

The Cast Net

An impressionistic painting of a landscape. The foreground is dominated by a field of tall grasses or reeds, rendered with thick, vertical brushstrokes in shades of green, yellow, and brown. In the middle ground, a large, dark green tree stands prominently on the left, with other smaller trees and foliage scattered around. To the right, a body of water reflects the sky and the surrounding greenery. The background shows a soft, hazy sky with warm tones of yellow and blue, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall style is expressive and textured, with visible brushwork throughout.

Millie West

CHAPTER 1



Discovery

"Mills, do you have the advertisement ready for the Roberts's account?"
"Yes, I do, Harry."

She removed several sketches from a portfolio and spread them out on his desk.

"Mills, this is excellent. I believe that our client will be very happy with what you've done."

"Thank you."

As he continued to look over her work, she noticed a newspaper article from the *New York Times* on his desk, neatly folded to display the photograph of a man. The caption read: "Cooper Heath, of Heath Brothers Shipping, Newark, NJ, and Charleston, SC." The man was very handsome with dark, wavy hair and well-dressed in a business suit.

"Who is this man in the newspaper photograph?"

"He's an old friend of mine. We attended the Air Force Academy together."

Mills reached over, picked up the paper, and quickly scanned the article. "The newspaper article states that he's a shipping executive from Charleston, South Carolina, and that his wife has been missing since August of last year. Why was this reported in the *New York Times*?"

"My friend is from an old Southern family, and aside from his family's assets, he's done well for himself. Since his family owns a worldwide maritime shipping firm, I suppose the case is high profile and would attract the attention of the *New York Times*."

Mills nodded.

Harry continued, “He phoned me several days ago, seeking a director for an educational foundation that he operates. I thought about recommending a couple of people out of our Boston office.”

“That might be something that interests me. Please tell me more about this foundation.”

Harry smiled at Mills as he continued, “The scholarship program is for low-income youths who maintain good grades and stay out of trouble. His mother started the program before her death, and Cooper wants to get more of the community involved. He said that with his job and farm responsibilities, he doesn’t have the time to properly run the foundation.”

“Farm responsibilities?”

“Yes, he maintains a large farm on the Edisto River near Charleston. He uses much of the profits from the farm production to fund the scholarships. Cooper was one year behind me at the Air Force Academy; I tease him that he turned in his F-4 for a John Deere.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He traded in his jet fighter for a tractor—Cooper is a conservationist. Dating to the late 1600s, his ancestors on his mother’s side were merchants and planters in the Charleston area. They came to South Carolina from Barbados to make money, and that’s what they did—it seems to be a family trait.”

“It sounds like an interesting organization.”

Harry sat back in his chair and looked at Mills. “I had no idea that you would be interested in leaving New York. Are you unhappy?”

“It’s not my job that I’m dissatisfied with. I’d like to change my surroundings.”

“Well, I would hate to lose you, but the directorship wouldn’t look bad on your resume. From what Cooper has told me, the job will pay well, and there’s also a guest cottage on his farm where the director can live rent-free.” Harry handed her the file on the Heath Foundation. “You can take this home with you and review the file—just to let you know, a job is always waiting here for you.”

“Thank you, Harry.” Mills paused a moment before asking, “Do the authorities have any idea about what happened to his wife?”

“No, they haven’t been able to get a lead. I can assure you that Cooper had nothing to do with her disappearance. If I thought he did, I wouldn’t allow you to talk to him. The last several months have been difficult for him. The

police, Cooper, his friends, and members of the community searched all of the roadways in the Edisto area, the waterways, you name it. Missing person posters were put up all over the Low Country. She vanished without a trace.”

He paused before continuing, “Elise Heath is one of the most charming women I’ve ever met. Her disappearance is a terrible tragedy.”



That evening, Mills pored over the information in the Heath Scholarship file and found herself once again staring at the photograph of Cooper Heath in the *New York Times* article. The foundation’s address was in Alston Station, South Carolina. She concluded that it was a small community, as she had never before heard of it. The more she looked over the file, the more impressed she was about the positive impact that his program had on young people.

When one of her roommates, Amber, came home that evening, Mills handed her the information on the Heath Foundation, including the newspaper article on Cooper Heath. “I think I might have a job opportunity in Charleston, South Carolina.”

“Are you serious?” Amber replied in astonishment.

“Yes, I am,” Mills quickly answered. “I would work as the director of an educational foundation that was started by the late Julia M. Heath. In reading the file, I found that she was heavily involved in charities in the Charleston area. This scholarship program helps underprivileged youths to attend college. She wanted to break the cycle of poverty that many families are trapped in, and I think I would like to be involved with this organization. After she passed away, her son, Cooper, continued her work. My boss, Harry, says that Cooper wants to hire a director to run the foundation—he and Harry went to college together.”

Amber looked at the newspaper photo before she glanced up at Mills. “Nice-looking man.”

As she began to read the article, her expression changed to a frown. “It says here that his wife has been missing for several months—she disappeared without a trace. What do you know about Cooper Heath?”

“Harry says he’s one of the finest people he’s ever known—Harry went to college with him.”

“People change. Even sophisticated, wealthy people commit crimes of

passion. I've never known you to take risks, and I'd say that you could be living dangerously. What's wrong with your job here in New York? You've done very well."

"I want a change."

"Please make sure that this is the change you should make. I'm sure there are plenty of opportunities for a smart girl like you."

"Thank you, Amber." Mills smiled at her friend, but her mind was already moving ahead with her plans.



The next morning, Mills knocked on the door of Harry's office as soon as she arrived at work. After a moment, Harry called out to her, "Come in and have a seat, Mills. Did you think about the Heath Foundation last night?"

"Yes, I did. I decided that I would like to speak with Mr. Heath before I make a decision."

"All right, I'll get you his phone number. He did tell me that he would be at the Newark office of Heath Brothers next week. Perhaps you can meet with him then. I haven't seen him in months—I'll go with you."



Harry had made arrangements for them to meet with Cooper Heath at Antoine's on Madison. Christmas was less than two weeks away, and the storefronts were handsomely decorated with red bows, wreaths, and garlands of green. That December, it was the coldest day yet, and the sky was cloudless and a brilliant shade of blue.

When Mills and Harry entered Antoine's, a tall, well-dressed man stood up at a corner table in the rear of the restaurant and smiled at them. "There's Cooper." Harry smiled back in recognition.

They joined him at his table, and the two men embraced each other in a hug. "God, it's good to see you," Harry said. "Cooper, this is Mills Taylor. I know you two have spoken on the phone about your foundation, and I'm glad that you could meet today."

He took Mills's hand to shake it, and she noticed how warm his hands

were. “I confess I recognized you from a newspaper photograph that Harry had of you.”

He did not respond to her comment, and Harry quickly added, “Cooper, how are things going with your company’s contract negotiations?”

“I’m meeting with a representative of Perret International of Le Havre, France, Henri Duchard. If talks work out, we should increase our shipping with France, and bring more jobs to Charleston and Newark.”

Mills studied Cooper’s appearance and she thought him handsome, with an excellent complexion and an athletic build. His blue eyes exuded brightness and warmth when he smiled.

“Mills, thank you for phoning me about the directorship,” he said.

When she had called him about the foundation, she noticed that she could only hear a slight Southern accent when he pronounced certain words. She was glad that she could now put the voice with the face, which was confident and calming.

They discussed the foundation until their lunch arrived, and then the subject changed to current Broadway plays. Mills admitted that she was a fan of theater, especially musicals, and attended as much as possible.

“The oldest designed theater in the United States, the Dock Street Theatre, is in Charleston. Many performances are still held there.”

“Speaking of performances, Mills, you should hear Cooper play the piano,” Harry said.

“What type of music do you like to play?” she asked.

“Mostly classical.”

“He writes his own songs—simply amazing.”

“I’d like to hear you perform.”

Cooper smiled slightly and said, “I’ll be glad to play for you some time.”

Harry was especially jovial around his friend, and she concluded that he attempted to brighten Cooper’s spirits. After they finished dining, Harry told Cooper, “I think Mills brought her portfolio to show you examples of her work.”

Cooper acknowledged that he’d like to view her creations, and she placed her portfolio on the table. The case contained magazine promotions, news

releases, original art, and several business plans that were executed when she'd assisted companies as a public relations advisor. A graduate of the University of Virginia with degrees in journalism and art, Mills had been employed with Harry's agency for the last four years. Cooper was attentive to her presentation and very complimentary of her work and ingenuity.

They spent more than two hours at lunch, but before they finished, Cooper told Harry that he would like him to attend his annual oyster roast, the first Saturday in February. "I had considered not having it this year, but so many people inquired, that I decided to go forward with it. After all, the donations from the oyster roast do fund scholarships."

Harry looked at his watch before saying, "Cooper, I apologize, but I have an appointment in an hour. I must go."

As they retrieved their coats, Cooper told Mills, "I have some time before my next meeting. Would you like to take a walk?"

Mills nodded and Harry embraced his friend saying, "Please know that I've been praying for you and Elise."

"Thank you, Harry," Cooper quietly responded before Harry departed.

Even though she wore high heels and a fitted business suit, Mills wanted to know more about him and decided to join him on a walk. Cooper helped with her overcoat before putting on his, and they left the restaurant.

Madison Avenue bustled with holiday shoppers, and they stopped in front of a jewelry store that displayed an extravagant collection of diamonds in the window. Inside the business, they saw a couple looking at rings. The woman held her hand out in front of her, admiring a ring that her companion had placed on her finger, and then she leaped into his arms. He held her tightly as they slowly rotated together.

"Looks like someone's just been made very happy," Cooper observed.

"Yes, it certainly looked that way to me, too," Mills commented as they resumed their walk.

They stopped for a cup of coffee at a vendor's cart near Central Park, and Cooper removed his Wayfarer sunglasses and looked attentively into her eyes. "What was the newspaper article about where you saw my picture?"

"It was an article in the *New York Times*, about you and your missing wife."