

1

Elaine's, late.

Stone Barrington sat with his client, Mike Freeman, of Strategic Services, and his former partner from his NYPD days, Dino Bacchetti, over the ruins of dinner and a bottle of excellent Cabernet.

"That was good," Mike said. "I never knew how good the food was here, until you started bringing me."

"Comfort food," Dino said.

Elaine sat herself down in the spare chair. "Comfort food?" she asked. "Is that some kind of crack?"

"It's high praise," Stone said quickly, not wanting to get her started. Elaine's did not enjoy a high reputation with the food critics of the local media, because they didn't come often enough to get the good tables, but the regulars knew how good the food was, and that was all she really cared about.

"I'll take high praise," Elaine said.

Stone's cell phone hummed on his belt, and he dug it out of its holster. "Stone Barrington."

"Stone, it's Arrington," she said. Stone and Arrington had once been a very big item, to the extent of his having fathered a son by her.

“Well, hello there,” he said. “I thought I’d never hear from you again.” They had spent one night together in his Maine house, on Islesboro, at Dark Harbor, and then she had taken her leave, saying it was over.

“I want to hire you,” she said.

“I’m for hire. How’s Peter?”

“He misses his father,” she said.

Stone wondered which father she meant, himself or her late husband, movie megastar Vance Calder, whose son the world believed Peter to be. Stone didn’t know what to say.

“I mean Vance,” she said. “He hardly knows you.”

“All right,” Stone said. “Why do you want to hire me?”

“I’m going to say this fast, because I’m sleepy, and I want to go to bed. I know you’re at Elaine’s at this hour, but I’m not.”

“So, say it fast.”

“You remember Centurion Studios? A large Hollywood film factory.”

“I believe so.”

“You remember that Vance owned a third of the shares when he died?”

“I didn’t know it was that much.”

“He’d been buying the stock for many years, every time somebody died and some shares became available.”

“Got it.”

“There’s a stockholders’ meeting coming up, and there will be a vote on whether to sell the studio. It has always been closely held, and Vance wanted to keep it that way.”

“Who’s buying?”

“I don’t know, some corporation or other. They’ll sell the property to developers, and the studio will just be a letterhead.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“Vote my shares against the sale, and do what you can to get the other stockholders to vote against it.”

“How many are there?”

“A couple of dozen, maybe. I’ll send you a list, along with my signed proxy, to the Bel-Air house. You can have the guesthouse, as usual. Manolo and Carmen will take good care of you.”

Manolo and Carmen were the Filipino houseman and his wife who ran the place. Stone knew he would be taken care of very well indeed. “All right, I guess I can manage that.”

“Can you get there tomorrow?”

“Or the day after,” Stone said. He wanted to fly himself in his new airplane.

“I guess that will be all right,” she answered. “You remember Rick Barron?”

“Yes, I met him and his wife at Vance’s burial.”

“That’s right. Call him as soon as you get there, and take him and his wife, Glenna, to dinner. Rick is in his nineties now, but he’s sharp as a straight razor, and he’s leading the fight to keep the studio closely held.”

“I’ll be glad to do that.”

“In fact, invite them to the house, and let Manolo and Carmen do the dinner. They know all the Barrons’ favorite dishes.”

“All right.”

“Call me when you get there?”

“Will do.”

“Say hello to Elaine and Dino.”

“Will do.”

“Goodbye.” She hung up.

Stone put away his phone. “Arrington says hello to both of you,” he said to them.

“How is she?” Elaine asked.

“Sleepy,” Stone replied. “Dino, you want to spend a few days in L.A.?”

“On whose nickel?” Dino asked.

“Transportation is free, and we’ll be staying in Arrington’s guesthouse.”

“I’m in,” Dino said.

Mike spoke up. “Can you just walk away from the NYPD that way?”

“I get time off, just like everybody,” Dino said, “but I get to approve when, and I approve this one.”

“Okay,” Mike said.

“Mike,” Stone said, “Dino has the NYPD by the ear, didn’t you know? He’s a law unto himself over there. The new commissioner, who doesn’t know him very well, loves him.”

“He’d love me more, if he knew me better,” Dino said.

Elaine pinched Dino’s cheek. “To know him is to love him,” she said, planting a big kiss on his forehead. She got up and made her move to the next table of regulars.

Dino rubbed his cheek. “I hope she didn’t make a bruise.”

“With that five o’clock shadow, who could tell?” Stone asked.

“You guys have the life,” Mike said. “And I’ll bet you’re going to fly the Mustang out there.”

“You betcha,” Stone replied.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Dino said. “I didn’t volunteer for suicide.”

“It’s time you had your first flight in the Citation Mustang,” Stone said.

“He’s right, Dino,” Mike echoed. “You’ll love it.”

Dino looked doubtful. “I just don’t know if God intended Stone to be put in charge of a jet airplane.”

“You liked my old airplane well enough,” Stone said.

“Yeah, but it had a propeller up front that made it go, and I took comfort in that.”

“The Mustang has two engines, Dino,” Mike said, “and they’re fan jets. Twice the safety.”

“No propellers, though.”

“Propellers would just slow it down,” Stone said.

“Mike, you think I should do this?”

“I’ve flown with him, Dino; he’ll get you there.”

“Well, okay, if you say so.”

“You get a choice of seats,” Stone said. “Up front with me, or you can lounge in the back and sleep all the way.”

“How could I sleep with you at the controls?” Dino asked. “I’ll take my chances up front, where I can do something, if I have to.”

“I’ll teach you to fly the airplane, Dino,” Stone said.

“Hey, that’s a good idea. That way when you turn blue and clutch your chest, I can save myself.”

“I wish I could be alive to see that,” Stone replied.