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*Homage to F. Scott—*

I'd be flyin' to find!  
My Miss One-of-a-kind!  
If I could only get—  
If only I could get—  
out'a this jail!—  
—"Rumplemayer's Basement Blues," 1921

## One

It was like being in a storm, except I heard the thunder first. That was the sound of a dozen anti-aircraft guns firing at us from the summit of a sheer butte that rose like a monolith above the cruel curls of the Montana Rockies.

The setting sun was wreathed with gauzy clouds, and it tinted the cliffs and crevasses below as pink as stained glass flamingos. We were flying a British Moth with a 60-hp de Havilland motor—those Brits could certainly make an airplane. The Moth was steady as a table and was Joel's and my favorite for wing walking and stepping off from one plane onto another. I was in the front cockpit this time, just along

for the ride. It had been Joel's idea to borrow the boss's beaut and skip out after our last performance to investigate “something goofy” in the mountains near Hades, which was more bare rock than a village set in the saddle between a mountain that looked like a two-knuckled fist and the mountain that was shooting bullets at us.

Joel swore and shouted through the communication tube and tried to get us the hell out of there, as bullets tore into the fuselage. Another burst hit the upper wing just above my head, which was where the fuel tank was located. My face was spattered with gasoline and I figured then and there that I had just bought the farm; Joel was shouting through the tube to tell me that everything was okay—when we were hit again.

I heard a ping as a bullet hit the motor, and an instant later I could barely see through the oily smoke and fire. I gagged on the burnt exhalations of fuel and oil that smeared over my goggles as the Moth went into a dive. Reflexively, I took over the controls, which were linked to the front cockpit, God bless Mr. Geoffrey de Havilland. I shouted back at Joel through the tube and pulled as hard as I could on the stick while working the rudder and aileron pedals. The compass was going all wacky, as though someone was playing over it with a magnet, pulling the needle this way and that. Although I couldn't see Joel, I *knew* that he had been hit. Another wave of heat swept over me and I figured I'd be lucky to have another few seconds before the fuel tank blew Joel and me right out of the postcard pink and purple sky.

I'd always wondered what I'd be thinking about in my last moments. I'd wondered about it every time I climbed into a Spad during Bloody April of 1917; I could fly as well as most anybody, although I was no Rickenbacker. I had figured I was going to get it in '17 or '18, but I never even took a bullet, not a scratch—I had the proverbial angel on my wing—and now here I was, about to get it in 1923, which was *supposed* to be the best year of my life. I remembered Dr. Coué's prayer, which everyone was saying: “Day by day in every way I am getting better and better.”

Better and better.

“Joel,” I shouted through the tube, “you're going to be okay. We're going to be okay.” *Day by day in every fucking way*, and I felt that hot, sweaty tightness all over my face like I always do when I'm going to cry, but I slipped out of that because the old girl was making a whining keening sort of a noise, and then the motor sputtered and everything became summer afternoon quiet, except for the snapping of the wing wires—

And I found myself counting, counting slowly and the ground spun through the smoke, and I kept the nose up as the valley floor rose like an elevator the size of Manhattan, and I wasn't thinking about anything, not about dying or the tank exploding or the smoke or the smell of the oil—or my Mother, or Lisa, whom I had only dated twice, but she had gone down on the first date and said she loved me, and she had so many freckles, and three curly black hairs between her breasts, I remembered those three black hairs as I counted and by one-hundred-and-forty-seven I expected the giant hand of God to slap me right into the canyon floor and the fuel tank to explode like the sun and—

\* \* \* \*

It was dark when they found me, but the moon was so big and bloated that everything looked like it was coated with silvery dust, except the shadows, where the moon dust couldn't settle. I don't know whether they woke me or whether it was the drip from the fuel tank, but once I realized I was alive and that this was certainly not heaven, I felt most every part of my body begin to ache. I moved my legs to make sure I still had them, and I tried to swat at the Negroes who were pulling me out of the cockpit. I don't know what was in my head because they were big men, and I was just swatting away, but they didn't throw me

about or mistreat me or ask me any questions; it was as if they were just handling a fragile piece of merchandise, nothing that was alive, just merchandise. I started coughing as soon as they moved me, and I craned my neck for one last look at the plane—and at Joel, the poor dumb jake who just had to see if the stories were true about a grand castle on the mountain. Now Joel was dead, his face shot off, and I was being carried away by giants who were speaking a dialect like none I'd ever heard; in fact, I couldn't understand a word, although I couldn't help but think it was *some* form of Southern English.

And we hadn't even seen a castle.

Damn you, Joel.

I blacked out, and woke up as I was being thrown this way and that in the seat of some kind of souped-up, armored suburban; but this beast hadn't rolled off any of Henry Ford's production lines. It was a chimerical combination of tank and automobile. Instead of windows, the passenger cab had thick glass portholes, and Lewis machine guns were mounted on the hood and trunk. I could hardly hear the motor as we sped and jostled into the long purple shadows of the mountains above, and my captors were as quiet as the mountains.

When I woke again, after dreaming that Joel was fine and we were back in the Moth gliding silently through the night over castles and fairy lights, I found myself in the air indeed. The suburban was being hoisted up the sheer face of a cliff, rising into the milky moonlight; and, startled, I bolted forward. The two black giants beside me pulled me back into the cushioned softness of the seat and held me there. I tried to talk to them, to ask them what was going on, but they just shook their heads as though they couldn't understand me.

Then with a bounce the suburban was lowered onto solid ground. Two men and a boy were waiting beside a crane used on aircraft carriers to hoist boats and planes; and as they removed the cables that had been attached to the hub-guards of the huge truck-tyred wheels, they spoke to each other in that peculiar dialect that was both familiar—and unfamiliar.

Once again we drove, only now we were that much closer to the sky. As I looked out through the porthole on my right, the moon looked green, radiating its wan, sickly light through filigrees of cloud; and the road made of tapestry brick was as straight and neat and ghostly as the fog and mist that clung to it.

We passed a lake that could have been a dark mirror misted with breath and reflecting the stars and bloated moon. I caught a sudden scent of pine, and then I saw it, a château—no, rather a moon-painted castle—with opalescent terraces, walkways, mosque-like towers, and outbuildings rising from broad, tree-lined lawns.

But my destination, alas, would be otherwise.

## Two

*“Hell's bells, it's almost noon.”*

*“Clarence, how would you know whether it was noon or what? Your wristwatch has stopped so many times, it could be midnight.”*

*“Don't call me Clarence or I'll break your legs.”*

“*You an’ whose army?*”

I snapped awake and looked around the room, which resolved around me. Walls, floor, ceiling seemed to be made of a piece, a smooth, translucent layer of opal, which glowed with light; but I could not discern the source of the suffusing light, nor could I see the inset marks of tile, only high, straight, iridescent planes that reached to a ceiling of the same substance. I was lying in a comfortable feather bed with a jewel-inlaid footboard; the bed and an ebony table and elbow chair were the only pieces of furniture in this smooth, glittering travesty of a monk's cell.

“Well, sleeping beauty has awoke,” said Clarence. He had a pale, freckled complexion, red hair that was graying, and a pop-eyed look, no doubt because his eyebrows were so white that they seemed to disappear. “You're probably still feelin’ dopey,” he said to me. “The slaves drugged you so Old Jefferson could do his interrogation. Takes a while for it to wear off.”

“Well, they didn't drug *me*,” said the man who had been goading Clarence about his name. He was bald, tall, and aggressive; and he had a ruddy complexion like Clarence—it was as if both men were of the same Irish and Dutch ancestry. Both wore pants and shirts that looked like pajamas, except Clarence wore an aviator's jacket and the bald man wore a cap.

Eleven other men were standing in the room behind them, and a short wiry aviator—I was sure right then and there that they were *all* aviators—said, “Old man Jefferson drugged *everybody*. Even you, Monty. You just don't remember none of it, while we do.”

“But none of us remembers much,” said Clarence, who introduced himself as Skip, and then introduced me to Monty Kleeck and Farley James and Rick Moss and Carl Crocker and Eddie Barthelmet, Harry Talmadge, Keith Boardman, Gregory “Cissy” Schneck, “Snap” Samuel Geraldson, and Stephen Freeburg, who “was the only Jew in this mess of Protestants.”

“You a Jew too?” asked the skinny, nervous upchuck who was called Cissy. There was a meanness in his voice, but he wasn't big enough to back it up, and I knew he was more dangerous than the three-hundred-pound hulk they called Snap.

I thought about saying yes, but I figured I might be here a while—maybe for life, from the look of them—and so I said, “No, I'm Catholic. You have a problem with that?”

“No, no,” said Cissy, backing off. “I got no problem with Christians.” Then in an undertone he said, “Long as they're Christians—”

“Where the hell am I?” I asked, some of the muzziness from the drugs finally clearing—if, indeed, I'd been drugged. I directed myself to Stephen Freeburg, who had the same kind of dark, sharp features as Rudolph Valentino, who last I heard had gone to prison for bigamy.

“You're in the Randolph Estes Jefferson Hotel,” Freeburg said, smiling. “It's probably the fanciest, most comfortable jail in the world. And unless you can think of something we haven't, you're here for life.”

“No, we'll get out,” said Carl Crocker, a short, overweight, squarish chap with bristly brown hair—they must feed these guys pretty well, I thought; but everything was just words and thoughts wriggling like worms in sand. Nothing seemed real. My mouth felt like it was stuffed with wire. My eyes were burning. My head was pounding. Wake up, I told myself. Wake the hell up.

“Yeah, your tunnel,” Freeburg said sarcastically. “Next, you and Snap will be drilling straight down.”

Everyone laughed at that.

I guess I looked bemused because Eddie Barthelmet, a reedy yet muscular man with thinning black hair, whom I figured immediately as the sort who kept his own counsel, said, "It's solid diamond underneath us. Hardest substance in the world."

I shook my head and grinned. I could take being the butt of the joke.

"I'm not joshing you. The whole goddamn mountain is diamond, except for the rock and stone above. And it's all owned by the Old Man, who isn't too willing to share, which is why we're down here, and he's up there." Everyone laughed at that, and Eddie just nodded toward the ceiling, as if some omniscient being were standing right above us. Then after a pause, he asked, "Did you happen to notice if your compass seemed to go wild when you approached the mountain?"

"Yeah," I said. "But I figured it had been knocked out of whack."

"No, the same thing happened to me. None of the others remember anything being wrong with their compasses, so I figure that the Old Man concocted something new. An artificial magnetic field, or something like that."

"Well, if he could change the official maps of the United States, he could screw up our compasses, I suppose," Clarence said. I didn't figure him to be the brightest of the bunch, but I couldn't help but like him. He seemed genuinely concerned, and maybe it was the way he slouched or patted the chair, I don't know, but for some reason I had the feeling that he was really at home here. He turned to me and said, "Don't worry, you'll be meeting the Old Man soon enough. And when you're ready, I'll give you the tour of the place and help you get set up. Now you think you're ready to tell us your name and how you came to be flyin' out here? You *were* flyin'?"—

I nodded and told them my name—Paul Orsatti—and I told them that I was a mail pilot, which I'd been for a while, until I got myself fired from New York Chicago Air Transport for being self-righteous; and I wasn't going to tell them that I'd been kicking around for the past year as a roustabout stunt flier, working for crummy outfits like Pitkin's Circle-Q Flying Circus. Or that I'd been playing piano in cheapjack speakeasies for nothing more than drinks and whatever change the Doras and ossified lounge lizards could spare. I didn't tell them about Joel, and how he'd heard rumors about there being something strange in the mountain near Hades. I only told them I'd gotten a bit off-course—next thing I knew I was being shot at.

And as if I'd been caught telling a lie by the Lord God Almighty Himself, I heard a voice calling everyone to attention.

A broadcast from above.

\* \* \* \*

"Well, boys," said God. "Don't you want to have a chat? My daughter's accompanying me, so y'all better be on your best behavior, gentlemen. None of your usual filthy street patois. Now shake a leg!"

Everyone started swearing and complaining, but they obediently moved out of my room toward where the voice was probably coming from, and Skip pulled me along, telling me that I might as well know my keeper and get it in my head that I'm here and that's that and how it's not so bad, in fact, probably better than we'd ever have it back home in the *real* world.

We walked through a seamless corridor made of the same stuff as the walls, floor, and ceiling of the room where I'd awakened. Dim, pervasive light radiated wanly from the ceiling, and doorways were evenly spaced on both sides. I caught glimpses into other rooms, some larger than others, some dark, some brightly lit, and could see rooms that led into other corridors. I was in a polished, many-hued glass warren that could hold many more men than we who were here now. We crowded into an empty room, which was a high tower—a terminus of sorts.

I looked up at a large, brightly lit opening covered with grating and saw a man looking down at us—I assumed he was Mr. Randolph Estes Jefferson.

Some sort of lens must have also covered the opening because Mr. Jefferson seemed greatly magnified and also slightly distorted, as though his girth was being pulled toward the edges of the opening. He looked to be about forty-five and had one of those faces that always remind me of a pug dog: jowly and fleshy, yet absolutely intent—the proverbial dog with a bone. He stood erect, as though he was wearing military gear instead of a straw boater, blue blazer, and white flannel Oxford bags. If it weren't for that face and his bearing, he could have been a fashion plate. He was swinging what I thought was a cane, swinging it back and forth over the opening to the tower of our prison (but which was, in effect, just a grating in the grass from his perspective). A girl of perhaps eighteen stood beside her pug dog father. She wore a thin blue blouse with a pleated tennis skirt and a blue bandeau to keep her hair in place. Her hair was blond, curly, and bobbed, and although I couldn't see the color of her eyes, I imagined they would be blue. Her mouth was crimson, her face tan against the blue bandeau. Even with the slight distortion, I could see that she was perfection—a pure vision of youth and freshness and beauty.

“Hey, leave the old guy and come on down here.”

“Push him through the grate, we'll take care of everything for you.”

“They don't call me snugglepup for nottin',” Crocker shouted, and most everyone was laughing—except Mr. Jefferson. His daughter smiled warmly at all of us and bowed, as though she was being presented at a cotillion in New York or Chicago or Paris.

“Gentlemen,” said Mr. Jefferson, “remember your manners. If y'all continue to embarrass me before my daughter, I shall be happy to instruct my slaves to forget to supply you with your daily rations, which I presume are to your expectations?”

“Slaves?” I asked Skip, who was standing beside me and rubbernecking, to get a better look at the girl.

“Yeah,” Skip said, “he's got hundreds of 'em, I guess.”

“The rations are fine, except we could do without the fish eggs,” said Rick Moss, a short unshaven man, who was so muscular that he looked like he might have been a weight lifter.

“So the rations of caviar are not appreciated,” Jefferson said. “Well, we'll take that item off the menu.” Randolph Estes Jefferson sounded cheerful, as if he were merely a waiter taking an order and listening to customers' complaints. “Now my Phoebe loves caviar,” he said, putting his arm around his daughter, “so I, of course, just assumed y'all would too. I figured your generation with all your jazz and Wall Street savvy was more sophisticated than mine.”

But Harry Talmadge and Keith Boardman, who were standing beside me and looking quietly bored, were not exactly what you'd call jazz babies—Harry looked to be in his middle forties, but it would be

difficult to guess whether Keith was in his fifties or sixties. He looked well fed and well exercised, as though he were someone who could afford to pamper himself and maintain his youth.

I thought it odd that our jailer Mr. Jefferson used “y’all” like someone from the Deep South, yet he had no accent at all—which was probably the same thing as having a midwest accent.

“Well, *I* don't mind the caviar,” said fat Snap Geraldson. “I guess that makes me the only sophisticated guy down here.” That got a laugh.

“Are you here to bait us like bears, or have you come up with a solution to our problem?” asked Freeburg.

“Ah, Mr. Freeburg, you are always so angry and so ready to argue how many angels might rest on the head of a pin. Aren't you satisfied with the Talmud I provided for your studies?”

“I've simply taken the bait,” Freeburg said.

“Well, good for you, then. But we've been over and over my predicament. I—being a man of conscience—must bear the burden of keeping y'all in prison because to free you would be harmful to my family and myself and my retainers. You'll soon come to understand that, too, Mr. Orsatti.”

I almost took a step back when he addressed me.

“I trust you're getting settled in comfortably,” he continued. “The other boys will show you the ropes. If anyone mistreats you, just slip a note into the food slot. It'll reach me in due course. I've developed quite a paternalistic affection for all of you. Quite.”

“We'd promise not to peach on you,” cried Carl Crocker. “And that's the honest truth. Just let us go. Give us a chance.”

“Ah, but you couldn't help yourself, could you, Mr. Crocker,” Jefferson said, as he pulled a lawn chair over for Phoebe and then disappeared for a few seconds to return with a chair for himself. “You'd have to tell *some* one. And if you could come back and get past my slaves and my guns, why then *you'd* be the richest man on Earth. Would you like me to send some more gems down to you? You can have whatever you wish—diamonds, rubies, sapphires, a birthstone of your own weight.”

“Won't do me any good down here,” Carl said.

“Ah, you see, value is relative. But once you got away from here, these diamonds and rubies and sapphires would be worth as much as life itself. Surely you can see that?”

“No, I can't,” said Carl.

“As I've asked you before, do you want me to have your wives and girlfriends brought here? I'll extend your accommodations. Y'all would have everything you could wish for.”

“Except freedom,” said Eddie Barthelmet. “What would it take to buy that?”

“You can't *buy* anything from me,” said Mr. Jefferson. “All that I give is as a gift. When last we spoke—how long ago was that? Perhaps a few months ago?—I asked if you could come up with a better solution. Well, this is your chance. Propose.”

“So you can dispose,” said Eddie.

“Very good, very good indeed. The newer members seem to be quicker than the rest of you. You'll need to study to keep up.”

“Then let us have some newspapers,” shouted Crocker.

“Yeah, is prohibition repealed yet?”

“What would you care?” Mr. Jefferson said. “Whatever spirits you request are sent to you. What more could you ask for?”

That elicited shouting and swearing, and Mr. Jefferson just smiled and held up his hands. “Well, gentlemen, I see that we're finished.”

“We do care about whether prohibition has been repealed,” Eddie shouted up to Mr. Jefferson. “Just as we care about what the stock market is doing, what's the new dance, what's happening with the Fascists in Italy, what's the latest Zane Grey, is Dempsey still heavyweight champion, who won the World Series?”

“Giants over the Yankees, 5-3 in the fifth,” I said in a low voice. Eddie nodded to me, and a few of the other boys started to argue the merits of the Giants and the Yankees.

“There's your answer,” Mr. Jefferson said. He could only have heard me if he had listening devices planted in here, which, of course, he would.

“We need access to newspapers—and the radio,” Eddie said.

“It will only stir you up, son, and make you yearn for what you can't have,” Jefferson said. “You've got a library of the great classics of literature. That should be edification enough.”

“I want *The Saturday Evening Post*,” Crocker said.

“I want *The Strand*.”

“I want Phoebe.”

“Good-bye, gentlemen,” Jefferson said.

“Wait,” shouted Eddie. “Why not at least give us leave? At least, let one or two of us out for a few days. You could have your slaves guard us to make sure we couldn't run for it. We could at least see a ball game, or a movie. Then you could bring us back, and take another group out. As you are always fond of telling us, ‘Money's no object.’”

Jefferson made a clucking noise and said, “That's a new twist, Mr. Barthelmet. Very good, indeed. Except my slaves would have to gag you and bind you so you wouldn't shout for help or make a run for it, and the constabulary might look askance at that. But even if you were a model parolee, you'd come back and yearn for what you'd seen. No, it would just deepen the pain of your circumstances. Allow me to bring your wives or lovers or friends to you.”



“No,” shouted Rick Moss, and he was echoed by the others.

“It's bad enough you've buried us.”

“Let us the hell out of here, you bastid.”

“Well, gentlemen, I think that's more than enough,” Jefferson said. “Come on, Phoebe, enough diversion for you.” He stood up, and I could see then that he had been holding a golf club, not a cane. We were buried under his golf course, and he and his daughter were just out playing eighteen holes. The sonovabitch!

There was a grating noise, and the opening above went black.

“Wait,” I shouted reflexively.

The ceiling irised open, and Jefferson and his beautiful Phoebe looked down at us. “Yes, Mr. Orsatti?” he asked.

“I'd like a piano.”

Jefferson laughed and said, “Done.”

“That's all we need, more noise—”

“We could use some of that—”

“You boys can dance with each other—”

“It beats what we're doin' now—”

But before the ceiling closed, I could see Phoebe looking down—right at *me*—and smiling.

### Three

The piano arrived, as promised. It was a special-edition, pearl-white Steinway grand, which produced a huge, full orchestral sound, yet the keys had such an incredibly fast action that I couldn't help but open up with a boogie-woogie medley. My feet stomped on the floor as my left hand flew over the keys beating out syncopated rhythms that were so tricky that I dared not watch what I was doing, lest I falter; and my right hand, weaving various melodies through the rhythms of my left, might as well have had a mind of its own.

I was a one-man band.

I was also, needless to say, half in the proverbial bag. But so was everyone else, except Cissy Schneck and Farley James, a nice British fellow who had been an Oxford don before the war. I found out from Skip that he had been an ace pilot. He'd come over here to compete in the ocean-to-ocean air race in '19, the same year the Cincinnati Reds beat the Sox in the eighth game, which was a miracle. So was Farley James, I guess, because he'd come in second place and decided to stay and start an air flying company with Charlie Lindbergh. That surprised the hell out of me because Joel, may God rest his soul, said he'd worked for Lindbergh for a while.

“Hey, Farley,” I called, and he dutifully came over to the piano, where Skip formally introduced us.

“Fahley, z’ish is Pauhhzzotti—”

“Skip tells me you had some business with Charlie Lindbergh.”

Farley nodded, smiling at Skip who then began to lead everyone in another chorus of another new song I had played for them.

“*Do you have any bananas?*”

“*Yes! We have no bananas!*”

“Do you know Charlie?” Farley asked.

“Yeah, I met him through a friend of mine, Joel Wagner. Ring any bells?”

“Small world. Sure, I remember Joel. Good aviator. Dependable. What’s he doing with himself these days?”

“He’s dead.”

Farley looked shocked, and he stared down at his shoes, which were so highly polished he could probably see his face in them.

“Did you ever talk to him about—a castle up in the mountains?” I asked.

His thin, sensitive face was tight as shellacked paper. He looked straight at me and said, “No.” After a pause, he said, “But he was shot down with you, wasn’t he—”

I started playing “Look for the Silver Lining,” which everyone knew, then “Wild Rose,” and “Ma—He’s Making Eyes at Me” which Snap Geraldson sang in falsetto. That was something to hear—and see. Isn’t often an elephant imitates a parrot being squeezed into a juicer. I played and sang Bessie Smith’s “Downhearted Blues,” and, of course, nobody knew who she was; but Rick Moss and Snap started dancing with each other. I taught them how to Charleston, which had just become all the rage, and all hell broke loose with everybody swaying back and forth, slapping their knees, swiveling around on the balls of their feet, and falling over like they’d been dancing in a marathon for two weeks. After a while I started playing slower tunes again like “All by Myself” and “Who’s Sorry Now,” and then even a little Lizst and Bach, and the party broke up, and—

“You can’t sleep on the piana.”

I don’t know how he did it, but somehow Skip got me up and dragged me or walked me or rolled me toward my room. I remember seeing open doors that led into rooms with pool tables and ping-pong tables. I remember a kitchen and gymnasium and a room that was so bright I could barely look into it. I passed the fabled library that God had provided with all the classics but no up-to-date *Saturday Evening Posts*, and I remember feeling a pressure around my temples; I imagined that Joel and I were back in the Moth, and the engine was on fire, and my forehead was hot, and then something squeezed my stomach, and from far away Joel or Skip or somebody said, “Hot damn,” and I dreamed about beautiful Phoebe looking down at me from the perfect golf-course gardens and tennis courts of Heaven.

Her eyes, set in her sun-bronzed face like perfectly shaped transparent gems, were impossibly blue. Sky blue freedom.

And then I woke up in Skip's room.

“Drink this. Hair of the dog.”

Skip probably looked worse than I did. I couldn't see him very well—my head was pulsing with pain. I guess I wasn't used to drinking real hooch. The rotgut I'd been drinking since '20 hadn't killed me, but it sure felt like the vintage Johnny Walker and Chivas Regal would.

I drank the tomato juice and brew, which Skip called “Virginia Dare.” It went down like razor blades, and when I stopped being sick, I asked him why he'd decorated most every surface in the room with a towel—there was a white bath towel neatly tacked over his desk, a white dish towel on the bed table, a red face towel placed like a doily over the back of his stuffed chair, another added color and warmth to a utilitarian tallboy, and towels of various sizes and hues decorated the inside of every drawer open to my view.

“I learned how to do that when I was a kid. I spent a few years in an orphanage.” He grinned. “Well, not exactly an orphanage. A private school. But same difference. After Dad popped it, and Mom decided she'd follow by sticking her head in a stove, Dad's best friend kept me in the best schools for as long as my inheritance money held out, which wasn't long.”

That was more than I wanted to know about Skip's schooldays, but he seemed cheerful about it all, even about finding his mother, who he said was “blue as a curtain.” He said he'd learned about making things cozy in “the orphanage,” and he'd got used to decorating with towels.

“Thanks for the bed,” I said, “but you didn't have to sleep on the floor. You could've slept in my room, if you couldn't drag me that far.”

“I could barely get you *this* far,” Skip said. “You're heavier than you look. But I never sleep anywhere but right here. It's as much home as anything else. Some of the other guys move around. You know—”

I didn't, and I could feel the nausea working its way up to my throat.

“—sleep with each other, like that. No girls here, what else you going to do? Except get really friendly with Madam Palm and her five daughters.” He grinned again, looking pop-eyed and childlike, and wagged his right hand at me. “I prefer Madam Palm.”

“Can't God up there help you out with some women?”

Skip laughed and said, “Old Jefferson's very prim and proper. You heard him. The choice is wives or girlfriends, or nothin'—and he'd make you marry your girlfriend, sure as shit, not that it would matter, anyway, 'cause once they got here, they wouldn't have any choice. They'd be stuck here forever amen like we are. And who knows how dangerous it would be for them, what with all the other guys. We asked Jefferson if we could borrow some of his slave girls, although we never saw them, but he doesn't believe in whorin' and promiscuity, as he calls it, and, anyway, according to him, he wouldn't misuse his slaves.”

“How does he keep slaves? It's 1923, for Chrissakes, not 1823.”

Skip shrugged. “There's all kind of stories. George Bernard, who's been here the longest—over twenty years—probably knows, but he ain't saying. You didn't meet George. He's sort of a hermit, doesn't even go to the tower when the old man calls. He don't talk to no one. He wasn't no flier, that's for sure, but, like I said, he don't talk. You got to respect that, I figure. Anyway, none of us talk about the slaves since Lowell Legendre was poisoned—now he *was* a pilot, shot down just like the rest of us, only he could speak a couple of languages. He had your room, come to think of it. Anyway, he said he was learning how to talk slave-talk from one of the slaves who brung the food. That must have been some trick, ‘cause I've never met any of the old man's slaves who could speak or understand one word of English. Lowell said he was getting the hang of it, though, and that once he'd figured it all out, he'd know what was going on and maybe we could figure a way out of here. But he got sick after eating dinner—it was terrible, worse than my mother—and we tried calling for someone to get us some help. But the old man and his slaves suddenly got deaf, dumb, and blind. We didn't get any food after that for a week. All we had was water. And after that, all the slaves that had anything to do with us were new. So probably best not to get too curious about them. You'll see your share.”

“I want to meet this George Bernard,” I said.

“I'll show you his room,” Skip said, “but he won't let you in. I once—”

I made a dash for Skip's toilet, but didn't make it.

When I came around again, still hung-over with a blinding headache and a mouth that tasted like it was full of metal shavings and dirt, I was back in my room.

Old Skip must have found new reserves of strength. Or a few buddies.

\* \* \* \*

George Bernard *did* receive me, as if he wasn't a prisoner like the rest of us, but a guest with special privileges. However, I waited before knocking on his door, which was a football field away from the rest of us.

I got to know my fellow inmates. I spent time in the “sun room” with Snap Geraldson discussing Edward Egan and Sam Mosberg, who took gold in the Lightweight and Light Heavyweight categories respectively at the Antwerp Olympics in ‘20. It was like discussing boxing with the Buddha. I played ping-pong with Carl Crocker and pool with Keith Boardman and Harry Talmadge, who wanted to be brought up to date on current events; and we argued over the Sacco and Vanzetti convictions. I swam every day in the pool, usually with Skip, who did a couple of miles a day, when he wasn't coming off a hangover, and I spent hours talking plays and movies and books with Farley James and Stephen Freeburg in the library. We discussed Conrad and Gide and Ibanez and Waley and Apollinaire, while we drank God's good whiskey until we were ossified. And every day I practiced the piano. I played for hours, doing scales, working the life back into my fingers, which flew over the keyboard; and if I had to be here, if I was going to be trapped in this diamond pit with this ragtag group of swillers in this speakeasy prison, I'd get my hands back. I practiced the sonatas of Scarlatti and Clementi and Mozart and Bach and Schumann and Brahms, and Liszt, of course; and it all came back to me; it was like I'd never left conservatory. I played Debussy's *Etudes for Piano* , Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe* , Schoenberg's *Five Piano Pieces* , which I knew by heart, and Stravinsky's *Piano-Rag Music* . I played until I was exhausted, and there were no days or nights, just melody, counterpoint, rhythm, and drinking and talking.

Was I in prison? Or purgatory?

Or Heaven, as it surely was for Skip—good food, whiskey, friends, a room tidied up with towels. But after Snap Geraldson threw a fit and hurt his back, I began to suspect that *everyone* was crazy—

That's when I decided to visit George Bernard.

\* \* \* \*

“Welcome, Mr. Orsatti.”

A beefy man dressed in an old-fashioned military-style smoking jacket with silk cord frogging stood hulking like a costumed bouncer in the partially closed doorway. He was the same body type as Mr. Randolph Estes Jefferson—a bull-dog endomorph—and he was wearing flannel trousers that were so wrinkled they looked like he had been sleeping in them for weeks, which he might have been. His slippers were torn, and his sparse, curly brown hair appeared as though an electric current had passed through it only seconds before my arrival. But while the Lord God Jefferson above struck me as conceited, self-satisfied, and vital (as male members of the upper crust were trained to be), George Bernard seemed somehow incongruously tall and fat and fox-like. He sized me up, seemingly taking in every detail, and grinned.

“How do you know my name?” I asked, trying to place the ratchety noises that were emanating from all over his room. But I couldn't see past him.

Obligingly, he stepped aside.

“Skip Cinesky told me that—”

I suppose I was stopped dead in my tracks—so to speak!—because George's room was mostly a huge table covered with Lionel standard gauge HO track that ran over perfectly modeled hills and rills and suspension bridges, and through pastureland and woods and tunnels and realistic towns with main streets fronted by electrically lit municipal buildings, stores, and porched houses. It was like looking down from a cockpit, except there were too many trains chugging and spewing wisps of smoke as they rushed through miniature fields to miniature destinations. At least twenty brass-trimmed Lionel and American Flyer locomotives pulled blue, green, and yellow enamel cattle cars, boxcars, oil tank cars, coal cars, day coaches, Pullmans, baggage cars, and bright red cabooses.

“You wanna try it?” George asked, as he pointed out a large black box that controlled the switching and speed; and I thought I said, “No,” but there I was working the controls of the Blue Comet while George went into the kitchen to fix up drinks. Unlike the rest of his neighbors, he had a suite down here in the pit. I couldn't judge how many rooms he might have had.

For a few seconds, George's Blue Comet train set occupied all my attention because he had pushed all the rubber-tipped control levers over to #9 and the locomotives accelerated. They were chugging along so fast that they'd fly off the tracks when they hit the curves or smash into each other at the track switches. I pulled all the levers back, but not before a Cowen Comet Special locomotive pulling freight cars with their own magnetic lifting cranes jumped the track. Cars scattered across the table; although I prevented a few cars from falling, I couldn't reach the expensive, heavy black locomotive, which broke when it hit the floor.

“Good save,” George said, returning with two whiskey glasses and a bottle.

“If that's your idea of a good save, you must have a lot of broken train sets.”

George gestured toward two easy chairs placed around a table in the corner of the room. “What's the good of having things if you can't break them?”

There wasn't much I could say to that. We sat down, and he poured far too much whiskey into cut-glass tumblers.

“That's why I'm down here. I broke too many things. So why give up a bad habit?”

“What did you break?” I asked.

“Ah—. Confidences. The golden rule of silence. But only when I got drunk.”

I tasted the whiskey, which was woody and bitter and good, and hefted the weight of the tumbler.

“You can *try* breaking that,” George said, “but I'd drink up the contents first. You think it's crystal, don't you? Wrong, my boy. It's diamond—and probably enough to buy you the Ritz-Carlton in New York City, I would judge. But the boys have already told you that this mountain is one big diamond, didn't they? But that's probably about all they could tell you.”

“What can *you* tell me?”

“Oh, probably everything.”

“Can you tell me how to get out of here?” I asked.

“That's easy,” he said, smiling and obviously enjoying himself hugely. “But you'll find out everything soon enough.”

“How?”

He pointed upward, then poured himself another drink and topped mine up.

“For crying out loud, what are you getting at?”

“But don't break anything, 'cause he won't take you back.”

“Who won't take me back where?”

“God won't take you back here.”

Completely nuts, I thought.

After one more go-round with the trains, I left.

\* \* \* \*

He probably was nuts.

But as I soon discovered, he was also probably right.

## Four

It seemed like a dream, but, of course, it wasn't. I hadn't drunk very much, only a highball with Farley James and Keith Boardman in the library where we'd played a few games of mah-jongg after dinner. That might not sound like a very manly thing to do, but then none of that mattered in the pit. I'd become a veteran.

We shouted “Pung!” and “Chow!” and “Kong!” and swore blue murder as we rolled the dice and tried to build winning hands out of the inlaid ivory tiles. After about an hour, I started feeling queasy and headachy and cotton-mouthed, and so did Farley and Keith. We figured it was the food and blamed Snap Geraldson, who must have requested shit-on-a-shingle again—aka tuna on toast—and the dumbwaiter in the dining room obliged.

So we dispersed and went to our rooms.

I fell asleep immediately, fell into the deep sleep of exhaustion, as though I was back in the war, flying mission after mission; and I dreamed that I was looking up at my ceiling, which glowed dimly like faraway neon; and it was like being a kid again and seeing faces and animals and buildings in the stucco ceiling of my bedroom. Only now part of the ceiling was slowly floating down toward me, and two slaves dressed in white uniforms were standing on what might have been a scaffold platform. They were black angels, and they carried me up to heaven. I smelled sweat and ambergris and roses and

I dreamed that I would float upward forever—

\* \* \* \*

As I woke up, blinking in the strong morning light, I could see ebony panels on tracks sliding open to reveal formal gardens with stone hermae, geysering fountains, lamps, a marble wellhead, terra-cotta jars tall as a man, and statues of sylphs and mythical animals so lifelike that they almost seemed to move through the boughs and terraced pathways. My new chamber was now open to the world, and I could smell perfume and the richness of loamy soil. Beyond the gardens lay a small village of cottages massed around a church; but it was no ordinary church; it rose into the brittle blue sky like it was all of a steeple; and it was transparent as glass, proof that man could rise up and tear into the very fabric of Heaven.

“The gardens are indeed beautiful this morning, are they not, sir,” said a man dressed in the same uniform as the men in my dream. He looked to be in his seventies, but he carried himself like an officer who was used to giving orders. His strong face and bald pate seemed polished; the wrinkles that radiated from his eyes and the corners of his thin mouth resembled fine scrolling chiseled into mahogany.

“Yeath,” I said, my mouth dry and swollen and tasting of iron. My tongue didn't seem to be working right; it filled my entire mouth and wouldn't get out of the way of my teeth.

I'd surely been drugged.

“Whey am I an' ha'ad I get hea?”

The old man smiled, as one would at a child, and said, “You're in the north bedroom of the guest suite. You're a guest of the master, and it's my privilege to serve you, Mr. Orsatti.” I couldn't place his accent. It seemed Southern, but it had a certain crispness, a *wrongness*, as if an Englishman or German were

speaking with a drawl.

I heard a rustling behind my bed, and although my head felt like it was half-filled with some vile-tasting, vile-smelling liquid, I managed to turn—and see a giant dressed in white like the old man.

“Don't give no never mind to Isaac, Mr. Orsatti. You can think of him as your shadow—or your own personal bodyguard, if you prefer. Isaac won't be a bother, as he understands no English— Now, *you've* got a big day today, sir. A bath to start the morning right, sir?”

My head began to clear and I found my voice. “Tell me what the hell I'm doing here?”

“It's up to the master alone to explain his intentions, sir. But I believe you're to give a recital in an hour.”

“The master?”

“Master Jefferson, sir. Surely you know—”

“And you, what do *you* know?” I asked Isaac, who stood as still as one of the statues in the garden and gazed at me disinterestedly.

“I told you, sir, he cannot understand you.”

“Can't slaves understand English?”

“Sir, I am not in a position to advise—or to educate you. But I'm sure Master Jefferson will see to all your questions in his time.”

“Are *you* a slave?” I asked. I would recite the Gettysburg Address to him if I had to.

“I have served Master Jefferson for many years, sir. Now would you prefer rosewater and a salt-water finish or a milk bath followed by warm water? Isaac will remove your pajamas.”

I wasn't letting Isaac or anyone else near me.

I heard the old man sigh and nod his head, and then the bed tilted, and before I could gather my wits to grab hold of something, I was sliding toward the wall, pajamas and all. Drapes parted, as I slid down an incline into warm water. I heard myself shouting, but brought myself under control immediately. The chute folded back into the wall. I was in a sunken bath, the water warm as a womb; but swimming all around me—and above and below—were salt-water fish of every description: spiny fire fish, huge groupers, barramundi, mackerel, cod, orange-striped dragon fish, and there were jellyfish with long, almost transparent tentacles, a diamond-toothed moray eel, sea snakes, turtles, black spotted cuttlefish, and a hammerhead shark that was at least seven feet long.

The shark swam toward me, swam through the illuminated water.

Only a layer of crystal separated the shark from my feet, for my bathroom was inside an aquarium, and the great mass of water pressing against the walls cast shimmering, coruscating reflections everywhere. Then rain began to fall from the ceiling, and jets of rosewater and liquid soap bubbled into the bath while electric paddles churned the water into a blanket of sparkling soap bubbles. Music began playing, as if a chamber orchestra composed of mermaids were playing beside me.



The old man and Isaac stood on either side of the white marble sunken bath.

“My name is Robert,” the old man said. “When you have completed your bath, Isaac will give you a rubdown and a shave and dress you. I will serve you breakfast in the sitting room,” and with that he bowed and left.

Perhaps it was a combination of the drugs and warm bath, but—against my will—I found myself enjoying this warm, voluptuous kaleidoscope of a bath.

Nevertheless, I had the cold, dead feeling that I was being prepared for my last meal.

\* \* \* \*

Washed, bathed, massaged, dressed, and fed steak filet and eggs and hills of fried potatoes on plates shaped out of layers of emerald and diamond and ruby, I was led—like a royal prisoner—through corridors and rooms with walls created entirely of diamonds and other precious gems, through rooms where fire seemed to coruscate over walls and ceilings, through rooms composed of deep green crystal that could have held back the weight of an ocean with its dark, deep creatures, through elegant rooms, antique rooms, and rooms that might have been designed by Klee and Kandinsky to defy the normal rules of up and down. I walked over carpets of the rarest furs, glimpsed walls covered with paintings by Rubens, Caravaggio, da Vinci, Titian, Giotto, Manet, Monet, Poussin, Cézanne, and Miro, Picasso, Ernst, Gris, Demuth, and Modigliani. Marble creatures reached out to me: naiads, sylphs, satyrs, soldiers, gods, and goddesses by Michelangelo, Saint-Gaudens, Rodin, and Brancusi; and I was led up stairs cut into a huge, marble-veined extended hand.

Into a Baroque hall of mirrors that overlooked park-like grounds.

Hundreds of mirrors were set opposite windows and into the scrolled columns and archways. The high ceiling was curved, and painted angels gazed down from clouds in heaven upon gold and silver chairs and bejeweled trees. A forest of gold. Glades of diamonds. In keeping with this stone and jeweled forest was a grand piano that looked to be cut from a gigantic block of jade. Our feet clacked on the inlaid floor of this formal hall that seemed to extend into a finger-width arched door in the distance as Robert and Isaac led me to the piano.

Robert bowed and said, “I will leave you now, sir.”

Isaac stood over me, and I was sure that, should I stand up from the piano, he would force me back down onto the cushioned stool.

“And what am I to play?” I asked.

“I would think that would be up to you sir,” Robert said, and, nodding to Isaac, he clattered away toward the far, perspective-shrunk doorway, his reflections creating an army of stiff, marching Roberts.

“And who am I to play to—?”

I sat before the translucent green piano, and began warming up by playing scales from Clementi's instruction book. Looking around the seemingly endless room, I couldn't see anyone except for Isaac, reflected in a dozen mirrors; he stood so still that I wondered if he even breathed. But I could *feel* other eyes watching me, and I remembered what crazy George Bernard had said about God not allowing me to return to my gilded prison. What was he planning for me, then? I wondered. Certainly Master

Randolph Estes Jefferson wasn't going to take any chances with me, although I wondered—perhaps I *could* escape. I chuckled and looked around at this room constructed from dream and imagination. Would I *want* to escape?

But I could feel Isaac's presence pressing against me and knew I was freer in the pit. No matter, I was here to play, and if I failed Jefferson's test—if that was what it was—who knew what he might do. So I played, beginning with Chopin's *Waltz in G Flat*, then playing his *préludes* and *nocturnes* and *études*. I played Bach and Mozart and Beethoven. I expected *something* to happen. Someone besides Isaac to appear. Then I began playing Erik Satie's piano works, which I loved: *Gymnopédies*, *Gnossiennes*, *Peccadilles importunes*—Satie the joker, the dissonant, the genius; and I heard a giggle behind me.

Saw reflections.

Phoebe stood before me, big as life, just as she stood beside and behind me, reflections in a myriad mirrors, a company of lovely, fragile, faun-like Phoebes looking awkward one instant and graceful the next. She wore a white gown, a silk scarf draped carelessly—or perhaps very carefully—over her shoulder, and a fetching bonnet with a red sash. Her eyes were indeed blue, her face was freckled, and she was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen.

She said something to Isaac, which sounded like, “*Ra'ase, nah'ye haingwine heaightmuh*,” and then she stood right by the piano and said, “Well, Mr. Paul Orsatti, you can certainly play, and I told Poppa that if he didn't bring you up out of that horrible place with those men, I'd never speak to him again. You're a genius, that's just what I told him, and I told him you'd be happy to teach me how to play the piano. I want to play as well as you, can you do that for me?”

I was about to tell her that I didn't know, but she said something else to Isaac, who looked sullenly down at the glassy floor.

“What did you say to him?” I asked.

“Just now, or before?” She looked steadily at me, and I could feel myself blushing. I don't know why, but she made me feel like I was sixteen and pimply and gawky and trying to get up the courage to ask out the prom queen. She was just a wisp of a thing, her cheeks were freckled, and her curly blond hair stuck out from under her bonnet. Yet she seemed completely self-assured, as though she was accustomed to absolute obedience. And innocent. Perhaps it was the combination that unnerved me. Or perhaps I had just instantly fallen completely in love with her.

“I don't know,” I said. “Both, I guess.”

She giggled. “Well, I told him to calm himself down, that you probably weren't going to hurt me or kill me or anything like that.” She backed away a step. “You're not, are you?”

“No, of course not.”

“There, you see—? And then I told him—”

“Yes?”

“That's for me to know and you to find out,” she said. “Now do you want to take me for a walk before you meet Poppa? He wants to have a talk with you.”

“What about your friend Isaac?”

“Oh, don't worry about him. He'll keep out of the way,” and she turned to him and glared. He quickly resumed looking at the floor.

“I'm Phoebe,” she said as she led the way out of what she called the Mirror Gallery. Isaac followed, keeping a safe distance.

“I know your name.”

“Ah, those awful men in the pit told you, did they.” It wasn't a question. “I hate them.”

“Why?”

“Because of what they say about me.”

“And what is that?”

“That's for me to know.”

I nodded. She was obviously younger than her years, but I couldn't help feeling attracted to her. I'd often been in the company of the rich and spoiled, and Phoebe was certainly the quintessential product of excess. Could she even imagine that there was another world out there, a world of people working twelve hours a day, haggling over pennies at the market, cooking their own food, sharing their possessions? Probably—no, definitely not.

“How did you know I could play the piano?” I asked.

“Well, because I heard you, that's how. Poppa can listen to everything those horrible men say down in the pit. And so can I, although if you tell Poppa that, I'll never speak to you again.” We walked down a huge stone staircase and past the Neptune Pool that reflected the sun as a sheet of yellow light. “But you wouldn't care, would you?”

“About what?” I asked, overwhelmed by the sheer size of this place, by the formal gardens with statues as large as houses, by the pergola ahead, which was fashioned of crystal and gems and seemed to extend for a mile. And there was the château—the castle that connected to dozens of other buildings, each one of a different period, yet part of the perfect white, geometric whole—that was surrounded by pools the color of terra-cotta and marble constructions that resembled Greek and Roman ruins.

“You wouldn't care if I ever spoke to you again, would you, Mr. Paul Orsatti?” She sniffled, turning her head from me. “Well?”

“Of course, I would care.”

“Why?”

“I don't know!”

“There, you see?” she said, but of course I didn't see.

“I listened to you play, even the night you got so drunk that the dumbbell with no eyebrows had to drag

you to his room. I listened to you snore. Do you know how loud you snore? I'd do something about that if I were you."

I chuckled and asked if her father was able to see his prisoners as well as hear them. But Phoebe ignored that question—as though she hadn't heard it.

We walked past tennis courts, a reservoir, greenhouses, barracks, a zoo surrounded by marble lions, and then through the pergola to the edge of the formal gardens. Phoebe glanced back at Isaac every few minutes, and he would respectfully drop back several feet.

"I think it's all a lie," Phoebe said.

"What?" I asked.

"That the servants can't understand English. I think they've been tricking Poppa about that for years, and so does Uncle George."

"Uncle George?"

"You met him and played with his trains. That's what Poppa told me."

"Your *uncle* is in the pit?"

"Oh, yes," Phoebe said. "George Bernard Jefferson. He didn't tell you his last name, I imagine." She giggled. "He's always been in there. Well, practically always. But Poppa will tell you all about that. He tells everybody."

Everybody—? I thought.

"Would you like to kiss me now?" Phoebe asked, as we looked out at a herd of Master Jefferson's zebras grazing on a hill beyond the gardens. I said something inane about Isaac lurking behind us—which he was—and the moment passed.

Of course I wanted to kiss her. But she looked so vulnerable—and she was so young.

"Do you hear that?"

"What?"

"Airplanes, I think. Listen—"

Sure enough, I could hear engines. But I couldn't see anything in that eggshell sky, which was the exact color of Phoebe's eyes.

## Five

An alarm sounded and a chill caught the air as we made our way back to the castle, which Phoebe called *Adamas*. She told me with breathless conviction that the king of France hadn't lived in anything half as nice, and she ought to know, she said, because Poppa had all the plans of the greatest castles in the world, and he made sure that his was the best. She was excited about reaching the roof garden so we

could watch the airplanes through the telescope there.

Although she hurried to the castle, she was not in the least afraid. Isaac tried to say something to her, but she had only to shout something quick and guttural at him and he fell back behind us, properly cowed.

Then a porcine, well-dressed young man flanked by what I took for two slaves caught up with us by the Roman ruins beside the pool. He was nervous and out of breath, and kept looking at the sky as if lightning were going to strike him down at any second. Just ahead was a marble staircase that led to the western exposures of one of the buildings that adjoined the château. I could see a glint of metal: the telescope mounted on the embrasure.

“Father sent me to find you,” he said, out of breath. “You won’t believe how angry he is. You’re supposed to be in the bunkers, and not legging around with *him* .” He meant me, and his eyebrows knitted together and his face got all scrunched up when he said “him.” I couldn’t help but smile.

“You won’t even get to keep him until September, if you act like that,” the young man continued. “And that’s *exactly* what Father said. I didn’t make it up.”

The alarm sounded again.

“Now come on, for crying out loud, or do you want to get killed out here?”

“Those airplanes are probably just mail carriers, like always,” Phoebe said. “And mail carriers don’t carry bombs. But they’re all gone now.”

She cocked her head, obviously listening for the sound of airplane engines. Everything was quiet, but for the wind.

“You see, false alarm. All that trouble for nothing—and I *was* coming back.”

“Well, you can tell that to Father,” the young man said.

“You’re not my boss, Mr. Near Beer.”

The young man blushed at that, and Phoebe said, “Mr. Orsatti, this is my brother, Morgan.”

Morgan gave me a slight nod, then shouted something at Isaac; but I couldn’t understand a word.

“Isaac had nothing to do with it,” Phoebe said. “It was my idea. And if you dare say one word—”

I heard the sudden drone of an engine, and then the deafening, bone-shaking *stucka-stucka* of anti-aircraft guns, which were mounted on the castle fortifications above.

There was another burst—and another.

“You see?” Morgan screamed at Phoebe, and he grabbed her. But she broke free. Isaac stepped over to her, as if to intervene. The guns fired again. I heard a distant explosion, but couldn’t see any airplanes—the castle blocked the view. One of Jefferson’s slaves shouted something to Isaac, who looked nervously at Phoebe and then at me, before running after Morgan and his fellows.

“Morgan is such a flat tire,” Phoebe said. “And I’ll bet you ten thousand dollars right now that those

enemy airplanes don't have any guns." She paused, then explained, "According to Poppa, everybody is the enemy. And so Morgan is always so-oh afraid we're going to get bombed. I know that Poppa scares the bunk out of him about it to make a man out of him, but Morgan is just a flat tire."

I followed her up the marble staircase, across a patio, and up several more staircases to the roof garden. I could see Jefferson's slaves manning the anti-aircraft guns, which were quiet now. Ghostly pink billowing clouds were filling up the sky like suds in a bathtub. From the position of the sun, I could see it was late afternoon. But how could that be? I must have slept through the morning.

I stared at an oily trail of black smoke left by a plane that had been shot out of the sky. But I could also hear the distant thrumming of an engine. Perhaps it was one of Jefferson's. Or perhaps one of the intruders had escaped into the swollen pink and purple curtain of storm clouds. Phoebe tossed her bonnet onto a wrought iron chair and looked through the brass telescope, swinging it around so hard, it was a wonder she could see *anything* .

"There it is," she said. "Right over—there— Poppa's guns got it. See the smoke in the canyon? Something's burning. Positively. But I can't make out very much. I can't see for jellybeans without my glasses. Here, you try." She pulled away from the telescope, brushing my face with her curly hair, and I could smell her perfume, lilac sweet and damp. I looked through the eyepiece. There was indeed a plane burning. I couldn't see it well through the smoke, but it looked like a Curtiss Jenny. I wondered if the pilot made it to safety and tried to cover the area by moving the telescope around, but Phoebe became impatient and insisted that I return it to her immediately. After a time she said, "I can't see anything. Do you want to bet on the pilot?"

"What do you mean?"

"A thousand dollars that Poppa's slaves find him alive and put him in the pit." She shrugged. "If he's dead, you win."

"I wouldn't make such a bet," I said. "And I certainly don't have a thousand dollars."

Phoebe pulled a magnificent diamond and ruby ring from her index finger and slipped it onto my pinkie. "That should cover your side of the bet." She smiled mischievously and said, "Now we're engaged."

"I can't accept this," I said, handing her back the ring.

"Perhaps I made a mistake about you, Mr. Paul Orsatti."

"It's very beautiful, but I don't think your father—"

"He won't care. He's going to be too upset to care about anything, which means he won't be bothering too much about you." She took my hand, slipped the ring over my finger again.

"What do you mean?"

"There was another plane," Phoebe said. "Couldn't you hear it?"

"Yes, but I thought it might have been your father's."

Phoebe laughed at that, a soft, sexy, whispery laugh. "Not unless he was flying it. Or Morgan." She laughed again. "Or Uncle George."

“You've got plenty of—slaves.”

She seemed astonished. “Why, you couldn't allow a slave to fly an airplane.”

“Why not?”

“Because—you just couldn't. But it doesn't matter. Poppa will surely find out who was flying that plane and what company he worked for and fix it all up. He always fixes everything up.”

“You mean he'll have him killed.”

She shook her head and looked genuinely hurt. “Poppa's an honorable man. He'll have him brought back here to live and give him everything he could want. We don't just go around murdering people, you know.” When I didn't say anything, she asked, “Are you sorry?”

“About what?”

“What you said about my father.”

“Yes, of course. I'm sorry.”

She turned back to me and asked, “Well, do you still want to kiss me?”

“I never said I wanted to kiss you.”

But against all judgment—of course—I did.

\* \* \* \*

Phoebe and I lay in bed. It was evening, and the garden was a fantasia of fairy lights. A sweetly scented breeze wafted in through the balcony, shadows and pale, milky lights played over a wall-sized Flemish tapestry of Neptune standing upon a shell and creating a horse of air with his trident. The walls were covered with blue brocade from Scalamandre, and the gilded wood ceiling glowed as if lit by fireflies. Phoebe was curled up beside me, and we were wrapped in smooth satin sheets as blue as the brocade.

“You see, everything is perfect,” Phoebe said. “I knew it would be. I always know.”

“Ah, so you always lure lonely prisoners into your den to have your way with them, is that it?”

“Exactly so.” After a pause, she said, “How could you even imagine I would have anything to do with anyone else?”

There was nothing to say to that, so I enjoyed being close to her, feeling her smooth shoulder and slipping my hand down to caress her small breast. She was thin and long and smooth and as perfect as I had imagined.

“Well, just in case it might interest you, I've never had anything to do with anyone down there”—I knew she meant the pit—“or anyone who Poppa has brought to visit.”

“So your father does have guests here,” I said. “Doesn't he worry about security?” For an instant,

Phoebe seemed to be nonplussed, but then she giggled and said, “Poppa worries about everything.”

“What if they told their friends? Why—”

“They're very rich,” Phoebe said. “Not nearly as rich as we are, of course, but they're worth quite a boodle, you can count on that. And Poppa could just as easily make their shares in the stock market go up or down. He can make it do whatever he wants. But you, Mr. Paul Rudolph Valentino Piano-player, you're like a big dog with a bone, aren't you? Now, do you *really* want to talk about Poppa's friends, or—”

She was quite persuasive; and I was indeed, in all respects, like a dog with a bone. “What was all that business about not getting to keep me until September?” I insisted. “What did your brother mean by that?”

She drew away from me and pulled the sheets up to her neck, as though she were wearing them as a nightgown. “You got what you want, so thanks for the buggy ride. And now you want to play twenty questions.”

I tried to put my arm around her, but she turned away, taking most of the sheets with her. It suddenly felt cold in the room.

“I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.” I said. “I—”

“Then say you're sorry.”

“I'm sorry.”

She unraveled herself from the sheets and turned toward me. “I'm coming out in London in September. I'll be presented at court, and I'll meet King George. He's also a friend of Poppa's. Now does *that* answer your question?”

Of course it didn't; but I would bide my time. I nodded.

“Then you may have your way with me again.”

But that wasn't to be either because there was a sharp knock on the door, followed by the booming voice of God.

\* \* \* \*

“I'm not dressed, Poppa,” Phoebe said sweetly, sitting up in the bed. She seemed to be talking to the polychrome sculpture of Saint John that was positioned beside the paneled door. “I'll meet you down in the library.” She looked at me and shrugged.

“You'll open this door right now, young lady!”

“No I *won't!*”

I started to get up. I could grab my clothes, perhaps hide; but Phoebe said, “Don't be goofy. He'll go away in a minute. Absolutely-positively.”



Then I heard Jefferson say something incomprehensible in a low voice—most likely, he was speaking to one of his slaves.

I was right.

I should have known better than to listen to Phoebe. Now it was too late.

A key turned in the lock, Robert pushed the great door open, and Master Randolph Estes Jefferson, dressed impeccably in formal eveningwear—white tie and tails—walked into the room. Phoebe was a blur rushing into the adjoining bathroom; it was a wonder she didn't slip on the blue, diamond-smooth floor. She slammed the door shut and left me to face the music by myself. There was nothing I could do but pull the sheets around me. My clothes were strewn across the floor.

Passion had certainly taken precedence over foresight.

“Do you see what happens, Robert, when you leave guests unattended?” Master Jefferson spoke to his slave in English.

Robert nodded and looked at me as if I were the wayward child and he was the parent.

“Well, good evening, Mr. Orsatti,” Jefferson said. “I see that you have already provided my daughter with her first lesson. I will expect you to attend to my daughter's musical education with as much ardor as you seem to have displayed here tonight.” He lifted my undershorts with the toe of his polished leather spats and then kicked them across the room. “And I am expecting to see a marked improvement in her proficiency at the piano, Mr. Orsatti. In September, she will give a recital at Carnegie Hall. It's all arranged.”

“Sir, don't you think that's a bit, er, premature—?”

Jefferson gave me a genial smile, his ruddy, fleshy face the picture of cheerfulness, his eyes as hard as the diamond mountain below us. “Wouldn't you say *this* is premature, sir?” he said, looking around the room, indicating my situation with a simple turn of his head. Then he nodded to Robert, who picked up my scattered clothes and laid them out neatly on the corner of the bed.

“You look perplexed, Mr. Orsatti,” Jefferson continued. “Did you expect I would have you beaten? Or killed? Or thrown back into the pit with your colleagues? No, you're Phoebe's guest now. And Phoebe is a woman of the '20s. Why, she's practically emancipated.”

“*Practically* emancipated?” Phoebe asked, opening her bathroom door a crack and peering out. The light behind her transformed her curly hair into a halo.

“Well, maybe you'd prefer to leave school and go to work for Mrs. Millie Scotch Barker and her suffragettes,” Jefferson said. “But this is none of your business, young lady. You're taking your bath, are you not? while poor Mr. Orsatti must make his own introductions.”

“For your information, her name isn't Millie Scotch Barker. It's Abby Scott Baker, and in case you've been too busy to notice, Poppa, we've won the right to vote.”

“*You* don't have the right to vote, nor do I think you'd care to be poor.”

“I know poor people at school,” Phoebe said.

“Ah, yes, those poor girlfriends of yours who can't afford to keep their own staffs of servants.

“Well, I know Mr. Orsatti.”

“Ah, yes, Mr. Orsatti, whom you're going to make as rich as Croesus, isn't that so?”

“If you have no objections, Poppa,” Phoebe said meekly, then closed the bathroom door.

Jefferson chuckled and said, “Well, Croesus had better dress for dinner, hadn't he? When Robert is finished with you, Mr. Orsatti, he'll bring you to my library, and I will explain everything before we join the ladies. No, better yet, Robert, bring him to the theater. Do you like moving pictures, Mr. Orsatti—?”

Without waiting for an answer, Jefferson left, and Robert introduced me to my new bodyguard, Wordsworth, who had been waiting like a good foot soldier in the wood-paneled lobby. I learned that Isaac was being punished for a dereliction of duty, and I would not see him again. I wondered if *anyone* would ever see him again.

As Robert and Wordsworth escorted me out of the room, I could hear the faint splashing of water and Phoebe singing in a sweet, yet raucous voice—“Who's Sorry Now?”

\* \* \* \*

Scrubbed down like a horse after a race, perfumed, pomaded, and dressed in evening clothes, I sat in the richly cushioned maroon seat beside Jefferson and watched Fatty Arbuckle and Buster Keaton slap each other across the screen.

Jefferson's “theater” was more magnificent than any movie house I'd ever been in. Scarlet damask lined the walls, and the thirty-foot ceiling was supported by huge gold caryatids holding dimly glowing ruby lamps. As the moving picture flickered before me like a dream, I sipped Napoleon brandy and smoked a sweet cigar rolled in the Haymarket district of New York City. But the butterfly collar that Robert had snapped around my neck was so heavily starched that I felt like I was wearing sandpaper.

“I think all that business about Fatty raping that actress and all is a lot of hooey,” Jefferson said in a whisper, although there was no one but his manservants and us in the theater. This was certainly a place that inspired awe, a church for the brightly lit images that towered before us in profound silence. This was the perfect temple for the new gods that were so much larger than life and above the sound and the fury, beyond boredom or smell or homely sound. We might laugh at their antics, but *they* would have the last laugh and live forever. However, being here in this sumptuous palace atop a mountain of pure diamond, it would be easy to imagine that *we* were the new gods.

“Even if he did have a bit of fun with her,” Jefferson continued, “it would have been her fault, not his. He didn't force her to stay at his hotel. He didn't force her to stay there for two of God's long days. And now the poor soul is blacklisted and can't make a moving picture because that stupid woman ruptured her bladder, probably from being loaded to the plimsoll.”

“Well, she did die from it,” I said as we watched Buster Keaton being struck by a sack of flour. Keaton absorbed the shock as if he had been struck by a hanky. I'd seen *Butcher Boy*, although I can't say it was one of my favorites. But Jefferson howled with laughter.

After he calmed down, he said, “The court cleared him of all charges, and the jury said that a great

injustice had been done to him.”

“It did take three trials.”

“I wouldn't care if it took a hundred trials. He was completely exonerated.”

“I'm not sure that—”

“Are you going to continue to argue with me?” Jefferson asked. His voice was soft, mellifluous, and menacing.

“No, of course not. I apologize.”

“From what Phoebe tells me, you're good at that.” He laughed, whether at me or Fatty Arbuckle's antics, I couldn't tell; but he patted my arm, thus preserving my—dignity. “Perhaps I should get into the film business. What do you think? Give Arbuckle a second chance?”

“The press and public seem to hate him,” I said.

He pulled on his cigar, belched a huge cloud of smoke, and said, “I can fix the press. And I can guarantee that the public will love him. I'll bet you a thousand dollars. Is it a bet?”

“I've already had a conversation like this once with your daughter, sir. I don't really *have* a thousand dollars.”

“Ah, but you've got a new ring, haven't you?”

“I think we'd both be in the doghouse if I lost her ring to you on a wager.”

Jefferson seemed to like that because he put his arm around me, waved the porter over to fill my snifter with more brandy, insisted that I stop acting like a teetotaler, and told me the “improbable but true” story of the Jefferson family.

When he finished, I asked, “Why are you telling me all this?” I had become more and more nervous as he spoke because—I already knew too much.

But he just handed our crystal—or perhaps they were diamond—snifters to one of his servants and said, “Because you're part of the family now, Paul.

“Shall we join the ladies—?”

## Six

Randolph Estes Jefferson was no relative of Thomas Jefferson.

Nor was he the scion of any distinguished lineage. His father Frances Tiberio Jefferson did, however, settle in Shadwell, Albemarle County, Virginia, where the third president of the United States was born and grew up; and he claimed to be a distant cousin of “Thomas,” who also had a reputation of being able to talk a tree out of its roots. Frances won a medal for “World's Greatest Liar” at the Great Albemarle Fair. Like Thomas, he was a states' rights man and distinguished himself in the War of Yankee

Aggression by rising to the rank of Colonel. He was too robust to succumb to the diseases that routed both the northern and southern armies, and rose quickly through the thinning ranks.

After the war, he took his pay and his gift of gab and became the most successful auctioneer in Albemarle County; but he was too restless for that.

It happened that he found twenty-five “orphans,” ex-slaves still living on a played-out plantation. Their owners had put the plantation up for sale and left for Europe. The men and women left behind spoke high German, had developed their own, unique dialect, and didn't know that the North had won the war and that they were no longer—slaves. They were starving and Frances fed them, gained their trust, and promised them wealth and a piece of land out west.

However, he neglected to explain that they were emancipated.

And so Frances left the Thomas Jefferson Auctioneers & Feed Company to his brother. His plan was to buy twenty parcels of cheap Montana land in the names of his new wards and start a cattle and sheep farm. But that was not to be because, after a series of misadventures, all he had left were his orphans; and they were starting to have doubts about the master who could do no wrong.

In fact, they would have probably killed him if he had not gotten lost in the mountains and shot a squirrel that happened to have a perfect diamond the size of a pebble in its mouth. That pebble would be worth a hundred thousand dollars. He went back to his camp and told his orphans that he had discovered a cache of “rhinestones” that could be mined “for a few dollars.” Since none of the slaves had ever seen a diamond, much less owned one, they agreed that they could dig out enough stones to get back sufficient money to buy homesteads.

Leaving his miners to continue their work, he took a valise of diamonds to Billings; but he underestimated their value and a jeweler, flabbergasted at the size and quality of one of the smallest stones, tried to have Frances arrested. Frances went to New York, where he started another furor; this with only one stone, which a dealer of consequence believed might have been part of the Duvergier Diamond, said to have been stolen by a French soldier from the eye of an idol. The Duvergier had been cut into twenty-one stones, which ranged from less than a carat to eighty carats, and The World's Greatest Liar did not dispute the opinion that *his* diamond might have been cut from the same venerable stone.

After several weeks, Frances was several hundred thousand dollars richer. But he had to leave New York, as the metropolitan police were now looking for him. The diamond market was in chaos. Some said that the world's largest diamonds were somehow being cut up and “dumped by a syndicate.” These new stones *had* to be cut from great diamonds such as the Orloff, the Koh-i-nor, the Akbar Shah, the Dudley, and even the Cullinan—which became part of the crown jewels—because they were too big to be anything else. Madness had replaced logic. Would-be prospectors were rushing to Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Southampton, Long Island—and the yellow rags kept proclaiming new locations where diamonds had “just been discovered.”

Indeed, The World's Greatest Liar had found what was undoubtedly the world's largest diamond—a solid and perfect mountain of diamond; and he realized that he would have to be careful, lest he devalue the world market.

He sent for his brother to manage the mine and left for a tour of the world. Carefully, he sold his diamonds. He used pseudonyms, forged passports. He lived like a criminal on the lam, yet he sold his stones to emperors, kings, criminals, sultans, and mercantile barons; his diamonds became invested with

their own history and myth, as if they had been in circulation for hundreds, if not thousands of years.

In a few years, Frances was worth millions.

In a few more years, he was worth billions.

And he married a Spanish beauty; had two sons, Randolph and George; convinced his slaves that the South had indeed won the war, and that all was once again right with the world; murdered his brother, who became too generous with the family fortune and “talked out of school”; and dedicated himself to protecting his family and consolidating his fortune.

Randolph, being a chip off the old block, also invested widely and wisely; saw to the construction of his castle on the mountain; married a woman from Braga, his mother's village near the west coast of Spain; sired a son and two daughters; and being kinder and gentler than Frances, merely imprisoned his overly generous and voluble brother, rather than murdering him.

Thus was I introduced to the secrets of the family while titans who had assumed the shapes of Fatty Arbuckle and Buster Keaton beat and kicked each other in joyous, rapturous revenge.

## Seven

It was like being invited to dinner in a cathedral, perhaps because great pennons hung from the high, gilded wood ceilings and paintings of winged cherubs and Rubenesque angels gazed down upon the guests, as though the heavenly host itself were in attendance. Perhaps it was the plundered sixteenth-century choir stalls, or the flickering candles and the altar of a table spread with linen and silver and gold. The plates and glassware seemed to be composed of layers of ruby, sapphire, emerald, opal, and diamond. Muted colors and pure, prismatic reflections met my eyes wherever I looked, and the Persian tile upon which I stood seemed to have infinite depth, as if this great room was floating stock-steady upon extraordinarily deep water. Servants glided in and out, as though stepping through shadows, and I could hear the clear but distant strains of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. I tried to locate the music, but could not.

Randolph Jefferson stood at the head of the long table and motioned me toward a chair beside Phoebe, who was dressed like a blond angel in white chiffon. Beside Phoebe, and facing Jefferson at the other end of the table, sat a beautiful dark-haired woman wearing a black chiffon evening dress. I thought it particular that, except for a gold wedding band, she wore no jewelry. She looked like she could have been in mourning. To Jefferson's right was Morgan, and beside Morgan was a homely brown-haired girl in a stylish green evening outfit that somehow seemed larger than she was.

“Paul, allow me to introduce you to Giroma, my wife.” I bowed, and the woman in black held out her hand to me. I wasn't sure whether I was expected to kiss it or formally shake it, so I decided upon the latter. She seemed pleased, but then she turned away from me, as though impatient to return to her own thoughts.

“And my son, Morgan, who tells me y'all met under rather unexpected circumstances.” Jefferson gave Morgan a cold, disapproving look and then introduced me to Marion, his eldest daughter, who was still being overwhelmed by her green evening dress. Perhaps I had been too hasty in describing Marion as homely. She had the same features as Phoebe, but they were slightly—crooked. What seemed like perfection in one sister was bland and uncomely in the other.

“Sit down,” Phoebe whispered to me. “You look like you just stepped on your own foot.” Marion giggled at that and, embarrassed, I sat down.

We made small talk throughout dinner, all seven courses, and Phoebe was winsome and witty and wickedly pressed her leg against my thigh. I asked about the music, wondering how many more musicians—indeed, how many other “guests” might be on the grounds—only to learn that the sweet music was being reproduced by an electrical phonograph that used a new Panatrope loud-speaker.

“It's the bass that fools you, Paul,” Jefferson said. “It's big as life, don't you agree? The old orthophonic machines aren't a patch on this one. The diaphragm of the loudspeaker is coil-driven, the acetate records are finely grooved, and the stylus is diamond, of course. The Victor Talking Machine Company will be bringing out a version like this—sometime in the next four or five years, I would suppose.” Jefferson seemed very pleased with himself.

I nodded, unsettled that I was the only guest. Phoebe's sister Marion must have been reading my mind because she complained, “It's not fair, Poppa, that Phoebe always receives special treatment. She's coming out before me, and I'm older. And you've allowed *her* to have company. I haven't had *any* company this summer.” While Phoebe's voice was smooth, dulcet, Marion's was whiny.

“Phoebe has company for a reason,” Jefferson said. “Would you have her give her concert unprepared?”

“She's never going to be prepared,” Marion said, looking defiantly at Phoebe, who stared assiduously into her jeweled plate, as though she could move the broccoli by the mere power of her gaze. “She can't play the piano any better than I can, yet you've bought Carnegie Hall for her.”

“I did no such thing,” Jefferson said. “She was *invited* to play, as you might have been if you had applied yourself.”

“She only wanted to play piano because I did. And y'all went gaga over *her* and couldn't even be bothered with me.”

“That's not true.”

“It is too. It's because Phoebe is a liar. She lies to all of you, and you believe everything she tells you. It's not fair, it's just not fair.”

“Are you quite finished?”

“I'm sick of being here all by myself.”

“You have your family here, or is that of no importance to you?”

Marion shook her head and said, “It's not fair.”

“I'll spend time with her, Poppa,” Phoebe said. “I will, Marion, I promise.”

“That's the bunk!” Marion said to her father. “She's a liar.”

“Morgan, what do you have to say?” Jefferson asked.

“Don't know, I—”

“She's your sister, and it's your responsibility to take care of her, isn't that right?”

“Yes—I suppose, but—”

“Well, I've decided that you should follow up our little problem with the pilot who got away from us,” Jefferson said. “What do you think of that? It's time you proved yourself to be a man.”

“What do you want me to do?” Morgan asked.

“More to the point, what do *you* think you should do?”

“I dunno—go find him, I guess.”

“And what does that have to do with me?” Marion asked. “You see, that's just what I mean. I'm invisible.”

“Not at all,” Jefferson said. “You're the eldest. Perhaps I should send *you* out to test your mettle instead of Morgan.”

“Perhaps you should send *me*,” Phoebe said. “Mr. Orsatti could protect me.”

“Indeed he could,” Jefferson said. “Indeed he could,” and they exchanged teasing looks, as if they had rehearsed this little skit—as if Mother and Morgan and Marion were out, and only Poppa and Phoebe were in.

And I soon found out where I stood in their dangerous little universe.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh, Poppa wouldn't send either one of them to the grocer for a loaf of bread,” Phoebe confided to me as we stood on the artificially lit, glaucous-green lawn that seemed to roll on forever into the night.

Fireflies pulsed in the perfumed air. I held her cool hand; and I must admit that against all logic and experience and plain good sense, I was head over heels in love. It wasn't about what kind of a person Phoebe might be—how smart, immature, spoiled, and selfish she was. I knew her for a brat, and probably as dangerous as her father. Perhaps more dangerous. But she was—perfect. The sound of her voice was perfect, the way her eyes narrowed when she was thinking was perfect, her smell, the cast of her hair, the way her eyebrows arched, the curl of her mouth—all absolute perfection. I was smitten, but at least I had the presence of mind to conceal the extent of my ardor—or so I thought, anyway. In fact, I was as transparent as the goblet I had been drinking from at dinner.

“I'm surprised that he lets either one of them go to school,” she continued.

“You don't like Morgan and Marion very much, do you?”

“*Au contraire*, I love them both to pieces. But would *you* let them out of your sight?”

“I'd rather not let you out of my sight.”

She giggled and pulled me to a copse of trees that were silver and shadow in the dim, flickering

lamplight. She sat down, her back against the bole of an elm.

“You'll catch cold on the damp ground,” I said.

“Poppa will go alone,” she said, as though talking to herself. “He won't take Morgan. I'll bet you a thousand—”

“Don't start that again.”

“Did Poppa try to make a bet with you?”

“Why do you ask?”

She twirled the ring on my finger—the ring she had given me. “I expect he noticed my ring. Well, did he?”

“Did he notice—?”

“No, did he make you put it up for collateral?”

“I would never bet your ring.”

“Good for you,” Phoebe said. “Poppa likes you.”

“He didn't suggest sending *me* to find your flier.”

“But he did take you out of the pit.”

“Because you asked him to.”

“And you'd just better remember that,” she said, and then allowed me to fumble with her clothes, caress her breasts, kiss her in all the delicious, unmentionable places, and finally make love to her. Everything was rustling and whispering and breathing, and when we were finished—and still half-dressed—she said, “You haven't said you love me.”

Caught off guard, I just smoked my cigarette.

“And you didn't offer *me* a cigarette.”

I gave her the cigarette, which she smoked, inhaling deeply. She didn't cough—she just cleared her throat, as though she were about to give a formal speech. “Well, are you going to say it?”

“How could you be sure I'd mean it?”

“Because I know you do.”

“And what about you?”

“Do you think I'd let you do what you just did if I didn't?”

I knew better than to fall into that trap.



“I love you,” I said, trying to arouse her again.

“I know you do,” Phoebe said, surrendering, or pretending to.

“But there is something else.”

Phoebe pulled away and watched me.

“You've had company here before. Your sister said as much.”

“Ah, so we're on that old stick again.”

“Well, I still can't get what your father said out of my mind.”

“And what would that be?” Phoebe sat up again and leaned against the tree. Her blouse was open, her hair was mussed, and I must admit I could not imagine anyone being more beautiful, alluring, and piquant.

“That unless you behave, you won't be able to keep me until September.”

“Morgan said that, remember? And he lies.”

“I need to know,” I said, insistent.

“I've only had one friend from school ever visit me for vacation,” Phoebe said. “A girlfriend. And you wouldn't have liked her, anyway.”

“Why?”

“You just wouldn't. *I* didn't like her very much. I—”

“Yes—?”

“That's all. Now, are you done with your Twenty Questions?”

“Does your sister usually have guests?” I asked.

“So now it's Forty Questions, is it,” Phoebe said, and she buttoned her blouse.

I felt the sudden distance between us, but I couldn't stop. “Well, does she?”

“Yes, this is the first summer she's been alone. Poppa's punishing her.”

“Why?”

“Because she has a big mouth. She takes after Uncle George.” She looked around, and although she didn't act nervous, I knew she was. I could feel it radiating from her.

“Your father doesn't let your guests return home, does he.” That was a statement, not a question.

“What do you want from me?” Phoebe asked.

“The truth.”

“Why? Will it make you free?”

I waited for an answer.

Phoebe looked directly at me as she spoke, as if the truth would be a reproach. “You're right—Father doesn't allow the guests to return home.”

Then he imprisons them, like he did me?”

“No,” she whispered, watching, studying me. “That wouldn't be fair to the family.”

“The family?”

“To us.”

“Why?”

“Because we'd feel terrible. Mother would have a breakdown. She's had one already.”

“So you *murder* them?”

She flinched at that, but kept looking at me, unafraid yet vulnerable. “There is no—there is really no other choice. Marion and Morgan need friends. And Poppa is too considerate to force them to be hermits.”

“Considerate? I—”

“You'd think we starved and tortured them,” Phoebe said. “Invited guests are shown every courtesy. They have the best time of their lives—good company, good food, the best quarters, and Marion and Morgan and Mother shower them with presents. Whatever they fancy they get, and when their time comes, they simply go to sleep. It's really very pleasant, I would imagine. It really is— It always happens in August or September, but Marion and Morgan never know exactly when. It's easier for them, that way.”

“And what about their poor families?” I asked, aghast.

“We explain that they caught typhus and passed away, and Poppa *always* sends flowers.”

“How lovely. And when is my time going to be, hey? This month or next.”

“Well, you do have to give me lessons for my recital,” Phoebe said. She was playing with me, yet I was convinced that she had told me the truth. Jefferson would never allow anyone to give up his secrets. It was a miracle that he allowed his brother George to live—perhaps he was a trifle sentimental.

I got up to leave, and she said, “If you go now, I'll never speak to you again.”

“What's the difference?”

“What's the *difference* —? Do you seriously believe I would bring my friends here, knowing Poppa wasn't going to allow them to leave?”

“Well, you have. *I'm* your guest. Or rather your victim.”

“Go fly a kite! You were going to rot down there in the pit.”

“But I wouldn't be about to be murdered. Is it this week or next?”

“I wouldn't allow Poppa to murder you. He agreed that when you're finished tutoring me for my recital, you'll go back in the pit. So there! I wouldn't kill anybody. Not even you.”

I could hear her breathing falter like she was going to cry, but I persisted. “But you have, haven't you? You've probably had as many guests as Marion. Or Morgan. Or your mother, for that matter.”

“Mother never has guests, neither does Poppa,” Phoebe said. “They allow us to have guests because there's no other choice. Mother stays by herself and barely speaks, or haven't you noticed? She lost her best friends, and couldn't stand to lose any more.”

“It's disgusting.”

“We're not like other people. We can't live like they do. If we could, we would. And for your information, Mister Know-it-all, when I found out what Poppa had to do, I refused to invite anybody else ever again. I'm content to read and enjoy music and walk in the gardens. Alone.”

“That's very white of you.”

“Thank you.”

With that, I turned and walked away.

Half-dressed and shoeless, she caught up with me.

“Paul, do you really believe I could abide you being killed or put back with those other—men?”

“I don't really know,” I said. “I would guess that you could.”

“I love you. I didn't know that when I saw you in the pit, or when I heard you play the piano like a genius. And Poppa would never hurt anyone in the family.”

“I'm your piano teacher, Phoebe. I'm not in the family.”

“But you will be when we're married—”

## **Eight**

Phoebe was, of course, correct. Her father left the mountain by himself to take care of business. It seemed that eight pilots had already been murdered by his agents, yet none of Jefferson's sources could be absolutely sure that the right pilot had been dispatched. Jefferson was going to take matters into his own hands and direct his army of spies, scouts, facilitators, lawyers, bankers, and mercenaries to find the

“conspirators,” wipe them out, and smooth over the facts so that no one would ever recollect that anything odd or untoward had ever occurred. Whether Jefferson was a good general, a coward, or just foolhardy, I couldn't say. But when the shooting started and all hell broke loose, he should have been present.

However, I'm getting a bit ahead of myself—

The next few weeks were bliss. Just Phoebe and me. There were long, languorous hours in the mirror gallery, the afternoon sun a dusty-golden mist filling the long, arched room as Phoebe concentrated on her music—and me. She was going to dedicate her recital to me and play a selection of my favorite piano works by Erik Satie. I tried to talk her into playing a selection of Chopin's waltzes and preludes and explained that Satie's music was absurdist and humorous and only seemingly simple, but she was not to be dissuaded. The hours of practice were punctuated by lovemaking and champagne lunches on the balcony. She disappeared the slaves. They were to be invisible, yet at her beck and call, as it should be, she said; and she was summer itself. Every day another Phoebe appeared, as though by magic. Sometimes she was an Egyptian queen in evening gown. Sometimes a chic matron wearing cloche hats and “Coco” Chanel skirts and pullovers and suits designed specifically for her and no one else. She could be “Flapper Jane” with heavy makeup and oiled hair and whiskey on her breath, or an athletic fresh-faced beauty in pleated skirt and blue bandeau.

And so the days passed, each delicious, each one only slightly different from those before. We swam in a green pool illuminated by ivory lamps under a ceiling of hammered gold. Surrounded by marble Roman sarcophagi and statues of Sekhmet, the Egyptian goddess of war and destruction, we made love. We had dinner with the family and made small talk; we hardly saw Morgan and Marion, who were sullen and secretive, as if they were privy to something we were not.

I found out what *that* was all about a few nights later.

Although Phoebe and I made love every night, we slept in our respective rooms. “When we're married, you can stay the night,” she said; and, indeed, by midnight I would be so exhausted from the rigors of the night—and the day—that I would fall into a deep, satisfying sleep, only to be awakened by Robert with breakfast on a gold tray and the bright, pure light of another perfect morning.

But on the night when all hell broke loose, I was dreaming of the boys in the pit. I was back there with them, and so was Joel, who was dead, of course. But in the dream, we were all dead—except Phoebe and old man Jefferson and Morgan and Marion, who were all dressed in formal finery and standing on the golf course above us by the grated opening of the pit. Jefferson was praying for us and mixing up the part about dust to dust, and then Phoebe started crying while her brother and sister began shoveling dirt into the pit to bury us. There would be no more golden days and luminous nights with Phoebe, no more lovemaking in Jefferson's forests of gold and glades of diamonds, no more Bach or Beethoven, nor the ironic mockings of Satie. I could smell grass and rot and decay, the Paris perfume of Phoebe mixed with her sweet sweat as the clumps of black soil fell on top of us. Black rain. Phoebe's tears, tapping, dropping like soft leather heels on marble.

I choked. I couldn't breathe. I—

Woke up to scuffing, whispering, creaking. Then the click of the diamond doorknob being turned, the sighing of the door. I didn't wait to determine who the intruders were because I was sure they were going to try to kill me, just as they killed all the other guests. But I couldn't escape without somehow getting past them. Unless—

I felt for the button on the wall beside my bed and pressed it hard. The bed tilted and drapes parted with hardly a sound as I slid down the chute into the empty bath. The aquarium walls of the bathroom were a luminous green, and as I hastily made my way out, I could see the shadow of a ray swimming toward me. I turned the knob on the bathroom door. It wasn't locked, and I made my escape down the stairs. Indeed, my first thought was to go directly to Phoebe's room on the other side of the house. I certainly wanted to, but for all that I loved her, could I really trust her? She was, after all, a Jefferson; and I was, after all, just a guest, a guest who even now could not help but be awed by the pre-dawn magic of this house; by the cathedral walls covered with medieval tapestries; by the loitering stone and marble fauns, naiads, satyrs, soldiers, gorgons, gods, and goddesses, all pale as moonlight and bigger than life; by the carved ceilings so high above; by the emerald and turquoise rooms that each opened into other, even more magnificent rooms. Tall, jeweled lamps cast a roseate light, and pitch-velvet shadows concealed treasures that could only be imagined.

I rushed toward the atrium, where I thought I would escape into the gardens.

And I heard Phoebe screaming hysterically. "You'd better not have killed him. He'd *better* be alive."

I retraced my steps and waited behind an archway near the ivory staircase. I wasn't surprised to see slaves pacing nervously on the landing above. Wordsworth and Isaac had obviously been sent to kill me, and perhaps Isaac had been given his chance to get back into the family's good graces.

But I *was* surprised to see Morgan step out of my room onto the landing; a very angry Phoebe was right behind him. I suppose Morgan had finally found his courage, although he seemed to have lost it again in Phoebe's presence.

"What the hell did you think you're doing, Morgan?" she shouted. Her voice seemed magnified by the dark, cavernous spaces. "He's my guest, you little twit, and what happens to him is *my* decision, not yours. Or Marion's."

"Marion has nothing to do with this," Morgan said. "It was all my idea. I just wanted to help you."

"Help me?"

"Anybody can see how much you're stuck on him, and you know Father isn't going to let you keep him, no matter what. He told me that before he left."

"Did not."

"He did too, and he practically told me to take care of things for him while he's gone because the more you fall in love with him, the more you're going to be hurt. And Marion thought that—"

"That's just what I thought," Phoebe said, but she did not continue because at just that moment everyone looked up into the grayness above, as though we could see through the ceiling. We could hear the sound of aircraft overhead, and then there was a terrible concussion. I felt heat and was thrown backward. The ceiling shattered. The archway cracked and fell in a cloud of red dust and smoke before me.

More explosions.

Bombs falling, and I remembered my dream. Clumps of black soil falling. Black rain. Phoebe's tears. And, indeed, I was drenched. Water poured through cracks in what was left of the ceiling, which would soon give way; and the swimming sharks and rays and groupers and cuttlefish would fall onto the

jewel-polished floor below.

Somehow, I had to rescue Phoebe, lest she be caught in the inevitable waterfall, a vertical tidal wave that would smash and splinter the balcony like balsa wood; but as I called out to her, my voice was swallowed by the staccato thunder-pumping of machine guns above. At least the slaves had the presence of mind to stand and fight. As I ran to the grand staircase, I met Marion and Morgan. We stopped for an instant, amid the cacophony of exploding bombs, machine guns, and the abdominal groaning of the castle. Water dripped like rain through the cracking and bulging ceiling high above. Morgan scowled at me, Marion called me a filthy something, and then I ran up the stairs to Phoebe while they, presumably, ran to the bunkers where they would be safe and sound and fitted out with champagne and caviar until the danger was over.

“Phoebe,” I shouted, catching the back of her. She was running through the corridor, which curved around the inside of the house like a mullah's ledge on a minaret. She heard me over the firing of machine guns and the thrumming shaking deafening exploding of bombs.

She stopped and shouted, “Mother,” which I understood as code for “I've got to find Mother,” and then disappeared into one of the many branching corridors. I followed her, my eyes and nose burning from smoke.

“You've got to—”

I meant “You've got to get off this floor now immediately run,” but I seemed to run right through my words. I was intent on grabbing her up and getting out of the house, into the bunkers, perhaps, off this mountain; and then, in those heart-pounding exploding acrid smoke-smelling seconds I imagined that we'd somehow miraculously escaped from the mountain, from her father and family and everything associated with them, and I wondered whether she could live in the real world five minutes with me, without the insulation of millions—or billions—of dollars. It was idiocy even to dream of getting out, much less turning Phoebe into Suzy Housewife. In spite of the smoke and sudden heat, for the house was certainly on fire, although I couldn't see flames—yet, I think I grinned at the thought. But if I had the chance, the split-second chance of a lifetime, I'd take Phoebe away, without a dime in my pocket, I'd take her away for as long as she'd stand me.

But there *was* a chance. I was, after all, a prisoner. If the air strike was successful, as I imagined it would be, then we would all be set free. The lads in the Pit would vouch for me. Perhaps there was a way to escape. To hide Phoebe, take enough diamonds and rubies to keep us more than comfortable in our new life.

Nonsense madness lunacy, yet those words had little meaning deep in this castle of impossibility where ceilings were layered with gold and walls of diamond and ruby glowed translucently like dreams in the deepest sleep; where hammerhead sharks could fall like rain, and God's machines could play music as well as orchestras.

I found Phoebe in her mother's suite, which was the size of most people's houses, and Phoebe turned to me and said, “She wouldn't've gone to the bunkers on her own, how could Morgan and Marion leave without her?” Phoebe was wild-eyed. “They hate her, that's why.”

“Why wouldn't your mother go to the bunkers?” I asked, trying to bring her back to reason.

“She's claustrophobic. She can't stand darkness, can't stand to be without windows and light and—”

The sound of gunfire, the ceiling cracking, the house groaning, and then the expected waterfall, complete with all manner of fishes. Water poured over us, for the aquarium was two stories high, an aquatic crystalline house within the house, and I grabbed Phoebe and ran through the rain and wriggling, flapping, slapping fishes as the floors and walls and ceilings collapsed behind me, ran until I found another staircase, a narrow *escalier dérobé*. The smell of wet ash was thick as we ran down the stairs, ran through the undecorated corridors used by servants, ran straight into blazing, blistering fire.

We found another way, which was blocked by the debris that had been ceiling and furniture, only moments ago. Coughing, panicking, we raced through darkness; now I was following Phoebe, who pulled me by the hand, down, down, into the damp stone cellars where we felt our way along the rough cold walls. Then an incline, the clanging of a heavy latch—Phoebe had found an exit. We pushed open a heavy door and looked up through the swirling smoke and soot to glimpse the dawn-pink sky.

The attack had been planned perfectly.

From an emplacement on the roof of an adjacent building—another burst of anti-aircraft guns. I could see only a few bodies of slaves scattered across the lawn; but in the dawn pinkness of this impossible morning, I couldn't see blood; nor could I smell the puke and feces of dying men, thank God, for the reek of gasoline, the acrid smoke, and the thunderstorm and metal odor of machine-guns firing on the roofs above were overpowering. I took a chance and stepped away from the castle to see what was in the sky; and you could've knocked me over with your pinky because the attackers-invaders-saviors, whatever they were, had just about everything in the air that could fly, all remainders from the war. Christ, there was a Vickers Gunbus, which hadn't been in service since 1916; and its gunner was strafing the slave quarters with his moveable Lewis machine gun. There were several Jennys in the sky, and from the sound of it, I guessed they had been fitted out with 7.7 mm machine guns, just like the Gunbus. The Jenny was the favorite of most barnstormers, and I was no exception. While everything was happening around me—all the crashing and burning and exploding, I daydreamed about whisking Phoebe away in a Jenny, saving her from all this death and destruction; and I felt a sudden, unexpected rush of happiness. I would be saved, wouldn't have to spend my life a prisoner, or worse, become another one of those poisoned or strangled guests buried in an unmarked grave in the shallow soil of the diamond mountain. All that in a second, just like when I'd been in combat in the *Toulouse-the-Wreck*, the Spad that got me through Bloody April without so much as a bullet tearing through its delicate frame. I was again smelling oil and gasoline, hearing the peculiar and particular chinking sound of machine guns, and daydreaming. Time stretching, then collapsing, while my body, my hands and eyes, made all the moves.

Phoebe caught my arm, as though she had just read my mind and discovered my true thoughts of escaping with the enemy, and that's when I saw the twin-engined Handley Page 400, a British bomber that could carry a bomb load of around 1,800 pounds—Lord knows how they got their hands on *that*, and again, daydreaming, I wondered who they were. The bomber made a wide circle, and I asked Phoebe where the bunkers were because once that Handley Page started dropping her guts, there wouldn't be much left to talk about.

“Look,” Phoebe said, pointing, and, indeed, I saw slaves scrambling across the courtyard and leap-frogging up the inlaid tile perrons of the castle. They moved like trained and disciplined soldiers; the strafing fire of machine guns didn't deter them, even when two slaves were hit and fell backward over the stone steps.

We had to get out of here. I could hear the Handley Page's engines change tune as the great plane turned to begin its bombing run.

And then Phoebe shouted “Momma,” and ran into the courtyard.

Sure enough, there was Giroma Jefferson strolling absently in her black chiffon evening dress embroidered with tiny beads.

I followed, but was too late: the Gunbus was strafing the courtyard, and in that second I felt time stretch out like some terrible gasoline-tainted gray wodge of taffy, wrapping itself around me—suffocating me. I saw Phoebe's mother fall, hit by the strafing fire, and Phoebe screaming and falling on top of her; and then it was like being in the cockpit of my Spad again, feeling once again absolutely focused yet numb, as I did during every dogfight. The numbness was fear, but it was a distant thing; and—as if I were a spectator still standing in the doorway of Jefferson's castle—I could see myself pulling Phoebe away from her mother and dragging her out of the courtyard. Phoebe screamed and tried to bite me before she came to her senses.

“I can't leave my mother,” she said desperately. “She might be alive, mightn't she?”

“No, darling,” I said, “but don't think about that right now. We'll think about everything once you're safe. Now tell me where the bunkers are.”

“There,” and she pointed toward a strand of rocks where goats were trying to hide in the surrounding brush. “But we can't leave without Mother.” So I picked up Mrs. Jefferson, who was just skin and bones, and we made our way under cover of the pine forest that was the west edge of Jefferson's zoo. I glimpsed zebras standing stock still, as if they were painted sculptures. Like Lot's wife, Phoebe looked back, seeking one last glimpse of paradise, and then we felt the concussion of an exploding bomb. For a few seconds, I could only hear a rushing, windy sound. I wasn't sure if the castle remained, as it was out of our sight from here; and we made our way, circuitously—keeping under cover—to the bunker. Phoebe pulled at an iron bar set cleverly into the rock—the camouflaged opening could only be detected if one already knew where it was—but nothing happened. I pulled the bar. Still nothing.

“They're in there, and they can hear us,” Phoebe said to me. Turning to the cliff face of the bunker, she shouted, “Open the goddamn door, Morgan, you bastard. Mother's dead, and it's your fault.”

But Morgan, if he was inside, was silent as the stone.

## Nine

We laid Mrs. Jefferson out in the family mausoleum between the marble sepulchers of her father-in-law, the World's Greatest Liar, and his brother, who was murdered for the family cause. The cacophony of machine guns and bombs was reduced to great sighs and groans; only the dead held sway in this great marble shrine at the end of the gardens, and they ruled imperiously over the spiders and dust. Phoebe and I—and the cold and stiffening Mrs. Jefferson—were dwarfed by loggia of fifty-foot columns and pavilions that supported hordes of stone beasts and angels; and a huge equestrian statue of a Jefferson glowered down upon us like a marble god in his adamantine heaven. But there were no glowing onyx or pearl walls here, and not a diamond or a ruby or a sapphire in sight. This grand tomb might well have been designed by Phoebe's mother, who defied her wealth by never wearing a jewel. Perhaps she was the only one in the family who understood that you couldn't take it with you.

“I can't leave her here like this,” Phoebe said, her eyes glistening with tears, and at that moment I felt I was more in love with her than ever before.

“It's not safe here.”



“Pah! It's not safe anywhere,” she said, suddenly gaining the weight and wisdom of the world.

“I'm getting you away from here this very minute,” I said, and she turned to me, her face lit by anger and perhaps even hatred.

“That's my mother lying dead there, and you want to—you want to—”

“I want to get you to safety.”

“You're as flat as my brother,” she said, “and I'm not leaving.”

“Then what *do* you propose to do?” I asked, trying to keep the frustration out of my voice. She turned away from me, leaned over her mother's corpse, and began to cry softly.

“It's all over.”

She allowed me to put my arms around her and pull her away from her mother. “Poppa should have been here. He should have saved us. But he's too interested in—” She looked up at me and said, “*You* should have saved us. So what are we to do now, Mr. Orsatti?”

She turned back to her mother, as though she could somehow find all the answers behind those dead and closed eyes. She was shivering, trembling; and then, by sheer act of will, I should imagine, she straightened up and became absolutely calm. Her eyes narrowed in determination, and I saw her father in her heart-shaped perfect face. I saw in that instant the inevitability that she—and not her brother or sister or anyone else—would control everything. She was her father's daughter; and love her as I did, I felt the sudden panicky urge to flee.

“I'm *not* giving everything up,” Phoebe said firmly to her dead mother. “I won't, and they can't make me.” Then she finally turned to me and said, “Well—?”

“Well, what?” I asked, and for that instant I felt like a nervous schoolboy. The muffled booming of bombs and the thick bursts of machine guns became louder. “We've got to get out of here right now!”

“Will you help me or not?” she asked, ignoring my last remark.

“Help you to do *what* ?”

She stepped across the flawless marble floor and reached behind the stone sarcophagus of the World's Greatest Liar and strained as she pulled something. “Well, are you just going to stand there?”

She stepped back and allowed me to squeeze into the space behind the marble coffin. I felt the smooth metal bar she had been pulling at, which was ingeniously hidden under the curl of the coffin's lower rail, and released it without straining my back. The coffin slowly and smoothly slid down toward the wall, as if by magic, to reveal a dark catacomb fronted by dirty marble steps.

“Go on,” Phoebe said; and when she saw my hesitation, she said, “Are you afraid I'd close you in?”

I must admit that a nervous thought had crossed my mind.

“Maybe I should, but I wouldn't,” and she grinned at me, as if she'd forgotten everything for an instant;

then she took a last look at her mother, and led me down the steps and into the pit. She picked up a lantern from a ledge and scratched a match. Once the lantern radiated a halo of buttery light, she pulled at something in the wall. A rumbling echoed through what I imagined to be countless corridors, a hellish maze from which we would never escape; and I wanted to run back up the stone steps before the entrance was sealed. But the coffin fit into place like the last stone block of a pharaoh's tomb. The darkness seemed to sharpen my sense of smell. I breathed in the musty odors of the grave, and I was sure that this was a catacomb in the true sense—that bodies had been left to rot on shelves like the one where Phoebe had found her matches and lantern.

“Follow me,” Phoebe said.

“What on Earth is this place?” I asked.

“You'll see.”

“It's where your guests end up, isn't it?”

“Well, it's where *you* ended up.”

“Answer me.”

“I don't approve of overbearing men.”

“Oh, I'm so very sorry,” I said sarcastically. She hurried ahead, but I kept close to her. Our voices and movements echoed through the crudely cut corridor. “This place certainly wasn't cut out of diamond.”

“Of course not, silly,” Phoebe said. “The whole mountain isn't one big diamond.”

“Your father said it was.”

“Well, he's like my grandfather. He exaggerates. About two-thirds of the mountain is one big diamond. The rest is this stuff, regular stone, I would suppose.”

“And where does it lead?”

“Well, you're going to find out now, aren't you?” Phoebe said peevishly. Perhaps she was as frightened as I was, although I doubted that. She had obviously been here before. Probably many times. I shivered, swore, and slapped at something that had dropped onto my neck. Phoebe waved her lantern, which was smoking.

“Lots of spiders in this part. I hate them, don't you?” Phoebe said, quickening the pace.

I heard a screeing sound.

“And bats,” she continued.

Which meant that there was another opening. But I was not relieved yet. We came to a terminus of sorts, and I heard water dripping and the distant rumbling of machinery. Phoebe led me through another corridor, which became narrower and narrower; her lantern threw cascading shadows across the rough-cut walls—and the reinforced metal doorway ahead.

Turning a large combination lock, which would unbolt the heavy door, she said, “We’ll be fine now.” The door was three feet thick; I’d only seen its kind in bank vaults. I helped her pull it open, and we were bathed in the dim but steady light that emanated from the opalescent walls and ceiling. I felt like I was back in the pit. There were no shadows in this place. We had entered a two-dimensional realm.

Phoebe led me through a long corridor that opened into a large storeroom filled with rifles, machine guns, shotguns, pistols, flamethrowers, grenades and grenade launchers, all manner of knives and swords and bayonets, pull carts, sledge hammers, wire cutters, welding and carpenter’s tools, cables, foodstuffs, canteens, medications, bandages, stretchers, gas masks, and canister weapons I didn’t even recognize. “I think Poppa said this place is as secure as the bunker. Anyway, everything we need is right here.”

“What are you looking for?” I asked warily, following her as she walked up one aisle and down another.

“You’re the veteran of the Great War. You tell me.” She walked on, then stopped and picked up what might have been a grenade. Behind her were shelves of gas masks and medicines: bleach ointments, clouded glass bottles of petrol, methylated spirits, kerosene, liquid paraffin, and carbon tetrachloride. There were swabs and eye drops and bandages and a metal mask with holes. I knew what *that* was for—what all that was for: mustard gas poisoning.

“No,” I said, realizing that I had shouted. “No.”

“We could gas them when they get out of their planes,” Phoebe said excitedly, almost cheerfully. She walked a few paces down the aisle, stopped, and picked up what looked like an ordinary grenade launcher. Finding it unexpectedly heavy, she nearly dropped it. “Here, we can use these tubes to shoot them off with. I think these go with the gas grenades. Poppa showed me once, but I’m not so sure now.”

“I won’t have any part of cold-blooded murder.”

Phoebe raised her eyebrow slightly, as if mystified. “I don’t want to *kill* them, just put them to sleep for a while.” Then her face reddened and she said, “What do you think they did to Mother—and our servants? Well—?”

I nodded—there was nothing I could say to that—and examined the canister she had been holding, and the others neatly laid out on the gunmetal shelves like condiments for a deadly banquet. “Well, you’ll certainly put them to sleep for a good long while with this. It’s phosgene, for Chrissakes. The Germans used it at Ypres in 1915.” I *thought* I could smell a faint odor of new mown hay, which is a dead giveaway for phosgene. “If I can smell it, something must be leaking. Let’s get *out* of here now.”

“I like the smell, don’t you?” Phoebe said, teasing me.

“Phoebe!”

“Phoebe what, you flat tire. How could you believe for even one second that I would actually consider killing those men?” She seemed to be about to break into tears. “Well, I don’t need your help, after all. I can do it myself.”

“What? Kill all those aviators? And how do you propose to do that all alone? You could get a few of them, I’ll admit, but not all of them.”

“I told you I’m not going to kill *any* of them,” Phoebe said, and she looked so angry that I thought she might actually stamp her foot. Or throw the canister at me. “Come over here.”

“We need to get out of here,” I said. “We've probably already poisoned ourselves.”

“Well, I've been down here only about two hundred times, and it always smells like this, and I'm still alive, so stop being a stupid coward.”

I felt my ears burn.

She walked over to me and asked in almost a whisper, “Are you going to trust me?”

After a time I said, “Yes,” and put my arms around her.

“Then you'll help me?”

“Of course I will.” I felt the last tuggings of my conscience and wondered if, indeed, I would be killing those aviators— For those few seconds as I held Phoebe close, I could hear her shallow breathing and the ever so faint booming of bombs.

And somehow I *knew* I was making a great mistake...

Then she kissed me, tenderly but without passion, and said, “Let's get ready. If you can pile up the little gas bombs and the tubes, I'll try to get us some more help.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I know the way to the servants' quarters,” Phoebe said, “and I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts that some of the servants are using the tunnels like bunkers. If they're there, I'll find them.”

“I should be with you.”

“No, we've got to make sure the enemy doesn't land before we can get out there. If you just keep following the tunnels to your right, you'll come to the outside. Don't worry, I'll find you somewhere between here and there.” Phoebe nodded toward a corridor that curved to the right. The light made the far wall and the branching corridors look flat, as though the tunnels, as Phoebe called them, had been lightly sketched with a charcoal pencil. Phoebe turned and looked back toward where we had come. She seemed to be staring at something only she could see, and her eyes were bright with tears.

“Phoebe—”

“They killed her,” she said, meaning her mother, and then she disappeared into the flat light. I called after her, and her voice echoed back, “Make sure you take the right bombs.”

And I wondered once again if the *right* bombs would be lethal.

\* \* \* \*

I followed Phoebe's directions, kept turning to the right, and navigated the warren of corridors until I reached a camouflaged opening in the hill west of the château. Phoebe and I had spent many a perfect hour watching the zebras play and frolic through these gently inclined fields, and the sweet fragrances of spring flowers and Phoebe's perfume were cold memories as I looked out at the devastation before me. It was a clear morning with just a touch of chill—and the smells of oil and metal. Through the copses of

evergreens and oak, I could see the blackened château and the ruined grounds of what the Old Man had called his enchanted hill. A streamer of smoke rose from the castle's west wing, yet, miraculously, most of the castle was untouched. A bomb had obliterated the Neptune pool and the great Grecian marble steps.

Above, in the blue, ceramic sky, planes circled like buzzing insects waiting their turn to land.

We were probably too late. At least half the planes would already be on the ground and the aviators, probably armed to the teeth, would be making their way to the château. I had enough gas canisters in the pull cart to asphyxiate half the population of Chicago. I waited for Phoebe and had begun to worry when I heard footsteps. Phoebe had indeed found a squad of servants, including Robert, who, surely, was too old and decrepit for this kind of operation. Yet he stood in front of the other slaves.

“We're ready,” Phoebe said, looking at me determinedly, as if waiting for me to respond with the proper etiquette. She stood away from me, waiting, testing me, and I knew if I didn't respond properly, I would lose her forever.

I nodded to Robert and asked him if he knew how to launch the gas grenades.

“Yes, Mr. Orsatti, I certainly do, and so do my men.”

“Your men?” I asked, glancing at Phoebe, who did not seem disturbed, just anxious to get underway.

“Yes, I trained them. Under Mr. Jefferson's orders, of course.”

“And who trained you?” I asked.

“I believe he was an ordnance sergeant, whom Mr. Jefferson invited for a visit. Miss Phoebe took quite a shine to him, if I remember correctly.” There was an underlying meanness in his soft, pliant voice; and it was obvious that he viewed my condescension as intolerable. “Isn't that so, Miss Phoebe?”

Ignoring him, Phoebe asked me if I was ready.

I nodded and picked up a grenade. Robert did the same, and attached it to the launcher; indeed, he knew what he was doing. He then picked up a gas mask from the pull cart and pulled it over his face to be at the ready. The others followed in turn. Before Phoebe could pull her gas mask over her face, I said, “Phoebe, why don't you stay—”

“Don't even suggest it,” she said.

\* \* \* \*

Moving quickly, we made our way under cover toward the landing strip north of the château. I deployed the men along the way with orders to fire if they saw the enemy, even if there were other slaves nearby who might inhale the gas—after all, the grenades *should* not kill.

However, there was no time to wait and ponder.

By the time we reached the rocky outcrops near the landing strip, we were in the thick of it. Half a dozen pilots were already making their way toward the château, and they were armed and at the ready. They saw us at the same time we saw them, and we both took cover. They began firing, and Isaac calmly launched a grenade at them, which exploded with a low thumping sound. I watched through smeary

goggles and heard my breath wheezing through the mask, which smelled of rubber and formaldehyde. After a few moments, the aviators stopped firing. We waited and then moved forward cautiously. I feared the worst, but when we examined them, they were indeed still breathing; one pilot was snoring, as if happily tucked into his bed. We wasted no time pulling the sleepers under cover so they could not be seen. Then we moved forward to keep an eye on the planes as they landed. They kept a tight formation. Impressive. As each plane taxied down the turf of the golf-course runway, the pilots who had just landed stayed close to provide possible covering fire. We waited behind copses of weeping willows. It was too easy to gas the aviators, take their weapons, and drag them under cover—we were shooting the proverbial ducks in a barrel—and like everything that seems too easy, there was a snag. We miscalculated.

One of the aviators had somehow managed to get past us and circle around to our rear. He was wearing one of our gas masks, which he must have taken from one of the servants on the way; and he shot three of our servants with his automatic rifle before we could retaliate. To my surprise, Phoebe shot him squarely through the forehead with a handgun.

Robert sprayed the area with machine-gun fire and ordered his squad of servants to move forward.

More gunfire and the chuff chuffing of canister.

Then silence, a heavy awkward silence, as though some sort of geologic time or consensual dream had been replaced by a darker, more sinister reality.

As we moved forward, I could see faint wisps of gas roiling in the fetid air. Above me was a clear blue sky, as innocent as day. I looked around for Phoebe, but she had suddenly disappeared. “Robert, where’s Phoebe?” I asked, and then I heard a series of shots from the trees behind us. Each shot seemed to be timed.

Robert just looked at me.

Of course, he knew—

And a moment later, so did I.

\* \* \* \*

I found Phoebe beyond the landing strip near the cover of trees and brush. Facemask and goggles hid most of her perfect face—it was as if someone else was committing the terrible deed.

“Stop!” I shouted, my voice muffled by my own gas mask.

Phoebe looked up at me blankly, raised her rifle reflexively toward my chest—and I felt strong arms lift me into the air as my own rifle clattered to the ground.

Isaac—the slave who had been my “bodyguard”—didn’t relax his hold on me, even while Phoebe calmly continued to execute the sleeping pilots.

## Ten

“I can’t believe that she has received any of my messages,” I said.

Robert lowered his great wrinkled head and said, “All you have sent has been received by Miss Jefferson.” He stood before my makeshift bed in the guest library where I’d been imprisoned—upon Miss Jefferson’s orders.

Isaac stood by the door, his bulk taking up most of the doorway.

The north wing had survived intact, and I wondered why I was being kept here. Perhaps the other rooms, the bedrooms, had secret exits. Or perhaps Robert was right and Phoebe thought I’d keep myself occupied with her father’s books and the Steinway grand piano that sat like a great white gold-crested bird in the center of the library. I’d practiced most of the days and nights; the suppleness had returned to my fingers, and I indulged myself with Berg’s atonalities and the cloying wretchedness of Mahler’s *lieder*. Jefferson’s collection of leather-bound volumes and first editions were, indeed, glorious, and it had taken me two weeks to replace the books back on the shelves in alphabetical order. It was as if an earthquake had struck the château, or what remained of it.

“Will there be anything else you wish this morning, Mr. Orsatti?” Robert asked. “A bath, perhaps—? I’ve laid out your clothes, just in case.” He bowed and smiled condescendingly.

“Just in case of what?” I asked.

“Why, in case you might wish to change, sir.”

I waved him away. The door clicked shut, the key turned in the lock, and I was alone. I had not shaved, nor bathed. My hair needed trimming, my pajamas smelled as sour as my breath, and I was wallowing in self-pity. I didn’t feel like reading, studying, or even playing, which was most unusual. Instead I mused on the possibilities of escape. I had tried everything I could think of, from picking the door lock (impossible!), to working the bars loose on the high windows, to holding Robert hostage—but somehow the old servant had managed to break two of my ribs before Isaac overpowered me—and all I had accomplished trying to get past the bars was to break the window glass.

So Robert had won, and I had lost.

We both knew that he was not my servant. But I was certainly his prisoner.

To add insult to injury, it was yet another magnificent morning. Golden sunlight poured in from the gardens, and the grounds were alive with hammering and shouting and the grinding and creaking and groaning of heavy machinery. The château was being repaired—rebuilt, and I had been imprisoned in this room for almost two months.

At least when I was in the Pit I had had company—

I padded back and forth barefoot on the Persian carpets. I examined Jefferson’s astonishing collection of Greek vases that were secured to the hand-carved bookcases in case there might be an earthquake. Well, there *was* an earthquake, and it originated in the skies! I plonked my fingers over the keys as I passed the piano. I took a bit of toast and bacon from the silver tray Isaac had laid on an overly ornate gilt bronze table designed by Pelagio Palagi. I picked up my rose porcelain coffee cup and paced.

I had ruined everything—

No, *Phoebe* had ruined everything.

I wolfed down breakfast and swore once again that if Phoebe ever had the gall to come anywhere near me, I would—

There was a light tapping on the door.

I knew who it was. I *knew* —

“Go away.”

A key turned in the lock, the doorknob turned, and the door groaned open. Phoebe stood in the doorway, looking small, uncertain, and breathtakingly lovely. She wore a simple pleated blue skirt with a white pullover. Her blond hair was pulled back, rolled, and tied with a golden ribbon that was the same color as the gilded trefoil arches over my prison bar windows. She stepped into the room, leaving the door ajar. Her face colored as she looked at me. She lowered her eyes, then, as if catching herself, looked directly at me.

“Where are your bodyguards?” I asked, more harshly than I’d anticipated. “Surely they’re waiting in the hall in case I try something funny.”

“What could you try that would be funny?” she asked in a low voice, and for only an instant, there was merriment in her eyes, which were bright, as though she’d been crying.

“What do you want?”

“What do you think—?”

“Don’t answer my question with a question. You at least owe me an explanation. I’ve been in here for—months.”

“I don’t owe anybody an explanation, and you’ve only been here for five weeks and a day,” she said, then looked down at the carpet again. “I’m sorry, Paul. I’m getting this all wrong—”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, sitting down on the end of the long gold brocade couch. My eggs were glassy-looking in the plate on the table before me. My coffee was cold, but I drank it anyway; I felt awkward, as I always did around her, and I needed something to do with my hands. After the coffee, I lit a cigarette, and Phoebe asked if she could have one, too. She bent over me while I lit her cigarette, and I could smell her perfume, see the light in her hair, and I caught my breath.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” she said, standing behind the table, as though afraid to sit down beside me. I gestured her to do so, but she stood her ground, closed her eyes for a beat, then said, as if reciting, “I had no choice but— No, that’s no good. None of it’s any good.” Then she sat down and against all my better judgment, I was caught by her—again. But she didn’t seem to know. Her eyes filled with tears and she said, “How you must hate me.”

I moved toward her, then caught myself. “I don’t hate you.”

“Yes, you do. I remember how you looked at me. I’ll never forget the horror and disgust on your face. I—”

I didn’t say anything.



“But I have to live with what I've done. Somehow—”

I could only nod.

“I've tried to come up with a way to tell you, to explain. Every day I prepared a speech, but I—I just couldn't.”

“So you just left me here to rot.”

“I told Robert to look after you.”

“You know what *that* means,” I said.

She nodded, and I saw that she had used too much rouge on her cheeks to give her color; her perfect, dimpled face looked strained, and I detected worry lines on the corners of her pale blue eyes. “I know—I was selfish, but I couldn't think. I didn't want to lose you, so I—”

“Yes, Phoebe, we know what you did. Now what do you want to tell me?” Those words sounded cruel, even to my ears, and I regretted them immediately. Foolishly, stupidly, impossibly, I didn't want to lose her. It didn't matter what she had done.

Too late. She stood up, as if I had slapped her. “Yes, of course, you're right.”

“What do you want to tell me?” I asked quickly, and I found myself standing also.

“I want to tell you that—I don't know. I can't do it now. It was a terrible mistake—” and she turned to run out the door.

I caught her, held her close, and although her breath was ragged, she didn't cry. She stiffened, then rested her face against mine and said, “All right, I can tell you now. I don't regret killing those men. I didn't then. I don't now. I know I was wrong, I know I'll burn in hell forever, God forgive me, but they *murdered* Momma. I couldn't help it. It was like someone else was killing them, even while I was doing it. Maybe it was because I found out about Father, maybe—”

“What about your father?” I asked.

She pulled away from me and sat back down on the couch. She took a puff on her cigarette, which was still burning in the ashtray, as was mine. The smoke roiled in the sunlight like clouds, or gas. “I'll tell you everything, but I need to know—”

“What—?”

“I know you can't forgive me, but will you listen?”

“Yes, I just told you that.”

“I'll tell you everything,” Phoebe repeated, “but—”

“But what?” I asked.

She shook her head, and tears stained her makeup. Then she straightened up, composed herself, and said, “I kept you here because I love you. Selfishly. I knew you'd try to escape. I was even going to give you a choice. I was going to ask you whether you'd rather go back down to the Pit to be with your friends.” She laughed, puffed her cigarette, and smashed it out in the ashtray.

“But you weren't going to let me be your confidant and stay with you.”

“I—I needed time to—”

Instead of listening, I went on, caught up in my own anger. “And you certainly weren't going to let me leave the mountain.”

“No,” she said. “I'm crazy about you, but I'm not stupid. God help me, I'm my father's daughter.” Before I could say anything, she continued. “I had to work things out. I told you—I needed time.”

“You could have come to me anytime,” I said.

She nodded. “I've tried—every single day. I guess I can now. Now that Father is back.”

I felt a chill tickle down my spine. It was over. All over. If Jefferson was back in charge, he'd figure a way to dispose of me sooner rather than later—once he got around Phoebe. Or perhaps he wouldn't even have to do that.

“No, Paul, you don't understand,” Phoebe said. “Will you come with me? And then you can decide.”

“Decide what?” I asked. “Whether to stay up here or go back to the Pit?”

But Phoebe was waiting for me at the door—as were Robert and Isaac.

\* \* \* \*

I must have been favoring my right side a bit as we walked because Phoebe asked me what was the matter. I glanced at Robert, then asked, “Didn't he tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Phoebe asked.

“Ask *him* .”

“Well, Robert—?”

He started talking to her in dialect, but I interrupted. “In English, Robert.”

So Robert explained that he had broken my ribs—by mistake—and Phoebe dismissed him then and there. Isaac, however, was retained, presumably to guard me from Phoebe. I couldn't help gloating, and defended Robert as my servant.

“You see, you're learning,” Phoebe said to me as we climbed the servants' staircase to the third floor. She unlocked the door to old man Jefferson's bedroom and study, which was surprisingly modest—except for the wildly ornate Spanish ceiling crafted from gilded wood and an eighteenth-century bed with a satin canopy and matching bedspread. There was a simple desk and cushioned chair beside the bed, a small fireplace that needed cleaning, and family portraits on the walls. The desk was piled with

papers and an odd mechanism that seemed to sit on the desk but was supported by what looked like a drainpipe that disappeared into the floor. There were folders on the floor around the desk and the pipe, along with women's underclothing and various scattered skirts and dresses. Obviously Phoebe's. "I've taken Poppa's room," she continued. "It's a bit messy, but that's because I won't allow the servants in here." With that she pushed the door closed on Isaac. "You see, now I'm alone with you and at your mercy."

I nodded and she apologized.

"No need," I said, but she had already forgotten and was rummaging for something in the covers of her bed.

"Here they are," she said, finding what she was looking for: a large envelope containing photographs of her father and a dark-haired, finely featured girl. "You see, she's younger than me. Can you beat that? It's the bunk. The fucking bunk."

I was surprised, as I'd never heard Phoebe swear before, but she just glared at those photographs and blinked back tears.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"Poppa's whore, that's who she is. Mother's dead because of her. Poppa promised that he'd make her a film star. Here, look for yourself," and she took a handful of letters from the desk and practically threw them at me.

"Easy," I said. "I'm not the enemy."

"Maybe you are—maybe you aren't. We'll see, won't we?"

As I glanced at the embarrassingly fraught yet boastful love letters, Phoebe continued. "Her name is Greta Gustafsson, but Poppa changed her name to Garbo because he thought Gustafsson sounded like it could be a Jew name, although anybody would know it was Scandinavian. And he hired his pervert friend Mauritz Stiller to pimp for her. Do you know who he is?"

I confessed I didn't.

"He made that sex film *Erotikon* back in 1920."

I shrugged.

"Poppa showed it to me in the theater. He laughed all the way through it. It wasn't that bad, I suppose, but it was trash. Like her." Phoebe took the photographs from me. "Well, her career is down the drain. I've seen to *that*."

"What have you done?"

"Taken Poppa back, the filthy snake in the grass double-crossing, double-dealing—"

"Phoebe—"

She hunched over the bed and wept. "He murdered Mother and sold us out. The dirty bastard." Then

she shook her head, tried to smile at me, and said, “I found it all out from Uncle George.”

“Uncle George?” I asked. “He's crazy—and he's in the Pit.”

“He knows more than you think. He's got ways of knowing everything, and the slaves trust him. It was Robert who passed on his messages, and because of you, I've probably lost a good slave forever.”

“Because of *me*?”

“Well, slave or not, he shouldn't've broken your ribs and treated you like a bump.”

“Phoebe, about your father?”

“He sold us all out. He brought in the planes and the bombs and the gunfire. After he changed his name and converted most of the money.”

“I can't believe he'd do all that, just for a little bit of cheesecake.”

“It was getting too dangerous to keep the mountain,” Phoebe said. “Uncle George explained it all to me. It was so simple. Father allowed that pilot to get away from us, or could have allowed it, anyway. Once the mountain was found out, then the market for diamonds would crash, which is why Poppa started putting his money into—radium. Now he thought that would be perfectly safe, but he was wrong about that, too.” She paused and stared at the contraption on the desk. “Poppa thought of most everything, I've got to hand him that. He'd even made sure that two of the aviators who tried to invade us were reporters, just to make certain that the word got out properly.”

“It doesn't make sense that he would give up everything,” I said.

“Did you read those letters?”

“Still—”

“And he wasn't giving up hardly anything. Only us. He'd end up with more money than he had, once the government clamped down on the diamond market, which Uncle George says would certainly happen. Poppa has hidden diamonds everywhere you could imagine.”

“I can't imagine he'd harm his family. And family tradition was so important to him.”

She chuckled. “So was his freedom, and he figured that we'd be let off. He probably also figured we'd all be safe in the bunkers. But he knew Mother wouldn't go to the bunker because of her claustrophobia. He *knew* that, and he killed her just as sure as if he pulled the trigger.”

“But he came back,” I said.

“Yes, Paul. I *brought* him back.”

“How?”

“Uncle George. He knows everything Poppa knows. He and I—became Poppa, and used the slaves and his contacts to chase him down. We caught him buck naked with his mistress. I've got more photographs, but Uncle George is against letting the press have them.”

“I should imagine he would be.”

“And so am I—of course.”

I nodded and watched her walk over to the desk and adjust the contraption.

“Come here, Paul, and I'll show you how Poppa kept an eye on everything.”

I followed her to the desk, and she turned a switch that engaged gears below us—I could hear them shift. She directed me to look into the concave glass that covered the large pipe. For an instant everything looked ghostly and smeary, as if I were gazing at a crystal ball, and then my eyes grew accustomed to the images. I was looking into a room lit by uniform light. Looking down. Looking at Randolph Estes Jefferson, the old man himself. God.

“Can you see him?” Phoebe asked.

I nodded, fascinated. The room looked slightly askew, curved somehow, as if the edges were being pulled upward.

“It's hard to see sometimes.”

“What's he *doing* ?” I asked. He seemed to be kneeling beside his bed, except the bed was transparent as a diamond.

“That's the biggest diamond in the world—except for the mountain, of course,” Phoebe said.

“Is he praying to it?”

Phoebe laughed mirthlessly. “He asked to have it sent down. It was all he wanted.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it's perfect,” Phoebe said. “Poppa has had I don't know how many diamond cutters working on it. They're all in the tunnels.”

“You mean they're dead,” I said.

She nodded.

I gazed at the stone, which seemed to be suffused with blue light.

“He calls it God's Blue, and I don't know what he's doing with it now. I eavesdropped on him when I first sent it down. He tried making some sort of deal with God. If God would turn everything around like it was before he left, he would give up all his sins and build God a diamond cathedral. Silly, but I guess he's quite mad.” She looked at me—I could feel her staring at me—and said, “But no more mad than the rest of us, I suppose.”

“Are you just going to leave him there?” I asked.

“Until he drops dead,” Phoebe said quietly.

“Have you talked to him?”

“I’ll never speak to him again, but Uncle George visits him regularly and makes sure he eats.”

“The other men will kill him.”

“No, they can’t get to him. Poppa is perfectly safe.” After a pause, Phoebe asked if I wanted to say hello to Uncle George. She turned one switch on and another off and said, “Hello, Uncle George.”

I could see Uncle George looking straight up at us. He had been fiddling with his trains, which were all speeding around the miniature countryside with great electrical abandon.

“Hello, Phoebe.”

“He can’t see us,” Phoebe said.

“Phoebe—are you there?” George asked.

“Yes, I’m here, and so is Paul Orsatti.”

“Aha, so you’ve finally gotten up the courage to pop the question.”

“Not yet, Uncle George,” Phoebe said.

“Ah—? So why then are you calling me?”

“To ask you to come up and help us.”

“You’re doing just fine, Phoebe,” George said. “You don’t need me up there. You’ve got Paul— Hi, Paul.”

“Hi, George,” I said.

“No, I had more than enough of ‘up there’ when I was up there. Now stop watching me walk around in my underwear and fix things up with Paul. Bye, Paul.”

“Bye, George,” I said.

Phoebe clicked off the contraption.

“Well?” I asked. “What did George mean about popping the question?”

“What do you think he meant?”

“Stop it, Phoebe, and answer me.”

“It’s just what you probably think.” She looked intently at the carpet and whispered, “Do you want to marry me?”

I was going to say yes immediately, but something caught in my throat. I wanted to rush to her, envelop

her in my arms, and protect her. She was the pearl beyond price, the object of my desire. She looked perfect standing before me, her ribbon golden in the sunlight streaming through arched windows, her face flawless; and yet suddenly she seemed—flat, featureless like the denizens of dreams, dangerous creatures that suddenly appear, that *look* familiar, but are something else entirely.

Phoebe looked pale and white and fragile. She looked up at me and said, “You see—? There, I have your answer.”

“I haven't said *anything* yet.”

“Which says it all, doesn't it.”

“No,” I said. “I love you.”

“But—”

“No buts.”

“Then you'll marry me—?”

I nodded and started to move toward her, but she took a step backward.

“And you'd be willing to live here?” she asked.

“You mean as a prisoner?”

“No, as my husband.”

“Would I be a prisoner?”

“You would be my husband,” she said; and I felt a thrill of possibility—that I would be with her, but more than that—that I could change things, I could—

“And as my husband, you would respect the way things are,” Phoebe said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“The way we live—the way we are.”

“Of course, but we can make things better.”

She looked away from me, as if considering. Then she said, “We *will* make things better. It's already happening. I'm rebuilding everything Poppa and those pilots destroyed. I hate pilots—except for you, darling.” She smiled at me, as though I had provided her with all the answers. “We could make everything ever so much better. Poppa didn't think smart enough. We'll camouflage everything, so even if planes fly overhead, they won't see anything but rocks. Of course, it won't be rocks.” She hugged me and said, “You're brilliant. I'll tell Uncle George about your idea, and he'll figure out how to do it. He won't want to stay down there in the Pit anymore. He *loves* to solve problems—”

Phoebe must have seen something register on my face because she stopped talking and gave me a quizzical look. “But that wasn't what you meant, was it? So who *do* you want to make things better for?”

she demanded. “The servants? The prisoners in the Pit?”

“Both, for a start.” I understood then that this mountain was the only thing that was real for Phoebe. She would never leave it for very long—or change it.

Her eyes suddenly became moist. “Poppa told me you’d be as selfish and greedy as all the rest of them.” She turned away from me and walked out the door.

And I realized that I still loved her more than ever.

## **Eleven**

I shouted “Pung” and concentrated on our game of mah-jongg while Uncle George's Lionel trains steamed and clattered around us. George was a good player—and he'd assured me that Phoebe would probably take me back once I saw the light of reason.

It was simply a matter of time—and conscience.

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