

Chapter 1: John and Linda Parker

John and Linda Parker are two professionals who happened to live in an upper mid-class suburb of a well-known American city.

John was a manager at a multi-national investment company, which provided a wide range of financial services. He was the team's quarterback in his college years and made a name for himself by winning a championship game with a clutch last seven seconds throw.

Linda was a teacher and the principal of a reputable high school. Her father, Reverend Wilson, lived all his life trying to bring the word of the Gospel into less fortunate communities and fight with all his energy gang violence by speaking to the teenagers and convincing them to follow a different path. Linda felt like her father's legacy must live on; she wasted no time getting involved in community projects and volunteering to work with kids from less privileged neighborhoods.

John

Since kids have left for college, they developed a habit of sleeping with the door of the master bedroom open. It was just another way of keeping in touch with "the world downstairs."

The smell of the freshly brewed coffee made him crack a smile even though he was still half asleep. He set the alarm clock to go off fifteen minutes before the coffee maker started brewing, and the pleasure of laying in the bed and stealing another quarter of an hour from yet another hectic day to come was bringing him immense pleasure.

Finally, he decided to get out of the bed; turned and rolled over, closer to Linda. John lifted his head, looked at her for a few seconds, then hugged and kissed her on the side of her neck. Even though she was still sleeping, he could see that his kiss brought immense pleasure to her beautiful face and a purring-like sound made him think of naughty things. He bit his bottom lip and slowly rolled out of bed, trying not to wake her up.

When he turned the bathroom's light on, a moment of hesitation came on his face as the eyes tried to adjust to the new environment. He took his T-shirt off and looked into the mirror. "Still got it, still got it, buddy!" came instantly out of his mouth and flooded his face with an expression of satisfaction.

His flat stomach was still showing the six-pack, which during his football years brought him the famous nickname everybody in the team was envying: "The Spartan." It was the nickname in the locker room given each year by the teammates to the player with the best-sculptured abs. A great sense of pride brightened his face, and the memories poured in: the great game for the championship, the game won in the last seven seconds by his throw, and the injury which ended an up-and-coming career. Dropped his head for two seconds, then looked again in the mirror and chuckled: "You would've made it to the NFL! You sure would've made it!"

The morning routine settled in very quickly: teeth brushing, showering, and shaving; he did everything with exact motions and a set time frame; three minutes for teeth brushing, five minutes for the shower, four for shaving. Hair combing came after and was still taking some time in spite of the fact that he lost some hair around his temples. The grey shades in his hair gave him a mature look, the look of a man who is in control, a man who is an established professional capable of providing a comfortable living for his family.

“Coffee time! It is now coffee time!”; he took the stairs down to the living room and then to the kitchen while putting on a lovely silk robe around him and rubbing his hands against each other in the sense of great expectations...like a kid in a candy store, one would say. The smell of the fine coffee he just poured into his cup made him close his eyes and take a deep breath - like he wanted to make sure he absorbed all that wonderful essence of the Caribbean blend he was buying from the gourmet coffee shop across his downtown office. The first sip was short, with his eyes closed, trying not to lose anything of the great bold and robust aroma of the liquid in his cup. “So good, so good,” exclaimed John in such an enthusiastic way, a way which would’ve made one genuinely understand that John was indeed a specialist in gourmet coffees! He put the cup on the kitchen table and headed towards the entrance. He opened the door, wrapped the robe around his waist, and picked up the newspaper. He looked at the sky and mumbled, “It will be a cold winter; hopefully, we won’t have too much snow.” On his way back, he took a quick look at the sports section, “They lost!” A glimpse of sadness – like a lonely cloud on a clear winter morning sky – settled on his bottom lip. “Why did I miss the game? How come I got so out of touch with the sport I love so much that I completely forgot about the game? Aha...the meeting!”

After the unexpected call for a large-scale meeting (directly coming from John John yesterday afternoon), he started digging into his files. Due to the fact that J.J. did not provide any meeting agenda, he was nervous because this had never happened before. “What if I have to present something? No. He didn’t provide any discussion topics. “What if...?” That “if” started torturing him, and he completely forgot that he was supposed to be with everybody else from the office at the usual sports bar to watch the game together. Even forgot that while the guys were leaving, he asked Vicky to order wings for him when she asked him if he was coming? “Of course I do! Today is the big game! I wouldn’t miss it for the world. What sort of question is this?”

- “Just asking, John. Just asking,” said Vicky and left while looking over the shoulder, smiling persuasively. He smiled back, opened a large binder containing notes he took from the past two years’ meetings and started reading. He didn’t even realize when it got dark outside. He raised his head only when John John softly knocked on the frame of his opened office door and asked, “You didn’t go with the guys to watch the game?”

John pulled a chair and had another sip while turning the TV on.

- “Temperature is in the low forties, and we expect it to stay like this for the whole week...it will be a cold winter, folks.” “Yeah, thanks for the late-breaking news!” and switched the channel.

- “Financial markets took a dive, today folks, at the news that Chinese economy will only grow at a rate of 5.7%, much lower than most of the analysts predicted. On the other hand, the Bank of China announced unprecedented reforms to the lending policies trying this way to stimulate an

economy which everybody in the world fears will start sputtering and come to a stall after years of robust growth.”

He was now “eyes and ears” at the news and immediately opened the newspaper’s financial section on the table. “Glenworth Financials” lost three dollars and forty-three cents per share between three and four o’clock yesterday, which was unexpected, especially after the steady growth recorded over the past five years. Growth mainly due to the opening of the Shanghai office and exposure to the enormous Chinese market.

- “This doesn’t make sense. It is an emotional sell. People are selling based on the news...Hmm, maybe it’s time to buy a few shares,” and a large conspiring smile showed up on the left corner of his mouth. “Maybe it’s time to buy”; John took another sip out of the cup and continued digging into the written material.

He then finished the coffee with short and calculated sips while devouring the financial section in front of him. It didn’t take too long before he got a clear picture of what the markets will do in the following weeks. Then he stood up and headed towards the living room when all of a sudden everything became clear to him: “This is why John John is calling the meeting! Of course, this is the reason! It has to be!” John John knew about the announcement and wasted no time in calling this emergency meeting. He has been working close to J.J. since he joined “Glenworth Financials” and his reaction felt simply normal. He got to know John John very well, and not being ahead of the game was something he hated the most. “I’m sure that he already has a plan sketched up.”

Moments later, he was upstairs, opened up the closet, and took a quick look at the large wardrobe at his disposal. The shirts were all aligned by color. He picked a light silk cappuccino that beautifully matched the beige suit with thin, vertical, light gray stripes he set his eyes onto. The leather light brown shoes and a tie which wonderfully matched the shirt and the suit, completed his choice for the day. He took all of them into the bedroom, making sure he didn’t make too much noise. Linda was still sleeping, and judging by the look on her face, he figured out that she was having pleasant dreams. He started dressing, and this particular morning he spent very little time looking at the details like a perfect knot or a perfect pants crease. He was dressing with feverish and precipitated moves as opposed to calm and calculated ones – as he usually dressed. He was so eager to get to the office as soon as possible, so he could get access to the network and dissect the financial statements Glenworth publicized two days ago! “Done! Let’s go!”

- “Morning, handsome,” came from Linda’s direction. He quickly turned around and looked at her. Bent a knee then hugged and kissed her.

- “Morning, beautiful,” he whispered into her ear. This made her wrap her arms around his neck and smile again.

- “I have to go, please let go.” Her arms were firmly holding him close to her chest. “I really have to go, now. Come on, be a good girl and let me leave,” repeated John with a soft and calm voice, trying to break loose from the hug.

- "I'll see you tonight at the theater?"

- "Of course, you'll see me. Have a good day now. I'll call you after lunch."

- "OK. You may go now," she said, closing her eyes while hugging the big pillow she was sleeping on.

He rushed downstairs with the shoes in his hands. The rule was simple and straightforward: "No shoes inside of the house." He put them on in the hallway and was ready to storm out of the house when he realized he had left the TV on. "That's OK" was his first instinct as he knew Linda would watch the news as well while having her tea. But the discipline cultivated during his college football career and the years at Glenworth made him take his shoes off and head for the kitchen. "No electric device should be kept on while being away from the house."

He grabbed the remote control, and the moment he was ready to push the power button, sports news came up: "And now let's watch some highlights from last night's game and especially the last seconds' drama when our boys came so close to winning." Memories popped up in his head as he watched the last throw of the quarterback to the receiver; it was a close miss. "It was less than an inch, less than an inch. This is terrible luck, bad luck, folks!" A sigh of disappointment came out of his chest, making him turn the TV off. On his way back to the entrance, he stopped by the room he was using as his home office. Flipped the switch and took a long look at the big poster showing him making the throw with seven seconds left for the championship. He was entirely covered by mud on that torrential rain, making that last throw while tackled by two defensive linemen. And it was the same play that ended his career. He never fully recovered from that torn ACL, and even if the broken ribs healed well once in a while, he was feeling some pain in the area, especially during intense physical effort. "I guess I was lucky. I made the throw. I did make that throw!" came out of his chest while chuckling and flipping the switch back off.

He put the shoes on, grabbed the overcoat from the coat hanger, the suitcase, and then headed straight for the garage. He opened the door of his red muscle car, threw the suitcase and the coat on the front seat, and stormed out of the driveway without waiting for the car to warm up. Usually, he wouldn't do it, but now there was a different ball game on the line. He had to get into the office as soon as possible. The meeting was called for 9.00 am. "Hopefully, the traffic is not too bad. It is early". Once he got on the freeway, he stepped on the gas pedal, shifting into the highest gear. The 500 HP engine neighed like a pureblood Arabian horse taken out of the stable for the morning run, and the tires squalled on the fresh asphalt trying to keep up with all the mightiness of the eight-cylinder engine. "Hopefully, there are no cops around," John said to himself and moved into the most left lane. The superb sports car he was driving was doing what it was designed to do: racing. Virtually there were barely a few cars on the freeway, and the suburbs were left behind one by one. He was closing in to reach downtown when all of a sudden, he started seeing red brake lights from the cars ahead of him. "Damn it! It must be an accident ahead." He swiftly moved towards the most suitable lane to be positioned for an exit on one of the city streets towards downtown. Within the next half a mile, he got a clear picture of what was going on ahead of him: one lane opened only – accident. Luckily he was close to the next exit and, without any hesitation, took a side street towards downtown. "Not too bad, not too bad! At least I am moving." It took him another eighteen minutes to reach the street his office building

was on as he caught every single red light possible. He truly started believing in Murphy's laws: "When something bad has to happen, it will happen."

After making the right turn towards the building, the traffic came to a complete halt. "You gotta be kiddin' me!" He opened up the door (as nothing was moving) to see what was going on. He had less than a hundred and fifty yards to the front of the building. "Are you kidding me? These jackasses are towing a car now, during the rush hour, so the traffic can get from bad to the worst possible!" His carotids were pulsing from anger. "Think John, think!" came out of his mouth, looking around and holding his point fingers at the temples. Suddenly he saw Leo on the other side of the road, walking on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, rubbing his hands against each other, attempting to stay warm. Leo was one of the valets who were parking cars at the hotel across the street. He met him a few years ago when carpooled with Vic while his car got fixed. It was exactly the same situation, but at that time, Vic had the answer: got Leo to park the car while both of them walked to the office. Obviously, Vic did it before, otherwise how would've he known Leo?

- "Leo! Leo! Boohoo," yelled John as hard as he could. However, people were honking their horns, trying to achieve something impossible: moving. Leo couldn't hear him. John started waving at him while still yelling: "Leo! Leo!" Finally, Leo saw him, and before heading in his direction, he had a short hesitation. Leo didn't recognize John. However, Leo was one of those street smarts who have their noses trained in smelling a nice tip from well-dressed people driving sports cars. Just by looking at John's nice red muscle car, he intuitively knew his day was about to start on a high note. He was a city guy, and it was a giving knowing how to complement your regular income with cash coming from wherever else.

- "Leo, I'm John – we met a while ago. I'm Vic's friend. Remember me?"

- "Heeey, of course, I remember you! How are you, Mr. Parker? How is Vic? I haven't seen him in years!"

- "He is in China. Long story..."

- "Ahaaaa. He is in China. Lucky guy! He probably got himself a nice Chinese chick, boom, boom, boom..."

- "He is there for a work assignment."

- "Oooh...I understand. Work assignment," said Leo while winking, and a large smile exposed his impeccable white teeth, contrasting with his dark skin were shining like well-polished diamonds.

- "Listen, Leo. I need your help. I have a meeting in exactly thirty-eight minutes, and I still have preparations to make. I need..."

- "Of course, I can park the car for you, Mr. Parker!"

- "Thank you so much, Leo! You have no idea how much you are helping me!"

- "Don't worry, Mr. Parker. I will leave the keys with the guys downstairs at the information center and a note with the parking spot number."

- "Leo, you are a treasure!" John pulled the wallet out of his pocket, took all the cash out of it, and gave it to Leo.

- "No, Mr. Parker! You don't have to do this! However, Leo's fingers were already counting the fresh bills in his hand.

- "I insist, Leo. I still owe you. You are helping me big time," said John while running towards the building.

Leo jumped into the car, took his valet coat off, and set the radio to his favorite rap station at a volume any other person would've instantly gone deaf. "Yeah baby; yeah baby; yeah baby! Hundred twenty dollars! It's gonna be a good day, good day, good day! Yeah baby... yeah baby... yeah baby". Despite the crisp fall morning, he opened up the roof and continued to rap, hoping that the traffic would still be jammed for a while.

John stormed into the building. The elevator was not coming quick enough! He checked his wristwatch: "come on, come on!" and started pushing button 27 numerous times. Glenworth Financials was renting the whole 27th Level of the building. His office was a short distance, down the hall from J.J.'s office. Mr. Glenworth was already in. All the lights in his office were turned on, making John understand that his boss showed up for work very early in the morning.

- "He is reviewing his presentation. He did not provide any sort of agenda! I hope this meeting is his show only."

He passed J.J.'s office and took a look inside while passing by. He had his laptop set on the table behind his working desk and was typing.

John wanted to stop and say good morning but realized his boss was too absorbed by his work, and disruption wouldn't have made him a very happy person. So, he just headed for his office, trying not to make any sort of noise that would've disturbed his boss from his work. He turned on his laptop and logged into the network. He was particularly interested in the financial statements related to Glenworth's investments in China. "Bingo!" said John with a great relief of satisfaction on his face while looking at his watch: "I still have twenty-five minutes on my hand." He feverishly started crunching numbers.

Linda

The alarm clock went off ten minutes before 8.00 am. Linda reached for the snooze button and turned on the other side, trying to steal another ten minutes of the morning sleep.

Her first class for the day was scheduled for 10.00 am, so she didn't feel any pressure to hurry in waking up. Shortly after the second alarm sound, she got up and headed towards the bathroom. She was always brushing her teeth before taking a shower, which she did as a morning routine

once again. Then dropped her pajama and got into the shower. Despite giving birth to two children and closing in to be forty-nine, her body was still showing forms that a twenty-year-old girl would've been jealous of. All those years spent as a cheerleader, all the gymnastics hours taken during her youth were paying off now. It was actually how she met John. He got out of the pocket during the big game and made a run for the first down. He got pushed out of bounce and couldn't stop running towards the cheer leaders' area where Linda was a main piece into the formation. Luckily he got the presence of mind of dropping the ball and taking her into his arms – otherwise, he would've knocked her down. She remembered being carried for a few yards without touching the turf. When their little tango came to a halt, she finally felt the ground under her feet, and it was only that time when she had the power to look him up into the eyes: he was John Parker! Every girl in the school had his name in the daily vocabulary or at least a poster with him on the dorm's wall.

From that moment on, everything was a fairy-tale story: the "I am so sorry" which came out of his lips while looking her straight into the eyes, the party after the game when she was desperately looking for him, the unexpected phone call which came the second day, the visit at the hospital where she saw him in a cast from the waist up to the armpits, the start of their relationship, the wedding, kids, kids going to college...

All these memories were popping up while looking into the mirror when carefully drying her long, beautiful hair, and a big smile was flooding her face.

She grabbed a robe and headed for the kitchen. Then she turned the TV on and started making her morning tea—weather channel, financial markets, sports...nothing interesting.

She poured the tea into a cup and started browsing through the newspaper John brought in. It was still opened at the financial section. She saw the mark made by John with a black marker: it was the quotation on the market of Glenworth Investments. "The news is not too good, I guess," she said to herself, seeing the negative sign in front of the dollar figure. Then she moved to "Arts & Life." It was a piece of cake for her – new art at the galleries, movies, and new plays at the Opera House.

- "The shooting which took place last night in front of the Lagoon Paradise left two young men: sixteen and eighteen years old dead and three others in their twenties seriously wounded. The police have sealed up the area, and the investigation behind the shooting has begun. It is strongly believed, though, that it was gang-related shooting" came up, and all of a sudden, all her attention was captured by the TV.

- "This is just great! Yet another shooting! Somebody has got to do something about this; otherwise, the whole city will turn into a war zone."

As a teacher and the principal of a reputable high school in town, she regularly participated in the City School board meetings and was very familiar with the gang-related issues in the schools. She was spending a great deal out of her free time working with children from underprivileged families, helping them catch up with the learning but mostly offering guidance on day-to-day life.

She was doing it with great pleasure as she grew up with the mindset that you always have to give something back to society and help people less fortunate than you.

Her father was the minister of a church in the little town she grew up (not far away from the city) and spent his whole life spreading the word of the Gospel, comforting and helping people in need. Most of all, going into the poor communities and talking to parents, teenagers, and even kids. Reverend Wilson was a true missionary dedicating a good part of his life to the welfare of the kids coming from broken families, homeless people, or teens joining gangs. He was particularly working with kids dragged into the gangs. He believed that they are just missing the guidance and the warm environment of a stable family, of an environment where they can feel having a future, where they feel “important”.

He almost lost his life when he got caught in a crossfire shooting between two gangs. He was having one of his regular discussions about God and the life of Jesus with a few kids close to a community basketball court. A bullet hit him in the neck, and he was fortunate it had not touched any major artery. From that moment on, he truly believed that God chose him to take his will to the poor and unfortunate. He spent the rest of his life trying to build a parish into that community, a community riddled with violence, unemployment, broken families, and gang fighting. He did not live to see the church opening up. He lost a battle only the Good Lord could’ve won. Until the last moments, he thanked God for the life and the family he had, for the chance to be His humble servant on Earth, and for the good deeds he did serving Him.

For the last two weeks of his life, Linda was with him, all the way to the end, and she still remembers him whispering while looking up at the ceiling: “Lord, thank you for not taking my mind away from me.” Then his beautiful blue eyes froze, and Reverend Wilson went to meet Him.

This last phrase followed her for a long time after his passing.

He was her life model, and although she was not going to the church as often as she used to, her dad’s teachings survived into her subconsciousness, and his legacy turned into a mission.

The great Easter Sunday morning when the parish was opened and people flocked in made her feel such a great sense of pride, especially that she had managed to take her father’s project to the end despite all adversities and lack of financial support! And only the fact that her father was not there to see his dream come true stopped her from thoroughly enjoying the ceremony.

Reverend Jackson officiated the mass. He was one of the teenagers her father saved from the gang environment. He followed the path of faith laid in front of him by Reverend Wilson and eventually became the pastor of the parish. He relentlessly continued the work of his mentor, trying to keep his legacy alive.

In all the charitable projects she had in the community, Linda worked very closely with him. The fact that he grew up there and people knew him was of tremendous help to her. The seeds planted by her dad are now producing crops.

- “And with the help of Good Lord, hopefully, we will get to harvest the crops, amen!” said Linda and took the stairs up to the first floor. “It’s time to get ready! It is another day”. She began dressing, and for a reason she couldn’t explain, memories of her first teaching class (at the high school she was still teaching) settled in. The nervousness, anxiety, sense of pride, and fear of failure all came up, and despite that, all of these feelings were pure history. She felt a knot in her throat. She looked into the mirror and realized that small drops of sweat were coming down her face. “What’s going on? Why is this happening?” she called out as she wiped the sweat with the robe’s sleeve and sat on the edge of the bed to gather her thoughts while still looking into the mirror. She had a look of worry on her face. “Why is this happening? Why?” Memories of her father losing the battle with that cruel illness flooded her mind. She covered her face and held the head into her palms for a second. “It has to be just an anxiety attack! It will go away soon, and everything will be just fine,” she said again to herself, then tried to get all these negative thoughts out of her mind by deeply breathing while gently massaging her lower abdomen.

- “It’s gone! See? It was just a short anxiety attack! I knew it!”

She immediately jumped to her feet and feverishly started looking for the suit she wore during her first teaching class at the high school she was still teaching. It was buried among other suits she was not wearing anymore at the end of the walk-in closet.

She took it to the bedroom while it stayed on the hanger and cried while looking at it. Then she did a little pirouette, turned around, and looked from the profile. She really liked what she saw, and a smile blossomed on her face. Her abdomen was still flat, the skin smooth like velvet, and the few little wrinkles around her eyes were only adding charm to the whole bouquet of femininity she was radiating at that moment. She softly bit her lower lip, the same way she did when John grabbed her from the sideline and made her levitate for a few seconds during the championship game. That little lip-biting in tandem with her angelic smile made John forget that he had to get back on the field. He was brought back to reality by “Big K.J.,” who yelled at him while grabbing both his shoulders with his huge palms: “Come on, man! We are losing! What the hell is wrong with you?”

She burst into a big healthy laughter, a laugh that came when she needed it the most. It was like a vane releasing the steam out of a boiling vessel.

Two years later, K.J. was one of John’s “best men”. Eventually, he became a successful businessman who tremendously helped her make her father’s dream come true during the struggling years.

She immediately decided to try the suit out: “Still fits!” yelled with such a pleasure that her whole face was flooded by a large smile which eventually turned into a discreet laugh of satisfaction. “Still fits!”

The decision to wear the suit came without any sort of hesitation, in spite of the fact that it was out of fashion. Probably all those memories which made her go through an emotional roller coaster a few minutes ago made her immune to any thoughts related to what people could say. And the fact that in the evening, she will have a nice movie-watching night out with John pushed

her even more towards getting dressed into that particular attire. Maybe her subconsciousness just wanted to trigger memories from the times of her first date with John. From the times when they were just grabbing a bucket of popcorn and had walked into a theater to watch a movie, from the times when there were not too many responsibilities on their shoulders...times she knew will never come back.

A short sigh came out of her chest, and she started dressing. It did not take very long. She took the stairs down to the kitchen and had a last look at the news channel: "...it is going to be a cold week, folks! Dress accordingly" the advice came from the weatherman.

- "Great! It is exactly what we want, a cold October. Probably at Thanksgiving, we'll have two feet of snow!" and turned the TV off.

While walking towards the hallway, she wanted to shut John's office door close. For whatever reason, she flipped the switch up and the big poster showing John making the last seconds throw for the championship win appeared in front of her. For a second, she was stunned, completely lost in the poster. The same knot came back into her throat and felt like choking. She had looked at that poster hundreds of times before. This time was something special about it, something she could not explain. Finally, a great sense of pride settled in, and again, that little smile and lip biting made her chuckle and turn the light back off while closing the door.

She grabbed her overcoat and the suitcase, set the alarm, and headed for the garage while in her mind, she had already decided to take the SUV and leave the small convertible she was also driving during summertime at home. Probably the weather forecast she listened to for a few seconds made her set into a self-protection mode when she decided to take the big car to work. She turned the radio to her favorite station and stepped on the gas pedal. "It is a new day! Good Lord, please watch over us!"

She picked the usual route: a street that eventually turned into one of those little two-lane roads through the countryside.

This time of the year, the scenery was fabulous. The colors of the leaves were simply astonishing: hundreds of different shades of red, yellow, and orange combined into a unique pallet of nuances offered a tremendously restful view. The spectacle of colors surrounding the car everywhere made her adjust the volume knob to a minimum. She just felt like wanting to absorb every single detail of the view, every single quiver of those heavenly colored leaves.

All of a sudden, something caught her eye: on one side of the road deep into the farmland, on a little hill, a deer herd was quietly and carefully resting and ruminating on a recent meal.

Linda pulled over, took a little binocular out of the glove compartment, and zoomed into their direction. Their ears were pointing up and rotating, trying to catch every noise that would have signaled danger. It was like a hypnosis session: everything around her became surreal, mystic, and untouchable, yet so close to her senses. The binocular brought the animals she was admiring so close that she felt like stretching her hand and fondling them.

She watched them for a few minutes, completely lost, forgetting that she had a class in less than forty minutes.

Finally, reality settled in, and Linda hit the road again with a sigh of sorrow that she was leaving her “friends” behind. “Maybe they will be back, and I would be able to see them again.”