

husband – is urgently needed by Mr Randolph Crowther, address below, within the hour. I would not request this of you were it not – quite simply – a matter of life and death.”

Harry looked up. And said, simply, “Well...”

“*Well* indeed. What do you think?” she said, staring at Harry and shaking her head in surprise. Or maybe shock.

The vacation suddenly off to a bumpy start.

“Life or death? With those words, I think we *don't* have a choice.”

“I agree.”

“This Crowther chap. Mean anything to you?”

“You bet he does,” said Kat, “Randolph Crowther is one of the grandest of this city’s many grand old businessmen. And that address? One of Wall Street’s finest.”

“Indeed?” said Harry. “An American tycoon? In which case, I do believe I had better unpack and find my best suit and tie.”

“So much for the holiday away from it all,” said Kat, as she headed for the bedroom to dress – not at all sure what would be best to wear.

Thinking, *What’s the dress code for a matter of life and death?*

And also feeling that old thrill... when it seemed a case might be about to start.

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Harry opened the cab door for Kat, then paid the driver and stood on the sidewalk for a moment to look at the Crowther Building, all marble pillars and granite carvings, stretching what seemed like twenty floors up into the morning sky.

“I do see what you mean about *grand*,” he said, taking Kat’s arm. They nodded to the doorman and entered into a lobby as tall as it was wide, with a reception desk as long as a cricket pitch, and a line of elevators.

“Pretty quiet,” said Harry.

“Saturday,” said Kat. “This place on a weekday? Not a seat in the house.”

Just one uniformed man stood behind reception. He stepped out and walked over to them, the squeaking of his polished shoes on the marble floor echoing in the vast space.

“Sir Harry and Lady Mortimer, I assume?” he said.

“You assume correctly,” said Harry.

“This way, please. Mr Crowther is expecting you.”

He led them to the furthest elevator, took out a key to unlock the controls, then pressed a button and the door opened.

Harry and Kat stepped in, but Harry was surprised to see the man remain outside.

“This is Mr Crowther’s private elevator. It will take you *directly* to his office. Good day.”

The doors shut, and with the gentlest of movements, Harry felt the elevator rise.

“Well, I must say. Not a museum or a gallery. But still – a jolly *interesting* start to the holidays,” he said, and he looked at Kat.

“I suspect it’s going to get way more interesting at any moment,” she replied.

After half a minute, the elevator stopped, and the door pinged softly, then opened. Harry and Kat stepped out into a small, empty anteroom – ahead of them, a polished door in the most perfect walnut.

Silence.

Then the door swung open and Harry saw a man appear – tall, white-haired, an old pin-stripe suit and waistcoat with a gold watch chain.

He looked to Harry like the classic Victorian lawyer – but for the weatherbeaten face, like a farmer’s, which now broke into a broad grin as the man saw Kat.

“Well, well,” he said. “Look at you, *Kat Reilly*. There’s a sight for sore eyes.”

“Sean O’Driscoll, as I live and breathe,” said Kat, and Harry heard a bit of an Irish lilt creeping into her voice.

Harry smiled and watched the two of them embrace – Sean stepping back to fully take her in, before turning to Harry, taking his hand and giving it a vigorous shake.

Got a grip like a farmer’s too, thought Harry, liking him instantly.

“You, sir, are one *very* lucky man,” he said, grinning, “being married to this extraordinary woman.”

“Don’t I know it,” said Harry.

“And also a brave one, I have to say,” said Sean with a wink, and Harry laughed.

But then he saw Sean’s face take on a serious expression.

“I do wish these were happier circumstances,” he said. “But they are what they are. Follow me now, and we’ll go through to Mr Crowther’s office. I’ve taken the liberty of explaining to him – in confidence of course – your particular *history* and *skills*, Kat. And also yours, Sir Harry, of which I have been apprised by one of my dearest old pals in our own diplomatic service. Again – all in strictest confidence.”

“Sounds as if you believe these *skills* are about to be called upon?” said Harry, as he and Kat followed Sean down a long corridor to a pair of imposing doors.

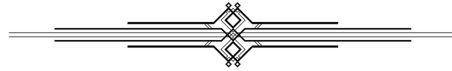
“Indeed,” said Sean. “But know this: you are at absolute liberty to reject the request that Mr Crowther is about to make of you.”

“Which is?” said Kat, as Sean stopped in front of a pair of double doors, with the word *Chairman* engraved in gold letters on a plinth above.

“I think I had best leave that to Mr Crowther to explain,” said Sean, then he knocked on the door.

“Enter!” came a gruff voice from within, and Sean opened the doors and in they went.

3. The Chairman of the Board



Kat took in the wood-panelled room, the expansive leather-topped desk, the wide leather sofa and matching wingback armchairs – all dwarfed by massive oil paintings in the heroic style which filled the walls.

Each painting, a different romanticised vista of the great American West: a locomotive, steam and smoke billowing fiercely, powering into a sunset; brawny railway workers laying track across an endless plain, engineers on top of hills surveying mountain passes and the vast wilderness ahead.

All to be conquered.

Framed in the quartet of windows overlooking Wall Street, stood a man, his back to them, leaning on a silver cane – *Randolph Crowther*, Kat assumed.

He turned slowly and stared at his visitors for a few seconds. Kat stared back: he had the bearing, she thought, of a man used to giving orders to any and all, and seeing them quickly obeyed.

“Lady Mortimer. Sir Harry. Welcome. Your passage good? And I trust you are not suffering too much from this infernal heat?”

Kat saw Harry, ever the gentleman, stride over to the man and shake his hand.

“Oh, we’re used to it, sir,” he said. “Some of our postings were worse than this.”

Kat joined him and shook hands with Crowther, noting that grip – holding nothing back because she was female.

“Cairo, Morocco, Istanbul, yes?” he said, peering at them both. “And even, I believe, a stint in Tokyo, Lady Mortimer – am I correct?”

“You’re well informed, Mr Crowther,” said Kat, glancing at Sean who stood to one side. She saw him shrug.

Her own and Harry’s classified postings in government service clearly not as secret as she’d thought.

“Please. Take a seat,” said Crowther, nodding to the sofa and walking over to the desk and sitting behind it. “I’d like to start, but we shall have to wait for my damn son to get here. *Never* on time. No wonder the company’s going to the dogs.”

Kat glanced at Harry – both of them knowing not to add fuel to this fire. Then she heard the door burst open behind her.

“Ah, here he is *at last*,” said Crowther.

Kat turned to see another man enter – in his forties maybe, flustered, a sheen of sweat on his brow, a stack of papers under one arm.

“Joseph Crowther,” said the man, putting down the papers in a sloppy heap, then quickly shaking their hands. His grip, looser, sweatier than his father’s. “Sir Harry, Lady Mortimer, pleasure to meet you, and please, call me Joseph.” Kat saw him turn quickly to Randolph. “Oh, sorry father, Midtown traffic, you know, even Saturdays now, this city, impossible, I don’t know what—”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure,” said Randolph. “Now sit down, will you? Let’s get on with it. Already lost half a morning! Sooner this is done, sooner we’ll have the boy home and you can get back to work and we can all get *back* to our lives.”

“Sorry everyone, sorry,” said Joseph dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief and taking the seat next to Sean.

The father shot a look at his son.

“Now, let *me* explain the situation,” said Randolph. “And a damn fine mess it is, I don’t mind telling you.”

Kat saw Joseph open his mouth as if to add something, but clearly thinking the better of it.

“Two nights ago, you see,” said Randolph, “my grandson Teddy was kidnapped. Grabbed from the street, thrown into a car, and taken by persons unknown. Yesterday morning, a ransom note was received by my son here, the boy’s father, demanding fifty thousand dollars for his safe return!”

Kat looked at Joseph, then Harry. *So this was the matter of life or death. And fifty thousand – quite the sum.*

“The kidnappers insisted that the police be kept out of it. No surprise there. They would say that, wouldn’t they? But I have no problem with that. In the last couple of years, there’s been a plague of kidnapping in this country and, in most cases, as far as I can see, the police have done more harm than good. I want my grandson back, foolish boy though he is, so I *shall* pay the ransom – problem solved. Questions?”

“I’m very sorry to hear this, Mr Crowther,” said Kat. “It must be terrible for you both, for your whole family. But perhaps the police should—”

Randolph quickly cut her off. She guessed his views about women and opinions. *Ancient at best.*

“Running around like headless chickens, most of ’em,” said Randolph.

“Yes, but—” – another look to Harry – “I wonder,” Kat continued, “how do you think my husband and I can help?”

“As I said, the police can stay the hell out of this. But – damn it – I need people watching over this show who know what they’re doing. There’s not just a life at stake.

There's a lot of money. *My money.*"

She heard Harry clear his throat. Then, as if pointing out the obvious, he said, "Could you not just hire a detective agency? Chaps like Pinkertons or Burns maybe?"

"Pah! Agencies? First thing they'll do is sell the story to some damn newspaper. That is, if they aren't already in the pay of whatever mobsters are behind this. *Worse* than the police, in my opinion."

Kat wondered, *Does this powerful tycoon have his own history with the police?*

"No. When Sean mentioned you two, I knew straight away you'd be right for the job. Piece of damn luck you're here in the city. Now – what's it going to cost me?"

Kat looked at Harry again and caught his nod. This man was used to buying anything and everything – not exactly Harry's *cup of tea*.

She jumped in quick before Harry bid Crowther good day and good luck.

If this was important to Sean, it was important to her.

"Mr Crowther, let me make something very clear," she said. "*If* Sir Harry and I decide to help – *if* – then there will be absolutely no charge. We will be doing it first as a favour to my dear mentor Mr O'Driscoll here. And second, because, as you say, there is a life at stake."

Randolph's eyes narrowed, staring right at her.

One tough cookie, Kat imagined, not used to the word *if*.

"And, I must say, we need to know *plenty* more about this situation before we decide one way or the other."

She waited while Crowther seemed to take her words in.

"Hmm. No charge, eh?"

"We're *not* a detective agency, Mr Crowther," she said.

She caught a small smile from Harry – enjoying this back and forth.

"Right," said Randolph, as if the idea of working for free was alien to him. "So, what else do you need to know? Joseph will answer your questions. Isn't that right?"

Kat looked at Joseph Crowther – who sat in the leather armchair opposite, still dabbing his face with a handkerchief – then nodded to Harry.

Time to get some details.

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"Joseph, your father here said you got a note yesterday," said Harry, taking over the questioning. "Do you have it with you?"

"Sure," said Joseph, reaching into one coat pocket, then another, before pulling out a tattered sheet of paper.

Harry unfolded it carefully – held it so that Kat could see it too. White writing paper pasted with words cut from a newspaper – the message simple: WE HAVE YOUR SON TEDDY. WE WANT 50 THOU. NO POLICE. BE BY YOUR PHONE SATURDAY AT 6 SHARP. FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS OR HE DIES.

At first glance, there were no obvious clues in the note. Harry had never been involved in investigating a kidnapping, but, from what he'd read – or learned chatting to