

Lust, Money & Murder

Book 1

by

Mike Wells

Smashwords Edition

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Mike Wells is an international bestselling author of “unputdownable” thriller and suspense books. Here’s what readers have to say about Lust, Money & Murder:

5 Stars! Good, unclean fun! Buy buy buy—this is a sure satisfier, trust me on this.

5 Stars! If there was a 10star rating then that’s what I would have given as 5 stars do not do this book justice.

5 Stars! You will be hooked! Not since Sidney Sheldon has a male author captured a woman's perspective so well.

5 Stars! Plot keeps you guessing with one unexpected twist after another. You won’t go wrong with this book. I want more!!!

5 Stars! Mike hooked me. And yeah, I agree with the other reviewers, I couldn't put it down. That's saying a lot, because I'm very busy, get bored easy, and was already reading a bestseller. I put down the other book in favor of this one.

5 Stars! Fast paced, brilliantly written, I am definitely a fan of Mike Wells and will be reading more of his books. I would love to see this turned into a movie...

5 Stars! This book is a journey through the entire emotional spectrum. Love, revenge, danger, and pride propel the reader through this excellent novel.

5 Stars! Laundry? Forgotten. Dishes? Piled up in the sink. And don’t talk to me. I am finishing Lust, Money & Murder.

5 Stars! This book was so captivating and amazing I couldn't put it down. I bought the book at 10pm and opened it up, at 2am I clicked to the last page with even more enthusiasm than when I started.

5 Stars! Don’t start this book if you have anything important to do...like collecting your children from kindergarten! I nearly forgot.

5 Stars! Mr. Wells, The value you provide for the money is unparalleled.

5 Stars! I enjoyed reading the book tremendously. The plot is catching, the characters are realistic, the author's research and knowledge on a subject is very thorough. When I started reading the novel, I couldn't stop until I finished it.

5 Stars! This could be a movie! Well-written and factual in detail, I enjoyed this face-paced thriller and look forward to reading more of Mike's work!

5 Stars! I am totally hooked and can't wait to read the other two books in this series.

5 Stars! Once you start the series, you will want to finish it! Mike uses the twists and turns of the story where you never know what is coming. It is an exciting page-turner, a book you won't be able to put down! Remember Mike Wells name, he will be someone we see much more from in the future!

5 Stars! Mr. Wells, you don't charge enough for your books.

5 Stars! The kind of book you want to give to your daughter, but also have the urge to hide from her! This story touches on the brightest and darkest aspects of human nature.

5 Stars! Awesome! Written in a crisp, straight to the point style—it's clear that Wells is a very skilled writer who knows exactly what he's doing. Unputdownable? Definitely! Can't say enough good things about this writer & book. Get a copy and devour it.

5 Stars! I could not put the book down. It was full of action, the story felt realistic and I loved every protagonist, even the villain.

For Anya, with love

PROLOGUE

Italy – Present Day

The man picked her up in Vernazza, a picturesque village perched along the rugged coastline of the Italian Riviera.

From his salt-and-pepper hair, and his lined face, Maria guessed he was in his early 50s. He bought her a drink, then dinner, then a new dress and a pair of pumps and a few other things, spending lavishly on her in the quaint village shops.

There were no pretenses. They went to his plush villa, which afforded a breathtaking view of the sea. When she asked his name, he looked at her with his brooding dark eyes and said, “Are names important, *cara*?”

All she knew was that he was a businessman from Rome. She supposed it didn’t matter.

They were soon hungrily making love to each other on the king-sized bed. She hadn’t expected such energy out of a man his age—he was insatiable. She often had to fake orgasms with older men, but not with this one.

They spent most of the weekend in the bedroom. In between sexual bouts, they hiked up and down the cobblestone streets of the village, admiring the view and the lovely, narrow houses that were painted in pink, blue and yellow pastels. They gorged themselves on the local cuisine—*capon magro*, a pyramid made of fresh vegetables and a half dozen different types of fish, and the *torta pasqualina*, a cake made of 18 layers of light pasta and stuffed with *ricotta* cheese.

They spoke very little. Maria didn’t care. Words might break the spell, and she didn’t want this to end.

* * *

On the third day, he felt that he had won the girl’s trust.

The experiment he wanted to perform was far too important to delegate to one of his lieutenants. There was much riding on the outcome. He needed to see the results first hand.

But he had to be careful.

When she lay in his arms, spent, he said, “Did you know I am celebrating this weekend, *cara*?” He stroked one of her full, firm breasts. “You are a gift to myself.”

She looked up at him with liquid brown eyes. “What do you mean? What are you celebrating?”

He rose naked from the bed and picked up a small leather Gucci bag that was sitting on the coffee table. He knew she was curious about what was inside—he had been carrying it around everywhere they went, keeping it close at all times.

When he opened it, she gave a little gasp.

The satchel was packed with crisp, new U.S. \$100 bills.

“So much money,” she said in a hush. “Where did it come from?”

“I sold a flat in Portofino, a dilapidated hovel I have been trying to rid myself of for years. I finally found an American gullible enough to buy it, but he insisted on paying part cash. It’s only about fifty thousand dollars.”

Even though she was trying to hide it, he could see the greed in her 21-year-old eyes. She was a *velina*, a soft hooker who survived on her good looks, roaming up and down the Riviera, living off one rich man after another, staying a few days or

weeks in a villa or onboard a yacht until the current sponsor tired of her and threw her out, after which she moved on to the next.

He said, "I was thinking of driving up to San Remo and trying my luck. Have you ever been to the casino there?"

"No," she lied.

"You'd love it—it's the largest casino in Italy. All the richest people gamble there." He also happened to know that the establishment had just updated its currency verifying machines with the latest software.

He motioned to the cash, feigning frustration. "Unfortunately, I left my passport in Rome. There's no way to change this kind of money without one."

"I could change it for you," she blurted, but then checked herself. "I mean, if you want me to." When he didn't react, she said, "I have my passport right here," and reached over to her purse and produced it.

He smiled. He already knew she had a valid passport. He also knew that she had left her home in Naples at the age of 16, and was unknown to anyone in these parts.

* * *

Ten minutes later, they were driving up the coast, heading towards San Remo in a metallic blue Porsche cabriolet, the wind blowing through their hair. It was just before sunset. The highway ran up and down the rugged cliffs along the shore. Soon, the sky exploded into a riot of orange and indigo and violet.

Maria was excited, looking forward to a few more days of luxurious meals, plush accommodations, and expensive presents. Maybe he would buy her a diamond bracelet at the casino gift shop. Why not?

* * *

When they reached San Remo, he surprised her again. He pulled up in front of the sidewalk that led to the casino entrance and handed her the Gucci bag. "Take that inside and convert all of it to casino chips." He motioned to the other side of the street. "I'm going to have a cup of coffee and catch up on a few business calls I have to make."

Maria was astounded that he was going to let her walk away with all that cash. When she got out of the car, he leaned over and looked up at her and smiled. "Try not to gamble it all away before I get there!"

She walked up the long sidewalk towards the casino. When the uniformed man opened the door for her, she glanced over her shoulder. Her generous friend was just sitting down at one of the tables at the cafe. He waved at her.

Maria was tempted to try and run away with the money. But she wasn't some stupid *puttana*—she knew better than to try and steal from a man like him.

Carrying the Gucci bag in one hand and feeling very chic and powerful, she went inside the busy currency exchange.

There were security cameras above each counter. Then she noticed a sign on the wall:

- WARNING -

ANYONE CAUGHT TRYING TO PASS AS MUCH AS ONE
COUNTERFEIT BANKNOTE ON THESE PREMISES WILL BE TURNED OVER
TO THE POLICE

Of course the money she had to change wasn't fake—she had nothing to worry about.

“Casino chips, please,” she told the male clerk, emptying the bag on the counter.

She was disappointed with his reaction—he only looked bored. “Passport?” he said.

Maria handed it over.

He studied the document, then took a few of the bills and studied them, rubbing them between practiced fingers.

Maria was suddenly terrified. What if this money *was* fake? She didn't know the man who had brought her here! He could be a criminal!

With a sinking feeling, she wondered if she was being used to change counterfeit currency.

The clerk began feeding stacks of the notes into a big, complicated-looking machine. It had a red digital display that showed the total amount, the numbers escalating as the bills were swallowed up.

If any of the money was fake, it was too late now. She would be arrested on the spot, just like the sign said. And the man who had supposedly given it to her? Conveniently disappeared.

“Here you are, *signora*,” the clerk finally said. He handed her a handsome, leather-crafted carrier that was loaded with casino chips.

Thank God, she thought, greatly relieved. She let out a little laugh as she carried the chips into the casino. It was silly of her to think badly of the man she had just spent the last three days in bed with—he was a nice person, she had known it from the start.

She began playing roulette, betting only €50 at a time.

A few minutes later, her friend showed up.

“Ah, there you are!” he said, rushing over to her. He took the chips and placed a drink in her hand and gave her a warm smile. “Come, *cara*—I will teach you how to play baccarat.”

* * *

He gambled recklessly that night, delighted with the results of the experiment. Within several hours, he had lost €150,000 worth of chips, but he didn't care. It was a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of money he would make in the coming months. He gave Maria €10,000 in chips to gamble with and sat back and watched her lose it.

By 3 am, she was tipsy, and he was getting tired.

“Let's go back to Vernazza,” he said, stopping her before she placed another bet.

“Vernazza?” she said. She looked disappointed. “I thought we would stay here...”

“It's silly to waste money on a hotel room here when I own a beautiful villa so close by.”

A guilty look flickered across her face. “I'm sorry I lost all that money...”

“It's nothing,” he said. “It was thrilling, wasn't it?”

* * *

By the time they were back at the villa, he found his second wind. He drove his lean, hard body into the young girl, bringing her to a series of toe-curling orgasms.

They lay there for a few minutes, and then he suddenly rose from the bed and started putting on his pants. “I’m buzzing with energy—I can’t sleep. Let’s go for a walk.”

“A walk? Now?”

“Come,” he said, pulling on her hand. “The fresh air will make you feel better.”

“But it’s so late…”

He ignored her protests and helped her get dressed, making sure she wore only her own clothes and not anything that he’d bought for her. When she reached for her wristwatch, he grabbed her hand and impatiently said, “For God’s sake, *cara*, you’re not going to a fashion show!”

It was windy outside, the sky just hinting at the coming dawn. They walked up the hill, along the cliffs.

Vernazza is part of a cluster of five villages known as the *Cinque Terre*. They veered off in the direction of Corniglia, the next closest village, which was only 3 km to the south. The path soon became so narrow that they had to walk single file.

“Be careful, *cara*,” he said, letting her move ahead of him. “It’s slippery in places.”

The sea along this particular stretch of coastline was always rough, the waves breaking over clusters of jagged rocks that were covered with razor-sharp coral. It was not uncommon for hikers to slip and fall down the sheer 200-foot cliff face. Within minutes, their bodies were pulverized into bloody slabs of unidentifiable gristle and bone.

“Isn’t the view incredible?” he said, stopping her after the path widened again.

“Yes,” Maria said, snuggling her back up against his warm chest. Far below, the waves were exploding over the rocks, the spray filling the air with brine.

He kissed the top of her head, hugging her tightly. It was a shame. She was a beautiful girl—he was already developing a paternal, protective feeling for her.

Even though the fake \$100 bills had passed through the casino’s verifying machine, they would eventually be detected. She had shown her face on video. Her passport had been in the camera’s field of view as well.

He gently turned her around and kissed her again, aggressively, shoving his tongue deeply into her mouth.

When he drew away, her eyes widened—all at once, somehow, she understood everything.

He shoved her into the abyss.

* * *

A few minutes later, he placed a call to a number at a sprawling dacha on the outskirts of Moscow.

A deep voice answered on the other end. “*Da?*”

“I have good news, my friend. Our experiment was a smashing success.”

CHAPTER 1.1

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania – 1985

The day Elaine Brogan was born, Patrick Brogan's life underwent a dramatic change. Patrick Brogan was a construction worker, and his existence consisted of a never-ending blur of brick-hauling and muddy work boots and dented hard hats and drunken bar brawls. He hadn't given much thought to the baby that had been coming for the past nine months.

When he gazed down at the spastic little creature he cradled in his arms, his life suddenly took on meaning.

* * *

By the time Elaine was four years old, Patrick would carry her up to the tiny wooden deck he had added onto the attic of their run-down Garfield house, holding her in his arms.

"Your great-great-great-great grandmother was an Irish Princess," he whispered, his beard tangled in her blonde hair. "She lived in a beautiful, ancient castle. It had a moat, and a—"

"What's a moat, Daddy?"

"A *moat*. It's a pond that goes all the way around the castle and protects it from attack." He paused. "Princess Alana's daddy, the king, would hold great feasts and celebrations at Brogan Castle. Afterwards, Alana would come out on the balcony, like this one, and all the people would cheer her. 'All hail to the Princess! All hail to the Princess!'" Patrick pointed out into the tiny backyard. "Can you hear them cheering?"

Elaine listened. She *could* hear them! Except they were crying, "All hail Princess Elaine! All hail Princess Elaine!"

"Was Princess Alana very rich, Daddy?"

"*Very* rich, sweetheart. Just like you're going to be one d—"

"Why do you fill her head with that nonsense?"

Kathy Brogan was standing in the doorway, smoking a cigarette, her face haggard from working a 12-hour shift at the supermarket. "You're going to make her think she's better than everybody else," she said.

Patrick looked genuinely surprised. "But she is better than everybody else."

* * *

Elaine was six years old when she realized her father was little more than a beer-guzzling manual laborer with an overactive imagination, and that Garfield, where they lived, was one of the worst areas of Pittsburgh. She would never be rich and there had never been any Princess Alana or a Brogan Castle. But she adored her father all the same.

Elaine loved to nuzzle her face into his broad chest when he came in the door from work. He smelled of sawdust and bricks and the outdoors.

She knew he would always be there to protect her.

* * *

As a little girl, Elaine felt a special affinity for working the visual puzzles in newspapers and magazines. The ones with two pictures side by side that appeared

identical at first glance, with a caption that said: *There are ten differences between the girls in these two photographs. Can you find them?*

Patrick marveled at the speed with which his little tow-haired prodigy could work these puzzles. "The girl on the right doesn't have a bracelet, and there are two straps on her sandal...see how easy it is, Daddy?"

"No," he chuckled. "I don't see how easy it is. How the heck do you do that?" To his wife, he said, "She has an incredible eye for detail. Someday she might become a great artist."

"Uh-huh," Kathy said.

* * *

Patrick was forever concerned about his daughter's safety. When she started school, he drove her in his truck each and every morning, and picked her up and took her home each and every afternoon. At the construction sites, no matter how busy he was, he would drop whatever he was doing and say, "I have to go pick up my daughter." These words were always uttered with a great sense of pride.

His bosses put up with him because he was such a diligent worker, and they could not help but admire his fatherly dedication. Patrick was always the first one to arrive on site, and the last one to leave. During the day he worked faster and harder than anyone else.

His employers had no idea that he was the one responsible for the pilfering and theft that plagued the sites for years.

* * *

When Elaine was seven, Patrick caught her and the girl next door smoking cigarettes in the back yard.

That night, Patrick said to his wife, "I'm sending Elaine to a private school. I want her out of this shitty neighborhood."

"And how do plan to pay for it?"

Patrick took a sip of beer, gazing at the TV. "Don't ask."

* * *

The Bromley Academy for Girls was housed in a cluster of brick colonial-style buildings nestled on 40 tree-filled acres of land, a half hour drive from Garfield. It was quiet and peaceful there, with plenty of fresh air, a gazebo, a stable, and the ruins of a little country church, complete with a graveyard.

The day of Elaine's interview, Patrick was a nervous wreck. His hair was slicked back, his beard neatly trimmed, and he wore a five-year-old ill-fitting suit he had bought for his mother's funeral. He was afraid that Ms. Prentice, the director of the school, would be an arrogant snob. To his surprise, she turned out to be a pleasant, unassuming little woman with a pug nose and a gentle smile.

"Your daughter is adorable," Ms. Prentice said, perusing Elaine's file, "and her grades and tests scores are outstanding. We would be thrilled to have her here at Bromley."

Patrick breathed a great sigh of relief. He picked up a heavy satchel and began stacking piles of rubber-band bound bills on her desk. "I hope you don't mind if I pay cash."

"I'm sorry, but we only accept checks."

“That’s not convenient for me. See, I run a cash business.” Patrick Brogan was a big man, with rough-looking hands. He had listed his occupation on the Elaine’s application as “construction site foreman.”

“And what kind of business is that?” Ms. Prentice said uneasily.

“Me and my friends have some investments in different things. Video arcade for kids, stuff like that, you know. Cash businesses.”

“I see. Still, I’m afraid we can’t accept ca—”

“I was noticing that the paint’s beginning to peel out there on your gazebo, and some of the pillars are rotten out front.” He paused. “Appearance is important, don’t you think?”

“Well I—”

“I’d be happy to fix things up around here on Saturdays.” Patrick smiled easily. “I’m good at that sort of thing.”

* * *

The first day at Bromley was a nightmare for Elaine. She made the mistake of telling the girls where she lived. There was a great deal of snobbery. She instantly became “the girl from Garfield” with the construction-worker father. His pickup truck was visible somewhere on the campus practically every Saturday, Patrick in his jeans and T-shirt, somewhere nearby painting or sawing or standing on a ladder and repairing a gutter.

Patrick went out of his way to be friendly and helpful to all the students, knowing how important this was for Elaine. He could speak in a passable Irish brogue, and he would say, “Top a de marnin’ to ya, gershas!” or “I saw a leprechaun hidin’ in de garden!” They would all giggle.

Eventually they accepted him, and they accepted Elaine.

* * *

As Elaine grew up, Patrick lost all interest in his wife. To Kathy Brogan, it seemed that her only purpose in life had been to bring her husband’s beloved “Lainie” into this world.

Kathy found herself more and more jealous of the constant attention he gave their daughter. Kathy was from Beaumont, Texas, and the high point of her life had been when she had been named prom queen at her high school. Her natural blonde hair and model-like figure had always made her the center of attention when men were around.

Kathy hated herself for being jealous of her own daughter, yet the feelings were so intense at times she couldn’t control herself. One Sunday night after Patrick had spent the entire weekend with Elaine, she said, “Maybe you would rather little Lainie sleep in our bed and I can sleep in her room?”

Patrick slapped her so hard it knocked her off her feet. Pointing his shaking finger at her as she lay on the floor, her lip bleeding, he said, “You ever say anything like that again, I’ll kill you.”

Two weeks later, Kathy Brogan ran away to Florida with a 23-year-old check out clerk from the supermarket.

She was never seen or heard from again.

CHAPTER 1.2

“Have you ever done any modeling?” the man asked.

Elaine was 16 years old and had a summer job at a Pittsburgh shopping mall to help save money for college. She was on break, looking at a window display, when he approached her from behind.

When she turned around, he said, “My name is Randy,” and shook her hand. He had an easy, disarming manner. A professional-looking camera was hanging around his neck. “I work for the Rising Star Modeling Agency.” He gave Elaine a business card. “We’re doing scouting for new models right now. You’ve got a fresh look. You should drop by our office.”

When she got off work, Elaine took the bus straight downtown to the Rising Star Modeling Agency. There were dozens of beautiful young girls walking in and out of the sleek offices, which were on the third floor of a fancy office building. The walls were covered with posters of glamorous looking models in designer clothing. She didn’t recognize any of them, but she was sure they were top fashion models.

A chain-smoking, middle-aged woman named Ms. Crawford interviewed her. She studied Elaine’s face, asked Elaine to turn around.

Elaine was tall, almost 5’ 10”, and had her mother’s figure—modest breasts, a flat stomach, and long, slim legs.

“I think you have a lot of potential. Do you have a comp card?”

“A what?” Elaine said.

The woman sighed as if she were dealing with a total amateur. “A comp card is a piece of paper that has your photos with different poses and tells potential clients all about you—your height, weight, dress size, shoe size. Like this.” She showed Elaine one. “No agency will hire you as a model until you have a comp card.”

Elaine blushed, embarrassed by her own naïvety. “How do I get a comp card?”

“You start by getting some top quality photos. You can use whatever photographer you want, but I can only recommend Randy. A comp card costs two hundred dollars.”

“Two hundred dollars!” Elaine gasped. It was a small fortune to her.

Ms. Crawford sighed. “Look, honey, do you want to be a model or not?”

* * *

Elaine emptied her bank account and paid the \$200. Posing in different outfits under the bright lights and with all colorful props was thrilling. Elaine felt a heady rush when she picked up the comp cards. She looked spectacular in all the different photos. Now she was a real model!

She gave the cards to Ms. Crawford and went home, waiting for the phone to ring.

* * *

Ms. Crawford did not call. Two days passed, then a week, then ten days.

Elaine finally decided to go talk to Ms. Crawford and see what was wrong.

When she reached the agency, Ms. Crawford was standing next to the open window, smoking, talking on the phone. She seemed to talk forever. Finally, she hung up and looked at Elaine. “Yes, dear?”

“I...I was wondering if there were any modeling jobs for me yet.”

“And you are...?”

“Elaine Brogan. I left my comp cards with you almost two weeks ago.”

“Oh. Yeah. I thought you looked familiar. You’re B list, right?”

“B List...?” Elaine didn’t know what she was talking about.

She went over to a file cabinet. “Let’s see... Bailey, Bennington, Bernstein...Brogan.” She pulled out Elaine’s file, glanced at the stack of comp cards, then put it back and shut the drawer. “Everything is in order. Is there anything else?”

“What does ‘B List’ mean?”

“Means you’re untrained. You’re not client-ready. Modeling is a highly competitive field, honey.” She blew out smoke, looking at Elaine. “It’s tough to get work unless you’re client-ready.”

“How do I become client-ready?”

“Training of course.” She handed Elaine a color brochure that showed all the different classes the agency offered. When she saw the price for the whole program, her eyes bugged out. “Two thousand dol—”

“Do you think you could be a successful doctor without any training?”

“Well I—”

“A successful lawyer?”

Elaine didn’t speak.

“A successful engineer? Honey, modeling is no different than any other profession.”

Elaine felt stupid again.

She left with the brochure.

* * *

“Two *thousand* dollars?” Elaine’s father said, staring at the paper.

“Modeling is no different than any other profession, Dad. If you want to be a successful doctor, you have to have training. If you want to be a successful lawyer, you—”

“I know all that. But two thousand dollars...”

“You don’t think I’m pretty enough to be a model?”

“Of course you’re pretty enough.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s just that...I was hopin’ you’d choose a profession where you’d use your brains.”

“It’s only a hobby, Dad. I don’t expect to do it as a *career* or anything.” The truth was, Elaine had fantasies about being a supermodel and having her picture splashed all over the cover of *Vogue* and flying all over the world and being filthy rich. She wasn’t keen on the idea of going to college.

Patrick scratched his head, looking at the brochure. “I don’t know...seems like this could be a scam to lure a lot of gullible young girls—”

“It’s not a scam! Why do you always have to be so suspicious?”

“Lainie...” Patrick sighed. He gazed into his daughter’s big blue eyes. He couldn’t say no to her. “Is this really that important to you?”

“Yes,” she said emphatically.

When he finally agreed, Elaine threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek. “I’ve got the best father in the whole wide world!”

* * *

For Elaine, the rest of the summer was an exhilarating blur of activity. She took classes on how to walk the ramp and catwalk, on hair and skin care, on fitness and diet, and on positive mental attitude. She attended seminars covering what to do

in the “green room” and backstage, how to create good portfolio poses, and the use of body language. Outside of the agency, she also signed up for aerobics classes to burn off extra fat.

Her father brought home a ten-foot length of wood and sanded it down so she could practice “walking the beam,” for catwalk training. He installed a huge mirror on her bedroom wall to help her refine movements and improve her posture.

Elaine slowly transformed from the proverbial ugly duckling into a swan. She didn’t consider herself naturally beautiful, but she learned to make the best use of everything she had. She learned to buy clothes that accentuated her long legs and downplayed her small bust, and to do it on a budget that created a classy impression. She learned to smile more often, and to hold her head high when she was afraid. In general, she became much more aware of her posture and facial expressions and learned to move with much more grace and finesse.

Elaine worked hard, day and night, anxious to complete all the courses as quickly as possible, so she could get her career off to a roaring start.

In mid-August, she finished the last class offered by the agency, *Acting in TV Commercials*. She excitedly took the certificate down the hall to Ms. Crawford.

“All done,” Elaine said.

“All done with what?”

“With the acting class,” Elaine said, proudly holding up the signed certificate. “I’ve completed the entire program now.”

“Congratulations,” Ms. Crawford muttered. With her cigarette dangling from her mouth, she took the paper and turned to the file cabinets. “What’s your name again, honey?”

Elaine gritted her teeth. “*Brogan*. Elaine Brogan.”

She pulled Elaine’s file out, dropped the certificate in with all the others, and shut the drawer.

“We’ll call you.”

* * *

Two long weeks passed. School started. Elaine heard nothing from the agency. She had expected the phone to start ringing off the wall for auditions. But every night when she got home, there were no messages on the answering machine.

She finally took the bus downtown to the agency and went straight to Ms. Crawford’s office. The woman was on the phone, as usual. Elaine impatiently tapped her fingers on the counter until she hung up.

“Can I help you?” Ms. Crawford said, lighting up a cigarette from the fire of the previous one.

“Yes.” Elaine mustered up her courage. “I want to know why you’re not calling me for any jobs. I’ve completed the entire training program, and—”

“What’s your name, dear?”

Elaine couldn’t believe it. “Brogan!” she snapped. “*Elaine Brogan!*”

“Don’t get snippy with me, honey. We have hundreds of girls at this agency.”

“I’m sorry...I’m just a little upset. You told me that when I finished the training classes, I would be able to get modeling jobs.”

“I told you no such thing.”

Elaine blinked once. “You said that to be client-ready, I had to have training.”

“That’s right.”

“Well? I’ve taken every training class you offer.”

“Yes, that’s right. You’ve done all the group training. To be client-ready, you also need individual training, one-on-one, with Mr. Eskew.”

Elaine fought the anger that was growing inside her. “And how much does that cost? Another two thousand dollars?”

“My, you’re the jaded one, aren’t you, missy? It so happens that personal training with Mr. Eskew is free.”

Elaine was taken aback. “Free?”

“You have to be personally selected by Mr. Eskew.”

“Oh. And how does that work?”

“By asking for an interview. Would you like me to schedule one for you?”

“Yes, of course.” She added, “Please.”

Ms. Crawford went to a desk calendar and opened it. “Let’s see...Mr. Eskew has an open slot three weeks from—”

“I want an interview *now*. I don’t want to wait three weeks.”

Ms. Crawford stared. Elaine’s heart was beating hard with anxiety, but she intended to hold her ground. She wasn’t going to let herself be pushed around anymore.

The woman ran her pencil down the calendar. “There has been a cancelation for six-thirty tomorrow night—would that suit you?”

“That’s perfect,” Elaine said.

Elaine turned to leave, then looked back. “Thank you.”

Ms. Crawford blew smoke out of the side of her mouth. “The pleasure was all mine.”

* * *

Ronald Eskew, the owner of the agency, was a handsome man. In his 40s, he had a swarthy complexion, long sideburns, and a droopy mustache. He was always immaculately dressed. The only time Elaine ever glimpsed him was on the elevator or passing through the hall to his office. He was always with a beautiful young girl or two, who were decked out in expensive designer outfits.

For her interview, Elaine wore what she thought was her best outfit, a pair of skintight white jeans that showed off her long legs, and a top that revealed her flat stomach. She spent her last three weeks’ pay to have her hair styled and splurged on a professional makeup job, even though she could have done it herself now.

She took the bus to the agency. For some reason, she did not want her father to know what she was doing, so she told him she had to work at the mall. The weather could not have been worse. It was pouring down with rain, the wind blustery. Even with her umbrella she was wet from the knees down when she arrived at Rising Star.

Ms. Crawford let her right in—she didn’t have to wait.

“Well, Ms. Brogan, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Mr. Eskew said. “Please have a seat.”

She sat down on his leather couch. His office smelled of cigar smoke and musky aftershave lotion. He closed the door, then pulled up a chair and turned it backwards, sitting directly across from her. He was so close their knees were almost touching. He wore a lot of gold jewelry. She noticed that he had a Rolex watch.

Taking her comp card from her sweaty hand, he glanced at the front, then the back, then looked her up and down, pausing to admire her figure. His gaze rested on her bare stomach. “You have a fresh look. There’s a certain innocence about you that’s appealing.”

“Thank you.”

He set the comp card down on the coffee table, then looked into her eyes. “I know I don’t have to tell you how competitive the modeling profession is, Ellen.”

“It’s Elaine.”

“Right. Elaine. To make it in this business, you have to bring out your true self, your uniqueness.” He motioned to her. “You know what I mean?”

Elaine nodded.

“The camera picks up what you’re thinking, what you’re feeling, your...*attitude*. That’s really what it’s all about. *Attitude*.” He moved his hands a lot when he talked.

He glanced back down at her stomach. It seemed like every time he looked there his droopy mustache gave a little twitch.

“With my personal coaching,” he went on, “I bring out the model’s uniqueness.” He peered down at her knee, then reached out and put his hand there. Gazing into her eyes again, he said, “Would you like to receive personal coaching, Elaine?”

“Well...” She wanted to brush his hand away. “I’m not sure I—”

“Would you like to go on photo shoots in the Caribbean? In Paris? In LA?”

“I—”

“To own expensive clothes? To have so much money you can buy whatever you want without giving it a second thought?”

His hand slid up her thigh. Elaine looked down at it, unable to move. She abruptly rose.

“I don’t like you touching me,” she blurted. “I’m only sixteen.”

He looked up at her, frowning with disapproval. “You’re acting like you’re twelve. Professional models have to be mature.”

For a second, Elaine felt an impulse to repress what she was feeling and try to act more “mature,” but then she realized it was just more manipulation. Everything was crystal clear to her now.

“This agency is just a scam,” she said. “I know what you’re doing.”

“And what is that?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ve seen those other girls—”

“What other girls?”

“The others...” Elaine realized that she had no concrete evidence of anything this slimy man did. “I want my money back. I spent two thousand dollars here, and I want it back!”

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question.”

“Really? Then I think I’ll go to the police and tell them what you just did to me.”

“And what was that?” he said, raising his eyebrow again.

“You...” She realized she had very little to say. *He touched my knee.*

“Yes?” he said.

“I’ll—I’ll tell my *father* what you did. He’s six-three and weighs two hundred and fifty pounds. He’s a construction worker.”

Mr. Eskew’s dark complexion lost a little of its color. He watched her for a few seconds.

“There’s no reason to make threats,” he said, cordially. “At Rising Star, we guarantee satisfaction.” He stepped behind his desk and crouched to one of the cabinets. She heard clicking. It sounded like he was opening a safe.

“Two thousand dollars, you said?”

“That’s right.” Elaine was sure this was some kind of trick. She couldn’t believe he would actually refund her money.

He shut the safe and placed two bundles of \$100 bills on the desk, then pushed them towards her.

She stared at them.

“Go ahead. Take it.”

She picked them up before he could change his mind, putting both bundles in her purse.

“I hope you see now that we are a reputable agency, and that you will tell others so. Just because your personal expectations weren’t met, it doesn’t mean the same will hold true for other girls.”

* * *

When Elaine reached the lobby, she saw that it was still pouring with rain outside, and then realized that she had left her umbrella in Mr. Eskew’s office. She wasn’t about to go back and get it.

She flew out the door and dashed down to the bus stop. By the time she reached the shelter, she was soaked to the skin. But she was grinning ear to ear.

She had gotten all the money back! Every last dollar!

Her father would be proud of her. He had been right all along. He would have the satisfaction of saying “I told you so,” but at least she got the money back.

As she waited for the bus, she began to worry. Something was bothering her. It felt too easy. She glanced up and down the rainy street. What if Mr. Eskew called some thug to intercept her and steal the money back?

Making sure no one was watching, she took the bundles from her purse and slid them into the front pockets of her jeans.

The bus soon arrived. Elaine took a seat in the back and worried all the way home, glancing out the rear window every so often, afraid someone might be following along in a car.

When she reached her stop, she asked the driver to wait for a second while she stepped out and checked the road behind the bus, but no car was following.

She quickly made her way home. She didn’t live in the kind of neighborhood where it was safe to carry more than \$10 around in your purse. But then, nobody expected her to have any money, and everyone on her block was terrified of Patrick Brogan.

Elaine found her father in his usual position, sitting in front of the TV set, a beer in his hand.

“How was your day, sweetheart?” He looked more closely at her. “You’re soaked, Lainie! You better change clothes.”

Elaine pulled the two damp bundles from her pockets and deposited them on the coffee table in front of him.

“What’s this?” he said, sitting up.

“All the money we spent at Rising Star, Dad. Every penny.” She leaned over and put her arms around his neck and kissed him. “You were right.”

“About what?”

“It’s a scam. All they do is...well, I’d rather not say. The point is, I got the money back.”

Her father looked at the two stacks of bills in amazement.

“I want you to put it in the bank, for college,” she said.

Patrick gazed at his daughter with admiration in his eyes. “You’ve grown up, honey, you know that?”

* * *

In her bedroom, when Elaine took off her wet jeans, she shuddered, remembering Mr. Eskew putting his hand on her leg. Then she noticed that there were two grayish stains on the white material over the pockets, where the two bundles of bills had been.

Even the man's money is dirty, she thought, as she put the jeans in the laundry hamper.

She hoped the stains would come out.

* * *

The following evening, when Elaine and her father were eating dinner, there was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it," she said, rising from the table. She went to the front door and cracked it open, leaving the chain in place. The first thing she saw was the flashing of blue light on the houses across the street.

"Is this the Brogan residence?" a man in a gray suit asked.

"Yes."

He flashed some kind of badge with a star on it. "U.S. Secret Service. Open the door, ma'am."

Stunned, Elaine unchained the door and pulled it back. There were not one, but two men in gray suits.

"Does Patrick Brogan live here?" one said.

"Well...yes." She swallowed, having a very bad feeling. "Dad," she called, but he was already stepping up behind her.

"What's going on?" he said nervously.

"Patrick Brogan?"

"Yes..."

"Did you deposit some cash this morning at the First National Bank branch over on Penn?"

"Well...yeah, I did, but—"

Handcuffs snapped around his wrists. "You're under arrest for passing counterfeit currency."

The other man said, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney..."

CHAPTER 1.3

Under federal law, Patrick Brogan had committed a Class C felony, punishable by up to 12 years in prison and a fine of as much as \$250,000.

Bail was set at \$500,000. He was interrogated repeatedly by local police, the Secret Service, and the FBI, but he refused to disclose where the \$2,000 in counterfeit money had come from.

A few days later, he was charged with a second crime—theft. His fingerprints had been run through the criminal database and matched a latent print taken at a crime scene two years ago, a construction site where he had worked.

Elaine's father was looking at a combined sentence of 25 years.

* * *

Elaine was sick with grief. She did not know what to do. Tormented by guilt, she went to the police station and tried to tell them that she had gotten the counterfeit money from the modeling agency, but they brushed her off as a distraught family member trying to protect her father.

He refused any visitors. He wouldn't speak to an attorney, not even a court-assigned one.

Six days after he was arrested, Elaine was finally allowed to see her father.

She sat down at the visiting window and waited, struggling with her emotions. A guard brought Patrick Brogan in and pointed. "Number Seven."

Her father walked slowly down the opposite side of the visiting booths, wearing orange prison coveralls.

"Daddy," she gushed, pressing her hands against the glass.

His lips trembling, he said, "I can't stand for you to see me like this," in a strained voice. He wouldn't even look up at her.

"Please don't be ashamed," she said, tears running down her cheeks. "Look at me, Daddy."

He finally raised his eyes. They were shadowed with dark rings, and his skin looked sallow. He had only been in jail a week, and he seemed like he had lost at least twenty pounds.

"Tell them where you got the money," she begged.

"I'm not dragging you into this, baby."

"Please, Daddy! They're going to put you in jail for twenty—"

"It won't make no difference." Patrick reached up and pressed his hands to hers against the glass. "What I done was for you, honey. For your future. I don't ever want you to feel bad about it. Ever."

The truth was, knowing that her father had been robbing construction sites to put her through Bromley all these years made her feel ill. Somehow she had known the money was coming from shady activity all along, but she had made herself believe his stories about his video arcade businesses he and his friends owned.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "You have to keep your mouth shut about that counterfeit money, sweetheart. Don't never tell a soul. Promise me."

"But—"

"Promise me, Elaine."

"I— I promise."

"Time's up," the guard said gruffly, stepping behind him.

Elaine pressed her hands harder against the glass, desperately wishing she could touch him. She had a terrible feeling that this would be the last time she would see her father.

“I love you, Daddy!”

The guard guided him out of sight.

* * *

Elaine had no idea what would happen to her now. She knew her days at Bromley were numbered. She drove her father’s old pickup truck to school by herself every day in a state of utter despair. She avoided Ms. Prentice, as if delaying any contact with the woman would help.

It’s all my fault, Elaine thought. *If I hadn’t gotten mixed up with that stupid modeling agency, none of this would have happened.* She wanted to destroy Ronald Eskew, but she could not think of a way to do it without defying her father’s wishes.

Three days after she had visited him in jail, a student aid came to her world history class and asked her to come to the office.

Elaine knew what was about to happen. As she walked down the hallway, she wondered how Ms. Prentice would feel knowing that her tuition all these years had come from the sale of stolen property. She shuddered at the thought.

When she entered the office, Ms. Prentice was sitting at her desk. Her eyes were red and puffy. A wadded-up handkerchief was in her hand.

“What’s wrong?” Elaine said, a feeling of dread descending over her.

Ms. Prentice moved from behind her desk, gazing sympathetically at Elaine, sniffing.

“What is it?” Elaine said.

“Your father...” Ms. Prentice held both Elaine’s hands tightly. “He killed himself this morning.”

* * *

Elaine drove the truck home in a robot-like stupor.

The words *He killed himself this morning* kept reverberating in her ears. But they didn’t have any meaning. They were just random noises.

She glanced around the inside of the truck, at the fuzzy dice that hung from the rearview, at his leather work gloves, at the faded picture of herself at age eight in a cowboy suit, clipped to the sun visor.

I knew I would never see him again, she thought, remembering the feeling she’d had at the jail. She laughed hysterically, her lower lip trembling. Then she began gasping for breath and almost ran off the road.

When she pulled into the driveway at the house, she was only partially aware of what she was doing. She felt like she was in a dream, a nightmare, and that she was viewing herself from above.

She watched herself unlock the front door. She watched herself walk through the small living room and go down the steps into the basement. She watched herself open the bottom drawer of her father’s beat-up metal desk and pull out the .38 revolver.

Under her father’s orders, she had never touched the gun before, but it didn’t look very complicated to operate. She found the button that released the cylinders. Her fingers spun them around slowly—there were bullets in all six of the chambers.

She put the gun in her purse, ascended the stairs, and went back out to the truck. It was all Ronald Eskew’s fault.

The sleazy bastard was going to pay.

As Elaine drove downtown, she visualized the scene. *You killed my father*, she would say, ramming the gun into his chest. No, under his neck. Into his Adam's apple. She would make him beg for his own life, get down on his knees and blubber like a baby. She would make him regret the day he was born. She would make him tell her where the counterfeit money had come from. When she was satisfied that she had completely broken him, she would call the police and hold him there until they arrived.

* * *

It was just getting dark when she pulled up to the main entrance of the office building where the Rising Star Modeling Agency was located.

She parked and got out, not bothering to lock the door.

When she stepped into the lobby, the security guard stood up and said, "You're not allowed to park there, miss..."

She was already heading towards the elevator.

"Hey, wait! You can't just—"

She stepped onto the elevator and pressed 3.

"Hold it!" the guard said, but before he could get there, the doors closed.

When the lift reached the third floor, she stepped off the elevator, her heartbeat thumping in her ears, yet sounding far, far away. She reached the agency's front door and twisted the handle.

It was locked. Then she noticed that the office lights weren't on.

Elaine frowned—it wasn't even six o'clock yet. Where the hell were they all?

The stairway doors burst open and the security guard trotted towards her. "What do you think you're d—?"

He stopped, glanced at the door, then back at Elaine. "They're gone."

"What do you mean?" Elaine said.

"Gone. Packed up their tent and moved away."

Elaine peered through the window into the darkened offices. All the desks were still there, the file cabinets, chairs...but there was trash scattered around on the floor.

"They didn't leave a forwarding address, nothing," the guard said. "Skipped out on the last six months of their lease." He looked at her sympathetically. "Did they owe you money, too?"

Elaine was dumbfounded. They had left, they had all left! Ronald Eskew must have known that her father had been arrested.

She turned and walked back down the corridor in a daze.

CHAPTER 1.4

Elaine was able to stay on at the Bromley Academy.

Ms. Prentice arranged for a full scholarship, which included room and board on campus. All the students grieved over the death of her father, and showed nothing but kindness towards Elaine.

She buried herself in her studies, hiding herself from her pain. She could not escape the deep-seated hatred that welled inside her for Ronald Eskew, or whatever the man's real name was. It grew inside her like a cancer.

One day, in the 11th grade, she and her best friend, Kaitlin, were in the guidance counselor's office, filling out their careers forms. Elaine noticed a magazine with an article titled *Careers in the Secret Service*. She read the part about the Anti-Counterfeiting Division.

She decided then and there that she was going to become a Secret Service agent, and that she was going to track down Ronald Eskew and punish him for what he had done.

The article said that to qualify for the Secret Service, you needed a college degree and that competition was fierce. It also said that if you were fluent in a foreign language and/or had some special education relevant to currency production, such as in intaglio printing, your chances of becoming an agent were much higher.

Intaglio printing, Elaine thought. She had no idea what that was, but she had always liked art and graphic design.

She didn't mention her plans to Kaitlin, or to anyone else. It was her secret.

In her senior year, Elaine applied to all the top colleges in the Northeastern U.S. that had strong graphic design departments and mentioned intaglio printing in their course catalogs. Ms. Prentice and her teachers wrote her glowing letters of recommendation.

Elaine was thrilled to be accepted at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design and Architecture, with a full scholarship.

Kaitlin was accepted at Northwestern University in Chicago, also with a full scholarship. She planned to study economics.

When they both graduated from Bromley, they had a teary goodbye, and they promised to stay in touch.

CHAPTER 1.5

When Elaine arrived on the RISD campus, she felt strange. It was like suddenly being set free. Life back at Bromley had been fairly strict, even senior year, with her comings and goings from her living quarters tightly controlled. And fairly isolated, the school located out in the countryside 30 minutes from Pittsburgh.

Now, she found herself in a coed dormitory with very little in the way of supervision, and living in the middle of an urban area, in Providence, Rhode Island.

The strangest thing was attending classes with boys. Elaine hadn't been to school with boys since the second grade, and she felt shy and awkward around them. She became tongue-tied whenever they talked to her.

She tried to ignore the problem by throwing herself into her studies, which wasn't difficult—college was so exciting and different compared to high school, especially at a design school. She loved her studio courses—Drawing, 2-D and 3D—and did very well in them.

But her insecurity with the opposite sex persisted, and she finally decided that she needed to do something about it. She thought that being a virgin was the main problem. If she had sex with a boy, then she would feel more comfortable around them.

Her assigned roommate, Ashley Page, was one of her more experienced classmates. She was the complete opposite of Elaine—a short, curvaceous, curly-haired artist from Brooklyn.

“We’ve got to get you laid, girl,” Ashley said frankly, when Elaine felt comfortable enough to talk openly with her. “What kind of guys do you like?”

“I don’t know,” Elaine said. “Strong, but kind.” Like her father.

“Strong, but kind,” Ashley said. “Hm. That eliminates about ninety-eight percent of the male population. What about looks? Tall, beefy, slim? Blonde, dark? Blue eyes—”

“I don’t know, Ashley. Does it matter? I just need somebody to get the job done.”

Ashley laughed. “Boy, you are jaded.”

Elaine had long given up on the idea that the process of losing her virginity would be a romantic event. It was simply a barrier she wanted to break—both literally and figuratively. She thought it would not only make her feel more comfortable with boys, but would make her feel like she was a complete, fully functioning female.

Ashley told Elaine that her best bet was to go to the athletic center at Brown University, which was available to RISD students. “Who knows, you might get lucky and end up marrying a rich Ivy League type.”

“Yeah, sure. They’ll be very impressed when they find out I’m from a ghetto in Pittsburgh.”

“Better than Brooklyn,” Ashley said.

“You haven’t been there.”

* * *

Elaine took Ashley’s advice and signed up for a Tae Kwon Do class at the Brown athletic center. There, she met several young men, though only one of them was a Brown student. The others were from RISD.

Elaine's first three sexual encounters were like the fairy tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The first one was too hot, the second one was too cold, and the third was just right...or at least, she thought so at first.

Too Hot was the one from Brown, a sophomore philosophy major. He had a shuddering orgasm the instant the tip of his rubber-clad manhood touched her vagina.

"Isn't— isn't it supposed to last longer than that?" Elaine said.

His face flushed, he quickly pulled his pants back on. "Who do you think I am, Superman?" He told her to get out of his room.

Too Cold simply couldn't get his machinery working. He was a rather shy graphics design major she met while she was working out on a stationary bicycle. Elaine had to make the first move, asking him how to work the machine. They went back to his dorm room and started making out on his bed. He quickly got an erection, but by the time he had fumbled with a condom and clumsily tried to put himself inside her, he was soft as dough. They tried again, three times. He finally became so humiliated he made up an excuse about being stressed about an upcoming test and asked her to leave.

Just Right gave Elaine her first satisfying sexual experience, but he was an oddball from the start. A good five inches shorter than Elaine, he was on the RISD hockey team, The Nads. He had a thick, muscular physique and a hairy chest, which Elaine found exciting. They met in the Tae Kwon Do class and made plans to meet at a bar.

She found him sitting in a booth, waiting for her, watching a basketball game on the big screen TV. As soon as she sat down, she noticed a prominent tenting in his jeans that, to her amazement, persisted the entire time they talked. He spoke of nothing but hockey and how he hoped to become a professional, that RISD was just a "backup plan" in case he couldn't make it.

"Let's get out of here," he finally said, and took hold of her hand as they left the bar. She expected him to take her to his dorm room, but instead, he led her across the street and directly into another bar. They had another drink, and talked, continued to watch the game on TV, talked, and then he took her to another bar. And another. And another.

She kept stealing glances at his crotch, and felt like saying, *Don't you get it? You don't have to impress me and chat me up all night. I'm a sure thing.* But she didn't want to scare him off.

She finally figured out what was going on about the time they went to the third bar. He always hung back when they entered, letting her walk ahead of him, by herself, to sit at the bar alone a few minutes. He always had an excuse—he had to use the restroom, needed to buy a pack of cigarettes from the machine—whatever. Then he would join her, stepping up to her and saying "Hey, beautiful," as if she was a total stranger to him. He wanted everyone in the bar to see him approach the pretty blonde who had just come in, who all the other guys were eying, and then—effortlessly—pick her up. It was a competitive, alpha male type thing.

Weird but understandable, Elaine supposed. He was too sexy to abandon on that basis...and that lump was too promising, especially after the Brown philosophy major.

Finally she could stand it no longer. "Want to go back to my room?" she whispered, holding onto his thick arm.

"We'll go to mine."

When they arrived, he locked the door and immediately turned on the TV. Another stupid basketball game was on. "You want a beer?" he said.

“No,” she said dreamily. She turned down the volume on the TV set. “I just want to be with you.” The truth was, she just wanted to get this over with.

They sat down on the bed and he kissed her, giving lots of tongue. When he pulled down his pants, his erection popped out and eagerly bounced up and down. It was short and thick, just like he was. But she wasn’t complaining—at least it was hard. Hopefully it wouldn’t explode at the slightest contact with any part of the female anatomy.

He expertly laid her down on the bed and plunged himself inside her, breaking her hymen with the first powerful thrust—at last. Within a moment or two, he brought her to her first externally-generated orgasm. He made love with a machine-like rhythm, his manhood maintaining a constant turgidity. He just kept going and going and going. She kept her eyes closed the entire time, and after a while she thought he seemed distracted, as if his mind were elsewhere.

He suddenly began thrusting harder. “Go, Rodriguez, go!” he yelled.

For a second, she thought Rodriguez was his pet name for his own penis. Then she opened her eyes and saw only the bottom of his chin.

He was still watching the basketball game on TV.

“Shoot!” he bellowed. “What are you waiting for, dumbass?”

“I...can we...” Elaine tried to wriggle out from under him.

“What’s the matter?” he said, looking down at her.

“I’ve had enough.” She rolled off the bed.

He looked at her a moment, then gave a shrug and bobbed his way into the bathroom. Elaine took advantage of the opportunity to quickly get dressed. When she reached under his bed for her shoe, she glimpsed a little blue pill on the floor.

She moved closer, squinting at the label.

VIAGRA.

That explains a lot, Elaine thought. He must be pickled in the stuff.

He came out of the bathroom, still naked and still erect, the bloody condom dangling from his finger.

She looked away.

“You’ve never done it before?”

“No,” Elaine said, putting on her other shoe. *And I’m certainly not going to do it again with you.*

* * *

When Elaine told Ashley what had happened, she started laughing. Then Elaine started laughing, too. They both laughed so hard they cried. “Go, Rodriguez, go!” Ashley kept repeating, in between fits of hysteria, pounding the mattress of her bed.

When they finally composed themselves, Ashley looked somberly at Elaine. “So, how was it, overall?”

Elaine shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

“Well, that’s good. Did you come?”

Elaine blushed. “A couple of times.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah. Overall, I think sex is overrated.”

* * *

Once Elaine lost her virginity and no longer felt like a leper, she concentrated on her studies again. It actually did make her more comfortable around boys. But

she didn't pay them much attention. Romance could come later—she was on a “mission.” She did not tell Ashley or anyone else the real reason she was at RISD, that it was part of a grand strategy to get a job at the Secret Service. Like most of the other RISD students, Ashley was a gifted artist. She and everyone else were so passionate about what they were doing that Elaine felt terribly cold and calculating at times, like someone who was using RISD merely as a means to an end.

Still, she was determined to avenge her father's death. Nothing could stop her from that. Deep down, she simply didn't feel like she could move forward in life until justice was done. She was going to track down Ronald Eskew, legally, and punish him.

To increase her chances of getting a job at the Secret Service, she took a second major in Russian. She had learned that much of the international currency counterfeiting activity occurred in Eastern Europe and the countries that made up the former Soviet Union. Even though Russian was difficult, it was the common language among those countries, and she figured that it was the best choice. She took the Russian classes at Brown. She enjoyed hanging out with the students there, as they were quite different from the arty, RISD types.

* * *

The four years at RISD went by amazingly fast for Elaine. She and Kaitlin kept in touch with each other, as they had promised they would. The first couple of years, they communicated using Facebook on almost a daily basis. But then, they slowly drifted apart, especially after junior year, when Kaitlin met this incredibly hunky law student at Northwestern named Matthew and moved in with him.

Elaine roomed the entire four years with Ashley, but like Kaitlin, Ashley eventually found a serious boyfriend, another design student at RISD, a year ahead of them. After that, Ashley spent most nights with him.

Cupid never shot his arrows Elaine's way. Every now and then she would see some young man that gave her goose bumps at a distance, but when she engaged in physical contact, it was always a disappointment. Like “Mr. Rodriguez,” as she and Ashley referred to the young man who deflowered her, Elaine inevitably found the good-looking ones too vain and self-centered. And like the Brown philosophy major, the intellectually stimulating ones all seemed unsure of themselves in bed.

In May of her senior year, Elaine got a call from Kaitlin, telling her that she and Matthew were getting married. Elaine flew to Chicago for the wedding, which was held in a beautiful park on the edge of Lake Michigan.

When Elaine came back to Rhode Island, she cried her eyes out.

She told herself that love could not be forced, that she had no choice but to wait patiently—or impatiently—for it to come her way.

CHAPTER 1.6

One afternoon Elaine came back from her intaglio printing class and Ashley was in the room, a rare occurrence these days. She was sitting at her drawing table and turned around to look at Elaine.

“What the hell have you done?” she asked, staring.

Elaine frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“A few minutes ago, some ‘government agency’ called and started asking questions about you.”

“What did they say, exactly?” Elaine’s heart was already pounding.

“All kinds of personal stuff—if you were honest, if you ever stole things, if you did drugs...”

Elaine was grinning ear to ear.

Ashley stared. “This makes you happy? Am I missing something?”

“I applied for a job with the Secret Service.”

“You applied for...*what?*”

“A job at the Secret Service. It’s not so strange, Ashley,” Elaine added, a little defensively. She had known Ashley wouldn’t understand. Like most everyone else at RISD, Ashley was applying for jobs at the fashion houses and design firms in New York, Boston, LA and Chicago. Elaine had applied for most of the same jobs—she and Ashley had filled out a lot of the applications together.

“The Secret Service hires a lot of people who have experience in graphic design and printing,” Elaine explained.

“I’m sure you’re right, but...jeez, Elaine. The Secret *Service?*”

“It was just a whim, Ashley. I thought I would just send in an application and see what happened. Why not?”

She did not tell Ashley that the application was 34 pages long and that she had slaved over it for an entire month. Elaine had filled out most of it online, and had made sure no printed portions were around for curious eyes to see. The hardest part was the Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSA) essays. They were supposed to show the applicant’s “ability to deal with people, take responsibility, and make independent decisions.”

Before Ashley left for her next class, she looked at Elaine a long moment. “You’re a strange bird, Ms. Brogan.” She gave Elaine a warm hug. “But I love ya. I hope you get the job, if that’s what you really want.”

“It’s what I want, Ashley. And thanks for the support.”

* * *

The Secret Service called two days later and scheduled an interview for the following Monday at 2 pm, at the field office in Providence.

Elaine was euphoric at first, but the feeling soon faded. She realized that on some level she’d hoped she wouldn’t get this far. The multi-stage process she was about to voluntarily engage in was intimidating, to say the least.

If she passed the interview, she would have to take the TEA, or Treasury Enforcement Agent Exam. From what Elaine could gather, the TEA was a bit like the SAT test, but for people who wanted to become Secret Service agents. It had three parts—Part A, verbal reasoning; Part B, arithmetic reasoning; and Part C, problems for investigation. There were commercial study guides available for it. She was studying for finals right now. She dreaded the thought.

Then, if she was clever enough to pass the TEA, she would be invited back to the local field office for another interview. This somber event went under the imposing name of “Factor V.” A panel of three senior Secret Service agents grilled you for 90 minutes to make for a fun-filled afternoon.

If you passed the Factor V, then came the lie detector test, an intensive physical exam, and an equally intensive psychological exam.

Only if you jumped all these hurdles would the Secret Service get serious about hiring you as a Special Agent. All the jobs in the Service required a Top Secret security clearance, so you had to undergo a thorough background check that left no stone unturned. Every address you had ever lived was verified and investigated. In-depth interviews were conducted with your friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, teachers, former employers, and anybody else you had ever known. This was to evaluate your honesty, judgment, reputation, financial responsibility, and of course your overall character. Then, and only then, would the Hiring Panel meet and make a final decision about you.

What bothered Elaine most was the psychological exam. By that point, they would know all about her father’s arrest for passing counterfeit currency. Elaine was wise enough to know that no law enforcement agency would ever hire anyone who had a vigilante mentality, someone who wanted to settle a personal grudge against a criminal. Elaine knew from the beginning that she had to hide her heartfelt desire to avenge her father’s death and create the impression that applying for the Secret Service was an idea that only recently occurred to her.

This was the main reason she had applied for all the “normal” jobs with Ashley. The truth was, she had no interest in any of them.

The only job she was interested in was being a Special Agent in the Secret Service.

* * *

Elaine did well in the interviews, passed the TEA by a wide margin, and passed the physical exam and the lie detector test. There was one tense moment when she was taking the lie detector test and the questioner said, “Did you have any knowledge of your father’s illegal activities?” Elaine had answered “No.” She half-expected the needles on the machine to swing wildly off the scale, but she didn’t notice any change. Her answer was truthful, but she thought she had known from a very early age, at least unconsciously, that her father was doing something illegal to pay for her education at Bromley. Apparently the machine did not notice.

* * *

By the time the psychological exam finally rolled around, Elaine had graduated from RISD and was living in a microscopic apartment in Providence. She increased her hours at the cafe to support herself. She’d had a couple of job offers, one in New York and one in Boston, but turned them both down, banking on being accepted into the Secret Service. She knew it was crazy to put all her eggs in one basket, but she just couldn’t get excited about working for a graphic design firm. The farther along she progressed in the Secret Service employment process, the more determined she became to get the job. It was a challenge.

* * *

When she sat down in the comfortable chair in the psychologist’s office, she was surprisingly calm.

His name was Dr. Steiner. He was in his 50s, with a snow-white goatee and penetrating blue eyes. He looked like the type of man who didn't miss a trick.

He started with the usual psychological tests with Elaine—Rorschach ink blot, free association, freehand drawing—and then started asking questions about Elaine's childhood.

"I see here that your father was arrested for passing counterfeit currency and construction site theft." He looked up at Elaine. "How do you feel about that?"

She tried to remain relaxed. "Of course I was very upset. I was only sixteen. I had no idea that my father was involved in any kind of—"

"I didn't ask you how you felt about it *then*, Ms. Brogan. I'm asking how you feel about it now."

"Oh." The man was apparently too smart to fall for that approach. "I'm not sure what you mean. Can you be more specific?"

Steiner motioned to her. "Do you feel angry about it? Sad? Ashamed? Vindictive? You and your father must have been very close." He looked at the file. "It says here your mother left when you were...ten?"

"That's right." Elaine could feel sweat trickling down her back. She had prepared a dozen different answers to this question, but she didn't know which one to use. "My father was not a sophisticated man, Dr. Steiner. He only had a ninth grade education. Now that I have some distance on my growing up, I feel genuinely sorry for him. I know he was doing the best he could."

Dr. Steiner nodded. "You're not angry with him, then?"

"Not anymore. At first I was mad at him for killing himself and leaving me all alone. But I've come to terms with it now. He just couldn't cope."

"The police report says he never revealed where he got the counterfeit money." Steiner looked up at her. "Do you have any idea where it came from?"

"No," Elaine lied. "I always assumed he got it from whoever was buying the stolen construction site materials." She shrugged. "Honestly, I never gave that part of it much thought—I'm sure he didn't know the money was counterfeit, no matter where it came from."

"I see." Steiner studied her for a long moment. "So, your desire to become a Special Agent has nothing whatsoever to do with your father's arrest..."

This was the \$64,000 question. "Well, I wouldn't go that far. Of course my father's arrest made me dislike counterfeiters a little more than other types of criminals. I'm basically a very moral person. I applied for this job because I think it will be satisfying to help protect the United States against criminal activities of all kinds."

What a bunch of hogwash, Elaine thought.

She waited anxiously as Dr. Steiner looked back at the file. He flipped through a couple of pages, scratched his beard, thinking, then closed it. "That will be all, Ms. Brogan. Thank you for your time."

Elaine rose from the chair uncertainly. The interview had seemed too short. She wondered if she had blown it with her morality pitch. "So...did I pass?"

"We'll let you know."

CHAPTER 1.7

When Elaine received the official letter informing her that she had been accepted into the Secret Service, she let out a whoop and did cartwheels through her little apartment.

She called Ashley and Kaitlin and told them the fantastic news.

Ashley still couldn't understand why Elaine wanted the job, and she could tell Kaitlin thought it was a little weird, but they both congratulated her.

A month later, Elaine began to wonder if she had made a mistake. The qualifying process had been bad enough, but the Secret Service training course was like going from the frying pan into the fire. It was one of the most challenging and stressful experiences Elaine had ever been through.

The first part of the course was conducted at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia. For 10 weeks she and 47 other new hires received an intensive education in criminal law and investigative techniques. It was mostly "book learning," as her father would have called it, something at which Elaine excelled.

The going got tough during the second part of the course. The 17-week intensive for Special Agents was held at the Secret Service James J. Rowley Training Center, in Laurel, Maryland. There were no signs indicating the facility's existence, except for GOVERNMENT PROPERTY—KEEP OUT postings around the fenced in, 500-acre perimeter. The center boasted six miles of roadways, 31 buildings, including the simulated downtown area of a city, underground bunkers, obstacle courses, a firing range, a high-speed driving course, and a simulated airport and helipad, including perfect mock-ups of Air Force One and Marine One, the president's airplane and helicopter, respectively.

The training was intense. Even though Elaine's knowledge of intaglio printing had slated her to work in the Anti-Counterfeiting Division, she was required to pass the same stringent requirements as any other Secret Service agent, including those who protected the President of the United States.

"By mid-term, half of you will have dropped out," the leather-faced instructor barked the first day, "and the other half will sorely wish you had." He glared out at the trainees, his eyes mere slits. "Those of you who survive until the very end will know how to protect this country against terrorists, threats against critical infrastructures, including our financial system." He chuckled. "You'll also learn how to kill a potential assassin three different ways before his body hits the ground."

One of the things Elaine quickly learned to loathe were the simulated attacks on presidential motorcades, on a just-landed presidential airplane or chopper, or on buildings where the highest government officials were being protected. The attacks would begin with "flash-bang" bombs, simulating sudden, unexpected gunfire. Computer-controlled cardboard cutouts of people would jump up in windows and on the street, some wielding various deadly weapons, and others who were merely innocent civilians holding a wallet or a telephone, caught up in the havoc. Agents had to react with split-second precision, without thinking, knowing exactly what to do in each and every scenario.

If there was one motto that the Secret Service lived by, it was:

Expect the unexpected.

A key part of the training involved replacing instinctual human responses—such as flinching at the sound of a gunshot—with practiced responses that were designed to neutralize the attacker and protect the intended target from harm.

Of course, firearms and marksmanship training was fundamental. Elaine had never liked guns, and the first time she held a pistol in her hand, she flashed back to the day her father committed suicide and she carried his gun to the Rising Star Modeling Agency offices, intent on teaching Ronald Eskew a lesson.

Elaine struggled to achieve the high marksmanship standards that the Secret Service demanded. At night, she tossed and turned, the instructor's voices still in her ears. *Come to the ready position! Lock the slide to the rear. Decock—reholster with one hand. Check the chamber and magazine well. Check, check, check twice!*

It seemed that Elaine's ears rang all the time with the sounds of gunshots, even though she wore ear protection. The pungent odor of gunpowder permeated her hair and clothes.

She had to qualify on a .357 caliber pistol and a shotgun, and be functionally familiar with virtually all other weapons known to man. There was a gun vault on site where they were shown a wide range of weapons, including those made from the latest technological advances, such as cellphone guns. She had to learn how to shoot in the darkness, from a moving vehicle and how to accurately hit moving targets from a variety of positions. She had to learn to draw her gun in a split second, to click off the safety, and to fire with pinpoint accuracy.

* * *

The training device Elaine dreaded most was The Dunker. The horrid contraption sat in a huge swimming pool that was in simulated sea crashes of Air Force One and Marine One. Strapped into the seats near an instructor who posed as the President, the machine was slammed into ice cold water at a random angle. Underwater, often upside down, you had to orient yourself and then release your safety belt and rescue the "President," who was unconscious. You had to swim him safely to the surface and protect him from harm. Like many of the students, the first time Elaine was dunked, she inhaled half a lung full of water. She was sure she was going to drown.

The Dunker alone caused six students to drop out of the program.

By the end of the fourth week in Laurel, Elaine was telling herself that if she had any sense, she ought to drop out, too, that she should abandon this crazy idea of being a Secret Service agent. She could use her RISD degree to get a mundane job at a copy shop designing stationery and business cards. But then, in her mind's eye, she would see Ronald Eskew's sleazy face, and she would find new resolve.

* * *

Elaine's worst nightmare came in the form of her martial arts instructor. All the instructors used pseudonyms. This particular woman called herself Luna Faye.

Luna Tic, Elaine thought, would have been more appropriate.

Luna was a jet black, 5 foot 10 inch tower of power. She had a face like a viper, with triangular jaws and beady eyes. Her voice was an octave lower than Elaine's. She sported a man's figure, her trunk-like legs tapered up to a stocky torso. Her breasts like two flattened cupcakes riding on 50 pounds of chest muscle.

Elaine was about the only trainee who looked, dressed, and acted like a woman, or who at least tried to. This seemed to infuriate Luna.

The first day, in front of all the other trainees, Luna gently raised Elaine's arm by the wrist. "Your nails are *so* beautiful," she cooed in her husky voice. "Do you do them yourself, or do you have them done at a salon?"

There was a lot of laughter.

Despite Luna's ridicule, Elaine actually did well in the course, at least in terms of learning the basic martial arts moves. All her aerobics and swimming and running she did at RISD kept her in great shape, and she easily mastered difficult moves that made other students sore for days, such as some of the more challenging Tae Kwon Do kicks.

Elaine's problem was that after spending so many years in sports facilities, she had developed a habit of gazing at her own reflection in the wall mirrors to make sure she was moving correctly. And, if the truth be told, to see if she looked good.

Luna picked up on this the third day. "You just can't stop watchin' your pretty self in that mirror, can you, honey?"

All the other trainees laughed.

Every time Elaine glanced at herself in the mirror, even for a split second, Luna mercilessly took her down. "This ain't no fashion show, baby-doll. You take your eyes off your assailant, you dead, and so is the person you're supposed to be protecting."

The second week of training, as Elaine dragged herself off the mat for what must have been the tenth time, Luna said, "You look at yourself so much in that damn mirror, I'm gonna start callin' you Alice. Alice through the lookin' glass."

All the students got a kick out of this.

"Can't we do the training somewhere else?" Elaine suggested. "Maybe outside?"

"Outside?" Luna snickered. "Why, baby-doll, you'd just admire your pretty self in the window reflections."

There was more laughter.

* * *

Elaine wanted to strangle the woman, but she also knew that Luna was right. When acting as a Special Agent in a protection role, she had no business looking at anything but the face, hands, and feet of an assailant. She found that glancing at her reflection was an incredibly difficult habit to break.

Luna only exacerbated the problem, constantly baiting Elaine during the training sessions with comments like, "Your hair's out of place," or "Your thong's showing."

Every session with Luna became a living hell.

* * *

Elaine began to worry that her "Alice" habit was her Achilles' heel, the weak point that would knock her out of the training program and out of the Secret Service for good. The day before her final review in Luna's martial arts class, Elaine ran into the big woman on the way to the obstacle course.

"Why don't you just throw in the towel right now, Alice? You ain't gonna make it."

"I'm not quitting," Elaine said.

"You can't shoot worth a damn, you're lousy on the obstacle course. My grandmother can drive a car better than you, and she's been dead twenty years. There's no way in hell you'll pass my review tomorrow."

"I'm not quitting."

Luna shrugged. "Face it, honey, you're too much of a girly-girl for this kind of work. Why don't you just get a job at some department store cosmetics counter and save yourself the humiliation?"

Elaine brushed passed her.

Luna looked on, snickering. “If you go on like this, I’m warning you—you might chip your nail polish.”

* * *

Elaine did not sleep more than two hours that night, worrying about Luna’s martial arts review.

Luna made Elaine wait until the very end of the session and watch everyone else get their reviews. Six of the students failed and had to take the “walk of shame” back to the main building to turn in their equipment and officially drop out of the program.

“Now, who’s left?” Luna said, looking around.

Elaine slowly raised her hand.

Luna said, with a sigh, “Okay, Alice, come on,” as if Elaine’s failing the test was merely a formality.

Elaine put in her mouth guard and Luna started circling her.

“Your lipstick’s smeared,” Luna said, taking a light jab at her. “Don’t you want to check it in the mirror, Alice?”

Elaine kept her eyes locked on Luna’s viper-like face. *Don’t even blink*, she willed herself.

“Your mascara’s running,” Luna said.

Ignore the bitch. If you don’t pass this test, you’re out of the Secret Service.

“Come on, Alice,” Luna jeered. “Don’t you want to check your pretty doll-face in that lookin’ glass?”

At that instant, one of the students cackled.

Luna’s eyes cut in that direction.

Elaine’s right leg shot up. It was a perfectly executed snap kick. It connected solidly with Luna’s jaw. The big woman’s head jerked up, and then her heavy frame went down hard, hitting the mat with such force she let out a loud “ugh!”

Elaine leaped on top of her, twisted her arms behind as required for cuffing.

All the other students were stunned. No one had ever knocked Luna down before.

Luna quickly rolled over and got to her feet, wiping her mouth with her hand. She looked at her fingers. They were smeared with blood.

Elaine backed away, terrified.

The room was so quiet that all she could hear was the sound of her own shallow breathing.

Luna glared at Elaine for a long moment, and then her lips pulled into a crimson smile. “Well done, girl. Looks like there’s hope for you after all.”

* * *

From that day forward, it seemed like the rest of the training was downhill for Elaine. She was filled with elation, thankful that she hadn’t given in to the temptation to quit halfway through, like some of the others. She and Luna became close. Elaine was thankful that she had faced such a formidable instructor and had passed all the tests. Her father would have been proud.

When the 15th week of training finally began, Elaine was excited—this was when the anti-counterfeiting modules began.

The instructor for the first day was a man who simply used the pseudonym “Judd.” Rumor was that he was an official from the highest echelons of the Secret Service Anti-Counterfeiting Division, perhaps even the director of the entire unit.

When the balding man entered the room, everyone stopped talking. Even though he was thin and walked with a cane, there was an intensity about him that was intimidating. He had a shock of red hair and a ruddy complexion. He seemed ill-tempered before he even opened his mouth.

Silently, he appraised the 32 students in Elaine’s class. He did not look impressed.

“Who can tell me what intaglio printing is?” He said this so abruptly that some of the students jumped.

Elaine glanced around—the trainees who had made it this far in the program were all cream of the crop, and were quick to volunteer answers. No one said a word.

“Not a single one of you knows?” Judd said, jingling the change in his pocket.

Elaine didn’t want her class to look like a bunch of dummies. She raised her hand.

Judd looked over at her and nodded.

“Intaglio printing is a special process that uses an etched or engraved plate. The plate is smeared with ink and wiped clean, and the ink left in the recesses makes the actual image on the printed material.”

Judd raised an eyebrow. “That’s absolutely correct.”

He turned back to the center of the room. “And what’s unique about any document that is printed using the intaglio process?”

Again, the entire class was mute. At the risk of looking like a know-it-all, she raised her hand again.

Judd again nodded to her.

“The ink surfaces on intaglio-printed documents are slightly raised on the front and indented on the back. You can feel this with your fingers when you touch them.”

“Correct,” Judd said. He opened the thick notebook that contained the module materials. “Now, why is it that intaglio printing is particularly effective against counterfeiters?”

Elaine thought he glanced at her, but she wasn’t sure.

“Several reasons,” Elaine said. “First, an intaglio printing press costs ten times as much as an offset printing press. Second, intaglio plates themselves cost *hundreds* of times more. Third, intaglio printing yields very fine levels of detail that—”

“Are you finished?” he said, staring at her as if she had just shat upon the classroom floor.

Elaine’s face flushed. “I thought you—”

“Nobody likes a smart-ass. See me after class.”

He turned to the rest of the students and said, “Today we will discuss the intaglio printing process in great detail...”

* * *

Judd did not look at Elaine again for the rest of the lecture, which lasted all morning—an eternity for her. She wanted to crawl under her chair and disappear. She was mortified at making such a fool of herself in front of her peers—she felt so humiliated now that she really did want to quit. If this monster was typical of the people who worked in the Anti-Counterfeiting Division, she wanted nothing to do with them. Had she gone through all this misery just to end up working for obnoxious assholes?

After a while, she found her hurt transforming into anger. How dare he chew her out like that in front of all her colleagues, and then tell her to see him after class, like some troublemaker in elementary school!

By the time the students had finished filing out of the room, Elaine had made up her mind. She didn't care who this "Judd" was or how high up he worked. She was going to put the old bastard in his place.

She approached him just as he was gathering up his things.

"I think you owe me an apology," she said boldly. "You had no right to attack me like that in front of the whole class. I was just trying to answer the que..."

He was smiling at her.

"What?" she said, flustered.

"I'm sorry I had to do that to you, but you wouldn't want everyone to think you're the teacher's pet, would you? The only reason I bother to come over and give this Mickey Mouse lecture is on the small chance of discovering a diamond in the rough, like you." He pulled out a business card and handed it to her. "When you get fed up working for the Secret Service, young lady, you give me a call. You're just the type of person we like to have at Treasury."

She looked down at the card. It simply said "Gene Lassiter," with a phone number printed underneath.

He picked up his satchel, smiled again, and gripping his cane, hobbled out of the room.

CHAPTER 1.8

The day Elaine graduated and was officially a United States Secret Service Special Agent, she felt like she was walking on air. When she received the gold, five-pointed star that was attached to her badge, there were tears in her eyes.

It did not matter to her that there was a note in her file from the head of the academy that said that due to her low marksmanship scores, she was “not recommended for protective services duty.”

She had made it!

She and the rest of the new agents met at a D.C. bar and got utterly smashed.

Luna Faye showed up. She was wearing a stunning black halter-neck dress that showed off her toned shoulders and chest.

“You look fabulous!” Elaine gushed, giving her a big hug. She truly meant it.

“You inspired me, honey,” Luna said modestly, holding out her hands palms-down so Elaine could see her manicure.

“French? Very stylish, Luna.”

“I don’t know if it’s worth thirty bucks.”

“It is.”

Luna smiled. “You know I had to throw everything I had at you to see if you could take it.”

“I know,” Elaine said, wiping away a tear. “I’m glad you did.”

Luna appraised her evenly. “It’s only gonna get tougher, girl. This is only the beginning.” She glanced around and lowered her voice so no one else could hear. “I’m not talking about only toughies you might have to face on the outside. I’m talking about on the inside, too. The Service is a damn competitive organization. You’ll end up working for at least one first-class asshole, maybe more. You’ll have to survive on a lot more than your looks and charm.”

Elaine nodded. “I understand.”

“Good.” Luna’s face relaxed into a smile. “Anyway, baby-doll, congratulations!” She gave Elaine another warm hug. “I’m so damn proud of you I could pop!”

CHAPTER 1.9

On the Monday when Elaine arrived in Great Falls, Montana the temperature was a nose-numbing five below zero. The city, with a population of only 60,000, was flat as a pancake. There was no skyline. The tallest building, where the new Secret Service office was located, was the U.S. Bank “Tower” —a staggering seven stories high.

When Elaine had received the notification letter informing her that she was assigned to the Secret Service field office in Great Falls, Montana, she tried to keep her chin up. She had known she would be sent to the least desirable location in the country, that it was standard practice for all new Special Agents.

Shivering as she locked her beat-up Toyota, she told herself she could stand living in Great Falls for a year or two, and to make the best of it. *Look at the bright side*, she thought. *It’s a small town. People will be a lot friendlier than in Pittsburgh.*

“You can’t park your fuckin’ car there, lady.”

Elaine turned around—there was a blubbery man shoveling snow off the sidewalk, a cigar jutting from his mouth. “What’s the matter with you, can’t you read?” he said, pointing at the NO PARKING sign.

Well, she thought, *‘most’ people were probably more friendly than in Pittsburgh.* She moved her car down one space.

For her first day at work, she had bought a new navy blue business suit and had her hair styled. When the dumpy receptionist ushered Elaine into the office of the SAIC—the Special Agent In Charge—the man slowly rose from his desk, staring at her.

“Ms. Brogan?” he said. His eyes moving down to her legs, her shoes, then back up to her face.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, shaking his hand.

“I didn’t know you were...” The receptionist was standing there, watching him ogle Elaine. He glanced at her, his face red. “Thank you, Susan. That will be all.”

Susan left, giving him a dirty look.

The SAIC’s name was Bill Saunders. He began making nervous small talk, telling Elaine about the new-fangled office, which had only been established in Great Falls a year ago. He was about 35 years old, had a pot belly, was nearly bald, and what little hair he had left was speckled with dandruff. Elaine noticed that he was wearing a wedding band, which she thought was a good thing—the excitement she sensed in him had raised alarm bells in her mind.

He outlined her responsibilities, and mentioned that there would be a lot more training on “corporate stuff,” such as Ethics, Diversity, and Interpersonal Awareness.

Near the end of the meeting, Elaine asked, “Will there be time for me to work on some of my own cases?”

“Your ‘own’ cases? How do you mean?”

Elaine shrugged. “Cases that originate from my own leads, maybe cases in other states.”

“Trying to get out of Great Falls already?” he said, smiling.

“No, I just—”

“I don’t see why you can’t work on outside cases. As long as you get your required work done, do your DOPS.”

“My—DOPS?”

“Daily Operation Summaries.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, as long as you get your required work done, I don’t see it as a problem.”

* * *

Elaine spent the first few weeks settling in. There was only one other field agent working out of the new office, Ken, a man who had been with the Service only two years. A former Chicago police detective, he had a lot of experience and he spent much of his time working alone. Most of the activity in the Great Falls office concerned financial fraud, counterfeit checks, and Internet account hacking. Great Falls, Montana, was not the center of the world’s illegal currency counterfeiting activity. Or the center of anything else, it seemed.

Bill Saunders seemed to make constant excuses to go into Elaine’s office and talk to her, or call her into his. When he had to pick up a file or get his coffee cup, he would move uncomfortably close to her, sometimes “accidentally” brushing up against her. She noticed that he often discreetly inhaled when he did this, as if savoring the smell of her perfume.

One evening they were going over a list of banks in Montana that had been receiving a certain type of fake check, Bill reached over and took her hand.

“Elaine,” he said, his voice wavering, “I have to tell you something.”

“Don’t,” she said, pulling her hand away. She had been expecting this ever since the first day. She glanced at his open office door, afraid Susan would hear them.

“Susan’s gone, and Ken is up in Billings tonight.”

“I don’t care,” Elaine said, standing. She had been sitting beside him at his credenza. She put several feet of distance between them.

His face went red, and his scalp went even redder. “Elaine, I can’t stand it. Ever since you came to work here—”

“Bill, don’t do this. Please?”

“You don’t feel attracted to me?”

“That’s not the point, Bill. You’re my boss.”

“So what?”

Elaine opened her mouth, but closed it again, not wanting to sound like a newbie reciting rules from the Secret Service employee manual. “You’re married.”

“Not really.”

She motioned to the wedding band on his finger. “I suppose you’re going to tell me that’s a Secret Agent Decoder Ring?”

He chuckled. “Joan and I are finished. We’re getting a divorce.”

Sure you are, Elaine thought.

Bill noted her expression. “Look, I’ll take the ring off, if that makes you feel better.” He did so, putting it in his desk drawer. “I won’t even wear it home.”

“Bill...”

“What?” he said, reaching for her waist.

“I’m not going to do this,” she said, moving farther away. “I refuse to mess up my career.”

“Mess up? What are you talking about? This can only be good for your career.”

“You know better than that, Bill.” She searched for excuses. “If we started something and then it fell apart, it would be bad. Really bad.”

His expression grew cold. “What about after I get my divorce?”

Even if she had been attracted to him, and he really did get a divorce, she wouldn't allow herself to become involved with her boss, not at a place like the Secret Service. But if she told him that, she didn't know what he might do. She didn't have much experience with men, but her instincts told her to tread very carefully with this one.

"Well," she said, "of course if you were di... single, things would be different." His face brightened at this. "Now can we please put this aside and get back to work?"

"Sure thing," he said.

* * *

For the next few weeks, Elaine diligently went about her duties, hoping that Bill's infatuation would pass. She stopped wearing perfume and tried to dress down, hoping that would help.

She often came in early and spent an hour or two working on what she now thought of as the "Ronald Eskew" case. She ran the name through all the criminal databases but came up with zilch. She was sure that Ronald Eskew was an alias the man had only used for his sleazy Rising Star Modeling Agency scam.

Elaine wished she could travel back in time to the day she confronted Ronald Eskew in his office. If only she had thought to pick up something with his fingerprints on it. Of course, at that moment, she could not have known what was about to happen to her, and to her father.

She began doing detailed searches of all the modeling agencies that had been started in the year following the closure—or disappearance—of Rising Star. There were over 50 agencies that had started during that time in the USA. One by one, she began painstakingly investigating them.

* * *

One day when Elaine and Bill were working together in his office, going over the details of a new bank check fraud case, Bill suddenly grabbed her and kissed her.

"Stop it," she said, struggling against him. He pushed her back on his desk and hungrily pressed his mouth against hers. She could feel his erection pressing against her thigh. Before she knew it, his hand went under her skirt, his fingers rubbing her vulva.

"Bill!" she gasped, roughly pushing him away.

He backed off, breathing hard.

"This is not *acceptable*. Do you understand?"

He blinked, wiping his mouth. "I understand."

"You do?"

"Yes. You may go back to your office."

* * *

When Elaine went home that day, she had a bad feeling about what had taken place. She didn't sleep at all that night. The next morning, she went to a downtown cafe and had breakfast, dreading the thought of confronting him again. Things would be awkward, at best.

When she got to the office, he was already there. She passed his door.

"Good morning, Elaine," he said evenly.

"Good morning," she said, backtracking.

He was sitting at his desk, his arms crossed.

With a warm smile on his face, he said, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Excuse me?”

His face was red, but not with embarrassment. “Do you think the law enforcement computers are here for your personal amusement?”

He tapped on a printout on his desk. “Would you mind telling me who Ronald Eskew is?”

“Bill...I asked you if it was all right for me to work on my own cases, and you said it was.”

“Did I?”

“Yes. The first day I was here. You said...” Now she noticed another look in his eye.

“Abuse of law enforcement databases is a serious violation of your security clearance. I could fire you for that.”

Elaine swallowed. So this is how Bill Saunders dealt with his bruised male ego. She remembered Luna’s words. *You’ll end up working for at least one first-class asshole, maybe more.*

“Bill,” she said, willing herself to stay calm, “please don’t fire me. I won’t use the databases anymore.” She decided it was better to put herself at his mercy than to confront him about the real reason he was doing this.

He gazed at her for a moment with obvious resentment. “Well, you’ve been doing a halfway decent job here. What I’m going to do is recommend a transfer.”

Elaine was taken aback. “A transfer? To where?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. I’ll put in the request this morning.” He picked up his pen and cut his gaze from her. “That will be all.”

* * *

Elaine was furious, in a quandary about what to do. She was tempted to fly to Washington and file a formal sexual harassment complaint, but she thought the better of it—doing that so early in her career would probably just get her known as a troublemaker. Nobody would want her then. Besides, she had no proof of anything, including Bill’s permission to use the confidential databases. It would come down to her word against his.

She tried to tell herself that a transfer was a good thing. Just about anywhere was better than Great Falls, Montana.

CHAPTER 1.10

“*Bulgaria?*” Elaine said, staring at the confidential transmission in her hand. Bill smiled.

“You bastard,” she said under her breath.

His expression darkened. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Elaine just stood there, glaring.

“I had nothing to do with where they chose to transfer you,” Bill said. “I simply told them that I thought your talents were being wasted here—” he looked distastefully down at her legs “—and I think they are. Maybe in Bulgaria you’ll find a situation that’s more *acceptable* to you.”

He turned back to the papers on his desk. “You’ll leave tomorrow. Summarize everything you’re working on and have it on my desk by five o’clock today.”

* * *

That evening, Elaine stayed late, packing up her personal things in the office, putting them in boxes. Bill would go over it all with a fine-tooth comb and send it on to Bulgaria.

She felt as bitter as the weather outside.

Just as she was about to leave, she sat back down at her stark desk. She looked at the dark computer screen, hesitated, then turned it on and logged into the system. *The damage has been done*, she thought.

She opened up the criminal databases and continued her work on the Ronald Eskew case.

After only an hour, she stumbled on something exciting.

There was a modeling agency that was started in Dayton, Ohio only two months after Rising Star disappeared. It was only open eight months, then closed. According to city records, the owner had been R. E. Crawford.

Crawford—that was the name his assistant had used.

What about Robert E. Crawford?

Elaine typed the name R into the FBI criminal database, waiting on pins and needles.

After a moment, it came back with a match.

Ronald E. Crawford, a.k.a. Robert A. Eskew, a.k.a. Steven B. Hayes, a.k.a. Edward T. Cane, a.k.a... The list went on.

She opened up the rest of the file.

Her heart gave a thump as the man’s mug shots appeared, front and side views, holding a number.

It was him! He still had the droopy mustache, and a beard as well.

She skimmed through the file, her heart beating faster and faster. *Wanted for direct mail fraud, computer phishing, passing bad checks, currency counterfeiting...a dozen white-collar crimes.*

Elaine frowned, confused, scrolling back and forth through the long file. Where was he now? He’d obviously been arrested, because there were mug shots.

Ah, there it was. Five years ago...

Convicted on three counts of direct mail fraud, Decatur, Illinois. He was sentenced to two years in an Illinois minimum security prison.

And then what?

The file seemed to end there.

Then she noticed the last line.

September, 17th, 2006. Deceased.

Deceased? she thought numbly. The man is *dead*?

That couldn't be...

With a growing sense of disappointment, she clicked on some more buttons. She finally found the death certificate.

Cause of death: heart failure. It is the opinion of the examining physician that the deceased passed away peacefully in his sleep.

* * *

Elaine left Montana in a daze.

As she gazed out the airplane window, watching Great Falls sink away, it felt as if the rug of life had been yanked out from under her.

...passed away peacefully in his sleep.

It wasn't possible! The loathsome man who was responsible for her father's death, had *passed away peacefully in his sleep.*

The bastard! The lucky, despicable bastard!

Only during the last few hours did Elaine fully realize that everything she had done since her father committed suicide—every major decision she had made, and every action as a result of those decisions—was driven by her desire to get even with Ronald Eskew.

And now the man was dead!

It just wasn't fair. The greatest irony was that he had died long before she had even finished college.

Elaine felt every emotion imaginable, and she felt nothing. She had turned down two perfectly good jobs, had gone through that hellish process to join the Secret Service—and for what?

She was the captain of a rudderless ship.

* * *

When the plane landed in Chicago, instead of changing planes for the flight to Washington, D.C., she bought a ticket to Pittsburgh. She had not been home since she'd graduated from Bromley. Something told her it was time she came to terms with her past.

She rented a car at the Pittsburgh Airport and found herself driving to her old house in Garfield. A thousand memories flooded her mind as she drove down Penn Avenue, passing familiar landmarks—the little market where she used to shop, the laundry, bus stop where she had walked a thousand times back and forth to her house.

As she slowly rolled by the tiny, humble dwelling itself, it looked even tinier and humbler than she had ever remembered it, and the neighborhood much more run-down. She could see the balcony her father had built onto the back, the paint peeling. She could see herself as a little girl, held in her father's arms.

Your great-great-great-great grandmother was an Irish Princess. She lived in a beautiful castle. It had a moat, and a –

What's a moat, Daddy?

She felt a sharp pang in her heart and sped away.

A few minutes later, she pulled up to the Bromley Academy for Girls. She went inside to the main office. Ms. Prentice had long retired and had been replaced

by a new, young director. There was a security guard on duty at the front desk, also a new touch. Even he was a stranger.

“Can I help you?” he said.

“I’m a Bromley grad,” Elaine said. “I’m just going to walk around the grounds, if it’s ok...”

“Knock yourself out.”

Elaine went back to the rental car and, from the trunk, retrieved a small pot of chrysanthemums. She trudged through the snow around to the back of the main building, past the soccer field, across the hill, until she reached the remains of the church. Ms. Prentice had arranged for her father’s body to be buried there, in the old graveyard. The school had paid for everything.

Elaine squatted in front of the simple headstone and brushed away the snow.

IN MEMORY OF PATRICK KEEGAN BROGAN, A WONDERFUL
FATHER AND GREAT FRIEND OF THE BROMLEY ACADEMY FOR GIRLS

Elaine stared at the words cut into the slab, tears coursing down her face. She placed the pot at the foot of the marker. Suddenly she fell forward, weeping, overwhelmed by a feeling of loneliness and despair.

“I wish I could talk to you Daddy,” she gasped, pressing her hands and face against the cold marble. “I don’t know what to do.”

She wept for a few minutes, and then became aware of a crunching sound behind her in the snow. She turned around. Two girls about 12 years old on horseback, in their riding helmets, were moving along the side of the graveyard.

Elaine wiped her eyes and waved. The girls waved back.

She thought of Kaitlin, and how they had grown apart.

When Elaine went back to the car, her grief faded into a sweet sorrow. She would cope, somehow. She was a Brogan. *We’re made of the tough Irish stock*, she could hear her father saying. She would go to goddam Bulgaria and see what happened.

If things didn’t improve, she would quit the Secret Service.

CHAPTER 1.11

Sofia, Bulgaria turned out to be a pleasant surprise. The city had a distinctly European flavor, with balconied buildings overlooking tree-lined, cobblestone boulevards that rattled with slow-moving trams. The summer air was filled with the smell of flowers and the sounds of laughter and romantic accordion music. There was simplicity to the Bulgarian people and the way they lived, that Elaine found charming and down-to-earth.

In the center of the city, the men and women were better dressed than in the States, the men in suits and the women in stylish skirts or dresses, most wearing high heels. When they walked in couples, the woman would often take the man's arm the old fashioned way.

The males, with their dark eyes and swarthy looks, were handsome enough, but their attitude towards females left much to be desired. In some parts of the country, girls as young as 14 were still auctioned off at fairs to the highest bidder.

Still, Sofia was a thrilling place for Elaine to find herself. A helluva lot more interesting than Great Falls, Montana.

The day she arrived, she was met at the airport by a Bulgarian driver from the office and formally escorted to an apartment in the center. The flat had been rented for her on a weekly basis until she could find permanent accommodations. It was lovely, with antique furniture and ten-foot ceilings, and overlooked a quiet, tree-shaded square.

When she arrived at the Secret Service office, a stocky receptionist said, "We've been expecting you," in accented English. She motioned down the hall. "The SAIC's office is the last one at the end of the hall."

Elaine didn't know a thing about the SAIC except that his name was Nick LaGrange. She went down the corridor and stopped at the door marked with his name.

There was a tall, broad-shouldered man bent over a desk cluttered with papers, stained coffee cups, and other debris. He was counting out money from an envelope, muttering to himself, and scribbling on a piece of paper. Elaine couldn't see his face—he had long, unkempt brown hair that obscured it. He was wearing faded, holey jeans, hiking boots, and a cracked leather flight jacket over a wrinkled-looking linen shirt.

He looked up, brushing the hair out of his face. He saw Elaine and gave a warm smile. "Hi there."

He was the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on.

"I'm Nick LaGrange," he said, offering her his strong-looking hand. "You must be Elaine?"

"Yes," she finally said. She didn't want to let it go.

"I'm about to go on an undercover assignment. You wanna come along, get the feel of the place?"

Elaine glanced uncertainly down at her business suit.

"Don't worry, you're dressed just right for this assignment." He paused. "Got your service pistol with you?"

"Yes, of course." Elaine started to open her satchel.

"Leave it here." With a faint smile, he said, "I read the note in your file."

* * *

Five minutes later, they were climbing into an old cherry red Mustang that was parked in a garage near the office. Nick put the key into the ignition and the engine thundered to life.

“Bought this in New York, shipped it to the UK, and drove it all the way here from London,” he said proudly, as he pulled out of the garage. “An original Boss 429. ‘68 model.” He glanced at her. “You’re probably not much into muscle cars...”

“No,” Elaine admitted. She was still a little offended by the comment he had made about the note in her file.

They drove through the center of Sofia, with Nick honking, and pulling around trams and clusters of pedestrians. Steering with his knees, he pulled out a bag of tobacco and started rolling a cigarette. He slipped the perfectly rolled smoke between his lips and lit it.

He smiled when he saw her watching. “Had a lot of experience in college. Want me to roll one for you?”

“No, thanks,” she said, grinning. This guy was a real character.

As they continued on through the city, she noticed that everyone stared at the vintage American automobile as it rolled by.

“Isn’t this car a little conspicuous for a Secret Service agent?” she said.

Nick laughed. “There are no secrets in this place, Elaine. Everybody knows everybody else. And Americans stick out here like sore thumbs.” He turned a corner and waved at some man who was standing on a corner, smoking a cigar. “Any Bulgarian can spot a *chuzhenetz*—a foreigner— at a hundred yards. They can tell by the way you dress, walk, move, the shape of your face, and a hundred other cues. You have to be careful here, too. In Bulgaria, a foreigner spells only one thing—M-O-N-E-Y.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Five years. Five long years. Before that, Warsaw. Before that, Paris.”

“You like being abroad, then?”

“I like being as far from headquarters and their goddam DOPS as possible.”

He made a sharp left, into a square. He pulled into a parking space along the street.

“What exactly is this undercover assignment?” Elaine said nervously.

Nick finished his cigarette and tossed the butt out the window. “Ever heard of the Turkey Roll?”

“No.”

“Sounds like a sandwich, doesn’t it? It’s a con they pull around here.”

They got out of the car and walked across the street. There was a huge Byzantine-style church at the far end of the square, with glittering gold domes and curving, turquoise roofs.

“That’s the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral,” Nick said. “Probably the biggest tourist attraction here.”

Nick suddenly took Elaine’s hand. “For this to work, we need to look like a couple,” he said, in a low voice.

She wondered if he was just saying that as an excuse to hold her hand. *Wishful thinking*, Elaine thought.

After they had walked only a few feet, a man appeared from nowhere and cut directly in front of Elaine. He stooped to pick something up from the sidewalk, this all happened so abruptly that Elaine almost stumbled into him. He picked up a thick roll of American \$100 bills.

For an instant, Elaine felt angry— if the man hadn't cut in front of her, she would have found it herself.

He looked up at Elaine, then at Nick.

"Yours?" he said, holding up the money.

Now Elaine realized maybe this was the con. The Turkey Roll.

Nick glanced at her, then said to the man, "Yes, it's my money." When he reached for it, the man quickly stepped away.

He said, "We split it—fifty-fifty. Okay?"

Nick looked at Elaine again. "Well..."

"Let's go over there," the man whispered, pointing behind a building.

He led them around the corner.

Elaine glanced nervously around, afraid of what might happen next. She didn't like this situation, being in a strange country, mixed up with criminals, and unarmed.

The man pulled the rubber band off the money and quickly started counting it out. *Edin, dvama, trima, chitirima...*

There were 30 crisp \$100 bills in the roll, or \$3,000.

He handed half of them to Nick, then glanced past Elaine, his eyes widening. He turned and scurried away, running along the side of the building.

Two men trotted up to them from the opposite direction. One was in a rumpled suit, the other in a dirty-looking jogging outfit. The latter pointed at Nick, babbling in Bulgarian.

The well-dressed one flashed a police badge at them. "This man—he say you stole his money."

Nick glanced nervously at Elaine. "I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't steal any money."

"Empty your pockets!"

Nick hesitated.

"You want go to jail?"

Nick reluctantly reached into his jacket pockets and turned them inside out. Then, from his jeans' pockets, he pulled out his car keys, his wallet, and a cigarette lighter. "See?"

"There!" the other man said, pointing at the little watch pocket in Nick's jeans.

Nick sighed and pulled out the roll of money. "Look, it was just laying on the sidewalk. I didn't steal it from anyone."

"*Da!*" the other man said, snatching it from Nick's hand. He unrolled the bills, then frowned, looking back at Nick. "*To ne vsichko e tuk!*"

"He say you take some of his money," the cop said.

"I didn't take any of it," Nick said. He motioned to the back of the building. "Some other guy picked up the roll and gave me half."

"Other guy?" the cop said, looking around. "What other guy? I see no other guy."

Nick glanced at Elaine.

"You want go to jail?" the cop said again. He squinted at Elaine. "You want *both* go to jail? Bulgarian prison very bad. Not like in America."

Nick glanced around, then opened his wallet. "Look, I'll give you all the money I have..." He pulled out a few hundred dollar bills, and another few hundred Euro notes.

The cop looked at Elaine.

"I don't have any money," she said, her throat dry. She sure hoped this was the con that Nick had been talking about, and not something else.

The cop asked the other man a question. The man glared at Nick. "Okay," he finally said, and pocketed all the money. He turned and walked back around the corner, muttering to himself.

Pointing at Nick, the cop said, "You should be careful. Bulgaria very dangerous for foreigners."

He walked off in the other direction.

As they were alone again, Nick looked knowingly at Elaine. His lips curled into a smile.

"He wasn't a real cop..."

"Nope," Nick said.

"I don't get it—what was this all about?"

"This," Nick said, reaching into his back pocket. He produced a single \$100 bill. "This came off that roll of money—all of it was probably counterfeit. A couple of undercover cops—real cops—will keep tabs on those guys until we find out."

* * *

As soon as they were inside the Mustang and headed back to the office, Elaine said. "You should have let me bring my gun. I'm not incompetent."

"Did I say you were incompetent?"

"No, but..." She was angry with herself for wanting to impress him, but she couldn't help it. "You make me feel incompetent. I'm not a helpless girl."

"Don't get feminist on me, okay? I don't pay a lot of attention to rules, but when it comes to important things, I play by the book. Something happens to you, and I'm responsible." He glanced at her. "Is that all right with you?"

"Well, yes, of course it is. I just don't want you to think I'm inept."

"The Secret Service must have thought you had other assets that made up for your weakness in marksmanship." He glanced at her legs.

"Thanks a lot," she muttered.

"I didn't mean that. I meant, for example, intaglio printing." He looked curiously at her. "Your file said you know a lot about that."

"I ought to know something about it. I majored in it."

Nick looked surprised. "Where the hell can you major in intaglio printing?"

"RISD. That's the Rhode Island School of—"

"I know what it stands for. That's a damn good school."

She gave a modest shrug. "I guess so." Of course it was a good school—it was one of the best design schools in the USA.

Nick said, "Your intaglio printing knowledge could be very useful here. The main crime we deal with in this office is counterfeiting. But I'm sure you know that already."

They rode along in silence for a few minutes. Even though Elaine felt a bit frustrated with how he was acting towards her, she had a very good feeling being with Nick LaGrange. His open, honest, and confident manner was very attractive.

As they passed a group of rough-looking men on a corner, her thoughts turned to the con artists they had just been involved with. "That's a clever scam those guys pull," she said. "For a split second, I was mad when the first man cut in front of me and looked like he'd picked up that big roll of money. I thought I should have found it instead of him."

"Yeah. I always get the same feeling, even though I know it's a con." He smiled at her. "We're all greedy, Elaine. It's human nature."

* * *

When they got back to the office, Nick cleared off some debris from one of his guest chairs and offered her a seat.

“So, what do you think of this bill?” he said, handing Elaine the \$100 note. He also handed her a magnifying glass.

The look in his eye told her this was a test.

She carefully rubbed the bill between her thumb and forefinger. It had been printed with an intaglio press, as she could feel the ridges in the paper. She squinted at it through the magnifier, inspecting the finer details.

After a moment, Nick said, “Want a genuine note for comparison?”

“Don’t need one,” Elaine murmured, peering at the front side of the bill. “This is definitely a fake.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “How do you know?”

“For one thing, the color-shifting ink isn’t quite right. It changes from black to gold but the—”

“Yeah, good. And?”

“And the lines on Jefferson’s face aren’t spaced the same, especially around the jaw line. Plus, the microprinting isn’t quite as sharp as it should be.” Elaine paused. “Still, it’s a well-done counterfeiting job.”

Nick smiled. “Not bad, Elaine. Not bad at all. Usually we have to send bills this good back to the States to know for sure.”

He picked up the phone and punched in a number. While he waited, he opened his drawer and pulled out a stack of \$100 bills that was an inch thick. “See what you think of these.”

CHAPTER 1.12

The more Elaine worked with Nick LaGrange, the more she liked him.

He was so exciting to be around, always passionate about whatever he was working on, and so confident in himself and the abilities of everyone around him, including her own. Elaine felt completely safe with him, as if he radiated a sort of magical, protective energy that warded off evil.

She also enjoyed her job. She found she had a natural talent for recognizing fake banknotes, something Nick had seen right off. He gave her tasks that helped her further develop her skill at counterfeit detection, such as making detailed lists of all the major differences she could find each time a new type of fake banknote surfaced in the region. It seemed that in this particular Secret Service field office, you could create your own job, which was a nice change from the rigid position in Great Falls.

For Elaine, indentifying counterfeits was easy, like working those picture-puzzles that she loved so much as a little girl. *There are ten differences between the girls in these two photographs. Can you find them?*

Soon, Nick was funneling all the fakes found by the other agents in the office for scrutiny. With time and a lot of practice, she was able to distinguish fakes so quickly that agents at nearby Secret Service field offices— in Moscow, Bucharest, Frankfurt and Rome—began sending her suspicious banknotes to check for fast turnaround. Sending paper money to Washington to be verified through official channels was slow and required a lot of paperwork. By making this unnecessary, she began to develop a reputation for speed and reliability, even gained a little fame around the region.

* * *

A few weeks after she had gotten settled, Nick came excitedly into her office, a piece of paper in his hand.

“Remember the fake we picked up from that undercover operation the first day you were here?”

“Yes...”

“Turns out it matches a couple of others that have surfaced around Eastern Europe. I just got this report from Treasury, and it says these notes may be coming from a genuine KBA Giori printing press.”

That was a bit of a shock. KBA Giori was a company in Germany that made all the intaglio presses used to print U.S. dollars. The machines were manufactured under top secret contract for the American government. From what Elaine knew, the factory in Wurzburg had tighter security than the Pentagon.

“How’s that possible?” Elaine said.

“Well, I’m sure you know Giori makes basically the same machines for virtually every country in the world.”

“Yes...”

Nick shrugged. “Some third world country could have sold one of their machines to a criminal ring. Every Giori press is accounted for, except for one that never made it to Chile about five years ago. Nobody ever figured out what happened to that one.” Nick paused. “This is *big*, Elaine. Maybe the biggest case I’ve ever worked on. My god, if someone actually has their hands on a genuine KBA Giori machine like the ones we have at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and figure how to use it right, they could make a perfect counterfeit, one that’s so good even the Treasury Department wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

“But there were a lot of mistakes in the one I checked.”

“Yeah, but from what I’ve been told, other notes they’ve found are better. Whoever has this machine is on a learning curve, figuring out how to use it as they go along.”

“Can you get me scans of those other notes? I’d like to see them.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Nick said. “Once they go to Treasury, getting them back is like pulling teeth.”

* * *

At the end of the month, when Elaine was doing paperwork, she asked if she could see Nick’s DOPS to get a better feel for how the Sofia office worked.

He frowned at her. Gesturing around his messy office, he said, “You think I do DOPS?”

“I just assumed—”

“I’d rather spend an afternoon at the dentist than fill out those summaries. I’d rather be tied up and forced to listen to the President’s State of the Union address. I’d rather have bamboo shoots—”

“But don’t you have to do DOPS?”

“Well, yeah. Everybody has to do them. Every once in a while my boss in D.C. calls up and chews me out. I lock myself in here for a few hours and make stuff up, fill out as many as I can. It’s pure torture.”

“I’ll be happy to do your DOPS, Nick.”

“You’ll do my DOPS?”

“Yes, I can do them when I do my own. I don’t mind doing DOPS—they make me feel organized.”

He pointed at her. “You’re on, girl!” He nodded slowly, thinking about it. “Yes. Perfect! I can tell my boss we ‘synchronize our DOPS.’ He would like that.” Nick grinned at her. “Sounds kinda kinky, doesn’t it?”

Elaine blushed.

* * *

Elaine soon found that she looked forward to every moment she spent with Nick, and that she felt empty when he was out of the office or away on an assignment.

The highpoint of her week was when Nick would come into her office and say, “Let’s synchronize our DOPS.”

They would pack up their papers and go to an Ethiopian cafe across the street that served delicious coffee, and Elaine would sit there and write all of Nick’s DOPS, with him catering to her every need. He would buy her a double cappuccino and make it just the way she liked it—with one spoon of white sugar stirred in, and a half spoon of demerara sprinkled across the froth. *Lovingly* sprinkled over the froth, she liked to think.

Nick would hover around her. “Can I get you a muffin? A fresh-squeezed orange juice? A thousand dollars in cash?”

They talked a lot during this hour-long ritual and got to know each other better. She didn’t know how Nick felt about it, Elaine relished every second of it.

After three months of working in Bulgaria, she finally admitted it to herself. She was falling madly, hopelessly, unstopably in love with Nick LaGrange.

CHAPTER 1.13

Nick seemed to know everyone in Sofia, and he took Elaine with him to “make his rounds” at a variety of the city’s seediest clubs and bars, which she found deliciously intriguing. At least at first.

It was clear that Nick had lots of casual girlfriends, the type that hung around bars and lived off the generosity of men they met there, particularly “rich” foreigners.

The third night they were out, two young ladies who clearly knew Nick stopped at their table. One of them had a pageboy haircut, with jet black bangs cut straight across her dark eyes. The other had a thick blonde braid that came down to the crack of her butt, the features of which were so clearly outlined by tight black spandex she could have worked as a live model in an anatomy class.

“Come party with us, Neekie!” the brunette said, her pouty mouth glistening with bright red lipstick, tugging on his leather jacket.

“Can’t you see I’m with a colleague?” Nick said, his face flushed. The way Nick said it, Elaine felt like a piece of office equipment.

The blonde glanced saucily at Elaine with her dark eyes. “You can breeng your colleague, Neekie. We no mind.”

When he finally got rid of them, he glanced sheepishly at Elaine. “I just hang around with them to keep my ear close to the ground. You pick up a lot of stuff that way.”

“I hope it responds to penicillin,” Elaine said.

Nick smiled.

* * *

The younger Bulgarian women dressed to the nines, in short skirts, high heels, and low-cut blouses. They paid great attention to their hair, makeup, and their hands and feet—half of them wore fake fingernails and had eyelash extensions. It seemed to Elaine all the girls in Sofia were in a life-or-death competition with each other to see who could be the sexiest. There were so many beautiful women that Elaine felt positively plain and ordinary in her boring gray business suits and sensible flats.

One night when she, Nick, and two other agents—both married men—were out at a bar, Elaine made this observation to Nick when a girl walked by with a skirt so short you could see her frilly black stocking tops.

“Life is tough here, Elaine,” he said. “It’s not like in the States, where you have all those systems in place to protect women and give them equal opportunities and all that. Here, women need men to survive, and there aren’t enough good men to go around.” Nick shrugged. “To get a good man, they have to take full advantage of all their assets.”

“And I’ll bet you take full advantage of their assets,” Elaine said.

Nick glanced at the other two agents and grinned. “Well, you know what they say. ‘When in Rome...’”

Elaine wanted to strangle him.

CHAPTER 1.14

By December of that year, Elaine was so bogged down in checking the suspect \$100 bills sent in from other offices that she had no time for anything else. Her office walls were covered with huge sheets of paper with hundreds of banknote serial numbers, linked together like huge family trees, showing when and where each note had been found, and the graphical interconnections between them. This helped other agents track down the origin of the counterfeit bills and locate the illegal printing presses. Elaine's detective work had been partly responsible for two big busts already, one in Romania and another in Chechnya.

"You and I make a great team, Elaine," Nick often said. "You track 'em down and I bust 'em."

As the Christmas holidays approached, Elaine began to feel depressed—the Christmas season had made her feel down ever since her father died, as she had no family to spend the holidays with.

A week before the break began, Nick came in with a new set of suspect notes for her to check, his leather jacket dusted with snow.

"So, what are you doing for the holidays?" she asked casually. She hoped he might stay around Sofia, and maybe they could spend some time together.

"Oh, probably I'll go down to Minorca for a little R&R. That's what I usually do."

A little R&R. She wondered which one—or two—of his bar girls he was taking with him.

"And you?" Nick said, smiling politely.

"Oh, I'm thinking of taking a trip with a friend to Rome or Paris." The vague "friend" part was a lie, an effort to make him jealous. *A pathetic effort*, she thought.

"Sounds good," he said, unfazed. "But I'd head south if I were you. The winters here are murder."

When he turned around, Elaine felt like throwing her glass paperweight at him. But she didn't want him to leave.

"Nick?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"What about those two bills we sent to Treasury that came from the genuine Giori press?"

"Oh, those?" he said. "I don't know what happened, you know how they are. I'll ask again."

After he left, she had the distinct feeling he was being evasive.

* * *

She ended up spending the holidays in Paris. She visited the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, Versailles, and took a riverboat ride on the Seine.

And she was miserable.

CHAPTER 1.15

When Elaine returned to Sofia, her obsession with Nick deepened. When he brushed his arm against her, electricity shot through her whole body. When he left her phone messages, she would play them over and over again in the privacy of her office or living room, where she could relish the sound of his voice. Her emotional state would swing wildly to one extreme or another based on the slightest inflection or look in his eye. She longed for him to take her hand, like he had the first day she had arrived in Sofia.

Elaine could only imagine the shock he would experience if he knew the emotional turmoil he was causing inside her.

She felt like a schoolgirl endlessly pining over a boy who was utterly unaware of her existence.

She hated herself for it, yet she seemed powerless to do anything about it.

You want Nick so badly simply because you can't have him, she thought, trying to talk herself out of how she felt. He's out of your reach, and that makes him all the more attractive. If he was easily available, you wouldn't be interested.

She didn't believe a word of it.

* * *

One day she came into Nick's office and he was so engrossed with something on his computer screen that he didn't seem to notice.

"Nick?" she said.

"What?" he muttered distractedly.

She gradually came closer, looking over his shoulder. She almost expected to see pornography on the screen.

"Ever been to the Provence region of France?" he said. He was scrolling through a series of small countryside villas.

"No," Elaine said. "It looks lovely. Are you thinking of taking a vacation there?"

"Yeah. A permanent one."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm retiring. And soon."

Elaine was taken aback. "Aren't you a little young to retire?"

"Oh, I'll keep working at something. But something that's not life-threatening." He glanced over at her. "I've got plenty of money socked away," he said. "That old Mustang is the only thing I own."

* * *

Elaine often thought about what Nick had said during the next couple of days, wondering how he had so much money "socked away" that he could retire in his 30s.

One night she had a wonderful dream. She was eating dinner with Nick in a huge, rustic kitchen. The windows were open, the breeze blowing through the room. Fresh vegetables were spread over the table. Outside, she could see rolling, golden hills and poplar trees, like in a Van Gogh painting.

Two children were sitting at the table, a boy and a girl, and both were speaking French. The boy favored Nick. The girl had strawberry blonde hair.

There was a knock at the door. Suddenly, the feel and texture of the dream changed. For a second, she was back in her little house in Garfield.

"I'll get it," she said, getting up from the table.

As she walked through the hallway, she was filled with terror. The Secret Service was there, and they were going to arrest Nick, and take him away, and destroy her beautiful family and her idyllic life with him.

When her hand touched the doorknob, it was cold as ice. Swallowing, she twisted it and pulled the door open.

The two girls that had approached Nick at the bar in Sofia were standing there, the brunette with the pageboy haircut, and the blonde with the braid down her back and the skintight pants.

“Is Neekie here?” the dark one said, her lipstick-smearred mouth grinning lewdly. “Can he come party with us?”

Elaine awoke with a start.

* * *

She finally decided to call Ashley and spill her guts. She needed to talk to someone about her obsession—keeping all her feelings bottled up inside was making her crazy.

Ashley was good at giving advice about the opposite sex—ever since Elaine had lost her virginity to “Mr. Rodriguez,” Ashley had been a kind of mentor to her, at least in the romance department.

“You’ve got to let him know how you feel,” she said.

“How?” Elaine said, shivering. She was standing in a phone booth in a Sofia suburb, and it was about 10 degrees outside. She wouldn’t have dared talked to Ashley about this on her cellphone or from the phone in her office or apartment.

“If I make a pass at him and he’s not interested, I’ll be so humiliated, I won’t be able to look him in the eye again. I’ll have to transfer to some other field office. And I like it here—I *love* it here!”

“You love *him* there,” Ashley said.

Elaine didn’t say anything. There was no need.

“Look, Elaine, I’m not talking about ‘making a pass’ at him. I’m talking about subtle hints. You’re a woman, you know how to do it.”

“I’ve given him every subtle hint in the book, Ashley. He doesn’t respond to any of them.”

Ashley was quiet a moment. Elaine knew what she was thinking. *Well, maybe the man just ain’t interested.*

Ashley said, “Look, it’s probably the boss-subordinate thing. Does he know about the bastard in Great Falls?”

Ashley was the only one Elaine had told about Bill Saunders. “I don’t think so. How could he know?”

“Don’t ask me, I’m not a secret agent.”

“Ashley, we’re not ‘secret agents,’ we enforce the law, like the FBI.”

“Whatever.” Ashley had never understood Elaine’s career choice. “The point is, if he does know about the bastard in Great Falls, then he’s probably scared shitless to make a move towards you. He’s afraid you’ll fly off the handle and get him fired for sexual harassment.”

Elaine had considered this already. “I don’t think that’s it. This guy isn’t into following rules, Ashley. That’s one of the things that makes him so attractive—he’s a rebel, he does whatever the hell he wants.”

“Yeah, those types are exciting.”

Elaine sighed. “I just think that if he was really interested in me that he would take the risk.”

Well, there you have it, she could hear Ashley thinking.

“Look, Lainie, if you’re that crazy about this guy, you should just come out and tell him. You know what they say. ‘It is better to have loved and lost, than not to have loved—’”

“Come on, don’t feed me clichés!”

“Well, you call me for advice, and then when I give it to you, you reject it. What exactly are you wanting me to tell you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just so upset about this. You’ve been a big help, really. I—I just need to think some more.”

“You’ve done enough thinking already—you’re just driving yourself batty. It’s bad for your self-esteem.”

“Yeah,” Elaine sighed, hugging herself and shivering again. “Listen, I’m freezing my butt off, Ashley, I’ve got to hang up. I appreciate all your advice, and please, *please* don’t breathe word of this to anyone.”

“As if I’m going to share it with all my secret agent friends.”

* * *

Two hours later, Nick came into Elaine’s office.

“How would you like to go on an undercover assignment with me to Belarus?”

It was as if he had overheard the entire telephone conversation. Of course, Elaine knew such a thing was impossible.

“Sure,” she said, trying to hide her excitement. “What’s the assignment?”

Nick explained it to her. He suspected that there was a small counterfeiting operation there and couldn’t get any cooperation from the Belarusian authorities, so he wanted to go investigate himself. “It would only be for a couple of days,” he added casually.

“That’s fine,” she said, struggling to hide her exhilaration. She wondered if he would want them to pose as a couple again. She actually felt herself becoming sexually aroused at the thought of holing up with him for a few days in a hotel in Belarus. Who knew what might happen?

“You’ll need a fake passport, of course,” he said. “What country do you want to be from? Are you any good at any particular accent?”

“Might yeh be gettin’ me a passport from Ayerland, so? Some say I do an Ayerish brogue that ain’t half bad.”

Nick burst out laughing. “That’s awesome! Are you Irish, or part Irish?”

“My great-great-great-great grandmother was an Irish Princess. She lived in a beautiful castle.”

Actually, what Elaine said was, “My father used to wander around muttering in an Irish brogue for fun. Brogan is an Irish name, but I don’t think he ever actually knew any real Irish people.”

“Oh. Well, I know some people who can make an Irish passport. These ex-Soviet block countries love the IRA.”

* * *

When they flew to Minsk, the Belarusian capital, Nick traveled on a fake British passport and listed his occupation on the landing form as “Engineer.” He told her to write “Accountant” on hers. Her passport was a diplomatic issue, supposedly granted by the Irish Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Food.

“We’ve been married five years, we live in London, I work for British Petroleum. We have no kids. We’re here on vacation. Got it?”

“Yes.”

Elaine was so excited she could hardly contain herself. When they stepped out of the taxi and approached the hotel lobby, she mustered up the courage to take Nick’s hand.

He quickly let go, frowning at her.

“I thought we were supposed to be married,” she said, a little hurt.

“We are. Five *years*, Elaine. No married couple holds hands after five *years*.”

* * *

When they actually went to the hotel room Nick had reserved, Elaine was even more disappointed. She had hoped it would only have one large bed. Instead, it not only had two separate beds, but they were in separate rooms. It was a suite designed for a family, with one bedroom for the parents and one bedroom for the kids. There were even separate bathrooms.

She was disappointed that he would never get to see her in the new peignoir that she had spent half her salary on.

“I thought this would give you more privacy,” Nick said, as he took his suitcase into the smaller of the two rooms.

“Thanks,” Elaine muttered.

She went into the other bedroom and glumly unpacked her suitcase.

A few minutes later, Nick appeared at her door.

“I’m going out, see what I can stir up.”

“You don’t want me to—”

“No, you need to stay here. Be ready to check out any bills I bring back—we’ll have to move fast.”

* * *

The three days they spent in Belarus were miserable for Elaine. Nick made her stay in the room like a prisoner. He went out and tracked down suspect \$100 bills, brought them back for her to check, and then went out again, leaving her alone nearly the entire time. The only reason he wanted her with him was so that he could quickly determine if the bills he tracked down were fake, and to tie them to other notes that had surfaced elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

On the third day, when Nick was preparing to leave again, she said, “I’m getting awfully tired of room service, Nick. Can’t we at least go out to dinner?”

“Can’t do it,” he said.

“Why not?” she said angrily.

“Because it’s too dangerous here. I’m almost sure I was followed today.” He paused, looking at her sympathetically. “If anything happened to you...”

“What?”

He looked away, brushing the hair out of his face. “It’s my responsibility to keep you safe, that’s all.”

He left without saying anything else.

* * *

Nick did not return until early the next morning. He looked haggard, with two days of stubble on his face. There was a small gym bag over his shoulder. With a sigh, he slung it onto the coffee table and unzipped it.

It was packed with bundles of dirty-looking Belarusian rubles, held together with bright yellow rubber bands.

He silently unzipped his own suitcase, opened up a false bottom, and began carefully packing the money into it.

“Do you mind explaining where that came from?” Elaine said.

“A false bribe,” he muttered. “I posed as a corrupt Interpol agent to get closer to the source of those counterfeits that I think are coming out of Russia.” He glanced up at her. “I think we’re getting close to the source of those, Elaine. That could be a big bust, a real feather in our cap.”

He finished packing in the bills and closed his suitcase. “It’s only about \$10,000, but it will come in handy for my undercover operations.” He glanced at her again. “I don’t want to report it as coming from here, it’s too much to explain and too much paperwork. I’ll convert it to American dollars and say the money was found during an undercover operation in Sofia—we can recycle it much easier that way.”

* * *

When they got back to Sofia, Elaine seriously considered asking for a transfer to another Secret Service office. Her one-year anniversary was almost up. Technically, it was possible.

Why should I keep torturing myself? she thought. Working side by side with a man she was madly in love with, but who would not return her feelings? It was masochistic.

Finally, Elaine could stand it no longer. Two days before her one-year anniversary, she downloaded the Request for Transfer form on her computer and started filling it out.

When she reached the blank that said, Reason for Transfer Request, she hesitated, her fingers hovering over the keyboard.

Can’t take this anymore—have the hots for my boss, and it’s driving me insane.

“Morning, Elaine.”

She looked up sharply. Nick was standing in her doorway, smiling at her.

She quickly minimized the window on her screen. “Good morning.”

“Are you free Friday night?”

“Why?” she said guardedly.

“I thought we’d go out and celebrate your anniversary.”

“I—” She feigned surprise. “Has it been a year already?”

“Sure has.” Nick grinned. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

Elaine watched him a moment, standing there in his jeans and leather jacket, his hair disheveled. He looked like he just tumbled out of bed with one of his bar girls.

She wanted to strangle him.

With a sigh, she said, “Nick, I really don’t want to go out with you and your...”

He looked puzzled. “My...what?”

“Groupies.”

“My *groupies*?” He laughed. “Is that how you think of them?”

Elaine didn’t answer. He stood there a long time, gazing at her. “If I didn’t know better,” he said, “I’d think you were jealous.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, blushing. She opened the window on her screen. He couldn’t see what she was doing, so it didn’t matter.

He said, “The only reason those girls like me is because I spend money on them.”

Elaine ignored him, filling in another field on the transfer application.

"I've got a present for you," he said.

She looked up at him. Smiling, he reached into his pocket and took out a small cardboard box. It was about the size of jewelry box for a ring.

Keep dreaming, she thought, but her heart beat a little faster as he set it on her desk in front of her. "Just a memento of your first day in Bulgaria."

All she could remember about the first day here was how good her hand felt in his. Hiding her bitterness, she opened up the box.

Inside was a little plastic turkey, with funny little legs hanging down. Nick picked it up, wound the knob on the side, and let it go. It waddled crazily around the desktop, making an awful grinding noise.

They both started laughing.

"The Turkey Roll," Elaine said.

"Bet you'll never forget that day, will you?"

No, Elaine thought, *but not for the reasons you think*.

He just stood there and they both watched the little toy wind down until it fell over on its side.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?"

"About Friday night. Do you want to go to dinner, or not? I made reservations at Maison Godet. It'll just be you and me." He smiled. "No groupies allowed."

Maison Godet was the best restaurant in Sofia, an, intimate, romantic setting.

No way was she going to set herself up for another letdown.

"What time?" she said.

"About seven? Pick you up at your place."

After he walked away, she looked after him, thinking that the dinner would be a good chance to tell him that she was requesting a transfer.

* * *

When Friday night rolled around, Elaine took the afternoon off. It wasn't so she could get ready for her evening out with Nick. She wasn't about to do anything special to prepare—she just wanted to relax for a few hours, maybe take a nap so she wouldn't get sleepy if they had wine at dinner.

No way will I do anything out of the ordinary to try and look prettier, she thought, as she sat in the Salon de Pierre, having her hair and nails done. *No way will I spend my good money to try and impress him*, she thought, as she paid the clerk in the boutique for the soft, flowing cashmere dress that picked up the blue in her eyes. *No way will I get my hopes up just to have him cruelly dash them again*, she thought, admiring her new outfit and hairstyle in the mirror, her heart pounding madly at the thought of what might happen if he walked her up to her apartment to say goodnight.

I'm a bloody fool, she thought, as she touched up her lips in the bathroom. *I'm the biggest bloody fool that's ever walked this earth*.

* * *

"You look nice," Nick said simply, when he picked her up.

"Thank you," she said. "So do you."

Nick was wearing slacks and a sports coat over a sweater, which was about as dressed up as he ever got, except when someone from Washington visited.

When they were seated at the restaurant, Nick said, "You seem a little distracted. Are you all right?"

“I’m fine. It’s just been a long week.”

“Yeah. For me, too.”

He started talking animatedly about one of his cases. “I think we’re going to bust the operation wide open.” It was a counterfeiting operation in Russia, but the printing operation was located somewhere else. Nick suspected it was in Croatia, but he wasn’t sure. “Without your help indentifying the fakes, this would have taken months longer. We wouldn’t be nearly as far along.”

“I’m glad,” she said.

Despite her determination not to enjoy herself, she had a wonderful evening with Nick, as always. She had never felt more comfortable with any man in her life. The Russians had a word that described it perfectly—*rodnoi*. A warm, close, family-like feeling.

That’s exactly how she felt with Nick. Like they were meant to be together, always, forever.

By the time they were eating dessert, Elaine started to feel annoyed with herself for letting her infatuation run so wild. She had a wonderful job, and Nick was a fantastic boss who truly appreciated her skills. And the best friend anyone could ever have! Why was she about to screw everything up just because the man didn’t have any romantic interest in her? She felt selfish and stupid and immature. She ought to just delete the Request for Transfer and, once and for all, fix it firmly in her mind that Nick was a *coworker*, and that was all he would ever be. Period.

* * *

“You want to go have a drink somewhere?” Nick said, when they got back in his Mustang.

Elaine glanced at her watch—it was almost eleven.

“Come on,” he said, with a boyish grin. “We’ll go to a place none of my groupies can afford.”

She smiled, but on the inside, she wasn’t laughing. It amazed her how fast her feelings could flip-flop. How could he be so cold and start talking about his damn groupies? She sorely regretted ever calling them that. And how could he not know how she felt about him? He had to be an absolute moron if he couldn’t tell. But then, men were pretty blind sometimes.

“I’d rather go home, Nick. I’m tired.” She opened the car door.

“Ok. I’ll walk you up.”

“You don’t need to do that, Nick.”

“Yes I do.”

When they went inside the building and got on the elevator, Nick looked a little uncomfortable. He kept stealing glances at her, but she avoided eye contact.

They stepped off the elevator and she unlocked the door to her apartment. She turned to him and smiled. “Thanks for dinner, it was really nice.”

“Glad you enjoyed it.” Before she could turn away, he touched her chin. “Are you mad at me about something? I haven’t done anything to offend you, have I?”

No, she thought, looking up into his brown eyes. *That’s just the problem, Nick. You never do anything to offend me.*

“I’m just a little tired, that’s all.”

“Oh. Well, if I ever do offend you, you’ll tell me, right? I don’t think I could stand it if I ever hurt your feelings or anything.”

“Why’s that, Nick?” she said, now looking directly into his eyes.

“I...I don’t know. You’re just...too nice a person.”

They both just stood there, gawking at each other.

“I wanted to tell you how much I’ve enjoyed working with you this past year, Elaine. I’m not very good at saying this kind of thing...but you’ve really brightened up things around here. For me, I mean.”

“I’m glad,” Elaine said. “I like working with you, too, Nick.”

There was another awkward silence.

“Well,” Nick said, “I’ll see you Monday, then.” He hesitated just an instant, looking past her, into her apartment.

“See you Monday,” she said.

He just stood there, looking into her eyes.

Time seemed to have completely stopped.

Suddenly, he grabbed her and passionately started kissing her.

The next instant, they were falling all over each other, knocking over furniture. Nick kicked the door shut with his foot and pushed her down on the couch.

Elaine found herself tumbling down a long, deep, delicious tunnel of ecstasy. Nothing else in the universe existed except her and Nick. He tore off her clothes and devoured her, his lips and tongue exploring every inch of her body.

* * *

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he whispered, sometime in the middle of the night.

“I didn’t think you liked me.”

“My god, I’m crazy about you, I have been since the first day you walked into my life!”

When Elaine finally drifted off to sleep in his arms, her worst fear was when they awoke, under the sober bright light of morning, Nick would be all fidgety and awkward, regret what they had done, and tell her that it was a “slip”, that they should just go back to being coworkers and friends.

But that didn’t happen.

The next morning, he held her close to him, stroking her hair and her face, looking into her eyes.

They made love again, and then finally got up and dressed. He was going to Russia for a one day undercover operation and wouldn’t be back until late Sunday night.

She hugged him tightly. She didn’t want to let go of him. She was afraid that if she did, she would lose him.

“I won’t see you again until Monday morning,” he said, gently pulling himself back so he could look at her face.

“What are we going to do, Nick?”

“What do you mean?”

“At work. It’s going to be awkward, isn’t it?”

“How so?”

“Everyone will know. You can’t hide something like this from people. They sense it.”

Nick shrugged. “I don’t give a shit.”

* * *

Elaine stayed in bed long after he left, in a euphoric afterglow like nothing she had ever experienced, smelling his manly scent on the pillows, still hearing his voice, feeling his touch. It was all like a dream—she couldn’t believe it had actually happened.

She'd harbored a fear, partially instilled by Ashley, that if it did actually ever happen, it would be a letdown, that the real thing would never live up to her fantasies. But it turned out to be quite the opposite. Making love with Nick was even better than she had imagined, partially because she had never slept with someone for whom she had such strong feelings. Sex with Nick wasn't complicated, it was easy and effortless—she would do anything to please him, and he seemed to have the same attitude towards her.

* * *

At about 10:30 am, her cellphone started ringing. Elaine was still in bed. She was in such a dreamy, exhilarated state that she was almost unaware of the sound until she realized it might be Nick calling her.

She pulled the blanket around herself and retrieved her cellphone from her purse.

The display said UNKNOWN CALLER.

"Hello?" she said, her voice still husky with lust.

"Hey, smart-ass."

Elaine frowned. "Excuse me?"

"It is you, isn't it?" a raspy male voice said. "The smart-ass who was in my anti-counterfeiting class at Laurel a while back?"

The memories of the training class at the Secret Service Academy slowly came back. It was Judd, or whatever his real name was, the instructor from the Treasury Department. Gene Lassiter. That was his name.

"Yes, it's me," Elaine said, sitting up in the bed.

"How come you never called me? Being sent to Bulgaria ought to be enough to get you fed up with working for the Secret Service."

"It's—it's not bad." She glanced over at the mussed up bedcovers. "I like it here." *Especially now.*

His voice changed tone. "I hate to tell you this, but you're in trouble. Serious trouble."

She sat up even straighter, suddenly afraid. She wondered if he could already know she had slept with Nick. "What do you mean?" she said cautiously.

"We shouldn't talk about this on the phone. All I can tell you at this point is that the SAIC there is about to be arrested. You need to get the hell out of that office, and fast."

Elaine was having a difficult time taking all this in. "Arrested for what?"

"It's better not to talk about this on the phone." He paused. "On Tuesday I'll be in Berlin, on business. Can you meet me there for a chat?"

"Well...yes, I guess so." Elaine's mind was racing, trying to come to grips with what Nick might be doing to get himself arrested. And why Gene Lassiter would be warning her about it.

He said, "Tell your office you have some personal business in Berlin on Tuesday, a sick relative or something, and that you'll just be out one day. Make absolutely sure no one knows anything else. Especially the SAIC. Is that clear?"

"Yes. Yes, sir."

The line went dead.

CHAPTER 1.16

Elaine spent the rest of the weekend in a state of despair. She couldn't believe that Nick was doing anything wrong. But then she remembered their trip to Belarus, and the \$10,000 worth of Belarusian rubles he had smuggled back in his suitcase. He had asked her not to report it, saying that he would convert it to dollars and say that it had been found in Sofia. When they had gotten together for Elaine to fill out their DOPS, the money had not been mentioned. Nor had she heard it mentioned since.

On Monday morning, Elaine made sure she arrived at work before he did so she could make her reservations without calling too much attention to it. Nick would find out, of course—he had to approve any requests for personal leave.

At about 10:30 am, he appeared at her office door. “Hi,” he said simply. He gazed at her, smiling, his eyes saying more than words ever could. He lowered his voice a little. “How are you?”

“Fine.” She tried to behave as warmly towards him as possible. “How was Russia?”

“Made a lot of progress this time.” He opened his jacket and handed her a small bundle of \$100 bills. “Check these out and see if any of them match the old ones.”

“Fine.”

He just stood there, watching her. Looking over his shoulder, he stepped closer and took her hand. He kissed it tenderly, gazing into her eyes. “You sure you're okay with what happened between us?”

“Yes.” Her face flushed.

“I know it's a little awkward...”

“Nick, I have to go to Germany tomorrow.”

“Germany?” he said, puzzled. “Why?”

“A friend of mine from college—Heather—who moved there with her boyfriend. He walked out on her last night.” Elaine felt horrible lying to Nick. But she told herself this was for the best—she would go talk to Gene Lassiter and straighten this out. Lassiter obviously was on the wrong track about Nick. Surely Nick hadn't taken those Belarusian rubles as a real bribe. “Heather's a basket case right now. I told her I would come see her.” Elaine added, “It will just be for one day.”

“Oh.” Nick nodded. Elaine thought she saw a flicker of suspicion cross his face, but she wasn't sure. “Well, I'll see you when—Wednesday?”

“Yes, Wednesday.”

“What about dinner Wednesday night...?”

“I'd love that.”

He gave her hand a warm squeeze. “See you Wednesday, then.”

CHAPTER 1.17

The meeting took place at the Ritz-Carlton, in downtown Berlin. Elaine found Gene Lassiter sitting at a booth in the bar, two beers in front of him.

He gave her a warm welcome and said, “I hope you like beer. Nobody does beer like the Germans.”

Elaine wasn't interested in beer—she was interested in finding out exactly what Nick was being investigated for—but she took a sip, tensely biding her time.

The aging man just sat there, smiling at her, one hand over the other on top of his gold-tipped cane. It was cast in the shape of a horse's head.

“You've got quite a reputation,” he said.

Elaine grew even tenser. “What do you mean?”

“Identifying the fake currency. Word gets around.”

“Oh,” she said, relieved. She was afraid that he somehow knew she had slept with Nick. She told herself to stop being so paranoid.

“It's a gift,” Lassiter went on, “being able to spot fakes with the naked eye, without using a lot of fancy equipment. I knew you were talented back when I had you in that class at Laurel.”

“Well, I ought to be halfway good at it by now,” Elaine said modestly. “That's about all I've been doing during the past twelve months.” She wished he would tell her about the trouble he thought Nick was in.

“You know, just three weeks ago, I was about to call you and offer you a job at Treasury. To join a special new project I'm working on.” There was a twinkle in his eye. “When I started checking you out, that's when I discovered that the SAIC at your office is under internal investigation.”

“Nick LaGrange?” Elaine said, just to make absolutely sure they were talking about the same person.

“Yes. LaGrange.”

“What's he being investigated for?”

“Are you aware of a case that concerns counterfeits from a genuine KBA Giori machine?”

“Yes. Nick has mentioned it from time to time.”

“What did he tell you, exactly?”

This information wasn't classified, so there was no harm in sharing it. “He said there's a possibility that the Russians, or someone in Eastern Europe, have a KBA Giori intaglio press. He's working the case himself.”

“That's pretty much right,” Lassiter said. The old man slowly twirled his cane between his fingers. “So, you haven't had any involvement in that case...”

“No.”

“That's damn lucky for you,” Lassiter said.

“Why? What exactly do you think Nick has done?”

“From what I can gather, he's burning the candle at both ends.”

“You mean, taking bribes?”

“Exactly. To throw the rest of the Secret Service and Interpol off track.”

“I don't believe it,” Elaine said.

“You better believe it. LaGrange is going to do hard prison time for this, Elaine. What he's doing amounts to treason. He'll get twenty years in a maximum security penitentiary. If you've had any material involvement in his activities, you may get dragged down with him.”

Elaine swallowed. Technically, she had falsified her DOPS to cover Nick's tracks.

Lassiter was studying her face. "How close are you and LaGrange, anyway?"

"Not very," Elaine said, a little too quickly. "I mean, we're good friends. But that's all." Damn it! Of course they could only be good friends, in Lassiter's eyes—Nick was her boss!

Lassiter sipped his beer, regarding her as if he was a little unsure of her answers. "The bottom line is, we need you at Treasury on a very interesting and exciting project, one that has to do with stopping these criminals who have the Giori press. It's a project where you can really put this talent for identifying fakes to spectacular use." He paused, raising an eyebrow. "Are you interested?"

Elaine thought it over. Why did this have to happen to her and Nick? Only three days after she'd slept with him?

"We'll give you a twenty percent raise," Lassiter added.

"I won't do anything against Nick," Elaine said.

"I'm not asking you to. But you need to get out of Bulgaria and wash your hands of this. And we really need you on this new project. You pull this off, it will be a fantastic achievement for you."

On the inside, Elaine was experiencing a riot of conflicting emotions, everything from outrage to grief. She was angry that she was being put in such a horrible position. But it wasn't Lassiter's fault.

"Do you want to think about it?" Lassiter said.

"If Nick really is guilty, I don't want to stay in Bulgaria, Mr. Lassiter."

"Gene," he said, smiling. "Call me Gene."

CHAPTER 1.18

Elaine flew back to Bulgaria feeling incredibly distraught. She didn't know how she would face Nick again. She was overwhelmed with guilt. She was betraying him. But now she was fairly sure he was guilty, and she wasn't about to go to jail for him.

But she had to be absolutely sure.

When she arrived in Sofia, she spent the entire evening packing up everything in her apartment. Then, at 5 a.m., she went into work, long before anyone else would be there except the guard at the front entrance.

After she made absolutely sure the space was empty, she donned a pair of latex gloves and went into Nick's office. He never locked his door, nor did he ever lock his messy desk or cabinets. Yet, the very bottom drawer of his large file cabinet was locked.

She pulled out her locksmith tools and, after fumbling around for almost five minutes, finally got it open. Buried in the very back of the drawer, hidden under a sweater that stunk of tobacco, was a cardboard box.

Please don't let there be any money in this, she thought, as she opened the flaps.

Her heart sank.

There it was, staring her in the face. The \$10,000 worth of Belarusian rubles Nick had taken from Bulgaria. She recognized the yellow rubber bands that were still around each bundle. He had never converted it to American dollars, never recycled it into the account used for undercover operations.

“Bastard,” she whispered, staring down at the damning evidence. Now she felt betrayed. She had falsified her DOPS, and his, too.

She shut the drawer, relocked it, and went back to her office.

Nick came in about the usual time. She was busy packing up the personal items from her office.

He stepped inside her door and said, with a grin, “Let’s go synchronize our DOPS.” The grin faded as he looked around at the empty bookshelves and the cardboard boxes. “What—what’s going on?”

“I have to go to Washington,” she muttered.

He looked back at the boxes. “What do you mean, you ‘have’ to go to Washington?”

“I—I’m being transferred.” She avoided his eyes.

“Transferred...what the hell are you talking about?”

“Word spread about me being able to check counterfeits fast, and they want me for a new project they’re working on at Treasury.”

He looked dumbfounded, then suspicious. She avoided his gaze.

“What the hell happened in Germany?” he said. “Who were you meeting with there?”

“I can’t tell you, that,” she said, pulling some file folders from her drawer. Before she and Lassiter had parted, he told her that absolutely, under no circumstances, was she to reveal anything to Nick. The cover story was that her skills in counterfeit recognition were needed for a new project in Washington, that her supervisor there was a secret, and that it would be in violation of her security clearance to reveal anything else. Her paperwork that transferred her from the Secret Service to the Treasury Department would be sent overnight. Prepaid tickets to D.C. would be waiting for her at the Sofia Airport.

Nick stepped behind her desk and grabbed her wrist. “What the hell is happening, Elaine?”

“Let go of me!” she said, yanking her arm free.

One of the other agents was passing the door. He stopped and looked into the office. When he saw Nick’s contorted face, he quickly continued on.

Nick just stood there, breathing hard. “In case you’ve forgotten, I’m the SAIC of this office. I’m asking you an official question. Who were you meeting with in ___”

“I don’t work here anymore,” Elaine said, her throat dry. “I work for Treasury now.”

Nick looked like she’d slapped him across the face. “What’s the matter with you? Didn’t the other night mean *anything* to you?”

“I—I just have to leave, Nick.” She was fighting tears. “I have no choice. Please don’t ask me anything else.”

“You *have* to leave? This isn’t the damn U. S. army, Elaine. You don’t *have* to do anything.” He paused, his expression pained. “Is it another man?”

She couldn’t do this to him, security clearance or no security clearance.

“Nick...you are about to be arrested.”

(End of Book 1 – to be continued)

To purchase Book 2 of Lust, Money & Murder, please go to [this page](#).

A Letter to My Readers

Hello, Dear Reader!

I hope you enjoyed this book. If so, you'll like many of my other novels. I write in a variety of genres—thrillers & suspense, romance, young adult, and horror. All my stories are written in the same gripping, fast-paced style with plenty of mystery and surprises. 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.

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I always welcome comments about my books—please feel free to give feedback via email (mike@mikewellsbooks.com) or via my [blog](#). Book reviews on Goodreads, Amazon, B&N, etc. are also appreciated.

Thanks for reading!

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