

Excerpt from Powerball 310

Chapter 1: Rodger McCormack is chief of security for the Pennsylvania lottery. He met earlier today with the co-conspirators he euphemistically calls the "math club".



Rodger parked behind a row of modest brick-front two-story town homes built around 1940. It was late – almost 2 a.m. He didn't want to wake his daughter or her baby. He carefully let himself in the kitchen side door. The room was lit only by the fluorescent light at the back of the stove. He went to the pantry cupboard where he retrieved the large gin bottle from behind glass doors. He poured two inches into a water glass.

The evening had gone poorly. After the "math club" meeting at the auto wrecker lot Rodger had gone to play Texas hold 'em at a club he favored in South Philadelphia. All during the game, he felt his luck was going to change; it never did. Promising hands backfired, but he stuck it out and around midnight, he had lost maybe a thousand dollars. Finally he had pocket kings and a king on the turn, but a crazy kid, a newcomer, went all in and filled an inside straight. Rodger had written some checks that probably were going to bounce tomorrow.

He drank off half the gin. A note on the kitchen table read "Dad – dinner in the fridge." It was signed with a heart. Sweet, Rodger thought, shaking his head. He opened the refrigerator and took out a plate of food covered with plastic wrap and set it on the Formica counter top next to the old porcelain sink. Melissa had made meat loaf; he was touched. She was a good kid who had made some bad choices and ended up back at home. Never had a husband,

but she sure had a baby. At least she was trying hard to get a professional credential, raise a kid alone, and help Rodger with the house. He knew *he* wasn't trying very hard; she deserved better. He stuck the plate in the microwave.

There were mashed potatoes and broccoli. Rodger picked up the slice of loaf with his fingers, and had a bite. It had good flavor, but his stomach was in a tight knot. He dipped into the rewarmed gravy and potatoes and ate a little more. Then the edge of his hand wiped the rest of the food into the garbage disposal. He ran water on the plate and left it in the sink. It looked like he had eaten it all. Under the heart on her note, Rodger wrote "thanks!"

Rodger refilled his glass, flipped off the kitchen light and slowly walked to the corner of the dining room where he kept his home office. He sat down heavily in an oak chair.

After a long minute, he fished a small silver cigar-shape from his pocket. It was a personal dictation machine that he had brought to the meeting that afternoon. He opened the case, flipped out a miniature tape cassette, held it between his thumb and forefinger, and shook his head. What had he gotten himself into.

The dining table was old walnut veneer with an ornate edge. The two halves could be pulled apart to accommodate an extra leaf so it could seat more guests. A long time since that had happened, Rodger thought, as he jerked on one end of the table and retrieved a folder from the gap exposed in the middle. Rodger scribbled a few notes, scotch-taped the miniature cassette to the sheet of paper, and replaced the folder in its hiding place.

He sat down again, slowly drinking off the rest of the gin. He forced himself to deal with the reality of a very bad situation. All the past year – while de Villiers was working out the scheme to fool lottery security, even after Amrik had gotten involved as a needed insider with technical skills –

Rodger had kept a file, persisting in the delusion that he was just doing his job, uncovering a weak spot in security. He realized now it would be a tough sell to convince his superiors that he was really a good guy when he was so deeply involved in the plot. A key part of the delusion was thinking that the whole scheme was de Villiers' idea.

Then there was the matter of money. Rodger was pretty much broke. He owed money on his house, his car, his credit cards, his gambling debts, everything. He had promised Melissa he would pay for her paralegal degree. He wanted to do that much, help her get on her feet, but he wasn't sure he could with what little he had. The gambler in him needed a big win.

Rodger eyed his empty glass. He had pretended that nothing would come of the lottery scheme and so he had never confronted the question of whether it was right, whether he was betraying his employer's trust, or what might happen if he were caught.

Now it looked like the scheme might work. Was Rodger going to play his hand or was he going to fold?

He rose absently and wandered to the corner of the room where a gilt-framed portrait of the Virgin Mary had been carefully placed to be a part of family life without being too obvious to visitors. Rodger studied the kind, luminous face. In the near darkness, the portrait looked a lot like his dead wife. It was her family heirloom. Her name was Mary Pat; another Mary, that was almost too much. Rodger remembered that she actually prayed out loud and he strained to hear an echo of her words, but the room was silent.

He realized that the two Marys had been watching him for the past three years, watching him fail. He hadn't looked after the house or the garden. He hadn't even looked after his only kid; he'd let her get into trouble because he wasn't there when she, too, was grieving. He

wanted to call it bad luck, blame someone else, but it was he who had squandered life. Now there were no moral choices left.

Grimly, he toasted the Marys with his empty glass. It was 2:30 in the morning when Rodger finally understood what it meant to be beyond salvation.

