
Codex

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CHAPTER 1

EDWARD Wozny stood squinting at the sun as crowds of people excused themselves past him in both directions. It was hot and bright. He was wearing a very expensive gray handmade suit, and he had to check what seemed like dozens of inside and outside pockets of various sizes and shapes before he found the scrap of paper he was looking for.

He turned it over. It was roughly triangular, with one clean right angle and one ragged edge, the corner of a piece of copier paper rescued from the recycling bin at his office. On one side was a fragment of a xeroxed memo beginning ". . . insofar as all holders of any equity funds . . ." On the other side was a name and an address written in blue ballpoint pen. He folded it neatly in half and put it back in the tiny inside pocket-within-a-pocket where he found it.

Edward checked his watch and set off up Madison Avenue, stepping over a NO STANDING sign that had been wrenched out of the concrete and lay across the sidewalk. In front of the corner bodega a man was spraying down trays of cabbage and lettuce and Swiss chard with a hose, filling the air with a ripe, wet, vegetable smell. A branching delta of glittering rivulets ran down toward the gutter. He stepped fastidiously between them and turned the corner onto Eighty-fourth Street.

He felt good-or at least, he was doing his best to feel good. Edward was on vacation, his first time off since he'd started work four years ago, and he'd forgotten what it was like. He was free to go wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted, and could do whatever he wanted when he got there. He thought he would enjoy it, but he felt unsettled, disoriented. He didn't know what to do with himself, with this blank, unscripted, in-between time. Yesterday he'd been a hard-charging, highly paid investment banker in New York, and two weeks from now he'd be a hard-charging, highly paid investment banker in London. For now he was just Edward Wozny, and he wasn't totally sure who that was. Working was all he did, and it was all he could remember doing. What did people do when they weren't working? Play? What were the rules? What did you get if you won?

He sighed and squared his shoulders. It was a quiet block, lined on both sides with expensive limestone townhouses. One of the facades was completely overgrown with a single fantastic vine as thick as a tree and twisted like a rope. A crew of overalled workmen was wrestling a white upright piano down a flight of steps into a basement apartment.



Watching them struggle with it, Edward almost stumbled over a woman who was crouched down on the pavement.

"You know, if you're going to use that word with me," she said crisply, "you'd better be sure you mean it."

The woman was squatting down on her haunches, her dress stretched taut between her thighs, one hand on the pavement for balance like a sprinter ready to burst out of the starting blocks. Her face was hidden from him by the wide brim of a cream sun hat. A few yards behind her stood a white-haired man with a narrow face like a knife—her husband? her father?—waiting next to a cart piled with trunks and suitcases. His hands were clasped lightly behind his back.

"Don't be such a child," he replied.

"Oh, I'm a child now? Is that what I am?" she asked excitedly. Her accent was somewhere between English and Scottish.

"Yes, that's exactly what you are."

The woman looked up at Edward. She was older than he was, maybe thirty-five or forty, with pale skin and dark wavy hair—beautiful in a way that was long out of fashion, like a girl in a silent movie. He could see the pale tops of her breasts in their lacy white cups. Edward hated this kind of public display—it was like rounding a corner and stumbling directly into somebody's bedroom—and he tried to slide past her, but she made eye contact before he could make his escape.

"And what about you? Are you just going to stand there looking down my dress, or are you going to help me look for my earring?"

He stopped. For a critical moment a simple, diplomatic response eluded him. Almost anything would have sufficed—a graceful demurral, a half-decent witticism, a lofty silence—but he blanked.

"Sure," he muttered. Slowly, awkwardly, he crouched down next to her. The woman picked up the exchange with her companion—her husband, Edward decided—as if nothing had interrupted them.

"Well, I'd rather be a child," she said, "than an old man with a red face!"

Edward frowned, studying the glittering cement sidewalk and pretending to have suddenly gone profoundly deaf. He had somewhere to be and his own business to mind.

But he couldn't help noticing that the couple was impeccably dressed. He had a professional knack for estimating incomes, and he smelled money here. The man wore a perfectly tailored light flannel summer suit, the woman a fitted cream sundress that matched her hat. He was thin and a little ravaged-looking, with a thick shock of white hair; his complexion actually was a little florid, as if he'd just gotten back from a spell in the



tropics. The luggage piled up on the cart was extravagant, made of deep green leather with a rough, pebbly texture, and it included pieces of every imaginable shape and size, from tiny cubical vanity cases to giant steamer trunks studded with gleaming metal clasps to a circular hatbox the size of a bass drum. It was old-fashioned, either vintage or a meticulous re-creation thereof-it had the glamorous air of an early twentieth-century transatlantic ocean liner, the kind featured in old newsreels being christened with bottles of champagne amid silent storms of confetti.

A sedan with tinted windows idled by the curb. On each piece of luggage was a label with a single word, in small or large letters: WEYMARSHE.

Edward decided to break his silence.

"So what did it look like?" he asked. "The earring, I mean?"

The woman looked at him as if a passing shih tzu had suddenly spoken.

"Silver. The backing must have fallen off." She paused, then added unhelpfully: "It's a Yardsdale."

The older man got tired of waiting and knelt down too, pausing first to tug up the legs of his trousers with the air of somebody being dragged into something that was infinitely beneath his dignity. Soon they were joined by the driver, a sallow man with a weak chin-a virtual straight line from his lower lip to his collar-who looked cautiously under the limousine. The doorman finished loading the luggage into the trunk. Edward sensed that they shared the older man's dislike of the woman in the sun hat. They were allied against her.

Something crunched under Edward's right heel. He drew back his foot to reveal the crushed remains of the earring. Judging from its surviving twin it must have been shaped like a delicate silver hourglass, but now it was a scrap of mashed tinsel indistinguishable from a gum wrapper.

Serves her right for dragging him into this, he thought. He stood up.

"Sorry," he said, without making any special effort to sound apologetic. "I didn't see it."

Edward held out his hand. The woman stood up too, her face flushed from squatting for so long. He expected an explosion, but instead she looked like she'd just gotten exactly what she wanted for Christmas. She flashed him a heartbreaking smile and plucked the earring delightedly from his hand. As she did so he noticed something he'd missed before: a drop of blood, swollen and fully formed, dangling tremulously from her delicate earlobe. Another spot of blood was visible on the shoulder of her dress right below it.

"Look, Peter! He utterly demolished it!" She turned gaily to her husband, who was brushing invisible dirt from his sleeves. "Well, you could at least try to feign some interest."



He peered at the contents of her palm.

"Yes, very nice."

Just like that, they were back to keeping up appearances. The woman rolled her eyes at Edward conspiratorially, then turned to the car. The weak-chinned driver opened one of the doors, and she climbed into the back seat.

"Well, thank you very much, anyway," she called back to Edward from the bowels of the sedan.

The driver shot Edward a warning glance, as if to say, that's it, that's all you get, and the limousine peeled away from the curb with a short, sharp screech. Were they somebody famous? Should he have recognized them? A little triangle of the woman's cream dress was trapped in the door when it closed, and it luffed frantically in the wind. Edward pointed and started to yell something after them, then stopped. What was the point? As the car turned the corner onto Park Avenue, still accelerating, Edward watched it go with a sense of mild relief. But he felt a trace of belated disappointment, too-the way Alice might have felt if she had decided, sensibly and prudently but boringly, not to follow the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole.

He shook his head and refocused on the matter at hand. Edward was officially on vacation, two weeks off free and clear before he took over his new job in the London office, but he had agreed to look in on a client before he left. They were a married couple, colossally wealthy, and he'd had a small part in making them fractionally wealthier, a rather artful deal he'd orchestrated involving silver futures, a chain of thoroughbred horse farms, and a huge and hugely undervalued aviation insurance company. Setting it up had involved weeks of mind-crushingly dull research, but when he'd put all the elements in motion it had worked perfectly, like musical chairs in reverse: When the music stopped everyone else was left sitting down in an uncomfortable position, and he was the one left standing up, free to walk away with an appallingly large heap of money. He'd never even met the clients, hadn't known they knew who he was, but he supposed they'd gotten his name from his boss-probably they'd asked after that promising young lad who'd earned them all that cash, and that was why they'd requested him today. He'd been instructed to keep them happy at all costs. At the time he'd made a fuss about it-what was the point of starting up a new client relationship just when he was about to leave?-but now he was embarrassed to realize that he was almost looking forward to it.

The building the well-dressed couple was leaving turned out to be his destination: an ugly old brown brick high-rise left over from the nineteenth century. The windows were small and crowded close together except for the very top three stories, where they were twice or three times as tall as on the other floors. A cheap-looking, billiard-green awning extended out over the sidewalk with a much-trodden red carpet underneath it.

The doorman stepped forward.



"I can help you please?" he said. He was short and broad, with a thick mustache. His thick accent might have been Turkish.

"Laura Crowleyk. Twenty-third floor."

"If you are insisting." His bad English seemed to be a private joke that gave him a certain amount of satisfaction. "Nem pliz?"

"Edward Wozny."

The doorman stepped into a tiny alcove to the right of the doorway. It had a little wooden stool in it and an antiquated-looking intercom, all black knobs and Scotch tape and old yellowed slips of paper. He pressed a button and leaned down to speak into a grille. Edward couldn't hear the answer, but the man nodded and motioned him inside.

"I cannot stop you!"

The lobby was unexpectedly dark after the brightness of the day outside. He had a fleeting impression of dark wood and cigar smoke, shabby red oriental rugs and mirrored squares on the walls that were imperfectly fitted together. It was a once-grand building gone to seed. The instant he pressed the elevator button a bell rang and the doors shuddered open. It was a minute or two before he reached the twenty-third floor. Edward took the time to straighten his tie and shoot his cuffs.

When the doors opened again he found himself in a bright anteroom, as sunny and airy and open as the lobby had been dark and shabby, with white walls and a hard, polished wood floor. Opposite him his reflection appeared in a full-length mirror with a heavy gilt frame, its face misted over with age. He checked his appearance. Edward was tall and skinny, young-looking for his age-twenty-five-with sharp, pale features. His hair was short and very black, and his eyebrows ran in two thin, high curves that gave him a slightly startled expression at all times. He practiced his banker's face: pleasant, well-meaning, attentive, with a touch of sympathy-not too much-and a shadow of gravity.

A battered old umbrella stand stood in one corner, upholstered in some exotic-looking reptile skin. He imagined the beast that had donated its hide, shot long ago in some obscure tropical colony by a cartoon safari hunter with a pith hat and a blunderbuss. A pair of French doors opened onto the apartment proper. Edward let himself into a spacious sitting room. A sturdy young black woman in an apron was fussing with some knickknacks on an end table. She turned around, startled.

"Hi," Edward said.

"You here to see Laura?" she said, already backing away. Edward nodded.

She hurried away. Edward took up a position on the edge of an enormous and complicated oriental rug. Sunlight streamed in through a pair of impressively tall windows. The room's opulence was pleasantly at odds with

the building's gritty exterior; it was like stumbling onto a secret pasha's hideaway. The ceiling was high and white, and there were some side tables standing against the walls, set with vases full of elaborate arrangements of dried flowers. In a small but expensive-looking painting, a pointillist person sculled.

"Is that Edward?"

It was a woman's voice, a low alto with a light English accent. He turned around. Laura Crowleyk was small and fortyish, with a long and elegant face, bright eyes, and slightly unruly brown hair tied back in a bunch.

"Hello," she said. "You're the money person, aren't you?"

"I'm the money person."

She squeezed his hand perfunctorily and let it drop.

"Eddie? Ed?"

"Edward is fine."

"Follow me, please."

The corridor down which she led him was dimly lit, and in a couple of places Edward noticed large dusty outlines where it looked like pictures had hung and been recently removed. Laura Crowleyk was almost a foot shorter than he was, and her light Empire-waist dress billowed out behind her as she walked.

A door on their right was ajar, and she led him through it into a sparsely furnished study. It was dominated by a cavernous fireplace guarded by two large red leather wingback chairs arranged at cozy angles to one another.

"Please sit," she said. "Would you like some tea? Water? A glass of wine?"

Edward shook his head. He never ate or drank in front of clients if he could help it.

They sat down. The fireplace was swept meticulously clean, although past fires had left behind a blackened patch on the stone. A bundle of dusty birch sticks stood on the hearth in a wrought-iron cradle, still covered in plastic wrap.

When she was settled in opposite him, Laura Crowleyk spoke.

"I suppose Dan told you something about what you'll be doing for us?"

"Actually, he was a little mysterious about it," Edward said. "I hope it's nothing too shocking." His little joke.

"Not unless you're very easily shocked. You'll be available for the next two weeks, more or less?"

"More or less. I hope he told you, I'm moving to London on the twenty-third. I still have some arrangements to make."

"Of course. Congratulations on your appointment, by the way. I understand it's considered quite prestigious." She left open the question of whether or not she herself considered it prestigious. "How long have you been with Esslin & Hart?"

"Four years." Edward sat forward in his armchair. Time to dispense with the job-interview chat. "Why don't you tell me how I can help you."

"In a moment," said Laura, unreadably. "You're originally from-?"

Edward sighed.

"Well, I grew up in Bangor. Maine, that is. I know there's one in England, too."

"Yes, I think I would have detected a Welsh accent. Your parents?"

"My father passed away recently. I haven't seen my mother in years."

"Oh." At least she seemed slightly abashed at that. "And you took your undergraduate degree at Yale. In English?"

"That's right."

"How unusual. Did you have a particular area of specialty?"

"Well, the twentieth century, broadly speaking. The modern novel. Henry James. Some poetry, too, I guess. It's been a while."

Being interrogated as to one's qualifications was an occupational hazard when dealing with the very rich, but he hadn't expected this particular line of questioning. His English degree was one of those shameful secrets he avoided mentioning, roughly on a par with having gone to a public high school and having once tried Ecstasy.

"And now you're in private banking."

"That's right."

"Right. Right." She drew the word out in her upper-class English accent, nodding her long, shapely head.

"Well," she said, relenting, "let me tell you a little bit about what we have in store for you. Upstairs in this apartment there is a library. It was brought over here by my employers, the Wents, about sixty years ago for safekeeping, shortly before the Second World War. There was a great deal of hysteria, you



understand, everyone thought England would be overrun by the Huns at any moment. I don't remember it, of course-I'm not that old-but at the time there was some wild talk of selling up and moving the entire family across to America. Thankfully that plan never came to fruition. But the library came over, and somehow it never went back. It had been in the Went family for quite a long time, since the sixteenth century at least. Not unusual in the grand old families, but they were terribly proud of it. Excuse me, it's rather stuffy in here-would you mind opening that window for me, please?"

Edward stood and went over to the window. It was an old wooden window frame, and he expected it to stick, but when he opened the latch it floated up almost by itself, lifted by hidden counterweights. A breeze moved through the room, and the sound of honking horns drifted up from the intersection below.

"The books were brought over in crates," she went on. "Probably would have been safer back in England, all things considered, but never mind that. Once they arrived here this apartment was procured-purchased from a professional baseball player, I believe-and the library was sent here. But then the war ended, and what with one thing and another the crates were never unpacked, or even opened, as far as I know. They've been upstairs ever since.

"Anyhow, that's how things stand. It's scandalous, really, but I think the Wents just lost interest in them. For a long time no one even remembered they were here, and then one day a family accountant was trying to balance the books and thought to wonder why we were paying such absurd taxes on this apartment-remind me to ask you about that later-and sure enough, somebody stumbled on the old library again. By now nobody has the slightest idea what's up there, just that it's very, very old and someone needs to take care of it." She paused. He waited for her to go on, but she just watched him patiently.

"And the books are . . . very valuable?" he prompted.

"Valuable? Oh, I wouldn't have the first idea. Not my field, as they say."

"So you wish to have the value of the real estate they occupy assessed."

"Not really, no. By the way, did you do any medieval work in college?"

"No, I didn't, but-"

There was a limit to how much storytelling Edward allowed his clients as a matter of professional principle, and Laura Crowleyk was now over her quota.

"Ms. Crowleyk, I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but why am I here? If you've come across some historical documents that need evaluating, the firm can certainly put you in touch with a specialist who handles that kind of thing. But I don't really-"



"Oh, no, there's no need for anything like that!" She seemed to find the suggestion slightly hilarious. "I was just getting to that. All we really need is for somebody to get it all unpacked and onto the shelves. Just to break those crates open, for one thing, and start putting it all in some kind of order. Organizing things, getting them cataloged. Sounds hideously boring, I know."

"Oh, no," Edward lied. "Not at all."

He sighed. Either this woman was slightly insane, in some megalomaniacal English way, or a serious miscommunication had occurred. Someone somewhere along the line had Fucked Up. He was a senior analyst with Esslin & Hart, and she was apparently looking for some kind of glorified intern to do her housecleaning for her. Either way he, Edward, was going to have to clear things up, rapidly and if possible without provoking an international incident. He had a reasonable idea of the size of the accounts she represented, and offending her was not an option.

"I think there's been a slight misunderstanding," he purred. "Do you mind if I make a phone call?"

Edward extracted his cell phone from his jacket pocket and flipped it open. No signal. He looked around.

"Is there a phone here I can use?"

She nodded and stood up, giving him an unexpected flash of freckled cleavage as she leaned forward.

"Follow me."

He had to take an extra step to catch up with her as she strode out the door. They turned right down the corridor, heading deeper into the apartment. An intricately woven and apparently endless maroon runner followed them underfoot. Edward frowned behind Laura's back as he caught glimpses of more doorways and hallways and rooms. Even he, a frequent visitor to the abodes of the moneyed, was impressed by the apartment's sheer size.

Laura stopped at a doorway. It was half the width of an ordinary door, with a miniature glass knob-it looked like the door to a broom closet, or the entrance to some secret fairy hideaway. She opened it to reveal a narrow, musty alcove, unlit and paneled in dark wood. The floor was littered with old paint chips and hanks of gray dust. It contained a narrow cast-iron spiral staircase leading up.

He balked.

"I'm sorry," he said, "is this the way to your phone?"

She didn't answer, just started up ahead of him. It was dark, and the stairs were extremely steep, and he snagged his foot on the lip of one of them and had to catch himself on the delicate helical railing. The metal rang faintly

under their footsteps. The staircase wound around in a tight spiral, and after two revolutions up into the darkness he couldn't see a thing. When she stopped he nearly walked into her. Standing behind her, he smelled the coconut smell of her shampoo and heard the jingle of keys and the clicking of heavy bolts and latches.

She braced her thin shoulders and pulled, but the door resisted, as if somebody were pulling back from the inside, somebody who adamantly did not want to be disturbed. She struggled for a few seconds, then gave up.

"I'm sorry, I can't do it," she said, panting a little. "Please open it for me."

She stepped to one side and flattened herself against the wall, and they gingerly changed places on the tiny metal landing. The keys were still in the metal doorknob. He grasped them, wondering whether this was an elaborate prank, gave them a quarter turn and pulled, putting his back into it, then spread his feet wider apart and pulled again. Behind him he heard Laura take a step down to get out of his way. The door was surprisingly thick, like the entrance to an air raid shelter, and there was a cracking, tearing sound as it started to move, like a tree falling, roots snapping deep under the earth, then a sigh of relief as air began to flow through from behind him. The wind crescendoed as it swung open, then died away again as the air pressures equalized.

It was pitch black on the other side. He tapped gingerly at the floor with the toe of his shoe, but he could see nothing. The sound echoed. There were some glimmers of light, high up and indistinct, but that was all.