David called her just as she had opened several of them.

"I hope it's okay to talk right now..."

"I can talk for a minute," Heather said, cradling the phone to her ear.

"I expected to hear from you by now. Did you get back last night?" David sounded a little hurt.

"Yes, but it was very late, and I didn't want to wake you. I've been buried in work this morning."

"How is your mom? Did you get her to the hospital?"

"Uh, no, that turned out to be a false alarm."

"Oh. That's good news."

"Yes, it is." Heather was distracted, reading the text on her screen. She had just discovered that it was indeed possible to bet on the upcoming election in Ecuador. Two of the sports betting sites had the Ecuador election listed.

Heather had never used a sports betting site before, but it seemed simple enough. You could place a bet with your credit card.

"Heather, are you there?" David said.

"Yes, sorry. I'm piled with work right now. Can I call you back in a—"

"I just wondered if you wanted to go to dinner tonight. About seven?"

Heather stared at the screen, thinking. "Eight would be better. Can you pick me up here at the office? I have to work late tonight."

* * *

By 6:30 that evening, the office had cleared.

Heather was all alone except for the janitors, who always started with the executive's offices upstairs.

Two windows were open side by side on her computer screen. One was the order entry page of one of the sports betting sites, and the other was her bank account, open to her credit card page.

She still had \$1,500 left that she could charge to her credit card...

Fifteen hundred dollars...

It was a lot of money.

This idea was totally nuts! It was crazy to bet \$1,500 on an election in Ecuador when all she'd gotten was one correct prediction from whoever had sent her the email.

Totally insane.

Then again, she kept thinking, why not go out with a bang? She might not ever get another chance like this, and if something didn't happen soon that would have a big impact on her financial standing, David was going to find out about her mother's house and that her family was destitute, and he would dump her. Heather was sick and tired of being poor, of living hand to mouth, of scraping by. In the

overall scheme of things, if she lost this bet she would be no worse off than before. At least things would change, and she had reached the point where *any* change was welcome.

There was a legal issue, though. Sports betting seemed to be a gray area, but Heather was fairly sure that it was illegal in New York State. But the chances of getting caught seemed very slim—millions of Americans were doing it every day. This particular betting site was huge, processed millions of bets every week, and had been in business for ten years. It seemed relatively safe to her. If she won, she wasn't worried about getting paid or having legal problems.

If she won...

Heather looked back at the screen. The odds showed that there was about a 50-50 chance of Hector Gonzales winning the Ecuadorian election.

She swallowed hard, then quickly shut the gambling site window. No, no, no, this is too crazy! I can't risk \$1,500 on some stupid prediction I got in an email!

But there was another voice chattering away in her head. *You can't pay your credit card off at the end of this month, anyway. So what difference does it make? Why not take the chance? If you would have bet on the World Cup prediction, you could have won a lot of money! This prediction may be right, too!*

Heather kept getting up from her chair and pacing around the empty office, vacillating. She would convince herself that the person who was sending her the messages really was her "friend in need," and she would sit down and fill in the box with the numbers 1,5,0,0...

And then she would lose her nerve.

But her intuition kept telling her to do it.

Finally she went into the kitchen and had a cup of Lisbeth's Earl Grey tea, trying to calm herself down. Her heart was racing and she was actually perspiring from stress—the prospect of placing such a large bet was both scary and exciting at the same time.

She wondered what David would think if he knew what she was considering...

Still, there was a faint hope in the back of her mind: if these emails were to keep coming, I could make enough money to pay off my mother's mortgage!

Another stupid thought, but she kept having it anyway.

And she kept asking herself: what do I really have to lose at this point? I'm broke already, and so is my mother.

Finally, she finished off the tea and went back to her cubicle.

She once again filled in the blank with the \$1,500 amount of the bet. She sat there for a full five minutes, unmoving, her hand on the mouse. The cursor was hovering over the PLACE BET button.

"Do it!" she hissed at herself, and with a feeling of wild abandon, she clicked the mouse.

Chapter 1.4

Heather's date with David did not go well.

Five minutes after she had placed the bet, she was convinced it was the stupidest thing she'd ever done in her life.

She felt edgy all evening. David took her to an Italian restaurant in Little Italy, and at one point she dropped her fork on the floor, and at another, she nearly knocked over her wine glass.

"What's got into you, Heather? You seem awfully nervous tonight."

"Sorry." She sipped her wine and made an effort to keep her hand steady. "Seeing my mother always gets me in this mood. She's very difficult to deal with. You know how trying parents can be."

"Do I ever," David groaned. He watched her a moment, then gently took her hand. "Speaking of family, what about going over to my parent's for dinner on Thursday night?"

"Thursday night? I thought you said Sundays were the 'casual nights' when you brought your friends over."

"Thursday is casual night, too."

"David..."

He shrugged. "My parents aren't going to be home this Sunday."

"Then we can go a week from Sunday. Anyway, I thought you always played tennis on Thursday nights."

"My partner cancelled."

"David, why are you in such a hurry for me to meet your parents?"

"I'm not in a hurry," he said defensively. "They spend a lot of time up at the Hamptons in the summer, and I want you to meet them, that's all." He looked hurt. "If you don't want to meet my parents, that's fine."

* * *

Though it was against Heather's better judgment, she let David talk her into going to his parents' house for dinner on Thursday night.

That was one day before she would know the result of the bet she had placed, which was stressful enough. Meeting David's parents would quadruple it.

It was overcast and drizzling the next morning, and as Heather made the long, 40 block walk to work, she was acutely aware that she was penniless and in debt.

What would David think of her if he knew the truth?

Worse, what would his parents think?

Heather shuddered at the thought. She prayed there was no way they could find out.

Placing that \$1,500 bet really had been the dumbest thing she'd ever done. She didn't know what had come over her.

By the time Heather reached the office, she had worked herself into a frenzy, berating herself for her stupidity.

The first thing she did when she sat down in her cubicle was check the sports betting site to see if the odds had changed.

Now they were 45-55.

The chances of her candidate winning were dropping.

Heather felt sick to her stomach.

This isn't productive, she thought angrily, and closed the window on the screen. The election results would not come out until Friday night and the odds might fluctuate a lot more while various polls were conducted. It was too late to withdraw the bet. What was the point of making herself ill over this?

It was dumb enough to have placed it, but even dumber to suffer needlessly over actions that could not be reversed.

Heather made a firm decision then and there. She would not allow herself to think about it anymore. She would not check the odds again nor would she watch for anything in the news. After work on Friday, when everyone was gone, she would simply log into the sports betting website and check her balance to find out the result.

She would see that it had all been some kind of scam, and that she had lost fifteen hundred dollars.

She tried to tell herself that it was no big deal.

After all, it was only money.

Chapter 1.5

Heather changed outfits a half dozen times on Thursday night as she got ready to meet David's parents. She wanted to look classy, but it wasn't that easy to achieve on her budget. She tried on a genuine velvet suit that she made herself from her mother's old evening gown, but she thought it was too conservative.

As she changed into various outfits, she kept saying, "What about this?"

Percy was sitting at the dinette table, studying, and he would look up and say, "Too modest" or "Too flashy" or "Shows too much leg."

"Well, now you've seen everything I own!" she said at last, nearly in tears.

Percy sighed. "You're making this dinner into too big a deal, Carrot-top. David's parents aren't going to form their entire opinion of you based on how you dress."

"Thanks a lot, Percy. You're very helpful."

"Well, I already told you, the green outfit is fine."

"I thought you said it was too dowdy?"

"It's a little dowdy, but maybe dowdy is good."

Heather glared at him. He may have been gay, but in many ways he was just like any other man.

"Anyway," Percy said, "that's one of your own creations—you can impress them. It's a good conversation starter."

"I don't know how impressed they'll be, knowing that their son's serious girlfriend is a seamstress."

"You're not a seamstress, you're a designer. A budding designer, anyway."

Maybe Percy was right, she thought. At least the green outfit would give her something to talk about. She had no idea of what kind of conversation she could make that would be of any interest to such wealthy and worldly people.

* * *

As soon as she had put the green outfit back on, Heather studied herself in the mirror. It was composed of a knee-length skirt, a silk blouse, and a jacket.

She decided to wear a faux pearl necklace her mother had given her.

It looks real enough, she thought, after she put it around her neck.

"What do you think of this?" she said, stepping back into the living room so Percy could see it.

He smiled. "Now you look perfect, Heather. The necklace jazzes up the whole ensemble."

Chapter 1.6

While Heather waited for David to pick her up, she browsed the magazine section of the corner newsstand two blocks from her apartment building. As hard as it was to believe, David had never seen her apartment or met Percy. She always had David pick her up and drop her off at the newsstand, giving the excuse that it was too difficult for him to find a parking space on her street. Of course he knew the real reason. He had only said, “Heather, I’m not going to judge you by where you live—I know it’s tough for you to make ends meet here” once, and then he had let it go. That was something she loved about him.

But of course there was no way to avoid meeting his parents, and regardless of how much David tried to reassure her, she couldn’t help fearing that they were going to judge her harshly.

Heather went back outside and looked up and down the street, then glanced at her outfit, at the sensible high heels she had chosen to wear with it.

Relax, she told herself. Ultimately, David’s parents would form their opinions based on her personality, after they got to know her, not on her dress. There was nothing she could do to change her basic personality.

* * *

Heather soon saw David’s Jaguar approaching. She stepped over to the curb and climbed in.

“Hi sweetheart,” he said, giving her a warm kiss on the lips.

As she settled into the seat, she always found herself doing a double-take at his striking face, unable to believe how good-looking he was. He was wearing an expensive leather jacket, and the car smelled of it, and his cologne.

He glanced at her as he pulled away. “You look fantastic, Heather. Is that one of the outfits you made?”

“Yes,” she said modestly, glancing down at it. She felt underdressed compared to David. His left hand was on the steering wheel, and she could see that he was wearing a gold Cartier watch, one that she hadn’t seen before.

“Is that new?” she said, mostly to change the subject.

“Not really, my Mom gave it to me two or three Christmases back. She always gives me watches and bracelets as presents. I’m afraid she’s not very imaginative.”

David studied Heather’s face, sensing her nervousness. He kissed her hand. “Don’t worry, honey, everything will be fine tonight. My parents will love you, just like I do. I promise they will.”

Chapter 1.7

The Windsor's Manhattan residence was a magnificent 19th Century brownstone on Central Park West.

Heather's heart raced as David pushed the bell.

A liveried butler opened the huge door.

"Good evening, David," he said in a cultured British accent. He looked at Heather. "Good evening, Ms. Bancroft."

"Hello," she said, trying to smile naturally. She had never been greeted by a liveried butler before.

They entered an elegantly paneled foyer. A lighted painting to her right caught her eye, and she slowed to get a better look at it. It was an impressionistic dreamscape showing angels floating over a distorted Earth.

She glimpsed at the signature.

Marc Chagall

When Heather realized that this was not a copy, but an original, she had to stifle a gasp. It had to be worth a fortune.

"My father collects art," David explained. "That's one of his favorite pieces."

The butler led them to the living room, which was outfitted with antiques and Persian rugs.

* * *

David's father, Nathan Windsor, was one of those larger-than-life men with a natural charisma that filled the room. He heartily greeted Heather, looking her up and down just as David had the very first time he had seen her.

Like father, like son, Heather thought.

David's mother, Madalen, was tall and regal, with black hair and a long, slender neck. She was wearing a simple, black cashmere dress that was a perfect background for an exquisite double string of pearls. She smiled and quaintly shook Heather's hand as David introduced them. She seemed aloof and appraising.

She glanced down at Heather's "pearl" necklace. Now, in comparison with real pearls, Heather's looked like costume jewelry. Heather cursed herself for wearing it.

She glanced around the room—there were more paintings and a few small statues, antique furniture, and beautiful bookcases.

"You have a lovely home," Heather said, hoping to break the ice with Madalen. "I love all the artwork."

Nathan's eyes lit up. "Oh, you're interested in art, are you? Let me show you my collection."

* * *

The butler brought champagne while they all made small talk, and they soon went into the dining room.

The opulent, paneled walls were so well insulated that you couldn't even hear the traffic outside. This felt strange to Heather, because the sound of horns and engines and sirens was a continuous backdrop in Manhattan. They might have been sitting in a villa nestled in the Swiss Alps.

The butler poured wine and served salads. To Heather, it was like eating in a restaurant. A very expensive one. It was so quiet she thought that everyone could hear the croutons crunching in her mouth.

Nathan was a talker and, as they ate, he rattled on about the stock market, the problems with construction in the neighborhood, and various other safe topics.

As the butler took away their salad plates, Nathan said to Heather, "David tells me you graduated from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill."

Heather tensed. "Yes, that's right." Here it comes, she thought. The Inquisition.

"Wonderful school, just wonderful! My older brother earned his bachelor's degree there, then went on to get his MBA at Harvard."

"Is that so?" Heather said. "You didn't tell me that, David."

"I thought I did," David said, staring at his fork.

Nathan glanced at his wife. "What do your parents do?"

Heather tensed, but tried not to show it. She noticed that David's mother was watching her.

"My mom is a nurse. And my father was in sales."

A look passed between the two of them.

"Sales is by far *the* most important function in any business," Nathan said quickly, as if to show he wasn't a snob. "In business, everything starts with the customer. No sales, no customers. No customers, no business." He nodded to David. "Isn't that right, son?"

"Hm?"

"I said sales is the most important function in a business."

"I suppose so, yes."

Heather looked more closely at David. He seemed distant and detached from the conversation, just sitting there, saying very little. Then she noticed something else. In the presence of his father, he looked like a completely different person. He seemed unsure of himself, almost childlike. While Nathan Windsor was physically no taller than his son, the man's forcefulness and self-confidence seemed to dwarf everyone around him, especially David.

Heather thought that if she peeked under the table, she might see that David's legs did not reach the floor.

"So, you're from Raleigh, then?" Nathan said.

Heather glanced at Madalen, hoping she might stop this line of questioning, but she just sipped her wine, gazing at Heather. The woman's expression was unreadable.

"Yes, born and raised in North Carolina." Heather made a conscious effort to hide any trace of a Southern accent, afraid that they would look down on her for it.

"Raleigh is a beautiful town, just lovely. We've had a few small development projects there. What part of Raleigh are you from, exactly?"

Now Heather tensed again. "Historic Oakwood."

"Oakwood! Why, there are some gorgeous old antebellum homes in Oakwood, aren't there, Madalen?" He paused, as if he were waiting for Heather to tell him if she lived in one of them.

"Yes, our house is about one hundred years old." Her mother's about-to-be-auctioned house was the last thing she wanted to talk about.

"Is that right? Complete with front porches and white columns and all that?"

“Yes,” Heather managed. *And the columns are peeling because we’re flat broke, and the house just went into foreclosure because my father was not only a salesman but an alcoholic and a gambler, and he drank himself to death and left us with nothing.*

And I’m no better than he was.

“Well, you were very lucky to grow up in such lovely surroundings.”

Heather only smiled.

* * *

Heather could not have been more relieved when dinner was finally over and she and David were back in the warmth of his Jaguar.

She was annoyed with David for letting his father ask her so many pointed questions, thinking that he could have done something about it, and for being so distant most of the time.

But she was glad he was back to his normal, confident self. It was as if the moment he was out of his parents’ locus, he became the “old” David that she had fallen in love with.

“I think you made a great impression,” he said, kissing her hand.

“Really?”

“Definitely. My father really likes you, I can tell.”

“And what about your mother?”

David shrugged. “What can I say? Mothers are mothers. You know how they are about their sons.”

This also irked Heather after David had assured her they would both “love” her. But she didn’t want to start a fight. She thought the evening was painful enough for David as it was. She really didn’t understand him—he seemed so upbeat about her going to meet them, yet he was clearly miserable the whole evening. She could feel the emotional wedge between him and his father. It must be very hard for them to work together, she thought.

Maybe she just didn’t understand the ways of the super wealthy.

* * *

Heather spent that night with David, and then he dropped her off near her apartment at 7:00 a.m. the next morning so she could get ready for work. He had to go to Philadelphia on a business trip, investigating a new real estate project his firm was considering there, so she wouldn’t see him all weekend.

It was just as well. Today was the day that Heather would find out the results of the \$1,500 bet she had made on the Ecuadorian election, and she would be devastated.

After meeting David’s parents, people who had made their money the hard way, gambling with a large amount of cash based on silly emails seemed even worse than it had before. She had to make sure David never found out about it.

Tomorrow, she would take some sober and, hopefully, effective action to try and solve her mom’s problem. She would call Estelle in Chicago and lay the situation out. If Estelle and Robert would drive down to Raleigh and talk to Alicia face-to-face, they could convince her to go back to Chicago with them. Estelle could talk Alicia into it in person, Heather was sure of it. Then Heather could go back to Raleigh and arrange for all the furniture to be sold. Alicia had a few valuable antiques so she could bring a small “dowry” with her to Chicago. Hopefully that would make things easier for Estelle.

Chapter 1.8

Heather thought it would be hard to resist checking the Ecuadorian election results as the day progressed, but Rita loaded her with so much work she didn't have a chance. Three different press kits needed to go out first thing Monday morning, and Rita wanted them all completed and ready to send by closing time.

Heather was finished with the task just before six, and almost everyone on her side of the office had left.

She went to a nearby bar and ordered a sandwich and a beer. Then she had a second beer to brace herself for the bad news.

When she went back up to the office, most of the lights were off. It was deserted.

She sat down at her cubicle and opened the sports betting website and logged in.

Preparing herself for the worst, she clicked the ACCOUNT BALANCE button.

Current Balance: \$3,000.00

Heather's mouth dropped open. She stared at the number on the screen, then glanced around at the other text on the page, wondering if she was just confused.

She had actually *won*?

She clicked the election betting page.

Betting now closed.

Winner: Hector Gonzalez

"I won!" Heather shrieked, jumping up from the computer. She let out a little squeal, then leaped back into her chair and flipped over to the account page, gazing at the number again.

\$3,000.00

I just won fifteen hundred dollars by pushing a few buttons, she thought. That was more than half her monthly salary!

"What's all the row about, luv?" Lisbeth said.

Heather quickly closed the window. She turned and glanced at Lisbeth—Heather wasn't sure if she'd closed it fast enough.

"I-I just won a cheesecake and coffee at Lindy's."

"Well bully for you," Lisbeth said sarcastically. "Never saw someone get so excited over a free pudding." She headed toward the door, her purse over her skinny shoulder. "Cheers, luv, have a good weekend."

As soon as Lisbeth was gone, Heather transferred her winnings to her bank account. She wasn't going to take any chances in case the police or IRS monitored the site she was using.

* * *

Heather walked slowly home, pleasantly dazed. She still couldn't believe she had won so much money so easily.

She had checked her email before she left, but there were no new messages from her "Friend in Need." She remembered that both the other messages had come on Mondays, at about the same time, between nine and ten o'clock. So maybe there would be one waiting for her on Monday morning.

As she walked along Sixth Avenue, she tried to imagine who this mysterious person was. She felt like writing him a reply, telling him how much she appreciated his help, how grateful she was. For some reason she was sure that he was male and

much older, either middle aged or even elderly, by the tone of the messages and the way he signed them, *Faithfully* and *I remain*. In her mind's eye, Heather saw a heavysset blind man, perhaps blind from birth, sitting in front of a computer. To use it, he had to have a lot of special equipment.

Then that image faded and Heather saw an old man with snow-white hair slumped in front of a beat-up computer in a decaying apartment in a slum.

Heather slowed. What if it was just a joke? What if someone she knew was sending her the messages?

Could it be David?

But why would he do a thing like that? It made no sense.

What about Lisbeth, or someone at the office? Lisbeth just happened to be around when she was researching the sports betting sites, and when she had gotten the results today. But that made no sense, either—it just didn't seem like something Lisbeth would do.

What about Rita or Kevin? But why? Both of the workaholics were far too busy trying to become vice presidents at Potter to play games with peons.

By the time Heather reached her apartment, she had convinced herself that whoever was sending the messages truly wanted to help her and might well have some sort of psychic ability. Either that, or the whole thing was a scam run by the people who owned the sports betting sites. They could send out thousands of such messages every day at random, encouraging people to bet, and make money on the commissions, regardless of the outcomes.

But Heather had never heard anyone else mention receiving such messages.

Heather decided that over the weekend she would subtly check around and see if anybody she knew had experienced anything like this.

* * *

David called Heather on Sunday afternoon.

"I'm back," he said. "How about dinner and a movie?"

It was wonderful to hear his voice. He'd only been gone two days and she badly missed him.

They ate at a French restaurant and then went to see a very tedious art film in Greenwich Village. Not Heather's favorite kind of movie, but David enjoyed analyzing the acting.

Heather's mind was still occupied with the \$1,500 she had won and the emails from her mysterious "Friend in Need." She had checked around over the weekend and no one else seemed to be receiving anonymous messages from psychics, urging them to gamble.

David was in a particularly upbeat mood that evening. When they came out of the theater, he said, "I'm still kind of hungry—how about we go some place for dessert?"

"Sounds good," she said.

"I know a great Chinese restaurant in Gramercy Park."

"You want to go to a Chinese restaurant to have dessert?"

"They serve this incredible homemade plum ice cream, Heather. You'll love it."

* * *

David was right—the plum ice cream at the restaurant was delicious, the best ice cream Heather had ever tasted.

David was talking a lot about the film they had seen, but Heather's mind was still occupied with the bet and the email messages. She longed to tell him about it and felt guilty for keeping it a secret, but there was no way she was going to share it with him. The whole thing was just too reckless and crazy.

After the waiter took away their plates, he returned with two little saucers, a fortune cookie on each. He set one saucer in front of Heather and the other in front of David.

Heather had always liked fortune cookies. Not the cookies themselves but finding the fortune inside.

She looked at David. This was a good opportunity to test the water.

"Do you believe that it's possible for people to predict the future?" she asked.

David smiled. "Of course I do."

Heather was surprised by his answer. "Really?"

"Absolutely." David motioned towards the saucer in front of her. "For example, I predict that you're going to find a diamond ring inside your fortune cookie."

Heather laughed.

David smiled. There was a strange look on his face. He nodded towards the saucer. "Go ahead. Open it. Let's see if I'm right."

Heather eyed David for a moment, then looked down at the fortune cookie. It was sealed in a clear plastic wrapper.

She picked it up. Did it feel heavier than a normal fortune cookie, or was it just her imagination?

David was still smiling at her, that odd look on his face.

Heather carefully removed the wrapper, then, glancing at David again, broke open the cookie.

A gold ring tumbled into her palm.

A gold ring with a big diamond set in it.

Heather gasped.

David slowly took the ring from her, and tenderly slipped it on the third finger of her left hand.

Looking into her eyes, he said, "Heather, my love, will you marry me?"

Chapter 1.9

This is all happening too fast, Heather kept thinking.

She was standing in front of the mirror in the bathroom, putting on her makeup, getting ready for work. As she applied her eyeliner, she kept glancing through it at the ring on her hand. She was still stunned that David had proposed to her last night. She supposed she should have seen it coming, but she hadn't.

She had not actually said yes. He told her to think about it. She hated to break the spell, but on the way home, she said, "Don't you think this is a little too quick?"

David shrugged. "When you know you've met the right person, why wait?" He leaned over and hugged her. "I guess I'm ready to settle down—that's why I moved back from California, really. And it's like that Zen saying: 'When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.'" He hugged her again. "I'm ready, and the right woman appeared."

That was David's perspective. From Heather's perspective, it still seemed too fast.

As she started to put on her lipstick, Percy appeared at the bathroom door. He was dressed in his suit, preparing to leave for work.

"I can't believe you're already getting married," he chuckled. "I can't even hold on to a boyfriend for more than a couple of weeks, and here you are tying the knot."

"I haven't said yes yet, Percy."

"Well, you're wearing the engagement ring, aren't you?"

"True," Heather said, glancing down at it, "but I still haven't said yes."

"But you are going to say yes. You'd be a fool not to."

This annoyed her. "Why, Percy? Because he's rich?"

"No, Heather. Because you're in love with him. I've never seen you this happy before."

She was surprised by this. "Really?"

"Yes, it's written all over your face." Percy suddenly looked sad. "I'm going to miss you, Carrot-top." He stepped inside the bathroom and gave her a hug.

Heather's eyes welled up. "Don't say that. I'm not married yet. And you're messing up my eye shadow!"

Percy smiled sincerely. "Honestly, Heather, I'm very happy for you." He glanced at his watch. "Got to run, see you later."

Heather gazed after him, a pang in her heart.

Percy was the best friend she'd ever had.

Chapter 1.10

It was a cool, sunny summer morning. Heather enjoyed the walk to work, even though it was Monday, the beginning of another work week. Somehow, the hustle and bustle of the city grounded her and made her think more practically.

She would tell David ‘yes,’ she decided, but she would not commit to a wedding date. Before she actually got married, she had to resolve the problem with her mom’s house, one way or another. She could not become part of the Windsor family carrying that baggage with her. They would feel obligated to bail her mother out, and that would bring Heather into the family with a permanent blemish, one that they would never forget.

Heather was anxious to share the good news with her mother and all her friends back in North Carolina, but she would hold off on that as well. No need to tell anyone until she and David had set a date. And she certainly wouldn’t tell anyone at Potter Public Relations. They would all find out sooner or later, but there was no need for it to be sooner. She could only imagine how Lisbeth would spread it around and try to turn it into something sleazy.

Two blocks from the office, Heather slipped off the engagement ring and put it safely inside her purse.

As soon as she got settled in her cubicle, her thoughts turned to the mysterious emails from the “Friend in Need.” Rita was already in a staff meeting and Lisbeth was on vacation today, so she didn’t need to worry about either of them watching over her shoulder.

As soon as she logged into her email account, she saw it—another message with “From Your Friend in Need” as the subject. It had come at 9:02, only a few minutes ago, right on schedule, on Monday morning.

Heather clicked it open, her heart already starting to pound.

*Dear Heather,
This Friday, Albert Grundig will win The Booker Prize.
I hope you use this information to your advantage.
I remain,
Your friend in need*

The Booker Prize, Heather thought. That was an award for the best novel written by an author in England or in Commonwealth countries, something like that.

She quickly opened the sports betting site she had used for the last bet and searched for “Booker Prize.”

Nothing.

Feeling uneasy, she searched again, using only “Booker”, but it still came up blank.

What if I can’t bet on this? she thought, panicking. She quickly did a web search using “Booker Prize sports betting” as a keyword phrase.

She was relieved when several other sports betting sites were listed in the results. All of them were well established and solid-looking.

Albert Grundig seemed to be the second most popular betting choice for the Booker Prize, with someone named Cherie Nguyen running as the first. She’d never heard of either author.

Placing this bet would be a pain—she would have to create another sports betting account. But according to the odds, if she won, she would double her money and end up with \$6,000!

Heather leaned back in her chair, thinking. \$6,000 was still trivial compared to the \$200,000 she needed to pay off her mother's house.

She looked back at the email message. *I hope you use this information to your advantage.*

She needed to get her hands on more cash to add to the bet.

But where could she get more cash?

Percy knew a loan shark. One of his friends had needed to borrow \$10,000 for a week, until he got his tax refund from the IRS, and Percy put him in touch with the guy.

Wait a minute, slow down, she told herself. *Do you really want to borrow money from a loan shark to place this bet? If you lose, you'll be in big trouble.*

Heather began to get cold feet. Maybe this was a scam. Maybe those first two correct predictions had been sent just to build up her confidence, and this third one was the kicker.

It's too risky, she thought. *I'll bet the whole \$3,000, but I'm not borrowing any extra money to add to it.*

As there was no big hurry to place the bet, Heather started on her Potter work and intermittently took the steps necessary to create the new sports betting account and transfer the \$3,000 to it.

By 4:00 p.m., the new account was set up and the transfer was complete.

* * *

This time, when Heather entered in the amount—3,000—she did not feel the same level of anxiety as when she had placed the first bet.

She supposed this was because, in her mind, she was still just risking \$1,500—the other \$1,500 was “free” money she had won and therefore it didn't really matter if she lost it.

Still, she hesitated as she prepared to click the PLACE BET button, knowing that the third prediction could very well be the culmination of the scam...

“Here goes nothing,” she said, and she placed the bet.

Chapter 1.11

That night, when Heather accepted David's marriage proposal, he seemed overjoyed. They were eating dinner in his apartment, and he gave her a big hug and a kiss. "You've made me the happiest man in the world, Heather." He beamed at her. "I was thinking maybe we could get married sometime around Labor Day."

"*Labor Day?*"

"What's wrong with Labor Day?"

"I...it's just...there's not enough time for us to plan very well. We have to tell our parents and—"

"I already told mine."

"You did?"

"Yes, why not? Well, I didn't tell them we were getting married, of course, but I told them that I asked you, and that I gave you a ring." He paused. "When are you going to tell your mother? And when can I meet her?"

"I don't see why you're in such a hurry, David."

"I'm not in a hurry. Why do you keep saying that?"

"Well, it seems like you're in a hurry."

"Heather, you don't understand..." He motioned vaguely at the living room. "I want us to ..."

"You want us to what?"

"Live together. I want to wake up next to you every morning. I don't like us living in separate places anymore."

That's sweet, she thought. Of course she wanted the same thing. "But why can't we just live tog—"

"My parents are old fashioned, Heather."

"Oh." This hadn't occurred to her. She had assumed if they were from Manhattan they were liberal about that sort of thing. "But would they have to know we're living together? I'm already spending the night here a lot."

"Of course they would know. My father just drops by here anytime he feels like it. He thinks it's his right. He would see your clothes in the closet—"

"What do you mean, he thinks it's his 'right'? He just drops by here unannounced?"

David frowned. "This apartment belongs to Windsor Properties. I told you that."

"I don't remember you saying that."

"Yes I did. I told you the first time we came here."

"Oh." Heather smiled. "I guess my mind was on other things..."

David chuckled. "Anyway, before I moved back from L.A. and joined the firm, it was for company use, for visiting clients to relax or spend the night if they needed accommodations. Our offices are just up the street, so I guess my Dad got used to dropping by here."

"I see."

"Anyway, my trial period as VP will be up in November. I'm sure if we get married in September my dad will make it official. He'll put the apartment in my name and I'll get a huge raise." David shrugged. "We can stay here or sell the place and move somewhere better that we would both like."

* * *

Heather spent the night at David's, and when she woke up the next morning, she realized she had forgotten to bring her hairbrush.

David was in the shower, and she didn't want to start rifling through his drawers, so she went into the bathroom and asked him.

"There should be one in the nightstand," he said.

Heather went back into the bedroom and tried to open the nightstand drawer, but it was locked. Strange, she thought. She'd never seen a lock on a nightstand drawer before.

"Not on my side of the bed," David called. "On the other side."

"Okay," Heather called back. She stepped around to the other nightstand and opened the drawer. There was a hairbrush and a few other grooming items. Fortunately, the hairbrush looked brand new—there was no "old girlfriend" hair in it.

David came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist.

Heather glanced at him. She had started brushing her hair in front of the dresser mirror.

"You're probably wondering why there's a lock on my nightstand drawer."

"Not really," she lied.

David laughed. "You wouldn't be normal if you didn't wonder." He paused and motioned to the nightstand. "There's a gun in it."

She stopped brushing her hair. "A gun?"

"It belongs to my dad. I keep telling him to come get it, but he keeps forgetting."

"Why does he keep a gun here?"

"Ah, he's old fashioned. Second Amendment and all that. He thinks every man should have a gun to protect himself and his family. He keeps a gun everywhere—in his office, in their apartment in the city, in the house in the Hamptons."

"Oh."

David chuckled. "If a robber ever broke in, I'm sure he would end up killing my father with it."

"Don't talk like that, David."

"Anyway, I'll make sure he comes and takes it away."

* * *

Heather was bothered by what David had told her about the apartment. About the gun being there, and the fact that he didn't actually own it.

She hadn't realized the luxurious Upper East Side digs belonged to Windsor Properties, and that he was working for the firm on a 'trial' basis. She now wondered if David even earned a salary. She'd noticed that he paid for everything with company credit cards, but up until now she thought it was simply something to do with taxes.

Once, on their way to dinner at a private club, David had forgotten that the stuffy establishment required men to wear neckties. They stopped at a Fifth Avenue clothing shop and picked up a \$200 Stefano Ricci, David merely telling the clerk, "Charge it to my dad's account."

On another occasion, when they came out of a theater, David's Jaguar had a flat tire. Instead of changing it, he called a garage and said, "David Windsor here, Nathan Windsor's son. Can you send over someone to fix a flat?"

It seemed to Heather that David was too dependent on his father and was letting Nathan push him around. She knew that David had moved back from Hollywood virtually penniless. She supposed Nathan Windsor was taking advantage of his son's vulnerability and was, in an indirect way, punishing David for wasting years of time pursuing his "foolish" dream of becoming a movie actor.

Heather didn't know how she would broach the subject, but she decided she needed to have an honest conversation about the situation. It would probably make David mad, but she had no intention of marrying him and living her life under Nathan Windsor's thumb.

* * *

On Tuesday night, David played tennis as usual. Heather tried to distract herself by working on a new dress design while Percy sat in the kitchen, studying. But all she could think about was the bet she had made on the Booker Prize winner, and it was driving her crazy.

Percy suddenly threw one of his textbooks across the room and said, "I can't stomach any more statistics tonight! Let's go party, Heather!"

He invited her out to one of the GLBT get-togethers he frequented. Heather really wasn't in the mood, but Percy pressed her.

"Come on, Heather, I've never been to a mixer with this particular group."

"Which group is that?"

"GLBT Accountants."

"GLBT *Accountants*?" Heather laughed. "Sounds like a wild bunch, Percy."

"Oh, they are, believe me. They get pretty crazy. Sometimes they save their spreadsheets *without making backups*."

She laughed again.

Percy looked at her pleadingly. She decided she ought to go—he spent so much time working and studying he had very little opportunity for dating, and whenever he did meet someone interesting, things never seemed to work out. "I have the worst luck in the world," he was always saying.

Anyway, Heather thought, going to the mixer might get her mind off the Booker Prize bet.

An hour later, Heather and Percy were standing around the Marriott bar, drinking wine and mingling. Percy had already concluded there were no interesting men at the event and said that he didn't want to date another accountant type, anyway.

As Heather set her empty glass down on the bar, she heard some woman behind her talking about going to school at Stanford.

Heather turned to see who it was.

The woman was short and squatty, with freckles and thick glasses. She really did look like an accountant. She appeared to be about David's age and was holding hands with another woman.

"Excuse me," Heather said, smiling "Did you say you went to Stanford?"

The short woman smiled back. "Yes, I did."

"What year did you graduate?"

She told Heather. It was the same year David graduated.

Heather said, "Do you happen to know David Windsor?"

A look of immediate recognition crossed her face. "Of course I know David! He was a fantastic tennis player, played against my roommate a few times. Beat the hell out of her, too."

Heather laughed.

"I haven't seen him in years," she said, with a nostalgic expression. "I actually don't think I've seen him since we graduated. Is he a friend of yours?"

"I guess you'd say that." Heather modestly showed her the ring. "We're engaged."

"Oh, that's gorgeous! Congratulations. Tell David I said congratulations, too, will you?" She shook Heather's hand. "I'm Jessica Taylor, by the way."

"Heather Bancroft."

"You have the most beautiful red hair."

"Thank you."

The woman looked down at Heather's ring again and gave a nostalgic smile. "David Windsor...that's a flash from the past. I doubt he even remembers me."

* * *

The next evening, when she and David were waiting to be seated at a restaurant, Heather said, "I ran into one of your Stanford classmates last night."

David glanced at her. She thought he looked uneasy.

"Don't worry," Heather said, "she wasn't one of your ex-girlfriends. As a matter of fact, she's a lesbian. At least she is now. Jessica Taylor...?"

"Jessica Taylor...Jessica Taylor. Sounds familiar, but I can't place her."

"Short, with thick glasses and freckles?"

David frowned. He seemed to be drawing a blank. "That was ten years ago, Heather."

"Well, anyway, she said to tell you congratulations on our engagement."

David smiled. "If you run into her again, tell her I said thank you. And please don't let on that I couldn't remember who she was."

"Of course I won't."

* * *

On Wednesday night, they were at David's apartment, lying on their backs, side by side in bed. They'd just finished having sex, and it was spectacular, as always. David's breathing was slowing, becoming deep and regular. It sounded like he was falling asleep.

"David, can I ask you a question?"

"Yes," he said, opening his eyes a little.

"I don't want to butt into your business. You promise you won't get mad?"

"Of course I won't get mad, baby. Ask me anything you want."

"Well...I just wanted to know...are you sure it's a good idea for you to be working at Windsor Properties? I mean, I'm sure with your business degree from Stanford there are a lot of other jobs you could get."

David sat up a little, looking more awake. "I know what you're saying, Heather. You can't imagine how much I hate having to kiss my dad's ass every god damn day. But it's only temporary. You have to remember that the position I have with Windsor Properties is ten levels higher than I could get if I just went around applying for jobs."

"I know, but—"

“Wait, let me finish. Windsor is a huge company. The Manhattan offices are its corporate headquarters, but we have offices all over the world. My older brother works in the Rome office. In another year or two, if I do well, I can go work in any of our other international branches, far, far away from my family. We can move to London or Milan or Dubai or Paris—”

“Paris?” Heather said excitedly.

“Sure, why not? One of our largest divisions is in Paris.”

Heather laid her head back down on the pillow, gazing at the ceiling, imagining herself strolling along the Champs-Élysées, the Eiffel Tower in the distance. Paris! She had always dreamed of moving there, finding a way to somehow use her design talent in the fashion industry. At Chapel Hill, she had minored in French, and had spent a whole semester in France, in Montpellier. She could speak the language passably.

“Oh, David...do you think we could really move to Paris?”

“Of course we can, sweetheart,” he said, kissing her. “We can do whatever we want.”

Chapter 1.12

On Friday morning, Heather slowly walked up 6th Avenue towards work, jittery with anxiety. She had tossed and turned all night, having tangled dreams of moving to Paris with David, losing her mother's house, and losing all the money on the Booker Prize bet.

She had finally gotten up at 6:30 and had left her apartment a full half hour before she usually did. The Booker Prize winner would be announced in England today, and England was six hours ahead of New York. So the winner may have already been announced. Heather had been tempted to turn on the TV but she didn't want to wake Percy. He was taking the day off today, exhausted from a full week of work and night school classes.

As Heather neared midtown, a man caught her eye who was working in a window display of a bookstore. He was arranging some hardback volumes in a pyramid.

Heather stopped short when she saw the author's name on the covers.

Albert Grundig.

She went inside the store, her pulse racing, and came around to the display.

The clerk was squatting, pulling more of the books out of a cardboard box.

"Excuse me," Heather said.

He glanced up at her, straightening his glasses. "Yes?"

"That book... is it going on sale or something?"

"No, we're doing a special promotion. It just won the Booker Prize. News came out about an hour ago."

"Yes!" Heather said, jumping up and down.

He smiled. "You're a big fan of Albert Grundig, huh?"

"Oh, yes," Heather gushed. "I've read all his books!"

Heather walked back outside, bouncing on her heels.

She now had about \$6,000 in her sports betting account.

The clerk in the bookstore window watched the cute redhead bop along the sidewalk. Confused, he glanced down at the back cover of the book in his hand. *I could have sworn this was Albert Grundig's first novel.*

* * *

Heather's glee over winning the Booker Prize bet did not last long.

When she arrived at the office, she noticed some strange looks from her coworkers. Amy and Jason, two other Junior Account Executives in her section, barely said hello to her. And the first time Lisbeth passed her desk, she gave Heather a knowing smile.

Heather wondered if everyone had somehow found out about the bets she had made. But she couldn't imagine how—she was careful to close all the windows on her computer every time she got up from her desk. She supposed it was possible that the IT staff was monitoring her activity, but she doubted it. Stanley Potter was against that sort of thing.

During her lunch break, Heather was alone in the kitchen, microwaving a sandwich, when Lisbeth came in and sat down. She opened her laptop and then gave Heather the same knowing smile she had earlier that morning.

"What?" Heather said, slightly annoyed.

"You made out all right with David Windsor, didn't you, luv?"

"Excuse me?"

“I had a feeling that ‘friend’ you mentioned meeting him at Lindy’s was actually you. Word has it that you’re engaged. Is it true?”

Heather felt herself blushing. She didn’t know what to say. She fought the urge to glance down at her left hand. She never wore her ring to work. Still, she wasn’t surprised that Lisbeth had found out. Heather had always known it was just a matter of time.

The bell on the microwave rang, and she turned and took out her sandwich.

“Well, is it true or not?” Lisbeth said.

With her back turned, Heather said, “Yes, it’s true. So what?”

“Nothing, luv.”

When Heather turned around again, Lisbeth was busy reading one of her British tabloids on her laptop screen. Heather had planned on eating in the kitchen, but now she decided to take her sandwich back to her desk.

Just as she reached the door, Lisbeth said, “I have to hand it to you—snagging David Windsor right out from under Stanley Potter was a bloody good trick. I didn’t know you had it in you, luv.”

Heather was getting mad. “What exactly are you talking about, Lisbeth?”

“Well, you know I’m not one to gossip—”

“Yes I know. What did you hear?”

She could see that Heather was angry. “Well, what *I* heard, and it may not be true, was that you were so taken with David that you botched the photo shoot at the shopping mall. David’s father wasn’t happy when he saw the pictures, and he dropped Potter and the project.” Lisbeth smiled. “But you snagged David Windsor for yourself. Well done, luv! Well done!”

It took all of Heather’s willpower not to unleash the blizzard of profanity that was building up inside her. Gritting her teeth, she said, “That is a complete pack of lies,” and left the kitchen.

* * *

When Heather sat down at her desk, she was so furious she could barely type on her keyboard. It only took her a few moments to find the number of Dominique, the photographer who had been hired to shoot the construction site pictures for Windsor Properties.

“Hi,” she said, trying to keep the rage out of her voice. “It’s Heather Bancroft, from Potter Public Relations. We worked on that photo shoot together...”

“Oh, yes. Hi, Heather. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to know—what exactly happened to the pictures that we took that day? The ones that you and I made together?”

There was a long pause. “Is there some kind of problem?”

“Not at all. I’m just curious if Rita looked at any of them while she was there, and what happened to them.”

“No, she didn’t look at them, she told me to delete them all. We started over from scratch.”

“So nobody ever saw them but Rita...”

“That’s right. I didn’t do anything wrong, did I?”

“Not at all. I just wanted to know what happened to them. Sorry I bothered you.”

* * *

“Why didn’t you tell me you cancelled your contract with Potter?” Heather yelled.

“Calm down,” David said, taking her by the arm. “What in god’s name is the matter?”

Heather had called David from work and told him to pick her up there at 5 p.m. sharp. They were sitting in his car, double-parked in front of the office building.

Heather burst into angry tears, telling him everything that Lisbeth said.

“What a bunch of nonsense,” David said, stroking her hair. “I cancelled our contract with Stanley Potter myself. I simply told him we had a change in strategy about how to handle the environmental protestors, and that’s all. I decided that my ‘play dead’ strategy was best, and to stop letting my dad push me around.” David paused. “It was because of what you said, Heather. You were right.”

“Did you tell Stanley Potter we were engaged?”

“Of course not.”

Heather felt a little better.

David went on. “We paid Potter for basically doing nothing except setting up that photo shoot. Stanley Potter has no right to be mad at me about anything.” David reached into his pocket for his cell phone. “I’m going to call him right now and straighten—”

“You will not!” Heather said, pushing the phone down.

“But this isn’t right, Heather.”

“I’m sure that Stanley Potter isn’t mad at you, David. He didn’t create this nasty rumor.”

“Well, who did, then?”

“I have a pretty good idea.”

“Your boss...what’s her name, Rita?”

“Yes. She hates the fact that I was able to go out and handle that photo shoot, and when you dropped the project and she somehow found out about our engagement, she just made it all up to make me look bad.”

“That’s very low, Heather.” David looked up at the office building, glaring at it. “Those people treat you like dirt. You should look for another job.”

“It took me six months to get this one, David. All the entry level PR jobs are just the same. I don’t have a family business I can go join, like you do.”

David took her hand. “Honey, after we’re married, you won’t have to work at all if you don’t want to.”

“I love working,” Heather said quickly. “The last thing I want to do is sit around and turn into a bored housewife.”

“Of course not.”

Heather paused, looking into his eyes. “David, how long do you think it will be before we can move to Paris?”

* * *

On Monday morning, Heather found it difficult to walk the 40 blocks to work, or to find one ounce of enthusiasm for her job. She had spent a lot of time over the weekend, thinking about it. Oh, if only she could quit!

Ironically, the sky was gunmetal gray and there was a fine mist falling in the air, exactly the same weather as her first day of work at Potter Public Relations.

As she walked along, she remembered the day she interviewed for the job, and that made her smile. What Stanley Potter had told David the day she ran into

the two of them in the elevator, that he had “handpicked” Heather for the job, was true.

When she arrived at Potter’s offices for the interview, she nearly turned around and left. There must have been 25 people in the reception area, sitting shoulder to shoulder on couches and milling around, mostly young women. There was so much body mist in the air that it smelled like a perfume factory.

“My name is Heather Bancroft and I have an app—”

“Take a seat, please,” the receptionist said mechanically.

There were no vacant seats, of course.

Heather glumly found a place to stand near a hallway that led into the interior of the office. This kind of setup really irked her—she supposedly had an interview at 10:30 and she would end up spending half the day here. But most of the others would wait, and if she wanted a chance at the job, she would, too.

As she stood there, simmering mad, she could faintly hear a man talking in a raised, annoyed voice. She moved a little closer to the doorway. The voice was coming from across the hall, from behind a door marked *Stanley G. Potter, CEO*.

“...those figures for India, dammit!” Heather barely made out.

“I’m working on it,” a female voice said.

“Well, work harder!” Now he was yelling. “How difficult can it be to find out the number of movie industry jobs outsourced to India, for god’s sake? It’s not a state secret.”

There was an apologetic reply that Heather couldn’t quite discern and then the door opened. A harried-looking middle aged woman emerged, her arms cradling a stack of paper with yellow sticky notes protruding everywhere. The instant she stepped into the hall another woman rushed up to her. “You’ve got a call on Line Four, and TV Six is waiting on Line Fourteen.”

Both women hurriedly went down the corridor and disappeared around a corner.

Heather glanced around the reception area—no one else was paying any attention. Most of the other job applicants were reading magazines or clicking away on phones and portable computers.

Fortunately, at that time Heather still owned her smart phone, the last valuable possession that she hadn’t sold. She quickly pulled it out and sent out a message on all her social networks. *I need current information on the number of U.S. movie industry jobs outsourced to India—can anybody help?*

Then quickly started searching the Internet with the key words
OUTSOURCING HOLLYWOOD INDIA.

About the same time, someone wrote back, *I think I saw an article on that about a month ago on some Bollywood news website in India.*

She added BOLLYWOOD to the search terms.

A moment later she found an article entitled, *American Film Industry Leans on Bollywood Resources* on an Indian news website. It was only one month old.

Yes! Heather opened up the article and started reading. The statistics were right there—the number of jobs outsourced by the Hollywood film industry, broken down into categories...

She opened a new email message and began composing.

Dear Mr. Potter—I thought you might need this info on Hollywood outsourcing, pasted in the link to the article, and signed her name below.

She added, *P.S. I am interviewing for your Junior Account Executive position today—I’m the redhead in the navy suit.*

She walked over to the receptionist.

“Can you give me Mr. Potter’s email, please?”

The woman chuckled. “Oh, sure, honey. Would you like his home address and his bank account number, too?”

Heather sighed. Stanley Potter’s email wouldn’t be that hard to figure out, unless he purposely kept it secret. She picked up a Potter company brochure and went back to the spot where she had been standing, typing the website address into the TO: field of her message. She glanced at Potter’s door again, looking at his name. She started with *stanley@potterpr.com*, then added every variation she could think of: *stanley.potter*, *sg.potter*, etc.

As soon as she sent the message, her inbox started filling with Undeliverable Message emails, her phone beeping annoyingly. Several people glanced over at her.

It was a long-shot, Heather thought dejectedly, but had been worth a try.

A moment later, Potter’s door opened. A balding man dressed in an expensive suit stepped out, a stern look on his face. He scanned the reception area.

His gaze locked on Heather’s face.

He just stood there, his eyes boring through her. He did not look pleased.

He promptly turned around and went back into his office, slamming the door behind him.

Heather’s heart sank. He was obviously not happy about getting an email from some girl out in Reception who was desperate for employment.

A few seconds later, her phone beeped.

It was a message from Stanley Potter.

Heather braced herself. He was going to chew her out for eavesdropping and butting into his personal business.

She clicked open the message.

Nicely done, young lady! You have the job.

Heather smiled at the memory as she walked along in the rain. If only she could have only reported directly to Stanley Potter, she thought, even doing grunt work and subjecting herself to his vitriolic temper, she would have been a lot happier. At least he recognized one of her positive qualities—her resourcefulness.

But that wasn’t possible, the way the firm was organized with its hierarchies and “chain of command.” It was obvious to Heather from early on that both Rita and Kevin were super-competitive, backstabbing workaholics and would stop at nothing to get ahead within the firm.

The first day of actual work at Potter had been a nightmare. She hadn’t really known what to expect. She had heard that entry level PR jobs in New York were a nightmare, that they treated you like dirt the first couple of years, burying you in grunt work and abusing you in every way possible.

But she firmly decided she wasn’t going to allow herself to be treated like that. She desperately needed the job, but she was a human being, and she had her dignity.

Before she had left the apartment, Percy had told her, “Draw a line in the sand and don’t let anyone cross it,” and that’s exactly what Heather intended to do.

After filling out a bunch of forms in the Potter HR Department, she was told to report to the downstairs conference room, that Rita and Kevin were expecting her. She was told that they would “share” her time between them.

When she approached the door, the two of them were talking intensely about a press release they were apparently working on.

Heather patiently stood at the doorway. Both of them glanced at her but kept talking. Finally, Rita's voice trailed off as she looked at Heather.

"Yes, what is it?" Rita snapped.

"I'm Heather Bancroft..."

They glanced at each other. It seemed they didn't even remember her face from the interview. Rita gave a half-smile. "Well, sit down! Don't just stand there like a statue."

Lovely greeting, Heather thought. She sat directly across from them. Kevin was a short man of about 30 with wire rim glasses and skin that looked like it had never seen the sun. He opened a folder and pulled out a piece of paper—Heather could see that it was her resume, with some notes scribbled on it.

"To be perfectly frank," Kevin said, "you were not our first choice."

Rita said, "We had pressure from..." she motioned vaguely to the ceiling "...above. Apparently you somehow impressed Stanley Potter."

That's just perfect, Heather thought. Off to a fabulous start.

"But no matter," Rita said dismissively. "From your resume, you seem to be well-qualified for the job." She smiled. "The PR industry in New York is very exciting—you couldn't have picked a more vibrant place to build a career, Heather."

Kevin was nodding. "As you know, Heather, public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their stakeholders."

"Yes," Rita said. "Due to the explosion of social networking, it's probably the most stimulating and fast-moving field there is." She motioned to Heather. "Are you ready to shape the communication strategies of some of American's biggest Fortune 500 companies?"

"Well, yes," Heather said.

"To manifest the visions of some of the most exciting startups in Silicon Valley?" Rita said.

Heather nodded. "Of course!"

"And to help some of the world's largest multinationals establish commercial footholds in countries all around the globe?"

"Absolutely!" It did sound exciting.

"Great!" Kevin said. "I'll have a skinny hazelnut latte with an extra espresso shot." He looked at Rita.

"And I'll have a soy decaf cappuccino, extra hot." She looked evenly at Heather. "The café is in the lobby. We have an account."

They both just sat there, watching her.

Draw a line in the sand and don't let anyone cross it.

Heather looked evenly at Kevin, then at Rita. In her most resolute voice, she said, "Would you like white sugar or brown with those coffees?"

That's how it had been ever since the first day, and Heather knew nothing would ever change. Now that they were envious of her relationship with David Windsor, it would only get worse.

It doesn't matter, she told herself.

When she finally arrived at the office and ordered Rita's coffee, she asked for skim milk.

The young man who usually made the drinks hesitated. "You mean soy milk, don't you?"

"No, I mean skim milk. And don't make it extra hot, either."

* * *

It was 9:15 when Heather sat down at her computer that Monday morning. She prayed that she would receive a new email from her mysterious Friend in Need. She couldn't help having a feeling that these emails, and betting on the information, would get her out of this untenable situation at Potter.

Maybe it was naive to think that, but she thought it anyway.

In any case, Heather was no longer so afraid that the emails were part of a scam. Unless the three sports betting companies had all secretly joined forces and hired someone to send out these messages, she couldn't imagine how it worked, or who would benefit. Besides, if it was a scam, then how come no one else she knew was receiving these messages, or had ever received one?

As soon as Heather logged into her email account and saw the subject line of the latest email, *From Your Friend in Need*, her pulse began to race.

Dear Heather,

On Sunday, Baruto Kaito will win the grand championship at the sumo wrestling tournament in Tokyo, Japan.

I hope you use this information to your advantage.

I remain,

Your Friend in Need

An electric thrill ran through Heather's body. She quickly opened both of her sports betting sites and searched for the word "*sumo*".

No hits on either site. Heather frowned, thinking. She tried "*sumo wrestling*" and simply "*wrestling*".

No hits on those, either.

She was soon searching the Internet for any way to bet on sumo wrestling. She knew very little about the sport. To her, the wrestlers looked like overgrown babies in diapers.

"How many times do I have to tell you that you do not check your personal email on company time?"

Rita was towering over her. Heather had been so excited she'd forgotten to close her personal email window.

"Sorry," Heather said.

"Don't let it happen again, not if you want to keep this job." Rita marched off.

* * *

Heather used her lunch break to thoroughly investigate how to gamble on sumo wrestling matches. By reading some sports betting forums, she uncovered some discouraging information.

She had come to the unpleasant conclusion that it was impossible to bet on sumo wrestling matches in the United States. No sports betting sites covered them. Even if you went to Las Vegas or Atlantic City, where a vast array of worldwide sports gambling was possible, there was no way to place bets on sumo wrestling.

Heather read all the discussion forums she could find on the subject, which were surprisingly few.

Finally, her eyes locked on the very last line of a discussion thread written by someone who seemed to be an expert on sports betting, as well as everything to do with sumo wrestling.

The only way to bet on sumo wrestling is to go to Japan and place the bet in person, and in cash.

P.S. Betting on sumo wrestling is illegal in Japan. If you choose to do it, be careful!

* * *

Heather slowly walked towards her apartment, angry with her mysterious “Friend in Need.”

She felt like he had let her down. All the previous predictions were easy to take advantage of, using the sports betting sites, and now this? A sumo wrestling tournament in Tokyo? Was that the best the man could do?

Then again, if he really was psychic, which certainly seemed to be the case at this point, he probably had no control over his visions or however he got the information.

She again wondered who he was, where he lived, what he was like. Now she really couldn’t imagine.

Heather walked with her head down, lost in thought, brushing other pedestrians along the sidewalk.

She eventually found herself standing in front of a travel agency, reading the signs in the window.

London \$799 – Round Trip

Barcelona – \$899 Round Trip

Rio – \$1,099 Round Trip

Tokyo – \$1,299 Round Trip

A voice inside her said, *You’re not seriously considering flying to Japan to bet on a sumo wrestling match, are you?*

* * *

By the time Heather got home, she had decided that, yes, she was indeed going to fly to Tokyo to bet on a sumo wrestling match this weekend...if she could get more money to bet with.

Why not? It wasn’t as crazy as it seemed, not when she thought about the details. The trip itself wouldn’t cost more than \$2,000, including the hotel. She had already won a lot more money than that. So, in a way, she wasn’t really losing anything if she went to Tokyo and couldn’t find a way to bet on the match.

But the \$4,000 that remained wasn’t enough to gamble with. If she was going to fly all the way to Japan to place this bet, she wanted to maximize the return. There was no point in doing this halfway.

Heather was sitting on the couch when Percy came in the door.

“Howdy, Carrot-top,” he said. He looked surprised to see her home.

She said hello as he set his satchel on the dinette table and loosened his tie. She had already prepared her speech, and he sensed she was about to say something important.

“Percy, I want you to put me in touch with the loan shark you know.”

“Come again?”

“You heard me. I want to borrow some money from that loan shark you put your friend in touch with.”

“May I ask why?”

“It has to do with my mother’s house. I might be able to save it.”

“No way,” Percy said, sitting down. “You have no business borrowing money from a loan shark. It’s too dangerous.”

“Why, because I’m a woman?”

“No, because my friend’s situation was a sure thing. He was waiting on a tax refund—he only needed to borrow the money for a few days to put a down payment on an apartment he wanted in Brooklyn. The only way he would have gotten in trouble was if the federal government went bankrupt during those few days, which is pretty unlikely.”

“But—”

“No, Heather!” Percy paused, looking at her sympathetically. “How much do you need, anyway?”

She shrugged. “Ten thousand.”

“What for, exactly?”

“It’s complicated, Percy.”

“Look, I already told you, I’ll be happy to lend you the money from my student loan. I don’t need it—the only reason I took it was because I’m an accountant and it was too sweet a deal to pass up, at such a low interest rate.” Percy motioned to her. “That’s eight thousand dollars, free and clear, that you’re welcome to use. The government isn’t going to send out any thugs to collect it, either.”

She was actually planning on borrowing \$20,000 from the loan shark, if she could get that much. But it was dangerous...

“Are you absolutely sure about this, Percy?”

“I’m sure. Take the money if you can use it.”

“That’s really nice of you. I appreciate it.”

“As long as you’re willing to make the payments when they start, and pay the interest...”

“Of course I will. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“When do you need the cash?”

“By the end of the week? If I could get it by Friday, that would be wonderful.”

* * *

That night, Heather used Percy’s laptop to reserve more airline tickets. She found a cheap flight that left Friday morning and, due to the 12 hour time difference, arrived in Tokyo on Saturday at noon. She would return to New York on Monday. She would only miss two days of work.

She had found a schedule for the sumo matches online. The last match, the one she intended to bet on, didn’t take place until 7 o’clock on Sunday evening. So, she would have a full day and a half to find a way to place the bet. Hopefully that would be enough time.

* * *

Heather spent the rest of the week on the financial organization for the trip, getting the money from Percy, transferring the cash from the sports betting account into her New York bank account, purchasing the airline tickets, and then

withdrawing \$12,000 of it in cash. She made a credit card payment to free up \$1,500 and charged the plane tickets and hotel to it.

She had done some web research on carrying cash across borders. Apparently, there was no problem until the amount exceeded \$10,000, in which case you were required to declare it by filling out a customs form. But she would be carrying a lot more than that into Japan, and—hopefully—even more back out. Still, Heather did not plan on declaring it. According to the research she had done online, airport security equipment couldn't detect relatively small amounts of currency as long as it was spread around in your suitcase—a little here, a little there.

After all, it was only paper.

* * *

Heather dreaded telling David about the trip. She knew she would have to lie. But she convinced herself it was for the best, in the long run. It was for a good cause. It might just save her mother's house, and her engagement to David.

She decided to break the news to him on Wednesday night. They were going to have a quiet dinner at his apartment, so she took the subway to his place. He wasn't there when she arrived. She had to wait in the lobby almost half an hour, and it wasn't the first time. It irked her that his parents were so conservative they wouldn't accept David and her living together, but she supposed she understood.

"Sorry," David said, rushing in the entrance and giving her a kiss. "I was tied up in a meeting."

Heather decided to tell him in the elevator—she didn't want to ruin her dinner worrying about it.

"Tokyo?" David said, surprised. "They're sending you to *Tokyo* after what happened?"

Heather shrugged. "They're short on help at a trade show they're managing for a Japanese client."

As he unlocked the front door of the apartment, he glanced over his shoulder at her. "What client is that?"

"Oh, a company in the Japanese sports industry, not very exciting."

They went inside the apartment. Heather hoped he wouldn't ask her any more questions.

David set his satchel down on the kitchen table. "So how long will you be away?"

"Just three days. I'll be back on Sunday night."

He nodded, but there was a skeptical look on his face. "You don't have a boyfriend squirreled away in Tokyo, do you?"

Heather laughed. "You and your 'squirreled away' boyfriends and husbands. As a matter of fact I do have a boyfriend squirreled away over there. He's a sumo wrestler, weighs six hundred pounds. You better watch your step, buddy."

David chuckled. "Hey, I've got something for you. Wait here." He disappeared into the bedroom.

A present? Heather thought excitedly.

David came back dangling a set of keys. He put them in her hand. She looked down at them, surprised.

"To the apartment," he said, nodding towards the front door. "I had them made yesterday." He gave her a kiss. "Now you won't have to wait for me in the lobby anymore."

Heather smiled. It wasn't quite as good as living together, but it was an improvement.

"I have something else for you, too." Smiling, he pulled a cell phone from his pocket and handed it to her. "Now you can call me from work without having to worry about that bitch of a boss you have chewing you out for it."

"No, David," she said, handing it back to him.

"Why not?"

"I don't want you buying me a phone. I'm not comfortable with that."

"I didn't buy it, Heather. It's an old one that was just lying around. Look, it's scratched up, hardly worth anything."

She was tempted. Not being able to call him from the office was a pain, and it wasn't a good idea to live in New York City without having a cell phone in case of an emergency.

"It's just a second phone on my account," David said. "It's no big deal. I'm just lending it to you."

"All right," Heather said, taking it. "But I'm only going to use it to call you."

"That's fine." He kissed her. "That's what it's for, honey."

* * *

On Friday morning at 8 a.m, Heather was ready for her trip. She had carefully packed a carry on suitcase with a couple of her best outfits. She took the subway to Jamaica Station and then the AirTrain to JFK Airport.

Heather held on tightly to her purse every step of the way. Tucked inside the inner zipper compartment was \$12,000 in crisp, new \$100 bills. The notes were bound together with a thick red rubber band.

When the announcement, "Flight 1021 to Tokyo is ready for boarding" came over the PA system, Heather felt goose bumps.

I'm actually going to Japan! she thought.

Chapter 1.13

When Heather had graduated from college, she and Percy and four other classmates had spent three weeks backpacking around Western Europe. They had visited London, Amsterdam, Paris, Barcelona and Prague.

But nothing had prepared Heather for the dazzling sights and sounds of Tokyo. By the time she got through Passport Control and Customs, it was almost dark. She took the train from Narita Airport into the center of the city.

She found herself standing on a street that reminded her of Times Square, with a thousand brilliant neon signs and digital displays in constant motion, the streets filled with people. But different from Manhattan were the elevated freeways that swept across the city. Everything seemed to move at a blurring, jerky pace. The outline of Mount Kumotori was faintly visible on the horizon.

The subway system was color-coded yet mind-boggling, with all the station names in Japanese looking like so much gobbledygook. For Heather, the 12 hour time difference and jet lag gave everything an odd, dreamlike quality.

She finally figured out the right subway line to take her to her hotel, the Royal Ryogoku. The “Royal” Pearl was only a three star hotel but was housed in a modern, ten story building. It was also located right in the middle in the Ryogoku district of the city, which was where the sumo wrestling hall was located and was the reason Heather had chosen it.

When she went into the lobby, she was greeted by a polite Japanese woman who bowed to her and spoke broken English. The woman showed Heather up to her room. It was on the 8th floor and afforded a beautiful view of the eastern part of Tokyo and the Sumida River.

As soon as Heather was alone, she went into the bathroom but stopped short when she saw the toilet. To the right of the seat was an electronic control panel that might have rivaled the one on the 747 she had just flown on. The buttons were labeled in Japanese but had graphics on them that supposedly explained their functions. Some were obvious, such as one that heated the seat, but others were unintelligible.

Curious, Heather touched one with a symbol that looked like a man with a mustache.

A jet of water sprayed up and struck her smack in the forehead.

Heather gasped, and quickly pushed the button again and it stopped.

She stood there, stunned, soaking wet from the waist up, and started laughing.

* * *

Heather had been thinking all week about how to find a way to bet on the sumo match. She decided the best approach would be to discreetly ask the concierge at her hotel. If that didn't work she could go out into the city and simply explore. She had read online that there were plenty of illegal casinos scattered all over Tokyo that were not difficult to find. Unfortunately, though, it was hard for foreigners to gain admittance.

She also had to buy some tickets to the match.

It was warm outside, so Heather put on a pair of light blue capris with kitten-heel pumps, which showed off her delicate ankles without being too revealing. On top, she wore a feminine blouse of cream silk.

Carrying only her purse, which still contained the \$12,000, she went back down to the lobby. There was a group of German tourists checking in at the front desk.

She spotted a counter with a CONCIERGE sign. There was a man sitting behind it, typing on a computer. When he saw Heather approaching, he rose and bowed.

“May I assist you?” he said in a thick and barely intelligible Japanese accent.

“Yes. I would like to buy some tickets to the sumo tournament tomorrow night.”

“So sorry, all arena seats sold out. Only extra box seats available now. Very expensive.” The man seemed to have a lot of trouble with his l’s and cringed every time he tried to pronounce one, as if they tasted bitter.

“How expensive are the box seats?”

“Twenty, twenty-five thousand yen.”

It sounded like a fortune. It was actually about \$300. Heather hadn’t expected the seats to be so expensive. The concierge explained that all the box seats were reserved by the wrestlers’ sponsors, and that the sponsors only sold the seats when one of their guests cancelled.

Heather thought it over. The sponsors were probably betting on the matches, and some of their guests were probably high rollers. Her instincts told her that it would be a good idea to be sitting among those people.

“I’ll take one of the tickets,” she said.

The concierge began making calls. He finally found an extra box seat, telling Heather that the ticket would be delivered to the hotel in two hours. It cost the equivalent of \$360.

She paid for it with her credit card.

“Is there anything else I can help you with? There are many interesting places to visit in Tokyo. Perhaps you would like to see one of our Buddhist shrines?”

Glancing around to make sure no one could hear, Heather said, “I would like to place a bet on one of the sumo matches tomorrow night. Can you help me?”

The man frowned. “Betting on sumo illegal in Japan.”

“I know, but—”

“So sorry. We have many other legal gambling sports. Such as horse racing, boat racing, and also the racing of bicycles and motorcycles.” He really struggled with the last two words. “Can I make a reservation for you to attend these events?”

Heather sighed. She could see she would not get anywhere with this man.

She motioned to the front entrance. “Is it safe for a woman to walk around this part of Tokyo alone?”

“Oh, yes, very safe district. No worry.” He touched his shoulder. “But one must always keep hand on purse in Tokyo.”

Heather nodded. “Thank you.”

* * *

Heather roamed up and down the streets near the hotel, trying to take everything in and yet not look like a rubbernecking tourist. She couldn’t help drawing a lot of attention to herself, mainly due to her red hair and pale skin. Since she had arrived she had seen few non-Japanese people, and both men and women stared as she passed.

Before she had left New York, she had printed out some material on sumo wrestling and had read it on the plane. She figured that if she was going to gamble \$12,000 on the sport, she ought to know at least a little about it.

The Ryogoku district turned out to be just as she expected—everything here was oriented towards sumo wrestling. Besides the huge tournament hall, there was the Sumo Museum and many of the sumo “stables”, places where the huge wrestlers lived and trained. Also, there were a lot of bars and restaurants owned by retired sumo champions. They all served *chankonabe*, the super hi-protein stew that the wrestlers ate in massive quantities to fatten themselves up.

Heather poked her head inside one of the restaurants and saw the walls covered with photographs and other memorabilia from the owner’s matches. Sumo was considered Japan’s national sport, and its wrestling stars were highly revered by the public. Of course Heather had glimpsed matches on TV and knew how humongous the men were, but the first time she encountered one in the flesh, she couldn’t help herself from staring.

She heard a *clip-clop, clip-clop* sound coming from around the corner, and suddenly she found herself face to face with one of the massive athletes. It was his wooden sandals that were making the racket. The enormous man was dressed only in a thin silk robe, his long black hair pulled up into a tight topknot. His dark brown eyes shifted to Heather’s face, only for a split second, his puffy features showing no expression whatsoever, and he continued on.

It was like watching a barge sail by.

* * *

Heather soon turned down a street that was more crowded than the others, both sides lined with bars and restaurants. She hadn’t taken more than three steps when she spotted a man walking in a sandwich board, with Japanese written all over it.

At the top was a drawing of a pair of dice.

She then noticed there were two more men in sandwich boards along the street, calling out in Japanese.

She slowly walked along, watching them. Every now and then one of the passersby—all men—would stop and chat with them. They were given a slip of red paper and directions, it seemed. The men would walk about halfway down the street and then turn down an alley in the middle.

Heather approached the first man in the sandwich board. As soon as he saw her, he turned his back to her.

“Excuse me,” she said, stepping around to face him again.

He turned his back to her and kept calling out.

“Excuse me,” Heather said, this time stepping forward so he couldn’t easily turn around.

“No *gaijin*,” he said, shaking his head.

Heather knew that word—*gaijin* meant foreigner.

“I want to place a bet on the sumo match.”

“No *gaijin*!” he snapped and hurried away from her.

Heather looked on, frustrated, and then walked down to the alley. It was brightly lit, with restaurants lining both sides.

Heather waited until a man entered, carrying one of the red slips of paper, and she followed closely behind him.

He went all the way to the end of the alley and made a sharp right into the entrance of a bar.

Heather followed, only to find her path cutoff by a big Japanese man with a pockmarked face.

Heather swallowed. "Casino?" she said.

"No casino here," he said, his arms crossed over his thick chest.

He did not look like a person Heather wanted to cross.

She turned around and went back out of the alley.

* * *

Heather went back to the hotel and decided to get some sleep, to try again tomorrow. Maybe she would have more luck in the brightness of the daytime. Certainly she would feel a lot safer.

Before she went to bed, she double checked the deadbolt on her door, then took the \$12,000 from her purse and spread it out underneath the center of her mattress.

* * *

Due to the jet lag, Heather tossed and turned for several hours, then finally fell asleep. When she woke up, the sun was shining through the window. She had slept so hard she almost felt drugged when she dragged herself out of the bed.

Picking up her watch from the nightstand, she gasped. It was almost one o'clock in the afternoon! She only had a few hours left to place the bet.

Heather dressed quickly, wolfed down a sandwich in the hotel restaurant, and then took the subway to the very center of Tokyo, where many of the biggest and best hotels were located. As she moved through the crowds, she was acutely aware of the \$12,000 she was carrying and held on tight to her purse.

She was sure that plenty of rich foreigners came to Tokyo to gamble. Surely the hotels where they stayed helped them find casinos and arrange card games.

Heather picked up a Tokyo hotel guide and started mapping out the locations of the five star hotels. She picked one in the fashionable Roppongi district. She rode the subway over.

The hotel looked ritzy from the outside, with doormen in fancy uniforms and limousines parked out front. Good choice, she thought.

Heather was dressed inconspicuously in slacks, a feminine silk blouse and some cute ballerina pumps. She casually entered the posh lobby as if she was staying in the hotel, and went directly to the elevators. She stepped inside a lift and pressed "5". When she reached the fifth floor, she took a slow walk down to the far end of the hallway, then returned to the lift and went back down.

When she came out of the elevator she walked directly to the concierge desk, which was located between two elegant marble pillars.

An immaculately-groomed Japanese man in a beige suit stood and bowed. "How may I help you, miss?" He spoke in a cultured European accent.

This is more like it, Heather thought.

Lowering her voice, she said, "I'm going to the sumo wrestling match tonight, and I would like to place a bet on it."

He smiled politely. "Gambling on sumo is illegal in Japan."

"What about casinos? I heard—"

“Casinos are illegal in Japan.” The concierge paused. “But certain forms of gambling are legal. Perhaps you would be interested in horse racing, boat racing, bicycle racing, or motorcycle racing?”

* * *

Heather received the same treatment at every hotel she visited.

“Sumo wagering illegal in Japan.”

“Only gambling in Japan on horse racing, boat racing, bicycle racing, and motorcycle racing.”

“So sorry, betting not possible on sumo wrestling in Japan.”

By 5 p.m., Heather was gritting her teeth and on the verge of panic. If she heard another word about boat racing or motorcycle racing, she thought she would scream. Had she come all the way to the other side of the world to be given the brush off? She knew people were placing big bets on the sumo match tonight. How could she break through the barrier?

Heather knew at least one reason why it was difficult. When researching sumo wrestling online, she had learned that there had been more than one gambling scandal involving the Japanese mafia—the *Yakuza*—and sumo wrestlers. As Sumo was considered Japan’s national sport, the public did not like those in organized crime interfering with it.

Of course, there was another approach to breaking the betting barrier that Heather had not tried, which was to accept the advances of the many men who had tried to flirt with her in and around these fancy hotels. Some were Japanese and some were other foreigners—Europeans, Middle Easterners, Chinese, South Americans. Many of them looked wealthy and could probably help. But she didn’t want the complications that would arise from such an approach. She would only use that method if she became desperate.

She finally decided to go back to the first five-star hotel, to the man who spoke the cultured English. He seemed more worldly and sophisticated than all the others.

He smiled politely when he saw her coming, and he rose.

“Hello again,” he said, giving another bow.

“Hello. You speak excellent English.”

“Why thank you.”

“How did you learn to speak so well?”

“I attended university in the United States.” There was great pride in his voice.

“Which university?”

“Northwestern.”

“That’s a wonderful school.”

The concierge smiled. “I enjoyed it very much. I love America. Is there some way I can be of assistance?”

“As a matter of fact, there is.” Heather motioned to the guest chair. “May I sit down?”

“Of course,” he said, and he seated himself behind his desk.

Heather said, “You’re Western-educated. I’m just curious as to why there is so much discrimination in Japan.”

The concierge looked puzzled. “Discrimination? What do you mean?”

“Discrimination against foreigners. I want to go to a casino, and they won’t let me in because I’m a *gaijin*.”

“Oh. That is not discrimination against foreigners, it is discrimination against not being able to speak Japanese. If you cannot speak and read Japanese, it is very difficult to gamble in a casino because you cannot understand the rules. It leads to all kinds of misunderstandings and problems.”

Heather smiled. “So there *are* casinos here.”

The concierge glanced around, looking a little uncomfortable. “Illegal casinos, yes, of course there are.”

“I want you to arrange for me to go to one.”

“That would be impossible.”

“Anything is possible.”

Heather had placed her palm flat on his desk. She spread her fingers slightly to reveal a \$100 bill.

The concierge glanced down at it, and then looked back up at her face.

“Well, even if it were possible to arrange, you would not want to go to such places, believe me.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “They are all run by the *Yakuza*. The *Yakuza* are the Japanese equivalent of the maf—”

“I know what they are.”

He stared at her. “Why are you so determined to gamble?”

“Can you arrange it or not?”

* * *

The concierge could not use the hotel phone to make the call, so Heather gave him the cell phone that David had lent her.

He spoke to whoever was on the other end in low tones, first casually and then more aggressively. Heather couldn't understand a word he was saying except the phrase “American woman.” But she got the general impression he was arguing on her behalf. He kept glancing at her as he spoke, as if he were telling the person on the other end, “This is a perfectly nice young American woman with money to spend—why won't you let her in?”

He finally cut the connection and handed the cell phone back to her. “When you exit the lobby, turn left and go to the corner. A young man in a blue suit will meet you. His name is Shiro. He will take you where you want to go.”

Heather slid the money forward.

“That's really not necessary.”

“I insist. You've been incredibly helpful.”

“If you have any problems, you cannot come to me for help.”

“I understand that.”

He discreetly palmed the bill.

* * *

Heather just reached the street corner when a young Japanese man approached her, smiling.

“I am Shiro.”

“Hello,” Heather said, smiling back. He looked a bit rakish, with long black hair and a cigarette in one hand.

“Follow, please.”

He led Heather down a street that was similar to the one where the men in the sandwich boards had been last night, only this avenue was much more upscale. The restaurants looked more expensive and the clientele looked wealthier.

Shiro took a sharp right down another street. Within a few steps they went inside a bar.

A huge man, who was clearly a security guard, eyed Heather as Shiro led her through the place, which was only scattered with a few customers, all Japanese. They went down a corridor, past some restrooms, and then through another door that Shiro unlocked using a code. There was another security guard on the other side.

They walked down a carpeted hallway and Heather could hear the familiar jingling sound of one-arm bandits and the clatter of poker chips.

She found herself standing in a smoky room filled with perhaps one hundred Japanese, well-dressed men and women, standing around a few baccarat tables and playing the slots. There were also a few Westerners there and some men in Arab headdress.

Shiro motioned around the room. "Prease enjoy."

Heather saw an empty seat at a blackjack table next to a middle aged couple who didn't look remotely Japanese. Both the man and the woman had blond hair and very pale skin. As Heather bought some chips from the dealer, she heard them speaking in a tongue that sounded like Swedish or Norwegian.

"Hello," she said, smiling.

They both smiled and said hello back. The dealer started laying out cards.

Heather didn't know much about blackjack and barely paid attention to the game, making small bets and losing nearly every round. She was discreetly glancing around the room, trying to figure out if there was any sports betting going on here.

Beyond the baccarat table there was a cage where people were changing money. But other than that, there were only people playing cards and slot machines.

"I wondered," she said to the couple, "is it possible to place a bet on the sumo matches here?"

"It is possible," the man said, "but not for *gaijin*."

Not this again, Heather thought. "Well, that makes no sense to me—why do they let us lowly *gaijin* in here to play cards but not place sports bets?"

"Because you will have to come back later and collect—they don't like that."

"I see." Heather looked around the room again. Shiro was still there, now playing one of the slot machines. As soon as she finished her hand, she said, "Excuse me," and went over to him.

"I want to talk to your boss."

Shiro frowned, pulling the lever on the machine. One cherry, another cherry...and one pineapple.

"I want to talk to your boss," Heather repeated.

"Not possible," he said, feeding the machine more coins.

Heather slipped something into his free hand. "Anything's possible."

Shiro glanced down at the \$100 bill.

"Why you want talk boss?"

"I have a business proposition for him."

Shiro looked tempted, but uneasy. He was obviously at the lowest end of the food chain.

He finally slipped the bill into his pocket.

"Follow, prease."

* * *

Shiro ushered her past the gambling tables to a door on the far side of the room. It led to a hallway where there was yet another mean-looking Japanese security guard. This one was sitting on a metal chair, reading a magazine. A gun was visible under his sport coat.

He and Shiro had a short exchange in Japanese. It sounded heated. But then the Japanese language always sounded a little heated and short to Heather, especially when men spoke it.

The guard finally relented, but wanted to look inside Heather's purse. She hesitated, then held it open for him. He peered inside, then reached behind her and lightly touched the small of her back, checking for a weapon. He nodded, satisfied.

Shiro stepped over to a door that looked like it was armored, covered with gray metal. Shiro nervously brushed his hair back, and then knocked.

Someone shouted from the other side, and Shiro answered. Heather heard the scrape of a deadbolt being pulled open.

They entered a smoky room. Now Heather was truly scared—she found herself looking at half a dozen Japanese men playing cards. Most of them were covered with tattoos. They were all in their stocking feet, the table very low to the ground. There were huge stacks of yen in front of them.

All the men's faces were hardened and they wore tight-fitting, shiny suits. The air stank of cigar smoke and sweat.

One of the men shouted something at Shiro in Japanese. The man looked like an aging Buddha, with a jiggling pot belly, leaning back against some pillows.

Shiro motioned to Heather and replied.

The pot-bellied man appraised her, looking her up and down, puffing on his cigar. Now Heather could see that his left eye was glass, and the skin on that side of his face was mottled with burn scars. There was a creepy-looking tattoo that snaked up the left side of his thick neck.

"What you want?" he snapped at Heather.

She swallowed, self-conscious, all the gangsters staring at her. "I want to place a bet on the sumo wrestling match tonight."

The men exchanged glances, and then they started laughing. The pot-bellied man started laughing, too, all of them getting a big kick out of this.

Grinning, he said, "How much you want to bet?"

"Twelve thousand dollars."

The laughter stopped.

All eyes returned to the pot-bellied man.

He looked Heather over more closely, puffing on his cigar.

"You are who?"

Heather shrugged. "Just an American tourist who follows sumo."

"Who you bet on?"

"Baruto Kaito."

Heather half-expected more laughter, but the room was dead silent.

"Odds seven to eight on Kaito. We take five percent."

Heather nodded, her mouth dry. "Fine."

"Bet accepted," he said, and he pushed her money to one side of the table.

They resumed their card game as if she was no longer there.

Shiro took her arm, but Heather pulled it free. "What about a receipt?"

The pot bellied man gave her an incredulous stare. "Receipt?"

“Yes. To prove I placed the bet with you.”

He chuckled, glancing at the other men. “You know who I am?”

“I have no idea.”

He chewed on his cigar for a moment, studying her. He snapped his fingers and barked something in Japanese.

Another man quickly handed him a pen and a piece of paper.

With an exaggerated flourish, he dashed off a bunch of Japanese symbols with the figure \$12,000 embedded in it.

“Your receipt,” he said sarcastically, passing it to the man to his right, who passed it around to the next man, until it came around to her. All of them were snickering.

“Ret’s go,” Shiro said nervously, pulling on her arm again.

* * *

As soon as they were back out in the casino area, Heather turned to Shiro and showed him the paper.

“What does this say?” she demanded.

“Say you bet twelve thousand on Kaito in sumo tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I must go now.”

“But how do I get back in h—?”

“Goodbye.”

Chapter 1.14

Heather did not feel confident that she would ever be able to collect her winnings, nor did she have much faith in the “receipt” she had been given, since she could not read Japanese.

Still, as she headed back to her hotel, she was glad she had placed the bet and to be rid of the \$12,000, even if it was in the hands of the *Yakuza*. She felt a lot safer on the subway now.

It was 6:30 by the time she was back in her hotel room. She ordered a meal via room service and quickly started getting ready for the sumo tournament. She wasn't sure how people would be dressed there. She wanted to look reasonably conservative, yet stylish.

She decided to wear the Chanel vintage suit imitation that she had made herself. It was in pale pink tweed, composed of a knee-skimming skirt, a silk blouse in cream, and tight fitting jacket. The pale pink offset her red hair. She liked wearing this outfit because only women with her milky complexion could get away with the hue and not look like a Barbie doll or one of those women in their 40's who tried to dress like teenagers.

She used natural-looking makeup and pinned her hair up in soft feminine curls.

When she finished, she stepped back from the mirror and looked herself over.

Not bad, she thought. I would definitely let myself into a sumo wrestling match.

* * *

As soon as Heather went down to the street, she could hear the primitive sound of the drums beating at the top of the tower that was next to the sumo wrestling arena, calling people to the main event.

It was sunset, and the street was thronged with people now, the colorful flags in front of the sumo hall fluttering in the breeze. The air felt charged with excitement.

Heather went inside the lobby of the arena and gave her ticket to one of the ushers, a man dressed in a maroon robe. He led her into the arena itself. It was a strange sight. Thousands of people sat on four sides of the *dohyo*, the circular clay ring where the actual wrestling takes place. Suspended from the center of the ceiling was a gigantic wooden *yakata*, an inverted V-shaped roof. It seemed to be floating above the ring. At the moment, nothing seemed to be happening—the ring itself was deserted.

As the usher led Heather down the steps towards the ring, she kept looking for the box seats, but she couldn't see any.

Just before they reached the ring, the usher turned and motioned. “Your seat.”

There were three middle-aged Japanese men sitting cross-legged on cushions, with a fourth cushion empty. Now Heather could see that the “box” seats were actually just four pillows surrounded by metal bars, with some space in the middle for snacks.

The men glanced up as she awkwardly slipped out of her high heels and sat down. Damn! She should have worn slacks. She knew the Japanese often sat on the floor, but she hadn't expected that in a sports arena.

The men chuckled among themselves, eyeing her long legs. “Wercome!” one said, smiling. “Prease—sake,” he said, pouring her a small cup.

“Thank you,” she said. Aside from their blatant leg-ogling, they seemed nice. Fortunately their attention was soon drawn to the ring.

A Japanese man in a stunning pale blue kimono and black hat stepped out into the center and was making some kind of announcement. Then, to the slow, steady beat of two sticks clacking together, a group of the massive, 20,000 calorie-a-day-consuming sumo wrestlers began to ascend the ring. The crowd cheered. The wrestlers were all bare-chested and wore colorfully embroidered ankle-length “aprons” over their diaper-like *mawashis*.

They encircled the ring, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, their black hair in tight topknots, their beefy arms at their sides, their faces expressionless.

On TV, they might have looked like overgrown babies in diapers, but up close, they were terrifying.

The crowd went wild.

The thunderous applause and whistling began to die down and they filed back out of the ring. Heather noticed a stunning brunette walking up the aisle. She was tall and slim, wearing a black suede knee-length dress with a deep narrow V neck that plunged to just above her navel, held together by a crystal clasp. Her face was exotic looking, perhaps a mixture of Japanese and something else. Her long, black hair was pure silk and seemed to cut the air as she turned and headed in Heather’s direction.

She was wearing heels that were so high they might have looked ridiculous on anyone else, but the girl moved with the grace of a ballerina and seemed to float rather than walk. To Heather’s surprise, she sat down next to a much older man in the adjacent box, kicking her heels off and settling on a cushion. Her long legs were encased in super-sheer, reinforced vintage style stockings. Her makeup was equally outrageous, her eyes were done up like a cat woman with black eyeliner, extended eyelashes, and the tiniest crystals in the outer corners.

Heather realized that she was staring at the girl, and just about the time she was about to look away, the girl glanced over at her. She looked at Heather’s suit, then back up at Heather’s face and gave a big smile. “I love your outfet,” she said, in what sounded like a French accent.

“I love yours, too,” Heather said. “Is that the iconic Givenchy you’re wearing?”

“Is that ze iconic Chanel *you* are wearing?”

They both laughed.

“I made thees,” the girl said modestly, touching the V neck.

“Really? I made mine, too.”

“No!” She looked more closely at the pearl buttons. “I’d give anything to have a set of buttons like those—zey look so real! Where did you get zem?” Before Heather could answer, she said something to the man she was with, and then said, “Come sit with us—my father, he does not mind.”

Heather was glad to be rescued from the ogling men in her box.

Her name was Nicole, and she and Heather immediately hit it off. Nicole was from France, her father Japanese and her mother half French and half Moroccan.

“My father is crazy on ze sumo,” Nicole said, pouring Heather some sake from a bottle. He was a serious-looking man, with broad shoulders and graying hair. He merely grunted when his daughter introduced Heather.

Nicole said, "He's been bringing me to ze sumo tournaments since I was a little girl."

Heather considered trying to speak French, but she lost her nerve and stuck to English. "Do you live in Paris?"

"No. I leev in sooo boring Aix-en-Provence ."

"I've been to Aix-en-Provence. I thought it was beautiful."

"*Oui*, it is beautiful, but it is not *Paree*," Nicole said wistfully.

* * *

As the wrestling matches started, Nicole filled in Heather about what was going on, explaining the symbolism of the ornamentation and rituals and sumo's roots in Japan's centuries old Shinto religion.

"Sumo was originally created as a performance to entertain ze Shinto gods..."

"The four flags hanging from ze four corners of the roof symbolize north, south, east and west..."

"The wrestlers scatter the salt around the ring, and on themselves, to drive away negative energy and to protect themselves from injury..."

Heather already knew a lot of this from her reading, but it was interesting hearing Nicole explain it. Heather loved her accent, and her enthusiastic, animated manner. Nicole worked in marketing at a bank in Aix-en-Provence, but hoped that she could find a more interesting job in Paris. She asked a lot of questions about Heather, about why she was in Japan and why she was at a sumo match.

"I was here on business and I was just curious," Heather lied. "I like Baruto Kaito—I think he'll win the championship."

"Oh! My father is one of Kaito's sponsors! This is why we have the good box seat."

Nicole's father glanced over at them.

"Heather favors Kaito!" Nicole told him.

The man looked at Heather and finally smiled, giving her a thumbs-up sign. "Kaito number one!" he said.

* * *

It was after nine o'clock when the last match began.

"This ees the beeg one!" Nicole said, squeezing Heather's arm.

Heather's heart started beating faster. She glanced at Nicole's father, wondering if he had bet any money on it.

The two wrestlers entered the ring. One was much heftier and taller than the other. Heather hoped that was Kaito—of course she didn't know who was who and couldn't ask Nicole.

The two big men began their posturing, squatting and raising one thick leg high in the air and then stomping down, and occasionally slapping their gigantic butts. Heather had seen this on TV and had thought it was funny, but there was something grimly intimidating about watching these monstrous athletes perform the rituals close up, in real life. They were like two bulls squaring off against each other, pawing the ground, steam coming out of their nostrils. Heather certainly wouldn't want one of them mad at her!

Finally, after about fifteen minutes of this, the two contestants got down to business, squatting across from each other in the ring behind the thick white lines.

When the smaller one set his fists down on the white line, Nicole said, “Come on, Kaito!”

So Kaito was the smaller one. That was not good news.

Heather leaned forward on her cushion, tensing as she thought about the \$12,000 that was at stake. The two men faced off for a painfully long moment, with the referee standing between them, crouching with his legs far apart and pointed in opposite directions, fanning out the colorful kimono.

Both wrestlers rose and started waddling around the ring again, stomping and slapping their bottoms.

I wish they would get on with it, Heather thought. It had not taken her long to learn that the wrestling itself lasted no longer than 60 seconds—most of the time was spent in this sort of pre-match posturing.

“I sure hope Kaito wins,” she said, hoping Nicole might say something encouraging. “He’s so much smaller.”

“Size eez not important in sumo,” Nicole said. “A small man can easily beat a bigger one. Is that not so, Papa?”

Her father merely grunted, his gaze riveted on the two men in the ring.

Heather didn’t see how a man as small as Kaito could win against the other one. The object was to either push your opponent out of the ring or make him fall or stumble so that some body part besides the feet touched the ground. It seemed to Heather that in sumo, weight and size were everything. Otherwise why would all the wrestlers fatten themselves up so much?

Heather felt sweat on her brow and knew her face was getting shiny. She couldn’t get the vision of the bundle of \$100 notes out of her mind.

Your Friend in Need said that Kaito will win, Heather told herself, *so Kaito will win*.

The two wrestlers were squatting behind the white lines again.

Something told Heather that they were ready to do battle this time.

Again, the kimonoed referee crouched between the two men, his legs spread wide. He barked out something.

With no further warning, Kaito flew across the ring and slammed head on into his opponent, but the bigger man grabbed him in a hold. The two were instantly spinning round and round in the ring, each grabbing, or trying to grab, the thick back band of the other’s *mawashi*.

“Come on, Kaito!” Heather found herself yelling.

“*Allez, Kaito!*” Nicole screamed.

Kaito faltered. He was pushed backwards, his left foot stopping just at the edge of the white circle.

Heather’s heart skipped a beat.

Now the two men were locked in an almost romantic-looking embrace, their heads butting, each trying to grab the other’s arm.

Their movements slowed and they became almost still, their legs trembling as they both pushed against each other. Kaito would suddenly shift and try to grab the other’s wrists and forearms, but the two massive wrestlers were in a deadlock.

Heather couldn’t take her eyes off of Kaito’s left foot—it was pressed right up against the ring’s outer white line. The referee was watching it carefully. If it moved even an inch, the match would be over. Kaito would lose.

The crowd was growing impatient, with loud shouts and shrieks echoing through the stadium.

Kaito lurched forward, his opponent grabbing him an instant later, and both of them spun around the ring like two clumsy, obese ballet dancers, clawing at each other's *mawashis*, trying to get purchase.

Heather was so tense that her nails were digging crescents into her palms. She didn't think she could take even another five seconds of this...

A horrifying thought struck Heather. What if it was the *Yakuza* who had been sending her the email messages, all in a plan to lure her to Japan to gamble on this match! But why her...?

Before she could pursue the thought, Kaito got hold of the other man's belt and slammed him down on his back—Heather could feel the thud through the floor.

"Wooo!" Heather screamed, leaping to her feet. "I won I won I won!"

Nicole and several of the men in the next box glanced at her.

Oops, she thought.

* * *

"Please, come have a drink with us," Nicole was saying, as they slowly made their way out of the sumo hall. "Then when Kaito is rested we will go to a party where we will celebrate his victory. All his sponsors are invited."

"I really can't," Heather said, looking at her watch. All she could think about was picking up her winnings.

"Why not? Don't you want to meet Kaito?"

"Of course, but my flight leaves early tomorrow..."

Heather finally gave in, agreeing to have only one drink. She decided she needed a little liquid courage before she faced the *Yakuza* again...

* * *

The three of them took a taxi to a restaurant called Alice in Wonderland.

The décor was 1960's psychedelic and, according to Nicole, was a popular hangout with the Gothic Lolita crowd. Most of the patrons were girls in outrageous blonde wigs, carrying parasols and dressed in Victorian era clothing. Some had powdered faces and wore dark blue and purple makeup.

"Isn't this wild?" Nicole said, as they sat down.

A waiter dressed as The Cheshire Cat took their drink orders. Heather asked for a Mad Hatter and Nicole ordered a White Rabbit. Nicole's dad, who looked rather uncomfortable in this atmosphere, asked for some ordinary Japanese beer. He immediately pulled out his cell phone and hid himself in a game.

Nicole started talking fashion in Tokyo, and how it compared to that of Paris and New York. Heather had trouble concentrating, unable to stop thinking about the money she had won and whether she would have trouble picking it up.

But when Nicole said, "...and I'm going to open a boutique. Paris has so many small designers who are unknown. Of course, I will sell some of my own designs, too..." she caught Heather's attention again.

"You want to open a fashion boutique?"

Oui!

"In Paris?"

Oui!

"That's my dream, too!"

"Really? We can open it together!"

Heather felt a stir of excitement. David had said they could move to Paris. Maybe...

But she wasn't sure if Nicole was serious, or it was her White Rabbit talking—the cocktails were incredibly strong.

"When do you plan to open this boutique?"

Nicole shrugged. "When, when. Of course, the problem is mo-nay."

"Mo-nay?"

Nicole rubbed her fingers together. "Mo-nay."

"Oh," Heather chuckled—she thought Nicole had said Monet. "Yes, it's always the problem, isn't it."

"*Oui*," Nicole sighed.

Heather glanced at her watch again. "I'm sorry, Nicole, but I really have to go."

Nicole glanced at her father, who was still absorbed in the game on his phone. She leaned close to Heather.

"In ze sumo hall, what did you mean when you said, 'I won, I won'? You bet some mo-nay on ze match?"

Heather hesitated, but she didn't want to lie to Nicole. "Yes, a little."

"I knew so. How exciting!" Glancing again at her dad, she whispered, "My papa makes bets on sumo but he thinks I do not know."

Heather smiled. "Anyway, I have to go pick up what I won."

"Let's exchange telephone numbers, Heather. We must stay in touch so we can open ze boutique!"

Heather was embarrassed that she didn't have her own cell phone number to give Nicole, so she gave her the number of the phone David had lent her. "But this number is better to call me on," she said, adding the landline number of her apartment.

Heather tried to put down some yen to pay for her drink, but Nicole wouldn't let her.

"*Au revoir, mon nouvel ami!*" Nicole said, giving Heather three alternating kisses on the cheek, French style.

"*Au revoir.*"

* * *

Since it was late, Heather decided to take a taxi to the Roppongi district. She regretted leaving Nicole, wishing they could have spent more time together. Nicole was so upbeat and optimistic. Heather didn't often meet other girls with whom she had so much in common. She had thought about asking Nicole to come along with her to pick up the "mo-nay" but, of course, Heather didn't want to get her mixed up with any *Yakuza*. Heather was scared enough as it was.

The taxi let her off at the five star hotel and she retraced her steps to the alley where Shiro had led her. It was after 11 p.m. now, and she was afraid that the narrow passage might be dark and deserted, but it was actually brightly lit, with lots of people walking around.

As Heather approached the bar where the casino was located, she grew more and more anxious. What if they pretended they didn't know her? Or refused to pay her?

Worse, what if she couldn't get back into the casino at all? Without Shiro she, as a *gaijin*, might not even be able to get past the security guard at the front door. All she had was the receipt for the bet—hopefully that would serve as a pass to enter.

She stepped inside the bar. A different guard was on duty. He looked her up and down but seemed uninterested, his eyes moving back to the door.

The place was more crowded than it had been in the afternoon. No one paid her any attention as she walked past the bar and down the corridor that led to the restrooms. She slowed and found herself standing in front of the door with the touchpad. It was very quiet, and there wasn't a soul around.

Heather went back out to the bar and walked up to the security guard. She touched his arm and he bent down to listen.

"I need the casino," she whispered.

He frowned.

"Casino," she repeated.

He shook his head as if he didn't know what she was talking about, then pulled away looking back at the entrance.

"Damn it," Heather muttered. She went over to the side of the bar. One of the young men who was mixing drinks glanced at her. She motioned him over.

"Yes?" he said.

"I need the casino."

"No casino here."

He turned away and continued mixing a drink.

"Look, I know there was a casino here, I was in it this afternoon."

The bartender shook his head.

Heather was starting to panic. She went back to the security guard. "I have a problem," she said, pulling on his arm. "Problem." She pointed at the corridor. "Big problem."

He reluctantly followed her around the bar and down the hallway, past the restrooms. She pointed at the door with the keypad. "I want to go in the casino, do you understand?"

"No casino."

"Don't tell me that. I was there this afternoon, dammit! There is a casino on the other side of this door, I know there is."

The big man sighed, his arms crossed over his chest. "No casino."

"Open that door!" Heather said.

The man sighed again, then reached up and quickly clicked in a code and pulled the door open.

"Thank you," Heather said, and she walked down the hall. She opened the door that she had gone through before.

She found herself looking into an empty room.

There was nothing there but a few cardboard boxes. No slot machines, no baccarat tables, no crowd of people.

Nothing.

She stepped back out into the hallway.

The guard was standing there, his arms still crossed over his chest, with a look that said, "Are you satisfied now?"

* * *

Heather went back out to the street, shaken and confused. This was like some crazy con game movie—the casino was there one minute, and the next it had vanished.

The first thought she had was that this had all been some elaborate trick to con her out of \$12,000...but by the time she was back out on the main street, she

knew that was ridiculous. Men like those wouldn't go to so much trouble for a measly twelve thousand dollars—there had been many times that much money was just scattered around their card table this afternoon.

The casino must have closed, or moved somewhere else.

Heather looked helplessly up and down the street. She had no idea what to do.

She finally flagged down another taxi.

“Do you know the restaurant Alice in Wonderland?”

The driver nodded.

“Take me there, please. And hurry!”

* * *

Heather went inside the restaurant and scanned the room. Nicole and her father were still there, but they were about to leave—her dad was counting out yen and putting them in a wooden tray.

“Heather!” Nicole said, as she approached. “You're back...” She saw the look on Heather's face. “What's the matter?”

Heather hesitated, glancing at Nicole's father. Speaking in a low voice, she said, “The casino where I placed the bet on Kaito seems to have disappeared.”

“Disappeared? What do you mean?”

* * *

They hired a taxi to take them to Kaito's party. Heather and Nicole sat in the back seat and Heather finished telling Nicole what had happened. She noticed that Nicole's father glanced over his shoulder now and then, listening.

“*Quel désastre!*” Nicole said.

“*Quel est le problème?*” her father said.

“May I tell him?”

Heather nodded.

Nicole started explaining in French. Her father listened, looking at Heather. When Nicole finished, he just shook his head.

“Gambling not for women,” he muttered. “You should know better.”

* * *

They soon arrived at another restaurant that was packed with Japanese, mostly men. Several TV news vans were parked out front.

Nicole's father led the way inside—it seemed that there were several parties going on for various sumo wrestlers who had done well in the competition.

They went to the very back and Heather spotted Kaito. He was sitting in an eye-catching maroon robe, his hair still in a topknot, surrounded by his fans and sponsors.

Nicole's father squeezed his way in and made a small space for Heather and Nicole.

Kaito may have looked small in comparison to his opponent out in the ring earlier that evening, but he seemed positively huge now. The table was piled high with food and drink, the sake flowing freely. Reporters kept coming up to Kaito and he waived them away, apparently already tired of being interviewed.

Of course Heather couldn't understand a word that was said. She was the only non-Japanese at the table. She kept getting curious glances from the group, including Kaito.

At one point he smiled at Heather and then looked at Nicole and said something in Japanese.

Nicole translated.

“He wants to know how he can have hair of your beautiful color,” Nicole laughed. “He says he is tired of black hair, that everyone here has black hair and it is very boring for him.”

“Tell him thank you, I’ll lend him some of it if he wants.”

When Kaito heard the translation back to Japanese he laughed.

Nicole’s father leaned over and whispered for a moment in Kaito’s ear. Kaito listened, looking at Heather, and his smile disappeared. Kaito drank some sake as if lost in thought, and then asked Nicole’s father something.

Nicole said, “He wants to know who was the *Yakuza* you placed the bet with. Do you know the man’s name?”

Heather shook her head. “All I know is that he was the head of the casino.” She opened her purse. “His name might be on this—it’s a receipt, sort of.”

Nicole’s father took the paper. When he read it, he recoiled.

Kaito reached out and snatched it away. He gave the same reaction, his chubby face taking on a look of disgust.

“What does it say?” Heather asked, not sure that she wanted to know.

Nicole turned to Heather. Grimacing, she said, “For twelve thousand dollars, I will let you kiss my big fat Japanese ass.”

Heather’s face turned red.

“Where was this casino located, exactly?” Nicole’s father said.

“It was in the Roppongi District.” Heather explained how she had found it.

Kaito thumped down his sake cup on the table and rose, moving surprisingly fast. He slid Heather’s “receipt” inside his kimono and said something to Nicole’s father in Japanese.

“Come on,” Nicole said, getting up and taking Heather by the hand.

“Where are we going?”

“To get your mo-nay.”

* * *

The group went outside, Kaito leading the way, *clip-clopping* along in his wooden sandals. He had to fight off dozens of enthusiastic fans who wanted autographs and photos taken with him, and more reporters.

They all piled into a Hummer stretch limo that Kaito’s sponsors had rewarded him with for that night. The behemoth was huge. It felt like they were inside of a discotheque on wheels—it was so large you could nearly stand up inside and walk from one end to the other, and it sported a sound and lighting system that would rival that of any Manhattan nightclub.

Kaito took up most of the back himself. They started driving through Tokyo, the music blaring and lights flashing. In addition to Nicole and her father, several of Kaito’s sponsors had come along, all Japanese, of course, and getting more and more drunk. Kaito kept downing sake, too, but he appeared steady and unfazed. Heather supposed it would take gallons of sake to have any impact on a man with his body weight.

Soon Heather recognized that they were in the neighborhood of the casino.

The limo stopped. One of the Japanese sponsors touched Heather’s arm. “Show me where the casino was.”

Heather and the man got out. “It was down there, inside of that bar,” Heather said, pointing. She took a step forward but the man stopped her.

“Stay in Hummer, please.”

Heather reluctantly got back inside, feeling anxious. She didn’t like this—there was no telling what might happen.

A moment later the sponsor appeared and got back inside the limo. He started talking to Kaito in Japanese.

Nicole’s father said, “The casino was raided by the police earlier tonight. They are raided all the time. The *Yakuza* can get everyone out and break all the equipment down in a matter of minutes.” He spoke to the limo driver and motioned to Heather. “Do not worry, Kaito will get your money. The *Yakuza* do not like problems with foreigners.”

* * *

The limo drove only a few blocks before stopping again. This time, Kaito himself began to get out of the vehicle. He motioned to Heather and spoke.

“He wants you to go with him,” Nicole’s father said.

Heather said, “I don’t want him taking a risk because of me.”

“He is not taking a risk. He is a national hero, known to every man, woman and child in this country. No one would dare touch him, not even the *Yakuza*.”

Kaito waited, one of his beefy legs extended to the pavement. He glanced at Heather and then apparently asked Nicole’s father what she had been saying.

Kaito motioned to Heather and started talking, Nicole’s father translating each sentence. “With respect, I do not take risk for you. What I do, I do for sumo. *Yakuza* always interfering with my sport, they dishonor it. They must show respect.”

Kaito pulled himself up and out of the limo.

Heather got out and followed him down the street, his sandals *clip-clopping* along.

* * *

It was almost 3 a.m., and there weren’t many people around. The few who were out stared—Heather supposed that there weren’t too many sumo wrestlers walking around in robes and wooden sandals in the middle of the night, especially with a redhead following along behind.

Kaito made a slow turn like a ship and waddled into one of the bars, Heather right behind him.

“Kaito!” someone exclaimed, but he did not glance in that direction, just kept moving purposefully forward, like a tank. He headed straight for a security guard.

The man smiled but his expression changed when he saw the stern look on Kaito’s face.

Kaito barked at him in Japanese.

The man hesitated. Kaito took a menacing step forward.

The guard quickly pointed to the right and said something else.

Kaito turned again, *clip-clopping* along the side of the bar and then down another hallway, not unlike the one where the other casino had been located.

The huge wrestler swayed around a corner, Heather following, growing more and more afraid of what might happen. Now they were heading towards a

keypad-protected steel door. Sitting beside it, in a metal folding chair, was a tough-looking man reading something on a tablet computer.

He heard the *clip-clop* of Kaito's sandals and looked up, but the sound abruptly stopped when Kaito stepped out of them and kept moving.

The guard rose uncertainly. When Kaito kept coming, he reached for his gun.

Kaito lurched forward in the same manner as sumo wrestlers did at the start of a match. He slammed into the man head-first. The next instant, the stunned guard went flying backwards like a ragdoll. He rammed into the wall, his head snapping back, the gun spinning from his hand. He crumpled to the floor, moaning.

Kaito swung his bare foot out and kicked the gun to the other end of the hall.

He turned to the metal door and began pounding on it, slowly and deliberately, with his huge fist—*boom—boom—boom!* He glanced over at the keypad, then struck it once with a furious blow.

The keypad caved in and made a distorted beeping noise.

A panel in the door slid open. Two brown eyes peered out through the slit. The eyes cut to the side, apparently in search of the guard, but he wasn't visible, slumped on the floor, moaning.

A voice shouted something in Japanese from behind the door.

Kaito pulled the "receipt" from his robe. He held it up in front of the slot.

The eyes took this in, cut over to Heather again, and the panel slammed shut.

Kaito just stood there, breathing hard, the air whistling through his broad nose.

The slot opened again. This time a beige envelope was stuffed through, and it fell to the floor.

Kaito bent, picked it up, and handed it to Heather.

There was money inside.

He nodded to it, as if he wanted Heather to count it.

There were two bundles of \$100 bills. One looked exactly like the same bundle she had made the bet with, a red rubber band around it. The other was a little thicker, held together with a paper strip.

She quickly counted the money.

It was all there.

* * *

Half an hour later, the Hummer was nearing Heather's hotel. The music was playing full blast, along with the blinding disco lights. Everyone was in a jovial mood, getting drunker. Everyone had congratulated Kaito on his successful recovery of Heather's money.

Heather had thanked him, but he gave her a dismissive wave, reiterating that it had merely been a symbolic gesture, a message from the sumo community to the *Yakuza* that the sport of sumo, and all those associated with it—even gamblers—must be respected.

In clumsy French, Heather said to Nicole and her father, "I can't tell you how grateful I am to both of you. If I hadn't met you tonight I would have lost all that money."

Nicole's father shook his finger at her. "You must not play around with the *Yakuza*, mademoiselle! These men are killers."

"I know."

Kaito nodded, too, understanding the gist of what Nicole's father had said, but he was grinning. Despite the reason he gave, he had clearly enjoyed helping a woman in distress.

The limo pulled up to the hotel and stopped. It was now 4 a.m.

Nicole gave Heather another triple kiss goodbye.

"Please do not forget our secret plan," Nicole whispered into her ear.

"I won't. *Au revoir!*"

Heather kissed Kaito on the cheek, and then got out and went inside the hotel lobby.

What neither Heather nor anyone else knew was that they had been discreetly followed all the way from the casino.

Chapter 1.15

When Heather got back to her room, she found herself standing there in dead silence. The entire hotel was asleep. After spending the last few hours in the crowded restaurant and the “disco” limo, she found the quiet and stillness unsettling.

The phone rang.

Heather nearly jumped out of her skin.

She wondered who it could be, afraid to answer. Could it be Nicole? Calling to see if she had gotten to her room all right?

Heather picked it up on the third ring.

“Yes?”

There was a click.

“Hello?” Heather said, her throat dry.

The line was dead.

She slowly hung up the receiver, and looked down at her purse. There was about twenty-five grand inside it, and the *Yakuza* knew it.

She was gripped by fear, her heart racing. She looked back at the phone. How could they know which room she was in? They didn’t know her name. Maybe it was just a wrong number...a hotel guest trying to call someone else in another room...

Maybe she could find out. She picked up the phone and pushed the 0 button.

“Hotel operator,” a female voice said.

“I just received a phone call but the connection was broken. Can you tell me if the call came from outside the hotel?”

“Yes, call came from outside.”

“Did they ask for me by name?”

“No, ask for room number.”

“In English?”

“In Japanese.”

Oh dear god, Heather thought.

“Is there a problem?”

“Uh...no problem, thank you.”

Heather shakily hung up the phone. Now her mouth was so dry she could hardly swallow. She twisted open the top of a bottle of mineral water on the desk and took a few desperate gulps.

Get a grip on yourself! she thought. *There’s not a chance they could know what room you’re in, not unless someone followed you up to the fifth floor. You were alone in the elevator, so that’s impossible.*

But as she thought more about this, she realized that someone could have been in the lobby and watched the display above the elevator. Still, they wouldn’t know the exact room she was in.

Then it dawned on her.

It was four o’clock in the morning, and the entire hotel was dark. She looked over at the window. When she had turned on the lights, anyone outside who had watched her enter the hotel would know exactly which room she was in...

Her first impulse was to turn the lights back off, but of course it was too late now.

Heather cautiously went over to the window, staying to one side. The curtains were closed. With a shaky finger, she slowly pulled the right-hand side just far enough to allow herself to peek outside.

There were cars parked up and down the dark, empty street. Being up so high, it was hard to tell if anyone was inside any of the vehicles.

Then she noticed a movement in a dark-looking sedan. The orange flicker of a cigarette. It brightened, and then faded out.

Heather backed away from the window.

Now she was utterly terrified.

They knew she was alone in the room with \$25,000 in cash.

* * *

Two hours later, Heather was sitting stiffly on the bed, the lights in the room still shining brightly, battling her fear. The deadbolt was securely locked on the door. The desk chair tilted and wedged under the handle.

Every minute that slowly passed seemed like ten. It was dawn now, and the gradually brightening curtains made her feel a little better. She had convinced herself that nothing would happen as long as she kept the lights on and whoever was watching her thought she was alert and awake. If she could just make it from here to the airport, she would be safe.

But she couldn't figure out how to accomplish this. Taking a taxi, even in broad daylight, would be too dangerous. Even if the taxi driver were legitimate, she might be accosted along the way, at a traffic light—who knew what the *Yakuza* might do?

The amount of money wasn't that much to them, but it was probably a matter of principle, just as it had been with Kaito. They weren't going to be pushed around by anybody, even a national sumo hero.

Heather had considered calling the police, but had quickly dismissed the idea. She would have to explain why she thought someone was after her, and there would be no way to do that without admitting she had broken the law by gambling on a sumo match.

She kept looking at her purse, thinking. Now her life was in danger. It would, of course, be better to just give the *Yakuza* the damn money than risk being injured or killed. But she couldn't figure out how to do that, either. Go to the window and try to communicate with hand signals? Throw the money outside? The windows in the hotel wouldn't even open.

Think, she told herself. *There has to be a way out of this. There must be a way.*

* * *

At 8:00 a.m., Heather had changed positions—she was now standing at the window, the curtains still closed, peeking outside.

She was keeping an eye on the driveway that led up to the lobby.

About 8:20, a tour bus pulled up. Elderly people started piling out of it. The driver started unloading suitcases from the belly.

This is my chance, she thought.

Her bag was already packed. She quietly pulled the chair away from the door, carefully slid the deadbolt back, then cracked the door and peered outside.

The hallway was empty.

* * *

A minute later Heather emerged from the elevator and walked steadily through the lobby, pulling her suitcase behind her, heading straight for the front desk.

The group of elderly tourists had started checking in.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a Japanese man sitting in a chair, reading a newspaper. He glanced in her direction and sat up straighter.

Heather walked up to one of the clerks at the front desk who was checking in a group of the old folks.

“Your housekeeping people are a bunch of thieves!” she shouted.

The woman recoiled. “Excuse me?”

“Someone stole my engagement ring!” Heather yelled. “It was in my suitcase yesterday afternoon, and when I came back last night, it was gone!”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure, you incompetent moron!”

Now everyone was staring at her, the clerks exchanging glances.

“Miss, please calm down,” the first clerk said.

“How dare you tell me to calm down! I want my ring back, and I want it back *now!*”

“We have a safe deposit box here at the front desk—”

“Don’t give me that! Aren’t your rooms safe here?” She glanced at the elderly people around her, who were looking concerned, glancing at each other.

“Miss, calm down please.”

“Stop telling me to calm down!”

A middle-aged Japanese man emerged from a room behind the counter.

“I’m the manager on duty,” he said. “Is there a probl—”

“You bet there is!” Heather shrieked hysterically. “Somebody on your staff stole my ring, and you’re responsible!” Heather shoved over a plastic container of rental car brochures. It clattered to the floor, the papers spilling everywhere.

A security guard rushed up and grabbed her arm.

“You must come with me,” he said, pulling her aside.

“Take your hands off me! I’m an American citizen, I have my rights! I’ll call my embassy!”

The guard firmly guided her behind the front desk, into a small room, and sat her down in a chair.

He pointed a finger at her face. “If you no calm down we call police.”

“Go ahead, call them! I’ll file a lawsuit against you, and this hotel, too!”

He left the room, closing the door and locking it.

Heather smiled.

* * *

Ten minutes later, the door opened again.

The hotel manager and a policeman entered. The cop was about 35, tired and harassed-looking.

“I hope that we can calmly work this out,” the manager said. He handed her a piece of paper. “If you will just fill out this lost item report we will pass it along to Housekeeping and they can—”

“Housekeeping?” Heather cackled. “You think those thieves will give it back? It’s worth over ten thousand dollars!”

“Are you absolutely sure you left the item in your room?”

“Of course I’m sure, you fool!”

The cop raised his eyebrows, glancing at the manager.

The manager remained unfettered “I can assure you we employ only the most honest staff and do very thorough background checks.”

“I’ll bet.”

“The item may have been picked up by a vacuum cleaner, or fell into the sink, or any number of other possibilities. I promise you that we will do a complete search during the next twenty-four hours.”

“The next twenty-four hours?” Heather said incredulously, glancing at her watch. “My plane leaves in three hours, and I have a non-refundable ticket. Are you going to buy me a new ticket while you try to find my ring?”

“I can assure you that we will return the item to you if we find it.”

“Ha!” Heather said. “What are you going to do, stick it in an envelope and mail it to me? I want my ring back, damn it!” Heather looked at the policeman. “I want to press charges!”

“Against whom?”

“Against the whole staff of this hotel, that’s who—they’re all thieves, they’re all in cahoots, stealing from unsuspecting tourists!” She motioned to the lobby. “I’ll bet you’re going to steal all those poor elderly people blind.”

The manager sighed, and then nodded to the cop.

“Okay,” he said, gently taking her arm. “We go to station and you fill out complaint.”

“That’s fine with me,” Heather said. Through gritted teeth, she said to the manager, “You’ll hear from my lawyer.”

* * *

The cop guided Heather out through the lobby, one hand on her arm and the other carrying her suitcase.

The Japanese man who had been reading the newspaper was standing now, talking on a cell phone. He watched her as she was escorted out of the lobby.

The cop opened the back door of the police car, slid Heather’s suitcase inside, and then held the door open for her. “Please.”

Heather glanced at the metal screen that separated the back from the front. “You’re going to make me sit in the back, like a criminal? I’m the victim here!”

The cop sighed, shut the door and opened the front door for her.

Heather slid inside.

As soon as they pulled out into the street, she burst into tears.

“My fiancé will kill me,” she wailed, her face in her hands. “He only gave me that ring a week ago, and I already lost it! I’m such an idiot.”

The cop looked surprised. He pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her.

“I’m sorry I made such a fuss in the hotel,” Heather said, sniffing and wiping her eyes. “I’m just so upset. My fiancé will be furious with me. He’ll probably call off the wedding! I shouldn’t have brought that ring on this trip with me, I was so stupid. But I wanted to show it off.”

“You should keep such valuables in hotel safe.”

“I know, I know, I just didn’t think about it, I was very busy on this trip. I wanted to walk around last night and I didn’t think it would be smart to wear that ring. I thought it would be okay to just hide it in my suitcase.” Heather glanced nervously at her watch. “If we go to the police station I’m afraid I’ll miss my flight

—can't I just quickly fill out the complaint here in the car? Do you have a form with you?"

The cop slowed the car, pulling a paper from his notebook. "I have a form, but only in Japanese. English one at station."

"Well, you can translate for me, can't you?"

He hesitated, but she touched his arm. "You've been so kind, so understanding. The policemen here in Japan are *so* much more intelligent and gentlemanly than American policemen."

The officer smiled a little. He handed her a clipboard with a pen attached. She slid the form into it. As she did so, she glanced out the side mirror. There was a black sedan two cars back, but she couldn't tell if it was the same one that had been parked on the street in front of the hotel.

"Family name, first name," the cop said, pointing at the top line of the form.

Heather filled it in. She glanced in the side mirror again—the black sedan was still behind them.

"Home address," he said, pointing at the next section.

Heather slowly filled it in.

"Personal ID...that would be your passport number."

"Right." Heather opened her purse and rummaged around, pretending to look for her passport.

She gasped. "No...oh my God!"

"What's wrong?"

She slowly pulled the ring from her purse, staring at it, looking bewildered. "I'm sure I put it in my suitcase yesterday afternoon—I'm *sure* I did."

The cop sighed.

"I've made such a fool of myself," Heather groaned. But she was grinning ear to ear as she slid the ring onto her finger, admiring it. "I found it! It wasn't stolen after all!"

With one hand, the officer pulled the form from the clipboard and crumpled it up.

"Please, please apologize to the hotel manager for me," she told him. "That poor man! I feel terrible for treating him so badly. And all those housekeeping people! They won't get in trouble, will they? Please contact the hotel for me as soon as possible, will you, to make sure?" Heather glanced at her watch again, and she also caught a glimpse out the side mirror—the sedan was still two cars back.

This was the moment of truth.

"I really have to get to the airport—you can just let me out at the nearest subway station. I'm so sorry for all this inconvenience I've caused you, I just feel terrible about it."

The cop hesitated, slowing the car.

Heather said a silent prayer to herself.

"Which airport?"

"Narita."

He glanced at his own watch.

"No problem, you have very difficult day. I take you there myself."

* * *

Heather leaned back in her seat and looked out the airplane window, watching the city of Tokyo and Mount Kumotori slide away beneath her. She was giddy with relief.

I did it, she thought gleefully. I flew all the way to Japan, bet on a sumo wrestling match, and came away with twenty five thousand dollars in my pocket!

Chapter 1.16

The Sunday Heather returned from Tokyo was, literally, the longest day of her life. With the 12 hour time difference, the “day” actually lasted 36 hours.

She was physically exhausted when she finally got back to her apartment, but her mind was buzzing. She was still high from her successful, high-risk adventure.

She called David and they went out to dinner at a quiet French restaurant.

“So,” he said, “how was your trip to Tokyo?”

“Oh, pretty dull. You know how it is—work, work, work.”

“You didn’t get a chance to see any of the city while you were there?”

“Well, I did go to a sumo wrestling tournament.”

David stared at her. “You went to a *sumo wrestling* tournament?”

“It was actually pretty interesting.” She told David a little bit about the rituals and the matches she had watched.

“Somehow I can’t visualize you at a sumo wrestling tournament.”

Heather thought he probably couldn’t visualize her placing a \$12,000 bet with a bunch of tattoo covered *Yakuza*, either.

“I should take you back to Tokyo sometime for a little excitement,” David said.

Heather only smiled.

* * *

When they were leaving the restaurant, a middle aged blonde woman stepped in the door, nearly bumping into them.

“David!” she gushed.

“Hi, Bridgette.” Heather thought David seemed a little uncomfortable. He looked at Heather. “Uh, Bridgette, this is Heather.”

“Hello,” Heather said, shaking the woman’s hand. She was beautiful, sporting a deep tan, with an impressive, well-toned figure.

Heather noticed that David did not tell Bridgette that she was his fiancée.

“So are we on for Thursday night?” Bridgette said, making a gesture with her arm, as if swinging a tennis racket.

“You bet,” David said. “You’re on my calendar.”

“Nice to meet you, Heather,” she said, and she turned and went inside the restaurant.

As soon as they were alone on the sidewalk, Heather said, “That’s a lovely tennis companion you have there, David.”

“She’s not a ‘tennis companion’, Heather. She’s a student.”

“A student? What are you talking about?”

“I’m giving her tennis lessons, Heather. I told you that. I give lessons on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“You never told me that. You just said you played tennis on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

David shrugged. “I teach, too, but just not for the money. Just to keep my game sharp.”

Heather didn’t like it, nor did she understand why he needed to do it. She knew he’d given tennis lessons when he was a struggling movie actor in L.A., but why now? Especially with beautiful women.

“Look, Heather, I’m hardly making any money at the firm yet, and these Manhattanites will pay top dollar to improve their form.”

“I’ll bet they will.”

“The woman is married to one of my father’s best friends. They’ve known each other since Harvard, for god’s sake.”

At that moment, a stout gray haired man was scurrying down the sidewalk, looking like he was in a rush.

“David!” he said, coming up and shaking hands. He glanced curiously at Heather. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“We just had dinner,” David said, motioning over his shoulder. “Bridgette is inside the restaurant—we just ran into her.”

“Please tell me she just got here...”

David smiled. “Yes she did.”

“Good,” the man said, looking relieved. “She hates it when I’m late.” He smiled at Heather and quickly continued down the sidewalk.

“See?” David said.

Heather still didn’t like it.

* * *

Heather told David she wanted to spend the night at her place, that she was worn out from the trip and needed a solid night’s sleep. This was true, but she also felt cool towards him because of the tennis lesson surprise.

Even though she longed to get to bed, when she was finally home she found that she could not sleep, that she was overtired from the 36 hour day and wide awake. She kept thinking about the blonde. And that mysterious locked nightstand drawer in David’s apartment. She wondered how many other “students” David had, and if he’d really changed his ways, like he claimed.

Heather finally got her mind off this unpleasant subject when her thoughts turned back to the trip to Tokyo, and Nicole. She found herself smiling.

She needed to do something nice for Nicole, and for Nicole’s father, too.

She remembered something Nicole had said.

I’d give anything to have a set of buttons like those—zey look so real!

Heather got out of bed, took the Chanel jacket from the closet, and cut off all the faux pearl buttons. She put them in an envelope, along with a \$100 bill that she wrapped with a glossy page from a magazine so that it wouldn’t show if held up to the light.

Nicole,

I won’t forget about our ‘secret plan’ and, please, don’t you forget about it, either!

XXX

Heather

P.S. I’m enclosing a little money—please take your dad to dinner with it.

* * *

When Heather woke up Monday morning, she felt disheartened and lethargic. Even stopping to mail the letter to Nicole didn’t cheer her up.

She dreaded getting back into the old grind at Potter. She grimaced at the thought of seeing Rita’s and Kevin’s faces, of having to bring them their damn coffees.

The only bright spot was hoping that there was another message from her Friend in Need, and that it would give her new information that she wouldn't have to travel halfway around the world to take advantage of.

As she sat down at her computer, she whispered, "Please, please let there be a new message."

And there was. It had again arrived like clockwork at 9:03 a.m.

Dear Heather,

On Friday, NASA's UARS-II satellite will fall to earth and land somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere.

I hope you use this information to your advantage.

I remain,

Your Friend in Need

Heather stared at the message.

What the hell?

A satellite was going to drop out of the sky on Friday?

These predictions were getting more and more bizarre.

How in the world could she take advantage of something like that?

Then again, maybe it was possible to bet on it, strange as it sounded.

Heather made sure that Rita and Lisbeth weren't around, then pulled up a couple of the sports betting sites. She searched for the term *satellite*.

To her surprise, both betting sites were taking wagers on whether the UARS-II would land in the Northern or Southern Hemispheres. Apparently, due to the satellite's erratic orbit, the chances were about 50-50. The current odds reflected that.

Amazing, Heather thought, looking back at the email message. Who was this incredible, gifted person? She felt a tremendous rush of gratitude towards him, and again felt the urge to type a heartfelt reply telling him how much she appreciated his help, how wonderful he was to care about her problems, how he was changing her life...

He *is* changing my life, she thought.

She glanced around the office, at all the other workers clicking away on keyboards, every one of them with gloomy, Monday-morning looks on their faces.

My Friend in Need is my pathway out of this hellish monotony, Heather thought. Thanking him is the right thing to do.

She started to click the REPLY button, but hesitated...she hadn't thanked him before, and the predictions had kept coming. Maybe replying would jinx it. The last thing she wanted was to do anything that might stop the steady flow of lucrative predictions.

Heather clicked the SENDER field, which only read YFIN, to check the exact email address from which the message was sent.

ykd32k932@yahoo.com

She had checked this before, and it was always different, a jumble of meaningless letters from some free email account. Her Friend in Need obviously wanted to remain anonymous. He probably wouldn't even get the reply if she sent it...

Heather closed the email window—better to leave whoever it was alone. Maybe someday she would find out who he was and she could thank him in person.

* * *

At lunch, Heather deposited the Tokyo winnings into her bank account. Later in the afternoon, she transferred the funds to one of her sports betting accounts.

When she placed the \$25,000 bet on where the satellite would land, she did not hesitate, now fully confident about the tips she was receiving.

* * *

That night, David invited Heather to dinner and to see a very popular Broadway play that had been sold out for the next few months. A client had given David the tickets as a gift.

“Oh no,” David groaned, just as they were leaving the restaurant. “I forgot the damn envelope with the tickets.”

“Where is it?”

He was busy checking all his pockets. “It must still be on the kitchen table. I could have sworn I picked it up right as I went out the door.”

Heather glanced at her watch. “But it’s only seven. We’ve got time to go get them, don’t we?”

“Maybe, if the traffic’s not too bad.”

Fortunately, the traffic was relatively light. David drove fast and reached his apartment building in record time.

“You go in and get the tickets,” David said, pulling the Jaguar over into a NO PARKING zone. “They’re sitting right on the kitchen table.”

Heather opened the car door, but turned back to David.

“I don’t have my keys.”

David frowned. “Why not?”

“I changed purses,” she said, holding up the clutch that went with her evening dress.

“You women and your purses,” David muttered. He shut off the engine, pulled the car key off his key ring and then handed the rest of the keys to her. “Hurry up, I don’t want to get a ticket.”

Heather dashed into the building and went up to David’s apartment. It took her a moment to unlock the door, fumbling with the unfamiliar keys.

She noticed that there were two small keys on his key chain, the kind that unlocked drawers.

Heather went inside the apartment, flipped on the lights, and found the theater tickets on the kitchen table, right where David said they would be.

She turned to leave, but hesitated, the keys in her hand, glancing towards the bedroom.

Don’t do it, she told herself. It’s an invasion of David’s privacy. Would you want him suspiciously going through the drawers in your apartment?

She found herself standing in front of the nightstand in David’s bedroom, gazing at the “mystery drawer.” It had been in the back of her mind ever since the morning he had told her that his father kept a gun there.

And now there were these “students” to whom David was supposedly giving tennis lessons...

Heather glanced at the window—she could hear car horns out on the street. She wondered if David was honking for her to hurry up.

She looked back at the drawer. *We’re engaged, damn it, and he shouldn’t have any secrets from me.*

With that thought, Heather knelt in front of the cabinet, and tried the first small key on the ring.

It didn't fit.

The second one did.

Swallowing, afraid of what she might find, Heather slowly opened the drawer.

There was a revolver inside, just as David had said. It was wrapped in a cloth—she could see the handle.

But there was something else.

A pile of jewelry. Expensive jewelry, all men's. Bracelets, necklaces, and at least a dozen watches.

Breguet, Tag, Girard-Perragauz...

Heather recognized a few of the pieces—she had seen David wearing them.

There was also a file folder filled with documents.

She didn't touch any of it.

She quickly shut the drawer, locked it, and went back out the front door.

* * *

David enjoyed the play and Heather pretended to enjoy it, but she could not keep her mind on it. The only thing she could think about all evening was what she had seen in the drawer—the pile of jewelry, the gun, the documents...

What did it all mean?

She tried to stop herself from thinking the worst, but she couldn't help it.

Throughout the play, she kept stealing glances at David. Was this charming, handsome, sophisticated man that she was engaged to a common thief? Had he stolen all that jewelry? But that made no sense, with him coming from such a wealthy family.

Could he be a kleptomaniac or have some strange psychological problem that compelled him to steal?

When they were driving back to David's apartment, Heather could stand it no longer. He was still talking about the play, but Heather interrupted him mid-sentence.

"David, I did something bad tonight."

He glanced over at her. "What did you say?"

"I said I did something bad tonight. When I went up to your apartment to get the tickets."

David slowed the car a little, glancing at her again. "You opened the drawer of my nightstand..."

"Yes."

She expected him to get mad, but he merely shook his head and kept driving. "If we can't trust each other, Heather, how can we possibly get married?"

"I know it was wrong of me, David. But now that I've done it, I'm really worried. about what I saw there..."

"And what did you see?"

"I...I saw a bunch of jewelry and a gun and some papers."

"So you put two and two together and decided I'm a jewel thief or a cat burglar or something?"

"No, David, I didn't. I know that you're going to give me some logical explanation."

David started laughing.

“I don’t think it’s funny.”

He glanced at her again. “Heather, what did I tell you about the history of that apartment?”

She had to think for a second. “You told me it belongs to Windsor Properties, and that before you moved in it was used for out-of-town clients.”

“I told you it was a place for clients to spend the night and *relax*.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Don’t you understand what that means? To “relax?”

“What are you saying, David?”

“Heather, do you know what it takes to close huge real estate deals, to convince zoning commissioners to give their permission to build, to sway politicians to your side, to entice big investors to put up millions?”

“I think I do. So it was a party flat, then.”

“That’s an understatement. You wouldn’t believe the number of high end call girls who’ve floated through that apartment over the years, the drugs, the orgies, the fuck fests. I’ll bet there have been fifty kilos of cocaine snorted off that glass table in the living room alone. All by Windsor property clients or investors or ‘gatekeepers,’ as my dad calls them.”

Heather found this disgusting. “I hope you’re exaggerating, David.”

“I wish I was, Heather. Big time real estate can be a very sleazy business. You wouldn’t believe what we had to do just to get that New Jersey shopping mall...never mind. You don’t want to know.”

“You’re right, I don’t want to know.”

David sighed, looking back at the road. “That’s the reason I didn’t want to join my dad’s firm in the first place. I hate all that sleazy stuff.”

“Well, I still don’t get it. Where did all the jewelry come from?”

“Oh, that?” David laughed. “It’s all from dear old Mom. I told you, every Christmas and birthday she gives me a watch or a bracelet or something. She’s got no imagination. I wear it all to make her happy. It’s the only stuff of any real value in this apartment, so I keep it locked up.”

Heather wasn’t sure she bought this. “Are you telling me the truth, David?”

“Of course I’m telling you the truth. Why would I lie about it? I keep telling my father to come pick up the gun, but he hasn’t gotten around to it yet.”

Heather looked out the window. They were almost at his apartment now.

“I think I’d rather sleep at home tonight, David.”

“Come on, Heather, not again. Don’t be upset. You shouldn’t have opened that drawer, you said so yourself. Curiosity killed the cat.”

“Maybe. I just don’t feel like staying in that apartment tonight, not after what you told me about it.”

“Are you sure that’s all it is?”

“Of course,” Heather said, taking his hand. “It was just a shock, that’s all. I’m sure I’ll feel better in the morning.”

Chapter 1.17

Heather didn't feel better in the morning.

In fact, she worried all day.

On her afternoon break at Potter, she went into the restroom and called David on his cell phone.

"Can I come talk to you after work today?"

"Sure, sweetheart. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, I just want to talk."

"No problem. You want me to come pick you up?"

"No, I'll take the train."

"Are you sure?"

"It's fine, really."

"Okay. I'll cook my famous Chicken Milano for you. How's that? And I'm going to try my hand at making crème brûlée—I bought a little blowtorch so I can caramelize the top."

Heather smiled. It was hard for her to stay mad at David for long.

* * *

When she arrived at David's apartment, the door was unlocked. An unfamiliar briefcase was sitting on the floor next to the couch in the living room.

She heard male voices as she went towards the kitchen. She was surprised to find David's father there.

"Hello, Heather," Nathan said warmly, kissing her cheek. "How's my future daughter-in-law?"

"I'm fine," she said, blushing. Nathan had his tie loosened, a drink in his hand, and seemed to be in a good mood.

David seemed jovial as well. He was wearing an apron, standing over the stove, stirring the pasta sauce. It smelled delicious. And he looked very sexy in the apron—it made his shoulders look even broader than they were.

"Anyway," Nathan said to David, "we can talk about the Thompson project later." He glanced at Heather. "I don't want to ruin a romantic evening with your lovely fiancée."

"Oh, please stay for another drink," Heather said, following him out into the living room.

"You're very kind, dear, but I must go." He picked up his briefcase and gave Heather a peck on the cheek. "Enjoy your dinner. David can make a mean Chicken Milano. I'm a little worried about that blowtorch, though. When he was a teenager he was a bit of a pyromaniac."

Heather laughed. When she shut the front door and turned around, David was standing on the far side of the living room, still wearing his apron. He extended his forefinger and motioned for her to follow him.

David led her into the bedroom. At first she thought he wanted to have a quickie before dinner, but he bent down and unlocked the nightstand drawer, then pulled it out.

Heather peered inside.

The jewelry was still there, but the gun was gone.

"My dad finally picked it up. I knew how upset you were about this, so I put my foot down and insisted that he come get it today." David started to shut the drawer and saw her looking at the file folder. "That's just my personal legal

documents.” He pulled it partially open. “Passport, birth certificates, diplomas...” He shut the drawer and locked it.

She felt better.

David put his arm around her and kissed her. He started to guide her back towards the kitchen, but hesitated. “Did you want us to talk now, or after dinner?”

“I don’t want us to talk at all,” she said, slipping her arms around his neck and pulling him towards the bed.

Chapter 1.18

When Heather left work on Friday evening, she still did not know the outcome of the last bet she had placed. She didn't know where the NASA satellite had landed, or if it had come down at all.

She had checked the news online one last time before turning off her computer. David was picking her up out front and they were going to dinner, so she probably wouldn't have a chance to check again for a while.

On the way to the restaurant, David said, "So, have you thought about getting married on Labor Day weekend?"

"David—"

"And don't ask me why I'm in a hurry." He motioned to her left hand. "Giving you the ring doesn't mean much without setting a date."

"How so?"

"Look, that's why I usually don't introduce you to people as my fiancée. They always say, 'Oh, that's wonderful, congratulations! When is the wedding?' and then we have to tell them we haven't set a date yet." David shrugged. "It doesn't look good. It looks like a sham."

"It does not look like a 'sham', David. Besides, people don't ask 'When is the wedding?' They ask 'Have you set a date? Polite people do, anyway.'"

"That's not the point."

"What is the point, then?"

"People think I'm just stringing you along, Heather. They think I gave you a ring just to keep you happy and I don't really have any intention of marrying you."

"So, this is all about how you look to other people..."

"Of course not. It's about how you look, too."

Heather was annoyed with him, on the verge of being angry. But she held her tongue. "Let's not get into a fight about this, David. That would be pretty silly, fighting about our wedding."

David took her hand, "I'm sorry, honey, I didn't mean to pressure you." He chuckled. "This is a role-reversal, isn't it? Usually it's the woman putting the pressure on the man to get married."

"Look, can't you let me get used to the idea of being married before we set a concrete wedding date?"

"Of course I can, I'm sorry. I just wish we could live together." He paused, glancing at her. "By the way, when am I going to get to meet your mother?"

"I actually haven't told her yet."

David looked surprised. "You haven't? Why not?"

"Because I don't want to do it over the phone, I want to do it in person."

"When can we go down there, then?"

"Well...I would prefer to tell my mother myself, first, to let her get used to the idea, too."

"Oh. Okay, fine."

David seemed hurt, but she was too preoccupied with the bet she had placed on the NASA satellite to get into a heavy discussion. If these predictions kept coming in as steadily as they had been, and she could keep betting on them, she might be able to save her mother's house. As far as she was concerned, she couldn't even think of marrying into the Windsor family before the problem with the house was resolved, one way or another.

* * *

The friction about the wedding date put a bit of a damper on the first part of their evening, but by the time they finished their dinner, things had warmed up again between them.

“Let’s go back to my apartment,” David whispered, as he paid the bill. Even though they were both stuffed, there was a hungry look in his eye.

They had planned to go dancing, but Heather smiled. “Fine with me.”

As soon as they arrived back at David’s place, he started undressing her.

“Let’s shower first,” Heather whispered. “I’ve had a long day.”

“Together?” David said, smiling.

“I’m too tired for aquatic acrobatics tonight. Can’t we just do it the old-fashioned way?”

David laughed. “Fine. You shower first.”

As Heather lathered herself with soap, she kept thinking about the bet she’d placed. Hopefully she could watch the news while David was taking his shower and find out what happened with the satellite.

As soon as David took his turn, Heather sat down on the bed, wrapped in a towel, and clicked on the TV. It was 11 p.m. and the news was just starting.

There were stories about violence in the Middle East, protests in Russia, a near miss by two jets approaching Gatwick Airport, and various other items...but not a word about the satellite.

When the commercials came on before the weather portion began, Heather really started to worry. Now she wondered if the satellite had come down yet, and if the bets would be valid if it landed on Saturday rather than Friday. The email message had said it would come down today, and land in the Southern Hemisphere...

David emerged from the bathroom, also wrapped in a towel. He glanced at the TV.

The commercial had ended and now the news anchor was talking to the weatherman. “Bob, you’ve got the latest on that NASA satellite that was supposed to come down today...”

“Yes I do, Sandra. It finally did come down, and it didn’t land on anyone’s head, fortunately.”

“That’s a relief, Bob.”

David sat down on the bed and slipped his arm under Heather’s towel, cupping her breast.

“Wait,” Heather said, putting her hand on his.

David looked at Heather. “You want to watch the weather?”

“Shhh.”

The weatherman was talking about people betting on where the satellite would hit.

“You can bet on that sort of thing?” the news anchor said.

“You sure can, Sandra. I happen to know a few people out there in TV land who put money down on this event.”

“But not you, Bob.”

“Of course not, Sandra. You know me—I never gamble.”

Apparently this was an inside joke at the TV station, as there was a lot of laughter in the background.

David stuck his tongue in Heather’s ear. Goose bumps ran down her neck and shoulder, but she kept her eyes on the television.

A 3D image of the world appeared on the screen, behind the weatherman. As the globe rotated to the Pacific Ocean, a dashed line appeared diagonally across the screen with an X at the end.

“As you can see, the UARS-II satellite descended along this path from east of Hawaii, down across the South Pacific. It hit the water somewhere West of the Galapagos Islands...”

The Southern Hemisphere, Heather thought.

She giggled.

David looked over at her. “You find that amusing, do you?”

“Some of the people at work were betting on it, that’s all.”

“They should have bet on this,” David said, pushing her back on the bed and pulled her towel away.

Heather moaned with pleasure.

She now had \$50,000 in her sports betting account.

(End of Book 1 – to be continued)

To purchase Book 2 of *Passion, Power & Sin*, please go to [this page](#).

A LETTER TO MY READERS

Hello, Dear Reader!

I hope you enjoyed this book (Books 2-5 can be downloaded [here](#)). I write in a variety of genres—thrillers & suspense, romance, young adult, and horror. As I say on my website, my goal has always been to write novels that are so engaging and entertaining that you can't stop reading after a couple of pages—"unputdownable" books. You can read all my book descriptions and read/download free chapters at www.mikewellsbooks.com.

Also, if you enjoyed this book, I would greatly appreciate any help you can give me in spreading the word about what I have to offer. Positive word-of-mouth for independent authors like me is the only formula I know for success. Please pass this book along to your family and friends—give it to anyone who you think would enjoy it.

I always welcome comments about my books—please feel free to give feedback via email (mike@mikewellsbooks.com) or via my [website/blog](#). Book reviews on Goodreads, Amazon, B&N, etc. are also appreciated.

Thanks for reading and have a great day!

Mike Wells

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