

The Enigma Gamers - A CATS Tale

Breakfield & Burkey

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or people living or dead is coincidental.

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We have some new heroes in this book that are loosely based on friends of ours. Massoud, David, and Marco lent their persona generously to the story, and we took approved liberties with those characters. Our technical world is richer for having you gentlemen permit our using you for our characters. Baby Perez volunteered to participate in the book as well and received a promotion that took her from her home in the Philippines to become a powerful elected official in Spain. Thank you for the inspired character that you are, madam.

Many of our readers have grown to love some of our regular characters and do ask us to tell them different things about the origin of our characters or who they might be patterned after. If you have any of those types of questions, we would welcome your requests and comments on our website, www.enigmabookseries.com

Specialized Terms are available beginning on page 293 if needed for readers' reference

Other stories by Breakfield and Burkey included in the Enigma Series:

**The Enigma Factor
The Enigma Rising
The Enigma Ignite
The Enigma Wraith
The Enigma Stolen
The Enigma Always**

KIRKUS REVIEW – The Enigma Factor

... Breakfield and Burkey's novel is a thriller for the 21st century. Instead of drug or money mules, it features "information mules" who steal others' codes and work for organizations such as Dteam... A complex thriller with a hacker-centric plot and polished technological descriptions that may attract new fans.

KIRKUS REVIEW - The Enigma Rising

...latest techno-thriller, a group combats evil in the digital world, with multiple assignments merging in Acapulco and the Cayman Islands. ... The story boasts strong characters: R-Group hacker Quip and JAC (both of whom are more pivotal to the narrative this time...

...the story will hold readers' attention until its unsettling conclusion, which once again leaves plenty of room for a sequel.

KIRKUS REVIEW - The Enigma Ignite

... This time around, however, they've amped up the suspense, as R-Group has very little time to find Keith and EZ. There's also considerably more humor in this third outing, including a number of tongue-in-cheek acronyms (such as Su Lin's "Polymorphic Operational Programing of Technology to Aggregate Recurring Temporal Synergies," or "POPTARTS")... Su Lin's pig is shown to have just as much personality as his human counterparts. The authors continue their run of stellar villains with the returning Chairman Lo Chang, but they also add wonderfully unpredictable characters with unclear motivations. The solid ending could either stand alone or serve as a lead-in to a potential sequel.

...A solid espionage thriller that adds more tension and lightheartedness to the series...

KIRKUS REVIEW - The Enigma Wraith

... The authors' latest novel—their fastest-paced yet—dives headfirst into the plot and maintains an engaging mystery based on the R-Group's investigation. The person responsible for the Ghost Code, they discover, is Mephisto, corresponding with hacker Callisto, though the true identities behind the handles aren't initially clear. There's a veritable hodgepodge of characters, most of whom are returning, but the authors include context for new readers without weighing the story down with a laborious retread...

... Another stellar installment. Breakfield and Burkey show no signs of slowing down in an ever improving series.

KIRKUS REVIEW - The Enigma Stolen

... The authors focus on characters in preceding books, but this time, they've breathed new life into the series with Julie's CATS. Her subset, of sorts, allows for the introduction of unfamiliar faces, like employee Brayson, and fresh storylines. Breakfield and Burkey once again deliver the goods, as returning readers will expect—intelligent technology-laden dialogue; a kidnapping or two; and a bit of action...the romance between Julie and husband Juan is unparalleled. Their storyline warrants a spinoff novel or two. Should lure readers who haven't yet discovered the series.

KIRKUS REVIEW - The Enigma Always

The authors excel at breezing through exposition, quickly setting up their newest tale: this time around, returning R-Group lovebirds Jacob and Petra are separated, the latter having isolated herself due to her physical and mental scars. Familiar bad guys abound as well: Jacob's freelance work inadvertently entangles him with Zara of the villainous Russian Dteam. Zara, meanwhile, is on the run from Chairman Chang, from whom she stole €5 million in diamonds. There's mystery throughout ... The authors have likewise mastered scenes that are simultaneously cool and comical: Jacob's tracking program is "his secret sauce," ...

As always, loaded with smart technological prose and an open ending that suggests more to come.

Since time immemorial human beings have gambled things of value on the outcome of pending events. This desire to play and compete with a bet on the outcome of some event has followed us to the present day. Here in the 21st century it has become a digital activity and has earned the common designation *gamification*. It is suggested that this is a harmless quest to collect points and also use it in an easy way for people to learn. However, like everything on the digital landscape now becoming the Internet of Things, machines can now interact with machines to the misery of us all. Not everything that results from the gamification of our digital world is always to our benefit. .

...The Enigma Chronicles

Old definition:

Gamers \ 'gām ers\ n: participants in a rules-based contest for a stake in the outcome; see amusement

New definition:

GAMERS (Generally Ambiguously Motivated Exercises for Rewarding Scoundrels)

Locations and Primary Cast Members:

CATS Team

Julie (JAC Rancowski) Rodríguez - Part owner in the CATS Team with her husband

Juan Rodriguez

Eilla Zan (EZ) Marshall (CATS operation/communication headquarters in Luxemburg)

Supported by R-Group staff Quip, ICABOD, Wolfgang, and Otto

Australian Mines Consortium

George Jones, member of the CATS team

McLaren, operations duty manager for the consortium

Mohawk, operations chief for the consortium

Tina, Mohawk's girlfriend

Hoyt, McLaren's nephew

Barcelona, Spain - (Smart City)

Brayson Morris, member of the CATS team

Baby Perez, Mayor of Barcelona

Constellation Stuff - The Store to the Planet (somewhere in one of the US Midwest States)

Summit Hayes, member of the CATS team

Marvin Oile, truck driver for the Constellation Stores

Massoud Mostafavi, head guard at the Constellation distribution center

Marco, guard at the Constellation distribution center

David, guard at the Constellation distribution center

Fast Flyers - (US Airline)

Mercedes Field, member of the CATS team

Jim Hughes, member of a US three letter agency

The Sean, Sean Riley, lead negotiator for Fast Flyers Management

Chuck Wood, lead labor negotiator for Fast Flyers Union Team

Macau, China - (Hotel, Casino)

Ernesto Gleen, member of the CATS team

Frieda, Jamie's girlfriend, and computer operations knowledgeable

Jamie, roamer, gambler, risk taker, and programmer

Chairman Chang, silent owner in the Macau casino and high placed Chinese Official

Won and Ton, wards of Chairman Chang

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania - (E911)

Tyler Hebert, member of the CATS team

Detective Cormorant, Como, assigned to work with Tyler on city problems

Mayor Barker, Pittsburg mayor that brought in the CATS team

Russian Interests – (Believed to be in a hardened data bunker under the Kremlin in Moscow)

Dmitry Vasnev, Russian Minister of Information Propagation, war hero

Konstantin Grankin, Longtime assistant and technology support for Dmitry

The Enigma Gamers – A CATS Tale

Chapter 1 – So far and yet so very near

The drone of the commercial aircraft was unmistakable, though First Class was undeniably quieter than the Coach seats behind the engines. Conversations were muted, or passengers dozed. The distinctive aromatic smell of heated nuts wafted from the forward galley. The aircraft had almost reached the cruising altitude that would allow comfort services to begin. They were on the last leg of the long flight from Zurich to Macau. Juan had grumbled about taking a trip so far away, but Julie had sold him with her vivid description of the small peninsula across the Pearl River Delta from Hong Kong. As Portuguese overseas territory until 1999, it reflected an extraordinary mix of Portuguese and Chinese influences. What seemed to put the glint in Juan's eye was its nickname, the *Las Vegas of Asia*.

Macau was one of Julie's favorite places, but she had never gone for pleasure, only for work purposes. Julie, also known as JAC or Cyber Assassin Julie at work, had originally visited the city to meet with Ling Po. Julie had been hooked the first time she walked over the beautiful black sand on Hac Sa Beach with her thick light brown hair ruffled by the breeze. Her legs, which made up most of her 1.7 meters, gobbled up the sand as she'd traveled to her destination.

Since then, Julie had maintained her overall agility with the martial arts training sessions with Juan and chasing after their twins. That seemed a lifetime ago. Even now, she carried almost no fat on her supple body, just the way Juan liked it. She was delighted with their current lifestyles even though it had some elements of risk in their professional endeavors.

So much had happened since the last trip she'd made to Macau. It felt as if she were looking through an entirely different lens. She and Juan had started their own business, known as the Cyber Assassin Technology Services or CATS team, shortly after they were married. Their business was supported by her family's business yet thrived nicely on its own merit. She leaned back into her seat to relax as the fragments of the history and in-between events went through her mind.

Julie, adopted as a baby, had grown up as part of a family which was part of an ongoing business formed during World War II that now stretched around the world. The business, which was referred to by the family and close associates as the R-Group, had interests in real estate, finance, technology, security, and information resources. Their clientele were both private elite families, initially serviced post-World War II, and public entities including Interpol and the intelligence agencies of various countries. The primary pillars of the R-Group were to uphold the rights of the individuals or governments that stood for freedom and justice.

Originally, the family founders, three daring young men, had taken a copy of the Enigma Machine. These intelligent and resourceful men had joined their skills to slightly modify the device and then had used it to undermine the German Nazis through encryption of information shared in just the right places. Though many of the core family members had changed over the years, the foundational beliefs of the operations had not. Their span of power and influence had increased though much of the operation was only known within the family business.

Juan and Julie had met during an R-Group assignment where Julie had worked to locate an heiress, Lara Bernardes. Lara, the head of a now successful fashion house of

Brazil, was also the love of Juan's brother, Carlos. Julie had provided both Juan and Carlos with new identities at the end of that assignment, though he had mightily protested erasure of his past.

Juan, the crazy flyboy, had captured Julie's heart with his quick wit and ability to unconditionally love her. She knew she was in love with Juan when she had beat him in a martial arts challenge at a gym. He told great stories, kept his cool under pressure, loved their twin children, and was deliciously passionate.

Julie glanced over to her resting partner. His thick ebony hair was a nice topping to his nearly 1.83 meters of rippling muscles and clean-shaven face. When he smiled, she had no doubts that he adored her. Julie was known for her never ending smile and leveraged it often with her delightful male, as well as in some undercover roles. As if aware of her stare, Juan's hand reached over and gently cradled her hand in his with a slight smile appearing on his generous lips. If they weren't on a commercial flight with people all around, she might have started something, hoping Juan would finish it.

Juan rested comfortably against the window and almost dozed, though he was aware of his surroundings. It was odd to be flying somewhere and not piloting the aircraft. The feeling of Julie's hand in his, warm and soft, was not exactly the scenario he had been thinking about, but it would do until they reached the resort. Julie had told him that the resort offered more private and scenic rooms than the large, over-crowded casino hotel. But a promise to go and check out the gambling at some point was fine with him. Juan liked to gamble a bit and had even brought some of his reserves from his Pre-Julie Mexico investments to play, thus presenting no risk to their business. The business was

doing well, and Juan knew that Julie's family had money, but it was something they were building together for their family dynasty.

Juan missed the twins, Gracie and Juan Jr., with their constant babbling and laughter. Regardless, he was going to make the most of four days alone with his beautiful wife, partner, and love of his heart, right next to him where she belonged. He opened his eyes at the sounds of services beginning, and Julie rewarded him with one of her megawatt smiles. He toasted them when their wine was served and knew he was very lucky to have her.

Julie and Juan were laughing while they deplaned, finally at their destination. Their driver was there with the correct placard on display as they walked outside. Julie's father, Otto, who was enjoying the time with his grandchildren almost as much as her mother, Haddy, had insisted they have a driver on call so they could go anywhere, anytime without needing to worry about the vehicle itself. It had been his gift for them to enjoy.

Otto, as one of the primary heads of the R-Group, rarely took time off, but the twins seemed to somehow make it easier to set aside those responsibilities. Maude was the children's full time governess, but Haddy and Otto insisted on staying to enjoy Gracie and Juan Jr. in peace. Their time with the twins was also being referred to as the Grand Spoiling Time. Julie chuckled as her fruit phone indicated another text message with likely a candid photo arrival. Her giggles erupted anew as she showed the picture to Juan, and he laughed too.

Their driver, Chen Lee, smiled as he greeted them and proceeded to tell them, in his perfect English, that his name meant morning. His non-stop oration included the

points-of-interest they drove past, things he liked, his family, and how much he approved of their choice of the beach front villa that afforded privacy. Privacy and seclusion was expensive and limited in Macau. Chen was lean and a bit shorter than Julie but had a welcoming smile and a twinkle in his dark eyes that reminded Julie of espresso. Chen boasted about his twelve children, and Juan privately remarked that working must be the only time Chen was able to speak, so Chen obviously made the most of it. After delivering them to their villa and making certain the arrangements were in place, Chen indicated he would pick them up that evening for dinner. At their request he promised to provide several options for after-dinner activities.

Their room was magnificent! The floor to ceiling windows dominated the two sides reaching into the corner with a breathtaking view of the water and a view of the city. Quiet music was in the air but gentle like a breeze. The furniture was sparse with the oversized bed, covered in white and ivory silk covers and overflowing with huge pillows, as the dominating feature. Bold-colored silk flowers offset the whites and ivories of the interior and bedding. The bathroom contained a shower as well as a four-person, sunken Jacuzzi with a private window view toward the sea. Everything was elegant and yet seemed practical to a fault.

Juan called for room service while Julie made quick work of unpacking and settling into the luxurious suite. Room service had already arrived when Julie emerged from the bathroom. She was comfortably garbed in the almost-bikini that perfectly matched the blue in her sapphire and diamond wedding ring. Ahead of where she walked, she spread fairies of light across the room as the sun caught the surfaces of her ring.

Juan leered at her, grinned and then groaned, “My darling, if you keep dressing like that we will never see more of Macau than this room.”

Julie wagged a finger toward Juan as she firmly explained, “Juan, we need to establish some rules. I want to go curl my toes in the black sand and perhaps bring back just a little for our kids. I want to swim with you in the South China Sea and enjoy all the historical sites with you.” Then she insisted, “Juan, you need to behave.”

He handed her a glass of champagne and raised his to toast to them both. Juan grinned then replied, “Sweetheart, it is far too late to start trying to establish rules. I will of course behave as your servant and lover. All your wants will be fulfilled as will mine. Then, I promise, we will see about the sights on your list.”

He pulled her close as they sipped the wine. The glasses were magically resting on the table empty as Julie found herself horizontal on the giant bed with Juan leaning over her with a familiar look of passion burning in his eyes.

“We have not been alone in far too long, my beautiful wife.” Running his hands over her skin that somehow had lost the minor inconveniences of the bikini, he continued, “Your skin is so soft, so smooth, and well, so kissable.”

Juan kissed her lips and every available inch of her body, while she returned the kisses and the touches, lost in the wonder of the magic they shared. She had never felt as much heat or ardent pleasure as she did when he had her in his arms. Juan knew all the right places to touch and lick until she begged for him to get closer and deeper.

“Sweet Mercy,” he groused as her inner thigh muscles clamped down on him as she pushed her hips up against his to continue the pleasure, “why did I wait so long to finish.”

Another female might have been insulted at the comments had she not known, heart and soul, that to this point he had only considered her fulfillment and her pleasure. He had repeatedly given her everything she wanted and needed. He cared about her satisfaction in a way that was absolute until the precise moment when it shifted to being about him. He allowed her to be on top and drive him to the end of the precipice as he pulled her bottom into him, growing bigger and harder with each thrust until they both felt as if they were launched into space and flying. Afterward they tumbled as an entwined pair and drifted into a soft slumber after their exhausting lovemaking.

Minutes or hours later, Julie murmured, “We really need to see the sights while we are here.”

Juan shifted them slightly and gripped her a bit closer as he whispered, “From my perspective, the sights are perfect from here.”

Chapter 2 – **Rambling Gambler**

Frieda questioned, "So what do you want to do? The communications infrastructure is crumbling, plus we need more personnel and sizeable upgrades just to keep things running!"

Jamie looked at her rather dispassionately and remarked, "Just tell them this is what we need. What's the big deal?"

Frieda and Jamie were certainly an unlikely pair. He was blond-haired and blue-eyed, but she was a dark haired beauty with her stoic, logical German temperament that often clashed with his romanticized Irish temper. When her temper flared, her cheeks got rosy and her curls seemed as if they were on springs. When he was annoyed or angry, he held his temper in check until the last possible moment and then he bellowed. She had seen that once and it wasn't pretty.

They lived together in a poor excuse for an apartment with the only saving grace being that it was furnished. Their knowledge of technology complemented one another with her specialty in hardware, networks, and high-end databases and his in programming, especially cowboy style. He had the inbred flair for the blarney with a side of manipulation.

This job had been advertised as high-paying and filled with bonuses for making or beating deadlines. To date, it had been well below even the most modest expectations. Both of them were tired of the frustrating situations they faced daily. Lousy work and no extra money did not a happy couple make.

Becoming really annoyed with his illogical approach, she angrily countered, "Because they will argue the cost. Then they'll tell me to deal with it and stop asking for more funding! We have a major technology implementation sunk into this wretched continent, and they won't listen to spending any more, for anything! This is the once-and-done bunch when it comes to WAN communications infrastructure. I get so mad at them, sometimes I could just spit!"

He sighed and replied, "Frieda, why do we always have to have this same discussion? Come on, get dressed, and let's go fix this."

She stared at him incredulously and exclaimed, "Jamie! What are you talking about? Didn't you hear what I just said? They don't listen and then they don't spend! THEN they complain about the poor service! They will dock our pay because they cannot dock the bonus we won't earn."

Oblivious to her remarks, he asked, "How much do you need again?"

Not completely comprehending the situation, she answered, "Uh, fourteen point five million Euros. But I have already...."

Jamie clucked his tongue then suggested, "Okay. Let's go see the finance group of Ebenezer and Scrooge so we can get the necessities for your problem, shall we?"

Jamie was a high-stakes gambler with an unjustified self-confidence that always seemed to court disaster. One time he'd rounded up several investors to buy up a toilet paper manufacturer that had seen better days. He figured that the price was right, and that with his marketing prowess, they could turn the company into a dominant player in the toilet paper manufacturing business. Unfortunately, his marketing instincts were wrong, and the company imploded before it could get off the ground.

The truth was no one from the wholesaler down to the retail buyer could accept a product based on a design intent called *Break on through to the Other Side* regardless of the old rock song of the same name being used in the commercial messaging. Toilet Paper labeled *Break on through to the Other Side* was simply a marketing nightmare on steroids. The customers avoided the product in droves.

Jamie had what was known as the *Reverse Midas Touch* in his endeavors, but it never seemed to bother him when he launched into his next con game. Frieda had been a part of his world for a couple of years now. He seemed to make strides and get out of situations only to turn around and step into a bigger puddle of muck.

She numbly followed him into the manager's office where Jamie launched his verbal assault. "Which one of you race car drivers has this Formula 1 car stuck in second gear?"

The finance manager looked up from his computer, somewhat puzzled, then asked, "Whadda you two want? If it costs anything, the answer is no. Unless you are here to deposit money, you can leave now."

As usual, the finance manager retrieved the parked #2 regular pencil from behind his ear as if he was going to write down something, even though everything he did was on his computer keyboard. The office was cluttered, dusty, and screamed for a good cleaning. Rather than being dressed for success, the finance manager was a perfect match for the office décor of messy and shaggy right down to the hair that he combed over from the back to minimize the reflection from his shiny scalp.

Jamie, as close to disinterested in the manager as possible, replied in a very tired voice, "We are here to advise you that you need to pony up 38.5 million Euro to stay in

business here. I am ordering this gear and consulting services to be shipped in for installation the week after next. Are you interested in having it installed or not?"

Jamie tossed a handwritten list of gear on a piece of paper at him that Frieda had hastily assembled during the walk over to this office. In Jamie's mind the desk reflected the disorganization of the user, which made this plan easier. A wobbly desk, a dusty ten-key adding machine with mountains of paper flowing out in ribbons behind it, and a tired looking computer with a smaller screen than the old man's eyes needed.

After his chuckling subsided, the finance manager focused a puzzled expression at Jamie and asked, "Has the jungle fried your brain? I can't begin to authorize that kind of expenditure! If you have really ordered that gear, you'd better find a way to cancel it, or you're fired! Then after I fire you, I'll cancel the order and extract the order cancellation fees from your last check.

"What kind of clown are you anyway? No one approved any expenditure of that size. You're lucky I let you order your own printer cartridges and paper!"

Jamie looked at him hard, shook his head, and with a sour look on his face informed Frieda, "You're right, sweetie, he's sharp as a soccer ball."

Then after a moment of silence, Jamie turned toward the finance manager. Using slow carefully-enunciated speech, he explained, "No, genius, you don't get it! If you don't buy it, I will take it to the competition, and we'll set it up for their entrance into the market. Haven't you noticed all the free goods that have been circulating around in the area? While you have been squeezing pennies, the competition has been dropping serious folding money to soften the market up for a switch to the greener pastures of your

competition. You seriously didn't think you guys would be the only game in town indefinitely, did you?"

Now starting to panic slightly, the finance manager responded, "We simply cannot spend that kind of money! We must fight for market share another way! We intend to stay in Africa, and no one is going to push us out by giving some bars of soap to the natives."

Jamie looked at Frieda and straight-faced snorted. "See, I told you he was dumber than he looked."

He turned his head back to the finance manager and flatly stated, "Oh wow, slow down, lightning! We are not talking about spending our own money! And we are not talking about spending only for this state in Africa. Your competitors are coming in to offer them the expertise if THEY pony up the money. And by THEY, I mean all the surrounding African states as well. You think so small! That's why you'll fail."

The finance manager stared blankly, unable to comprehend, until Jamie sighed again and clarified, "WE don't write the checks, they write the checks! We get all the surrounding states to come into the game because we can't operate in a vacuum. We invite them in on the game, and we get them to pony up as well. No one will refuse because no one wants their country left behind. Are you beginning to see or do we also need to get your glasses checked?"

After a long pause the finance manager replied, "Yes, Mr. Rafferty. I now begin to see. We invest, but we use their monies. You said the gear is coming in two weeks?"

Jamie smiled and asked, "Yes, how do you want it invoiced? My alternate client is standing by, in the event you don't want it. In fact, I'm not quite sure I know what I'm going to tell them if you actually use your never used #2 pencil to approve the purchase."

The finance manager nodded and agreed, "We'll take it. Make sure your team gets it deployed as soon as possible."

Jamie grinned and remarked, "Actually, it will go quite slowly since we will be training the local IT students on its installation and operation. No local politician would dare to cross us, because we would have to lay the students off if we're ejected from this market. Then they would lose voters. Remember, invest locally and your competitors will struggle to displace you. Am I right?"

The finance manager almost smiled as he responded, "About the time I think you two have outlived your usefulness, you pop up with something to help extend your contract."

Outside the finance manager's office, Jamie smiled at the bewildered Frieda and queried, "See how easy it is to steer the weak-minded? Of course they do have to be greedy. But to make this look really convincing, we should approach the competition to see if we can get a better deal.

"However, before we do that, I would like to get some more wine, get you back out of your clothes, and see what kind of erotic calisthenics can be executed in your hammock. But, this time, no falling out as we rotate positions!"

Frieda smirked as she responded, "So you're going to let me participate in the pole vault game this time instead of doing all the work yourself? That's mighty big of you! ...Well, not really."

Jamie clucked his tongue in mock annoyance with the disparaging comment and then threatened, “Just wait until I get you naked, sweetie!”

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They had returned to their humble accommodations. Frieda had remarked she was going to change into something more comfortable as she walked into the adjoining bedroom. About that time, Jamie saw the incoming email he had been waiting for pop into his PC screen. He grinned broadly as he read the awaited response. Straining to contain his exuberance, he loudly stated, “Hah! They took the bait! I mean, my career destination is now on target! Pack our bags, babe! We are heading to China and our newest gig!”

Frieda’s mouth hung open slightly in disbelief as she watched Jamie doing his happy dance around their grimy living quarters. Finally, shrugging off her dumbfounded state she reminded, “We’re under contract here, my soon-to-be-in-jail-for-fraud, aka my humping-buddy. We haven’t saved anything to just pick up and leave this cesspool that has been downgraded from its earlier status in the travel brochures as the Armpit of Africa. You just conned the finance dweeb of this disgusting manufacturer of personal hygiene products for animals and larger primates with a fabricated story that rivals the Wall Street financial derivatives debacle of 2008. None of that now matters because you think we are leaving for China instead of jail! By the way, where in China? I don’t speak Chinese and neither do you as far as I know.”

Jamie, still elated that his dream-scheme was unfolding the way he needed it to, waltzed over to Frieda. While smiling tenderly, he pushed her dark hair behind her ear. He then moved his head over to whisper in her ear but instead began teasing her ear with

his tongue while his right hand moved to begin caressing her breast. He would have undone her blouse if her indignation hadn't kicked in, prompting her to pull away.

After a few retreating steps were made, she rebuked, "So it's going to be like the last time, right? Me desperately trying to keep us out of jail, and you ready to drop and run to the next gambling exercise. Jamie, I can't ask my folks for more money to underwrite this lifestyle! Don't we ever get to do what I want? Will there ever be a time when we can just have a normal life? Is this just one big con game for you? Is that all I am as well?"

Jamie, always the gambler, offered, "If you don't want to go, you don't have to. After all, apparently all I am is your humping-buddy anyway. Surely someone as pretty as you can get that anywhere.

"Look, Frieda, I don't have anything but my wits to leverage. I've taken all these backwater IT jobs that no one would take to learn just one thing. I wanted to know how computers communicate, how information flows, and most importantly how to profit from that knowledge. Not to do it for the rest of my life, but how to win at their game.

"This job in China is exactly where the payoff comes in. I will be the lead IT engineer in a fully automated gambling casino, in what is probably the newest version of the old Wild West. Since this part of China is similar to Hong Kong, English is spoken as well as Chinese and Portuguese. I need to do this. If you want to go with me, I promise you will be wearing diamonds as big as horse turds before I'm through. Are you with me?"

Frieda could feel the old con game being staged again with her emotions simultaneously pulling for and pushing her away from the blue-skies offer. How many

times had he taken her along for his *roll-of-the-dice* only to lose everything except the clothes they wore? She fought the tears and the tidal wave of anger, but it boiled down to only one of two choices. Each time he promised something better, and every time they were the losers.

She really wanted to go home to start over in a normal life. Trouble was, she wanted him to go too! He simply wasn't the reliable, home by five for dinner, kind of male. She knew this would be like the last time, and the next gig he signed on for would be like the one previous. She told herself that he was the one with the gambling problem, but if that were true, then why couldn't she just leave? The tears streamed down her face as she made up her mind on what her future was going to be.

In that short moment of thought, Frieda stared at Jamie for a few minutes and then slapped him hard across the face.

Chapter 3 – I thought I saw ...

With their last full day in Macau, Julie and Juan were planning to spend it in the historical district and then on to dinner and gambling in the casino. Juan had heard that this particular casino had some of the best payoffs, which Chen had also confirmed. Julie was comfortable in a flowing dress with small flowers scattered across the pale blue background, and strappy sandals that were like walking barefoot. Juan was casual yet elegant in his khakis with a linen shirt that accentuated his dark skin and barely concealed his powerful build. He wrapped a protective arm gently around her waist while his eyes scanned everything nearby.

The historical district was a dichotomy of the merging of western and eastern culture that spanned decades. Each of the more than twenty ancient monuments and urban squares contained various stories of history with religious foundations, right in the forefront. The chapels, temples and churches were erected from the early fifteen hundreds well into the twentieth century. Even the Protestant cemetery they walked through highlighted the diverse community profile of Macau, as it was nestled next to a fabulous and expansive garden with sweet flower scents filling the air.

Juan called for Chen to retrieve them and take them to the casino. Both of them smiled when Chen arrived within moments with a bright smile. At their request he took a picture of them with the garden in the background and then held open the door of the car. All the way to the casino, Chen chatted about what to do or not to do.

“This casino is very different than others you might have encountered. You can speak for anything you want, and it will magically appear at your elbow. No one speaks very loud as there are ears everywhere. Just know that what you say will be heard, interpreted, and analyzed for the best way to fulfill the speaker’s wants or needs. It is said the information gathering is second to none.

“The food is excellent, and the wines are brought in from all over. Madam, I suspect that you might find favor with the wines from France, while you, sir, might enjoy the richness of the Jamaican Rum.”

Juan laughed and asked, “Chen, how is it you have us pegged so well?”

Chen smiled and replied, “I listen too! And I have very good ears, a necessary requirement with so many children. However, you, sir, actually asked me where to find the best of each the first day I picked you up.”

Julie flashed him her megawatt smile and suggested, “Chen, you have an excellent memory. You let me know if you ever tire of this job. I have good use for those that pay attention to details.”

Chen stopped the car in front of the casino and then walked around to open the door. He offered his hand while Julie emerged and said, “Pretty lady, you have a nice evening with your husband. I think he will take care of you.” Then Chen winked and quietly added, “I will keep your job offer in mind, perhaps part time.”

Julie laughed as she then took Juan’s arm, and they walked in through what looked like a door, but which magically disappeared as they approached. Other guests that preceded them also looked impressed with the unique surroundings of Chinese art and artifacts. The ambiance was very different and bespoke the locals’ name for the

casino, Chinese Dragon. Juan escorted Julie into the dining hall where they were seated at a secluded table near a meandering brook that seemed to encircle the restaurant area like a mote, but with water that bubbled and danced over the rocks like a natural stream.

“Juan, this is exquisite. I never imagined that a casino could house this quiet, elegant restaurant. I can see others at the nearby tables, but yet I cannot hear a word they are saying.”

Juan cocked his head as he surveyed the area then commented, “It must be a series of white noise columns that somehow isolate each of the guest tables. I for one will enjoy this quiet time with you while I sit back and sip some of that Jamaican Rum that Chen mentioned. And you, my love, would you like a glass of the French Chardonnay we shared earlier at the resort?”

Julie flashed one of her coveted smiles and said, “I would like a glass and perhaps some fresh vegetable bits to snack on.”

Soundlessly, within seconds of her response, a robotic waiter placed their glasses on the table followed by a tablet for each of them that flashed pictures of the available cuisine for the main courses and desserts.

“Juan, this is amazing. All the food is pictured, so there is no confusion on what will be served.”

“You’re right, honey. This is fun, but let’s skip the octopus as the tentacles, cooked or not, still give me the creeps.”

“I agree.” Julie laughed and then added, “I think that a nice scallop salad with the main entree of rice with shrimp would be more than enough for me.”

“That sounds pretty good, except I think I would prefer the filet mignon, medium, with the steamed vegetables on rice for the side, more to my liking.”

Their snack of cold vegetables with a wasabi ranch dipping sauce arrived while silent mechanical hands removed the tablets. Juan offered a toast to their love, good fortune, and their last night in Macau. It promised to be totally memorable.

After a delicious dinner culminated with a fresh lemon mousse, Juan declared he was ready to try his hand at the tables. Julie was happy to walk along or sit next to him as he moved from one table to another. Julie looked around when they stopped at the Baccarat table as Juan declared there was no skill required to play this game of chance.

There were people dressed up with flashy jewelry that advertised their wealth. Couples and groups laughed and chatted at all the tables within sight. Some laughed and clapped with their success while others asked the mechanical waiters for additional drinks. In many ways, Julie thought it very efficient, yet still inviting. Juan had found some level of success at each table they had encountered, including this one. He promised that he would spend only a short while at each type of game.

The casino floor was enormous with muted lighting and soft rugs of gold and red with dragon characters of various colors seemingly creating a path to walk from one area to the next. There were only a handful of casino personnel that could be identified by their name tags and non-descript apparel. These people smiled at the guests and looked around to make certain all were having fun and all robots were functioning. Julie noticed the sensors on most of the items and recognized that what Chen had said regarding their spoken words was very real.

A young man caught her attention as he appeared to be fixing a machine. His well-groomed blond hair along with his tailored black uniform and polished boots were enough to get him noticed. Yet, what Julie was drawn to was his rapid hand movements and flipping of switches. She studied him closely, trying to put words to what she was seeing. She scanned the ceiling for the monitoring cameras and easily detected four or five that should have him in their sights. Then she wondered why anyone would attempt such a clumsy skimming play on Euro coin slots with that many cameras present.

Juan leaned over very close to her ear and whispered, “That young rogue has quite the moves. Do you find him that attractive, my love, or are you trying to see exactly at which point he is lining his pockets with the Euros he is extracting from the machine while resetting the counters? Makes me wonder if the management is even aware.”

Julie shot Juan a megawatt smile and laughed, “That was exactly it. How did you spot it so easily? I thought you were playing your game.”

“I told you, sweetheart, this game takes no skill. I can play and still enjoy watching you and seeing what fascinates you, or what captures your attention.”

Julie leaned in and kissed Juan soundly then commented, “You, honey, fascinate me. I like seeing you play and win. Show me some more of your winning streak.

“I hope he doesn’t get caught. I suspect they would frown upon that sort of action. Glad it’s not our problem.”