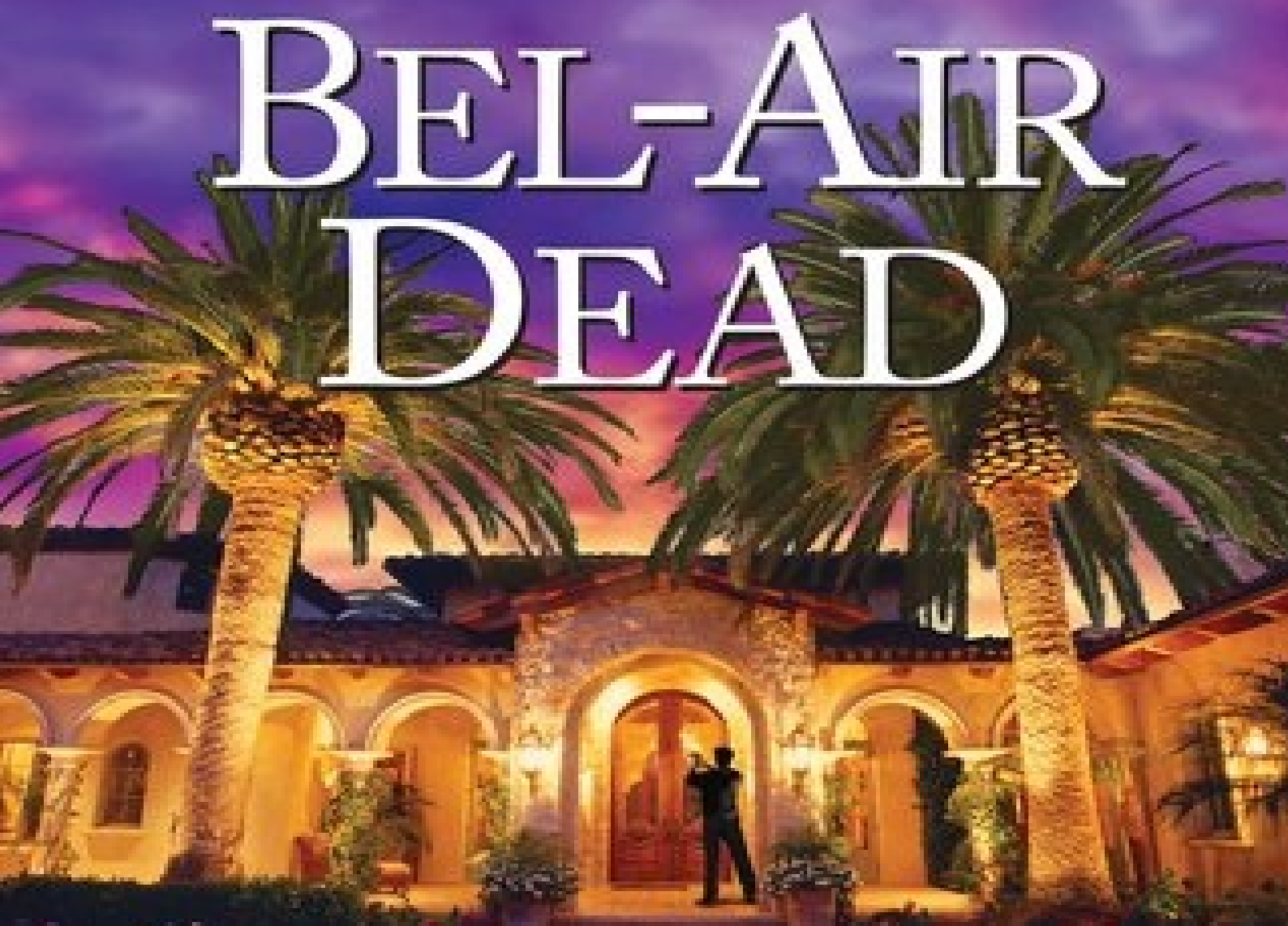


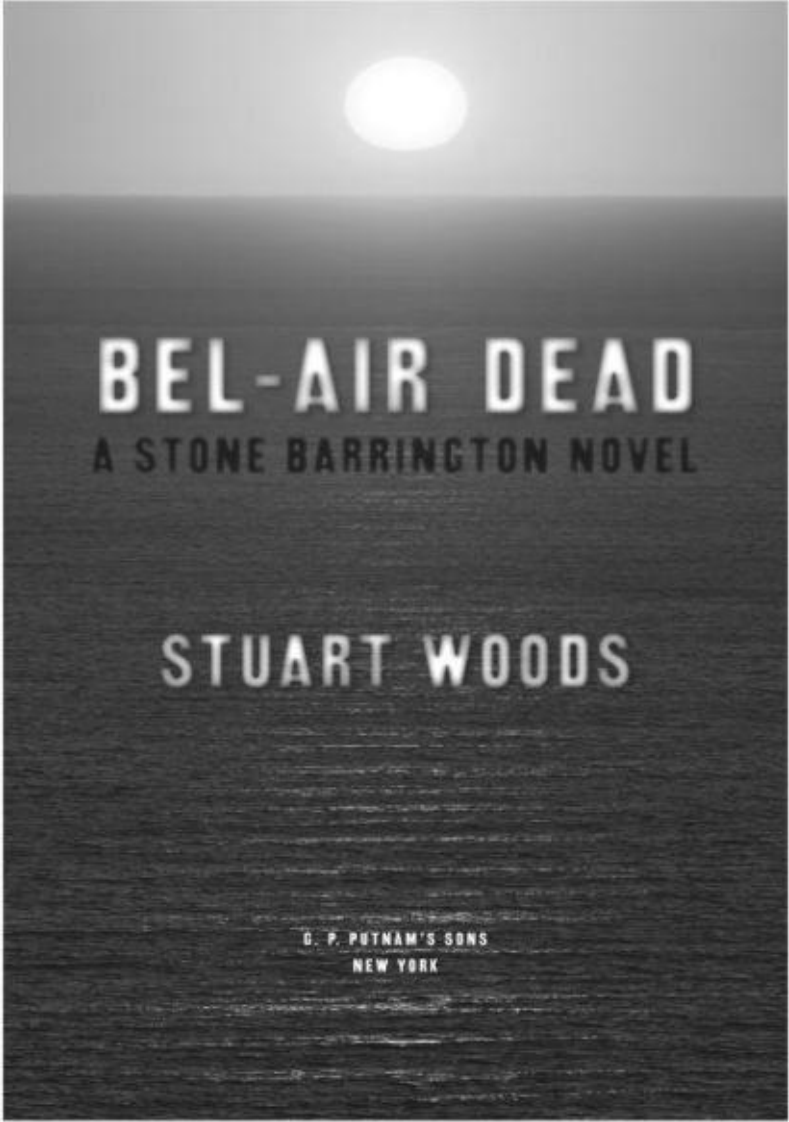
STUART WOODS

New York Times–bestselling author of *Lucid Intervals*

A STONE BARRINGTON NOVEL

BEL-AIR DEAD







BEL-AIR DEAD
A STONE BARRINGTON NOVEL

STUART WOODS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)
[Chapter 42](#)
[Chapter 43](#)
[Chapter 44](#)
[Chapter 45](#)
[Chapter 46](#)
[Chapter 47](#)
[Chapter 48](#)
[Chapter 49](#)
[Chapter 50](#)
[Chapter 51](#)
[Chapter 52](#)
[Chapter 53](#)
[Chapter 54](#)
[Chapter 55](#)
[Chapter 56](#)
[Chapter 57](#)
[Chapter 58](#)
[Chapter 59](#)
[Chapter 60](#)
[Chapter 61](#)

[*AUTHOR'S NOTE*](#)

BOOKS BY STUART WOODS

FICTION

Strategic Moves²
Santa Fe Edge⁴
Lucid Intervals²
Kisser²
Hothouse Orchid¹
Loitering with Intent²
Mounting Fears³
Hot Mahogany²
Santa Fe Dead⁴
Beverly Hills Dead
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Fresh Disasters²
Short Straw⁴
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Dirty Work²
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The Short Forever²
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Cold Paradise²
L.A. Dead²
The Run³
Worst Fears Realized²
Orchid Beach¹
Swimming to Catalina²
Dead in the Water²
Dirt²
Choke
Imperfect Strangers
Heat
Dead Eyes
L.A. Times
Santa Fe Rules⁴
New York Dead²

Palindrome

Grass Roots³

White Cargo

Deep Lie³

Under the Lake

Run Before the Wind³

Chiefs³

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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.

Stone rose the following morning, showered, shaved, packed and took his luggage down to the garage in the elevator. He put his bags in the trunk of his car and went to his office.

His secretary, Joan Robertson, put some papers on his desk. "Sign these," she said.

Stone signed them.

She picked them up. "Thank you."

"What were those?" Stone asked.

"Just a complete power of attorney and assignment of all your assets to me, personally, with immediate effect."

"Oh, okay," he said absently. "I'm going to L.A. for a few days," he said.

"Another vacation?" she asked.

"You know I never take vacations, unless there's work involved."

"What's the work?"

"Voting some shares at a stockholders' meeting for Arrington Calder."

"Sounds simple enough."

"No, I have to persuade others to vote with me."

"If there are any women in the group, you'll succeed," she said.

Stone brightened. "That's a thought," he said.

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know—give me a week."

"It's not as though you're needed here," she said. "I can handle whatever comes along."

Stone knew that was close to the truth. "Try not to practice any law," he said. "You'll get arrested."

"Don't worry, there won't be any of my fingerprints on anything." She flounced back to her office.

At Teterboro Airport, Stone did his walk-around preflight inspection of the airplane while Dino stowed their luggage in the forward compartment. When he finished, Dino was standing, staring at the airplane. It was the first time he'd seen it, Stone reflected.

"Well, I like the paint job," Dino said.

"Is that it?"

"The airplane is kind of pretty; it looks like it could fly, if it had to."

Stone pushed him aboard and settled him in the copilot's seat, then pulled up the stairs and closed the door. He got into the pilot's seat, ran through the checklist, and started the engines.

Then he called Teterboro Clearance and got his IFR clearance for his first leg.

"How many times do we have to stop?" Dino asked.

"Twice, if we're lucky. There'll be very little in the way of headwinds today, maybe even a little tailwind. That's unusual."

"I'll take what I can get," Dino said.

Stone radioed Ground Control and got permission to taxi. Shortly, they were ready for takeoff.

Stone looked at Dino and saw a film of sweat on his forehead. "I turned on the air-conditioning," he said. "Are you still hot?"

"I'll be okay," Dino said, mopping his brow.

It occurred to Stone that Dino might really be nervous about flying in the jet. "I'll give you

something to look at," he said, pointing to the copilot's Primary Flight Display. He pressed a button on the throttle and a wide, magenta V popped up on the screen. "When we take off, all I have to do is to keep the yellow V, which represents the airplane, nestled up against the magenta V, which represents our climb angle and course. As long as the two are together, we're fine."

"Okay," Dino said, tightening his seat belt.

The tower called and cleared them for takeoff. Stone taxied onto Runway One, stopped the airplane, centered the heading control, and, with the brakes on, shoved the throttles all the way forward. The engines ran up, and he released the brakes. The little jet shot down the runway, and, at ninety knots, Stone rotated, pulling the yellow V up into the magenta V. He raised the landing gear and flaps, then, at 700 feet, he pressed the autopilot button and turned the heading bug to 040. At 1,500 feet, following the departure procedure, he turned to 280 and climbed to 2,000 feet, then the controller gave him 10,000 feet, and they were on their way.

Dino was staring at the PFD.

"It's okay to look out the window now," Stone said. "The autopilot is flying the airplane, and it is a better pilot than I."

Dino looked around. "This isn't bad," he said. "It's quieter than your old airplane, and smoother, too."

"That's the idea," Stone said. The controller handed them off to New York Center, and they climbed to their final altitude of Flight Level 340, or 34,000 feet. Stone reduced power to the cruise détente on the throttles. "That's it," he said. "Now the airplane flies us to Wichita."

Dino looked at the chart on the big panel display. "That looks like a long way."

"See these two rings?" Stone said, pointing. "The dotted one is the distance we can fly and still have a forty-five-minute fuel reserve, and it falls beyond Wichita. The solid ring is the distance we can fly before dry tanks."

"Let's not fly that far," Dino said.

"And we even have a little tailwind," Stone said, pointing at the indicator.

They refueled at Wichita and took off again.

Dino handed Stone a sandwich and a Diet Coke from the ice drawer. "Where's our next stop?"

"Santa Fe."

"Why that far south?"

"We could refuel in Denver, but look," he said, pointing at the display. "The Nexrad shows some thunderstorms over the Rockies, so we'll go south of them to Santa Fe, then on to Santa Monica. The weather along that route is clear all the way."

"Got it."

They picked up three hours with the time change, and as they made their final turn on approach to Santa Monica, the sun was setting before them like a big red ball into the Pacific.

Stone left a refueling order. Then their rental car was brought out to the airplane, and they drove to Vance Calder's home in Bel-Air.

"This is possibly the ritziest neighborhood in Greater Los Angeles," Stone said, "and Vance owned eight acres of it." They drove through the open gates and pulled up in front of the house.

Manolo awaited them with a luggage cart. His greeting was warm, and he led them through the house to the back garden, where the sumptuous guesthouse awaited them by the pool.

Stone and Dino had both stayed here before, and they settled in quickly.

"What time would you like dinner?" Manolo asked.

“Well, it’s three hours earlier here than in New York. How about nine?”

“Of course,” Manolo said, then left them to unpack.

They dined by the pool. The evening was cool and pleasant and the food delicious.

Stone’s cell phone went off. “Hello?”

“It’s Arrington,” she said. “There’s been a change of plans.”

Stone sighed. "What do you mean, a change in plans?"

"I want you to vote my shares for the sale of the studio."

"I guess I'm tired after the flight," Stone said. "I thought you just said you wanted me to vote your shares for the sale of the studio."

"That's exactly what I said."

"But what about Vance's wishes?" Stone asked. "You said he had always wanted the studio to be closely held, not sold to some developer."

"I wish I could follow his wishes, but I can't," Arrington said.

"What's wrong, Arrington? Why the about-face?"

"I need the money."

Stone was astounded. Arrington had been left a *very* wealthy woman at Vance's death. "Arrington, really am very tired after a long flight. Can I call you in the morning, and then we'll find the best way to do this?"

"All right, but I'm not changing my mind again," she said. "Good night." She hung up.

Dino was looking at him. "She flip-flopped?"

"She flip-flopped."

"Oh, well, what do you care?"

"I'm too tired to care right now," Stone said. "I'm going to bed." Ten minutes later, he was asleep.

Stone woke the following morning in a strange, sunlit room. It took him a moment to orient himself and to realize the phone was ringing. He struggled to sit up in bed and grab the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Stone? It's Rick Barron," a voice said. He sounded a lot younger than his ninety-odd years.

"Good morning, Rick," Stone said. "It's been a long time."

"Too long. Arrington called me a couple of days ago and said you were winging your way west."

"Yes, and she suggested we have dinner. Would you and Glenna like to come here tonight?"

"We'd love that; I've always been a sucker for Carmen's cooking. May we bring a guest?"

"Of course. Seven o'clock?"

"I see you remember L.A. is an early town. That's perfect."

"I'll look forward to seeing you," Stone said. They said goodbye.

Someone rapped on Stone's window, and he looked up to see Dino outside, wearing a terry robe.

"Come on," he shouted through the closed window. "Breakfast."

Stone brushed his teeth and took his vitamin pill, then got into the guest robe and his slippers and went outside.

"I ordered for you," Dino said, waving him to the seat on the other side of the table. "Man, you were out last night. Sleep well?"

"I think so; I don't remember," Stone said, taking a seat.

Manolo and Carmen were coming across the garden with trays. They set them before Stone and Dino and simultaneously took the covers away.

"Eggs Benedict!" Stone said. "My favorite."

"I knew that," Dino said.

“Oh, Manolo, Carmen: Rick and Glenna Barron are coming to dinner tonight at seven with another guest. I think you know the things they like.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Stone,” Manolo said. “We will be ready for them.” The couple returned to the kitchen.

“Who are Rick and Glenna Barron?” Dino asked.

“Rick is the chairman and CEO of Centurion Studios,” Stone replied. “I think he’s mostly confined himself to management for a while, now, but he still produces a picture now and then. His wife is Glenna Gleason.”

“The old-time movie star? I love her!”

“Not as old as Rick, I think, but getting up there. I met them at Vance’s burial a few years back. I’m supposed to plot with Rick about how to save the studio, but now Arrington has pulled this reversal, and I don’t know what to do.”

“What, exactly, is the deal about?” Dino asked.

“I think Rick is going to explain that to us tonight,” Stone replied.

“And then you explain that Arrington is voting against him?”

“God, I hope not. I’ve got to talk seriously to Arrington.”

An hour later, Stone called Arrington at her Virginia horsecountry home.

“Hello?” She sounded sleepy.

“Did I wake you?”

“Not really, I sort of slept in this morning. I’m sorry I got you when you were so tired last night.”

“I’ve recovered now, and I want you to explain to me why you need the money from the sale of your studio stock.”

“Oh, Stone, this is going to sound crazy to you, but I learned yesterday that I have an opportunity to buy a neighboring horse farm and business.”

“What kind of business?”

“Breeding and racing thoroughbreds,” she replied. “Perhaps you’ve heard of it; it’s called Virginia Champion Farms.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of it; it’s just about the biggest racing farm in the country, isn’t it?”

“The biggest outside Kentucky, anyway. The owner, Rex Champion, who’s a friend of mine, is getting on in years and is ready to sell. Horse farms are down in price right now, along with everything else, and this is a wonderful opportunity.”

“How much?”

“I got him down to fifty million dollars.”

Stone was struck dumb.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“I’m still here; I’m just stunned.”

“My financial adviser says it’s worth sixty million, and that’s what he was asking, but I got him down to fifty. I can’t sell stocks right now, what with the market being the way it is, and my biggest asset is Centurion. This buyer has come along at just the right time.”

“And that’s all you can sell to raise the fifty million?”

“I’m afraid so. Oh, I’m sentimental about the studio, Stone, but I’ve always wanted to be in racing.”

“I thought your only interest in horses was hunting and dressage.”

“Those things cost money; racing horses *makes* money.”

“Arrington, you’re not a businesswoman, and that’s a big business.”

“The beauty of it is that I get the whole thing intact, with a staff, a board of directors, and all the real estate and stock. In a better year, it would cost seventy-five million!”

“Arrington, let me look into all this. I’m having dinner with Rick Barron tonight, and I want to hear what he has to say, and I can look into Virginia Champion for you, too.”

“Oh, all right, but I’m not going to change my mind about this, Stone. Remember, you’re working for me, not yourself.”

“I’ll speak with you in a day or two,” Stone said, and hung up.

Stone got dressed and called Bill Eggers. Eggers was the managing director of the law firm to which Stone was of counsel—meaning he handled the cases the firm did not wish to be seen to handle. This association gave him advice and backup when he needed it, and he needed it now.

Eggers came on the line. “Morning, Stone; what can I do you for?”

“You can do me some advice, Bill, and some other help.”

“What have you got yourself into now?”

“Two very large business deals,” Stone replied.

“That’s a little out of your line, isn’t it?”

“Bill, why do you think I’m calling you?”

“Oh, all right; what do you need?”

“I need these two deals looked at objectively,” Stone said. “The first is the possible sale of Centurion Studios to some real estate developer. I know you have the contacts out here to put an ear to the ground. I want to know what’s being said about the deal.”

“I can do that; what’s the other one?”

“Arrington Calder wants to buy Virginia Champion Farms for fifty million dollars. You know the company?”

“I do, and I know Rex Champion. He’s a gentleman, but with a sharp edge.”

“I want to know what the farms are worth in today’s dollars—land, horses, other assets—and I want to know about the quality of the current management, and see the profit-and-loss statements for the past ten years or so.”

“To find out all that I’m going to have to send a business appraiser outfit down there to rake the books and talk to the people. We can’t do this surreptitiously.”

“Of course not.”

“And Arrington is going to pay for the assessment?”

“She will.”

“I need a direct statement from her about that, not your opinion of what she’ll do. This is going to cost in the low six figures and take a couple of weeks.”

“I’ll get her permission today.”

“I’ll make the call as soon as I hear from you. In the meantime, I’ll make some calls about the Centurion deal. Are you in L.A.?”

“Yes, I’m here to vote Arrington’s shares in Centurion.”

“Okay. See you.” Eggers hung up.

Stone called Arrington. “We have to send somebody to Virginia Champion to look the company over.”

“Why? I trust Rex Champion.”

“This is just due diligence, Arrington; it has to be done to protect you, and it’s going to cost in the low six figures. Champion will understand; call him and tell him these people will be there tomorrow.”

“Oh, all right, but this is embarrassing.”

“It’s business; Champion will understand that, and you have to learn not to be embarrassed about proper business requests.”

Arrington hung up, and Stone called Eggers back to report the conversation. He was done for now, until he saw Rick Barron, anyway.

Stone and Dino were in the living room of the main house when Manolo ushered in Rick and Glenna Barron. They rose to greet their guests, and Stone introduced them to Dino.

“Our other guest will be along shortly,” Rick said, as they shook hands. His handshake was dry and firm, and his movements were not those of a very old man. Glenna, amazingly, looked a healthy sixty. Everyone ordered drinks.

“When did you arrive, Stone?” Rick asked as they sat down.

“Yesterday afternoon, late. I flew us out.”

“Oh, in what?”

“A Cessna Citation Mustang, recently acquired.”

“Beautiful little airplane,” Rick said.

“I know that you flew off carriers in World War II,” Stone said.

“Yes, but I flew a lot more than that. My father owned a little FBO at Santa Monica Airport, and I flew charter flights for him for years. I still own the FBO. I’ve also been type rated in every jet Centurion has owned, including the current Citation Ten, though I haven’t been pilot-in-command for years. I still have my medical certificate, too.”

“I didn’t know all that, Rick; you’ll have to come and fly my airplane.”

“I’ve already flown one, thanks. We’re thinking of buying a smaller, shorter-range airplane for flying around the West.”

The doorbell rang, and Manolo escorted in a tall, striking blonde. It took Stone a moment to recognize her.

“Stone!” she said, rushing toward him and planting a tender, juicy kiss on his lips.

Stone dabbed at his lips with a handkerchief, and it came away red. “Charlene, it’s so good to see you,” he said, then introduced her to Dino, who was flabbergasted to meet a bona fide movie star. Stone had had a brief fling with Charlene Joiner on a previous visit to L.A., just as she had had flings with numerous men, including a president.

They all sat down again, and Manolo served their drinks.

“Rick was telling us about his flying career,” Stone said.

“I’ve flown with Rick, and he’s a marvelous pilot,” Charlene said.

Rick warmed to the conversation. “Stone, do you remember the movie actor Clete Barrow?”

“Of course,” Stone said. “He swashed a lot of buckles in his time. Died in the war, didn’t he?”

“That’s right, he did. In September of 1939 I flew Clete, David Niven, and Clark Gable up to Oregon for some steelhead fishing on the Rogue River. We were up there when we heard Neville Chamberlain on the shortwave radio, announcing that a state of war existed between Britain and Germany. We returned to L.A. immediately, and before you knew it, Clete and Niven had left for England, where they joined their old regiments. Niven had a splendid war record, and Clete died at Dunkirk, getting his men onto boats. After Clark’s wife, Carole Lombard, was killed in an airplane crash while returning from a bond tour, Clark enlisted, too. So did I, but for a different reason.”

“That was quite a moment in history,” Stone said.

“Glenna got into it, too,” Rick said. “I was serving aboard the aircraft carrier *Saratoga* when she came aboard with Artie Shaw’s band for a show, and we got to have a very brief meeting.”

“It was a remarkable experience,” Glenna said. “Artie, the band, and I were lowered from the main deck into a huge area hangar belowdecks on an aircraft elevator, and three thousand sailors went wild. I’ve never heard such a sound, before or since.”

Manolo came into the room. “Dinner is served,” he said, and everyone followed him into the dining

room.

~~Rick walked arm in arm with Stone and whispered, "We'll get down to business over coffee."~~

When the dishes had been taken away, Manolo approached the table. “Would you like to have coffee in the study, Mr. Stone?”

“Thank you, yes, Manolo,” Stone replied, and stood.

Glenna looked across the table at Dino. “Dino, would you like to take a look at the gardens while they talk business?”

“Of course,” Dino said, standing and offering her his arm.

Stone, Rick Barron, and Charlene Joiner settled in the comfortable library/study with coffee and brandy.

“Now, Stone,” Rick said, “I want to tell you what’s going on and where we stand.”

“Thank you,” Stone said.

“A private hedge fund called Prince Investments has made us two offers, both of which we rejected the most recent one over the objections of nearly half our stockholders. Now they’re coming back with a final offer, and I’m going to need fifty-one percent of the voting shares to keep us in business.”

“What was the last offer?” Stone asked.

“Twenty-five hundred dollars a share,” Rick said. “My sense of the other stockholders is that they’ll sell at something near three thousand.”

“How many stockholders?”

“Fifty-five. Arrington is the largest shareholder, with three hundred thirty-three thousand shares, I’ve got a hundred thousand shares—I’ve sold various blocks over the years to studio executives, to keep them—and Charlene has fifty thousand shares.”

“How many shares extant?”

“One million. With Arrington’s shares we’ve got four hundred thirty-three thousand, and I know of one other stockholder who will very likely vote with us—Eddie Harris, who was running the studio when I joined them, in 1938, had two daughters, one of whom died in her thirties. The other is Jennifer, who is in her midseventies now, and she holds twenty-five thousand shares, which can put us over the top.”

“Tell me what will happen to the studio if the sale takes place.”

“The studio was originally on two hundred acres, and we sold off fifty in the 1960s to build Centurion City, a mixed commercial/ residential development. That money got us out of debt, and we’ve stayed that way. Prince’s offer is for one hundred ten of the remaining one hundred fifty acres. That would consist of all of the back lot—our standing sets—our Western town, our small-town square sets, and numerous street sets, including our New York streets. It would rob us of five of our six soundstages, two of our three audio recording studios, and our set storage buildings. We would become, in essence, a small office park, including our admin buildings and the offices we rent to a couple of dozen independent producers who use our production facilities.”

“And what would that do to your ability to make pictures and TV shows?”

“It would devastate us,” Rick replied. “We would have to rent soundstages for our movie and TV productions, which would dramatically increase our production costs and cut our profits. Our hallmark has always been to make quality pictures and TV shows on moderate budgets. We simply could not continue our present production schedule, much less expand it. Centurion would become a shell, like too many of the remaining studios. I didn’t spend two-thirds of my life in this business in order to see that happen to it.”

“Who are the people who want to sell?”

“They’re all studio employees or independent producers on the lot. They own, generally speaking, from as little as fifty shares to twenty thousand shares. Some of them are nearing retirement age, and they can sell us back their stock at a price determined by a formula, which would net them, maybe a third of what selling the studio would.”

“So, some of them stand to make forty million to sixty million dollars if the studio is sold.”

“Yes, and as you can see, that is a strong motive for selling.”

“Yes, I can understand that. Any hope of getting some of them on your side?”

Rick shook his head. “I’ve been working on this for two months; we’ve boiled the list down to the four of us: Arrington, myself, Charlene, and Jennifer Harris.”

“Rick, if you win this fight, how long will you be able to hang on to the studio?”

“I’m leaving my shares to my two grandchildren, and if Arrington hangs on to hers, then we can keep it going as it is for many years.”

“I see,” Stone said.

“Stone, do you understand the importance of keeping Centurion as a working film studio? Not just to the stockholders, but to people everywhere who enjoy intelligent, quality entertainment?”

“I can certainly see why you feel that way,” Stone said. “If I were a stockholder, that’s what I’d want, too.”

“Now we come to the crux of things, Stone,” Rick said. “Jennifer Harris, Charlene, and I are on board. Everything depends on Arrington now. What is she going to do?”

“Has she expressed her intentions to you, Rick?”

“At first, she seemed to be with us, but the last couple of days I’ve sensed that she’s wavering.”

“She has to make some important business decisions not associated with the studio,” Stone explained. “She won’t be able to make a final decision until those have been resolved.”

Rick suddenly looked closer to his age.

“I believe her heart is with you,” Stone said, “and I will do everything I can to swing her shares to you. I’m afraid that’s all I can say, at the moment.”

“I see,” Rick replied.

“Please don’t be disheartened,” Stone said. “This could still work out. When is the new offer expected?”

“Early next week.”

“So we have a week or so to make it work.”

“Yes, I suppose we do.”

“Charlene, are you acquainted with any of the stockholders whom you might be able to swing our way?”

“I’ve pretty much done what I can,” Charlene replied.

Somebody’s cell phone rang. Rick Barron looked at his phone and stood up. “Excuse me for a moment,” he said, then left the room.

Charlene turned her attention to Stone. “It’s good to see you,” she said. “I hope we can get together while you’re here. It’s been too long.”

Stone knew from experience exactly what “get together” meant to Charlene, and he hoped his health was up to it. “It certainly has been too long,” he said. “I’d like that.”

Rick returned to the study and sat down heavily in his chair. “Jennifer Harris is dead,” he said.

Stone and Charlene looked at him.

“How?” Charlene asked.

“I don’t know; the police are at her house.”

“Do you know what her will says about the stock?”

“No,” Rick replied. “She seemed in perfect health.”

Stone rose. "I think we'd better talk again, when you have more information. I hope we can get a grip on this."

Everybody went home, and Stone returned to the guesthouse, where Dino was watching television.

"Nothing's on at the right time out here," he said. "The TV schedule is crazy."

"That's not all that's crazy," Stone said.

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