

Chapter Two

When I came to, I had no idea where I was. There was a pillow under my head, and I was tucked up in a soft blanket. There was a soothing, vibrating sensation but no noise. Very faintly I could hear a clock ticking. Otherwise it was silent.

My jaw ached. There was something I wanted to remember that seemed vaguely important, but I was quite comfortable and a little groggy. I just wanted to sleep a little longer.

Suddenly I sat up. I was in the back of the Rolls-Royce. That little bastard had coldcocked me, and now he was hauling me off to Albert's! There he was behind the wheel, cool as a breeze. I would wring his head off like a chicken!

But the thick glass partition did not respond to my tugging at it; and when I rapped sharply on it with my knuckles, Rudy didn't even bother to turn around. It was just a quarter inch of glass and I was sure he could hear me rapping. If he thought he was going to get away with this, he didn't know Jack Darcey! I looked around for something solid to bash the glass with, but there was nothing. I didn't even have a good shoe to work with. I was still in my old beat-up sneakers.

I sat back against the seat. It felt ridiculous to keep tapping at the window. What time was it? I found the clock by its gentle ticking, a lovely and expensive timepiece set into the armrest. It was early afternoon, and the best I could figure was that I'd been out for about an hour. That little rooster had put me out for an hour with one punch? I thought about those gloves he had slipped on. Now I could see them clearly in my

mind's eye, padded across the knuckles with a little pillow of lead sand. Sap gloves they were called. What a sap I was not to have noticed! And the way he set me up, smiling and winking. What a chump I was! It should have given me a good laugh at myself, but I didn't feel like laughing.

Where were we? We were humming down some turnpike that could have been anywhere. From the position of the sun I guessed we were headed east. This was kidnapping, wasn't it? I was being kidnapped, a federal offense! It didn't *feel* very much like a federal offense, with me sitting in the back of a Rolls-Royce with a pillow and a comfortable blanket. But it was, goddammit!

This time I pounded on the partition with the side of my fist and shouted, "Rudy, you better listen to me, buddy, if you know what's good for you!"

"No need to shout, Mr. Darcey, I can hear you just fine." The voice came from a little speaker above the partition.

"Turn this car around, Rudy. Take me back home."

"Aw, Mr. Darcey, why don't you make yourself a cocktail and have a nice snooze. We'll be there in a couple of hours. You'll have a good time, I guarantee it. You like to ride horses, don't you? Mr. Keane said to tell you he has a really fine horse for you that is the spittin' image of Phoenix."

Phoenix was the horse the Keane family used to keep especially for me to ride, as though it was my own horse. Of course I'd like to ride a fine horse; how could I say otherwise? And that wasn't the point.

"Listen," I said. "Horse or no horse, you have no right to do this. This is kidnapping, understand? A very serious offense. You take me back home, or I will see you sitting in a cell!"

"Be a sport, Mr. Darcey. How would you like it if Marya Randall had put *you* in a cell?"

Marya Randall? I couldn't believe my ears! What did he know about Marya? She was an old lover I hadn't seen in ever so many years. He had to be referring to that time back in college when I kidnapped her and took her off to the mountains to have sex with her. It had all been very playful and as much her idea as it was mine; a novel and exciting way for us to begin our relationship. But what was I supposed to say now?

I was starting to feel very confused. Leaning back in the seat, I closed my eyes. Was I being stupid? A spoilsport? Maybe so, but I still wanted to have some say over what I was going to do or not do.

Then it occurred to me. We would have to stop somewhere. There had to be a traffic light or something between there and the old homestead. I could just open the door and jump out and then I could make my way back home. It wasn't a very heroic plan, but it gave me some feeling of being back in control. Isn't that what we all want, the feeling that we have at least a little control over what happens to us in our lives?

So I relaxed a bit, and started to enjoy the lush summer landscape dotted with farms and little towns, waiting for some kind of delay that would give me the chance I needed. But when I began to look for the door handle, just to be ready when the time came, I couldn't find one. There was no handle, no lever, no button, nothing that would open the door or even the window. Maybe it was very cleverly disguised to blend in with the decor, or maybe it was all controlled from the front. Now I was fuming again, and my mind was filling up with dark thoughts about what I would do to that little bantam when I got my hands on him.

On the outskirts of some little burg, we picked up a cop who jumped on his motorcycle and took off after us. I put my nose against the partition and tried to see the speedometer.

Eighty-five miles an hour! It certainly didn't seem so fast in that smooth-rolling Rolls. Anyway, it would get Rudy pulled over, and perfect timing too, because that little town was sure to have at least a bus station. Once again I relaxed. I decided I really didn't care about the whole kidnapping business and trying to get Rudy in trouble. Best just to think of it as a joke and forget about it.

The cop turned on his flashers, but Rudy didn't even slow down. Instead I saw him punch some numbers into a mobile phone. What he said into the receiver I couldn't hear, but a minute or two later the cop pulled around in front of us with his lights still flashing and gave us an escort all the way to the Massachusetts line. There he pulled over, touched his helmet in an informal salute, and went about his business.

In the meantime, something had snapped and all the fight had gone out of me. I was on my way to Albert's for a little study break, and what had I really been fighting against anyway? My own embarrassment, mainly. I didn't want to go face someone who knew my whole history, feeling like a failure and a drifter who had forgotten where he was drifting, someone who had had every opportunity in the world, and wound up wasting them all. In my old jeans and sneakers, with no luggage and no toothbrush, I was going on a visit to see a man who had somehow earned such gracious solicitude from the New York State Troopers.

"Rudy," I said, "where are the cocktail fixings in this dream machine?"

A small but well-stocked bar, quite a marvel of engineering and cabinetry, unfolded itself and slid into place. When this graceful transformation had completed itself, I had to laugh with admiration.

You don't even need a toothbrush. "Thank you, Rudy," I said. "Where are my clothes?"

A drawer slid open, and there, beautifully folded without so much as a wrinkle, was a complete outfit, casual but in impeccable taste. Everything fit me perfectly, even the shoes. I put my old clothes and ratty sneakers into the drawer, and it quietly swallowed them and disappeared.

Better prepared in my fashionable clothes for a journey in a Rolls, but also feeling disoriented and somewhat unreal, I poured myself a brandy and gently rocked the liquor in the bottom of the glass, sipping from time to time as I gazed out the window. The idea that I'd made a mess of a perfectly good life kept recurring, and that made me feel sad and blue. On the other hand, sitting in that Rolls with a brandy in my hand, I also had the comforting sensation that life was really just an amusing dream. It made for a kind of balance, and I wasn't suffering as we hummed along through the Massachusetts countryside.

It didn't seem long at all before I began to recognize Albert's neighborhood, the big estates with the rustic names like Oakbridge, Briarthorn, and Overknoll. This was fox hunting country, and Albert and I had ridden to hounds in some of these very same estates. It was quite a wild and nutty sport, all that was left of the noble hunts of ages past. Everyone had booze in their coffee in the morning to get them in the mood, that is reckless as hell, and then you rode until your ass fell off. Someone was always breaking his arm, or almost breaking his neck, and that was one more thing to crack jokes about. When we all finally straggled back out of the woods and fields, exhausted and giddy, there would be a huge dinner, and everyone would get really plastered and finally stagger off to bed. It was very expensive and rowdy fun.

Albert's mother and father did not participate in fox hunting, though they were both accomplished riders, and Mrs. Keane had a jumper she was very proud of. Actually they disapproved slightly of fox hunting. I heard her refer to

it once in private as being *déclassé*; but they didn't mind if Albert and I went occasionally. They understood that since we were locked up in school most of the time, we had to blow off some steam.

When we got back to school, back to the classes and books and endless papers and tests, life at the old homestead seemed like a half-remembered dream. I would go back to pestering people about liberty, justice, and human rights whenever I began to worry that I was starting to blend in too well with my upper-class surroundings. I persuaded myself that my trips to Albert's home were in no way inconsistent with my ideals. There was a time for classes and studying and bandying ideas about, which was most of the time; occasionally there was an opportunity to have fun. When I was having fun, I told myself, I was entitled to make the most of it.

Anyway, the enemies, according to my teenage ideals, were people obsessed with making money, and who made it by exploiting people, that is by lying, cheating, double-dealing, and card-sharping the innocent and helpless. Albert's parents couldn't have cared less about making money; they were not in any way sly or venal. On the contrary, Albert's father was always running off to some meeting about some hospital or library he was founding, and his mother was often busy with charities. And if they occasionally forgot to say thank you to elevator operators and doormen, they were very friendly to their own servants and let them take home all the leftovers.

From our first meeting, the Keanes were very nice to me. When Albert told them that my family was in show business, I saw Mrs. Keane raise one hair on one eyebrow about a tenth of a millimeter. But except for that one moment, I always felt completely accepted and welcomed as though I was a member of the family. In addition to the horse they kept especially for me to ride, I also had my own room with my own closet and bath. I had a particular chair in the dining room where I always

sat to eat. And when it was time to head back to school, Mrs. Keane always reminded me that they wanted me to think of the old homestead as my own home.

Mr. and Mrs. Keane were glad to see that Albert had a friend. He was their only living child, and he had been more than a little sheltered. I understood that. They were also a little short on kids. Albert's older brother had died young, and Mrs. Keane, for some medical reason, could not have any more children. I understood that too.

What I did not really understand was that they genuinely liked me just for myself. Like the majority of young people, I hadn't yet learned to like myself very much. And my own family had sent me away. So it puzzled me and made me uncomfortable sometimes to be treated so well by these people.

What I also did not understand at all was what an inestimable blessing it was to have the patronage of such a powerful family. A lot of parents who sent their children to prep schools went down on their knees every night praying that Junior would find a friend with a family as rich as the Keanes. Such parents told their children right up front that they were being sent to school to make friends in influential circles and never to forget it.

I didn't understand any of that at the time. I don't think anybody ever explained to me what I was doing at that school. The first time my parents approached me about going there, I said no way in hell. The second time they talked to me about it I said oh all right. That's all I remember. I was tired of horrible fights and breaking glass keeping me up until all hours of the night, so I let them talk me into going. Whatever they may have said about it being for my own good, I disregarded as typical adult lies and subterfuge and forgot about it. Anyway, I had no clear notion of why I was being sent there, and mostly

I felt like they just wanted to get rid of me.

When the Keanes took me in, I was very touched and grateful to have another home. I took what they gave me and thanked them for it. But I didn't know that it would have been normal and acceptable for them to use their influence to help me make my way in the world; and I never would have dreamed of asking them for anything.

I never ever told my parents about Albert and his family. I was afraid they would think worse of me for consorting with the enemy.

Now I recognized the northwest corner of the fieldstone wall that bordered Albert's estate, and about two miles down the road, there was the impressive fieldstone arch, two hundred years old at least, that framed the entrance road. And I was *very* surprised to see, on one side of the arch, very bright and garish and out of place, a sign that said: AUCTION TODAY.

We started up that familiar road that wound through lovely woods that all belonged to Albert now, and my stomach began to churn with a whole ragbag of emotions: nostalgia and envy and a kind of dread at having to admit to this friend from my past that I had done nothing really worthwhile with all the years since I'd seen him last. Time had passed me by; I didn't have any answers to life's big questions or anything to show off. I'd just wandered from one thing to another and one place to another and let it all slide. I was wishing now that I'd been more creative about escaping from the Rolls and making my way back to my cottage in the boondocks. Not for the last time!

When we arrived at the mansion, a monument of fieldstone and oak, all gables and dormers and diamond-paned windows, the grounds were so crowded with cars and trucks that several men with orange batons were busy trying to keep them organized. They waved the Rolls by, and we drove across the west lawn to the house.

Rudy came around and opened the door for me. With my new clothes on and a couple of brandies inside me, it seemed like a long time ago that he had knocked me cold and kidnapped me; I hardly felt I could hold it against him. Maybe he had done me a favor. At this point I wasn't sure.

One of the side doors opened, and a woman came over to the car. I guessed she was a year or two into her thirties, and her casual jeans and sweatshirt did nothing to disguise her world-class beauty.

"Welcome, Jack," she said with a smile that brought a lump to my throat. "We're so glad you could come. I'm Jenna Yumans." She gave me a handshake that was both warm and firm. "Everything in the house is bedlam right now, but we're having something to eat in the kitchen. Won't you join us?"

I nodded and followed her into the house. The way her dark brown hair glistened with auburn highlights in the sunshine, the graceful, alluring way she walked . . . Ah, here was trouble.

"So," cried a familiar voice, "it's you!" H el ene Hardricourt, big-bosomed and silver-haired, made for me across the kitchen, folding me up in a hug that made me gasp for air. "Where have you been?" she wanted to know, as though I had just come back from playing outside and was half an hour late for dinner. "You had a fight with Albert, okay, these things happen. But you don't write? You don't call? You don't have anything to do with the people who love you? Oh, Jack," she cried, impatiently wiping the tears out of her eyes, "it's so good to see you, but you should be ashamed of yourself!"

"I'm sorry, H el ene, God's truth I am. But this is America, you know? It's a big country and it's easy to get lost."

H el ene was the Keane's cook, one of the family of servants that went with the house. She was married to  Emile, the butler, who took his turn next, shaking my hand and embracing me

with tears in his eyes. Then their daughter Maxine, who had been a child when I last saw her, embraced me and kissed me and introduced me to *her* daughter, who embraced me and kissed me, and then they all cried again. They are French, so they behave that way. I'm a yank, so I hide my feelings; but inside I felt very moved to see them again.

What H el ene had said was true. When Albert and I had parted ways in anger so many years ago, I had pushed the whole household out of my mind, out of my heart. I didn't know any better.

Now H el ene heaped up a plate for me, and I fell upon her delicious cooking just like I had in the old days. H el ene sat and watched me eat, but  myle was antsy and excused himself. With so much activity going on in the house, he was not comfortable unless he was keeping an eye on things.

"What's going on?" I asked H el ene. She replied with a series of emphatic French gestures, but said nothing. So I looked questioningly at beautiful Jenna Yumans, whom I had been pretending to forget about while I was eating.

"We're having a huge auction, Jack, as I'm sure you can see. But I think Albert would like to be the one to tell you what it means."

"Where is Albert?"

"I don't know. The auction upset him. I'd be surprised to see him before tomorrow afternoon when this will all be over. In the meantime," she said, running her fingers back through her hair and shaking it out, "he asked me to make his apologies, and to see to your comfort. Do you like to ride?"

I tried not to swallow, but I couldn't help it. "I love to ride, Jenna."

"Then that's what I think we ought to do after we finish eating."

"You're not auctioning off the horses?"

“Not all of them.” The smile was enigmatic, teasing. *Oh, Albert, hurry up before I do something I’m going to regret!*

An hour later, dressed in borrowed jeans and boots, I swung myself into the saddle of a big brown stallion named Pollux. He was spirited and required quite a tight rein at first. That was all right with me. I would give him his head when the time was right. Jenna had changed into a light blouse, some kind of a cross between shorts and a skirt, and tennis sneakers. She was riding a roan mare named Cassie. We took a trail straight into the woods from behind the stables. Soon the droning of the auctioneer faded away, and we were alone among the whispering trees.

“Are you a good rider?” I asked her.

“Are you?”

“I think the main thing is not to break your neck.”

“I heard you used to ride to hounds.”

“Albert and I used to do that sometimes on a break from school.”

“It’s hard to imagine you at one of those schools.”

“It was kind of an accident that landed me there.”

“I didn’t think you looked very comfortable in those clothes you arrived in. You look more relaxed now.”

“They weren’t my clothes.”

“I know. They were in the drawer in the car.”

She was still talking to me in that teasing manner that made everything she said seem like a little puzzle to be solved. I was very intrigued by her. I was also making the pessimistic assumption that she was Albert’s girlfriend, and that I was a damn fool to be falling for her. “Whose clothes are they?”

She looked at me, and her lower lip made a little pout. She didn’t want to talk about clothes. She wanted to flirt. “They’re your clothes,” she said. “They were bought for you.”

“They fit me very nicely.”

“Of course. Why would we buy you ill-fitting clothes?”

“But how did you know my size?”

She shrugged. The pout became more pronounced. She seemed a little offended. What had I done? We rode in silence to the edge of a broad meadow.

“Actually I think all clothes are stupid,” she said. “Do you mind if I take mine off?” And she did, without bothering to get off the horse. First the blouse went flying. Then, with the sound of ripping Velcro, the skirt went flying after it. And there she was quite irresistibly buck naked in her tennis sneakers.

“Are you a good rider?” she asked.

It took me a moment to find my voice. “I have had a compliment or two in my time.”

“Then let’s see if you can catch me.” Snatching up the reins like some crazed and exquisite Amazon, she whacked her heels into Cassie’s flanks, and shot off across the meadow like a vision in a dream.

With a whoop, I gave chase. If anything I had underestimated Pollux’s spirit, for he was mad for a gallop. In a few seconds we were bounding across the meadow after Cassie and Jenna, whose flying hair and callipygian rear had suddenly become the focus of all my energies and desires. My mind was blank, the past was gone.

It is very difficult to think while you are galloping, especially over rough terrain. Why was I chasing her? I didn’t know. What did I expect to achieve? I didn’t care. I was just a crazy centaur chasing another crazy centaur across the crags of the timeless past.

I chased her across the meadow, but she disappeared down another trail. I chased her down the trail and saw her plunge into the trees. I chased her through the trees, and when

she splashed across a stream I splashed after her. Now we were back at the meadow, and I chased her in the opposite direction. We were both wet from the stream and whiplashed from the branches. Was she planning to go streaking through the auction?

No, she veered onto the trail toward the waterfall, and suddenly I was gripped with fear. It was not a good place to be reckless. The trail there turned into a twisty and steep dirt road that switchbacked down through a narrow canyon to the bridge in front of the waterfall. I knew it well, for it had made a hair-raising course for a Flexible Flyer when the snow was deep. On a galloping horse it would be suicide.

“Jenna, don’t! Jenna, no!” I knew it was too late. At the top of the grade, I reined in sharply and looked down. Her horse was out of control. It was too steep to stop, and she would never make the last turn before the road curved down to the bridge. Far below were the big boulders of the streambed.

Someone was screaming now. Was it me? No, it was Jenna screaming at her horse, screaming Cassie up to top speed, lashing the animal with her voice. She was lying low on the withers, one hand tangled tight in Cassie’s mane, the other arm gripping the horse’s neck. Suddenly I saw what she had in mind.

On the other side of the canyon the road jutted out from the hill. Jenna was going to try to make it across the gorge. It was all up to the horse now. I saw Cassie break a quarter stride as she measured the distance. She knew what she had to do to survive.

Please God give that horse wings, please God don’t let her fall, please God, oh please God, please! The horse was in midair now, straining every nerve, the forelegs reaching out, the hind legs tucking up, all time compressed into one second, one beat of my heart. Now a rasp of rocks spun out

into the gorge as the hooves found a few inches of purchase on the other side. Cassie was stumbling, went almost to her knees, caught herself and stood up straight, stamping in the road. Jenna was still lying flat against the horse's spine, her hand tangled in its mane.

Slowly she sat up, slowly she rolled a leg over and slid to the ground. Dropping to the grass, she wrapped her head up in her arms.

When my heart stopped pounding so desperately, I rode the short way back to the meadow and retrieved Jenna's clothes. Then I picked my way along the road past the bridge, and tied Pollux up near Cassie. Jenna accepted the clothes and pulled them on without comment or coyness.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," she said finally. She seemed annoyed with herself.

"I'm glad you're all right, Jenna."

"I have to do things like that. I can't help it."

"You did that on purpose?"

"Well, no, of course not. But throwing my clothes off, behaving wildly . . . It's just that life gets so boring sometimes, don't you think? And when you try to liven it up, things often end badly. Why is that?"

"I don't know, Jenna. I don't know anything about life, except that it's easy to get it all screwed up, even with the best intentions."

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Oh, yes."

It was not the answer she was expecting. "Oh? Well, I'm sorry I asked."

"I think everybody's crazy. I don't see any way around it."

"But you don't think badly of me?"

“I think you’re a hell of a rider.”

“Would you like to kiss me now?”

“Where do you fit in around here, Jenna?”

“Wherever I want.”

“Are you Albert’s girlfriend?”

“I don’t belong to Albert or anybody else.”

“But are you Albert’s girlfriend?”

She turned angrily away. “Oh, you are so bourgeois!”

We rode home without talking. The auction was winding down for the day. After we had turned Cassie and Pollux over to the stableman, Jenna said, “I think that unless Albert comes back, we will dine out on the terrace, just the two of us. Will that be all right?”

“I’d like that, Jenna.”

“Let’s eat at seven. No need to dress.”

“I have only that one set of clothes anyway.”

“Look in your closet,” she said over her shoulder as she walked away. “You’ll find a few other things.”

Sure enough, there were several changes of clothes in the closet of my old room, all my size and very thoughtfully chosen. For dinner on the terrace I chose slacks and a light sweater, but when I came downstairs, there didn’t seem to be anyone home. The house seemed empty and hollow after the ravages of the auction, which was obviously not just the kind you have to clean out the attic. No, this was the hardcore, going-out-of-business kind of auction: everything must go! What wasn’t already gone was rolled up, stacked up, or lined up on its way to the block.

I could see where some living space had been temporarily improvised, like a mini-living room consisting of a table and a few chairs near a nice window in the corner of a large and empty room. But mostly it was a ghost mansion now. It

echoed; and the shades of Albert's ancestors slipped from room to room shaking their heads in dismay.

Dinner had been served on the terrace, and sat waiting on a candlelit table. It seemed a little spooky to me, like a magic dinner in a fairy tale. I was sipping a bit of brandy when Jenna finally appeared. She floated in wearing something that was a mixture of evening gown and negligee. It was very silky and looked like it would be easy to slip off.

I held her chair as she sat down, and she smiled at me coyly over her shoulder. When I was seated she began to serve me; every time she leaned forward she was showing me her perfect breasts nestled in the silky folds of her dress. After she served me, she stole things back from my plate and fed me little bites from hers. She poured my wine and then took sips from my glass. It was very exciting. She transformed eating dinner into a silent conversation about sex, and she did it with grace and style and humor. She was melting me down.

"The house seems very empty," I said.

"Yes, I thought all the servants could use a night out."

"Jenna, everybody is going to know."

"So what?"

"Well, they're Albert's servants."

"And?"

"Do you want Albert to know?"

"Jack, don't spoil everything. Aren't we having a nice time? I told you I don't belong to Albert, and that's the truth. Also, Albert doesn't *want* to know, so no one is going to tell him, don't you see?"

"But . . ."

"No, Jack, no buts. Now for the rest of the night we're not going to mention Albert's name, do you understand?"

I could have gone upstairs and locked myself in my room

until morning, but I didn't. I was having a wonderful time with this beautiful woman, and it was easy to convince myself that the pleasure would outweigh the consequences. I had at least one thing in common with Jenna: life often seemed boring, wasted, pointless. To reject such an exciting encounter for the sake of a scruple seemed ungrateful, like throwing away a gift from the gods. Reality, I chose to let myself dream, had been suspended indefinitely. The night would last forever, and we would live happily ever after.

"Darling?" she said, lifting her warm, moist lips from my tingling body. We were upstairs in her candlelit suite, lying on satin sheets in her canopy bed. Beyond that was the gentle night, the moon and stars. There was no stress or strain, no poverty or violence, no lack or need. All undesirable things had been remedied and healed. There was nothing left in the world but luxury and happiness and Jenna. It was one of those moments in life that almost make up for the rest of it.

"Yes?" My voice sounded very far away.

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, Jenna, I love you very much," I said, and I meant it. I also felt a little fear, for when you love, you have something to lose. But as long as dawn never came, everything would be all right, and dawn would never come.

"Darling?"

"Yes, Jenna?"

"It's dawn."

"No, dear," I said, "there will never be any more dawns. It was simply a mistake in the original creation, and the mistake, at my request, has been corrected. Stupid mundane day with all its pointless cares has been cancelled and replaced by endless luscious candlelit night."

"How poetic! But, darling, it really is dawn, and the servants will be up and about soon."

“So?”

“Well, I don’t think it would be a good idea for them to see you leaving my boudoir.”

“Don’t be crazy. I left them a note on the mantelpiece saying that you and I are in bed together. If they see Albert coming, they’re to ring the silver dinner bell three times.”

“The silver dinner bell already went to auction. And this bed is going today. Things are going to get busy very soon around here.”

“This bed?”

“Yes, dear, isn’t that awful? So you see . . .”

I held my head tightly in my hands. Reality was like the sudden onset of a migraine. What kind of a world was this? You have a few hours of joy, and then they come and auction the bed right out from under you! And what about Jenna? Did she really care for me? “I don’t know when I’ve ever had such a magical night,” I said, reaching out to her.

“Yes, it was wonderful,” she said, covering my neck with little kisses. “You’re a very gentle lover, Jack.”

Was that a compliment? Did she really mean wimpy? Unimaginative? I was feeling very desperate all of a sudden. Jenna got out of bed, found my shirt, and began to help me on with it. I wanted to cling to her, but I knew that wasn’t the thing to do. I was supposed to get dressed and make a cheerful exit. *Until next time, Cherie!* When would that be? For competition I had her zillionaire boyfriend who might be arriving at any moment. It was his house. It was his bed. And I was his guest.

“Listen,” Jenna said. “It’s Albert.”

A jolt of adrenaline hit me like a blow. Where was he? What had she heard? I expected him to come bursting into the room, and all I had on was a shirt. “How do you know?”

I whispered.

“Can’t you hear it? The helicopter?”

Sure enough, I could hear the whop, whop, whop of the rotor off in the distance. I had a little time then. My clothes were all over the floor where I’d dropped them, the landmarks on a treasure map leading to a canopy bed. I watched Jenna as I dressed. She looked a little hurt, a little puzzled. Her words came back to me: *I have to do things like that. I can’t help it.*

My shoes were in my hand now, my silk scarf draped around my neck. When I went to kiss her she gave me a frightened look, but grabbed me around the neck and kissed me wildly.

“Goodbye, Jack,” she panted. “Thank you so much. Oh, here, don’t forget your sock.”

So with shoes in hand, I sneaked guiltily across the mansion as day was breaking and Albert’s chopper was coming in. Cracking the curtains in my room a tiny bit, I watched it land. I was expecting something gay and racy, with chrome trim and a bright stripe or two. But what landed on the lawn was dark, squat, and armor-plated, and carried two machine guns that I could see. I couldn’t see any numbers nor any insignia. It looked like a flying pirate ship.

Two men in jumpsuits ran low under the swirling rotor and then walked toward the house. The one who was carrying the attaché case and gesturing with his free hand was Albert. He was still on the portly side, and had grown a little beard.

So fascinated was I with this new image of Albert that I opened the door and tiptoed out on the landing. I heard them come in the front door, heard footsteps below, a sliding sound, a thump, and then a soft clang. Then Albert said, “This should take care of everything. Please count it if you like.”

Some small noises, then a gravelly voice that said, “It seems to be all here. We’ll see you at 0800 hours on the

nineteenth then.”

“You can expect up to ten horses.”

“Ten horses or ten cannons, it’s all the same to us.”

“Very good,” said Albert. “Never heard of you.”

“Never heard of you,” said the other man. I heard his boots going to the front door as I tiptoed back to my room, where I watched him run back under the rotor. The chopper lifted off, banking swiftly over the trees at the edge of the lawn.

Quickly I hung up my clothes and slid under the covers. That seemed the safest place to be. All I had to do was close my eyes, and I would be the image of the innocent guest who had been behaving as he should all night. At first I lay there trying to think, but my mind would not engage. Aside from the hour I had spent out cold in the Rolls-Royce, and some catnaps in Jenna’s arms, I’d had no sleep in close to twenty-four hours. It had been a very full day, and I was really starting to feel it. I would get a little shut-eye, and then make some excuse to be on my way, maybe after a friendly bit of brunch and some light banter about old school pranks.

An affair with someone’s girlfriend was dicey enough and almost sure to lead to trouble and hard feelings. But now the arrival of that corsair helicopter had got me to thinking that the situation here, whatever it was, was very much out of my line, and the quicker I was out of there, the better.

I closed my eyes, relaxed my body, and as the images of the previous day were all just beginning to mingle together into gold-plated chauffeurs and bare-assed helicopters, there was a knock on the door. Cranking one eye open, I saw by the clock on the bedstand that I had actually been out for a couple of hours, not a couple of minutes as it had seemed. But I did not feel rested, and I was not happy to be awakened.

In the past when I had visited the estate, it was customary

for the servants to bring in morning tea and open the curtains. Apparently the custom continued, for it was Maxine, Émile's daughter, who opened the door and brought in the tea service. I struggled to look chipper and rested.

"Good morning," said Maxine with a smile. I could not detect any reproach in her face or voice. One usually assumes that the servants in a household like that know everything that goes on; fortunately it is very much in their best interest to keep it to themselves.

"Good morning, Maxine," I said, trying to smile back.

"Mr. Keane has come home," she said, "and wants to know if you will meet him in the den for breakfast."

I said I'd be delighted to, and she opened the curtains and left. Could I steal a little more sleep? Probably not. So, with a sigh and a curse, I took my tea into the bathroom.

On my way to the den I felt pretty good. A hot shower cures many ills. I had drawn a screen in my mind around most of the events of the previous day. I felt ready to renew my acquaintance with Albert and then get the hell out of there.

Albert stood up as I walked in, and came right over to shake my hand warmly in both of his. "Jack," he said, "what a joy it is to see you again."

One of the great mysteries of life is how people can change so dramatically and yet remain unmistakably the same. This man had much more force and focus in the way he presented himself. And with most of the baby fat leached out of his face, and the well-trimmed and kingly beard he was now sporting, Albert had become quite a handsome man.

Yet in the eyes, so very light blue that you were drawn to look directly at the pupil rather than the iris, it was the same innocent and loving boy I had known at school. Perhaps the odd effect of his light eyes had something to do with it, but there seemed to be no shield, no barrier, no subterfuge

in Albert. He seemed now, as he had always seemed before, completely sincere and open; and it made me just as nervous to feel all that undiluted and undisguised warmth pouring out of him as it had in the past. It was too much. It was too naked. But mostly it made me uncomfortable because I never felt able to return it in kind. It made me feel guarded and held back, which I am to some extent, but who isn't? Until you run into an oddball like Albert who doesn't seem to be that way, it seems perfectly normal and necessary.

When I first knew him I used to tell myself that it was because his family was so rich; that he had never been exposed to any trouble. Over time, I realized that the idea was a lot of crap; that Albert's defenselessness was his gift; very courageous really, very commendable, and very annoying at times.

"Nice to see you again, Albert. You're looking very well."

He beamed and even blushed a little at the compliment. He was full of light, and it would light him up over anything at all. "Come and have some breakfast, Jack. You still love sausages, don't you? H  l  ne is making sausages now which would win prizes all over the world."

"Thanks, Albert, don't mind if I do."

We sat down and began to help ourselves. The sausages were very delicious. Everything about the breakfast was fit for a king. I ate a few mouthfuls and then I said, "What's going on, Albert?"

"Why, Jack," he said with a broad smile, "you, of all people, don't have to ask *me* what's going on."

"Is that so?" I thought about it for a few moments, but I didn't get the joke. "You've been keeping tabs on me. Why?"

"Oh here now, I haven't been keeping *tabs* on you. Why do you say it that way? You make it sound so vulgar."

That was something else which apparently hadn't changed about Albert. Vulgarity, whatever that was or whatever he thought that was, was still something he couldn't tolerate.

"Well, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I think sending some private eye to take photos of me is a little vulgar, wouldn't you say?"

In truth, I had never been sure what the word vulgar was supposed to mean in Albert's lexicon. I was just pushing his buttons. I hadn't talked with Albert in ever so long, and I wanted to know what he was like.

"Perhaps so, but I didn't *send* anyone to do any such thing."

"If you didn't *send* anyone, then how did it occur that someone was there?" It was difficult to talk to Albert without picking up his emphatic manner of speech. Conversation, communication, the life of the mind, these were all terribly important to him, and he chose his words the way a chemist would choose the ingredients in an experiment. "And how do you happen to know every little thing about me, right down to my shoe size, if you haven't sent some vulgar private eye to find it all out for you, hmm?" I thought I had him there.

"Because, my dear Jack, I never *sent* anyone to find out those things. And you needn't give me that fishy look, because it's true. I just happened to mention one evening at a party many years ago that I was curious what had become of a certain old friend. A few days later I was surprised to receive a complete report on you along with a bill, naturally, and since I paid the bill, I've continued to receive regular reports ever since."

"And continued to pay the bills."

"Yes. After that first report I was quite concerned about you, and though I knew better than to interfere, I preferred to stay informed."

We ate in silence for a while. The idea that Albert had been checking up on me all those years was infuriating. That he had been doing it out of concern was even more infuriating. Who the hell did he think he was?

On the other hand, I couldn't help but wonder if I was just being touchy about wasting so many years, or if I was feeling guilty about Jenna and just wanted to pick a fight to cover it up.

"These sausages are really something, Albert," I said, trying to find some neutral ground for my thoughts.

"Hélène will be very pleased to hear that you said so."

"Where is your lady friend this morning?"

"I think she's still in bed. She says she has trouble sleeping sometimes when I'm not here."

What was it that she said? *Albert doesn't want to know, so no one is going to tell him.* Well, it certainly wasn't going to be me. Images of our lovemaking had been drifting in my mind all morning, and I wanted very much to be with her again and again and again.

"She told me you went riding together. Was that fun?"

"Uh . . . yes, it was a lot of fun, thanks." More images of naked Jenna crowded into my mind. We already had a whole intimate relationship that Albert knew nothing about.

"I thought you would enjoy Pollux. Do you ride much anymore?"

"No, not much anymore, Albert. If I get the opportunity I do, but I never bothered to make enough money to be a horse person."

"Do you still ride well?"

"Fairly well. I didn't fall off even once."

"Do you still fence?"

"No."

“Never?”

I had to laugh at that. “I’m a little stiff and creaky for those long lunges.”

“You still know how, though?”

“Of course I still know how, but I doubt I’d be very good at it. You have to practice if you want to keep up a skill.”

“This is disappointing. You used to be a real champion.”

“I used to be a lot of things. Why is it disappointing that I don’t fence anymore?”

Albert didn’t answer. He was thinking about something. I sat watching him while I stuffed in the last bits of sausage that my stomach would hold. “Why did you invite me here?”

“Uhm?” he said, still lost in thought. I made some circles in the air with my palm to attract his attention.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“Why did you invite me here?”

“Well, that’s not such an easy question, but I’ll get to that, I promise you. Can’t we just talk for a few minutes? It’s been such a long time, Jack. When was the last time we saw each other?”

“It was the year they fixed the presidential election and nearly got caught.”

“Yes, and you developed the notion that I had something to do with it.”

“You were behaving very queerly, Albert. When I asked you a point-blank question about it, you almost dropped your teeth into the Béarnaise sauce.”

“Well, I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Okay, Albert, I believe you. What difference does it make now?”

“But I did know that it was going to happen.”

“So I really wasn’t so far off base after all.”

“No, you weren’t.”

“How did you know?”

“Because I wanted to know. And because I’m willing to pay people to find out what I want to know. Channels of communication tend to stay open between people who share a common interest.”

“Between zillionaires, you mean.”

Albert nodded. “That’s one of the reasons we have country clubs. It’s a pleasant and private place where we can gather and gossip about things that concern us.”

“So why did you have me packed and crated and delivered up here?”

“Jack, I’m so sorry! Rudy told me what happened, and I meant to say something to you about it earlier, but I was so happy to see you, it totally slipped my mind!”

“Don’t worry about it, Albert. I can take a joke. But if you don’t tell me right now what this is all about, I’m going to come over and shake it out of you.”

“Good morning, Albert dear. Good morning, Jack. I trust I’m not interrupting anything.”

That was Jenna, making her appearance, freshly groomed in slacks and a silk blouse. She went right to Albert and kissed him sweetly. He looked up at her with his light blue eyes filled with affection, and I knew in that moment how dangerously infatuated I’d already become.

“Sit down, my dear,” said Albert, “and help us finish this delicious breakfast. Jack asked me why I invited him here, and I’m afraid I’ve been beating about the bush.”

Jenna held out a cup to Albert, and while he was pouring her coffee, she flashed me a look of such tender yearning and complicity that I saw I would have every possible opportunity

for two-timing my host under his own roof.

“You haven’t told him yet?” said Jenna to Albert.

“Perhaps he won’t even believe it,” said Albert.

“Perhaps not,” said Jenna. Then she turned to me with a dazzling smile. “Jack, Albert has created a little country of his own. It’s a monarchy, and he’s the king.”

“It didn’t happen in a day, Jack,” said Albert. “Actually, it’s over fifteen years since we brought in the first people, mostly farming families that had lost their farms to banks and conglomerates but yearned to continue their old way of life.”

“Of course there are tradesmen, too,” said Jenna. “Blacksmiths and millers and weavers . . .”

“Wheelwrights and masons and fletchers,” said Albert. “What do you think, my dear? I’m not so sure he believes us.”

Jenna smiled at me. “You look a little confused, Jack.”

“No, I’m sorry, but I don’t get it. You made yourself a king, you say? How can you do that?”

“I gave people land to farm. I gave them seeds to plant. I gave them cows and goats and sheep and pigs and chickens and geese. In return I ask them to respect my sovereignty and to obey my rules.”

For awhile I just sat there staring. He wasn’t joking, as far as I could tell, but what he was saying didn’t make any sense. “And what happens to people who don’t obey your rules?”

“I throw them into the dungeon until they’re ready to behave themselves.”

“It’s an awful dungeon, Jack,” said Jenna. “No one who’s been in it once ever wants to go back in again.”

“Albert,” I laughed, “you’re making this up. How could you get away with such a thing?”

“It works very well. I don’t keep a person in the dungeon

any longer than I think will do him good. He comes out filthy and stinking and rat-nipped, and everyone has a good laugh at his expense. Then he goes home and gets cleaned up and goes back to his farming or his trade with a more compliant attitude. Life goes on.”

They both *looked* like they were telling the truth, but that didn’t make it possible. “Albert, give me a break, will you? You can’t have a kingdom in the United States.”

“Oh, Jack, don’t be so naïve. The U.S. is full of private roads with gates and guards, and you’d be very surprised at the queer sorts of things you’d find at the ends of those roads. This is a huge country, and there’s plenty of room for any kind of a secret you can afford to keep.”

Jenna was growing restless. “Albert, dear, just tell him about *our* kingdom. Jack, it isn’t even *in* the United States. It’s far north of the border.”

“It’s in Canada?”

“Well, technically yes,” said Albert. “I had to put a great deal of money into some Canadian pockets for my ninety-nine year lease. I’m joking about the lease, you understand, but it’s not really anywhere at all. You’ll see what I mean. It’s hundreds of miles from anything bigger than an Indian village, up there where everything is fresh and new.”

My mind was still telling me that this was probably just a big put-on, and that any second they would burst out laughing. But from my toes to my scalp, my body was tingling with a new and strange kind of energy, very pleasant and exciting.

“Well, okay Albert, I sort of believe you. But what’s it for?”

“What’s it for? It’s my life’s work. You know I inherited hugely when my parents died. Their plane crash was so very unexpected, it almost killed me with confusion to have so much money dumped on me at such a young age. I hadn’t

any idea what to do with so much money, none at all.” Albert paused, and I could almost see his memories come flooding back.

“And there were scads of people suddenly rushing at me from all sides with advice and schemes, not to mention the most vulgar propositions of every kind. Émile and H  l  ne really saved me from losing my mind, I think, by arranging a situation of deep and secret seclusion for me where I had the time and the privacy to adjust to my situation.”

I could see in his eyes something of what he must have gone through. Jenna came around behind his chair and gave him a little hug.

“Well, that was ages ago, or so it seems anyway,” he went on. “I wanted to do something special with that money. I wanted to do something unique. I knew that none of those schemers and sycophants had anything to offer me in the way of ideas. I knew I had to come up with a plan all by myself. And then very late one night I had a vision of a land that was free from pollution, free from corruption and greed and graft; free from the callous materialism that is tearing our beautiful world to shreds. In other words, a new land where people could live in peace and nurture their true, natural spirit within, free from . . .”

“Vulgarity,” I said. It wasn’t very nice of me to shoot him down out of the stratosphere of his vision, but he was pissing me off. I suppose that was because I myself at one time had a vision of a little theater that was free from a lot of those same things and it was all ashes now. Jenna shot me a disapproving look, but Albert just turned toward me and said, “Yes, exactly.”

“And so how did you do? Did you succeed?”

“No. Not like that. I had a lot to learn about people, Jack, about humanity, about the human predicament. I had a lot to learn about myself, God knows. No, I didn’t succeed in

creating anything like my vision. But I did succeed in creating something very different from anything you've ever seen in your whole life. Am I right, my dear?"

"Yes, Albert," Jenna said softly, "quite right. There is nothing on this planet right now like your beautiful kingdom."

Neither of them were looking at me now. They were both seeing something in the mind's eye. I don't know quite how to describe it, except that it was as if their eyes had both turned the same shade of gray. There was an aura around them, a completeness, a kind of grandeur. Maybe it was right at that moment when the door of my fate closed softly behind me.

"Okay, Albert," I said. "Against my better judgment I feel like maybe I believe you. But with all the water that has gone under the dam since I last saw you, I can't believe that you had me kidnapped just to tell me about your dreams. So for the tenth time, what am I doing here?"

Well, they both looked at me, and then they looked at each other; and if I hadn't been soft-headed with curiosity, I would have recognized that look right away. We've all seen it a million times and what it said was, "We better not tell him too much!" But like a chump, I let it pass right by.

"It's lonely at the top, Jack," Albert said finally. "I need a real friend now, a man like yourself. I need someone who can beat me at chess occasionally and who'll tell me I'm an ass if that's what I need to hear. I need someone I can trust the way I trust you; someone who can see through the shadows into the true meaning of things. I need someone to make my kingdom a beacon in the darkness! But I'm not being entirely selfish either, you know. Given what I know about your present situation, I'd be very disappointed in you if you let an opportunity like this go by. Unless, of course, you're satisfied with your little cottage in Marysville."

“I have some debts I need to settle, Albert.”

“Yes, I know. I hope you will forgive me, but it was such a piddling sum that I paid them off for you.”

Floored, I didn't know what to say. I felt excited and energized, and I was already looking forward to something unusual and challenging. “Give me a minute, will you?” I left the table and headed out onto the terrace; a few minutes later Jenna joined me.

“It sounds like you really like it there,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” she replied, “I love it there. Each time I come back to the modern world, the life here seems a little more absurd, a little more intolerable. I'm not the least bit comfortable here any longer.”

“Will you be going back this time with Albert?”

“Yes. My coronation takes place at the end of this month.”

Her answer snapped my head around. “You're going to be queen?”

“Yes, Jack. I'm going to be queen.”

“It's really a kingdom, this thing Albert cooked up? It's not just some kind of a commune or a co-op?”

“It's a real kingdom right out of a storybook.”

“Swords and horses?”

“Yes.”

“Wizards and dragons?”

“There's only one way to find out.”

“Suppose it just isn't my cup of tea?”

She paused and seemed uncertain what to say. I was just beginning to wonder if there was a catch, when she said, “No one will try to keep you there against your will.”

“Well, I guess it's a deal then.”

She took my hand and squeezed it. “I’m glad, Jack. I’m so very glad. I’m going to tell Albert,” she said, and she left me to my fantasies.