

A circular vignette showing a misty forest path. The path is illuminated by a warm, golden light, possibly from a low sun or a lantern, creating a strong contrast with the dark, misty surroundings. The path leads towards a stream that flows through a dense forest of evergreen trees. The trees are dark and silhouetted against the mist. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and serene.

The protector  
is the robber.  
~ Arabic proverb



Part I  
**SEATTLE**



## Chagrin

Lindsey Dumont clutched her portfolio, eyed the two men, and waited.

Akira, senior partner of Matsukata Books, smiled as he introduced Lindsey to his nephew.

The courtly old gentleman smiled again as he handed over her sample book and photographs.

Lindsey sat down and tried to smile too. Perhaps the chill that clamped her stomach against her ribs was an overreaction.

But after his uncle left, Kando Matsukata shuffled through her photos, spread them across his mahogany desk, and said nothing. His smooth, pale face lacked his uncle's warmth, and his eyes, when he glanced up at her, were sharp and appraising.

Lindsey returned his gaze, curious about this handsome, thirty-something person with thick black hair that hung to his collar. He wore an air of superiority as evident as the sheen of his gray shirt and silver cufflinks.

"A brilliant man," his uncle had told her. "Kando is the brains of our operation. I'm just the idea person."

Kando opened Lindsey's book, which featured black-and-white photos of children in an orphanage. "My uncle speaks highly of your work," he said, and flipped through the first pages. He paused at the photo of a blind child snuggling her plush kitten, raised an eyebrow, and turned back to the copyright page. Murmured the publication date. Frowned.

The skin on Lindsey's face began to feel cold, and as the minutes passed, her smile froze and slid off. She lifted her chin, telling herself to ignore his frown.

She examined the walls of his office. Book jackets flung their banners aloft, and mounted photographs sent color dancing through the air. Close by, a trio of exquisite black-and-whites gave her hope.

Kando was still turning pages with his long, elegant fingers, but finally he spoke. "It's been seven years since this book was published. What have you been working on since then? Do you ever shoot in color? We find that color is effective for communicating emotion."

"I've done many photos in color." She unzipped her portfolio to reach for a sample magazine, but he stopped her with a dismissive gesture.

"Dogs, wasn't it? You were taking pictures for a dog magazine?"

"Yes."

"Posed?"

"Mostly."

"Anything else in color?"

"Not much."

He picked up one of her samples, the photo of Ginni. “And this little girl. Someone you know?”

“Yes, it was just an impulse. A gift for friends.”

“My uncle talked to you about the kind of books we publish?”

“Yes.” The word lodged in her throat, cutting off her breath. Was he trying to intimidate her?

“He said you have a book proposal. What is it?”

Her idea—photos of children with books, a celebration of literacy—seemed to wither as she described it, shriveling before the magnificent photographs all around her.

After she ran out of words, he studied her in silence, his gaze impersonal, as if he were filling out a police report.

Subject is wearing a dark business suit. No rings.

Age: early forties

Height and weight: average

Hair: dark brown, short, curly

Face: pale, stiff

Eyes: green

She resisted the urge to smooth her hair and sit up tall, hoping he couldn't see her foolish need for reassurance. She stared back at him, imagining that face in black and white. She'd shoot it with backlighting.

Finally he said, “The pictures you took seven years ago are better than these.” He flicked her photos with a manicured fingernail. “Except possibly this one.”

He dangled the Ginni-in-moonlight shot between his thumb and forefinger. “All that time, you should have been improving. What happened?”

Should she tell him about Enrico, how he died, how she'd lived for months in a small New Jersey town, healing? No.

He let the photograph drop to his desk. “We publish books that are significant. Photos with vitality and power. Not pampered dogs.”

Dismay churned through her. She didn't answer. Couldn't.

He must have noticed. “So now the green eyes come to life.” His mouth twisted. “I do not mean to discourage you, Ms. Dumont, but let's face reality. My uncle thinks you are remarkable. Perhaps I will have reason to agree with him. Perhaps you have some talent.”

Once again he consulted the book's copyright page. He'd be checking her birth date. “Excellence requires hard work, even daring.” He paused. “I wonder if you are up to the challenge.”

She dug a fingernail into the soft edge of the portfolio and kept her gaze unflinching.

His uncle had beamed when she described her book idea, as if he'd caught her vision. But this Kando was the one who issued contracts—or not. The uncle would defer to him.

She waited, wanting that contract so badly her hands quivered and she had to slip them beneath the portfolio.

Kando took a sheaf of stapled pages from a drawer, turned to the last page, and wrote something swiftly across the bottom. He slid the papers into a large, white envelope and placed it in front of her.

“A contract for you to look over.” His voice held a note of dismissal. “You will see that I have added a contingency.”

He stacked the photographs and handed them to her, along with the book. “I'm leaving for Japan tomorrow, but I'll be returning to Seattle the week before Thanksgiving—that's about a month from now. I want you to bring me some different photos. Perhaps something significant. Show me what you can do.”

She held the envelope with fingers gone cold. His expression told her that he didn't expect to see her back. The contingency clause was there to placate his uncle.

He rose, and she did too. "Agreed?" he said.

"Agreed." She clenched her teeth over the rest of the words she wanted to say.

He extended a hand. She brushed the thin fingers with her own and left his office without so much as a glance for the sweet-faced receptionist. She clattered down the stairs, pushed through the heavy glass doors into the street, and only then remembered to breathe.

A brisk autumn wind cooled her face. It scattered leaves across the sidewalk and kept pace with her angry stride as she lurched around the corner onto King Street. Keep going. Anywhere.

Why hadn't he come right out and said it: "*Forget this. You're a has-been.*"

But his uncle had liked her book idea. He'd even suggested that she investigate Seattle's many organizations that focused on children's literacy.

Or . . . was it because of Colin's influence that the old gentleman received her so kindly, not because her work was any good?

A train hooted from the terminal on her right, and a car eased out from the parking garage on her left. Everyone else was getting on with business, this pale October morning. The sidewalk took her up a flight of stairs to a broad street, Jackson, that looked like the busiest place in downtown Seattle.

She turned along Jackson, sliding her book and photos back into the portfolio as she went.

So . . . what had she been doing for the last seven years? One whole year spent at a seaside retreat in New Jersey. Six years pouring her energy into *DogTales Magazine*, based in New York. And what did she have to show for all that work? Not much. Kando Matsukata was right.

She might have walked for ten minutes or half an hour, but finally she paused at an intersection to get her bearings. Where was Seattle's famous Pioneer Square? The taxi driver had spoken of totem poles and historic old trees. She must have taken a wrong turn.

Wrong turns. She kept doing that, didn't she? Why had she left that nice safe job at the magazine?

She shook the question out of her mind and quickened her pace.

Traffic hurried along the street, and joggers detoured around her. She passed Union Station with all its vagrants. She passed a bakery. Another cross street.

Red banners rose overhead, and dragons climbed the light poles, their spiny backs outlined black against the clouds.

She slowed to admire the Dong Hing Market, which spilled out onto the sidewalk with boxes of plump cabbages, polished eggplants and cucumbers, sweet potatoes, and rosy apples.

The breeze kicked up bits of paper and fallen leaves, and cars and busses and trucks rushed past, reminiscent of a street in New York City. She'd done plenty of assignments in New York—maybe that's where she should be working.

She shifted her portfolio to the other arm. Don't think about New York. Get away from this traffic.

At the next corner, she turned along a quiet street hung with signs written in Chinese and came upon a tiny red-brick plaza, serene and lovely as a secluded park.

A crimson pavilion stood at the far end of the plaza, and its roof, shaped like a pagoda, gleamed with gold tiles. She took out her phone for a quick photo and then strolled down the terraced steps. A few Chinese people sat at small round tables in the open space, and yellow-leafed gingko trees bordered the park on two sides.

She stopped for a close-up shot of the pavilion's golden roof and took another of the roof's underside, which was set with dozens of decorative tiles. A jade green table and stools waited there for someone to play chess.

Nearby, she found a pair of cement monuments, each inset with a brass plate that told of the first Asians who settled here in the late 1800's. They had been refugees from poverty and war, and they'd built a new world for themselves in the face of continual hardship.

She sighed as she trailed a finger across the incised words. How courageous and determined those early settlers must have been!

A scarlet dragon, painted high on a wall at the far side of the plaza, caught her attention. Its outspread wings, the curve of its neck, its posture, spoke of determination too.

Beneath the dragon mural stood benches attended by flowering plants, so she crossed the plaza to sit there, keeping her phone in hand for more photos. She would remember this place with its splendid pavilion and the calm-faced people beneath their dragon. And especially the monuments.

She glanced expectantly at her phone. Colin worked at the University of Washington, and he'd promised to call during a free hour. He'd be curious about her meeting, since he was the one who had set it up with the Matsukatas. What was she going to tell him?

She lifted her face to the cloud-filtered sunlight, closed her eyes, and once again heard Kando's disparaging words. Why not let go of the book idea, at least for now? She had plenty of good contacts for freelance articles. She could phone those people, do a few pieces, and build up her reputation again.

Her eyes snapped open.

"Face reality," Kando had said.

Reality? Reality was this: she wanted—no, she was determined—to produce excellent photos, photos good enough to be published by Matsukata Books. She'd heard much about their books, which were respected by the best photographers. It would take hard work and . . . what? Maybe not the daring Kando had spoken of, but something more valuable: courage.

She nodded at the monuments, at the sturdy Asian pioneers they portrayed. Yes, courage. And if Kando preferred color, she could give him color. The Nikon did well with color, but she'd hang onto her vision and do it her way.

She gathered up her portfolio and purse. Maybe she should study the books Kando had published. What made them significant?

Her phone rang with its five-note song. This must be Colin.

"Lindsey." His deep voice wrapped her round with warmth. "I hoped your meeting would be finished by now."

"It is."

He paused, as if listening to her unspoken words. "Where are you?"

"I don't know." She looked across the plaza but couldn't see a street sign. "I started walking and ended up here—a park, I think."

He laughed. "Give me a hint."

"Dragons on the lamp posts?"

He laughed again. "The International District. Is there a red pavilion?"

"Yes. With a pagoda roof that is simply beautiful."

"Hing Hay Park. I often go to the Uwajimaya Market near there. Great place."

In case he decided to ask about the meeting, she said quickly, "Akira Matsukata was very kind. I'd like to investigate some of the books they've published. Any ideas?"

"Elliott Bay bookstore—you'll love it. Your taxi driver will know how to get there. And speaking of taxis, would you mind picking me up tonight?"

Mind? She'd better not, since she still had his car.

“Sure. What time? Where?”

He described how to get to the University’s Suzzallo Library, suggested five o’clock, and said he’d take her out for supper.

After saying goodbye, she took more photos, mindlessly, distracted by her thoughts.

How much would she tell Colin about the interview with Kando? He would understand about fighting for what she wanted to do. She could talk about that.

Slowly she put her phone away. It seemed longer than two days since their last night in Cameron Bay, the last time she’d spoken with him.

Should she ask about that mysterious phone call? Fraser, their mutual friend, had received one too. And then the two of them had hurried off for a meeting in Seattle.

Why? Was there a problem with the CCO, their student program at the University of Washington? Maybe he would tell her about it.

Maybe not.