

Prologue

“I am worried.”

Andaris walked down the aisle, looking at the Council of Eight sitting in front of him.

“Another fool claims to shine the light for those in need.”

He shook his head in disbelief.

“It is amazing how well-known this guy has become. Thousands of people are following him, believing every word he says, desperately trying to find out who they really are . . .”

A sigh escaped his lips. “When will they finally get it? The road to wisdom can only be paved by eliminating the chaos they have created themselves.”

His hand rested on the ancient document, carefully wrapped in a silk sheet.

“Where is the love? I fear this beautiful feeling is drifting away. Mankind seems to have totally forgotten it. The main source of our existence will slowly disappear.”

The Council of Eight watched him carefully. “It would be a disaster . . .”

Andaris’ eyes looked sad.

“The time to act is now,” he said slowly. “However, we all agreed to stick to the Plan.”

A hush fell upon the Council.

“What about the Plan?” It was the Chairman. He looked puzzled.

“Why don’t we change it?”

The other men nodded in agreement and started to speak out loud.

“I agree. It is now or never.”

“If the world continues to move in the wrong direction, the Plan has no use.”

“The earth will be destroyed.”

“What about the Girl? Is she strong enough?”

“Our Leader, is he in agreement . . .”

“Silence.” Andaris raised his voice. “I met with our Leader. He shares my concern. Endless discussions have been taking place, resulting in a change of the Plan.”

The men were startled. The look of surprise was clearly written all over their faces.

“We will follow the Plan as it is,” Andaris said. “However, there is one significant change.”

He took a deep breath before he continued.

“The world will be confronted with a heartbreaking love story.”

The room was filled with voices now. This exciting news from the Leader clearly shook them up.

“Andaris, how is this possible?”

“The Leader . . . does he think it will happen?”

“How on earth are you going to do this?”

Andaris raised his arm again.

“We need to keep the Faith.” He sounded convinced. “I feel their love will be earth-shattering. Somewhere deep inside, humanity will recognize a long-lost feeling. A desire will start burning in their hearts to love in a similar passionate way. The scent of their naked souls, united in a never ending song of love and affection, is as pure as a blossoming tree.”

It was very quiet. All men were gazing in awe at him.

“We have waited long enough.” He was deadly serious. “They are ready now.”

Hell was breaking loose.

“Andaris, are you sure?”

“There are so many people . . . Why do you think they will fall in love?”

“Suppose their love is not as strong as we thought it would be . . . ?”

“Is there a back-up plan?”

Andaris shook his head. “None of this. There is no fall back. I understand your concern.”

He looked around. The Council seemed to give serious consideration to what he just said.

“Through the years I always fulfilled your expectations. Never did I fail.”

The men nodded. He was right.

“The Leader has clearly put his trust in me. We have made our decision.”

He cleared his throat, knowing exactly the effect his words would have.

“I am extremely proud that the Plan has been put into full operation today. The change will be leading. All will happen as it should.”

1.

Jessie

It was hot.

I can't believe we finally have a real summer this year.

Jessie Golden unbuttoned the top of her purple Cavalli dress. A drop of perspiration stood on her brow. With a smile on her face, she looked over her shoulder. The antique seventeenth century door of the impressive building hosting the office of Kruger Publishing stood wide open. The heat inside was unbearable. She walked away. At last her well-deserved holiday started.

The past eighteen months had been pretty hectic. It all began when John decided to send her to Rome, just before the weekend. It had been announced that Larry Tremont, CEO of Sharkline Express, would give a press conference in the ancient Italian city. For months, now the word was out in the market that the company would definitely be sold.

“I have been hearing this rumor since the beginning of this year.”

John De Witte looked at Jessie. For five years he had been general editor and Jessie's direct manager. She was a reporter for *Business Men*, one of Kruger Publishing's many magazines.

“It would not surprise me if this meeting is to announce the final buyer.”

She nodded while John provided her with the necessary details.

“Try to use your charm.” He gave her a wink. “It would be great if you could have a one-on-one with Tremont after the official part.”

During the flight to Rome an attractive gentleman flirted with her. He worked and lived in Switzerland, but was born in Italy. After she told him she was a reporter, he was even more impressed.

“I rarely have met a woman like you,” he said, looking deep into her eyes.

His voice had a pleasant Italian accent.

She gave him a closer look.

Probably mid-forty, she thought, noticing the refined gray in his short black hair. His beautiful dark eyes were inviting and she was impressed by the way he took care of his hands. His business card revealed his name and title: Stefano Farinelli, general manager of a worldwide venture capital fund.

When the plane landed at Fiumicino Airport, he accompanied her to the luggage belt, still flirting with her. When she made her way to the taxi stand, he followed her as if they were travelling together.

“Alora, which hotel?” he asked before instructing the taxi driver.

“The Excelsior.”

She took her place in the back seat, while he closed the door.

“I am staying in the Hassler,” he said, seating himself next to her.

He looked at his watch. “What about dinner? I will pick you up at 10 pm sharp.”

Totally overwhelmed by his direct approach, she left the cab thirty minutes later and entered the impressive lobby of the Excelsior.

Who does he think he is? I am not going!

She debated, unsure what to do. For fifteen years now, she had been in a steady relationship with Edward. She never cheated on him.

I still love him, but something changed.

Two years ago Edward was promoted to vice-president. Since then he had travelled a lot, just like her. Lately she noticed they were almost strangers sharing the same house during their spare time.

Uneasy, she paced her suite.

Forget him. He is trouble.

She made up her mind. Staying in her room was her best option.

Against her own judgment, she dressed up in a simple black dress. Sonia Rykiel always looked great on her. Barely a couple of minutes later she went downstairs. To her disappointment, Stefano was nowhere to be found.

He probably had second thoughts.

She turned around and started to walk back to the elevator, when suddenly somebody called out her name.

“Jessie, mi devi scusare, sorry, I am late.”

Stefano walked up to her. His dark hair was tousled, which made him irresistible.

He took her hand and guided her through the small streets. It was a ten-minute walk. The restaurant was on the roof of the Hassler hotel, conveniently located in the heart of Rome’s historic centre. The view was breathtaking and the atmosphere extremely romantic.

It is only dinner, nothing more, Jessie was trying to ease her conscience.

When desert was served Stefano clearly had other plans.

“I want to make love to you, amore mio,” he whispered.

Delicately he kissed her fingertips. She looked away, shy, not knowing what to say.

After dinner he looked deeply into her eyes and as a matter of course, she followed him to his suite. Feeling a burning desire, she surrendered to him immediately, forgetting everything, most of all Edward.

When the church bell rang five in the morning, Jessie was completely awake.

What have I done?

Carefully she lifted the sheet. Stefano was sound asleep. She put on her dress quietly. Five minutes later she softly closed the door of the expensive suite. Fuck. She was a cheat.

Oh Edward, I did not want to hurt you.

She stared at the well-decorated chair in her suite of the Excelsior. She was back, totally awake and with an upcoming press conference in four hours’ time. It was close to six. She set her alarm clock for nine and tried to catch some sleep.

The room was packed when she arrived close to ten. She struggled to find a place to stand.

Whoever booked this room made a big mistake.

She was irritated. With the rumors going around, Sharkline Express should have known that the media presence would be huge.

“Sharkline Express is not for sale and will not be sold any time soon.”

It was the first thing Larry Tremont made unmistakably clear when he entered the room. He opened his briefcase and waved his hand. His secretary started the beamer. Soon after some graphs and figures were displayed on the wide screen that covered the wall of the small room.

Did I fly all the way here just to see the semiannual figures?

She was mad at John.

To her surprise it was pretty easy to get a private interview with Larry Tremont. His PR person agreed immediately and she was given thirty minutes out of his busy schedule to fire her questions. She noted he liked her.

“Could you tell me your name again, please?” he asked after the interview.

She looked in her purse and handed out her business card.

“Jessie Golden.”

“I enjoyed the interview, Miss Jessie Golden.”

He held her hand just a minute too long when he shook it.

“No, I have to thank you,” Jessie answered politely. She gave him a smile and left the room.

The sun blazed in the sky. She looked at her watch. It was only 2 pm.

Edward is so sweet . . . He insisted that I should stay for another day.

“It is a beautiful city,” he had told her. “The shopping is great. Just enjoy it while you are there.”

Somehow she was not in the mood and decided to go back to the hotel.

The porter waved at her when she walked by his desk.

“Miss Golden, I have a message for you.”

Not knowing what to expect she looked at the folded paper he gave her.

Probably John, she thought, almost positive the note was his. But it was not.

“Amore mio, where are you? I miss you already. How late can I pick you up today?”

Stefano Farinelli. Her cheeks colored red. A flash of hot sex ran through the veins of her body.

No, this is wrong, she told herself. *I need to get back home.*

Later that day, she arrived at Schiphol Airport, twenty-four hours earlier than expected. A strange car was parked in front of the house. Edward was nowhere to be found. Five minutes later she caught him in bed with a red haired woman. She sighed, thinking about her own adventure.

We are in serious trouble indeed.

Edward didn’t know what to say until Jessie confessed what happened in Rome.

“There you go,” he said, throwing his hands into the air. “Why doesn’t it surprise me?”

Iknew it would happen. Fifteen years . . . we are so bored, Jessie thought, still hoping they could work it out.

For a while they really tried hard to spice up their love life and be at home together more often. Unfortunately, the previous years had left a permanent separation between them.

After a desperate attempt that lasted no longer than two months, Jessie realized that Edward had become a total stranger to her. It took another month before she broke up with him.

It was not easy to be alone again. In the end her busy job at Kruger Publishing became her salvation. Rushing from one deadline to the other, she never had a dull moment. After a while she got used to the new situation.

Stefano, however, had not forgotten her. In the months following their steamy night, she ignored his calls. He kept on phoning her after Edward left. In the end she told him the timing was not right.

“Stefano, please. I know we had a wonderful night. It’s just . . . I am not ready for a new commitment.”

“I know you feel the same,” he told her. “One day you will give in to me, I am sure of it.”

After two additional months, Stefano finally stopped calling and with a sigh of relief, Jessie thought she would never hear from him again.

Six months after her Rome adventure another unexpected event took place.

“Alan Burns passed away last week,” John said with a sepulchral voice.

Burns was the star reporter of the US edition of *Business Men*.

“They have a serious problem,” he continued. “Carlos Gomez will be in London tomorrow. Burns was supposed to attend his press conference.”

He took a file out of the drawer and threw it in front of her.

“Our New York office requested I send someone.”

His look was provocative.

“There is only one person I can think of who can replace Burns,” he said mysteriously. “Someone who recently succeeded to get a private interview with the Sharkline Express CEO . . .”

“Are you suggesting . . .”

He nodded. “Yes, indeed. Jessie, you are well suited for the job. Our New York office is quite impressed.”

I am going to meet the Carlos Gomez! This was great news!

She picked up the file and got pretty excited. Not so long ago Forbes selected him for the third year in a row as America’s Number One CEO.

“Let me give you a word of advice,” John continued. “Jessie, please be careful with him. He tends to be a true lady killer.”

She laughed, telling John he didn’t have to worry. Gomez’ sexual adventures were constantly filling the pages of each gossip magazine. Even Kruger Publishing’s own sleazy *Ssh* published every move he made.

Glancing at his picture, he did not strike her as a common businessman.

If you told me he is the latest model for a Versace fashion shoot, I would believe it, she noted.

His impeccable, tidy suit made him look really hot.

Still, there was something about him she did not like; however she could not point it out immediately. Carefully she studied his picture once more.

It is the way he looks, she concluded in the end. His dark eyes stared at her in a curious way. It made her shiver.

Carefully she put the file back on the desk.

“You will leave tomorrow,” he added. “The press conference starts at ten am sharp.”

For a moment he was silent. She noted he was observing her.

“Jessie.”

“Yes, John . . .”

“In the afternoon there is something else you need to do. . . .”

“A similar press conference?” Her heart was beating loudly.

“Not exactly.” He passed her another file.

“I just got off the phone with the head editor of *Ssh*. They have a problem. Bobby Prince finally got a slot in Lauren McHill’s busy schedule. They asked me if you could interview Joselin McArthur. You know who she is . . . An insignificant actress, who thinks she is a star.”

“But John, I have never done this . . .”

“Piece of cake, my dear.” He winked at her. “You have dealt with the toughest business characters. How difficult can it be to talk about movies?”

The next morning Jessie dressed up in a bright red suit. The sexy short skirt was just above the knee. She looked at herself in the big mirror.

That should do, she thought and rushed to the airport to catch the first flight to London.

Unfortunately, it was not her day. Her plane was delayed and the taxi ride to Central London took over two hours. She was totally exhausted when she arrived ten minutes too late at the reception desk of the luxury Ritz Hotel, fully aware the press conference had already started.

Ten minutes later she realized she was in big trouble. The expression on the face of the fair-haired woman said it all. Glenda Burrows, Carlos Gomez’ press agent, was outraged.

“You are much too late,” she shouted at Jessie. “It already started twenty minutes ago.”

“I am so sorry,” Jessie apologized. “My flight was delayed and . . .”

But Glenda ignored her excuses.

“Come with me,” she said instead. “Please sit down quietly. Mr. Gomez hates interruptions.”

Depressed about the situation, Jessie followed her to the elevators.

Afterwards Jessie could not exactly recall how it happened. Was it because she was tired of running on her high-heeled red Dolce & Gabbana shoes? Or was she too eager in getting herself seated on the last row? It did not matter. The sound of her voice was harsh and terrifying when she lost her balance. Immediately after she entered the room, she found herself lying on the marble floor. Fifty people turned to stare at her, including Gomez. He stopped talking and looked puzzled.

“I am so sorry,” she stuttered, trying to get up as quickly as possible.

Her knee hurt like hell and her hair was totally awry. She felt utterly ashamed.

Glenda pulled her up.

“You . . .” she whispered, trying to disguise her anger. “Sit down and be quiet.”

Not knowing where to look, Jessie kept her eyes fixed on the floor when she took her place between colleagues.

After ten minutes she took out her notebook.

Damn! Damn! I screwed it Shyly she finally dared to look at Gomez. For a brief moment their eyes locked. To her surprise, he stared at her in a way she did not expect. His dark eyes softened.

Not at all the tough and ruthless guy I thought he would be, she thought, remembering the picture John had given her earlier. *He seems to take pity on me.* How could that be?

Quickly she looked away. *Take a deep breath. Yes, you can do this.*

She tried to get Glenda’s attention several times by raising her finger. After her disruptive entrance, Jessie wanted to make a better impression on the famous businessman sitting in front of her. However, Glenda ignored her completely.

At exactly half past eleven she left the room with none of her questions answered. Very frustrated, she walked through the elegant lobby, past Glenda. Her glance was frosty.

Bitch! Jessie thought. *Do you think I did this deliberately?*

One thing was clear. She would certainly not earn the Pulitzer Prize for this interview.

Two hours later she realized luck had left her that day. The interview with Josselin McArthur went far from smoothly. After spending another hour and a half in a taxi, she arrived just in time at her place in Surrey.

“And who would you be?” was the warm welcome the actress bestowed upon her, reading Jessie’s business card. “This can’t be true. Jerry . . .”

An overly dressed assistant rushed into the room. He appeared to be Josselin’s press agent.

“Darling, I don’t understand. What the hell happened with Bobby Prince?” she whined.

“Mr. Prince sends his apologies,” Jessie told her, before Jerry could open his mouth. “I am here to replace him.”

The actress looked her up and down.

“I never heard of you, Miss, uh . . . Golden.”

“I normally only interview business executives. Does the magazine *Business Men* ring a bell with you?”

It did not. Josselin was clearly not interested in her skills.

“Jerry, I told you . . . Only Bobby knows how to write my story,” she complained.

Needless to say, the interview plodded along heavily. Two hours later Jessie found herself in a taxi back to the airport, overly frustrated by the course of events.

But the day had more surprises in store for her. Just before London the taxi stopped and the driver took out his cell phone.

“What’s going on?” she asked suspiciously

“Sorry, the car is out of gasoline,” he apologized.

This is beyond belief. She sighed and checked her watch. It was a quarter past six. Her flight was due within two hours.

“How long will this take?”

She drummed her fingers impatiently on the back of her briefcase.

“Take it easy, lady. I already called a colleague. He’s coming as quickly as possible.”

It started to rain. Jessie shuddered. It was pretty cold for the time of year. She stared through the window. A stretch limo passed on the opposite side of the road and stopped. She saw the driver leaving the car. To her surprise he walked towards her taxi. He tapped on the window.

“Are you that Dutch journalist from *Business Men*?” he inquired.

She nodded.

“Mr. Gomez offers you a ride to the city.”

“I have to go to the airport,” she replied, before grasping the full extent of his words.

“That’s not a problem. Would you like to follow me?”

He paid the taxi driver and put out an umbrella. It was only then when she realized what he’d just said.

Carlos Gomez is sitting in that car? And he gives me a ride?

There was no time to pull back.

The driver opened the door and one pair of seductive jet-black eyes looked at her.

“Hello Miss Golden.”

He seemed very relaxed, sitting on the leather couch in the middle of a pile of papers, which he hastily put aside. He invited her to sit next to him.

“This is very kind of you,” she murmured. “I have to go to the airport.”

He was not interested in her flight and grabbed for the bottle of Bollinger.

“You are perfectly fine. Champagne, or do you prefer something else?”

Her head nodded automatically and he poured a glass.

“Were you satisfied with the interview? I saw that Glenda ignored you.”

His eyes were amused.

“How urgently do you need to catch your plane tonight?” he inquired casually.

“I mean, do you have an appointment tomorrow? Can you fly back one day later?” he clarified, meeting her quizzical look.

“Well, I am free. Why?” she asked suspiciously.

“Perfect.” He ignored her question.

“My dinner appointment just cancelled,” he explained. “Would you do me the honor of accompanying me this evening? Maybe I can answer some of your questions?”

The rest of the ride he was trying to get information out of her. How long had she been working for *Business Men*? Was she seeing someone?

Am I not supposed to interview him?! she thought amused.

He poured a second glass and by the time the spacious limo arrived at the Ritz, she felt pretty relaxed.

Glenda Burrows was certainly not happy to see her.

“Miss Golden will stay here tonight,” Carlos informed her. “Could you have her flight sorted out and arrange a room?”

He walked to the elevator. Jessie followed him automatically.

“I ordered a simple meal in my suite. No objections, I assume?”

She knew she should say ‘no’, but to her own surprise, she did the opposite.

“No problem,” she said airily, feeling pretty excited.

At dinner she got all of her questions answered. He was a very engaging talker.

What a man. He is indeed irresistible. Those eyes, that body. She was drifting. He exudes power and self-confidence. No wonder every woman falls for him.

After dinner he invited her to the large, cozy sofa. He sat close to her, his knee touching the fabric of her skirt. It was silent. He bowed his head and she felt his warm lips meeting hers. The kiss was passionate and her whole body yearned for his.

In a split second Jessie realized what was happening. *This is Carlos Gomez, world-famous playboy. Even John calls him a ruthless lady-killer.*

To Carlos' astonishment, she pushed him away.

"Mr. Gomez . . . Carlos. Thank you for dinner," she stammered. "All that trouble . . . I, I have to go."

She picked up her bag and walked as fast as she could from the scene of temptation.

I am lucky I got to my senses in time. She felt foolish. Like a sheep, she almost walked into his trap. She could not believe what had gotten into her.

Yet there was something positive. John would be extremely pleased with the exclusive interview Carlos had given her.

The rest should be erased from my memory immediately. What the heck? She probably would never meet him again.

A week passed by. Jessie was just in the car on her way home when he called.

"Miss Golden. This is Carlos. Carlos Gomez."

The sound of his voice startled her. She almost bumped into the car in front of her. Quickly she stepped on the brakes.

"Mr. Gomez, uh . . . Carlos . . ."

"I got your number from your boss," he apologized.

"Oh, ok," she murmured.

"I happen to be in Amsterdam. Just arrived. Am in the Amstel Hotel."

He paused. She kept silent.

"Our last meeting ended a bit abruptly. You suddenly disappeared," he continued.

Again she did not say a word. There was an awkward silence.

So? What is your point? she thought, not knowing what to say.

He started to laugh.

"The hotel has an excellent restaurant, La Rive, do you know it? Let me make it up to you," he added, to her amazement. "Shall we . . . do you feel like having dinner with me tonight?"

“Fine.” It did not sound very friendly, as she was totally caught off guard.
“Well then, I will see you there at nine.”

He was already waiting at the bar. His dark eyes lit up when she entered.

“Jessie, I’m so glad to see you.”

The touch of his hand moved her immediately, like a spark of electricity, lighting her up.

Oh dear, this is a big mistake, she thought, trying to put a smile on her lips.

“Champagne?”

“One glass, I have to drive back.”

He ordered a bottle.

The dinner went smoothly. The conversation was light, a mixture of business and fun. Again she enjoyed his company. To her annoyance, she really started to like him.

It was far past midnight when she got up.

“Thank you for this evening, I really enjoyed it,” she said truthfully.

He accompanied her to the elevator.

“The evening doesn’t have to end,” he whispered in her ear.

With his left hand he touched her cheek. He pressed the button. First floor.

“That’s not the exit.”

He laughed. “You are absolutely right. We are going to my suite.” His words said it all. “Jessie, I would be happy to . . .”

His sudden kiss took her by surprise. An uncontrolled desire aroused between her legs. His hands were all over her body. She surrendered completely.

In his suite, they immediately ended up in the large king bed, their bodies and souls totally connected. He drove her to the extreme, moaning loudly when he finally came. For a brief moment he was silent, studying her face.

“Jessie,” he said thoughtfully, caressing her dark curls. “Do you have plans for tomorrow? If so, please cancel all. I want to spend each minute with you.”

That was the beginning of an overwhelming romance that has already lasted for nine months. Initially, she was not sure if he was really serious about their relationship. To her surprise he repeatedly visited her while concluding business in Europe. It made her doubt her intuition.

“I miss you so much, baby,” he said to her amazement.

Could it be . . . does he really love me? She gazed into the mirror.

Her reflection made her insecure.

I'm definitely not a beauty. He is constantly surrounded by gorgeous women.

Why me?

After two months she decided to pop the question. He looked surprised.

"Baby, I love you," he said. His glance was sincere.

"I'm dead serious." He looked troubled. "You are my girlfriend; we have a relationship. Or am I mistaken?"

From that moment onward she gave in. He had her full commitment.

However, she remained worried about John.

"He will dismiss me the moment he finds out," she said, troubled.

"Why?" He was bemused.

"Conflict of interest." She sighed.

He shook his head.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

Within a week John called her into his office. To her surprise she learned he had officially appointed her as Alan Burns' successor.

"New York loved your interview with Gomez."

He hesitated.

"Jessie." He paused and observed her for a split second. "I was informed that Carlos Gomez himself insisted on your promotion."

He looked suspicious.

"Oh, that's odd," she said, smiling innocently at him.

"It really is," he replied thoughtfully. To her relief, he refrained from pursuing the matter.

Still one thing continued to amaze her. Carlos managed to keep their relationship out of the tabloids.

"The world doesn't need to know who my real girlfriend is," he had said when she once mentioned it.

And today was the first time they would go on holidays together. She smiled happily, stepping out of the elevator. Her apartment was located on the third floor.

It will be great. I wonder where we are going. Carlos had been very mysterious about their final destination.

"A bikini and some summer clothes. That's all you need," was the only thing he revealed.

She had ample time. It would certainly take a few hours before he would arrive this evening.

Well, I can pack my suitcase.

She opened the door of the built-in wardrobe. It was the only thing that still reminded of the original state of the renovated 19th century Manor House in which her apartment was located.

She looked around. The cabinet was used as storage space.

Fine. She sighed. The suitcase in the back was stuck between two antique tables. After some push-and-pull work, she managed to get it. A harsh sound filled the closet. She backed off.

Ohno, the antique table is damaged, was the first thing she thought.

To her relief this was not the case. A shelf, formerly nailed against the wall, lay on the wooden floor. She grumbled while picking up the piece of wood. To her surprise there was something else. It turned out to be a brown leather folder, filled with papers. Curiously she picked it up.

Her cell phone rang. *Carlos!*

Very swiftly she got back on her feet and ran with the dusty folder under her arm back to the living room.

“Baby, can you hear me?” The cacophony of sounds was unmistakably coming from an airport.

“I have just landed at Heathrow. Two weeks ago we made an offer to Sharkline Express.”

His voice sounded excited. “Larry Tremont has just accepted. Glenda is trying to organize a press conference in our London office.”

“Baby,” he rambled on, “I am so sorry, but we need to adjust our trip. I will come as soon as possible. Hopefully early tomorrow morning.”

Before she could say a word, he cut the connection.

What a shame. She closed her cell phone, knowing all about mergers and acquisitions. For the next twenty-four hours Carlos would be consumed by the media. At least she was happy with his intention still to come her way.

Tomorrow morning, he said. Well, she would keep her fingers crossed he would be able to make it.

The mysterious, fabric-covered leather folder pulled her attention. She opened it gently, finding a little booklet among other papers. Something was written on top in blue ink.

Can you help me? it read. Dying to see more, she turned the page.

“This book is dedicated to the woman who has done so much for our daughter. Anna and Bob Klasen.” *What is that all about?*

In addition to the thick stack of paper, she discovered an envelope. Curious about its contents, she tore the flap. The sheet of paper inside contained quite a few notes. Attached to it were two pictures. The journalist in her awoke immediately.

She picked up the first photo and studied it carefully. On the back somebody had scrambled a note.

“Nancy,” it read.

What a handsome woman, she thought. With her long blonde hair and perfect facial features, this Nancy resembled an angel.

Automatically she picked up the second picture. It was a man with dark brown wavy hair and naughty blue-green eyes.

“Paul,” she read. His photo really struck her. He looked familiar.

Did we meet? Once again she studied his picture.

Who are these people? She frowned, eager to discover more.

Carlos and the suitcase were totally forgotten. With a glass of wine, she snuggled on the couch. Interestedly, she opened the booklet and turned the pages, trying to unravel the mystery.