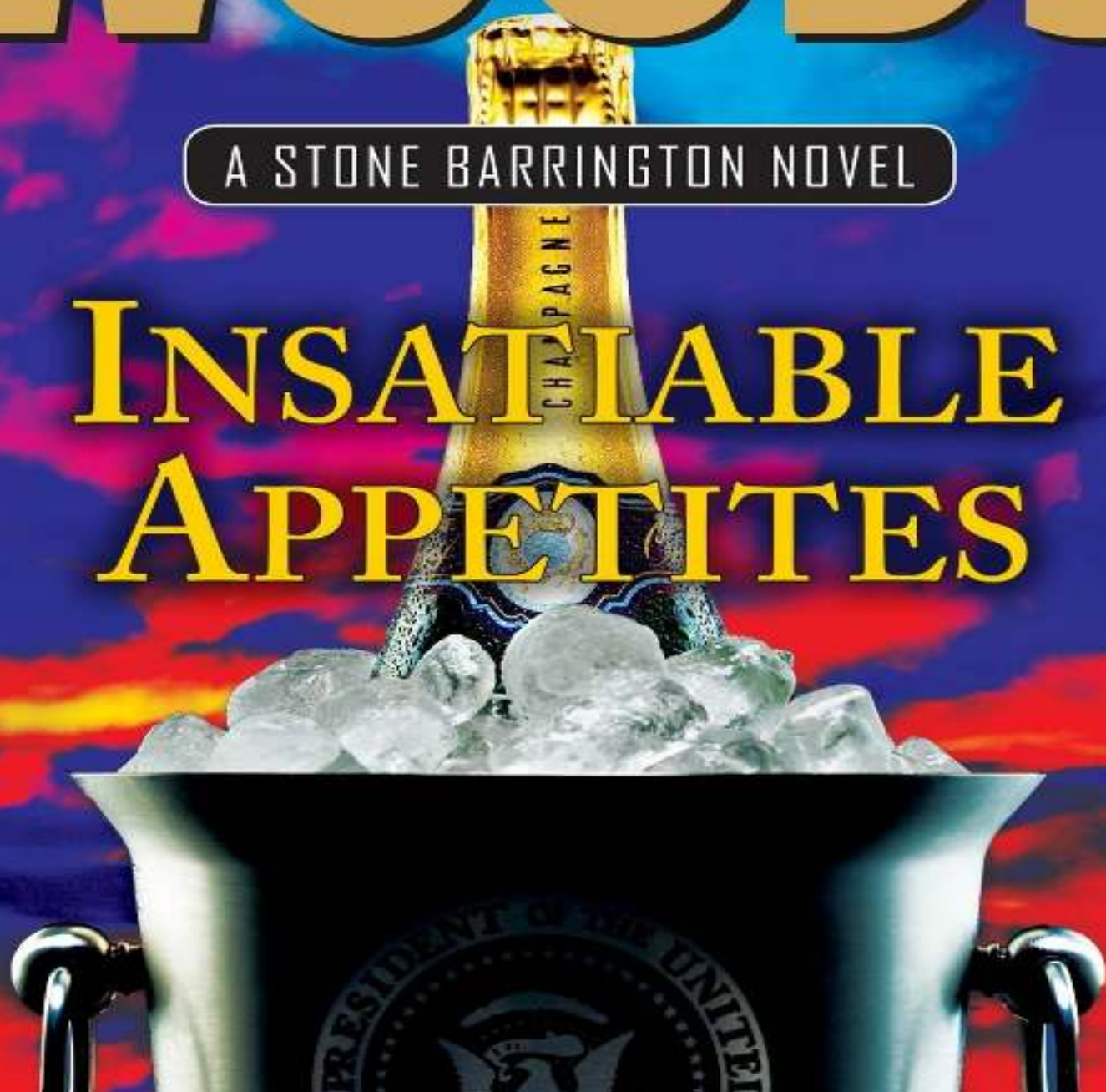


#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*—BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STUART WOODS

A STONE BARRINGTON NOVEL

INSATIABLE APPETITES



FICTION

Paris Match[†]

Cut and Thrust[†]

Carnal Curiosity[†]

Standup Guy[†]

Doing Hard Time[†]

Unintended Consequences[†]

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Chiefs[‡]

TRAVEL

A Romantic's Guide to the Country Inns of Britain and Ireland (1979)

MEMOIR

Blue Water, Green Skipper

*A Holly Barker Novel

†A Stone Barrington Novel

‡A Will Lee Novel

§An Ed Eagle Novel



STUART WOODS

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

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Election night, late.

Stone Barrington sat on a sofa in the family quarters of the White House, watching the presidential race unfold on television. Things were not going as he had hoped. The race, between Katharine Lee, First Lady of the United States, and Senator Henry Carson of Virginia, seemed to be a dead heat.

Kate Lee and her husband, President Will Lee, were Stone's friends, and he had looked forward to their invitation to spend election night in the family quarters with a couple of dozen good friends. He had not looked forward to seeing her lose the race to a cardboard cutout of a Republican senator, which was how he saw Henry Carson, known in the Lee campaign as Honk, due to a failed attempt to get the nation to think of him as a Hank, instead of a Henry. A mispronunciation by a French official had rechristened him.

Ann Keaton, the Lee deputy campaign manager, to whom Stone was very, very close, came and sat beside him.

"How do you feel about all this?" he asked Ann.

"Nauseous," she replied.

"What's going wrong?"

"We're not getting the turnout our pollsters told us to expect," she said. "Young people and independents are not voting in the numbers we had hoped. At least, that's what our exit polling is telling us. Also, Florida is taking a hell of a long time to count. They've got a Republican governor, and we're worried about hanky-panky. It could be Bush-Gore all over again. On top of that, Ohio is neck and neck."

"The West Coast polls close in ten minutes," Stone said. "Those states should give Kate a boost."

"They should, yes, but California can't put her over the top, if Florida and Ohio go the other way. This could be a very big upset."

"Something's happening," Stone said, pointing at the TV. Chris Matthews and Tom Brokaw were on screen.

"Based on our own exit polling and with eighty-nine percent of the precincts reporting," Brokaw was saying, "our desk is calling Florida for Senator Henry Carson."

"No!!!" came a shout from around the room. "Not possible!" Senator Sam Meriwether of Georgia

Kate's campaign manager, yelled.

~~"Easy, Sam," Will Lee said. "It's not necessarily over because a network has called it."~~

"CBS has called it that way, too, but ABC is holding out," a woman watching another TV set called.

"Fox called it for Honk half an hour ago," somebody said.

"I regard that as encouraging," Stone said, and everybody laughed, releasing some tension in the room.

Kate Lee emerged from the Presidential Bedroom with a coat over her shoulders. "I'd better get over to the armory," she said. "I'm going to have to make a statement soon."

"It's not over yet," her husband said.

"I hope you're right," Kate said, kissing him, "but I'd better be ready." She started for the door, two Secret Service agents in tow.

"Wait a minute!" Sam Meriwether shouted. "CBS is reconsidering their call."

Kate stopped. "Have they reversed themselves?"

"No, but they're saying that Florida is back in the undecided column."

"That has to be a good sign," Ann said to Stone.

"I hope so."

"New totals from Florida," Sam called out. "With ninety-six percent of precincts reporting, Kate leads by three thousand votes!"

Kate walked back toward the TV set. "That's too narrow a margin. What precincts haven't reported?"

Sam pointed at a north Florida county.

"That county is nearly all African-American," Kate said. "It should be ours by a big margin."

"I'm thinking hanky-panky," Sam said.

"Have we got anybody in the courthouse there?"

As they watched, cars pulled up in the courthouse square and men in suits got out.

"Republicans?" somebody asked.

"FBI agents! I see badges."

The men swept into the courthouse.

Will came and stood beside Kate. "You're right," he said, "you'd better get over to the armory. They've got a comfortable room for you to wait in there. Don't do anything precipitous."

Kate kissed him again and ran for the door.

"The West Coast has closed," somebody called.

"MSNBC is backing away from their call in Florida," somebody else said.

"What do they know that we don't?" Stone asked Ann.

"I don't know anymore," Ann said. "I'm through reading exit polls and guessing. We'll know soon anyway."

"One precinct in north Florida has reported and that, alone, has widened Katharine Lee's lead by another two thousand points," Chris Matthews said. "And we're hearing that they'll have a statewide count at any minute."

"Here's some good news for the Lee campaign," Brokaw said. "Now that the polls in the West have closed, we can tell you that our exit polls show Katharine Lee winning California by nearly thirty points."

A cheer went up around the room.

"We've got a report from Ohio," Brokaw said. "Let's go to Amy Roberts there. Amy?"

“Tom, this is official. All Ohio votes are in, and Kate Lee has won by less than twenty thousand votes!”

There was a roar of glee from the people present. Will Lee was on his cell phone, and everybody knew who he was calling.

Five minutes later, Florida came in with a final vote. “Katharine Lee has won Florida by thirty-one thousand votes!” Chris Matthew said. “We can now call the election. The next president of the United States will be Katharine Lee!”

“Will,” Stone called, “did you reach Kate?”

“Yes, and she’s hearing that Henry Carson is about to speak.”

Carson came on camera before a big crowd and waved for silence. “Well,” he said, “we haven’t heard from Guam, yet.” His crowd both laughed and moaned. “But it’s clear that our next president will be Kate Lee. I congratulate her for the campaign she ran and the victory she has won. I will do all I can to help her.”

The TV switched now to the armory, where Kate was making her way to the podium. Will was not with her by design; he had wanted her to accept or concede on her own terms. She stood for nearly ten minutes, waving at the crowd and waiting for the noise to die down. Eventually, the floor was hers.

“Thank you all,” she said, “and my thanks to every American who voted today, no matter for whom. Once again, we are on the brink of new leadership in our country, just the way the framers of the Constitution wanted it. I promise you the best government I can put together, and I invite our Republican friends to help us make this country better than ever!” Finally, when she could speak again, she said, “Will, I know you’re watching. Unpack!”

Back at the family quarters, people were pounding Will Lee on the back and opening more champagne.

Stone sank into the sofa, relieved and grateful, happy to be in this room on this night.



Stone felt Ann ease from his bed, then heard her get into a robe and slip from the Lincoln Bedroom. He looked at the clock. Half past five.

Wide awake now, he got out of bed and into some trousers and a shirt, then left the room, looking for coffee, following the scent. He walked into the big oval room and found a table of pastries and a coffee urn. He drew himself a mugful and turned to find a seat.

“Good morning,” a female voice said.

Stone turned to find Kate Lee sunk into an armchair, coffee in her hand. “Good morning, Madame President-Elect,” he said. “May I be the ten thousandth to congratulate you?” He took a chair facing hers.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said. “Will is out like a light, but my mind is still racing.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“For years I couldn’t let myself believe this could happen, and now it has, and I still can’t believe it.”

“Enjoy your disbelief,” he said. “It will get real soon enough.”

She checked her watch. “Right now, it’s just another early morning at home. In a couple of hours all hell will break loose. I must remember to find time to write in my journal today.” She patted her belly. “He/she will want to read that someday.”

“You still don’t know?”

“I know I’m out of fashion, but I don’t want to know until I can hold him/her in my arms. Neither does Will.”

“Maybe this is callously political of me,” he said, “but I think your being pregnant is going to be a material advantage to your presidency.”

“I hadn’t allowed myself to think of that,” Kate replied. “How an advantage?”

“It’s going to be hard for your opponents to criticize a pregnant woman,” Stone said. “I’ve noticed that men are very delicate with women who are carrying a child.”

“That’s true in its way.”

“I think you should try to get as much as possible accomplished before you give birth.”

“After that, I’ll just be another mom, huh?”

“Men aren’t afraid to argue with their moms.”

Kate laughed. “God knows I wasn’t afraid to argue with mine. What about you?”

“I learned early on that my mother had an annoying tendency to be right. It was daunting, and I thought twice before I opposed her.”

“You were a smart boy.”

“That’s what she used to tell me.”

“Stone, I want to appoint you to something.”

He held up a hand. “No, please, Kate.”

“Shut up. This is your president-elect speaking. You are now, officially, the first member of my Kitchen Cabinet.”

Stone laughed. “How could I not accept that post? I’m honored beyond words.”

“And you will serve for the entire eight years.”

“That’s thinking ahead.”

“A president can get things done in a first term, but she needs a second to keep her opponents from dismantling her accomplishments.”

“You’ve got a narrow majority in both houses—that should help.”

“The next congressional campaign starts today,” she said, “and so does my charm offensive with Republican congresspeople and senators. They may vote against me a lot of the time, but I’m going to make their hearts break when they do.”

“I believe you.”

“I heard Ann sneak back to her room a few minutes ago.”

“Oops.”

“I’m happy that you two were able to get together for a while, and, believe me, I’m sorry that I’m going to be keeping you apart for a long time.”

“Thank you. We’ve talked about that, and we know it has to be done.”

“What is it the mafiosi say? This is the business we’ve chosen.”

“Ann knows that.”

“I’m glad she does.” Kate got to her feet. “I hope you’ll be around for a few days.”

“No, I have to get back. I’ve been away from my desk for too long, what with the Paris trip, and I flew a borrowed airplane down here that has to be returned.”

“I hear you bought a house in Paris.”

“I did, and I have to be careful about doing that every time I get a little depressed. If you and Will ever need a hideaway, it will be waiting for you.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Kate said, patting his cheek, “but the only hideaway we’re going to have is the one we have now at Camp David. And that’s sort of like a White House in the woods. We’ll take you up on your Paris house when they kick us out of town.” She kissed him on the forehead and padded out of the room.

Stone thought maybe he should start a journal of his own.



Stone said his goodbyes to Ann over a second cup of coffee and was back in his home office in New York in time for a sandwich at his desk, while he went through mail and phone messages. Joan stuck her head in. “Herbie Fisher wants to come by after lunch to catch up.”

“Sure. He’s been keeping an eye on my clients.”

“You’re starting to get phone calls from people that sound like they want your ear, because you know our new president.”

Stone sighed. “I suppose that’s inevitable.”

“Especially when your name is on the Lees’ guest list for the White House on election night. Did you really sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom?”

“I did, and quite well.”

“What’s it like?”

“Very Victorian. Lincoln never slept there, but he used it as an office.”

“Any ghosts?”

“I was sleeping too soundly to notice.”

“How’s our Kate looking?”

“Just great. Didn’t you watch her on TV?”

“Sure, I did.” The phone rang and she went to answer it.

Stone found four letters in his mail that alluded to his friendship with the Lees, and he dictated perfunctory replies.

Herbert Fisher turned up at two o’clock, with a catalog case full of files to return. He accepted a cup of coffee and settled into the sofa.

“Thanks for riding herd on my clients while I was gone, Herb,” Stone said.

“Don’t mention it. Just vote for my partnership tomorrow.”

“Is it tomorrow? I’ve lost track. You shouldn’t have anything to worry about, you know. You’ve brought more business into the firm than a lot of the partners.”

“I still feel a chill here and there.”

“That’s envy, not doubt.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“You’ll be the youngest partner.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“And you’ve set a record for going from new associate to senior associate to partnership.”

“I hear that, too. I think it was too fast for some of the partners.”

“Has Bill Eggers offered you a better office?”

“I’m happy where I am. I did ask for another associate and another secretary, though.”

“If the workload demands it, he’s not going to turn you down.”

“Do you think you’ll get new business because of your relationship with Kate Lee?”

“I never got any because of my relationship with Will, and I’d decline anything I thought was nakedly political—or refer it to you.”

“Referrals are appreciated.”

“Herb, you seem a little down at a time when you should be elated.”

Herbie shrugged. “I’m just not sure how I’ll like being a big boy in the firm. Being the kid was fun.”

“You’ll like it at bonus time.”

“I already like it at bonus time.”

“Bonuses get bigger when you’re a partner.”

“I guess.”

“Herb, is there anything wrong? Anything I can help with?”

He was about to answer when Joan buzzed Stone.

“Yes?”

“Eduardo Bianchi on one.”

Bianchi was a kind of mentor to Stone. He knew everybody in town, served on the most prestigious boards, and had his fingers in many pies. He had also been long rumored to have been a power in the mob as a young man and an adviser to it in his maturity, but nobody had ever proved anything.

Stone picked up the phone. “Eduardo, how are you?”

“Better than I have any right to be, Stone.” Bianchi was well into his eighties. “Will you come to lunch tomorrow?”

“I’d love to.” He had an idea. “May I bring a friend? A young attorney?”

“Of course. I’m always happy to meet your friends. Twelve-thirty?”

“See you then.” He hung up. “Herb, I have a lunch invitation for you tomorrow.”

“Sorry, I’ve got a date—new business prospect.”

“Reschedule,” Stone said.

“Who’s lunch with?”

“Eduardo Bianchi.”

“I’ll reschedule.”



Stone walked up to the Seagram Building the following morning and took the elevator to the highest of the four floors occupied by the law firm of Woodman & Weld. The firm's grandest conference room had rows of folding chairs set up, and all the partners filled the room.

Bill Eggers, the managing partner and Stone's friend from law school, strode into the room, sat down at the head of the conference table, and rapped sharply with his gavel. "The partnership meeting will come to order."

Everyone took their seats and became silent.

"There is only one item on the agenda this morning: the consideration of Herbert Fisher for full partnership. I know that some of you think that Herb has moved a little too quickly through our ranks but you have only to consider his ability as a rainmaker. From the first week of his association with us, he has been bringing this firm business, and the importance of his clients to the firm has grown with each year he has spent with us as an associate and senior associate. I have a cashier's check in my pocket for a million dollars, covering his buy-in. Do I hear a motion?"

Stone, a little way down the table, stood. "I am pleased and honored to propose Herbert Fisher for full partnership."

"Do I hear a second?"

"There were several shouts of "Second!"

"Without objection," Eggers said, looking around the room with a beady eye, "the motion is carried unanimously." He rapped his gavel again and stood up. "This meeting is adjourned!" He walked quickly from the room, and the partners dispersed.

Stone walked downstairs a flight and found Herbie sitting in his office, reading a contract. He looked up and smiled at Stone. "Something I can do for you, Stone?"

Stone took his hand, pulled him to his feet, and hugged him. "May I be the first to congratulate you on becoming a full partner in Woodman & Weld?"

"You certainly may," Herbie replied.

"Then let's get downstairs. Fred is waiting to drive us to Eduardo's."

Fred piloted the Bentley out to the nether regions of Brooklyn, where Eduardo Bianchi's sixty-year-old Palladian mansion overlooked a fine beach and the sea. They were met at the door by Pietro

Eduardo's longtime factotum and, allegedly, in his youth, assassin, said to be particularly good with the knife. Pietro looked Herbie up and down. Before he could start frisking the younger man, Stone said, "He's with me, Pietro."

The little man led them through the house and into Eduardo's library, where a table had been set for them. At a more benign time of year they would have lunched on the back lawn, near the large, black-bottom pool that had been designed and crafted to look like a lake. Stone introduced the young man to the elder.

Eduardo looked closely into Herbie's face and held on to his hand for an unusually long time. "I have heard good things said of you," the old man said.

"Stone is too kind, sir."

"Not only from Stone." He let go of Herbie's hand and showed them to their seats.

"Eduardo," Stone said, "Herb was, an hour ago, elected to partnership in Woodman & Weld."

"My hearty congratulations, young man," Eduardo said, pressing his hand again.

"Thank you, sir," Herbie replied.

"How are you keeping busy these days, Eduardo?" Stone asked.

"Business," Eduardo replied. "The usual. They won't leave an old man alone."

"I think you would be very unhappy if they did," Stone said, causing Eduardo to emit a rare laugh.

"Perhaps you are right, Stone—you so often are. I hear that is why Katharine Lee thinks so highly of you."

"Do you indeed? Do you know her?"

"Since she was an anonymous CIA analyst," Eduardo said. "I was able to be helpful to her behind the scenes when she was being considered for the directorship, though I don't think she would like that to be public knowledge, now that she will be president."

"I should think she would be proud to have people know that you are her friend."

"She is discreet, and that is better than being proud. It is good, though, that you and I may see more of each other when exercising our duties in her Kitchen Cabinet."

That startled Stone, but only for a moment. Eduardo had a tendency to know things before they became public. "I will look forward to that," Stone said.

Pietro brought antipasti that was passed around, and a crisp white wine, perfectly chilled, was served with it.

"I've never served on a Kitchen Cabinet," Stone said. "What may I expect?"

"I was privileged to serve two other presidents in that capacity," Eduardo said. "First, Lyndon Johnson, though we talked only of domestic matters. I wholeheartedly disagreed with him about Vietnam, and as that wore on we spoke less and less. And then there was Richard Nixon."

Stone blinked, speechless.

"We only rarely talked directly, usually it was through John Ehrlichman, of whom I thought highly. After that little burglary, I withdrew. Dick was so obviously headed for ruin, and none of them would listen to reason."

"Each time we meet I learn something new about you, Eduardo. You should write a memoir."

Eduardo laughed again. "If word got out that I were even contemplating such a thing, not even Pietro would be able to protect me from those who would want my head in a basket. I know far more about too many people than is good for me. Or for them."

"Have you ever written anything, Eduardo?"

"Well, I dabble with my journal from time to time," the old man said. "I'd let you read it, but it is written in a Sicilian dialect that is quite impenetrable to the uninitiated. Sometimes I entertain myself

by reading a few pages. There are eight volumes, so far, covering as many decades. They are covered in fine leather—red, the color of the devil!” He laughed and slapped Stone on a shoulder, a remarkable rare display of camaraderie. “When I and all I love are dead, you may publish it, Stone—if you can find a translator!”

“Have you met with Kate yet, Eduardo?” Stone asked.

“Not for a couple of years, but I expect to see her when she comes to New York again during the transition.” Eduardo looked thoughtful for a moment. “This Kitchen Cabinet thing could cause you problems, Stone.”

“How so?”

“Once you are identified as a member of that group, there are people who might try to damage Kate by damaging you.”

“I’ve already had a whiff of that during the campaign,” Stone said.

“All the more reason for them to try again,” Eduardo said.



After lunch, Eduardo gave them a little tour of the house, clearly for Herbie's benefit, showing them his collections of books, sculpture, and pictures.

"I've always loved the Modigliani portrait," Stone said, nodding toward the woman on the wall.

"She is my favorite," Eduardo replied.

"I love the two Picassos," Herbie said, nodding at two paintings hung side by side.

"One of them is a Braque," Eduardo said, looking amused. "See if you can tell me which one."

"The one on the right," Herbie said without hesitation.

"You have quite an eye, Herbert."

"No, I just made a lucky guess."

Everyone laughed.

Stone was amazed at how well the two men got on together. He could remember when Herbie was little more than an overgrown street urchin, chiseling his way through life.

Finally, Eduardo walked them to the front door to say their goodbyes. Pietro approached them and handed Eduardo a very fine alligator briefcase; Eduardo handed it to Stone. "A little gift," he said.

"Thank you, Eduardo." The briefcase was not empty. Stone laid it on the front passenger seat of the Bentley, then Fred drove them away.

"What did Eduardo give you?" Herbie asked.

"I don't know," Stone said. "Maybe a picture. He's given me things like that before."

Fred dropped Stone at home, then drove Herbie back to his office.

Stone set the briefcase on his desk and looked through his messages, then Joan came in.

"Did Herbie make partner?"

"He did," Stone said. "I took him to lunch with Eduardo. They got on amazingly well."

"Nice briefcase," Joan said.

"A gift from Eduardo."

She went back to her desk, and Stone opened the briefcase. Inside were eight slim volumes bound in red leather. The color of the devil, he reflected. He picked up one and opened it. The hand was florid, almost artistic, obviously the product of the teaching of one or more long-gone nuns, but it was incomprehensible to Stone—perhaps even to most Italians.

An envelope was tucked into the volume, and Stone's name was written on it in the same hand. He opened it and read the short note.

I want these to be in your keeping, Stone. When I am gone there are those who will want them, so be careful.

Under Eduardo's signature there were four groups of two-digit numbers, but no explanation of them. He read them several times, trying to make sense of them, but nothing came to him.

He took the eight volumes to the big safe in an alcove off his office, opened it, and made room for them on the bottom shelf. One day, he thought, he would try to have them deciphered. He sat down and went to work.

Near the end of the day Joan buzzed him. "Mary Ann Bacchetti is on line one. She says it's important."

Mary Ann was Dino's ex-wife, the mother of his son, Ben, and Eduardo's elder daughter. Stone picked up the phone. "Hello, Mary Ann." He hadn't spoken to her since Dino's divorce, except in passing.

"Daddy's had a stroke," she said. "He's not expected to live."

Stone was stunned. "I had lunch with him today, and he seemed in great form."

"He's ninety-four," she said. "Nobody that age is in great form. Pietro said that after you and your friend left, he went into his study and dictated some things to his secretary, worked all afternoon. He signed some documents she had typed up, then he complained of a headache and collapsed onto his desk."

"I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do for you, Mary Ann?"

"It looks as though I'm going to need a better lawyer than I've got," she said. "I'd like to hire you, Stone, and whoever you need from Woodman & Weld."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Stone, his doctor thinks he won't make it through the night, and when he goes, all hell is going to break loose, and everything will fall into my lap. It's not too soon to start thinking about that."

"Where did they take him?"

"To his bed. There didn't seem to be any point in taking him to a hospital when his room is well stocked with medical equipment. He hates hospitals and always wanted to be treated at home when he got sick."

"All right, let's meet, then."

"Can you come out here tomorrow morning?"

"Of course."

"Around ten."

"All right."

"And will you call Dino and tell him? I can't deal with him right now."

"All right, but you should call Ben, if you haven't already. He'll want to be here."

"He's already on his way," she said. "And, Stone, not a word to anybody outside our families. I don't want it known that he's dying."

"I understand. I'll see you tomorrow morning." They hung up.

Joan buzzed him. "Your son is holding on line two."

Stone punched the button. "Peter?"

"Hello, Dad. You've heard about Mr. Bianchi?"

"Ben's mother just called me."

"We're on our way to Santa Monica Airport. The studio's jet is bringing us east. We should land

around ten tonight.”

“I’ll have Fred meet you at Teterboro and bring you and Ben to the city. Is Hattie coming, too?” I knew she would be; he never went anywhere without his girlfriend and collaborator.

“Yes, and Tessa, too.” Tessa Tweed was Ben’s girlfriend, and she had had featured roles in two of his and Peter’s films.

“Your old suite will be ready,” Stone said. “I’ll see you at breakfast.”

“Good, Dad. We’re looking forward to seeing you.”

“Shall I call Hattie’s folks?”

“She’s doing that now. I’d like for us all to have dinner tomorrow night if . . . circumstances allow.”

“Of course. We’ll do it here.”

“Thank you, Dad. See you at breakfast.” They hung up.

Stone called Dino, who was in a meeting. “Please ask him to call me the moment he’s free,” he said to the policewoman sergeant who guarded Dino’s gate. “It’s important. Has his son called?”

“Yes, just a moment ago.”

“Good.” Stone hung up.

Five minutes later, Dino called.

“Have you talked to Ben?”

“No, I’ve just been handed his message. I called you first.”

“Mary Ann called me a few minutes ago.”

“Since when is she speaking to you?”

“Eduardo has had a stroke, a bad one. She says he may not live through the night. Ben and Peter and their girls are flying in late tonight, and I’m having them met.”

“Where is Mary Ann?”

“At Eduardo’s house. She asked me to call you, so she may not be ready to talk to you.”

“I’ll send a patrol car and some uniforms out there,” Dino said. “Keep the press away.”

“No one knows he’s ill yet. She asked me to keep it in confidence.”

“She won’t be able to keep the lid on that one for long.”

“I had lunch with Eduardo today,” Stone said, “and I took Herbie Fisher out there to meet him. He looked wonderful.”

“He always does.”

“Mary Ann told me he’s ninety-four. I had no idea.”

“I didn’t know that, either. I thought he was, maybe, in his mid-eighties.”

“When you talk to Ben, find out where he’s sleeping. He’s welcome here, of course, but he may want to go to Mary Ann’s or your place, or he may want to go to his grandfather’s. I’ll have Fred take him to wherever he wants to go.”

“Thanks, I’ll ask him. You want dinner tonight? Viv’s away on business.”

“Sure. Patroon?”

“Eight o’clock.” Dino hung up.



Stone got to Patroon first, and Ken Aretsky, the owner, joined him for a moment. “How is Eduardo Bianchi, Stone?” Ken asked. “I know you two are close.”

“I had lunch with him today,” Stone replied, “and he looked wonderful, in very good form.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Ken said. “He comes in once in a great while, and I’m always happy to see him.”

Stone wondered why Ken happened to bring that up, but he didn’t want to ask.

Dino came in and sat down, and a waiter appeared with Knob Creek for Stone and Johnnie Walker Black for Dino. They chatted briefly, then Ken excused himself to greet another customer.

“Have you heard anything new?” Dino asked.

“Not a word, but Ken just asked after Eduardo’s health. I thought for a moment he might have heard something, but he didn’t say so. Have you heard from Mary Ann?”

Dino shook his head. “Anna Maria and I don’t do business.” That was her given name, but she had begun using Mary Ann as a teenager.

“She said something odd on the phone. She said that when Eduardo died, all hell would break loose.”

“I’ve no idea what she meant by that,” Dino said. “He’s an old man, and nobody’s going to be surprised when he dies, are they?”

“That’s what I thought, but Mary Ann seems to know something I don’t.”

“She’s probably referring to the disposition of his estate.”

“She’s certainly thinking about that. She asked me and the firm to represent her in settling his affairs.”

“My guess is you’re not going to find a huge amount in his estate,” Dino said.

“You think Eduardo’s been concealing assets?”

“Eduardo is a Sicilian. It’s in his nature to conceal everything, especially money. I’ll bet when you see his will, you’ll find there isn’t much in there besides the house and some investments.”

“I’ve always had the impression that Eduardo was immensely wealthy,” Stone said.

“Back when we were married, Mary Ann thought so, too. Even before she started her investment firm she was helping him with investments, so she knew things that I didn’t.”

“What sort of investments?”

“I had the impression he was pretty big in real estate, but I don’t know what else. Except for his house, which is lavish, he seemed to live fairly simply. There were some practically invisible servants around the place—in addition to the evil Pietro—and Eduardo’s dead wife’s younger sister lived there and cooked for him until she died a couple of years ago.”

“He owns a lot of art,” Stone said. “His study, the living room, and the dining room are filled with his acquisitions.”

“So are the upstairs rooms,” Dino said. “Did you ever go up there?”

“No.”

“Have a look around, if you have the chance.”

“I may have the chance tomorrow,” Stone said. “I’m meeting Mary Ann out there at ten.”

“She’s right on it, isn’t she? She always had a mind like a steel trap, and hands, too.”

“Well, I’d rather have a client who is ready to deal with things than one who doesn’t want to know.”

“I’ll bet you two things,” Dino said. “One, she already knows a lot. Two, there are things that she doesn’t know, that Eduardo kept to himself.”

“It will be interesting finding out.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Dino said, slapping his forehead. “I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“Dolce.”

Stone gulped. Dolce was Eduardo’s younger daughter. Stone had once had a torrid affair with her, ending in their marriage, in Venice. It had been a civil ceremony, and before the religious one could take place, the following day, Stone had been called back to the States. Dolce had followed him, apparently believing that he had jilted her at the altar, and had begun a series of attempts on his life. She was clearly mad, under a placid surface, and Eduardo had locked her away in his house. She kept escaping, continuing her plots against Stone, and finally her father had packed her off to Sicily, where she had been kept in a convent. Stone had received an envelope from Eduardo containing a page from the book they had signed at the Venice town hall upon their marriage. It was the only legal evidence of their union, and Stone had burned it.

“Oh, shit,” he said.

“If Eduardo dies,” Dino pointed out—unnecessarily, Stone thought—“what’s to keep her in Sicily?”

“I wonder if Eduardo had her legally committed?” Stone mused.

“More likely, he just stuck her in that convent and made a generous donation,” Dino replied. “That would be more Sicilian. I’d look into that, if I were you.”

“Believe me,” Stone said, “I will. Listen, I’m having everybody to dinner at my house tomorrow night.”

“What time.”

“Six-thirty for drinks.”

“Viv will be back. We’ll be there.”

“I’ll have to ask Mary Ann, but I doubt she’ll come.”

“From your lips to God’s ear.”



Stone called Herbie Fisher at home after dinner, told him about Eduardo, and asked him to work on the new case. The kids arrived after eleven; Stone greeted them all, sent Ben to Mary Ann's apartment, then went to bed.

The following morning, Stone had Joan print out a representation agreement, which was mostly boilerplate, then Fred drove Stone and Herbie to nether Brooklyn. As they turned into the driveway, they were flagged down by a uniformed policeman. They identified themselves and, after a call to the house, were admitted.

Pietro met them at the door, somehow looking older since yesterday, then he led them to Eduardo's study. Mary Ann sat at her father's desk, rifling drawers and peering under the large piece of furniture.

"Good morning, Mary Ann," Stone said. "How is your father this morning?"

"In a deep coma, thank you." She stared at Herbie. "Who's this?"

"Mary Ann, let me introduce Herbert Fisher, a partner at Woodman & Weld, who will be assisting me in this matter."

"Bring us coffee," she said to Pietro, who vanished.

"What were you doing under the desk?" Stone asked.

"Looking for secret drawers," she replied.

"Before we begin, Mary Ann, let me explain a few things about how we will work."

"All right, go ahead."

Pietro appeared with a silver tray bearing a coffeepot, creamer, cups, and a plate of small pastries.

"Leave us," she said to him. "Go ahead, Stone," she said, when the man had gone.

"First of all," Stone said, "we can represent the estate or we can represent you, personally, but not both. Since you are, presumably, an heir, that would be a conflict of interest. Which will it be?"

Mary Ann thought about that for a moment. "You will represent the estate," she said. "I'll find my own attorney."

"Fine. You must understand that we will, in a sense, be representing the court, and that means we must keep you at arm's length while we do our work."

"All right," she said.

"I want to go off the record here for a moment," Stone said. "What I'm now about to say to you is to be confidential among the three of us."

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