

A ST. CLAIR THRILLER

BOOK 3

RIDGE KING

NO EXIT



Slanetti's day got off to a good start with his first telephone call.

"Mr. D'Orofino is on line one, sir."

"Thank you, I'll take it," he said to his secretary. He lifted his phone apprehensively.

"This is Phil Slanetti."

"The Keystone fits the arch."

Slanetti smiled and replaced his phone. He immediately took his files from his briefcase and selected three he'd been studying the night before at home, the files on Leland Masingale of Tennessee, Wade Trexler of Rhode Island and Adam Foster of Oregon. Oregon was a much-needed state. Masingale of Tennessee was his "example" to congressman with second thoughts about the seriousness of White House involvement in this affair. He was lukewarm about the real chances of getting Trexler of Rhode Island to come over. He was prepared to let Trexler go by the boards if Masingale proved shocking enough to other members. If not, he was prepared to sacrifice Trexler's career as another example.

He placed a call to the liaison man he had selected for Masingale and arranged to meet him later that morning in someplace out of the way. Since he had absolutely no hope of convincing Masingale to vote for St. Clair, however, Slanetti then called a lawyer at the Justice Department the attorney general had assigned him a week ago at the express order of the President. He'd already had a long interview with this man and merely wanted to let him know that he was free to move ahead preparing the formal documents against Masingale. He was also instructed what to release to the press and when.

Slanetti was keenly aware of the importance of timing in the whole Keystone matter. Both the Democratic and Republican caucuses were scheduled for the next day. Slanetti had been having second thoughts about the advisability of letting those caucuses meet. He now preferred that the parties not caucus, because according to

the terms laid upon his hits, they had to vote for St. Clair during all caucuses between now and January 3rd. If they did this, they would be exposed to unnecessary pressures from the Democratic candidate Frederick Thurston as time went on, and he saw more and more states turning against him for apparently no reason. The caucuses would prompt a reaction in Thurston that Slanetti was quite willing to forego. He had his secretary arrange urgent appointments with House Democratic Leader Niles Overton and Republican Leader Duncan Olcott for later that morning.

As Slanetti looked once more over the interesting file on Wade Trexler, he found himself shaking his head and wishing he had the things he had on Trexler on someone less assertive and powerful than the six-term congressman from Rhode Island. He was guilty of much complicated deceit and fraud. If the information he had on Trexler had been on someone else, the state would go to St. Clair, he felt sure. Trexler spoke like a preacher when he campaigned and the people of Rhode Island loved him and would doubtless return him to Congress even if he had a cut in every citizen's paycheck. He placed a call to Ambassador Mitsumasa Yasuda, his contact man for Trexler.

"Good morning, Mr. Ambassador. What I'm going to ask you will seem strange until you meet me this morning. Then you will understand my motives."

The ambassador first was hesitant about meeting Slanetti on the terms the latter laid out, but he eventually gave in.

After talking to Yasuda, Slanetti glanced over Adam Foster's file. He thought of the unfortunate two-term alcoholic from Oregon. He was like a fish in a bowl to Slanetti, with no power at all over the terms of his own existence. He was an easy fish to catch. He placed a call to the chairman of the Consolidated Bank of Greater Washington and after some initial difficulty secured an interview with the man later in the day.

Immediately after the conversation, Slanetti took his hat and heavy coat and left the White House, driving his car to Rock Creek Park in the northwest section of Washington off Nebraska Avenue. He left the car and walked into the park through the snow, which was still not too deep, heading for the baseball diamond not far away. He waited in the covered first-base dugout and within minutes the ambassador from Japan joined him, alone, walking hunched against the light wind in his dark overcoat, hat pulled over his head, short as a boy. He entered the dugout and took the two steps down, shaking Slanetti's hand and sitting down.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Ambassador. Where did you leave your car?"

"The driver is waiting for me across the street from where you left your car, Mr. Slanetti. I watched you arrive."

"I hope you didn't tell anyone you were coming to see me," said Slanetti.

The ambassador smiled. Slanetti thought that his teeth were as yellow and ugly as his skin.

"I wasn't selected by His Imperial Majesty to be his ambassador because I am, what do you Americans say, a blabbermouth."

He laughed at his joke.

Slanetti smiled.

"I'm sure of that, Mr. Ambassador," he said, opening his briefcase. "The President is aware that Japan does not want Mr. Thurston elected President any more than he does," he began. "The information I'm going to show you, if exposed, would embarrass not only the American involved, but also the government of His Imperial Majesty, and especially you, sir, his ambassador to the United States." Yasuda wasn't laughing anymore as he took a piece of paper from Slanetti. "The figures listed there will coincide, I believe, with the ones that concluded your negotiations last year with Wade Trexler. You are intimately aware of Mr. Trexler's personal business background, which is heavily involved in the textile

industry in Rhode Island. We are aware that the Japanese government bribed Trexler to the extent of \$6.5 million to get him to support the elimination of tariffs in committee on a certain list of Japanese products, quite a lengthy list it is, too, Mr. Ambassador. We know he received this money, that it was not declared, and that you are going to pay him another \$2 million this year per your agreement. We also know that in exchange for the money and his support, Japan agreed to quietly refrain from importing into the United States the exact products that Trexler's own mills manufacture in Rhode Island. We know that it was this fear of competition with you that prompted his opposition to lowering the tariffs. We are prepared to use this information to publicly ruin his career in Congress and his standing in Rhode Island unless ..."

Yasuda listened carefully and then asked a question.

"How did you come to receive all of this information, Mr. Slanetti? To the best of my recollection, the figures here are quite accurate."

Slanetti wondered that no one else had asked that question.

"I am happy to tell you *what* I know, Mr. Ambassador. I'm sorry I can't tell you *how* I know it." And that was that. Yasuda, in rather understated terms, reminded Slanetti what a forceful man Trexler was and also that continued Japanese support for the American position in the Sino-Russian feud might be badly damaged if this information became public knowledge. It was this consideration that led Slanetti to decide earlier not to try to ruin Trexler if he could possibly avoid it—purely for reasons of foreign policy. He didn't know what the President was thinking about Japan. He simply didn't want to risk the President's wrath by causing an uneasy situation between Japan and America.

Five minutes later the two men, hats pulled over their heads, walked away from the first-base dugout in separate directions across Rock Creek Park.

Yasuda told Slanetti that he'd use his influence with Trexler because it was true that Japan didn't want Thurston elected. Yasuda told him that he'd been searching for ways he might influence members to support St. Clair instead of Thurston and thanked him for the opportunity to approach Trexler. Since the information of which Yasuda had been aware beforehand was coming from the White House and not the Japanese, Yasuda felt his bargaining position with Trexler would be stronger than if he had tried to threaten him with the exposure himself using the same information.

* * *

About 2 P.M., as Slanetti and the chairman of Consolidated Bank discussed Adam Foster of Oregon, Congressman-elect Matt Hawkins of Wyoming and Congressman Neil Scott of Montana were meeting in the House gym to play handball.

"Ever play before?" asked Scott.

"Nope," said Matt, stripping nude and pulling on a jock strap and a pair of athletic shorts.

"Good," laughed Scott. "I'll show you and then kick your ass on the court."

Scott wore a tennis shirt onto the court but Matt went without one. Scott was somewhat disconcerted at the excellence of Matt's physique. He couldn't wait to crush him on the court even though he did like him.

"It's not an easy game to learn right off, but once you get the hang of it, you'll really like it. A great way to relax."

As they came to their designated court, they ran into Jack Houston St. Clair and Carlos Rodriguez entering the same court as an attendant carrying a clipboard came around the corner, rushing up to them.

"Congressman Scott, excuse me," said the flustered attendant. "We've booked Mr. St. Clair on your court by accident."

Jack held out his hand.

"Neil, how are you?"

"Fine, Jack, just fine," said Scott. "Looks like we have a little problem. I was going to teach Matt Hawkins here a little bit about handball."

Jack shook hands with Matt.

"This is Carlos Rodriguez, a friend of mine from Miami. Or, I should say, newly appointed Secret Service Agent Rodriguez. Carlos, this is Congressman Scott and Congressman-elect Hawkins."

"Congressmen," said Carlos as he shook hands.

"I'm sorry we don't have any other courts available," said the attendant, looking at Jack.

"Not a problem. Carlos and I have a couple of things to go over. You guys go first. We're just guests anyway."

"And a very important guest if your dad becomes the next President," said Scott.

"Fat chance with you two voting against him," Jack laughed.

"I'll schedule you right after them, Mr. St. Clair," said the attendant, relieved he wasn't going to have to put up with the clashing egos of two congressmen and the son of a Presidential candidate using the House facilities as the guest of a Florida congressman who'd made the arrangements.

"You guys go on and have a good time," said Jack.

As Neil and Matt went in, Jack and Carlos watched through the reinforced Plexiglas wall at the rear of the court as Neil showed Matt the basics involved in serving and returning the ball.

"I'm glad we got a little time to talk before playing," said Jack. "You've got to be really excited about everything."

"Oh, shit, dude, you know I am."

“What’s your first assignment?”

As a new Secret Service agent, Carlos did not draw a very glamorous assignment. He was to spend the next six months working with a Treasury Department unit involved in breaking up a counterfeit money ring out of Baltimore. (Until 2003, the Secret Service had been a division within the Treasury Department and, in addition to protecting Presidents, handled counterfeit money investigations. Now the Secret Service was a part of the Department of Homeland Security.)

"After that they're sending me to Tampa to join the Pearson detail."

"Ah," said Jack. "That's light duty."

Mrs. Pearson was the widow of a former President, now living in Tampa. She qualified for lifetime Secret Service protection, and was in her 80s.

Rodriguez looked at the players through the glass wall.

"Matt's gonna kick Neil Scott's ass."

"I know. Something about the way he moves."

"Even if he never played before."

“Yeah.”

“Nothing you can do to get those guys to vote for your dad?”

"We're working on it," sighed Jack.

After a few lessons in the walled-in court, Scott suggested they play a game. He was a little winded already but Matt just smiled and nodded yes.

Scott beat him the first game and Hawkins beat him the next two before Scott was exhausted.

“I give up, you bastard,” he said, sinking to the floor. Matt came over, breathing heavily, the sweat streaking the hair under his arms and on his chest, and sat down beside him.

“What about that pool you told me about?”

“Yeah, I’ll go over with you in a minute,” said Scott, catching his breath.

"I like the game a lot. We'll have to play again soon," he smiled. Scott just looked at him and shook his head.

The pool for members was twenty by sixty, and was just off the locker room. They went back to the locker room and stripped down, walking nude through the swinging door to the pool. Only one other member was swimming at that time and he was just diving off the board. As he went under water, Matt asked who it was.

"That's John Fulton—Oklahoma."

"Oh, yeah. Fulton, of course."

"A big man in Oklahoma and up here, too. Eight terms. He could be a senator tomorrow if he wanted to be. I think he just likes the House, though. He's down here every day at this time except for the weekends. An exercise nut."

As they walked to the shallow end of the pool, Fulton's head popped out of the water. He swam the length of the pool, and pulled his old naked body up to sit on the side. He had thin, tightly pressed lips which gave his otherwise gentle, dignified face a cruel or at least stone-hard determined look. His gray hair was parted perfectly down the middle by the water, but that was the way he parted it ordinarily. He was a large, powerful man with not a bad body for his age—and extremely imposing and dignified, in the nude or fully clothed. He looked up at the two younger members.

"Hello, John. This is Matt Hawkins. He'll be taking Bill Crampton's place next term."

"How do you do?" said Fulton, raising his arm for Matt to shake hands. "Have a seat," he offered.

Matt dropped down and lowered his feet into the water alongside Fulton's. Scott sat on Fulton's other side. Matt's legs and crotch were a bristle with dark brown hair and he looked almost savage beside the gray-crotch'd Fulton and the fairer Scott.

"I understand you support Fred Thurston. That right?" asked Fulton.

"Well, good. Though I'm a Republican, I despise St. Clair

“How clean do you think Fred will take it, John?” asked
ott.

“He’s been pretty quiet the last few days, just sitting
er there in the White House,” commented Scott.

“The pool looks mighty inviting, gentlemen,” interrupted
tt. “I think I’ll swim.”

Matt pushed himself into the pool and began an energetic breaststroke towards the deep end, the water cooling off the muscles in his back as his arms worked beneath the water. Fulton followed, his slow, methodical crawl leaving him far behind the faster Matt. Scott hopped to the water and ducked himself to wet his head. When he came up he was facing Matt, who was now on the diving board ready to spring. He watched Matt's body moving forward, his arms rise up and his legs push him up to dive, the strong muscles in his thighs bulging with the effort. Scott regretted he wasn't as young as Matt anymore and started to swim.

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Back in his office later, Slanetti was pleased with his interview with the banker. When the chairman heard Slanetti knew about the \$4 million unsecured loan at reduced interest rates his bank gave Foster to cover his many financial woes, he was ready to do anything Slanetti told him to convince Foster to vote for St. Clair. It was common knowledge in Washington that Adam Foster was an alcoholic, but when Slanetti told the chairman another bit of news, the chairman understood why Foster was a drinker. Foster's wife, Enid, was a lesbian. The chairman's eyes went wide.

"How in God's name did you find out something like that?" he asked, amazed.

"Don't worry about that. Just bring him over. It's true."

Slanetti gave Foster only one day to make up his mind.

He was not at all happy about the results of his interview with Niles Overton earlier that day. He hadn't asked Overton directly to cancel caucuses; it would be too obvious. He merely probed and tried to get him to see other viewpoints. Overton didn't see any.

Olcott cancelled the Republican Caucus as soon as Slanetti said he spoke for the President. Any Republicans who came over, then, like Larry Kellerman, would be shielded from attention because they probably would not have to vote for St. Clair publicly until January 3rd when the new Congress convened and the Electoral College vote count would officially recognize a tie for President.

Democrats switching sides, however, would be revealed when they caucused and Slanetti began to worry about this and consider what Thurston might try to do to get them back.

Slanetti waited late in his office in case any Keystone calls came in earlier than expected. He also worked on future targets, selecting his liaisons and recounting the number of states he had left to get.

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Chapter 2

THE JEFFERSON MEMORIAL

A little before 8 P.M., Matt told staffers Liz and Dave, who shared his suite, that he was going out for a short walk and took the elevator down to the lobby. The Secret Service agent watching Hawkins that night walked into the tobacconist's to get a pack of Winstons just as Matt stepped out of the elevator. Realizing that he was a bit early to meet Patricia at eight, Matt went into the bar for a drink. He was half surprised she didn't call to cancel their meeting. He thought she might be afraid. The Secret Service agent came out of the tobacco shop, glanced at the elevator and took a seat facing it in the lobby, picking up a newspaper someone left in the seat next to his.

Matt left the bar through its outside entrance, not returning to the lobby. About a minute later, he saw a Rolls Royce coupé pull under the shelter of the Hilton's covered ramp. The windows were covered with ice and snow and he could barely see inside it, but he knew it was Patricia and went around to open her side of the car just as it stopped.

* * *

On her way to the Hilton, Patricia was nervous and fidgety as she thought of meeting Matt again. She was flustered and bit her bottom lip on the drive across town. She knew she was like putty last night—she'd never been like that before—but she knew she loved him. Although she'd never been infatuated in the normal sense before, she believed what she felt was love. She was thirty years old and somewhat past the schoolgirl infatuation stage, or so

she thought. She was essentially a giving person, one who wanted to share herself with someone—share what she was as a human being. Her life had been such, however, that she'd never found a man who would share with her or who ever gave her the indication that he cared to be a part of her. Doubtless there might have been other men she met before Matt who could've provided what she wanted. But love is curious in such a way that timing almost always makes the difference and decides who falls in love with whom and when. Matt was just what she needed now, or just what she now realized she'd needed all her life. There were countless men who wanted to sleep with her. Almost every man who approached her she spurned, always thinking they were available when she decided she wanted them. Her rather bleak sexual experience could be explained because she'd never been interested in sex without love, and only the primal urgings were responsible for her affair with Neil Scott, and the couple of men before him.

She wanted a lover she could talk to and one who wanted her to talk to him. So many married people she knew couldn't talk to each other, and for her that was neither love nor marriage the way she wanted it. Her lifelong refusal to look the other way to avoid seeing her life as it was kept her from pretending it was something that it wasn't. This same honest approach towards herself, while responsible for her seeing herself as she was, also was responsible for her present state of frustration and pain. And for the momentary stripping of her multi-layered defenses at the ball the night before after she danced with President Norwalk and her total submission to Matt when he found her in the darkened exhibition room—that was something she never would've let happen had not her mind been completely overworked, her emotions naked to every impulse and unresponsive to any logical thought. She fell into his strong arms as into those of a savior, and she

looked forward to seeing the same man tonight with an agitated mixture of feelings and sharp though not easily analyzed sensations.

If she'd regained her composure during the past twenty-four hours, she might have called Matt to cancel their rendezvous. She thought of doing it several times, but never got so far as touching her cell phone. He impressed her as being the type of man, sure of his strength and unwilling to compromise, who might break down her door if she refused to see him. But she'd been touched by his tenderness, sensitivity and compassion. She wanted to see him not out of fear but out of pure desire to be close to him again. She despised being pitied and wouldn't stand for that, but she sensed no pity in his actions the night before. She didn't think she'd falsely perceived or underestimated the qualities in Matt she was attracted to. Neither did she think he was faking them to get her into bed.

When he kissed her the night before she sensed as he stroked her hair reassuringly that he hadn't intended kissing her the way he ended up doing. She understood that it just happened between them—the impulse took hold of him to kiss her, to let out the obvious passion in him that hadn't been let out through any other channel, just as the impulse took hold of her to accept and let him go ahead. She wasn't in a state of mind at the time to resist him, anyway.

She was shrewd enough to know the fineness of some of her instincts. She wouldn't have let any man kiss her under those conditions in which her mind and soul seemed stretched to the point of breaking.

As she thought back to the kiss, she thought the many things on her mind and heart just built up to give her a certain desperate freedom with Matt she never enjoyed before. As he kissed her, she found herself suffused with pleasure and joy. Frankly, she couldn't wait to see him again.

She was willing to tell him anything—*wanted* to tell him everything. In Matt Hawkins she sought advice, comfort and direction. She was still unsure if he wanted to give those things to her, even though she realized she couldn't verbalize these emotions. But her heart told her she was on the right path and had, inadvertently and luckily, happened onto a man she loved immediately, with no reservations or conditions. Whatever the other qualities she thought she wanted in him, it was a bold and raw attraction for Matt that compelled her to keep the rendezvous with him tonight: Love.

While she thought she knew why she responded so completely to Matt, she wondered what in him caused him to kiss her the way he had. She granted that he was attracted to her in various ways, including physical. She sensed that much (and other things) through their table conversation, subtle in saucy suggestiveness only they picked up. But when he kissed her with such deep passion, she recognized that the impulse sprang deep from within him and the gnawing curiosity of one lover about the other kept her pondering what might be bothering him. She was hopeful of being able to help him in some way and prayed when she found out what was troubling him that she'd be able to help. He'd already helped her last night, not just by being there, but by the passionate expression of his care and feeling for her.

Patricia thought about Matt's absent wife. Obviously, there was something wrong between them she didn't know about yet. A man doesn't follow another woman and act the way Matt had last night if he is enjoying a perfect relationship with his wife.

It was obvious to her that Matt had compassion to spare. She was worried that Matt's wife would come to Washington and she would never see him again, but the strength—moral, physical and mental—that she sensed and felt in Matt's arms made her cling to the belief that he would see

her, whatever it took. She believed instinctively that Matt loved or he didn't love. No middle ground.

So she was anxious, curious and slightly hesitant about meeting him again because she really didn't know anything about him except what she hoped or guessed might be true, and it was with these conflicting emotions running through her mind and rapidly beating heart that she pulled up to the Washington Hilton.

* * *

She looked out the frosty windows but didn't see him. As she pulled to a stop her door was suddenly opened. She jerked her head to see who it was and saw him standing above her. He was wearing a gray wool suit and an open topcoat, no hat. They looked into each other's eyes for just a second with a pointed seriousness. And then they smiled.

"Move over. I'll drive," he said.

She slipped over and he got in, closing the door, the ice and snow-covered windows protecting them from the brutal, cold world outside. The quiet rushing of hot air coming from the heater filled the car while they looked at each other. She wore a pair of light brown corduroy pants, a print shirt and a dark brown corduroy jacket, unbuttoned. Her dark brown hair fell down over her shoulders. They both had dark skins, more brown than flesh-colored.

"I'm glad you came," he said, smiling at her.

"You knew I would," she looked into his eyes. He broke off and looked out the windshield. She wondered why he didn't kiss her.

"You know your way around Washington better than I do. Where do we go?"

"Can we just drive for now?" she asked.

"Sure," he said and instantly pulled away from the Hilton into the dark streets of Washington. She felt creeping into her that slight but natural superiority a person feels who knows a town better than a newcomer. This made her feel slightly more at ease with Matt than she thought she'd feel.

"Feel much like talking?" he asked.

"About what?" she said flippantly, trying to be cute. She was sorry immediately for saying that. She was timid and always covered her timidity with her carefully constructed air of casual indifference.

If she had any doubts about what Matt was thinking, she soon found out because as soon as she spoke, he zipped the car into a parking place on Connecticut Avenue, slammed the transmission into park, leaving the motor to idle, and slid across the seat to her. She leaned back and he was instantly over her before she knew what happened, smiling scornfully into her eyes. He held her around the waist.

"Listen, baby," he said, "you can play the cool, sophisticated bitch just about anytime you like. I like that in you. But not with me when I don't like it, and I don't like it here, and I don't like it now."

As he spoke her heart beat faster, she felt threatened, not by him but by his manner. He was right. She didn't disagree with him and was sorry for what she'd said. He pulled her up, sitting up himself, and she brought her arms around his neck as he pulled her close to him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into his ear, and he held her tight. "I don't know what I feel sometimes and I don't know what to say."

"If I have to tell you how to feel around me, we're off to a pretty bad start, aren't we?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "I know how I feel when you hold me." He held her tighter.

"Why'd you marry that shit of a husband?" he asked, holding her more easily. "You look like you have more sense than that."

"I didn't when I married him."

"It wasn't him bothering you last night. He couldn't bring all that out in you, not by himself."

"No, it wasn't Jonathan," she demurred, looking down and fiddling with her fingers. He watched her and touched her hands, hoping to reassure her. She didn't know how to talk about Neil.

"The President?"

"Not him, something he said about someone."

"Who?"

She looked up into his face, shrouded in the shadows of the night, but his eyes were still visible, wet and luminous.

"Neil Scott."

Matt thought of Scott and their game. Scott was quite a bit older than he was, but he could see the two having an affair. This occurred to him naturally, but he disregarded the thought because there wouldn't be any reason the President would say anything about it—he wouldn't mention a lady's secret lover at a formal occasion while dancing with her.

"What about him?"

"I've been having an affair with him for quite some time," she managed to say. "I ended it a few days ago but Norwalk mentioned it."

"How could he know about it and why would he refer to it then?" Matt was puzzled and his brow creased with wrinkles as he frowned. She came close to him and brushed her hand across his brow, removing the wrinkles. She wanted him to kiss her, make love to her right then and there. But remembering his question, she didn't know what her answer might mean. It was the frustration of not knowing who knew what when the President spoke to her that caused her to break down at the ball. She leaned back a little but he moved closer and held her.

"He didn't mention it specifically but I know he knows."

"What did he say?"

She shook her head, not knowing what the President meant and trying to tell Matt so that perhaps he could understand something she didn't.

"He talked about what a hard time they were having getting people to vote for St. Clair in the House. He mentioned a few others and then he pointedly mentioned Neil. Asked if I could somehow persuade Neil to vote for St. Clair. Then he looked at me and I thought I'd die right there in his arms."

"So they want you to convince him," he said, pausing, "to use your womanly charms on him and pull him over, right? Blackmail."

"I guess so," she said, starting to sniffle. She thought she might cry. He touched her chin.

"Don't worry, they can't hurt you." She believed him when he held her, but he was thinking how unsure he was. Couldn't they in fact do anything they wanted to her or to anyone? "Thing is, they don't know that you ended it."

"I don't know how they found out. No one knew. No one."

He knew he couldn't do much right now and he was hungry. He hadn't eaten any dinner earlier when Liz and Dave went down to eat.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She nodded. "I could eat. I didn't have dinner. I was too nervous about meeting you." She cracked a smile.

"I'm glad you mastered your fear of the wolf," he said smiling and leaning over to kiss her. He sat back and prepared to move the car onto Connecticut Avenue. "Tell me someplace we can go where they won't know you."

She directed him to a small dark restaurant on New York Avenue she'd eaten in only once or twice and where she wouldn't be recognized. She remembered its cozy quiet booths with high backs and the dark corners. When they arrived, Matt looked around the room and chose a secluded booth far from the door and in a corner. They sat on the

"Will they do anything if I don't?"

"I doubt it. You know Washington better than I do, but I can't see why they would go out of their way to make trouble for you if Scott votes for Thurston. Seems like they'd be too busy with other things."

She changed the subject abruptly.

"Will you talk about your wife?"

He frowned but it wasn't a funny frown like her earlier one. She leaned closer and stroked his sleeve. His elbow was on the table and his wine glass in his hand.

"You don't have to talk about it. I'm sorry."

He smiled weakly and turned to her.

"I have to talk to you about her sooner or later."

"Do you love her?"

"I did."

"Do you now?"

He spoke softly, almost whispering, looking down on the tablecloth to the breadcrumbs there, shaking his head slightly.

"No."

She felt sorry for him, knowing what he had to face even though she'd never faced the same situation herself. He'd been in love before, she hadn't. He leaned over the table on both elbows now, and turned his head to look at her. She had no expression on her face and sat there just looking back at him.

"It's you," he said quietly.

Her lips parted slightly; she didn't know what to say, to show the expected, sheer happiness she felt, or what.

He sat up and took her in his arms, kissing her deeply on the mouth and then the cheeks and chin. He started caressing her breasts and then quit. He hugged her tightly.

"Shit," he said, suddenly backing off. "Let's get out of here."

They were back in the car in a few minutes. They kissed again, inside the cold car. The wine caused her head to swirl

in the frigid air; a little sweat appeared on her forehead. He started the engine and got the car warm before turning to her.

“Which way’s the Jefferson Memorial. I’ve never seen it.”

She laughed.

“The Jefferson Memorial is the last thing I thought would be on your mind.”

“It isn’t exactly top priority,” he said, rubbing the inside of her thigh. He kissed her again and then kissed her eyes.

“We’ll get to that,” he said quietly and turned to the wheel.

“We’ll get to that.”

She wanted him to make love to her, but she didn’t know where to suggest they go to do it. She showed him how to get to the Memorial. They drove down Seventeenth Street past the White House. It became East Basin Drive, which took them around the Tidal Basin. The Memorial was brightly lit except for the parking lot next to the water. The Memorial stood out shining white with its understated rotunda in the falling snow. They got out of the car in the empty lot in front of the monument and walked to the edge to look at the city across the waters of the Basin. He held her close to him with one arm. The city was a clean white paradise of reflected lights coming across the water, everything gilded with an icy cover of fresh new snow. He looked down at her.

“You aren’t wearing much. Are you too cold?”

“No, not with you here to keep me warm.”

“Button up at least.” She buttoned her corduroy jacket and they turned around to walk up the slippery front steps of the Memorial. He held her to keep her from slipping on the icy steps until they got inside the structure with its mammoth columns surrounding the great statue of the third President of the United States. A smiling guard approached.

“You two sure are out late to see the sights.”

“It was such a beautiful night, we couldn’t resist taking a drive in the snow,” said Matt.

"I know what you mean," said the guard, looking out through the columns, following President Jefferson's frozen gaze over the Tidal Basin. "It is beautiful here at night."

He was an affable man and eager to tell them all about the structure. He fancied himself quite an expert on early 19th Century Presidential politics, and he had his own opinions on the Jefferson-Burr fight in the House in 1800. They were both somber-faced as he mentioned the relationship between that contest and the one Norwalk had suggested Patricia help resolve by bringing Neil Scott over to support Sam Houston St. Clair.

The guard left them and they walked around the statue looking at each other (and not at it) before going back to the car.

"You will come to the party Thanksgiving, won't you?" she asked when they were inside the warm car. He laughed and hugged her.

"You're God damned right I will, baby."

"What if your wife comes to Washington?"

Again he frowned, but he wanted to get off the subject of his wife. He had other things in store for the evening besides Sue.

"Don't worry about that right now. Let me do that."

"I can't have you worrying about me and everything else at the same time."

"I'll manage," he said with a smile. "Just let me handle her when I get ready." He was already close to her. She saw what was in his eyes and became silent, looking deep into his. He touched her cheek with the palm of his hand, then angled it back behind to her neck. Suddenly he pulled her head to his and kissed her with the same passion he had the night before. He deftly unbuttoned her jacket, then moved his hands to rub hard along her legs and between her thighs. As he began fondling her breasts they both began to breathe heavily. She could feel the force and passion rising up in him. She was ready for him any time he wanted her.

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Patricia,” he said, squeezing her and kissing her again with so much power that she thought he would rip her mouth apart with his tongue. As he kissed her he unbuttoned her blouse. She didn’t resist him. He pressed his hands once more between her legs, exciting her to a soft groan.

“Have you ever done it in a car?” he smiled. “Somehow I don’t think you have,” he said relaxing just a little, but his hands still busy. “You’ve got a lot of breeding. I’m an animal.”

“I haven’t, no. When I’m with you like this I don’t care about anything. I don’t think I’ve ever been made love to before—not really the way it was meant to be. I know it.”

He smiled at her warmly, holding her brown eyes with his, her breasts heaving against his chest with uncontrolled excitement, trepidation and anxious expectation. There was a natural sensation of fear mixed with the excitement that she knew would flood through her when this moment came.

“Tonight, Patricia Vaughan, you’ll find out what you’ve been missing.”

* * *

Liz and Dave were asleep in their rooms by the time Matt Hawkins returned to the Hilton. As he walked into the elevator, the Secret Service agent made a note in his book, his lips hard-pressed together. He knew he’d get chewed out for letting Hawkins out of his sight and he was furious when he saw Matt walk through the lobby door. He had no idea where the son of a bitch had been all evening.

Chapter 3

THE FIRST VICTIM

The next day Washington's streets were slush channels of snow, water and ice as the temperature rose a few degrees. But snow and rain would begin falling again later in the afternoon.

Arriving at his office early, Slanetti looked at the front page of *The New York Times*. One headline caught his attention. He read the whole story.

MASINGALE INDICTED ON CHARGES OF TAKING AIRLINE BRIBES

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON — Representative Leland Masingale of Tennessee was indicted yesterday on charges of conspiracy, bribery, perjury and conflict of interest involving efforts to obtain a route for an airline.

The 10-count indictment in federal court here alleged that Masingale, who is a Republican, had obtained a total of \$835,000 in bribes to use his influence as a congressman in an attempt to win a route for Atlantic-Bahamas Airways.

Two other defendants indicted in the alleged plot are William T. Smith, Masingale's administrative assistant in Congress, and Alfred R. Considine, President of Atlantic-Bahamas Airways.

The indictment charged that Congressman Masingale sought to assist the airline by "fraud, corruption and misrepresentation" in dealing with the Civil Aeronautics Board, the Federal Aviation Administration, the Federal Communications Commission and the Department of State.

An angry denial of the accusations was issued by the 37-year-old four-term representative from Nashville, who said,

"I will place myself on the stand today if it will help prove to the people of America and the people of Tennessee that I am innocent. These charges are false, they are lies, base and dastardly lies."

He said further, "I consider this indictment an honor. It represents an effort on the part of unknown people in power to discredit me before the American people. I will fight to the end. I will not be bullied."

The congressman would not comment on the specifics of the charges leveled against him.

* * *

Also looking at the *Times* with more than casual interest that morning was Representative Adam Foster of Oregon. The banker had arranged a breakfast meeting with Foster to break Slanetti's news to him.

"Did Phil do this?" Foster asked, pointing to the front page over his steaming coffee in a little restaurant near the Capitol.

"I think so. He said you might learn a lesson or two if you looked at the paper this morning."

Foster smoothed out his gray wavy hair and then held his badly pockmarked face in the palms of his hands, shaking his head slowly.

"What must you think of me?" he said with his face still covered.

"I'm just sorry they found out about it, Adam. I thought we had it pretty well hidden. I don't blame you for Enid. That's not your fault. What could you do about it?"

"If that came out I could never show myself in public again. I don't know what I'd do."

The chairman pulled out his wallet and took a few bills from it, dropping them on the table to cover breakfast. He

got up.

"I'll make that call this morning, then," he said sadly, looking down at Foster.

"All right," said Foster. "All right."

"Isn't there a caucus this morning?"

"Yes."

"You know how you'll have to vote?"

"Yes," said Foster, lowering his hands and looking up to the man above him. "But what do I tell Overton and the others? They won't be expecting this."

"Tell them you've had a change of heart. Don't discuss it with them and keep as far away from them as you can the next few weeks."

Chapter 4

SETTING THE TAIL

Derek Gilbertson eased his Jaguar XJ to a stop on 29th Street across from Enriqueta's Sandwich Shop. Just as he always did, Omer Flores stood waiting for him in the shadow of a cluster of low palm trees beside the dumpster in the narrow parking lot. He sipped from a café con leche he'd gotten from the window, holding another one in his hand for Derek.

Derek got out and walked across the street, taking the coffee from Omer. He suddenly found himself wondering why Omer always got there before he did, not that it mattered.

"Thanks, man," said Derek.

"No problemo," said Omer with a big broad smile.

Derek wanted to reach out and slap him, but put on his best two-faced smile, pried open the little plastic lid on the Styrofoam coffee cup and took a sip of the scalding liquid.

“Just wanted to check in with you. What kind of schedule they got you on since you got back from Honduras?”

“I’m loose. I got another month or more off till they set me up with a new assignment.”

“The DEA takes care of their boys—that’s good,” Derek said good-naturedly.

“Yeah.”

“Where will they send you?”

“There’s talk about Peru, but nothing definite yet. They don’t want me back in Central America. But I got time to work. You got something going on? And what’s happening with Howard Rothman? I should be getting my cut of the wire transfers I set up on the other end.”

“Yeah, he’s working on that. It’s just our cash flow took a major hit when that sub went down.”

"Yeah, with my best friend."

"How you handling that?" Derek asked, feigning great sincerity.

"So-so. It's the business we're in, you know?"

"Hey, I know it's bad, man, but he knew the risks of undercover work."

"I know," said Omer, looking down at his cup.

The fucker, thought Derek. He's a better actor than I am, the son of a bitch.

"What I got is a line on these people with ten check cashing outlets. The Oyebanjos, husband-wife team. He's pretty cool, but he's got a real bear for a wife, Aricela."

"Yeah?"

"They're up to their necks in Medicare money."

"Yeah, big money in that."

"And it's getting bigger every year. They have a couple of dozen fronts they set up—fake clinics, you know?"

"Yeah."

"They need to get some of the cash out of the country."

"They don't wire it?"

"They do. They wire millions of it. Tens of millions of it."

"So, what's the problem?"

"It's too much. They've been working with Howard to get some of it out, but they need more help. He came to me 'cause he needs a couple of guys on the ground."

"I'm your man. And I got people."

Derek finished his coffee and tossed the cup into the open dumpster next to them where flies swarmed by the hundreds.

"I'll set something up next few days."

"OK, man. See ya. Think I'll get some more coffee. You?"

"Nah, late for a meeting. Be in touch."

They did a fist bump and Derek returned to his car. With his back to Omer, he scanned the vehicles in the immediate vicinity, and saw some men sitting in three different cars on the street, one eating, one on the phone, another talking to his passenger.

Two of them had to be working for Vlad Kucherov and the guys at the Kremlin Club. After they established tails on Flores and Duarte, he'd get to the bottom of how they were fucking with him, and what they were fucking him over for.

The simple fact that Laurencio Duarte had *not* gone down in that narco-sub, and that Omer had not told him, was enough to convince Derek it was something big. Could it even be the \$20 million that went down with the sub? Derek's mouth watered when he thought about it. Or maybe the sub never actually sank at all. That was a possibility. Did that mean Duarte killed all the other crew and then piloted the sub to some secret destination and now needed Flores to help him? He wasn't sure. He was only sure of one thing:

I'll get both of 'em, the fuckers.

He got into his car and drove away and when he turned the corner, Omer made a call on his cell phone. Three minutes later, Laurencio Duarte pulled up and parked in the same place previously occupied by Derek, got out and strolled across the street to join his friend under the palm trees. In the meantime, Omer had gone to Enriqueta's outside window to get Duarte a cortadito.

Duarte gave his pal a hug as he took the coffee.

"So what did he want?"

"Got some people involved in Medicare fraud. Need to move some of the money."

"They must be in it in a big way," said Duarte.

"Yeah. My cousin is in it, small time, but he does almost 300 thou a year working out of one little clinic in Hialeah. Bribes a guy in a nursing home to funnel the patients to him, gives 'em treatments they don't need. He's ramping it up this year. Wants to get it up to half a million. The guy at the nursing home lets him bill Medicare even when he doesn't bring the patients in. They're all so old they sign anything. He signs for 'em, whatever. He's my cousin, but I keep my distance from him 'cause I'm with DEA."

"Yeah, looks bad."

"Won't matter after we get our fuckin' money, you know?"

"Yeah. Hey, it's almost lunch. Wanna go in for a sandwich?"

"No. Gotta check in at HQ."

"All right."

"Key West next week, like we planned, right?"

"Yeah, man."

"You work up a list of guys?"

"Got two or three right in Key West can help us."

"I got two in Islamorada."

"OK. Later, bro."

After hugs, each went to his car and drove away.

The tails working for Derek quickly followed each car.

* * *

"What'd I tell ya, Boss?"

"Just like you told me," said Jack, sitting with Sean Walsh and Wilfredo Zequiera in the white paneled Ford van catty-corner from Enriqueta's. Fredo lowered his long-range shotgun directional microphone.

"These guys are into some serious shit," said Fredo.

"I knew Derek was mixed up with Howard Rothman, but I didn't know how deep."

Walsh pointed to a nondescript Chevy Malibu across the street.

"He did the same thing last time, only in his own car," he said, pointing out Derek sitting in the new car, partially hidden from Enriqueta's by a low palm shrub.

"He had it waiting around the corner. He just had to see his guys pick up the tails, that's all," said Jack. "Derek, what a loser."

"Yeah," said Walsh.

"Your guys pick 'em up later, right?"

"Yeah."

"Must be killing Derek not knowing what they're up to," said Jack.

"He doesn't have Fredo listening in the way we do."

"He'll find out when they go to the Keys. And he's gotta have a pretty good idea since he knows Duarte's alive," said Jack.

"For sure," said Fredo.

They watched as Derek drove away, a big smile on his face.

"You got the bugs in their cars?" asked Jack.

"Yes, sir. Did it this morning," said Fredo.

"We'll know where they are at least," said Jack.

"We know they're going to the Keys."

"So are we," said Jack.

"Derek's guys will follow them down."

"And we'll follow them."

Chapter 5

THE TRANSITION BEGINS

At 10 A.M. that morning, Sam Houston St. Clair and Frederick Thurston came to the White House with their advisors to meet President Norwalk to discuss Transition procedures. Since it wasn't known who would be President till the new Congress convened January 3rd, Norwalk announced earlier that he would hold briefings for both candidates and their staffs to ease the transfer when it did occur. These were traditional meetings held when one President left office and another was entering.

Norwalk, Vice President Coker and Norwalk's Chief of Staff Eric Stathis, met the two candidates at the formal entrance to the White House, the President's chief government advisors and Cabinet secretaries behind him.

Norwalk and the two candidates each said a few words into the waiting microphones before the whole bunch went inside to break up into small groups for the talks. Stathis, the President's closest and strongest advisor on most matters, led most of the discussion on domestic matters. Norwalk briefed the two candidates, along with his military advisors, on the static situation in China and Mongolia, reinforcements each side was bringing up to support front positions, the state of readiness of U.S. and allied armed forces, etc.

As Norwalk, Stathis and the two candidates sat down in the Oval Office for press photographs, St. Clair smiled and tried not to show the photographers (and Thurston) how depressed he was. He was extremely pessimistic about his chances of winning in the House. If the Democratic caucus going on that very moment (Duncan Olcott cancelled the Republican caucus on short notice to all members) did not reveal some weakening of the Democratic strength, St. Clair

was about ready to give up all hope. He would stick it through to the end, of course, but he was beginning to be in a hurry to see the whole thing settled and over with so he could return to Miami to tend to his ailing wife, Sofia. As the photographers went about their work and he smiled for them, reacting mechanically to their encouragements to look this way or that, he thought how good the fishing would be over in Bimini just about now.

Senator Thurston's mood couldn't have been much more different from St. Clair's. He smiled broadly for the cameras. His feeling as Norwalk shook his hand on the White House portal a little while ago was one of unbelieving numbness. He began to think of the White House as his new home in all but fact. Somehow he couldn't believe he'd be discussing—just a few minutes from now—current administration policies and commitments that his administration would have to deal with, accept, reject or alter.

His mind wasn't on the Democratic caucus being held in the House Chamber. If he lost a couple of states, it was all the same to him. He was more and more sure that he had the twenty-six he needed. The rest were gravy. He didn't even feel vindictive towards St. Clair anymore. He began to feel that aura of tolerance that he conceived every President had to cultivate to be capable of ruling the entire country, whether segments of it agreed with him or not.

He knew he would continue to excoriate the Republican position publicly, but he knew his heart wasn't completely in it now, not since he walked through the formal front entrance to the White House. He was a changed man and he felt the change palpably. *He felt like a President*, felt a generosity come over him that warmed him and gave him a fresh outlook on positions other than his. He thought that some of this feeling came from the fact that he saw within his grasp the Presidential power that would enable him to implement his own policies and push Russia back where it belonged. He would not combine with China against Russia

at this stage. That, he thought, was un-American and deceptive. And he had no wish to begin his administration with such underhanded duplicity. His hands fingered the fringe of the armchair in which he sat, waiting for the photographers to finish so the talks could continue. Everything in the White House today seemed unusual to the touch, different in its feel and smell, its look and aspect. It *was* different, he thought, for here was the very center, the very heart, the pulse and origin of power at its summit in the United States of America.

* * *

In his office not far from where the two candidates were sitting with the President, Slanetti received a call from the chairman of the board of the Consolidated Bank of Washington.

"This is Phil Slanetti."

"The Keystone fits the arch."

Slanetti replaced his phone.

While Senator Thurston was involved with delusions of grandeur, House Democratic Majority Leader Niles Overton was stymied with what he considered a serious problem. Before any discussion began on general party strategy in the upcoming House battle, a preliminary caucus vote was taken which revealed that Oregon and Tennessee might go Republican. This bothered Overton because he hadn't expected the men who voted for St. Clair *ever* to vote for him, much less in such a casual manner as they voted for him today.

Albert Delamar and Adam Foster were the two men in question. Each sat in his seat looking down, ignoring the exhortations of their colleagues who were trying to find out why they had swung over. Neither answered and each sat

stone faced and rigidly determined. Overton sat next to Speaker of the House Lamar LeGrand Perryman. Stan Rifkin, the whip, was at his side.

"Stan," said Overton, "get down there and see what the hell's the matter with those two and come back fast."

Perryman was rubbing his chin. He found the surprise votes curious indeed.

"What do you think of that, Lamar?"

"I think it's mighty unusual for Albert to do that. I don't know about Foster. He's just two terms, but Albert I find mighty in-te-rest-in', yes mighty in-te-rest-in'."

Rifkin came back.

"They won't talk, Niles. They both say they just changed their minds and that's that."

"You get another vote started, Lamar, while I go down there and shake the sawdust out of their heads. I'll have Foster back on the D.C. Committee so fast he won't know what happened to him. Stan, send for our files on Delamar and Foster. Let's check out military bases and other things we might use on them. Aren't they going to build a big dam up on some river in Oregon?"

"That's right. Next session the vote comes up."

"Well, we'll see how badly Foster wants that dam, the fucker! Let's go."

Perryman called for another vote as Overton approached Delamar. As the clerk went through each state, Perryman found the curiosity almost overwhelming as to why each man had so suddenly and unexpectedly changed his vote. By their unswerving, dogged attitude he observed in them from the chair, he sensed something out of the ordinary behind all this and he was determined to find out what was going on, what their motives were, who had pressed them, and everything else he could find out.

Of course, the first thing that came into his mind was the *Times* story that morning about Delamar's colleague, Leland Masingale. He knew that the two were not all that close, and

that Masingale scarcely even knew Foster. He saw no connection anywhere. Masingale, indicted and indignant, was sitting in his seat not far from Delamar, his chin held pugnaciously high, his eyes flaring furiously. He voted for Thurston with a vengeance. It was all Overton could do to keep him from denouncing St. Clair and Norwalk.

As the votes came to their states, Perryman silently watched the deans of the Oregon and Tennessee delegations approach the two men in question for their votes. The votes came in as they had before. Perryman reached for the figures Thurston and Overton had worked out (without consulting him at all) and saw that Tennessee was expendable and so was Oregon. It didn't upset the number of states Thurston planned to carry. It was a blow to see St. Clair suddenly rise. A blow to Overton, not to Perryman. He had been secretly wishing for something like this to happen. He wondered how he could follow it up. Overton returned to him.

"They won't budge. When I told Foster what I'd do to him, give him lousy assignments and kill the dam, all he said was, 'Kill the fucking thing, I don't give a shit, just leave me alone.' Thank God they aren't states we need," he said.

"That's mighty curious, Niles, mighty curious. A dam's pretty important to most two-term congressmen. Yes, mighty curious."

Overton looked at the patrician Virginian with slight distaste. "Is everything 'curious' to you, Lamar?"

Perryman looked slyly at the majority leader.

"Oh, yes, Congressman, just about, but not everything's '*mighty curious*,' no, sir..."

"Do you think you could work on Delamar? You know him pretty well."

"Pretty well, yes, pretty well. I'll talk to him."

Overton announced the caucus would adjourn and meet again in two days. Perryman climbed down from his perch above the Chamber as everyone dispersed. Delamar took

up his briefcase and was about to leave the Chamber when Perryman called out to him.

“Albert!”

He turned, and when he saw Perryman, a defensive look immediately came into his eye that Perryman recognized from long years in the House.

It was fear.

“Now don’t you start in on me,” said Delamar, adjusting his glasses as Perryman came up.

“I can’t do anything to you, you know that, Albert. Let’s just have a seat here for a minute.” They sat down in two empty seats as the Chamber emptied.

“What is it, Lamar?”

“I’m just curious like most everybody else, Albert. Only I hope you won’t mind my curiosity.”

“I don’t mind your curiosity, Lamar, I just won’t be pressured on this.”

“Far be it for my addled old brain to consider such a thing, Albert,” said Perryman with a sigh. “I just thought you were hog-tied on Thurston, hog-tied, yes, sir.”

"I was," said Delamar, hesitating. "I just ... changed my mind, just changed my mind."

"I can see that. Everybody can see that. In fact, even a blind old man like me can see *that!* I'm just wondering, Albert, if maybe your mind changed on its own accord or if maybe it got changed for you," Perryman spoke slowly. He saw the fear in Delamar's eyes. He'd seen it often—fear of ruin, fear of exposure. "Is there anything I can *help* you with, Albert? You know I'll do what I can," he said, lying under his serious frown.

“I don’t think so, Lamar, but I appreciate your concern. It’s not in your hands, it’s not in anybody’s hands. Don’t ask me about it, please.”

“Somehow I don’t think Sam Houston St. Clair has such an influence over you, Albert. Somehow I just don’t see that.

You're a man of convictions, a strong man. It must be somethin' bigger than him."

"It is, much bigger, but don't ask me."

“The White House?” Perryman asked quickly, changing his tone to one of hurried secrecy and sitting up with a jerk close to Delamar. The change was enough to evoke a startled reaction in Delamar that satisfied Perryman that the White House was behind it. The Representative from Tennessee immediately regained his composure, however, and Perryman slumped back in his seat.

"Don't ask me, Lamar, don't ask me. I won't talk to you. I can't. I've got to go."

Perryman said nothing, didn't even look at him, but inserted his hands in his pockets and looked through him, as though Delamar had suddenly transformed into a piece of glass. Delamar got up and left the Chamber.

Overton, who'd been pretending to gather his papers while conferring with Rifkin, quickly came over to Perryman, who watched him approach. Rifkin followed.

"Well?" said Overton.

"I think the man's had a serious change of heart for some reason, Niles. I wouldn't worry too much about it. He's not from one of the states we wanted all that badly, anyway."

“No, but I don’t like a trend that builds.”

“I don’t think we can call Sam Houston St. Clair the kind of man who can set trends a-rolling all by himself, do you?”

Overton laughed, "No, I suppose not, Lamar. I'm going to see Fred after the White House. I want to brief him on these two changes. See you later."

“ ‘Bye now,” said Perryman cheerily as the two men left him alone in the Chamber. He stretched out his feet and clasped his hands over his broad stomach and slouched slightly in his seat, thinking.

* * *

By noon St. Clair and Thurston were through with their first session with the President and his top advisors. After the briefings, Norwalk remained in the Oval Office to receive Secretary of State Thomas Uptigrow, who was called in for a conference. Stathis accompanied the two candidates outside.

Overton was waiting and immediately told Thurston about Delamar and Foster.

"Well, what's your worry?" said Thurston. "We didn't really need those states."

"What happened?" asked Stathis. Everyone considered him nonpartisan in the purest sense of the word, so there was no effort to hide anything from him, especially something so public as a Democratic caucus.

"They switched over to St. Clair."

"Why?" asked Stathis.

"Who knows? They won't talk about it." Overton turned back to Thurston. "I want you to talk to them yourself, Fred. You never know what good it might do."

"All right, all right, I'll talk to them," said Thurston, not wanting to bother. "We'll worry about that later."

The Democrats left the White House and Eric Stathis returned to his office, not thinking either way about Delamar and Foster.

As Thurston left the White House, he was even more confident of success than he'd been when he entered it. He enjoyed the briefings very much, and thought about the time when he would be holding such briefings for his successor.

Eight years, he hoped, from now.

Overton talked on and nagged at him to see Delamar and Foster as soon as possible. But Thurston wasn't really listening to him. Overton's comments registered with

Thurston in the same way the remarks of introductory speakers did.

Back in his hotel, he talked to his wife, Peggy, for a little while alone, telling her how much he felt at home in the White House. They embraced and laughed together. When all his aides returned from lower-level meetings with Norwalk's staff, he gathered them together to discuss possible Cabinet assignments and other posts he would have to fill when he was elected. Some were shocked that he had the bold-faced confidence and cockiness to suggest such matters when most thought the fight far from over. But his judgment had led them this far and in-depth discussions began at once.

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Chapter 6

JOE'S TAKE AWAY

People who knew Raven Fuentes knew that she didn't smile very often, unless of course there was a man involved. After she broke up with Jack Houston St. Clair and after she married and then divorced Derek Gilbertson, her smile returned. Whatever it took to lure the next man.

But today there was no man involved. She smiled at the cashier at Joe's Take Away at the farthest end of South Beach.

"Thank you, Ms. Fuentes," said the cashier. "Good to see you again."

"Good to be back. I always miss my Joe's. Did you remember the extra mustard sauce?"

"Yes, ma'am, of course."

"Thanks."

Just to be safe, she glanced into the bag and saw two portions of large stone crabs, hash browns, creamed spinach, seafood bisque and grilled tomatoes—her lover, Skye Billings, really liked the grilled tomatoes from Joe's.

She collected the large carry out bag and marched out the door, running into Steve Sawitz, one of the owners, on his way in.

"Raven, how are you?"

"Oh, lovely, Steve, just lovely."

They kissed on the cheek.

"I haven't seen you in this season."

"No, this is my first time this year. But it won't be my last," she laughed.

"I hope not. Say Hi to your mom."

"And Hi to your mom as well."

Steve held the door for her and she went out, crossed the street and put the carry out bag on the back seat of her

light blue Lincoln MKS.

Steve's mom, Jo Ann Bass, was the granddaughter of the original Joe who opened the restaurant in 1913. She was great friends with Raven's mother, Ramona.

As she got into her car, she couldn't believe she hadn't been into Joe's since stone crab season opened in mid-October. And here it was almost Thanksgiving. She smelled the hash browns and could almost taste them melting in her mouth. She loved the crusty edge they had that came from frying in a skillet.

She drove up a block and headed west down First Street toward Alton Road, which she would take up to Fifth Street where she'd merge into the MacArthur Causeway for the trip across the Bay to her apartment in the Palm Bay Tower. Skye, who commanded the Coast Guard cutter *Fearless*, had brought it into port the night before. After a night of wild lovemaking, this morning they'd decided to feast on stone crabs tonight, but do it at home so they could go back to bed right after they ate.

As Raven passed the posh Italian restaurant on the west end of First Street, her glance was drawn to a blinding white Coast Guard uniform. When she looked over, she saw the man, an officer, greeting a girl at the front door where he kissed her on the lips.

When she realized the officer was Rafael St. Clair, Jack's younger brother, and the girl her sister, Antonia, she almost ran over a woman walking an Irish setter across the street, swerved to avoid them, and hit the brakes, pulling into a parking spot on the right side of the road.

She took in a deep breath to calm herself and looked over her shoulder to see Rafael hold the door open for Antonia.

What the hell are they doing together? she asked herself.

Raven straightened out the car and parked it properly.

Rafael sat down and put his arms around Antonia.

“Don’t worry. What can she do, anyway?”

“Besides stirring up the family—something we don’t need right now—she’ll tell your Captain Billings when she gets home.”

Rafael rolled his eyes, shook his head, knowing how much Skye hated him, and shrugged.

“He’s makes my life a living hell anyway. This just gives him something else to fuel it with.” He shrugged and kissed her. “Fuck him. Let’s eat.”

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Chapter 7

WIRE TRANSFERS

Lucy Azzinaro pulled up to the guard gate blocking access to St. Clair Island. A Cuban man decked out in a resplendent security guard's uniform finer than any she'd ever seen came out of the squat guardhouse with a clipboard.

"Lucy Azzinaro to see Mr. St. Clair."

"He's expecting you," the guard said with a nod, giving her directions to Jack's house.

Though she'd never been on St. Clair Island before, she knew exactly where Jack lived. She'd done a lot of research, even zeroing in on Jack's house using Google Maps. She could easily discern the make and model of his cars as well as the three boats he kept docked at his house on the southwest side of the island: a 28-foot Boston Whaler, a go-fast boat similar to the types used by drug runners, and a sumptuous old-fashioned 1973 Burger yacht.

While she was at it, she thoroughly researched the St. Clair family history. She already knew a little about the family, of course, because Jack's dad was the current governor of Florida and running for President. It was impossible to be unaware of the St. Clair family in Florida. But, she realized, while everybody knew about Sam, not that much was known about Jack, who kept a much lower profile.

Lucy knew of Jack because of his relationship with her boss's daughter Raven. Raven used to storm into the Fuentes law firm offices raging on about Jack, and it was all Ramona could do to control Raven's bitter jealousy. Eventually, everyone at the firm knew, Raven drove Jack (who seemed to everybody like a very good guy and a really great catch) away.

While Jack's house was impressive, the majestic Beaux-Arts mansion occupied by his dad, Flagler Hall, which stood just across a golf course green from Jack's house, dwarfed it. (She even knew from Google it was the 16th green.)

Henry Flagler had built Flagler Hall in 1902 as one of his winter residences (in what Jack in an article in *The Miami Herald* called the "Spanish-Mediterranean-Italian-Robber-Baron-Can't-Make-Up-My-Mind" style) by John Carrère and Thomas Hastings, the same architects who designed the New York Public Library. Actually, for all Jack's kidding, Flagler Hall was considered by architectural historians one of America's masterpieces of Beaux-Arts architecture.

Flagler, whose Florida East Coast Railway had opened first Jacksonville, then Palm Beach, and then Miami before crossing the Keys to finally end up extending all the way to Key West, died in 1913. In 1914, a Force 4 hurricane devastated Miami, leveling almost everything in its path, gutting Flagler Hall, but leaving its "bones" fully intact.

One of Jack's ancestors, Beaumont Houston St. Clair, trying to cross Biscayne Bay just before the hurricane struck to rescue someone on a barrier island that would later be called Miami Beach, had his boat sink under him. He swam ashore with a black servant, Augustus, during the storm's first onslaught and they took shelter in the huge house where they safely weathered the storm.

When Flagler's widow saw the ruined mansion, she sold it to Beaumont for a song (along with the island itself). All St. Clairs since then had been raised on the island. The island was the foundation of their fortune, as it kept giving back money as each parcel of the island was developed over the generations. The key to the St. Clair fortune was that you couldn't buy a lot on the island. You had to lease it from the St. Clairs. A professional 18-hole golf course filled the center of the island and waterfront mansions lined the perimeter.

Flagler Hall had been turned into a clubhouse once the golf course was built, and the current head of the family lived on the upper floors while the lower floors were used as the clubhouse. About 30 rooms and suites were available for overnight guests.

The St. Clair Island Club was the most exclusive Club in Florida, one of the most exclusive in the whole world. You couldn't apply for membership: you had to be invited. There were only 400 members worldwide. To be invited as a guest was a major social coup.

Lucy also knew Jack had been a Navy SEAL, and on the super-secret Team 9, the one SEAL team (out of ten) the Navy never admitted even existed. She'd heard this part of Jack's history through the grapevine.

After Lucy and Ramona met Jack at Monty's in Coconut Grove (Ramona had not wanted to meet in the office), Ramona had made it very clear that she, Lucy, was to render Jack whatever assistance she could as he sought to find out where the numerous wire transfers that were processed by Derek Gilbertson in their law firm through Howard Rothman at Dade International Bank ended up.

Lucy had been processing these wires for a long time. Ramona's husband, Héctor, had approved everything but Héctor began having questions about some of them, resulting in some heated words with Derek. When Héctor died suddenly, Ramona had been forced to retire from her prestigious Federal judgeship to return to manage the firm.

Lucy drove into the spacious driveway and parked under a banyan tree with a soaring canopy. (Lucy had noticed the width of the tree when she was on Google Maps, and that it covered half of Jack's house.)

As she got out of her snazzy little red Camaro, Jack came out of the house through some sliding glass doors giving onto a patio half covered by a hunter green awning. He ran his hand through his black hair softened with little silver streaks of graying hair that gave him a "George Clooney

“Here are the dates, the amounts, the account recipients, everything for six months. Do you want me to go back further?”

“I don’t think we need to do that. Which ones look curious, or suspicious, or different from normal?”

“Well, none of them, really. They’re just transfers from DIB to different accounts all over the world.”

“Which ones are most active in Central and South America?”

Lucy held up a flash drive.

“I’ve put everything on this. I’ll leave it with you.”

“Yes, that’s very good.”

“It looks like accounts—all with different names, of course—are clustered in these banks: the Banco Ruiz Crespo in Buenos Aires, the Rio Sonoma Banco in Rio, the Banco de Crédito de Caracas and the Unibancolombia in Bogota.”

“I see, yes,” Jack said, going over the figures.

They went over the different account names and she told them what she knew about them.

“But of course once the money is in any single account, it can be—and often is, I’m sure—transferred out the same day if you think it’s money laundering.”

“Into another account within the bank, another account at another bank in that country or another account at another bank in Europe or wherever,” said Jack.

“Exactly,” said Lucy.

Lucy answered all their questions. She had another glass of tea, Jack had another Peroni, and when they were finished, Jack escorted her out to her Camaro.

“You’ve been a really big help,” said Jack, extending his hand to shake. Lucy loved the way his hand felt, and wished she’d met Jack under different circumstances. As much as she wanted to make a play for him, she didn’t dare, not given the tight relationship he had with Ramona Fuentes.

“I’m happy to be helpful. Señora Fuentes was very clear. I am to do *whatever* you need. So feel free to call on me.”

She squeezed his hand and Jack was sure she was making a pass at him, and he thought back to his original impression of her when they met at Monty's: that she was a frumpy little Cuban woman who reminded him of Gloria Estefan (and you couldn't get plainer than that) who somehow had a very active sex life. When he saw her pull up in the red Camaro, he thought he'd hit it right on the mark with little Miss Lucy.

Once she was safely out of the way, Jack went back into the Game Room to find Gargrave leaning over the sideboard poring over the paperwork. He wore a lightweight bush jacket and as Jack came over, he pulled a piece of paper out of one of his pockets.

"We're in luck, sir. My contacts have connections at two of the banks on Lucy's list where activity is heaviest: Banco de Crédito de Caracas and Banco Ruiz Crespo in B.A."

Jack clapped Gargrave on the shoulder.

"Well, done, my friend. If we can crack ten or twenty of these accounts through your pals and follow the money trail, we'll see what old Derek is up to. Start the process."

"Very good, sir."

"If you have to travel to push things along, you get yourself the hell off of St. Clair Island and go do it, OK?"

"Very good, sir. I will."

"Oh, and Gargrave?"

"Sir?"

"First class, not economy. Ramona Fuentes can well afford it."

"Yes, sir!"

Chapter 8

MASINGALE EXPOSED

The next morning, Matt Hawkins relaxed in his suite as Liz came back from his offices in the House Office Building with the morning's *Washington Post*.

Headlining the front page was another Masingale story:

MASINGALE INVOLVED IN DUMMY FUND

Special to The Washington Post

Representative Leland T. Masingale, R-Tenn., received money from a dummy fund here in Washington in his last election campaign, according to Justice Department officials. The contribution was never reported.

A spokesman for the congressman said several election committees handled funds for his campaign and that Mr. Masingale did not keep close personal track of campaign expenditures.

About \$8 million appears to have been sent directly to a New York advertising agency as well as numerous consultants to which the Masingale campaign owed money.

The Justice Department issued a statement promising a full investigation into Mr. Masingale's involvement in the setting-up of the dummy fund, which reportedly might have been used in a former campaign as well.

Rep. Masingale's press officer refused direct comment on the charges.

* * *

Matt shook his head as he read the story and then turned to a related news analysis inside the paper that said Masingale, in light of the disclosures that morning charging him with airline bribes, and the afternoon story that created doubts about the integrity of his campaign financing, ought to resign immediately. It reviewed past illegal campaign practices that supposedly had not been repeated as a result of direct congressional action to halt campaign-funding improprieties, action that Masingale supported when it was before the Congress. The analysis quoted other officials who said that Masingale couldn't pretend to represent the people of his state in light of the recent doubts created about his honesty, and that "certain sources" said he should remove himself from Congress while settling the court cases being brought against him.

Matt thought how lucky he was not to be involved in such things. He was conscious of starting his career in Washington with the cleanest slate possible. He wanted to make sure he kept it clean.

* * *

About an hour after the paper hit the streets, Lamar Perryman put in a call to President Norwalk. They put him right through.

"What's up, Lamar?" asked Norwalk, who had just finished a meeting with Secretary of State Tom Uptigrow.

"Oh, not much, maybe, Mr. President," said the speaker, "not much maybe. Maybe even nothing at all. I was just wonderin' if you had any idea what was behind Delamar and Foster's changin' their votes? I've made up my mind to help

your man St. Clair if I can be of service. My own leadership doesn't really need me, and you alone know my position between the two candidates."

"That's awfully good of you, Lamar, but I don't see how you can compromise your position as speaker. They'd snatch it right out from under you if you got caught."

Norwalk couldn't express his relief that Perryman had finally decided for St. Clair, and was even willing to work secretly against his own party.

"I'm willing to take the risk I won't be caught if you are, Mr. President."

"I tell you what, Lamar, I'll talk to my people and see what they think you can do to help. You know I'll personally appreciate any help you can give us."

"I sure am curious to know just which one of your people is handling this thing. Wouldn't be Phil, would it?"

"You're asking leading questions, Mr. Speaker," smiled the President into the phone.

"He must have something mighty powerful to work with, Mr. President."

Norwalk knew the foxy old congressman. He also knew that the best way to keep him from snooping around on his own was to let him in on the whole secret effort. Norwalk had already approved Slanetti's request to include Ambassador Kornilevski and perhaps Lord Ellsworth in on the scheme as liaison men. But he had a feeling that too many were getting involved, so he wanted to think twice before letting Lamar LeGrand Perryman in on it. He at first wanted no one to know about Keystone, but Slanetti convinced him that this was impossible. The best to be expected was to keep knowledgeable parties to a minimum.

"I'll try to meet with you in the next few days, Lamar. We'll talk about it then, all right?"

"That's fine with me, Mr. President. Whatever you say."

"Thank you, Lamar."

Norwalk immediately called Slanetti in to confer.

Norwalk frowned. "If you get through early enough, come see me tonight after you visit Kornilevski, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"It'll be interesting to hear his response. I'm sure he'll help with a contact or two. I don't want him getting too interested to help, however. You can understand that. We don't know what he might do. We have to remember what happened to Ambassador Yang."

"Yes, sir. They say he's still in a coma—might never come out of it."

"And the Chinese Embassy is just stewing. All right, Phil," said Norwalk, ending the interview, "take care and get back to me tonight ... or tomorrow if you come back from Kornilevski too late."

Slanetti had thought of using Kornilevski at the same time Yasuda had occurred to him. Use of the Diplomatic Corps at first did not spring to mind when he began considering liaisons. But as he thought about it, he saw no reason why he should exclude such personally influential men as those that filled the Corps. And many favored St. Clair over Thurston, especially European envoys. He realized, as did the President, that such action might mean that various governments around the world would know that the White House was actively involving itself with the election, but both men hoped the urgency of the situation would impress the envoys selected so much that they wouldn't inform their governments. Still, if governments knew, it wouldn't be the sort of thing gladly leaked to the world press. Any government would have to cite its own ambassador as an accomplice with the White House in attempting to sway the election. On the whole, both Slanetti and Norwalk thought the move a safe one.

Chapter 9

THE TWO AMBASSADORS

Early in the evening, Slanetti took a taxi to the Russian Embassy where he was to have a private interview with the ambassador. At that time, Kornilevski was concluding another he had gladly granted Ambassador Lord Ellsworth of Great Britain.

"I thank you for visiting me, Lord Ellsworth," said the Russian.

"I thought it essential that some of us get together and try to do something. As I told you, my talks with Girard, Meitner and others have not produced any beneficial course of action that we could all agree on. I therefore assumed that the best thing to do was to act in secret with perhaps one other party, and since you represent a government most anxious to see Mr. St. Clair elected, as I represent such a government, I thought you were the best person."

"I understand your sentiments, Lord Ellsworth," said Kornilevski. "I have been wondering what information we could use to influence some members of the House, and as yet I haven't been able to uncover anything of value."

Kornilevski, conscious of the impending interview with Slanetti regarding unknown business, didn't see fit to mention this to the British ambassador until he knew what Slanetti wanted. Since he wholeheartedly trusted Ellsworth's motives, however, he decided to combine with him to move any member in the House they could possibly find a way to influence. Ellsworth's experience in Washington's political and diplomatic circles would always be invaluable to Kornilevski, who didn't move as gracefully and as seemingly innocuously as Ellsworth did. The outwardly harmless nature of Ellsworth's maneuvers gave him great advantages not perceived by many members of the Corps. Kornilevski, a

shrewd man, clearly understood how Ellsworth's superiority resulted in high performance.

“Well, if you do discover any valuable information, you may rely on my total efforts to help you employ it to its fullest potential.”

Kornilevski walked Ellsworth outside where he prepared to get into his limousine. Just then, as the two ambassadors chatted in the cold outside the Embassy, Slanetti's taxi pulled up and he got out.

Ellsworth turned his head when he heard the car approach and though it could not be gleaned from his fixed facial expression, he found it strange indeed that the President's aide for congressional liaison should visit the ambassador from Russia, and especially when he'd be more importantly occupied visiting members of Congress.

“An odd visitor for you, Mr. Ambassador, don’t you agree?” said Ellsworth, his head still turned toward the approaching Slanetti, his dignified double chin pressed against his stiffly starched white shirt collar.

Kornilevski looked at Slanetti coming down the sidewalk to them and then back to the ambassador, whose Homberg-hatted head was still averted. Ellsworth looked back to Kornilevski for a comment. Ellsworth's eyes, demanding an explanation, had become cold and indignant.

"I don't know what he wants, Lord Ellsworth," shrugged the Russian. "It was a hastily arranged interview."

“I am just wondering, sir, what he *could* want, and I must admit that my mind is not overwhelmed with readily acceptable propositions.”

“I’ll let you know tonight if it is germane to our discussion,” said Kornilevski. Slanetti saw the two men chatting and saw Ellsworth look at him indifferently, or what he thought was indifferently. He assumed the two diplomats had been discussing some mutual concern. He came up to them.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said.

“How do you do? Mr. Slanetti,” said Lord Ellsworth. Kornilevski nodded hello to Slanetti, who nodded back. There was an awkward pause. “Well,” continued Ellsworth, smiling, “it’s chilly out and I’d better be getting back. I can’t spend every day debating with the august representative from Russia what we can possibly do to help Governor St. Clair get elected, now can I?”

Slanetti and Kornilevski smiled (but for different reasons), as Ellsworth stepped into his big Rolls Royce and the chauffeur closed the door. Ellsworth waved goodbye and smiled as the two men raised their hands back to him before going inside to Kornilevski’s office.

“How may I be of service to you, Phil?” asked Kornilevski when they were seated.

“In more ways than you think, Ambassador,” said Slanetti, opening his briefcase. “The President is aware of your desire to see Governor St. Clair elected. He hopes you’ll be willing to help him in a way which I will specify.”

“My government stands ready to aid in any way it can, I assure you,” he responded.

“The White House has information on certain members of Congress which, if released, would prove damaging to their careers, and, in some cases, ruinous. To avoid implicating the White House directly with these members, I have chosen not to visit them myself, but to work through various liaisons. I want you to be one of those people.”

“I agree immediately, Phil. Give me the details and I will do all I can,” said Kornilevski, trying to conceal the enthusiasm running through him.

“Unlike my other liaisons, you know that there are others like yourself. They do not. I have tried to make them think that we are trying to pressure only the individuals they have been asked to contact.”

“I am thankful for the confidence,” said Kornilevski, his mind working twice as fast as Slanetti’s, trying to weigh the value of the information he was receiving.

“The purpose of this is to avoid any group of members combining and trying some sort of countermeasures which could hurt our position. The less they know of a concerted effort on the part of the White House, the better.”

“I quite agree with that,” said Kornilevski.

Slanetti gave him the piece of paper that contained the details on Deaver Moldow, Democrat from Wisconsin, who, if he came over, would break the four to four tie in that state’s delegation.

Moldow was guilty of minor infringements of the law compared to some of his colleagues, but Slanetti felt sure they could pull him over because he was known for not being an exceptionally strong-willed man, just a little greedy like most.

He was guilty of considerable double-billing on congressional expenses and illegal trips charged to his congressional account. Recently, the Congress approved plans to build a large Army base near Sheboygan, a city not far from Moldow’s hometown, which he practically forced down the Pentagon’s throat. He made a lot of money in kickbacks from two plumbing contractors and suppliers that, through his influence, were awarded contracting jobs to work on the base. The sum rose into the millions.

“That’s about all I have on him, but I think in his case it will be sufficient.”

Slanetti then explained how Kornilevski should place his call once Moldow gave in and covered a few other details.

“I will visit you later with another target when we see how this one goes, Mr. Ambassador.”

“I will be more than happy to help you,” said Kornilevski.

“The President deeply appreciates the aid you’re giving us and told me to tell you that if Governor St. Clair is elected, you will see the benefits of your efforts.”

“Why do I say ‘Keystone’ when I call you?” Kornilevski asked casually.

"It just seemed an appropriate name when I began the files some years ago," shrugged Slanetti. "The President actually suggested it."

Kornilevski nodded silently. Slanetti didn't know he'd said the first wrong thing since the secret Keystone affair began.

"I will arrange to meet with Mr. Moldow tomorrow sometime," said the ambassador, rising. Slanetti got up and shook hands.

"I will be getting back to you before long, Mr. Ambassador," he said before leaving.

And I'll be getting back to you before long, too, thought Kornilevski as Slanetti left his office.

Chapter 10

BIKINI BABE

Jack and Lucy were in the middle of another session discussing wire transfers to Europe when they heard a car door slam and moments later Babe came strolling into the Game Room through the sliding glass doors.

“Hi there,” she said, coming over to Jack and giving him big fat kiss on the lips.

"Wow, is it three already?" Jack said.

"Yes. We're going swimming, remember?"

"I do. Just lost track of the time."

There was a slight pause. They were so into each other they'd both forgotten that someone else was standing right next to them. Babe's eyes darted to Lucy.

"Uh, this is Lucy Azzinaro."

“I’ve seen you before. You work at my mom’s firm,” said Babe.

There are other partners in the firm besides your mother, thought Lucy. Sure, she'd seen Babe flounce into the office, disrupting everything, demanding first her father's attention and now that he was gone, Ramona's, when there were many other more important things to be done.

“Yes, that’s correct. I work down in Financial.”

“Oh, that’s two floors down. No wonder I couldn’t place you right away. I never go down there.”

Gargrave appeared.

“Something for you to drink, Miss Fuentes?”

“No thanks, Gargrave. I’m going to change.” She turned back to Jack. “We *are* going swimming, aren’t we, Jack?”

Jack had to admit it: there was a bit of Raven's tempestuous nature in Babe. It didn't come out often, but it was there, lying dormant like a sleeping Vesuvius. He supposed it just ran in the family. He wondered for a minute

what Ramona had been like when she was Babe's age. Must have been a spitfire.

"Yes, of course we are. Lucy and I were just wrapping things up."

"Yes," Lucy said simply.

Babe disappeared down the hallway.

"You did want to go over those wires to the U.K. and Switzerland, Mr. St. Clair."

"Yes, but they'll have to wait till next time."

A minute before Jack had been the perfect embodiment of a focused, driven man on a mission to follow a trail to the end. Now, he was distracted by Babe. Lucy decided to let it go. As much as she was attracted to Jack, she knew she was powerless to follow through on any of her emotions because of the delicate relationships involved. And she had to remember she was only an employee in the law firm headed by Ramona Fuentes. She wasn't even important enough to have an office on the same floor as Ramona, as that bitch Babe had been so quick to point out.

"I've got copies of everything on this flash drive," she said, handing him the little drive.

"Thanks."

"I'll just get my things together then," she said, turning to shake hands with Jack.

He smiled, and like any man, was able to read the signs of a woman who was interested in him.

"I've got to change," Jack said as he passed Gargrave standing behind the bar. "Gargrave will help you with your things," he added, leaving the flash drive on the bar where Gargrave scooped it up.

Lucy sat down where they had been poring over all the documents and collected her papers into two large satchels. She was just about to leave when Jack and Babe came down the hallway from the bedroom. Babe was wearing a skimpy azure bikini that left very little to the imagination. It pained Lucy to see Babe's long legs and lithe, graceful frame, her

rich brown hair lustrous and dancing around her shapely shoulders. She was suddenly acutely aware of her own short stature, her dull hairstyle, pulled back behind her into a “practical” ponytail, her frumpy clothes and her slightly overweight body. She was even more impressed when she saw Jack dressed in his coral colored boxer-style swimsuit. He had a finely sculpted body that showed wear, but everything about him was tough and manly. When she shook hands with him, his palms were lightly calloused and heavily lined: the kind of hands an ex-military man with lots of service in the field would have.

Babe walked past her with a glance.

“ ‘Bye!” she called out.

“Goodbye,” said Lucy quietly.

“Call you for a meeting next week,” said Jack as he followed Babe through the glass doors onto the patio where they crossed to the pool on the other side. She watched them as they laughed and ran, jumping like two kids into the sparkling, glittering water.

She sensed someone near and turned to see Gargrave standing beside her.

“Shall I take these, Ms. Azzinaro?” he asked, nodding toward the two satchels.

“Yes, thank you.”

When she’d done her homework on Mr. St. Clair, she also did a background check on his right hand man, Vernon Gargrave. She knew plenty about him, too.

She even knew about Gargrave, that he’d met Jack when they were both in the service, Jack with the SEALs and Gargrave with the British Royal Navy equivalent, the SBS, or Special Boat Service. Gargrave had been a member of M Squadron, which focused on maritime anti-terrorism and ship boarding operations. He was even in the elite Black Group, a unit within M Squadron specializing in helicopter assault.

She carried her briefcase and Gargrave followed her out to her car.

Gargrave stowed the satchels in the back seat and closed her door after she got behind the wheel.

"Thank you again, Mr. Gargrave," said Lucy.

"My pleasure, Ms. Azzinaro."

He watched her drive away and turned back toward the house, pausing to watch Babe and Jack cavorting in the pool. A cell phone went off.

"That's my mom," said Babe. "I've got to take that."

She swam to the far side of the pool where she took the call. Gargrave walked over and knelt down beside Jack who had swum over toward Gargrave.

"I got a call from Sean and Fredo in Key West while you were meeting with Lucy," said Gargrave.

"And?"

"To cut to the chase, Derek's team followed Flores and Duarte down there twice and can see they're putting together some kind of crew to go to sea."

"Won't be long before Derek knows it's got to do with that narco-sub that went down."

"With \$20 million of his money on board."

"Yeah," said Jack. "Wait'll he finds out there's another \$45 million keeping company with his twenty."

"We're going to need more people," said Gargrave.

"We're tailing Flores and Duarte and we're tailing Derek's team tailing them."

"And we're also tailing Derek," Jack added.

"Yeah."

"Call Adele at the office and tell her to put a couple more guys on call if Sean and Fredo need more help down in the Keys."

"Right."

"And I think we'll go the Keys next time the action shifts down there. If they've made two trips already, they'll be getting close to making a move."

“Right.”

“And we have to be ready to follow them wherever they go.”

“I’ll make sure our scuba gear is in order.”

“All right, Gargrave.”

“Very good, sir,” said Gargrave, standing up as he saw Babe finish her call on the other side of the pool. “Enjoy your swim.”

“Yeah,” said Jack with a twisted grin when he saw Gargrave’s knowing smirk.

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Chapter 11

THE LURE OF LOVE

Matt Hawkins wasn't the least bit tired. In fact, he even took an afternoon nap, he had so much time to spare. There wasn't that much for a congressman-elect to do after all. He was excited about seeing Patricia again tonight. Their first time together had gone well for her. That was his main concern, that it be good for her. He could tell in the early stages of lovemaking that, as cool and confident as she seemed at social events, she really hadn't had too much experience in bed. She knew how to use her hands, however, and Matt thought that was the key ingredient in lovemaking. Too many women didn't know what their hands could do to a man, even on the obvious parts of his body.

He loved being with Patricia in much the same way he used to love to be with Sue. He wondered as he came down the elevator (he told Liz and Dave that he would be having supper with Crampton and wouldn't be in till late—he really didn't plan coming in at all) if it might be possible for his relationship with Patricia to end up as meaningless and empty as his relationship with Sue had turned out. He doubted it would, on the whole, because there was so much more to Patricia than there was to Sue—so much more to hold him. He could only think of the word “substance” to apply to the difference between them. He and Sue had been interested in each other as bodies, and not as people, and they both realized this soon after they were married. He felt, though, no less driven by sex in his late twenties than he had been in his early twenties. He knew he was, as they say, a very “sexual” person. He looked forward to it, enjoyed it, liked to give and he liked to get.

He was glad Patricia forced herself not to be shy the night before. He knew she naturally was—but that she was

holding it back so he wouldn't see it. As it was, he went slowly and was very gentle with her. He could tell when she came that sex had never been prolonged for her before. It had always been quick and she never really got much out of it. He could tell. Her breathing, the wild, crazed look in her eyes as she came the first time, the way she seemed desperately to swallow each breath rather than simply breathe it, the way she clutched his neck and dug into his back – all told him how new everything was for her. And when she came the second time he could see that she couldn't believe the pleasure she was feeling. She never felt pleasure quite that pure and exquisite before.

He smiled, self-satisfied and smug, as the elevator doors opened and he walked into the lobby.

He knew he had to be slow and methodical with her, and though he knew he mainly wanted to make it good for her, he had to admit he enjoyed every minute he took to do it. He stripped her nude before he even took his shirt off, caressed her entire body, touched every inch of skin on her as the car idled, keeping them warm in the deserted parking lot of the Jefferson Memorial, their heavy hot breaths fogging the windows so they couldn't even see the lights of the city across the Basin—if they'd been looking.

Leaving the lobby, Matt went out and got into a taxi and gave the address for Horizon. A Secret Service agent hurriedly ran to a waiting government car and followed him.

After feeling her and touching her until she almost went crazy, he began kissing her. And everywhere his hands had been, his lips followed. He soaked her flesh with his wet kisses, her face, neck, shoulders, arms, breasts, her nice flat stomach, the insides of her thighs. He wiggled his tongue inside her navel and she laughed. After that he made her lie back all the way.

As he looked at the passing Washington cityscape, Matt found himself remembering the first time he'd ever been

laid in a car. He definitely preferred the larger Rolls Royce to the cars he'd been used to as a kid.

* * *

As Matt was on his way to Horizon, Patricia was remembering the very same things herself. In fact, she could think of nothing else all day. She was in a daze and no one in the household could understand anything she said all day, which wasn't all that much. She ate neither breakfast nor lunch. She had a glazed pleased look on her face all day long. She even told her social secretary, when she came in, to go back home. She didn't feel like doing anything.

The night before, she told Matt to come to Horizon because she would let all the servants go for the evening so they could have the house to themselves. She knew those who slept in would be coming back late that night, but by then she and Matt would be in bed and alone in her suite in the big mansion. If he was there in the morning and shocked them, that was fine and dandy with her.

She blushed when she thought of undressing in the car last night.

When they got back from the Memorial and he started the car, she thought he was going to drive them back to the Hilton where he would leave her. She hadn't been able to think of anyplace they could go, so suggested nothing to him. She couldn't have suggested anything, anyway. She wouldn't have been that bold, not with Matt Hawkins as she saw him. She assumed that he'd make it clear when and where he wanted to sleep with her. She assumed correctly, and was a little surprised when it turned out to be in her car.

As he began to undress her she had mixed feelings. She wanted to love him right then and there, and yet she wondered what in God's holy name they would do if the

guard came down to the car from his warm little cubbyhole inside the Memorial, or if the police came by and shined a light on the car and decided to investigate.

He made her take off her corduroy pants by herself, helping her a little. Then he let her take off his shirt and held her to his chest when she was completely naked. Even in the dark, with the diluted glow of the city lights across the Basin coming through the front window, she could see how beautiful he was. He overwhelmed her with his looks, his blunt strong manner and direct, unbashful, uninhibited attitude. It was new to her. Just like the rest of the evening was new to her.

After last night, Patricia felt like she'd just lost her virginity. She could tell how much she'd been missing. She could tell that with Matt around she could make up for lost time fast. She never knew such tenderness as he showed her or the violent emotions that poured from him into her. He seemed to revel in touching her and kissing her, arousing her for her own pleasure and not necessarily just for his. He made her feel like a woman, a complete woman.

When he covered her body with kisses, hot and juicy, it was almost too much for her.

After they were finished, he fell back down on her, collapsing into her arms, his head resting on her heaving breasts. He was breathing heavily, it seemed to her, for the first time. She felt his hot breath get quiet and they cooled off. His head was on its side and he stretched his lips and kissed her without moving his head. And then he moaned once, very quietly.

She heard Matt's taxi pull up the long drive to Horizon, the tires crunching in the gravel. In the cab, Matt looked out at the big house where the Thanksgiving party was to be held. His mouth opened as he took it all in, the snow falling all around it. There were houses, he thought, and then there were *houses*. But he loved Patricia. He didn't care if she lived in a one-room shack.

He got out and tossed the driver some bills, not even looking to see what they were, and ran up the steps. The cab moved back down the long circular drive. As he came off the grounds of the estate and turned right to go back downtown, the cabbie passed a dark unmarked government car with its lights off. If he could've seen inside it, he would've seen a Secret Service agent scribbling down some notes in the dark.

Matt touched the bell. Patricia instantly opened the door, saw him and leapt into his arms. She was wearing a pair of black wool slacks and a heavy cabled white turtleneck sweater. He grabbed her around the waist as she ran into his arms, picked her up easily and kissed her before setting her back down.

"Aren't you cold?" she laughed. She opened her mouth wide and pushed him back. "Oh!" she said, raising her eyebrows in mock disdain and haughtiness, "you're not the man I was expecting."

"I'm sorry," he said, walking inside and closing the door. "I was hoping to get a free meal out of all this."

"What can you give me in return?" she asked cattily.

"Well," he said, unbuttoning his topcoat and pretending to feel his pockets, "all I've got on me is an empty stomach and, well, something else you might want." He laughed out loud, showing his teeth in a broad smile. She came up to him with a grin and pretended to slap his face, but he caught her hand and twisted it behind her, pulling her close and kissing her on the mouth.

"Oh God, I'm glad to see you again, kid. No shit," he said seriously, close to her face.

"I've been waiting for you all day, even if you are vulgar. I thought you'd never get here." She leaned her head against his chest and he stroked her hair.

"Well, feed me, I'm hungry," he said out loud, holding her back. "You did invite me for dinner, didn't you?"

“Yes, I did, Mr. Big-Shot-Congressman,” she said, swinging her head back. “I’m not making company out of you, so you’ll have to help me.” He left his coat in the marble foyer and looked up at the grand staircase at the other end. A great chandelier hung down over the center of the foyer. He followed her through the Great Hall and other beautiful rooms lavishly decorated with fine French and Italian antiques into the cavernous kitchen.

“The kitchen’s a mile from the front door,” he said when they got there. She frowned.

“I know it’s not too cozy, but we’ll fix everything here and take it into the hunting room. I built a fire in there all by myself. Jonathan’s great-grandfather built it. He used to hunt with Teddy Roosevelt. It looks like a jungle wax museum in there, but it’s pretty cozy with the lights off.”

She’d made a salad and quickly cooked a couple of thick Porterhouses. He uncorked a couple of bottles of good claret and they went to the hunting room.

It was a massive, high-ceilinged room with rich dark mahogany paneling lit only by the flames of the large fire that licked the shiny surface of the wood. There were heads of most of the big game of three continents hanging from the high walls. Several racks of guns lined one wall. There were wing chairs scattered about, a tremendous bar and skins covering parts of the oak planked floor.

Matt pulled a low table up before the fire. He took off his jacket and slipped off his tie, loosening his shirt collar. They sat on a big bearskin rug, and enjoyed the steaks, salad and bracingly dry red wine, talking about various things. He asked a few questions about the animals because he was fascinated with them and she told him all she knew (from Jonathan’s mother Bedelia) about the trips Jonathan’s ancestor made with Teddy Roosevelt to South America, Africa, Alaska.

“It seems a shame the way they slaughtered those animals.”

“A different time. We have lots of big game up where I’m from, of course, but the last thing I’d do is kill any of them. Where’s the sport in shooting beautiful animals like these between the eyes with a gun?”

“You’ll have to find other ways to take out your aggression.”

“Good food, good wine, good fire and a good woman,” Matt said, chewing his Porterhouse and smiling at her at the same time. She couldn’t resist leaning over and kissing him with his mouth full.

“Your mouth is so greasy,” she said, picking up her napkin and wiping his mouth.

“Take your pick, I might have had salad in my mouth and then it would have been Roquefort cheese,” he said, clearing his mouth with a swallow of wine. They laughed, coming together, touching foreheads, looking into each other’s eyes.

After eating, she laid down in front of the fire. He refueled it with several big logs. He kissed her, lying on his side, supported by his elbow, and then looked about the room, scanning the awesome, majestic heads of the animals that were their company for the evening, looking at the deep empty plates where their steaks had been, their knives and forks resting on the edges, the salad bowls streaked with the remnants of the pale Roquefort cheese dressing.

“That was good,” he said, looking back to her as she smiled up at him.

“I’m glad then,” she said.

He put his other hand on her stomach and leaned down, still on one elbow, to kiss her. He moved his hand under her sweater. She wasn’t wearing a bra tonight and he fondled her breasts. He laid down all the way on his side and she turned on her side to face him. He rubbed up and down her bare hot back under the sweater facing the fire.

“Isn’t the fire hot on you? Want to change places?”

"It's not as hot compared to what I went through last night," she said, kissing his chin and feeling her tongue scrape against his shaved face, hard and scratchy. She liked his rough beard against her soft skin. He kissed her nose.

"What say you show me around, ma'am," he said, looking around the room again. "I'm just a mountain boy—never been in a real live palace before."

"What did you want to see in particular, sir? Shall it be the library? Fifteen thousand volumes, many priceless first editions of Keats collected by Jonathan's father, who actually read most of them while he wasn't safeguarding what is now Jonathan's fortune. Or shall it be the music room, or maybe the gallery, which does offer a tiny Monet? Or perhaps the main dining room, which seats sixty comfortably, or the south drawing room? I can't decide which to show you first."

"I think the first and last thing I'd like to see is the stairs, the ones leading up to your bedroom."

She wrinkled up her nose, about to laugh, and stuck her tongue out at him. He leaned down to kiss her, but she rolled over and got up.

"Right this way, sir," she said bowing low. He got up and kissed her and they went up.

In her bedroom suite, only the light in her dressing room was on. The bedroom itself got a little illumination from it.

"This one's mine," she said, spreading her arms wide. "But there are nineteen others if you don't like this one."

"Maybe before the night's over we'll try them all. I'm not fussy, miss. The rug in the hunting room would be just fine with me."

She came over to him and loosened some of the buttons on his shirt. "Start some water, let's take a bath," he said, kissing her forehead and touching her breast lightly.

"Oh, great," she said, kissing him and running into the bath. He heard the water start and sat down on the bed to take off his shoes and socks. As he stood up to loosen his

Chapter 12

SCARFACE

“They should put out tables and chairs under those scrawny palm trees,” said Fredo as he rigged his long-range microphone near the opening in the side panel of the agency van so he could capture the conversation. Sean Walsh sat behind the wheel and Jack was in the passenger seat.

“Once we found out about this meet, thought you oughta be here for it,” said Walsh.

“Yeah, it’s looking pretty intense, all right,” said Jack, gazing across the street through a pair of high powered Bushnell Powerview binoculars as he watched a mixed bag of personalities assemble under the palm trees in the tiny parking lot of Enriqueta’s, the busy little Cuban eatery on the corner of 29th Street and Northeast Second Avenue in Wynwood, adjusting his headphones so he could listen in on whatever Fredo picked up with his microphone.

They’d all been brought together by Derek Gilbertson, the man in Ramona Fuentes’s law firm trying to push through additional wire transfers of the type he’d been going over with Lucy. Derek stood there in his blue pin-striped suit, looking with his perfectly styled blond hair like the Ivy League WASP lawyer that he was.

When they pulled over to set up the surveillance, Derek had been there with Omer Flores, an undercover DEA agent Derek had worked with a long time smuggling money and drugs. What Flores didn’t know was that Derek knew Flores was in the process of fucking him over in a deal Flores was working on with Laurencio Duarte, another dirty undercover DEA agent who had supposedly drowned when the narco-sub he was crewing on as part of his DEA assignment went down in the Dry Tortugas with all hands—until Duarte showed up one day alive and well. (Flores didn’t know that

Derek knew Duarte had survived, and that Derek now had tails following both Duarte and Flores.) But Jack knew all of this.

Moments later these two were joined by four others, a skinny Cuban man in a bright floral Hawaiian style shirt and a tough-looking short Cuban woman as well as another man, this one strongly built with wide shoulders and a drooping mustache. The fourth person Jack knew: Howard Rothman, a big shot at DIB, Dade International Bank. Everybody had gotten a café con leche from the window at Enriqueta's before strolling nonchalantly out to the cluster of low-slung palm trees that threw a welcome bit of shade onto the otherwise sunny parking lot.

"I know Rothman, but who are these other people?" asked Jack.

"Not a clue," said Walsh, looking closely through his own set of binoculars.

"Derek, how are ya, man?" asked Rothman.

"Coming through to you OK, Fredo?" asked Jack over his shoulder.

"Crystal clear with this nice weather we're having," said Fredo.

Jack took a moment to notice how really nice the perfect Florida winter day was outside the sealed-up van. But he quickly returned his focus to the conversation coming through his headset.

"I've been working with these people for a year now," Rothman led off the conversation, and I think it's time you met Derek's guy, Omer Flores. He can handle your problem."

"So since we worked so well with Howard on a lot of different deals, he recommended you guys to handle a transfer to the Bahamas," said the skinny guy.

"Yeah, we got like \$30 million in cash from our Medicare operations we need to get out of here," said the tough-looking woman, who'd called herself Aricela. Jack could

easily see the scar that ran diagonally across her face, looking like some hideous kind of saber slash. “We’ve wired that much more out through different accounts, but we can’t get it all out that way.”

“No, we need someone to get the bulk cash over to our people in the Bahamas so they can get it into our accounts there.”

Jack interrupted this dialogue.

“And send it God knows where.”

Under the palm trees, Flores responded.

“Hey, it’s easy for me to do. I got just the crew for something like this.”

Yeah, thought Derek, that fucking Duarte you’re working with behind my back.

“That’s why I put you guys together,” said Derek out loud, a genial smile covering his face.

As Jack listened in, he realized Derek was branching out. No longer was he just taking a small cut of dirty drug money laundered by facilitating suspicious wire transfers through the Fuentes law firm using Rothman at DIB. Now he was branching out into laundering money derived from the massive Medicare fraud that had been driving the Feds nuts for years. South Florida was the national hub of Medicare fraud.

Cuban nationals—either U.S. born Cubans or recently arrived foreign nationals—had been implicated in these schemes for years. A lot of Cuban nationals, in fact. It was so broad the U.S. government hadn’t been able to get its hands around the problem, so vast was the illegal take these people were raking in.

Jack noticed the big-shouldered man had said little beyond his name, Jorge Gonzalez.

“We’ll set up another meeting to get the details right,” said Flores. “We can move the money in two or three weeks.”

“That sounds good to me,” the skinny man, who’d introduced himself as Severo.

Jack and his team listened in as Derek, on behalf of Flores, negotiated a \$400,000 fee for services to be rendered. Jack wondered how much of that Derek and Howard would pocket for setting up the meeting.

“Damn,” said Jack. “We’re gonna need more people to follow these three.”

“OK, Boss,” said Walsh. “I’ll get Adele at the office to bring in some more people.”

“Right,” said Jack.

“Anybody want some more coffee?” Flores asked when they wrapped up their meeting.

No one did. Everybody had to “get back to the office.”

“Omer, I’ll be working on the next \$27 million for you guys to move for us,” laughed Aricela, her scar turning a little red when she blushed.

Jack watched as the group dispersed, heading to their cars as Flores went to the window to get another café con leche. Once he got it, he went back to stand under the palm trees, making a call on his cellphone.

“Hey, Duarte, it’s me. Just finished the meeting. It was just what Derek said. It’s a good score for us. You can help me set it up, but we’ll get some of our Key West crew to go with me when we take the boats over to Nassau. Can’t have Derek seeing you,” Flores said with a big smile.

Even Jack smiled. Little did Flores know that Derek was on to him and Duarte.

“No, you wait for me in Islamorada. I’ll meet you there, we’ll have lunch and then take one car to Key West. OK, buddy. See you in an hour or so.”

Jack lowered his glasses as Flores strode to his car.

“These people,” he said to no one in particular, “what a pit full of snakes.”

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Chapter 13

LORD ELLSWORTH REQUESTS

The next morning the sun was bright above Washington, though slush and water filled the streets. No more snow was expected till the next week. President Norwalk had already been to the ceremony to light the national Christmas tree, inaugurating the holiday season. Decorations poured from the stores and shops in the business district and the fashionable boutiques in the northwest section.

Ambassador Lord Ellsworth kept an early appointment with Ambassador Kornilevski at the latter's embassy. In the interview Kornilevski told Ellsworth everything that transpired at the meeting with Slanetti the day before.

"Would you tell Phil that I'd be happy to act in the same capacity for which he's chosen you?" asked Ellsworth.

"I will, Lord Ellsworth. I myself am curious as to the extent of White House involvement in this matter. Slanetti would not give me details, so I cannot be sure, but he did tell me that I was the only one who knew that such an effort existed on a broad basis."

"That is very curious indeed," mused Ellsworth, rubbing his chin. "He certainly acquired his information rapidly, considering that only a few days have elapsed since the election."

"That's true," said Kornilevski, but the Russian was thinking of a phrase Slanetti had used: "When I began the files some years ago." In fact, he'd thought of little else but just that phrase since Slanetti uttered it. It intrigued him as only an experienced diplomatist could be intrigued by anything. The slightest nuances or remarks are open to the widest interpretation in a diplomat's mind. And, for all his nervousness and bluster, Kornilevski had such a mind.

He didn't reveal to Ellsworth this little bit of information because he knew Ellsworth would be as curious as he was as to what information Keystone contained. And he wanted that information for his own. He didn't know what to do in the face of it, but he knew that he wanted Keystone, plain and simple: he wanted it badly. Russia could live without it, but Kornilevski saw no reason why Russia shouldn't have the information if it could be acquired.

"I've already made arrangements to meet Congressman Moldow at Astor's Restaurant."

"When?" asked Ellsworth.

"Lunch."

"Wasn't he curious that you wanted to see him?"

"Amazed, Mr. Ambassador," said the Russian, lifting a bushy eyebrow. "Quite amazed."

"I don't wonder," said the British envoy. "Why Astor's?"

"I like Greek food."

"Of course."

* * *

At 10 A.M. that morning in a regular White House staff meeting, many members of the Cabinet and close staff were present. In attendance at such meetings were Norwalk's advisors on all matters political, domestic and foreign.

COS Eric Stathis was there, Duncan Olcott of the House and the Senate minority leader were there, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was there, as well as various high-level White House aides.

As the men and women settled down in the Cabinet Room, Eric Stathis glanced down the table from his seat behind the President to the far end where the aide for congressional liaison usually sat. Slanetti's seat was empty.

"I believe we can begin," said Norwalk.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Phil, Mr. President?” asked Stathis. Norwalk looked up at him and there was a slight hint of distaste on his slightly pursed lips. At the last few meetings Stathis had always asked about Slanetti. The President always answered for him.

“Phil’s busy with that military appropriations bill we’d like to get through before the first of the year,” he said, looking back down to the papers before him. Stathis didn’t say anything, but just looked casually down at Slanetti’s empty seat. Then he looked at the agenda before him and began.

“The first thing is the problem with the fishing rights off Newfoundland that the Canadians want to settle before it gets out of hand,” Stathis said. As the discussion moved from him to other aides, Stathis couldn’t help thinking again that it was odd for Slanetti to be absent. He was one of the most efficient White House aides, always busy and never, before recently, absent from a staff meeting. Stathis could not help thinking that, considering Slanetti’s efficiency, he was busy being efficient at something Stathis didn’t know about.

Since the election, Slanetti hadn’t attended a briefing or a general staff meeting. Stathis passed him several times in the hall not far from the Oval Office where they both had their offices. Slanetti always seemed to be pulling on his overcoat to leave or coming back from somewhere, always too rushed to talk. He knew he saw the President frequently, but he didn’t know what about. He’d even—ever so casually—probed appointments secretary Charlie Roebuck about it, but Roebuck said Norwalk never indicated what he wanted to see Slanetti about.

A dead end.

Stathis thought he might just ask Norwalk when they were alone what Phil was really doing. The appropriations bill Norwalk mentioned the last two meetings to explain Slanetti’s absence was nothing that would keep him running

in and out of the White House the way he'd been doing lately. Slanetti could handle something like that in an afternoon. And before the election, it had been agreed in a staff meeting to worry about the bill when the new Congress met, not the current lame duck Congress. There was no particular hurry because it was just follow-up legislation. Why the rush now? Stathis wondered.

He decided not to ask Norwalk. Obviously, the President didn't want to tell him. It was this interesting deduction that so fascinated him. He'd never known Norwalk to hide anything from him. *Why now?* He was proud of his well-known intimacy with Norwalk, an intimacy developed over many years of close friendship. But he knew, he felt it in his bones that Norwalk was keeping something from him. This blunted Stathis's pride and even caused a slight streak of indignation to rise in him.

What is it I'm not close enough to Norwalk to know about? he wondered.

It plagued him, had been plaguing him, since he began to notice Slanetti's absences. Stathis resolved to return to the White House that night to have a look in Slanetti's office. He didn't expect to find anything substantial, but he had to begin somewhere to find out what was going on.

As usual, the meeting broke up just before lunch.

* * *

At the same time the White House meeting broke up for lunch, Ambassador Kornilevski sat down at a table in the rear of Astor's with Deaver Moldow of Wisconsin, whose most prominent features were his slightly pointed nose, slightly buck teeth and a more than slightly receding chin.

To Kornilevski the man looked weak. He felt that Moldow wouldn't even put up a fight. He admired Slanetti's selection of targets.

* * *

Lord Ellsworth lunched alone in his study. Usually he lunched with his wife, Allison, but she was out with some lady friends shopping. He was just as glad to be alone because he wanted to think, to concentrate. He was a victim of nervous anticipation, praying the White House would call on him to help pressure some member or members of Congress to vote for St. Clair. If what Kornilevski said was true, the White House already had information powerful enough to sway the members they needed to elect St. Clair. He and his government would be overjoyed, which was saying a lot for Her Britannic Majesty's government and its ambassador to Washington, both extremely reserved diplomatic entities as a rule. If some information was given to him, he could act. He could break out of the immobility that tortured him since the election, which brought with it Norwalk's speech, seeming to give the election to Thurston. He found intolerable the possibility that he might be excluded from playing a part in the important machinations currently afoot in Washington. This, more than anything, greatly annoyed the ambassador's delicate sensibility.

After lunch, the ambassador drank two glasses of Colosia Oloroso, a sweet sherry from Jerez he indulged in after meals. He was about to have a third out of sheer frustration when his telephone rang.

"Yes?" he snapped, snatching up the receiver with a quickness that shocked his secretary.

"Mr. Slanetti's secretary at the White House has called, my Lord. He requests an appointment with your Lordship a

half hour from now.”

“Grant it,” he said.

“But your Lordship has—”

“I don’t care. Cancel it!”

“Very good, my Lord.”

He went back to the sideboard with a hearty smile and poured a third glass of the Colosia.

* * *

At that moment, Slanetti was sitting with Lamar Perryman in his office in the Capitol.

“I’m glad to see you come on over, sir,” said the speaker.

“I’m always happy to visit the opposition, Mr. Speaker,” said Slanetti with a broad smile. “I hope that you were pleased with your interview with the President the other day.”

“I’m always pleased with any interview the President allows a humble congressman.”

“I’ve come to deliver specifics to you regarding two members we would like your help with.”

Perryman rubbed his hands together with a wily smile and leaned over the desk.

“That’s what I’ve been waiting for, sir – specifics.”

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Chapter 14

THE BRIEFCASE

Ellsworth placed a call to Kornilevski to tell him that Slanetti was coming in a few minutes.

Kornilevski was just returning from his meeting with Deaver Moldow. They agreed not to tell Slanetti that they were discussing any of these matters privately.

Kornilevski, after talking to Ellsworth, was even more convinced of Keystone's depth and value.

He called in his first secretary and ordered him to fly to New York personally to pick up a large amount of U.S. dollars waiting for him in the Russian Mission to the U.N. He was told to bring it back in the diplomatic pouch and to deliver it himself to Kornilevski that night.

*** * ***

About 7 P.M. that evening, Eric Stathis drove to the White House from his home in McLean. He stopped long enough to look in the computerized night register, which he had to sign. Slanetti visited in the evenings more often than he imagined he did. He used his own key to open his office. He went in and sat. If he called the guard to open Slanetti's office across the hall, he risked the guard's mentioning it in his nightly duty report, a common security practice. He didn't see how to get around it. He took a breath and punched a button on his intercom.

“Yes, sir.”

"Come to my office, please."

Stathis hurriedly got out some papers and pretended to be busy with them when the soldier on duty came in. He put down his pen and rubbed his eyes, feigning weariness.

“Would you open Phil Slanetti’s office for me, please? I left a file in there when I was talking to him this afternoon and I can’t work without it.”

The soldier, he knew, would never consider questioning the President’s COS.

“Yes, sir,” said the soldier.

Stathis put down his pen when the soldier left and listened. He heard the guard’s keys jangle and the door opening. After unlocking it, the guard closed the door and returned to Stathis’s office. Stathis took up his pen and doodled on some papers.

“Just call if I can help with anything else, sir.”

“Thank you,” said Stathis, not looking up.

As soon as he couldn’t hear the soldier’s footsteps, Stathis hopped out of his chair and went to Slanetti’s office, closing the hallway door quietly behind him. Inside, he went through the outer office into Slanetti’s private office and turned on the lights.

Every file in both offices was locked. The secretary’s desk was locked. Stathis went through the trashcans but found nothing of interest.

The only thing he found was an empty file on Slanetti’s desk. The label interested him. It read, “McARDLE, HARRY; NEW MEXICO: KEYSTONE.”

He sat down in Slanetti’s chair after looking through the two offices and finding nothing but the empty file folder that told him nothing. He looked at it with a frown. He could find nothing to explain Slanetti’s recent absences.

Finally, he leaned back and looked at the desk drawers. He hadn’t tried them yet, assuming they, of all things, would be locked. He tugged on the center top drawer and to his surprise it opened, making a sound that startled him.

Besides the usual desk equipment, he found two other files. They read the same way that the one on the desk read. They were files on Deaver Moldow and Victor

Berman: both were empty. He threw them back in the desk drawer and shut it.

Keystone, he thought, *Keystone*.

He punched the intercom and summoned the guard, meeting the guard at the door as he waved a file folder he'd brought with him from his office.

"Found it. Thanks. You can lock it up."

"Yes, sir," said the guard, engaging the deadbolt and moving away.

Back in his own office Stathis looked at his computer and brought up all the code names in the White House staff manual and scrolled through it. There was no code name "Keystone" designation in it. He knew there wouldn't be. He wrote the manual himself.

What the hell is Keystone?

He recalled the frequency with which Slanetti's signature appeared in the night register. He decided to wait a little longer in his own office to see if Slanetti returned that night.

* * *

At that moment Slanetti was talking to Kornilevski who'd been telling him that Deaver Moldow would be calling with his decision the next morning and how much his government appreciated Slanetti's work to elect St. Clair.

"I am very happy that your government is pleased. I will tell the President."

"I have something here which my government wishes you to have as a token of its appreciation," Kornilevski smiled as he lifted a briefcase onto his desk.

They'd already gone over the new target Kornilevski was to contact and Slanetti wasn't expecting any further business, much less a gift.

"I don't understand, Mr. Ambassador."

"Just consider this a token," he said, opening the briefcase. Slanetti stared wide-eyed at the case full of cash.

"You want to give this to *me*?"

"Yes."

"Why? I'm merely carrying out the orders of the President in the Keystone matter," he said. "It would be wrong to accept this money."

Kornilevski shrugged.

"Then I apologize for offering it," he said, scarcely touching the lid of the briefcase with one finger and causing it to drop closed. Slanetti's face fell a little as the money was lost to his view. Kornilevski caught this flash of humanity in the cold Slanetti. It pleased him.

"It's not as though I am trying to bribe you, Phil. That's a little too cloak and dagger for these times."

"You might say the same thing about Keystone, Mr. Ambassador. But such things do, on occasion, happen."

"I admit that is true. It can hardly be denied."

Slanetti had the image of all that money in his mind. He had been offered a few thousand before to use his influence, but he'd never been offered a suitcase full of money. It surprised and pleased him that Kornilevski and the Kremlin thought him so valuable.

"You don't want anything in exchange for the money?"

Kornilevski sighed heavily, as though talking to a child.

"Oh, my, no," he said, slowly shaking his head from side to side, "you have helped my government immeasurably by doing what your own government has requested of you. You are intimately aware of the close relations between our two governments, of our mutual desire to see Mr. St. Clair elected." He indicated the briefcase before him. "This is merely a token of our appreciation—nothing more."

"How much is it?"

"\$500,000."

Slanetti leaned back and thought quickly. He was planning to leave government service as soon as Norwalk

left office, even if St. Clair replaced him and offered him a plum job in the new administration. Not even his wife knew he had made the decision. He had several lucrative offers from New York waiting for his decision.

He knew Kornilevski was lying. *A token*, thought Slanetti. *Sure it was*. Such money was almost always paid back in one form or another. Though he saw no logical reason why he shouldn't take the money and shut up. By the time the Russians decided to follow it up with pressure and more money and the threat of exposure for whatever reasons they had in mind, he would have left government and hidden the money safely. He knew he could hide the money. He'd seen too many ill-advised methods used by bungling congressmen and senators that he easily detected over the years. He was an expert on the dark side of Washington. He knew the ins and outs of graft and bribery. Slanetti was an expert in total corruption. He was perfectly confident that he knew such things as well as the Russians did.

“Thank your government for me, Mr. Ambassador. I have many uses for the money.”

"It gives me great pleasure to be helpful to you, Phil."

Slanetti nodded, shook hands, and left Kornilevski. When he got to the street outside, now carrying two briefcases, he looked left and then right, half expecting to be cuffed by the FBI.

But it was no set up.

He'd passed that test. Now it was just a matter of waiting to see what the big Russian bear wanted from him.

* * *

Returning to the White House, Slanetti went through security and headed into the West Wing.

Stathis heard him coming down the hall. He had his coat ready, slipped it on and left his office, locking the door as Slanetti was opening his.

"Hello, Phil. What brings you to work so late?" he asked, coming down the hall. "I see you've even got two briefcases," Stathis laughed. "You *are* busy."

"That's right, Eric," said Slanetti, feeling butterflies in his stomach for the first time since he was a kid. "It's nothing. Was at dinner with someone and just wanted to drop some papers off before going home."

Slanetti went inside his office, leaving the door open. He couldn't really close it in Stathis's face. He couldn't and wouldn't risk insulting him. He hoped Stathis would go away, but he came in, talking jovially, following him into his inner office. Slanetti sat behind his desk, putting the two briefcases on the floor beside his chair.

"I've missed you at the staff meetings, Phil," said Stathis, watching as Slanetti smoothly picked up the empty file folder on his desk and put it inside the top drawer.

"Oh, I've been busy with that appropriations bill. The President decided he wanted to get on with it now instead of waiting for the new session. We weren't too prepared for that so it's been a bit of a rush."

"Have you got a copy of the legislation, Phil?"

The request hit Slanetti hard. He wasn't sure if he had it or not. He picked up one of the briefcases and put it on his desk, opening it towards him. Staring him in the face was \$500,000 in small bills. He quickly snapped the briefcase shut and smiled over it at Stathis, who stood on the other side of the desk, unable to see inside the case.

"Must be in the other one," Slanetti managed to say with a smile to Stathis. He lifted up the briefcase and hunted around in it, finally finding a copy. He handed it over to Stathis.

"Thanks, Phil. I'll look over it tonight and give my suggestions to you tomorrow."

"I'll appreciate that, Eric."

"Things'll get a little better around here when we find out who the new President will be."

"I hope so," said Slanetti. Stathis watched him lock every drawer in his desk. They'd been left open by accident.

"Have you had much luck getting any members to change over?" Stathis asked. Slanetti looked up so sharply at him that Stathis was inwardly surprised at his reaction to such a normal question. What else would be more normal for the aide for congressional liaison to be doing than trying to convince members of Congress to vote Republican, no matter what the issue? Stathis looked on St. Clair's bid to be President as being no more (from the White House viewpoint) than any other measure the White House was seeking to have enacted.

"A couple seem to be teetering, but it does look pretty dim," said Slanetti, recovering himself, aware that his heart was beating unnecessarily fast.

"Delamar and Foster must have been good news," said Stathis.

"Damn right, Eric. They're a good start. We're just trying to build on them," said Slanetti, who told himself there was no way on earth Stathis could be aware of his part in their "change of mind."

Slanetti stood up and picked up the briefcase with the money in it, leaving the other one beside his chair.

"It's been a long day, Eric," he said, sighing.

"I know. Me, too," said Stathis, and they both left to go home.

* * *

The next morning, Slanetti's first call was from Ambassador Kornilevski.

"This is Phil Slanetti."

"The Keystone fits the arch."

He replaced his receiver and marked Deaver Moldow off the list. Wisconsin would go for St. Clair.

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Chapter 15

FOLLOWING LUCY

When Gargrave saw Derek Gilbertson open the door to Room 9 at the Biscayne Inn, he knew he'd hit pay dirt. Gilbertson quickly closed the door behind Lucy Azzinaro after kissing her quickly on the lips. She'd thrown one arm around his neck when they kissed. (The other held a thick briefcase she brought from her car.)

Gargrave knew that somewhere close by would be the tail who had followed Gilbertson to the seedy motel on 67th and Biscayne.

Gargrave looked longingly at the little restaurant on the corner, the Blue Collar, where he'd eaten several times. (He was partial to the pork shoulder and the roasted beets and goat cheese.) Though the flophouse motels along this stretch were still rundown, high-end restaurants had been opening as the area slowly revitalized. Still, he had not followed Lucy Azzinaro to find her meeting Gilbertson in Danny Serfer's trendy Blue Collar. That would have been one thing. It was entirely another matter to find her meeting him in the seedy hooker motel attached to it. This was not the kind of place one expected to see a guy like Derek Gilbertson.

But here he was, and here he was meeting with none other than a "colleague" who worked in the same law firm as he did. Gargrave was very curious about what might be in that briefcase. It was obvious Lucy was there to get laid—a quickie on her lunch hour—but she wouldn't have brought her briefcase from the trunk of her car if there hadn't been something in it she wanted to show to Gilbertson. It obviously wasn't something she could show him in the office. Besides fucking, they were doing a little business in that room.

He called Jack's cell.

"Yep," came Jack's voice.

"I'm at a little motel on Biscayne where Lucy just met Derek Gilbertson. When he opened the door and kissed her, he already had his suit jacket off."

"Jesus Christ," said Jack. "She's feeding him everything she's been giving us."

"Yes, sir, looks that way."

"I thought he was fucking that hot Wilma Kassman from the Kremlin Club."

"He is," said Gargrave. "Our boy gets around."

"He certainly does," said Jack. Derek had been married to Jack's old girlfriend, Ramona's eldest daughter, Raven, but they'd been divorced for a couple of years.

"This makes you wonder how good the information she's giving us might be," said Gargrave.

"Yes. If she's in on the deal with Derek, she might be hiding more than she's sharing. Even so, some of the stuff she gives us has to be good because she couldn't hide it all. Ramona would fire her if I let her know she was feeding us shit."

"True," said Gargrave.

"We won't tell Ramona about Derek till we get past all this. Then Ramona can handle Lucy any way she wants."

"Yes, sir."

"And Derek still doesn't know we're on to him and his buddies."

"No."

"But he'll certainly want to know why Ramona's giving us access to all those wires run through the office."

"Yes."

"OK, Gargrave. I'll see you back at the house."

"Very good, sir."

* * *

Less than an hour later, as Derek opened the door for Lucy to leave, he quickly pulled his shirt on.

"That was great, Lucy. You're the best."

She smiled up at him, giving him a big farewell kiss.

"No, you're the best. I wish we could do this more often."

"We'll have plenty of time together—after this is all over," he smiled.

"We'd better," she said, the hint of a veiled threat in her voice.

He smiled as he eased the door closed.

The second she was gone the smile fell from his face. He was glad to be rid of her.

The sex had always been great with Lucy. He'd always thought that the sex was usually better with women who weren't dynamite lookers. They had something to prove the real beauties didn't. Time after time he'd found this concept to be true. It was certainly true in Lucy's case. The woman was a ferocious tiger in the sack, a take-no-prisoners fucking machine. Thirty minutes with her was like a workout in a gym.

Lucy had come to him as soon as Ramona had hooked her up with Jack, right after that lunch Ramona had with her at Monty's in the Grove where she introduced her to Jack. They'd been sleeping together before that, and she was in on a little piece of the action he had with Howard Rothman.

He'd been able to limit some of the information flow to Jack, but not all of it. Jack was smart enough to figure out if Lucy held back too much. Why Jack was interested in where the money went was beyond Derek's imagination. Was there a client that somehow played into all this? Why had Ramona put Jack onto this business in the first place?

He'd quickly got hold of Howard Rothman and told him about Jack, and Rothman suggested they cool their activity for a while until Jack went away. Rothman said he'd slow

things down at the bank while Derek found another law firm to handle some of their business. It was important at this stage to spread the business around so it would be easier to hide.

He went into the bathroom to take a quick shower to wash away Lucy's scent. Unlike her, he could take as long as he wanted on his lunch hour. The last thing he wanted was to go back to the office smelling of Lucy Azzinaro's cheap perfume.

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Chapter 16

ALBARIÑO & SHRIMP SALAD

"I'm so glad you called me, Sofia," said Ramona Fuentes as the waiter gently eased the chair up behind her at a corner table in the Mizner Room of the St. Clair Island Club in Flagler Hall.

The room had been named after the architect Addison Mizner, who remodeled the room in the late 1920s in the Spanish Colonial Revival style that had made him so famous in Palm Beach and Boca Raton.

"Some wine, Señora Fuentes?" a second waiter asked.

"Of course. I see you ordered my favorite, Sofia: Albariño."

"It's my favorite, too," said Sofia, looking slightly wan as the waiter refilled her glass. "We'll order in a few minutes," said Sofia, a signal to leave them alone.

Ramona noticed there were no guests seated near them, which she took as an indication that Sofia wanted to have a private conversation with her. Sofia didn't waste any time.

"I've got throat cancer, Ramona. It's as simple as that."

"No," Ramona said in a low whisper. "I'm so sorry, Sofia."

Sofia nodded.

"I know. And I believe you," she said. "I wanted to have this meeting before I lose my voice, which they say I will sooner or later as the cancer spreads."

"It's not treatable?" Ramona asked as she picked up her glass and took a healthy gulp of the chilled Spanish wine.

"Stage 4. We're going to do some radiation, but I told them I wouldn't do the chemo. I'd rather have a few good months than spend my last weeks vomiting into the toilet every two hours."

"I'd rather Sam be with a good Cuban woman and not that Washington socialite."

Ramona laughed.

"I hear you."

"Sam will be down this afternoon. We're seeing the chief of the Oncology Department at the University of Miami in the morning. He's bringing Lord Ellsworth with him."

"I understand. Does Jack know any of this? Or Rafael?"

"No. We haven't told anybody. We want to get the election behind us."

"That's understandable."

"We'll tell Jack and Rafael in a couple of days. Rafael's at sea. Gets back tonight."

Sofia reached for the bottle of Albariño. As the waiter rushed over to pour it, she shook her head for him to go away. She refilled their glasses.

Ramona looked out through the southwest wall made up of ten sets of side-by-side ornately carved French doors leading to the piazza that overlooked Biscayne Bay.

Around the corner of the building, Jack and Babe came into view walking across the wide lawn. They strolled hand-in-hand, like college sweethearts or newlyweds, and as they passed close by the dining room, Sofia and Ramona could hear them laughing. They moved on, crossing one of the greens on the golf course on their way toward Jack's house on the far side.

"They really make a nice couple, don't they?" said Sofia.

"They made a nice couple when the other girl was Raven, so I'm reserving judgment."

Sofia laughed so hard she put down her glass of wine and coughed. Ramona reached over and patted her on the back.

"Well, it was funny," said Sofia.

"I know it was," Ramona laughed. "So sad it's funny."

Ramona was pretty sure Sofia had no idea about Rafael and Antonia, and she decided to keep it to herself. Sofia had

enough on her mind right now, and would have more than enough to worry about as she battled the cancer over the next few months.

“Pretty out there, isn’t it?” said Sofia.

“So restful.”

“I think we have more rooms here at Flagler Hall than they do in the White House. The main building, of course.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“When I think about it, I’m almost glad I won’t be First Lady. I’ve never been a big fan of Sam’s political career. The last thing I ever wanted to be was a President’s wife. All the things you have to do. Being a governor’s wife is bad enough.”

“I know. Imagine being First Lady. You wouldn’t have a minute to yourself,” Ramona agreed, but inside she was filled with excitement at the prospect of being with Sam again, and with his widow’s blessing!

The waiter slipped over at Sofia’s nod.

“I think we’ll order now. What’ll you have, Ramona?”

“Oh, I always get the same thing. They always make the best shrimp salad here.”

“I know. It’s my recipe,” said Sofia. “Waiter, two shrimp salads.”

“Si, Señora.”

“And, oh, what the hell—another bottle of this Albariño.”
Ramona smiled. She was going to miss her old friend.

* * *

An hour and a half later, Club General Manager Santiago Ravelo came walking swiftly toward their table, bending down solicitously to Sofia.

“The Governor’s helicopter has just landed, Señora,” he said.

“Gracias, Santi,” said Sofia. “We could hear it shaking the paintings off the walls. We finished a while ago. Just been gossiping. Let’s go out and meet them, Ramona.”

“Of course.”

Waiters on both sides sprang over to hold their chairs as the ladies got up.

The Mizner Room gave onto the Great Hall where everyone entered after passing under the portico. They came out just as Sam came into the room followed by Lord Ellsworth and several aides, followed immediately by Jack, Babe and Carlos Rodriguez.

Sam saw Sofia and hurried over to kiss her on the cheek.

“How are you, my dear?”

“Oh, fine, fine. Just had lunch with Ramona.”

Sam leaned over and kissed Ramona on the cheek.

“And how are you, Ramona?”

“Wonderful, Sam. Good to see you.”

“Mami!” Babe called out, rushing over to kiss her. “I didn’t know you were here. Hello, Mrs. St. Clair,” she added, leaning over to kiss Sofia.

“Hello, my dear.”

Lord Ellsworth stepped forward.

“Very good to see both of you,” he said, kissing each lady on the hand.

“Harold, it’s been far too long,” said Sofia, ever the gracious host.

“Lord Ellsworth,” said Ramona.

“Ramona, a pleasure, as always.”

Jack came over and gave both Sofia and Ramona kisses.

“Oh, look who’s here,” Jack said, looking over Ellsworth’s shoulder.

They all turned to see Gargrave come through the main entrance. He came over, said hello to everyone and gave Lord Ellsworth a hug.

“Uncle Harold, good to see you.”

“And very good to see you, too, Vernon.”

"Carlos," said Babe. "What are you doing here?"

"We just came in about an hour ago with Mrs. Pearson."

"How about that," said Sam. "We've got two First Ladies under the same roof," he laughed.

Maybe three, thought Ramona.

As people broke into little groups, Babe talking to her mother, Gargrave talking to his uncle and Sam and Sofia talking to Santi, Jack turned to Carlos.

"So, you got the old lady set up."

"Yeah, she's up resting. It was a sudden trip. She wanted to see Sofia before she went up to Washington."

"Sofia might not be going up to Washington for a while—not feeling well."

"Yeah, she doesn't look so good."

"So, you'll be here at the Club for how long?"

"A week, maybe longer. Depends on the lady. She changes her mind at the drop of a hat."

"Then we'll get to spend some time when you're off."

"You got it, definitely."

"Dad says he's only down for a couple of days. Then I'll go back up with him for a day or so."

"Everybody, listen up!" Sam called out and everybody stopped talking. "We're going to have a big party tonight. We've got the former First Lady here, the future First Lady here and Lord Ellsworth. Santi here's going to put together a nice little affair for us and everybody here has to attend. Babe, call your sisters. I want them here, too."

Babe nodded. She could just imagine what the party would be like having Skye Billings in the same room with Jack. But, whatever Sam demanded, Sam usually got. And what he was going to get was fireworks.

Chapter 17

DINNER AT 8

Matt met Patricia for lunch at Obelisk on P Street. The night before she told him various places in the world she liked. She liked Mexico, Cannes and New Orleans. She said she wanted to go to New Orleans with him someday and suggested they lunch at Antoine's, famous for its Cajun food.

"What time can you come over tonight?" she said to him across the table in a corner of the restaurant.

"You can come to me this time, baby," he smiled.

"How?" she stared at him. "My reputation," she flounced.

"I've sent Dave and Liz back to Wyoming. Things are slow enough here so I told them to go back for a holiday while they have time before the new session starts."

She smiled at him, happiness written on her face.

"Will they be gone long enough for us to slip away for a couple of days?" she asked.

They'd already talked about making a little getaway trip before the session started and before Sue came to town.

"That's still a little tough. I don't know where to tell people I'm going."

"You can make up something, Matt," she urged.

"Looking at you makes figuring out a way easy."

"When, when, when?" she nagged, laughing.

"Take it easy, we'll figure out something," he laughed back.

That night Patricia came to the Hilton and walked into the lobby unnoticed (except by a Secret Service agent). She went into the elevator. The agent watched the indicator stop at 14. He knew she would be going to suite 14K. He jotted the time in his little notebook.

Matt had a good lobster dinner already waiting.

"For me?" she said, looking at the spread. He helped her take her coat off and rubbed her back as he kissed her.

"Yes, you came just in time. I thought it would get cold."

"You could sit under the table and it would get hot again," she smiled into his eyes.

"Are you saying I'm oversexed?"

"You *are* a Scorpio, that's enough for me."

"You don't believe any of that bullshit, do you?"

"Of course not," she said unconvincingly, walking over to the room service table and picking up one of the tops of the covered dishes and smelling the hot food, looking down at the white lobster meat and creamy yellow melted butter.

"I don't believe you."

"Good."

Matt opened a bottle of Chassagne Montrachet.

"The waiter said this would go great with the lobster," he said, pouring her a glass.

"A *grand cru*—very expensive," she raised her eyebrows. "Can you afford such luxuries on a congressman's salary?"

"Sure. I sold my vote to St. Clair for a hundred grand."

They both laughed and sat down beside each other to eat. He kept one hand on her just about all the time, either rubbing her leg or her back.

"How can I eat with you doing that?"

"I don't know," he said. "How can you?"

"I ought to put you on the other side of the table."

In bed later, they were lying naked on their sides facing each other. She ran her fingers lightly up the side of his leg and torso and he groaned with a fine smile on his face.

"You *know* how to touch a man."

"I know how to touch Matt Hawkins."

"It's nice."

"Sexually, compared to you, I'm lost in the woods."

"You learn fast, my dear, and there're some basic things a woman either knows or doesn't know. You know them. A

man can tell." He leaned up on his elbow, supporting his head on his shoulder and resting his flat hand on her smooth stomach. "I love to touch your skin."

"And I love for you to touch it." She leaned up and kissed his chest and shoulder. He rolled over on top of her, his penis hard against her.

"It's hot," she whispered into his ear.

"There's only one way to cool it off," he said.

"You might try sticking it in a vat of cold water," she chuckled.

"You're handier."

"I'm glad," she said, slapping him lightly on the face.

Afterwards, they lay quietly between the sheets, soaking wet.

"Shit," said Matt.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I have to call Sue. I meant to do it earlier, but I forgot."

"It's all right," she said, sitting straight up and tossing her mussed hair back over her shoulder.

He flung off the covers and sat up with his back to her and picked up his cell phone to place the call to Wyoming. She held the covers around her and looked at his back.

"I'm sorry I can't come back right now, Sue," he was saying. "The leadership and Crampton both say I ought to stay here in town. Liz and Dave are gone for a few days ... that's right, I wanted to let them have the time while they can before the session starts ... of course, I miss you, honey."

Patricia tossed the covers off and moved up on the bed, sitting on his pillow so she could look at his face. He turned to her and smiled. She had her legs bent up close to her chest. She wiggled her toes beneath the firm muscles of his ass and he smiled and rubbed his hand up and down her leg and thigh.

"You know I would if I could, Sue ..."

She leaned closer and kissed his hard collarbone and down behind the ridge it formed, caressing his neck and scratchy chin and lips when he wasn't speaking into the phone.

"How's your mother?"

She looked over his shoulder at his crotch where he was limp amidst all the hair. She enjoyed looking at him. He was totally uninhibited before her and this made her respond the same way. He rubbed her back as he talked, holding her close. She fingered the hair on his thighs and watched his face smile. She followed his gaze to his crotch and they both smiled as he got hard again.

Then she cupped his balls in a hand and gently squeezed them. He wanted to laugh and pretended to wince. He reached down and pinched her ass and she gave a little yelp and let go of him.

"That was nothing—just the room service waiter clearing the dishes," he said, smiling at Patricia, who raised her long heavy brows at his lie. She leaned her chin on his shoulder and noticed he'd gone limp again. As soon as she touched his thigh, however, he got hard.

"All right, I'll talk to you again in a couple of days. Yes, we'll talk about that. Maybe you can come for Thanksgiving," he glanced at Patricia, who looked startled. "I'm not sure, we'll see how your mother is. All right—I love you. Good night."

He stood up and faced Patricia, his strong hard penis almost in her face. She leaned back against the headboard, her arms around her legs close to her chest again.

"Are you trying to expose me?" he said, standing with his hands on his hips.

"You look pretty exposed already, mister," she said. He smiled, still hard. He hopped on the bed, standing first on his knees in front of her, then crossing his legs and sitting on them. His penis was like a tall bare tree rising from a jungle of hair.

"You're looking very handsome tonight, Santi," said Raven.

"Thank you, Ms. Fuentes," Santiago said with a bow. They moved off down the hall.

"I love the Blue Onyx Room," said Raven in a whisper.

"I've never been in it."

"Just you wait."

* * *

Jack and Babe walked hand-in-hand across the 16th green toward Flagler Hall.

"Oh, look—there's Skye and Raven getting out of their car."

"Can't wait for this dinner," said Jack with a heaving sigh.

"Really?"

"Yeah. For this dinner to be over with."

Babe laughed.

"Oh, it can't be all that bad."

"Maybe it's the karma. Bad, good or indifferent, there's just trouble when you get a St. Clair together with a Fuentes."

Babe stopped and crossed her arms across her gorgeous chest.

"And what exactly is *that* supposed to mean? We're doing OK, aren't we?"

Jack held up his hands defensively.

"Hey, I don't mean anything by it. It's just that—"

"Just what?"

"I don't know. Maybe we're cursed." He started laughing.

"Cursed!" Babe started laughing, too. She came over and put her arms around his neck. "Mister, all I know is I feel blessed every minute I'm with you. We'll have to go down to

a little bodega in Little Havana and get a Santería priest to bless us."

Jack took her by the hand and led her across the green.

"C'mon, my pretty little witch. Let's go see what trouble we can make."

* * *

"I would've driven, Mami," said Antonia.

"Not with both of us drinking," said Ramona. "It's better to have Lencho drive us, right, Lencho?" she asked the driver of the long wheelbase BMW 7 Series.

"Si, Señora," said Lencho.

"That's why I keep this car, Antonia, so your ex-Federal judge mother doesn't go to jail for DUI."

"Oh, Mami."

Ramona scooted over a few inches and lowered her voice.

"You can always go home with Rafael if you want," she said.

"When do you think's a good time to tell everybody about me and Rafael?"

Ramona paused a few seconds.

"I think *never* is a good time to tell everybody, but I don't expect any of my daughters to heed the advice of their poor mother."

"It's got to come out sometime," said Antonia.

"After your sister caught you kissing Rafael at a back table at Il Mulino, I don't think you'll have to wait long for it to get around, do you?"

"She's such a bitch, Raven."

"Don't talk about your sister that way," Ramona said under her breath, although, when Ramona thought about it

Ellsworth walked over and patted Gargrave on the shoulder.

"I didn't mean to dwell on the past, Vernon."

"It's all right, Uncle. It's just that he's been a good anchor for me, gave me a helping hand when I needed it most."

"You did save his life when you were in the SBS."

"He saved mine as well."

"I know he did. Your mother and Allison and I will forever be grateful to him for doing that, don't think we won't. Enough of the past. It's so very good to see you. Why don't you ever visit me in the Embassy?"

"There's so much to keep me busy down here, Uncle."

"I should visit you here more often. The weather's so glorious compared to Washington."

"It's only nice in the spring in Washington," said Gargrave. "The summers are too hot."

"And the winters—"

They said this at the same time as they laughed:

"Just like England!"

"Your mother's coming over to visit us in May, so perhaps you will make it up then."

"Yes, I got an email from her about that a couple of weeks ago. Why don't we split her visit with a trip here? I'll come up there for a few days in Washington with you, and then we'll all come back down and have a few days in Miami. She's never been here before."

"That's a very good idea, Vernon."

"Why didn't Aunt Allison come down with you?"

"Oh, she had too many other things going on. Just as well. I can avail myself of some of that rare Cognac I know Sam keeps under lock and key here without Allison dragging me up to bed before I'm ready. And do you feel that glorious breeze coming through the windows?"

Gargrave looked at the windows his uncle had thrown open. The diaphanous drapes fluttered in the breeze. Stars

twinkled in the sky above the surging waters of Biscayne Bay.

“Yes, I get that almost every day, Uncle. And every night.”

“Shall we go down? Mustn’t keep the future President of the United States waiting.”

“Do you really think he’ll make it? All the news reports say it’s tilted in favor of Senator Thurston.”

“Well, we’re very happy that’s what the media keep saying. Those of us working on behalf of the St. Clair candidacy have every confidence he’ll pull it off at the last minute.”

“Why would you say that?”

Ellsworth thought about the dossiers on Aaron Macklin of Utah and Victor Berman of New Mexico supplied to him by Phil Slanetti just before his trip. Both looked to Ellsworth like easy marks.

“Well, we can’t be sure, Vernon. Let’s just say we do our best and pray a lot.”

* * *

“The stairs or the elevator, honey?” asked Governor St. Clair as he and Sofia left the master suite on the southwest corner of the second floor offering an unpanelled view of downtown Miami in the distance.

“I think the stairs, Sam. I feel much better today.”

He took her arm and led her out of their bedroom into the drawing room and out into the open-air promenade that led around the rooms of the second floor to the grand staircase on the other side.

“I see you had lunch with Ramona today.”

“Yes. We finished just before your chopper landed.”

“You tell her?”

"No," Sofia lied. "I just hadn't seen her in a long time and we needed to catch up." She didn't see any need to tell Sam what she and Ramona talked about. He would find out in good time.

"Rafael's back and he told Jack he'd be in port for three days unless an emergency sends them out again."

"Then we'll have to tell them. Maybe tomorrow at breakfast."

They came to the high wide marble staircase with a straight shot down to the Great Hall. No landings, just a majestic graceful drop to the ground floor.

"It's awful to think that Henry Flagler fell down these same steps in 1913."

"And died because of it. I'm mindful of the old man every single time I get to the top of these steps."

"Speak to Jack tonight," she said as they started down. "Tell him we want to see him tomorrow if he can manage it for breakfast, but not with Babe. If she's still at his house, we can get the boys together later in the day."

"All right." Sam held the rail as he went down. "You know, we still have to meet those doctors at the university tomorrow."

"Sam, let's not go over this again. We're going to go ahead with the radiation, but stop short of the chemo, OK."

"OK. Whatever you want."

"That's what I want."

"OK."

"One other thing I want," she said.

"What's that, my little sweet pea?"

"I want this dinner to go off without a hitch."

"I know," he laughed. "The words were barely out of my mouth before I realized what I'd said. We'll cross our fingers," Sam said as they reached the bottom.

Waiting for them were Rafael and Santiago.

Rafael, out of uniform and wearing a dark suit, rushed up and gave his mother a kiss and a big hug. He shook hands

with Sam.

"Oh, darling," said Sofia, "you look so handsome." She stroked his black hair slicked back over his head.

"And you, Mother? Are you feeling better?"

"Oh, much, much better."

"Most of your guests are in the Blue Onyx Room, Governor," said Santiago, standing to the side.

"Thanks, Santi. Let's get a drink. We're gonna need it before the night's out."

Santiago led the way to the Blue Onyx Room but on the way they passed the elevator just as the doors opened. Mrs. Pearson, taking those tentative baby steps the very old often do, hobbled out, her arm firmly grasping Agent Rodriguez's elbow.

"Well, well," Sam said. "I'll take over from here, Carlos."

"Yes, Governor," said Carlos.

"Hello, Sam! Sofia!" Mrs. Pearson called out, her face lighting up when she saw them.

Now Sam had a lady on each arm and he made the most of it.

"I've got a former First Lady on one arm and a future First Lady on the other. What could make a man happier?"

"Oh, Sam! You're such a card," howled Mrs. Pearson.

"How are you feeling, Sofia?"

"Fine, Lydia, much better, thank you."

Sofia wondered how bad she must look if Lydia Pearson was asking after her health. Lydia, who at 87 had already survived two strokes and a heart attack, looked much chirpier than she did, and she was only 67.

Carlos and another Secret Service agent followed behind the trio as they followed Santiago to the Blue Onyx Room. Two other agents on the St. Clair detail followed behind them.

* * *

The Blue Onyx Room was only opened on rare occasions when Governor St. Clair entertained privately. It was located on the southwest corner of the first floor, directly below the master suite St. Clair shared with Sofia.

Since December was high season in Miami, St. Clair had sent Santiago to pass the word to the various captains of industry hanging around the bar to join him and his wife in the room for drinks before the “family” dined.

St. Clair walked in with Sofia and Lydia on either side and Santiago leading the way through the ornate heavy double-doors that two formally dressed waiters pulled open for them.

“Governor and Mrs. St. Clair and Mrs. Pearson!” Santiago announced in a booming voice, standing aside for them to enter.

Everyone in the room applauded. St. Clair held up an arm for silence.

“I’m reminded of that time every year when the Sergeant at Arms walks into the House Chamber before the State of the Union Address and loudly proclaims, ‘Mr. Speaker, the President of the United States!’ I think if Santi wants to relocate after I’m President, I will help him get that job.”

Everyone laughed and the applause erupted again.

Beaumont St. Clair, who’d bought the island from Mrs. Flagler in 1914, was an avid collector of onyx, and it was in this room that he husbanded his precious collection. Though specimens of onyx can be found in almost every shade of every color, blue and purple are the most rare. Hundreds of *objets d’art* made with varying shades of onyx decorated the sumptuous room, from the black onyx floor to the extraordinary blue onyx walls.

Everyone got a drink and then meandered around the room looking at the rare collection. Waiters opened the

doors to the terrace outside, allowing guests to move in and out of the room at their leisure.

Jack noticed that Raven and Skye found a corner of the room and pretty much remained there the whole time. Rafael and Antonia could be seen on the opposite side of the room, heads close in private conversation. Babe roamed the room freely, hanging mostly with her mother and ignoring her two sisters. He saw Gargrave standing by the entrance to the room with a glass of white wine. He worked his way through the crowd.

"You look like a mortician waiting for them to bring the body in, Gargrave. Can't you lighten up a bit?"

Gargrave hazarded a smile.

"Thank you, sir. I'm just uncomfortable in this company."

"It's your uncle, Gargrave, and you're a guest here just like anybody else, so feel free to relax."

"Is that an order?" Gargrave smiled.

"At least do me the favor of standing at ease."

Jack saw Carlos out in the hall chatting with other agents. He caught his eye and Carlos came into the room.

"Hey, Jack."

"Hi, Carlos."

"Vernon."

"Hello, Carlos."

"Hard at work out there?" asked Jack.

"Tough duty, let me tell you," said Carlos.

"So when are you off? We need to go fishing."

"I've got two days off day after tomorrow."

"Hmm," said Jack. "Got to be back in D.C. then, but Gargrave here can take you out if you want to go."

"Anytime, Carlos," said Gargrave.

After an hour of drinks and passed hors d'oeuvres, Santiago announced dinner. The other guests made their way back to the main barroom in the Club and the family made its way outside.

“The weather’s so nice, Harold,” Sofia said to Ellsworth, “that I thought it would be nice to eat outside on the terrace.”

“You couldn’t have asked for a more perfect night, my dear,” said Ellsworth, taking Sofia’s arm and leading her outside where the staff had set up two tables on the terrace at the edge of the lawn just a few feet from the seawall.

Miami’s downtown skyline shimmered in the distance. Lanterns hung above the tables, festooned from the low branches of a large banyan tree whose canopy spread out over the terrace.

People took their assigned seats and the dinner went off without a single mishap. Sofia had had the foresight to place the Fuentes girls away from each other so Skye and Rafael and Jack weren’t so close they’d get into a scrap.

After dinner, people got up to mill around, most of them heading back into the Blue Onyx Room for dessert and coffee. Jack had made his way down to the seawall and was by himself looking toward the Miami skyline. Skye saw him and went down to stand a few feet away from him. Jack looked over his shoulder.

“Well, hello there, Captain,” said Jack, taking a short pull off a Montecristo and exhaling the pungent aroma into the night air. The Bay waters lapped at the seawall just a couple of feet below them. The tide was high. A concrete ramp a few feet to their left ran down into the water.

“Hello, Jack. How’s everything?”

“Everything’s OK, I guess. You?”

“Good.”

Jack saw Skye was wobbling on the edge of the seawall.

“Why don’t you step off the seawall, Skye? You’ve had too much to drink.”

“Why don’t you fuck off, Jack?”

Jack told himself not to get upset—it was just the liquor talking.

The Governor, Gargrave and Rodriguez saw the two men standing on the seawall.

"Uh-oh," said Rodriguez.

"They don't get along," said St. Clair.

"I know, Governor, I know."

"A shame, too, because they used to be pretty good friends, until—"

There was a pause.

"Until Raven got her hooks into Skye," said a voice behind them.

They both turned and saw Ramona standing there.

"Ramona!"

"Well, it's true. In fact, Sam, you'll remember that Skye and Jack used to be the best of friends until Raven came between them."

"Well, that's true..."

Down on the seawall, Jack and Skye kept it very casual, polite, even distant, as if they could only discuss the weather.

"So, how's my little brother doing working for you on *Fearless*? A good job, I hope."

"He's a competent executive officer. That's about all I'll give him."

"You're being your usual generous self, Skye."

"He's such a dick, that little brother of yours."

"Now, Skye, let's try to be nice. We have the whole family up there eating molten lava cake and drinking café con leche. In twenty minutes we can all go home."

"Well, he is a dick."

"Skye, just shut up, will you?"

"I got a good thing going with Raven and he has to go and fuck everything up by sleeping with Antonia."

Jack took the cigar out of his mouth and looked at the man.

"What did you say?"

"He's fucking Antonia!"

“What happened here?” asked Babe, who was now standing with the others. Rafael and Antonia had made their way down as well.

Rafael went down the ramp and put his bother's arm over his shoulder, hauling him back up onto dry ground.

“Your secret’s safe with me, stud,” Jack whispered to Rafael. “She’s a real cutie.”

"Oh, God," said Rafael. "Is that what started it?"

“Skye Billings doesn’t need anything to start something. Just a wild hair up his ass. Why’d you have to go after a Fuentes girl?” he said in a low voice.

“Well, you have good taste, Jack, and she was the only one left.”

Jack started laughing again until his father came face to face with him.

“I don’t think it’s very funny you ruining our dinner party, Jack?”

Jack held his hands out.

“Me? He took a swing at me, Dad. I didn’t do anything except laugh at something.”

St. Clair turned to the people gathered around.

"All right everybody. Go back to your dessert. The excitement's all over down here."

People started moving away as Club staffers came down with towels to dry off Skye and Jack.

“Listen, boys,” said St. Clair when no one could overhear him. “Need to see both of you tomorrow, just me and Sofia and you two. No girlfriends. Call me if you can do breakfast, but it’s got to be tomorrow, whether early or late, doesn’t matter.”

"But, Dad, I have to—" Rafael started.

"Son, it's important."

"Yes, sir."

"Sure, Dad," said Jack.

* * *

Wrapped in Matt's arms later that night, Patricia wished the evening would never end. He had one leg stretched over her and behind her legs as they faced each other. He moved his leg bringing her closer to him. She thought he had more power in one leg than she had in her whole body. She told him so.

"A woman's powers are just as strong. They're just not as physical."

"I like your power," she cooed, squeezing her hand up between their chests and running it through his hair. He kissed her softly on the forehead and cheek.

"I think I'll have a drink," he said, loosening his legs and getting up.

"Me, too," she said.

He slipped on a pair of white boxers, a little shorter than normal, which fit closer than regular boxers. She liked the little slits in the side of the shorts but preferred seeing him naked. She got up and slipped into the terrycloth robe he held for her. He rubbed his hands briskly up and down her arms.

"Cold?" he asked over her shoulder, kissing her on the back of her neck.

"Not like this."

They went out into the living room, he in his shorts and she in his bathrobe. He went to fix the drinks as she moved over to the terrace. Pulling aside the drapes, she looked out over Washington at night, the city's lights standing out like white pinpricks in the moonlit landscape. The stars and a full moon overhead provided a milk-wash light that seemed to flood everywhere over the city. She opened the sliding doors, both at once, and walked in her bare feet out onto the cold concrete floor of the terrace, folding her arms across herself to keep warm. She leaned over the balcony

“I was kidding, Patricia. We’ll go somewhere the day after the party, when that’s out of the way, say, for a few days.” She hugged him around the neck and kissed him as he laughed. “Don’t you fight for anything?” he asked.

“Not for a trip, just to be with you. I’d fight for that. We can even go into the hills, rent a little cabin and spend some time out of Washington.”

“At least I know who’s on my side.”

“I’m always on your side, Mr. Congressman.” He held her close. He was beginning to feel the subfreezing temperature. She felt his skin and it had lost its warmth, but he didn’t seem visibly affected by it.

"You're freezing, Matt."

"It is a little chilly."

“I’m sorry,” she said with some distress. “Here I am keeping you out here chatting like two housemaids when you’re freezing to death. Let’s go warm up.”

“Motion carries.”

* * *

The next day Matt went by Crampton's office.

"I haven't seen you much since the ball," said Crampton, busy with some papers on his desk.

Matt asked what Crampton thought about the congressmen who'd switched their votes to St. Clair.

“These things are always so fuzzy, you never know what to believe when you hear it. Just various things about why they switched their votes. Things are getting mighty interesting in this town.”

“When’s the next caucus?”

“Tomorrow, if they hold it as scheduled. It was supposed to be a couple of days from now, but they moved it up to tomorrow. Then Perryman got Overton to agree to postpone

it again. Now it's back on. I don't know why. They don't tell shit to a lame duck like me."

"What do you expect to happen?"

"Nothing till it happens—not in this town."

* * *

The caucus was postponed another week. At the end of that week, everything seemed to go smoothly for everyone except Slanetti's targets. Nothing was smooth for them. Slanetti came to rely more and more on three people as liaisons: Ellsworth, Kornilevski and Perryman, all of whom did considerable work for him. Slanetti still had the money from the Russians in a safe at his home. He had an excellent contact in the Cayman Islands through whose good offices he planned to hide the money. He didn't want any slip-ups.

As yet there'd been no trouble from Kornilevski. He made it a point to let everyone know he wasn't ready to leave government service so Kornilevski would think he would be valuable to Russia later on as well as now. If Kornilevski offered him more money between now and January, he decided to take it and add it to what he already had. He could hide \$10 million as easily as he could hide \$500,000.

Slanetti got a good batch of Keystone calls over the next few days. Several men had been approached.

One of them was Wilbur Pettigrew, Republican from Delaware, a distinguished eleven-term congressman of impeccable virtue, which Slanetti found disagreeable, considering what he required of congressmen in the Keystone matter: members with plenty to hide. Pettigrew promised Thurston he'd support him in the contest. All Slanetti could do was to send various people to try to convince him not to vote Democratic. Norwalk had even

met with him once. Slanetti himself had sought to bring him over, not to mention the efforts of his Republican colleagues in the House. The man was immovable. He'd made up his own mind. He was one of the few men in Congress who could afford that rare luxury.

Not so Aaron Macklin, a Republican and seven-term congressman from Layton, Utah. He was in his fifties, had a big, tube-shaped nose and a liver spot on his right cheek. He combed his gray, thinning hair over the back of his head and had a slight space between his two front teeth. Utah was a big copper mining state. Macklin had no personal interest in the copper business there, but employment in his district was depressed owing to the high costs of American labor, production methods and union demands which kept prices high. Slanetti dug up a lead on Macklin two years before which sent him on a brief business trip to South America. There he found out after much searching and quiet investigation that Macklin had been paid off by several large South American copper exporters to use his influence to get the tariff duties against copper lowered. Although he voted against the measure in committee and in the House (it would have been political suicide to support it publicly), he privately lobbied all the members of his committee to vote for it. They understood he came from a state with important mining interests. Now he would owe them a vote when they needed him.

Part of the deal he made with the South American companies took the form of a large amount of money in copper futures—South American copper futures. By secretly speculating in favor of foreign copper against U.S. copper, a large portion of which came from his district, Macklin had made millions.

Ellsworth was the liaison in the case. He told Slanetti that it took Macklin all of fifteen minutes to capitulate, once confronted with the evidence.

The next hit was Victor Berman, a four-term Democrat from Socorro, New Mexico. Slanetti got his information from a traitorous administrative assistant who was no longer on Berman's staff, having left soon after giving Slanetti the information a year ago for a certain sum of money obtained through the Republican National Committee.

Berman was secretly connected with a large uranium mining company back in his state. He used his influence in committee to force the already high price of the rare substance even higher. He also went to great measures to block environmental legislation that would've limited the company's freedom to explore for more ore. Part of the bill demanded an improvement of working conditions in the mines. There'd been a devastating explosion in one of the company's mines that killed several workers and exposed much livestock to harmful radiation. Berman got provisions requiring the improvements excluded from the bill, and the company built him a huge vacation home on 800 acres an hour out of Santa Fe.

In addition to all this, Berman was pulling in about \$250,000 a year from the mining company as part of "consulting fees" conveniently funneled through Berman's former law partner's ex-wife.

Berman was a young man in his mid-thirties with black hair and a dark mustache. He was quite strong-willed, however, and resisted the initial attempt to bring him over. Lord Ellsworth was the contact here. When Ellsworth offered from Slanetti a massive administration effort to push for a future increase in the price of uranium and again threaten exposure within twenty-four hours if he didn't come over, Berman's greed got the better of him and he gave in.

Kornilevski handled Harry McArdle of North Dakota. It was not an easy assignment. The man was so afraid of exposure that he actually hardened his position and refused to vote for St. Clair.

His misdeeds included using his influence during the Iraq War to get his son's wife's company a valuable contract to supply American beer to the troops.

He also was a secret partner in a firm that made faulty armored breastplates for the Army. His dad not only held up the Army plan to move to a new company providing better armor, but squeezed millions in intentional cost overruns out of military appropriations. Kornilevski failed to win him over the first time.

As a back up liaison, Slanetti sent an influential fleet admiral stationed in Washington to see McArdle the second time. Added to the threat of exposure for this illegal influence peddling, the admiral revealed White House knowledge that Billy McArdle, his son, was sleeping with McArdle's second wife, his stepmother. Slanetti had a long list of campaign irregularities for which McArdle could be indicted, but it was the love affair between his son and his wife that had the desired effect and McArdle caved in, frantic that none of this become public knowledge.

Rebecca Isdel of Indiana was a pain in Slanetti's ass. After successive interviews with St. Clair and Norwalk, she pledged to support the Republican over Thurston. But her support was lukewarm, at best. Slanetti had nothing specific on the lady and much preferred the power of the threat of exposure to the power of political argument. She had nothing to lose but White House support in the future. But when you stand to lose your career, you think twice about whatever particular political views you hold. They don't seem quite so precious and inflexible when someone is prepared to throw you to the wolves. That was Slanetti's experience with politicians, anyhow. Thurston, however, continued to see her. He even saw her twice in one day. Slanetti just prayed for her to hold, and he directed St. Clair to keep working on her to reinforce her interview with the President. She was promised various public works in her district and these seemed to please her, but Slanetti was

certain that Thurston had matched their promises one to one. So he just hoped.

Slanetti's great concern right now, just before Thanksgiving, was the Democratic caucus scheduled the next day. Perryman couldn't get Overton to postpone it any longer. The only changeovers would be Moldow and Berman, added to Foster and Delamar. McArdle and Macklin were Republicans and would be shielded from public exposure because Olcott was not holding any caucuses, a fact he knew perturbed the Democrats to no end. Slanetti was interested to see what the Democratic response to the changes would be. Berman and Moldow both came from states he knew the Democrats hoped would remain tied. So, according to the Democratic strategy, the party had not really lost any strength to the Republicans. Slanetti hoped they would continue to see it that way, and they would so long as they listened to the rationalization Perryman fed them on a daily basis. Slanetti, meanwhile, was saving his important kills for later.

Slanetti counted his sure states now at twenty, with a possible twenty-one if Rebecca Isdel held fast. Just a few more states to go. With Trexler not giving in, Hawkins of Wyoming became more and more important.

Keystone was extremely valuable, but it didn't contain every illegal practice by every congressman. Slanetti realized even he, with a full staff and plenty of time, couldn't pin down everything. It would take years. He hoped the agents in Wyoming could find something on Hawkins there. The only thing at all he had on Matt Hawkins was his recently begun love affair with Patricia Vaughan, but he didn't know if this would be sufficient. He'd have to wait and see.

With Rebecca Isdel, Slanetti had twenty-one states. Only five to go and so far the Democrats didn't suspect a thing.

Chapter 18

FRENCH ONION SOUP

Raven Fuentes saw her mother seated at their usual table at an upmarket French restaurant in the Bal Harbour Shops where all three daughters had a monthly luncheon with their mother.

"I don't know why we're bothering with this lunch. We were all just together at the Club."

"Thanks for coming early, Mami," said Raven as she walked up and kissed her on the cheek.

Ramona wore a sour expression on her face as her eldest daughter sat down.

"I hope you didn't want me to meet you early so we could talk about Antonia and Rafael."

Raven gave her mother a sharp glance.

"That's *exactly* why I wanted you to meet me early."

"I wouldn't give you the time of day over the phone to talk about this. Why would I do it over my French onion soup?"

Raven leaned forward.

"How can you sit there like a lump on a log while your youngest daughter sleeps with Rafael St. Clair?"

Ramona shook her head sadly.

"I sat here like a lump on a log when my eldest daughter slept with Rafael's brother, didn't I?"

"Well—"

"Well, nothing. I tried to warn you away from Jack. I told you he was a wonderful guy and you had to rein in your temper and your jealousy. But did you listen?"

"Well—"

"Well, nothing. Of course you didn't listen," Ramona said, her voice rising even as she tried to control herself.

"And what happened? Exactly what I said would happen. You drove Jack away."

"And now he's sleeping with Babe."

"And Antonia is sleeping with Rafael."

"Exactly."

"Since we both seem to be using the word 'exactly' a lot, what *exactly* do you think I should do about Antonia?"

Ramona asked, leaning back as the waiter approached.

"Yes, I'll have some wine," Raven said to the waiter.

"What are you drinking, Mami?"

"Sancerre."

"Fine."

After the waiter left, Raven leaned in again.

"I think you should forbid her from seeing him."

Now it was Ramona's turn to lean in.

"Listen, Raven. There is absolutely nothing wrong with Rafael St. Clair."

"Pah," Raven spat out.

"He's a thoroughly charming, very handsome officer in the Coast Guard from one of the best families in the United States whose father might just be elected President in the next few weeks. He's just as good and strong and brave as his older brother that you drove out of your life. My problem, Raven, is not with the St. Clair boys. It's with my wild and crazy daughters."

Raven snatched up her wine glass in some kind of weird act of defiance and took a healthy gulp.

"You know that's not true."

"Yes, it is. And here are the other two. I expect you to be civil."

"I'll try."

Ramona raised her eyes to Heaven.

* * *

While the Fuentes women lunched in Bal Harbour, a few blocks away over a short bridge in Bay Harbor Islands, St. Clair was meeting with his staff at the St. Clair Agency offices on Kane Concourse.

"So they've had more meetings with their crew down in Key West," St. Clair said.

"Yeah. They've pulled together their people. Now they'll head out to sea any day," said Fredo.

"We're getting out feet wet pretty soon, too, Fredo."

"Right, Boss."

"More coffee?" asked Adele Teran, his office manager.

"I think I've had two pots already. Bring me a beer, will you, Adele?"

"Yes, sir."

Sean Walsh came in and pinned a photo to a corkboard against the far wall. It was the strongly built man with wide shoulders and the drooping mustache they'd seen at Enriqueta's.

"At least we know who the mystery man is now," he said as Adele left the room.

"Oh? Who?"

"Fernando Pozo," Sean said, handing St. Clair a file.

"He's not Jorge Gonzalez, as he told Omer Flores."

"Wow," said Jack in a low voice. "If Pozo's involved, this is much bigger than we thought."

"We're out fishing for minnows and we reel in a great white shark."

Jack thumbed through the file. Pozo was a ranking figure in the Dirección de Inteligencia, or DI, Cuba's famous and deadly intelligence agency. Pozo was second in command of one of the Operational Divisions of the DI, the one in charge of covert foreign ops.

"Wonder how long he's been here?" Jack mused.

"Who knows?" said Fredo.

"Pretty ballsy, a guy like this wandering around in Miami," said Walsh.

"Probably came in by boat from Bimini or they landed him in the Keys and he came up U.S. 1," said Jack. "With good papers, he could be stopped for a DUI and probably get away with it."

"Oh, he'll be carrying the best fake papers money can buy," said Fredo.

"Here you go," said Adele, placing a Becks beer on a cardboard coaster in front of Jack.

"Thanks, sweetheart," said Jack.

Fredo and Walsh sat down at the conference table. Adele took a seat across from them to take notes.

"Want what we have on the couple?"

"Yep," said Jack.

"They're a husband-and-wife team, Aricela and Severo Oyebanjo. Severo runs about two-dozen so-called clinics where he processes thousands of Medicare patients, but Aricela owns a string of check cashing companies called Cambio Xtra they run the money through to get it out of the country," said Walsh.

"Well, some of it. They want Omer to take a load over by boat," said Jack.

"There's so much money they can't even deposit it to wire out," said Fredo.

"Not without attracting too much attention," said Adele.

"Even DIB doesn't want all that money," said Walsh.

"So they get the Medicare checks and then run the proceeds through Cambio Xtra, where they wire it to different accounts overseas," said Jack.

"That's about it."

"So it seems reasonable to expect that Aricela and Severo know that Jorge Gonzalez is really Fernando Pozo, but that Derek, Howard and Omer don't know," said Jack.

"There's no need for the others to know who he really is."

“And why would they care, the kind of money they’re making?” said Sean.

“So he’s up here to handle the couple?” Jack asked.

“Maybe,” Walsh offered halfheartedly.

“OK,” said Jack. “But what’s Pozo doing here? Why is he talking to these people? What’s he doing here?”

Everyone around the table paused as they exchanged glances.

“A big Cuban intel officer? Maybe it has to do with where the money’s going?” Fredo said.

“Which is what we’re trying to find out with the DIB transfers,” said Jack. “Gargrave is tracking the few wires that went to banks where he has solid contacts.”

“If he finds out where some of that money went, you can be pretty sure where the other money ended up too,” said Walsh.

“Yep,” said Jack. “Pozo’s up here working on something big.”

Chapter 19

THE CAUCUS

The next day on Capitol Hill, the Democratic Caucus started right on time. Delamar and Foster voted for St. Clair, and Overton gave them a contemptuous stare. He'd expected this. But when Moldow and Berman voted for St. Clair, giving him the states, the Chamber of the House went wild with members running back and forth. Perryman didn't flinch a flabby muscle from his perch high above the rows of seats and scurrying members. His old lined face had no expression. Overton, looking at him, read this as a sign that the speaker was as upset as he was. He left Perryman and went to talk to Moldow.

"Relax, Mr. Majority Leader," said Perryman when Overton returned and said that neither Moldow nor Berman would give in. "When you lose a state you've been counting on, then worry."

"I'm worried now, Lamar. Fred's outside now. I sent Stan to tell him. Adjourn the caucus for a half hour so he can talk to them alone. Then we'll come back and see what they do."

Perryman looked at Overton. He didn't like the man's superior tone, and he didn't like being ordered to do anything by anybody. However, he did as he was told because he wanted to remain as speaker a little while longer.

Thurston was outside the Chamber when Democratic Whip Stan Rifkin brought him the news.

"Thank God they weren't from the states we were figuring on, but it's bad news whichever way you look at it."

He took Moldow into the speaker's office and sat him down for a talk. The frightened little man from Wisconsin with the buck teeth and receding chin wavered this way and that before finally rejecting Thurston's promises, threats and pleadings. Thurston, unable to stomach the man's character, dismissed him with a sickened wave of his hand. Moldow stood up and garnered what little dignity he could from the other's high-handed attitude and stalked away to sulk in some corner.

Thurston had some Democratic congressmen bring in Berman and he went through the same procedure. As the target members were cajoled, threatened and argued with by their party colleagues, Leland Masingale's fate ran through their minds. And each was utterly convinced that his crimes would be seen to be greater than those committed by Masingale. Most thought that if Norwalk could get information supposedly hidden and inaccessible, he would and could ruin careers to achieve his ends. Not one target spoke about his approach and meeting with whatever liaison had been chosen for him. They all wanted their ordeal to be over with as fast as possible. They were willing and anxious for January 3rd to arrive so they could vote for St. Clair and be done with it. At this point, they didn't give a damn who the next President was.

At the time he heard about the switched votes, St. Clair was in the Senate Caucus Room taking a little time from his busy schedule to help his running mate, Robert Degraff. A round of applause broke from Republican ranks when the news came and senators rushed about trying to get votes for Degraff from opposition members on the strength of the small House victory.

* * *

his state and the word “Keystone.” *Again that Keystone*, he thought to himself. He opened John Fulton’s file.

His eyes grew wider and wider as he skimmed down the piece of paper containing the basic facts on Fulton, which would eventually go to the liaison chosen to approach the congressman from Oklahoma.

“*John Fulton?*” he found himself saying aloud, disbelieving what he read.

He glanced at his watch. Slanetti was always prompt. He still had a few minutes. He looked into Neil Scott’s file. Again his mouth opened as though he would say something out loud, but he didn’t. His brow wrinkled because he couldn’t understand what he was reading.

He actually did understand clearly what was going on. He just couldn’t bring himself to admit it, admit that President Norwalk, his close personal friend, would ever condone such muckraking for political gain.

Then he picked up the file on Deaver Moldow, the congressman who had just voted for St. Clair, glanced once at it and admitted to himself what was happening.

Keystone was clear to him: an across the board effort to sway the election of the President of the United States by means of extortion, bribery and blackmail. Stathis froze over the files, petrified by the impact of what he’d discovered, scared to death at the thought of having to make up his mind what to do about it. He could not believe Norwalk would instruct Slanetti or anyone else to carry out such activities. At first he tried to convince himself that Slanetti was doing it all on his own, but the President’s actions covering up for him, his unwillingness to discuss the House battle except in general terms, which had caused most people on the staff to think Norwalk was remaining elegantly above the fray, convinced him that Norwalk knew intimately everything Slanetti was up to.

He suddenly realized he had to get out of the office undetected immediately. He bolted for the hallway door. As

he reached for the doorknob, he heard it turn and jumped behind the door as it opened, pinning his back to the wall, all six-feet four-inches of his broad-shouldered, dignified body ramrod straight and sweating like a coal miner, his forehead shiny and wet with excited perspiration.

Slanetti walked in looking at papers in his hand and went directly into his office, closing the door behind him, Stathis frozen dead, only his eyes and sweat glands seeming to work as he watched Slanetti's back and tried to hold his breath back.

Stathis closed his eyes and breathed a heavy sigh of welcome relief before immediately cracking the door to see who was in the hall and walking out into it, back to his office to think. After a few minutes, sitting and standing, pacing back and forth, he decided he should go to lunch as normal and left his office.

As he passed Slanetti's door, it opened and Slanetti popped out, startling him. Slanetti looked at him and was puzzled by the wild expression of fright in his eyes.

"Did I scare you, Eric?" he said. "I'm sorry."

Stathis regained his composure.

"No, no, Phil. Just gave me a start. Just on my way to lunch." He recalled that he told Slanetti he was on his way to lunch before. "I forgot something a minute ago."

"I'm going to lunch, too. Want to go together?"

"No, Phil," he said, trying to smile. "I already have an engagement. Thanks, anyway."

They walked out together. Stathis had his driver take him to his favorite bar.

Chapter 20

POZO

"There's no reason they have to know who I am," said Fernando Pozo. "Jorge Gonzalez is as good to them as Fernando Pozo."

Severo Oyebanjo grunted.

"Hell, they probably wouldn't know who you are if they knew your name."

"Correct," said Pozo. "They will try to run a background check on me, same as they did you, but it will tell them nothing. All they care about's the money."

He raised his chin in a motion to attract the waitress at La Carreta on Southwest 8th Street in the heart of Little Havana.

"Una cerveza, por favor," he ordered. He looked at both the Oyebanjos, but they shook their heads in unison. They were happy with the coffee in front of them.

"I think we made a good choice with Derek leading us to Omer Flores," said Aricela, her ugly white scar marring what might have been in her younger days a pretty face. But the way the scar healed, with puffy discolored ridges on both sides, disfigured her, giving her one of those unfortunate faces that causes people to do a double take.

"Let's hope so. It's \$27 million we're talking about."

"There's more where that came from," said Severo confidently.

A hard glance from Pozo corrected Severo's attitude immediately.

"Listen, Severo. Every time we get up to \$50 or \$100 million, we have to shut down the clinics and open new ones. People like you have to get the hell out of Miami and run back to Cuba while we set up more fronts."

"I like your idea of getting ten or fifteen teams working," said Aricela, "not just us."

Pozo shrugged.

"You'd think the Americans would put a little money into checking up on the paperwork before they send the payments out."

"But they don't," Severo said with a sly smile.

"No, they don't," Pozo smiled back.

"The money arrives like clockwork. A never-ending stream of money," said Aricela.

"We send them phony invoices for services never performed, and they send back real money. It's like a sick game. And we win."

"Until they get their act together—" said Aricela.

"Which isn't likely any time soon," said Severo.

"No," said Aricela.

"We keep doing what we're doing. We figure you two alone have channeled \$350 to \$400 million into government accounts in Havana. And you've only been working five years."

"Impressive," said Aricela.

"And it's practically free. The Americans are so rich they don't do anything to stop it."

"Too bureaucratic."

"Plus, we have teams working in Naples, Tampa, L.A., San Francisco, New York and we're expanding our Medicare operation in San Juan."

"Excellent," said Aricela.

"We figure we've taken in \$8 billion so far," said Pozo.

"We haven't had any problems," said Severo, "so this ought to continue for a while."

"Yes. We've been getting more warning notices about overbilling and high frequency of billing the same patients. Warnings they will send inspectors," said Aricela.

"They will send inspectors, eventually. But it takes them forever," said Severo.

Pozo leaned across the table as he put down his empty beer bottle and raised a wagging index finger as a warning.

"The minute—and I mean the minute—you feel the heat, you get to our safe house in the Keys and we'll pick you up at night and get you home."

"Don't worry, we will," said Severo.

"We'll give you new identities and in a year we'll place you in Seattle or somewhere where you'll start up a new series of clinics."

"OK," said Aricela.

"Can't we get someplace warmer than Seattle?"

They all paused to smile. Cubans do not like cold weather.

"Ever since Raúl took over from Fidel, he's been pushing hard on this business. He wants to make the Americans pay."

"They're paying," said Severo.

"And they don't even know it," smiled Aricela.

"They know it—they just can't follow the money to Havana, not the way we move it around."

"Thanks to Derek and Howard."

"They work cheap."

Pozo picked up a copy of *The Miami Herald* and waved it at them.

"The U.S. Treasury is making these big international banks pay fines for dealing with our central bank. There's another one in the paper today."

Pozo pulled out a cigar and went to light it.

"You can't smoke a cigar in restaurants in Miami, Comrade," Severo whispered.

Pozo let out a long breath, exasperated.

"Who would even think you'd not be able to smoke a cigar in a *Cuban* restaurant?"

* * *

Jack folded *The Miami Herald* in half and put it down on the glass-topped table under the hunter green awning over his patio as his housekeeper, Emilia Acevedo, came through the sliding glass doors from the Game Room with a pot of coffee.

"Ay! Señor Jack, why not you let me make you good Cuban coffee?"

"I feel like Folger's right now, Emilia. I've already got a couple of holes burning through my stomach."

She laughed and poured a cup.

"At least I make fresh pot."

She tittered as Gargrave came through the doors carrying a sheath of papers.

"Thank you, Emilia," said Jack.

"Would you like coffee, Mr. Gargrave?"

"No, thank you, Emilia, I would not."

She went inside and closed the doors behind her.

"I wish you and Emilia would get along a little better, Gargrave."

"It's just that she's an incompetent moron, sir, nothing else."

"And you're not used to having incompetent morons under your command, is that it, Gargrave?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sit down," Jack waved to a chair.

"Yes, sir."

"You're not in the SBS any more, Gargrave. You my butler, basically. But of course you're more than that."

"I know, sir."

"And the reason I keep Emilia is because my father wanted to get her out of Flagler Hall, but couldn't fire her because her family is close to Sofia's, so we're pretty much stuck with her."

"She does make a serviceable tortilla, sir."

Jack nodded at the sheath he carried.

"You got something?"

"Yes, sir," said Gargrave as he spread out his papers.

"We can almost be sure—well, I can almost be sure—that some if not all of the money wired from shell companies using the prestigious Fuentes law firm and going through DIB is making its way—circuitous though it may be—into the the Banco Central de Cuba."

"Cuba's national bank and Castro's piggybank."

"Yes, sir."

"Go on."

"Of the 200 or so wires Lucy gave us to work with—"

"And we know there were many more."

"Yes. Many more. But from those 200, I was able to run down about ten wires all the way from Miami through the labyrinth of transfers they used to cover their tracks."

"And?"

"I have a very good old contact high up in the Banco de Crédito de Caracas. He helped me follow the money through his bank into the Sonoma Banco in Rio where he had a friend who could track it quietly into the Unibancolombia in Bogota. Then we had a guy there that another friend of mine persuaded to follow up and the next wire went to Banco Ruiz Crespo in Buenos Aires."

"What about that trip you took to Kingston last week?"

"This is where we ran out of contacts. I went down to pick up the trail, and it was the best thing we did. My man in Caracas gave me the introduction. And \$5,000 did the rest. The banker in Jamaica showed me that all the wires following this route into his bank—and other routes around the world—all were wired to Banco Central de Cuba."

"Which is where all the money stops dead."

"Yes, sir."

"Into a black hole."

"Yes, sir."

Jack picked up the *Herald* and flipped it open to page 8.

“Little item here about the U.S. getting British-based bank HSBC to pay a \$1.9 billion fine to settle accusations that it laundered Cuban drug money through its Mexican branches and branches in Colombia and Brazil. All this is in violation of our economic sanctions on Cuba as part of our 50-year trade embargo.”

“Interesting,” said Gargrave.

“HSBC didn’t admit anything, of course.”

“A pretty stiff fine for not doing anything wrong.”

“Yes. The background in the article says Japan’s Tokyo-based UFJ Bank recently paid a small fine, \$8.6 million, for doing the same thing, and that the Netherlands’ ING Bank paid \$619 million and that Credit Suisse paid \$539 million a couple of years ago. All for the same thing—vague accusations, but no proof.”

“A lot of dirty money flowing around the world.”

“Billions.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a pause as Jack carefully folded the *Herald* and pushed it across to Gargrave. He examined the paperwork Gargrave had laid out in front of him.

“It certainly looks like Castro has found a way to make some of that lost money back.”

“Yes, sir.”

“By defrauding the U.S. Treasury and wiring the money into the Cuban national bank.”

“Nice work if you can get it.”

“Our friend Pozo seems to be doing a very good job for his homeland.”

“He certainly does.”

Jack took a sip of his cold American coffee and spat it out.

“Tell Emilia I’ll have a café con leche. American coffee is such shit.”

“Very good, sir,” Gargrave smiled.

“That’s one thing she does better than you, Gargrave.”

“Yes, sir. Then maybe I’ll break down and have a cup with you.”

* * *

Pozo climbed out of the Ford Navigator driven by Aricela and wished her well.

“I hope to be back in a few days—I want to see how this Omer Flores performs. We may have other uses for him if this shipment goes right.”

“All right, Comrade. I will pick you up here as soon as we get word.”

He nodded, closed the door and she turned around to make the return trip from Tavernier in the Upper Keys back to Miami.

She had dropped him off at the Tavernier Creek Marina, on the Gulf side of Tavernier, just under the bridge crossing over the Inlet. He walked down the pier until he came to *Big Fish IV*, the 45-foot charter fishing boat he used to get in and out of the U.S. when he wanted to avoid airports. He always used to fly into Miami with no problem. But now, he avoided American airports. With the heightened security after 9/11, there was always an extra threat.

Chico DeCespede, captain of *Big Fish IV*, had been on the DI payroll for over fifteen years. His father had worked for the DI before him. He was but one of eight different charter boat captains working in the Keys who were Cubans sent over specifically to run deep sea charters, or were descended from earlier operatives. All these agents were now American citizens, but they were an integral part of the DI’s network of high and low-level operatives maintained in the U.S., especially in Miami.

Chico ran his boats—as did the others—as if they were normal fishing boat captains. And indeed they were. When

the DI had need of them, they kept bookings light so they'd be available. No one knew their secret income from the Cuban government made their annual salaries about five times a year greater than the hardest working charter boat captain anywhere in the Keys.

Pozo greeted Chico and nodded to the two other men on board who made up his half-day charter "party." He went below and grabbed a can of cold beer. He stayed below until the boat passed under the Overseas Highway Bridge and made for the open sea.

He went back on deck as Chico pushed the throttle forward, pushing the twin diesel engines to their limit.

The mate went to the well (where the catch was kept), opened the top and pulled out a 4-foot barracuda and a 5-foot, 45-pound wahoo.

"Good catch today, amigo," he said with a smile.

Pozo nodded and went up forward where he sat and let the quickening breeze flow around him.

When they got out to sea about 20 miles, when no other boats were near them, they'd rendezvous with a similar fishing boat, but with bigger engines, and this boat would return him to Havana at top speed.

He was very pleased with the progress of the Medicare Fraud Program. He had even greater hopes for their IRS Program launched a few years ago. It had taken a while to get the systems down, but with the advances in technology used to steal IDs, the IRS Program showed signs that it would be so profitable it might eclipse the revenue they were generating from the Medicare Program. But with both programs forging ahead at full steam, the Cuban government was in line to rake in billions of dollars from the U.S. Treasury—all because Washington sent out hundreds of millions of dollars so indiscriminately.

Let them fine these insignificant foreign banks. Anything Cuba was losing from the American trade embargo was

coming back to them ten times over, courtesy of America's mindlessly massive inefficiency.

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Chapter 21

KEY WEST

"I think you better get down here, Boss," said Sean Walsh over Jack's cellphone early Thanksgiving morning.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah—Omer's had a few meetings with charter boat captains."

"OK?"

"Yeah. But he quit with them and took a coupla meetings with guys running boats that go out for stone crabs and lobsters."

"That's because they have those cranes with winches that pull up the traps. They need that kind of rig to bring up the bundles of money."

"Right," said Sean.

"OK. Tell me more."

"Just a gut instinct, but I think they're getting close—"

"And you think I oughta get myself down there, right?"

"Yes, Boss."

"My ass is on the next flight."

There were several American Eagle flights to Key West every day, so Jack was out of the house in thirty minutes with Gargrave driving him to MIA in the black Escalade.

"Sean says they were talking to deep sea fishing boats but jumped over to crabbers," he said to Gargrave.

"It's the winches they need."

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

"Question is," said Gargrave, "is whether they go out to have a look first before they make the trip with their crew to do the salvage work."

"Yeah. What do you think?"

"I'd run out there, just me and my partner, dive down there and make sure everything was cool, and then I'd bring

my crew out the next day, or even the same day if I could get an early enough start."

"That's exactly what I'd do," said Jack. "Sean also said they'd rented a Donzi this morning, but haven't been out in it yet. After you drop me, go rent a six-seater, bring Fredo down with you and put tracking equipment aboard so you can get the exact GPS numbers when they stop to make the dive. If you keep high enough and make wide circles, they won't take any notice of you in the plane."

"Yes, sir."

"Once you get a fix, we'll know exactly where the sub is."

"Yes, sir. It might be a good idea to have Sean attach a GPS transmitter to that Donzi as a back-up," said Gargrave.

"Good idea. I'll call him right away and have him do that while they're talking to crabbers about a boat and crew."

"They might be planning on making the first trip today."

"No reason for them to delay—none that I can think of—and there's a nasty front passing through in a couple of days."

"Yes, so why would they wait?" said Gargrave.

"I'll contact Camilo and have him crew up three fishing boats. Also a go-fast boat to follow the fishing boats. I can get closer in the fishing boat. Tell Fredo to bring his best quality high-powered lenses. We might get a look at what's going on even if we're a couple of miles away if the seas aren't too bad."

"Yes, sir," said Gargrave.

"While they're dawdling, we can get our whole operation set up. If they don't leave in the Donzi till late morning, they'll be forced to come back tomorrow with their full crew."

"Giving us a little window of opportunity," added Gargrave.

"Yes. If they do what I'm thinking they'll do."

“Good thing we’ve done so many operations down here.”

“What was it?” Jack said. “The six Ps: Prior Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance?”

“I think you added a P,” said Gargrave with a smile.

They pulled up to the American Airlines concourse at MIA and Jack hopped out of the Escalade.

“I’ll expect you in Key West in two or three hours as soon as you get Fredo and his equipment and hire the plane.”

“Very good, sir. What does Sean say about Derek?” asked Gargrave.

“Says he’s down there already with the people tailing Flores and Duarte.”

“How’s he going to track them?”

“I don’t know what he’s thinking. It looks like we’ll be following them as they follow Flores and Duarte.”

“I hope they don’t get in our way.”

“They’ll be in our way, Gargrave. They’ll be right after Flores when he sets out in that Donzi. But will they be ready to move when they have to?”

“Yeah,” Gargrave said doubtfully.

“We’ll pick you up when you call from the Key West airport.”

* * *

Derek Gilbertson at that very moment was watching through binoculars as Flores and Duarte talked to the captain of a crabbing vessel. Standing next to him was Kremlin nightclub owner Vlad Kucherov, also looking through a set of glasses. Next to him was his partner, Napoleon LaPierre, looking through his own set.

“So this is the kind of boat they need to get this money up out of the water?” Vlad asked in his heavy Russian

accent.

“Yes,” said Derek.

With a big smile, Vlad clapped Derek on the shoulder.

“I’m glad you came to me when you needed some muscle, Derek.”

“Yes,” said LaPierre with a smugness Derek didn’t appreciate. Derek still couldn’t get used to his greasy hair that ran down to his shoulders in twirling curls and even over his forehead in whirling locks. He looked like some wild-haired 19th Century character like Charles Dickens or Benjamin Disraeli.

“Nothing can happen to these guys until we know exactly—*exactly*—where that sub went down. Anything happens before then, we’re fucked, see?” Derek emphasized.

“Oh, I see very clearly, my friend.”

“And Omer, the fat one, he can’t be harmed. We can scare him, but we can’t hurt him. I have other business with him and I need him.”

“Again, I understand clearly. We will track them. My guys have already put a transmitter on the Donzi they hired this morning. We did it as soon as they left to come meet with these captains across the street.”

“No one saw you, you’re sure?”

Vlad let out a little breath to show his exasperation. Again, he patted Derek on the shoulder reassuringly.

“No, Derek, no one saw my man. We are professionals. Is this not why you came to me?”

“To be honest, the reason I came to you was because you’d already squeezed the information from Howard why I wanted you and Napoleon to put tails on these two guys.”

“Since you were spending the kind of money it takes to put surveillance on two people 24/7, then I knew it had to involve a lot of money. Let’s just say I put Howard in a compromising position.”

“Yeah,” said Derek, not pleased. Howard had remained in Miami when they came down to Key West.

“When Howard told me how much money you thought might be in this submarine, he got my immediate interest. I knew—whoever else was involved—you’d need some serious back-up personnel. Let’s put it that way.”

“A 30% share was still pretty steep, don’t you think?”

“You don’t want to risk losing it all because you do not have the people to do this kind of thing the right way, now do you, Derek?”

“No,” said Derek, dejected, wishing Howard had kept his fat mouth shut. But Vlad was right; Derek did need top quality back-up for an operation like this. While he and Howard were experts pushing through the paperwork, in the field you needed a different kind of expert. Experts with muscles, as Vlad had put it.

Experts with muscles—and guns.

Chapter 22

PLEASED AS PUNCH

Lord Ellsworth remained in a state of quiet excitement throughout this period as he made contact with the targets supplied to him by Slanetti. His first Keystone call to Slanetti reminded him of his war days in British intelligence. He was sorry that he couldn't inform his government of his activities. Everything about Keystone was highly irregular and decidedly illegal. But he thought it was all for the best and looked forward to another meeting soon with Slanetti at which he would receive new information on another congressman.

* * *

Jack got a call from Gargrave just as his plane passed over Marathon in the Lower Keys.

"Have you considered, sir, where you're going to put all that money after we get it?"

Jack looked around the small plane—too many people to talk comfortably.

"I'll text you."

He texted Gargrave:

"Not sure what legalities are w/ this ... whose money is it if the bad guys have lost it?"

Gargrave replied by text:

"Whoever gets it, I suppose."

Jack:

"Like treasure?"

Gargrave:

"Not sure."

Jack:

"We'll worry about that later. Where do we stash the cash?"

Gargrave:

"Not a good idea to put \$65 million in your dad's basement. He might be President someday."

Jack:

"Good point."

Gargrave:

"Maybe somewhere in the Keys?"

Jack:

"Camilo has a couple of safe houses down on Big Pine Key. We've used him a lot in the past."

Gargrave:

"Yes. Camilo. He's always been very discreet. Very good, sir. Will arrive EYW w/ plane & Fredo & eqpmt in 2 hrs."

Jack:

"OK."

Jack put the iPhone in his top shirt pocket. Camilo was a long-time associate with whom Jack had shared many an adventure in the Keys. Before the plane taxied out to the runway, he'd put Camilo on notice to put a crew together. A trustworthy team Jack knew he could count on.

What a way to spend Thanksgiving Day, he thought.

Chapter 23

\$500,000 MORE

Kornilevski was just as pleased as Lord Ellsworth with the way things were going. He ordered another \$500,000 in cash to have on hand to offer Slanetti. After this money was given over, he planned to pressure Slanetti into giving him some of the information in the Keystone files.

What interested Kornilevski was the information buried in Keystone Slanetti had collected on members he *wasn't* pressuring to vote for St. Clair. The members that didn't matter in this particular decision. That's what Kornilevski was after.

Like any good diplomat with his ear to the ground, he'd picked up the rumors that Slanetti would be elevated to a high post in St. Clair's administration—if the Keystone method worked and he was indeed elected when the House of Representatives voted the first week in January. Kornilevski planned to work that much harder to see that he was. Nothing could have suited Kornilevski's wishes more than St. Clair's unwitting cooperation in the Slanetti matter.

* * *

Sean Walsh was waiting for Jack in a rented Ford Explorer when he disembarked at the Key West airport.

"What's the latest?"

"Things are hopping, Boss."

"Yeah?"

"Good thing we have guys watching the guys watching Derek and his cronies."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah—we were just about to send a guy in to put a transmitter on the Donzi Flores rented when we held back ‘cause we saw they were sending in a man to do the same thing.”

“Really?” Jack couldn’t help but laugh, though there was nothing funny about any of this.

“Yeah. So we waited till he was finished so we could put ours on the same boat.”

“Looks like they’ll follow the go-fast boat out first thing, not wait for the crab boat.”

“We’re gonna do both, right?”

“Here’s the plan: Gargrave will be here in an hour or so with a plane. He’ll have Fredo aboard. They’ll be our back-up in case something happens to our transmitter. We’ll go out in a boat with equipment Fredo is bringing so we can get a visual on them if we can get close enough. After Flores and Duarte determine the sub’s in good shape and the money’s where it’s supposed to be, we think they’ll return to port, get their crew together and come out tomorrow on the crabber, pick up the money and bring it home.”

“But what do you think Derek and his guys are going to do?”

Jack paused.

“I have no fucking idea, Sean. We’re playing it by ear. We’re going to have our guys following us out in case we can move in right away. You talked to Camilo after I gave him the heads-up, right?”

“Yeah. He’s ready right now. Can ship out in ten minutes. Has crews on board two fishing boats that will follow the one you’re in.”

“Good. I want him in the boat behind me.”

“Oh—forgot to mention. Derek’s brought in some heavy hitters. You know those guys that own the Kremlin on South Beach?”

“Yeah, there’s Vlad Kucherov, Napoleon LaPierre and Jonah Lomax.”

“Right. Jonah’s not down here, but the two Eurotrash—they’re here with Derek.”

Jack shook his head as Sean made his way into the Pier House parking lot at the foot of Duval Street.

“Not good, Sean. Not good at all.”

“I know.”

“Those guys are seriously nasty characters.”

“You don’t have to tell me—I ran into some of their people on that smuggling job you sent me up to handle in West Palm, remember?”

“I remember telling you how easy it would be to pick up those people.”

“ ‘Till the fuckers started shooting,” Sean laughed.

“One thing you were always really good at, Sean,” Jack said with a laugh, slapping Sean on the shoulder.

“What’s that?”

“Ducking.”

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Chapter 24

AT THE FRONT

Meanwhile, at the front, things were still pretty quiet. There'd been no major ceasefire violations on a large coordinated scale. U.N. troops were ordered by the secretary general to bear down hard on either side when it appeared the ceasefire was not holding. All U.N. officers knew the disastrous effects of a full-scale war between Russia and China, especially if nuclear weaponry came into play. Their strenuous efforts seemed to be paying off.

In the Forbidden City, the premier, Wu Quiglin, met several times over the past week with his scientists to check their progress, which was much too slow to satisfy him. Yet he didn't threaten them in any way. He knew such threats were idle and would have no effect on his top engineers. They were already more self-sacrificing than any other group in his country besides the military. He was thankful they were doing their best.

"But I want that Canal finished, comrades, *I want that Canal finished!*" he screamed at them over and over again.

"The best estimate we can offer you at this point, Comrade Premier," said his chief engineer, "is that we will have enough code written by the middle or end of January to divert enough water away that will destroy millions of acres of Russian farmland. After that . . ."

There was no need for him to continue. Everyone in the High Command was well aware of what would happen when China fully activated the Mao Canal.

They could expect the full force of Russian non-nuclear power to be rained on them and their people. The government was not unaware of this probability and yet was not afraid of its consequences. The fanatical leadership in the current government saw the elimination of millions of

Chinese citizens as a healthy tonic for the people. The Russian attack would ease the widespread famine demoralizing the people and give them an added incentive to defeat the Russians in the field.

The Chinese counted on world opinion to keep the Russians from using their deadliest weapons.

Nothing they could do could blunt the Chinese capacity to field several million well-trained soldiers. The government and High Command were absolutely certain that Russia could be defeated within Chinese boundaries no matter how many men or how much armored power she poured into the battle. China could throw a thousand men against each tank Russia might send.

The premier met with General Yin Feng-hsu to discuss a point of strategy that the ministry of defense had been pushing. This move called for a large-scale counterattack between the two fronts directly through the Xinjiang and Mongolian territories in an effort to obtain a foothold somewhere in the southern regions of the Great Siberian Plain, the area to be starved of water by the Mao Canal.

General Yin's advice was that such an advance couldn't be sustained against the massive Russian forces in Russian General Tulevgin's rear, which were heavily armored and had considerable air support. He'd studied the plans and strongly advised the premier that such a move would be valuable *only* when they had diverted the river flow away from Russia.

The premier decided in Yin's favor once more, and the ministry officials withdrew to wait for another day. All high-level Chinese eyes were fixed on the end of January—when the outcome of the American election was known—when the final struggle with Russia would begin.

* * *

"Where are they now?" Jack, far out at sea, said into his satphone.

"Looks like they're on their way to the marina to pick up the Donzi," said Sean.

"They're heading out. I'm about thirty minutes from Fort Jefferson, so I'll be in perfect position when they bear down. I'll get Gargrave in the air in a few minutes and he can follow them down."

"Right, Boss."

"What's the story with Vlad and Derek? I'm more concerned with them, really? We know what Flores and Duarte are going to do. Not so these other guys."

"My guys on them say they're going to the marina where they rented their boat."

"So they're gonna be right behind Flores and Duarte on the way down."

"Looks that way."

"How many in their party?"

"Six are going there. Not sure how many they'll take aboard."

"I hope they don't follow so close they spook our guys."

"They oughta be smart enough to know if they get too close, Flores and Duarte won't lead them to the site."

"Let's hope so. What's their craft?"

"They got a big three-engine Cigarette, one of those SLS AMG types."

"Fuckers can haul ass."

"Yep," said Sean.

"OK. We'll be waiting. Keep our people on the ones they leave behind."

"Right."

Jack had headed out on the fishing boat an hour and a half earlier to get a sizeable head start on the go-fast boats that he felt sure would be coming down right after him.

While slow, the fishing trawler was the ideal vessel to be in. They could position themselves relatively close to the scene not far off Fort Jefferson where Flores and Duarte in their Donzi would eventually meet up with Derek, Vlad and his crew in their monster Cigarette. Jack almost felt sorry for Flores and Duarte since in all probability they had no idea the kind of power that shortly would bear down on them.

Sean had said it would be just Flores and Duarte heading out in their Donzi. As DEA field agents, Jack knew they both would be certified to scuba, so they both would probably go down to have a look at the sunken sub to verify the cash was still secure. Jack could just imagine the scene when they surfaced from their dive to see what waited for them on the surface. Jack imagined they'd be looking into the barrels of a half dozen semi-automatics. Not a pretty picture. Unless the transmitter Vlad attached to the Donzi dislodged and fell off (not impossible given the high speeds at which the boat traveled and where and how it was attached), there was no way Flores and Duarte could avoid a confrontation of some sort with Derek and Vlad.

Chapter 25

SURPRISE! SURPRISE!

At the same time, Matt's doorbell rang in his suite in the Washington Hilton.

He went to open it, thinking Patricia had come a little earlier than he expected her. She was about an hour early.

He swung open the door with a smile on his face and when he saw Sue Hawkins standing in front of him beside a bellhop, he had to master the impulse that seized him to let his face drop with utter shock and disappointment.

"What *is* this?" he said with a weak smile, hugging her quickly.

"I decided to surprise you. Mother's better so I came for your birthday," she said as she and the bellhop came inside. He left Sue's bags and took the twenty dollars Matt handed him, leaving them alone.

"This is unreal," he said, trying to look overjoyed and hugging her again. With his face over her shoulder, he bit his lower lip. A great pain entered his heart just thinking about her—suddenly having his wife in his arms was too much.

"I knew you'd be happy," she said. He closed his eyes.

"Have you eaten?" he asked, holding her back and looking at her with as bright a smile as he could manage. "We'll go out to lunch to celebrate."

"I haven't and I'm starved. You know I can't eat on planes. They scare me. But let's not stay out too long," she said with a suggestive smile. "I want to go to bed."

"So do I. It's been a long time, honey," he said, lying, and hugging her once more.

"Well, let's go eat, then. But first, I *have* to go to the bathroom. I've had to go since the airport." She rushed off in the direction of the bedrooms, throwing her coat on one of the chairs. When he heard the door close, he jammed his

hand into his pocket and pulled out his cellphone, dialing Patricia's number. It went to voice mail. He called the main line at Horizon.

"Mrs. Vaughan please, and hurry," he said in a low voice to the butler.

"Who shall I say is calling, sir?"

"Mr. Hawkins, Simkins, and hurry!"

"Hello, Matt," said Patricia, finally. Her voice seemed to sooth his very flesh, like clean, sun-warmed water running over his body.

"Patricia, don't come over for lunch. I just opened the door and Sue's come to town. I'll see you at the party. I'll have to bring her. She's in the bathroom now so I've got to run."

"Oh, Matt," she said, her voice crestfallen.

"I can't talk, you understand?"

"Of course," she said almost crying, but trying not to.

"Take care, baby, and you know who I really want tonight." He put the phone down and bolted for the bar where he began to make drinks just as Sue came out.

She breathed out, relieved, and ran her hands through her long dark hair.

"God, do I feel better." She came over to the bar and took the drink he offered with a smile. She smiled back.

"What a way to turn thirty," he said.

"You look a little down," she said. "What's the matter? Aren't you glad to see me? Have you got another woman hidden under the bed?"

Half the time, Sue wasn't kidding when she asked such questions, although she was now. She was extremely protective and possessive of him.

"No," he said nonchalantly. "There was this beautiful wealthy Washington socialite who was planning to come over for a lobster salad lunch and some wild sex to help me celebrate my birthday, but I figured since you were here I'd

spend it with you. I called her while you were in the bathroom.”

“When will you get serious?”

They went out to eat at Billy Martin’s Tavern on Wisconsin Avenue. The place was packed. They got a table in the room where the pianist tinkled out pleasant background music. She babbled on about the restored colonial atmosphere of the place. After lunch they took a taxi and drove around Georgetown before going back downtown. He pointed out his window in the House Office Building and various landmarks. She’d never been to Washington before.

“I’m so excited about Washington, Matt. I can’t wait to live here.”

Every time she referred to the future, Matt felt a stabbing pain in his gut. He hated the thought of hurting her, knew what she would go through when he told her about Patricia, that she’d feel like her life was ruined. He didn’t honestly want to hurt her. He felt he had no choice if he wanted to have the woman he loved. He realized he should’ve ended it a year or more back in Wyoming when he knew it wouldn’t be any good for them for too much longer. Or any good for him. Sue loved him, he knew it and was sorry that he didn’t love her. It would’ve made both their lives so much easier in the years ahead if he did love her, completely, passionately and with his whole self, his whole soul. But he didn’t and he was agonizingly aware of it every time she touched him. With every touch, he wished Patricia was with him instead of Sue and though he tried to drive thoughts of Patricia from his mind, at least while he was with Sue, he couldn’t do it. She was so much a part of him that he couldn’t forget about her, even for a minute.

He didn’t know how to rationalize giving up one woman for another, not when marriage was involved. It never came up before. The only argument that entered his mind was his ultimate happiness. He knew he couldn’t be happy with Sue,

he knew he could be with Patricia. It was that simple. And since he considered that he had only one life to live, he knew he had to live it as happily as he could. He recognized that impulse as a basic human urge. He wasn't sorry that the urge was strong in him. He wasn't sorry he felt about Patricia the way he did. He was just sorry, very sorry, that he had to hurt Sue in order to achieve what he hoped would be a better, more happy and fulfilling life for himself.

"When do you have to go back?" he asked casually when they got back to the Hilton and got ready to hit the sack for the sex he knew she expected.

"Day after tomorrow. Another two weeks in Cheyenne and I'll be ready to move down for good," she said, slipping out of her dress. He'd already stripped and lay naked on top of the bed with his hands behind his head looking at her.

"Two more weeks," he mused aloud.

"Yes," she said, lying down beside him and kissing his chest. He put his arms around her. Somehow, her skin felt like sandpaper compared to Patricia's, but he knew this was foolishness. Sue had a great body and he was still physically attracted to her. He'd lost interest in loving a body. He longed for Patricia's person.

"There's a big party tonight."

"On your birthday?" Sue asked, looking up at him, a little put out.

"Well, I didn't know you were coming, so I accepted. It was for both of us, so you'll get to go to your first Washington party. Everybody's talking about it."

"My first Washington party," she glowed. "I can't wait."

And probably your last, he thought to himself, sadly.

"Who's giving it?"

"I don't know them. Nobody knows the people whose parties they attend in this town. Crampton says that's a way of life. It's a couple called the Vaughans. Mr. and Mrs. Jonathan Vaughan."

"Never heard of them."

“Me, either. Crampton says they’re big in oil somehow. I’m not sure.”

“The hell with the Vaughans, I’m interested in you right now,” she said, cuddling up to him.

He felt an urge to defend Patricia, but shut up. She began caressing him. She didn’t notice the slight resigned sigh as he turned on his side to face her. She was too stimulated and aware that he was moving his hands along her buttocks and between her legs. Matt found, for the first time in his life, his mind filling with fantasies that he hoped would excite him enough for him to get through the session without her noticing his disinterest. He thought of himself back in college and of the times he’d gone out to get laid just to relieve himself, like taking a piss.

He’d been good then at giving the women a good time while he cut his horns. But since he was far from horny, he just concentrated on giving Sue a good time, which was all she really wanted.

He got it up good and hard and went to work on her. For him, it was work.

* * *

Vlad hadn’t really wanted to bring Derek along on the trip but it didn’t seem like the right thing to do to suggest he remain behind since the whole operation was his to begin with.

He ran the boat himself, making sure Gregor, his guy monitoring the Donzi position up ahead, told him if he was getting too close, and when he was, he eased back on the throttle so they would remain far enough behind the Donzi to avoid detection. He felt confident that the guys in the Donzi had no idea they were being followed.

As Vlad scanned the horizon, he was pleased to see quite a bit of boat traffic: pleasure craft, both power and sail, were plentiful. A half dozen commercial fishing boats trolled along at their usual leisurely pace. Plenty of traffic to get lost in.

* * *

Aboard one of those commercial fishing boats, Jack was thinking the same thing: there was plenty of boat traffic to cover him. He double-checked the Donzi's coordinates with Fredo flying high above with Gargrave and ordered his captain to move at a faster speed toward Long Key, five miles to the north.

Fredo called in on the satphone and told Jack the Donzi had stopped about two miles due east of Long Key. Jack whipped out his high-powered Magnar 20x50 Image Stabilization Binoculars and took a good long look as his boat approached the site. He could barely make out the Donzi. He called his captain over and told him to deploy his outriggers and to slow down to trolling speed, but to continue in the direction of the Donzi. He would keep a mile or so away from the Donzi because he fully expected the Cigarette to bear down on it as soon as Flores and Duarte went under water. Off to the left, Jack could see the masonry parapets of Fort Jefferson on Garden Key, a couple of miles or so away from the Donzi.

* * *

Vlad had the Cigarette roaring along at half speed when he felt a light touch on his elbow. He turned and saw Gregor

make the motion to cut the speed. He brought the boat back into idle.

"They stopped," said Gregor.

As the boat idled, another of his men, Dmitri, lifted the Canon 10x42 L Image binoculars hanging around his neck and peered through them off the bow.

"See anything?"

"Yes, far ahead. Might not be them. Can't tell."

Vlad nodded and put the throttle forward.

"No movement?" he asked Gregor.

"No."

"So we go slow, give them time to get their gear on and get under water," said Vlad, "and then we come up to them and seize their boat."

"I'll get into my gear," said Dmitri.

"Yes."

Whatever happened with Flores and Duarte, he was sending Dmitri down to have a look at the sub to make sure the money was there.

Derek moved forward.

"We're going to do it my way, Vlad, remember?"

"Yes, Derek, I remember," said Vlad, a little impatiently.

"We're going to take them, but not kill them."

"Especially Flores."

"Why is he so important to you? You never told me."

"I'm not like Howard Rothman," said Derek. "I don't tell you everything. It's just that Flores is working on another job with me."

"And you think us showing up and ripping him off is going to build his confidence level in you?"

"That's the way it has to be."

"You need Flores for something, and you can't replace him, that's what I'm hearing. Maybe I can help with that job too," Vlad smiled.

Derek wished he had been able to postpone the meeting between Flores and the Oyebanjos until after this operation

had played out, but Howard had forced the issue because the Oyebanjos refused to wait any longer, so desperate were they to move their \$27 million over to the Bahamas. He thought long and hard about simply going back to the Oyebanjos and telling them he decided to replace Flores with someone else, but then he thought he'd look stupid and indecisive to them. Why introduce them to Flores in the first place if he didn't want to use him two weeks later? He'd look like a jerk.

Vlad moved forward fast enough to get within range of Dmitri's Canon glasses. Derek was also looking through a pair of high-powered glasses.

"Vlad," Derek finally called out. "I got it. Dead ahead."

"Anyone on board?"

"No," said Dmitri.

"They've both gone down."

"Hold on, boys!"

Vlad hit the throttle and moved in.

Chapter 26

NOTHING IN WYOMING

Just a bit earlier in Washington, Phil Slanetti was in his office at the White House. The two agents sent to Wyoming were back to report and he didn't have to keep them away from their families and turkey dinners too long.

They didn't have a thing. They went over Hawkins's background, early days in Moran, his graduation from Moran High School with no incident, his university days, his marriage, brief law practice. His law partners were clean and honorable men and women and that brought Matt just about up to date. The campaign for Congress hadn't been too expensive and the two agents could uncover no improprieties in financing it.

"He hasn't had time to do anything, for Christ's sake," said one agent.

"He's only twenty-nine," said the other.

"Thirty today," mumbled Slanetti, looking at the Hawkins dossier in front of him.

"He's not even old enough to be in the Senate," said one man.

"No, he is today. Thirty's the age," said the other agent.

"That's true," said Slanetti thoughtfully. "You guys go home to your families."

* * *

From a mile and a half away, Jack watched as the three-engine Cigarette moved in on the smaller Donzi. Because there were four other boats trolling along slowly within three or four miles of the Donzi, Jack had felt confident enough to

bring his own boat in closer. He'd watched as Flores and Duarte put on their gear and slipped over the side. He didn't know if they'd be down ten minutes or twenty, but there wasn't much point in staying down any longer than needed to make sure the loot was there.

Five minutes after they went down, he saw the Cigarette closing in at high speed. The boat slowed down as it approached the Donzi, came alongside it and tied up.

Jack looked up at the sun. It was about noon. There was still plenty of light left to do what he and his team had to do, depending on what happened over on those two boats in the next half hour.

He pulled out his satphone.

"Gargrave?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You got the coordinates of that Donzi?"

"Yes, sir. We locked in the coordinates. The transmitter signal coming from the Donzi is still going strong, so we have two fixes on it."

"So if they leave, we can move right in?"

"Yes, sir."

"OK."

He dialed Camilo on one of the two boats following him, probably six or eight miles back.

"Si, Señor Jack?" came Camilo's heavy Cuban accent.

"Move up at full speed and take a position trolling one mile to my south."

"Si, Señor."

Now it was just a matter of time.

He raised the Magnar binoculars to his eyes. All he could see were three guys in the Donzi and three more in the Cigarette. They were obviously taking up stations to be ready for Flores and Duarte when they surfaced.

As Jack looked intently through his Magnar binoculars, bracing them against a ladder that went up to the flying bridge, he saw two heads bob to the surface. After a couple

of minutes, the men in the Donzi pulled the two divers into the boat. A couple of minutes after that, Jack heard the unmistakable sound of automatic weapons fire.

He looked up from his glasses and scanned the horizon. There were fishing boats on all sides of the two go-fast boats, but sufficiently far enough away to give the men on the two go-fast boats every confidence that they'd be left alone.

Normally in these waters—very dangerous and rife with smugglers and God knows who else—gunfire was met with a studied indifference. Just because you heard gunfire come from a nearby boat did not mean you throttled forward and raced over to see what had just happened. Truth is, you didn't want to know what happened and you wanted nothing to do with anybody on board that boat. You made sure the weapons on your own boat were ready for action, ready to defend against a boat that approached too close to you without permission.

Jack leaned over to the captain.

"Veer off south-by-southwest. I want them to see us heading away."

The captain nodded and went to the wheelman.

Whipping out his satphone, he called Camilo and gave him instructions to follow him.

Jack peered back into his Magnars. Where there had been eight men standing, there were now only six. And one of them took the plunge overboard. This, Jack surmised, was one of Derek's men going down to do the same thing Flores and Duarte had done: make sure the money was still in the sunken sub.

He dialed Gargrave above in the plane.

"Sir?"

"I'm hoping they stick to the plan we mapped out for them, Gargrave. Let me know when Fredo records movement away from the site. I'm taking our ships toward the horizon so they see nothing but empty sea between

them and us. You follow them in the plane till you're sure they are heading back to Key West. Then give me the word and we will head back to the site and make our first dive. We still have a lot of daylight."

"Yes, sir. You think there's any chance they'll leave a boat out here all night to guard the site?"

"Not if they don't think anybody knows where it is except them and the two guys they just killed."

"Oh, they killed Flores and Duarte?"

"No question. I heard the rounds."

"Very good, sir. I'll keep you advised."

* * *

"What the fuck'd you have to do that for?" Derek shouted immediately after Vlad grabbed a MAC-10 machine pistol from one of his men and shot Duarte in the head, paused, looked at the terrified Flores, glanced at the unbelieving Derek and then shot Flores as well.

"I didn't trust them," said Vlad simply, handing the MAC-10 back to his man. His other guys were busy scanning the horizon to make sure the boats a few miles off didn't react if by chance they'd heard the rounds go off. Vlad nodded to Dmitri, sitting on the gunwale, and Dmitri raised his legs and did a back flip over the side to go down below.

"You didn't trust them? Didn't *trust* them?" Derek screamed. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Vlad simply shrugged.

"It's nothing. They're nothing. They got lucky. The luck ran out."

Derek was practically hysterical.

"I told you I needed Flores. I *needed* him."

Vlad braced himself against the console and walked over to Derek where he gave the flabbergasted lawyer a pinch on

the cheek, as if Derek was his Godson or something.

“Now you need me more,” Vlad smiled. “You tell me what it was Omer Flores was going to do for you that was so important and I will help you get it done.”

Derek just stared at the burly Russian, shook his head and sat down in one of the seats.

“What the fuck?” he said, mostly to himself. No one was listening.

When he looked up, he saw Vlad and the others scanning the horizon with their binoculars. He followed their gaze to a line of fishing boats to their south and a couple of others to their north, a couple of sailboats heading north toward Key West. Except for the bloodied bodies of Flores and Duarte lying on the deck, all was quiet and serene, a beautiful winter day in the Caribbean.

A few minutes later, Dmitri bounced to the surface and everybody leaned over as he lifted his mask from his head. There was a long pause.

“Well?” Vlad yelled at him.

The broad grin that took over every part of Dmitri's face caused everybody on the boat to break out into riotous laughter, but this stopped instantly when Dmitri let float to the surface a bundle of the money.

Once they'd hauled Dmitri on board, he told them that there was much more than \$20 million down in that sub.

"You said \$20 million, Derek, yes?"

Now it was Derek's turn to shrug.

“\$20 million of whatever’s down there is mine and Howard’s. It doesn’t mean there’s not money from the Sinaloa Cartel or whoever else. The money could belong to anyone.”

"Well, it belongs to us now, Derek."

Derek found himself wondering if Vlad might grab a MAC-10 from one of his guys and shoot him the way he'd so calmly dispatched Flores and Duarte. But he was different from them. He was connected to powerful people in Miami.

Very powerful. He had accepted Vlad into this operation. He was much more valuable alive than dead. If Vlad had wormed his way into this operation, he'd be certainly interested in getting involved in future deals.

Derek found himself thinking as he looked at Omer's blood-spattered body that maybe it had been a good thing that Vlad had shot him. Hadn't Flores planned to fuck him completely? Mightn't he have tried something with the Oyebanjo money he'd been recruited to smuggle over to the Bahamas? Maybe it was a good thing Vlad had done. Vlad was a better partner than Flores.

"There's nothing going on out here," said Vlad after ten minutes had passed with no sign of activity from any of the ships remotely near them.

"We need to get back to port as fast as we can," said Gregor.

"Yes, Gregor, you're right," Vlad agreed. "We can't do anything out here until we get the right equipment," he said as he held a fistful of cash in his hands. "Let's go."

Chapter 27

PARTY PLANNING

After the sex, Sue and Matt spent part of the day in a taxi showing her some of the general sights. She was ecstatic about moving to Washington.

"How have things been for you here, Matt?" she asked.

"Oh, so-so," he replied.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, I like it very much."

"So do I," she said, looking out the window. "What time do we go to the party tonight?"

"Just about anytime we want. It'll go on and on from what I've heard."

"I wish I knew something about the Vaughans. That would make it nicer."

"Yes, that would be nicer," he said flatly. "You'll find him—well, his family—in Wikipedia."

Just about everybody in Washington with any pull at all was keeping the evening free to attend the expanded party at Horizon.

Lamar Perryman told his valet that he'd dress at seven to go to the party by eight. Duncan Olcott's wife was getting out the minority leader's black tie outfit. Edward Healy of Chicago wasn't sure he wanted to let Carberry and Brown go to the affair, but decided it was all right when he received an invitation to attend along with them. Old Wilbur Pettigrew of Delaware loved parties. Albert Delamar, Deaver Moldow, Victor Berman and Larry Kellerman, among other targets, phoned their regrets, but everyone else was coming. John Fulton of Oklahoma and his wife were planning to attend. They kept up with anybody in Washington with large oil interests and they both knew the Vaughans very well. Fulton himself hoped Jonathan Vaughan would be there because he hadn't talked to him in a long time. If he wasn't, he planned

the day waiting for the party. None could understand the holiday and none observed it. But there wasn't much they could do because all federal offices were closed and the city had slowed to a snail's pace for the day. They looked forward to the party to liven things up a bit. Kornilevski had other reasons for wanting to go to the party, besides that, however.

Various lobbyists would be attending and all were getting ready for the party by late afternoon. Will Nesbitt looked horrible in a tux, but he got it out anyway. Mario D'Orofino was furious that he hadn't been invited and sulked all day. He spent some time at his desk working on a report to his bosses that suggested a way the interests he represented might enter the oil industry, a topic he knew to be touchy. Legitimate interests controlled the industry too exclusively and it was always hard to work into it. They were as powerful in their area as Mario's people were in theirs.

* * *

Horizon jumped all day from early morning. The caterers were the first to arrive, bringing mountains of food and drink and taking hours to set themselves up to prepare the stand-up banquet ordered for the occasion. Patricia refused to use their flatware and linen because hers was of finer quality. The servers would be arriving later in the afternoon. Delivery trucks from the caterers filled the front drive to the mansion and when they left trucks from the florists replaced them. Simkins had most things in hand, but Patricia had her secretary ready to help him handle the arrangements. He was getting older and couldn't keep up sometimes. Boxes of food and crates of fruits and vegetables filled the kitchen where the cooks were working, preparing hot foods and cold dishes and setting out flatware and plates that Patricia's

under-butlers brought out for them to use, counting every piece. The house began to smell like a fresh food market by noon.

Six bars were set up and fully stocked. Liquors, liqueurs and wines were readied for fast service. Horizon's large bar in Jonathan's hunting room, being somewhat out of the way, was covered and closed but the room remained open so that people could wander in to look at it.

Patricia had originally planned a small cocktail party, but the affair had mushroomed into a gigantic social occasion. Society editors called Horizon all day long for information for their columns. An orchestra had been hired to play in the music room, which was cleared and cleaned to house it and any dancers who were interested. The room hadn't been used since Bedelia Vaughan lived in the house. Patricia had never given a party so large as to require an orchestra. At her largest events she managed with a combo.

Chafing dishes warmed and the aroma of hot hors d'oeuvres filled the mansion as the cooks stood behind their stations ready to serve guests drawn to them by the particular smells emanating from their areas. Serving people hired for the evening began to arrive late in the afternoon, dressed by their company and ready to receive instructions from Simkins and his staff.

* * *

Jack ordered his little three-ship flotilla to heave to and turn around the minute he got word from Gargrave and Fredo that the two go-fast boats had cleared away from the site and made for Key West at full speed. Jack felt sure they'd stop along the way and scuttle the Donzi after stuffing the bodies into the little cuddy cabin where they'd slowly rot.

Jack knew they wouldn't have time to get back to Key West and return to the site this afternoon. It would take too long, and they wouldn't try to work at night. No, they'd set out tomorrow before dawn with a timetable calling for them to arrive on the site at first light. This gave him and his team all day to raise the money.

If Jack could get his boats in place, he thought they might be able to get all the bundles out of the sub in five or six hours—depending on how much was down there and the size of the bundles.

As they approached the site, Jack saw Gargrave's plane make a low pass and then circle over the three fishing boats as he came down for a landing. Jack was glad Gargrave had suggested they switch to a seaplane so Gargrave would have the ability to swoop down in case of a sudden emergency. Jack watched as Gargrave brought the plane down, the pontoons beneath the fuselage skimming the water until it landed and slogged along in a wide arc as Gargrave brought the plane back to the site.

By the time Jack's three ships tied up to each other, all his divers were ready to go down. The outriggers and winches were ready and Jack saw no reason why they couldn't get the loot on board in record time, long before sunset.

Camilo sent a dinghy over to the seaplane to pick up Gargrave and Fredo.

"Let's go!" Jack called out. He and Gargrave immediately stripped down to their underwear and pulled on scuba gear. "We both need to have a look at this thing, Gargrave."

"Very anxious to see it, sir."

Down below, they led the first divers hauling the winch cables down and lifting bags after them as they approached the open hatch of the *Mirta*. Pushing their dive lights before them, they entered the pitch-black seawater filling the hull. Jack led the way into the narrow passageway aft toward the stash and came upon it very quickly.

He made room for Gargrave to come up to get a good look and then motioned for Gargrave to follow him back above.

Slipping through the hatchway, Gargrave motioned for the other divers to enter the hull and begin the process of attaching the bundles to the winches or to the lifting bags to begin sending everything to the surface. Then he followed Jack up.

"Quite a load," said Jack as he yanked at his mouthpiece on breaking the surface.

"Yes, sir, quite a load indeed."

"All right, we'll leave Fredo to handle things while you get me back to Key West. You ordered the Lear Jet?"

"By the time we land, it'll be waiting at the airport, yes, sir."

"Right. After you drop me, you fly back out here and oversee everything. I want you to sail in with Camilo and the others tonight when they unload at Big Pine Key."

"Yes, sir."

Jack had a few words with Camilo before he and Gargrave crawled into the dinghy to go over to the seaplane.

"You're going to leave all this now, Señor Jack?"

"I have to, Camilo."

"But this, Señor Jack, what could be more exciting than what we're doing here?"

Jack looked at Gargrave and smiled.

"Nothing, Camilo. It's just that I have to go to a Thanksgiving party tonight in Washington, and I'm running a little late."

Chapter 28

THE PARTY

Simkins inspected the rooms with Patricia and her secretary about 5 P.M. Many rooms had been cleaned and left open to various groups who'd want to sneak away to discuss things in private. This was accepted procedure at such a party in Washington. The orchestra was tuning up and practicing various songs when Patricia glanced into the second floor music room, with its fine parquet floor and row of French windows giving onto a terrace overlooking the well-kept gardens behind the house. Then she left her entourage to handle last minute details and went to the kitchen to see her own cook. Her secretary found her there later with her hands covered with flour and couldn't understand what she was doing. Patricia said she would dress in a little while, that there was still time and for her secretary to get back out front. Patricia's entire kitchen staff was on hand to provide support for the caterers in case of any snags. They were busy preparing dishes and specialties that Patricia wanted to offer her guests. She kept one oven to herself, however.

Horizon was not a classically beautiful mansion. Classic in the vulgar sense of imposing, yes, but it was built by a rail millionaire and seldom used by him. When Jonathan's grandfather acquired it in the early 1930s, he completely renovated it. Since new money relies on the tastes of others, the place had been made rather gaudily baroque and mannerist in style on the outside, combining many of the elements of several periods. The massive Corinthian columns were left to stand, but pediments had been added above each window, giving the façade a heavy effect. The long, wide windows were retained on the outside and a new wing was added to provide more private rooms and a larger library. The library was still intact. It was here that Jonathan's father, an educated man, spent much of his time

before his death. It was kept in order now, but seldom used by either Jonathan or Patricia, who had no literary interests. Jonathan's father had loved it, made it beautiful. He loved more than anything the verse of John Keats, and the library had a priceless collection of original Keats memorabilia, original editions and even a few poems written by the poet in his own hand. Scholars constantly visited the library to refer to them. Patricia refused attempts of museums to get the collection. The library had a spiral staircase of rich mahogany leading up to the gallery, which was supported by strong, heavy columns with gargoyle-like creatures twisting around them.

Jonathan's grandmother loved to grow things and the drive had been smothered on either side by trees until the place had an overgrown look except behind the house, which was more formal, with fountains and ordered gardens where parties were often held in good weather.

There was always a problem with parking during large parties. About fifty cars could be handled on each side of the house. Others were usually strewn along the wide, long drive after chauffeurs delivered their important cargoes to the front of the house. Drivers then gathered in the kitchen where they were fed and given light drink to keep them off the grounds.

Jonathan's grandmother seemed to return incarnate each spring when the dogwoods blossomed. She had a positive passion for dogwoods and they were everywhere. Loads of wisteria, when it bloomed, gave Horizon a sad, dreamy, ancient air that never really suited Patricia's temperament.

The name Horizon had stuck with the house over the years. No one knew why. The builder, the rail magnate, who thought the sky was the limit when it came to human accomplishments, named it. A plaque in the foyer with words to this effect told anyone interested in the millionaire's sentiments.

Patricia hurried up from the kitchen to dress. Her maid was ready and she hopped into her waiting bath as her secretary came in and out to report. The first arrivals were expected any moment. She would wear her hair loose, so it would be no problem once it dried and was combed out, fluffy and light, soft and shining.

As she was getting into her black, floor-length, tightly fitted strapless gown, Jane Turner brushed into her dressing room.

"I had to come early to look everything over," she babbled. Patricia asked about her husband.

"Oh, he's down getting drunk, as usual," replied Jane Turner.

In a moment, Bedelia Vaughan entered the room, old, haughty and elegantly dressed. Jane made her excuses when Bedelia gave her a cool greeting and retreated downstairs. Bedelia had come over the day before to check on Patricia's arrangements and was slightly disconcerted (though she never showed it) when she couldn't find anything that needed her touch or suggestion for improvement.

"You're learning well, my dear," was all she had said before kissing Patricia on the cheek.

"Ah, you're almost ready," she said now.

"Just about," said Patricia with a smile as her maid zipped her up. The young women stood before the grande dame for inspection.

"You are beautiful and alluring, Patricia, my dear," said the elder Mrs. Vaughan.

Patricia was all that and more. The tight black gown brought out every sensuous curve in her sculpted figure, her hips spreading out just enough from her flat stomach and narrow waist. She wore a strapless gown just right, her smooth skin brown and healthy against her dark costume. She stood before a mirror.

"The hair," she said, wrinkling her nose.

“Yes, you might do something about it,” agreed Bedelia.

It was hanging loose and though sensuous, did not quite fit the mysterious aloofness created by her black dress. Her maid brushed it out for her and twisted it around, pinning it up. Patricia’s cheekbones and facial features took on a finer shape when her hair was up. She thought to herself that Matt had never seen her with her hair up before and hoped he would like it. But she might not find out what he thought because he would be with Sue tonight. She suddenly wanted to be alone—until Bedelia spoke. She addressed the maid.

“Leave us,” she said, not even bothering to look as the maid raised an eyebrow and withdrew.

“Sit by me, dear,” Bedelia said, patting a bench on which she was sitting near the full-length mirror Patricia had been looking into. She came over and sat down.

“What is it, Bedelia?”

“I just wanted to tell you what a great job I think you’re doing with this party.”

“Why, thank you, Bedelia.”

“Such a shame about Jonathan. What a team you would have made,” Bedelia shook her head. Patricia didn’t want Bedelia getting misty-eyed over spilt milk.

“If he’s happy, Bedelia, I’m happy for him. Let’s go down. It is a party, remember?”

* * *

By 7 P.M., Horizon was filled with a special warm buzzing sound of voices talking in undertones, an occasional laugh or shriek that carried above the chatter when a joke was told in a small group. Fine china was covered with hot and cold foods. At the six bars, business was brisk as glasses clinked and liquids were poured. The sloshing sound of

cocktails being mixed could be heard around the house. And an integral part of the whole scene, like a rhythmic undertone carrying the evening, was the sound of waltzes and easy dancing tunes to be heard from the second floor music room where couples danced after walking up the grand staircase festooned with flowers and garlands, the sound of gentlemen's leather shoes snappy and formal on the wide marble steps leading gracefully up and around, almost circling a chandelier and the marble-floored foyer in a gentle but encompassing sweep. The great chandelier provided brilliant light in the foyer from where the guests went into whichever room they chose to begin partying on either side of the Great Hall.

The guests entered on a rich deep Persian carpet, long and narrow, greeting first Patricia, then Bedelia and the one or two dignitaries added to the line when they arrived, including, later, the two candidates. Thurston's wife was with him but Sofia St. Clair was not with her husband. Word had it that she was under the weather and had remained back home on St. Clair Island.

Patricia was happy when she saw Jack coming through the door behind Sam with a sexy dark-haired beauty on his arm—someone she hadn't met.

"Hello, Sam," Patricia smiled as she kissed Sam's cheek.

"I've got 'Hello, Gorgeous' here and," he said, looking at Bedelia, "'Hello, Beautiful' over here. I'm a blessed old man."

She quickly passed Sam on to Bedelia, who had known Sam for many years.

Jack gave Patricia a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey, Patricia," he said.

"People told me you were in Miami this morning. How'd you make it up so fast?"

"Where there's a will," he began, before trailing off. He turned quickly to the girl. "This is my wonderful girlfriend,

Babylon Fuentes, but you can call her Babe if you like. I'm sure you two will get along famously."

They shook hands. Babe was beautiful, all right, a strikingly beautiful woman in her mid-20s who looked exactly like the kind of hot-blooded Cuban firecracker Patricia had seen so many times on her trips to Miami. (In fact, she remembered Jack's tempestuous affair with Raven Fuentes.) Sam and Jonathan's father had done some business together, so that established the connection. She and Jonathan had been to Flagler Hall many times, and she'd been there a few times by herself. She'd come close to sleeping with Jack, but there always seemed to be another woman in the way, just the case tonight. But then, thought Patricia, she had her man. He just wasn't free.

St. Clair and Thurston stood in the line smiling, separated by Peggy Thurston, each candidate trying to make the best of what both considered an uncomfortable situation. Each was anxious to get out of the receiving line and into private conferences in quiet rooms somewhere where aides could channel traffic to them.

Jack and Babe took glasses of Champagne from a passing server.

"She's attractive."

"Yes," said Jack, admiring Patricia from as distance.

"Anything ever go on between you?"

"No. I'd tell you if it had."

"I'd *know* it if it had," said Babe. "I trust you."

"Thanks. I think," he smiled.

"You were right about her husband—"

"Jonathan."

"Yes, Jonathan. A no-show."

"That's right."

“How could a woman who looks like that end up with Jonathan?”

"I've been asking myself that question ever since they got married. I could tell he was gay when I first met him, but

he was still in the closet. You heard rumors. But when he married Patricia, it looked like he was going to make a go of it, or try to at least, but it wasn't long before he bailed on the marriage, but left her sitting pretty."

"In this big old house."

"Yep. We—me and my Dad—we still do some business with Jonathan, one of his companies in New York."

"That's why he stays at Flagler Hall when he's down?"

"Sometimes he stays there and sometimes he stays down on South Beach at the Raleigh with his boyfriend, Rolando. Closer to the gay bars. But he's been to Flagler Hall a couple of times with Rolando."

"But not with Patricia?"

"Sometimes with her. Sometimes with him. Never all three of them. It's a mess. I don't envy Patricia."

"Your dad seems to get along with Bedelia pretty well."

"They've known each other for decades. He actually dated her when she was young, but Dad married my mom and she married Jonathan's father."

"Does your dad like living at Flagler Hall, you think? With the St. Clair Island Club in the same building?"

"He's used to it. There's plenty of room in that big house."

"I know. It's just like living in a four-star hotel, that's all."

"Excuse me. That's five stars, sweetie," said Jack with a wink as he leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

"You know, you cut it pretty close this afternoon coming back from the Keys. You got back to Miami just in time for us to get here."

"I know."

"I didn't think we'd make it."

Jack sighed.

"Neither did I. Your glass is empty. Let's get another one."

When Matt and Sue arrived, Patricia pulled off the introductions easily, waiting until her butler announced their

names to her before introducing them along the line. Bedelia gave them a dignified smile before passing them on to the candidates. Each candidate said he wanted to see Matt a little later in the evening alone. He smiled and said, "Of course," figuring neither would have the time to get around to him.

Patricia gave Matt a quick glance as he passed her. He didn't see her but Bedelia did and whispered to her before the next couple came up.

"Do you know them?"

Patricia knew she was safe because Bedelia didn't say "him."

"No, they're new in town. He's the new man from Wyoming, I know that."

"I see," said Bedelia, not thinking anymore about it. She recognized that Matt was an extremely handsome specimen of a man. It would be only natural for a young woman like Patricia to look more than once at such a man when she had been without male company for so long.

Lamar Perryman arrived alone as usual. He knew Bedelia Vaughan quite well.

"How are you, Lamar?" asked Bedelia warmly.

"Jus' fine, Bedelia, and how is it with you?"

"Fine. I'm so happy you could come. I do hope you enjoy yourself."

"I'll enjoy myself much better if you dance with me two or three times. I'm too old to hope to get you for the entire evening," he said, cocking his eyebrow jauntily.

Patricia watched Bedelia laugh with Perryman. She knew she was happy and liked the old speaker's company.

"Those dances are yours."

"I'm not as good as I used to be," he warned her with a wagging finger.

"Neither am I," she whispered back, putting a hand beside her mouth, "but don't tell anybody. We'll both fool them."

They laughed and Perryman proceeded along the line, smiling at both candidates as he shook their hands. Perryman planned to enjoy himself a little while before getting down to the business he'd come to the party to handle.

By half past 8, most of the guests had arrived and the receiving line broke up, each person going in a different direction to mingle with the noisy crowd. Patricia stood next to Bedelia as they turned from the entrance and looked at the long wide foyer with its grand, sweeping staircase and the couples climbing up and down it, taking slow, graceful steps, almost seeming to keep in half rhythms with the music wafting down from above.

"You look sad, Bedelia," said Patricia, looking at her as she gazed at the scene before her, people moving here and there, laughing, talking, arguing in groups, eating and drinking.

"Oh, it's nothing, my dear. I had forgotten just how *alive* Horizon could be at times like this."

Patricia smiled and wondered what she would think about when she was as old as Bedelia Vaughan. They both moved among the guests, stopping several times for small talk as they made their way through the house.

Crampton took Sue and Matt around and introduced them to some people so Sue wouldn't feel completely unknown. Most people knew who Matt was by now, but most couldn't place the face with his name and had to be reminded.

"Oh, yes," said one New York banker when he was introduced. "You're the one from Wyoming, aren't you?"

He and Sue got something to eat and drink before going upstairs to dance.

"Will you get a load of this place, Matt?" said Sue, looking around like a child plunked into a fairyland. "These people have got money up to their armpits."

“Sure looks that way,” he said. He was more interested in the power and influence that went to build marble floors and large houses than in the floors and mansions themselves. That was a basic difference between him and Sue.

Sue's mouth dropped open when they entered the music room, which was really a small ballroom. There was a little alcove in one corner where the orchestra had set up and now played. Mirrors lined the walls on all four sides and gave a heady experience to all who swirled between them. Chairs and benches ranged along the walls and in front of the closed French doors along the entire other end of the room where people were sitting in small groups and chatting. About fifty people were dancing. Sue looked at the women's gowns and frowned at Matt.

“I wish I’d known we were coming here,” she said. “I could have brought something to wear.” She was wearing a full-length pink dress she had thrown in with her other things “just in case,” and the hotel worked on it that morning to get it ready for her to wear. She and Matt joined the couples on the floor, Sue’s eyes taking in everything but Matt’s heart.

Ambassador Kornilevski was on the main level trying to catch Calvin Brown away from Mayor Healy long enough and in a place private enough to tell him that the White House knew about those power and light connections back in Cook County, but he was having no success and wouldn't all evening.

Lamar Perryman joined the dancing with Bedelia Vaughan to the applause of the assembled company. He danced two dances with her, making her very happy with his country humor and entertaining her a great deal before excusing himself and going back downstairs. He walked briskly down the marble steps, stopping halfway down to look over the crowd. He spotted Neil Scott between two great crystal prongs of the chandelier talking to a group of

men. Perryman moved down a few steps to get a better view of Scott, and waited, exchanging remarks and greetings with various people as they passed him.

When Scott's glass was empty, he moved away from the group of men towards the bar. Perryman moved, too, trying not to look too hurried as he came down the stairs. He weaved his way quietly through the crowd, nodding this way and that to various people he knew, before squeezing through the press at the bar to stand beside Scott.

"Hello, Lamar, having a good time?" Scott asked him.

"Sho' am, Congressman," Perryman smiled back. "I'll have a triple bartender—Jack Daniels neat." He turned to Scott, leaned on the bar close to him and spoke in a serious whisper. "Neil, I have to talk to you and talk to you right now. Let's go somewhere a little more private." Perryman had selected a place he remembered from a previous visit to the mansion.

"All right, Lamar, what's up?"

"Just you come with me, sir, and you'll find out."

They got their drinks and Perryman led Scott through the rustling crowd to a small turn of the century telephone room off the foyer, unused for years. It was a small, dark paneled room with a little light above the telephone table. Perryman entered when no one in particular was watching them and Scott followed. He closed the door against the noise and sat in the telephone chair. He motioned Scott to a bench opposite him and moved the light so that he could see the congressman from Montana.

"What is it, Lamar? You sound so serious."

"I am serious, Neil."

"What is it?"

"Aplenty, Neil, quite aplenty," said Perryman, taking a healthy swig of his Jack Daniels and placing the drink on the little telephone table beside an antique instrument. He reached inside his double-breasted dinner jacket for the piece of paper he obtained from Slanetti earlier.

"They know about something," he said, withdrawing the paper.

"Who does?"

"The administration. The White House."

"What?"

"The gas money."

Scott's eyes widened.

"Gas money?" he asked timidly.

"Don't look surprised, Neil, not with me. I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you, especially considering my position, but they wanted a friend to tell you instead of an enemy—someone who could keep his mouth shut—so they picked me."

Scott held the paper into the light and glanced at the payments and kickbacks he'd received over the past three years from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in the northwest part of Montana east of Glacier National Park. Scott wouldn't let legislation through his committee in Congress to give the Indians control over their natural gas deposits until they agreed, he thought secretly, to pay him off. He had built his new home in Great Falls with part of the money from the Indians and had been much criticized for the splendor of it.

"They won't like that back in Great Falls if they find out about it, Neil."

"What do they want me to do?" asked Scott, looking up at the speaker.

"That's the hard part," said Perryman, leaning closer in the dim, almost green light. "You have to vote along with Clint Gilmartin for St. Clair so Montana will go for him. They've given you twenty-four hours to decide, then they release it," he nodded at the paper in Scott's hand.

Perryman sat back and waited for his handiwork to sink in before applying any more pressure. He didn't want to blow his Good Samaritan cover.

Scott was one of two men in the Montana delegation. Clint Gilmartin was the other man, a staunch Republican and supporter of St. Clair's Russian policy. Scott's vote kept the state tied.

"Twenty-four hours?" he asked, screwing up his face in indecision. Perryman felt the man's weakness drip from him. *This will be easy*, he thought. "But I've got to have more time, Lamar. I can't give in just like that. What will everybody say?"

"I don't think they're willing to let you wait long enough to chase a coon out of a low tree, Neil. You've got to tell me in twenty-four hours or it'll be too late and the newspapers will get it from what I was told and then Justice will pick it up and by then it'll be a little late to change your mind." He sighed. "I'm just glad Montana isn't one of the states we were counting on for Fred. We just wanted it to stay tied. But even if we needed it," he said shaking his head sadly, "you wouldn't have much of a choice."

"What would *you* do, Lamar?" asked Scott, practically hunched over the paper and looking up at Perryman pitifully. Perryman leaned down close, the dim light digging deep shadows out of the heavy lines in his face.

"I'd do what I had to do to save myself from total ruin and disgrace, sir, that's what I'd do," he said, and sat back up. He'd lied completely, because Perryman followed his convictions and was much more of a man than Scott was. It was a matter of courage, a matter he doubted would suddenly enter into Scott's mind, where, he was sure, it did not have a welcome home. Perryman was always ready to withstand public disgrace if it was a matter of defending his convictions. He doubted Scott would persevere.

"I don't see how I can do it, Lamar, I can't. No one in the world would understand why I suddenly changed my vote. No one," said Scott with strength of voice that surprised the speaker. He decided to use his last, but certainly potent, piece of information.

"There's something else I should have told you, Neil," he said with downcast eyes, trying in his voice to sound embarrassed and ashamed of what he had to say. "I hoped I wouldn't have to tell you, but it's best you should know all they have against you."

"What is it?" asked Scott with wide eyes and a trembling voice.

"They know about Patricia Vaughan—everything."

Scott's eyes narrowed to a pained squint when he heard her name. Perryman decided to twist the knife a little so the man would break completely.

"They've known about it for a long time from what I understand," he lied, because they knew of only one meeting, "right up until the last time you met, the night Congress reconvened, when she went over to see you." Perryman knew he was gambling on the shred of evidence Slanetti had that the two were having an affair. He prayed to his Episcopalian God. God answered by striking Neil Scott down.

"Oh, Jesus," Scott said in a whisper. "What am I going to do?" he mumbled to the floor, not really asking Perryman. "Annie would kill me."

"It's up to you, Neil. I won't try to sway you, to tell you what you oughta do," Perryman said slowly. "Otherwise, I would like you to vote for Thurston. We both want him elected, but I wouldn't try to tell you to vote for him when I know that by so doin' you'd ruin your career *and* your marriage. I couldn't do that. A man has to look out for himself in this world."

"I'll do it then," Scott said quickly, getting up. "Tell them I'll do it. Who told you all this, Lamar?"

"No one in particular. The information came through a third party who didn't know what he was delivering."

"Well, it doesn't matter."

"They say you have to vote for Sam Houston St. Clair in any caucus and on January 3rd. After that your file is to be

shredded and no more said about the whole thing and you can go back to fighting St. Clair if you want to, if indeed he is elected. They just want to do what they can to get him in. They're pretty desperate, all right," said Perryman, rubbing his chin.

"Yes," said Scott standing over the speaker. Perryman looked back up at him. "So am I."

They left the little telephone room separately, Scott first. Perryman reclined as best he could in the little telephone chair before he left, sipping his bourbon, a sly smile spreading across his face. He was jubilant. He looked forward to his next hit and even felt like dancing a couple of more dances with Bedelia Vaughan if he could round her up and snatch her from the arms of that banker cozying up to her when he left.

He reminded himself to be sober and serious as he glanced around the low door to his little room to see if he could get out unnoticed. He did and waddled up the grand staircase.

* * *

Sam Houston St. Clair milled about the great house, taking in the details. To his practiced eye, he thought Horizon must have been built within ten years of Flagler Hall, given certain Beaux-Arts architectural details he noticed.

"Shouldn't you be working the crowd, Governor?" he heard behind him.

He turned around and saw Lord Ellsworth standing there with a glass of white wine.

"Hello, Harold."

"I see you do not have a glass in your hand. May I accompany you to the bar?"

a month, let me tell you."

"A lot *has* to happen, Harold."

Jack appeared at their side.

"Why, hello, Jack?"

"Lord Ellsworth," said Jack.

"How has Vernon been since I last saw him?" asked Ellsworth.

Since Jack had just come from outside where he'd spoken with Gargrave, he knew exactly how Gargrave was doing. He and Camilo and the team had successfully recovered all the loot from the sub and made it back to Big Pine Key in the darkness. They were just minutes ago in the process of offloading the cash into Camilo's houses where the money would be guarded by Camilo's people until Jack decided what to do with it.

Gargrave had told Jack that the salvage operation went like clockwork, that, as expected, they'd not been revisited by Derek or Vlad or any of their people, and that the few fishing and pleasure craft that had passed them had not paid them the least bit of attention. He said that the boat that came closest to them was, surprisingly, the *Fearless*, but that it was running at top speed bound for Miami.

"Oh, since I had to rush up here with Babe, I gave your nephew the day off and I think he said he was going to the Keys for a bit of fishing."

"That Vernon," smiled Ellsworth, "he was always a very keen fishermen, even as a small child. I used to take him trout fishing up in Scotland when he was only ten and he caught more than anybody else in our party."

"And where's your wife?" asked Jack.

"She's out ill. Your father here has invited her down for a little stay in Flagler Hall, and I think I may have to join her—after, mind you, we find out who the next President will be."

"Which reminds, me," said St. Clair, "I better be doing a little more pressing of the flesh." He smiled and moved into a nearby crowd, slapping backs and shaking hands. There

was no question he had a much more winning personality than the thin-lipped, uptight Thurston.

"He's under a lot of pressure, you know? And with Sofia ill, it's worse. How's he holding up, Jack?"

"As well as can be expected, I guess," said Jack.

"We're doing everything we can here to persuade people to see the light."

"I just wish I knew more people to talk to." He glanced over Ellsworth's shoulder and saw Matt and Sue Hawkins talking to Babe. "I know this new guy, Hawkins, from Wyoming. He's over there with his wife talking to Babe."

"I've made a study of the membership of the House, Jack, and my research shows he's a staunch Thurston supporter."

"Yes, I know. I played handball with him. A very nice fellow. Solid. I put in a good word for Dad, which I'm going to do again right now." He touched the ambassador's shoulder. "You and Allison come down as soon as you can get away. We'll keep your regular suite available at the Club."

"Thank you, Jack. Now go get that Hawkins chap."

Jack nodded and headed over.

* * *

"Oh, there you are!" said Babe as he walked up.

Jack went up and kissed Babe on the cheek and then shook Matt's hand.

"Jack, you haven't met my wife, Sue. Sue, this is the *other* candidate's son, Jack Houston St. Clair."

He shook hands with Sue and nodded slightly.

"Very nice to meet you, Sue. Your husband plays a mean game of handball."

"Jack taught me everything I know."

"I've never met anybody from Wyoming," said Babe.

"Well," said Sue, "there's only a little over half a million Wyomingites, so that's not surprising."

"There are more people in Vermont than in Wyoming," said Matt with a laugh.

"Wyomingite?" asked Babe.

"That's what they call us," said Sue.

Matt could tell Sue was having a good time with Jack and Babe.

Although the foursome didn't notice him, Slanetti watched them closely from across the large crowded room. He saw the easy give-and-take between Matt Hawkins and Jack. He knew they'd played handball together and even met for drinks the next day.

"Once you get settled," Babe was saying across the room, "you'll have to come down to Miami and stay on St. Clair Island."

"I've read a good bit about Flagler Hall since the campaign started," said Matt.

"Oh, wait'll you see it. Flagler Hall makes this place look like a double-wide in a Hialeah trailer park," Babe laughed, flicking her wrist over her shoulder as she summarily dismissed the glory that was Horizon.

"We'll have to do that," said Sue, nodding at Matt for approval.

"Yes, I'd like nothing more than to go to Florida."

"I don't know how anybody can stand the cold up there where you come from," Babe shook her head as she shivered.

"It gets tougher every year," said Matt.

"Actually, I like the cold," said Sue. "It's, oh, I don't know, what's the word? *Fresh!*"

Babe shook her lovely head, unconvinced.

"I don't think so. A week in Colorado skiing, that's one thing. You two just get your asses to Miami in February and I'll show you what I'm taking about."

"We'll take you up on that," said Matt.

"If you're in the House, then you're voting for Jack's dad, right?" said Babe.

"Not really. I'm in the House, yes, but I'm a Democrat and I support Frederick Thurston."

"Thurston?" Babe recoiled, wrinkling up her nose. "Jack's a Democrat, too!" she exclaimed, as if the media throughout the campaign hadn't exploited that little tidbit.

"I know," said Matt.

"Now, Babe. This is not the time," Jack tried to head her off.

"He voted for his dad. Why can't you?"

Matt smiled.

"Well, it's his dad, first of all. Second, I support Thurston's position on the Sino-Russian issue. I think Jack's dad has made the wrong call. It's really that simple."

"Let me jump in here," Jack said, trying to derail an out-of-control Babe and take charge of the conversation. "I do disagree with my dad on a lot of issues, but on the Russia-Chinese matter, I think he's got the right stance, the right policy."

"You could always oppose him once he got in, you know," Babe offered.

"But if I oppose him now, why would I vote for him?" asked Matt, a little perplexed by Babe.

"Just to be nice," said Babe. "Oh, I know. I'm just kidding."

"Yes, she is," echoed Jack.

"My glass is empty." She looked at Jack's glass. "Yours is, too. I'll get us refills," she said, taking Jack's glass and moving off toward the bar.

"Sorry about that," said Jack. "I should be the one twisting your arm, not Babe."

"I was thinking the same thing," said Matt with a laugh.

"Haven't you two discussed the vote?" asked Sue.

"Not really," said Matt.

"Jack, you should push a little harder, don't you think?"

"I should, yeah," said Jack sheepishly. "It's just that I'm not—"

"Hey, we're lawyers, Matt and me. We're used to it." She grabbed Matt's glass. "I'll join Babe at the bar and get you a refill, honey," she said, leaning over and giving Matt a kiss on the cheek. "While I'm gone, Jack, I suggest you work on him," she winked as she followed Babe.

"That kinda puts me on the spot," said Jack.

Matt folded his arms across his chest.

"Do your worst, Jack. I'm all ears."

"I do have some points I'd like you to consider before you make your decision."

"Aren't you forgetting I've already made my decision?"

"OK, before you make your *final* decision," said Jack.

"Like I said, I'm all ears."

Jack bent Matt's ears for about three minutes, casually glancing every now and then over at the bar where he saw Babe and Sue engaged in deep conversation, paying them no mind. He put all of his passion into convincing Matt that his dad's (and President Norwalk's) policy was the best one. Matt just smiled as Jack ran out of steam.

"Are you finished?"

"I think I am."

Patricia Vaughan drifted toward them with her mother-in-law in tow.

"Babe is quite the girl," said Bedelia.

"Yes, she's quite the girl, all right."

"Sam's invited Patricia and me down to St. Clair Island, and says we ought to come before the Congress convenes," said Bedelia.

"He's invited Lord Ellsworth and Allison, too," said Jack.

"And Jack's invited me and my wife," said Matt with a laugh.

"We'll just make a big party, then," said Jack. "The week before Christmas would be nice."

"How does Flagler Hall compare to Horizon?" Matt asked.

"Oh, my dear, please!" said Bedelia. "Flagler Hall makes this place look like a lean-to," she laughed.

"The hunting room here is pretty impressive," said Matt.

"Yes, it is," said Jack.

"And the fire roaring in that humongous fireplace. Nothing like it."

"And the library," said Bedelia.

"And the library. Must be a million old leather-bound books in there," said Matt as if he lived in the place.

"You'll find, Mr. Congressman-elect," said Bedelia, "Flagler Hall has all that and much more. Everything but the *need* for a roaring fire. The weather's so divine in Miami."

"You're welcome anytime, Bedelia, you know that."

"I'd really like to go down to see Sofia. It's been some time since we caught up."

"She'd appreciate the visit, I'm sure," said Jack. "She's really upset she missed this party."

"Then we'll definitely plan a trip, Patricia and I, and even Jonathan if the scamp is around."

"Good."

"You're the young man from Wyoming, aren't you?" asked Bedelia.

"Yes I am, ma'am, I am indeed," said Matt.

"Someone told me you're voting for that awful Senator Thurston. Can that be?"

Matt and Jack broke out laughing.

"We were just discussing that, Bedelia," said Jack.

"And Jack hasn't been able to win you over?" asked Bedelia.

"Not yet."

"What you need—if you're from Wyoming—is a trip to Flagler Hall. Down there Jack can wine and dine you and exert undue influence over you," said Bedelia.

"Sounds like an offer I can't refuse," said Matt.

Someone touched Bedelia on the elbow and she turned away to talk to a diplomat.

“A trip to Miami. That sounds like fun,” said Patricia with a raised eyebrow

“Yes, we’ve been planning a little getaway—” Matt started, suddenly realizing he was looking at Patricia when he said the words, and smiling much too broadly. He quickly looked at Jack, adding, much too defensively, “Sue and I, we were talking about a little getaway after she moves down and we get settled. We could do it earlier.”

“That sounds lovely,” said Patricia, very awkwardly, looking at the floor.

The damage was done.

Jack saw Matt’s face go red with an adrenalin rush when he realized he’d said the wrong thing. Not the wrong thing, really, but the wrong thing about the wrong woman. When he said those words, he looked at Patricia with stars in his eyes. Jack knew instinctively that Matt was sleeping with Patricia Vaughan.

By this time, Babe and Sue had returned, arm in arm, laughing and chatting it up.

Earlier, Matt had mentioned the hunting room, a roaring fire, the library, but Jack had been in there minutes before and there had been no fire burning. He knew Matt had been to Horizon before—obviously without Sue.

Jack was very aware when Matt steered Sue way from their little circle before the subject of Miami was brought up again.

Bedelia turned away from the diplomat and back to Jack, Babe and Patricia.

“My dad’s plane makes the trip almost daily between here and Miami. I’m on it most of the time. We’ll set this up, if you like, and you’ll come down with me.”

“This sounds wonderful, Jack,” said Bedelia.

“Yes, that’s very generous of you, Jack,” said Patricia, looking into his eyes and wondering how much he knew.

* * *

Eric Stathis left his wife abruptly in the music room and moved out to the long balustrade to look out over the crowd. He saw Lamar Perryman moving briskly up the stairs and went down to meet him. Perryman looked up.

"You look mighty sour tonight, sir," he said cheerfully. Stathis was still looking around the foyer filled with people mingling.

"Where is Frederick Thurston, Mr. Speaker?" he said in an urgent hoarse whisper. Perryman felt uneasy by the man's tone of voice. He was extremely on edge. Perryman turned and looked over the crowd with Stathis.

"Why, I don't rightly know, sir. I haven't seen him in a little while. Out looking for votes, if you ask me," Perryman chuckled.

"I have to speak to him immediately on the most urgent business—" said Stathis, taking Perryman by the arm. "It would be unseemly for me to approach him. Could I ask you to find him and bring him to the library?"

"You certainly may, Eric," said Perryman, suddenly as serious about the matter as Stathis was. "I'll round him up right now. Is he the only one you want to see?"

"Yes, and perhaps yourself, of course. I'll go now. I'll go in from the gallery entrance and you bring him in from the first floor," said Stathis, turning hurriedly and moving up the stairs. Perryman rubbed his chin as he watched the tall, dignified Stathis move away. Then he lowered his hand, turned around and clipped down the steps as fast as he could, his mind working at triple speed.

What in the Lord's sacred name could Eric Stathis ever have to say to Thurston? wondered Perryman, thinking the worst. Stathis's reputation was not an unearned one. He was known to be nonpartisan and extremely proud and conscious of his honor. What could possibly have ruffled him

enough to want to speak to the Democratic candidate in private?

Perryman caught sight of Thurston's head of dark hair surrounded by a group of people listening to him expound on one of his policies. He was in good form and had them all laughing as he cut down the opposition. Perryman wiggled his way through the crowd, inching closer to Thurston.

Thurston kept talking until he caught Perryman's glance. He couldn't have mistaken the sense of urgency in Perryman's eyes, especially when he jerked his head quickly to one side meaning for Thurston to disengage himself at once.

"I think I've kept you good people long enough. This is supposed to be a casual nonpartisan affair and there only seem to be Democrats around me," he said, and people laughed and started dispersing, many heading for the bar and some going back to the long lines of excellent dishes that were being refilled for those with big appetites. Two fellow senators took Thurston by the arms and moved him away to talk about Dexter White's Senate battle, but Perryman intervened.

"Excuse me, senators, but I have some rather urgent business to discuss with the candidate," he said, smiling casually. "I promise you may have him back in a few moments."

"I'll get back to you in a little while, fellas, all right?" They nodded and Thurston moved away with Perryman to a corner of the room at the end of the makeshift bar.

"What is it, Lamar? You look like you saw a ghost," Thurston whispered.

"I felt like I did, and he had something to say to me. Eric Stathis is waiting to see you in the library right this moment, sir. He said it was something urgent, and he didn't mean he had to go to the bathroom."

"Stathis?" Thurston asked with a squint. "What could he possibly have to say to me?"

"I don't know, Senator, but if I were you, I'd put one foot in front of the other and go see what he wants." Perryman was anxious for the two to have the interview. He was sure if they didn't have it at Horizon right now, they'd have it later, because Stathis looked determined to see Thurston at all costs. And Lamar Perryman wanted to be there when he did.

"Let's go, then," said Thurston.

Stathis was pacing on the first level of the library when they entered. He turned quickly and rushed over to Thurston.

"How do you do, Senator?" he said urgently by way of opening, clasping his hand.

"Fine, Eric. What's the matter?"

Stathis looked quickly at Perryman, standing slightly behind the candidate.

"I am sure I may speak in front of Lamar. What I have to tell you is of the most delicate nature."

Thurston looked at Perryman and then back at Stathis.

"Of course. I'd be in a bad fix if I couldn't trust my own speaker."

Perryman had the impulse to roll his eyes but he restrained himself.

"Someone came in while I was waiting for you," said Stathis, looking like a scared cat. "I can't be seen talking to you, especially by Phil Slanetti." Perryman couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Let's go up the staircase to the gallery where it's darker."

They followed Stathis up the spiral staircase to the gallery, wrapped in shadows in the dark library, which was illuminated only by two dim lights on tables on the first level. Stathis took them to a little alcove right behind the staircase where they were protected from the sight of anyone entering the first floor. There were no chairs so the men sat on the floor in a circle, Perryman grunting as he crouched down.

"Do we have to hide like this, Eric?"

"Yes, we do. Because I've got the God damndest thing to tell you."

Just then, a door opened on the first floor, allowing a wide sliver of bright light to slice into the darkness.

"Quiet," Perryman whispered.

They peered through the slats in the railing as Jack and Babe entered below.

"This is the library," Jack was saying.

"Wow!" said Babe. "What a room."

"I know."

"Look at that fireplace," said Babe.

Hand-in-hand, they walked across the room as the three men in the gallery watched them silently.

"Imagine that with a great big fire roaring and it snowing outside," said Jack.

Babe came over and threw her arms around Jack's neck.

"And you and me making love on this bearskin rug," she said seductively.

In thirty days, you'll be making love in the White House if I have anything to do with it, thought Perryman with a smile.

Jack kissed Babe, picked her up around the waist and twirled her around in a circle.

"That, my dear, will have to wait," he said.

"This is some house, all right, but it's got nothing over Flagler Hall."

"Flagler Hall is one helluva house, I gotta admit," said Jack. "C'mon, let's get back to the party. I'm supposed to be helping my dad round up some votes."

"OK, but you have to make it up to me later."

"I'll make it up as soon as we get back to the hotel, sweetheart," said Jack.

He pulled her by the wrist across the room, closing the door behind them, shrouding the lower part of the room once again in semi-darkness.

“OK. What is it, Eric?” Thurston asked, his eyes riveted on the President’s chief assistant.

“I want you to know what I’ve found out because I want you to know what you’re operating against.”

“Go on.”

“I saw some files on several members of Congress on Phil Slanetti’s desk yesterday that completely amazed me.”

“Yes?” said Thurston urgently.

“They contained information of the most illegal sort on the business and private activities of those members. I’m not sure to what use they’re being put, but I saw Albert Delamar’s file and it’s obvious to me now why he changed his vote. He must have been pressured by Slanetti with information he had on him.”

“*Fucking bastard*,” Thurston said in a furious undertone, looking through the wood in the rail along the gallery down to the first floor, then back at Stathis sharply. “How many files did you see?” Had he been looking at Perryman, he would have seen his eyes bulging. He wanted to wring Stathis’s neck—anything to keep him quiet.

“Just a couple—Delamar, something about timberland, John Fulton, and one other but I can’t remember his name or the information. I remember vaguely something about money paid to Fulton—something in oil, naturally.” He pursed his lips trying to think, then spoke quickly. “I didn’t have but a minute in the office before he came back. I noticed he’d been absent from staff meetings and I got curious about what he was up to.”

“Do you estimate an extensive file on members?”

“I’m not sure. I know there’s a code name for it I’ve never heard of.”

“What’s the code name?”

“Keystone. It was on each file I saw.”

Perryman was nauseous.

“*Keystone...Keystone...*” Thurston turned the word over in his mind. “It’s secret, all right. I never heard of it before.

Lamar?”

Perryman quickly returned the senator’s glance.

“No, never. So this explains their changes in the caucus vote.”

“Yes, and their weird attitudes,” said Thurston.

“I don’t believe what I’m hearing,” Perryman commented, just because he thought he ought to express some form of shock at hearing the news, just to look good. He wasn’t thinking much about getting in another dance with Bedelia Vaughan. *I have to get to Slanetti as soon as I can to tell him about Stathis.*

“I’m simply overwhelmed by what I’m saying to you, Senator. I couldn’t believe what I read in those files or that the President would condone such activities by anyone. It’s hurt me very much. I thought I knew most of what went on in the White House.”

“Your boss is a smart guy—we both know that,” said Thurston with understated contempt and passion.

“I just knew I couldn’t stand by and let you go on not knowing what you were fighting. I don’t know what to tell you to do, how you can combat the files. All I have decided is to keep my peace. My long friendship with Norwalk prevents me from breaking with him publicly. I’ll leave office when he does and that’s that.”

“I wish it were that easy for me,” said Thurston.

“Nothing’s easy for a man who wants to be President,” said Stathis.

“So I’ve found out,” remarked Thurston. “What do you think, Lamar?” he said, turning to Perryman.

“I don’t know what to think, Senator. I’m shocked, of course, as you are.”

“But we’ll have to do *something*. We just can’t sit by and let them erode what strength we do have. They have too much time before the third.”

“I won’t be able to help you. I can tell you that Phil Slanetti is handling it. He’s the one in charge. The President

could not possibly follow the details or make the arrangements. That would be too tricky and he hasn't got the time. But I'm convinced he knows everything that's going on, or I would've gone to him instead of you. They are the only two who know about it. If I wasn't let in on it, no one else could know, I'm sure."

"But how could the files come into existence?" asked Thurston, wincing. "He couldn't have compiled them since the election. There hasn't been time."

"Only Slanetti, Norwalk and God know that," said Stathis, shaking his head.

Thurston sighed.

"All right, Eric. I can't thank you enough for coming to me like this, and so soon after finding out what you have. I understand how it must pain you to have to do something like this against Norwalk. I know you've been very close."

Stathis's head dropped sadly.

"We'd better separate," suggested Perryman.

"Right," agreed Thurston.

They got up and Stathis held out his hand to Thurston.

"Good luck, Senator," he said. "I wish you good luck and the very best."

"I am lucky, Eric," Thurston said, managing a weak smile. "I'm lucky you're an honest man."

Stathis left by the gallery door and the other two by the front entrance after circling down the spiral staircase. Outside the library, Perryman and Thurston walked into one of the public rooms still full of talking, laughing people, all having a good time. Thurston had a set expression on his face, one of pain and total frustration, but a face of inherent dignity. The music filtered down from the music room and got louder as they moved into the cavernous foyer heading for the next room. Perryman knew it would be hard for him to get through the rest of the evening with any comfort at all. Thurston suddenly stopped in the foyer. A waltz drifted to them from above as they stood near the grand staircase.

"Who should we tell about this, Lamar? Who *can* we tell?"

"I wouldn't tell anyone about it right now." He wanted to contain the information as best he could and for as long as he could. "It would leak out if you told too many people. We'll have to get together and talk it out and decide what to do." They smiled at a man and woman who passed them. Perryman spoke out of the corner of his mouth after they passed. "I wouldn't even tell Niles right now. You know how he'd react. He's weak sometimes and might fly off the handle."

"You're right about Niles, Lamar. He'll have to hold. But I've got to tell Jesse," he said, almost in a tone of voice that asked Perryman's permission.

"Of course," said Perryman, not seeing what he could do to stop Thurston from telling his trusted campaign manager.

"Do you see Phil Slanetti around?" asked Thurston, craning his neck to see over the crowd. Perryman, too, gave the area a quick once-over.

"No, I don't," he replied.

But then he didn't see Matthew Hawkins, either, and Hawkins knew where Slanetti was.

* * *

He was with Slanetti himself, alone in the hunting room, standing beside the darkened fireplace where he'd made love to Patricia not too many nights ago.

"Matt, I know you don't think I know you very well, but I do know you much better than you may think."

"I see, why is that?" Matt didn't like Slanetti's superior tone, but came with him to the hunting room when asked because he had nothing better to do. He'd seen Patricia, but she was busy talking to a gaggle of people.

“Well, I’ve had to make it my business to get to know you. You see, I want your state for Sam Houston St. Clair.”

“Naturally,” Matt said in good humor, “and I wish I was a millionaire. You’re barking up the wrong tree, Phil. My statements are clear and they support Thurston.”

Slanetti smiled and looked into the fireplace for a moment. The man seemed so naïve, seeming to think Slanetti wanted no more than to *request* his vote. He looked Matt in the eye. He liked him—everybody liked Matt Hawkins—and he didn’t want to hurt him if he could help it.

“You don’t understand, Matt. I have to get that vote and I’m prepared to do what I have to do to bring you across.”

“You better tell me what it is, then, because I can’t think of a thing you could say to make me change my mind,” he smiled.

“Not even if I said I know every particular of the affair you’re having right now with the hostess of this party?”

He let that sink in. It was all he had and he wanted to approach Hawkins and get it over with, just to see if it would work or not.

Whoa! It had some sinking in to do, for Matt couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“You what?” he said almost childishly.

“I know you’re *fucking* Patricia Vaughan.”

He’d absorbed it now. What could he say? He decided to hedge, and started walking around the room.

“I thought you thought Neil Scott was having an affair with Patricia Vaughan,” he smiled.

Slanetti smiled back.

“We had to guess on that one, but we think we’re pretty sure.” He decided to dig in where he could. “I can’t keep up with Patricia Vaughan. So she sleeps around a lot,” he shrugged.

This was enough to make Matt lunge at him, but all he did was approach him, fury written on his face.

“*You fucking sonofabitch,*” he said slowly.

“Take it easy,” said Slanetti, backing away. “I’m serious about using this information against you.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his dinner jacket and handed it over to Matt. “On this you’ll find every single time, to the best of my knowledge, that you have met with Patricia Vaughan since arriving in Washington, the times you met her, how long you stayed with her, where you saw her, what you did, as best we can determine,” he said with a suggestive edge, “and when you left her.”

He was quite correct, thought Matt after he snatched the paper and looked at it. Everything was there except the first time when they went to the Jefferson Memorial.

“So what?” Matt said nonchalantly, handing the paper back to him.

“So how would you like it if this information was released?” said Slanetti, not liking Matt’s sauciness.

“What are you going to do? Give it to the *Post*? What will they do? Put it on the front page: ‘Congressman Screws Socialite.’ You can’t use it. Not on me. You can’t change my mind with that.”

Slanetti was forced to use what little ammunition he had left. “I wasn’t thinking of starting with the *Post*, but I’ll keep it in mind. No,” he said, turning half way from Matt and looking back into the fireplace, “I was thinking of starting with your wife.”

This hit Matt and he showed it.

“How do you know I haven’t told her already?” he responded.

“I hardly think she’d be in the mood to attend this party if you’d told her you were fucking the hostess. You haven’t seen her since you left Wyoming until she arrived here yesterday. You never met Patricia Vaughan before you came to Washington and attended the Society ball. And from reports I’ve received from your home state, everyone there thinks you and your wife are madly in love with each other. At least, it’s common knowledge that she loves you. You

haven't told her yet. You may be *planning* to tell her, but you haven't yet." He looked away again.

"I could tell her anytime now that I know this. It's just a matter of time, anyway. You don't know that I'm planning to divorce her and marry Patricia, do you?"

"No, I didn't know that," said Slanetti, turning back to him. "But can you conveniently tell her in," he thought quickly how long to give him, "umm, twenty-four hours? That's how long I'll give you."

That was enough for Matt. He moved towards Slanetti.

"I ought to beat the shit out of you," he said.

"That wouldn't really do any good and you know it. I'll let you think about it." He quickly turned and went to the door but turned back. He forgot something. "Oh yes, if you decide to vote for St. Clair, you should call me at the White House. You will say five words to me and nothing more: 'The Keystone fits the arch.' If you attempt to say anything else, I'll hang up on you and go to work. Is that clear?"

"I've got two words for you now and you don't have to wait twenty-four hours—*fuck off!*"

Slanetti left, glad to be through with that particular interview. Outside and mixing with the crowd again, Slanetti wasn't happy with the way things went. Hawkins was a strong character, stronger than he thought he'd be, a young man convinced that his ideals were worth defending. He hadn't learned the ways of Washington yet, the give and take that became habitual after a couple of terms in the House or after any brief service with the government. He hadn't learned. Slanetti gripped his cocktail glass with some anger and thought that Mr. Matthew Hawkins would have to get a crash course in Washington manners and morals and be satisfied with it ... or else.

* * *

When Matt came out of the room, he went to the bar and ordered a double straight Scotch and downed it in two swallows. Then he ordered another and took it with him. He assumed Sue was still dancing with Crampton—that's where he'd left her.

He hadn't seen Patricia much all evening. Now he saw her standing at the bottom of the stairs in the foyer, disengaging herself from some people she'd been talking to. She was ravishing in her strapless gown and he longed to reach out and touch her skin, her smooth, bare, inviting shoulders. She caught his glance far across the room and started up the stairs. Her eyes told him to follow. He did. She went straight to her bedroom.

On the second floor he passed by the music room and saw Sue still dancing with Crampton, both of them laughing. He took a quick look down the hall, saw people in it who didn't know him, and not many of them altogether, and bolted up the stairs three at a time to the third floor where Patricia's room was. There was no one in the darkened hall outside her suite. Light came up the stairwell and washed down the hallway, the music creeping up with it. He walked in and closed the door behind him. Patricia was standing in the almost completely dark room, candles from the birthday cake she made that afternoon lighting her skin, flickering across its gentle contours.

"Happy birthday," she said, smiling softly.

He went over to her as she raised the cake between them.

"Make a wish," she said sweetly.

Matt took in a deep breath, closed his eyes a second, opened them and blew out the candles. He took the cake and placed it on a nearby table before pulling her into his arms and squeezing her. She loved it.

"*God, I love you,*" he said, holding her away and looking at her. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him

lightly. He kissed her back passionately, circling her with his arms and rubbing his hands down from her bare neck to her backside.

“Did you make a wish?”

“I did. I wished we were far away from this place.”

“Do you like my hair up? You haven’t seen it up before.”

“I saw it when we took that first bubble bath together. Remember?”

“Oh, I forgot,” she said, putting a finger to her lips, remembering. “Well, do you like it anyhow?”

“I like it any way, any way at all,” he said joyously, kissing her all over her chin, neck, shoulders and the tops of her full firm breasts, much exposed by the low cut of the gown.

He stopped and looked at the cake. She followed his gaze as he smiled.

“I admit it. I didn’t make the icing. Didn’t have time. But I would have. Next year I’ll make the icing, too.”

“It’s gorgeous, Patricia. Just like you.” He picked at the icing with a finger and tasted it.

“And just as sweet?” she said with widened eyes so full of fun.

“Yeah, and just as sweet,” he smiled.

“Part of my wish was that we’ll be happy together,” he said seriously, thinking back now on Slanetti and the trials ahead of him.

“Oh,” she said softly, touching his shoulder as she stood beside him. “You shouldn’t say it out loud. It might not come true.”

“It’ll come true. I’ll make it come true.”

* * *

Perryman had long since left Thurston, who went looking for Epstein to tell him about Keystone. Perryman looked for Slanetti and when he found him, nodded from a safe distance in his direction when he was sure Slanetti was looking at him. Slanetti followed Perryman, who went to the little telephone cubbyhole off the foyer where he'd spoken to Scott. Both men entered a few minutes apart from each other, entirely unnoticed.

Matt came down from the third floor into the foyer as Slanetti emerged alone from his quick briefing with Perryman. They glanced hard at each other before moving in opposite directions, losing each other in the throng.

Patricia came down next, much on her mind. Matt had told her quickly about his meeting with Slanetti because he wanted to prepare her in case they tried to hit her with it, too. She began to cry, worrying for him, but he kissed her tears away. He knew now that he was valuable to Slanetti. If he were, he wouldn't tell Sue anything right away. There was still time—all of December—before the new Congress was sworn in. He knew he'd have to find a way to spend more time with Patricia. He found himself hoping Sue's mother remained sick a few more weeks, and cursed himself for such an evil thought. The truth was, though, he couldn't wait for Sue to return to Wyoming.

* * *

Slanetti made it a point to find Jack and when he did, maneuvered him into a corner on the far side of the bar in the Great Hall.

"How are ya, Phil?"

"Fine, Jack, fine."

Jack noticed Slanetti seemed to be sweating heavily.

"Anything I can do to help the cause?"

"There is, Jack, there is. I saw you chatting away with Matt Hawkins a couple of hours ago."

"Yeah. I played handball with him. A really nice guy."

"Though we didn't think so when this whole thing started, we now think his vote might be important."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. It might be *very* important, Jack."

"I see."

"So it goes without saying that anything you can do on a personal level to sway him, by all means use whatever influence you can."

"I'll do my best, Phil, count on it."

"We're all counting on you, Jack—me, the President and your dad, though I haven't told him about Hawkins," said Slanetti.

"I'll tell him, so don't bother. We meet every day on this."

"OK, Jack, thanks," said Slanetti, patting Jack on the arm. He held up his empty glass. "One more before I go."

Slanetti moved away.

Jack wondered if Slanetti knew that Matt was sleeping with Patricia. Slanetti hadn't mentioned it if he did, and Jack was not about to tell Slanetti anything that would hurt a good guy like Matt Hawkins, even if it cost his dad the Presidency. *You have to draw the line somewhere*, he thought as he raised his glass to drink. Empty. *One more for me, too.*

As he edged through the crowd toward the bar, Jack began to wonder about that trip to Miami that seemed to be shaping up. It might be more important than ever given the situation outlined by Slanetti. Maybe there was a way to bring Matt over without cutting off his balls and completely emasculating him.

* * *

Patricia came around a corner and saw Perryman step out of the telephone room, but didn't think anything other than that it was unusual for anyone to go into that room. The old phone there hadn't worked in years. She looked for Bedelia. The party would be breaking up soon and they would have to see their guests off.

It was late and she was tired. The hum and buzz of conversation in the crowd had lowered to a general murmur and she knew the signs well. Within 45 minutes the first guests would start leaving. It was nearly midnight.

Bedelia Vaughan came up to her.

"I was sad at the beginning of the party, my dear. You seem sad at the end of it."

"Too much wine," she smiled, tired.

"I wonder if either candidate gained much this evening. It's so hard to tell with this many people here. They look like sheep. I saw Sam a minute ago in a corner with John Fulton. I talked to him myself about changing his vote. He wouldn't. A strong man, John Fulton."

"Yes, he is," said Patricia flatly, "very strong."

"You seem in a daze, my child."

Patricia smiled.

"I'm tired, that's all. It's been a long, long day."

"We need to take Jack up on that invitation to go to Miami. The sun would do you good."

Patricia arched an eyebrow. This was the third time someone had mentioned a trip to Miami.

Patricia wondered if Bedelia had any designs on Sam. The rumor mill was working overtime about Sofia. How ill was she? The St. Clair campaign had made no announcement, only that Sofia was "down with an extended case of the flu."

"Yes, we definitely should. I'll follow up with Jack."

* * *

Jack saw Matt slip outside through high French doors into the darkened garden. Maybe he smokes and went out for a cigarette, thought Jack.

Jack knew he hadn't leaned on Matt the way he ought to have—after all, his dad was in a desperate fight to become the next President. The least his eldest son could do was bring pressure to bear. He and Matt got along like the best of friends even though they'd just met, and maybe there was a way into the man's mind that Jack hadn't fully explored.

Thinking he might get a private word in outside and away from everybody else, he followed him out. As he expected, there were little clusters of people huddled together in the freezing cold—a brisk wind was whipping up—smoking cigarettes. Jack took in the bold aromas of the odd cigar. He looked around and didn't see Matt, but then saw a figure moving away in the darkness.

That had to be him, thought Jack, so he followed as Matt made his way to a greenhouse shrouded by tall oaks that kept their brittle green leaves in the winter, gray moss hanging from their lowering limbs now tossed by the winds and looking like the witches in *Macbeth* wailing into the night.

Jack stopped suddenly as he saw someone stand out from behind one of the oaks, take Matt's hand and lead him into the greenhouse.

Suddenly, he felt like a peeping tom. What was he thinking? Obviously, he smiled to himself, he hadn't been *thinking* at all, so anxious had he been to speak to Matt alone.

He made his way back onto the terrace where the smokers were gathered, voices slightly raised against the

now howling wind.

He shivered as he opened one of the French doors and went back into one of the drawing rooms.

He went to the bar and got a large snifter of Cognac and took a quick swallow. The liquid coursed through his blood and burned through his body, immediately restoring him.

Sue entered the room, her head turning from side to side, obviously looking for Matt. He ambled over, hoping to give Matt a little more time out in the greenhouse with Patricia.

"Hey, there," he said. "A splash of brandy?"

"Yes, that would be nice. I was out on the terrace a little while ago looking for Matt. Think I got a chill."

Jack put his arms around Sue's shoulders and led her toward the bar.

"We'll warm you up. I saw Matt a few minutes ago, but he was upstairs on the other side of the house talking with Bill Crampton."

"Ah, of course. Politics, politics, politics."

"Bartender, a double portion of that Delamain Cognac for this chilly lady, if you please."

"Yes, sir," said the bartender.

"When Matt decided to run for Congress, I never thought he'd be able to unseat Bill Crampton."

"But he did," said Jack.

"Yes, he did," she sighed, taking her first tentative sip of the Delamain. She shuddered. "This stuff will kick your ass."

"It does have a kick. So, you look forward to moving to Washington?"

"I'm of two minds. I have a whole career going on back in Wyoming, a good strong career."

"That's always a problem, a consideration."

"I'll just split my time between here and there, juggle both lives. Who knows how long he's going to be in the House?"

"What if he racks up term after term like so many of the others?"

"I don't know. Haven't given that much thought yet."

"You'll be in Washington long? Matt said something about your mother being ill."

"Yes, she's sick. That's why I haven't been down before this. I didn't tell Matt I was coming, just showed up at his hotel this morning."

"Oh?"

"You should have seen the look on his face," said Sue, smiling. "I think it was a big surprise."

Jack took a long sip from his snifter and glanced toward the French doors.

"I'll bet it was."

"So I'm heading out of here tomorrow. I couldn't possibly get back until after Christmas. I think Matt'll come back home for the holiday."

"I think with what's going on, he'll consider it pretty important to be here."

"But his vote for Thurston is solid. No offense."

"None taken."

Sue drained her snifter.

"I think I'll go upstairs and look for Matt. I'm a little tired."

Jack took the glass from her hand.

"I'll drop this off over there," he said. "Look forward to getting together with you and Matt next time you come down."

He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She smiled and moved out into the Great Hall.

Jack had just dropped off Sue's glass at the bar and had his own refilled when he saw out of the corner of his eye one of the French doors open and Matt walk through it. He saw Jack and came over.

"Getting cold out there," he said, rubbing his hands together as if he'd just come off a ski slope.

"For a tough Wyomingite like you, I'd think the weather outside was child's play," said Jack.

"Maybe I should have a little of that," Matt nodded at Jack's glass.

"Bartender? More of the same for the gentleman."

"You know, I've been thinking about that trip to Miami."

"Yeah?"

"You said the week before Christmas would be good, right?"

"Always nice this time of year in Miami."

"Sue's going back to Cheyenne tomorrow. I'll see if I can get her to come down before Christmas. It'd be great to see your place."

"I'd love to show it to you. And my dad won't be there to twist your arm. He'll be here twisting arms."

They both laughed.

"And you don't mind if I hitch a ride on your plane?"

"Not at all. I'll be traveling with Patricia and Bedelia. The more the merrier."

Jack and Matt both saw Patricia, Babe and Sue come into the room together, chatting away happily. The women saw them and headed over.

Matt leaned in to Jack.

"I'd like the little jaunt to Miami to be a surprise for Sue, Jack, just in case it doesn't work out, you know. So if you don't mention it..."

"I won't say a word," said Jack.

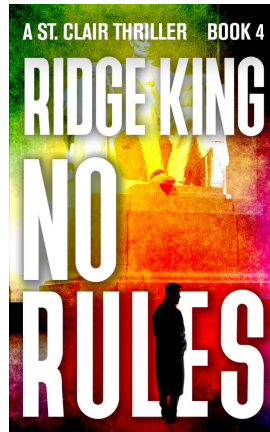
Matt raised his Cognac and they clicked glasses.

"To Miami, then," said Matt.

"Yes," said Jack, "to Miami."

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The next book in this series is **NO RULES**.



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