

You've managed to get past a good number of stumbling blocks in your life, haven't you? And remember, you've always managed to stay on your feet.

Wen Bao Zhu

CHAPTER 2

15 JULY 2020, WEDNESDAY

RANDALL **(TOKYO, JAPAN)**

In a seven-star hotel suite, Randall paced across the ample living room to leave his carry-on luggage next to the sofa. He was in a hurry and needed to be at Haneda International Airport before noon.

He'd received the e-mail from Chloe Franklin inviting him to be a guest on Retro-Rate. Though deeply sorry upon hearing the news from her, he'd been equally honored by her first-hand invite. *How many times in a lifetime does one get the opportunity to show up, and show off, on a live broadcast hosted by Chloe Franklin?*

A thrill of excitement rushed through him. Shuffling across the room, he called Kirk to check if he knew what was going on.

"Did you get an e-mail from Chloe Franklin yesterday?" he asked slowly.

"What would she send me an e-mail for?"

"Do yourself a favor, and check your mailbox once in a while. Wen Bao Zhu was found dead in her apartment yesterday."

"I know, I heard it on TV last night," Kirk replied after a heavy sigh. "Phew, gone just like that."

"Hey, I'm really sorry, and don't know what to say. I know how important Wen was for you."

"Can't believe still."

"It's amazing how Chloe kept our cell numbers and e-mail addresses for so many years," Randall said, shaking his head. "I'll be there tomorrow."

"Here, in New York? Don't tell me you're coming all the way to attend Wen's funeral."

"No, no, but listen, check your mailbox first. Chloe sent you an e-mail, and guess who else was on cc, except me? Heather."

"No way. Are you serious?"

"Ah, and who is Doris by the way, do you know her?"

Kirk was surprised. "Yeah, I know her," he said. "She used to be a good friend of mine. And I can easily say she's the coolest woman I've ever met in my life... I mean, after Wen."

"And how come I've never heard her name before?"

"Cause I've never mentioned Doris to anyone. I introduced her to Wen once, and I haven't seen her in years. What about her?"

"Nothing. I thought something's gone astray in the cyber world, you know, or some kind of mix-up data. The net connections suck these days."

"Are you trying to say that Doris received the same e-mail from Chloe?"

"Exactly."

"I see, you're right, seems like I'll have to check my mailbox more often," Kirk said, trying to placate the tone of his voice. "And how's it going with the messy subway situation over there? You said it was terrible last week."

"Bah, terrible still," Randall rolled his eyes, and blew a whistle toward the wall-to-wall flat screen to watch the recent subway dilemma. "See you tomorrow."

The situation was the same. Due to the closing of the subways, hundreds of thousands of people had been stuck in traffic all week. The mayor of Tokyo had recently announced via all available outdoor speakers that TURP (Tokyo Underground Renovation Project) would be completed by the end of next Tuesday, but the local news channels didn't say so.

This would be Randall's first live interview, and he didn't want to jeopardize its chances of happening because of a subway renovation in Tokyo. He switched off the TV. He no longer had the attention span for repetitive news on TURP developments. The construction had created havoc for everyone trying to get to the airport, so now all available heli-taxis had been booked already, in advance.

Over the past five years, he'd enjoyed a laid-back, hedonistic life in Tokyo, and got used to the convenience of dwelling in a hotel room. If it hadn't been for an emergency, he would have definitely passed and not stepped a foot back in New York for another couple of years. But now he wanted to be there as soon as possible. Arching an eyebrow, he headed to the master bedroom. *How on earth did this babe become one of America's biggest TV stars in such a short time?*

Yesterday evening, he'd sent a short message to Chloe to let her know that he was on his way to New York. Then, he'd immediately sent an in-house text to the hotel's escort service to cancel his 10 p.m. rendezvous with a twenty-three-year-old Moroccan brunette he'd placed a rush-order for earlier that night. Having to negotiate a peace agreement with his lower-extremities was not something he would do on a regular basis, so he'd reluctantly taken an ice-cold shower to relax. *Bah, it's not the most appropriate time to throw a naughty late-night party for two.*

Thinking of Chloe, he recalled the solo-salsa show she'd granted to an airy crowd of socialites seven years ago at *The Purple Lizard*. It'd been six years since the legendary New York nightclub had been shut down, but the memories of good old times had stayed with him still.

Back then, some snobs at the club had considered Chloe to be a pretty, but yet another novice model. They'd been so mistaken. The moment he'd met her there, Randall had instantly figured out that she'd been polishing her claws to be something more. After all, he'd always been a shrewd guesser when it came to spotting ruthless people in search of favorable connections.

He slipped into a comfortable pair of jeans and wore a red, loose T-shirt for the flight. The night before, he'd swallowed two sleeping pills of horse-killing caliber with the expectation of a six-hour deep sleep, hoping to ease his busy mind. It had worked. He was rested now.

Before he left, he acted on an unnecessary urge and dialed the number of his regular car service. Though he'd confirmed everything earlier, he wanted to double-check that the company would send the same driver to pick him up for the airport transfer. For the last couple of months, he'd developed a certain amount of sympathy toward the twenty-four-year-old Greek man who had ambitions of someday becoming an actor in the U.S. The glorious near-future dreams of the chatty driver, who came from a totally different background-slash-culture than Randall, made each ride a satisfaction-guaranteed talk show. This effusive young man had proved to be the best substitute *ever* for any anti-depressant that he'd tried so far. *Even Chloe would have tough competition from this guy.*

He glanced around the suite for a final check, and locked his room. As he waited for the Aero-lift, he pressed the *down* button four times in a row, as if the effort would help it to arrive faster than usual. Soon, a glass elevator stopped on the 73rd floor to transfer him down at stomach-churning speed. He put on a pair of purple sunglasses.

Once in the lobby, he scanned the crowd, and stopped at the private reception area to fingerprint on a tablet device. This told the system to send a short text message to his cell phone just before the car service arrived. He could have the system announce his name, but he decided against that. *What if I'm stuck in the toilet or at the e-library of the hotel's Media Lounge and couldn't hear my name announced?*

Randall wasn't some tourist or egocentric businessman who got a charge out of hearing his last name being announced throughout a hotel lobby. *That sort of thing is for those who still feel like neglected children.*

He left his carry-on luggage in the cloakroom, and decided to kill some time at the breakfast lounge. As he crossed the lobby, he fixed his gaze on the ceiling to avoid the whimsical glances of a French woman he'd met a few days ago at the heated indoor pool. She'd jumped in the water right after him, topless, but with a huge straw hat on her head. She'd given him a hell of a summary on her boring life, as if he'd asked to hear about it. Her pathetic, obvious loneliness had turned him off immediately hence the splendor of her twin-towers couldn't keep him in the pool for long.

As he wandered around the crowded breakfast lounge, he chatted with a few hotel personnel whom he was familiar with already. But after having drunk two glasses of grapefruit juice, he realized that his stomach would soon clench, as it always did when he was anxious. In time, he'd learned how to handle these cramps. The cure was to focus on bad memories. Hardcore stuff, but it worked surprisingly well. He called it 'self-inflicted emotional masochism'.

Picking up a random bad memory from his lengthy collection, his thoughts instantly drifted to the Swedish stewardess he'd met six months ago in a first class flight to Stockholm. She'd been gorgeous, and he, a little drunk already. While she'd been serving another glass of champagne to him, he'd touched her arm. To his surprise, she'd winked at him, brimming with liquid self-confidence.

"How's your sex life baby?" he'd asked boldly.

"Like *Coca-Cola*," she'd responded matter-of-factly, giving him a toothy smile. "It was *normal* at the beginning, then it became *light*, and now it's *zero*."

They'd had an on-and-off affair going on for a few weeks. All was going smooth until she'd confessed that she was getting married to a Danish guy soon. Soon? She'd meant in a month.

Though he'd failed to admit it into consciousness at the beginning, he'd very well sensed the real reason behind her backing off. *Wake up, Randall. Aren't you tired of these last-minute made-up excuses? Who needs a nymphomaniac fuck-buddy like you, with a left ball removed? Plastic surgery won't get you anywhere. Can't you see that even the best tissue producers in Japan couldn't make you a so-so replica? You're half-crippled, man. Admit it.*

Holding on to the wild and wet memories of this relationship that had started and ended like a fart in a whirlwind, he checked the weather report for New York. *'In the low twenties and rainy for the whole next week.'* He'd almost become an expert in converting Celsius to Fahrenheit, and vice versa.

Relieved by the mere thought of his date-of-return, he double-checked his e-ticket to see if it still read 18 July 2020, Saturday. It'd been almost two years since he'd booked an express round-trip ticket to New York, and it would take him only two hours to get to JFK, if he was lucky enough to get to the airport on time. Finally receiving the text message he was waiting for, he stepped out to the driveway.

"Hello," the Greek driver snapped, giving a sudden jerk of his head toward Randall, "Is it me you're looking for?"

"Hey, Lionel," Randall grinned, handing him his carry-on luggage. The back seat of

the car was more comfortable than he remembered. He kept his unruffled attitude, and gifted himself with ten points of virtual self-credit. This was a harmless daily game he played every day. Today's points were for securing a ride with his favorite driver, rather than risking a tedious ride with a total stranger. *A non-English-speaking one is far worse.*

**HEATHER
(ROME, ITALY)**

Running on the treadmill in her bedroom on slow-mode, Heather commanded, "Stop!" She had no clue how loud she was. She'd noticed the flashing green light of her audio device, the only indicator to inform her that she had an incoming call. Experiencing a dramatic hearing loss since last year, she had a nagging throb in both ears, and hardly been able to hear her own voice at times. Although she'd undergone a special treatment plan, utilizing the most advanced audiometric tests, nothing seemed to help her regain a reasonable level of audio perception so far.

"You need to take a break from your routine," the doctors had said to her. "You should be grateful that you're still alive. You've survived a terrible car accident, but you'll end up deaf if you refuse medication. Be patient, you'll be fine in two months."

For the time being, she took her calls with the help of a special application, which typed each spoken word into a text.

The call was from Chloe Franklin, an old friend. She didn't answer, thinking that it was an unnecessary thing to do at this point. *You don't stop at anything, do you?* Yesterday, after reading the odd e-mail that Chloe had sent to her, she'd already sent a quick R.S.V.P. that she would attend the show. That was enough. *How dare you cc me and put Kirk on top? And who the hell is Doris?*

In her opinion, Wen Bao Zhu was the last person on earth to commit suicide. *Ha! This reunion is a cynical ploy to boost ratings. This 'gathering old friends tomorrow night' is just Chloe planning to pull in big bucks one more time.*

The thought embarrassed her, sending her reeling backwards in her mind. *Am I still devastated by her huge success?*

Heather Hayes, an alluring dark-blond with smoky green eyes, had led a full-vibe social life until the hearing loss issue had taken hold. And since then, she'd radically decided to seclude herself from society. No outsider could guess the hard work she'd put in over the years to climb up the stairs of triumph, or how she'd woken up in a cold sweat to face another day, trying to eliminate her worries of failure. She'd made up her mind to become a famous actress long ago, no matter the cost.

The haute-society milieu she'd been a part of for the last six years had little acquaintance to her former lifestyle, but her close friends knew what kind of a bittersweet gunfire she was.

"If I were you, I'd focus on the strategy of becoming a socialite first," Mina, her closest friend still, had suggested in those days. "Recognition brings connections."

Supported by a dose of self-injected hope shot gently on a day-to-day basis, Heather's life had hit pure luck when she'd finally met the Barbunian Brothers. That had happened a while ago though, in 2013. Now, unwillingly having to put her hard-gained privileges aside, she had to back off. And just when she thought she had it all.

For the time being, she mostly spent her days reading, cooking, and watching movies with English subtitles in her two-bedroom apartment overlooking the Vatican. Situated within the industrial area in Rome, and located in a luxury condominium on the 37th floor, the place would have been paradise for many, but she was going crazy from boredom and loneliness.

For someone like her who had a special interest and love for music, her current circumstance could easily be considered a temporary punishment. A loyal fan of the 1980's tunes, she thought the best music of all time belonged to that specific era. Currently, let alone her favorites, she felt she could even settle for a cheesy generic tune for a while. She recalled the once-popular Korean Wave hit, and performed its bizarre moves, a signature horseback-riding dance back in 2012. *Eeeehh...Sexy Lady oh...oh...oh...oh, Oppan Gangnam Style.*

Her thoughts shifted once again to the email she received from Chloe. For many reasons, the idea of having to get ready for a live interview was a bit more than she could handle. It was in New York, and within the next thirty-six hours. *Ugh. I hope I won't be laughed at in front of a live audience with this hearing device.*

Reluctant, but curious nonetheless, she booked a business-class ticket to New York for the next morning. There was no other option than looking her best, so she scheduled an express online appointment with Carmen Salt, her favorite make-up artist and hair stylist from years ago. Four p.m. would do. The good thing was that Carmen's studio was still in Time Warner Center on Columbus Circle, and Heather knew the G.M. of the Mandarin Oriental. She called the hotel. *Oh, God, only you know how I hate this 'type me the voice' button. It's like watching paint dry.*

"No problem at all," The G.M. said in a friendly but respectful manner. "It will be my personal pleasure to host you again."

She took off her sweatpants and put on a pink bikini to see if it still fit. *Wow, seven long years since I'd tried this on. But Tom says I'm still fuckable. Is he lying? No, I don't think so. He never lies to me.*

Heather had, indeed, been as slick as a Wampus cat once. Feeling adrenalized, she threw the pink bikini on her king-sized bed. Naked, and cursing in Italian, she got back on the treadmill. *The monotony is driving me nuts! I need my music.*

KIRK **(NEW YORK CITY, U.S.A.)**

Kirk woke up to a gloomy summer morning in his one-bedroom Upper West Side apartment. Stretching his body, he caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the mirror across his bed. Lips pursed, he ran his hands through his shoulder-length, dark-blond hair and tied it in a ponytail at the back of his neck. Just like every morning, except weekends, he was supposed to have been in his office long ago—around eight-thirty—but he couldn't have fallen asleep the night before.

Barefoot, he paced the shiny marble floor to reach the blinds. The rain was pouring at full blast, and he needed fresh air to inhale. He let out a loud yawn, and strolled to the open kitchen to click the "toast" sign on the food machine.

After having a cup of coffee and a cigarette, he was ready to escape the state of denial that he was in. Wen Bao Zhu, the world's most enigmatic self-help guru, but above all, the only woman he'd cared for in his entire life—except for his mother—was found dead in her apartment last night. *Seven full years have passed by without seeing Wen. But I haven't spent a single day without thinking of her since then.*

He'd heard the breaking news from a local TV channel yesterday evening by chance, during a regular visit to the 24-hour-open neighborhood deli for some food shopping. To come across Wen's face on a 3-D plasma screen while waiting in line for the cash register, had hit him like a painful slap in the face.

His overall confusion had grown when he'd received that call from Randall. He knew very well that Kirk would never flip through the pages of a daily newspaper or check with online news. Kirk had long ago cut his bonds with the outer world and had

chosen not to pay attention to the cynical manipulations of public opinion. Once a huge fan of online discount coupons and e-mails, he no longer had the desire to check his mailbox. Not more than twice a week.

Though part of him was well aware of the reason why Chloe had suddenly decided to contact them after so long, the other part of him couldn't wrap his head around the occasion. *Heather, I can understand, but I don't get why Chloe invited Doris. Did they really know each other that well? Ah, Doris! So, you were the one to give Chloe the idea of Retro-Rate?*

It was around one p.m. when he had his fifth coffee and took a drag from his sixth cigarette, and one-fifteen on the dot when he received a call to his cell. As soon as he read *Chloe Franklin-Bandana Calling* on the screen, he squinted, and reached for the small coffee table next to him to grab his phone.

"Hi, Kirk. Don't you ever check your mailbox?" she asked in a soft tone. "I sent you an e-mail yesterday and I'm still waiting for your confirmation."

"I know, I just couldn't get back to you sooner. I guess I'm still in shock."

"I'm very sorry, really. I know how important Wen was for you."

"If no one knows what happened to her yet, how can you say that she committed suicide?"

"It was just a guess."

"A guess?" Kirk spoke under his breath. "I hope you're wrong. Anyway, are Doris and Heather coming?" He needed to know.

"Yes, they texted me that they're on their way to New York. And, I'll be glad to see you again. Will you be able to make it?"

"Yeah, I will."

He hung up the phone, and licked the tip of his forefinger and then hit the *power* sign on the touch-screen to start his computer—an old-fashioned, 2017-release tablet that only functioned with personal saliva.

After reading Chloe's e-mail once again, and scratching the surface of his emotions, he finally laid an honest hand on his heart for the truth. He calmed down a bit, but his fears were still falling in the unwarranted category. Praying that the whole incident was one of those false alerts and bits of imperfect data that were often provided to multi-media channels, he started surfing on the net. *No way you committed suicide, Wen.*

His anxiety escalated while he zapped quickly in between a few news channels, and decided that logging on to Chloe's show would be a smarter choice. He subscribed to Retro-Rate's recently rolled-out 'sort-and-rush' version, in case a new development was to shed light on what was going on. All the evidence gathered so far on the incident was being researched in detail, and the media was apparently not ready to make a final statement before a thoroughly completed investigation.

On the other hand, although Kirk occasionally thought Chloe was an opportunist, he'd been happy for her when she'd finally made it as a successful talk-show host. He remembered the private party at *The Purple Lizard* in 2013, the one he'd invited her to join as a guest. *Phew! In those days, she was nothing but an aspiring looker, and a keen hunter of the spongiest kind.*

Broadcast every Thursday at eleven p.m., Retro-Rate was set to air again tomorrow night, and no-doubt it would draw in millions of viewers, per usual. For the time being, Chloe's career and loyal fan base were trivial issues when something far more important to the public interest was currently going on. So he stopped thinking of her, instead, he walked to the bathroom to brush his teeth. But when he examined the coarse, grey hair growing on his lower cheeks in front of a magnified mirror, he thought that the whitish shadow added no extra charisma, but unnecessary weariness to

his overall, fair complexion. *Does it recently resemble that of a nasty, toothless fisherman? Not really. But, it's hard to tell you're only thirty-eight. It's time for a quick shave to get rid of this ten-day-old beard. Look at you.*

Intuitively, he changed his mind and kept his beard for Retro-Rate. Distressed, he decided to get outside for a short walk, but before that he ransacked the whole apartment to find his keys. *I yam what I yam.*

DORIS
(LONDON, U.K.)

Doris, a thirty-five-year-old head hunter with curvy hips and very short black hair, leaned forward to reach her brown, leather briefcase. She unzipped it quickly to grab a pack of paper napkins and a tiny bottle of eye drops. The sudden reddening of her nose—along with her eyes getting watery—announced impending sneezes, one after another. She was allergic to dust.

As an established talent agent servicing indie -film investors and full-service studios in Europe, she usually had plenty of unread stuff on her desk waiting to be evaluated. Though she'd learned long ago how to separate the wheat from the chaff, she still liked to go over and carefully eye-scan every single piece before she made a final selection. Always on the lookout for hands-on creativity, she browsed every single screenplay submitted from new scenarists.

She blew her nose loudly, and stared at the flat-screen tablet mounted on her oak desk. Soon, she heard a barely-audible knock on the door, and spotted Julia, her new assistant, approaching with a wood tray held tightly in both hands.

"Hi Doris, it's my birthday today," Julia said, as she got closer with an ear-to-ear smile across her face. "I turned twenty-seven today."

Doris raised her chin and ground her teeth. "Nice. The same thing happened to me around eight years ago too, so don't worry, it'll pass quickly," she said, glancing at the piece of chocolate cake next to a small cup of coffee on the tray. With a smile, she straightened her body, and motioned her head in a 'leave me alone now' gesture. Within her office, this was often equivalent to a 'thank you' as well.

After Julia left, Doris viewed a few screenplay submissions. She forwarded one of them to an online text reader, and touched the 'male voice' option on the paper-thin screen. She closed her eyes. *An interesting piece in terms of conceptual value, but the dialogue parts desperately need a total re-write.*

Once she finished listening to the first three chapters, she reached for the tray. As she swallowed a bite of the cake, she noted down the PNR password for her flight to New York the next morning. She wanted to dial Kirk's number for a chat like in the old days, but she didn't have the heart to do so. Though supremely astonished that she would see him again soon, she felt tense somehow. *I haven't called him for years, and for no specific reason. Have I been a bad friend?*

On the other hand, to be invited to Retro-Rate meant 'get prepared for a tough interview'. No one knew what to expect from Chloe in a live broadcast. Doris had seen her last at a charity event in 2018, and they'd run into each other at Bergdorf's a year ago, but it wouldn't count. But the memory of the day they'd met for the first time was as vivid as if it had been yesterday. *I liked her from the beginning.*

No one could have ever guessed that Doris Jane Black had met Chloe Franklin at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on a cold November afternoon in 2013. It was in New York and when Chloe was only twenty-three years old. They'd first seen each other in the basement of a church where the weekly meetings were held, and had exchanged smiles upon entering the seminar room.

She and Chloe were first-timers; they'd sat on the same row, leaving only two empty chairs between them in the relatively empty room. Doris remembered how guilty they both had felt when they found themselves staring at an older woman. Knitting a shawl at the back end of the room, the old lady had been nodding for confirmation each time a speaker made a statement. Doris and Chloe had exchanged a few glances, smirking at each other.

Six other women and three men had randomly seated themselves in the other rows, and were listening carefully to the speaker's story. Four of the participants had already introduced themselves and told their stories, and soon it was Chloe's turn. Another participant had already handed the microphone to Chloe, but she had obviously no clue how to proceed. Chloe Franklin, the black queen of live entertainment in the current era, had no idea how to hold a microphone or speak in front of a small group of eleven then.

Doris recalled how happy Chloe seemed at the end of the meeting when she'd said how honesty, along with tolerance, could lead the world to a brighter future. After the meeting, Doris had invited Chloe to grab a quick cup of coffee at a neighborhood café.

"Wow, that was scary," Chloe had said in excitement. "I never thought that I'd be tied up within such a puzzled state of mind. I'm usually very open and talkative."

"It happens when you're surrounded with curious strangers. When they gave me that tiny microphone, I was in a crooked mood, too. Thank God that I could open up fast."

Chloe had given her a pitiful look. "I'm sorry to hear that you've been drinking since the age of thirteen."

"Listen, I have a confession to make," Doris had said. "I'm not an alcoholic at all. I mean, I can hardly finish a glass of red wine."

"Really? Then what were you doing in there?"

"I'm a scriptwriter working on a play. I've only been there to have a first-hand impression. That's all."

"But why?"

"I have to dig deeper and develop a plot for a fictitious character struggling with alcohol addiction, so I needed to know what a real AA meeting is like," Doris had explained further. "Being a scriptwriter sometimes requires me to do things like this."

"So...you made it all up, just like that?"

"Yeah, but I sort of feel cheap now for having lied to a whole bunch of people."

Chloe had listened to her confession silently, eyes wide with surprise.

"Anyway, I have a train to catch in two hours, I need to be in Washington tonight. I hope I see you again somewhere, you never know," Doris had said. She had avoided mentioning a small detail, though, that she'd recorded every single word in the room—including Chloe's introduction and speech—into a tape recorder.

'Woink, woink, woink...'

Doris's thoughts instantly got flustered by her smart-phone's ring tone. The 3D image indicated that she had an incoming video call from Joe, her private driver. "I'll be waiting downstairs at the gar..."

She quickly pressed the 'no' button to let him know that she's on her way down to the garage. She'd developed a clear pattern of communication with her staff, and not a single misunderstanding had occurred so far.

Her office-time was up for the day, and she needed to be present at Wills & Smiles Steakhouse for a lunch meeting with Barbara von Hagens. An amusingly unconventional and idiosyncratic personality, Barbara had been a longtime idol of Doris. The woman was a veteran of the film industry of the past two decades, and

Doris adored her zany sense of humor. These occasional face-time lunches with producers were the best time-slices of her weekdays, providing her the opportunity to hobnob with the real-deal film executives. Luckily, Barbara was now the chief contract manager for a well-known movie-production studio that was currently interested in signing a contract with one of Doris's new clients.

She now had twenty minutes to get to the restaurant, and try to convince the iron lady that it was worth giving this talented screenwriter a try. The first lesson Doris had learned long ago was not to be a hundred percent sure of anything. And the second was that the future held tons of inestimable opportunities for everyone, with no exceptions. She grabbed her briefcase and quickly headed downstairs to get to the garage. To be late for a meeting with Barbara was a big no-no —an unaffordable gaffe.