The Villiers Touch

by Brian Garfield, 1939-

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Riches are a good handmaid, but the worst mistress.
Francis Bacon

Chapter 1

Mason Villiers.

The girl opened the bathroom door; a swath of light splashed across the bed where he lay. Momentarily he saw her silhouette, lithe Oriental girl in tight yellow silk, and then she switched the light off, leaving only the faint illumination that came in from the living room of the suite, where a lamp burned with a soft 25-watt glow. The girl walked to the hall door, long hips swaying, and paused there to adjust a bracelet, her head tipped to one side.

Mason Villiers reached for the wristwatch on the bedside table, held it close to his face and squinted: four-thirty in the morning.

The girl's voice was muted, courteous. "Will you want me again?"

"I'll let you know."

"Cheers," she said, with no particular cheer. He listened to the hall door latch behind her. He stretched-a hard crackling of lean musculature; he yawned and closed his eyes and was almost instantly asleep.

He had always been a cat-napper; he rarely slept more than an hour at a stretch. At five-twenty he was up, padding across the deep carpet. The suite was mock-Victorian, heavy with the forced freshness of recent and frequent redecoration-hotel stationery and ashtrays; complimentary cut-glass bottle of Chivas Regal and bucket of ice, both of them reflected in the waxed surface of the table; thick nubby draperies, endless sets of white bath towels that were never quite big enough-all the impersonal size and ubiquitous big-city luxury of hotel quarters for rich transients. Villiers was unimpressed to the point of being oblivious; he might as well have been in a skid-row flophouse for all the attention he gave the room.

He came out of the bathroom drying himself, tossed the towel on a chair, and walked into the huge closet to paw through his bag. It was a Vuitton suitcase crested by a bar sinister coat-of-arms. The bar sinister amused him.

He put on silk socks and underclothes and a mustard-hued shirt, and a wide burnt-olive tie; he rattled hangers past a smoking jacket and a dark Dunhill suit, kicked into lean black shoes, and zipped up the trousers of an olive Italian suit while he walked to the phone in the living room. He picked up the receiver and waited, a young man who wore expensive clothes because he had once been poor.

When the sleepy-voiced switchboard girl came onto the line, he gave instructions to screen all incoming calls before putting them through; then he had the line switched to room service and ordered breakfast. He poured a drink from the cut-glass bottle, went back to the phone, and gave the girl Sidney Isher's number.

It was good Scotch; he sipped it. Isher answered the ring coughing and mumbling. "What the hell, Mace, it's not even six o'clock."

There was a woman's acrimonious muttering in the background. Sidney Isher said, "Hang on while I get to another phone."

Villiers tipped the glass up and rolled whisky on his tongue, savoring before he swallowed. He heard a click and Isher's nasal voice: "Okay-okay. How's Canada? Find any old Rollses?"

"No. I picked up a twenty-seven Pierce Arrow."

"They hard to find?"

"Anything good is hard to find."

"Funny-you still don't strike me as the hobby type."

"Investment, Sidney."

"Peanuts," Isher said, and cleared his throat violently. "Where are you?"

"The New Executive."

"That huge Goddamn barn?"

"In big hotels they care less." He heard the click that meant Isher's wife had finally hung up the bedroom phone. He began to speak, then stopped; he heard a whispering rustle at the other end of the line. "Turn off that fucking tape recorder, Sidney."

"Ah?"

"Turn it off."

"You know I always use the thing. I'd be a fine lawyer these days if I didn't. Even my mother-in-law goes on tape."

"Off, Sidney."

"All right—all right."

He heard the scrape stop. Isher said, "It's off. Now, what's so secret?"

"If it was a secret I'd hardly be calling you through the hotel switchboard. But I don't like being taped."

"Don't worry about that—nobody's ever taped you. But what have you got to say to me at six in the morning that couldn't wait till office hours? Is this the one phone call they allow you before they jug you for molesting a minor?"

"Spare me the innuendo, Sidney."

"Why don't you ever relax?"

"People don't get in my tax bracket by relaxing." Villiers didn't add that he preferred to catch people off-guard. With Isher it sometimes worked to advantage.

Isher was saying, "That's something we've got to look into, your tax bracket. We may have some trouble with the IRS people over those-"

"Some other time. Now tell me about our friends in Edison Township."

"You mean—"

"No names—remember the switchboard."

"Sure. I can't tape the call, but the switchboard girl can take it all down in shorthand. You suppose she's listening because she owns forty thousand shares of the stock and wants to know which way it's going? You think she's listening for that, Mace?"

"Avidly," Villiers said. "Don't get flip, Sidney, it doesn't become you."

"For Christ's sake, what's a lousy switchboard girl going to know about—"

"Come on, Sidney."

"Keep your shirt on. About the Edison Township people-oh, hell, how can I make sense without mentioning names and numbers?"

"Then get your clothes on and come over here." Villiers removed the squawking phone from his ear and hung up.

The bellhop arrived faster than he had expected-an acne-faced kid wheeling the breakfast table into the room on big silent rubber tires. Villiers gave the boy five dollars. "Buy yourself some Noxzema."

The bellhop flushed deep, dropped his eyes, and hurried away clutching the money. Villiers lifted the domed steel covers and scented the food; abruptly he had no sense of hunger at all. He put the covers back and walked to the window, carrying his glass of Scotch. Momentarily he wondered why he had inflicted that gratuitous bit of cruelty on the bellhop; it passed out of his mind quickly. Once a girl had rebuked him for his careless brutality with words, and he had replied, without thinking, "I offend, therefore I am."

He drew open the blinds, turned off the lamp, and looked out at the gray morning. He was thirty stories above Park Avenue, with that incongruous stripe of trees and flowers overhung by grave-marker buildings and sooty air. Then he looked again at the breakfast cart, felt hungry, and dragged it over to the window.

He was seldom given to reflection, but the sound of Sidney Isher's catarrhal voice had taken his thoughts back-not to the real past, but into the history he

had invented for himself: dull, plausible, impossible to check, and carefully rehearsed so that he would not slip and contradict himself. Now and then, like an actor with a script, after many months' run of the play, he went back over his lines.

He had devised it when he first came to New York and used it for the first time when he had met Isher six years ago. He had created a middle-class childhood for himself, pictured a quiet Chicago suburb where children rode bikes along shady sidewalks, housewives knelt on their lawns pulling up weeds and tending daffodils, weekending husbands waxed their cars in hedge-bounded driveways. He had named a public school which had subsequently burned down with all its records; invented an adolescence of proms and paper routes and hot rods; claimed three years' education at an unspecified Midwestern university and pretended it had been cut off by the sudden death of both parents in a motor accident. Of course, they would leave more debts than assets; of course, the blameless dropout they left behind had vowed to make back every penny and pay off the creditors. It gave him a plausible reason for not possessing a diploma-and for leaving no outstanding debts against him which might later be checked. The invented Mason Villiers-even his name was an invention-was next to be found working as a trainee with a small suburban bank, which conveniently had failed and gone into bankruptcy nine years ago, its depositors reimbursed by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, its employment records lost somewhere far beyond the range of any casual search; Villiers' claim that he had worked there for two years was enough to explain his financial education.

Ordinarily he was indifferent to image-his own or anyone else's-but in finance, where proxy votes depended on stockholders' confidence, a man in motion needed an unsullied background. Poverty itself was not suspect; but there were different kinds of poverty. Poor in the Horatio Alger sense was acceptable. Poor in the sewer sense was not. Mason Villiers' poverty was dead, buried in the gutters of Chicago's South Side.

Sidney Isher arrived. The lawyer was a small man with a nose like the snout of a teapot. His skin had the mottled look of fresh paste that often went with red hair.

"Hello, Mace. How are you?"

Villiers shut the door behind him. Isher cleared his throat; he had a bad case of catarrh, and a constant eye tic that made him look as if he was winking. The combination of handicaps was enough to make his success as a lawyer baffling. His jeweled cufflinks and tiepin bore his monogram-it seemed particularly fitting that Sidney Isher's initials worked out as a dollar sign.

Villiers said, "What about Melbard?"

"How quickly you always come to my point. Do you mind if I sit down?" Isher opened an attache case and took out a sheaf of documents. "You can read it for yourself."

Villiers went back to his breakfast. "I haven't got time to read all that crap. Give me the high spots."

Isher sat, withdrew a folder, and used his thumb to flip through the pages the way a bank teller would count money. He extracted one and began to quote bits and pieces:

"Melbard Patent Chemical Processing Corporation. A mouthful of names for a small company. Got a comfortable record, nothing spectacular-founded in 1927

by James W. Melbard, who still runs it, majority stockholder and chairman of the board. Started out by producing ethyl alcohol under a patented process. During the thirties it expanded to produce various pharmaceuticals and chemicals. In World War II it was one of the early suppliers of nitroparaffin insecticides and fungicides-the stuff they used in the South Pacific. After the war Melbard went into cosmetics as well-Melody Cosmetics and Cosmeticare, a pair of minor brand names. You still see them in drugstores here and there, but they've got no advertising. In the fifties some of their early patents expired, but the company got a boost from the Korean War and got more firmly established in biochemicals. Am I going too fast?"

"You're going too slow."

"Unh. All right. Early in the 1960's Melbard started sinking a lot of money into research-the chief research biochemist is an egghead dedicated to 'pure science,' and I guess the Nobel Prize is just around the corner, but he hasn't produced enough commercially profitable discoveries, and they've been losing money on him for ten years."

"Why keep him on?"

"Because the old man, James Melbard, is an old buddy of the biochemist's. You want a rundown on him?"

"Not now. Go on."

"Okay. When the biochemist's lab expenses started wagging the dog, James Melbard went public, to finance the research department. That was in sixty-two. Most of the stock stayed in family hands-about thirty percent of the total capitalization was issued as a public offering. Melbard's a tight-fisted old son of a bitch, and he only issued enough stock to meet immediate needs. But the company's got a good record."

"Now, I've got a copy of the Dun and Bradstreet report here, from their auditors, and my staff did a little nosing around out there. The company's in fair shape. It's like a lot of family-owned companies-it's suffered some mismanagement, mostly because old Melbard's got this fixation on research. They've only got a hundred thousand shares of stock outstanding, besides the seventy percent that's still in family hands and the twenty-three percent that NCI owns. What there is of it, the available stock's worth quite a bit less on the market today than the company's book value. From that point of view, it's a good buy-if you can get your hands on some shares."

Villiers said nothing in reply, whereupon Isher gave him a sharp look and added, "But I get the feeling you're not interested in spending time and money to buy a few thousand shares."

"Should I be?"

"As an investment? I'd vote no. Melbard's been conservative in his dividend policies-twenty-five cents a year, mostly. The market price of the stock hasn't moved three points either way in the past couple of years."

"What about his board of directors?"

"Rubber stamp. Except for the two boys from Northeast Consolidated Industries. NCI's pretty well committed in Melbard, you know-Melbard makes the basic chemical ingredients in a lot of the stuff NCI manufactures. Lanolin-cholesterol for cosmetic products. Chemicals for law-enforcement equipment like riot-control foams and gas-fog generators and that banana-peel stuff they coat streets with. Tear gas, gas-mask chargers, breathalyzer reagents-"

"You don't need to read me the whole catalog."

Isher made a growling sound; he blinked and said, “Okay, then what is it you want to know?”

“You said NCI owns twenty-three percent of Melbard and puts two of its own directors on Melbard’s board. The fact is, NCI owns sixteen percent of Melbard. Elliot Judd owns the other seven.”

“But Elliot Judd is NCI. Board chairman, biggest stockholder, what-have-you. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is, Sidney, I don’t pay you for sloppy work. I want facts, not approximations.”

Isher bridled. “Look, how can I give you what you want unless you tell me what you want? How am I supposed to know what to look for if I don’t know exactly what your angle is?”

“Do I always have to have an angle?”

“I wish I knew more about why you’re interested in Melbard. I could answer your questions with a good deal more precision. For instance, if you’re out to raid them the way you did Ewing, then it’s a very good setup. You offer the Melbard family a higher price for the assets than the existing market price of the stock. You can afford to do that, because you can still clear a healthy profit simply by breaking up the assets-mostly the inventory. Then pay off the family from the accumulated reserves and end up owning the physical assets for peanuts. It shouldn’t be too hard to get at it-old James Melbard’s sick, the rest of the family are golfers and clubwomen. All you have to do is go to them and convince them the company’s in danger of running down like an old clock.”

“Is it?”

“It could be, if they don’t get on the stick.”

“Go on,” Villiers said.

“Convince Melbard he needs help to modernize-then offer to buy him and his family out, with enough capital to save the company. You don’t buy all his stock, but naturally your price for bailing them out is controlling interest: you buy fifty-one percent of the stock. The family keeps the remaining nineteen percent. It should look attractive to them-after all, old James Melbard’s getting too long in the tooth to hang on much longer. If you buy in, they can’t lose, no matter what happens. They get a premium price for their stock. And they might even make more money on the shares they keep. Then, of course, there’s that item in the assets column called goodwill-some nice outside money could boost that for them.”

Villiers opened a flat silver case and took out a cigarette. “You got a match, Sidney?”

Isher snapped, “No. I don’t smoke.”

“Maybe you ought to. Might clear up that cough.” Villiers smiled a little.

“What else do you need to know?” Isher asked.

“For openers, we can’t move into this without knowing which way NCI’s going to jump when they find out Melbard’s got a buyer sniffing around.”

“You mean Elliot Judd may get nervous when he hears somebody’s trying to move in on Melbard.”

“I don’t want NCI bidding me up, Sidney-I can’t compete with that monster.”

“Nobody could, this side of General Motors. You’ve got a good point.”

“Give me an educated guess. Will they bid against me?”

“Depends on how you handle it,” Isher said. “Do you want me to use your name?”

"No. Approach them through dummy fronts. With my reputation I'd make them too nervous."

"All right. That makes it easier for a start. Now, suppose we use George Hackman again. He's a reputable broker, and he's enough of a WASP backslapper to charm the Melbard family. With Hackman and me fronting, they probably won't get too suspicious. We'll tell them we're fronting for a syndicate of bigshot conglomerate executives looking to diversify."

"Won't Melbard get sniffy if you don't identify the clients? There's a lot of front men dummying for Cosa Nostra goons that want a legitimate outlet for their money. How do you convince Melbard you're not acting for racketeers?"

Isher's face changed. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Melbard will."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Diane Hastings."

Isher shaped the name on his lips and frowned. "Elliot Judd's daughter?"

"She owns the Nuart Galleries chain."

"Would you mind going back over that one more time? What's that got to do with us?"

"Diane Hastings will be the client you're fronting for, when Melbard asks."

"A bunch of art galleries? Where does she get that kind of money?"

"It's a nationwide chain, Sidney. Sixty-one outlets in forty-two states. Art for the masses at popular prices. Greeting cards, artists' supplies, art books, paintings, posters, prints. Nuart grossed twenty-six million last year-and nobody's going to question Diane Hastings about Cosa Nostra backing. She'll say she's looking to diversify her holdings. Nuart goes public, and she uses the capital from the sale of stock to buy the Melbard company."

Isher had to chew on it. After a period of digestion he said, "I don't know-I don't know. Tell me something-does Mrs. Hastings know anything about this?"

"She will."

'That's what I thought." Isher started sliding papers back into his case. "I'm not going to Melbard with any offers until I have it from the lady herself that she's acting for you. Otherwise I get hung right in the middle."

Villiers' only reply was a dry look. Isher snapped the case shut and stood up. "How far do I go? I mean, if we're going all the way, it means you pounce, close the firm down, and sell out the assets. You take a quick profit, but you gut the company in the bargain. Is that how it'll be?"

"Just set them up for the buy," Villiers said. "Let me worry about what happens afterward."

Isher looked sour. "And what about the Melbard family?"

"If they go for it, they're suckers-marks. There's no way to stop them from giving it away. All you can do is try to be first in line when they're handing it out."

"Maybe. But it's got a sick smell to it."

"That conscience of yours will make trouble sometime, Sidney."

"What about yours?"

"Mine means about as much as my tonsils-which were removed twenty years ago." Villiers smiled a little. When Isher turned toward the door, he said, "Aren't you forgetting one thing?"

It turned Isher back. "Which?"

"What's yesterday's closing price on Melbard stock?"

"Five and an eighth. But I told you, it's undervalued. The family knows that." Isher nodded quickly. "Oh, I see. All right-how high do you want me to go?"

"Start at seven. Go up as high as twelve if you have to."

"Twelve dollars?"

"You heard me."

"You'll lose your ass. You can't afford to pay more than eight. At twelve, it'd cost you nine million dollars to buy a controlling interest-and you can't sell Melbard's assets for anything like that."

"Don't waste money. Get it at eight if they'll go for it. But get it. Go to twelve if you have to. But let me know if there's any sign of NCI bidding us up."

Isher shook his head and said dryly, "Yassuh, boss. Anything else?"

"Find out exactly who the two directors are that Elliot Judd has on Melbard's board. And find out which members of Melbard's family own what percentage of the stock."

"Don't you think I've already done that? How long have you been taking me for an irresponsible fool?"

"Sidney, if you get that steamed up at this hour, you'll boil over before noon. How'd you find out about the family personalities?"

"Took their plant manager to lunch. Amazing how often you can get somebody to reveal inside information just by wining and dining him-expensive restaurant, good food, plenty of martinis, an attentive companion. I asked a few leading questions-all it took."

"Good work."

Isher smiled.

Villiers said, "One thing-don't volunteer Diane Hastings' name too easily. Make them fight and scratch to get it. That way, when they get her name they'll think they've got the real buyer. They won't look any farther."

"Smart."

"I'll get back to you some time."

"Have Mrs. Hastings call me. Reach you here at the hotel?"

"Leave a message if I'm not here."

"Which is probably most of the time," Isher said, and went.

When the door closed, Villiers was smiling slightly. He had won the points he intended to win, and at the same time left Isher with the feeling-which the lawyer needed badly-that he had achieved a victory. Isher was a good corporation-law man, a spectacular tax attorney, and a timid businessman. He needed pushing; he needed flattery. Villiers provided him with his needs. He reminded himself to have some token jewelry sent to Isher's wife.

He sat smoking by the window, withdrawn deep into thought. It was just as well to keep Isher in the dark; Isher only needed to know he was to take over Melbard. He might balk if he knew the move against Melbard was only a prelude.

Mason Villiers had raided companies bigger than Melbard. The little ones no longer held his interest. This time his aim was targeted much higher. Time to come up and play with the big boys.

He cupped a hand around the back of his neck and reared his head back lazily, smiled a bit, and glanced toward the phone. Was it too early to call Diane Hastings? Probably. It wouldn't help his cause to offend her at the outset. Better to wait until she reached her office at nine. He looked at his watch-seven-thirty. He decided to take a nap.

Chapter 2

Russell Hastings.

The morning was hot, muggy, and without breath. The frail sun seemed watery and distant through its lemon sky. Air-conditioners thrummed in a million windows, pulling hard against the Edison generating plants, which-to meet the strain-poured tons of additional smoke into the heat-inverted cloud over the city.

Traffic backed up in lower Manhattan, raucous with horn-blowing frustration, from the Battery to Greenwich Village, choked by double-parked trucks making ear-splitting deliveries. Subway tunnels, gray with pungent mists, poured the morning rush of sweat-grimed bodies up onto the jammed sidewalks of the financial district.

Russ Hastings emerged from the IRT subway onto the Broadway sidewalk and pushed through the crowd, hands in his pockets, mouth closed and nostrils pinched, trying not to breathe. He found an empty eddy by the corner of the Irving Trust building, stopped there to stand a moment in the heat and watch a group of vivid pretty girls-well-turned legs, miniskirts, trim hips rolling in healthy action. They paused in a knot at the corner and burst into high laughter before they separated into the jam.

Russ Hastings' attention followed one of them-tall girl with long yellow hair, white blouse, and pink skirt-as she went smartly up the far side of Broadway along the Trinity Churchyard fence. She didn't really look like Diane, but at this point in his recovery the sight of any pair of long legs clipping along with lithe, quick strides still had the power to fill his mind with contradictory fantasies, part poignant nostalgia, part indiscriminate lechery, part misogyny; he watched them hurry by, thin-clothed, breasts bobbing and surging with young physical arrogance… It was some time before he shook it off and pushed Diane back into her slow-receding niche.

Feeling hungry, he checked the time and went on past Wall Street to a crowded coffee shop. He had to wait for a stool at the counter; when a space opened up, he ordered coffee and Danish and leaned on his elbows. Half his mind picked up the conversation between two men on his right:

"… I made six points on it when it split last year."

"You got in on the ground floor, then."

"Aeah. I figure to hold on till it hits fifty, then unload and get into something else."

"What makes you think it'll go that high? Somebody buying into it?"

"Who knows? But I picked up a tip from one of our district managers, his wife's an administrator out at Brookhaven Labs-there's a lot of inside talk out there about government contracts. Even Standard and Poor's says NCI's expected to earn a buck and a half a share by the end of the year."

Russ Hastings glanced toward them-both middle-aged, talking through clouds of cigar smoke, fat with the self-importance of the not-quite-competent who had been passed over by Big Fortune. He listened with more care. The man beside him went on: "Expecting a big rise in earnings because they're getting in

on all that government money going into police enforcement equipment. Stands to reason, Charlie. All this law-and-order talk, the crime rate zooming up, and the police market booming."

"Who ever said crime didn't pay?"

Some laughter in the cigar smoke. "Sure. Getting the kind of market play they used to give to tronic stocks and aerospace and the Pill. Well, hell, NCI's already gone up six points this year-where'd it start, around twenty-five? Up to thirty-one yesterday at the close. One of the magazines I read says enforcement-equipment spending will keep going up by ten percent a year for five or ten years."

"Come to think of it, I had lunch with Sol Weinstein last week. He'd just come in from Chicago-said Chicago Investment Mutual was buying NCI."

"Then there you are."

"On the other hand, you know, NCI's involved in a lot of things besides law-enforcement supplies. When you look to invest in these conglomerates, you've got to see the whole picture. Now, take these shale oil stocks-they're bound to start moving pretty soon now…"

Russ Hastings stopped eavesdropping then; he paid his check and pushed his way out of the place, squinting with thought. He picked up a Times at the corner stand and folded it back to the financial section and stood on the corner of Broadway and Wall Street running his eye down the columns.

197O Stocks and Div. Sales Net High Low in Dollars 100s High Low Last Change 31? 24? NorthEastCon 1.25 779 31? 30? 31? +1

He rolled the paper up and put it under his arm; his face had taken on the expression of a man not sure whether he had made a significant discovery. He turned into Wall Street, looking for a phone.

His cheeks stung in the heat from shaving rash. He rubbed his jaw and turned into a revolving door, found phones in the lobby, went into a stifling close booth, and dialed Quint's number. As the connection whistled and clicked, he could picture Quint-the fattest man he had ever met-perched in his huge leather wingback chair, lapless, grunting as he counted candy wrappers in his abalone-shell ashtray.

The call, on Quint's direct line, would not have to go through the switchboard; Hastings was spared the operator's saccharin chirp, "Good morning? Securities and Exchange Commission? Whooooooom did you wish, please?" Instead, Quint's private secretary came on the line, sterile and brisk, and put Hastings through.

"Gordon Quint here-Russ?" Quint's slurred roar thundered in the earpiece, the London accent completely at odds with the hearty bellow of the voice. "How are things in the financial fleshpot?"

"I'm beginning to learn the language," Hastings said, sweating in the airless booth. "Question for you. Have we got anybody working on Northeast Consolidated?"

"I very much doubt it. Why? Should we?"

"I'm picking up a few vibrations. The last week or so, all of a sudden every other tongue in Wall Street seems to be wagging about NCI."

"Just rumors, or something firm?"

"Rumors-loose ones at that. But a lot of volume to them."

The sound, like crackling flames, meant Quint was unwrapping another hard ball of low-cal candy. Quint said, in the cultivated English drawl he hadn't

relaxed a bit in the thirty-odd years he'd been in America, "I shouldn't think too much of it if I were you. Perhaps you haven't been in this job long enough to strike the proper balance. You've still got a bit to learn, you know. Rumors come and go-they're all fads. Last month it was airlines, next month we'll have another favorite; it might as well be the hit parade."

"I haven't heard one come up quite so fast before, with nothing at all behind it."

"How do you know there's nothing behind it?"

"I don't-I'd like to find out."

There was a pause; the creak of the burdened springs of Quint's swivel chair; finally Quint said, "I should imagine your ears would be particularly sensitive to any mention of NCI, since your father-in-law occupies its throne. What if there were no personal involvement with Elliot Judd? What if this were a company whose board chairman you'd never heard of? I suppose you've given thought to that?"

"My ex-father-in-law," Hastings corrected mildly. "Yes, I've taken that into account. I still think the vibrations are too strong for the usual run of things. There haven't been any applications for merger clearance? Big stock options exercised? Insiders buying blocks of stock?"

"All I can tell you is, nothing's come to my attention. I'm quite sure-"

"Then why did it sit still at twenty-six for four or five months and suddenly shoot up four points in the last two weeks?"

"I'm sure I couldn't give you an answer to that off the top of the head, Russ, but it's hardly a startling movement in the price. Perhaps a few of the big funds decided to pick up blocks of it-after all, it's a sound security."

"It always has been. But don't you get suspicious when there's a sudden flurry of excitement over a blue chip?"

"Mildly interested, perhaps. Suspicious? No-not unless there's much more to go on. We've far too much work here to chase down every odd rumor. Have you any idea how far behind schedule we are in processing applications?"

Hastings pulled the booth door open an inch for air. "I'd like to look into it, Gordon. How about it?"

Quint hesitated. When the fat voice finally replied, it was as avuncular as a handpat on the head. "Look, old boy, don't take this the wrong way, but don't you think it might be worthwhile for you to take a holiday-a week or two in the country to unwind and get your breath?"

Hastings closed his eyes briefly. "What I do not need right now is to take time off so I can brood."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"I suppose I'll forgive you."

Quint chortled. "May the Lord save us from eager beavers."

"How about it, then?"

"Oh, I suppose-all right, Russ. You'll, ah, forgive me for saying so, but it should do you a bloody bit of good to work off some of that office fat."

"Coming from you, that's droll. Another twenty pounds and you'd have to wear license plates."

"I am not overweight," Quint purred, "I'm merely too short for my weight. According to the chart, I ought to be eleven-foot-eight. All right-just one thing. Are you certain you know how to handle this sort of investigation? It won't do to trample unnecessarily."

"I won't step on any sore corns unless I have to. You'll remember I did enough investigative work for Jim Speed to learn the ropes."

"Ah, yes. But that was politics. This is finance."

"The object of the game may be different but the rules are the same."

"Don't be too sure of that, Russ."

"I'll be circumspect," Hastings said.

"Good luck-keep your pecker up, old boy."

Hastings hung up and dialed another number, trying to imagine the stares he might attract if, in fact, he kept his pecker up.

Gloria Sprague's matronly voice spoke to him briskly: "Securities and Exchange Commission, Mr. Hastings' office. May I help you?"

"That depends on what sort of help you're offering," Hastings said, deadpan.

"Oh, Mr. Hastings." Brief, nervous, spinsterish laugh. "I'm glad you called. The papers on the National Packaging case just came up from the Justice Department. They have to have your signature before we can send them down to court."

"How soon do they have to be signed?"

"Anytime today, but I wasn't sure whether you planned to be in the office at all today."

"Do I play hooky that often, Miss Sprague?"

"Oh, I didn't mean-" she began quickly.

Hastings laughed at her and cut her off: "It's all right, never mind. I'll be up sometime this afternoon. In the meantime I want you to do a quick research job for me."

"I've got my notebook-go ahead." Her tone implied not only businesslike efficiency but a mild rebuke; Miss Sprague, after twenty years' service as secretary to the bland civil servants who had preceded Hastings, had not quite learned how to cope with his quiet, sometimes wry brand of humor.

He said, "The subject is Northeast Consolidated Industries. I want a rundown on large-block trades within the past two weeks-identities of buyers and sellers. You'll have to call some of the brokers, of course-let me know if any of them give you static."

"Static?"

"Resistance, hesitation."

"All right. How large is 'large'?"

"Let's say anything over five thousand shares. I'm going down on the floor myself this morning, so I'll get some of the information direct from the specialist. What I want you to do is check through the larger brokers and find out if there've been any large trades negotiated privately, not through the Exchange. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. When will you want this?"

"Ten minutes will do."

"All right, I'll-ten minutes, did you say?"

"Just a little joke, Miss Sprague," he said wearily. "Do it as quickly as you can, but don't break your neck over it. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll see you this afternoon." He rang off and went outside, a tall man in his late thirties with a lot of loose brown hair and a wide, blade-nosed Saxon face. His expression was the small, distracted frown of mild irony of a man looking for something he had lost. At the corner of New Street he waited in a crowd for

the light to change, presenting a picture of easygoing indolence, of which he was sometimes acutely aware, particularly when it was spurious, as it was now, and had been since the break-up with Diane. It was sheer habit that coated his turmoil with a surface pose of relaxed self-confidence. The brows that hooded his eyes were thick and unruly, of a lighter shade than his hair; his skin was the sort of smooth light brown which would take a deep tan and hold it if he spent any time at all on the beach; he never did, abhorring crowds and being by nature a land animal. Big and limber, with flat shoulder muscles and a long, loose gait, he had an easy way of moving, a natural taken-for-granted grace, the result of genetic endowment more than conscious care.

He joined the New Yorker's endless war against aggressive taxis trying to nose through the pedestrian crossflow, reached the far curb intact, and stood for a moment looking at the great gray tomb across the street-11 Wall Street, the hub of it all.

Standing here, he was alert to his awkward presence: a pariah in an alien land where a foreign tongue was spoken, the language of blocks and odd lots, margins and floats, puts and calls, dollars divided into eighths, hedge funds, mutual portfolios, letter stocks, bid and asked. He had come to it by an odd route; he had not planned it.

In the beginning, he thought whimsically, you're a fair corporation lawyer, and you're a long way from home now, brother. You were one of the faceless juniors in a giant midtown partnership: practice in estates, corporate-charter drawing, real estate, mergers. Respectable law; no negligence cases, no criminal cases, no divorces, no insurance torts. So why right away did you begin to think about changing jobs?

Restless. You were restless, looking for action. You were in that frame of mind when you married Diane. It was a mistake from the start, but in those days you enjoyed challenges. Your own family was embedded as solidly in the social strata as hers, her money wouldn't become a problem between you, but what you never counted on was her discontented ambition: her father's wealth should have been a cushion, but to her it was a goad.

You quit private practice and you went to work for Jim Speed-fiery muckraker, stubborn digger, eminent exposer of corruption. That was where the challenge was. Doing Speed's investigative work, unearthing the grit for the white papers on military-industrial collusion and Mafia labor corruption. It got Speed elected to Congress, and you spent those years running his home office in New York, and then the mayor tapped Speed to take over as commissioner of the scandal-staggered city Finance Department, and you, his chief assistant, helped clean it up, you with your mesomorphic curiosity and righteous indignation, and, just incidentally, with your home disrupted by a part-time wife who had a compulsion to succeed on her own and flung in your face, as an act of defiance (against you or against her father?), the art gallery she opened on Third Avenue. The senseless, brittle competition between the two of you-the divorce; and then, still rocked by that, you're propelled out of your job when Speed dies in the crash of a private plane and a new commissioner moves in, complete with staff.

You didn't know what you wanted to do then. You had dealt often with Quint's SEC office. There were half a dozen good job offers, law firms and city jobs, but you didn't see any promise of action in the rest of them. Maybe with Quint...

And so here you are, he thought, dour. If there was going to be any action, he would have to create it himself. Take up skydiving, maybe. Rob a bank.

Around him the street was still crowded, but the rush to get to work was nearly ended. The financial district's working hours were earlier than those uptown; Wall Street was a city of its own, little known to midtown businessmen, bounded by Bowling Green to the south; the swift, filthy East River; Fulton Street (or perhaps Chambers Street, depending on your vintage) on the north; and on the west a mute anachronism: the cemetery of Trinity Church, where no human corpse had been buried in living memory, since Manhattan had long since run out of space for its dead.

By now the brokers, bankers, secretaries, corporation potentates and their entourages had long ago hurried into their offices. The streets still flowed with workers and late arrivals, rushing, as thick as pigeons in the Piazza San Marco. In offices looming all around, men would be swiveling toward Quotron tickers and watching their clocks, synchronizing like field generals preparing for battle. In these slow-ticking moments, all over the world, men and women would be drawing their telephones near-waiting, adrenalin flooding in anticipation, for the Market (very capital "M") to open.

They waited keenly, in offices and homes and hotels, for the Magic Hour when they could dial their stockbrokers, ask "How's Motors?", talk about yesterday's closing Dow-Jones, place buy or sell orders, discuss the weather or the day's political news with brokers who only wanted to be let alone by the lonely phone callers so they could run their businesses.

All over the United States right now they would be converging into the funeral-parlor board rooms of Stock Exchange member firms: wise investors, ignorant speculators, compulsive gamblers, ticker-tape addicts, retired bored pensioners. In the Far West, to coincide with New York's exchange hours, brokers' offices would open as early as seven A.M. The customers would sit for the next five hours with faces studiously guarded against any show of feelings as they watched the boards tick over, watched the stock news chatter by like an endless freight train, pacing off the latest sale price, bid-and-asked, high, low, and close of all active listed stocks…

Hastings went across the street into the old mausoleum-the New York Stock Exchange. Crowds churned through the doors. There were virtually no women in the place-the Street was one of the few masculine preserves left in the world. He had a brief vision of Diane, talking archly: That's probably what's wrong with it.

A group preceded him into the visitors' gallery; the young girl-guide spoke briskly, identifying the shirtsleeved men on the crowded floor below: floor traders, two-dollar brokers, commission house representatives, odd-lot dealers, specialists-"You are looking at the men who do the actual physical trading of listed stocks." Not true, Hastings thought-not physical. No stock certificates passed these portals. Here it was all word-of-mouth-trading on faith, always assuming the stock certificates which were traded here did, in fact, somewhere, exist.

It was getting on toward ten o'clock. The floor men began to coagulate around the eighteen trading posts. No one ran: the milling crowd must be protected. No one smoked: paper must be safeguarded-the slips on which orders from a few dollars to a few millions were jotted in cryptic symbols, as vital as certified bank

checks. But these restrictions would not observably reduce the frenzied bedlam that was about to erupt.

Precisely at ten o'clock the gong on the south wall sounded its brassy doomsday clang.

The New York Stock Exchange was open for another day's pandemonium.

All noise and confusion, traders clustered at their posts, licked pencils, hurtled their voices against the babble. By the end of the day the floor would be ankle-deep in paper. Overhead, giant boards signaled floor brokers by number on turning metal flaps. Thump, slap. Roar. Trades were made in seconds; the words "We buy from you" were enough to bind a transaction-not even a handshake was needed.

He moved along the rail, looking for Herb Capps's bald head in the foaming sea below: Herb Capps, floor specialist in Northeast Consolidated Industries stock. Finally Hastings spotted him, at a post near the west wall.

Hastings went downstairs, flashed his identification to the guard, and went onto the floor. He went across like a swimmer pushing against the current; he came up to Capps's station just as a floor broker approached:

"How's NCI quoted, Herb?"

"Thirty-two to 32?."

"Put me down for an odd lot-fifty shares at 32?."

"Might be a few ahead of you on the list at that price."

"How many?"

Capps glanced past the broker and grinned at Hastings. "You know I can't give that out, George. There's an SEC hawkshaw breathing right over your shoulder."

The broker turned and shook hands with Hastings. Then he looked at his watch. "I've got a buy order too, five hundred shares at the market. You said 32??"

"Right."

"Okay. We buy from you five hundred."

Capps nodded his bald head; the broker and Capps checked each other's badges before they separated to send word to their customers. Hastings waited for Capps to return.

The transaction was completed; if the market's ticker machinery wasn't jammed, the trade would appear on the tape within a minute or two, and a new market would be established in NCI stock-up an eighth over the previous close.

Capps came back, amiable and unperturbed by the thunder around him. Hastings said, "NCI's started to move in the past couple of weeks-what do you think?"

"It keeps me busy."

"Do you see anything behind it?"

"Not that I know of. From down here you don't see much anyway. I just execute orders, you know?" Capps was friendly and smiling, but there was something vaguely defensive in his answers; he wheeled to meet a new broker who came up to trade. Hastings watched Capps flip pages in his notebook while the broker talked in characteristic clipped phrases. The floor specialist's notebook was on a par in value with a top-secret copy of a diplomatic document. Capps would have his buy and sell orders listed on facing pages, written down in the order received: he acted as a one-man auction market, and the knowledge of the listings in his book gave him the insider's advantage-he

knew the volume of buy orders just below the current market, the number of sell orders just above it. Specialists like Capps were forbidden to divulge the contents of their notebooks to anyone but Exchange officers and the SEC.

Of the men on the trading floor, market specialists like Capps made up at least one-fourth of the population. The specialist's function was to "make a market" for one or more listed stocks. Every stock listed on the Big Board had at least one specialist, sworn to "maintain a fair and orderly market" by buying or selling against the trend of the market.

Regulations were strict: the specialist couldn't be an officer of any company he handled on the floor; he was not allowed to operate for his own personal account if he had any public bids or offers-they always had to come first-but he was required to trade for his own account when it was necessary to keep the market balanced. The specialist split his commissions with brokers, made his income on profits in trading his own account. It was his duty to execute stop orders for clients-to buy if the stock was rising, or to sell (to prevent further loss) if the stock was falling.

The rules were stringent; but it was not unheard of for a specialist to get nervous when the market started to slide-to start selling fast, to get in ahead of the public, which would keep buying the stock until the news caught up on the tape. Nothing, in this gambling casino, was guaranteed; nothing was certain.

In all this bustle and press, Russ Hastings was supposed to be traffic cop and detective all at once. It was his job, the SEC's job, not to police the price of shares, but to make sure investors were informed of all activity that might have an effect on stocks. "Full disclosure"-that was the SEC's aim, and its limitation. The government agency could not prevent an idiot from forming a corporation and selling shares for the express purpose of hijacking airplanes to Cuba. It could only see to it that the corporation openly declared its intent, its assets, its liabilities, and its structure.

Jostled by fast-moving traders, Hastings kept shifting his stance; he felt awkward, as if he had wandered into a football play by mistake. He watched Herb Capps conclude a trade and come forward smiling. Capps's amiability was a shell which ended a fraction of an inch beneath the surface, beyond which there seemed no clue to his real personality. The Exchange, having put all its specialists through the strenuous screening process of examinations and investigations, assumed Capps and all the rest of them were trustworthy; but one couldn't always go by that. Capps could easily be a rock of honor; he could just as easily be a thief.

Capps said, "Still waiting for me?"

"I'm curious about NCI."

Capps's smile switched on, confidential and neighborly. "Look, I know you're a bit of a rookie, maybe you haven't seen this kind of activity before, and you're wondering about it. Believe me, it goes on all the time."

"Maybe. Don't you think NCI's too big to be acting like a volatile penny stock?"

"Three, four points in a couple of weeks? I wouldn't call that volatile."

"It is when you're talking about a blue chip that's exactly the same company it was a month ago. It's been moving against the averages, remember. Look, maybe I'm green, but a violent upheaval in the stock of a giant like NCI could snowball the whole market into a mess."

The bald man gave him a dry look. “You’re trying to build a mountain where you haven’t even got a molehill. Look, here’s my book-records of the past few weeks. Look for yourself, if you want.”

It was exactly what he wanted. He had wondered if he could goad Capps into offering his book without being asked for it; he had succeeded, but it would have meant more if he had failed. By proffering the book, Capps was proving nothing. Either he had nothing to hide or he was clever enough to be one jump ahead-and there was no way to determine which it was.

Hastings gave the book a quick riffling through and said, “You’ll have to interpret.”

“Sure. We all use our own shorthand. I haven’t got time to give you a complete translation, but let’s see if we can-yes, here. A block trade, ten thousand shares, bought by a broker in Montreal. I happen to know that one was bought for the portfolio of a Canadian mutual fund. Back here, let’s see-two weeks ago today, two lots of twenty thousand shares each. First one bought by the Vancouver Trust, second one bought by an Ottawa broker in a street name-could be any client, of course.”

“All Canadian? Why all the Canadian interest?”

“Who knows. Maybe somebody started to float a rumor up there. NCI’s got several industrial plants in Quebec and Ontario. Diesel engines, earth-moving equipment, chemicals, that kind of stuff. I’ve heard some talk myself, that NCI’s going to be bidding on the construction job at the new Alaska Slope oil fields. Nothing to it, far as I know, but that’s all it ever takes, you know-a little loose talk.”

“What’s this one-nine thousand shares?”

Capps looked over his shoulder. “Three weeks back. That was local, here in New York. The broker’s Hackman and Greene.”

“Who was the client?”

“I’d have to ask Hackman and Greene. That’s their floor trader right over there-want me to ask him?”

“If you don’t mind,” Hastings said, and watched Capps move away through the throng, eyes forever darting to the raised fists and fingers which communicated coded information like semaphore signals across the noisy, crowded floor. Traders swirled around Hastings. Slips of paper fluttered to the floor around his feet. The bedlam made him dizzy. Capps returned with another man in tow-a tall gaunt old man with yellowish-white hair and a face that looked as if it had been slept in. “Paul Meaghan, of Hackman and Greene,” Capps said, and introduced Hastings. The old man shook hands, unsmiling; Capps spun away to meet a customer, and Meaghan said, “You wanted some information?”

“About an NCI purchase you made three weeks ago, nine thousand shares.”

Meaghan flipped through his notebook. “I have it here. You wanted the price?”

“No. The name of the client.”

Meaghan gave him a sharp look but thought better of asking why; he said, “I have it down for a Miss Carol McCloud. You’d have to get her address from our main office.”

Hastings made a note of the name. “Have you bought any other blocks of NCI in the past few weeks?”

“Sure. I suppose everybody has. What is this, a spot check?”

"Call it that."

The old man's glance flicked across the crowd, not willing to miss any business; he consulted his notebook at brief intervals and spoke in gusts: "Well, the largest block we've bought recently was twenty-five thousand shares, in the street name. I believe it was for one of the Swiss investment trusts. Then, I've got a note here on fifteen thousand shares just last Friday for the McGill Niagara Fund."

"That's a Canadian fund?"

"Of course. Nothing to do with the university, though. Here's one, seventy-five hundred shares we bought for the Claiborne Fund-that's New York, of course, old Howard Claiborne of Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers. Here's five thousand shares in the street name again-I don't remember who the client was, probably one of our regulars. Here's a purchase last week, ten thousand shares sold to Salvatore Senna at a Montreal address. I recall that one because I'd never heard the name before, and you don't usually associate Italian names with French Canada. Then, let's see, two weeks ago five thousand shares for the street name, a Swiss account on that one-no name, just a number, you know how they work. Then I've got-"

"Okay," Hastings said. "I wonder if you'd do something for me after the market closes today. Have your secretary make up a list of all sales of NCI to Canadian clients in the past thirty days and send the list over to my office. Would you do that?"

"No trouble. Is this something I should know about?"

"No. As you said, it's just a spot check. A pattern survey of the market, you know?"

Meaghan, not quite satisfied with that vague explanation, nodded and walked away, carrying one of Hastings' business cards. Hastings intercepted Herb Capps on his way across the floor and left with him a request for a list of Canadian purchases of NCI similar to the one he'd asked of Meaghan; he went on through the throng, hearing vaguely the pretty tourist guide's glib spiel on the balcony above; he made his way outside. The sidewalks were too narrow to hold the crowds; people walked in the streets, herded by slow-moving cars. At the Broadway corner, trucks stood jammed into the intersection. Stifled in the surging crowd, he felt momentarily as if he had lost his identity, as if he had been turned loose in a foreign country without passport and unable to speak the tongue. Hands pocketed and shoulders lifted in defense toward the crowd that pushed itself against the shell of his enforced indifference, he walked along with false nonchalance, thinking of Diane and all the things that had gone wrong in his life. In moments like this he was not able to shake the feeling of being somehow in the wrong place-as if there was, somewhere, a right place.

At this hour a taxi would be hopeless. He walked. It took the better part of half an hour, at a brisk pace, to walk north past St. Paul's and City Hall to the new Federal Plaza at Foley Square.

The Commission's New York staff of one hundred and fifty people took up a good part of Quint's floor. Hastings went by Quint's door without pausing-Trading amp; Exchange Division, Chief of Investigations-and went straight into his own small brown-carpeted cubicle. Miss Sprague gave him a bony reserved smile; she was talking into a telephone. Hastings went around behind his desk and sat. It was a pedestal desk, its side wing open with dictaphone and adding

machine. He couldn't see Miss Sprague until she hung up the phone and came around the partition with her notebook.

She said, "I put those papers for you to sign on your desk."

"Thanks." He glanced through them and spoke while he signed his name. "A couple of things. Call Hackman and Greene, the brokers, and get the address and phone number of one of their clients, a Miss Carol McCloud. Then see if you can reach her by phone and set up an appointment for me to see her today or tomorrow. Tell her it's about some stock she owns. Oh, and before you do that, see if you can get Bill Burgess of Justice on the phone for me."

Miss Sprague acknowledged the instructions with a one-inch nod and retreated, exuding all the sensuality of an ironing board. Hastings finished signing the documents. By the time he was done, the intercom had buzzed.

"I have the Justice Department for you. Mr. Burgess."

"Thanks." He picked up the phone. "Bill?"

"Hiya, Russ, howsa boy?" Burgess had a rumpled-seersucker voice, amiable and cheery. He was a hearty, clean-cut, perennial collegiate. "How's bachelorhood treating you?"

"Kind of dull," Hastings said, wry.

"You miss the flying pots and pans, hey? Listen, I don't think I've seen you since Jim Speed died. When we going to get together? I still have the boys around to the poker game every Wednesday night-how about it?"

"I'll try to make it sometime soon," Hastings said. "Listen, an item for your IBM brain. Does the name Salvatore Senna punch out one of your computer cards?"

"Not offhand. Should it?"

"Beats me. It belongs to an investor in Montreal."

"Montreal, huh?"

"Exactly. I thought it might be one of your expatriate mobsters. But nothing lights up, eh?"

"I'm sorry, Russ. Want me to run it through R and I for a check?"

"It's probably not worth it. If the name doesn't strike a chord in that memory of yours, it's probably clean. Maybe I haven't been sufficiently educated by the Italian Anti-Defamation League."

"No doubt. Anything else on your mind? How do you like the job up there?"

"Too soon to tell. If I could get my teeth into something, it might be all right."

"You sound jaded, Russ."

"Maybe I am. I'll see you sometime." He rang off and sat back, drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk, frowned, and wondered if he wasn't jumping at illusions. In the old days, with Speed, he had produced large results by following nebulous hunches; but maybe Quint had been right: this was finance, not politics, and perhaps he wasn't yet sensitive enough to the clues and signs. In this arena one needed a good deal more than hunches and suspicions; the evidence of malfeasance had to be ironclad and substantial. Otherwise there was no point in opening a case. The government, even with the best evidence, was loath to prosecute securities cases; to a juror, the details were as baffling as hieroglyphics; to get a conviction was to achieve a miracle.

Prosecute a case… jurors… conviction. His chuckle, uttered aloud, was a wry snort. He didn't have so much as a clear-cut suspicion. Only the vaguest intimation. But he had told Quint there were vibrations: he had felt them. Something was in the air. He felt vague stirrings, the disquiet of anticipated

excitement, and he didn't want to bring himself down by reminding himself that perhaps he was only sensing what he wanted to sense: he wanted the hunt, the chase. I feel like a fight. So help me, I feel like a fight.

Chapter 3

Diane Hastings.

In the dirty narrow gorge of Madison Avenue a yellow taxi made its way to the curb to discharge its passenger, who emerged with a trim stretch of long legs and drew male stares when she walked across the curb into a tall, checkered-glass slab of a building.

She took the express elevator to the thirty-third floor and stepped out into the deep-carpeted reception foyer of Nuart Galleries International, answered in kind the pretty receptionist's grin, and went along a hall until she stopped outside the open door of the stockroom.

The place was a frenetic mess, a welter of prints and paintings. Matted reproductions stood against every available inch of wall. Cynthia MacNee was striding back and forth with impatient disgust. "Shit. Hello, Diane dear."

Diane Hastings stepped carefully over a litter of catalogs, chic and slim as a fashion model, with the long-boned slender-ness that photographers loved as a clothes hanger. She used it herself for that purpose, today wearing a severe, classic Givenchy.

Cynthia flung herself around the room with big-limbed abandon; she gave Diane a rushed and furious glance and said, "God damn it, it's all crap."

Diane Hastings surveyed it. "How can you possibly tell, in this clutter? Where did that Mandering come from?"

"I wanted to have a look at it. We might be able to get the repro rights for a few thousand. It's the one what's-her-name auctioned off upside down at Parke-Bernet."

"Not bad," Diane said.

Cynthia stopped, stared at her, and uttered a horsey snort. "Not bad? My dear, you see before you examples of dismal taste from every period in the history of civilization. I ask you-look at that moth-eaten Scott Taylor. That vertiginous Mosarely." She struck a pose. "Aht for the masses at pop-yew-lah prices! Madness, don't you know? Yah gets what yah pays for, honey, and this pile of horse shit only proves once again that you can't make a silk purse out of a two-dollar whore."

Diane laughed, picking a path across the room to her office door. "Better get it cleaned up before their majesties the out-of-town buyers arrive tomorrow."

"I'll dump it all down the incinerator chute," Cynthia said in her drawling, throaty voice. "Just see if I won't!" She made a Girl Scout's honor sign. Diane laughed again and shook her head, staring with amused wonder at the huge girl in transparent boots, lacy patterned stockings, a miniskirt, a little vinyl jacket, and a derby hat. Cynthia recognized her expression and crinkled her nose with fierce defiance. "Somebody around here has got to look the part of the artsy-craftsy kook. Who'd buy modern art from anybody who looks as sane as you?"

Diane went into her private office, leaving the door open behind her. It was a big room with deep carpet, push-botton phones, big-window views of the downtown skyline and a patch of the East River. The furnishings were in walnut, gold, and beige; there was a long couch with a coffee table, a wide expanse of beige carpet, and set across the corner, the desk. Its opulence and size were part of the boss-lady image which, at rare moments, amused her. She had not got used to the idea-after five years she probably never would-and she still felt she lacked the hard brass that seemed common to all the bitch-on-wheels female executives she knew.

She settled into her chair and buzzed the secretary: "Any messages, Maude?"

"A Mr. Villiers called this morning. He said he wasn't sure where he'd be and said he'd call you back."

Diane took a deep breath. "Thanks. Anything else?"

"A call from the manager of the Seattle store wanting to know what had happened to his shipment of Thanksgiving greeting cards. I switched him to Mr. Winslow in Distributing. He sounded kind of sore-I guess the computer loused up his order."

"That damned computer," Diane said. "That all?"

"Yes. You have a luncheon appointment at one-thirty."

"I know. I'll be in the office till then, if there are any calls."

She switched off the intercom and thought of Mason Villiers, constructing a picture of him-dark, tautly attractive, glittering with hard ambition and thoroughly masculine charm. She hadn't seen him in months. She had met him just after her divorce, and there had been a few dates; she had been afraid of what the wags called the Rebound, and she had not allowed anything to come of it. He had wanted to seduce her; he was a man to whom conquest came easily. But she had told herself, I won't be a pushover. She had evaded him, and he seemed to have taken the hint. Now he was back. Why?

She played with a pencil, speculating, a walnut-haired woman with skin pulled taut across the good high bones, the sweep of her eyebrows emphasized in pencil. She knew she was beautiful, not with the padded softness of early youth, but with the pared-down bone beauty of thirtyish maturity. She had seen few men since the divorce, and those few only casually; she had plunged deep into her work. She didn't want to admit she was afraid of herself in a man's company, but she couldn't forget the things Russ had said to her. She wanted very desperately not to believe him: "It's got to the point where you're doling out warmth by the teaspoonful." Words blurted in the anger of the moment, admittedly-but sometimes when she glimpsed herself in the mirror, she thought the eyes were a bit too cool, a bit glittering.

Her friends in art and business claimed to envy her; with awe they assured her she had reached the exalted nirvana of the parlor psychologist: she was well adjusted. But adjusted to what?

The result of a collapsed marriage was always self-pity. She had seen it often enough in others. It was, she knew, time to come out of the self-imposed period of mourning. She began to look forward to Mason Villiers' call.

Cynthia MacNee came batting into the office like a clumsy brunette sheepdog. It was always a surprise to view that pretty, shield-shaped face atop the ungainly hugeness of her. She wasn't unattractive; were it not for her horsey way of moving and the absurdity of her costumes, she might have been regarded as statuesque and lovely. She had to be in constant social motion, or

she would perish; her overwhelming energy and furious bounce were awe-inspiring. She said loudly, with her customary twinkling urbanity, “I know a lot about art, but I know what I like, and this season’s horse shit isn’t either one.”

“Stop being silly. It isn’t all that bad. In fact, quite a few of them are good.”

“You’re a Philistine. I’m the buyer around here, I’m supposed to be the expert on art, and I say that stuff would be a swindle if you peddled it at three-ninety-eight a yard. My deah, a painting is supposed to capture a feeling that will rouse you when you look at it. Even revulsion will do. But these are just nyeh.” Cynthia threw up her arms and wailed, “Where oh where are the promising young geniuses of yesteryear? I’d like to sue them all for breach of promise!”

“Wherever they are,” Diane answered mildly, “they’re not offering paintings to us for thirty dollars per original oil. I’m sorry these are beneath you, but let’s not forget we have fourteen offices down that corridor occupied by men and women who get paid to supply paintings and whatnot to sixty-one galleries. You’re welcome to junk the whole lot if you like, but you’ve got just two weeks left to replace it.”

Cynthia blinked and scowled. “Quit sounding like a shop foreman. Where’s your barefoot dash?”

It made Diane look away in discomfort. “I’m sorry. Was I being hard-boiled again?”

“A little. Honey, don’t you recognize the symptoms when I start to bitch and moan like this? It’s only frustration because they haven’t invited me to be acquisitions chief at the Met. With my background, in this crass job of yours I’m slumming.”

“And getting paid twice what you’d get at the Met.”

“See what I mean?” Cynthia demanded. “Crass!”

Diane poked her pencil toward the big girl. “I see it now. The real trouble is, you’ve broken up with the latest boyfriend.”

“Curses! Foiled again!” Cynthia cried. “Am I that transparent? You sting me to the quick!”

“It happens every other week.” Diane smiled with half her mouth. “I’m beginning to recognize the signs. Who was it this time, young Ted Raine?”

“How did you know?”

“You’ve bought too many God-awful paintings of his.”

Cynthia’s face fell. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-I usually don’t let that kind of thing interfere with my judgment. It won’t happen again-were they really God-awful?”

“Pretty bad. How’d you manage to get rid of him? Insult his mother?”

“No, that was the last one.” A crafty gleam came into Cynthia’s eye. “At a really passionate moment, I called him Phyllis.” She winked elaborately and exploded in barking laughter that doubled her over.

Diane shook her head in ironic disbelief. “Only you could have thought that one up. He must have left at full gallop.”

“He almost forgot his pants,” Cynthia gasped through her tears. She straightened up, gave a few post-paroxysm snorts of subsiding laughter, and dragged a vinyl sleeve across her eyes. She added weakly, “You should’ve seen his stricken face.”

“Why do you do it?”

“Oh, hell, honey, they make me want to puke when they get so damned serious and intense. I can’t help it, it just comes out. Sex is supposed to be fun.”

Diane put the pencil down. “Easy to say. Not all of us can be so carefree about it.”

“Hah!” Cynthia roared, and composed her face to snarl in her Humphrey Bogart rasp, “Now you liften here, fweetheart, ya gotta think of yourfelf af a fwinger, fee?” She came to the front of the desk and braced both long arms against it, leaned forward, and peered close. “What good does it do to make a ladies’ magazine heroine out of yourself, all the time waiting for love? Shit, there are all kinds of things you can get along without if you have to-arms, legs, eyesight. Lots of people do. Love. Okay, forget it-you just take stock of what you’ve got left, and you convince yourself it’s just as important, and maybe a whole lot more fun. I wasn’t kidding just now-it’s a hell of a lot easier to tolerate yourself if you think of yourself as a swinger instead of using a loaded word like ‘promiscuous.’ Why lock yourself up in a chastity belt? Think of what you’re missing out on.” She straightened and lunged around the room, talking with big swings of her arms. “Do I sound like some old Lana Turner movie on the late show? Hell, put it down to my stunted intellect-I started smoking when I was fourteen. But it makes me a little sad to see you locking yourself up, and I hate things that make me sad. It’s a swinging world, honey-there aren’t any hellfire-brimstone Calvinists around here to punish a girl for going out and getting laid when she feels like it. Why do it yourself with leg irons and twenty lashes of Freudian guilt?”

“You make it sound simple.”

“Do I? That’s the disadvantaged child in me. I make profound truths sound like comic-book cliches. Now, if I had your breeding, I could make even the most nonsensical small talk sound distinguished-think what I could do with the Great Truths! Christ, I’d hang out a shingle and put a couch in my office and charge two hundred dollars an hour!”

The intercom buzzed. Diane flicked a switch, and the secretary’s voice came through: “I’m going out to lunch now, Mrs. Hastings. Shall I switch incoming calls to your phone?”

“Yes, thank you, Maude.”

The intercom clicked; Cynthia said immediately, “You ought to tell her to quit calling you Mrs. Hastings.”

“Oh, I’m still Mrs. Hastings to the trade-it would be too confusing to change my name back now.”

Cynthia stopped patrolling; she stopped with her shoulder blades against the wall, folded her arms, and said, “Come off it, dahling. That’s not the real reason.”

“If you’re suggesting I’m still-”

“In love with Russ? No; even I am not that cornball. What I’m suggesting is that you give yourself a kind of untouchable immunity as long as you keep that ‘Mrs.’ in front of your name. And I don’t think it’s healthy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I simply don’t want to resume my maiden name, because I’ve always been too proud to trade on my father’s name. Really, Cynthia, sometimes I wish you’d quit jumping to conclusions.”

“Are you sure that’s what I’m doing? Look, if what you say is true, why not keep the ‘Hastings’ but change the ‘Mrs.’ to ‘Miss’?”

"Because it just isn't done."

"Oh! A thousand pardons, memsahib!" Cynthia bowed elaborately from the waist. "You must forgive my gauche ignorance. I have lousy table manners too."

"The result of your disadvantaged childhood, no doubt."

Cynthia grinned. "Okay. Touche. But if you can be defensive about sex, I can be defensive about my po'-white-trash background. Let's be fair about it."

Diane made a face and reached for the stack of correspondence in her In tray, indicating that so far as she was concerned, the conversation was ended. But Cynthia said stubbornly, "Have you met Emiliano Upton?"

"No. Why?"

"Know who he is?"

"He paints, doesn't he?"

"You could call it that. He used to paint enormous canvases of, ah, human sexual organs-in exquisitely enlarged detail. A real howl, but it didn't find much of a market outside of a few rich voyeurs. Your ordinary dimestore-art buyer would hardly hang one on his living-room wall. I persuaded him to try something a bit more genteel, and I'm going down next week to see the results. He's a big sumbitch, really hung-I think maybe I'll fix you up with him for openers." Cynthia grinned furiously.

"When I want a matchmaker," Diane snapped, "I'll let you-"

The phone rang, cutting her off. She punched the blinking button and lifted the receiver. "Mrs. Hastings."

A man's voice laughed. "Answering your own phone now? Have they knocked you down that far?"

She recognized his voice immediately but refused to give him the satisfaction of it; she said coolly, "Who is this?"

"I was hoping you'd know my voice," he said. She gave him no encouragement. After a moment he said, "It's Mace Villiers. Remember?"

"Yes, I do." Giving away nothing, she was trying to make up her mind whether to be pleased or angry.

"I left a message I'd call. Didn't you get it?"

"It must have slipped my mind," she lied.

He said, "I thought we might have dinner."

"Tonight?"

"Of course."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have a date." She saw Cynthia's ferocious frown and headshake.

"Break it," Mason Villiers said.

"Why should I?"

"Because I want to see you. It's a business matter as well."

She thought, As well as what? But what she said was, "I'm sorry. I can't." She realized she was smiling; she composed her face and added, "I'm afraid the rest of the week is blocked in quite solidly."

"Oh, come on. Let's make it tomorrow night. Do I have to horse-trade with you? I'm altogether serious, and it's an important matter."

"What business could you possibly have to discuss with me? We're hardly in the same line." She ignored Cynthia's impatient scowl.

"I don't do business over the phone," he said. Then his voice turned low and ultramasculine: "I'll pick you up tomorrow at seven, your apartment."

"Do you always press so hard?"

“My luck? I always push that. You walked away from me once.”

“And you’d like to have me believe that never happened to you before, and you can’t stand it.”

He laughed. “Exactly. I’ll see you at seven tomorrow.” He hung up.

She put the receiver slowly in its cradle.

Cynthia said immediately, “Villiers?” And when there was no reply, she assumed she had guessed correctly; she said, “You’re scared of him. Are you going to meet him?”

“Mind your own business.”

Cynthia grinned happily. “You are? Why, that’s even better than Emiliano Upton. Hell, Mace Villiers is the world’s champion fornicator. If he can’t-”

“We’re going to discuss a business deal,” Diane said.

“Horse shit. Admit it, why don’t you? You’re just as attracted to him as any other woman with all her faculties would be, but you’re afraid of him because he’s a man you can’t control. But don’t you see that’s why he’s just what you need? Mace Villiers is strong enough to-”

“Will you please just shut up?” Diane demanded.

“Honey, I only want to see you regain your self-assurance as a woman.” Cynthia gave an emphatic nod of her head and batted out of the room.

Diane said aloud, to her disappearing back, “May the gods save us from meddling busybodies.” But she was smiling.

Chapter 4

Russell Hastings.

After a dull lunch with two junior SEC attorneys Russ Hastings walked the steaming sidewalks to Chatham Square to find a taxi bound uptown through the Bowery. He waved down a vacant cab and got in.

“Well?” the driver growled. “Where ya wanna go?”

He had to look it up in his notebook. “Forty-fourth and Sixth.”

“Unh.” The traffic light was green, but the driver was busy writing the address down on his clipboard. “You got the time, mister?”

“One-thirty.”

“Thanks. I got to put it down on my ride sheet here, see, and I busted my watch last night.” The dashboard of the taxi was festooned with plastic madonnas, American flags, religious medallions. The driver finished scribbling and looked up; the light had just turned red against him. He put the shift in neutral and revved the snarling engine, startling a passing pedestrian. When the light changed, they started off with a neck-snapping jerk and careened across the intersection. Hastings sat back and tried to ignore the taxi’s violent progress through the traffic; watching, from the perspective of the back seat, always made him tense with alarm.

It was a big cab, a Checker, the high old body style with jump seats. A warped sliding plexiglass window separated the back from the front seat; it was open, against the heat.

The driver was a compulsive talker: “You one of them broker guys? My daughter works for one of them guys-Howard Claiborne, maybe you heard of

him. Now an' then I get tips on the stock market, y'understand what I'm saying?"

Hastings only grunted to indicate he was listening. The driver was a hulking big man with a thick brutal chin and a polished bald head; from the rear quarter he looked like a thug.

An errant car crossed the taxi's bows, and the driver roared in a voice like a bassoon, out the window: "Whassamatta with you, ya dumb asshole-tryin' to getcha stupid fuckin' balls creamed?" The driver shook his head and said in exasperation to Hastings, "Mutterfuckinsonsuhbitches think they own the road or somep'n. Y'understand what I'm saying?"

Hastings glanced at the license sign on the glove-compartment door. He made out the driver's name on the placard: Barney Goralski. The photo wasn't much worse than his own passport photograph. It gave a vague indication of a big fleshy face, nothing more.

"Yeah," Barney Goralski was musing, "that stock market sure a hell of a place. My daughter, Anne, now, she gets all kindsa inside dope, y'know, but she's a good kid, she don't go spreadin' it around the wrong places. Y'understand? Yeah, I fool around some with them stocks myself-I'm an independent businessman, y'know, own this cab myself. Ain't one of your hired minority-group thugs what don't know how to drive a cab. It's a fuckin' disgrace the punks they put behind a wheel nowadays. Half these stupid fleet drivers ain't got no idea at all how to get from one place to another. You gotta keep movin' to make a living in this racket, mister, I can tell you-you get yourself caught in fuckin' traffic jams, and you lose your shirt. Y'understand what I'm saying?"

Hastings grunted. Goralski gunned and braked violently, slithering between cars, outwitting traffic. In the taxi everything seemed slightly loose-taximeter, doors, windows, ashtrays, plexiglass, horn ring, change counter-so that a constant din of rattles assaulted the ear, symphonic accompaniment to Barney Goralski's nonstop monologue. "One time, see, I buy a hundred shares of this five-dollar stock. So right away it becomes a three-dollar stock."

Goralski cursed a double-parked truck, bucked loudly past it, and once more launched into his history of his battles with the stock market: "'Nother time I get this tip, so I buy a hundred shares of a six-fifty stock. I pay thirteen and a quarter commission."

It awed Hastings that the cab driver could remember the exact figures, let alone believe anyone could conceivably be interested.

"But then I find out the fucking stock's selling at eighty times earnings, y'know what I mean? Eighty times earnings, Christ-sake. So I get shaky. The stock goes up half a point, and I sell out everything, both them stocks. I end up with a net loss of a hundred and thirty-seven bucks and seventy-five cents, thirty bucks of which is commissions to the crooked bastards that sold it to me in the first place."

"Then I buy a hundred shares of this Trymetronex-cost me damn near thirteen hundred, time I paid the commission. And the minute I buy, it starts to slide. I put in a bunch of sell orders a point above the market-I admit I was pushin' for that extra point, y'understand what I'm saying? I figured, shit, it's bound to bounce back sooner or later. So it goes down to nine. From twelve and a half down to nine mutterfuckin' dollars. Then they pull some legal hocus-

pocus, the bastard corporation calls its convertible debentures. You know what that does?"

Hastings grunted, which was a mistake, because Goralski had to explain.

"Well, they got convertible debentures worth ten million bucks, and when they recall them they issue shares of common stock to replace the debentures. Debentures-that's bonds. Y'understand? So they shovel out ten million bucks' worth of new stock onto the market, and naturally the price drops to seven mutterfuckin' dollars. You can bet your sweet ass those insiders knew all about the debenture recall in advance. It's little outside guys like me that get grabbed by the balls. Then I go back to the stupid asshole broker, and you know what he says to me? He says my stocks was overvalued when I bought them, he says. He says I shoulda known better. Jesus Christ, the mutter-fucking sonofabitch didn't say that when I BOUGHT them!"

Mercifully they had arrived at 44th Street. Hastings' ears rang. He paid Goralski, tipped him half a dollar, and got out quickly. A small old lady darted past him into the cab. He walked down 44th Street a few doors to the address the brokers had given his secretary on the phone. It was one of the medium-sized midtown hotels, not far from the Algonquin. Miss Carol McCloud-probably a white-haired old lady, like so many who lived in residential-hotel apartments, clipping her coupons and keeping miniature dogs. Miss McCloud had recently bought a large block of NCI stock. Why? Who had touted her onto it? Rumors were wildfire in the stock market, but not even little old ladies spent a quarter of a million dollars on the sole basis of rumors.

He went into the narrow lobby and found a house phone; after four rings a low female voice answered. The voice sounded younger than he had expected, but it was hard to tell. She seemed drugged with sleep. He glanced involuntarily at his watch.

"Miss McCloud? This is Russell Hastings, Securities and Exchange Commission."

"Oh yes-of course. What time is it?"

"Ten till two. I realize I'm a little early-we did say two-fifteen. If it's not convenient, I can-"

"No. Give me five minutes, and come on up-it's ten-oh-eight. Turn right when you get out of the elevator."

He went into the coffee shop and had a cup of coffee at the counter, finished it, and went to the elevator. It was self-service. On the tenth floor he found 1008 in an Edwardian rotunda at the end of the corridor. He recalled some literary acquaintance once telling him this old hotel had been one of Stanford White's less memorable architectural monuments. Before the war it had been the home of several Algonquin Roundtable celebrities. It appeared to have been well kept up-not luxurious, but far from dingy: a select small hotel which would not cater to conventioneers.

Her telephone voice had changed her image in his mind; he wasn't quite sure what to expect when he knocked. Nevertheless, he had a shock when she opened the door.

She was stunning.

She gave him a radiant smile. "Mr. Hastings."

"Miss McCloud?" He felt he ought to have a hat, if only so that he could doff it. He walked in past her. The room surprised him, as well. It was large, informally divided by sectional settees and comfortable chairs, punctuated by

walnut end tables, stern classic lamps, and a big fireplace that dominated one end of the room. The suite was done in shades of beige, brown, and pale green. A curved bar was built into one corner. The far end of the room opened through glass doors onto a narrow terrace rimmed by potted shrubs, big enough for two lawn chairs and a white iron table.

Hastings brought his attention around to Carol McCloud. She had shut the door and walked into the room ahead of him. Her hair was soft rich brown, full and loose to the shoulders. She had dark, dramatic eyes. She wore blouse, skirt, and sandals; there was no indication she had hurried to get dressed. Her splendidly turned legs would provoke fascinated stares on any sidewalk corner; she had a long waist, high classic breasts, good warm skin tones, and a striking face that was curiously strong and delicate at once. No pose, no artifice-beauty, but not beauty's arrogance. She had a good fresh pride in her loveliness that was neither vain nor imperfected by false humility.

She laughed. "Well, sit down."

"I expected you to have white hair and a cane. I feel like a fool."

Her laugh was low, husky, smoky; she settled on the divan opposite him, full of supple grace. The appraisal she had given him was not the usual casual sizing-up an attractive woman would give a masculine stranger; it was more direct, aware, intense-and slightly provocative, because it was carried on a glance of slightly sardonic private amusement. With gentle irony she said, "I must say your approach is new. What can I do for you that hasn't already been done?"

She was smiling; but her words took him aback. Before he could answer she was up, briskly moving toward the bar in the corner. "I imagine you'd like a drink."

"Kind of early in the day," he said.

She stopped; she seemed puzzled for the first time; she said, "Coffee, then?"

"Just had some, downstairs."

Her head was tipped quizzically to the side; she touched a finger to the point of her jaw. "Then you'd better tell me what you do have in mind."

"My secretary must have mentioned on the phone-I'm making a sort of survey of buyers of NCI stock."

"You mean you're really doing that?"

Baffled, he was beginning to get angry. "Of course. What did you think it was? Some subtle kind of pitch? Look, if I've made a mistake-you are the McCloud who bought a big chunk of NCI a few weeks ago?"

She had begun to laugh; she returned to her chair, still laughing. He noticed for the first time a faint discoloration under the makeup on her cheek-a small bruise. He had never seen her before and had no comparison, but she looked as if she had a slight swelling on that side of her jaw-it showed when she laughed.

Finally she said, "I'm sorry-really I am. I took you for a-for someone else. Please forgive me. Now, what was it you wanted to know about those stocks?"

"You did buy them?"

"I suppose so. I'd have to go look it up."

He said, "Frankly, you don't look that rich."

"What?"

"Are you in the habit of misplacing two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?"

She gave him a blank look. "Two hundred and fifty thousand?"

He stood up. "I guess I've made a mistake, after all. I'm sorry."

"No. Wait." She pulled open a drawer of the end table by the settee, sifted through a small stack of papers, and put them back. When she turned her face toward him, her forehead was creased; she said, "No, it wasn't a mistake." She spread her hands with helpless mocking good humor. "You see how it is-sometimes I'm a little scatterbrained."

Scatterbrained? He shook his head; he said, "But you do remember buying the NCI shares."

"Yes, I do. I'm very sorry if I confused you." But her eyes were still mocking.

"Uh-hunh," he muttered. "Can you remember why you bought them?"

"I don't understand."

"Why pick that particular company to invest in? Why not spread the money around in several investments?"

"I suppose someone must have recommended it to me." She smiled.

It was a blinding smile. He looked away; he closed his eyes and said, "Miss McCloud, we're talking about a quarter of a million dollars."

"Yes, I know that," she said, as if she couldn't understand what was upsetting him.

"Can't you at least remember who might have recommended the stock?"

"A broker, I imagine. I really can't recall."

He had seen that helpless-female role played enough times on the witness stand in court to know it well enough: the pretty, wide-eyed, innocent misunderstanding of every question. It didn't fit quite right; she was too obviously intelligent to carry it off.

He said, "You're not under oath, you know-there's no reason why you should tell me anything at all."

"I'm quite aware of that," she said. "But I'm curious-why are you so interested in my investments?"

"I guess you could just call it a routine check."

"Sure," she answered, matching his tone for casual evenness. But her smile was too knowing; it was no accident that after sidestepping his questions so adroitly she had deftly trapped him in his own evasiveness. It was a neat trick-so neat it made him shift his focus once again. His thinking jumped the straight track of his mind. He had built several hypotheses about her; none of them really fit. Clearly she wasn't just a spoiled heiress, careless about her millions-she wasn't flighty enough, her surroundings weren't opulent enough, she didn't have any air of class consciousness or liberal phoniness. She met him on equal terms, matching wits and subtleties. She was far too bright, and too relaxed, to be some rich married man's penthouse plaything; and again, the surroundings didn't fit in with that notion. An actress, perhaps? But if she was successful enough to be that rich, wouldn't he have heard of her, recognized her face? No-she didn't have the mannerisms for it; she was too straightforward. A wealthy divorcee, investing her lump-sum alimony settlement? Maybe-but something about her didn't quite fit that frame, either. Granted she had brains, even a hard cynical edge that showed now and then; he still couldn't picture her in the role of an adventuress sinking vindictive, greedy teeth into an ex-husband to the tune of a quarter of a million dollars.

He realized suddenly that Carol McCloud was sitting very still-looking at him, unblinking.

She said, "You went away for a minute there."

"Trying to figure you out."

It brought her smile again-slightly crooked, slightly turned against herself in some sort of distant irony. She said, “That would be a useless pursuit.”

He got to his feet. “You don’t want to talk about those shares of stock, I gather.”

“It’s such a dull, dry subject, isn’t it?”

“Unless money turns you on.”

She had a nice laugh, low in her throat; her eyelids drooped just a bit, and she said, “Oh, don’t make that mistake-I think a lot about money, Mr. Hastings.”

“Russ,” he said suddenly.

“Russ.”

He went halfway to the door, and turned to look at her. She hadn’t moved in her seat. She was watching him with that same directness. He said abruptly, “Have dinner with me?”

He had no way of anticipating what she might answer. Her smile changed; she tipped her head toward him, the fall of her hair swaying. She was one of the most exquisite creatures he had ever seen.

After a while she said, “It might not be a good idea.”

“I didn’t mean to step on anybody’s toes.”

“Not that. But I don’t think I want to-” Whatever she had meant to say, she didn’t finish it; instead, she tossed her head quickly, her eyes flashed at him with some kind of sudden resolution, and she said in a different voice, “It might be fun.”

“Tonight?”

“Why not?”

He found himself grinning; he said, “I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty.”

“It will be better if I meet you at the restaurant,” she said.

“Fine. The Bourgogne suit you? Eight o’clock?”

She nodded; the smile was quizzical now, speculative. Still grinning, Hastings went out. Halfway to the elevator he realized he was almost loping. He hadn’t felt this good in months.

Chapter 5

Mason Villiers.

Villiers stepped out of the rickety old elevator and walked the length of a narrow hallway. He knocked at a door and looked at his watch-just short of two-thirty. He stood without patience waiting for the door to open. Sometimes it was an irritant to him, his sexual imprisonment: he needed women frequently-sometimes two or three times in a day, when he was tense with the pressures of corporate juggling.

He knocked again and put his ear close to the door. He could hear the rapid clicking of a typewriter. Finally it stopped, and after a moment he heard Naomi’s voice, close to the door, husky and cross: “Who is it?”

“Mace.”

“Who?”

“Mace Villiers.”

She opened up, and hands impudently on hips, cocked her head to glare. “I’m in the middle of a chapter. Why didn’t you telephone?”

“Ran out of small change. Anyhow, a telephone’s always long distance.”

“You Goddamned sex maniac.” She looked him up and down with slow insinuation and stepped back to let him in.

She was a small, tight-packed, spider-waisted girl, fluffy and blond. She had huge china-blue eyes and a soft, heavy mouth. She wore a yellow dress, not quite chic because it had strong-seamed darts around the bustline to clothe her unfashionably big, plump young breasts, which bobbed and jiggled when she moved ahead of him into the large studio apartment.

Villiers pushed the door shut, indifferent to the surroundings, looking at the girl with desire.

The typewriter was on a small desk by the window. On the sill were dozens of teen-age girls’ novels, pointedly displayed, all by the same author: Naomi Kemp.

Villiers said, trying to put some show of interest in his voice, “What are you working on?”

“A simpering book about a prissy nurse. As if you gave a shit. Really, Mace, you could have picked a better time of day to come charging in.”

“I’m on my way downtown.”

“And that explains the whole thing? You just dropped in on your way to Wall Street for a quick bang?”

“That’s right,” he said, without humor.

“You’re a one-of-a-kind original, Mace. Don’t you know there’s a speed limit in this town?”

“If the idea doesn’t appeal to you,” he said, and turned to the door.

“You’re pitching low and inside,” she complained, and then blurted, “Come back here. You know you turn me into cream pudding. Can’t I be sore for a minute first? I haven’t seen you in months. Not even a postcard.”

“I’ve never sent a postcard in my life.” But then he smiled at her. “What would you want with a postcard from a man who was too far away to stick it in you?”

“You’ve got a foul mouth,” she said. “No shit.”

He peeled back his cuff to look at his wrist. “I haven’t got a lot of time.”

“You motherfucking bastard,” Naomi said, and stripped off her dress. He could see dark fluff in the translucent crotch of her nylon panties. She wore no stockings. She unfastened her brassiere, leering at him, doing a stripper’s bumps and grinds; she rubbed her back where the bra straps had welted her. He watched unblinking, savoring the milky full richness of her breasts. They were warm, red-brown-tipped; her body was the kind boys conjured up in adolescent masturbatory fantasies. Her breasts were so engorged, so thrustingly assertive, that it was never possible to look at her or think of her without focusing on them. Naked, she kept her arms wide of those proud organs, as if they were swollen to the point of tender soreness.

The bed, made up for the day with divan throw pillows, waited against the wall. He came to her beside it. She surged her warm breast up full into his palm, meeting his eyes with a sensual smile and quickened breath; she unzipped his fly and put her hand in. He clutched her breast and slid his left hand up her naked back to her neck, and pulled her forward for a kiss. Her lips were moist and parted; she sucked his tongue in her mouth. Her hand caressed his huge muscle-rippled shaft, thick and hard with pumping blood.

She drew back from his kiss and whispered, “You bastard, haven’t you even got time to take your clothes off? Never mind the window-let the voyeurs watch if that’s how they get their jollies. At least take your Goddamn pants off.”

She undid his belt buckle and the fly fastener of his trousers, and laughed at him when they fell down around his ankles. He kicked them away, shrugged out of his suit jacket, and pushed her down on the bed. He came down upon her, his fierce mouth on hers. Her arms came around him; her tongue probed him, her hands glided over his buttocks. He bent his head to suckle her soft white breasts. His rigid hot phallus brushed her thighs and found her ready moistness and thrust into her, lunging. She clung to him furiously, sweat-slick and arching herself ecstatically. He plunged and twisted, a hungry strong animal, mauling her around the narrow bed. As her flesh beneath him began its anguished tumultuous throes of completion, he was thinking of tomorrow night, his dinner date with Diane Hastings. Then his own excitement quickened, and he spurted himself into her. A shuddering sigh, and she clutched him tight, her eyes closed, her fingernails sharp against his back, scratching through the silk of his shirt.

Tension went out of his fibers. He lay across her, limp, feeling the rise and fall of her breathing under him. After a moment he got up.

She opened her eyes and frowned. He went into the bathroom, spent two minutes, and came out again to put on his pants. Naomi got off the bed, not speaking, not even looking at him; she pulled her panties up and stooped, making herself round-shouldered, to fit her spectacular breasts into the twin hammocks of her bra, hitched it into adjustment, and straightened, elbows spread-eagled, to snap it behind her.

He got into his jacket and straightened his tie, went to the mirror to comb his hair, and heard her say to his back, “Are you still rich?”

“Sure.” He turned around to regard her. “You always go with the winner, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“What if I go broke?”

“Then I’ll find another winner.”

He smiled. “Anyhow, you’re honest. I’m still rich. Do you need money?”

“I always do. It takes me ten weeks to write a book, and I only get a fifteen hundred advance on it.” Her mouth twisted, and she added, “Just put it on the bed. That’s the way they do it, isn’t it?”

“Don’t get sour, I only asked.”

She said, “When I was thirteen I laid my best girl friend’s old man. I guess I’ve always been a whore. But not for money, Mace. Always for free, for fun. Once in a while they give me something-a bracelet or a watch. But it’s not pay. I never take pay. The difference may not look very important to you, but it does to me.”

He said, not caring, “I understand. All right, you don’t want anything right now, because that would be too much like taking pay. Suppose we have dinner together, say Thursday night.”

For some reason he sensed but did not comprehend, she gave him an enraged scowl and turned her back, folding her arms. She said in a low tone, “When you invite a girl to dinner, at least you could look as if you cared which way she’ll answer.”

“I don’t make invitations unless I mean them.”

"You could look a little less bored."

"Suit yourself, then," he said indifferently, and opened the door.

When he glanced back, she had turned to watch him; her eyes were too wide and too bright. She said, "God damn you, you think you can come and go like a subway train."

He made no answer; he pulled the door shut and walked to the elevator.

He emerged from the narrow apartment building onto a Greenwich Village street and looked around, planning to ambush a taxi before he saw the limousine and remembered that Sanders was driving him today. He crossed the curb diagonally and got into the luxurious back seat. Sanders had the engine idling and the air-conditioning on; it was cool but stuffy in the Cadillac.

Sanders, via the rear-view mirror, gave his cowardly apologetic smile and said, "Where to?"

"Hackman's office."

"Yes, sir." Sanders looked over his shoulder at the traffic and eased out into the flow. Villiers sat back and frowned at the back of Sanders' billiard-ball head.

They stopped for a traffic light, and Sanders cleared his throat. "Sir…"

"What is it?" Villiers snapped.

"My mother, sir. She's ill, and I was wondering if you'd be needing me for the evening. I mean-"

"I may need you. I'll let you know."

"Yes, sir." The traffic began to move, and Sanders turned into Seventh Avenue and manhandled the limousine through heavy traffic past St. Vincent's Hospital, heading downtown toward the financial district.

Tod Sanders was becoming an annoyance, Villiers thought. For a while it had amused him to put Sanders through hoops.

Ten blocks farther downtown, Sanders said again, "I'm not looking for a chance to goof off, sir. She really is sick. My mother, I mean. I wish I hadn't brought her down here from Canada. You know, this stinking hot wea-"

"Shut up," Villiers said. "Nothing runs out of listeners faster than a hard-luck story. You ought to've learned that by now."

"Yes, sir. I suppose. Mr. Villiers, why is it things like this never bother you? What's the difference between you and me?"

"Difference? I dominate my world, Tod. Your world dominates you. Now, shut up, I've got thinking to do."

But the back of Sanders' head was an irritant that badgered him and kept him from concentrating. Memory took Villiers back to the Alaska oil fields two years ago, when he had met Sanders. He had thought he'd known the man from the past, but Sanders had refused to answer to the name Villiers had addressed him by. Sanders had been a petroleum engineer, thought to be very bright by the oil company that employed him. Thinking Sanders might be of use to him, Villiers had investigated-and found out that the youth he had once known in Chicago had fled a hit-and-run homicide charge and disappeared.

He had confronted Sanders with it, broken him down with ridiculous ease, and used him to obtain inside information from the oil company, which he had been in the process of raiding.

Tod Sanders was a small shy man with inky fingernails and a hangdog face. A thirty-four-year-old mama's boy whose mother became ill every time he got serious with a girl. It had aroused Villiers' interest, as a coolly scientific

experiment, to see how far the man could be pushed without stiffening to retaliate. Evidently there were no limits to the degradation he was willing to suffer. He had been convinced from the moment he was born that the world was too much for him, and Villiers' harsh treatment of him only provided him with added evidence of that which he was already convinced of. Sanders had become Villiers' valet, chauffeur, shoeshine boy, and memo pad; he spent his scuffling hours arranging hotel rooms and procuring women for Villiers. He didn't object to any of it. Sanders never seemed to be taxed by any desire to ask himself why he had to be subjected to such degrading ignominy; and because he was so unresisting, Villiers was sick and tired of baiting him.

By the time the limousine reached Hackman's building, Villiers had forgotten Sanders; he was thinking about bigger things.

The car slid in at the curb, and Villiers glanced upward past the tall buildings at the thick sky which hung heavily masked in vapor. The traffic of pedestrians was a morass of hot bodies, tramping gray sidewalks and narrow streets in an area where every square foot of ground was worth more than six hundred dollars.

Hackman and Greene were on the nineteenth floor of a building which hadn't been there three years before. The modern reception foyer reminded Villiers unfavorably of the waiting room of an airport. Beyond lay a collection of cubicles with desks, phones, and typewriters, inhabited by junior salesmen and brokers, secretaries, and the clerical staff. The firm boasted an English receptionist with high breasts and a good London accent, an elegant letterhead on twenty-weight linen bound stationery, and an acronymous cable address for clients abroad.

George Hackman, one of the big beefy hucksters of Wall Street, was standing by the receptionist's pretty shoulder, leaning forward, with her telephone at his ear. He nodded to Villiers and went on talking into the phone-evidently the call had caught him here and he had taken it rather than go back to his own desk. Talking and listening on the phone, Hackman was jotting with his left hand in a brass-framed calendar pad on the receptionist's desk. Villiers noticed Hackman's brawny forearm brushing the receptionist's breast as he wrote. The girl had a pretty face but sat with spreading heavy buttocks; Villiers wondered dispassionately why she didn't wear a girdle.

Villiers went to the window beyond and looked down at tiny New Yorkers crawling painfully across the hot pavements.

George Hackman said into the phone, "Bet your ass, Carl. You heard right, Continental's buying them out. It can't help but jack up Reuland Express, and Jackson's gonna suffer from the competition, with all that new capital behind Reuland. So what happens, you go long on Reuland, and you sell Jackson short, got it?... Sure, just give me the word. All right, then, five hundred of each. See you, Carl baby."

Hackman handed the phone to the English girl, leered at her, and walked over to Villiers to clap him on the arm; he said heartily, "How they hanging, Mace?"

Villiers gave him a cool stare. Hackman swallowed his smile and backed up a pace. Over his shoulder he said, "No calls and no visitors until I let you know otherwise," to the receptionist, and steered Villiers back along a corridor toward the door to his private office.

“Sidney Isher’s already here,” Hackman said. Villiers went into the office and saw Isher in a chair. The lawyer nodded his red head and coughed. Hackman shut the door behind them and went around to sit behind his desk; he said, “How’d you like the new girl out front, Mace? Class with a capital ‘K,’ boy. She’s a pistol. Christ, I love to watch the way she shifts her carriage.” Hackman grinned and stuck a cigar in his mouth.

Villiers sat down and looked at him, not speaking. Hackman was big, meaty, hearty, with a broad red-brick face lined with broken commandments. He spoke with the rapid-fire delivery of a used-car salesman. He was the kind of man who believed his life could be measured by his number of old buddies and by his possessions, inside tips, and the athletic accomplishments of his adolescence. He was an after-office-hours alcoholic, casually unfaithful to his third wife, a former showgirl. He lived a lusty routine and threw rowdy parties in his suburban home. Isher had once described him to Villiers as a golfer who lied about his score at the nineteenth hole; it was an accurate thumbnail description.

Seated in an enormous leather chair behind his desk, Hackman pushed the office intercom button and said, “Honey, never mind that stuff on cocoa futures till later, I’ll be tied up for a while. Go powder your snatch if you want.” He flicked the intercom off and sat back to light his cigar. “Christ, Mace, long time no see. How’sa Canadian operations? Jesus, I may move up there myself pretty soon; I tell you, they’re running us out of business down here in the Street. The Goddamned Stock Exchange reduced our brokerage fees on big-block trades, down five percent. Going to cost me six thousand dollars in commissions this year.”

Villiers opened his mouth and said mildly, “Spare me your ululations, George.”

“The hell. Some broker down on the twelfth floor jumped out his window last week.”

Villiers shrugged. “Financial wounds aren’t fatal. I’ve never understood bankrupts’ suicides.”

Hackman exhaled a diaphanous cloud of smoke. “Country club had an antique-car auction last weekend. There was a 1913 Rolls Royce landaulet that went for twenty grand. I thought of you.”

“I know the car,” Villiers said. “I didn’t come down here to talk about it. What’s the market on Melbard?”

“The stock’s moving around a little. Up a quarter, down an eighth-I imagine it’s a few casual boys moving in, selling short, and buying it back half a point below, pushing it up and selling it again. Nothing to worry about. It’s all small stuff.”

Sidney Isher cleared his throat and remarked, “Nobody’s onto you, yet.”

Hackman said. “I sounded out a bank about underwriting the Nuart Galleries if they go public. They like it. The boy I talked to seemed to think the issue will be oversubscribed the minute it goes on the market. You ought to open with a nice premium, one-fifty or two dollars.”

Villiers said, “How much will they be getting?”

“The underwriters? Two and three-quarters percent, and options on ten thousand shares at two bucks above par.”

"All right," Villiers said, without excessive interest. "I'm having dinner tomorrow with Mrs. Hastings. You'll have word from me next morning, either way. She'll probably come along."

"Meaning she's a woman," Hackman observed. "You do have a way with them."

"When you get word from me," Villiers told him, "I want you ready to roll fast. Tell the underwriters to give it a good hard sell, like bond salesmen. And we'll want to put out a nice slick report full of color photographs and expensive artwork on the heaviest coated stock you can buy. We'll need front men to go out on the circuit, Elks and Lions and Kiwanis and whatever-any of those outfits that need speakers. Send the front men up with literature and lecture material, some off-color stories, plenty of illustrated color slides to sell the company. I haven't got a year to get this one off the ground."

"That's why I picked Fleischer's bank," Hackman said. "They've got a network of correspondent firms. They'll get the thing moving all over the country. But of course you realize we can't tell how it'll really go until we run it up the flagpole and see if anybody salutes."

Sidney Isher made a face.

Hackman added, "It's a fluid situation, Mace."

"Don't give me that crap."

Isher said, "A fluid situation is what you drown in, George."

Hackman flushed and puffed rapidly on his cigar. After a moment he said, "Not to change the subject, but I made contact with Colonel Butler for you-you know, the president of Heggins Aircraft. You said you wanted to talk to him."

"I know what I said. I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what he said?"

"I was coming to that."

"Anytime you're ready, George."

"You don't have to get sarcastic. Listen, I had a hell of a time reaching the son of a bitch. He's always off on safari someplace collecting big-game trophies. I got him between planes last week. Told him what you told me to tell him. I'm not sure it worked. He thinks-"

Villiers said, "If Colonel Butler thought anything, he wouldn't be a colonel."

"Don't underestimate him. He's a retired colonel, but that doesn't make him senile. He's maybe fifty-two or — three and he acts like one ballsy tough bird."

"It's a bluff," Villiers said. "He's on the ropes and he knows it. But you still haven't told me whether you set up a meeting."

"I tried to have him here this afternoon-he's in New York right now. He wouldn't go for it. I needled him a little, and he finally admitted he didn't want to be seen going into a business meeting with you. Nothing personal, Mace, but you know you do have a rep. A guy with Butler's defense contracts on the line can't afford to be seen at a conference with you."

Villiers gave no indication whether or not he felt slighted. He said, "You're hanging onto the punch line. What is it?"

"Well, I said suppose I could arrange a meeting on neutral ground where it would look accidental and nobody'd think anything of it. He didn't say no, so I told him I'm having a party tonight at my place, which is true. There'll be plenty of people there for camouflage. He said he'd come. He didn't sound too happy about it but I dropped the hints you told me to drop, and he won't ignore them. He won't be able to let them alone-he'll have to pick at it until he finds out what you want and what he can get out of it."

Villiers said, “I detest parties.”

“What the hell do you want from me? I should set up a meeting in the bus-station restroom? Look, all you got to do is show up, mingle a few minutes, and go back to the guest bedroom. He’ll join you there, and you can lock the door from the inside, get your business done, and leave. I went to a lot of trouble to set this up, Mace. How about it?”

“I suppose so. But try to be less clumsy next time.”

Pleased with his success, Hackman sat back grinning, ignoring the chastisement. “Yes sirree Bob.” He opened the lid of his cigar box and pushed it forward. “Help yourself. Real Cuban Upmanns-cost me a hundred bucks from a U.N. diplomat.”

Villiers ignored the offer. Sidney Isher said abruptly, “I’ve kept my mouth politely shut through all this, but I’d be obliged if you’d let me in on it. What’s all this about Heggins Aircraft and the colonel? It’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“Elementary tactics,” Villiers said, not smiling. “Heggins has been in trouble for years. They brought in Colonel Butler a few years ago in the hopes he could swing Air Force contracts their way. He did, but that was some time ago, and the contracts are running out. The Pentagon’s changed its policy since then-there aren’t any negotiated contracts anymore, it’s all competitive bidding now, and Heggins is too loaded with sloppy management to be able to underbid the big companies. They’ve put in sealed bids that are due to be opened next week on two new VTOL planes, but they’re not likely to get the contracts, and even if they do, they’ll lose money in production. The company’s on the verge of collapse any way you look at it.”

“And?” Isher said.

“And I step in with an offer to bail the colonel out.”

“What the hell for?”

“To get my hands on a Big Board company name. Heggins is listed on the New York Stock Exchange.”

“Maybe, but it’s hardly what you could call gilt-edged. I don’t get it,” Isher said.

“You don’t have to,” Villiers said.

Isher cleared his throat to speak again, but Hackman frowned at him with a warning shake of his head. Isher dropped the subject, displaying his pique with a brief catarrhal bark, and reached into his briefcase. “About the Nuart Galleries business, Mace, were you apprised of the fact that Mrs. Hastings would save a good chunk of money if you were to buy into Nuart with stock instead of cash? If it’s a share-for-share trade, you avoid personal tax, both for Mrs. Hastings and yourself.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“I just want to make sure I understand the deal. You’re going to back Nuart with your own capital when she goes public?”

“Naturally.”

“Will Mrs. Hastings realize that?”

“She’ll realize however much is necessary for her to realize,” Villiers said. “Leave Mrs. Hastings to me.”

“Gladly. But inasmuch as you’re dealing with Elliot Judd’s daughter, it’s my opinion your scheme has the smell of insanity.”

Villiers said quietly, “Thank you for your candor, Sidney.”

Isher shrugged. “You’re made out of poured concrete, aren’t you? All right, be it on your head. Back to the matter at hand-”

“No,” Villiers said. “I’ll make one thing clear. We’re going into this to get control of Melbard, not Nuart Galleries. I have no intention of taking over Mrs. Hastings’ business-only taking over her controlling interest in Melbard when she obtains it. You follow me? She’s only the middleman in this. The Melbard stock goes through her hands into mine, that’s all. That’s the way you’ll set up the legal documentation with her, once I’ve sold her on the program. I don’t want to leave any openings for her to get suspicious that I’m trying to get my hands on her God damned art business. What the hell would I do with an art business?”

George Hackman said, “Okay, let’s get down to the nitty-gritty. Where do you get the capital? Money’s tight.”

“We issue stock and exchange it for the Melbard stock, through Mrs. Hastings.”

“What stock do we issue?”

Villiers said, “I’ve got a Maryland insurance company that’ll do the trick. We’ll issue the stock as part of the terms of an exchange-merger-on paper it will be a merger with Nuart Galleries, but you’ll arrange that the actual exchange is for Melbard shares. Since the stock’s to be issued by the insurance company as part of the terms of a merger, it won’t have to be registered as a public offering.”

“Memorize that,” Isher said to Hackman, “and then throw your head away.” He had a sharp, irritating laugh, like a small dog’s yapping.

“Piece of cake,” Hackman remarked. “It’s beautiful. Melbard’s unlisted. Insiders and control stockholders don’t have to reveal their trading in the stock, which you’d have to do if it was listed.”

Villiers said dryly to Isher, “Give that man a raise.”

Hackman guffawed. “Aw, shit, you don’t-”

“I mean it,” Villiers said. “We’ll put you down for a bonus commission on this job.”

“Well-Christ, thanks, Mace, I mean-”

“Don’t thank me. The more you stand to make, the more you’ve got to lose if you louse it up.”

“Yeah. But thanks anyway. God knows I can use it.”

Villiers glanced at Isher. “That’s all for you for today. I’ll call you day after tomorrow, after I’ve seen Diane Hastings. We’ll want the articles of incorporation drawn up for Nuart by then.”

“Forty-eight hours? You’re moving too fast.”

“Maybe by your clock. Not by mine. Keep your staff after hours if you need to.”

“Is next week a holiday, or what? Christ, we’ve got to go through the Corporation Commission, X and Y and Z and divers others. You can’t just-”

“Don’t bitch, Sidney. Just do it.”

“Will you listen to me, Mace?”

Hackman said, “What’s to listen? You heard the man.”

“I want no lip from you, George.”

Hackman grinned at Villiers. “Mace, don’t give it another thought. He just likes to go on record with a few complaints. He’s a smart Jew-he’ll get it done.” Then, seeing the sudden shift of Isher’s expression, he said hastily, “What I meant to say, Sidney-”

Isher snapped, “You don’t need an interpreter. You made yourself clear the first time.”

“For God’s sake, I was only-”

“All right, shut up, both of you,” Villiers said, without raising his voice.

Isher was on his feet. “I’ll need the information on that insurance company.”

“Tod Sanders has it down in the car.”

“All right. You’ll call me and let me know how it went with Mrs. Hastings.” Without further talk, Isher left the office.

When the door closed, George Hackman chuckled. “Time you’re through, you’ll be able to drive your Cadillac right through Melbard’s board of directors. Christ, I don’t know how you do it. You’ve got a thousand-volt charge keeps you running, I swear-you’re a thirty-six-hour-a-day man. Nobody keeps up with you, do they? Watch out galloping senility don’t catch up with you by the time you’re forty.”

Villiers watched while Hackman went to the door, opened it, and looked out, then closed it and went back to his desk, saying, “He’s a sensitive son of a bitch, ain’t he? What the hell did I say that got him up on his high horse?”

“It wasn’t what you said. It was the way you said it.”

“Christ, you’d think I was anti-Semitic or something. Thin-skinned bastard.”

“George,” Villiers muttered, “I couldn’t possibly care less. Don’t parade your wounds in front of me, it’s a matter of no interest. Let’s get down to cases-you were supposed to have some private detectives’ reports for me.”

Hackman tilted the cigar in his teeth. “That’s all set. Hell, it’s open and shut-the cat’s in the bag, and the bag’s already on its way to the river.”

“Quit bragging and spell it out.”

Hackman halved his smile. “All right. Your boy’s a kid named Steve Wyatt, one of the portfolio managers over at Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers. You wanted a man with a respectable name who could be controlled. He’s it. Young and fast, and he plays pretty loose. He’s what you might call a high-society black sheep-if your name’s Wyatt it means you can hobnob with Phippses and Cabots, it’s a wealth-symbol name, but Wyatt’s father was a klutz who spent the whole damned family fortune, or otherwise separated himself from it. Mostly in the twenty-nine crash, of course, but it had help from him. The Wyatt kid’s got the name but not the substance-he’s out to regain the family’s lost wealth any way he can, so he can resume his proper place in the scheme of things and mingle with the kind of people he thinks he deserves to mingle with. He’s got most of the credentials for it-fancy prep school and a Yale degree, you’ll find it all in the file.”

Hackman opened a desk drawer, withdrew a folder, and pushed it across the desk. Villiers reached for it. “I’ve got no use for Yale men.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They’ve got no sand. Will you go on?”

“Okay. I went into this in considerable detail after I heard from you last month. I think Wyatt’s the one we want. We looked over quite a few, believe me.”

Villiers leafed through the file, not making any pretext of reading it. “How reliable is this information?”

“Impeccable. Ironclad. I had eight private dicks on it for a month. You’ll get the bill.”

“How did a man with his record get a job with Howard Claiborne?”

"It's all in there. Family connections. Wyatt's mother's related to Claiborne, cousin or something."

With more vehemence than he usually displayed, Villiers said, "I don't trust anybody whose family put him where he is."

"What'd I do, step on a sore bunion? Listen, if you wanted somebody trustworthy, you wouldn't be able to use him. Wasn't the idea for me to find somebody who'd be willing to sell out? What are you worried about? You can buy him, and he'll stay bought-you've got enough in that file to make him jump through hoops."

"All right."

"You want me to interview him, or do you talk to him yourself?"

"I'll talk to him." Villiers looked at his watch. "It's almost four. Get him over here in twenty minutes."

"That may be a little rough-"

Villiers lifted his eyebrows. Hackman swallowed the rest of his statement, swiveled in his chair, and reached for the phone. He spoke into it briefly and hung up. "He probably won't come on such short notice."

"When you get him on the line, I'll talk." Villiers sat back and opened the file folder. "Then I'll want a private office where I can study this before he gets here."

"I'll fix something up." The phone buzzed; Hackman grunted into it, pushed a button, and said, "Wyatt? This is George Hackman of Hackman and Greene-that's right. Can you hold on one second?"

Hackman cupped his hand over the mouthpiece and nodded. Villiers got up and reached across the desk for the phone.

"Wyatt? My name's Mason Villiers, possibly you've heard of me."

"Sure. Nice to talk to you." The voice was young, well modulated, with quick delivery and a slight snappish arrogance.

Villiers said, "There's a matter I'd like to discuss with you that may be to the advantage of both of us."

"Me? Are you sure you've got the right boy, Mr. Villiers?"

"Quite sure. I'm at Hackman's office, you know where it is. Be here in twenty minutes."

"Well," Wyatt's voice said, and after a beat added, "it's kind of rough right now-I've got an appointment."

"Break it."

"I really can't-"

Villiers cut him off. "Among the items I want to discuss with you is a woman named Sylvia."

There was a long silence, at the end of which Steve Wyatt said in a different voice, "I'll remember this, Villiers."

"I'll see that you do. Be here in twenty minutes." Villiers handed the phone back to Hackman, who hung up, his face twisting up in spasms of soundless laughter.

Hackman said, "He'll be here, just as sure as there's a hole in his ass." It was wasted on Villiers, who had gone back to reading the file. Hackman said less firmly, "Well, then, uh-suppose I leave you here to read that? I'll be out front." When Villiers didn't respond, he left.

At six minutes past four the door opened and Hackman admitted the young man to the office.

Villiers looked up without hurry. The young man stood motionless just inside the door. He was handsome in a tennis-bum fashion-thin nostrils, large clever eyes, sandy hair brushed to one side, shaggy but carefully groomed sideburns and hair fluffing out fashionably over the back of his suit collar. He had a long, spare, sinewy body which looked neat in a lean dark suit, deep blue shirt, and modishly wide blue tie. Roman-coin cufflinks and soft expensive shoes. The suit, Villiers guessed, was a Dunhill-maybe five hundred dollars.

Villiers did not rise; Steve Wyatt did not offer to shake hands. He slid his cool glance past George Hackman and brought it to rest on Villiers. Villiers' hard eyes penetrated him, sizing him up. "All right, you've had your look. I'm Villiers. Sit down."

Steve Wyatt settled into a chair beyond the corner of Hackman's desk. "I'm listening."

Villiers opened the folder. "You know who I am and what I do. I'm-"

"What's that?" Wyatt interjected. "The story of your life?"

"Not mine. Yours."

Wyatt snorted.

George Hackman said, "Think again, boy. We've investigated you right down to the price you pay for pants and the brand of gin you drink and the number of women you balled in nineteen-sixty-two."

Wyatt bridled. "What is this? Some sort of blackmail? You've come to the wrong store to make that kind of buy. I'm not rich."

Villiers shook his head. "George, suppose you go outside."

"But I-"

"It'll be better if there are no witnesses to this conversation. Better for me and better for Wyatt."

"Oh-all right. I get you." Hackman got out of his swivel chair and went.

When the door closed Steve Wyatt lifted a flat cigarette case from his inside pocket, selected a cigarette, and lit it in the manner of an actor. Squinting through the smoke, he said, "What's this all about?"

Villiers closed the file and set, it down beside his chair. "You're twenty-eight years old, not married, no close surviving family except your mother, Fran Wyckliffe Wyatt. You-"

"Why tell me what I already know?"

"To convince you I'm not bluffing. You went to the right schools as a child, the right summer camps, the right birthday parties and dancing classes and tennis lessons and ski resorts. You marched with the Knickerbocker Greys; you graduated with gentlemanly marks from Hotchkiss and Yale, where you made Skull and Bones, and in nineteen-sixty-four you made a good showing in the Bermuda Cup Race sailing a boat that belonged to a second cousin of your mother's. You're a fair shot with a skeet gun, a good horseman and beagler, and a fair if casual hand with a tennis racket. You're a good swimmer. You can hold up your end of a conversation, whether it's opera, pop art, stock market, or who's who. It's only natural, because you come from a family that represents the luster of aged vintage money, if not the money itself. You're poor, and your mother is poor. You've always been a hanger-on, living off relatives. When-"

"All right, all right. You said you wanted to talk to me about someone named Sylvia. I don't know any Sylvia."

Villiers shook his head with a mild grimace. "That won't do, and you know it."

“I tell you, the only Sylvia I ever heard of was Sylvia Ashton Warner, and I never met her. Sylvia Sidney, maybe? I never met her either.” Wyatt had a glittering smile and a quick glib-ness. His accent was the kind of maloccluded patois spoken by some of the upper crust who had obviously been taught as children to speak with pencils clenched in their teeth.

Villiers said, “If the name meant nothing to you, you wouldn’t have hurried over here. Forget it, you’ll only waste both our time by stalling.”

“I tell you I-”

“Sylvia Hunter, now deceased, was the alcoholic wife of a real-estate financier named Farris P. Hunter. Her life was a textbook history of notoriety and divorces punctuated by psychoanalysis, tranquilizers, and a parade of gigolos, of whom you were the last.”

Wyatt’s eyes were bright with venom. He spoke without bothering to pry his lips apart, “You fucking bastard.”

The phrase was, in a sense, a literal description of Mason Villiers. He didn’t respond to it. What he said was, “I’ll finish this, and then you can get the wisecracks off your chest. When you graduated from Yale you spent two years drifting the international watering places, worming your way into jet-set cliques as a professional guest, bed partner, and mascot with your brassy line of patter and your well-developed seductive talents. You cut a swath with eight or nine society wives and too many unmarried girls to count-I have a sampling of names and dates here if you want them, but it’s not necessary right now-incidentally, if you’ve got a microphone on you, you’ll find this conversation has been jammed to jibberish.”

“I’m not wired for sound,” Wyatt growled. “Go on-you’re doing the talking.”

“You met Sylvia Hunter in nineteen-sixty-four, in Biarritz. You ripened the acquaintance in sixty-five, when you made it your business to appear in Palm Beach at a time when Mrs. Hunter and her daughter were there but Farris Hunter was wintering in New York to take care of his business affairs. The daughter was seventeen, the product of one of Sylvia Hunter’s earlier marriages. Mrs. Hunter was forty-two at that time, plenty attractive from these photographs, in spite of the punishment she gave herself.”

“You had the draft board on your tail at the time, but Mrs. Hunter introduced you to a doctor who told you what drugs to take before your draft physical, so you were classified 4-F and didn’t serve. By this time, of course, you were already living on forgery-you wrote a lot of bad paper against the checking accounts of various people who couldn’t afford to expose you because they couldn’t afford scandals. A bit sordid for a Wyatt, you must admit. I’ve got photocopies of some of the canceled checks here with your forged signatures on them.”

Wyatt jerked violently. The back of his hand struck his cigarette, showering sparks over his pants. He brushed them awkwardly and straightened up, trying to smile; the effect was tremble-lipped, white, ghastly.

“To go on. You ingratiated yourself with Sylvia Hunter, and in the absence of Farris Hunter, you moved into their Palm Beach estate, living ostensibly in a guest house, but actually, of course, sleeping with Mrs. Hunter. But Mrs. Hunter’s daughter was underfoot all the time-Amy. You seduced the girl, of course. Amy was-is-a careless pretty blond who grew up with several stepfathers in seasonal homes in New York, Palm Beach, and the Adirondacks, with the usual visits to Riviera spas. She hated her mother. When you seduced

her, she taunted her mother by revealing that she was taking you away from her mother. It was too much for Sylvia. She died of what the doctor friend called heart problems caused by an accidental overdose of reducing pills. The fact is, Mrs. Hunter didn't take reducing pills, she didn't need to. Was Mrs. Hunter so enraged by the way you let her daughter capture your attentions that she threatened to throw you out and expose you? And when she threatened you with exposure, did you kill her to keep her quiet? Probably not-and anyhow, I doubt anybody could prove premeditated murder at this late date. But the doctor who signed the false death certificate can be reached, and there's enough circumstantial evidence lying around to put you in a bad fix if anybody decides to resurrect the case. Any comment?"

Wyatt's crooked smile slipped. "You're asking all the questions, and you're answering them. What am I supposed to say?"

"I'll go on, then. Mrs. Hunter died. You must have been sick of the kept-man role by then anyway-you could live in style, but you'd never accumulate the fortune you wanted, not even by forgery and blackmail. You've always wanted to restore the family fortune."

Wyatt snorted.

Villiers picked up the folder and turned pages. "In April of nineteen-sixty-seven you persuaded Howard Claiborne, through your mother, to recommend you for an executive training program in a Wall Street firm, not Claiborne's firm. You spent a year as a trainee, and with your brains and character you were well qualified to become a stock-market swindler. You-"

"You sound like you're describing yourself."

"No. I've never been a cheap swindler. One thing I learned early-if you're going to take the risk, you may as well steal big. The penalty's the same either way if you get caught. That's something you'll learn for yourself if you survive long enough."

Wyatt cocked his head; for the first time, his curiosity seemed stimulated.

Villiers said, "Up to now, what I've described is ancient history, for you and for me. I have no interest in it, and I won't use it unless you force me to."

"Force you?"

"Let's pick you up in May of nineteen-sixty-eight, when you went to work in the bullpen at Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers. Your mother had to work hard on Howard Claiborne to persuade him to take you into his organization. He knew some of your background-he had a vague idea of your history. But you promised that was all behind you. You said you'd just been sowing wild oats, and now you were ready to take on adult responsibility. Claiborne swallowed it, provisionally. Not because he wanted to, but because your mother begged him to."

"Within a year, always keeping your books scrupulously clean, you were made an account executive, and you-"

"Account executive," Wyatt barked. "A two-dollar name for a ten-cent job. Salesman, that's all I was."

"With your ambition, I suppose it was menial. It would have been for me. But it was a leg up, and you used it. You got your chance late last year, didn't you? You finally persuaded Claiborne to give you a crack at one of his mutual funds. He must have had misgivings, and you must have had your mother bend his ear quite a bit. But finally he let you take over the portfolio of the Wakeman

Fund. You started carefully, but it appears it wasn't long before you were manipulating it like a high-wire juggler."

"Crap. Prove it."

"Do you think I can't? You committed the portfolio deep in Petrol stock, far deeper than Claiborne would have allowed if he'd still been auditing your performance as closely as he did the first year. You used the portfolio to cover your own operations-you bought and sold in the name of the fund, but the trades went into your own dummy accounts. I suspect you must have embezzled from the fund to get it started, but it's immaterial, and I'm sure you put the money back before anybody could find out. The scheme succeeded spectacularly, and you must have put the money back fast-you didn't want to get caught out by a minor indiscretion like penny-ante embezzlement."

"You were deep in Petrol stock. Through the fund, you borrowed heavily to pay for the stock. You pyramided Petrol on factor margins, paying about ten percent cash and borrowing the rest from the factors. You started with ten thousand shares, which you bought for a hundred thousand dollars. It went up a few points, and you took the profits and applied them against the purchase of more stock on the same factored margin. Now you had approximately twenty times your initial cash investment, all tied up in Petrol stock."

"But then, six months ago, the stock dropped three points, and you had to pony up twenty-five thousand dollars to cover with the factors. You managed to do that, but Petrol kept going down, and you got desperate. You short-sold a block of NCI, hoping to recover there, but NCI went up about three points. So now you had to produce the NCI stocks to cover your short sales, at a higher price."

"Working through Claiborne's bullpen, you started a rumor that Petrol's new Chilean oil field was going to be taken over by the Chilean government. Then you sold ten thousand shares of Petrol short. That worked, didn't it? There was a plunge, and you stepped in to buy the stock at a lower price and cover your previous short sales. It was a little clumsy, but a good trick, and you got away with it-as far as everyone was concerned but me."

Wyatt's cigarette, forgotten in his still hand, had grown a tall ash. He said, "You'd have a hard time proving that story."

"I can prove enough of it to raise serious questions. I can produce at least four witnesses who'll testify they heard the rumor first from you. I can see to it that the factoring banks produce their records of the money you borrowed on big margins to pyramid Petrol stock, and I can prove you were selling Petrol short at the same time you were spreading the phony rumor about the nationalization of the Chilean oil field. The lawyers call that manipulation and fraud-they take a dim view of it."

"You ought to know," Wyatt growled.

"It'd be pathetically easy to nail you," Villiers said. "All I'd have to do is blow the whistle. In fact, I don't even need to do that. All I need to do is see to it that the information falls into Howard Claiborne's hands. It'll get you fired on the spot-and unless your portfolios are in perfect shape, which I very much doubt, you can't afford to have the slightest whisper right now. If Claiborne fires you, he'll audit your books-and if he finds what I suspect he'll find, he'll have to prosecute you."

Abruptly Wyatt grinned. "You're slick, you know that?"

"I'm glad you're impressed."

"It still doesn't mean I've got anything you want."

"I didn't ask if you're selling," Villiers said. "What I'm telling you is, I'm buying."

"Buying what? You know I'm broke."

"Buying you."

Wyatt nodded. "Of course. What do you want me to do-and what do I get out of it?"

The youth's brashness both irritated and pleased Villiers. He said, "I'll want you to take care of a few chores inside Howard Claiborne's organization."

"Such as?"

"I'll want every piece of confidential information Claiborne has on Heggins Aircraft and certain other stocks. Later on, I'll want you to plant pieces of information in Claiborne's files, and spread a few rumors."

"To affect the market price of some stock?" Wyatt pursed his lips. "You're after big game, aren't you? Suppose I say I'm willing-if there's something in it for me."

"There will be."

"Such as?"

"Don't push your luck," Villiers murmured. "You're outside jail right now on my sufferance."

"I see that. Only I'd be a happier workman if I was sure I'd get adequate pay for the job."

"We'll see."

Wyatt studied him with narrowing eyes and said slowly, "I can compile a dossier on you too, you know."

It made Villiers smile. "Go ahead and try."

"You think I can't?"

"When you get a little older, you'll learn how to cover your tracks."

"You must have left a few tracks when you were young, before you had experience."

"I had experience from the day I was born," Villiers murmured. "The difference between you and me is, you were born broke, but I was born poor. There's a hell of a difference, even though you'll probably never be able to distinguish it. Hell, I was peddling the streets of Chicago when I was eight years old. I state this as advice, not threat-don't bother trying to dig into my past. You'd be wasting your time."

"Maybe," Wyatt said, making his face judicious and noncommittal. "In the meantime, you want everything I can get on Heggins Aircraft, is that it? I'll have to figure out a way to get at it-it's not in my department. Any suggestions?"

"You'll think of something."

"What if I don't? What if I can't bring it off?"

"I don't think I have to spell it out, do I? Let's not get tedious."

Steve Wyatt swallowed. "All right. I've never tried spying before-maybe it'll be amusing."

"I'm sure it will," Villiers muttered. "Now, this next is between you and me, and if it goes any further, I'll have your head in a basket, understand that. Heggins Aircraft isn't your main objective. What you're really going to look for is confidential information on Northeast Consolidated Industries. Everything there

is-You'll have to get into Claiborne's private confidential files. I particularly need to have anything you can get on Elliot Judd."

"Jesus. You want a lot."

"With parsley," Villiers agreed.

"Do you mean personal items on Judd?"

"Anything. His private holdings, his politics, the state of his health."

"You think he's not well?"

"Did I say that?"

"It rings a bell," Wyatt said. "He's been hidden away on that Arizona ranch for almost a year. He's about as accessible as Howard Hughes. I may not come up with much."

"Howard Claiborne's his broker. He probably knows more about Elliot Judd than Judd's doctor knows. It will be in Claiborne's files."

"Those files are locked up, damn it."

"Do you think I'd have gone to all this trouble to nail you down if Claiborne's files were out in the open like merchandise on a dimestore counter?"

"All right-all right. You've made your point."

"I'm glad you think so," Villiers muttered. Without stirring in his chair, he closed his eyes and said, "You can go."

"How do I get in touch with you?"

"Through Hackman."

"How much does he know about this?"

"Best for you to assume he knows absolutely nothing about it. You'll make appointments with me through Hackman. Other than that, you'll tell him nothing. You may get instructions from me through him from time to time. If so, don't argue with him, because he'll only be delivering messages."

"I understand," Wyatt said, and got up. Glancing up at him, Villiers saw he had already gained his resilient composure. Wyatt grinned impudently. "So long." And left the office.

Villiers picked up the file of investigators' reports and folded it shut.

Chapter 6

Steve Wyatt.

Wyatt emerged from the office with a pulse pounding in his throat, walked forward through the corridor, and saw George Hackman in the front reception room. Hackman stood close behind the receptionist's chair, leaning forward to read something on her desk, his left forearm balanced casually across her shoulder, fingers trailing one firm high breast. When Wyatt came in sight, Hackman removed his hand quickly, and the girl gave him a saucy upward look-one lifted eyebrow and a smirking upturn of one lip corner.

Wyatt strode toward the door, but Hackman came around the desk to intercept him. Hackman beamed and put a thick arm across his shoulders to walk him to the door, talking expansively. "Glad you've joined our team, kid."

"Sure. Welcome aboard, Ishmael." Wyatt smiled synthetically.

At the door Hackman turned him with hand pressure. "Hold up a minute."

"I've got to get back to the office before closing time."

"This'll just take a sec. Stay put." Hackman went back to the desk and rummaged through a drawer until he found a Xeroxed sheet of paper. He brought it back to the door. "Here. Long as you're joining up, be a good idea for us to get to know each other. My wife and I are throwing a little party tonight, nine o'clock. I ran off this little map to show folks how to get to our place from Thornwood. You know Thornwood?"

"No."

"You go up the Saw Mill Parkway to-hell, have you got a car?"

"Certainly."

"Fine, fine. Otherwise I could send somebody to pick you up at the station. Anyway, all you do is drive up the Saw Mill to Hawthorne Circle, keep going on the Saw Mill past the Circle, and it's the first exit. Take a right and go across the railroad tracks, and you're on the main drag, this street here." He planted a stubby finger on the map. "From there, follow the map. Look, it's all sociable, bring your girl, okay? See you tonight?"

Wyatt's shrewd eyes lifted to Hackman's florid face. "Actually," he began, but then he hesitated and pursed his lips. "I may be able to come. I'll let you know later."

Hackman clapped him on the shoulder. "Great, kid-great. You take care, now." He grinned affably.

Wyatt left without making an answer. He came out of the building into sweltering heat and hurried the two blocks to the baroque building at 42 Wall Street, which housed a number of distinguished brokerage firms and two investment-banking partnerships, of which one was Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers, occuping the seventh and eighth floors. Wyatt went into the feudal-hall lobby and crossed the echoing marble, hurrying.

At the eighth floor the elevator doors slid open with a soft, almost soundless scrape. The hallway was wide and carpeted, broken at intervals by wide, double, carved oak doors. He looked at his watch and was surprised that it was only ten till five. He entered the bullpen by the side door, to attract less attention; coming into the big room by way of carbon-paper-filing-and-clerical country, he tightened his lips and hurried on past rows and rows of desks toward his own, near the head of the room.

The huge bullpen was a picture full of restive motion. Squads of long-haired young men bustled in and out. Scores of men at scarred enormous old desks, arranged in neat rows like military ranks, spoke into telephones or dictated to stenographers, keeping the wheels rolling within the thousands of stock positions that Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers maintained on its books. Claiborne's empire was an investment bank, a brokerage, and a specialist firm all at once. It held four New York Stock Exchange seats, three American Exchange seats, and made markets in twenty-eight major stocks.

Approaching his desk, Wyatt passed the open door of the War Office, the walls of which were papered with graphs on which were plotted the movements of various stocks, watched by youthful analysts who during Exchange hours stood near telephones which were wired directly to a computer bank in Jersey City.

Progress through the ranks had moved Steve Wyatt up from the seventh floor a year ago; since then his desk position had been switched three times-each time closer to the head of the room. As portfolio manager for the Wakeman Fund, a closed-end mutual fund, he now rated a desk less than twenty feet

from the splendid dark-oak door of the executive sanctum, inhabited by the old man himself: Howard Claiborne, descendant of merchant princes, Wall Street patrician, gentleman of glacial elegance honed by ancient habit, representing the quiet wealth of old money, the image of grace and comfort, well-worn elegance, and mellow tone.

Wyatt rolled his desk swivel chair back on its casters to sit down and turned to speak to the blond young man at the next desk.

"Anything come up?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle." The blond man gave him a brash grin. "I put a few notes on your desk."

"Thanks for covering for me, Jimmy. It was important."

"Sure-what was her name?"

Wyatt waved a hand and smiled. "How's the Yankee Croesus? Good mood or bad?"

"Good, today. I took your report on Motors in to him, and he liked it. I heard him grunt four times while he was reading it."

"Four times?"

"Four times. Indeed. You did a hell of a job." Jimmy grinned at him.

"Did that seem to surprise him?"

"God, no. The last time anything gave the old man a surprise was when Truman beat Dewey. That's nothing-old man Bierce told me the last time Claiborne smiled was the day they repealed the Volstead Act. But he liked your report, even if he didn't crack a smile, and that's saying something, since it came from a man whose guiding principle is 'No.'"

Wyatt grinned and nodded, and watched Jimmy get up to walk over to the railing that surrounded the secretary's desk just outside the door of Claiborne's office. Jimmy De Angelo was a slim, blond, northern Italian youth with the fresh open innocence of a Midwestern college sophomore; he was inoffensive and eager to be helpful. Wyatt watched him go over to the railing to speak with the girl at the desk there. She was Howard Claiborne's private secretary, but in the feudal setup of Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers even a private secretary didn't rate a room of her own; her status was indicated only by the oak railing that separated her desk from the bullpen. She was a Polish girl-Anne Goralski. A small girl, dark and pretty. Smooth Indian-black hair gracefully surrounded her olive face. Jimmy De Angelo had been dating her casually for a few weeks.

She was smiling up at Jimmy while he talked; but then her eyes slid past Jimmy and came to rest on Wyatt. He let his eyelids droop when he smiled at her. She lifted her eyes to reply to something Jimmy De Angelo said; De Angelo turned, shaking his head, to come back to his desk, and the girl returned her glance to Wyatt and suddenly gave him a blinding smile. It was lovely and brilliant. Her teeth were bright, she looked happy and flirtatious.

De Angelo sat down, glum, and turned his back to make a phone call. Wyatt propped one elbow on his desk and looked past De Angelo's shoulder at the girl. She had gone back to her work. The thought which had edged into his mind in Hackman's office was still there: she was Howard Claiborne's private secretary.

Dimly he heard De Angelo, talking on the phone: "It's quoted forty-five to forty-six bid and asked, CTM… Well, I know, but Gulfstream Investments sold a big block, you know." Wyatt leaned back in his swivel chair, his eyes closing down to slits, thinking.

Promptly at five o'clock, Howard Claiborne emerged from his cork-lined office and marched into the bullpen rather like a Buckingham Palace guard. Claiborne had nostrils like a horse; he carried his head high. He wore a carnation in his buttonhole and looked as dignified as a penguin.

The old man's appearance always had a disintegrating effect on conversation. The muted bedlam of the bullpen subsided to a low rumble, soft voices speaking into telephones. Claiborne stopped at Anne Goralski's desk to say a few words and then came forward, dropping a remark here and there-each of his words was received as attentively as a ransom note. He had a dignified core of blue ice; he carried around him an aura of melancholy antique solitude, indifference to trivialities-a gentleman of privilege with a shrewd, skilled intellect. He was the heir to one of the great fortunes, but in spite of that, he had, according to the values of his generation, chosen to start out as a page boy and runner for the family bank firm.

He stopped by Steve Wyatt's desk. "You did a satisfactory job on the Motors report."

"Thank you, sir."

Claiborne nodded and moved on-the evening ritual. From here he would go directly to the Wall Street heliport, where his private copter would pick him up and whisk him to his estate on Fishers Island.

When the dapper, unbent old figure had disappeared into the corridor, the bullpen erupted. Typewriters were tilted back into their desks, and the steno girls gathered together to leave in a twittering knot. The men shoved papers into briefcases, straightened up their desk tops, and went out by ones and twos. Wyatt sat back, relaxed, his arrogant high-bred face sleepy, watching bemusedly while Jimmy De Angelo made his preparations for leaving, and then, instead of heading for the hall, went to the secretary's railing, where Anne Goralski was repairing her eye shadow with the aid of her compact. De Angelo spoke; the girl shook her head; De Angelo shrugged angrily.

De Angelo came past Wyatt's desk with a downturned mouth and joined the exodus. Wyatt stayed put. The huge arena was almost empty when he left his desk and went toward the girl's little fenced-in enclosure. She was busy liberating a little sweetheart rose from the vase on her desk and pinning it to her dress. When she looked up at him with her warm brown eyes, he said, "I just wanted to tell you something."

"Yes?"

He smiled at her. "You light up the whole room."

It was a direct attack, but it didn't put her off; it amused her. She had put the telephone receiver on her shoulder, head tilted against it to free her hands, and now she shushed him with a gesture and spoke softly into the phone. "Yes, Mr. Bierce." She hung up and got out of her chair. She went through the little gate and said, "I'll be back immediately-I've got to hear the rest of this, it must be good." Wrinkling her nose at him, she disappeared into the executive offices.

Glancing impatiently across the empty bullpen, Wyatt lit a cigarette and waited.

She was true to her word. Within less than sixty seconds she reappeared. She had good breasts and a provocatively outflaring rump; she was animated and vibrant-and, he thought, ready to be aroused by gentle, easy masculinity.

She settled her nice round little ass in the chair, not taking her eyes off him. "Now, then, sir."

"Don't call me sir," he told her. "'My prince,' if you like."

She wet her lips with the sharp pink tip of her tongue and said, "You were saying, my prince?"

"To begin with, I don't mean to tread on anyone's toes."

"Whose, for instance? Mine?"

"De Angelo's."

She only grinned at him. "Tell me, do you always talk with your teeth together?"

"That's breeding." He glanced at the door and said, "A stock-broker with a reputation as the wildest party thrower in West-chester County has invited me to a bash at his suburban bungalow tonight, only I have a terrible problem."

"And?"

"The invitation is for two," he said, and turned his hands over. "You see how it is. Mr. Hackman was absolutely insistent that I bring with me the most beautiful young lady of my acquaintance. Of course, you are the most beautiful young lady of my acquaintance, and in order to meet the requirement, I would have to bring you. However, since we've hardly exchanged fifty words in three months, I don't hold out much hope of meeting the requirement. That's my problem."

"It sounds like a terrible problem," she agreed. "Are you asking me to help you solve it, sir?"

"I certainly am," he said eagerly. "I'm so glad you understand."

"Yes, indeed," she replied.

"What I'm doing," he said, "is inviting you to dinner, say, at Armand's, and then to Mr. Hackman's party. I have a car, so it will be no trouble getting you home afterward, unless-"

"Unless I happen to live in some ungodly place like Brooklyn? I'm afraid I do."

"You wouldn't put me on!"

She shook her head gravely. "Brooklyn," she said, drawing her lips back and pronouncing it with a conspiratorial leer. Then, with her face screwed up brokenheartedly, she whispered, "You see, that's my terrible problem. You can't imagine how many men have broken dates with me as soon as they found out I lived in Siberia. So I'm being very honest with you and giving you this chance to withdraw gracefully."

"I'll risk it," he said staunchly. "Neither fire nor flood nor sleet nor Brooklyn streets could stay me from making my appointed rounds with the most beautiful young lady of my acquaintance on my arm."

He saw the lift of her breath; she smiled. "Honest to God, I thought you'd never ask me."

Steve Wyatt took her arm like a true gentleman and walked her out.

Chapter 7

Russell Hastings.

Russ Hastings sat at the curve of the bar pushing his ice cubes around with a swizzle stick, looked at his watch and wondered if she had decided to stand him up-she was twenty-five minutes late now. Waiting laid a frost on his

nerves, and he ordered another Scotch. Sunset midtown traffic crawled by outside the window. His fresh drink came and he demolished half of it at a gulp and looked at his watch again, thinking of Carol McCloud. A glamorous woman with a mysterious source of income-his lips made a lopsided wry smile, but as he began to feel the pervasive ease of the whiskey, her image came to him like a photograph printed on the insides of his eyelids.

When he looked up toward the door, she was there.

He gave a start and went to her. She smiled a little and said, "I'm sorry. I hope you didn't think I'd forgotten. The phone rang just as I was leaving-someone I had a hard time getting rid of."

They waited by the door until the captain took them in tow and guided them to a small table. She wore a sexy black dress, sleeveless and cut low beneath lovely arms and shoulders. She moved with grace and pride.

They were seated and a waiter hovered until they ordered drinks. There was small talk, the awkward maneuverings of strangers-the traffic, the heat, the elections. Her voice had a resonant low smoky quality, and when Hastings remarked on it the girl dipped her head with an inturned smile-her hair swung forward, swaying with silken weight. She said with a small laugh of admission, "I spent a good many boring hours at home with a tape recorder correcting my voice level. That was a few years ago-you wouldn't have recognized the old Carol McCloud. I had a God-awful twang."

When he responded, she said, "That's a nice laugh." Her eyes smiled at him over the rim of her martini glass.

He tipped glasses with her. "To a long and happy life."

"By all means," she replied, with an inverted twist to her tone. It puzzled him, and he said, "What sort of twang was it? Texas?"

"Kentucky."

"No kidding."

She laughed. "You know-where they have pretty horses and fast women. I'm a refugee from a one-drugstore town in the back hills."

"In that case," he announced, "you certainly have got no right to look so beautiful."

She only shook her head, giving him the same amused look she had given him at her apartment this afternoon. She said, "Some men are afraid of beautiful women." But when that remark only elicited his amiable smile, she laughed again. "Was that a trite old saw, or did I make it up?"

She seemed fully at ease. He couldn't tell if she was flirting with him, and for the moment it didn't matter: it suited him well enough merely to look at her. Her only jewelry was a huge amethyst clip set in gold. Her elegance was all in her luxurious simplicity. She had the kind of firm-muscled, high-boned beauty that wouldn't fade.

They smoked and drank and ordered dinner. After a stretch of silence, he said, "I suppose we could play the old game of who do you know that I know."

Her eyes widened a little, and she pursed her lips. "I don't think so."

"No? You keep taking me by surprise."

"I was born this afternoon when you met me. No past, no associations-let's just leave it that way."

"Now you're really making me curious."

She made no answer of any kind. A waiter took away the ashtray and replaced it with a clean one. Carol said, “You look older in this light than you did this afternoon. You’ve got a touch of snow around your temples.”

He nodded. “My gray hair’s a little premature, but I prefer it to no hair at all. Early gray runs in my family.”

“It must be nice to know things like that.”

“Come again?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Only, you haven’t volunteered much about yourself.”

“Not much to volunteer.”

“Now you’re being demure,” she said. “It doesn’t suit you. You do interest me, you know-you caught me off guard this afternoon and I pegged you all wrong.”

“I know. You said you took me for a-And then you stopped. Took me for a what?”

“It doesn’t matter, does it? I jumped to conclusions, which I don’t ordinarily do. But you didn’t seem to fit into the image you were trying to create for yourself. I mean, you just don’t match the ink-stained bureaucratic hack picture, the gray-faced civil-service type tangled in the typical government delirium of red tape. You’re too-I hate the word, it’s so damned emasculating, but you’re too sensitive. That’s what intrigued me.”

His lips slowly twitched into a little smile. “I can’t tell if you’re flattering me or insulting me. The truth isn’t nearly as mysterious as you seem to think. I’m a lawyer, I used to work for a politician named Speed, and when he died I had to find a job, so now I’m with the SEC.”

“Jim Speed?”

“Did you know him?”

“I knew him to-to talk to,” she said. “He was a very nice guy, compared to most.”

“Most politicians?”

She opened her mouth, thought better of what she had been about to say, closed it, and nodded.

He said, “As for not fitting the image, what can I say? At least my work’s less dull than sitting in an office drawing up corporate charters.” The dinner came-filets mignon with sauce bearnaise.

He regarded the girl from under lowered brows while she began to eat; he said suddenly, “If I ask you a direct question, will you answer it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who are you?”

“Try another one.”

He said, “We’re skating around each other. I don’t like it much.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, with an edge on her voice.

He matched her tone. “If you didn’t want to know me, you didn’t have to accept my invitation.”

“Can’t we just enjoy each other’s company? Why do we have to pry up rocks and see what’s under them? Have I asked you about your wife?”

It took him aback. He bridled. “I haven’t got a wife.”

“No? You don’t act like a bachelor-you act like a man with a home who doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m divorced,” he said. “A few months ago. Does that satisfy you?”

"If you say so." She was eating; her eyes lifted to meet his. She had his anger up now, and he glared at her; they began to scowl at each other, silently, jaws set.

It went on, a grim contest of wills, until abruptly Carol's eyes began to sparkle. Hastings' nose twitched. Suddenly they were both laughing helplessly.

He said, "Okay-okay. I apologize."

"No, don't. It was my mistake."

"Mistake?"

"I thought I could try something. I can see it's no good."

He said, "Damn it, you confuse me. Every time you open your mouth, I get confused."

"I know. I'm sorry. I've been putting on an act with you. I deserve your anger."

"An act? What kind of act?"

Her hair swung forward as she looked down; it masked her face. She said slowly, with care, "Sometimes it seems an awful waste to think about where you are-it's so much nicer to think about where you could be."

"You're not making sense."

"When you came to my apartment this afternoon you were a total stranger, you didn't know anything at all about me, and I liked you immediately-you seemed so nice and sensitive and so Goddamned normal. I don't meet many normal men in my life and I gave in to the stupid fairy-tale wish that I could just meet a nice normal fellow and have a nice normal dinner with him, no strings attached, no front to keep up, no tired dreary thoughts of what would come after it."

She still hadn't looked up, and he didn't speak; he waited for her to go on, and after a moment she drew breath sharply and said in a very low voice, "It wasn't any good. I should have known that-I should never have come. But you asked me here without suspecting a damned thing and you haven't mentioned a word about that NCI stock you tried to pump me about this afternoon, and I did come, and now, damn it I owe it to you-I've got to level with you."

She tossed her head back and gave him, full face, a twisted smile. "Do you really want hear about me, the sad story of my life?"

"Do you want to tell it?"

"No. But I've got to, or you'll keep phoning me for dates-you'll keep after me until you're satisfied, I can see it in your face, and I'd only have to turn you down. You deserve to know why."

She peered past the bar to the front window of the restaurant. The lobby entrance of a small hotel across the street was lit. "Do you see the two girls in that hotel entrance?"

He turned to look. The girls were skinny and nervous, standing hipshot in the hotel doorway, wearing miniskirts and elaborate tousled hairdos which were probably wigs.

Carol said, "Ladies of Cypriot persuasion. They do a brisk business from lobbies like that one, all over the midtown area. This town is Mecca for thousands of teen-aged girls like that. Out in Queens and New Jersey the pimps recruit them in candy stores by promising them parties and expensive clothes. They're stupid, backward, maybe already hooked on hard stuff, fourteen or fifteen years old. I mean the ones that cruise Times Square and hole up in flophouses on Ninth Avenue. Those two across the street work out of that

hotel. They're a little higher in the social order-they get maybe twenty dollars a trick, which they have to split with bellhops and cops and a pimp. They may gross a hundred and fifty a night, but they only keep sixty of it, and most of that goes to support their habits. They'll snag a chief petty officer on overnight shore leave, or a typewriter repairman whose wife's home pregnant and won't let him touch her, but if you're a district sales manager in town for a meeting, or a doctor at a medical convention, you want something better-a girl you can take to dinner at the Copacabana and show off to the other doctors at an after-hours hotel party. Someone who can make good conversation and look gorgeous and spend the night, provided you're willing to shell out for it."

Hastings' eyes were squinted almost shut; his hands had become still. Carol said wearily, "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I guess."

"Then you do understand what the mystery was all about." She met his eyes and said with brutal directness, "I see no reason not to believe I've been the principal player in more dirty locker-room stories than the farmer's daughter. It's part of my stock in trade-one of the reasons I can charge what I charge is that the johns want to boast about it later. It feeds their egos and their sagging libidos to brag to the boys in the club car that they just blew a stinking great fortune on one of the highest-priced call girls in New York City. A girl who only accepts johns with references, who looks innocent and gives them the illusion of glamour. A girl who shops in the best Fifth Avenue stores and likes paying two hundred dollars instead of nineteen-ninety-nine for a dress. By appointment only."

She sat back and gave him a brassy stare.

He paid the check, drew back Carol's chair, and took her elbow. Outside she disengaged herself and turned to walk away, her back stiff. He gripped her arm, saw her puzzled scowl, and held her beside him while the doorman smiled and nodded and summoned a cab. Hastings tipped him and got in beside her. He gave the driver the address of her hotel, and settled back. There was no conversation. It was a short ride. They got out of the cab and, on the sidewalk, Hastings said, "One question. Do you enjoy it?"

Her smile was twisted.

"My God, you're rude. I suppose now you want to go up with me for a nightcap. No man's got any conscience below the waist."

He took her inside, his mouth making a pinched line across his face like a surgeon's wound. They went up silently in the elevator, and he walked her to her door. When she inserted the key she said coolly, "I'd better warn you, I come damned high."

"Sure," he said. "I guess the fat ugly ones have to be extra generous if they want you."

She opened the door and went inside, not barring his way. She said, "Misunderstood husbands, sweating little-boy men-I thought maybe you were a little different."

"You'd be surprised," he said. Then, shutting the door and going into the big room after her, he said, "What I'd really like is a cup of coffee."

She froze. "What the hell are you up to?"

He shook his head. "I don't honestly know. I was putting on a tough act, the same as you were, but I can't bring it off, can I? The trouble is, once I make up my mind about someone, I resist changing it even when I get proof that I was

wrong. I'll be honest about it-you're outside my experience, but then you're probably outside most men's experience. I have never understood men who were capable of buying sex. I've never been with a whore in my life-frankly, if there wasn't some kind of emotional communication, I doubt I could get it up. So you see, I didn't come up with you for that. I came because I'm intrigued. You tried to shock me right out of your life, and it almost worked-it would have, except I'm curious, and a little stubborn, and it seems to me you can't just label somebody 'prostitute' and let it go at that. When you say the words 'call girl,' that's fact, but it's not truth. I still want to know the truth."

"Truth," she said, "is anything but beautiful. You're babbling like a romantic idiot. Act your age."

"Why not humor me?"

"Oh, damn it, Russ-if you've got any sense at all, you'll walk out that door and never see me again."

He said in a flat voice, "I might-if I knew enough about one thing."

"Oh, God, now we're back to those shares of stock."

"That's right. We are."

"What the hell do you want of me?" She threw up her hands. "They were a gift from an admirer, all right?"

"A two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar gift? Come off it. I could get a subpoena, you know."

She gave him a wicked small grin. "Now you're trying to bluff me."

"Bluff? Don't you believe I have subpoena power?"

"You have the power to subpoena the records of corporations and insiders and control stockholders. I'm none of those. I own nine thousand shares of NCI common voting stock. That's not even one-half of one percent of the outstanding stock. You couldn't convince a federal judge I was an insider by any stretch of the imagination."

He made no immediate reply. Only one lamp was lit. Carol stood highlighted in the center of the carpet, statuesque, shadows deepening the roundnesses of her high breasts, soft thighs, and long legs. He came to her, leaned forward, kissed her mouth. It was a long lover's kiss but her lips were still and stiff under his. She slipped her face away. "Don't be ridiculous-don't get intense, Russ."

He straightened. His face was expressionless. "You're damned beautiful, you know."

"You're forcing me to be cruel," she said. "You asked me if I enjoyed it. The answer is, it's the way I earn my living-it's no more enjoyable than punching a clock, and no less."

"Maybe-maybe. But you're a good liar. How do I know that's true?"

She only gave him the twisted smile he was getting used to.

He said, "You made a mistake, you know, coming back at me with that business about insiders and control stockholders. You were trying to prove it wouldn't be any good for me to try to push you around, but all you did was convince me you're involved in something. Whatever it is, you're in it up to your gorgeous hairline. You've been too well briefed in legal technicalities for an innocent."

She uttered a harsh laugh. "I have never pretended to be an innocent."

"You know exactly what I mean."

"Do I? You'd have to prove that, wouldn't you?"

“Being top-priced in your line may be lucrative, but it’s not that lucrative. Why don’t you tell me who you’re fronting for?”

“Fronting for? I don’t know what you mean.”

“All right,” he said, turning toward the door. “I’ll keep digging until I find out.”

“Please don’t, Russ.”

“It’s my job-what do you expect me to do? You could make it easier for me.”

“I could only get you hurt if I did what you want me to do.”

“Don’t be melodramatic.”

“Melodramatic? You don’t know the kind of people I have to deal with.”

“Do you mean the Mafia?”

“No. That’s not what I mean.”

“I thought they were tied up in-your racket.”

“You don’t have to use that tone on me, Russ. The skin trade doesn’t pay enough to interest the Mafia anymore, they don’t bother to organize it. Oh, they force a lot of kids onto the streets by hooking them on heroin, and it’s true racketeers are like anyone else with money-they can get a girl when they want one. But it isn’t what you think. I’ve got no connection with them.”

“Then stop threatening me. It’s asinine. You’re only throwing raw meat on the floor.”

“No. I’m telling you the truth. I don’t want you to play boy detective in my affairs. There are too many powerful people who can’t afford to have that kind of thing going on.”

“Like the one you fronted for when you bought the stock?”

“Drop it right now, Russ. I’m not kidding.”

He gave her a long, slow scrutiny, as if to fix her image forever in his mind, and suddenly he put a chill smile on his face. “Ciao, then,” he said softly, and turned on his heel and left.

By the time he reached the street he was feeling hung-over and stupid. He lit a cigarette and walked east toward Fifth Avenue, his shoes thudding the pavement; took the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it into the gutter; lifted his shoulders defensively and put his hands in his pockets. He was angry with himself for his stupefying naivete. He had somehow ignored all the signs-they must have been there all along-and plunged ahead, his perceptions corrupted by an innocence so eager it must have been comical to her. It had been a shabby trick; he had made a fool of himself.

He turned downtown on Fifth and walked all the way home. By the time he got there, his thinking had undergone a series of subtle changes. Mounting the steps of the converted brownstone, he found himself remembering her radiance, the range of colors in her voice, the sincerity screened by her mockery. He had opened the gates of his mind to let her flow inside, and now, by the time he entered his apartment, her face and name raged in him like a fever. Incredulous, he sat down on the bed and stared sightlessly, filled with disbelief and a half-hysterical feeling that things had escaped completely from his control.

The more he thought about it, the more outraged he became. He was far too mature for this kind of silly infatuation. It was absurd. She was nothing but a tramp. A prostitute, a cheap Goddamned whore. How many thousands of men had gone through her as if she were a revolving door or a public rest room? It was epic to estimate. He tried to make the dirty degradation of it loom

forbiddingly, tried to fill his mind with loathing and contemptuous disgust. And when that didn't work, he went to his desk and began to write, in a fierce crabbed hand, a list of investigative gambits on which he would get to work first thing in the morning. But when he finished it and leaned back to stretch, he could hear her throaty, mocking laugh and see the twisted smile on her stunning face. He caught himself reaching for the phone to call her; he shouted an oath and slammed the receiver down and sat staring in amazement at his own trembling hands.

Chapter 8

Mason Villiers.

The great yawl of a limousine prowled smoothly and almost without sound at fifty-five miles an hour, surging toward the huge complex of buttressed flying concrete at the Hawthorne interchange. Villiers sat back with his eyes half-shut, too disciplined to reveal even in the dark privacy of the Cadillac his distaste for the idea of having to attend one of George Hackman's parties. Sanders tooled the big machine through town and along a succession of curving drives. Here and there Villiers saw at windows the reflected blue glow of television. Shrubs and trees nudged the big ranch-style houses, each set off on its own acre of ground. Neat lawns, asphalt driveways, Early American mailboxes. Villiers detested the suburbs. For years Isher had tried to persuade him to buy a house, for the tax advantages inherent in ownership. He had bought one, in Grosse Pointe, but he had never set foot inside it. Either you lived on a forty-square-mile estate on your own Mediterranean island or you jetted from hotel suite to hotel suite; there was no point in half-assed compromises.

Tod Sanders found a space for the limousine amid the herd of big cars that browsed in Hackman's crescent driveway. Villiers said, "Stay put and stay awake," and walked up to the porticoed entrance, the slight pinching of his lips the only sign of his displeasure. He could hear the noise of a jammed crowd through the door. When he rang the bell it swung open immediately, and Ginger Hackman greeted him with a cry: "Mace, darling, why is it we never see you?" And added in a lower voice, "I'm so glad to see you, Mace."

There was a lot of noise and restive motion in the smoky room behind her, but she stood blocking the entrance for a moment, smiling at him, an attractive, sad-faced young woman with sulky and sensuous eyes. She was sewed into a low-cut cocktail dress, so tight it revealed her buttocks and pubic bulge and the seam lines of her panties. She licked crumbs from her fingertips and thumb, casual and unselfconscious, frankly staring at him. Finally she sighed. "Well, come on in and face it."

When he squeezed past her through the door, she turned to present her cheek for a ritual kiss of greeting; when he didn't make the appropriate response, she said, "Oh, Mace," and stepped back to shut the door behind him.

The room roared with a thick crowd. Villiers surveyed it with his piercing gray eyes and an unsmiling expression. Ginger came along behind him and

took his arm with a proprietary air. “You ought to give lessons in how to do a dramatic pause,” she told him.

He made no answer. She took him around to make introductions; Villiers went with her, moving with languid grace and his unflappable ability of ignoring any obligation to acknowledge the existence of the people to whom he was introduced. The room was jammed full of women in Pucci prints, men of all ages talking about earnings ratios and defensive market positions, and the titular guest of honor, a red-headed Irish actress, oft-married, a photogenic female who had enjoyed a brief flurry of Hollywood popularity in swashbucklers and Westerns, the results of her pneumatic talent for taking very deep breaths. She smiled at everything she said and everything that was said to her; she seemed to have been programmed to smile incessantly. Ginger brought Villiers along to meet her, and they found Ginger’s husband staring at the lardy cleavage revealed by the actress’s scooped neckline, while a woman was saying to the actress with completely false affection, “Oh, my dear, how divine! That dress is you.”

George Hackman looked up, recognized Villiers, and swarmed all over him in his enthusiasm. Villiers pushed him away gently, and Ginger said, “Don’t be gauche, darling,” calling her husband “darling” with steely emphasis and absenting the r from the word. She stared angrily at him, but Hackman was grinning obliviously; Ginger gripped his sleeve, turned him around, handed him her empty glass, and said, “Darling, why don’t you reach deep down in your heart and get me some ice cubes?” She smiled sweetly.

Hackman shifted his glance from Villiers to his wife and halved his smile. “Imagine you needing ice cubes.” Then, with elephantine cheek, he turned deliberately to stare at the actress’s breasts before he looked up again and said to Villiers, “Come on, let’s get you a drink.”

En route through the crowd, he said, “She says she’s got nothing to wear, and it takes her three Goddamned hours to put it on. Damn glad to see you, Mace. Glad you came.” He elbowed a path to the built-in bar. It was racked with cheap liquor, without apology. Hackman went around behind it and started filling glasses, roaring in his bumptious voice, “Now, this is what you call an income-tax cocktail-two drinks, and you withhold nothing.” He guffawed.

A man by Villier’s elbow said, “Anybody can make a fortune in the market, George, but it takes a genius to mix a good Manhattan.”

“You bet your ass,” Hackman said. “The secret is, you don’t pour the vermouth, you just pretend to pour it.” He emitted another bark of laughter, turned to Villiers, and said in a low, confidential growl, “Why the hell can’t I convince Ginger a pretty secretary can be just as efficient as an ugly one, hey?” He winked elaborately.

Villiers eased back to the end of the bar and stood isolated by his aloofness. For a moment he looked speculatively across the room at the red-haired actress. She was swivel-hipped and large-breasted and impregnated with sensuality; but her hair was bottled, the thick mouth was outlined with a great smear of red like a gunnery target, and her eye makeup seemed to be compounded of shoe polish and reinforced concrete. Villiers lost interest and looked away. A man beside him said in his ear, “Christ, the heat.” Villiers didn’t even look at him.

He caught snatches of talk: “The servant class is dying off a lot faster than the upper class.” “… went up seven points in fourteen days!” “… can’t get the

Goddamned car fixed at all, not a single competent mechanic left in Westchester County."

Hackman handed him a drink. "Wrap yourself around this, old buddy." He looked up and saw his wife approaching and said, "Cheese it, the fuzz," and disappeared into the crowd; Villiers had a last glimpse of him resting a casual, proprietary hand on a girl's rump.

Ginger came up to Villiers and let her shoulders slump. "Christ, Mace."

He gestured with the drink Hackman had handed him. "How high the moon, Ginger?"

"About four Scotches," she said. "Forgive me, I'm a little drunker than usual tonight. I've got a summer cold, which I've been curing with Scotch. God, look at this mess. All these Yo-Yos lying to each other, talking all the time about how much they hate parties. They're all trying to sell something. What ever happened to the gay old times? What ever happened to the real laughs, Mace?"

"If you don't like it, you can divorce him."

"And go back to the chorus line and the runway at Macy's? Thanks a lot."

"You'll suit yourself, I suppose," he said, and put the drink down on the bar, untouched. "I expected to see Colonel Butler here."

"He's here-that little bald character over there talking to the Winslows. Shall I introduce you to him?"

"No. Where's the guest bedroom?"

She gestured with her drink. "Down that hall, the last door on your right."

"Tell Butler I'm there. Don't let anybody else hear you."

She lifted her eyebrows. Villiers moved off toward the hallway. He glanced back once and saw that Ginger was standing very still, looking at him, unblinking. Her lips parted; she followed him with her eyes when he turned away.

He found the guest room and went in, switching on a table lamp and choosing his spot. When knuckles rapped on the door, he had just finished moving the two chairs to new positions in the room. He opened up and said without smiling, "Come on in."

"You're Villiers. I've seen your picture in the Times. I'm Lew Butler." The colonel offered his hand, and Villiers, out of politics, took it; the colonel made a childish contest of strength of it, and Villiers matched him grip for grip until the colonel smiled slightly and relaxed his hold. Villiers indicated a chair and crossed the room to sit down. He had so positioned the chairs that most of the light in the room fell on Colonel Butler's face when he sat down. If Butler was aware of the deliberate placement of furniture, he made no sign of it. He was a trim, short-bodied man with a well-taken-care-of body that bespoke gym workouts and rubdowns; his suit was well cut, conservative, Brooks Brothers; his voice had that curious combination of command abruptness and Southern twang which seemed to be the standard patois of the armed services.

He said, "I had to postpone a trip to British Columbia to hunt bighorns for this. I hope you've got something important to say."

"I have," Villiers said, and added without expression, "I'm glad you could make it."

"I don't much care for this clandestine way of doing things. Always been a straight-from-the-shoulder man, myself."

"You were the one who didn't want anybody to know about this meeting."

The colonel made a quick, impatient gesture, like a short judo chop. “Let’s get at it. What’s on your mind?”

Villiers took his time answering. He was sizing the man up. Butler had manicured fingers and a diamond tiepin. His shoes were $125 Johnston-Murphys. The necktie was silk, possibly Dior. Clearly a man who liked to spend money: if he spent that much on his attire, he probably had ambitions of owning his own private steam yacht to take him on his trophy-hunting safaris. Probably had tens of thousands invested in his hunting wardrobe and armory. All of which suggested a direction of approach. Villiers said, “Heggins Aircraft is a tired old company. You let yourself be tapped to head it because five years ago there were plenty of Pentagon contracts to be had and you liked the sound of the seventy-five-thousand-a-year salary that went with the job. When the contracts started to come in, in fact, you liked it so much you bought into the company with borrowed capital. By last year you’d bought enough stock, mainly through stock options, to control the board of directors as well as the management of the company. You moved up from president to board chairman because you owned fifteen percent of the stock and got the proxies of another forty percent. But you had to borrow money to do it, using your fifteen percent as collateral. All of which makes you control-rich but cash-poor. Let me finish. It strikes me you might welcome someone to come in and take the clunker off your hands, if it would allow you to retire with a pocketful of cash and negotiable securities instead of the mountain of debts you’ve got now. You’ll correct me if I’ve given offense. I’m offering you cash in hand.”

“For control of Heggins?”

“Of course.”

“I own only fifteen percent of it, and that’s in hock. How can I sell the company when I don’t own it?”

A bit of a smile touched Villiers’ mouth for the first time. “You’re not dealing with a country boy now, Colonel. Your pretended innocence is misplaced. As long as you control your own board of directors, you can sell the company to anybody you please. Let’s not waltz, shall we?”

The heavy roll of Butler’s lips compressed. “Why do you want it? You said yourself it’s in bad shape. Not that I agree, but if that’s your opinion I don’t see why you’d be interested in the company.”

“Does it matter?”

Butler stood up, picked up his chair, and carried it forward five feet. It took him out of the direct beam of lamplight. When he sat down he said, “I spent my life as a military man. It’s a straightforward kind of profession, and you learn to tackle things directly, without beating around the bush-at least you do if you’re a good soldier. I’ll be direct with you, Villiers. If you were a blue-chip executive coming to me with this offer, I might not give a tinker’s damn what your reasons were. But one of the first things I learned at West Point was not to go into unknown country without prior reconnaissance. I’ve had you checked out pretty thoroughly.”

“And?”

“I’m not sure you’re the kind of man I’d want to do business with.”

“Then why are you here?” Villiers said, unaroused.

“I didn’t say I’d absolutely refuse to do business with you regardless of circumstances. I’m saying you’re going to have to convince me. Now, why do you want Heggins? To strip it of assets and close it down? Because if that’s

your game, I won't play it. I've got too many friends in the company. I won't be a party to it if you intend to close the company down and lock them out."

"Fine sentiments," Villiers murmured. "But Heggins is going under, whether or not you sell out. What happens to all your good friends in the management when Heggins runs out of defense contracts?"

"We'll limp along. Civil aircraft, an executive jet we're designing, component parts. We've still got markets. I admit we may have to lay off labor, but they're only hired on a contract-term basis anyway. It's the cadre I'm concerned with. Forty or fifty top men."

"If they're good, they won't have any trouble finding positions in other companies."

"You're admitting you'd close the company out if I sold it to you?"

"Nothing of the kind. I'm only trying to make you see that your sentimentality's misplaced. Look here, Colonel, you helped the company once because you had the contacts to get government contracts. That's over. You got passed over for promotion to brigadier general for the same reason you'll let Heggins go under. You haven't got what it takes to ramrod the company into shape. I have. I see a chance to build the company up and make a fortune out of it. If I didn't, I wouldn't offer to buy it. I've insulted you? Good. Let me tell you something, Colonel-you're in a tight place now, your ability to deliver is on the line, and I'm the one who can bail you out. I'm offering you a stock swap with a sound chemical corporation which will give you fifty thousand shares of a rock-hard six-dollar stock in outright exchange for your Heggins shares, on which I'll pay what you owe in your margin account. And I'm offering you options on twenty-five thousand shares of the same chemical stock at fifty cents over the going market, exercisable anytime in the next two years."

"What chemical company?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. If you come into the deal, you'll be informed."

"I'm not a country boy either, you know. I don't sign blank checks. For all I know, you're offering me fifty thousand shares of an on-paper corporation which won't cost you anything to issue but six dollars and ninety-five cents in printing bills." Butler stared at him with fierce challenge.

Villiers' eyelids dropped, covering his thoughts. He said, "I think you're in the wrong game, Colonel. Don't you realize how easily I can cripple you? All I have to do is start selling Heggins stock short to drive the price down. If I start a rumor that your sales are slipping, your sales will slip. Once the price of your Heggins stock drops enough you'll have to come up with more margin, and when you don't they'll sell you out. I'll step in and buy, and you'll be toppled from control without a thing to show for it. I'm offering you a chance to avoid that. I'm offering you cash. I guarantee the stock you'll get in exchange for your Heggins will be worth a minimum of six dollars a share on the open market at the time of the trade. If it's not, I'll make up the difference out of my pocket. Three hundred thousand dollars guaranteed, for your interest in Heggins and your signature on a contract authorizing the merger. Options on more. Now, let's have your decision."

The colonel sat silent and surly, not meeting Villiers' eyes. After a long time he said in a smaller voice than he had used heretofore, "My position in Heggins is worth more than three hundred thousand at the market."

"Nuts. By the time you pay your creditors, you've got less than two hundred thousand equity. Quit sparring, I won't bargain with you. My offer's firm."

"You'll pay the creditors, is that what you're saying?"

"Of course." Yawning, Villiers patted his lips; he knew he had won-he was already beginning to lose interest. Butler searched his face intensely, quarreling with himself in silence, but Villiers' opaque eyes blocked all inquiry, turned the appraisal back, as effectively as if they had been the eyes of a dead man. He had long ago learned not to give anything away with his face.

Butler said finally, aimless and without strength, "How do I know you'll treat my people fairly?"

"You don't. They'll take their chances-we all do."

"You drive a sonofabitching hard bargain."

"I'm not running a charity institution. Your conscience is your own affair-I'm only offering money. If you're worried about your friends, maybe you ought to try to use your influence to get them commissions in the Air Force."

Butler stood up. "I could fight you, you know."

"You could," Villiers agreed.

"I could make it tough for you to get your hands on Heggins."

"No. I'm not that desperate to own it. You put up a fight, and I'll drop out. Then where are you? The company still dies."

"It would give me one hell of a pleasure to spit in your face. I wish I could afford to." Butler turned toward the door. "Let me know when the papers are ready for my signature."

Villiers didn't stir when the colonel walked out. He sat still for several minutes before he got up to replace the chairs on their original sites. He was reaching up under the shade to switch off the lamp when the door opened.

Ginger Hackman said, "Being exclusive, Mace?" She came inside and shut the door behind her. Villiers straightened, unsmiling. She stood just inside the door, slightly slumped, eyelids drooping; her eyes, beautiful and slanted with wary, rancorousirony, were bright and clever, and often wounded-the wisdom of frank cynicism that had come from rebuffed idealism. She said in a voice that seemed more resigned than eager, "I was wondering if you were feeling athletic. You used to, in the middle of a business deal."

"Trouble in paradise so soon, Ginger?"

She smoothed down her skirt with lingering, suggestive hands. "All he wants at home is a mother and housekeeper. He saves all his fun and games for his other girls-his toys."

"There are seventy-five people out there."

Ginger turned the lock. "I'm not worried if you're not."

Villiers smiled a little. Ginger gave him a watchful look that turned playful. "Maybe you'd rather take it up with our Hollywood friend, out there shaking her big bloated boobs all over everybody. Maybe you'd rather climb into her big juicy saddle and score with her?"

"What's the matter?" he said, his voice low and husky.

"I don't know. I guess I'm sore at myself. Wouldn't you be? No, hell no; you wouldn't." She moved forward until he felt the warmth of her legs moving close against him. She uttered a short nervous little gasp when he touched her. Her eyes were open wide; she kissed him with moist warmth and suction, whiskey on her breath. He felt coiling spasms in his groin, his genitals engorging, trying to swell free; her hand slid down his fly to the distended cloth, unzipped him, and reached inside to clutch him. As strength flowed into his hard penis, it came out, rising with eager stiffness into her hand. She stepped away from him

abruptly, presenting her back, and he opened the dress and watched her step out of it. The strapless bra bit into the velvet of her back; he unsnapped it and watched it fall free of her round, brown-tipped breasts as she turned, smiled, slid tawny panties down her long legs, and lay back on the bed. She watched him with heavy-lidded eyes; she was caressing her soft pubic bush. She leaned back, thrusting it toward him. Her knees separated and arched, her thighs twisted, and she presented to him her emerging vaginal slit, the pink lips swelling. “Well?” she said. “Come on!”

Chapter 9

Steve Wyatt.

By the time Steve Wyatt tooled the open-topped XKE Jaguar into George Hackman’s street and squeezed it into a space across the road, the party had sprawled out into the front and back lawns. Wyatt walked around the car to open Anne Goralski’s door. She smiled up at him, twisted her rump to stretch her pert legs to the grass, and let him take her arm. “What a lovely ride.”

He gave her his warmest smile and steered her toward the house, threading knots of people on the lawn. As they approached, he saw Mason Villiers emerge from the front door, saying something to a gorgeous young woman who had a tousled, slightly rumpled look; the woman had a sad smile. Villiers nodded at something she said and came down the two steps, his glance traveling over the crowd. Wyatt knew Villiers had seen him, but he left it to Villiers to make the first sign of recognition, and Villiers went right by without a glance. All right, if that’s the way you want to play it, Wyatt thought, a little surprised to have seen Villiers here at all-the man hadn’t struck him as the partying type. A diminutive chauffeur popped out of a Cadillac limousine and trotted around to open the door for Villiers, who got in without a word to anybody; the limousine slid away, crunching bits of gravel on the asphalt. The sad-faced young woman at the door kept her eyes on it until it disappeared; she turned then and said, “You must be Steve Wyatt. George told me to expect you-I’m Ginger Hackman.”

Wyatt introduced Anne Goralski and let Mrs. Hackman direct him, in an absent, distracted way, toward the bar. He took Anne that way, making small talk in her ear while his alert eyes prowled the place to gauge the party’s pulse. This one was obviously uptight, everybody self-consciously trying to prove what a good time was being had. Grim jocularity, forced festivity, all of it overlaid with sexuality and determined anxiety. Husbands and wives roved the shadows, on the make. A wooden salad bowl on the fireplace mantel brimmed with machine-rolled marijuana sticks, and as Wyatt approached the bar he could hear George Hackman in his hearty bellow complaining about the middle-class difficulty of scoring grass: “Christ, we can’t just walk into an East Village discotheque, they take one look at you and figure you’re fuzz. It’s tough to make a connection. I finally got an in with one of the faggot kids in our building, but the bastard made me come across with forty bucks an ounce for the stuff. Hey, there, Steve, gladdaseeya, boy!” Hackman bounded forward enthusiastically to pump his hand and beam at Anne. “Who’s this?”

Wyatt introduced the girl, privately amused by the way Hackman stripped her naked with his eyes; but when he saw discomfort in her face he steered her to the other end of the bar arid said, “I told you he throws wild parties.”

“Then let’s have fun,” she said, twinkling. She reached for a potato chip and scooped it into a bowl of onion dip.

Soon after, he found she had been separated from him in the shuffle-and George Hackman plowed forward. “Drink, Steve-o?”

“Martini,” Wyatt said, following Anne with his eyes until she disappeared from view. Hackman poured a glass of gin, anointed it with a few drops of vermouth, and passed it across the bar to him; Hackman leaned close and said confidentially, “Women are okay as long as you keep them on generalities. That’s the secret. Never talk to a woman about specifics. See? That’s the secret of successful marriage, kid-you marry them for their charm, not their brains, and you only get yourself in trouble if you let yourself get to arguing with them about tomorrow night’s supper menu or how much she paid for some Goddamn dress. No woman can make any sense about specifics. If you get trapped in that kind of argument, you just can’t win it. So, see, the trick’s to keep it all generalities-if you got to argue with her, argue about the future of the welfare state and the black-power movement and the kids trying to burn down the universities, but never fight about the price of a Goddamn pair of high-fashion shoes.”

Wyatt nodded his head an inch, gave a brief cool, polite smile, and edged away; he heard Hackman say to the man at his elbow, “Now, that’s what I call a dry martini. That kid sure plays it close to the chest, don’t he?”

Steve Wyatt cruised through the house, passing knots of people. On the couch a blonde was sprawled back with her shoes off and her head in the lap of a man, not her husband; the man had his hand casually cupped over the blond’s breast as he spoke to a woman standing beside the couch. He was talking loudly about his divorce.

Wyatt moved on toward the back of the house, searching for Anne. He could see a group in the kitchen and went that way, but found his path blocked by a knot of drunks in the crowded hall; one of them was a middle-aged man with a beard, talking in a strident wail: “… trying their Goddamnedest to grind all their husbands into mincemeat. Carry out the trash, pay the mother-fucking bills, mow the lawn, listen to my complaints, come on we’ll be late, stop yelling at the kids, what’s happened to us, why don’t you love me like you used to, Harry’s a hell of a lot better in bed than you are darling…” There were thunders of laughter; Wyatt squeezed through the crush and made his way out of hearing as quickly as he could.

Coming into the kitchen, he found Anne propped on a step stool with a pale drink in her hand, talking animatedly with an attractive young couple who stood side by side with their hips and shoulders touching and their fingers twined together. When Wyatt made his appearance, Anne gave him a deep, luminous smile. She looked lidded and dreamy-not drunk, but languid and at ease; when she smiled at him, there was nothing held back. She made introductions; he shook hands with the young couple, and for quite a while the foursome made desultory conversation, after which the young man bounced his car keys in his fist and exchanged glances with his girl; he said cheerfully, “Been a large evening,” and took the girl away with him.

People drifted in and out of the kitchen. Wyatt moved close against Anne's side and put his arm around her, fingers against her breast; she tipped her head back to give him an intimate smile, and pressed his hand against her with her inner arm. There was a flurry of activity when a covey of wives entered the kitchen to brew coffee, a sure sign the party was running down. Finally he took Anne toward the front of the house and found that half the guests had left. The living room was littered with cigarette butts and burns on the carpet, and spilled drinks, and someone had vomited into an ashtray and rinsed it imperfectly, leaving a strong smell in the room. Stale cigar butts and half-empty tumblers added to the maculose aura. A man and a woman somewhere in the house were having a bitter shrieking quarrel. He eased Anne past a couple in the front door and walked her out to the car, not bothering to hunt up the host or hostess to say good-bye. When he stopped by the side of the car, Anne snuggled against him. Her head was at his shoulder. Wyatt slid his hand down the front of her dress and stroked her with feather-light fingers. She made a small sound and closed her eyes. He kissed her gently at earlobe, throat, lips, then deeply into her mouth.

He felt cool and detached; it was a campaign well planned. He put her in the sports car, walked around to the driver's seat, and got in; and drove out fast. Going down the Saw Mill Parkway, the wind was in the girl's hair and Wyatt's gently caressing hand was on her thigh. He said idly, "There's a flask in the glove box," and smiled to himself when she took the hint. It was an hour's drive to the city, and he didn't want her drunk, but he did want her to keep the easy glow of soft, uninhibited intimacy. It was almost midnight; he had been with her, almost without interruption, for seven hours. Over drinks before dinner he had been easy with her, bantering and teasing; during dinner he had quietly muted the tone to one of soft, dreamy, candlelight romance. The ride to Hackman's, along the tree-lined parkway, had done its work, and the loose, hearty atmosphere of the party, with its unceasing and singleminded emphasis on sex, had done the rest. He had artfully stimulated her with all the sensory devices of the game-the attentiveness that made her feel exciting and important, the nuances of pose and voice, the attitude of deferential assurance, the seemingly inadvertent touch, the quick smile of shared private amusement at things observed, all designed to create a seductive aura of closeness.

In the elevator going up to his apartment she stood in the circle of his arm with her head thrown back against the front of his shoulder; his hand rubbed her belly and breasts, and she murmured drowsily. He guided her into the frankly sybaritic apartment and flicked a wall switch, which turned on one softly glowing lamp and a stereo tape deck which filled the apartment with the music of soft strings. Anne went through the apartment with him, giving the place a lidded look of approval, and when they stopped in the bedroom, she turned in his arms and looked up and smiled.

He said quietly, "How does a nice girl like you find herself in a place like this?"

She grinned at him. They stood quietly face to face, his hands against her waist and rib cage; he lifted his thumbs and wiggled them against the taut, erect nipples of her breasts.

He murmured, "What would you like to do?"

She only smiled.

He said, "Say the word," and nibbled at her ear.

He felt her shudder.

Anne felt the heavier, faster rhythms of her breathing, the sense of body flush, all the intimate sensations of arousal that had been stirring in her all night. She had wanted this, she had planned it, but now she was afraid.

She had watched him for months, wondering; today, at last, he had made the move. All night she hadn't been able to take her mind off him, his easy athletic grace, his good masculine face. But she had only really known him these few hours, and now, knowing it was the sheer desire to sate body lust that coiled in her, she felt chilled by uncertainty. Was it nothing more than epidermal passion? She was neither a virgin nor a prude; but she put a value on herself, she didn't want it to happen if afterward it would mean nothing at all. Now she had to ask herself at each moment's interval if she should stop or let it continue.

She felt the press of his thighs, the movement of his soft-caressing hands from the back of her neck to her buttocks; she uttered little gasps with every touch of his hands, and she knew if it went beyond here she would not be able to stop it.

He was pulling her against him. He sucked her tongue into his mouth, and she savored the intoxication of sweet wantings. She wanted to be loved; she hated the doubts in her mind that kept trying to push desire away, hated the uncertainty that held pleasure back.

He was slipping her clothes off, her dress and bra. She felt the cups drag free where she was pressed against him; he touched the sudden softness of her naked breasts, massaging the rubbery tips of her nipples with fiery lances of delicious pain. He had shrugged off his jacket; she picked at the buttons of his shirt and pushed fear and doubt into the back of her mind. Craving, excited, trembling, she breathed against his ear, "Yes-oh, yes!" Hurry, please hurry. She wanted to fill up with him. She helped him strip off his clothes; she felt swollen and flushed, short of breath. He took her hand and placed it on his-penis, she thought. Cock, pecker, prick. What the hell. Big son of a bitch. She laughed with an open throat, feeling healthy and girlish. She ran her fingertips along it and felt it grow and throb. The pain in her was exquisite, bursting into flame at the touch of his fingers. She fell back on the bed, spreading her thighs, tugging him down. She felt his great rigid organ touch the twitching moist heat of her, felt it thrust into her alive and throbbing. She thought, in a curiously distant way, All right, then, I'm getting laid-not for the first time, anyway. Isn't that what it's all about? She wanted to suck him in, lock him forever inside her. Her head swirled dizzily. She heard a broken groan in her own throat, and then he was sliding into her white-hot agony, rolling and twisting. The charging, plunging rhythm drove her uncontrollably toward a peak of anguished urgency. They flailed slick together, writhing; she uttered pulsing grunts of ecstasy, rising to a crescendo of heat that grew in her to a scalding high hot wonderful flame that drenched her in sweet anguish, reached height after height, reverberated and echoed through all the halls of her quivering flesh, and at last shattered in an agonizing flash of hot joyous triumph and the slow wonderful draining away of frenzy.

She felt sated, yet still excited. When he lifted himself from her she lay naked and grinned absurdly at him. He held her close against his side, not speaking, softly rubbing her arm. She closed her eyes and felt a slow gentle kind of regret, not unpleasant.

She was smiling softly; she opened her eyes and turned her head on the pillow to look fondly at him.

His face was kind and gentle. He reached out to touch the tip of her nose. “You’re a girl after my own heart.”

“Yes,” she whispered, “I am after your heart, Steve. Be warned of it.”

He picked her up, laughing quietly, and carried her across the room. They showered together, and as his hands rode over her body with soap, as he toweled her gently afterward, she felt the stirrings of desire welling again between her legs. Still damp, they clung together and made love on the bed again; and afterward she said to him in a panting whisper, “I can’t get enough of you-I can’t fill up with you!”

He came awake sometime in the night with the girl, curled against him like a child. He had been dreaming, but he couldn’t remember the dream. He could see her shape faintly in the darkness, the high rounded mound of her hip, the curve of breast and shoulder. She was all right, he thought drowsily. But as he came more clearly awake, he remembered she was Claiborne’s secretary and there was a purpose to all this. He had to have her hooked-he had to make it like a drug she couldn’t stay away from-and so, stirring gently at first, he rubbed her body with his open hands until she awakened. She blinked fuzzily and smiled; she moaned with loosening sensuality-she was easy to arouse. Her nipples came erect before his hands touched them. He brought her to a peak of desire with easy languor, but when at last he penetrated her and began to satisfy her craving need, he battered her roughly, with powerful plunging strength, not cruel but heavy and brutal, and brought her to a pitched screaming climax beyond anything she could have experienced ever before.

Afterward he took her into the shower again and brought her partway to desire again with his hands and his body under the tingling pin spray of water; but he left her unsatisfied this time; he was shaving at the bathroom mirror when she reluctantly went back to the bedroom alone.

He dried his face and splashed on after-shave cologne. He scratched his belly and stood in front of the mirror with his lips peeled back, inspecting his strong, even white teeth.

When he came into the bedroom she was dressed. She wore a look of anxiety and strain. “This is terrible,” she said. “My mother and father-it’s almost five o’clock! I’ve got to run.”

“What for? Can’t you tell them you spent the night at a girl friend’s?”

“You don’t know them-you don’t know my father. I’ve got to go.”

He said, “I’ve got to see you again-and I don’t mean in the office today. I don’t know if this meant anything to you besides a few hours’ fun and kicks, but I-”

“Oh, God, no,” she breathed, her eyes wide and moist. “Steve, this-”

“I’ve got to see you tonight,” he said, putting heavy urgency in his voice. “Darling, I’ve got to have you to keep.”

She swayed against him, turned her face, and spoke with her mouth muffled against his chest. “Oh, yes-yes. I need you, Steve darling.”

All the tired old slick-magazine dialogue, he thought petulantly; he had probably spoken these lines more often than any Hollywood screen actor. “Not half as much as I need you,” he said, making his voice tremble with sincerity, nuzzling her hair.

“I trust you,” she whispered. “Let’s make it forever, Steve darling-I don’t want to spoil it, ever.”

She kept talking, and he began to chafe; he responded automatically-her lines were as easy to parry as a third-rate tennis player's strokes-and finally, to his relief, she drew away from him with her eyes moist and said miserably, "I really have to go."

He headed for his clothes. "I'll drive you."

"No-the subway's much faster, and I have to try to sneak in before they get up. I've got to run, darling-kiss me?"

He gave her a long, lingering kiss that left her pulse pounding visibly in her throat when she backed away, snatched up her handbag, and ran out.

Steve heard the door slam. He walked slowly into the bathroom and grinned at himself in the mirror.

Chapter 10

Russell Hastings.

Wide awake, Russ Hastings lay on his side with his legs scissored like a running man's, listening with dismal resignation to the racket of trucks that thundered up from the street below his window. Oh, God, of all the stupid, asinine hang-ups. He kept having the feeling Carol was just behind him and all he needed to do was look around into her smiling eyes, reach for her hand, and pull her close, hearing her low laugh, feeling her soft warmth. Whore bitch. Garbage trucks, unspeakably ear-splitting, squatted at the curb with their machinery grinding, gears whining, steel cans clanking. The modern urban sound barrage was enough to induce premature hearing loss and sufficient emotional stress to cause ulcers, heart attacks, mental aberrations-a public-health doctor had said so the other day in the Times. Hastings had spent an hour, sometime between two and six, composing in his mind a furiously worded indignant letter to the mayor concerning noise pollution; but as his fantasies folded and blended and blurred, the letter became a plaintive cri de coeur, a compound of sticky sentimentality and desperate outrage, addressed sometimes to Carol and sometimes to Diane.

He rolled over, cursed, flung himself upright, and batted into the bathroom to slam the door and drown out the racket under the shower. When he came out again, with a trace of shaving lather still drying by his ear, the jackhammers had started at the construction job half a block away across the street. His face closed down; he tried to ignore it, pawed through his drawers, and finally ripped open a string-tied bundle of ironed laundry that had sat untouched on the dresser for a week-he had been here for months but had yet to develop a bachelor's efficient tidiness; he still all but lived out of suitcases. It had taken three weeks before he had been able to unpack at all: the divorce had stunned him; for a long time his mind had jumped the orderly straight track of his thinking and wandered through a melancholy mist in which decisions, even small ones, paralyzed him. He had had trouble deciding what dish to select from restaurant menus, choosing which sock to put on first, remembering how to spell familiar simple words. In time he had drawn himself up, got a grip on himself; but it was still uphill, like slogging through molasses-decisions still came hard.

He put a pot of water on to boil and swept the room with a bleak glance. It was undistinguished-convertible couch, dreary coffee table, an old TV, a chair with a ruffled slipcover, anonymous gimcracks on the walls. It revealed no personality, not even that of the fat landlord who had rented the place to him, furnished, for three times its value. Russ Hastings had matured with a highborn indifference to tangible possessions and rarely paid attention to his surroundings. It was a trait Diane had rarely understood-except once, he recalled. Early on in the marriage she had said with her lovely laugh, "Fashions and styles-I know it's all superficial sham, Russ, but I can't help it, I like it." Sometimes she would come home exhausted after a lustful fury of shopping and insist he pay attention while she paraded before him her new clothes or antiques or paintings. Even when he feigned enthusiasm, his want of real interest had always incensed her.

He poured his instant coffee and sat down with it, feeling wrung out and angry because he was still going back over it, beating the dead horse, unable to dismiss her. So much of it kept flooding back every time she came to mind.

He had been so sure of himself. He had stalked her patiently for months, bemused by her determined private ambitions, confident they represented only a stage, convinced she would get tired of it, discard it, submit in the end to his masculine domination. With hindsight it was bitterly easy to see how he had deceived himself every step of the way. The time of decision had been the day she had opened her first art gallery. She had a compulsion, which excluded him, to succeed on her own; it had taken him a long time to realize that much, and still longer to know that only in a bad marriage did one's success mean the other's failure. The more Nuart grew, the more she regarded his accomplishments with weary boredom. She had begun to patronize, then to avoid, until the competitiveness between them became transparent and they separated into their distinct worlds. When they did meet it was with a cool sense of withering estrangement that made them overpolite with each other, hearty with forced cheer in public, straining for hurried smiles, a pair of actors speaking memorized set-piece speeches to outsiders and speaking to each other hardly at all.

Nothing as intimate as sex could remain unaffected by the drying up of their emotional wells. Gradually Diane had discovered a growing fear and distaste for lovemaking. She had suffered it, more and more, with trembling limbs and clenched teeth. She had tried-he had to give her that credit-she had tried with increasing desperation. But finally she had stopped trying. One night she had stood by the bed and slipped out of her robe, looking away, not at him. Without speaking, she settled down on her back and spread her legs out neatly, not disturbing the sheets, looking mindlessly at the ceiling and waiting with a flat, lifeless expression that promised she would resign herself to doing her sweaty functional duty but she could no longer pretend to like any part of it.

Filled with sudden revulsion, he had put his clothes on and walked to the door. Looking back, seeing the pain in her eyes, he had felt viciously glad: it showed, at least, that it was still in his power to hurt her.

Force of habit was stronger than love; they had kept up the outward pretense of marriage for a time. But one day he had stepped into the elevator, and it had hit him, unmistakable, the scent of her perfume. She must have just gone up to the apartment. He had left the elevator at the third floor and walked down the

fire stairs to the lobby, gone to a hotel, and telephoned her. That was how it had ended.

He shrugged into a seersucker jacket and glanced in the mirror; he looked, he thought, like a burned-out reporter, a young-old man with deep creases bracketing his mouth, hair starting to gray, eyes puffy and bloodshot. On his way down to the sidewalk he was thinking of Carol McCloud. My trouble is, I'm just horny, that's all. But he couldn't shake her image. He went along Thirty-fourth Street and had a meager breakfast at a lunch counter; stopped afterward to paw through a sidewalk bin of old books. He found nothing but a layer of dirt on his fingers. Suddenly he turned into the street between two parked cars and hailed a downtown-bound taxi, got in, and gave the driver Saul Cohen's address.

Saul Cohen's office was in a small brown old building of almost colonial vintage that squatted cringing next to one of the tall Wall Street slabs checkered with glass, steel, and concrete-a nondescript new structure of the kind he had once heard Elliot Judd scorn: "I don't intend to be put in a box like that until I'm dead. This city complains of vandals and they're tearing down historic buildings to make room for that!" The new buildings weren't even ugly; they were only boring, as inhuman as digital computers, and as cold.

But Saul Cohen inhabited the overshadowed little building next door. It was a dark, pleasant place, carved and ornamented, with aged woodwork and a brass-cage elevator that took him slowly but comfortably to the third floor. The office was small but homey and elegant-there was an elaborate Tabriz carpet swirling with vivid birds and animals, an Etruscan figurine on a wooden pedestal, and beyond a walnut rail fence with a swinging gate in it, an old man sitting at a huge antique desk in the corner.

Saul was the room's only occupant; the secretary's desk was unoccupied. There were tickers and a Quotron; phone wires were tangled on the old man's cluttered desk.

Saul got up from his chair spryly. "Russ, my boy." When the old man grinned, his eyes wrinkled up until they were almost shut. He walked forward to the rail, held the swing gate open, and shook hands. "How are you? Come and sit-come and sit."

"I was hoping I'd catch you here this early. But if I'm taking up work time-"

"Nonsense. For you I make all the time you want. Sit."

Saul Cohen was a crickety, bookish, gentle little man with a harsh simian face, tangled eyebrows, prominent nose, gray hair cropped close to the little round skull. His voice was rapid, scratchy, impatient. His expression, painted on indelibly, was that of a man who smelled something distasteful; it made his face seem a repository for the anguish of the ages. Hastings had never been able to look at that suffering face without seeing the old man as torment personified.

He took the proffered chair. "I need some wisdom."

"That I don't sell. Only stocks and bonds. I made a couple of good trades last week in your account and your father's. Do you need cash? Is that why you come to me with such a long face? To ask me to sell your investments for cash?"

"Nothing like that."

"I'm happy, then. But wisdom? The wisdom of a learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure: and he that hath little business shall become wise.

Ecclesiasticus, thirty-eight: twenty-four. What can I tell you? I'm a businessman all my life. I'm seventy-six years of age, and I'm still working, only because what else do I know how to do? I never learned the wisdom of spending money, all I can do is play the game here. I own a seat that's fifty years old, I bought it for a few thousand, and now it's worth a small fortune-what can I tell you?"

"You can give me the impossible, Saul. A Wall Street education in one lesson."

The old man smiled gently. He was a Wall Street gadfly, a keen-eyed gnome with a clever mind salted away behind his indulgent cracker-barrel philosophizing. He said, "Instant knowledge. What everybody wants nowadays. Ah, my young friend, you'll never get that outright. But what you can get, if you've got the right brain, is two here and two there, to put together with the two you've already got, to make six. You've gone to work for the Securities and Exchange since I've seen you last."

"That's right. Word gets around, doesn't it?"

"As I said, I keep in touch. Besides, I've known you since you were so young you'd be embarrassed to be reminded. I actually did bounce you on my knee. Naturally I'd be interested to follow your career."

"Such as it is," Hastings said, smiling. "My problem's an odd one. I've picked up vague hints that something may be going on out of sight in the market. But I'm too new to this business to be sure of myself. The problem is-"

The old man held up a hand, palm out, and grinned, full of mischief. "We will wait to hear what the exact problem is. You come to me as a neophyte, and the opportunity to lecture is too great for me to pass up. I will tell you about this Street, and then you will ask your questions." He settled back, steepling his fingers, with a deep breath and a manner that instantly identified him as an in-training long-distance talker. Hastings smiled fondly. Watching Hastings from the pained depths of his eyes, Saul Cohen said, "Do you read Freud? No? You should. Freud observed that Galileo removed the earth from the center of the universe; Darwin removed man's uniqueness, and made him but a link in a chain; and Freud himself removed the illusion that a man is his own master. But most of us still cherish that illusion-and you see evidence of it here in Wall Street. Everybody thinks he can control his own destiny by working out a logical investment policy and making himself a millionaire overnight. They make a mistake, of course-they should read Freud. There's no such thing as a logical man, there's no such thing as a logical investment policy. The market isn't any more logical than the men who make it. It operates out of greed, fear, rumors, hints, intuitions-and for your first lesson I can tell you that selecting investments by throwing darts at a list of stocks is the best method of beating the market. You see?"

Hastings began to smile, but Cohen shook a knobby finger at him. "I meant it seriously, young man-it's quite true. It is a plain bare fact, beyond argument, that more people lose than win in the stock market. If you buy one share of every share listed, across the board, you'll end up losing. To be specific, you'll lose about seven and a half percent on your investment. Because in the end all we do in Wall Street is shift piles of manure from one corner of the barn to another, and we brokers charge a commission for the service of shifting it back and forth."

“But facts like that don’t matter to the public. They see a stock start to shoot up, and they don’t own it, so they get greedy and they buy. Profit fever-they start to think of themselves as manly cannibals in this meat market. The fact is, they’re jackasses, following carrots on sticks. All you’ve got to do is keep them supplied with carrots.”

The old man’s face crinkled in an anguished smile, and he spread his hands in an ancient old-world gesture. “Guilt. In the old days society was work-oriented and success was a measure of denial, self-sacrifice, thrift, hard work, all virtues. Big money used to be the symbol of that kind of achievement-remember Horatio Alger? Wealth was a reward for courage and clean living and hard work. Now wealth is only a symbol of your ability in choosing an accountant smart enough to allow you to dodge taxes. Today money is a prize, not a reward. People play the market because they’ve learned you don’t need to work-you only need luck. They’re out to get something for nothing. They’re gamblers-and they feel guilty because deep down they know they ought to be leaning over a hot sledgehammer to justify all the money they’re trying to make. They’re hagridden with anxieties and guilt-and we’re back to Freud.”

He shook his head in pain. “The human race is the constant victim of congenital idiocy. I have pointed out for fifty years to my clients that a fool and his money rush in where angels disdain to tread-what is it after all but money? Money! Money is useless, literally and actually. If it wasn’t useless you couldn’t use it for money. You see? So money is an abstraction itself, but the stock market is an abstraction once removed-we don’t even work with money, we work with paper arithmetic. We print paper and call it stock, and hang it on the hook end of a line and see if anybody swallows it. Money? It’s not what you have that makes you rich nowadays-it’s what you owe.”

The old man took a breath and began to talk again, but one of his phones rang and he reached for it. Hastings sat still, amused and entertained. The old man’s surgical wit was a good counterpoint against his own feeling of dull lassitude; he enjoyed listening to Cohen’s darting rapier talk.

Cohen finished his phone conversation and turned back to him. “You want to learn about us-you want to learn what the stock market is. You can’t do that, you know-nobody can say what the stock market is. The only thing that can be described is what it was. The only way to anticipate the market is to know how all the people in it are going to behave, and no man alive can do that-oh, I know the big portfolio houses are using computers to analyze the market and make forecasts, but no computer can give an accurate answer on the basis of incomplete inputs, and who can program a computer with every vagary of human neurosis that may affect the market tomorrow? It can’t be done.”

Cohen showed a gentle smile, his face a labyrinth of creases. “This on the phone was one of my oldest clients, a lady who’s been with me forty-one years. We’ve seen a lot together in that time. I almost feel we were around to see the first bulls and bears gather beneath the buttonwood tree on the old Wall Street, where all this madness got its start. I do remember some of the panics after the war-the First World War, that is. I moved into this very office in nineteen-nineteen, and I’ve been here ever since. Of course I have vivid memories of Black Thursday. October the twenty-fourth, nineteen-twenty-nine. The big fellows had gone to the well once too often, and confidence was cracking all over-you’d be amazed how many of us did see it coming, and got out well ahead of the crash. I was out of the market entirely by the end of September, and then

I just sat back and watched. You could hear the bear traders' artillery start to rumble, and the news spread like wildfire-the specialists on the floor were forced to execute whole notebooks full of stop-loss orders at a rate so fast it dumped millions of shares on the market. I was in the arena that day, and you couldn't believe it. The floor was flooded up to my eyebrows with paper that got cheaper by the minute. Everybody decided to sell, and of course when that happens, there is no market any longer-no such thing as a market, just a junkyard, a dumping ground. And as prices go down, people who hold stock on margin are forced to sell into the new lows to pay off their margins, and that pushes prices down even faster. Once a crash starts, you can't stop it. Of course, we all pretend Black Thursday was the big one, there'll never be another like it, but it can happen again, and it very well may. On the twenty-eighth of May in nineteen-sixty-two we had a crash with a paper loss of twenty-one billion dollars in one day's trading-that was double the loss of Black Thursday, it was the greatest dollar loss of any single day's trading in the history of Wall Street. There was nothing your SEC boys could do about it-there never will be. And in the meantime we've got stocks selling at a hundred times earnings, new issues skyrocketing within twenty-four hours of going public. Do you know what 'one hundred times earnings' means? It's like buying a building for one thousand dollars and being forced to rent it out at ten dollars a year. But people go right on buying it. They're just crazy. All the golden, beautiful paper profits don't produce a single new tangible object. There's no creation here, no productivity, no material advance-only inflation. And now, with our foreign exchange snarled up and our domestic financial policies all out of line with this rate of spending, there's a very good chance the entire international monetary system will collapse.

"Add it all up, and what do you get? You could easily have a stock-market debacle like nobody's ever seen before. You'll see Dow-Jones drop to ground zero. It'll be like Weimar. The world economy will crumble to powder. It'll be a blight, a disappearance."

The old man's smile was sly. "I paint a grim picture, no? It's only one side of the coin, you know, but you need to be aware of it. On the other side, what can I say that you don't know? You can get very rich very fast here, everybody knows that. Right now two new millionaires come into existence for every hour of every working day, did you know that? Six thousand new millionaires in this country every year. Most of them do it in the stock market, and most of them will never get around to spending the fortunes they make. Like me. They don't enjoy the money-money's just a symbol of victory down here, nobody actually uses it. There isn't time. That's a shame, isn't it?"

The wistfulness of his tone made Hastings smile. Saul Cohen shook his head. "It makes odd mathematics, I know, but you will find there are more horses' asses than there are horses."

"That happens everywhere, Saul-not just down here."

"We exaggerate it. Take the basics, which nobody stops to think about. A stock is selling at X dollars. Why? What makes it worth X dollars today and X plus two or X minus five tomorrow? The value of a share depends not on its real worth but on what one fool thinks another fool is willing to pay for it. Most often that judgment comes not from rational appraisal but from whispered tips and floating rumors that have less reliability than a tout's tip at Aqueduct. And the euphemisms, I ask you. Does a broker ever admit the market is falling? No. It

makes readjustments, it eases, it makes technical corrections, it retrenches. It never falls."

"Wall Street's got no monopoly on rose-colored glasses. When did you last hear a Pentagon general admit we hadn't won the war in Vietnam?"

"What are you, Russ, a cynic or an optimist?"

It made him grin. "Both. I'm as inconsistent as the next guy. But my job doesn't include indicting investors because they're horses' asses. It's my job to enforce the full-disclosure provisions of the law. Truth in securities-if there is any such thing. See that nobody manipulates prices. Investigate unusual activity, weed out fraud, nail manipulators. That much I can do, Saul. But I can't keep people from making fools of themselves. That's up to them."

The old man twinkled. "You've always been earnest, Russ. But from the champing-at-the-bit look on your face, I doubt you've learned the limitations of your power yet. You're in the most frustrating of professions-they'll give you a tough job to do, and then they'll prevent you from doing it. Why? Because the private interests have strong lobbies, and the public doesn't. If you don't move fast enough, you're accused of lying down on the job, and if you do, you're accused of ruining the whole financial barrel just to get at a couple of rotten apples. How can you win? The best you can do is avoid losing." The smile was more pained than ever.

Hastings said, "Maybe that's enough. That's the world we live in. Nobody tries to win wars anymore, either. You just try to keep from losing them."

"You're incorrigible," Saul Cohen snapped. "All right, then, you've got something on your mind. You came to Delphi to consult the oracle, and the oracle has monopolized the conversation. I apologize. What can I do for you?"

Hastings shifted his seat and examined a fingernail; he said, "I believe in intuition, Saul, I always have. And my intuition tells me there's something stirring in Northeast Consolidated."

An eyebrow went up; the old man didn't smile. "Elliot Judd's organization. Is that why you're interested?"

"That may be why it attracted my attention."

"What sort of hints have you found?"

"It's hard to pin down. There's a bit of activity, people buying the stock, quite a few Canadian orders and Swiss numbered accounts."

"But nothing's happened visibly, has it? I've watched the stock-I don't recall seeing anything queer."

Hastings said, "If anybody's maneuvering in the dark, he's being discreet. But there are dummies buying into it. I want to find out what they're after and who they're fronting for."

The old man rearranged the wrinkles of his face into an agony of thoughtfulness. "I'm not sure I can help. Of course, the market for NCI is so broad, anybody could put half a million dollars into the stock without forcing it-they're trading twenty, thirty thousand shares a day. So unless there's a massive manipulation, you won't see it reflected in the price. And anything less than massive would not be to anyone's advantage."

"I thought you might be able to tell me what I ought to be looking for."

"To know what to look for, you must first know why you're looking. What do you suspect?"

"Nothing-everything. I don't know."

“Do you have any reason to believe someone might challenge Elliot Judd for control? One of the large stockholders, perhaps? Someone who thinks Judd isn’t running the company as well as it should be run? Any indications of a proxy war shaping up?”

“Nothing like that.”

“Have you asked Elliot Judd?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you?”

Hastings said, “I don’t think I ought to upset him unless I’ve got something concrete to show him.”

“It could be a fight for control from inside, you know. If one of the top men in the company wanted to take it over, he might use dummies to buy stock for him, to avoid alerting Judd. Or it might be an outsider.”

“A raider.”

“He’d have to be big. Very big. A Howard Hughes would have trouble buying control of NCI.”

“There are other ways to get control of a company. You don’t have to buy it.”

“Hard to do, with a strong company,” the old man said. “Has it occurred to you there may be dummies buying the stock on behalf of an insider who knows something exciting is going to happen within the company-something that will raise the price of the stock? A new contract, perhaps? An oil discovery?”

“NCI doesn’t deal in oil very much. And as far as I know, they’re not getting ready to announce any big news. That’s what intrigues me. Somebody has a reason to buy big chunks of the stock through front men, and all the reasons I can think of are the ones we’ve just ruled out.”

“Then either one of your assumptions is wrong, or you’ve missed something.”

“Sure,” Hastings said. “I was hoping you’d spot it for me.”

“I’m sorry, my boy. I’m only a broker, not an oracle, after all.” Saul Cohen began to smile; his telephone rang.

Hastings stood up. “I don’t want to kill the rest of your morning,” he said. “The market’s about to open. I’ll see you soon.”

“Take care,” the old man said, flapping a hand at him and reaching for the phone. When Hastings left the office he could hear Saul’s magpie voice chattering gloomily into the telephone.

Chapter 11

Diane Hastings.

When Mason Villiers lifted his lighter to Diane’s cigarette, she drew the smoke slowly into her mouth and kept a rigid, nervous smile on her face: Villiers’ stare unsettled her.

He kept watching her over cognac and demitasse, looking relaxed and at ease, sated after the fine meal. The headwaiter came by, gliding like a cobra; he had greeted Villiers by name and given them a choice table and since then had fawned over them effusively. Diane brought her attention back from that distraction and found Villiers’ eyes on her, his guarded smile repellent and

fascinating at once. His magnetism was uncanny. She found it masculine, erotic-and frightening.

He was turning his cigar slowly in the flame of his lighter; his slate eyes studied her, and when he clicked the lighter shut he said, "You've had time to think it over. What do you say?"

"I haven't decided. It's short notice-I'm honestly not sure. Not yet."

"It's the sensible thing for you to do. All the new stock issues are drawing investors like flies. Last week nine companies went public, and seven of them closed Friday at premiums more than a point above the offering price. One of them shot up seven dollars. If you go public and price your shares at ten dollars, they'll probably be selling for fifteen before you know it."

"It sounds attractive," she said. "I admit that. But I can't help wondering what your angle is."

His smile seemed genuinely amused. "Does everybody have to have six fingers, Diane?"

"I can hardly ignore your reputation, can I?"

"I know you don't approve of me-is it bad form to notice? But you'd be smart not to judge a case by its advocate."

"Really?"

"I've told you what I stand to gain by it. I'll go over it again, if it will help. I undertake to write the Nuart tickets, take care of preparing your prospectus, arranging to have the issue underwritten, all those details. In return I get an option on a specified number of your shares at the offering price, exercisable for three months, and I'll also want use of a portion of your capitalization to trade into other companies. Look, I've developed a Jesse James reputation, and it's hard for me to make trades in my own name-nobody wants to sell to me. I need companies to front for me. I'm being honest about this, you see. But you've got to understand the contracts will be drawn up so that you'll have absolute control of Nuart at all times. You'll have your own lawyers go over every step of it and make sure it's set up in such a way that I can't possibly get control away from you. You'll retain an absolute majority of voting stock in your possession."

"You sound like a lawyer."

"I should-I've argued with enough of them. But I'm trying to lay it out without legalese double-talk. Your lawyers will examine everything. If they find anything at all to object to, you can withdraw anytime without losses. I'll even pay the legal fees. You want to know what I'm getting out of it? Easy. I can raise capital to buy into any company, but it can be messy and costly-a lot of money gets eaten up in taxes. But if I buy in through a corporation-through Nuart-then the picture changes completely. When one company buys another, it can be reported as a pooling of interests. A merger. The buyer's assets don't have to reflect the cost of purchase, which would reduce his reportable profits, and he doesn't have to pay any tax on the exchange of stock-Does this bore you?"

"No. It does confuse me. You're handling me with kid gloves. The smile on the face of the tiger. You're clever, Mason-I'm not. You're an astute judge of weakness, and I can't escape feeling you're putting something over on me."

"Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you? Isn't it the way you work? Caveat emptor?"

"I'm not selling you a bill of goods, Diane. What do I have to do to convince you?"

She inspected him coolly. His suit displayed its good London tailoring, if a bit showy-he tended to wear his money on his lapels, but that hint of crudity was attractive in its way; it set off his magnetic power. He was like a natural force, not possible to control; like a volatile explosive. He surrounded himself with an electric aura of excitement-violence held precariously in check.

She pursed her lips. "Granting it's the wise thing for me to do at this point-going public-what makes you think I won't just take the idea to my father and let him handle it for me?"

"You won't."

"Why not?"

"You never have. You could have done that anywhere along the line, from the time you opened your first gallery on Third Avenue. But you didn't. You've got too much pride-your ambition's too personal, too private. I get the feeling somewhere along the line you decided you had to prove you were just as good a man as your father."

"That's silly. I'm not competing with my father."

"Aren't you?"

He let it drop softly between them and hang in the air until she heard herself utter a brief and unconvincing nervous laugh. Villiers said, "I don't know anything about your ex-husband, but from what I hear, you had to choose between him and your business, and you chose the business. Doesn't that suggest an unusual sort of drive?"

"That's ridiculous. Russ and I broke up for a lot of reasons that were far too complex for you to boil down into half a dozen words. Maybe we were just two incompatible people-it happens."

"It happens," he agreed. "But not everybody's father is Elliot Judd. And not every daughter of a billionaire has to prove she can succeed in business on her own, without her daddy's help."

"Where did you come across all this cockeyed information about me?"

"I never go into things blindfolded," he said. "I know a great deal about you. Enough to be sure you won't take the proposition to your father. You'll do it with me or not at all. You may turn me down, but you won't take it behind my back-and particularly you'll never take it to him."

"You're so damned sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I learned a long time ago that only a fool goes into anything without doing his homework." He turned his hand over and gave her a brief hard smile.

Her apartment was on the eleventh floor of a high-ceilinged old building on East 61st Street, a co-op occupied mainly by presidents of insurance companies, banks, and industries. An elderly starched doorman leaped to open the door of Villiers' limousine when it eased in at the curb. An elevator boy in white gloves whisked them up the eleven stories in a fast, silent elevator, and Diane stood at her foyer door with key in hand, hesitating, not wanting to admit him.

Looking at him, she saw how fragile was her standard New York armor-the defense of brittle sophistication which, to a man like him, was no defense at all.

He gripped both her arms and turned her to face him. "Invite me in for a nightcap."

"I don't wear nightcaps, Mason."

"I see. And that's all there is to it?" He smiled slightly, and she felt the pressure of his hands drawing her toward him. She said sharply, "Please, Mason."

"You're a bit glacial tonight, aren't you? You know damn well you're a beautiful woman, desirable. We're not adolescent kids-do you really need to have me start breathing hard and whispering sweet nothings to you?"

His hard hands were against her arms. She had a swift, sudden vision of two figures on a bed, clutching at each other-it was what she wanted; it was what she feared. She stiffened; she said, "Damn it, this city's packed full of women that want a man. Any man. Do you have to force yourself on me?"

"You're not just any woman."

"Please, Mason. Don't. You'd be wasting your time, and I'd rather not disappoint you."

"I'll take that chance. I've always-"

"Damn it, what I have to tell you is difficult enough without your impatience. I'm no good in bed. Do you understand?"

Her eyes went wide; her breath stopped in her throat.

Mason Villiers said, "Do you think I can't arouse you?"

"Mason, please, for heaven's sake. Do you know how hard this is for me?"

She lifted her hands and pushed his arms away, and backed up against the door, feeling the hot rush of blood to her face. "Please," she whispered, shaking her head.

He nodded slowly. "All right." His voice was gentle enough, but his face had closed up. He turned to the elevator and pushed the button.

She clutched her arms and stared at his wide, flat back in miserable silence. He didn't stir. The elevator came, the doors slid open, and he stepped in.

She took a pace forward. "Mason?"

He turned to regard her with a calm air of cold, arrogant disdain.

She said in a small voice, "Go ahead and start the arrangements to incorporate."

He nodded his head an inch. "Thank you," he said with precise courtesy, and watched her, unblinking, while the elevator doors slid shut, cutting him off from her view.

She went through the apartment turning on lights, and sat down on the living-room couch with a cigarette. She had a sudden impulse to run from the empty apartment and rush into one of the crowded bars on Second Avenue.

She was halfway to the door before she stopped and went slowly back to the couch. She could just see herself sitting in a bar, trying not to look like a pickup, fighting off men who knew of no other reason why a woman alone should come into a bar. In her strong moments she was fully capable of turning a slow burning stare on a man that would send him hurrying away, shaking his head defensively; but right now she didn't have the courage to look a man in the face.

She said sternly, aloud, "I am not going to crack up. I absolutely refuse to crack up. It's ridiculous-it's absurd. I won't!"

She went into the bedroom, drew the blinds and draperies, and removed her clothes, putting them away with care. She sat down naked at the dressing table and fluffed her hair, watching critically in the mirror.

Lamplight on the pale blue walls depressed her; she resolved to have the room repainted. She went into the bathroom and turned on the tub faucets,

and walked through the apartment to the bar, where she poured half a tumbler of straight gin over two ice cubes; carrying the drink, she went around switching off lights, checked the bolt at the front door, and came back to the bathroom in time to shut off the water. She closed the bathroom door, glanced at her expressionless face in the mirror, and stepped into the steaming tub; she took a long swallow of gin, set the glass on the rim of the tub, and lay back in the hot water, thinking about nothing in particular; and then she slowly became aware of the tingling in her breasts, the vaginal tautness, the generation of hidden excitement that made her feel shamed and sick with loathing, knowing she would spend a little while pretending it wasn't there, and a little while more hoping it would go away, and a little while more massaging her hardened nipples while a protective cloak of serenity would seem to descend around her, and in the end she would promise she would never let it happen again, but she would begin to rub herself with her fingers until she reached that terrible guilty, lonely climax.

Chapter 12

Mason Villiers.

The limousine turned up Third Avenue from Forty-seventh Street and cruised slowly with the lights. Taxis darted past, jumping the traffic lights, and along the window-lit sidewalks male prostitutes cruised with brazen, casual arrogance. In the back seat of the limousine Villiers became irritated with the bedraggled whine of Tod Sanders' complaining voice and said, "I'm sick of hearing about your mother. Shut up."

Sanders didn't say another word until he eased the big car in at the curb in front of Villiers' hotel. Then, blank-faced, Sanders turned in his seat and said, "You want a girl? You want me to send for a girl?"

"No, to hell with it. You go on home and sit up with your sick mother."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Tod Sanders was perpetually nodding, nervously pretending agreement before he could possibly know what he was going to be agreeing with; he was like a student-there was one in every classroom-whose head bobbed up and down the whole hour long.

"I'll need you here at nine in the morning with the ear."

"Yes, sir."

The doorman had the limousine door open; Villiers stepped out and went into the hotel lobby. He glanced at the row of elevators but went on to the cocktail lounge. Drunk businessmen were crowded loud at the bar. As he moved past them, he saw a slim attractive woman sitting alone; her glance touched him, direct and interested. He sized her up as an easy lay.

She had a warm, slow smile.

He sat down and spoke: "Staying here in the hotel?"

"Yes."

"In town long?"

"I live here." She was still smiling.

"Work here?"

"Well, I'm sort of between jobs, you know. I do a little dancing, and I model a little. I'm just sort of-around, you know?"

He nodded. "Expensive?"

"Some gentlemen don't think I am."

"Go on," he said.

"Two hundred."

He laughed quietly and gave her his room number and walked out to the lobby.

At nine-thirty in the morning he entered the offices of Hackman and Greene and went back through the corridor without waiting for the English receptionist to announce him. He found Sidney Isher in Hackman's office; the broker himself was nowhere in sight. Isher said, "George must be stuck in the traffic. It's murder out there in this Goddamned heat. You want a cup of coffee?"

"No." Villiers settled on a chair in the cool blast of the air-conditioner.

The red-haired lawyer coughed; his eye tic winked steadily. "I swear the pavements are starting to melt out there."

Villiers said, "Take a pill or something-you're nervous."

"I guess I am. We've got a problem."

"I'm listening."

"It goes by the name of Arthur Rademacher. He's James Melbard's brother-in-law-this'll take a minute to explain. You see, Melbard Chemical has about one and a half million shares of capital stock. As you know, there's only about a hundred thousand shares outstanding on the open market-the rest belong to the Melbard family and a few insiders, and the twenty-three percent that NCI and Elliot Judd own together. The idea, as I understood it from you, was to tender an offer to Melbard to get a controlling interest from the Melbard family, in an exchange-of-stocks deal with Nuart Galleries. This was supposed to-"

"I'm losing interest," Villiers snapped. "Get to the point."

"I'm trying to." Isher kept crossing and uncrossing his legs. "You want to buy a controlling interest in Melbard, right? The only way to do it is to buy eight hundred thousand shares of Melbard stock, right? And the only place you can buy that many shares is from Melbard's family, because nobody else owns that much. But what I'm trying to tell you is, there's a hitch we didn't foresee. It seems this old bastard Rademacher owns a quarter of a million shares in his wife's name-she's James Melbard's sister-and he's also got options on another quarter of a million shares which James Melbard owns at the moment. You get the picture now? James Melbard can't sell his stock to you unless Rademacher releases him from the options. For all practical purposes, Rademacher controls half a million shares of Melbard stock, which is better than thirty percent of the whole lot. Without that block of stock, you can't get control of Melbard Chemical-not unless you can buy NCI's block, and I doubt you could."

"I don't see the problem," Villiers said. "If Rademacher owns it, then buy it from Rademacher. What's so difficult about that?"

"Difficult? Nothing. It's dead simple. Rademacher won't sell." Isher assumed a pained smile and made a vague gesture. "Just like that."

"How do you know? Have you tried making him an offer?"

"Of course I have. What the hell do you think I'm talking from-pure guesswork? As soon as I got your call telling me Mrs. Hastings had agreed on the deal, I put my people to work on the Melbard group. I got a report from one

of them this morning. Rademacher flatly turned us down. His half-million shares are too big a block for us to buck."

"Maybe-if he isn't bluffing. Who says he's actually got control of that many shares?"

"Believe me. I checked it out."

"Have you talked to him personally?"

"I put in a call. He wouldn't talk to me."

Villiers squinted at him. "People who refuse to talk usually have something to hide."

"What's that got to do with it? He's got the stock, he refuses to sell it. That's all there is to it."

Villiers smiled gently and murmured, "Sidney, you haven't got the balls of a Chihuahua. I've told you how high you could go, bidding for the stock-all you need to do is make Rademacher an offer he can't turn down."

"You told me to go as high as twelve dollars a share. That's six million dollars-just for Rademacher's stock. At that price you'd have to put eight or nine million dollars in to gain control. You haven't got that kind of money."

"Of course I've got that kind of money. What did you think this was, a penny-ante deal?"

"Don't pull my leg. Where do you come up with nine million dollars?"

"Let me worry about that."

"I will. I will-but you're trying to grow too fast. You'll get caught, or you'll fall apart. I've watched you for years-can't you ever take advice? You've only got two speeds in your engine-full speed ahead and full speed reverse. You've got to slow down on the corners."

"All right, Sidney, you've exercised your mouth. Now I'll put in my fifty-one percent worth. You'll make Rademacher an offer he can't refuse. If he won't come to the phone, then don't mail the offer, have it delivered to him by personal messenger, and put a little note in the envelope with it. Give it the friendly touch, and throw in a hint that you're willing to grease him with options to buy a few blue chips below market price."

Isher hawked, cleared his throat, and growled, "You give me a pain, Mace."

"Take something for it."

"Okay, so it's an offer he can't refuse. Suppose he refuses it?"

"Then use pressure. Everybody's got something in his past he's a little ashamed of-everybody's scared of something. Find Rademacher's soft spot."

"I'm no detective."

"You can hire them."

Isher's eyelid was winking rapidly with tension. "I don't like it. You're getting too ambitious too fast. You can't just-"

"Don't lean, Sidney. I've been leaned on by heavier men than you. Just do your job. Look at me when I'm talking to you."

Isher flushed. He slid forward until he was sitting on the edge of his chair. "Hold it right there," he said, his voice under stern control. "You're not talking to a six-thousand-a-year lackey. Okay, so I've seen you order bigshot executives around as if you were a hung-over topkick yelling at recruits, and they let you do it because you've got enough clout to destroy them. You've never been bothered by leaving your cleat marks on people's backs, and I suppose up to a point that's good-it works, it's helped you claw your way up to seven figures. But listen to me, Mace, you can't treat these people the way you treat your

boiler-room marks, with that world-is-my-ashtray attitude of yours. And you can't treat me that way either. I know what you probably think of me, but-"

"What makes you think I think of you at all?" Villiers inquired, breathing evenly.

"-but don't forget I know you pretty well. I make allowances because, hell, a few years ago you could hardly spell Manhattan, and now you're close to owning it. I'm not such a hypocrite I won't admit I'm greedy. Okay, so your star's rising, and I hitched my wagon to it. But this time you're getting tense, I can feel it myself, and a tense man makes mistakes. Now, you can go ahead and sling insults at me, because I'm used to that, but when it comes to legal counsel, you're going to pay attention to me. That's what you pay me for, and I do a good job of it. Now, in this Melbard thing you've got ideas fixed in your head and you think you don't give a damn what I think. But I'm telling you for the good of both of us. You're taking a plunge in this thing without even knowing if there's water in the pool. You're too rigid, Mace-too stubborn. It's your great weakness. The inflexible man is always easiest to defeat. Look, the world is not a candy store. You've run into a dead end on this one, and I'm telling you to back out and find another way around."

Villiers had waited him out. Now he said, "A little more of that, Sidney, and you could be ending a promising career."

"Mine-or yours? Do you think I'm talking for the pleasure of hearing my own voice?"

"You are cram up to here with principles you haven't earned, Sidney-you're a snobbish prig. I told you to keep a rein on that conscience of yours."

"You just don't listen, do you? I'm not talking about conscience. I'm talking about a stone wall you're up against. You won't budge Arthur Rademacher. Certainly not with bribes, and I doubt you'll find anything in his past strong enough to use for blackmail. He's a crusty old son of a bitch, but he's a powerful man-he's a pillar of society, sits on half a dozen corporate boards. God knows he doesn't need your money. To budge him you'd have to start talking in seven-figure sums, which is ridiculous. You haven't got it, and it wouldn't be worth it even if you did."

"You're wrong. It might."

"For Melbard Chemical? Who are you kidding? The whole organization isn't worth fifteen million at the outside."

"It is to me."

"I don't believe it."

Villiers gave him a long scrutiny. Sidney Isher sat coiled like a taut-wound watch spring. His eyelid fluttered. Villiers said, "I've got to have control of Melbard before NCI starts thinking about bidding against me. Understand? Your mandate is clear and simple-go thou and keep piling the chips on the table in front of Arthur Rademacher until he comes across. I don't care what it takes."

"Sometimes chutzpah isn't enough, Mace. And-"

The door opened, and George Hackman came in beaming. Isher broke off and directed a resentful stare at him. Hackman's red face streamed with sweat, but he grinned with triumphant self-satisfaction. "The top of the fucking morning to you both," he said, and slapped down a briefcase violently on the corner of the desk nearest Villiers. "Help yourself. Merry Christmas."

Villiers waited for him to sit down before he said, "What is it?"

“Colonel Butler’s signature on all five copies. I caught him at the airport. He had a few words to say, but he signed.”

Villiers opened the briefcase and had a look through the contracts. George Hackman was laughing. “Son of a bitch nearly dropped his pants. He thought it was going to be weeks before we’d have the papers ready. It never occurred to the stupid bastard we had the papers all typed up and ready for his signature before he even heard about the deal.”

“Satisfactory,” Villiers muttered, making a neat stack of the contracts and dropping it on the desk. “But it shortens your deadline, Sidney. I’m buying Colonel Butler out with Melbard stock, and I don’t own any Melbard stock. Until you get it for me.”

“I told you you were moving too fast.”

“Nuts. Just do it-quit whining.”

Hackman was punching up the Quotron, reading its market announcements. He looked at his watch and grunted. “Good enough. The Dow Jones is up three points over yesterday’s close-market index up eight cents.”

Villiers said, “Never mind that. I want the two of you to look around for a man to put in nominal charge of Heggins Aircraft-somebody with an air of respectability who can be controlled. We’ll have to juice up their accounting, they haven’t been depreciating things fast enough. We’ll put out a slick report with plenty of expensive artwork. The first thing for the new administration to do is shave the operating costs-I want all superfluous personnel fired, particularly at the management level. The company’s topheavy with Butler’s retired Air Force cronies and sixty-year-old executives. I’ll spend the weekend going over the books, and by next week I’ll have a set of goals mapped out for the next quarter. One thing I know already-Heggins has a fleet of repossessed obsolescent cargo planes in mothballs in the desert down in Arizona. I want those planes fixed and sold-there are plenty of markets in the Middle East and South America. I want Heggins’ balance sheet to be in the black by the end of the year, with or without government contracts.”

Sidney Isher said, frowning, “You sound as if you want to keep Heggins operating. I thought you planned to strip it.”

Villiers shook his head. “The company’s no good to me dead. One thing our new management will have to do right away. Heggins has been paying rent to one of its own subsidiaries for the use of runways and test-flight ranges in Nevada. One of Butler’s cute ideas-the rent boosted Heggins’ operating expenses and cut its earnings, so Butler could defend his applications for higher government research fees. He never applied the subsidiary’s dividends against Heggins’ operating costs-he allotted them all to stockholders, and he’s the principal stockholder outside of Heggins itself. I don’t want the money going into Butler’s pockets. Heggins will have to buy back the runways and close down the subsidiary. That way we’ll increase the assets on the books and cut the operating expenses. It should show a big rise in paper profits by the end of the year, and that’s what we’ve got to have-the appearance of strength in the company.”

Sidney Isher said, “Mind telling us why?”

“My reasons are complex, and there’s no need to go into them all. I might just mention one item. Certain parties have been selling Heggins stock short in big bundles. If we can improve Heggins’ image in the market, the price will go up

and the short-sellers will be caught in a tight bind, which is exactly where I want them to be."

"Who are they?"

"Does it matter? They're people I mean to squeeze, Sidney. That's all you need to know."

The lawyer did not bother to conceal his resentment. Villiers stood up, ready to leave; he said to Hackman, "Any word from the Wyatt kid?"

"Not yet."

"He may need to be leaned on."

"Just let me know," Hackman said.

Villiers glanced at Sidney Isher, who did not meet his eyes, and left the office. He felt very good-taut, alive, expectant, the way he used to feel at fifteen when he was lining up a particularly complex and tricky shot on the green felt of a pool table. He gave the English girl his handsome smile on his way out.

Chapter 13

Russell Hastings.

Quint had probably been born fat-generous, good-natured, and often childish. His huge torso, contained in a dark vest, seemed to need a golden watch chain. He was a pink flannel-and-tweed man with thinning brown hair and a guardsman moustache; his face was big, with deep square brackets creasing it right down past the mouth into the big dependable jaw. He liked to act bumbling and vague, as if he were unaware of the events that surrounded him. It was an effective pose; it put his adversaries off their guard.

His office commanded a view of Foley Square. His desk ashtray, full of cellophane candy wrappers, was an abalone shell.

Russ Hastings sat in a wooden armchair listening to him growl. As Quint spoke, the bow tie bobbed up and down at his throat. "I don't know, Russ, you come into this business full of spice and vim, and before you know it you've been flattened and dried out by the damned bureaucracy of it all. I sit at this desk trying to work out my plans of action, and all day long I get phone calls from one fellow talking about personnel and another fellow talking about budgets and vacation schedules and some unhappy clerk who wants to resign. The chap from two offices down the hall drops in to ask for information about this and that. Salesmen get past the secretary and unnerve me about office supplies. One inconsequential interruption after another, and before you know it it's the end of one more day, and you don't know what the devil's happened to it, you came in red hot and raring to go in the morning, and you never got a chance to start. It makes me wonder what the hell I'm ever going to accomplish."

It was a speech Hastings had heard before, with variations; he said, "Why don't you burn the whole place down and start from scratch?"

Quint grinned and waggled a finger. "Don't mind me, old boy. There aren't many sympathetic ears hereabouts. Forgive me if I lean on yours now and then." The English accent, added to the guardsman mustache, gave Quint a Blimpish aura-one kept expecting him to refer to his wife as the memsahib.

Quint put on his stern down-to-business face. “All right. You said you had a request.”

“I want your authority to make a few waves.”

“To what end?”

“Maybe to squash a raid. Maybe nothing. It’s still too vague to write up a bill of particulars-but somebody’s playing Ping-Pong with Northeast Consolidated stock.”

Quint said, “A few days ago that was a hunch. Is it anything stronger than that now?”

“It’s getting there. I’ve collected lists of NCI trades from the floor specialist and a dozen big brokers. When you compare them, it sticks out like a sore thumb. Too much Canadian activity, too many anonymous Swiss accounts and dummy front men-all buying NCI. Small lots, but steady buying. Just the kind of thing you’d do if you wanted to accumulate a strong position but didn’t want to alert anybody or inflate the price. Whoever he is, he’s collected better than half a million shares in the past six weeks.”

“Is that a firm figure or a guess?”

“A little of both. Some of the Canadian purchases may be legitimate. It’s impossible to tell the difference until we’ve traced every stock certificate by number from source to buyer. That’s going to take time. But in the meantime this fellow’s still out there buying. It’s my opinion if we wait for guaranteed proof with all the t’s crossed, he’ll get there ahead of us.”

Quint unwrapped a ball of hard low-calorie candy and popped it in his mouth. “Any idea who this mythical chap is?”

“Not yet.”

“Suppose it turns out to be Elliot Judd?”

“I’ve thought of that.”

“Of course you have,” Quint mumbled. “It would make you look a bit of an ass, wouldn’t it?”

“It doesn’t have to. That’s why I want to stir things up. I want to take the wraps off-let our man know we’re tracking him.”

“Whatever for?”

“It may frighten him off,” Hastings said, and watched the fat man for a reaction.

Quint shifted his seat on the uncomfortable wooden chair. Finally he said slowly, “No. I’m afraid we can’t have it bruited about.”

“It’s the only way I know to-”

“Let me finish, please. That technique may have worked for you in investigating political corruption. Let a malfeasor know he’s being watched, and he’ll very likely back away from the trough. I understand your tactics. But they won’t work here. We inhabit an asylum of paranoid sensitivity, Russ. To reveal we’re investigating a security as big as NCI is to shake public confidence in it. If public confidence falls, the price of the stock falls, and if a blue chip like NCI falls, the whole market may fall with it. Our only weapon against that sort of disaster is our power to force the Exchange to suspend trading in the stock. But we’re not permitted to exercise that power unless we have substantial and cogent reasons-reasons we can explain to the satisfaction of all concerned. Do you see? Wall Street couldn’t be more fragile if it were perched on the lip of a seismic fault. We all have the same responsibility, to do nothing that threatens to set off the earthquake.”

The fat man crumpled the cellophane wrapper in his huge fist and dropped it in the ashtray. “Request denied,” he concluded.

Hastings nodded. “I understand all that. But I’m beginning to think it may be worth the risk. After all, the company’s too big to take very much of a beating in the market. Everybody knows it’s sound. If we begin to drop hints there’s a raider moving in, it may even raise the price of the stock-after all, if it’s attractive to a raider, there must be something in it.”

“Risk,” the fat man replied, “has to be measured not in terms of what you’ve got to gain, but in terms of what you’ve got to lose. Look, Russ, I don’t mean to trample your enthusiasms. You’ve convinced me there’s something afoot that bears investigating. But I’m afraid you’re going to have to go on conducting the investigation by the book. The idea doesn’t appeal to you? There was a time when I was too impatient to go by the book too. But everything in the book was put there for a reason. You’ll go right ahead and dig, with my blessings, but you’ll do it discreetly, and you won’t broadcast any warnings. I trust I’m making that abundantly clear.”

“About as unmistakable as a giraffe in a bathtub,” Hastings agreed. He stood up. “I guess you’re right.”

“You bloody Americans are always ‘I-guessing.’ It’s not one of your more endearing habits of speech.”

“You’ll get used to it. The first hundred years are the hardest.” He turned to the door.

“Russ.”

“Mmm?”

“Not one man in a hundred would have had the hunch you started with on this thing. Not one in a thousand would have played it. I’m not unmindful of that. Don’t take my schoolmasterish scoldings as criticisms. You’re worth any five other men in this office-and if it comes to it, I’ll support you right up to the lynching. But you must play this one close to your chest.”

“I understand.” He gave Quint a smile and went out into the hallway.

When he entered his own office, Miss Sprague looked up from her desk and said, “Mr. Burgess is waiting in your office. And there was a phone call from a Miss Cynthia MacNee.”

It stopped him in his tracks. He frowned at her. “Did she say what she wanted?”

“Only that she’d call again within a half-hour. She specifically asked that you don’t call her back-she said she’s not at the Nuart office. She also said it was very important, and she hoped you’d wait for her return call.” Miss Sprague gave him an arch look of speculation and turned back to her typewriter.

Puzzled, he went into the office and greeted Bill Burgess. The lawyer from Justice was a harried-looking sort with dark blond hair and a square face with a short nose and good jaw. He spent Wednesday nights playing poker, took his wife to neighborhood Italian restaurants and movies on Saturday nights, and spent summer Sundays at Jones Beach. He had limp shirt cuffs, blackened around the seams by soot and too much wearing; his shoes were very old and assiduously polished; the seersucker suit was baggy. His smile was fond with the warmth of old friendship.

“I know,” Hastings said, going around behind his desk and seating himself, “I didn’t show up at the poker game, and you’re sore because you missed a chance to nip me for fifteen bucks.”

"Yah. We need new blood in the game."

"What you mean is, you need a fish."

"You're not all that bad," Burgess said, packing his pipe. "Listen, you've made a lot of work for me. Ever since you called and dropped that name in my lap I've been going around in circles."

"What name?"

"Salvatore Senna. The Canadian stock buyer you wanted to know about."

Hastings sat up straight. "You've got something."

"Yah, I confess. The name kept kicking around in the back of my skull, and I knew there had to be something. I started checking things out yesterday, put a girl on the files, and spent an hour of overtime digging. Came up with some interesting stuff."

"Then unload it. Or does it come with a price tag?"

"This job makes cynics out of them all, doesn't it? Okay, so there's a price tag. Some of the stuff I got for you had to come out of FBI files, and they want reciprocation from you. Anything you get on Senna, they'd be obliged if you'd turn it over to them."

"So I was right about him."

"Uh-hunh. Cosa Nostra up to his eyeballs. Eight arrests, one conviction. Sullivan rap, concealed weapon. That was nine years ago, a little before my time. He's been in Canada since he got out of Sing Sing five years ago, which is why I didn't tumble to the name. But the FBI likes to keep tabs on them wherever they go. Anyhow, here's the gen. They call him Little Sally, which is to distinguish him from Big Sally-Salvatore Civetta, who as we all know is Vic Civetta's younger brother. Senna was a button in the Civetta mob before he went to Canada. His background maybe explains why he's turned into a stock-market investor. He used to enforce the money rackets for Civetta in Queens-loan-sharking mostly, and the numbers. Evidently he got interested in stocks and bonds when he was serving time at Ossining-there's a note in the file that he took out every book the prison library had on securities and investment. Since he went to Montreal we haven't been keeping an active file on him, but according to the FBI he's been fronting a boiler-room operation up there. Want details?"

"Go ahead," Hastings said. "I'll yawn if I get bored."

"Well, it's a stock-market confidence game. I guess you know that. Senna's got a big crew of professional con men. They work the phones eighteen hours a day, selling stocks by long-distance high-pressure pitches to widows and housewives and retired pensioners all over the States. You understand these stocks they sell are legitimate over-the-counter stocks, not fake paper. But the boiler-room boys sell them at twenty to fifty times their real value. Don't ask me where they find suckers stupid enough to fall for it, but they do-in droves. Technically, it's a crime-fraud. But they don't run much of a risk. How can a victim identify a swindler he's only talked to on the phone, never even seen? The boiler rooms used to operate out of lofts in the Wall Street area, but we cracked down on them, and most of the big operations moved to Canada. Gives them a good base to work from-the Canadian cops have a tough time with them because the victims aren't Canadians and aren't even in Canada at the time the crimes are committed. The cops try to harass them up there, but most of-"

The buzz of the intercom interrupted him. Miss Sprague's voice, full of disapproval, said, "Cynthia MacNee is on the line. Shall I ask her to hold, or do I tell her you're in conference?"

"Put her on," Hastings said to her, and to Burgess, "Don't move, I want to hear the rest of it." He picked up the phone. "Hello, Cynthia?"

"Dahling," Cynthia MacNee drawled, "it's not really necessary to sound so overjoyed to hear my voice."

"What's on your mind?"

"My deah, that tone of voice will never get you elected to office. I want to see you-it's important. I'm in the East Village in a telephone booth that's full of broken glass and the scent of piss, so I won't prolong this delightful conversation. I've just spent an hour looking at the most hideous paintings in the world and I'm prepared to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, but en route to it I could tell the taxi driver to stop at Foley Square. I can be there in ten minutes. Have you got a few moments to spare me?"

"I'm kind of busy. But you said it was important?"

"I did say that, didn't I?"

"You're insufferable," he said.

"I know. Isn't it wonderful? It is important, lover, and I'll see you in ten minutes. Hasta luego."

He cradled the phone, rearranged his thoughts, and said to Bill Burgess, "And Salvatore Senna runs one of these boiler-room operations in Montreal?"

"He appears to. I doubt he owns the operation-he's fronting for somebody. Maybe it belongs to one of the mobs. Anyhow it's worth pondering. When you get a mobster nosing in on the legit securities business, it spells Cosa Nostra and that starts with 'C' and that rhymes with 'T' and that stands for 'Trouble,' according to the impeccable logic of Professor Hill. We've traced some sizable stock-theft hauls to the Mafia, and I suppose the dons must own chunks of blue-chip stocks, but your interest in Senna is one of the first hints I've seen that they might be muscling in on the market itself. Have you got anything for me?"

"Nothing worth broadcasting. Senna bought a block of gilt-edged a couple of weeks ago. I've been curious to find out why."

"If you do turn up anything, let me know so I can pass it on to the hotshots over at FBI."

"I'll have to clear it through Quint first."

"Sure, I know." Burgess was out of his chair and moving. "I'll hold a chair for you at the game Wednesday," he said, and went.

Cynthia swept into the office with imperious clumsiness and came around the desk to deposit a smacking kiss on his cheek. "Dahling!" she cried at the top of her lungs; she grinned impudently and settled asprawl in the chair Burgess had vacated a few minutes earlier. "That was for the benefit of your sterile secretary," she said under her breath. She wore a ridiculous hat; her dress, a loud print, was girdled under her abundant breasts. There was a great deal of irrepressible mischief in her face, but-it always surprised him-it was essentially a very lovely face, an ivory shield surrounded by long dark hair, as fine and straight and liquid as an Oriental's, falling softly to her big shoulders.

She said, "You look fine, Russ. You look like a surfer. You must like your job here."

"It has its points. What's up?"

She nodded. “You didn’t want to see me. I guess I understand that-you don’t want reminders. In the terminology of the pulp magazines, you’ve still got fresh scars that haven’t healed over. Am I warm?”

“You are always very warm, Cynthia.”

“How am I to take that?”

“With a grain of salt,” he said. Then he smiled. “All right, it is nice to see you, after all.”

She laughed. “My deah, you’ve made my whole day. Christ, it needed a boost, let me tell you. The horse shit I’ve had to look at in those East Village galleries. But what can you expect in a civilization whose most popular cultural achievement is Bonanza? America is divided into quality and equality, and we at Nuart are resoundingly dedicated to the latter.” She was incapable of speaking without the accompaniment of vast sweeps and lunges of her arms. Gesticulating wildly, she said, “I should never have been given an education, you know. Think of the bliss of ignorance. I could have been a truck driver. I mean, I did try my best. At Bennington I drank all my classmates under the table, but they graduated me with honors anyway. It’s a fucking trap, Russ, don’t let anybody kid you.”

“I see you’re your usual cheerful self today. Looking for a sympathetic ear?”

“In a way I am, lover, but not for myself. Yes, that’s right-steel yourself. I have come to speak of her ladyship.”

“Did she send you?”

“No. God forbid. She doesn’t know I’m here, and she had better not find out.”

“What is it, Cynthia?”

“I think she’s in trouble.”

His jaw clicked. “She can take care of herself.”

“She thinks she can. Question, Russ-have you heard of one Mason Villiers?”

“The one who gutted Lee Central Plastics?”

“Among others. Have you ever met him?”

“No. Have you?”

“Once,” she said. “Would you like to see my Purple Heart? Never mind. The point is, he’s persuaded Diane to go into business with him.”

He sat up straight. “What?”

“He’s quite a panther, you know. To use the most apt cliche, a lady-killer.”

“With Diane?” Hastings’ smile twisted. “I wish him luck.”

“Don’t be too sure. When I asked her about it, her face became a study in scarlet. She admitted she’s authorized him to set up incorporation proceedings for Nuart. She’s planning to go public. Of course, it’s something we should have done before this-I don’t object to incorporating the business. But Villiers is a barracuda, Russ. He’ll swallow her whole. You need a deaf ear and a tough skin to survive his type, and whatever you think of her, she’s not that hard. As soon as she told me about it, I tried to talk her out of it. I used all the artillery I could think of. I told her Mace Villiers is trouble. I told her the business world has been treating him as if he had financial halitosis for good reason. He’s not the type who likes to see people dead-he’s the type who enjoys watching them die.”

The girl’s big dark eyes pressed at him. “She wouldn’t listen to me. I don’t know what he used as a persuader-I have visions of him caressing her erogenous zones like a musician playing on an instrument, that’s the kind he is, but with Mace Villiers there’s always a knife concealed in his palm. Whatever it is, he’s using her. Only she can’t see it. Or she refuses to. Maybe you think of

her as a tough bitch, Russ, but where men are concerned she's la plus grande imbecile de la cite."

His hand had formed a loose fist. He said, "Why did you come to me, Cynthia? What do you expect me to do about it?"

"You're a financial cop. You must have files and records on Villiers. Trot them out-show her his record. Prove to her what a bastard he really is."

He laughed ironically. Cynthia said, "I'm scared, lover. Not just for Diane-for me too. I've got a big stake in the business, and I have visions of the whole thing being flushed down the tubes. But mainly I hate seeing my best friend offer herself on the chopping block. I was hoping you still had enough feeling for her to help me get her out of this mess."

"Even if I did," he said, "I doubt I could even get an audience with her."

"You don't have to hold hands with her, dahling. Of course she'll see you. She's not vindictive. Maybe you don't realize how broken up she was when you left her. Shit, I'm not saying she wants you back, Russ, but she doesn't hate your guts."

"Cynthia, what the hell could I say to her? She'd suspect my motives the instant I said an unkind word about him."

"That would be childish. She's not a fool-oh, hell, I take that back. Where he's concerned, she's a fool. But don't you see that's why somebody has to talk her out of it? God knows what he's got in mind, but his touch has always been the kiss of death to any business he got involved with. He'll destroy her if somebody doesn't pry her out of it in time." She flung her arms wide and demanded, "Don't you believe he intends to gut Nuart the way he's gutted everything else?"

"It's my job not to believe anything too quickly," he said. But he was frowning darkly. "I'll tell you what. I'll nose around in our files and let you know what I find. You can put it up to her yourself."

"She wouldn't take it, coming from me. She knows I hate his guts."

"Why?"

"Call it postcoital depression," she said. "It was a long time ago, and I'd rather forget it. In fact, I did forget it for a while. When I first learned she was seeing him, I encouraged it. I thought he'd be good for her. She needs a man strong enough to bring her to heel. But as soon as I found out what he was up to, I got wise. Nuart is a dollar bill to him. Wherever there are two people and one dollar, there's going to be a fight to see who gets the dollar. It's always been that way with him. I'm scared to death, Russ. You've got to do something."

"We'll see," he said.

Chapter 14

Steve Wyatt.

The bullpen vibrated with a racket of phones and calculators and voices. Wyatt completed a call and glanced toward the secretary's railing. Anne had been absent from her desk all afternoon, taking dictation in the old man's office. He looked at his watch and leaned back in his swivel chair for a stretch.

The big room was filled with well-dressed young men, all cut from the same bolt, all imbued with the pep talk they'd received when, after the tough seven-month training drill, they had achieved the exalted nirvana of status-analyst, Account Executive: "Remember, gentlemen, from now on you're on your own. When you pick up that telephone, you are Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers." They were earnest, they knew the vocabulary, they knew everything from capital-gains taxation to corporation finance, they kept up with the required reading-financial pages, trade journals, tip sheets. They spent three-quarters of every working day on the phone, yet they had to know how to be discreet at all times.

He had to laugh.

The jangling phone cut off his ramble; he reached for it. "Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers, Wyatt speaking."

The caller identified himself and asked a question. Wyatt turned, bored, to run a finger down his note sheets. "It's quoted forty-five to forty-six bid and asked, CTM. Anything else right now?"

Getting a negative answer, he said good-bye, and looked toward the door beyond the railing. She was just coming in sight; she sat down, watching him with silent adoration.

He took her to Le Manoir for dinner. Afterward they window-shopped hand in hand along Fifth Avenue. He slipped the Jensen case out of his pocket and gave her the silver necklace, and she flung her arms around him and kissed him under the streetlight on the corner by St. Patrick's Cathedral.

He took her home to his apartment. When he closed the door, she moved against him and flicked her tongue against his, wheeled across the room in a gay dance, and stopped by the mirror to fit the necklace around her pretty throat. "How do I look?"

"Delicious."

"Steve, there's never been anybody but you and me."

He smiled and ran his fingertips up her arms very softly, feeling her shudder. Her eyes were half-closed; she began to lose her breath.

A full-length mirror hung on the back of the closet door. He twisted the door open, held it at the right angle, and stepped back toward the bed to test it.

He went into the kitchen to make drinks; dropped the liquid contents of a chloral hydrate sleeping capsule in her glass and delivered it to her; adjusted lamps and the record player, and came to her by the bed. He kissed the tip of her nose, and clicked glasses with her, said, "Bottoms up," and watched critically while she swallowed half the drink.

She smiled her warm, loving smile. When he reached around her to undo the back of her dress, she put the glass down and watched the dress fall in a pool around her ankles, and stepped out of it. "Can't we go on like this forever?" she breathed. "Oh, my darling, I never thought it could ever-"

"I love you, Anne."

"Always-always. We'll have eight kids. No, we won't have any, they take too much time, and there's no time for anything but this you and me, darling... Do you love my breasts, darling?"

"Mmmmm."

"Aren't they beautiful?"

"They're the finest perfect little breasts in the world."

"They belong to you, darling. Oh!"

He lay across her and caught his breath. She fell fully, deeply asleep with a nesty little smile on her lips. He padded across the room, switched off the stereo, and picked up her handbag. The drug would keep her asleep for hours; he moved without stealth. When she came to she would blame it on sexual exhaustion, the way the old ones had in the days when he had made a practice of rifling rich women's jewel boxes.

He found the leather key case in her bag and dressed without hurry, and before he left he looked up a phone number and dialed it. When a man answered in an irritable tenor voice, Wyatt said, "I just wanted to make sure you were there. I've got to get these keys duped and return them in a couple of hours."

The petulant high voice said, "I always keep appointments, Mr. Jones. You just bring the cash."

"I'm on my way."

He hung up and glanced back at the sleeping girl. She was superb in bed; he congratulated his luck. A little inexperienced, but he would teach her to make it soar. She had a good body and a great generous sensitivity to his pleasure. It was too bad she was the nesting kind. It would hardly do for a Wyatt to entertain marrying the daughter of a Polish taxi driver.

Chapter 15

Mason Villiers.

Ginger Hackman was long-legged and sad-faced. Villiers watched with tight-lipped reserve while she disrobed before him and came unwillingly toward the bed, her eyes half-closed. She said, "Make it good."

He did. As always, he was bored afterward. He watched her slip into the bathroom; he lay back, sated and thinking. When she reappeared in the lighted doorway, he had trouble for a moment remembering who she was-just one more in the endless chorus line of golden-thighed girls.

The vagueness passed; he made a brief smile.

Ginger said, "You look like a leading man in dirty movies. Shall we have some lunch?"

"No."

"I'm hungry."

"Later," he told her. He talked while he began to dress. "How long has it been since you saw Dan Silverstein?"

"Come again?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten his name."

"No. But it was kind of a non sequitur, wasn't it? Since when are we talking about the old crowd?"

"Since now. How long has it been?"

"I haven't seen any of that bunch since before I married George."

"Does Silverstein know you're married?"

"I suppose so. Why shouldn't he? It was hardly a secret, the way George bragged it up at the time. Exactly the way he'd have boasted about buying a new Rolls. Only now it appears the chrome must have rusted overnight."

"You haven't rusted," Villiers said, granting her a piece of a smile. "George gets tired of all his new toys fast, like a kid."

"Why didn't you tell me that before I let him marry me, Mace?"

"It was none of my business. You had your eyes open-don't tell me it was a love match, mad passion made you blind."

"I knew what he was-but I thought he'd keep his part of the bargain."

"George has plenty of talent," he said. "It doesn't, show, but he knows his business. But he'll never keep a bargain unless you force him to."

"He keeps bargains with you."

"He can't afford not to."

"Then you've got something on him," she said.

"Possibly I have. Why go into it?"

"Because I need something to hold over his head too."

"If you don't trust him, divorce him." He feigned interest, but most of his attention was concentrated in the mirror; he was knotting his silk tie. His face was lifted, poked forward, the muscles hard at the angles of his jaw.

She said, "I may get a divorce, but it's going to have to be on my terms. I need ammunition-to keep him from contesting it."

"Maybe I can let you have something," he said. "I'll let you know."

"Make it good," she said. It made him look at her in the mirror, but she seemed unaware it was the same phrase she'd used before coming to bed with him. The irony amused him. Ginger said, "I don't intend to be thrown out like an old shoe. When I leave him it's going to be in style. I want to gouge him good when I go. He can afford it-thanks to you."

"Suppose I ask you to hold off for a while."

"Why should I? Have you any idea how intolerable he makes my life?"

"You seem to be surviving," he said, shoehorning his feet into his shoes. "Hold off until I give you the word, and I'll give you the ammunition you want."

"I suppose I never should have expected anything from you that didn't have a price tag attached."

"If it didn't cost you something, it wouldn't be worth much, would it?"

"The puritan ethic, from you?" She was astonished.

He slipped into his suit jacket. "Let's get back to Dan Silver-stein. You used to get along with him pretty well, didn't you?"

"Carol got along with him better than I did. She was always his favorite. At least she was until they had some kind of falling-out."

"Do you know what it was about?"

"She was pretty green-it was a long time ago, wasn't it? Four or five years, anyway. She wasn't used to all the tricks of the trade. He wanted her to do something she didn't want to do, he pressed the point, and she kept refusing, he got nasty, and she belted him one. Carol used to have a pretty good right hand. Do you keep in touch with her?"

"Sure," Villiers said.

"The same way you keep in touch with me," Ginger said dryly. "But that's all right, you're big, Mace, there's plenty of you to go around. I never felt possessive about you at all. I couldn't care less about your other women-I suppose I'm only being realistic."

"You've always been realistic, Ginger."

"All right, you win. What about Dan Silverstein?"

"He's on a few corporate boards of directors," Villiers said. "I need his vote on a few things."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"I want you to bump into him, by accident. He's in New York, staying at the Plaza. Generally he has his dinner in the hotel dining room around seven-thirty. Let him run into you there."

"And?"

"Charm him. Reminisce about old times. Throw in a little nostalgia and a lot of sex appeal. He hasn't got his wife with him-he'll take you upstairs."

"I suppose you've got his room bugged with cameras and microphones? What the hell have you got in mind, a badger game?"

"You've played it before," he told her. "Don't be indignant, it doesn't suit you."

"I don't think I like it. What if I refuse?"

"What if you refuse? Nothing. I'm not twisting your arm."

"But if I don't do it, you won't help me with George, is that it?"

"Ginger, when you want something, you've got to be willing to trade something for it. I'm not a charity."

She said, "I don't like it. If you get him on film, it means you get me on the same film. Suppose you turn around and show the film to George?"

"You're not thinking," he said. "I've already got plenty of film on you. Don't you remember? If I'd wanted to show it to George I could have done it anytime in the past five years. Look, if you're worried, pull the sheets up over your face. Just make sure Silverstein's in plain sight. You know how it's done."

"Some things you just don't forget-even if you try."

He said mildly, "Go on, get dressed."

While she was in the bathroom he crossed the suite to the telephone in the living room and called George Hackman. A girl's voice told him in an English accent to hold on; in a moment the broker's hearty voice struck his ear. Villiers said, "Never mind the small talk. I want you to call Steve Wyatt. Tell him to get to a pay-phone booth at exactly two-thirty this afternoon and call me at this number." He quoted a phone number from memory, not the hotel's number.

Hackman said, "Okay, I'll give him the message."

"If the line's busy, tell him to keep trying until he gets through."

"Sure enough. Listen, Mace, while I've got you on the phone, Sidney's been having one hell of a time trying to get anything moving on this Rademacher business, you know, the old guy who-"

"Not on the telephone, George. You can tell Sidney I've got someone working on that problem from my end, but tell him to keep plugging anyway. Anything else?"

"Well, ah, yeah, one little item here, I guess we can talk about it on the phone. I just had this mock-up of the prospectus delivered over here, for the Nuart stock issue."

"How does it look?"

"Like all the rest of these things, mainly just a poor-mouthing hedge against some damn fool investor later claiming he's been misled. It more or less says we don't promise to make any money for the stockholders, in fact, we may well lose their damn money for them, but we'd like them to invest in us anyway."

"I know. Nobody ever pays any attention to those ritualistic disclaimers anyway. The important thing is, it's got to look like a good professional job, respectable and well done up."

"It's impressive. Want me to send it over with a messenger?"

"Never mind. I won't be here. I'll stop in Monday morning and have a look."

"Anything else you want me to do over the weekend?"

"Tap somebody to take over Heggins Aircraft for us."

"I'm working on three or four possibles. Expect I'll have someone by Monday."

"All right," Villiers said. "I'll be in touch." He hung up and glanced at the bedroom door, where Ginger stood smoking, dressed in a figure-hugging pants suit.

She said, "Was that George?"

"Yes."

"Don't you feel the least bit odd, talking to my husband with me right here?"

"Why should I?"

"Anybody would."

"I'm not just anybody."

"You can say that again," she said. "You know what really bothers me about you, Mace? The rest of us are just human beings, but you're so Goddamned sure of yourself-you keep acting as if you know more about me than I do, and that's crazy."

He said, "Seven-thirty, Plaza Hotel."

"I remember."

"You can cover it with George?"

"He doesn't care what I do anymore. He probably won't get home himself before five in the morning."

"All right. If he asks, have a story ready."

"I always do. It's always the same story, because I've never had to use it yet. He never asks."

"Count your blessings, then," he said. "There's one bit of dialogue I want you to memorize to use on Dan Silverstein tonight. Slip it in whenever you think you've found the right point in the conversation. Tell him your husband's latest big deal is the Heggins Aircraft take-over-tell him your husband negotiated the deal between Colonel Butler and me. Tell him I'm the one who's buying it, and let him get the idea I'm buying it for the purpose of gutting the company, selling off the assets, and closing it down."

"That's all true, isn't it? You're not just making that up."

"Most of it's true, except the last part, which is the only part Silverstein won't be able to check."

"What's the point of it, Mace?"

"You don't need to know."

"It would help if I had a hint. Sometimes you can't just drop a chunk like that into a conversation like dropping a stone into a pool. If I knew what it was all about, then maybe-"

She didn't finish it; she made a gesture instead, and Villiers said, "Put it this way. Silverstein has already sold a block of Heggins stock short. If he thinks I'm going to ruin the company, he'll sell more short. I want him to sell it short, that's all."

"That doesn't give me much of a handle."

Silverstein, he thought, was also a director of Northeast Consolidated, but there was no point in mentioning that to her. What he said was, "He'll ask you about your husband, and you'll tell him. I'm not going to write a complete script for you."

"I suppose," she said vaguely.

He settled the paper-thin watch on his wrist and made a point of looking at it when he spoke: "I hope you don't have any trouble finding a taxi."

She stood bolt still and stared. "I thought we were going to have lunch."

"We've had it," he said. "I've got things to do."

"You son of a bitch. You haven't changed a bit, after all. That eviction notice was about as subtle as a cheap john's pitch-what am I supposed to do with myself between now and seven-thirty tonight?"

"You'll find some way to amuse yourself, walking the streets," he said. "You always did."

She turned slowly and walked by him to the door. Her smile became sad and mocking by turns. "And besides being unique," she said, "you've got the character of a billy goat."

When she was gone he took the elevator down to the lobby and turned right, to the row of public telephone booths opposite the cashier's desk. He closed the booth door and lifted a sheaf of folded papers from his inside jacket pocket, flattened them out, and uncapped his fountain pen before he lifted the receiver and gave the operator a Montreal number and his Bell credit-card identification. He poised the pen and laid his expressionless gaze on the pages before him-coded lists, typed on phosphor-treated flashpaper which would erupt at a single spark and be consumed instantly. It was a precaution he had learned from a bookie in Chicago.

"Nine-six-nine-seven?"

"Mr. Senna, please."

"Who's calling?"

"You'd better learn to recognize my voice, honey."

"Oh-uh, it must be a bad connection, Mr. Villiers. I'm sorry. I'll put him on right away. Hold on, please."

"Mace? Right on time, boy, just like Mussolini's trains. How're they hanging?"

Villiers looked at his watch. "All right, Sal. I haven't got time for the rundown today. Just give me the totals."

Senna's abrasive voice rolled off a series of numbers. Villiers copied them down in his crabbed hand. There was interference on the line; at one point he could hardly hear Senna. "Let me have that last one again."

When he finished he put the pen down and glanced out across the lobby. "How secure are we on this line?"

"Where are you? Public phone?"

"Yes."

"Then we're okay," Senna said. "Hell, we pay that electronics team fifty grand a year to inspect this joint for bugs every three weeks, with random spot checks in between. They were just here Wednesday. We're fine, it ain't tapped."

"All right. Then tell me this. How do I get in touch with Civetta?"

"Sally or Vic?"

"Vic. He's the top man, isn't he?"

"He cracks the whip, all right. But what do you want him for? He can swallow you whole."

"Don't count on that. I may need some fast financing on a deal I'm working on."

"From Vic Civetta? Count your fingers if you do. He'd steal the pennies off a dead man's eyes."

"I'm not a dead man."

"Yeah. Listen, there's safer ways."

Villiers said, "Not for the amount of money I've got in mind. But I want to be absolutely sure Civetta's big enough to handle it before I approach him. Can he deliver?"

"How big?"

"Very big. Maybe nine figures."

Senna whistled. Villiers said, "I can't take the time it would take to go through legitimate sources. They'd take six months to check out something this big. Besides, the banks don't consider me a good risk."

"God knows why not, with your track record. They ought to be getting in line to lend you money, Mace."

"To be sure. But they've got a strange notion of where to draw the line between genteel Yankee cunning and dishonesty."

It made Senna chuckle again. "Okay. Vic can handle it if he wants to. Every motherin' dollar in Manhattan goes through his hands on its way to the kitty, and a piece of every dollar rubs off. It adds up."

"I get the point-he's big enough. Next question: is he reliable enough?"

"If he wasn't, the organization would have replaced him with somebody who was."

"How do I approach him?"

"I can think of a lot of ways, but there's one that'll save time and trouble. Just let me know when you want it set up. I'll call Sally Civetta, and he'll arrange it direct. That way we avoid half a dozen middlemen."

"Good. I'll know within a couple of weeks whether I'm going to need it or not."

"Just give me twenty-four hours to set it up. No big deal. I wouldn't give it a thought. Oh, say, there's a nut-case Englishman in town with a Duesenburg for sale. I thought you might-"

"Save it, Sal, I'm expecting a call. I'll talk to you Monday." Villiers hung the phone on the hook and glanced at his watch, folded the flashpapers, and put them away in his pocket. Through the glass booth doors he watched an ample-rumped girl cross the lobby; his expression changed slightly, and then the telephone rang and he reached for it, still watching the girl.

"Yes?"

"This is Steve Wyatt."

The girl disappeared beyond the range of his vision. He said, "What have you got to report?"

"I got hold of a set of keys to Howard Claiborne's office files and had duplicates made. I expect to do what you asked me to do sometime over the weekend when there's no one in the office."

"Keep an eye out for the building security people."

"Do you take me for an idiot, Mr. Villiers?"

"I'll let you know after I've seen how you perform."

"I'll perform. Don't worry about it. I've had enough practice at breaking and entering to know the drill. I'm like you, Mr. Villiers-I was born four days late and I've been running to catch up ever since. Don't worry about me."

"I'm not worried," Villiers said. "You are."

The youth uttered a harsh laugh that did not convey the nonchalance it was intended to express. Villiers let the silence hang until Wyatt spoke again: "I'll do the job, okay? You don't need to badger me. Anything else on your mind?"

“Sonny,” Villiers said in a mild voice, “you need to watch your tone with me. Don’t let it slip your mind I’m the one who can put you away.”

“Maybe you can’t afford to,” Wyatt said, insolent and cocky. “You need me right now.”

“Nobody’s indispensable to me. You’re expendable. Use your head, and we’ll get along.”

“I get along better with people when I know where I stand with them. I still want to know what’s in this for me.”

“You’re in too much of a hurry.”

“Am I? You’re asking me to dig skeletons out of important people’s closets. The least you can do is toss me a bone.”

“I’m about to put a corporation in your lap. Will that satisfy you?” Because no one could see him in the booth, Villiers allowed himself to smile.

Wyatt said, “All right, Mr. Villiers, now you’ve got the mule’s attention. Go on.”

The smile broadened slightly, and went. “I’ve put in a takeover bid for a small company called Melbard Chemical. You know it?”

“I’ve seen the logo.”

“There’s an old man on the board of directors who controls half a million shares. He’s got a grip on them an ape couldn’t pry loose. I need those shares to get control of the company. It’s a domino situation-if the Melbard bid collapses, I lose a string of important things beyond it. I need to have Melbard in my pocket by Monday morning.”

“It’s a tall order,” Wyatt said, “but it sounds intriguing. Where do I fit in?”

“I’m beginning to learn they don’t call society ‘The Four Hundred’ for nothing. All of you seem to know each other. The old man who’s in my way is pushing eighty, he’s the only surviving director from the original board of the Merchants and Maritime Trust Bank, and one of the other founding directors of that bank in nineteen-twenty-four was Robert Phelps Wyatt.”

“My grandfather. Sure.”

“According to the information I’ve put together, this old man used to bounce you on his knee. He still keeps in touch with your mother.”

“You wouldn’t be talking about Arthur Rademacher, by any chance?”

“I was beginning to wonder whether you’d come up with the right name before I had to give it to you.”

“All right, it’s Arthur Rademacher. I know him, he knows me. Where does that get us?”

“How much does he know about your record?”

“I have no idea. Not very much, I imagine. I’ve been discreet.”

“Not discreet enough.”

“You don’t have to remind me. But nobody else but you would have had any reason to sic private detectives on me.”

Villiers said, “Then we’ll assume Rademacher doesn’t know the sordid details.”

“I don’t like your brand of humor very much, Mr. Villiers.”

“You’ll get used to it. Now, Rademacher got out from under the Market crash of twenty-nine by methods which, not to put too fine a point on it, could be described as devious. Questionable. Nothing actionable, of course-it’s too long ago, there’s a statute of limitations, but just the same he’s got a reputation to

uphold, and his family has got a reputation to uphold, and in your circles nothing matters much except reputation."

"How the hell did you find out anything about what an old man did forty years ago?"

"The same way I found out about your activities of five years ago."

"Okay, okay," Wyatt said. "Go ahead."

"I need a lever to move Rademacher. You're the lever. By now the old man thinks his secret's safe forever. It will hit him hard when you spring it on him."

"When I spring it on him?"

"Coming from you, it will hurt more. You're one of his people, not an outsider. Once he knows you're onto him, he'll have to come around. Exposure in his own crowd could ruin him, and he's too old to start over. I want you to pry him loose from those half-million shares."

"I take it you made him an offer. Why'd he turn it down?"

"He doesn't want to see a venerable company like Melbard taken over by an upstart art-gallery chain."

"Art gallery?"

"The front I'm using. I've made him a legitimate offer; when you hang up, call Hackman, he'll give you all the details."

"All right," Wyatt said.

"It's got to be done fast. I want Rademacher pried loose from control by Sunday at the latest."

"I'll go out there tomorrow," Wyatt said.

"Lean on him," Villiers told him. "It will be worth your while."

"How?"

"I've got to have a man to put in charge of Melbard once I've got control of it-a straw board and an agreeable president. Why not you? You've got a respectable society name. I know those people-you'll be blackmailing Rademacher, but he'd rather be blackmailed by you than by an outsider. He'll be more willing to come around if he knows you're going in as the crown prince, ready to become president of the company as soon as the deal goes through."

"You're going to hand me the company just like that?"

"With strings. You won't be free to handle it your way."

Wyatt grunted. "In the long run, you'll get done with whatever you wanted it for. Then it'll be a drag on you. All I have to do is wait you out-you'll turn it loose sooner or later."

"Maybe," Villiers said, smiling again. "At least it's worth the gamble, from your point of view."

"Sure it is."

"Get it done fast," he said, and hung up. He pulled open the booth door and stood up. Two weeks, he thought. By two weeks from now I'll have the world in the palm of my hand.

Chapter 16

Russell Hastings.

Shortly after three o'clock Russ Hastings checked NCI's closing price on the ticker, scribbled the figures at the bottom of a column in his notebook, and buzzed his secretary. "Miss Sprague, ask the Exchange to have Herb Capps call me right away, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

He flipped back through the notebook and scowled. He had spent three days tracking investors who had recently bought blocks of NCI common. He had been able to reach only a handful; none of them had told him anything useful; by now they shifted together in his mind, as vague as the characters in a Russian novel.

Intercom buzz. "I have Mr. Capps on the line."

"Thank you… Hello, Herb? I see by today's close, NCI is up another two points for the week."

"Still worrying that bone, Mr. Hastings? You won't find much meat on it."

"Possibly. It happens I'm calling you about something else."

"That list of buyers I was going to send you. Look, I'm sorry about that. My secretary's out sick, I've been trying to put it all together myself, evenings. I'm a one-finger, hunt-and-peck typist, it's gone kind of slow. But I'll have it up to date and on your desk by Monday morning."

"All right. Thank you. I hope it's nothing serious-your secretary?"

"What? Oh, only a summer flu bug. She'll be back early in the week, I expect."

When Capps broke the connection, Hastings picked up the notebook and walked out past Miss Sprague's desk. She looked up. He discovered her neck was ropy, wondered that he'd never noticed it before, and said, "I'm going up to the boss's office. I need you to handle a small discreet job for me."

"Yes, sir?"

"See if you can find out if Herb Capps's secretary has been out sick this week. Don't let Capps find out you're inquiring about it."

"All right, sir."

He grinned at her and looked at his watch. "Buzz me in the field marshal's office if you find out about her before I come back."

He went down the hall to Gordon Quint's sanctum.

The fat man gave him an amiable glare. "What now?"

"My liege, I come bearing curious tidings." Hastings sat down without waiting to be asked. "Do you believe in coincidence?"

"Of course."

"I don't. Not unless every other possibility has been ruled out."

"Things are never neat and tidy," Quint said. "You have a suspicious mind."

"That's what I'm paid for, isn't it?"

"Let's have it, then."

Hastings flipped back the cover of his notebook. "There's been considerable escalation in purchases of NCI common, in blocks, by a large number of investors who don't want to be traced. Over the past seven weeks, all together one million eight hundred thousand shares of NCI have been traded. Of those shares, about two hundred thousand have been bought in small lots. That leaves a million six. Of which something like five hundred thousand shares have been bought by bona-fide institutional investors-banks, mutual funds, pension funds. Another eighty or a hundred thousand shares I can eliminate

from suspicion because I've been able to track down the buyers and they're reputable."

"Leaving a million shares you haven't yet accounted for," Quint said.

"Your math's good enough. Want to know who bought those one million shares?"

"That's childish. I don't enjoy riddles. Get on with it."

"It's one riddle I haven't found the answer to. You can follow those purchases just so far, and then a door slams in your face. Canadian front men. So-called mutual funds that turn out to be nothing more than dummies for unspecified stockholders. Anonymous numbered Swiss bank accounts. Corporations in Liechtenstein that won't divulge the names of their officers and principal stockholders. I've traced a quarter of a million dollars' worth to a call girl and another quarter of a million to a gangster. The other day you wanted to know if I had anything more than a hunch. Well?"

Quint grunted. He leaned on the leather arm of the chair and dipped his finger into the abalone-shell ashtray to stir candy wrappers as if they were tea leaves in which he expected to find an oracular message. Presently he looked up. "You are not making me a very happy man. I was looking forward to a quiet, untroubled weekend in the country."

"A thousand pardons if I've disturbed your royal slumbers."

"Oh, shut up, Russ."

Hastings grinned at him.

The fat man stirred and made a face. "You haven't finished, have you?"

"No. There are more curious coincidences. Herb Capps, the NCI floor specialist at the Big Board. That's number one. He promised me a list of buyers, but somehow he's managed to delay it from day to day, and I still haven't seen it. Is that coincidence? My secretary's trying to find out right now. Number two, Elliot Judd. I tried to reach him in Arizona. I intended to make it a personal call, just sound him out, see if he had anything on his mind. It would help to know if he's got suspicions of his own."

"Has he?"

"I didn't get a chance to find out. It seems he's not taking phone calls."

"That's hardly surprising. Does J. Paul Getty answer his phone every time it rings?"

"Judd and I are pretty close. He'd be happy to talk to me-unless he had a specific reason not to."

"Are you suggesting he knows something he'd rather not have us know?"

"It could be. Or it could be he isn't well enough to come to the phone. You see what that could lead to, don't you?"

Quint scowled at him. He was about to make a remark, but his interphone announced a call for Hastings; Quint handed him the phone and Miss Sprague said in Hastings' ear, "About Mr. Capps's secretary, she's been out of the office since Tuesday. One of the girls in the adjoining office overheard Mr. Capps calling a florist to send flowers to her at home. She's expected back at work Monday or Tuesday."

"Thank you," he said.

"Not at all."

He had to get up to cradle the phone; he stayed on his feet, restless and irritable. "The NCI floor specialist appears to be ruled out for now, but I'm not

scratching anybody off the list just yet. I wouldn't be surprised to find all kinds of people in this right up to their hairlines."

"Why?"

"Because it's big."

"Granted. But we still need to know whether Elliot Judd has an active part in it. Without that piece of information, we've got nothing."

"I know." Hastings put his hand on the back of the chair he had vacated and squeezed it until the knuckles whitened. "I want to fly out there."

"To Arizona?"

"Yes."

"If he won't come to the telephone, what makes you think he'll see you?"

"It would be awkward for him if he didn't-it would tell me something. Assume he's doing something illegal-would he risk confirming my suspicions by turning me away?"

"And you honestly think if he's concealing something you'll be able to sniff it out just by seeing him?"

"That's possible, isn't it?"

"It's also possible you'll put him on the alert and make it ten times as difficult for us to catch him."

"I think we have to take that chance," Hastings said.

"Why?"

"Because I don't really believe he's got anything to do with it. And if that's true, he's got to be warned. Right now. You see that, don't you?"

Quint hesitated. Finally he said, "When do you plan going?"

Hastings moved his grip from the chair, "The first flight I can get tomorrow morning."

"Very well," Quint said.

Chapter 17

Carol McCloud.

Carol McCloud had two telephones, both in the living room of the suite. One was her listed number; the bell was disconnected, she never knew if it was ringing. An answering service took her calls on that line.

The unlisted telephone rang. She was lounging on the divan with a book; in her occupation, with most of the day to herself, she had a good deal of time for reading.

"Hello?"

"Carol?"

A man's voice, calling her by her first name. She had the brief wild thought that there was only such a tiny handful of people in the whole world who would think of her when they spoke the name "Carol."

She said, "Hello, Mason," absenting all feeling from her tone.

"Have you got a date tonight?"

"How delicately you put it," she said. "It's Friday. What do you think?"

"Break it."

"My clients don't like that sort of thing."

"Break it," he said again. "Find somebody else to take your place."

"If I could be replaced that easily at the last minute," she said, "I wouldn't be in my tax bracket."

He laughed. Over the phone it was a hard, metallic sound. He said, "That's my own line you're using against me. Do you think that's fair?"

"Since when have you ever worried about whether anything was fair?"

"Break your date," he said. "I'll be there at seven."

Click.

She put the receiver down slowly and glanced at the Seth Thomas clock on the mantel-ten past five.

She had to make nine phone calls before she was able to find a suitable girl to cover for her. Afterward she went around the apartment doing meaningless busy things-adjusting ashtrays, moving a chair six inches, fiddling with air-conditioners. She was too angry to go back to her book.

In the bathroom mirror she inspected the fresh bruise on her right cheek and applied a new coat of makeup to cover it; the bruise had come on top of an old one that hadn't quite healed, and her cheek stung with throbbing agony.

An East Side hotel manager had called yesterday-he had four tycoons from the Coast looking to have a party. She had rounded up three girls and shepherded them to the appointed suite. The four tycoons were in real estate, and there was an hour's bragging about the millions they had made from Southern California land, after which they began to complain that the hotel manager had made them shell out the price of a small aircraft carrier and you girls God damn better be worth it.

The girls gave the johns a full-scale stag act. Three of the tycoons were high enough to loosen up and enjoy it. The fourth was beyond that stage into drunken surliness. He babbled something about his wife, something about Good Christian Women, something about Sin and Communists, and he belted her across the face. She laid his face open with her fingernails and kneed him in the groin and left him to his three companions, who shut him up.

It didn't happen often; it had been a long time since she had accepted a john without references. She didn't like being mauled; she feared exposure, the unknown allegiances of strangers. There were only two things she feared more. One was time, which would age her; the other was that voice on the telephone just now.

She went into the bedroom and put on her leotards and rolled out the mat on top of the carpet. She had done her exercises once today, but now she did them again, needing that mindless concentration on ritual physical movement. She spent an hour at it, exhausted herself, and knew she would be stiff in the morning; she took a hot shower, and a cold shower, and creamed and powdered her body, and after that she dressed herself in floor-length satin hostess pajamas. She took a great deal of care and time with her hair and her eye makeup, but just the same it was only six-forty when she was done. She went into the living room and sat down facing the door, folded her hands in her lap, and waited with no expression at all on her face.

He always made her vividly aware of the past she didn't want to remember. She remembered the sagging clapboard Victorian farmhouse with its paint long gone, weathered to a splintery gray. Kentucky, childhood, endless cuddlings by numerous "uncles." Her father had been an unidentified sailor who had spent one night in Lexington on his way to New London. About the only home she

remembered was the old farmhouse, with a rusty De Soto up on blocks in the yard, a sagging washday line hung between house and tree, chickens and dogs, two rusty truck fenders, and a dented galvanized milk can. They were on the relief rolls, recipients of charity packages of clothes and food at Christmastime. Her mother had been a sleazy middle-aged bag of Southern discomforts, too distracted by sex and alcohol to mind living in lackluster filth.

She remembered herself, a child of nine, curiously watching through an open window, seeing her mother step out of her clothes and leave them on the floor while a man, whose two-and-a-half-ton truck sat warm-hooded in the drive, came into sight putting a can of beer to his lips, wiping his mouth, brutally crushing the empty can in one hand. She remembered the torn undershirt, a wedge out of the cloth open and flapping at the side, revealing the man's hirsute pelt. The man tossed the mangled can away and reached impatiently for her mother's sagging naked body. The clatter of the can on the linoleum floor, the resigned flatness of her mother's withdrawn face, the man's blasphemous laughing remarks, and then the crash and squeak of the bed.

One day her mother had gone down to the crossroads to get a bottle of whiskey. She hadn't come back. Somebody said she took up with a salesman driving through. Carol had been twelve then; she remembered teen-age boys sneaking looks at her legs, a teacher who'd fondled her developing breasts, the groping hands of the men folk of the hill families who'd passed her from hand to hand after her mother ran off. She had done chores, now and then gone briefly to school. One seventeen-year-old had taken her to a boondock party, and he had put something in her drink that had made her feel good all over. Whatever it was, it ran her up the walls. She had stayed with him in the woods for four days. Afterward someone said something, and the boy's father horse-whipped her off the farm.

At fifteen she was slinging hash in a crossroads tavern. The cook's young brother came home from the Army, he was a smiling dandy with worldly charm, and they were married in the spring by a circuit preacher. Their sensuous delirium had lasted almost a week, after which Floyd had turned sulky and cross and dragged her off with him, to Concord and then to Pensacola, and then to Houston, on the trail of elusive wealth: "You want to eat beans the rest of yo' life?" He had borrowed money to open a Japanese car franchise, but it had failed; he had wildcatted an oil field and hit a dry hole; he met some gamblers, and they went to Miami.

He had become rough and cursory in bed, mounting her and pumping his spurt into her and leaving her hung up dry. She learned to make her body a nerveless thing, without shame or sensation, a bitter insensitive receptacle for his absentminded pleasures. He was making enemies then, with his surly ways, and they were not the kind of enemies a man could afford. He had already become a compulsive loser; now he ran his gambling debts up so high there was nothing to do but run for it. By then she had a spiderweb of scars on her buttocks from his tantrums. He refused to leave her behind; they left in the middle of the night, traveling in a car he had stolen, driving across the South by night, holing up by day. She was sixteen then, pregnant, and terrified. They fled into the Southwest and ditched the stolen car in Amarillo, hitchhiked to Albuquerque, and stopped there. He found work pumping gas in a filling station and began to lay plans to rob the till.

Whenever she argued with him, he beat her. He told her to meet him at the gas station at two in the morning, and she was too frightened to refuse; and when she arrived at the appointed hour, she found him bending over the owner's body, searching the pockets for the cash-register keys-he had smashed the owner's larynx with a tire iron. He emptied out the register, and they drove north in a car someone had left overnight in the gas station for a lube job. They left it parked on a side street in Trinidad, took a bus to Colorado Springs, stole a pickup truck out of a shopping-center parking lot, and drove through the night across the Rockies to Grand Junction, where a man spotted them having coffee in a diner and followed them outside. The man was from Miami.

They left with a squeal of tires, but the pickup was no match for the green Buick with Florida plates. The Buick followed them at a steady distance until they started up into the mountains toward Aspen; then it closed the distance and cut across a bend in front of them, crowded them away from the inside cliff, and forced them off the road. The pickup turned over twice before it hit the creek. She ended up crushed against her husband in the mangled wreckage of the cab. She was bleeding at her nose, in cuts on her shoulder and forearm, and between her legs.

The man from Miami came down the hill, scrambling in expensive shoes on the loose shale footing. She closed her eyes to slits and held her breath. He wrenched open the door and poked around until he was satisfied her husband was dead. Then he said, "You can open your eyes, I ain't going to hurt you."

Still she didn't stir, and after he slapped her a couple of times he left, evidently satisfied she was unconscious and couldn't identify him. She waited till she heard the Buick drive away, and then she dragged herself up to the road, bleeding, and waited for a car to come along.

In the clinic she told them a simpleminded story, some of it true. She said she came from Kentucky, she was an orphan, a man had got her pregnant and deserted her, she had been hitchhiking west to find some town where nobody knew her where she could have her baby. She had thumbed a ride with the man in the pickup truck, and he had lost control of it and gone over the rim. It was a simple, straightforward story, and she stuck to it when the police came and wanted to know how much she knew about the dead driver of the pickup. It seemed he was wanted for murder in New Mexico and several charges of auto theft and transporting stolen cars across state lines. She had thrown away her wedding ring in the woods along the road, and she played dumb with the cops, and after a while they left her alone.

She got out of the clinic after ten days, no longer pregnant; the wreck had made her miscarry. There were five forgettable months of hash-slinging in a diner, and then a man in a Lincoln took her away to Las Vegas for his pleasure. He was not a disagreeable sort, and for a day or two she even felt a small echo of the needs that had been deadened in her; but he went on to the Coast without her. She took jobs and survived, teaching herself to be hard. Now and then she dreamed in a far corner of her mind that one day, with someone, she would rediscover the frantic roaring tumult of eager happiness.

By the time she was nineteen, with her looks, her good body, she had climbed fast from a job in the pony lineup of a downtown Vegas dive to a good post as hostess in the show-bar room of a hotel on the Strip. And then one night she had come in to work and a man sitting at the bar had stared at her,

then turned to talk rapidly to his companion. The man was the Buick driver from Miami.

The old terrors came back, froze her, put a sour knot in her throat. She was here, alive, and she was a witness to the murder he had committed. He wouldn't do anything here, not in this crowd. But later, when she left, he would follow her. She began to think of how it must be done, how to elude him. She went through the motions of the job, guided people to their tables, and distributed menus, wearing a mechanical smile, keeping the man from Miami in sight in the corner of her vision. She would slip out through the kitchen, she decided, drive home, pack her things, and drive straight through the night to Los Angeles. Change her name again and get a different kind of job. She decided it all with numb resignation; there wasn't any room for regret.

But then the man from Miami got up off the bar stool and headed for the door with his companion. The two of them stopped in the doorway and looked straight at her, with never a break in their expressions. His companion was a tall young man with a hard and handsome face, the eyes of a stalking predator; yet he was not a gangster like the one from Miami, she could tell that much. The face was lofty, self-assured, filled with cool ambition and arrogant intelligence. If he had been an actor he would have been singled out for "star quality." He had a sensual presence, even across the room.

When the two of them walked out of the club, her dread returned. She got through the rest of her shift and walked out through the kitchen, concentrating her attention on the simple act of walking steadily. She said good night to the kitchen staff with a nervous smile; she came around the back of the hotel and swept the parking lot with a quick, frightened glance. No one was in sight. She hurried to her car and got in, and had to sit there motionless before she summoned the strength to start the car. Her nerves twanged with taut-drawn vibration; a red pulse thudded in her eyes. She shot out of the parking lot and drove fast through the back streets, taking a dark route home, knowing enough to choose the deserted streets so that she could see if she was being followed.

No one tailed her. She began to feel more calm; driving the last ten blocks, she was deciding exactly what things to pack and what things to leave behind. She pulled into the driveway of the little stucco house, switched off the headlights, and got out of the car, and for a moment stood by the spiked yucca plant in the dusty front yard to look both ways along the street. All the parked cars in sight were familiar. It was three in the morning; there were no pedestrians abroad. Presently she went up the gravel walkway, unlocked the front door, and went into the dark house. She flicked the living-room wall switch; the light came on, she turned into the room, and saw the tall young man with the hard arrogant face sitting in the armchair, smiling coolly.

She stood perfectly still. Her heart crashed alarmingly. She felt faint with dread, tightened her muscles against it, gave him a stare as cool and hard as his own, not wanting to give anything away.

He seemed in no hurry to speak. Finally, broken by the silence, she breathed, "How did you get here?" and realized immediately it was a stupid thing to say.

"Rocco dropped me off," he replied in a reasonable, resonant voice. "Which is why you didn't see a strange car outside. Take it easy, Rocco's not here."

"How did you find this place?"

"I own a piece of the hotel. It was no trick to find out where you lived."

She took a deep breath. "All right. What do you want?"

"Easy-gentle down. Why don't you have a drink?"

"I don't want a drink. What do you want of me?"

"You're lovely," he said, as if he hadn't heard the question. "You'll have to study voice modulation, of course-that hill-country twang won't do. You'll need to learn how to walk and turn like a model, how to smile and pose. How to do things in bed. Or do you already know that much?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I bought you from Rocco," he said. "You belong to me now."

She stared at him, full of bewildered dread. She had to put a hand against the wall to steady herself.

He crossed his legs and selected a cigarette from a silver case. "I'll explain it very clearly, just once," he said, "so that you'll never need to ask questions. Pay attention."

She watched him with terrified fascination. "I hope you start making sense," she said, fighting back the impulse to scream.

He said, "You're going by the name of Carol McCloud now. It's not the name you started out with. You were Minnie Jackson until you got married, and that made you Minnie Bragg. Floyd Bragg was into the loan sharks in Miami-Rocco claims he carried Floyd longer than his mother did. You and Floyd ran out on Floyd's debts, which is always a mistake, particularly when you're dealing with people like the crowd Rocco works for. You dropped out of sight for a while, but then Floyd killed a man in New Mexico. The police found his fingerprints all over the tire iron. The alarm went out, and Rocco's people came in on it. It wasn't too hard to trace you two from there-it was mainly a question whether the police or Rocco and his friends would find you first. I won't bother with the rest of it-I've only gone over this much of it to convince you I do have all the facts, I'm not just bluffing."

"Go ahead," she said in a thin voice. "You've got the floor."

He said, "You were in that gas station with Floyd when he killed the owner. How much do you know about criminal law? If you're involved in a crime like robbery, and somebody gets killed in the process, all parties to the lesser crime are equally guilty of felony murder, no matter who did the actual killing. Do I make it clear to you? There's still a warrant out on Minnie Bragg for first-degree murder, they still have the mandatory death penalty for felony murder in New Mexico, and there's no statute of limitations on a charge of murder. You'll never get off the hook, Minnie-your head's on that chopping block for the rest of your life. That's why Rocco isn't here-you can't threaten him, not without admitting who you are and going back to Albuquerque to stand trial for murder."

She whispered, "I wasn't even there."

"Where?"

"When he killed the man. I wasn't there."

"Legally it doesn't matter. Get that through your head-you shared in the proceeds of the robbery. That's all it takes to prove you're guilty of felony murder. They don't even have to prove whether you were there or not."

"How do I know you're not lying?"

"Call a lawyer. Go down to the library in the morning and look it up. Ask somebody you trust. Do I look stupid enough to lie to you about something you could verify that easily?"

His eyes were locked on hers; she felt her face flaming. She looked away. "What do you want of me? Who are you?"

“My name is Mason Villiers.”

The greater part of communication between people, she had learned, was nonverbal. It was in gestures and expressions, postures and physical movements; in the tone of a voice, even in the pace and depth of a person’s breathing, the pinched-artery throb of a crossed leg, the way he moved his hands through his hair-things seen and absorbed, even if not recognized consciously for the signals they were.

What made it impossible to detect Mason Villiers’ emotions was not his choice of words, the carelessly insulting diction, or the sometimes brutal impersonality of his sentences, but rather the control he exercised over all his physical responses. He let no clues escape. Rarely was he caught off guard; rarely were his reactions not studied and deliberate. Even his rages were not genuine: they were calculated for their effects. Sometimes he appeared to inflict outrageous insults on people just to see what the response might be.

Trying to understand him was like trying to hit him-something she did just once. Her fist cracked against the taut muscles and stopped cold, penetrating no farther, doing no damage, achieving nothing except to make him laugh at her.

He bedded her often, sometimes with drive and fury, but no one could have called it making love; sex was like food to him-something to nourish physical needs, not emotional ones-and if it gave him pleasure he made no indication of it. She was never sure how he really felt about her, if in fact he had feelings about her at all. She was useful to him, that was all: useful with men from whom he needed favors, men to whom he owed favors, men he wanted to control with infrared photographs. He told her once that the world was filled with women of glamour and beauty but she had something unique: “You make them think of Marlene Dietrich,” he said. “Call it mystery.” There were stag parties in expensive hotels. There were weekends for which johns paid fortunes. Three thousand dollars for a six-day cruise. Villiers never bought her gifts that were not part of the role he created for her, and he never paid her except in clothes, books, coiffures, training in voice and body movement-none of it given personally. He made her pay her own way from the start; he made it clear he was not going to keep her.

She became wholly professional about it. For her it wasn’t hard, she didn’t have to learn that most toads were not Prince Charmings in camouflage, they were just toads. She studied Villiers and by emulating him taught herself to close her mind to all feelings when she went through the ritual stag body grinds, pulling her dress slowly over her head until her breasts popped out, servicing panting drunks with no more feelings about it than she would have devoted to the act of feeding pigs at a trough. She invented an elaborate litany of self-justification (It pays well; everybody sells himself for something; what harm in taking a sucker if that’s what he wants? Might as well get paid for what you’d give away anyway.) but she soon discovered that all these rationalizations were part of the standard lexicon of every prostitute. Every whore had an excuse. After she learned that, she stopped trying to defend herself. No apologies necessary, thank you very much. Perhaps there was something wrong with her. Her conscience didn’t trouble her; she wanted only to be safe-she just didn’t want to be caught and sent back to Albuquerque. Whatever it took to ensure that, she would do. She became neat, calm, careful. She prepared for the worst; it was possible some freak accident could happen someday, someone

would find her out, New Mexico would extradite her. Not likely, perhaps, but possible. With that in mind, she had made plans accordingly. Over the years she had set aside a growing emergency hoard, though it hadn't been easy. Her high prices had to include the expenses of a considerable overhead-the grease sheet: bell captain, house dick, elevator boys, the cop on the beat, the precinct captain, two assistant district attorneys; and the weekly medical checkup, clothes, high rent. But she had saved enough to pay the highest fee of the country's best trial lawyer. Before a jury, a good lawyer, together with her own good looks and acting ability, would be more than a match for any hick district attorney who might try to put her away. And so, slowly and deliberately, she was paving a path out of Mason Villiers' trap.

He arrived promptly at seven; he said very little; he only watched her unbind her breasts and mounted her with unusual frenzy, spending himself in a harsh impersonality of pounding lust, sinking back afterward to lie in hard-breathing satiety.

She said, "Either you haven't had a woman all week or it's a very big business deal."

"You know me too well," he growled, and rolled off the bed to get dressed.

It was strange, she thought; he still had the capacity to terrify her, and yet in some utterly unlikely way she had become fond of him. She lay watching the light change on the hard planes of his face as he moved around the room; unaccountably she said, "Have you ever had anything close to you but your shirt, Mason?"

For a brief moment his hands became still. He did not glance at her, but she saw that she had scored a point and she took momentary satisfaction from it. Then he brought himself around, under rigid control, to look at her; he said, "Your concern is most touching."

"Have you ever loved anybody?" she said, and was alarmed by her boldness.

It made him laugh. "After all the things that have happened to you, you can still ask a question like that." He shook his head. "You'll never grow up as long as you believe in love, Carol."

"Oh, I believe in it. I believe in money, too. Some people have it, some people don't."

"Keep talking like that, and you'll end up looking like a fool," he told her.

She laughed, suddenly and with wild abandon; she could see it disturbed him, and that was what she wanted. He almost allowed his anger to show. She said demurely, "Yassuh, boss."

He rammed his shirttail into his trousers and planted his feet and gave her his undivided attention. "You're uncommonly impertinent and independent tonight."

"Am I? Never mind. Tell me something-with all the respectable women you can get for a snap of your fingers, why keep coming back to me?"

"Because I taught you to be the best."

"That's not quite what I was fishing for-I was hoping you might admit it was because you like me."

His head lifted slightly; lamplight reflected from his eyes. "I don't dislike you," he said. "I don't dislike anybody, as long as they don't get in my way."

"At least I'm not in your way."

"You make me wonder about that."

"Do I? It's probably good for you."

"Have you been smoking pot?"

"No. Only thinking."

"Don't think, Carol. It's not your strong point."

"What would you say if I told you I was thinking of retiring?"

"You?" He became amused. "You, Carol? A few more years of ringside tables and sable coats and you'll be too whipped and worn-out to make expenses at a plumbing-supply convention in Rapid City. You'll get passed down the line from hand to hand until some smart guy comes along and takes you on a little vacation to Hong Kong, and then they'll cop your passport and unload you into a crib, where you'll get slapped down so far you won't even want to come home."

She stood up, full of languid grace, her hair fanning down her well-shaped back; she smiled frostily. "What a pig you can be." She went into the bathroom, showered, and put on beige lace undies and a careful dose of scent, and emerged to find him smoking a cigarette, going through her closet with one hand. He was holding out the sleeve of a full-length Schulman Emba mink coat. "This is new," he observed.

"A great many things are."

He turned to face her. "What's all this about, Carol?"

"I want off the hook, Mason. I want to pick and choose among the dirty jobs to suit myself."

"Are you going to force me to remind you of the same tired old things we've been over before?"

"I'm not afraid of Albuquerque anymore. With a good lawyer I think I can beat the rap."

"Possibly. And if you did, what do you suppose Rocco would be inclined to do?"

"You could use your influence. Persuade him I have no intention of making trouble for him."

"Why should I do that?"

"Out of friendship, Mason. It's the kind of thing a friend does for a friend."

When he made no answer, she added mildly, "All you have to do is point out to him that even if I did accuse him of anything, it would only be my word against his."

He began to smile; he said nothing, and Carol said, "That's right, isn't it? Rocco's known that all along-that's why he never made trouble for me. It never had anything to do with you, did it? You just used it as something to hold over my head. It only worked as long as I didn't think it through."

"You've learned to use your head, haven't you?"

"I just don't see how it could possibly be worth your while to go to the trouble of turning me over to the New Mexico cops, not when I'd probably be acquitted anyway. Look, why not drop it right here and go on like equals?"

He shook his head gently, watching her. She said in a rougher voice, "You just can't do it, can you? You just can't have any kind of relationship with anybody where your money or your blackmail doesn't give you an edge."

He ignored it; he said, "You're ass-deep in muck, Carol. With your history it's far too late for a declaration of independence."

"Why? What could you prove against me? You can't use anything you've got on me without implicating yourself. You'd hardly do that. You've got thousands of feet of infrared film on me, but you'd never use it because you can't afford to

expose the men who appear on the film with me. Besides, who would you show it to? I haven't got a family. The law wouldn't care, and even if they did, I'd survive a fifteen-day sentence for prostitution."

"I admire your guts," he said. "But you haven't thought it all the way through. Working for me, you've learned too much about too many people. Some of them couldn't afford to let you off the hook, even if I could. You're locked in, Carol. There's never been any way out. You're a white chip in a no-limit game, and there are too many people in it who wouldn't care if they had to tie weights on you and drop you off a motor launch in Long Island Sound."

"You could keep them off my back, if you wanted to. You could convince them I was no danger to them. I've built up a complete new identity, false passport and bank accounts-I can fade out of sight and come to the surface in England or on the Riviera with a whole new identity. If you cover for me, the rest of them will never find me."

"Maybe I could," he said, turning toward the door, "but I won't. Not now. Maybe I'll think about it later. In the meantime, you'll stay put and do as you're told."

She felt exhausted; she had nothing further to say. At the door he paused and said absently, "That lawyer from the SEC who asked you about my shares-have you heard from him again?"

"No."

"All right," he said. "Don't do anything foolish." He gave her a flat, hard glance with his hooded eyes, and went.

She put on a dress, walked into the living room, and stared at the door he had shut behind him; crossed the room to the stereo and put an album on the turntable. It pushed a slow, soothing beat through the room. She was adjusting the volume when she heard a knock at the door.

Surprised, frowning a little, she walked to the door.

It was Russ Hastings.

He smiled and said, "May I come in? I'm unarmed."

Not certain how to respond, she stood looking at him. He was dressed in a rumpled seersucker suit, and he had an unassailable amiability on his pleasant, blocky face. He was searching her face with an odd intensity, but his manner was pleasantly abrasive, like a coarse towel after a bath. He said, "What a beauty you are, Carol," and grinned at her. "Look here-my palms are sweating from the effort of pronouncing your name."

"Good Lord," she said. She shook her head in amazement. "The hell with it. I need cheering up-come on in, then." She stepped back to let him enter; she thought, I'm being a fool.

Chapter 18

Russell Hastings.

She walked away from him into the room, moving slowly, because it was more graceful; all her movements were studied.

Russ Hastings said, shutting the door, "You're gorgeous."

"What's on your mind? I'm not sure I should have let you in."

"I think I'd like a drink. I don't mind fixing it myself-have one with me?"

"Why not?"

He went to the bar and watched her settle on one of the sectional pieces, drawing her lovely long legs up under her with a trim display of swelling calves and shapely ankles.

He mixed two drinks, heavy on the Scotch, and said to her, "I have been thinking about you all week. I decided Wednesday that I was in love with you, and Thursday that I wasn't. Today I'm somewhere in the middle. Maybe I'm not in love with you, but what the hell does it matter? Whatever you want to call it, maybe it's a way to ease loneliness. I need somebody-I guess that's all it amounts to."

He brought the drink across to her. "Very grave," he judged. "Very self-possessed and cool and competent and bemused by my foolishness. Very beautiful, above all. The trouble is, you see, in my vague fantasies it's far too easy to see you making a warm, serene home."

"You're drunk."

"Only a little." He tasted his drink, standing above her. "That piano record makes the room feel emptier, doesn't it? It's a good night for blues."

"I'm sorry you're so depressed," she said evenly. "Is it something you want to talk about?"

"Excuse me. I thought I already had."

"Oh," she said. "That. I'm ignoring your little speech-hadn't you noticed?"

"Then I'll repeat it. I've decided I've fallen in love with-"

"Horse shit," she said, smiling up at him. "You've decided. Sure you have. A strange bedfellow is better than none-that's about the extent of it, isn't it?"

He took his drink to a chair facing her and sat back, taking a long pull and feeling the heat of the whiskey travel his throat and chest. "I suppose you get this sort of thing from drunks all the time. You must have learned to shut your ears off-build a shell of indifference, it's no good anybody trying to push themselves against it. That right? Okay, let's see if I can bust it down. What do you do if I ask you flat-out to marry me?"

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Proposing marriage to me."

His grin turned sheepish. "Who knows?"

"Don't you ever commit yourself to anything, Russ?"

He recoiled. "I guess I asked for that, didn't I?"

"I hate helping you pour salt in your own wounds, that's all."

He took another swallow and slid way down in his chair until he was sitting on the back of his neck. "Marry me. Just like that. How about it?"

"No."

"No pause for thought? No moment to consider how I could take you away from all this?" He waved his arm around.

She laughed. "You're funny when you're drunk."

He scowled. "I'm not sure it's altogether a joke."

"Let's pretend it was."

"Looking at you now, I'm absolutely certain of it. I do love you."

"And how would you feel tomorrow or next week? I recommend a cold bath and aspirin. Anyhow, this dewy-eyed love business repels me. I suppose most women have some sort of atavistic mating instinct for a warm cave and

children, but that got washed out of me a long time ago. Domesticity isn't my thing. A life sentence of dirty dishes and diapers and orthodontists' bills? Hah."

"You're a cruel and heartless wench, verily."

"You don't know me at all, Russ-and you're not going to. Nobody likes a whore for long."

"Ouch."

"I've got too many fingerprints on me, and they all belong to men who know there's nothing any of them asks that I won't give them. Nothing. You understand?"

"Is that your biggest artillery? Because if it is, you've just fired a blank. I'm not scared off. This is the age of enlightenment and Aquarius."

In a rich Kentucky twang she said, "Hawss shee-yit."

He said, "I was sitting in a bar watching my drink sweat, and suddenly I said to the glass, 'And here I sit alone with you.' So I came up here. I haven't got a lot of money on me. I suppose you wouldn't be impressed by my wallet. What would you charge to marry me?"

"You've beaten that joke to death, Russ."

He felt a little dizzy; he sat up straighter. It took him a moment to marshal his thoughts. Finally he spoke with slow care. "I am getting very old," he said. "The world I grew up in seems to have disappeared someplace while I wasn't looking. I grew up equipped with a sense of how things ought to be. Standards-things that ought to matter, right and wrong. There used to be a point to things, you know? But now everything seems to be beside the point, somehow-I don't even know what the point is anymore. Look, I'm thinking of tossing it all up and going out West, live in the country someplace and raise dairy cows. How'd you like that?"

"I'd hate it. I'm an indoor girl. I like soft pillows and air-conditioners, and I never enjoyed getting dirt in my hair."

"You sound just like my ex-wife," he mused. "What was her name? Lorelei."

"You told me her name was Diane."

"So I did."

"Lorelei was the woman who lured men to their deaths."

"The same," he said, "the very same." He blinked at her and waved his half-empty glass extravagantly before he brought it to his mouth.

"Do you always get romantic and maudlin when you're drunk?"

"My darling, I am always romantic and maudlin. It shows more when I'm drunk, that's all."

The stereo rejected and switched itself off. After that the room was thick with silence until he roused himself groggily and peered at her. "I guess this is what they call a pregnant silence."

She gave him a distant smile; the telephone rang, and she went to it. He watched irritation and resignation chase each other across her face while she spoke and listened; she hung up, and her eyes looked harder than before. She disappeared into the bedroom for a moment and returned carrying a pair of shoes; she sat down and crossed her legs, arched one stockinged foot, and put a shoe on, sliding her forefinger around inside the heel like a shoehorn.

He said, "I find that whole series of movements insanely erotic. You don't suppose I'm a foot fetishist?"

"There are worse things."

He said, "You're throwing me out."

"Stay if you want. I have to go out. I may not be back for a while."

He said in a sour way, "Then you're not going to abandon all this and fly away thither with me."

"You give me an almost uncontrollable urge to snicker, Russ."

He nodded wisely. "All my life I've been a figure of ridicule and scorn."

"Oh, crap. You're all right, Russ, you're fine, all you need is a good stiff belt across the mouth to get you straightened out. Once you've broken loose from self-pity, you'll quit floundering around."

He said, "You're just full up to here with cynicism, aren't you? Only I suppose you call it realism. I never want to get that way myself, thank you."

She glanced at him with a bittersweet sort of smile. "Nobody wants to get that way," she said. "But we all do. You will, too."

"What for? Look, I am thinking about moving out West."

"Then do it. Good luck."

"Come with me, Carol."

He heard the small crisp snap of her purse, and he felt suddenly alone and forlorn. She came to him, bent down, and touched his cheek with a light, pecking kiss. "I hope you find a nice fluffy homey girl and have "steen babies and spend the rest of your life cuddling calves and fixing barbed-wire fences and hoisting beers at the corner saloon with the hands." She went toward the door.

"God damn it," he roared. "I'm flying to Arizona tomorrow morning."

"Forever?"

"I'll be back Monday," he said in a small voice.

"And you'll stay," she said. "This is where it's at, baby. All you have to do is make things matter." And she left.

He thrust himself angrily to his feet. What the hell; they were just two people who'd met one day. But by Christ she was lovely.

He would go home through the steamy, polluted evening and take an Alka-Seltzer, and in the morning he'd go and see Elliot Judd, and maybe, in the clean open solitude of the desert, he'd be able to sort himself out and decide what the hell to do with himself from here on, to justify his existence.

Chapter 19

Anne Goralski.

At the kitchen table, Anne had the telephone at her ear; she was listening with a hollow, sinking resignation to the endless unanswered ringing on the line.

Steve had come to her desk at five o'clock and told her he couldn't see her tonight. She had whispered, pleading, "When am I going to see you?"

"I told you, darling, I have to go out to my mother's. I always do on Friday evenings. No telling when I'll be back-I may stay over. But we'll be together tomorrow-we've got the whole weekend."

She had come home and sunbathed in the last sunlight on a towel on the buckling tarpaper roof. Her mind was full of Steve. She longed for him to return tonight; love had transfigured her existence-he had become the center of her

world; without him she was wrenched from life. She had started ringing his number at nine o'clock, wanting him tonight; she was dressed and ready.

She put the receiver down in its cradle and stood up to open the window wider. The heat was grotesque. She was beginning to turn away when she saw her father's figure come in sight at the corner.

Barney Goralski's heavy shoes thudded and echoed on the pavement. Isolated pedestrians swirled by, their faces as gray as the smoggy air. He was tramping the well-worn route from the taxi garage home, not hurrying, reluctant to arrive, and his head was ducked because he didn't need to look where he was going.

She sat down by the phone and dialed Steve's number quickly, and listened to it ring. She tensed at the heavy sound of her father's tread in the hall; she watched the door furtively. When the knob turned she cradled the phone.

His looming hulk filled the doorway; he came straight through into the kitchen shaking his head. "Rotten miserable day. How's your mother?"

"She had a headache-she's gone to bed."

"Yeah," he said, and opened the refrigerator. He took out a beer and pulled the snap-ring top; it came off with a pop and a hiss. He sat down at the tiny oilcloth-covered table and said again, "Rotten miserable day. Hot days like this the stinkin' commuters all bring their air-conditioned cars in. Been a puking jam all day long. Crawl all the way. Some clown didn't give himself enough time, wanted to make a train at Penn Station, naturally we missed it, and the sonofabitch blames me. I got the fare out of him, but not a nickel for a tip. Then I pick up some egghead professor insists we go the hard way, straight uptown through the traffic jam all the way to Columbia University, fifty minutes, for a twenty-cent tip. Big puking spender. Don't these guys know the stinkin' Internal Revenue assumes you make tips that amount to twenty percent of what shows on the meter? I gotta pay taxes on them tips whether I get it or not."

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. She could hear the abrasive scratch of his beard stubble when he rubbed it. His black, entrenched eyes came around to lie against her, and he said, "You ain't listening."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm waiting for a phone call."

"Yeah? How long you been waiting?" He loomed forward, scowling at her. "Gotchaself a boyfriend, hey?"

She couldn't keep from flushing; she felt her cheeks heat up. She nodded briefly.

Goralski said, "You look like you got hit with a ton a bricks. What's the guy's name?"

She shaped her mouth around the word: "Steve."

"Whyn'tcha bring him around here sometime?"

"I–I-"

His scowl darkened. "Ashamed of the way we live, ain'tcha? Christ, I can't blame you." He opened the refrigerator and lifted out another can of beer, yanked the ring-top opener off, and glugged out of the can, throwing his big head back to drink. He sat down opposite her at the little table, both huge hands wrapped around the can of beer while he brooded. He seemed to be lost in his own miseries, but suddenly, without looking up, he said, "You all dressed up like that for a date tonight? Kinda late for it, ain't it? Whatsa matter, he won't phone?"

“He’s gone to his mother’s for dinner.”

His head shot back, and he glared. “You’re ashamed to bring him here, let him see this slum we gotta live in, that’s okay. But he’s ashamed to take you home to meet his mother?”

“Poppa, he-”

“What kinda sonofabitch is this guy? Hah?”

“He’s wonderful,” she said. “He’s the best, Poppa, and I won’t have you-”

“You won’t have! That’s rich! This bastard don’t mind keeping you out nights till the sun comes up-you think I ain’t noticed? — but he won’t interduce you to his mother, hah? Christ, honey, y’unnerstand what I’m saying?”

Hot, stiff, eyes flashing, she said in a taut low voice that trembled, “I understand perfectly well, and I don’t want to listen to any more of-”

“You don’t? Christ, honey, you gotta listen to somebody. You got it sticking out all over you-you think you’re in love with this bastard, you’re taking it seriously, but he ain’t, he won’t even interduce you to his precious mother, right? You want love and marriage, and he wants something else, right? I know these guys, believe me-all he wants is sex.”

“That’s not so!”

“You think about it, honey. And while you’re with this guy, you see if you can tell yourself it ain’t just sex. You think I don’t know the way you kids carry on nowadays? Hell, I’m a broad-minded old sonofabitch, I don’t carry no horse whip, you know that. But this guy-Christ, I never even met the bastard, and I can read him like a book.”

“It’s not so! It isn’t!”

Her father lowered his eyes to the can of beer. He said softly, “Don’t try to persuade me, honey-see if you can persuade yourself first. Y’unnerstand what I mean?”

“All right,” she snapped viciously. “Maybe he is just toying with my affections. Maybe I’m just in a mood to have my affections toyed with.”

He murmured, “Don’t talk like that, Anne. Not to your old man.”

Wound up, she said with glittering anger, “Loving is more important than being loved, anyway. Isn’t it? What does it matter if-”

“It matters, honey. You think about him not taking you to meet his mother, and you think hard, and you see what you come up with.” He leaned forward suddenly and gripped her wrist. She tried to jerk back, but he held her in a tight fist; he said earnestly, “You really love him, Anne? You really want the guy? Then make him marry you before he leeches his way out!”

“What? How?”

“How have women done it for five thousand years?”

“Poppa!”

He released her and slumped back in his chair; his jowls seemed to sag. He said, “Forget that. I take it back. Christ, I got troubles of my own, honey, half the time I don’t know what I’m saying myself, y’know what I mean? It’s only, well, hell, I’d like to see you get yourself a good husband, get out of this rat hole here. Nothing’s ever gonna get any better here. You gotta get out of it while you can, honey. You gotta grab any chance you can get. And don’t worry about me and her. We’re all used up anyway-I don’t want you throwing your whole life away on a couple old wrecks like your mother and me. We got nothing left to look forward to. You have. You got your youth, which is a precious thing, y’unnerstand what I’m tryna tell you?”

"Stop talking like that, Poppa. I don't know what to think."

He said slowly, as if thinking it out with great care, "Listen to me, honey. When you're in love the way you are, you seem to lose a lot of your self-respect. Maybe you get to thinking, 'I'm gonna have him, marriage or no marriage, it don't matter.' But it does matter. You gotta have something to show for it, or you'll find out the world's full of bastards that'll use you up and throw you out. You gotta fight that, honey-you gotta grab your chance when you can."

He chugged the rest of the beer down and hurled the can in the paper bag by the sink, got up and shuffled heavily toward the door. She hadn't realized before how old he was getting.

He mumbled, "You think about it, honey," and went out of the kitchen.

She sat for a long time in the silence. Confused by double loyalties, she sat motionless until finally her hand, almost of its own will, reached for the phone, and she began to dial Steve's number, hardly aware of what she was doing. She was remembering the evening he had taken her window-shopping and given her the silver from Jensen's; thinking of him, listening to the phone ring and ring and ring, her body was in torment.

Chapter 20

Steve Wyatt.

Attended by four servants and a yard man, Fran Wyckliffe Wyatt lived in barely adequate comfort in a gabled rococo house on sufficient East Hampton acreage to ensure privacy, with a long soft lawn that rolled down to a grove of big old willows around a pond, on which floated a few swans and ducks. There was, inevitably, a gazebo. The faint fishy smell of the Atlantic came up from the nearby beach, and the evening breeze seemed to have cleared away the gnats and moths and some of the heat, making it possible for the Friday-night gathering-a tradition with Wyatts for eighty years-to move out onto the lawn after the late dinner.

Fran Wyckliffe Wyatt was sixty-seven. Her hair, waved tightly and meticulously, looked like a gray stone sculpture, done in a style that had not changed in forty years. She had a homely angular resemblance to Andrew Jackson and looked as if she might drink straight from the bottle, though no one had ever actually witnessed her doing so. She was confident enough of her impeccable antecedents and the position which accrued to it that she had long ago given up demure pretense; she had allowed her natural self to emerge, and in so doing she revealed that for all her imperious nobility she was in fact a creature of remarkable vulgarity-loud, vital, hearty, with tenacious jaw and strong whiskey-baritone voice. She was a character-a landmark.

Of the nine guests who had attended the dinner gathering, five had departed shortly after ten o'clock, pleading fatigue and the long drive back to Morristown, where they lived amid polo ponies and tennis courts. Letting the group out the front door with the aid of his mother's maid, Steve Wyatt heard one of the departing guests complain as they got into chauffeured Mercedes, "Really, you don't get invited to dinner at Fran's-you get sentenced to it." Steve exchanged glances with the maid, whose face gave away absolutely nothing, and listened

to the low run of laughter from the departing guests before the car pulled away, its headlights stabbing the night, and surged toward the highway.

When he returned to the rear lawn, he found his mother engaged in spirited argument with Prescott Van Alstyne, bitterly declaiming “those imbeciles in Washington,” by which she meant Congress, not the administration; she had had a Democrat in the house once, but she hadn’t known about it until after he left, and he had never been invited to return. It was said, with reasonable accuracy, that anybody at all could be invited once to Fran Wyatt’s, provided of course he had minimum credentials; the real sign of acceptance was a second invitation, which was extended to few.

The Van Alstynes were among the select-not the Best Known People perhaps, but assuredly the Best People. You had to catch Prescott Van Alstyne between yachting expeditions to the Adriatic and skiing safaris to Austria. He had played poker with Onassis on a yacht in the Aegean, and his wife had been photographed dancing with the Duke of Windsor. She was a fleshy woman in rubber-soled shoes and matter-of-fact tweeds, wearing the careless look of old wealth and good horses.

They had with them tonight their daughter Beth, a tall chic blond who spent her time Junior Leaguing-being decorative, attending concerts and ballets, opening exhibitions in galleries, and performing Good Works: her current passion was a foundation raising money to aid Asian children whose limbs her government had blown off. She never admitted her main purpose in all these activities was to show off clothes.

Wyatt’s mother had thrust Beth Van Alstyne upon him without trying to disguise her motives. He always did his best to humor his mother; but Beth conformed to her inbred type; she was a dull creature of ritual and repetition, preoccupied with appearance and gratuitous gossip. Within the past month he had learned firsthand that she disapproved of sexual experimentation-not on moral principle, but because it was vulgar. By now, merely the way she said “Hellew” was enough to make his skin crawl.

Even so, she was a pretty girl. Very tan, just slightly leathery, with squint creases from tennis and riding. She had sun-streaked blond hair, medium length, and for this occasion she wore the kind of upper-crust clothing that never went out of fashion-a McMullen blouse with round collar and short sleeves, a poplin skirt, practical shoes, a simple double strand of pearls. Wyatt rather enjoyed looking at her. He amused himself with a fantasy of sewing her lips shut with surgical sutures and taking her on an involuntary tour of exploration of the country discovered by the Marquis de Sade.

It would not come to pass. At any rate, she was rapidly becoming a copy of her mother, and that alone was enough to make him keep his distance. Letting the conversation ride by, he glanced across the group at Mrs. Daisy Van Alstyne and held his eyes against her until she met them. Her gaze shifted away quickly; color crawled up her cheeks. It made him smile slightly with recollection. It had often amused him to speculate how much she knew about the extent of his obligation to her. Everything I am, he thought dryly, I owe to you, dear old Daisy.

She was-what? — fifty-one now? She must have been about thirty-seven then. A thirty-seven-year-old blonde with abundant hips and breasts and, even then, the suggestion of a double chin. Her husband had been deeply engaged in

international finance in those days and rarely spent more than a fourth of his time at home.

For Steve Wyatt it had been an adolescent summer of sexual fantasies. He and his second cousin had bored a peephole through the wall above the john in the ladies' loo at the back of Chisolm's Restaurant; at night they took turns shivering in the damp chill of the seaside woods, watching through it. One night, on a dare, Steve had gone around the building and intercepted a waitress, a fat jolly girl with pendulous breasts. He had tried to make a pass at her. She had laughed. "You're a kid. Come back when you're big enough."

"Big enough where?" But she had only laughed and skipped away, leaving him red-faced, aggravating his sexual tension.

One evening in July or August he had gone into the Van Alstynes' house after a tennis match on their courts, and had found the guest-bathroom door ajar and Mrs. Van Alstyne unexpectedly there, standing in front of the bathroom mirror with her blouse unbuttoned to the waist, posing with the tip of her tongue caught in the corner of her mouth, both breasts heavy and white, lifted in her palms. Preoccupied and consumed, incredibly she hadn't seen him behind the half-open door. Passionately he watched her tickling her own breasts. He held his breath, wide-eyed, not stirring; but suddenly she saw him.

He wheeled in fear, confused; but she whispered, "Wait?"

She came to him slowly; she reached for his hand and would not let him go. She sat down on the edge of the guest-room bed. He stood looking wildly down at her while she tugged the tails of her blouse free of her skirt and pushed his hand against one of her soft heavy breasts. Tormented by fear and hardening excitement, he watched her eager eyes and felt the quick rise of her breathing, the sudden warm hard swell of her nipple under his palm. He sat down slowly, almost hypnotically, terrified of what she might do, just as terrified of what she might not do.

A slow smile spread across her face. She disengaged his hand and stood up languidly. He saw the blouse come off and the skirt drop. He looked away, afraid he would have an orgasm right then. The hard pressure in the lap of his pants made him feel hot-faced and ludicrous.

She stood swaying, a thick sweet fragrance of colognes and gin. He looked out of the corner of his eye in time to see her slip her panties down, exposing a tangle of hair which, freed, exploded into a soft hazy triangle, startlingly dark against the pale weight of her thick inner thighs.

His mouth was dry. He shook his head, afraid to speak. She tipped his face up with one hand, and he saw her mystical smile, vague and submissive and demanding all at once.

Her hand touched the front of his trousers. There was sudden flame. She brought him to his feet and undid his buckle and fly. He blinked very fast. She helped him push his underpants down and moved close against him. He felt her pull him down onto the bed. She was moist inside; she guided him into her. He lay on top of her while she curled her fat legs around him and began to pump.

His body felt rock-hard. Braced on his elbows, he held his hands cupped over her huge loose breasts, squeezing them with sucking rhythm. Her body came alive against him, pitching and bucking, and all the while she stared directly into his eyes with a look of incandescent heat.

In his agony of pleasure he went back into her again and again, unable to leave her alone for more than a half-hour at a time. Sometimes he could come twice or even three times before he lost his erection. She kept exciting him over again by the swell of her breasts when he was inside her, her cries of anguish, until most of the night was spent.

The rest of that summer he hadn't been able to stay away from her; she wouldn't have let him if he could. She was there whenever he came-waiting, aroused and tense, to do as her violent needs demanded. His own passions, stored up so long, matched her uncontrollable lust. Yet when he was not with her he felt sick with revulsion against the force which, greater than himself, drew him to her. She was ugly, going to fat; her compulsive hunger for sex-not for him, but for it-was as impersonal as cannibalism; she was intent on nothing but her own gratification. Yet through the spiral of degradation he felt growth, a sense of dynamic power surging in him. Lying with her, drained, limp, exhausted, he felt alive in his manhood for the first time.

She made of him an expert, ardent lover. After that summer he never bedded her again. She found other lovers; he found other women like her. He was never without a woman for long, usually an older woman. He had learned from her-he turned it onto the other ones, knowing how to suck them dry, make them ache in torment waiting for him, make their bodies sing with the drug of him.

Seated off to the side of the lawn party, listening to the conversation but not taking part, he watched the guests with secret amusement. Van Alstyne, a clumsy, pompous idiot still, after all these years, evidently unaware his wife was putting horns on him every chance she got. Daisy, squirming in her seat, not meeting Steve's glance. Beth, the blonde daughter, blithely unaware, chattering on about clothes and charities.

Finally, near midnight, the guests rose to leave. Wyatt's mother steered him stubbornly toward Beth's elbow, but he remained oblivious, and in due course the Van Alstynes trundled off in their determinedly anonymous Oldsmobile.

Fran Wyckliffe Wyatt sent the servants to bed and went striding across the foyer. "I'm pouring in the study, if you'd care to join me," she said, and thundered into the oak-paneled den.

He ambled in after her and said, "You're making an ass of yourself, trying to throw me at that bitch."

"Balls."

"You're a Goddamn snob," he said.

"Of course I'm a snob. I want my son to mingle with his own kind. The Van Alstynes are most acceptable-and they live damned comfortably."

"Comfortable" was one of those words in his mother's vocabulary that needed interpreting. It translated to mean filthy rich.

He said with a straight face, "But she wears such distressing clothes."

"Balls. She's got marvelous taste in clothes."

Wyatt grinned, accepting the brandy she had poured; he swirled it gently, sniffing the bouquet.

His mother sat down with one of her bony legs skewed over the arm of the chair. "She's a lovely thing, Steve. You might do far worse."

"She's dull. I've taken her out half a dozen times. Take my word for it, I've had more fun touring the BMT subway."

“She’s a hell of an attractive girl. I can’t understand why you’ve never sneaked her upstairs during one of these deadly parties and raped hell out of her.”

“How do you know I haven’t?”

“I’d know.”

“The last woman I took upstairs in this house gave me the clap,” he said. “This is good brandy.”

“Cousin Howard gave me half a case.”

“Good old cousin Howard.”

She pinned him with her shrewd gaze. “I spoke to him about you last night.”

“To Howard Claiborne?”

“He seems satisfied with your work, but when I hinted he might see his way clear to promoting you, he turned a deaf ear. Have you done something to offend him?”

“Not that I know of. He’s a skinflint by nature-the fellow I work with describes him by saying ‘His guiding principle is “No,”’ and that’s a good way to sum him up, isn’t it? What are you worrying about? I’m doing all right.”

“What’s happened to your ambition? Balls-when your grandfather was your age he’d already made his first million.”

“They didn’t have the income tax then.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What do you think I brought you up to do? Waste your life working for someone else on a salary?”

“And,” he said dryly, “it is very expensive to be rich, is it not?”

“Money,” she said, “does not matter as long as one has it. But you’ve a long way to go before you reach that point.”

“Your trouble, mater, is you were born chewing on a silver spoon, thinking that money, because it had always been there, always would be there. Then suddenly it disappeared, and my father killed himself, and you decided to forge me into a weapon of revenge and retaliation against the world for the injustices the world had visited upon you. Now, of course, you’re getting anxious because you want to see me succeed before you die. Well, you were a good teacher, and I’ve been a good willing student, and it won’t be long at all before we’ll have our fortune back. But I wish you wouldn’t keep trying to marry me off to bitches like Beth Van Alstyne-I’ve collected enough stud fees in my time and from now on I’d rather do it my own way.”

She didn’t answer right away. He lit a cigarette and inhaled too deeply.

Finally she smiled at him. “Very well. But let me remind you, your background and your social position impose certain great obligations on you-one of them being the choice of a wife. You can’t afford to pick up with just any sexy guttersnipe. If you want to have flings with some hatcheck girl, then by all means have your fling-take a mistress, be discreet, and let it run its course. But that kind of marriage is out. You understand? Your position rules it out. You’ll have to start thinking about marriage, Steve, and you’ll have to start thinking about it in terms of girls like Beth, whether you like her or not.”

He murmured, “You’re getting anxious to see your grandkids before you croak, aren’t you?”

“Don’t be insulting. Are you eager to have me die?”

“Sometimes I am,” he said, and grinned at her.

She laughed with easy warmth. When he came to stand beside her chair, she reached for his hand and held it gently. “In all my years,” she said, “you are the

only man who's ever really loved me. Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like, when I was still young enough to have been capable of it, to have had an incestuous affair with you."

"That's something we'll never find out, isn't it?" He bent to peck her cheek. "I've got to run."

"So early? I thought you'd spend the night in your old room."

"Can't this time. I've got things on the fire."

"Money things, I should hope."

"Naturally."

He left shortly thereafter, buoyed to high spirits as he always was by these times at home; he drove the little car at high speed along the night-empty parkways and reached downtown Manhattan before three o'clock. The narrow streets held a clinging residue of heat, clammy and a little frightening; the familiar block was as empty of life as it might have been after a nuclear blast. He parked directly in front of the elegant entrance and banged on the glass door with his ring to alert the watchman, who admitted him to the lobby and watched him sign the night book. Wyatt would have preferred to come and go undetected, but there was no way to circumlocute the building alarm system; later, if necessary, he would manufacture an excuse for his nocturnal visit. He took the service elevator up, because the main block of lifts didn't run at night, and carried his thin briefcase into Howard Claiborne's walnut-paneled private office. He took ten minutes to familiarize himself by the light of his pencil flashlight with the arrangement of files inside the row of brown filing cabinets that stood to attention in the alcove off the main office. Feeling like a spy in a movie, he began to go through the folders one by one, occasionally selecting a document and taking it into the windowless Xerox room to make a copy. It was slower than making flash photographs, but he didn't know anyone with a darkroom, and he could hardly send this sort of material to a commercial photo developer. No one would miss the few sheets of Xerox paper from the supply cabinet.

While he waited over the duplicating machine he was thinking, with petulance, that it served the old man right. As a fund manager, Wyatt handled upwards of a hundred million dollars in his portfolio; Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers received a percentage of the value of the fund's assets as annual payment for its "management services"-at least $750,000 a year-yet Wyatt, who did the work, was salaried at a miserable $28,000. Claiborne deserved to be robbed.

The Wakeman mutual fund had tremendous impact on the market, because of its purchasing power-and its dumping power. Vast manipulative authority was vested in its managers' hands; if Wyatt selected a stock with a limited number of outstanding shares, the mere fact that he was buying it would make its price go up. Then it was easy to unload at a good profit. It didn't matter that the result could be catastrophic. Once, he had arrived at the opening with 125,000 shares of a small stock to sell through dummies. The dump had knocked the price down to the cellar-and Wyatt had sold the same stock short. He had cleared sixty thousand on that one. Thinking of it now, he felt pleased; Mason Villiers would have applauded.

He tidied the Xerox room and switched off the light; returned to Claiborne's office and exchanged the Xeroxes for half a dozen documents from his briefcase-documents meticulously prepared by someone working for Villiers.

Some of them went into the files-substitute fact sheets on Heggins and NCI and other companies, the kind of sheets a broker would take out of their loose-leaf binders to examine when he made his weekly account evaluations. Others went into the stack of newly arrived material in the In box on Anne's desk; Claiborne would have it in front of him an hour after he came in to work Monday morning.

Wyatt locked up with his duplicate keys, went downstairs, signed out, and said good night to the watchman. The entire operation had taken less than an hour. He drove to his apartment, went into the lobby past the drowsing doorman, and punched the elevator button.

Bone-tired, he let himself in-and pulled up short: the lights were on. He frowned as he closed the door, and then Anne Goralski appeared at the bedroom door in a wisp of a translucent nightie and a blinding smile.

"Jesus Christ," he snapped, "what the hell is this?"

Her face changed slowly; she said, "What's the matter?" Her tone was small.

"How did you get in here?"

"Why-the doorman let me in; he knows me. Steve-darling-whatever's wrong?"

He shook his head. "I just don't like being taken by surprise like that."

She said in a tiny apologetic voice, "I love you, Steve."

"I know-I know you do. But maybe I can't take your love if I have to take this with it."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Do you know what time it is? Jesus, do you want to swallow me up? Is this your idea of love? Waiting up the whole damned night for me as if you had a set of chains for me with a lock and key?"

She looked miserable. "I thought you'd be pleased," she said vaguely. She broke into tears. "You don't love me. You hate me."

He crossed the room to her and held her shoulders; he said softly, "Darling, what have I got but you? What the hell's the matter with you? I've told you how I feel about you-isn't that enough?"

"No," she said, sniffling, burying her face against the front of his shirt. "Telling me isn't enough, darling."

He stepped back, dropping his hands, turning cool. "Then what do I have to do? You want to tie a bell on me? You want to keep me in reach twenty-four hours a day?"

She wiped her eyes with her hands and looked up, straightening, defiance seeping into her fibers; she said, "I'm sorry I went all to pieces. I guess I'm tired. But I've never seen you snappish like this-do you get like this whenever you go to see your mother? Is this the effect she has on you?"

He stared at her in slack-jawed amazement. "What the devil does my mother have to do with anything?"

"I don't know. But every time I mention her, you bristle."

"That's ridiculous."

"Then why haven't you taken me to meet her?"

The thought of such a meeting made him smile. "My dear, she'd chew you to ribbons, believe me. I'm doing you a favor by keeping you apart."

"Why do you assume she'd hate me? Because she hates all your women? Is she jealous of them? Do you think it's an accident that by adding just one letter you can change 'mother' to 'smother'? I'm beginning to get very strange feelings about your-"

"That's enough," he snapped. "That's God damned well enough. You're one hundred percent off base-let's just keep my mother out of it from now on, all right? There are things beyond your understanding, Anne dear. I have a strong feeling of loyality to my family-we Wyatts are tribal creatures in a way you could never comprehend. It has nothing to do with the cheap Freudian cliches you seem to have bouncing around in your head. My mother doesn't dominate me. I am not a concealed, mother-tyrannized homosexual. I'm not a hagridden victim of momism. Can't you trust me when I tell you it's better that you don't meet my mother for a while? She's a sixty-seven-year-old sachem, she's vicious and bawdy and hard to take, and if I'm to avoid having the two of you start scratching each other's eyes out, I'll have to pave the way with her gradually, get her used to the idea-after all, it's been at least thirty years since she last spoke to a single person, outside of shopkeepers and servants, who didn't belong to a family that was descended from Newport society or an ambassador to the Court of St. James. She's old and she's stubborn, and it's going to take me time to bring her around. Darling, I've told you all this before-you just don't seem to-"

"I'm sorry, Steve," she said. "I don't believe you."

He blurted, "Why not?" and immediately realized that what he should have said was, I don't give a damn whether you believe me or not. He tried to cover the lapse by sweeping her into the circle of his arms and murmuring, "Oh, look here, darling, let's not quarrel. I love you, you know-with all my heart." He caressed her slowly, gently, beginning to smile at her.

She said faintly, "I wish I could understand all this. I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I just don't want to be hurt."

"I could never hurt you," he breathed, and tipped her face up with his finger to kiss her mouth. Within his palm, through the fabric of the nightie, her nipple hardened.

"Oh, Steve darling," she said, with a long breath escaping; she began to smile with childlike eagerness. "I'm so sorry-forgive me?"

He laughed in his throat and carried her to the bed. Happy with the cruelty of planting doubts in her mind, he made love to her languorously and quietly.

Afterward he lay back, drowsy, caressing her absently.

She said, "Talk to me, darling."

After a pause he said, "About what?"

Chapter 21

Russell Hastings.

By the time Russ Hastings arrived at the airport Saturday morning, he was in a state of depressed anxiety that bordered on paranoid rage. In the past twelve hours the world had smitten him from every direction with petty, maddening annoyances. His shoelace had broken; he had tripped on it and practically brained himself tumbling into the elevator, the floor of which was four inches below where it should have been. After he had plunged to the back and narrowly regained his balance, the bored elevator operator had said,

“Watch ya step, buddy,” and Hastings had wanted to strangle him. Later, thinking about it, he had burst out laughing on a crowded street corner, where passing pedestrians gave him startled glances and edged away from him.

Too restless to go straight home from Carol McCloud’s last night, he had gone walking; somehow he had found himself, near midnight, on upper Broadway on the fringes of Harlem, buying an early edition of the Times and watching a workman on a ladder fix new letters on a movie marquee. On the dark side streets around him took place the transactions of night commerce: burglaries, furtive exchanges of money and narcotics. The lonely outcries in the hot night might have been those of people being bitten by rats in the sullen wretched tenements. He walked slowly down the gray sidewalks, avoiding refuse and shuffling bums; he passed a clutch of fags on parade, cruising for a mark, and a Spanish streetwalker wearing a loose, flowing cotton dress-he tried to ascertain her figure, but the dress made it hard to tell; she gave him a smile, and he went on, an innocent victim among innocent victims. A police van crossed Broadway, moving slowly, collecting the corpses of the ones who died in the tropical night. He felt foolish, disturbed, cowardly-like a pale dude among cowboys. If only he had seen action in the Army, he thought-it had been peacetime during his two years’ service. If only he had seen the worst. I am still naive. He knew these hard black faces under the Harlem street lights-violent ones, dope peddlers, muggers, thieves-but in his guts they were only dull black faces, Yassuh boss Nigras-shif’less and got rhythm, but violent? Impossible: he had never himself seen that kind of violence, and therefore he did not believe in it.

That had been last night. This morning he had gone into a coffee shop for breakfast, and a waiter had spilled coffee on his cuff. There was hardly time to rush back and change into an old tweed suit which he hadn’t packed because it was too warm. Then, breakfastless, he had stood on a corner in ten minutes’ growing panic before a taxi appeared.

Now there was the long hassle at the check-in counter-it seemed the airline had sold the same seat to another passenger as well, as airlines were wont to do. He had to pull rank by showing his government I.D. before they would let him on the plane. He knew full well the airlines had as much feeling toward their passengers as an armed robber had toward his victims, but it still enraged him. The eternal innocent. He made the half-mile walk down the echoing corridor, changing his carry-on suitcase from hand to hand every few hundred yards, going past the sign No Smoking Beyond This Point thinking of Jennys with struts and doped fabric-nostalgic for an era he hadn’t even known. He reached the gate in time to hear the obligatory public-address announcement that the flight would be delayed twenty minutes “due to frammissoshemlorbesan,” and he glared at the check-in man while someone stepped on his foot and left a scuffed dent on his shoe. The high, shrill whine of a plane moved past outside, and the peculiar stench of jet-engine exhaust stung his nostrils.

In time the plane boarded and taxied four miles to a runway where eighteen jets stood in line waiting to take off. He tried to adjust himself in the seat, which, neither sitting nor reclining, had clearly been designed with something other than a human body in mind.

Seventy minutes after its scheduled departure time the plane got off, launched by fifty thousands pound of pollutant thrust. He closed his eyes and

drowsed. But of course every six minutes a stewardess woke him up to inquire if he wanted a magazine or a drink, or insist that he uncross his legs so she could tip down the folding table, which sat empty above his cramped knees for twenty minutes before she set before him a meal reminiscent of fried concrete garnished with fossil ferns, served on a wood-grained plastic tray. “I don’t mind plastic,” he said unreasonably, “but why does it always have to look like something else? Why can’t they just let it look like plastic?”

“Is anything wrong with your lunch, sir?”

He waved her away.

Below, through the window, he could see a section of superhighway crawling with trucks and cars. I used to like to drive, he complained to himself, thinking of the awful turnpike food at overcrowded One Stop Service Areas, the stalled cars with their hoods lifted in the smoggy heat, the insulting stink of diesel exhausts, the construction-RIGHT LANE CLOSED 1 MI AHEAD-the unmarked cop cars and periodic bloody wrecks, the surly chargings of cars full of restless screaming kids, all of them bound to or from the great nerve center, Gomorrah-on-the-Hudson, the predatory megalopolis where eight million crushed bodies supported the weight of a handful of People Who Counted, who endlessly played games in which they fought to win, and having won, used victory-earned power to change the rules of the game to their own advantage. Rats, birds, fish, humans-it was all the same: crowd too many into too small a space and they lost their biological inhibitions and turned into mindless cannibals. It was no good trying to make decisions in those surroundings; he could no longer tell if he was still sane: in the city there was no norm, no way to judge.

At the end of the flight lay the open land-miles between beings. He harked back to male weekends in a damp duck blind, birds calling over the water. I have got to make up my mind to get out of it. Why care if someone played basketball with NCI? How could it possibly matter to those teeming ants down there? He had a vague recollection of last night’s whimsical conversation with Carol McCloud. “All you have to do is make things matter.”

Air travel always depressed him; ultimately the ordeal ended. Through the hair-oil-greasy plastic inner window he saw the desert mountains moving up. He felt the changing pressure in his ears and recognized the San Pedro Valley, the towns, the right angle formed by the two ranges of mountains north and east of Tucson. The pilot’s voice announced the temperature at Tucson International Airport was 103 degrees and the local time was 2:25 P.M. Hastings set his watch back and closed his eyes for the landing.

When he walked into the terminal, he did not expect to be met, but still he found himself seeking familiar faces; he saw none, and walked up the long ramp to the terminal center, silently congratulating himself on having survived yet another adventure.

He spent twenty boring minutes at the Rent-A-Car counter, signed a dangerous-looking document in exchange for a set of car keys, and stopped at a phone booth on his way out. His ring was answered by an alert baritone voice that belonged to Lewis Downey, Judd’s longtime private secretary, who gave him an affably courteous greeting and added, “I’m afraid Mr. Judd still isn’t taking any phone calls, Mr. Hastings-my orders are specific, and he made no exceptions.”

“I’m in Tucson,” Hastings said. “I’ve got a car, and I’m on my way up there. I should be there by five. Will I be admitted?”

He heard, distinctly, the suck of Downey's indrawn breath. Downey said, "Hold on a minute, will you?"

The operator presently came on the line and asked for an additional fifteen cents. Shortly thereafter Downey returned. "Sorry to hold you, Mr. Hastings. I didn't mean to be rude, but I only work here, you know. Mr. Judd hasn't been seeing anyone. But the gate will be open when you arrive. We'll prepare a room for you. How long were you planning to stay?" The voice rode on a tone of distant politeness, but nothing more.

Hastings said, "That has to depend on Mr. Judd. I've got a tentative booking on a return flight tomorrow evening."

"Very good, sir. We'll expect you around five?"

"Is he all right, Downey?"

"Sir?"

"I don't want to disturb him if he's not well."

After a beat Downey said, "Mr. Judd is in excellent health, sir. You'll see for yourself. Good-bye, then."

Frowning, he went outside into the brass blaze of sunlight. He found the gray Plymouth in the vast parking lot and unlocked it. The windows had been left rolled up; he opened them and tossed his suitcase in back and switched the engine on, and stood in the shade while the engine and air-conditioner got working. Even then, when he got into the car the vinyl seat covers blistered his back and rump. The steering wheel was too hot to hold; he drove with his fingertips, finding it hard to breathe. The radio informed him again that it was 103 degrees-"A nice mild day today, folks, after the hundred-and-twelve we had yesterday." He switched off the infuriating voice and squirmed on the seat, driving out along the familiar streets to the interstate highway.

In the next hour the road took him past the edge of the mountains; he took a fast, paved side road toward the high country, and by four-fifteen was climbing through long gentle meadows hip-deep in yellow grass. Dark spots on the hills were beef cattle, slowly browsing.

The sky was vast, cobalt blue, serrated at its edges by jagged peaks of crystalline clarity. He had forgotten how beautiful this country was-back East he always got to thinking of Arizona in Eastern stereotypes, as if it were all desert, sand and cactus. Easy to forget about the high country, the grass and hills and those high peaks where the snow hadn't melted in a thousand years. The road lanced up the center of a valley, and he didn't meet another car in twenty miles, and when he did, it was a pickup truck driven by an Apache Indian. Out here you didn't have to prove anything to anybody, and you could leave your doors wide open. No use for the horn on your car.

This was Judd's land now; he had been on Judd property for miles. The barbed-wire fences ran gleaming along both sides of the road, shiny wire and orange-painted steel posts, fading ahead of him with perspective, two parallel lines joining at infinity. At five thousand feet on this plateau it was cool enough to turn off the temperature control and throw the windows open to the wind. He pushed the car up to eighty and enjoyed himself.

In the back of his mind he was thinking about Judd. Lewis Downey had said he was in excellent health; it was the kind of thing he would say if he suspected the phone was tapped, and a man in Judd's position always had to assume his phones were tapped; that was the way of the modern world, and Hastings had no liking for it. Maybe I ought to retire out here and hang out my shingle.

Country lawyer. He grinned at the hills and breathed deep of the crystal air; it tasted as if no one had ever breathed it before. It made him think of the times he and Diane had spent out here, holidaying, visiting the old man. Diane had no affinity for the outdoors; her visits here had always been designed solely to please her father. But Hastings recalled long walks along the grasshills with Judd, jeep and helicopter rides across the vast acres, and now and then there had been the feeling he was as close to Judd as Diane was-and closer, in some ways.

The road lifted him now toward the summit of a long hill topped by a deep-green stand of planted cottonwoods. Inside the barbed wire a graded landing strip ran along with a lonely windsock and three parked crop-dusting planes. To make a landing, he remembered, you had to buzz the field first to chase the whiteface cattle off. Judd's operation used jeeps and planes to do its cowboying.

Lewis Downey was standing by the front gate, a trim neat man with salt-and-pepper hair and a good tan, dressed in light slacks and a short-sleeved shirt. When he recognized Hastings he waved and opened the wire gate. Hastings drove in, wheels rumbling on the steel-slatted cattleguard, and stopped just inside. Downey latched the gate shut and got into the car; it was a quarter-mile ride up to the house. "Hi."

Hastings said, "You're looking fit."

"This country's good for you." Downey propped his right arm in the open window. "Have a good trip?"

"Any air strip you survive is a good trip. Look, we're not on the phone now. How is he?"

"Improving. But better prepare for a shock when you see him."

He shot a brief sidewise glance at Downey, but the man's cheeks revealed nothing. He didn't seem particularly happy to see Hastings, but Hastings was no longer a member of the family; Judd had no real obligation to him; and Downey was a man who liked to keep things neat and exact, he didn't like complexities and muddles. He was efficient, brainy, assiduously neat and clean-otherwise unassuming and capable of immense diffidence. A superb private secretary. And like a good butler, he knew his place. He volunteered nothing.

There was no point in pumping him; Hastings would learn from Judd as much as Judd wanted him to know, and he'd never elicit any more than that from Downey.

The house was not especially large. It was single-story adobe, built around a quadrangular patio in the Spanish style, with exposed whole-log beam ends protruding from under the eaves. They approached it up a blacktopped drive that crossed a sloping grass meadow. Here and there were blocks of salt; gnats and flies swarmed around warm piles of cattle dung; the thick brown backs of steers swayed above the rippling tall grass. Beyond the summit, timbered peaks reared tier upon jagged tier.

Downey said, "Those cattle pens are new since you were here last. The one off to the left is full of seventy-dollar cows, and the little one in back of it's full of one ten-thousand-dollar bull. Funny when you think about it-it's the cow that does the work, giving birth."

Russ pulled up by the house and switched the engine off. The hot steel pinged with contraction. He heard cows lowing and saw a buzzard swoop silently across the treetops on motionless wings. Getting out of the car,

Hastings was amazed by the loud crunch of his own shoes. Sweat rolled freely along his face but the heat was dry and not unpleasant.

The big front door swung open and Elliot Judd came forward, smiling warmly.

The old man emerged from the house with his hand outstretched and his thin lips creased back in a welcoming smile. “Russ, I’m glad to see a human face.”

The fragile old hand felt as if it would crumble to powder within Hastings’ fist. “How are you, Dad?”

“Still taking nourishment.”

“You look fine,” he lied.

The painful smile twitched. “Like a battery-it looks just the same whether it’s fresh or all used up. By God, I am glad to see you, Russ.”

Hastings tried to keep his smile steady. His breath was caught up in his throat. The old man had lost an alarming amount of weight. The skin hung in brittle folds from the gaunt, scored face. His color had turned to a cyanotic blue and his spidery hands, once firm and powerful, shook with the palsy of age or illness-they were mottled with small brown-blue spots. But Judd’s commanding features were dignified, if anything, by pain; the eyes were still fiercely blue against the dark skin. He was a tough old man whose pride, not arrogant, was the kind that took itself for granted, like a high-caste Brahmin’s. He managed to wear a white tennis visor and a disreputable herringbone Harris tweed sport jacket without looking at all ridiculous.

Downey went by them, taking Hastings’ suitcase into the house. The old man tugged at the flap of skin that sagged beneath his jaw. “Let’s not stand here all day staring at each other like two strange dogs off their home ground. Come inside and let’s relax.” He turned, not quite steady on the balls of his feet, and led the way, talking over his shoulder: “I talked to Diane a few days ago. A regular damn tycoon I raised there-I guess she’s doing fine with her art, and I suppose it’s what she thinks she wants. But I wish I’d made more of a woman of her. No disloyalty meant to my own blood, Russ, but I’ve always taken it for granted the break-up was more her fault than yours.”

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly.”

It was only a few steps, but by the time they entered the big front room the old man was trying to conceal the fact that he was breathing hard. Hastings felt uneasy alarm. Judd pressed a buzzer and waved toward a chair. He sounded hoarse when he said, “I know all about Women’s Liberation and all the rest of that Carrie Nation crap, but nothing’s convinced me yet that women are biologically designed to excel as hunter-gatherers. Physically we’re still a tool-making species of apes, and any woman who tries to hunt with the men has something wrong with her. Know what I’m driving at?”

“Sure. I’m almost old-fashioned enough to agree with you.”

The old man grinned at him. A chicken-necked old Indian woman, her parchment face as wrinkled as a prune, rustled into the room in response to Judd’s ring. Covered by a long severe black dress that was buttoned up to the chin, she carried a drink on a silver platter. Hastings scented it and watched the old woman walk out. “Always the best Scotch in this house,” he said. “Aren’t you joining me?”

“Not now,” Judd replied. “Diane’s got a wire down in her somewhere, that’s certain-and I don’t imagine she’ll find any real kind of satisfaction until she gets over trying to prove she’s better than a man.”

“Back in New York things never seem that clear-cut.”

“I know. That’s why it pays to live out here, where you can strip away the fog and see through to the core of things.” The old man, still on his feet, kept tugging at his chin. “Russ, I’m glad you came. I’ve had it in mind for a month to call you and ask you to come down.”

“About Diane?”

“No. That’s over and done with-I couldn’t handle her, and neither could you. Maybe someone else can, but it’s not up to us to meddle, is it? No, it’s something else.”

Hastings watched him with full attention. The old man sat down where he could see out through the huge plate-glass window, across the rolling miles of grass. “Russ, nowadays this country’s full of young squirts just burning to save the world from villains like me. Are you one of them?”

“I guess that depends on what you mean. I’m no radical.”

“Maybe you ought to be. It’s taken me three-quarters of a century to learn some things I should have known by instinct from birth.”

“What do you mean?”

“When a man gets as rich as I am, he gets to thinking there’s nothing left to buy but personal comforts-privacy, luxuries, people to do for him. But it’s a terrible mistake. There is, after all, something important he can buy. He can buy, or at least try to buy, survival for his species.”

“Sounds ambitious.”

“You’re skeptical-that’s good.” Judd smiled at him. “The beginning of wisdom is knowing where to look for it, Russ, and you won’t find it in Wall Street. It’s right here. Look out there-what do you see? Virgin land. Four thousand square miles inside my fence, and a National Forest backing up on it. Outside of Alaska, it’s one of the biggest tracts of its kind in the country.”

He had to wait to get his breath before he spoke again: “I thought it was a virtue to build things. I was wrong. I’ve spent my whole damn life building things that have strangled our cities with traffic, killed thousands of people on the highways, poisoned the air and polluted the water. Destroying this planet of ours not for the betterment of man but for the profit of corporate industry. Well, we’ve always thought we were carrying on the American dream-the pioneer builder. But it’s become a nightmare, the pioneer heroes have become criminal rapists. We’ve killed off the animals, chopped down the trees, grazed off the grass, furrowed the earth into dust bowls, and filled the air and water with poisons. You can’t breathe anywhere anymore-there isn’t a river I know of where a man can feel safe drinking the water. This world’s not fit to live in any more.”

“I’ve given it all my attention these past months, Russ, and I’ve satisfied myself I’m not just an old fogy demented by a senile obsession. I’ve put huge teams of trained men to studying this thing, at great expense, and the findings terrify me. We’re getting closer and closer to a catastrophe that can’t be reversed. It could happen in a dozen ways. A big pesticide spill in ocean areas where marine organisms produce most of our oxygen. An oil spill in the Arctic, to melt the ice cap. But even if that kind of thing can be held off, there isn’t enough air and soil and water left to absorb our poisons. We carry smoke in our

lungs and strontium 90 in our bones and DDT in our flesh and poison iodine 131 in our thyroids. We've burned so much fuel the carbon dioxide content of the earth's atmosphere has increased by ten percent-and if it goes up another four percent the oxygen balance of the atmosphere will collapse. Every living thing on the face of the earth will die. We could reach that point within eighteen years. Am I boring you, Russ? Never mind-do an old man a courtesy, hear me out."

Hastings watched him, unblinking, listening to the painful voice, the frequent pauses for breath, watching the fiery glitter of the old eyes, like the last bright coals in a dying bed of ashes.

"I've talked to the engineers. They think we'll solve everything with our marvelous technology. We won't. Technology never saved a society. The most technologically advanced nation in Europe produced the most irresponsible tyranny we've ever seen-and when we get as overpopulated and regimented as Germany we'll do the same thing, count on it."

He paused; the silence ran on while Hastings put his glass down and put his hands in his pockets. When the old man resumed, he seemed at first to have lost the thread of his thought.

"Back in twenty-nine," Judd said, "I knew the country was in for a spectacular bust. Bloated up and ready to pop. I liquidated my stocks and put the money in short-term municipals and land and cash in my own vault. When the panic came, I waited for it to hit bottom, and then I stepped in and bought up blue-chips-oil, utilities, telephone, the things the country had to have, no matter how panicky the market got.

"Every day from my office window I could see the breadlines outside the public kitchens, men without jobs sitting like corpses in the parks, long lines standing outside the employment offices along Sixth Avenue. I gave jobs to as many of them as I could, and I thought my responsibility ended there. Maybe, in those times, it did. In any ordinary world-one that isn't threatened with complete extinction-you need hardship. An environment of savage conflict produces one thing-it produces leadership. The Depression produced the last real generation of leaders we've had in this country. Today even courage has become suspect. We can't afford to fight our enemies; we've got to learn to live with them on penalty of nuclear extinction, and that destroys the meaning of courage-do you suppose Roosevelt could have held this country together in forty-two if the Japanese had been armed with nuclear missiles?"

Hastings, expressionless, watched the quixotically gaunt face; the old man went on: "We haven't got leaders with the guts to do what has to be done. I know this much, Russ-nothing worth a hoot in hell will ever be preserved for mankind unless we can stabilize the numbers of our species. I'm glad I'm old-I'd rather sit under a nuclear blast than see what's going to happen in the next thirty years, when we'll have twice as many people as we've got now. We're going to have suffering the like of which no man has ever experienced. Right now, today, in the past twenty-four hours, ten thousand people have starved to death on this earth. If all the food in the world were evenly distributed today, every human being alive would go hungry. Is it any wonder it's the Cubas and the North Vietnams, and not the United States, that are producing leadership?"

Judd made a half-turn in his chair so that his gaunt face picked up light from the window; it looked remotely savage. He spoke in a whisper. "What

happens to the quality of human life, even in this rich country, when we've tripled the population of the earth, Russ?"

Then his head wheeled, and he leveled a bony finger. "You are the last generation that can save us, Russ. You, not your kids or your grandkids. For them it will be all over but the burying."

He drew a ragged breath. His eyes stared, defiant, and he went on more gently: "We spend two thousand dollars on military hardware for every dollar we spend on population control. If we keep doing it, you'll have no grandchildren, Russ. The race of man will be dead."

Hastings stirred. "You're a very wise old bird."

"I'm just a crusty old fart with his eyes open to see. Now I had better tell you why I've inflicted this impassioned speech on you-I confess I've rehearsed it for some time. I'm going to ask you to do something, Russ, so pay attention now." He eased himself back in his chair, heartbreakingly feeble. "My personal fortune," he said, "is larger than the national budgets of some small countries. I'm putting it to use. I've set up trusts here and in Canada and Australia and several other foreign parts-because frankly I don't trust America to survive-to work toward the rigid enforcement of population control throughout the world. I have not contributed to organizations that seek to control the conception of unwanted children, because we have got to prevent births of children whether they are wanted or not. Governments are going to have to prohibit childbearing by law, not by individual choice. I'm pessimistic, I don't think it's going to work, but it's the only chance we have.

"At the same time, I've set up a trust to operate the land we're standing on-about twenty-five million acres. It's set up to maintain this land as a perpetual wilderness. No tree cutting, no digging for minerals, no construction of any buildings aside from the replacement of worn-out structures on the same sites. The place will become an inviolable park when I die. I don't trust the National Park people-they're subject to lobbyists, and they'd throw it wide open the minute somebody discovered gold here-and so I'm keeping it in private hands. It's to be a completely private park. No trespassing."

"What?"

The old man's creased mouth had stretched into a strict, stern smile. "A few years ago," he murmured, "the last time I was in New York, I rented a bicycle and pedaled my way through Central Park. It was a Monday morning, and the park was reasonably deserted. Do you know what I saw?"

"I can imagine."

"Yes. The excrement of a thousand human savages. The leavings of a population of mindless animals who'd had their Sunday outing in the sun, and left their spoor behind. There wasn't a square yard of grass that wasn't covered with broken glass, crumpled napkins, bent beer cans, torn newspapers, spilled mustard, discarded condoms and brassieres, crushed sunglasses, bloody sanitary napkins, paper plates, half-pint whiskey bottles. All right. I believe the parks weren't put there for savages to defile. They don't deserve the use of it. I don't suppose there's any way to prevent the wildlife here from being stunned by a periodic sonic boom, but short of that I want this land untouched by human beings. The time is going to come when people will need to know there's an untouched wilderness like this still on the map of the United States. The public parks will soon be so mobbed with campers and picnickers there won't be room left to see the landscape, and I refuse to let that happen here. They

won't get in here, they'll never see it with their own eyes, but they'll know it's here, Russ, and I believe that's pricelessly important."

Hastings moved to the window and swept the horizon. Finally he said, "You're dead right, of course."

It brought a wide smile to Judd's face. "You can't know how happy it makes me to hear you say that. Because I'm offering it to you."

Hastings' mouth dropped open. He spun on his heel and stared.

"I need a man I trust to take it over," Judd said. "To oversee the birth-control trusts and see to it this place is kept intact. Someone to live here, on this land, and watch over it. When I set it up, I had you in mind."

Hastings was shaking his head. The old man murmured, "Don't say anything yet. Think about it, that's all I'm asking."

He had forgotten what a straightforward affair supper was at Elliot Judd's house. Judd had always been a meat-and-potatoes man. The old Indian woman rustled in and out of the dining room, serving; the conversation, with Lewis Downey at table, was light and inconsequential.

There were fourteen rooms in the house, most of them connected to one another only by the common porch-roofed walkway that ran around the patio. The front of the house contained three enormous rooms interconnected by wide double doorways.

The dining room contained Monets, and a Renoir worth close to a million dollars; the front room was hung with postimpressionists, Leger, and Lichtensteins; the office-library contained a hodgepodge of Wyeths and Sargents and a Remington cowboy in bronze. Judd was talking about his artwork: "I loathe museums. They're as bad as zoos. Hang a picture in a museum, and it takes the life out of it-museums are for the dead. Paintings were made for the walls of houses, where people live."

Downey said in his irritatingly impersonal voice, "Hadn't you better take it easy on that Rothschild?"

The old man's hand made a claw around the wineglass. "You're an old woman, Lewis. We're celebrating a homecoming."

It made Hastings feel awkward. The meal concluded, Downey excused himself and left. Hastings sat back, finishing his wine, feeling logy and inert; the wine moved like a soft warm hand across his tired joints.

The old man sat slack and indifferent, like an animal going into hibernation; he was awake, but unmoving, his breathing hard to detect, his metabolism slow in the suspended animation of the very old. He stirred and said, "Do you ever see Diane? Or did I ask you that before? I apologize-sometimes memories get stuck together like pages in a book. But the strange thing is, even now when I look in the mirror I still expect to see a young face looking back at me… I was asking about Diane, wasn't I?"

"We-don't see each other."

"Just as well, of course."

There was another stretch of silence; finally Judd said, "When I sit here dozing I like to think it passes for deep thinking. Actually, I'm distantly aware of the beating of my old heart, but that's about all. Oh, Christ, Russ, when you're old it takes so damned much frustrating time to do even the simple things like getting to the bathroom, reading, getting in and out of chairs. You've noticed I've pared the staff here down to nearly nothing-the old Indian woman cooks and cleans, and Lewis pretends to nurse me, and there's a fellow who comes up

from the bunkhouse once or twice a week to make repairs and do the gardening. But I got rid of the rest of them-they all started treating me with humorous amicability, which I hated bitterly. I can't stand being patronized. I envy my late wife, you know-she died within two days of falling ill with bulbar polio. No time for the kind people to come around and croon their sycophantic sympathy. You never knew her, did you-Diane's mother? No, of course not, she died long before. On this last page of my life I tend to confuse things in time. But sometimes I wake up in the morning and twist my head around, and I'm surprised to discover I've slept alone."

After a silent while, sipping wine, Hastings said in a soft voice, "Are you all right, Dad?"

"What do you mean? I'm old, Russ. Nobody gets out of this life alive."

"That isn't what I meant."

The old man stared at him, his lids beginning to droop as if to cover his soul. "I know," he said at last. "Of course, you're right-it would take a blind man not to know. This thing I'm in, this body, it ought to be in a hospital, but I'll be damned if I'll lie in a stinking hospital with plastic tubes rammed up my ass and prick and nose. Too many old ones have their lives stretched out by modern medicine-what good is it? Once I lose my ability to see with my mind and think with my soul, I want to get out of it fast."

Hastings' hand reached the table and gripped its edge.

The bony shoulders stirred. "It's inoperable, of course. The first doctor told me it was a medical opinion, not a fact-not then, yet. I'd want to consult another doctor, he said. So I did. Naturally I hoped for a different opinion-I do not want to die. Who does? There were tests, X rays, a biopsy. It's a malignant melanoma-bone cancer. No way to cut it back or stop it. Once it starts moving, it's faster than the telegraph, all through the skeleton. I can live a month or two or three. That's all. The pain's already damned severe, as you can imagine, but I control it with drugs. A few more days, and I suppose I'll have to confine myself to the house, because I'll be too doped up to walk. I'll regret that-walking around this place has been one of my greatest pleasures the past few months."

The old man took a breath; miserably, Hastings did not speak, but Judd saw his eyes and nodded. "We all get uncomfortable in the presence of sickness and pain. Don't search your mind for the right thing to say-your expressions of sympathy will only make you feel stupid, and they won't do anything for me. I can see in your face the love between us, like son and father-let it go at that. I've learned to live with it, if that's the word. There are times when I get touched with panic and dread-I'm no superman. Sometimes I sit alone in a room, and I try to sit absolutely quiet, waiting for the pain to touch me again. But there's nothing you or I can do about it. Now, then-you did come out here on some sort of business. I suppose we'd better talk about it now, since I happen to be feeling up to it."

"I don't think it's important enough to-"

"Nonsense. Let's hear about it, and then we'll decide whether it's important."

Feeling morose and reluctant, he turned the wineglass in his fingers by the stem and said, as briefly as he could, "For the past few weeks a large number of dummies have been buying up blocks of NCI shares. Up to this point they seem to have accumulated about a million shares. You've got something over eighty million outstanding. Either a raider is moving in from outside, or somebody's moving up from inside."

He wasn't sure the old man had been listening, until Judd gave him a small smile. "Interesting," he muttered. "All right, it's not me, if that's what had you worried, and it's not anyone I know about."

"Then it's trouble."

"I suppose it is. I suppose I ought to work up a great deal of indignation and rage. If it had happened a few months ago I might have enjoyed winning one last fight, but I'm afraid it's too late now, Russ. Anyhow, I'm too well protected-I'm still the chairman of NCI, only because there hasn't been a stockholders' meeting yet this year. I've assigned almost all my personal holdings to the population and wilderness trusts-I haven't got any NCI stock left in my own name. Of course, the trusts will be able to vote the stock when the time comes, but I'm pretty much out of it. And frankly, I don't care that much about the corporation any more. I'd just as soon have all the corporations gutted by raiders. It might destroy our civilization, but if our damned production machinery came grinding to a halt, we might have a chance that at least a few human beings would survive."

"I'm afraid I can't look at it that way. Putting a company like NCI in the hands of a buccaneer could never possibly do anyone any good."

"Except the buccaneer," Judd said dryly.

"Yes."

"Well, you're loyal to your hire, which is an honorable thing-though I sometimes wonder if there's any room left in this world for values like honor and loyalty. At any rate, you do what you see fit, in your little Wall Street battles. You have my authority to get in touch with the members of my board of directors and inform them of any suspicions you have, or any facts you dig up to support the suspicions. Let the directors handle it-I'm sure they'll want to fight. Fighting the jackals is the oldest and most firmly established of all animal activities. They'll enjoy the struggle. And maybe that's all there is left, now. It's possible to enjoy a good fight, you know, even when you're losing it." The old man grinned, sparkling.

Hastings began to speak; Lewis Downey appeared at the door. "Bedtime," he announced without fuss. "And you haven't taken your medicine. It was due an hour ago."

"Nonsense," the old man growled. "You know what that junk is as well as I do. I take it when I feel the need, not on any hidebound pharmacist's schedule. God, Lewis, you'll make a morphine addict of me yet."

"Sorry, sir."

Downey crossed to the old man's chair and took his arm to help him up. Judd looked over his shoulder. "Think about that proposition of mine, Russ."

"I will. Sleep well."

The old man went away, leaning on Downey's arm, feeble and full of pride.

Hastings left his wineglass behind and went outside. When he hit the open air he waited for it to revive him. The night air held a chill; he rammed his hands into his pockets. Under the stars it was as if he had stepped back a hundred years through time, and he felt tensions drain out of him as if he had pulled a plug. He heard the mourning hoot of a mountain owl. Somewhere on those slopes prowled the night-hunting predators; the world here, for a brief time perhaps, was still in balance. He stood in the empty silence, not reckoning time, thinking about Judd's offer.

Chapter 22

Steve Wyatt.

Wyatt went over Hackman's file on Arthur Rademacher for the third time, closed the folder, and sat back to blow smoke out of his nostrils and stare toward the ceiling, going back over it and making sure he had all of it ready on the tip of his tongue. He had to have it letter perfect; there was too much at stake this time to play it by ear. He spent half an hour rehearsing just how he would do it, and in the end he smiled and got up from his couch and sauntered into the bedroom.

She lay curled in a tight knot. Her sleeping face was composed, gentle, reflecting quiet happiness; she made a small curved mound under the sheet. He glanced at the clock and got onto the bed with her, snuggling close, fitting tight against her back; he slid his hand under her arm and cupped her breast.

Anne turned her face up, smiling to herself, her eyes half-closed; she looked warm and drowsy. She moved her shoulder under his chin so he could kiss her. She made him think of all the sagging middle-aged ones he had hustled-she had so much that none of them had ever owned. It was too bad her name had to be Goralski. He printed light kisses on her nose, her cheek, her mouth and chin. Sweet and warm, she turned over slowly, burrowing, and twisted her torso to feed him a saucy little breast. She murmured, "Aren't you going to take your clothes off?"

He grunted and got out of bed, reaching automatically for a cigarette. Anne's frown was like a child's, solemn and innocent. Wyatt lit up and moved to the mirror to check his tie, and she said to him, "You're smoking too much-do you know you're smoking almost three packs a day?"

"Now that's starting, is it?"

"What?"

"Don't be a nag, darling," he said, shooting his cuffs and inspecting his teeth in the mirror.

She said, "What are you doing?"

"What do I appear to be doing? I've got to go out."

"Now? Tonight?"

"It's only eight-thirty."

She looked in puzzlement at the clock. "So it is. When did I fall asleep?"

"About an hour ago. You were exhausted."

"As well I might be. You sex maniac." She was grinning gaily.

"It's business," he said, "and very important. I should be back around midnight."

"Business? On a Saturday night?"

"Don't you believe me?" He gave her a warm look of amusement. "I suppose you think I've got energy left over to go out and rape some other woman."

"But what kind of business could-"

"I don't want to talk about it now."

"Why not, darling?"

"I just don't," he said. "I haven't time. I'll see you later." He kissed her with feigned passion and left.

He made the drive in his bright cocky Jaguar from New York, by way of the Turnpike and the Raritan Bridge, in just over an hour. Arthur Rademacher's imposing house was set back from a curving street in Edison amid its own miniature rain forest. Carrying a thin attache case, he walked up to the door, straightened his jacket, made sure his smile was on straight, and rang.

Ethel Rademacher was a stout, elderly woman with blue hair and a Rushmorean countenance; she gave her imperious caw of welcome and admitted him, explaining that the servants had retired for the night. It made him smile slightly; he knew the Rademachers had dismissed the last of their live-in staff some time ago. It was necessary for Mrs. Rademacher to keep up pretenses, and that was both ridiculous and a point in Wyatt's favor.

Arthur Rademacher was on his feet in the drawing room, an old man whose white hair and eyebrows had the flowing fineness of the formerly blond. Wyatt crossed the room with long masculine strides to shake his hand. "You look good, Arthur."

The old man gave him a quick, firm handshake, said, "I've got a new taxidermist," and spoke to his wife: "We'll be in my office." And showed Wyatt into the private office with a flourish.

By choosing a chair other than the customary one, Wyatt intended to throw the old man off balance. But if the trick had effect, Arthur Rademacher gave no sign of it. He settled into his high leather chair with the slow movements of incipient arthritis, a gaunt antique with eyes gone pale with watery age. He had to swivel his chair to face the younger man, and when he did, he had Steve Wyatt against a lamp in silhouette. Nonetheless, Wyatt veiled his eyes when he said with false geniality, "It was good of you to see me at this hour."

The old man sucked on his teeth to keep them in place. "Quite all right, Steve boy. I'm so old they don't trust me with much work anymore-a few papers to push around on the desk, that's about all. In any event, I've always got time for Fran Wyatt's boy. It's been too long since I've seen you. Well, then, what's this business matter that's so urgent it needs discussing on a Saturday evening?"

"Well, sir, you see, I've been approached with an offer for an excellent position."

"Very glad to hear it."

"But it seems I need your help."

"My help?" The old man moved a hand in a self-deprecating gesture. "I doubt there's much I can do any more, you know."

"The fact is, I've been offered a job that doesn't exist yet. It can come into existence only with your help. Now, I understand you were approached a few days ago by representatives of Nuart Galleries with an offer to-"

"Absurd," the old man snapped, cutting him off. "The whole thing was absurd. They incorporate their damned firm one day and they want to buy Melbard the next. It's absurd. Put an old-line company like Melbard in the hands of those Madison Avenue upstarts and it would fall apart overnight. They deal in nothing but sham and pretense, those people-art fashions and fads that change from one minute to the next; what could they know about anything as solid and sturdy as Melbard?"

"Sir, we thought that might be the reason why you turned down the offer. That's why I've come to see you."

"You? Involved with that pack of Madison Avenue frauds?" The old man shaped his mouth with delicious cruel emphasis around the words "Madison Avenue," as if they were the foulest epithet in the language.

Wyatt thought, The old fart. He made his voice conciliatory: "Well, sir, after all, it is Elliot Judd's daughter who owns Nuart. We're not really talking about a gang of young opportunists without background or breeding, are we? From what I understand, it wouldn't hurt Melbard Chemical to have an infusion of Judd money. Besides, Elliot Judd is a big stockholder in Melbard-we'd only be keeping it in the family, in a manner of speaking."

"Then why not keep it in the Melbard family-my family?" The old man snorted. He had a disturbing trick of clicking his false teeth like castanets. Either he hadn't heard of, or didn't want to bother with, denture adhesives. He said, "I certainly don't see what makes Melbard Chemical so desirable to your Madison Avenue friends. It's hardly in their line."

"But you'd have to agree it's a good investment-a sound company. All it needs is an injection of capital to build on."

"Got capital enough of its own," the old man said curtly. "How did you get involved in this, anyway?"

"They wanted someone who knew corporate finance," Wyatt lied. "You see, the job I've been offered-it's the presidency of Melbard, provided, of course, it can be bought by Nuart."

The old man bridled immediately. His eyes narrowed; his face became hard and shrewd. He yanked open a desk drawer and took out an old meerschaum pipe with a badly chewed stem, and clenched it unlit between his teeth, supporting the bowl with one hand.

Wyatt said, "I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't. I just use it to remind me to keep my mouth shut when I'm confronted by something I don't understand."

"I didn't think it was hard to understand at all, sir."

"Isn't it? You tell me if I'm wrong, Steve, boy-it seems unconscionable to me. They're trying to bulldoze me by using you as a lever against me. They must know it would go against my grain, against my family ties, to stand in your way. But it must have occurred to you that for me to sell out to your friends would go just as much against my grain. After all, if you become president of Melbard, what happens to James Melbard?"

"He moves up to board chairman. He's ready to retire anyway-he's said so. Nobody wants to buy all his stock-he'll keep his seat on the board, and he'll remain chairman as long as he chooses to."

"A titular job, of course? You'd be in charge of operations, as president?"

"Well, yes. Of course, sir. Nuart would have a majority of the votes on the board. Naturally they'd be inclined to support me if a dispute came up between me and Mr. Melbard. But I assure you I'd be anxious to cooperate with him-after all, he knows this business better than I do."

Rademacher closed his mouth around the pipestem; he leaned back in the high-backed leather chair and closed his eyes. Wyatt, after a little while, made an elaborate sweeping arc with his arm, and looked at his watch; finally the old man opened his eyes, straightened his chair up, and said bluntly, "No. I won't do it. I'm sorry."

Wyatt nodded slowly. The old man took down his meerschaum and tried to work his teeth into a comfortable position. It was not beyond probability that he would, any minute now, decide to take them out.

Wyatt's eyes, which the old man could not see against the lamp behind him, expressed their contempt for Rademacher; in a quiet, slow way, his upper-crust voice slurring, Wyatt said, "Under the terms of the proposal I'm authorized to make, you'd receive stock options in the new corporation-you'd be granted the right, for ten years, to buy ten thousand shares of Nuart stock at ten dollars a share. We have every reason to believe it will be three or four times that price within a year, let alone ten years. On a cash investment of a hundred thousand dollars, you'll be able to show a capital gain of anywhere from one to five hundred thousand within a very few years. And of course, if I'm wrong, if the stock declines in price during the option period, it will have cost you nothing, since you're not required to exercise your option-you don't have to buy the stock. Heads you win, tails you don't lose. The option will be transferable to your heirs, of course."

The pipe was back in Rademacher's mouth. Around it, he said softly, "I told you not to bulldoze me. What makes you think I'd accept an underhanded chance to increase my own fortunes that way at my brother-in-law's expense?"

"Not at his expense, sir. He'll get the same stock option you get. Nobody stands to lose."

"Nevertheless, it's an effort to corrupt me-to bribe me with stock options. What must you think of me? An old fool, yes, perhaps-but a common chiseler?"

Wyatt's voice began to harden. "Everybody chisels, Arthur. It's only a question of need and time and motive. We all start out honest-we all see how easy it would be to give the suckers a shearing, but we're too decent to take advantage of them. Our consciences hold us back. But then some of us get pushed into a corner-bills we've got to pay, or grandchildren who need money for medical care or university tuition, or a relative who needs an expensive lawyer. Am I getting warm, sir?"

Stiff in his chair, the old man muttered, "You're a wretch, Steve boy. A scoundrel. How did you find out?"

"What does that matter? You need money, Arthur. You're not nearly as rich as you want your family to think. You need it very fast, because you don't know how long you're going to live. You've been thinking about it for quite some time. And it won't be the first time, will it? Forty years ago you saw a way to get money, and you must have explained very carefully to yourself how the suckers were just asking for it, just begging for it, and you might as well take it away from them, because if you didn't, somebody else would."

The old man's jaws were bunched on the pipe; his eyes were closed. Wyatt bounced to his feet and spoke from a semicrouch; his voice clacked abruptly: "September, nineteen-twenty-nine-you were a member of the board of directors of the Merchants and Maritime Trust, and you were present at a company meeting where the board decided to pay a reduced dividend. While the secretary went out of the room to type up the notification to the Stock Exchange, you excused yourself by pleading a call of nature. Only instead of going down the hall to the men's room you got to a telephone and sold all your stock in the company and sold more short. You got out just in time. Half an hour later the news hit the ticker, and the Exchange was swamped with sell orders-trading was suspended for two hours, and the stock reopened down several points. You

made good your short sales and cleared a half-million dollars. Isn't that how it happened, Arthur? And didn't my grandfather, who was with you on that board of directors, cover up what you'd done?"

Rademacher, eyes shut, was dry-washing his clasped hands. Mottled veins stood out on his wrists. He drew in a long ragged breath, and his gaunt old frame shuddered when he let it out.

Slowly he opened his desk drawer and put the meerschaum away in it, closed the drawer deliberately, and looked up, his eyes devoid of expression. He said, "I won't waste the energy it would take to call you names. What do you want of me?"

"Your quarter-million shares of Melbard, at the market price. And your affidavit relinquishing your option on James Melbard's quarter-million shares."

"Of course," the old man muttered to himself. Without further discussion, he turned to the phone and dialed a number. He composed his face into a slack-muscled smile, so forced he looked as if he had been posing too long for a slow photographer.

Wyatt picked up his attache case and opened it on his lap. Rademacher began to talk into the phone in an exhausted, defeated voice: "Hello, James. I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour, but something's come up... No, nothing like that. Look, James, I've done some questionable things in my lifetime, but I've never been a treacherous man, so I think I'm going to have to give you fair notice before I sell you out... Let me finish, please. Certain facts have come to my attention which have caused me to change my mind about the Nuart tender... Yes, that's exactly what I mean. I'm going to sign my control over to them. I wanted you to know... No. I'm really quite tired, James, can't we discuss it in daylight? Very well. I'll speak to you tomorrow. Good night."

Wyatt pushed the documents across the desk and handed the old man a pen.

"I am tempted," Arthur Rademacher said, "to scrawl a big fat X on this dotted line, sir."

But he signed. Wyatt slid the papers into his case, snapped it shut, went out of the office, and shut the door softly behind him.

Chapter 23

Mason Villiers.

Wednesday morning at ten, looking tired and confident and pouch-eyed in a slim mohair suit, Mason Villiers concluded his phone conversation with Montreal and went directly from the phone booth to the lobby doors. Crossing to the curb was like walking through a Turkish bath. He slid into the back seat of the limousine and slammed the door before the doorman could reach it.

Sanders, at the wheel, said, "Good morning, sir," over his shoulder.

Villiers grunted. "Hackman's. Don't dawdle."

The car slid out into traffic. Sanders said, "Sir, if you don't mind, I-"

"Later," Villiers said. "Not now." He reached for a button on the armrest panel. The hard glass screen ascended from the top of the front seat and sealed itself shut with a click against the ceiling. Concealed from the world by tinted

glass, he leaned back and closed his eyes. He had been on the move for seventy-two hours, catnapping at insufficient intervals; but he was pleased.

Sanders was unusually nervous. He almost clipped a truck, ran a stoplight, barely missed an errant pedestrian, and when he pulled up and double-parked outside Hackman's office building, he didn't leave enough room beside the car to allow the door to open. He looked back over his shoulder; his face twisted as if he were a small child valiantly fighting back tears. He jockeyed the car forward until there was space for the door to swing out, trotted around to open it, and tucked his chin shyly toward his shoulder.

Villiers, minding the heat, got out and said, "What's on your mind? I suppose your mother is sick."

"She's very ill, sir. Very ill." Sanders gave him a pained, ghastly smile. He ducked his head, birdlike, as if checking to see whether his fly was zipped. Finally he summoned the courage to speak. "I've got to have the rest of the day off, sir. Otherwise I'd like to give in my notice."

"Come again?"

Sanders' throat worked; he blurted, "I want to quit."

Villiers drew back. It was the first independent remark he had ever heard Sanders utter. "You don't like your job."

"I'm an engineer, sir. Working for you, I'm just a gopher. Sir, I know I can't quit if you won't let me. I haven't forgotten. But I'm begging you, sir."

"Why?"

"How's that, sir?"

"Why now? What's given you the backbone?"

Sanders averted his face. He said in a cold, rigid little voice, "She's dying, sir. My mother." His mouth corners jerked up in a shy little nervous smile. Sanders presented his cheek as if he wanted it slapped; he accepted every degradation willingly, out of some black buried need for self-mortification, and he was ready once again to receive rebuff without protest. Villiers suddenly could not stand his whining dyspeptic cowardice. The game had grown dreary.

"All right. I'm sick of looking at you. Get a chauffeur to take your place-I'll want the car here to pick me up by eleven."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much, sir." Sanders' lips were moist with eagerness. "I'll have to hire someone from one of the livery agencies."

"At your own expense, Sanders."

"Yes, sir. Of course."

"Keep me advised of your whereabouts at all times. I may need you again."

"Naturally, sir."

"With you for a son," Villiers said mildly, "she'll be better off dead." He crossed the sidewalk into the office building without looking back, forgetting the matter instantly. He reached the Hackman and Greene door and began to push it open, heard voices inside, and stopped where he was. The English receptionist was talking too loudly: "Your wife called. She said she was returning your call."

Hackman's voice: "My call? I didn't call her."

"From the tone of her voice I gathered that. You must have had a very rough night."

"Bet your bottom," Hackman replied, hearty but guttural with hangover. "It was a doozy."

Villiers, deliberately eavesdropping, heard a quick rustle, as if the girl had dodged Hackman's rush. The girl said in a tone like ice, "You live like a bloody sailor on shore leave. You weren't with your wife, and you weren't with me-just where the bloody hell were you?"

"You're getting just like her. I come home early, and she thinks I want something-I come home late, she thinks I've already had it. Look, I had business to do last night, okay? Christ."

There was a snort and the quick hard tap-tap of the girl's heels. Villiers pushed the door all the way open and strode in just as Hackman growled, "Sca-rew you, doll," at the girl's disappearing back.

Hackman turned and gave Villiers a momentary startled glance of red-faced alarm. Villiers pushed the door shut with his heel and allowed himself to smile slightly. Hackman, scowling, with a cigar in his mouth, was a picture of beefy chagrin. He removed the cigar and complained sourly, "She's just pissed because she knows she's nothin' but a piece of tail I can knock off anytime. Shit, one time she begs me for it, I may just let her hang up there and suffer."

Eliciting no answer, Hackman finally shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Ah, she'll be okay when she cools off. They all come around, don't they? Hell. Come on inside."

Villiers went along with him into the private office. "What did NCI open at?"

"Up a quarter. We got to talk about that."

"Why?"

"Because right now you're in trouble either way, the way I see it."

"Fascinating," Villiers said, settling in a chair. "Tell me about it, George."

"Well, look, you're holding a damn strong position in it. If it starts to slide, you'll have to start covering the accounts-you'll have people breathing down your neck for margin calls."

You don't know the half of it, he thought. "That's one way. What's the other?"

"You're right in the middle. Suppose it goes up instead of down? It could happen fast, any minute now. All the big firms have got computers scanning the stock lists to spot companies busting out of their usual patterns. Once some shlock analyst notices the uptrend, the word'll get around fast-they all eat at the same clubs, those guys, they're always on the phone with each other. One analyst starts to talk NCI up, and every guy he talks to thinks he's near the top of the list of people being told, so everybody goes out and buys because they know other guys are hearing the same story and the stock's going to go up. A broker hears the word, he passes it on to the big funds because he figures to land their commission business on it. So you start a little bull market in the stock, and it shoots up so far you can't afford to buy any more of it. What happens then?"

"I pyramid."

"With what? You got maybe eighty, ninety thousand shares on the books here. That's a drop in the bucket. But what I'm really worried about, suppose it takes a plunge? You paid for the stuff with checks written on a dozen corporations."

"Why shouldn't I? They're my corporations."

"That don't make it your money to sling around. I'd feel a lot happier if you'd sell off enough NCI shares to pay off the margin. I'm still holding your Amalgamated Elcom check to cover it, but I don't want to put that check through-I can return it to you, you tear it up, it won't have to show on

anybody's books. Mace, you're too deep into the Amalgamated Elcom reserve fund. You got no legal right to draw money out of it at all. I could get in a hell of a mess."

"Stop sweating," Villiers said mildly. "Elcom's as sound as granite. They've just discovered four hundred square miles of bauxite aluminum ore in Canada."

"It says here. Christ, you started that rumor. How much you want to bet there's no bauxite at all on that lease? All you wanted was to boost the price so you could issue carpets of the stock and trade it for NCI shares."

"Sometimes you surprise me a little," Villiers said, and as an afterthought showed a smile.

The yellowish, magnified stock tape moved rapidly across the screen. Villiers said in the same cool, even voice, "You're wrong on one point, George. I haven't got ninety thousand shares of NCI. That's only the part you've bought in your street name. My position in NCI, as of this morning, runs to approximately one million, seven hundred thousand shares."

Hackman just stared at him.

By the time Sidney Isher arrived at ten-thirty, Hackman was sitting back beaming with an H. Upmann cigar jutting from his mouth at a jaunty angle, his glad-handing smile pasted on as if it would never come off.

When Isher sat down, Villiers thought at first-astonished-that Isher was winking at him. Then he remembered it was a tic, a permanent affliction, the quivering of Isher's eyelid. It flicked and drooped of its own volition, and Isher probably had long ago lost his awareness of it. What unsettled Villiers' was that he had forgotten it. Not enough sleep, he judged.

Isher said, "I hear Farouk's nineteen-thirty Alfa Romeo is up for sale in Boston."

"I'm looking into it," Villiers said. "Right now we're going to have a conference. I want both of you wide awake."

"All right. Go ahead."

"I'm ready to come out in the open," Villiers said. "You two would have to know all of it eventually anyhow-I've held it back because you both get so damned nervous over the big ones. But now I'm going to spell it out so you'll know what we're after and what to look out for along the way."

Isher slid back in his chair and cleared his throat. "It's about time," he muttered.

"Yes sirree Bob," said Hackman.

"My aim," Villiers said, spuriously casual, "is to take control of Northeast Consolidated Industries."

Hackman beamed. "Sure."

Isher was blinking and rubbing his eyes. "NCI?" He seemed unsure he had heard right.

"Does it make sense now, Sidney?"

Isher's Adam's apple bobbed. "I'm, ah, not sure."

"Melbard was only a preliminary. That's why I didn't care what I had to pay to get it. The same with Nuart and Heggins Aircraft. You see-"

"Mace, maybe you ought to start at the beginning and take it slow for the benefit of us country folks."

Villiers disliked being interrupted but this time he let it go. "You're probably right. All right, from the top. I started by piling up capital. Used every gimmick I could think of to raise dimes and dollars. I've got boiler rooms running around

the clock. I've nursed more than a dozen companies I own-manipulated the books, fabricated figures, issued glowing annual reports, all of which is designed to show big paper profits and boost the prices of the shares. I borrowed money from myself through dummies, used fresh-printed stock as collateral, and defaulted on the loans. That leaves me free to sell them in the open market without having to register them as a new issue-I dumped the stock in small doses as distress shares, liquidated as foreclosures. We avoid government scrutiny that way, and the public doesn't have any way of knowing these are fresh new shares with the ink still wet. I slipped them onto the market out of Canada, over the counter and through the boiler rooms-that kind of small investor isn't likely to offer it soon for resale on the major exchanges, so nobody knows we've flooded the market with new paper and diluted the value of the shares.

"I used one trick I learned from you, George-bought small amounts of my own stocks on the exchanges at the close of the trading day, paying a higher price than the last previous quotation. That way the stock shows an uptick on the listings. Keeps the price up and sustains the appearance of activity, which makes the stock more attractive to the over-the-counter buyer."

"By now some ten thousand Americans have invested in my companies through the boiler rooms. They've bought about ten million shares for about forty million dollars."

Sidney Isher said, "All of which goes into your pockets. But wait till the Internal Revenue boys get on you."

"I'm hardly that careless, Sidney. All my operations are laundered through Swiss trusts with numbered accounts. Who's going to trace them to me? As far as my admitted personal capitalization goes, I'm covered. I've set up a private charitable foundation. Made huge donations to it and then borrowed the assets of the foundation back, and defaulted on the loan, which leaves the foundation bankrupt and the Internal Revenue boys empty-handed."

"It's taken more than a year to lay all the groundwork. I've sunk every dime that wasn't nailed down into NCI on margin and pyramided every time there's been an uptick. The upshot is, as of this morning I've got voting title to something like two million shares of NCI, and I'm prepared to spend the better part of three hundred million dollars to get control."

There was a suitable hush-in fairness, he had to call it a hush-and it pleased him.

Finally Isher, stone-faced, said, "You can't do it. That amount won't buy control."

"What do you take me for, Sidney? I can add and subtract. It'll buy me seats on NCI's board."

"You're aiming for a proxy fight, then?"

"Not if it can be avoided."

"Then I don't get it."

George Hackman said, "What about Judd? Does he take all this lying down?"

"Elliot Judd is out of it. He doesn't own the company anymore, he's turned his stock over to nonprofit trusts. At the next board meeting, he goes out. I mean to take his place."

Isher said, "Who told you that about Judd?"

"Wyatt found it. A letter locked up in Howard Claiborne's office. Judd's an old man, he's not well, and he's getting out. His directors are big names with big

reputations, but they've always been a rubber stamp for him. Without the force of Judd's personality in the chair, they'll buckle under pressure."

"No," Isher said. "Not that easy, Mace. I don't mean to play Cassandra here, but suppose you're the NCI board and a man with Mason Villiers' reputation comes in and tries to shove his hand up your twat. Do you just sit back and let him do it? No. The minute those boys find out what you're up to, the whole organization will close up tighter than a sparrow's cunt. The word will get out, there'll be a scramble, the price of NCI will start to sag on the market, and your factors will start making margin calls on you where you've pyramided. It'll take four, five hundred million dollars to turn the trick then, and you haven't got it."

"I'll have it when I need it."

"I don't see it."

"Have I ever let you down, Sidney?"

Isher was cold. "You might. It's too big, Mace, you can't cut it-no man alive could cut it, this side of Howard Hughes."

Villiers watched him darkly. The red-headed lawyer's eye winked rapidly. "All right, Sidney. There's something else in your craw. Get it done, or get off the pot."

"All right, I will. I know you, Mace-nobody ever has a meeting with you, it always has to be a collision. You're full of savage drives, you're brilliant-hell, maybe you're a genius-but your emotional insights belong to a ten-year-old, and your whole record testifies to that. Those boys on the NCI board know too much about you-they won't even give you a chance to open your mouth. They'll slam the door in your face."

"Just because they don't like my table manners?"

"You'd be surprised how much that counts. But more important, they don't trust your morals or your methods. They'll know what will happen to NCI if you get your hands on it. Everything you do is limited to the needs of personal aggrandizement and ambition. You're not capable of even the most rudimentary concern toward the good of the company or its stockholders or its employees, let alone the society of which NCI is an influential part. Those boys have got too much responsibility to too many people to let you get your foot in the door. They'll fight you right down to the last share of common stock. You're up against a stone wall, Mace. You haven't got the credentials, and you haven't got the finesse, and you haven't got the reputation to bring it off. They'll fight you all the way."

"Let them," Villiers said. "That's what makes the game worth playing, isn't it?"

"There's no point in playing this kind of game if you can't win."

"Sidney, not only can I win, I am going to win."

"Nuts. You're going to have to show me, and I won't convince easy."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," Villiers told him. "Why do you think I've told you this much? I've told you more than you needed to know, and you've rewarded me with exactly the kind of reaction I expected. But I'm going to convince you, Sidney, because if I can convince you, then I can convince them. And because I need to have both of you as alert and anxious and dedicated to this operation as I am. I need your eyes and ears, your sensitivities. I can't watch everybody and everything at once myself, and we've got to spot every sign of an opening. Now, I'm going to spell out the details for you, and you're going to listen carefully and save your objections until I'm done. Understood?"

“Go ahead,” Isher said, flicking a resigned glance toward Hackman, who sat back wreathed in cigar smoke, squinting, drumming the fingers of his left hand on the leather arm of his chair. Villiers shifted his seat and studied their faces, until Isher, made uncomfortable by the enforced stillness, coughed on his catarrh and said again, “Go ahead, Mace.”

“There are about eighty million shares of NCI outstanding. At thirty-two dollars a share, that comes to roughly two and a half billion dollars. The company’s assets are worth more than that, of course, but the difference is made up in preferred stock and other capitalization. To get absolute control, fifty-one percent of the voting stock, you’d have to pay one and a quarter billion dollars at the current market price. Obviously I can’t do that. At the moment I own about three percent of the outstanding stock, which makes me one of the biggest single stockholders. Perhaps the biggest, since Judd scattered his shares.”

“All right. I’ve got a sizable position in NCI, and I’ve got one NCI director already in my pocket.”

“Who?”

“Dan Silverstein. Never mind the questions, Sidney, take my word for it. I’ve got Silverstein on a two-way rack, and when I tighten the chain he makes the right noise; it’s that simple.”

“Now, we’ve got control of Heggins Aircraft, which is listed on the New York Stock Exchange. It’s a respected company. Starting next Monday, we’re launching an advertising campaign under the Heggins banner. We’re asking NCI stockholders to tender their stocks to us. For a limited time-say, four weeks-we’ll give them a forty-six-dollar Heggins convertible debenture for every share of thirty-two-dollar NCI they tender. We’re paying five and a half percent interest on Heggins debentures, which means the stockholder’s trading a thirty-two-dollar stock with a one-dollar annual dividend for a forty-six-dollar debenture with a guaranteed two-and-a-half-dollar annual interest. And they have the right whenever they want to convert the debentures into Heggins common stock at eight dollars a share.”

Isher said, “Where do you get the debentures?”

“We print them. The printing bill might run to two hundred bucks.”

“Sure. And who pays the two-fifty interest?”

“NCI does, after we take it over. Interest on debentures is tax-deductible. The government pays half of the interest. Look, Sidney, the minute we make our tender offer, the price of NCI goes up. Not to forty-six, but to thirty-eight or thirty-nine. A lot of NCI stockholders are going to be anxious to sell at that price.”

“Okay, but who’s going to buy it at that price? You won’t have that many buyers convinced the merger will take place.”

“Hell, I’d buy every share I could grab,” Hackman told him. “You’ve got a guaranteed split there. Money in the bank.”

“I don’t follow that,” Isher said, and coughed.

Villiers said, “George is right. The brokers will snap it up. You’ve got NCI selling at maybe thirty-eight, with Heggins convertibles at forty-six. A broker can take that spread and make it into a guaranteed arbitrage profit. He buys up NCI and sells Heggins short. If the price goes down, he makes good his short sales. If the merger comes off, he turns in the NCI shares for Heggins debentures, converts them to voting common, and gives them back to the guy

he borrowed from when he sold short. Either way, he clears a profit that's locked into the eight-dollar spread."

Hackman said, "Absolutely. Every clown down here in the Street will buy every share of NCI he can grab."

"And so," Villiers said, "the brokers will buy the NCI stock for us. They'll buy, and keep buying, and in the end they'll have forty or fifty percent of the outstanding NCI shares. They'll convert them into Heggins debentures, which means we give them Heggins and they give us NCI. We get forty percent of NCI or more for Heggins paper, and we go out and buy up from NCI stockholders however much more we need to get fifty-one percent of the company."

Hackman sat smiling. He tapped his temple. "Beautiful, Mace. Absolutely beautiful."

Isher said, "Do I understand this right? NCI pays the interest on the debentures? You're buying NCI stock with NCI's own money?"

"Exactly right, Sidney."

"There's got to be a hitch in it. It couldn't be that easy, or everybody'd have been doing that kind of thing. What about the NCI board? Do they just sit still and let it happen?"

"Hardly. That's why I've moved to get control of companies like Melbard. I've got two others in my pocket as well. They supply NCI with patented components. With control of Melbard and the other two, I'm in a position to raise the royalties on the patents. That would put NCI in a price bind. It would shake public faith in the company and create a wave of distrust. You'd see the price of NCI plunge down to a level where I could pull off the same debenture operation at one-third the price and buy up the controlling margin for peanuts. NCI would come down into my reach even faster."

"I see. You mean to hold that threat over their heads to keep them peaceful. I still don't think it's going to work."

"It'll work, Sidney. But it has to be done fast. I've had to move into NCI on small cash margin through the factoring banks to pyramid my holdings, and at the moment I'm into them for thirty million dollars, on which I'm going to have to pay something like ten million interest a year. The only way I can handle that is to treat the money as flash loans. I've got to get control of NCI fast enough to retire those loans before the interest cripples me. I want the whole debenture campaign worked out by Thursday and the ads placed in the financial pages by Monday morning."

Isher scowled at him, not replying; it was Hackman who spoke: "Do we let the NCI boys find out about it from the newspapers, or do we talk to them first?"

"We talk to them first. Friday afternoon. You'll set that up, George."

"I'd better get on the phone, then."

Bone-tired, he entered the elevator and rode it down, glancing at his watch. A limousine waited at the curb with a strange driver, a burly man with a polished bald head and baggy gray chauffeur's uniform and a world-weary face. Villiers spoke curtly to the man and sat back in silence until the car delivered him to Naomi Kemp's converted brownstone in the Village.

He knocked, heard the typewriter stop clicking, the padding slap-slap of her slippers crossing the bare floor, the inquiring call of her voice. He spoke; she opened the door to him and stood scratching her stomach, and frowned at him. "You look like the wrath of God."

“I need soap and water and a little sleep. Let me use your shower.” He kicked the door shut behind him.

She looked him up and down, turned, and walked away. Her big freewheeling breasts were bursting out of the scooped apricot blouse. Her walk was tidy and sensually muscular, but she had broad hips and heavy fullnesses of flesh, and there was a danger that once she began to gain weight she would quickly become gelid and loose.

Villiers said, “How’s the book coming?”

“Not well. How can I think in this heat? I suppose you happened to be in the neighborhood, and I just happened to be the closest.”

“That’s right. I didn’t come to get laid.”

“I’m flattered,” she said, sarcasm riding on a flat tone. “You were going to take me to dinner the other night, remember?”

“Something came up.”

“Thanks a lot,” she said. “You know where the shower is.”

He hung his jacket across the back of a chair and slipped the knot of his tie.

Abruptly Naomi walked past him toward the narrow kitchenette, marching with a magnificent jounce and heave of buttocks that seemed to writhe with a life of their own. Her voice trailed back from the kitchenette: “I’d like to throw you out. I don’t know why you make me feel so much like a woman whenever you come in sight-maybe I’m just a round-heeled mattressback.”

He heard the click of the refrigerator. He stripped off his shirt and trousers and bent to remove his socks. She came back into the room with a glass of milk and said, “Quel animal.” Her mouth was big and soft.

She came close, breasts jiggling with taut bounce, put her arms around his neck, and straddled him with her skirt rucked high, her heels gripping his flanks.

“Get down,” he said.

She went over to her desk and sat down, gave him a twisted smile, and shook her head. “Always when you want it, never when I do. Just like when we were kids in Chicago. God, Mace, you’ve never grown up at all-you’re still the same guttersnipe kid who just found out what his balls are for. Emotionally you’re still as hungry as a twelve-year-old-you’re oversexed, and you think it gives you the right to fuck everything in sight. You treat all women as sequels.”

He grunted.

“You don’t think it’s funny at all, do you? I guess children never laugh at themselves. That takes maturity.”

He stripped off his underpants. “You’re a fine one to talk about maturity. I read a chapter in one of your nurse-doctor books once.”

“Hah.”

He went into the bathroom. Her voice followed him: “Sex is a game, right? You’re a bitterly neurotic little kid, Mace.”

The shock of the cold shower stiffened him, took away his breath, arched his back. He withstood it until he could breathe normally, mixed warm water into the spray, and lathered his hard body with soap.

He toweled and opened the door. Steam escaped into the room past him, and Naomi gave him a tired smile. “Maybe you can be explained,” she said, “but you can’t be excused.”

“I can’t stand argumentative women.”

"You could always leave," she said. She twisted away from the typewriter. "I'm famished, Mace." All her appetites were wickedly ravenous.

"Then eat. I'm tired-I need an hour's sleep."

"You cocksucking bastard."

"You're always amusing, Naomi," he said. He lay down flat on his back and closed his eyes. "Why don't you get married?"

"I've never met anybody who looked like he'd be worth looking at across a breakfast table for fifty years. Except you."

"I'm not in the market."

"I know. The only thing you look for in a woman is novelty-and nobody can give you that for long."

"Quite."

"But we go back a long way, don't we, Mace? I'll bet I'm the only one you still keep in touch with, from the old days."

"I've forgotten those days. You'd be smart to do the same."

"Not me. I'm saving it. One day I'll write the Great American Novel, and you'll be in it, Mace-a crummy little orphanage kid on the South Side of Chicago who always had to have more jacks and marbles than any other kid on the block."

He heard rustling movement and opened his eyes. She was standing above the narrow bed, almost naked, presenting her great red-tipped round breasts. She rotated her hips at him, the buttocks all but bursting from her panties. Her tummy was sucked in, emphasizing the soft overhanging weight of breasts pendulant. Her smile was coy; she placed his hand between her legs, and he felt dampness through the nylon of the panties.

"Later," he said. "After I've had some sleep."

Chapter 24

Russell Hastings.

Gordon Quint popped a candy ball in his mouth and stuck it in his cheek squirrellike. "You've got a look on your face like a man who's about to make a speech."

"Just a few curious facts," Russ Hastings said.

"I suppose I must listen to this?"

"Listen to a name, Gordon. We were talking about coincidences last week, remember? I begin to disbelieve in coincidences when the same name appears too often in too many unlikely places."

"Since you evidently want me to inquire," Quint murmured, "whose name?"

"Mason Villiers."

The bulge rolled from one cheek to the other.

Hastings said, "Do I begin to see a gleam of interest?"

"Indeed," Quint growled.

"The name doth strike a familiar chord, then, sire?"

"Certainly. He's a young man who gave this department a hot foot four or five years ago when he managed to raid Lee Central Plastics and line his pockets with its assets without ever leaving himself open to prosecution. It was such a neat job of cannibalization I almost wanted to see him get away with it-purely

aesthetic appreciation, of course. Morally he's a savage. He made it work by somehow blackmailing all the potential witnesses against him, extorting guarantees from them that they wouldn't testify. Fortunately the Lee Central Plastics affair gave the financial world ample demonstration of his character. Nobody's wanted to have dealings with him since then-he's dropped out of sight. I haven't heard his name in several years, but I've always been certain it would surface again. Apparently it has. You may proceed-you have my attention."

"Your majesty's attentiveness is most deeply gratifying."

"Can't we dispense with the vaudeville routines, Russ?"

Hastings grunted. "Number one, last week Villiers took control of Heggins Aircraft. Item, Heggins supplies some patented components to NCI subsidiaries under government research-and-development contracts. Item, Heggins is a small company accessible to a raider with pyramiding in mind, and Heggins is listed on the Big Board, a significant asset."

"Number two, Villiers wanders the Western world like a prodigal gypsy, but if you could say he had a headquarters, it's a brokerage in Montreal which may or may not be a covering front for a high-pressure boiler-room operation. Item, a Mafioso named Senna seems to run one of the Montreal boiler rooms, and Senna recently bought a block of NCI. Item, a lot of untraceable purchases of NCI common have been made through Canadian offices in the past few weeks."

"Number three, last week Nuart Galleries announced it was going public. Item, Nuart belongs to my ex-wife, who is also the daughter of Elliot Judd, who is chairman of the board of NCI. Item, the power behind Diane's decision to go public is Mason Villiers."

"How do you know that?"

"Diane's head girl told me."

Quint said, "You've done a proper job of detective work, haven't you?"

"I wasn't fishing for compliments. I'm fishing for more authority. I want a longer leash-I think what I've turned up so far justifies it."

"I'm inclined to agree."

"Maybe Villiers is an errand boy. Maybe he's fronting for the Mafia. Maybe he's running the whole show himself. I need to find out."

"What do you want, Russ?"

"Authority to put a full-sized team of detectives on it. It's too big for me to handle alone, and it's no job for the lawyers and accountants on our staff. I want a trained team from the Justice Department to work under me."

"Justice will scream bloody murder."

"Not if I work through Bill Burgess. He'll do it, if I can show him I've got complete backing from you."

"Very well. I'll sign anything that needs to be signed. But keep careful, old cock-without evidence that will stand up in court, we can't make overt moves. There'd be too much danger in it, the market's perched on the point of a pin. I can't give you authority to uncover our official artillery and begin blazing away."

"When I want that, I'll ask for it."

"Wait, Russ. Before you go-your ex-wife. What do you plan doing about that?"

"I'm having lunch with her. I don't know if it'll do any good, she'll probably take it the wrong way. But if she's got herself into Villiers' hands, she's in trouble."

He went down to the square, trapped a taxi, got in, and braced himself while it made its ass-jarring way north along pitted pavements. He thought about Elliot Judd's proposition, worrying it around from all angles like a dog with a strange bone.

An illuminated sign on a bank told him it was 96 degrees at 12:19; the traffic was stop-and-go. Five minutes late, he paid off the driver and went into the sterile tall building. When he touched the depressed plastic square at the elevator bank, it lighted up in obeisance. Presently the doors opened and disgorged a crowd, and he got into the cage and watched lighted numbers move along the row, while Muzak whispered hideously and the elevator climbed so smoothly that he had the sensation it wasn't going to stop, it would break dreamily through the roof and carry him into space…

Diane kept him waiting. The receptionist asked him to be seated, but he stood, moving from painting to painting, making a circle of the room, pretending to study the oils and watercolors and gouaches. He was thinking of long ago, a vision of the young Diane stepping off a train with an art magazine in one hand and her tennis racket strapped to the outside of her suitcase. Memories crowded in, rushed together. Days of Russ-and Diane-one word, one entity. Days of increasing obsessive fervor, her evening salons at home for arty friends, the internecine gossip that crowded him out, the faces like living waxworks, until he got to feeling like just another object in the apartment-something she and her friends tried to avoid bumping into.

She kept him waiting almost ten minutes, then came out past the receptionist and gave him her cool hand. In the bright artificial light he saw the little scar traces of time on her throat and face. "You look lovely," he told her, feeling tense and awkward. Her skirt was three inches above the knees-a little nothing dress that had probably cost as much as a round-trip ticket to Rome. He said, "I thought we'd try the Homestead. I booked a table."

"Good. Isn't the heat ghastly?" She was ready to go, carrying her bag, putting on oversized dark glasses; she gave him a jerky smile and hurried ahead toward the elevator, and for the first time it occurred to him she was as nervous as he was.

They rode down in discomfited silence and walked toward the corner. He said with forced gaiety, "Look at all the damned cars. I once calculated the land occupied by a parked car in midtown Manhattan is worth something like a hundred thousand dollars."

They turned the corner. Diane said, "You've got sunburn on the nose. You must have found a girl who likes the beach."

"You know better than that."

"Better than to think you've got a girl?"

"Better than to think I'd let anybody drag me near a beach." He tried to smile, and held the restaurant door.

They climbed a flight of stairs to a corner table-chip-proof, burn-proof, stain-proof. Over drinks they exchanged furtive looks and kept starting to say things and subsiding, until he said, "You've been well?"

"I'm fine," she said. She had a strangely incomplete smile, one which began but didn't become whole. "I haven't had one headache since the divorce."

"Ouch."

"Oh, dear, now you're angry." She turned to the waiter: "Another old-fashioned, please. No sugar."

He said, “You really are looking more gorgeous than ever.”

Unaccountably, she blanched. “Stop looking at me.” She dropped her eyes and withdrew, with a brooding, inward expression. “You didn’t call this meeting to throw roses at my feet, did you? Will you please stop looking at me?”

“Why?”

“You’re making overtures. Don’t be adventurous-stop acting as though you still want me.”

“I suppose I do, when you come down to it-the way a reformed alcoholic wants whiskey. But don’t read anything into it; the truth is, you’re the one thing above all else I’ve wanted to forget.”

“By inviting me to lunch with you?”

“It’s not a social visit.”

“So you said on the phone. You were damned mysterious.”

“I apologize. I thought it would persuade you to come.”

“All right. It worked, didn’t it?” She had composed herself, putting on her arch face. She took out a compact to inspect her lipstick. Hastings tried to fight off the feeling of intimidation-as if he were a former enlisted man confronted suddenly by a lieutenant general: a subservient reaction ingrained in moments of crisis, but which would disintegrate if given time for logical assessment.

He tried to lighten the tone. “You’re still blushing. I remember how hot your face looked the first time I asked you for a date.”

“Let’s not resurrect our turbulent affairs, Russ. It’s so tiresome. I’ve still got tread marks where you ran over me-I’m in no mood for nostalgia.”

Overcome by an odd sense of defeat, he shifted his chair, feeling dismally that this cold space between them was a place where love once had been; it hardly seemed possible.

When a waiter brought menus, he accepted the interruption gratefully. They made selections, the waiter wrote orders and went, and Diane said, “Do you suppose we could get down to cases, Russ? I’m going to have to make it a quick meal-a thousand things to do this afternoon.”

“All right,” he said. Gladly. “Several things. First, I spent the weekend in Arizona with your father. I mention it only so you won’t later find out and suspect me of doing something behind your back. It was purely business-you know where I work.”

Her thin shoulders stirred; her mouth twisted. “All right. You’ve made it clear you didn’t go to him to ask him to intercede with me.”

“To persuade you to come back to me? You’re flattering one of us.”

“Am I?”

“Clutch it to your breast, if it warms you. I hope this is the last time we’ll have to see each other.”

Her look, not directed at him, was icy with scorn. Hastings looked down and said in a different voice, “Why do we always have to bicker? I’m sorry, it’s my fault. I’d like to keep it civilized. I came to see you because I want you to give me some facts which I think you wouldn’t give out to a stranger.”

“Facts about what?”

“You’ve gone public.”

“That’s hardly a secret.”

“I need to know how deeply Mason Villiers is involved.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “You need to know? Whatever for?”

“I work for the government, remember? Villiers is a crook, I’m a cop. It’s as simple as that.”

“I see. Either you’re indignant because he’s a crook, or you think I’ve been seeing him, and that makes you angry.”

“Jealousy? Maybe-it’s possible. But I don’t like seeing you involve yourself with a barracuda like Villiers. Underneath his brainy front, there’s the claim-jumping personality of a mining-camp swindler. All the professionals know enough to give him wide berth.”

Diane began to eat hungrily. “I gather you’ve met him?”

“Villiers? No.”

“You’re a bit green around the edges. Look, Russ, if it gives you comfort, you can assume if I had any dealings with him I’d have him watched by the best battery of attorneys I could hire. I’m no innocent child of the woods.”

“Maybe. But if you go swimming with sharks you need sharp teeth. I’ve got reason to suspect he’s using you as part of a scheme against your father’s corporation.”

She gave that odd half-smile again. “Don’t let your imagination run away with you, Russ. He may be tough, but he’s hardly as tough as my father. There isn’t a man alive who could whip my father in a corporate fight.”

He was taken aback. He covered his fast rearrangement of thoughts by addressing himself to his meal. Clearly she knew nothing of her father’s illness; equally clearly, Judd had deliberately withheld it from her. It was like him-Judd was curiously sentimental, but he had no patience with sentimentality when it was directed at himself. He would want his daughter’s love, but never her tears.

There was a clear choice; he made the decision painfully. He felt a strong duty to Judd’s implied wishes. He told her nothing of her father’s illness.

He carried on about Villiers, but she was having none of it, she seemed to feel personally assaulted, her judgment questioned. She gathered her sunglasses and handbag and said, “I really must run,” and he let it end lamely, inconclusively.

He sat over the detectives’ preliminary reports in his bathrobe, hearing the night traffic hoot along below his apartment window, staring at the pages without reading them, and feeling as if a plug had been pulled and everything drained out of him. Once he went so far as to dial Carol’s unlisted number-he had taken it down, perversely, that last night alone in her flat. There was no answer to his ring, and when he cradled the phone he laughed harshly at himself.

Around eleven o’clock there was a buzz at the door; he went to answer it and found Cynthia MacNee there, grinning, with one shoulder propped against the jamb and her silly hat askew. “Throw me out if I’m intruding. I was feeling a little lonely and kind of randy, and when I found out you’d had lunch with her ladyship, I kind of thought you might want company tonight.”

“Very astute,” he said. “Come on in.”

He watched her sweep into the room with her imperious lunging stride. She was big and tall, and long-faced with evident depression. She said, “Why don’t we get rip-roaring drunk?”

He closed the door. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Everything.” She was at the window, holding the drapery back. “You really have a pointillist’s view through the smog from here, don’t you?” She turned back and sank into a chair with elaborate indications of

unhappiness. “My latest pastime, duration one week, busted up last night. He gave me a little exercise and a lot of abuse, and I suddenly said to myself, ‘What’s a nice girl like you doing with a motherfucking son of a bitch like him?’ So I gave him his walking papers, and now I’ve got the blues real bad. The deep indigos. Do you mind me crashing in on you? I’d love to exchange sympathetic ears with you, dahling.”

“Sounds like a fine idea,” he said. “What are you drinking?”

“Whatever works fastest.”

He made drinks, and when he brought them she got up from the chair. “Sit here and let me sit at your feet. Are you nonplussed by my sudden appearance, dear Russ? Should I have my drink and depart hence?”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“Then hold my hand, dearest one.” She sat down on the floor with her shoulder against his knee; blindly her hand crept toward his. It felt cool and moist in his palm. She said, “The life of the swinging single can be most trying. I suppose you’ve found that out.”

“I haven’t made much of an effort to swing.”

“You ought to,” she said. “Get the bile out of your system. You’re all uptight, Russ. You’ve still got the look of a one-woman man, and that’s not much good when you haven’t got a woman. Swing a little, try some one-nighters for variety. Loosen up. Hang in there.”

Her hair was fanned out across his knee; he kneaded it with his hand. “It doesn’t come so easy to some of us.”

“You’ve still got her ladyship in your bloodstream? You require a transfusion, dahling.”

“Not her,” he said. “Someone else-just as inaccessible.”

“A married lady? For shame, dahling. I could weep-perhaps I will, given one more of these.” She waved her drink in the air.

He let her go on thinking there was a married woman in his life; it was simpler. After a while he rebuilt her drink, and she said, “Boss lady told me you’d been out to Arizona. It must have been lovely.”

“It was,” he said, and suddenly, for reasons he sensed but could not explain, he blurted a long monologue-how Judd had offered him stewardship of his wilderness trust.

At the end Cynthia said, “And now you have to make up your mind. What are you going to do?”

“I wish I knew. Indecision becomes a habit after a while. Let things ride often enough, and you contract some kind of paralysis. I’ve been chewing on it ever since I came back Sunday night, and I still haven’t made up my mind. When I was out there it seemed like a fine idea. Back here it seems unreal and stupid. It’s not that I don’t approve in principle-Judd’s right about the whole thing, no question of that. The only thing is, am I the man for the job? Realistically, the answer’s got to be no. I grew up in a Connecticut suburb, and my whole adult life has been in politics and law. I don’t know the first thing about maintaining a wilderness. Put me down on Judd’s ranch, and I’d get lost and die of thirst within half a mile of water. I can’t tell a cottonwood from a eucalyptus, I don’t know one cactus from another, I’d probably have trouble telling the difference between cow dung and horse droppings. I can’t tell a sick tree from a well one, and if I came across a brushfire I wouldn’t have the slightest idea how to start putting it out.”

“You’re avoiding the point,” she said. “Those things you could learn. The question is, do you want to?”

“I’m a card-carrying romantic. When I didn’t really have the choice, I liked to play a little game to convince myself all I really wanted was to get away from the big bad city and settle down in the woods somewhere away from all the cares and woes of the civilization I inhabit.”

“But?”

“But when you come right down to it and offer me what I kept asking for, I’m not sure it’s what I really want anymore. Right now I’m up to my ears in a job that depresses hell out of me because we’ve got to deal with human garbage, we’ve always got to be looking out for the worst in people. I feel like a cop working a beat in Harlem-there’s got to be all kinds of warm human reality all around you, but you just haven’t got time to look for it, you’re too busy watching the muggers and dope peddlers, and after a while you become convinced the human race is no damn good because everybody you see is peddling dope or mugging old ladies. It’s what you see because it’s what you look for.”

“But,” she said adamantly.

He had to laugh. “The job keeps me alive,” he confessed. “It keeps the adrenalin pumping. Right now we’re getting hot on the track of what may turn out to be the biggest stock-market conspiracy of the decade. It’s slimy and depressing to know there are creatures out there doing their damnedest to swindle thousands of people out of billions of dollars-but it’s exciting as hell to track them. I can’t deny I enjoy the chase. And stuck away in the woods somewhere I’d never have that stimulation. I see myself vegetating. Maybe it’s just too late for me to embrace the joys of pastoral solitude. Once you’re conditioned to action, you can’t live without it.”

“But you’re still not sure?”

“I hate this city so much,” he said vehemently.

After a while Cynthia said, “A couple of years ago I had a wild affair with a character who got mustered out of the Air Force because the only thing he was much good at was flying jet fighters, and the service decided he was too old to keep it up. He’d been an ace in France at the end of the war, and he’d flown all over Korea, and he’d done three tours in Vietnam, and they retired him, so he went into business here on his retirement pay-some kind of air-freight operation-and the poor son of a bitch was miserable. Finally he signed up to fly antique fighter planes for some belligerent African country. The last I saw of him he was getting on the ship to Africa, happy as a clam. Maybe the poor bastard’s crashed by now, but he never had any choice, really. He always hated airplanes, you know?”

He got up and went to mix drinks. He felt a little dizzy and drunk; he came back into the room with a glass in each hand and saw that she was on her feet. She took both glasses from him and set them down, turned, and drew him close; her face broke into a quiet smile. Inside, he felt a visceral quiver, the slow coil and press of wanting her. She breathed, “Don’t talk. Let’s just get laid.” Her voice was thick and sweet in his ear; her nails dug into him. She made a small, warm, contented sound. He tasted her breath in his mouth; her kiss went deep into him.

She slipped away, went around the room turning out lights until only one was left burning; she stripped off her clothes as she moved. He caught her by

the bed. She stood taut in tawny underwear, panties and a strapless little half-cup bra that supported her breasts from underneath, almost exposing the dark nipples. A fine pale down was faint along her lovely back by the spinal furrow. She unfastened the bra and held it against her breasts with one hand. He unbuttoned his shirt, all the while staring, as if his vision were tactile, at the soft, curved lines of her big body. She was turned half away; he drew her back, her buttocks hard against him, nibbled at her neck, rubbed his palms along her lithe waist until she shuddered and lifted her hands to the back of his head, tipping her head back and around for his kiss. The bra fell away; he shaped his hands over the soft-sheathed hipbones, the flat strong belly, up over the rib cage and the rubbery-resilient breasts. She turned within the circle of his arms, writhing, and gasped against his mouth, her hungry tongue questing the roof of his mouth, her hands plucking at his belt and zipper, tugging his trousers and underwear away until his penis sprang into her hand, pulsed, stretched, grew, swiveled upward hard and shiny, burning with sensation. She pushed him back onto the bed and sat astride him and played with him until he pulled her down, feeling the resilient weight of her breast in his hand. They did not speak; it was as if it were the most natural thing in the world, wholly right, requiring no reasoning. He probed her mouth with his tongue until her teeth opened and her breath came fast; felt her breasts against him, the hardened nipples coming moist. Her face was close, so that her two eyes blurred into one, and a pleasant warmth flowed through him; he became quietly attentive to the gentle searching touch of his own hands, the heat of her pulse-driven breath in his mouth, the hardness of her teeth against his flicking tongue. He cupped her buttocks and rolled her against him, his penis sliding hard and slow into her snug sheath; he massaged her back with long lazy strokes of his fingernails. A fire came leaping in him; they lunged and surged with driving abandon, flesh blending tight, until their pounding pulsebeats seemed to thunder together in a single roar: they became a single creature of ecstatic wheeling frenzy, fused and thrashing, flesh tingling in sensuous delirium, possessed by lusty animal joy that climbed with humid moans to the helpless, strained agonized cry of climax.

And then she was curled up with fists together against his chest, one knee hooked over his waist, snuggling close, soft and content; she yawned luxuriously and nuzzled his throat. He could faintly see the soft whiteness of her breasts, caught between her arms; he felt the light touch of her fingers against his chest, and he didn't want to think beyond this bed, this moment, her. He felt tranquil and at ease.

But soon she stirred and rolled away from him and stood up beside the bed.

He said, "Stay the night."

"No, dahling. I must hurry home before it turns into a pumpkin."

"Why?"

"Because, dearest Russ, we mustn't let this mean more than it should, and if I slept the night in your bed it would put thoughts in your head. I bear you fond affection, dahling, and you are superb in the sack, but I'm afraid I am not strong enough to encourage things I have no intention of carrying through to a finish. Strong, that is, in the sense that a skunk is a strong animal. I couldn't do that to you, and I won't let you do it to me. I know both of us too well. So let's leave it at the cliche of two ships passing in the night, shall we? The message has been exchanged to our mutual delight, and now we both go on to

sail our own courses. Oh, shit, what a poet I'd make! Wouldn't I have made a hell of a truck driver, though?"

She leaned over him, pecked him on the cheek, and trailed her fingers along his ribs, and said, "Chalk it up to education, dahling. Initiation rites. Feel free henceforth to join the hit-and-run fraternity of swinging singles. No, don't say anything-we simply inhabit different worlds, my deah. From time to time when I happen to be passing through yours, maybe I'll drop by. Between times, be thankful I didn't decide to stay."

And so he watched her leave, before he slept.

Chapter 25

Howard Claiborne.

Howard Claiborne walked down Wall Street without hurry; these great monolithic buildings gave him comfort-there was in them certainty, permanence, solidity. The old man had a keen appreciation of his life. He enjoyed the tight-knit efficient organization of his financial empire in the fuzzy world of modern bureaucracy. He enjoyed the daily luncheons in plush private dining clubs with pre-Castro Havana cigars and silverware crested with coats of arms. He enjoyed his exclusive multifold membership in the highest-priced club in the world, the New York Stock Exchange, each of whose 1,366 seats was worth more than half a million dollars.

The big bullpen on the eighth floor was half-empty when he strode across it; he had arrived, as always, ten minutes ahead of time. His secretary was in place behind the wooden railing: "Good morning, Mr. Claiborne!" Miss Goralski chirped. He nodded his head once, smiling with reserve, and touched the flower in his buttonhole as he entered his baroquely ornamented office and tore off the page of the desk calendar to expose today's, Thursday's, date. His big corner office was dominated by a huge walnut desk, behind which he settled in a chair which had been occupied by his father before him.

Howard Claiborne's parents had wanted a polite, neat, unintrusive child. He had grown up in the requisite prep school (Exeter) and summer camp, trained not to display emotion; even love, to a Claiborne, was polite.

On a chain across his conservative waistcoat he carried his Phi Beta Kappa key and his Skull and Bones doodad. He had the requisite membership cards in his wallet-the Union League, the Links. He lived, during the summer months, in a turreted gingerbread Victorian estate on Fishers Island, from which he commuted each day by helicopter. During the winter, while his wife-often with one or another grandchild-went to Florida or the Bahamas, he occupied a plush townhouse with spiral staircase, another legacy of his father. Howard Claiborne's great grandfather had been a buccaneering magnate who had used the bodies of workmen for railroad ties. His son, Howard Claiborne's grandfather, had used his inherited wealth to establish himself on Wall Street and in the best drawing rooms. It was said that if a family started with money, it would take at least three generations to get into the best society. Howard Claiborne was the fourth generation: a bulwark, a patriarch, a Brahmin. There were perhaps a dozen Claibornes in the New York telephone directories, but

only one family was meant when the phrase was uttered, “the Claibornes, of New York and Fishers Island.”

This Thursday morning, Howard Claiborne occupied the first half-hour of his working day by reading the correspondence that had accumulated overnight. He was near the bottom of the stack when the phone buzzed and he lifted it to his ear.

“Mr. Arthur Rademacher, of Melbard Chemical.”

“Fine, Miss Goralski. Put him on.”

There followed a fifteen-minute conversation, during which the expression on Howard Claiborne’s patrician face, and the intonations of his voice, underwent far vaster changes than was his usual wont. Afterward he sat back in the old chair with his eyes shut and his fingers drumming on the desk-a sign, with Howard Claiborne, of spectacular disturbance.

He went into the file room and unlocked the Wakeman Fund drawer and spent half an hour there; he could have had Miss Goralski bring the files to him, but somehow it seemed necessary to do this privately, with no one’s outside knowledge. And finally, when he returned to his desk, he buzzed Miss Goralski and said, “Is Mr. Wyatt at his desk?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ask him to come in here, please.”

The young man, Claiborne thought, had a supercilious air. That would soon change, he thought-and abruptly chastised himself for feeling a moment’s anticipatory vindictive pleasure in the thought. Steve had taken a seat without being asked and was sitting with his legs carelessly crossed, one arm flung over the back of the stuffed leather chair.

The old man said, in his customary unruffled murmur, “Tell me something. Would you feel happier working for a hedge fund?”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“The Wakeman Fund, which you manage, is a closed-end mutual fund. You are supposed to take prudent risks-prudent- with a view toward long-term investment gains. You’ve been juggling it like a hedge fund. I told you several months ago I wouldn’t tolerate the kind of supercharged financial gunslinging that goes on elsewhere in the Street. A hedge fund, if I need to stir your memory, is a high-risk speculation designed to move large blocks of capital in and out more rapidly than any other kind of investment operation. The little fellows like them because they generate brokers’ commissions. The manager hedges by selling short and thereby making money in both directions, knowing that whatever the overall day’s average may be, some stocks are rising and some are falling. The hedge manager leverages his buying power by margin-buying and factoring his assets. He deals in highly volatile issues of the sort an old-line partnership like Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers has a reputation for avoiding like the plague, out of consideration for the financial stability and security of our investors. Hedge funds can make huge sums of money in very short periods of time-but the risk of sudden loss is as great as the chance of sudden profit. Does all this sound familiar to you? It should. It describes pretty well the way you’ve been operating the assets of the Wakeman Fund for the past few weeks. And so, my callow young cousin, I repeat the initial question: Would you feel happier working for a hedge fund?”

The flip mask had drained from Steve’s face; he looked sullen. “I’ve been doing my best, sir, according to my own judgment, and I’ll remind you I’ve

broken every gain record in the history of the fund. I thought you'd be pleased, sir, but if-"

"Twaddle," Claiborne said. "I suspect if I audited your books right now you'd be found short on securities and unable to cover them. Don't throw bookkeeping smokescreens at me, young man-I know every trick in the book-I suspect I've forgotten more of them than you've learned. Well?"

Steve said stiffly, "If you don't trust me, you're welcome to audit my books, sir. I assure you you'll-"

"You're bluffing, and you're not very good at it."

Steve got to his feet. "I resent that."

"And well you might. The thief usually resents being caught out."

Standing with both hands on the edge of the desk, Steve glowered down at him. "I don't like being put on the carpet."

"Please sit down. There's no need for you to loom over me… That's better."

The young man took out a cigarette and put his lighter to it, avoiding Claiborne's eyes. Claiborne said, "I think you need to know that, were it not for your mother, I'd not hesitate to summon the other partners and fire you in their presence. As it is, I'm offering you a dignified way out."

Steve dragged suicidally on his cigarette and said, with smoke spouting from his mouth, "Bullshit. If you fire me I'll go straight to the exchanges and the SEC and tell them there are illegal manipulations going on in the firm-and I'll tell them right where to look."

"You're refusing my offer, then?"

"Wouldn't you?"

Claiborne said, "I realize the incendiary nature of this affair. But the only illegal manipulations to be found under this roof are those in which you have had a hand. To be sure, there'd be embarrassments all around, but in the long run you'd be the one to suffer most. Haven't you learned by now that I'm too shrewd, too old, and too stubborn to be bluffed? I'll just mention two other things-one, someone has tampered with my files, and I've taken the precaution of having a discreet private investigator dust them for fingerprints. I have the photographs of the prints, and they're quite clear. I haven't turned them over to the police for identification, and I trust you won't force me to do so. Second, I've just had a call from an old and valued friend, Arthur Rademacher. I imagine you know better than I what he had to say to me. Your conduct with that old gentleman has been reprehensible and inexcusable. If exposed, it would at the very least put you in jeopardy of serving a prison sentence for blackmail and extortion, for which the penalty is quite severe. Now, then, I've put my cards on the table. I can't tell you what to do. I can suggest you accept my offer to have your resignation arranged, and I can further suggest that as soon as possible you remove yourself from Wall Street, from this city, and in fact from this country."

The old man had not once raised his voice. Steve Wyatt dragged on his cigarette and stared at him from the sullen depths of hooded eyes. "Do I have any choice?"

"You always have a choice in any decision. To be sure, in this case the alternative would not be palatable. I would of course spell out the whole dismal affair before your mother-whether that would have any effect on you I don't know, I'm constantly amazed by the callous indifference you've displayed toward every decent human value since birth-but in any case, I'd consider it my

duty to inform her of your conduct. After that I should allow her a decent interval in which to try to persuade you to leave the country before I turn the whole body of information over to the police, which in the face of your continued intransigence I should be obliged to do. Does my convoluted syntax confuse you, or do you understand English well enough to follow me?"

"No need to be insulting. I'm literate."

"You are," Claiborne replied, "both morally and ethically illiterate."

Steve stood up, his mouth pinched into a thin white scar. Tipping his head back to direct his gaze at the youth, Claiborne said, "Tell me one thing. By what curious process did you arrive at the conclusion you could get away with all these ridiculous schemes? You could have been eminently successful without resorting to cheap crimes-you could have stopped this, even before it started."

"Uncle Howard," Steve breathed, "it's just started."

"What is that intended to mean?"

"I have no intention of fleeing the country."

Claiborne spread his hands. "Of course. I told you that option was open to you. You do, however, realize the consequences?"

"What I realize," Steve replied, "is that I'm not the only one in this room who tries to pull a bluff now and then. Your big threat becomes a pretty puny tissue when you analyze it. What does it amount to? One: You'll audit my books. Fine. You'll find I've made up whatever shortages might have existed one time or another. The Wakeman Fund's in better shape now than it was when I took it over. How can you prosecute me for that? So it's a bluff. Two: If I've manipulated anything illegally, I've done it in your employ, and the books will show it was done in your interests, not mine-you're the one who's profited from it, not me. Expose me, and that fact becomes public. No, you won't do it-you'd be risking much more than I would. So that's a bluff too. Three: It's quite possible my fingerprints are on your files, along with your own prints, and Miss Goralski's, and those of half a dozen other people. I'm one of your executives-I've had plenty of justifiable occasions to use your files, both in your presence and during your absence. So what have you got? Proof-of nothing. Another bluff. Four: It's true I was a little tough on Arthur Rademacher the other day, but it was in his own best interests. He stands to make a good deal of money from it. You'd have a pretty tough time convicting me of blackmail when I showed the court how my so-called victim had, in fact, profited from my 'extortion.' So? Another bluff. Five: My mother's getting on in years, and I'm convinced you wouldn't risk damaging her health by filling her head full of allegations about me which I've just shown are feeble and inconclusive at best. No one's been hurt by what you choose to call my reprehensible and inexcusable conduct-on the contrary, several people, including yourself, have profited from it. I trust you can follow my syntax?"

Howard Claiborne tipped his head an inch to the side. "You're a clever fiend, I'll give you that."

"Yes, sir. And now that we understand each other, I will not stand in the way of a successor. I'll be happy to have you arrange for my resignation at the earliest possible moment. As it happens, I intended to resign anyway."

Oddly, Claiborne suspected that last statement was true, and not merely a dignity salve. Without stirring, he said flatly, "Clear out your desk and get out of here. I don't want you to set foot in this building ever again."

"It'll be a pleasure," Steve said with a thin smile, and went.

Chapter 26

Anne Goralski.

As the lunch hour approached, Anne felt weak with anticipation. He had left the office mysteriously, telling her he was going home for the day; she watched his empty desk and felt sure he had meant it as an invitation. An uneasy lethargy settled on her body, her nipples tingled, she felt a flush of heat; she kept watching the clock anxiously.

From the first night she had fallen completely under the spell of his lithe virility. Her tumultuous loss of self had become a drug, taken in doses of massive sensation that left her blind, mindless and uncaring, hardly aware of the passage of day and night except when they were apart; she had lived these days only for the compulsions of her flesh, swept violently into exhausting abandonment; hovering always on the point of collapse, swept into a fierce delirium of sensuous vortexes, she had taken refuge in love, allowing herself to feel only sensation, investing all her faith in the darkening drug of a craving lust that never abated. Now, at her desk, her thoughts stirred with expectant eroticism, she saw in her mind the happiness glowing in Steve's face and felt an overwhelming love course through her, an unreasoning warm reaching out of her heart. She felt absurdly pleased with herself-she had to be the envy of every girl in the world, because she was the one who loved this man and had his love. She thought of him stretching out from the bed, his long pale hand picking past the Cartier watch to the pack, lighting a cigarette to be quietly shared; she thought of the wiry ridges of his lean body and the quiet loving amusement she always told herself lurked behind his casual air of indifference.

The hour came; she broke a rose from her desk vase and pinned it to her bosom, and hurried to the subway…

He came to the door wearing only his underpants. He didn't smile; he looked as if he had never smiled and never would. She felt suddenly chilled. She said hesitantly, "Darling?"

"What?" he snapped. "What the hell do you want now?"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, Christ," he said, and crossed the living room. She followed him and watched him pour straight whiskey into a glass. His lean muscles rippled when he turned; he snapped, "Do you absolutely have to trail me around every minute? Can't you stand to have me out of your sight?"

"But darling-"

"Am I supposed to dissolve with love every time you come in sight?" He threw back his head to swallow his drink, took a cigarette from the box on the coffee table, inhaled smoke, choked, recovered, and said, "I quit the job this morning, in case your boss didn't tell you."

"You quit? Why?"

"Because I had a better offer."

"Offer? Where?" She felt stupid and confused.

Steve's eyes came around irritably toward her; his expression congealed, and chilled her. He said, "You keep after me as if I'm on a witness stand. Why do

you have to leech every last fact out of me? Do you have to own my soul before you're satisfied?"

She said witlessly, "You don't love me."

"What?"

"You can't hide it anymore. Not when you're looking at me."

His face twisted into a crooked grin. He dragged on his cigarette, and she said, aimlessly desperate, "You smoke too much, do you know that?" When he held the twisted grin and did not speak, she leaned forward and felt urgency in her throat. "We had love," she implored. "Didn't we?"

"Did we?"

She pleaded with him: "Didn't we, Steve? What's happened? Where did it go? I'm so confused."

"What we had," he said, "and 'had' is the right tense, is fun. You're a good lay, you know. Actually it's been better than I thought it would be. But why hang on after things go sour? You're only hurting yourself. Can't you get the drift, Anne? It was all written down in the book before it ever even started. If you wanted to fool yourself into thinking you were in love with me, that was fine while we were banging each other. But kindly don't hang on like a wilted flower."

He spoke the words as if they were part of a long-prepared speech, oft rehearsed. Her eyes slowly filled with tears. She felt a shortness of breath, a debilitating rage that flooded through all the tissues of her body. She managed to whisper, "I trusted you, Steve. I asked you not to spoil it-I asked you not to tell me lies just because you thought I wanted to hear them, because I believed what you told me, and I didn't want us to hurt each other. And you went right ahead and lied to me…"

She stopped because although he was going through the motions of listening to her, his eyes showed the deceit of it. Her voice broke. "Steve, I don't know what to say."

"Good-bye would be appropriate."

She telephoned Howard Claiborne and pleaded illness; she fell on her dismal bed, with its mattress which sagged toward the center from all directions, and she clutched her pillow in her arms. When her tears dried she rolled over and lay on her side, hands under her cheek, staring sightlessly at the cracked plaster wall. The sense of loss had stunned her; she felt alone, afraid, like a bit of storm-wrecked flotsam washed up on a strange beach.

Maybe she shouldn't blame Steve for what he was-maybe she ought to blame herself, for not having seen it. But she had loved him so much, and she didn't love easily. Her eyes brimmed.

Abruptly she sat up and spoke aloud in the empty little room: "Quit pining over him. He's not wasting any time thinking about you." She thought back over what she was saying and she realized it was true. He didn't care-he never had; he had only let her talk herself into what she wanted to believe. She had been too ready for love. It made her realize that the sadness she felt now was in part the sadness of knowing she would be wary from now on-probably too wary; the shock of today's events had somehow created a temporary insight in her, the clarity of which would fade quickly. She could look ahead from this moment and see, with remarkable detachment, how this would immunize her. And there was nothing to do but wait for the vaccination to wear off. It filled her with regret.

In the kitchen she poured a glass of milk and counted the eggs in the refrigerator door. She saw her reflection against the windowpane-she was pretty, very pretty, a tough brown-eyed girl with a dancer's hard little body; she was tough enough to live through all this. To hell with stinking Steve Wyatt and his upper-class phony speech patterns and his sports car and his constant bragging about what a clever businessman he was. She began to remember bits and pieces of things he had said about his flashy business deals; thinking about it, she sat down slowly and absently sipped milk, with her frown darkening. Now that she thought back on it some of the things he'd said began to make sense in a curious, frightening new way. That man he had introduced her to Tuesday evening-Mason Villiers-wasn't he a crook of some kind, a swindler? She was sure she'd seen the name in the financial newspapers. The phone calls Steve had made from his apartment, talking to tip-sheet reporters and market analysts, spreading rumors about Heggins and NCI which she knew were false; he'd explained at the time that it was something everybody did, just a game they played to see which of the reporters and analysts were honest and reliable enough to reject such rumors out of hand. But now she began to wonder. She was no longer prepared to accept anything he'd said.

And thinking about it, she thought immediately of her employer. As Howard Claiborne's private secretary, she was bound to him by a devotion that was more than personal; it was partly a symbiotic sense of power, a devotion that came from being part of the exciting world of Howard Claiborne's empire. Shorthand, typing, office chores-these were duties she took for granted, paying them no more attention than she paid her morning tooth-brushing. It was her own power that moved her-the power to keep callers at bay, to lie about her employer's whereabouts, to browbeat lesser men's secretaries on the telephone, to demand information in Howard Claiborne's name, to sort calls and mail with dutiful care and know it was Within her power to bring each call or letter to his attention or withhold it. Howard Claiborne had allowed her an ever-increasing share of responsibility and her devotion to him had increased along with it. Now, with realization crystallizing in her, she knew what she must do; first thing in the morning she would tell him the whole story-well, perhaps not all of it. But he had to know the manipulations Steve had performed behind his back. The more she thought of it, the surer she was that Steve was involved in something shady, unpleasant, and deleterious to Howard Claiborne's interests. If she was being vindictive, seeking revenge against Steve, then so be it; he had asked for it. In the morning, she would tell Howard Claiborne.

Chapter 27

Mason Villiers.

A limousine, sealed against the heat, prowled southward through heavy traffic on Park Avenue. Wyatt sat with his back to the chauffeur on the flip-top jump seat, facing Sidney Isher, who crouched in the corner, resembling a middleweight boxer waiting tensely for the gong. Mason Villiers sat back with his lean legs stretched out, looking entirely at his ease, a chilled self-contained smile playing on his mouth while he talked in his resonant baritone. The face

he turned to his companions had been molded by years of deliberate calculation-the face of a man who could not be frightened, appealed to, or reasoned with on a basis of personalities; a cool face, primitive, unfeelingly logical, as pragmatic in design as a steel bayonet.

He carried a briefcase, according to habit, in which was hidden a demagnetizing jammer designed to ensure that no conversation in its range could be miked or tape-recorded. It was manufactured by a subsidiary of NCI and sold to the public for $289.50-legal, commonplace, and by now a fact of life in business.

Sidney Isher wheezed and snorted, and said, "I don't want to be a nuisance, but I keep wandering if-"

"People who don't want to be nuisances," Villiers snapped, "seldom succeed."

"Your point is well taken. I'll withdraw the preamble. The question is, will Cleland show up at this meeting? If he doesn't, we're wasting a morning."

"Cleland," Villiers murmured, "is as likely not to show up as a corpse at its own funeral."

Steve Wyatt agreed: "What choice has he got? We've got him by the balls."

Isher remarked to Wyatt, "No need to smack your lips so loud."

Ignoring the byplay, Villiers said, "Cleland's angry but that may be good-an angry man can make mistakes. He'll show up. Cleland and I understand each other, I think,"

"Like a pair of sharks smelling the same blood," Isher observed gloomily. "If Cleland was stupid Elliot Judd wouldn't have put him in charge of the NCI board of directors."

"We'll handle him," Villiers said, unworried.

Steve Wyatt said, "What about Dan Silverstein? Are you sure you can trust him?"

"I'm not sure I can trust anybody. I don't expect loyalty from Silverstein, but we'll get cooperation. He knows what to expect if he backs out."

The limousine pulled up at the curb; the three men got out and walked across the sidewalk into the air-conditioned lobby of the fifty-story building that housed NCI's executive offices.

The reception room on the forty-eighth floor was carpeted wall to wall, discreetly and indirectly lighted, furnished in cool Danish modern. The brunette at the reception desk was precisely groomed and tailored; her smile was impersonal. Wyatt muttered in Sidney Isher's ear, "You could hang meat in here."

Isher, disregarding him, identified himself and his companions to the receptionist, and said, "I assume the directors are caucusing now? Do you mind announcing us?"

The girl spoke into a phone, listened, and pointed to a leather-covered door. Isher and Wyatt affixed themselves to Villiers when he stepped toward the indicated door. By the time he reached it, it had swung open.

Cleland was big and lean, tanned, his face not unattractively lined; his hair was still a deep rich brown-dyed, perhaps, for his hands were veined and beginning to show age spots. He looked muscular and trim in a way that bespoke health clubs, steam rooms, barbells, and massages. His handshake, to Villiers and his companions, was perfunctory; perhaps he disliked being touched.

Six men stood in a knot just inside the door, not talking, looking at Villiers the way they might have looked at a prowling panther in the jungle-prepared to admire its grace and predatory strength, yet fearful and hostile lest it spring.

When Villiers strode inside, the group parted like the waters of the Red Sea. He went straight through, marching with a calculated display of arrogance down the length of the room to the head of the conference table. Only then did he turn to stare coolly at the others. The six men had been joined by Cleland, and when Villiers had gone right by them without shaking hands, they had burst into a low-voiced babble of talk. Villiers said, "All right, let's hold it down."

They gave him angry glares-all except one, a big apple-cheeked man with thin white hair combed carefully over his scalp-Dan Silverstein. The look that came onto Silverstein's face when Villiers met his glance was like the sickly smile of a rural bank manager confronted with a surprise visit by the auditor, searching quickly and desperately through his mind for the details of his plan to cover up an embezzlement scheme, refusing to admit to himself that it was too late.

The talk subsided and Villiers made gestures. "My associates, Mr. Sidney Isher and Mr. Stephen Wyatt. I know you, Cleland, and Dan Silverstein. I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting the rest of you gentlemen?"

The board of directors was, in due course, identified and separated out as to names and faces. They distributed themselves around the table. Ansel Cleland took a pair of glasses out of a leather case, arranged papers before him, pushed his glasses higher on his nose, and said, "You're the visiting team. You can have the first turn at bat." He planted his elbows on the table and thrust his jaw forward stubbornly, striking the pose familiar to anyone who had seen him on the cover of Newsweek.

Villiers, on his feet, launched into a clipped speech, the length of which was not out of proportion to what he had to say. He spoke without animation in a hard, mechanical voice; his words, delivered in a pitchless monotone, fell equally, like bricks, as if he were uttering a ritual incantation. Speaking down the length of the conference table from a widespread stance, he took the NCI directors step by step along a carefully planned route. He spoke mainly to Ansel Cleland, because in the absence of the chairman Cleland was NCI's top man, a Cincinnati-born businessman whose career in banking and corporate law had catapulted him onto the boards of directors of eleven corporations, but whose principal interest had lain with the affairs of NCI ever since he had been hired on in 1946 as Elliot Judd's corporation counsel. Cleland's facade-jutting jaw, shrewd eyes, alert seated posture-was no sham.

Villiers took them through a swift course, twice deferring to Sidney Isher, who put in legal niceties, and to Steve Wyatt, who had come armed with a briefcase full of statistics and corporate figures.

He watched them while he spoke, gauging the temper of the group with hair-fine care; afterward he paused, and in a room whose silence was disturbed only by the thrumming of air-conditioning, he moved his eyes from face to face with an expression like that of a man who, drawing back his whip, hesitates just briefly to select the most painful spot on his victim's naked back. And then he said, "My terms and conditions should be easy enough to understand. Either you support my campaign to persuade stockholders to trade their NCI shares for Heggins debentures, or I'll proceed with moves to raise patent royalties and drive NCI out of the competitive marketplace. I've accumulated enough of a position and enough voting proxies to make a strong bid for control in a

stockholders' meeting, but if you force me to that extreme you're only hurting yourselves and the company. Your best choice is to go along with the Heggins exchange and afterward dissolve the present board of directors so that I can replace it with my people."

There were no outraged cries; most of them steepled their fingers and squinted at him, making it clear they were not ready to jump for the lifeboats yet, not prepared to be easily swayed. Ansel Cleland just watched Villiers as if he were slightly crazy. Silverstein looked uncomfortable and sick; he was toying with a mechanical pencil and not meeting anyone's glance. There were looks of stunned fascination, pained looks of indignation, dazed looks of shock. Finally Ansel Cleland spoke: "You ought to be shot," he said, filling with red-faced anger. "I won't let you get near it."

"I'm afraid you can't stop me."

"You'll never pull it off, Villiers. We'll line up proxy-soliciting firms. We'll form a protective stockholders' committee. This firm will not be bled by a common raider!"

"Go ahead. Insist on a proxy war. You'll have trouble, Cleland. When I raise the patent royalties on Melbard and the others, your market picture will go sour. The big fund managers will dump NCI from their portfolios. Your own employees will get shaky and your customers will be frightened off. The competition will get brave, and you'll get squeezed out of your outlets. You'll destroy the confidence of your stockholders and wreck the entire company. Is that what you want?"

"Don't try to put words in my mouth," Cleland said. "You know what we want. The question is, what do you want?"

"I thought it was obvious by now. I want NCI."

"No. You won't get it, and you know that. So the question becomes, what will you settle for?"

Villiers shook his head. "You misunderstand me. I didn't come here to bargain and negotiate and reach a compromise. There's no middle ground here. You go along or you go under, that's all there is."

"You're playing poker-running a bluff. Don't you think we can see that?"

Villiers' reply was the slightest of smiles. It had no visible effect on Cleland, but some of the others were visibly chilled; shaken, they looked away and fidgeted. Villiers nodded to Isher and Wyatt, who dragged on his cigarette and poured thick, slow rivers of smoke from his nostrils while he packed up his briefcase. Villiers walked down the length of the room to the door, turned, caught Dan Silverstein's eye for a moment, and said to Cleland, "Our newspaper ads will be on the street Monday morning. You'll have to make up your minds between now and then. If you're smart, you won't make a fight of it."

Isher opened the door. They filed put; and Isher, with exaggerated propriety, closed the door firmly behind him.

They waited for the elevator-Villiers calm and steady, the others breathing hard. Steve Wyatt's grin jerked, and he said nervously, "Prosperity is just around the corner."

"Objection," said Isher. "Assuming facts not in evidence. They haven't capitulated yet."

"They will," Wyatt said. "Hell, four of them sold Heggins short on information we got leaked to them-those four are in a hell of a tight spot, and the only way

they can get out of it with their scalps whole is accept our deal and trade their NCI shares for Heggins convertibles."

The elevator came; they stepped in. Sidney Isher said, "If they're inclined to play dirty pool, they may stop us yet."

Villiers spoke finally: "They'll hassle for a while. Silverstein will keep slinging wrenches into the works. With him in the group, if all seven of them were laid end to end they couldn't reach a decision. The only thing they can do is try to get through to Judd on the phone, and they won't reach him. They'll still be arguing when our ads hit the market-and as long as they're arguing among themselves, they won't be fighting us."

"Maybe," Isher said. "Maybe. I think you're selling them short. I think Cleland will ride right over Dan Silverstein like a steamroller. I think for every ad of ours on a left-hand page we're going to see an ad of theirs on a right-hand page exhorting stockholders not to tender any shares to Heggins. And we can be sure they'll spell out the reasons in blood."

"Let them try," Villiers growled, and strode away across the marble-floored lobby.

Chapter 28

Russell Hastings.

Hastings came down the hall with his tie at half-mast, collar open, entered the head office, and found Quint wasn't alone-there was an elegant old man in a black Chesterfield, and a dark pretty girl.

Quint acknowledged his arrival in his wry English drawl: "Marvelous. Enter the hero." There never was any real bite in Quint's sarcasms; Hastings only smiled and shook hands when Quint introduced him to the visitors-Howard Claiborne, of Bierce, Claiborne amp; Myers, and Claiborne's private secretary, Miss Goralski. Quint completed the introductions by intoning, "Russ Hastings, an attorney on my staff. Russ has been concentrating on the NCI matter, and I think it would be judicious to repeat what you've told me to him."

Howard Claiborne gave Hastings a firm handshake and an unsmiling greeting. Quint indicated a chair, and Hastings settled in it after turning toward Miss Goralski but thinking better of offering to shake her hand: the girl seemed to be in a state of marked agitation, too distracted by nervous anxiety to do more than acknowledge him with a jerky nod of her pretty head.

Howard Claiborne cleared his throat and said, "My secretary and I seem to have become involved unwittingly in certain activities of a recent employee of mine-activities which, if not entirely illegal, could at least be described as extralegal. I think perhaps it would-"

"Excuse me," Gordon Quint said. "It occurs to me we'll save time if I ask one of the Justice Department chaps to sit in, so that you won't have to go over it yet again. Unless you object?"

"Not at all," Claiborne replied. "Miss Goralski was good enough to come to me with the information we've given you, and as I told you, I decided immediately to bring the entire matter to the attention of the authorities. By all means, let's have the Justice Department."

Quint nodded and reached for the phone; while he waited for his connection, he passed a sheaf of papers to Hastings and said, “Have a look through these.”

They were printed market letters and analysts’ bulletins, stacked in chronological order, beginning with two Standard amp; Poor’s yellow insert sheets on NCI and Heggins Aircraft dated a few weeks ago. One of the documents, ten days old, was the Albert Marlowe Bulletin, a market letter with a circulation in the hundreds of thousands-a hedging, pontifical tip sheet widely used by those who relied on forecasters’ predictions. Now and then it could have a marked influence on the Market.

It was headed “CONFIDENTIAL: FOR SUBSCRIBERS’ USE ONLY” and in typical Wall Streetese it said:

As the year develops, the economy has undergone a moderate readjustment, and even though there is no unanimity among economists, it is fair to estimate that, by and large, dividends will hold up well, though there will be a few instances of tax selling and casualties. Given the current slowdown in business it is doubtful there will be any short-term reverse in the present leveling-off trend, although with current high interest rates, only time will tell whether a slump across the board is in the offing. At the moment there is no sign of such a further deceleration.

NCI has advanced four points since recommended here in March, and we think that while near-term uncertainties exist, NCI has formed a sound base and will probably continue to rise steadily, although no one can guarantee against the unexpected.

Meanwhile it appears Heggins Aircraft may be ready to move. It may well be one of the sleepers of the year, when the public begins to recognize its potential under its new management’s dynamic programs of boldly planned expansion, continuing research and development, and forward-looking diversification.

Hastings read the rest of them, frowning and shaking his head and smiling wryly at intervals. Quint caught his eye, and Hastings said, “It’s inconceivable to me that so many subscribers can fall for this kind of idiocy. No real insider in his right mind is going to let a genuine hot tip out if he’s got any way to stop it. These writers are no more privy to inside information than the man in the street. The same people that believe this junk would never think of going into a high-stakes crap game on a stranger’s advice and on borrowed money.”

He saw the touch of a smile at the corner of Howard Claiborne’s stern mouth; he went on through the stack of bulletins, and it was only when he reached the end that he got the point. It was last Tuesday’s issue of the same market letter:

The economy remains in a moderate state of readjustment, and there is as yet no sign of acceleration in industrial capital investment.

Clearly, there must come times when circumstances force a recommendation to be rescinded. Since NCI was mentioned here last, changing factors have come to light which cast a cautionary glow over the company. Its relative position of strength would appear, perhaps, to have been affected somewhat adversely by the possibility that several of NCI’s important suppliers of patented chemical and mechanical components may soon seek other royalty outlets so as to add further increment to their patent-connected incomes. Royalties may be raised, and a careful analysis of the situation is therefore indicated at this time for those who see NCI as a possible investment.

Bill Burgess entered the office, nondescript and baggy in a seersucker suit. There was a round of handshaking, in which once again Miss Goralski did not engage. Burgess' smile was friendly; he winked at Hastings and took a seat.

Quint said to him, "Will you do me a kind of unofficial favor, Bill?"

"I've learned not to give an answer to a blank-check question like that," Burgess said apologetically. "But I'll do as much as I can. What is it?"

"Just listen to what Mr. Claiborne has to say, and be willing to forget you heard any of it if we decide not to take action. Can you do that?"

"It'll have to depend on what Mr. Claiborne has to say. If there's evidence of a federal crime I can't ignore it."

Howard Claiborne said, "Let's not pussyfoot around, Mr. Quint. If a crime has been committed, then by all means let's put the culprit under arrest. If I can disregard the fact he's distantly related to me, there's no reason you can't."

"The point is," Quint answered, "it might be better to put him under surveillance than to reveal our hand by arresting him prematurely. But I suppose we can decide that afterward, can't we? If you'll proceed now?"

Howard Claiborne nodded, adjusted his seat, and began to speak.

It was noon before Howard Claiborne and his secretary left Quint's office. The door shut behind them, and Bill Burgess sat back with his legs crossed at right angles and his hands laced together behind his head. "Okay," he said. "We've established those sheets were planted deliberately in Claiborne's files for the obvious purpose of influencing Claiborne's decisions. We've got Claiborne and his secretary willing to testify to Steve Wyatt's machinations in his portfolio and the blackmail pressure he put on one of Melbard's people to part with control of the company. The fingerprints might hold up-at any rate, we've got a pretty good case against Wyatt on half a dozen counts. Maybe it's the break we need; anyhow, it looks like paydirt, and I do mean dirt."

"If we can tie Wyatt to Villiers," Hastings said. "All we've got is the girl's testimony she saw them together once."

Quint popped a ball of hard candy into his mouth. "I want to nail Villiers. I don't care about Wyatt at this point. I don't think it's the proper time to blow the whistle on him. I should like to put surveillance on him and see where that leads us."

Burgess nodded. He was scribbling in a pocket notebook, his head tilted and eyes half-shut against the smoke from a cigarette in his mouth corner. He put the notebook away and sat back, once again at ease, the picture of careless indolence, the archetypal civil servant. Yet throughout the entire session he had watched with a stare of concentration that indicated his good quick mind was racing, hard at work behind the guarded face.

Russ Hastings looked at him, and looked at Quint, and said, "I'm still a novice at all this, but my instinct is to screw caution. What good does it do to wait for an airtight case if by that time the crook's dead of old age or fled to Brazil and shipped the money into an anonymous numbered account in Switzerland where we can never get our hands on it? I think we want to stop Villiers before he guts NCI, not after."

Bill Burgess grinned at Quint. "If you boys had a few dozen more like Russ, instead of that pack of bureaucratic nutless wonders…"

Quint said gently, "Let's dispense with the interservice rivalry, shall we? Go on, Russ, I'm listening."

Hastings spread his hands. “Maybe my approach is crude. It’s the way we used to work in political investigations. I’d have a federal court issue a bench warrant for Wyatt’s arrest. I’d charge him with illegal manipulation of the Wakeman Fund-I wouldn’t say a word about NCI or Mason Villiers. No point in spelling it out in block caps that we’re after Villiers. If we’re lucky, Villiers will just think it’s a rough break, but he’ll feel safe enough not to pull in his horns. Once we arrest Wyatt, we can try to break him down-offer him immunity from prosecution in return for his testimony against Villiers.”

Quint said, “You’re assuming Wyatt knows enough about Villiers’ operations to do us some good.”

Bill Burgess said, “I’d be willing to take the chance. Arrest the pipsqueak and scare the pants off him. Keep pushing him before he gets a chance to cool off-maybe he’ll spill something, and once he’s started, he may as well spill the whole thing. In the meantime, I can ask the Canadian securities cops to clamp the lid on those boiler rooms in Montreal. A surprise raid just might turn up documentary evidence to help us knock Villiers over.”

“It’s a long risk, isn’t it?” Quint said. “If Villiers has covered his tracks well enough, he may get off scot free. He rarely allows his own name to appear on paper anywhere in his dealings-it’s always done through fronts.”

Burgess said, “Hold on a minute before you make that decision, Gordon. I was on my way up to Russ’s office when your call caught me-I’ve got some news on the case, and it’ll save time to spin it out now for both of you. It has a bearing.” He looked at his watch. “There’s quite a bit to cover-have you got time?”

“Go ahead.”

“All right. We’ve had a team working around the clock on Villiers’ background, and we’ve had some luck. Partly because there aren’t many lone wolves left in Wall Street-the big action comes from institutions now, they’re all big staffs of college men, dry organization types straight out of those conformity molds they call executive training programs. An individualist sticks out like a sore thumb and people remember him.”

“Villiers has always been a standout, ever since he was a kid. He thinks he’s buried his past, but nobody that flamboyant can really expect to be forgotten. We pulled big crews of trained men off other jobs to run him all the way back to the place where he was born, and when you put a lot of people on a thorough job you’re bound to hit a lucky break somewhere along the line-you make your own luck. Anyway, we’ve got a mobster in jail in Chicago, goes by the name of Manny Berkowitz, and we’ve been pumping him for months. He’s an accountant for the mob, and I think he wants to be this year’s Joe Valachi. One of our men out there knew Berkowitz used to be tied in with Salvatore Senna-the button you put me onto in Montreal, Russ-and we put two and two together and asked Berkowitz if he ever knew Mason Villiers. It was the right question. Berkowitz has known Villiers since they were twelve years old together, and he’s got no reason not to talk.”

“So here’s what we’ve got. Villiers has manufactured a phony background for himself that would have been impossible to check out if it hadn’t been for Berkowitz. The facts: Villiers was born in Chicago, out of wedlock. He was taken in by a Catholic orphanage and put up for adoption, but he was a hard-boiled brat even then and nobody wanted to adopt him. When he was two years old he was christened Mark Valentine by the sisters. He spent ten or eleven years in

the orphanage. Evidently he was naturally brilliant as a student, but he didn't have a single friend, and he hated the nuns and he hated the orphanage. He ran away when he was eleven or so, and Berkowitz first met him peddling the streets down on the South Side. According to Berkowitz, he was always ambitious and greedy, and even from the first he operated in epic style. From the time he was old enough to count, Villiers wanted to be rich. Not just comfortably well off, but the richest man in the country. You've got to consider this guy came up from the bottom-a bottom so far down none of us have ever even seen it. According to Berkowitz, when the two of them were thirteen they had to kill and eat pigeons. They got jobs pearl diving in a hotel kitchen in Cicero. It wasn't too long before they'd started making contacts with minor-league mobsters. Villiers ran with the pack for a while, but he was never really part of it-he could never work with an organization above him, and the organization could never trust him."

"He really started out when he was about nineteen. He seems to have educated himself in libraries, mainly-he never spent any time in school after he left the orphanage. But at nineteen he had a hell of a vocabulary and the brains to go with it. He saw a chance to buy the capital stock of a bankrupt company for two thousand dollars of borrowed money at a sheriff's auction in Wisconsin. He had to borrow it from loan sharks in the mob, but it gave him a foothold-an established corporate name-and he's never stopped climbing since then. He got together with Berkowitz, and the two of them put the company into trivial production, just enough to make it look alive. Then they brought in a couple of other partners and started trading the stock back and forth among themselves. Pretty soon the over-the-counter market took note of it. The public watched for a while and decided it was an active stock, so they started to fool with it too, and so the price went up. Naturally, that was when Villiers and his partners pulled out. They took healthy profits after they'd churned the stock, and they left the public holding the bag."

Quint murmured, "It's a little game that's probably been played only a hundred thousand times. But they never learn out there, do they?"

Burgess smiled and nodded; he went on: "Villiers paid off the loan sharks and went into corporate finance for himself. He established an insurance company, chartered in Maryland, where the laws are pretty loose, and he issued reams of paper and used it to buy stock in other companies. Pretty soon he was just trading his own stock back and forth the same old way, but the public saw all the activity going on, and they kept moving in. Villiers took handsome profits and moved on into the plastics business by using Lee Central Plastics Company's own assets to buy control of the company. It seems to have been a watertight job he did with that one. He issued insurance-company securities and sold them to Lee Central Plastics in exchange for Lee Central stock. Got control, and shifted the watered insurance stock back into a dummy pocket quick enough to get it off Lee's books before the next annual report came due. Everybody knows he had to have some weapon to hold over Lee's directors to put the deal through but nobody ever proved anything."

"While he was in the middle of the Lee Central thing he was working another interesting stunt at the same time-starting a rumor along the Street that the Federal Reserve and the ICC were going to raise margin requirements. He did a hell of a job of planting information, sort of like this plant he's pulled through Wyatt on Claiborne's outfit. He got the rumor working so well it drove stock

prices down across the board for two days, and he was right in there selling short all the way, buying in at the bottom and riding it back to the top after the rumors fell apart. That kind of thing goes on all the time, I guess-painting the tape. Nobody ever proved Villiers started those rumors, of course, but the word got around somehow, and after that and the Lee Central thing, he's had a hard time doing business down here. That's why he shifted most of his base of operations to Canada."

"He's a con man, of course, a common swindler, but on a grand scale. That gives you the background-I think it may help, sometimes it's easier to anticipate what a man will do when you know how he tends to operate in a given situation. All right, now we're up to the present. That brings us to this item." He took a folded newspaper proof sheet from his pocket and spread it open on Quint's desk. "Better come over here and read it, Russ."

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> Heggins Aircraft Corp., Inc., is offering by the Prospectus to exchange unlimited shares of Common Stock of Northeast Consolidated Industries, Inc., for Convertible 5?% Debentures of Heggins Aircraft Corp., Inc., in the ratio described below. The Exchange Offer will expire at 5:00 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time on September 30, 1970, unless extended by Heggins Aircraft or withdrawn as aforesaid.

There was a good deal more, and Hastings, peering over Quint's thick shoulder, read all of it, right down to the italicized signature of Hackman and Greene, Registered Brokers.

Bill Burgess said, "We got that proof from the Times. The same ad's set to run Monday in The Wall Street Journal and every big metropolitan daily in the country."

"The fat," Quint said obliviously, "is in the fire. Not only that, but the damnable thing about it is, he can do it. Legally. Unless we find a means to stop him."

Bill Burgess said, "What I still don't understand is how he managed to beef up Heggins so fast. Two weeks ago it was a dying company floundering on the verge of collapse. Now the price has shot up six points, and you hear nothing but glowing reports-and don't tell me all of them were planted by Villiers' people."

"Part of them," Hastings said. "The rest of it must have been done by cooking the books. A lot of things. I'll lay a few examples on you to give you the drift. First, the company deals in a low-down-payment product-airplanes. Say a plane costs fifty thousand and the customer buys it with five thousand down. Ordinarily you report only the five thousand as income. But when Villiers took over, suppose his accountants cooked the books by inflating earnings with the whole thing in the income column-they report the full scale price as income, not

just the down payment. Shady, but legal. They can juggle the inventory accounts to make the assets look greater. They can bring in their own team of auditors, who've been coached to show how depreciation has been taken inaccurately, and fiddle with earned-surplus figures and net working capital and other vagaries. They can report the company's subsidiaries at book value instead of original cost. They can choose between accelerated depreciation and straight-line depreciation. They can take research costs immediately instead of amortizing them over a five-year period. They can announce they're going to grant stock options, which aren't charged to income, in lieu of cash bonuses. They can credit capital gains to income. They can, and did, declare a cash dividend last week to increase stockholder confidence. Villiers has created a bull market in Heggins stock overnight by operations like that and by putting out sales literature that convinces the readers it's a good company to invest in. All kinds of happy talk about talented scientists and engineers, capable financial leadership, and a new management that's balanced in depth so that the loss of a key exec won't wreck the company. A spirit of innovation. An aggressive intent to exploit existing markets and create new ones. A good record of sales expansion five years ago, and never mind the years in between. Hell, our boy's been a one-man inflation for Heggins stock. And it's easy enough to see what he's doing now. It's relatively cheap for one company to take over another company by issuing interest-bearing Chinese money like these Heggins debentures in Villiers' ad. And I'm not even sure the NCI board of directors will put up a fight."

Quint said sharply, "Why the devil shouldn't they?"

It was Burgess who answered him. "Because according to our information, at least two of them have got themselves into a trap that Villiers ingeniously set for them. And if two of them fell into the trap, it's possible one or two others are in it too that we don't know about. If it makes up a majority of the board, then the rest of the board members can't act-they've got to sit on their hands while Villiers moves right in."

Quint said, "Explain yourselves. What sort of trap?"

Hastings said, "Villiers bought himself a speculator's dream when he took over Heggins. God knows where he got the money. Some of it was an exchange for Melbard Chemical stock, but just the same, he had to raise an incredible amount of capital to pull it off. What he did, in the old-fashioned phrase, he cornered the market in Heggins. There weren't a hell of a lot of outstanding shares drifting around the market anyway. Villiers planted word, just before he bought the company, that Heggins was overvalued and bound for collapse. He planted it in the right places. Amos Singman and Daniel Silverstein and maybe two or three other NCI board members, among others. They expected a dive in price, and so they sold Heggins short, in big bundles."

"Now, of course, the price is up, and they've got to cover their short sales, and they suddenly find out Villiers has bought up all the shares. Put simply, the short sellers owe Villiers half a million shares, and to pay him they've got to buy the shares from him and then give them back to him-and he's got every legal right to name the price. So he's got them in a bind, and the only way they can squirm out of it is to sit it out while he moves into NCI."

Quint said, "It can't be legal. He's a control stockholder and he didn't advise us of his movements in Heggins stock. We can nail him for fraud and failure to divulge inside information."

“Nuts,” Burgess said sourly. “Do you think he’s done all this in his own name? You can be damn sure Villiers personally doesn’t own more than five percent of Heggins’ outstanding stock. It all belongs to Swiss trusts, and you know damn well how far you’d get trying to prove they belong to him. Even if we could hit him with that technicality, the worst he’d suffer would be a slap on the wrist and a meaningless fine.”

Quint made a face. “You can take a man out of the gutter, but Villiers has never washed off the smell, has he?”

Burgess showed his unhappy consternation by letting his hand dangle limply from his wrist and shaking it back and forth as if wearily drying his fingertips. “We can’t lay a finger on him unless we can prove fraud or extortionate coercion, and you can bet your ass none of the jokers involved are going to admit a thing-unless we can crack Steve Wyatt open.”

Quint put his big head down, thinking. Bill Burgess said, “Don’t forget, we’ve only been moving on this thing for a matter of hours and days. Villiers has had years to plan it out. He’s not an impulsive man-he wouldn’t have this ad in the papers if he hadn’t thought it through. He doesn’t blurt things out, and he doesn’t make easy mistakes.” He shook his head apologetically and uttered a dispirited little laugh.

Hastings shot to his feet. It made Quint’s head skew back with dignified astonishment. Hastings strode back and forth impatiently, hair falling over his eye; he said, “It’s not a question of finding some technical loophole to collar him with. There’s got to be a way to nail the bastard to the wall, pin him like a butterfly so he’ll never get loose.”

Quint murmured, “Do I detect a note of personal animosity? He’s been seen with your wife, I understand.”

“My ex-wife, damn it. And what does it matter whether it’s personal? The man’s guilty of a criminal assault, half of Wall Street will know it by Monday morning, nobody can touch him legally, and we sit here trying to decide if we’ve got enough evidence to hang a parking ticket on him! For God’s sake, there is no such thing as a little rape-we’ve got to stop him cold.”

Quint cocked his head to one side. “You’re really quite an emotional being underneath it all, aren’t you?”

Hastings made an exasperated sound.

The fat man said, “How would you handle it, then? Strap on a revolver and shoot it out with him in Wall Street at high noon?”

He was in no frame of mind for Quint’s brand of drollery; he formed his big hands into loose fists. “Just turn me loose on him, Gordon. Ill bring him down.”

“Large talk,” Quint observed, not visibly stirred. “Are you deliberately implying I’m the only thing standing between you and Villiers’ downfall?”

The skin on Hastings’ face tightened. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Bill Burgess said uncomfortably, “Cool it down, hey?”

But Hastings wasn’t through. He put his hands on Quint’s desk. “You gave me a speech about why you always go by the book. But this time we’re not in the kind of game that’s played according to Hoyle. It’s a dirty back-alley crap game and if you want to win it you don’t carry your book of Hoyle along, you carry a knife and a set of brass knuckles instead-otherwise you’re a dead loser.”

Quint’s eyes glinted. “I’ll only ask it again, Russ. What do you want? How would you handle it? I’ll listen-sit down and talk.”

He went back to his chair and cuffed the hair back out of his eyes; he glanced at Burgess and said, “Villiers can make his scheme work only as long as NCI doesn’t fight him. He knows he’s got the directors on the run. He must know Judd won’t fight him. With a relatively small cash investment he’s trying to take over a giant corporation worth billions. It can work only if people are willing to give him their NCI shares. If he had to pay for those shares, he’d be stopped-he hasn’t got the money, nobody’s got that kind of money. All right-I say we go to the directors, and we make it hotter for them than he’s making it. We fight him with his own weapons. We force them to switch sides and fight him. Faced with a proxy fight right down to the wire, he’ll go under; he hasn’t got the kind of financial backing it would take to fight it through. Even if he did try to go all the way with it, at least it would give us more time to dig into this thing and develop evidence against him. There have got to be chinks in his armor, and the longer we force him to fight, the more likely he is to make the kind of mistakes that can hang him.”

“I suppose you know exactly how to force the NCI board to turn against him?”

“If there’s one thing I learned with Jim Speed,” Hastings said softly, “it’s how to put pressure on people.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

“Go on,” Quint said, “both of you. Get out of here and leave me in peace.”

“You’re not buying it, then?”

“I didn’t say that, did I?” Quint did not smile; he glowered. “Every decision I make in this office is subject to review by higher authority, Russ. I can’t authorize you to use threats or extortion. On the other hand, you’re under no obligation to explain to me the nature of every stitch you sew into the fabric of your case. If you get results, that’s all anyone will notice. If you fail, it’s your neck, not mine. Clear?”

“Clear,” Hastings said. Feeling vital and alive, full of juices, he bolted out of the chair and strode to the door. “Come on, Bill.”

Burgess trailed him into his own office. Miss Sprague was out to lunch; there were three or four phone messages on his desk. He glanced through them and put them aside. “Damn it,” he said, “I feel good. For the first time in months.”

“Something you can sink your teeth into,” Burgess said. “I’ve been watching you flounder around like a headless chicken. Waiting for you to snap out of it. Ever since you got divorced, you’ve been acting as if you didn’t know who you were or what you wanted.”

Hastings gave him a look of surprise. “You see a lot, don’t you? You’re right, you know. Until a short time ago I was wandering around as if I’d lost myself somewhere in all the confusion. It’s like a nightmare-you keep trying to see yourself in terms of other people, like looking in a distorted mirror. I fell in love with a woman I didn’t even know. Whipped up all kinds of enthusiasm for a job Elliot Judd offered me when I knew all the time it wasn’t for me, it had nothing to do with me.”

“Forget it, Russ. You’ve turned the leaf over-I’ve seen the change in you. You could have ignored this NCI trouble, it was nothing but a vague hunch-but you sank both hands in it right up to the elbows.”

“Sure I did. Because right down inside I’m a gut-fighter, Bill. It took a long time to discover it, and I feel like a fool. But something clicked on this job. I’m a

predator just like Mason Villiers. I like a good fight. I need to be where it's at. Right down at bedrock, I've got the temperament of a good old-fashioned cop. Set me down in a precinct station house and I'll bet I'd blend right into the woodwork."

Burgess grinned at him. In a different voice, Hastings said, "I'm going to enjoy matching wits with Mason Villiers. And I think I'm going to beat him. It can't be done Quint's way, but it can be done."

"I hope you're right."

"I've got to have you with me right down to the wire, Bill, and it may get sticky. We're going to tromp on some important toes."

"Which Quint won't know about?"

"Which Quint won't know about."

"Then I guess my boss better not know about it either," Burgess said, and spread his grin even wider. "Where do we start?"

"With Ansel Cleland. Villiers got himself a corner on Heggins, and he's using it to whip Cleland's board into line. All right. Cleland can get back at him by staging a bear raid on stock in every company Villiers controls. He puts together a syndicate which sells Villiers short and publicizes the fact. They force the market price of those stocks down to levels where Villiers' creditors will sell him out to protect their loans-I'm taking it for granted Villiers has hocked every share he owns to finance this operation. Maybe he'll pull in his horns, and maybe he won't, but at least he'll have to scramble to raise the cash to pay off his margins, and when a man like Villiers goes after cash in a hurry, he's likely to do something we can nail him for."

"Fine. But how do we persuade Cleland to stage a counterraid against him?"

"Any stockholder has a right to file a private suit demanding a full accounting of the board's activities. All we need to do is find one man who owns one share of NCI and who's willing to file suit. We explain that to Cleland."

"I see. It puts the heat on his directors-'full disclosure.'"

"Exactly right. Cleland's directors will have to fight Villiers, no matter what it costs them, because if they don't, our stockholder suit will drag them into court, and they'll have to admit out loud, under oath, that they knuckled under to Villiers' extortion. They won't dare have it brought out in open court. They'll fight Villiers."

Burgess said mildly, "It's all pretty shady, isn't it? I mean, I don't know anywhere in the regulations where it says the SEC or my department are empowered to pull this kind of stunt. It's pretty raw-what if Quint finds out about it?"

"Why don't we worry about that if and when it happens?"

"Okay. You're the boss." Burgess stood up. "Who goes to Cleland? You or me?"

"We both do. When he knows both our departments are cooperating on it, he'll be impressed."

"If he only knew," Burgess said, and chuckled.

Hastings reached for the phone. "I want Villiers hung in a proxy fight where the whole world can see him fall down. If we don't pin him to the wall with legal evidence, at least we'll make damn sure he never does business in this town again."

"You don't mind fighting a little dirty yourself, do you?"

“I told you,” Hastings said, finding Cleland’s number in the Wheeldex and beginning to dial, “I’m a cop. My job is to stop the bad guys-any way I can.”

Chapter 29

Diane Hastings.

There was a phone call from Mason Villiers at four o’clock. He merely asked if he might drop by Diane’s apartment after dinner to discuss a business matter. “Or perhaps you’d rather meet somewhere?”

She let the silence run on before she said, “No. Come up to my apartment.”

She had trouble keeping her mind on work for the last hour of the working day; she was alarmed by the way she responded to him with both fear and fascination. She knew she could be an absurdly easy mark for Mason’s seduction, if she wanted it. She did not want it, and that was what troubled her. She was afraid.

At home she ate a silent dinner served by the unobtrusive day maid, who after washing the dishes removed her apron and said good night and left. Diane sat in the living room with a cup of coffee, irritable and impatient, trying to read an art-museum catalog. If only I could stand being alone at night.

When the doorman buzzed to announce her visitor, she paused on her way to the door to inspect herself in the mirror. Her lips were spotted; she had chewed the lipstick from her lower lip in her agitation. She repaired it quickly and opened the hall door when she heard the elevator arrive.

His cool, handsome face glittered; he was in high spirits, not bothering to conceal his satisfaction. He strode past her into the apartment and made the customary appreciative remarks about the decor, which surprised her, coming from him-and then it occurred to her he might have done it for just that reason: he liked to keep everyone off balance.

She made drinks, and they sat facing each other across the coffee table, and Mason Villiers said, “I’ve got good news.”

“Tell me.”

“You’re about to make your fortune,” he said.

She arched her eyebrows. “Indeed?”

“I’m on the verge of pulling off the biggest financial coup this town has seen in twenty years-and you’re going to share in it.”

“I am?”

“You’re the one who made it possible,” he said.

“I didn’t realize Melbard Chemical was all that much of a coup.”

“It’s the key that’s opening the floodgates. By this time next month you’ll be a millionaire in your own right.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand,” she said.

“Let’s just say the price of Melbard stock is going to shoot through the roof-which means Nuart will go right along with it, since Nuart’s merged with Melbard.”

She laughed uneasily. “I still don’t understand, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“Yes,” he said. He was staring fixedly at her. She swallowed the last of her drink and realized she had finished it too quickly. She felt light-headed and hot.

He rose from his seat with the flowing lazy grace of a well-fed lion and came around the coffee table, put his hand at the back of her neck, and bent his head toward her. Fear quivered in her eyes; she drew back and shook her head violently. “No, Mason.”

He straightened, but his hand remained at the back of her neck, hard and heavy. For a moment, staring into his face, she could not get her breath; she was frozen with an unknown dread. She whipped away from him and went striding away to a neutral side of the room, still shaking her head. When she got her breath she said finally, “No, I won’t have it. I won’t be just another scalp for you to hang on your belt.”

“I thought we’d celebrate our success. But have it your way-we’re both grown up, aren’t we? I can hardly expect you to start breathing hard every time I come in sight. All right, I won’t make it cheap-you don’t have to be afraid. Come back and sit down. I’ll keep my distance.”

She returned to her seat, still half-consumed by disbelieving wariness. “I’m grateful.”

“Are you? I’m not altogether sure you wouldn’t have preferred to have me overpower you. Maybe you need to be taken by force, for it to work.”

“Now you’ve made me feel cheap. Is that what you really think of me?”

“I’ve never been altogether sure what to think of you,” he said. “You’ve turned down my advances three times running. Three strikes, I’m out. I won’t try it again.”

“You didn’t really try all that desperately hard, now, did you?” she said recklessly.

“Is that an invitation?”

“You know better than that.”

He sat back with his drink; his eyelids drooped. An effervescence had begun inside her, and she denied it silently, but it crept through her body, a sultry heat like alcohol in the blood; it made her body feel looser, but it conjured up at the same time an image of rutting sweat and tangled sheets, and that image was all she needed to regain her resistance. She put on a cool smile, an arch look of self-confident control, and she said, “Thank you for not pressing the point. It would have made things disagreeable if you’d forced me to throw you out.”

He put his glass down on the table. “How long has it been since you’ve had a man?”

She blanched; she bridled. “You love taking people by surprise, don’t you?”

“Sometimes it’s the best way to break through to the answers.”

“Your questions can be very crude. That one was. You don’t honestly expect me to answer it?”

“You might have surprised me.”

“I won’t. In any case, it doesn’t matter that much to me. There are some of us who think about other things than sex, hard as that may be for you to believe.”

He only smiled a little and stood up. “Can I freshen your drink?”

“A weak one.”

“I didn’t have it in mind to get you smashed.” He took her glass away, and she put her head back and closed her eyes, listening to the clink of ice cubes as he made the drinks.

When he returned and settled facing her, she opened her eyes and said, “Are you going to tell me about your magnificent coup?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Of course. It’s what you came for, really, isn’t it? To do a little genteel bragging?”

That made him laugh softly, but his eyes didn’t laugh. “Not really. You don’t know much about me, after all, do you?”

“I know you’ve always fascinated me. You’re real, I’ll give you that-the kind of violence and force most people have never remotely tasted and can never understand.”

“But you do?”

“There’s a little of the same thing in me. I’ve met only a very few people who really understand how to enjoy power. Mostly they just go after it because it’s the way they were brought up, it’s part of the value system they’ve always been surrounded by. But they don’t really comprehend it. They make money because everybody approves of you when you make money. Even millionaires-they’re just doing it because it’s a game to play, a way to pass the time. But you’re not like that, I know that much. You don’t really care about money for its own sake, do you? What counts with you is the power to dominate the world. The difference between being kept waiting and keeping others waiting. Doesn’t it come down to that?”

He drank silently, and when his eyes narrowed she had the feeling, in that brief instant, that he was unguarded; something she had said had stripped the carefully crafted armor from him and left him naked before her. She comprehended that in this precise moment she had the absolute power to get total control of him-if only she knew the right method.

He said in an odd, light voice, “It’s funny. I’ve got dozens of people involved in this thing, and all any of them can see is the Goddamned money. They look at it, and the only thing they see is the size of the risk and the dollars-they’re awed by all those zeros. All those people and all those brains, and you’re the only one who sees the point, you’re the only one who can put your finger on what I’m really after.”

The armor had rejoined; the moment was gone; and now she said uncertainly, “I don’t think you’re pleased that I know. It bothers you, doesn’t it? It was your secret.”

Instead of giving her a direct reply, he got onto his feet and went over to the front wall and stood pretending to look at the Cezanne and the Corot. With his back to her he said, “This deal of mine is going to make you very rich. Or very powerful, choose your own word. I told you that, didn’t I?”

“You told me.”

“Has it occurred to you to wonder why I went out of my way to bring you into this thing? You, rather than someone else, some other company?”

“Of course it has.”

“You haven’t asked. Not once.”

“If I had,” she said, “would you have given me a straight answer?”

He turned to face her. “I will now.”

She kept her face strict and composed.

He said, “You’ll see the beauty in the irony of it. You see, the big coup I mentioned-I’m taking your father’s empire away from him.”

It took a moment for it to sink in. Her face changed slowly as realization came to her.

He said, “It’s intriguing, in an odd way, that you’ll profit from your father’s defeat. It always appealed to me.”

She was stiff, cold; she said in a hoarse breath, “Why?”

“A Freudian nutcracker might say I was raised by nuns and I learned to hate women in positions of executive authority. I doubt it, but it’s as good an excuse as any. Of course, it might be because you turned down my advances. If you think I’m that cheap. Actually, I doubt I could give you a good sensible answer. The design of it, the composition, the balance-that’s what appealed to me from the start. Years ago I went to your father with a deal that would have made him richer and made my fortune. He turned me down flat-not because the deal was no good, but because he didn’t want to have anything to do with me. Me, personally. I wasn’t good enough for Elliot Judd.” He gave her a very quiet, soft little smile and turned his hands over as if to say, You see how it is.

Watching him in horror, she became slowly enraged-flesh aquiver, eyes bulging. She caught herself; she said in a stiff low voice that trembled, “You’ll never do it. My father has hung tougher men than you out to dry!”

“Your father,” he said gently, “won’t live long enough to stop me.”

He strolled unhurriedly to the door, went through it, and pulled it shut behind him.

She walked toward the door woodenly, as stubbornly blind as a wind-up toy; she leaned both arms against the door, and after a while she heard the soft chunk of the elevator door. She went back to the drink she had left by her chair and drained it at a gulp. Then, still moving like a mechanism, she reached for the telephone and dialed the operator and said in a voice that broke, “I want to call Arizona.”

Chapter 30

Russell Hastings.

By Sunday night the young prisoner was hoarse from the sixty cigarettes he had consumed in the last eight hours. He had chewed his manicure to pieces. The small room was all but empty of furniture; Hastings and Bill Burgess camped hipshot against the spindly wooden table-the room wasn’t designed for sitting.

Steve Wyatt got up after ten minutes’ graveling silence and began to stride back and forth. His eyes were pouched, his clothes punctuated by wrinkles and creases.

The room’s air was thick with heavy body heat. Russ Hastings, stripped down to a rumpled pink shirt, felt tired and angry.

Bill Burgess said, “Nobody’s after your cherry, Wyatt. Why don’t you relax?”

“Why don’t you cool yourself off? You’re melting my butter.”

“We don’t want you, Wyatt. We want the big one. Villiers.”

“Look, I’m nobody’s flunky. Not Villiers’, not anybody’s.”

Hastings drawled mildly, “It’s no time to get contentious, Steve. We’ve got enough documentation to put you away for quite a few years, if the impulse strikes us.”

"Yeah. What other heroic kinds of work do your snoops do besides inspecting the contents of vacuum-cleaner bags and wastebaskets?"

"It netted us your copies of the phony sheets you planted on your employer, didn't it?"

"Suppose I say somebody must have planted that stuff in my apartment?"

Burgess shrugged. "You could try that on a jury. I don't think they'd like the fit of it much, but you could try. Now, quite waltzing with us, kid. You can't afford to-you don't know how much we know. Go back and sit down, and let's talk."

"God, you're a stubborn pair of bastards!"

"We have to be. And you'd be wise to remember it."

Wyatt's eyes flickered when they touched Burgess'. Finally he pulled the chair out and sat down. "Look, can I get bail?"

"If you decide to cooperate, you won't need any."

"You bastards make it sound easy, don't you? You make it sound as if I'd get off free as a bird. The fact is, if I tell you what you want to know, there's going to be a hell of a lot of mud flying, and a good deal of it will stick on me."

"You took that chance when you threw in with Villiers," Burgess said. "Isn't it a little late to worry about it now? Look, we're all tired, and if you don't want to testify, you don't have to. I offer my personal guarantee you'll end up making mail sacks in Atlanta, but it's your choice."

Wyatt's jaw muscles stood out like cables. He looked from Burgess to Hastings. His eyes were tired and raw. He lit a cigarette and held it in the manner of an actor preparing to turn toward the audience and deliver the line that would bring down the curtain, and Hastings felt himself tense up. But what Wyatt said was, "I don't suppose there'd be any way of keeping it from my mother?"

"I won't kid you," Burgess said. "It's going to be the biggest Wall Street news break since Robert Young went after the New York Central. I'm just stating facts, not enjoying it. You understand?"

There were signs stamped in Wyatt's face that Hastings saw with quick and easy recognition, and a slight contempt. To prime him, Hastings prompted, "You went with Villiers and another man to a board meeting of the NCI directors. Who was the third man with you?"

"Sidney Isher. You must know that if you know I was there."

"All right. Who's Isher?"

In the corner, the telephone rang. Burgess went to answer it. Hastings said, "Who's Isher?"

"He works for Villiers."

"Doing what?"

"Keeping the flies off him, maybe. I don't know. He's a lawyer. He draws up papers, that kind of thing. You'd have to ask him."

"We will. Now, what about-"

At the phone, Burgess had turned, catching his eye. Hastings went to the phone, crossing paths with Burgess, who said to Wyatt, "Ready to have your statement taken down by a stenographer now?"

"I guess so," Wyatt said, drained.

Burgess went to the door to call outside; Hastings picked up the telephone.

"Russ? It's Diane."

"Hello," he said, unable to think of anything else to add.

"It's important, Russ." She sounded dulled, as if she had taken a drug. "I've been trying to find you all weekend-I've been on the phone several times with Lewis Downey in Arizona. It doesn't look as if my father's going to last the night out, but I'm flying out there now to be with him. I'm at the airport now-I only have a minute. I hope I can get there in time. But I had to reach you-I saw Mason Villiers Friday night. You remember when you asked me about him?"

"Yes, I remember. My God, I'm shocked to hear-he seemed to be holding his own when I saw him…"

"It seems to have hit suddenly. Lewis said the doctors had warned him this could happen almost anytime. But Russ-they're calling my plane, I must hurry-listen to me. I've told my lawyers to try to break off the deal with Mason Villiers, if it isn't already too late. You were right about him, I should have listened to you. He's a dangerous megalomaniac. But something he said the other night has been echoing around in my head ever since, and it just came to me how important the implication was. He said-let me see if I can remember the exact words-he said he was going to take my father's company away from him, and then we argued, and I said my father would never let him do it, and then he said to me-I'm sure these are his words-'Your father won't live long enough to stop me.' Do you understand what I'm saying, Russ?"

"I understand it very well. Diane, tell your father-Oh, hell, what's the point?"

"You've always loved him, Russ, he knows that. I'm glad you went out to see him-Oh, God, I've got to run, I'll miss my plane. I'll call you from the ranch."

The line went dead. Hastings hung up and turned. The stenographer was settling in a chair with her notebook; Burgess looked up at him. He said, "Villiers knows Elliot Judd is dying."

Burgess stared at him. "So that's it. It makes it all fit, doesn't it? The slimy bastard, taking advantage of an old man's sickness."

Hastings walked over to the interrogation table and put his palms flat on it. Steve Wyatt flinched. Hastings said, "How did he find it out, Steve?"

"Okay-okay. Part of it he got from me. I found one of Judd's letters in Howard Claiborne's files. After that, Villiers hired some shady detective agency to burgle Judd's doctor's files. I think he's been suspicious ever since Judd withdrew from public sight last year. You know what it means, of course-NCI's always been a one-man empire, and in that kind of situation it works the same every time, the death of the tycoon always causes a tidal wave, and Villiers will be ready to buy carload lots of stock certificates when the price hits bottom."

Burgess looked over Wyatt's head at Hastings. "What do we do about it?"

"I'll post a man at a phone inside the Exchange. We'll have to brief the Exchange officials. If Judd dies and the news hits the wire, I want to be ready to suspend trading in the stock immediately, before Villiers has a chance to touch it." He sat down on the corner of the table and put his hard glance on Wyatt. "Let's have it now, from the beginning."

Chapter 31

Mason Villiers.

Villiers came awake and saw that he had slept alone. He had thrown Ginger out two hours ago; he didn't like to find women around when he woke up in the morning.

It was Monday morning; he felt keyed up. He rang down for breakfast and performed his morning ablutions with unusual enjoyment, a keen awareness of the roughness of the brush against his teeth, the heat of the shower spray, the scratch of the towel. He juggled plans while he breakfasted and dressed; he was downstairs forty minutes after waking up, climbing into the limousine and telling the driver to get him to Hackman's office fast.

The English girl gave him a frank appraisal as he crossed the office, but he was preoccupied and did not respond; he walked into Hackman's office, slammed the door, and let his hooded glance move from Hackman to Sidney Isher. And as soon as he saw Isher's face he knew something had gone wrong.

He looked at his watch-nine-forty. He said, "What's the matter with you?"

Isher said, without preliminaries, "The NCI board won't play ball. I couldn't reach Cleland-I left a message with his answering service. He's got a hell of a sense of timing. But I did get hold of Dan Silverstein, and he says there's been heavy pressure put on them to stand pat and fight."

"Pressure. From where?"

"Evidently from Howard Claiborne and the SEC and the Justice Department, not necessarily in that order."

George Hackman said, "There's indications some stockholders may be filing private suits demanding a full accounting of the directors' activities. And some of your stockholders in your little companies filing suits against you personally."

"On what grounds?"

"Charging you've misused company assets, that kind of thing." Hackman didn't look friendly. His jovial facade had crumbled.

Sidney Isher hawked into a handkerchief and said, "This could be a lot rougher than any of us bargained for. NCI's going to fight, Mace. No question of it. It's backfired. I say it's time to cut our losses and get the hell out. It was a good try, but to hell with it. We've still got our skins."

"If Wyatt keeps his mouth shut," Hackman growled.

Isher frowned at him. "Why shouldn't he? They turned him loose, didn't they? They didn't have enough on him to hold him."

"That's what he said. But I don't like the way he went straight out to his old lady's shack in East Hampton. He hasn't budged off the property since. And there's a carload of Justice Department cops watching the place."

"Maybe they want to make sure he doesn't run for it."

"And maybe they want to make sure we don't get to him," Hackman snapped. "What if he's talked?"

"If he talked, they'd keep him in protective custody, wouldn't they?"

Villiers said, "Shut up, both of you. It's easy enough to settle. Get him on the phone and ask him."

"I asked him last night," Isher said. "He told me he didn't say a word. Just demanded to have his lawyer present when they questioned him. They hollered at him for a while and then let him go. He says. No reason why he'd change the story now if we ask him again."

Villiers shrugged. "Claiborne fired him for manipulating the Wakeman Fund. They probably had him on the griddle over that. If he'd talked about us, they'd

have come after us by now, I think. There's no point carrying on about it-we've got other fish to fry."

"We have," Sidney Isher agreed. His eyelid ticked irregularly. "Let me tell you something. Cleland and his boys are preparing a series of ads to run opposite ours in the papers. According to Silverstein, they've dug up some highly unsavory material about your background in Chicago when you were a kid. I don't know what it is, but evidently they've got it documented to the point where they feel they can run it in their ad without risking a libel suit. It won't exactly help inspire confidence in us or our Heggins tender offer. And NCI's starting to line up proxy-soliciting firms."

"We'll line up our own."

"Let me finish, Mace. The whole thing's out of hand. Sure, we'll pick up a few blocks of NCI from the greedy ones who only see the instant profit we're offering them, but the big boys, the institutions, they'll hang back. We're not going to get anywhere near buying control of NCI with the Heggins operation. At a horseback guess, I'd say you won't end up with more than twenty-five percent of the outstanding. It means you've got to go out and buy another twenty-six percent for cash. You haven't got that kind of cash. Do you know how much it would take?"

"Six or seven hundred million, assuming I'd have to pay the whole thing in cash with no margin."

"The minute it starts to slide, you won't find anybody willing to give you a margin. You know that."

"That's why I said it, Sidney. On the safe side we can figure seven hundred million. I already told you I'm prepared to put up three hundred million myself."

"Leaving a slight gap," Isher said. "Don't look at me, Mace, I haven't got that kind of investment capital. I'm lucky if I can scrape up fifty grand to speculate with."

Villiers said, "I haven't asked either of you to risk a dime in this. I'll raise the cash-within twenty-four hours if I have to."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Isher said. "I know, I'm always saying it can't be done, and you're always proving me wrong, but this time you're talking about four hundred million dollars and I'm saying it can't be done. I'm saying it loud and clear. Now convince me I'm wrong."

"I'll convince you by showing you the money. Tomorrow morning you'll-"

The phone interrupted him. Hackman picked it up and listened briefly, said, "Thank you," in an odd tone of voice, and hung up. He looked at Villiers. "Ten minutes ago."

Elliot Judd was dead.

Villiers said, "All right. You both know what has to be done. Activate your orders the minute the market opens." He looked at his watch. "Four minutes to go."

Isher said, "It's brutal, Mace-the man's just died!"

"He's been dead for months. I won't weep for him."

They sat in uneasy silence until the ticker started. Hackman was instantly on the phone, barking orders; Isher was glued to the Quotron.

After a time Isher said, "I don't see any quote on NCI at all. But the whole damn market's sliding a little. Have you got a newswire somewhere, George? Maybe the news already got through-but that's damn fast work on somebody's part. We should have had a couple of hours."

Hackman closed his palm over the telephone mouthpiece and said dismally, “That’s it. They’ve suspended.”

“What?” Villiers, for the first time, displayed alarm on his face.

Hackman said, “There was an emergency meeting of the board of governors of the Stock Exchange at eight this morning. They voted to suspend trading in NCI common.”

“Then that’s it,” Isher said. “God knows when they’ll reopen it for trading. Your margin factors will call their loans any minute now. You’ve got to pay off and raise more cash someplace else. You’re all through, Mace, can’t you see it? The NCI deal is finished. You’ve got no more credit. You’ve got to pull out-all the way out. You’ll be lucky to save enough for a bus ticket back to Montreal.”

“I don’t like your tone,” Villiers said, his voice gritting. ’Remember this, Sidney-if anything happens to me, it happens to you, too. Don’t be in a hurry to pull the gangplank-you may want to get back on board.”

The phone rang again; Hackman snatched it up and barked. Then he made a face. “For you, Mace.”

Villiers took the receiver. “Yes? What is it?”

“Mr Villiers? Harold Ward, here, in Montreal. I’m Salvatore Senna’s attorney. The Canadian securities police have raided Mr. Senna’s brokerage office. He asked me to call you-the entire staff is in custody pending the setting of bail.”

“Thanks. I’ll get back to you.”

He hung up and sat down and said in a dead-flat monotone, “They’ve raided our Montreal room. They won’t find much to tie me into it, but they’ll keep it closed down for a while.”

“There goes your last source of quick cash,” Isher said. “Get out, Mace. Get out, can’t you see it yet?”

Villiers was slightly pale; but his jaw crept forward to lie in a long, hard line, and he said, “Don’t make any funeral arrangements until you’re sure you’ve got a corpse, Sidney. My God, any man who loses his cool in this business should never have got into it in the first place. Finance is no place for a nervous loser. If you’re that scared, you’re in the wrong game.”

“Even a fool knows enough to quit when he’s got no chips left to play with.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve still got a good chance. They’ve suspended trading on the Exchange, but they can’t suspend trading over the counter. They can’t stop us from going right ahead with the Heggins tender exchange. For that matter, it should be twice as attractive to NCI stockholders now-their only chance to unload at a profit, because the Big Board has to resume trading sometime, and when they do, NCI will open a good spread below where it closed last Friday. The whole world knows that much. We’re offering to bail them out, we’re giving them an opportunity they’ve got to snap up.”

Isher just watched him morosely, winking and hacking. In the end he said, “The little ones will grab it, the twenty-five percent. But the institutions will hang on, Mace. They know it’ll go back up to where it was before-as long as you don’t get your hands on it. None of them will sell one lousy share to you, Mace, not for double the price in Heggins convertibles.”

George Hackman averted his beefy red face. “He’s right, Mace. I hate to admit it, but this time he’s right. Cut your losses, buddy. Quit while you’re ahead.”

“I’ll quit,” Villiers replied, “when I get ahead.” His face was tight, a stern mask of arrogance, giving away nothing at all of the furious anxiety inside. There was

still a chance-a long shot. With far more confidence than he owned, he snapped, “The twenty-five percent is all I need. I’ll buy the rest for cash.”

“Whose cash?” Isher demanded.

Villiers walked with careful, even strides to the door. “By this time tomorrow,” he said, “it’ll be mine.” And went.

Chapter 32

Naomi Kemp.

Naomi lay on the bed pouting at the typewriter across the room. On days like this it was just as well to stay away from it. Maybe after lunch she’d feel better about it and write half a chapter.

She heard a knock at the door, a sharp impatient rapping, and she could tell from the sound who it was. She let him in.

He looked taut and pale; he seemed reluctant to pry his teeth apart when he spoke. “I want to use your phone.”

“You look terrible,” she said. “You look like the world just fell down around your ankles.”

He went straight to the phone and turned the dial once, held the receiver to his ear, and said, “I want Information in Montreal.”

She pushed the door shut and watched him; a slow frown of suspicion creased her brow. Villiers barked into the phone, “Montreal, Canada, for God’s sake. What have you heard from your head lately, sweetheart?… Directory Assistance, Information, is there one good reason on earth why I should care what you call it?… Yes, hello, give me the number of Harold Ward. He’s an attorney. No, I don’t know his address.”

He stood with his eyes shut as if frozen in statuary, pressing the phone to his ear. His eyelids fluttered just slightly. She had never seen him so agitated.

His eyes shot open. “Put me through to Ward. This is Mason Villiers… Sweetheart, I don’t give a shit if he’s in conference with the Prime Minister. Put me through to him or I’ll have your pretty head in a sack.”

His eyes closed once more, and opened. He gave her a glance, but he didn’t really see her at all. His shoulders tensed, and he turned half away from her. “Ward. Where’s Senna? Where can I reach him?… You mean he’s still in jail? What the hell kind of a lawyer do you think you are? Look, I don’t care if the magistrate’s gone fishing up on the Great Slave Lake, I want Senna out within the next sixty minutes… Don’t give me that. Take cash out of your safe and grease whoever has to be greased. Senna will reimburse you. Just get him out, tell him to call his contacts in New York, and tell him to set up a meeting for me with Civetta tonight. And tell him I’ll have his balls if he doesn’t come through. It has to be tonight. Tell him to call George Hackman when it’s set up, and leave the details with Hackman. Damn it, stop blubbering and get it done.”

He slammed the receiver down hard enough to make the bell ring. Naomi said, “Civetta. He’s a gangster.”

“Shut up.”

“What’s wrong, Mace? I’ve never seen you like this before. Are you all right?”

"I'm all right," he muttered. "I'm fine. The whole world's trying to break me down, but they're not going to do it. They think they've got me by the balls. Well, we'll see. By God, we'll see."

She said, "It's about time. You've been getting away with murder for years."

He brought his head around and seemed to recognize her for the first time. His face closed up; he said in a voice once more under control, "Not murder. You don't know business people. They're too stupid to get sore-they gripe about thieves, but none of them wants to stop the thief. They just try to figure out how they can get in on his act. They may be losing blood by the quart, but they're still eager to come in. They've never stopped me before, and they're not going to stop me this time. Come here."

Startled, she took a step and then stopped. He strode across the room, grasped her under the arms, and pulled her against him. His kiss was harsh and urgent.

Her mouth twisted while she let him strip her clothes off like rags. He thrust her toward the bed; and with sudden anger she stood her ground. "Why in hell did you have to come to me?"

"Shut up, Naomi."

"All you want is a Goddamned ego massage. You stand there with your dingle sticking out and you want to prove something to yourself by using me as a box to make a deposit in."

He slapped her across the face and laid both hands against her breasts and shoved her back onto the bed. He put one knee on the bed between her legs. In a strange sort of rage she closed her hand on his throbbing penis, hard. She squeezed.

His face changed, and she heard him utter an odd sound, somewhere between whine and groan. Driven by some sudden and extraordinary urgency, he fell across her, clutched her body, clung to her bitterly. Suddenly she understood. Her smile was hard; she saw him fight the flames leaping in him, and she squeezed his phallus with a fast, pulsing grip. Instantly she felt him shudder and gasp, and the warm issue of him ran wet along her hand.

Hard-breathing and pale, he rolled violently away. He refused to look at her.

She gave him a lidded glare. "You're no good to anybody any more, Mace-not even yourself."

"Shut up," he whispered.

Chapter 33

Russell Hastings.

Russ Hastings sat in his little office with a hand wrapped around a beaded cold can of soda. Bill Burgess was staring at the Post headline-"JUDD SUCCUMBS"-as if he hadn't already read the entire story twice. Hastings said, "I am going to miss him."

"He must've been quite a guy."

"He was a good man."

"Not much you can add to that," Burgess said, and glanced at the ticker. His shoulders stirred; he changed his tone: "Dow Jones down more than fourteen

points today, Russ-Exchange Index down sixty-two cents. Amazing how much impact one man's dying can have. I wish I'd met him. What's that you're reading? You look like you're trying to memorize it off the page."

"The Act of Nineteen-thirty-four. Ever read it?"

"On my list of favorite reading, it's second only to God's Little Acre," Burgess said. "I confess I have not read it. You find something fascinating?"

"Rule Ten B-Five."

"Oh, sure. Yes. Absolutely. Now I comprehend everything." Burgess rolled his eyes upward and threw up his hands.

"It says here," Hastings drawled, "all investors have an equal right to material information that might affect stock values. In other words, anybody who's privy to inside information can't act on it before it becomes public knowledge-otherwise he's guilty of fraud."

Burgess sat up. "Ah-hah!"

"Villiers had information about Elliot Judd's health before it became public knowledge, and he acted on it, and we can prove it."

"How much could we hit him with?"

"On that charge? Maybe a three-year sentence."

Burgess slid back down in the chair. "Or maybe we get a bleeding-heart judge who slaps his wrist and turns him loose on a suspended sentence. It's not good enough, Russ."

"Better than nothing, isn't it?"

"Christ, I wish we could act on the evidence we got out of Wyatt. Villiers gave the orders to burgle Claiborne's files."

"But all we've got is Wyatt's word against Villiers'. You know what happens to Wyatt's credibility in front of a jury when some crack lawyer gets done tearing him to shreds. He could swear the sun came up this morning and you wouldn't get twelve men to believe him."

"Well, hell, Russ, we've got Wyatt tying him into stock fraud and we've got Manny Berkowitz in Chicago tying him into the Mafia, and-"

"If Wyatt makes a poor witness," Hastings cut in sourly, "what would you call Berkowitz? We can't go into court without witnesses more reputable than those two-we'd get laughed right out of the building. We've got to find an unimpeachable witness, or concrete evidence. Diane doesn't know enough. The only things we've got on paper so far are documents that implicate Wyatt. That's no help at all."

"Then what do we do? Sit on our hands?"

"We've got to wait for Villiers to make a mistake. We've got a four-man surveillance team tailing him. We've got a tap on his phone in the hotel, and by tomorrow we'll have bugs in his suite and George Hackman's office. I don't like it any more than you do, but I don't-Wait a minute." He turned in his chair, picked up Wyatt's signed statement, switched on the desk lamp, and hunched over the deposition, thumbing pages back rapidly. "I've got an idea."

"I know," Burgess said. "I saw the light go on."

Hastings found his place. "Here. Wyatt says Isher kept warning Villiers he wasn't going to be able to raise enough money to finance the operation, and Villiers kept saying he had a source of capital if he needed it."

"So?"

Hastings closed the deposition and turned off the lamp. "So what's the source?"

"I don't get you."

"What's his source of money, Bill? We've closed his Montreal operation. He certainly can't go to the usual sources-banks, brokers, factors, insurance companies, investment trusts, professional moneylenders. After this morning they'd slam the door in his face; they wouldn't risk lending a dime to a man in his position, let alone the hundreds of millions he needs. He didn't have the money on tap already, and yet he's confident he can get it whenever he wants it. Now, even if he had a legitimate source for that much money, they wouldn't produce it fast enough to do his scheme any good. They'd have to investigate the whole thing down to the last line of fine print. They'd have to spend weeks drawing up legal documentation. Narrow it down, it's obvious-knowing his background. He's got to go to the mob for the money."

Burgess blinked and stared. "Sure. Christ, it's got to be."

"All right, then. Who does he go to? Which mobster? That's in your department, not mine; I don't know who's who in the hierarchy. But there can't be very many Mafiosi he could approach who could come up with a nine-figure sum overnight."

"Civetta," Burgess said promptly. "Sal Senna is Villiers' man in Montreal-and Senna traces back to Civetta's organization. Civetta's the money man in New York, he controls the loan sharks and the numbers. It's got to be Civetta, nobody else fits."

"Villiers has to get in touch with him soon, then. Can your people plant bugs in Civetta's hangouts?"

Burgess made a face. "We've had him bugged for months. Either he knows it or he's careful by nature. He rarely talks on the phone at all, only to his wife. When he wants a business conference he picks a nightclub with a loud orchestra or he drives his pals out into the woods somewhere and they talk half a mile from the nearest building. We've even bugged his car, but they don't talk in the car. They get out and talk too far away for the mikes to pick them up."

"Then we'll have to bug Villiers."

"I guess it's worth a try," Burgess said without great enthusiasm. "I'll have a man bump into him in his hotel lobby and plant a miniature mike in his pocket. But those James Bond gimmicks rarely live up to their publicity. The transmitters are short-range, you've got to have your receiver within a few hundred yards of them, and Villiers moves fast-it'd be a miracle if we could keep up. All it takes is a flickering neon light or a radio station nearby or one of those handy-dandy executive jammers in a briefcase, and all you're going to pick up is a noise like bacon sizzling in a hot frying pan. And even if you get past all those obstacles, you've got to have good acoustics and an absolute minimum of background noise before you can expect to get a signal clear enough to record on tape so that the voices can be recognized."

"Do it anyway-we've got to use every tool we can."

"What about the admissibility of that kind of evidence, even if we get it?"

"We'll get a warrant. That way it'll be admissible in court."

"If we pick up anything. I hate putting all our eggs in a basket this flimsy, Russ."

"Then find me another one. In the meantime, get your people moving on it. We'll need a federal warrant and all the gadgetry and people to operate it. You'd better get going-no telling how much time we have."

Shortly after the Market closed in the afternoon, Miss Sprague buzzed and announced coolly, “A Miss McCloud to see you, sir. She doesn’t have an appointment.”

“Send her in, please.”

He stood up, composing himself, surprised; he hadn’t expected her, he wasn’t prepared.

Carol appeared in the doorway. Her lovely eyes were round and wide, her uncertain smile was sweet and touching. Her hair made a thick, silky fall to her shoulders. She looked heartbreakingly beautiful.

“Hi,” he said. “Come in-shut the door. I didn’t expect-”

“I know.” She came into the room, moving lightly and quickly-soft, slim, stunning. Hastings veiled his eyes.

“I have to talk to you, Russ, and it couldn’t wait. Otherwise I wouldn’t have come. I feel awfully apologetic.”

“Nonsense.” He held the chair for her and perched on the corner of the desk. “I’m glad you came.”

“Are you? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. I’m a little jumpy. You see, I’m pulling up stakes, and for me that can be a risk.”

“You’re leaving New York?”

“Taking the night flight to Rome. I’m all packed, I’ve given up my apartment, everything’s arranged.”

“But-how long will you be away?”

“I’m not coming back, Russ.”

“I see.”

“I’m going to disappear,” she said. “I’m going to assume another identity. I’ve got all the papers to document it-I’ve been working it out for years.”

“But what will you do?” he asked, hearing the lame sound of his own voice.

She laughed. “You look so kind and concerned, Russ, your eyes are so fond. Please don’t worry about me. I’m not going to ‘do’ anything, in the sense you mean. I’m retiring while I’ve still got my looks and a little bit of my soul left. I’ve got plenty of money, I don’t have to work. Maybe I’ll join the jet set and drift from the grand-prix racing circuit to the film festivals and back. I really don’t have any plans-I just want to drift for a while until I decide what I want. I’ll dye my hair and change my style of doing things, and I doubt I’ll be recognized by anybody who knows me.”

He turned his hand over. “I don’t really know what to say.”

She laughed, and cut the laugh off; she reached out to touch his hand. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you, honestly. I’m very nervous-forgive me. I didn’t really make a special trip down here during your office hours to say good-bye. I would have called you on the phone. We’ve had a silly sort of time together, but you’re one of the few people I think of as my friend.”

“I’m glad to know that,” he said. “It means a good deal to me.”

“Then I’m happy.” She gave him a warm smile, but her eyes seemed to have lost focus; she pulled her head around toward the window and steadfastly kept her gaze in that direction, turned away from him, while she spoke: “But that’s not why I came. These are business hours, and this is business, Russ. I know the SEC is after Mason Villiers-I suppose by now a lot of people know it, but Mason isn’t worried, he thinks you can’t touch him.”

“He may be right, too. He covers his tracks better than an Apache Indian. But how much do you know about him?”

“I know a great deal about him,” she said in a low tone. “He’s owned me for years.”

He did not voice the instantly obvious question; he only watched her averted face. He could see the beat of a pulse at her throat. Disconcerted, she fumbled with her oversized handbag, sniffed, grinned derisively, and took a thick, folded sheaf of typewritten pages from it. She reached out to drop the document on his desk, near his hand; she said, “I’d prefer you don’t read that until I’m gone.”

“What is it?”

“The story of my life,” she said with a twisted mouth. “Some of it, anyway-the part that concerns Mason Villiers. It should make interesting reading in a courtroom. I’ve had it notarized-I don’t know whether it will stand up in court, but I’m afraid it’s the best I could do. I’m not going to testify in person, I’m too frightened, and I’ve got too much to lose. If that makes it worthless, then I apologize to you, Russ. But even if you can’t use it in court, you can find facts in it, and you can trace back to those same facts through other people. You’ll know where to look for proof.”

“Proof of what?”

“It’s all sordid and tedious, Russ, I don’t want to go over it with you, sitting here face to face like this. I want to remember your face with warmth in it. Once you’ve read my statement, you won’t think of me that way any more. I’ve done some unspeakable things.”

“We all have,” he said. “I don’t think anything you could tell me would change my feeling for you.”

“How do you feel about me? I know you made an absurd marriage proposal to me once, but you were drunk, and we were both upset, and none of it made any sense. Now we’re on your turf instead of mine, for the first time. Does it make a difference in the way you feel?”

“No.”

“I thought perhaps you’d thought about what I was. I had visions of your teeth grinding every time you thought about me.”

He laughed. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I don’t know very much about love,” she said softly. “Oh, I guess all women think about it, but I think there’s no room left inside me for love-I mean, the real kind, between a woman and a man. I’ve been used by too many men.”

“There are other kinds of love,” he said. “I’m not going to propose to you again, and I’m not going to fall to pieces when you leave for Rome. We’ll probably never see each other again. I regret that, but I’ll live with it. I’ll be grateful to have known you.”

“I’m glad,” she whispered. She stood up to go, but Hastings put out a detaining hand. Her back registered taut reaction. He turned her around toward him and put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her lightly, and then her throat made a groaning sound, and her fingers bit deep into his back.

She wrenched herself away and smiled. Her eyes were moist. “You’re so incredibly good, Russ. I wish you everything.” She halved her smile, gazed at him intently as if to fix his image in her mind, and wheeled abruptly away, walking straight to to the door with lithe strides, going right on through without once looking back. His last glimpse of her remained in his vision like an afterglow after she was gone: God, she was so lovely. He turned back to his desk, sat down very slowly, and reached for the document she had left behind.

Chapter 34

Mason Villiers.

The sky was crowded with full-bellied clouds, there was the smell of rain in the hot air. But the night remained fetid and oppressive. Villiers stood under the awning in front of an apartment house on West Thirteenth Street and kept looking at his watch, filling up with impatient anger. He remembered what Diane had said about keeping others waiting; he promised himself this would be the last time, ever.

The big Lincoln drew up in the shadows fifty feet down the street. He walked toward it. The right-hand rear door opened, but the interior domelight didn't go on-disconnected, probably. Villiers stooped to get in.

There was the driver, and a skinny bald man in the front passenger seat, and one man in the back seat beside him. That man reached across him to pull the door shut, and said to the driver in a voice that rumbled out like lump coal tumbling down a metal chute, "Let's go, Charley."

Villiers didn't offer to shake hands with the man. He sat back and put his briefcase in his lap and said mildly, "This has got all the heavy-handed, cloaked melodrama of an old German silent movie. Is it really necessary?"

"We ride now," the man said. "We talk when we get there."

After that there was no more talk. Villiers gave the man a sidewise study. Civetta's black hair was slicked back; his dark suit was carefully tailored, his shirt monogrammed on the pocket, his tiepin a glistening diamond. He wore Stacy Adams shoes and a pair of black-rimmed eyeglasses which failed to soften the lines of his big square face. He had burly arms inside the tailored cloth, and the hard-jowled features of a cross-country truck driver.

Civetta turned his head and gave him a frank appraisal; his iron eyes studied Villiers with cool mistrust. Then, with a trace of a smile, he said, "Maybe the heat's gonna break soon, what do you think?"

"I think we may get some rain."

"Should clear some of the gunk out of the air, huh?"

"Bound to," Villiers said, hating small talk, volunteering nothing more.

Civetta started talking about a Broadway musical he had seen recently. Villiers feigned attentiveness and grunted now and then. The Continental glided noiselessly toward the river, stair-stepping north along avenues and streets until it bumped up the ramp onto the West Side Highway and accelerated into the traffic stream with a smooth surge of power. The driver was superb-he crowded the speed limit all the way but never had to hit his brakes hard. They prowled north past the steamship piers-Villiers had a glimpse of the Queen Elizabeth II looming against the sky at the Cunard dock, probably just returned with a capacity load of summer travelers from England. The Lincoln swept past Harlem's tenement roofs at a precise fifty miles an hour and climbed the ramp to the George Washington Bridge. A freighter churned its way up the Hudson beneath them, its screw fighting the current. The driver paid the toll with a green ticket book, and they swung north onto the Palisades Parkway. At this hour it was all but deserted, but the driver kept carefully to the speed limit. Lush trees whipped past, black against the translucent gray of light-reflecting

clouds. Within ten minutes, somewhere toward the northeastern corner of the state of New Jersey, the driver pulled off onto U.S. 9W and made a quick turnoff into a side road. Trees intertwined thickly, arched over the road, cutting out the sky. The driver slowed to a crawl, peering forward. Shortly they came to a dirt road which went into the woods through a locked gate with a metal "NO VEHICULAR TRAFFIC" sign. The driver pulled off and parked on the narrow strip of dirt between the main road and the gate. The headlights flicked off, and Civetta said, "End of the line. We walk from here."

They got out of the car and chunked the doors shut. Civetta looked both ways and walked quickly through the small pedestrian opening beside the gate, into the woods. The little bald man smiled nervously at Villiers and went ahead of him, as if to reassure him. Villiers, frowning, began to follow; but the driver took a step forward and said, "Pardon me, sir. Your briefcase."

Villiers scowled at him. "What about it?"

"Mind leaving it in the car, sir?"

"You're damn right I mind. Look-"

Civetta, having looked back, spoke harshly. "What the hell's the matter back there?"

The driver only pointed toward Villiers' briefcase. Civetta snapped, "Leave the case, if you don't mind. He won't steal anything."

Reluctantly, Villiers handed it over and followed the two men into the woods. As he stepped through the pedestrian gate, he saw a car's headlights appear around the bend of the main road a quarter-mile away, but he paid it no attention; none of the others seemed to mind. The driver got back into the car, holding his briefcase, and sat smoking, the button tip of his cigarette alternately glowing and dimming. Villiers turned and joined up with the others. Civetta led them a hundred feet or so into the woods, and, to his surprise, Villiers discovered they were at the edge of a clearing. Three or four picnic tables were scattered around; there was a perforated trash drum and a number of signs posted-" NO FIRES," " NO COOKING," " NO ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES ON PARK PREMISES."

"It's the backside of a county park," Civetta explained. "Nobody comes here at night-they lock the front gates, and I guess the teen-age lovers haven't discovered the back way in. It makes a useful place to talk. This is my legal associate, Mr. Norman Fields."

Fields offered a hand, and Villiers, not without distaste, shook it briefly. Civetta sat down on one of the picnic benches and said, "Sit down and make yourself comfortable and let's talk."

"I don't like the setup," Villiers said. "You've got a witness, I haven't."

"Do we need witnesses, Mr. Villiers? My, my. I only brought Mr. Fields along for legal advice."

Villiers took out his wallet and extracted a bill. He stepped forward and held it up to Norman Fields. The little man frowned. "What's that for?"

"One dollar. You take it, and you agree that in the matter we're about to discuss, you're acting as my legal counsel as well as Mr. Civetta's. That makes it a privileged communication. If anybody subpoenas you, you don't have to answer questions."

The lawyer looked over his shoulder at Civetta, who nodded impatiently. "Sure-sure. It's all right, Norm, take the damn dollar and let's get down to it."

Fields stuffed the dollar in his pocket and sat down. Villiers kept his feet. He didn't like the clandestine setting, and he didn't like the fact that they had forced him to leave his briefcase behind. It contained the jammer, and the jammer wouldn't do a bit of good as long as it was enclosed in four thousand pounds of Detroit steel; the car would absorb its signals completely.

But it was no time to call the meeting off. He would take his chances; he had to.

He said, "All right. I want to make you a business proposition."

"Senna said that much. You worked pretty damn fast, getting him out of the Montreal brig on bail so he could set up this meeting. You must be in a hurry, Mr. Villiers." Civetta said it in a way that made it abundantly clear he was prepared to extract every possible advantage from Villiers' need for haste.

"I won't beat around the bush," Villiers said. "I'm taking over Northeast Consolidated Industries."

"You wouldn't kid me," Civetta said with a straight face. "Do you mean to tell me Heggins Aircraft is just a front for Mason Villiers?"

"You knew that already-everybody knows it."

"What everybody knows and what somebody can prove are two different things. You've just admitted it out loud, which means you're giving something away to me, and when a man puts that kind of advantage in my hands, Mr. Villiers, I kind of figure he wants something in exchange. Or am I gettin' too cynical in my old age?"

"Let's not play games, Civetta. I've got a proposition to make. Something I want in exchange for something you want."

"I know that, Mr. Villiers. You want money to finance your proxy fight. A lot of money. That's what you want. Now, what do I want that you could possibly give me in return?"

"Interest on a loan, to begin with."

"Peanuts, Mr. Villiers," Civetta murmured in his low gravel growl; but his face was attentive. "Let's talk facts and figures. How much?"

"Four hundred million."

"Sweet Jesus," Norman Fields ejaculated. Civetta's eyes shifted toward him, but Civetta's big head did not move.

All Civetta said was, "That's a lot of money."

"I've done business with the Chicago organization before. They know I don't welsh on my debts. And I know how it's done. I go to your bank, and if I want a one-thousand-dollar loan, I sign a two-thousand-dollar note. The note is legitimate, its terms are the usual bank terms and rates-but the only profit your bank shows on its books is the legal interest. The extra one thousand goes into your pockets. I'm willing to do business on that basis. Only, of course, when we're talking about four hundred million, I'm not willing to pay you back double. What I'm offering is standard legal interest plus a twenty-five-percent profit. You lend me four hundred million, and I pay you back five hundred million. Plus legal interest on the four hundred million."

Civetta didn't give him a direct answer. He looked at Fields, and Fields said nothing. He said after a moment, "You don't like me, Mr. Villiers."

"Should I?"

"A lot of people seem to think it's good politics to like me."

"Civetta, I don't like you, and I don't dislike you. This is business, not personalities. I'm not asking to join your social club."

“Point is,” Civetta said, “I don’t owe you a thing, Mr. Villiers, and you don’t even pretend you’re my friend. So why should I do you a favor? Why should I cut my vigorish rate down to one-quarter of the usual? You can have your four hundred million-all you got to do is, you pay me back eight hundred million. You see, I figure you can succeed if you get backing from me, and if you succeed, I know damn well you can afford to pay me eight hundred million. I’m a businessman too, Mr. Villiers. I know when I’m in a seller’s market, see?”

“I see, yes. It’s a matter of indifference to you, and you feel insulted that I should ask you into the deal when I don’t particularly like you, but it gets less insulting if I raise the ante from twenty-five percent to a hundred percent.”

“You’re real astute, Mr. Villiers. Now, you can tell me something else. Suppose I give you the four hundred million. What do you do with it?”

“I buy NCI.”

“Four hundred million don’t buy control of NCI, Mr. Villiers. It ain’t enough. I know my figures, see?”

“My tender offer of Heggins debentures buys the rest.”

“And what if it doesn’t? You come back to me for more money, right? I’m not a bottomless pit, Mr. Villiers. My assets are just as limited as the next guy’s.”

“You take my word for it or you don’t, Civetta. Would I ask for four hundred million if I wanted six or eight? What good would it do me to ask for less than it takes to do the job? The whole thing falls apart if I don’t end up with fifty-one percent of NCI. I think I can do it with three hundred million. But this thing’s too big to shave too close.”

Head down, Norman Fields pressed his hands together until Villiers heard the knuckles crack. Fields looked up and broke in, “Listen, I don’t like the whole-”

“Shut up, Norm. You’re out of order.” Civetta kept his eyes on Villiers. “Mr. Villiers, I’m in business because I learned a long time ago to find out what people need, and give it to them. Maybe sometimes the law don’t approve, but I supply the people’s needs, and I make a profit. Now, you come to me with a proposition, it means you got to make an offer that supplies my needs too. You get me? So far, you ain’t offered me nothing.”

“I’m offering you a chance to buy into one of the biggest legitimate corporations in the world. I think that entitles me to a break in your interest rates. You people have been bleeding for years to get a foothold in the top corporations. I’m offering it to you. Throw in with me, and I’ll repay the loan in NCI stock certificates. You’ll get your own people on the NCI board of directors. You can sit on the board yourself-you’ll have that right.”

Fields, staring at him, uttered an exultant noise of discovery and realization. Civetta shut him up with a wave of his hand. His hard eyes penetrated Villiers.

Finally Civetta said, “What you’re doing ain’t legal. We both know that. You’re operating on all kinds of inside information that’s never been released to the public. The federal boys could hang your ass if they could prove this on you.”

“Granted. They could hang your ass too if they knew everything about your operations. What of it?”

“What of it is just this, Mr. Villiers. Suppose the federal boys walk into your office one morning and haul you down to the Tombs. Okay, they futz around a while, and maybe they end up letting you go because you got a good lawyer. But in the meantime, your NCI pipe dream goes down the tubes, and I’m left holding an empty bag where I used to have four hundred million bucks.”

"I'm taking the bigger risk. If I can take it, you can take it. I'm not asking you to bleed, Civetta. I'm only asking for a loan. You stand to lose your investment every time you lend money. You take the risk because you're getting good interest rates and you're getting other considerations. What's four hundred million to you? I've got every dime I own on the line, and my life with it."

"That's your lookout, not mine, Mr. Villiers. But I'll tell you what we'd be willing to do. We'd go it for sixty percent instead of a hundred."

Villiers shook his head. "No. Twenty-five percent. I'm not going to haggle."

"You got someplace else to go for the money, maybe?" Civetta smiled slowly. "You see, Mr. Villiers, you got no place else to go at all. Because I'm a bighearted man I'll give it to you for fifty percent, all inclusive. No extra interest on top. You borrow four hundred mil, you pay me back six hundred mil, on a deadline of three months. If it goes more than three months, you pay me five million a month until you pay off the principal. Take it, Mr. Villiers, or leave it."

"I'll take it," Villiers said.

"Which means it was the figure you had in mind all the time, am I right?"

"What does it matter? Put as much of it as you want on paper, and I'll sign it in the morning."

Norman Fields said, "I'll have the papers in my office for you at nine." He stirred, ready to rise, but Villiers' eyes jammed him back down in his seat.

"I'm not finished. It's my ball game, Civetta, and you'll play it by my rules as long as we're in my ball park. If you think you can steal a base, you go ahead and try. You can't steal a base if you're not in the game at all."

"Absolutely, Mr. Villiers," Civetta purred. "Absolutely."

Suddenly Villiers grinned at him. "It's going to be interesting, you and me."

"You're right, Mr. Villiers. Interesting as hell. Let's go, Norm."

They left the picnic clearing single file. In the darkness Villiers' face rode high, a hard smile of triumph on his mouth. He had whipped the world again. He pictured himself in the big chair on the forty-eighth floor, behind the massive oak door with its discreet small golden letters, Chairman of the Board. It was time to plant his roots in the epic fashion for which he had held off throughout the years; as long as he had been building toward the summit, he had wasted little money on luxuries when he still needed it for capital growth. Now he allowed himself to think ahead. He would keep a yacht at anchorage off Palm Beach with a year-round crew of six living on board even if he didn't set foot on its decks for five years at a time. He would have his own Lear Jet (twenty thousand dollars a month maintenance costs alone) and a duplex apartment on Sutton Place, a house in Bermuda, a house in Palm Beach, and a Putnam County estate complete with riding stables, tennis courts, swimming pool, golf course, slot machines, and garages to house his proud collection of antique and classic cars.

All I want is not to want. Ever.

And now, right now, he had achieved that desire.

He stepped through the pedestrian gate, close behind Civetta. Charley, the chauffeur, had got out to hold the doors; he had the briefcase in his hand and turned to give it to Villiers. Villiers reached out for it and that was when a man stepped out of the shadows along the side of the road and said, "Federal agents. Stand still, please. You're under arrest."

Villiers' head turned slowly, keening the night. Shadows moved into sight on both sides of the road, five men armed. One of them came forward to the car

and turned the chauffeur around, forced him to plant his palms on the roof of the car, and frisked him.

"He's clean."

Civetta said, "Nobody says a word. Understand?"

A tall man with a big jaw separated himself from the circle and walked within two paces of him. "You're Villiers. We haven't met. My name's Hastings-I've been looking forward to this."

Villiers didn't say anything. Hastings reached forward to the side pocket of Villiers' jacket and withdrew a small disk from it. "Microphone-transmitter. We've got a tape of your whole conversation in a car just down the road. And a warrant to bring it into court." Hastings was watching him with fascination and with satisfaction, hard and unconcealed.

Hastings spoke over his shoulder, "Bill, better get on the two-way and clear your men to arrest George Hackman and Sidney Isher."

Civetta pushed himself forward. "I want a phone. I'll have forty-eleven lawyers down there before you can sneeze. You got nothing at all on me."

Hastings said mildly, "At the moment it's not you we want, Mr. Civetta." He turned and touched Villiers' elbow. "Come on-you'll ride with me."

"Keep your hands off me," Villiers murmured, and walked up the road ahead of him. A third man, with the wise face of a twenty-year cop, trailed along and got into the car with them, sitting in the back seat with his hand under the lapel of his coat.

Villiers said, "I believe I'm entitled to know what charge you've arrested me on."

"You'll have it spelled out on paper when we arrive in New York," Hastings said. He put the car in gear and followed the two other cars toward the main highway. "I may as well tell you we've got complete sworn statements from Steve Wyatt and from Carol McCloud. Do I need to add anything to that? I'm sure you know what they contain as well as I do."

Carol. Villiers closed his eyes down to slits and stared straight ahead at the red taillights of the Lincoln. He settled back in the seat and folded his arms across his chest; his chin drooped slightly, as if he were very tired.

Hastings said, "It's been a long time coming to you, hasn't it? You've had a good run for the money."

"Mr. Hastings," Villiers breathed, "I am not finished yet. I've still got the brain in my head, which is worth more than every stock certificate on Wall Street and every indictment you can draw up against me."

Hastings gave him a strange glance. "Maybe."

Villiers turned his head and looked at the man. "Maybe," he said. And then he uttered a harsh, metallic laugh.

Chapter 35

Russell Hastings.

The news had leaked, inevitably. Reporters had the Tombs under siege-photographers, radio-TV truck crews, newsmen with microphones and notebooks. Hastings and Burgess led a wedge through to the door. Mason

Villiers stared through the crowd, expressionless, while Civetta and Fields threw up their hands in front of their faces. “No pictures please!” A reporter crowded in front of Villiers and shoved a microphone in his face and yelled something; and Villiers said loudly, in a friendly voice, “Fuck yourself, friend,” which ensured that the soundtrack wouldn’t be aired.

They had to lean against the door to close it on the crush of newsmen. Burgess remarked, “I hate the whole breed-there’s not one of them who’d leave a stricken grieving widow alone without flash-bulbing and interrogating her to tears, and then they go ahead and write lies anyway.”

Quint was inside, with the U.S. attorney. One of Burgess’ men read aloud, in a bored monotone, the prisoners’ rights, at the end of which Civetta said loudly, “No talking until we get our lawyers down here. Not a word.”

Hastings all the while watched Villiers, but the tall man never cracked; he acted as if he were in complete control of his fate and looked forward to beating the rap. Burgess growled in Hastings’ ear, “There’ll be an arraignment, and they’ll get bail set, and the Goddamned outcome is murky as hell, tape or no tape. About all I can see is we’ve squashed the raid on NCI.”

“Isn’t that what it’s all about?” Hastings said. He looked at Burgess, and his eyes sparkled and flashed. “There’ll be another raid, Bill. And another one after that. God knows why they call it the securities market.”

After endless red tape and inconsequential talk the two men walked out and stood on the corner of Centre Street, and Burgess said, “It’ll rain soon.”

“You still playing poker Wednesday night?”

“Sure. You gonna be there, Russ?”

“You bet your ass I’ll be there,” Hastings said. “Warn them all to watch out for me, Bill-I’m going to be the Rommel of that poker table from now on.”

“Yeah,” Burgess said absently. “I wonder what’s going on right now inside his head.”

“Villiers?”

“I wonder if he ever thinks about all the people he swindled along the way.”

“Would you?” Hastings asked, and walked away from him. When he turned the corner he was thinking of half a dozen girls’ names and deciding which one to call tomorrow.

He turned uptown, deciding to walk. It was the deserted nadir of a very hot night; he moved north briskly, bright-eyed in a wilted seersucker suit. He remembered Mason Villiers’ cold eyes, which for a moment back there had mesmerized him, leading him to understand how and why Villiers was able to do the things he did; he remembered coming out of that brief entrancement suddenly with the realization that Mason Villiers was, after all, flesh. Not unique; I brought him down, he thought with hard satisfaction.

When you were on a tightrope, you had to walk carefully-but you had to keep walking.

The tiny smile on Hastings’ face hardened suddenly, like a scar, like a trap abruptly sprung.
