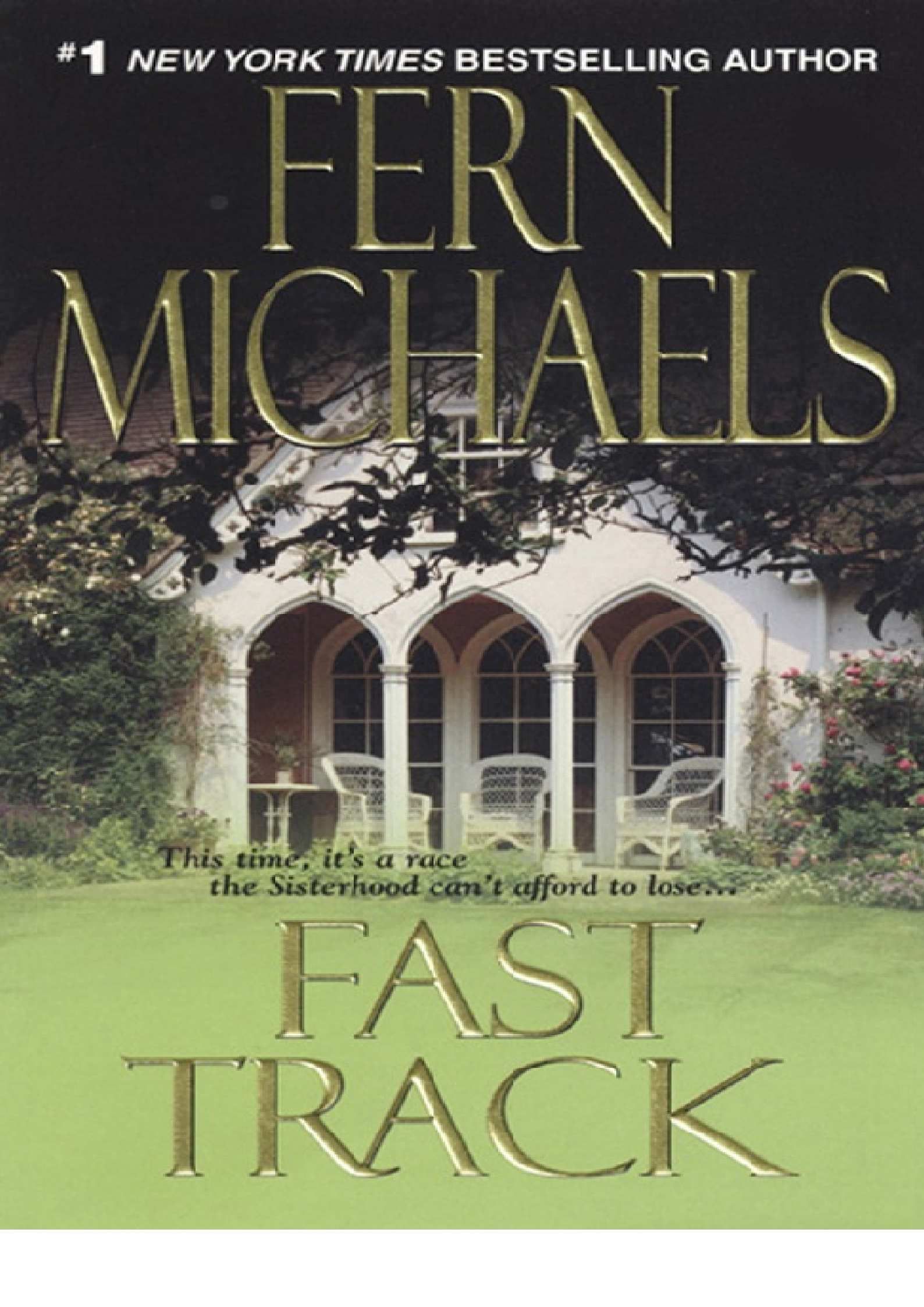


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Chapter 1

*Big Pine Mountain
North Carolina*

It was a fortresslike compound. A training ground. Of sorts. State-of-the-art. First-class accommodations. In the spook world of covert operations and espionage, it was beyond anything the CIA or the FBI could think of. The only facility that came remotely close was NORAD on Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado and was maintained by the government of the United States. Thanks to the taxpayers of the good old US of A. In the interests of security, the only accesses to the site on Big Pine Mountain were by helicopter and cable car.

The women, also known as the vigilantes, clustered together in the dark, their eyes on the helicopter pad and the platform that housed the cable car that had gone missing an hour ago. Off in the distance they could hear the *whump-whump* of helicopter blades. Company was coming, and the women knew it wasn't a social visit. Then they heard the screeching sound of the cable car coming up the mountain. They jostled one another for a better look in the rain-filled, pitch-black darkness.

Isabelle Flanders craned her neck. "A perfect evening for late-night visitors of the clandestine kind. Who do you think they are?"

"Probably the kind of people Charles doesn't want us to see or meet before he sets things up. This is just a guess on my part, but I think they're our next employers," Nikki Quinn said.

"We *could* go outside instead of hiding indoors and see for ourselves. I for one like to know what's going on, especially if it involves me. Or us as a whole. Charles is big on need-to-know where we're concerned. I think I need to know," the ever-verbal Kathryn Lucas said.

Alexis Thorne weighed in, "It would be nice if just once we bested Sir Charles, now, wouldn't it? By one-upping him, I think we could take the visitors down with one eye closed and our hands tied behind our backs. A preemptive strike, so to speak. Or if you don't like that, we can strut our stuff to let them see who they're dealing with. Whatcha think, girls?"

Yoko Akia looked around. "Two of our posse are missing. Myra's in the main house, and I haven't seen Annie since around ten o'clock, when she said she was going to bed early. Don't we need to confer with them? Personally, I love the idea."

The women as one shrugged. Nikki took the high road, lawyer that she was, and said, "They're going to be really pissed if we act without them. I say we call them on their cell phones and tell them to meet up with us right here. But be quick, the helicopter is about to land. The cable car is almost here."

Kathryn was already speaking on her cell. She nodded to the others, meaning the two older women were on the way.

“What about Charles?” Alexis asked. “I’m sure he’s going to be doing the meet and greet.”

“I say we take him out first. It’s the last thing he’ll be expecting. If we’re to believe our own PR we’re the best of the best. Let’s prove it,” Kathryn said.

The door to the women’s quarters opened silently. The dogs, Murphy and Grady, growled softly but didn’t move.

“It’s raining,” Annie de Silva said.

“We’re taking Charles out first. You in or out?” Nikki asked coolly.

“In,” Myra said in a shaky voice.

Annie’s whoop of pleasure was her “in” vote.

“Then let’s do it, ladies,” Kathryn said.

The women held a quick whispered conversation, then moved out into the dark night, the dogs leading the way. The steady *whump-whump* of the helicopter was so close it was deafening. It also masked the sound of the cable car sliding into its nest on the platform’s well-greased tracks.

The pungent scent of pine and the smell of the warm summer rain were aphrodisiacs on the women as they spread out and circled their quarry: one Sir Charles Martin. Murphy streaked forward to meet Charles head-on, while Grady barreled in from the side as Yoko, the rain beating down on her, kicked Charles from behind with one tiny foot and brought him to his knees. Alexis and Isabelle snapped on a set of flexi-cuffs, then yanked their host to his feet and dragged him to the bushes just as the cable car came to a stop. Nikki had pulled off one of her socks and stuffed it in Charles’s mouth.

The wind from the rotors of the Bell JetRanger was so strong it almost knocked over Myra and Annie, who were fiercely holding on to each other. The rain slapping at them from the force of the winds felt like a tidal wave.

Two men and a woman stepped out from the helicopter. The woman foolishly tried to open an umbrella. It blew away in the wind. Kathryn yanked a small penlight out of her pocket and flashed it twice. There was no point in trying to speak or shout. The pinpoint of light moved off just as Nikki led two fine-looking gentlemen, dressed in Savile Row suits, out of the cable car and into the pouring rain.

Mercifully, the helicopter was shut down and put to bed. The high-pitched whine was silent. A bolt of thunder roared overhead as a vicious streak of lightning danced across the sky, lighting the mountaintop from one end to the other.

Their thumbs up in the air in a sign of victory, Yoko and Alexis led Charles toward the newly arrived guests.

As a group, they ran toward the main building, Charles and Myra’s lair. The others called it the Big House. Inside the brightly lit kitchen, the women stared down at the delectable spread of food and drink laid out on the counters and on the table.

“Well done, girls.” Charles beamed when the sock was taken out of his mouth and the flexi-cuff

went done, girls, Charles beamed when the sock was taken out of his mouth and the next-cult removed. “Don’t for one minute think you ‘captured’ me. I knew what you were going to do before you made the decision to take me on. In other words, I allowed it. I wanted your new employers to see you in action. Ladies, meet your new employers. Names at this juncture are not important. I don’t expect they will be important later on, either. I’ll show each of our guests to a room where they can change into dry clothes. I suggest you all do the same. Twenty minutes, ladies, not one minute longer. Are we clear on this?”

“Crystal,” Kathryn said with a bite to her tone. “My ass, you allowed us to take you. You didn’t know what hit you. I’m not going anywhere until you admit it, *Sir Charles*,” she hissed.

Charles turned slightly so that he was in profile to his guests. He winked at Kathryn.

Nikki nudged Kathryn and whispered, “We’ll make an issue of it later. We need to get changed. You know how pissy he gets when we’re late.”

“Ask me if I care,” Kathryn said as she trailed behind the others, Murphy at her side.

Inside their own quarters, as they grappled with whatever they could find in the way of clean or dry clothes, the women kept up a running commentary concerning Charles and what had happened. In the end, a show of hands agreed that they had indeed caught Sir Charles flat-footed. And that he was trying to save face with his guests by his roguish wink. But they also agreed they could be wrong.

“A crapshoot,” Annie said.

Adorned in yellow slickers with matching Wellington boots, the little group made it back to the Big House in the allotted time. They peeled off their rain gear before they trooped out to the kitchen where Charles was handing out drinks.

Charles’s guests waited until the women were seated before they took their own seats for what their host referred to as a midnight feast: Lobster and shrimp and a foot-long cracked-pepper tenderloin. Emerald green peas from the garden behind the main house that were sugar balls of sweetness. Mountain tomatoes, lush and pulpy in the crisp garden salad. And finishing off the meal, tiny potatoes no bigger than a nickel drizzled with butter and fresh herbs. Everyone ate heartily including Charles.

The table conversation dealt with the different species of pine trees on the mountain, the virtual impossible access, satellite television, and the new iPhone, which was just hitting the market.

No one seemed to mind when Charles said he hadn’t had time to prepare a dessert, and coffee and brandy would be served in the conference room down the hall.

Five minutes later, the members of the Sisterhood, in their casual clothes and slicked-back wet hair, sat down at the long pine table and looked at the five strangers sitting across from them.

Charles stood up and immediately got to the point. “Our guests this evening have come a very long way to talk with us, and this meeting must be kept absolutely secret. Our guests are a special task force appointed by the World Bank. Three of our guests are also board members. They want to hire

voice appointed by the World Bank. Three of our guests are also board members. They want to hire you to help them out before a current situation gets out of hand and has worldwide repercussions. They came with a check in hand that bears only a signature. What that means is you can name your own price and fill in the blanks. This piece of paper is a mere token. If you accept this mission, the money will be wired into a special offshore account expeditiously. These monies will *not* come out of the World Bank funds. Concerned wealthy individuals have donated funds for this mission, people who care about fighting global poverty. People who wish to remain anonymous.”

“What is it you want us to do?” Myra asked a gray-haired man sitting directly across from her. “Is it a single person or a group of people who pose a problem for you?”

The woman sitting next to him spoke in a soft, cultured accent. She looked around at her colleagues, who simply gave curt nods to indicate she should speak. “The current president of the World Bank appears to have his own agenda where funds are concerned. We’ve done a discreet audit and a rather large sum of money appears to be missing. The funds in question, which were to go to several poor countries, were suspended, then a small amount was supposedly used to set up ragtag offices in other war-torn countries, without concern for security in those countries. That amount was mere drop in the bucket, so to speak. We can’t seem to find the balance of the money.”

“How much money are you talking about?” Annie asked as she leaned closer to the table, her eyes locked with those of the woman who was speaking.

“Close to two billion dollars.”

“Billion with a *b*?” Kathryn asked.

“I believe billion is spelled with a *b*. Yes,” the woman said curtly.

“And you can’t find two billion dollars?” Nikki asked, disbelief ringing in her voice. “Do you mind if I ask who minds the store?”

“Oh, we could find it if we want a world crisis on our hands. We prefer to let sleeping dogs lie and to exercise other...options. I believe that’s an expression Americans use to mean leave things as they are, is this not so?”

“If you’re concerned about keeping this under wraps, aren’t you concerned that the poor countries for whom those funds are earmarked might go public?” Alexis asked.

“Of course we’re concerned. That’s why we’re here. The situation is contained for the moment. Time, however, is of the essence.”

“How much time?” Nikki asked bluntly.

A stoop-shouldered man with a gray beard raised his head and spoke quietly. “No more than two weeks, and that’s extending the time beyond what we’re really comfortable with.”

“Where does the current president reside?” Yoko asked.

“He owns an apartment in the Watergate. A very lavish apartment, I might add,” a rotund little man with jet-black hair said. He had a heavy beard and glassy dark eyes. “He also has several

man with jet black hair said. He had a heavy beard and glassy dark eyes. He also has several mistresses. He's a divorced man whose ex-wife hates him. He has two children. They aren't particularly fond of him, either. He leads a very expensive life."

The woman spoke again with apparent distaste. "Maxwell Zenowicz held a very high post in your current government's administration prior to taking on the job of president at the World Bank, but he was not qualified for the job. He is an appointee. I believe it was a political favor that secured the job for him. He has surrounded himself with people with the same moral compass he has."

A tall, stately gentleman with chiseled features looked around the table and focused on Charles Martin. "We want him out. And the people surrounding him. We want no repercussions of any kind. Nothing must lead back to any of us or to any member of the World Bank. It goes without saying we want the funds returned as quickly as possible. We," the man said, motioning to his colleagues, "have it on good authority that the current president of the World Bank is a close personal friend of many people in the current administration, not just the president of the United States. We have been told that if anyone can do this, it's your little band of women."

"Little band of women!" Kathryn exploded. Her eyes narrowed as she looked around at the others to see how they were reacting to this sudden blasphemous statement.

Before things got out of hand, Charles hastened to step into what he knew could well turn into a battle royal. To his eye the volatile Kathryn looked like she was single-handedly going to wipe up the floor with the current speaker. The speaker looked like he was wondering how he would fare.

The man realized that his poor choice of words had created a situation. "I apologize, madam, but I do not know how to refer to you and the others. I only know what I have read in the papers and seen on television. My sincere apologies. Do you prefer the term 'vigilante'?"

"No harm, no foul," Kathryn said grudgingly. She wondered if the *stiff* talking to her knew what the phrase meant. She leaned back in her chair, her hand dropping to stroke Murphy's head. The bad moment was over.

With the preliminaries ended, Annie said, "It's time to talk turkey, ladies and gentlemen."

And they got down to business.

Chapter 2

Breakfast on Big Pine Mountain was served in the main dining hall. When they first came, it had taken a while to get used to the walk because the women had to trek from their individual living quarters across the compound. They liked to complain about the rain and the snow and having to get dressed three times a day just to eat. These days they didn't think twice about sprinting outdoors as they raced one another to the dining room.

Living as fugitives on Big Pine Mountain had its pluses and minuses. The main plus was that they were back in the United States. The main minus was that they were still fugitives. Although they hadn't actually lived on the premises of Pinewood in Virginia, Myra's palatial estate, they had had access to all the amenities, and they hadn't been wanted fugitives. When the law caught up to them, and they moved to Barcelona, Spain, atop a mountain owned by Countess Anna de Silva, they'd lived as fugitive recluses unless their help was needed on special projects brought to them by Charles Martin.

Here, back in the States, as Isabelle had said, they were merely trading their lavish style of mountain living for a more rustic one. Or, as Yoko had put it, "We're on our home turf here."

The women seated themselves in the dining room. It was a pleasant room with a huge fieldstone fireplace that rose from the floor to the ceiling. Beautiful flowers from one of the many gardens were on all the tables. Greenery hung from the beams overhead. All the tables, chairs, and end tables were solid oak, all polished to a high sheen. The floors were also solid oak, buffed and polished so that you could see your reflection in the old wood. In the days of Kollar (Pappy) Havapopulas's reign on the mountain, this very dining room had hosted all the covert agents under his tutelage who came there for training. Nothing had been changed because, as Charles had put it, "We don't know how long we'll be in residence." The women were all right with that simple explanation because they knew nothing lasted forever.

They all had chores. Yoko saw to the plants and flowers, Alexis tended the vegetable gardens, Isabelle did kitchen duty, Kathryn maintained the pool, while Nikki helped Charles in what they called the command center. Myra and Annie supervised to make sure everything ran smoothly. Unlike their command centers back in Virginia and Spain, this particular computer center was Kollar's and occupied a separate room in the Big House. It worked for all of them.

Breakfast this morning was simple and hearty—bacon, eggs, ham, toast, fresh fruit, coffee, and juice. It was all set out in chafing dishes on a sideboard that ran the entire length of one wall. At each end of the sideboard were two glorious arrangements of yellow roses, thanks to Yoko. The smell was sweet and heady.

Myra, a stickler for the finer things in life, marveled that here on this mountain, the Havapopulas family, father and son, had exquisite crystal, china, and silver. There was no sign of a paper napkin or

a plastic tablecloth. Everything was as fine as her bedrooms back in Virginia. She did love a pretty table setting.

Charles's main rule—never discuss business until a meal is over—was strictly adhered to. They made small talk, Yoko talking about the gorgeous roses that were now in full bloom, Kathryn discussing the water temperature of the Olympic-size pool.

When they were finished eating, the women all carried their dishes to the kitchen, poured more coffee, and got down to business.

“What time did our guests leave?” Nikki asked.

“I heard the helicopter at first light,” Alexis said. “Grady hates the sound and wanted out, but I waited till it took off. The cable car was already descending, so it left first.”

“What do we think about last night?” Isabelle queried.

“I don't think those people told us the whole story. Something wasn't quite right about it all. Just a feeling,” Kathryn said. “It goes without saying that everyone has an agenda. It could be something as simple as those people wanting to get rid of Zenowicz so they can get someone to take his place who will be more *friendly* to their specific cause, whatever that cause is. It's all politics no matter how you look at it.”

“I felt it, too, and I think you're right,” Yoko said.

The others for the most part agreed.

“I didn't go to bed after the meeting. I went online to see what I could find out about the World Bank,” Annie said.

The women leaned forward. “And...?” they chorused as one.

Annie loved being the center of attention. She preened for a moment. “Well, the president of the World Bank is an American, as we know. But do you all know that a European is the head of the sister bank, the International Monetary Fund? No one mentioned that last night, did they? If I had a crafty mind, which I do, I'd say this has something to do with Americans versus Europeans. The United States is the bank's biggest financial contributor. It's a decades-old tradition, and me thinks those people who were here last night might not want to keep it that way. In other words, politics.”

“A turf war?” Nikki asked.

“Without a doubt,” Annie responded. “The World Bank was created in 1945. The object was to rebuild Europe after World War II. You might not know this, and I didn't either, until I checked it out but the bank provides twenty billion dollars a year for projects like building dams, roads, and, of course, fighting disease. The bank offers interest-free loans to the poorest countries. I, for one, would like to see their books.”

“And our guy was in charge of twenty billion a year? I could see the temptation to pocket a little. I could also see some creative accounting where those interest-free loans are concerned,” Alexis said.

Don't forget, I did hard time for people just like this, who framed me."

The women were silent for a moment as they digested Annie's information.

"So, I guess what we're saying is our guests last night have agendas of their own that they didn't fully disclose," Nikki said. "But in the end, that's not what our job is about. Of course, if we find a way to...uh...change things, we will."

"Yes, dear, it would appear so," Myra said.

"I wonder who those anonymous donors willing to give us a blank check are. We need to decide how much to charge now. It goes without saying that we aren't going to keep the money, right?" Nikki asked.

"As long as the money isn't coming out of the World Bank, I say we hit them where it hurts," Kathryn suggested. "Anonymous means *anonymous*, and we're never going to know. Let's go with ten million and set up a fund where we disperse the monies to our own needy, but let's keep a little in reserve for an emergency. First crack off the bat I say we funnel some monies to Pearl Barnes so that she has enough funding for her underground railroad. Lizzie Fox can take care of all that. The more money they have, the more people they can get to safety," she said, referring to their last mission in the States where they posed as the G-String Girls to fight AIDS in Africa and save the Chief Justice's career.

"I'd like to see some money go to battered women's shelters," Alexis said.

"We can ask Judge Easter to take care of that. I think it's a wonderful idea, Alexis," Myra said.

"Animal rights," Kathryn said.

"All things children," Annie said.

"Done," Myra said smartly. "The children go to the top of the list."

"All this means is we have to go back to Washington. Again," Nikki said breathlessly. Going back to Washington meant she'd see District Attorney Jack Emery, the man she loved, again.

Yoko clapped her tiny hands in happiness because it meant she would get to see her love, Harry Wong, a martial-arts expert, to whom she was engaged.

"And just how are we going to get in and out of Washington again? The FBI is so hot on our trail they're smoking. And, let's not forget Ted Robinson. That guy wants to take a bath in our blood. I'm thinking this time around it's going to be even more dicey," Kathryn said. "Another thing, do we seriously believe, even for one minute, that there aren't rumors, leaks, *something*, that things aren't right at 1818 H Street, headquarters of the World Bank? If you all believe that, I'll sell you the Key Bridge."

"Kathryn has a point," Myra said thoughtfully.

Isabelle poured more coffee just to have something to do.

“We need a plan,” Annie said, excitement ringing in her voice. “The thrill of danger is so intoxicating. I just know this...this...mission is going to be the one that puts us on the map!”

“We’re already on the damn map, Annie. Any little thing that goes wrong is attributed to us. We’re supposedly in every state in the union. There have been more sightings of us than you can shake a stick at. We get credit or blame, take your pick, for everything that goes wrong,” Kathryn grumbled.

“Yes, yes, but don’t you see, that’s what makes it so exciting. They’re out there chasing their tails on all those false sightings, but when it comes down to the crunch, we move in and *strike!* It’s so perfect it boggles the mind!” Annie said.

Myra’s tone was grudging when she looked at her old friend, and said, “She’s right up to a point and it does make some sense, but none of us should ever think of the FBI as stupid or lax. Ted Robinson, possibly, but sooner or later someone with some chutzpah is going to pay attention to him. He’s gotten way too close to us too many times. He’s not going to give up, and he’s not going to go away. That’s a given we have to deal with.”

“So, we work around him. We’ll get Jack or Harry to put a tail on him. This way we’ll know what he’s doing in real time and be prepared,” Nikki said. Her expression darkened. “If it doesn’t work, or if he invades our space, we’ll simply take care of him.”

“Ooh, ooh, that sounds...*lethal*,” Annie said, her eyes bigger than saucers as she anticipated going a few rounds with the *Post*’s intrepid reporter.

The women left the dining hall and walked out into the bright summer sunshine. Murphy and Grady waited patiently in the hopes someone would throw a stick so they could play. Kathryn obliged and the dogs ran off.

The pine scent was heady after the night’s heavy rain. Everything looked scrubbed to perfection. Overhead, the sky was cerulean, with huge cotton candy clouds. The birds in the trees were singing their morning song. In a word, peaceful.

“It seems so perfect, doesn’t it? Almost mystical,” Isabelle whispered to Yoko, who was walking alongside her.

“If you don’t look deep enough as to why we’re here in the first place,” Yoko whispered in return. “Like Annie says, we have to pretend we’re on vacation.”

Murphy bounded up with the stick in his mouth; a moment later, Grady emerged from the thick pine forest with his own stick. Kathryn threw them again before the women climbed the six steps that led into the Big House.

Charles was waiting for them in the small foyer. He escorted them into the same conference room they’d occupied the evening before. The moment they were seated, the women bombarded him with questions and comments about their new employers.

“Ten million dollars, Charles. That’s our fee,” Nikki said. “We don’t plan to keep a penny of it for ourselves. I hesitate to ask this, but: What happens if something goes wrong? What happens if we fail? I’m not saying that’s going to happen, but I want to know, since we’re the ones taking all the

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