

THE POWER BROKER

STEPHEN FREY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THE
POWER BROKER

A NOVEL

**STEPHEN
FREY**



BALLANTINE BOOKS

NEW YORK

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*For Diana and our new daughter, Elle
I love you both so much*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Cynthia Manson, my agent; and Mark Tavani, my editor.

Thanks also to Jim and Anmarie Galowski, Gina Centrello, Kevin “Big Sky” Erdman, Dr. Te Forcht Dagi, Stephen Watson, Matt Malone, Chris Tesoriero, Andy Brusman, Gerry Barton, Baro Stewart, Jack Wallace, Gordon Eadon, Marvin Bush, Bart Begley, Barbara Fertig, Bob Wiczorel Scott Andrews, Jeff Faville, Jamie Faville, John Piazza, Bob Carpenter, Pat and Terry Lynch, and Mike Pocalyko.

PROLOGUE

TWO YOUNG MEN knelt side by side in front of a crude altar—a wooden crate they'd found in a cobblestoned alley off Nassau Street—covered with an azure cloth. On the altar was a human skull flanked by two candles. Before the skull lay a polished saber, a Bible open to a favorite passage, and a rolled parchment. Several dark drops stained the Bible and the parchment. Blood from cuts the young men had slashed in their palms.

When the clock on the wall chimed midnight, one of the young men stood and moved behind the altar, pulling the hood of his black robe over his head until only his face was visible in the dim light cast by the flickering candles. With trembling hands he picked up the parchment and untied its scarlet ribbon. Then he solemnly read the flowing script aloud, pausing at the end of a sentence or a long phrase so the other man could repeat after him. When he was finished, they changed positions and repeated the sacrament.

After they had both taken the oath, they shook hands and moved to a desk in one corner of the dormitory room. There they signed a confession, each of them inhaling deeply, thinking long and hard before finally picking up the quill and scratching their names at the bottom of the page. Admitting in detail to the recent rape of a sixteen-year-old girl from town who hadn't gone to the police because they'd threatened to kill her if she did. They were both from prominent Northeastern families. They could deal with the jail sentences—maybe—but not with the shame they'd cast on their families if the crime ever came to light.

Ink dry, they stored the confession, the parchment, the skull, and the Bible in a combination safe in the closet. Then they wrapped the saber in a blanket and slid it under one of the beds in the room.

There were two of them now. They needed seven more.

PART
ONE

CHRISTIAN GILLETTE sat on the balcony of his suite at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, watching first light scale the craggy peaks in the distance. In a few hours tourists would be mobbing the casino on the ground floor. He hoped soon it would be *his* casino they'd be mobbing.

Christian ran Everest Capital, a Manhattan-based investment firm that owned thirty companies in a wide range of industries—smokestack to high-tech. The companies were all large, at least a billion in sales, and Christian chaired eighteen of them. He also chaired Central States Telecom and Satellite, a communications company in Chicago that Everest had taken public six months ago—after owning it for three years. Everest had made four hundred million on the CST initial public offering—Christian had gotten twenty of that. Forty years old, he'd already made fifty times more than most people did in his lifetime, but it hadn't gone to his head. Money was just money, and success could be fleeting.

He dialed Nigel Faraday's cell number. Nigel was one of Everest's five managing partners. There were sixty-four people at the firm, but, other than his assistant, Debbie, the five partners were Christian's only direct reports. Beneath the partners was a burgeoning pyramid of managing directors, vice presidents, and associates, but he rarely dealt with them. Five years ago, he'd known everyone at Everest by name. He missed those days.

Nigel answered on the third ring. "Well, well, you gambling, Chris?" Nigel had lived in the United States for almost twenty years, but his British accent remained heavy. "Sitting in front of some one-armed bandit with your bucket of quarters?" He laughed. "Ah, the *slot machine*. Another wonderful contribution to mankind from you Americans. Right up there with rap music and the Big Mac."

Playing the slots actually sounded like fun to Christian, if only for its pure simplicity, but there wasn't time. It seemed like there never was anymore for things like that. "Hey, I don't mind rap once in a while, and I don't know why you, of all people, would bash the Big Mac. You've eaten your share."

"Hey, chap, what I eat is my business."

"Relax, *chap*, I'm just kidding." Christian heard traffic in the background at the other end of the

line—horns blaring, engines revving, tires skidding. “Where are you?”

“Walking down Park. Bit of a late start to the office this morning, I’m afraid.”

Nigel was huffing as he strode toward Everest’s Park Avenue headquarters. The Brit was thirty pounds overweight thanks to a steady diet of rocky road ice cream and those Big Macs. “Up late last night?” Christian asked. Nigel was fresh into a new relationship with a pretty brunette he’d met a few weeks ago. They were in the infatuation stage, calling each other five times a day and staying out late every night. “I don’t want that woman distracting you, no matter how wonderful she is.”

“Look, I—”

“No, no, I’m glad you’re finally enjoying yourself,” Christian broke in. Nigel had put in a lot of long days the last few years, taking care of administrative details so Christian could focus on the big picture. Nigel had been Mr. Inside so Christian could be Mr. Outside, and the formula worked. Both *Forbes* and *Fortune* had tabbed Everest Capital as one of the top investment firms. “Now, any updates?”

Dead air.

“Nigel?”

“Just one.”

Christian picked up something in Nigel’s tone, and a tiny alarm went off in his head. “What?”

“After you left for Vegas last night, I got an e-mail from Bob Galloway.”

Bob Galloway was the chief financial officer of CST. Despite being chairman of CST, Christian didn’t know Galloway well, just saw him for a few hours at quarterly board meetings. Nigel, on the other hand, knew Galloway very well. Though Nigel wasn’t technically a CST officer like Christian, he was Everest’s day-to-day person on the investment. The one at Everest who constantly kept up with how CST was doing. The one who knew CST’s financial staff and had been in charge of dealing directly with the lawyers and investment bankers during the IPO.

“Some woman from the Securities and Exchange Commission called Galloway yesterday,” Nigel explained.

Hearing from the SEC was like hearing from the IRS or the Grim Reaper: Safe bet it wasn’t good news. “What did she want?” Christian asked.

“She called to demand a meeting. Didn’t tell Galloway any more than that.”

“Okay, call Galloway as soon as we’re finished. Tell him to get back in touch with the SEC right away and find out what’s going on. Let me know as soon as you hear anything. And, Nigel?”

“Yeah?”

“Make sure Galloway doesn’t mention this to anyone else at CST.”

“Sure, sure.”

Christian heard a trace of fear in Nigel’s tone. “It’ll be fine, pal. Don’t worry.”

“Oh, I’m worried all right,” Nigel admitted.

“Being worried doesn’t help.”

“Sorry I’m human. I’m glad you can stay so cool about it, Chris, but those people scare the hell out of me. They can destroy anybody anytime. Remember that guy who got twenty years for telling his girlfriend he had a stock tip over the phone, when what he really said was he had a sock that was ripped?”

“What guy? I don’t remember that.”

“And with my accent,” Nigel continued, “I could see it happening to me.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Oh yeah? Ask the guys at Enron and MCI.”

“They got what they deserved.”

“You’ll be whistling a different tune when they bust into Everest and lead you and me out in shackles in front of the whole firm.”

Sometimes Nigel panicked too quickly. He didn’t have many faults, but hitting the eject button prematurely was one of them. “That call Galloway got was probably nothing, probably just some kind of follow-up on the IPO.”

“I hope so. Hey, what about the casino license?” Nigel asked, his voice growing stronger as he switched subjects. “Everything all right there? Opening day isn’t far off.”

Two years ago Everest Capital had won the National Football League’s new Las Vegas franchise and named it the Dice. They’d spent over seven hundred million for the team and a new stadium they were building east of the city. As part of the deal with the NFL, Christian had gotten permission to build a casino, also naming it the Dice. The casino was supposed to open the day of the team’s home opener, which was just a few months away. On top of the seven hundred million for the team and the stadium, Everest had forked out a billion on construction of the casino—which was almost finished. Now, at the last minute, the Nevada Gaming Commission was holding off on approving the operating license. What seemed like a dream come true a month ago was turning into a nightmare. Christian hadn’t told anyone else at the firm how bad the situation was.

“We’ll get the license,” he assured Nigel. Trying to figure out what was going on with the license was Christian’s main reason for coming to Las Vegas. At two o’clock he was meeting with the

chairman of the Gaming Commission. “Don’t sweat it.” Sometimes it seemed like he spent half his life convincing people there wasn’t any smoke and the other half putting out fires.

“You think the Mob’s involved?” Nigel asked. “Think they’re holding the commission up for some last-minute dough?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m here, to find out.”

“Didn’t we hire somebody in Vegas to take care of those things, to deal with the Mob? Like most people out there do when they’re building something big. What’s his name?”

“Carmine Torino.” Christian had been trying to reach Torino for a week, but suddenly no one could find him. Until now the guy had never taken more than fifteen minutes to return his call. Torino had vanished into thin air.

“Yeah, right, Carmine Torino.”

“I’ve gotta go, Nigel. Ray Lancaster’s going to be here in a few minutes.”

Ray Lancaster was the Dice’s head coach and general manager. Christian had hired him away from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers last February. Nigel had gone to Florida to do the negotiating on the contract, so this was going to be Christian’s first face-to-face meeting with Lancaster.

“Ray’s tough,” Nigel warned.

“He better be. I want the Dice in the play-offs this season so we get all that extra publicity for the casino. Call me back when—”

“What about Laurel Energy?” Nigel interrupted. “Anything on that? Are we close to selling it?”

Christian let out a ten-ton sigh. “Let’s talk about it later.” Laurel Energy was a Canadian oil and gas company—and another Everest problem child. Christian—and everyone else at Everest—had been anticipating a huge profit on the sale of Laurel, but it had been on the market for a while and there weren’t any takers. Just a few nibbles from bottom feeders, and no one could figure out what was wrong because it was reserve-rich. “I’ve got to go,” he said firmly. “Call me back when Galloway knows why the SEC’s snooping around CST so I can—”

“Where’s Allison?”

Another of Nigel’s annoying habits. Sometimes it was impossible to get him off the phone. “What?”

“Where’s Allison? I’ve been trying to get her for days. She’s been out of the office and hasn’t returned my calls.”

Allison Wallace was another of Everest’s five managing partners. “She’s on the West Coast working on that deal, you know, that company she’s been trying to buy for a month. Aero Systems.”

talked to her last night. It's going pretty well. She thinks the sellers are about to agree to terms."

Nigel snorted. "I guess the bitch doesn't think I'm important enough to call back."

"*Hey, Nigel, none of that. She's just—*" There was a loud rap on the suite door. "Talk to you later, Nigel." Christian slipped the phone in his pocket as the person in the hallway knocked again, louder this time. "Who is it?"

"Ray Lancaster."

"Hi, Ray," Christian said, extending his hand when he'd opened the door.

Lancaster had played defensive back for the Lions in the early eighties, but age and the stress of coaching had clearly caught up with him. His curly black hair was thinning and streaked with gray, his cheeks were pudgy, and there was a bulging spare tire beneath his shirt. Like Nigel, Ray probably ate a lot of his frustration.

"Christian Gillette. Thanks for coming so early."

"No problem, been looking at tapes since five this morning. First game's closing in. Cleveland Browns. We're gonna kick some ass. At least on defense."

"Good. I want to make the play-offs this season."

Lancaster stopped short. "Well, I don't know if we're—"

"Let's go out on the balcony," Christian suggested, motioning toward the back of the suite. "I like it." Christian pointed at the Dice logo on Lancaster's aqua golf shirt as they sat down. Two tumbling dice—one showing a single dot, the other six—with a sharp orange flame trailing behind them.

"Yeah, it's way cool."

"How's your family doing?" Lancaster and his second wife had two boys—one thirteen, one eleven. Whenever Christian relocated an executive he always worried about the family adapting to the new city. If the family wasn't happy, neither was the executive. "Las Vegas is a big change from Tampa."

"They're fine. Thanks for asking."

Lancaster seemed anxious, like something was on his mind. "Everything all right, Ray?"

"I should have called you after we inked my contract, but, well, better late than never." Lancaster looked directly into Christian's eyes. "Thanks for giving me this chance. I owe you."

Lancaster hadn't been the Buccaneers general manager in Tampa, just head coach, so this was a big promotion. "Win me a Super Bowl and we'll call it even."

Lancaster laughed nervously. "*Yeah, right.*" He tugged at the front of his shirt like it had suddenly gotten tight. "I didn't think I'd ever get a shot to be a GM in this league," he continued, skirting

Christian's Super Bowl demand. "Hardly any black men get to be head coach in the NFL, let alone GM."

"You've won a lot of football games. You got the Bucs to the NFC championship last year without a lot of talent. You deserve this."

"And I really didn't think I'd get a shot from a *white* man," Lancaster went on. "I thought I might eventually get it from a black owner, but not a guy like you."

Christian could tell it had been tough for Lancaster to admit that. "I don't judge a person by his skin, Ray, I really don't. I look at track record and work ethic, and I listen to what people close to him say." Christian understood the value of letting a camel get his nose into the tent every once in a while, the value of giving someone a brief window into his life, even if it was just momentary. "I grew up in a big house in LA, Ray. We had a couple of Hispanic maids, and my stepmother treated them like dirt. Not because they were maids, because they were Hispanic. I hated that."

Lancaster thought on that, then nodded.

"Now," Christian said emphatically, "how many games are we going to win this season?"

Lancaster gazed out over Las Vegas, his eyes finally focusing on the tower of the Stratosphere Hotel in the distance. It was easily the tallest structure in Las Vegas, over eleven hundred feet, with several terrifying rides at the top. "It's gonna be a wild year. We'll have a lot of close games."

"Why?"

"We got a good defense but no quarterback worth a damn. We're not going to score many points. It'll come down to the last possession in a lot of games."

"You going to start Ricky Poe at quarterback?"

"He's the only game in town. We picked him up in the expansion draft from the Cowboys, but he's ___"

"Not taking anybody to the promised land," Christian broke in. "Yeah, I know. So make a trade. We've got a couple of all-pro linebackers you can use as bait. If I have to choose, I'll take a top quarterback over a top linebacker any day."

Lancaster nodded, impressed. "Did you play something at Princeton?"

"Rugby."

"Man, that's tough. Basically football with no pads."

Christian turned his head so Lancaster had a profile. "Broke my nose twice. The second time it was almost in my left ear when I came to."

Lancaster made a grim face.

~~“Thank God for plastic surgeons.”~~

“Uh-huh, well, look, I’ve been trying to make a trade for weeks and won’t nobody talk to me.”

“What do you mean?” For the second time in a few minutes that tiny alarm went off in Christian head.

“I’ve been calling other coaches around the league, guys I’m close to. Guys who need linebackers and have a good backup quarterback. Guys who would be real likely to trade, but they ain’t calling me back. Christian, these are guys I was on staff with at other teams, guys I go way back with. I even played with a couple of them. But it’s like somebody got to them, like somebody told them not to talk to me.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I know how it sounds, but I don’t know how else to explain it.”

Christian’s cell phone rang. “Excuse me, Ray.”

“Sure.”

“What’s up, Nigel?” he asked, turning away from Lancaster.

“Galloway talked to the gal at the SEC.”

“And?”

“She wouldn’t say much, but it sounds like they’re going to start an investigation of CS Accounting irregularities, she claimed. It sounded serious.”

“*What?* That’s impossible. We run things squeaky clean at all our portfolio companies.”

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger,” Nigel complained. “I’m just telling you what Galloway told me.”

Christian closed his eyes. There were a lot of strange things going on lately. Too many.

THE THREE MEN hustled Alan Agee out of a limousine and into a freight elevator of the Stratosphere Hotel. Agee’s hands were bound behind his back, his mouth was gagged with a greasy rag, and a garbage hood was drawn tightly over his head. As the elevator doors closed, the men picked Agee up and tossed him roughly into a garbage cart, then slammed the lid shut. His muffled screams were barely audible now.

When the men reached the lobby, they wheeled Agee across it, straight past reception and a sleepy-eyed concierge. It was before seven and the lobby was still quiet, so only a few people saw them push

the garbage cart into the tower elevator. Normally this elevator wouldn't have been running until late but today was different. Things had been arranged.

Moments later the elevator doors opened and they were eleven hundred feet up, looking out over crystal-clear Las Vegas morning. The wind was stiff, and the men had to lean into it to keep the balance. They hauled Agee from the cart, cut off the hood and removed the gag, then untied his hands. He wouldn't try to run. There was nowhere to go.

Agee squinted against the bright sun as the hood came off, then glanced toward the railing, terrified. "What do you want?" he asked the man standing closest to him, the leader of the crew.

"I want you to call Christian Gillette and tell him you won't meet with him. Not today, anyway. From now on, you're mine. You do what I say. *Exactly* what I say."

Agee shook his head. "No," he whispered. "You're not gonna scare me like that. This is America."

The men chuckled callously. They'd heard that one before.

The leader nodded and the other two men grabbed Agee. They dragged him to the edge of the deck, kicking and shouting, then picked him up and dangled him over the railing by his ankles.

"Please don't drop me!" Agee screamed back up at them bug-eyed, his arms flailing wildly. "I'll do anything you want! *Anything!*"

PATTY ROTH knelt behind the base of a pine tree as the chopper landed, whipping needles, twigs, and dirt into a tornadic frenzy. She was a hundred feet from the helipad, well hidden in the underbrush, protected from the flying debris. Through the telephoto lens she watched the passenger shake the pilot's hand, then hop out and run toward the lodge, bent over at the waist, an arm in front of his face. She hated these men for what they were doing to her husband. Treating him like he was nothing because he'd taken the fall for someone else.

She had to help him. He wasn't going to help himself.

CHRISTIAN AND LANCASTER had been talking strategy. An intense investor, Christian was active in a number of Everest's portfolio companies, even the ones he wasn't chairman of. And he loved football. He and his father had watched football and golf together on television when he was young. His father had been away a lot, so Christian had precious little time with him, and he'd coveted those Sunday afternoons in the big study watching a big game or a final round. But memories were all he had now. His father had died in a plane crash nearly twenty years ago.

"Let me ask you something," Ray Lancaster spoke up.

“Shoot.”

“I read on the Web site that you guys at Everest Capital own thirty companies. You’re chairman of Everest, chairman of eighteen of those thirty companies, including the one you created to buy the football team and build the casino, and you’re chairman of some public company in Chicago named um, Central Satellite Telecom or something like that.”

“Central States Telecom and Satellite,” Christian corrected, instantly reminded of the SEC’s sudden interest in the company. God, it irritated him to have to deal with the SEC. He was constantly on people’s asses to get them to go the extra mile to make sure something like this *never* happened. “We call it CST.” Christian had been wondering if there was something he’d missed, something he should have seen. Wondering if he should have been more personally involved in the IPO instead of letting Nigel handle everything. Wondering if he hadn’t gotten as involved in the IPO as he normally would have because the truth was he couldn’t take dealing with the minutiae anymore. If, after ten years of constant pressure, he was burning out. “I’m chairman of that company because we owned it before we took it public, and the public shareholders voted to keep me on.”

“How the hell do you have time to be chairman of all of those companies?”

“I’ve got good people working for me who run the businesses day to day. People like you.”

“I hope you’re still saying that in a couple of years,” Lancaster muttered. “Is it all yours and Nigel’s money?”

Christian grinned. “I wish. No, the way it works is that big investors front us the money. Insurance companies, banks, pension funds, wealthy individuals. We buy the companies with the money the investors commit to us, operate them for a few years, then sell them, hopefully for a lot more than we paid.”

Lancaster looked puzzled. “But I read in *Forbes* magazine that you’re worth like five hundred million bucks. If it’s not your money, how can you be worth so much? Do they pay you *that much* salary?” He hesitated. “Or did you inherit it?”

Christian hadn’t inherited a cent. After his father’s death—right after Christian had graduated from Princeton—his stepmother had cut him off from the family. From the money, from everything. For while he’d been forced to beg, borrow, and steal—sometimes literally. “Neither,” he answered. “When we sell companies, we keep twenty percent of the profits. When we sold CST to the public we made four hundred million dollars more than we put in. Our investors got their investment back and three hundred twenty million of the profit. We kept eighty of the profit. One of my jobs as chairman is to spread that eighty around the firm.”

Lancaster shook his head. “Jesus, no wonder you’re worth so much.”

“It isn’t as easy as it sounds. Selling a company for more than you paid takes a lot of work, and almost as much luck.”

Lancaster was looking off at the Stratosphere tower again, a strange expression spreading across his

face. Like he had another important question on his mind, but he really didn't want to ask it.

"What's wrong?" Christian pushed.

"What happened a couple of years ago?"

"What do you mean?" But Christian was pretty sure he knew what Lancaster was getting at.

"There were all these articles on the Internet about you killing the mayor of some little town in Maryland," Lancaster answered, "and being hunted by the cops. The feds even got into it. You were public enemy number one for a few days. Then, bam, you go from desperado to hero. The later articles didn't really explain *why* you were suddenly a hero, but a bunch of senior government people were singing your praises."

"I didn't kill that woman," Christian said sharply. "The mayor of that town, I mean."

"What *did* you do?"

"It's a long story. Some people were trying to frame me for her murder, but, in the end, the truth came out. They were the ones that killed her."

Lancaster nodded. "I know, I read all that. I was just wondering what it was all about."

Christian took a breath. "Here's the thing, I—" His cell phone went off. It was a Las Vegas number he vaguely recognized. "Hello."

"Christian Gillette?" The voice at the other end of the line was faint.

"Yes."

"This is Alan Agee. I'm chairman of the—"

"The Nevada Gaming Commission," Christian interrupted. "Of course." The guy sounded awful like he was about to puke. "I'll see you at two o'clock, right?"

"Can't do it," Agee said. "Got to put it off. Maybe tomorrow. I'll call you back."

The line went dead before Christian could say anything, and he closed the phone slowly. Things were going from strange to bad. And he got the awful sensation that *worse* was lurking just around the corner.

fantasies in front of the others. Called “confessions,” these admissions were audiotaped. The video and audiotapes were the group’s bond, insurance against a member conveying the intimate secrets of their society to anyone outside the circle.

Down through the years the “infidelity requirement” had scared off several promising candidates. Which was something that inspired pride in the members. It was a huge leap of faith for men like these to allow such damning evidence to exist, but it worked. Not once in the history of the Order had anyone disclosed anything about the group to an outsider.

Samuel Prescott Hewitt, master of the Order for the last seven years, sat at the head of the table, his trademark black Stetson lying in front of him. Chairman of U.S. Oil, the largest industrial company in the world, Hewitt was a tough Texan from a long line of wildcatters. He was a man who always played to win. Whether it was the world energy markets or a game of poker with acquaintances at his sprawling ranch outside Dallas, he was as competitive as they came. He called most people acquaintances because he didn’t feel he had friends, not as other men defined the term. Which was fine with him. He’d always been a loner, and he’d always liked working that way because then it was easier to lead—there weren’t any emotions holding you back. He wasn’t even that close to his wife and children. In fact, the only person in the world who really mattered to Hewitt was his fourteen-year-old grandson, Samuel Prescott Hewitt III—Three Sticks, as Hewitt affectionately called the boy. If Hewitt’s confession tapes ever got out, it would destroy the boy—and him.

“The Order will now come into session,” announced Hewitt in a voice that silenced the room, his sharp edge wrapped in a Texas drawl. A natural tone that silenced an auditorium full of ten thousand shareholders as effortlessly as it did a small group of important men. “Proceed.”

The men bowed their heads and in unison recited a brief prayer in Latin, then picked up their glasses of port.

Hewitt stared each man straight in the eyes, thinking of how similar they all were, how they even looked alike. White, male, tall, silver haired, strong chinned, handsome. Like most of the United States Senate, he thought to himself—at least, as long as the Order maintained its influence. He leaned forward and thrust his glass higher into the air. “To Hugues de Payens,” he said fiercely.

“Hugues de Payens,” the other seven echoed solemnly, then drank.

When Hewitt finished his glass, he pointed at Mace Kohler, then at Franklin Laird. Kohler was CEO of Networks Systems International, a large telecom company, and Laird was an ex-chairman of the Federal Reserve. “Please, Mr. Kohler.” The men addressed each other formally once meetings began. “If you would.”

Kohler rose and moved deliberately to a sideboard centered beneath the large, antlered elk head. He picked up a glass and a bottle of Chivas Regal from atop the sideboard, returned to the table, placed the glass and the Scotch down in front of Laird, then retook his seat. Since Laird had missed the last meeting he was in the hot seat tonight, the one who had to confess. Generally, when a member missed a meeting he was the confessor at the next meeting. It was a tradition that kept attendance very high.

After staring at the honey-hued liquid for a few moments, Laird set his thin lips, poured, and swallowed, gasping as he threw back the first gulp.

The other men remained silent while Laird continued to drink straight Scotch. The confessor was allowed ice.

When he was satisfied that Laird had swallowed enough, Hewitt nodded. “That’s enough, Franklin.”

“Thank you,” Laird answered hoarsely, wiping his mouth with a linen napkin as he put the glass down.

“It’s your turn tonight, Mr. Laird. You know how it works.”

“Yes.”

Hewitt gestured toward Richard Dahl, an active five-star Army general who was with the Joint Chiefs. “Please, General Dahl.”

Dahl reached for a tape recorder on the table in front of him and switched it on. “This is Mr. Laird’s confession,” he began, “as documented during meeting forty-seven of the twenty-ninth Order.”

“Twenty-ninth” referred to this being the twenty-ninth distinct group of nine men to comprise the Order. One of the members had died four years ago, ending the twenty-eighth Order. That individual had been replaced by Kohler, marking the beginning of the twenty-ninth.

“Proceed, Mr. Laird,” said Hewitt.

Laird hesitated, allowing the alcohol a few more moments to sink in, trying to find his courage. “Coming on the plane up from D.C. this morning,” he began in a low voice, “there was a very pretty flight attendant. I—I was attracted to her.”

“Did you fly first class?” asked Trenton Fleming. Fleming was chairman of Black Brothers Alley, the last of Wall Street’s great private partnerships. An investment firm outsiders knew little about. “Well, Mr. Laird?”

“No, I flew commercial. Middle seat, too,” he added, clearly annoyed.

“Good,” Hewitt commended. He knew how much Laird hated dealing with the “great unwashed,” he called anyone who he felt wasn’t of his ilk. But it was good for him to live in the real world once in a while. More important, by flying commercial he was less likely to be recognized on his way home to Maine. “Go on. Describe the woman.”

“She was tall with long auburn hair.”

“Big breasts?” Fleming asked. Laird’s fixation with breasts was well documented on both the videotapes and audiotapes.

“What do *you* think?” Laird snapped.

The other men nodded. They knew one another so well.

“Anyway,” Laird continued, “I fantasized about her.”

“Details, brother.”

“I undressed her in my mind.”

“What did you have her do?”

“I—I—” Laird’s voice faltered.

“Come on,” Hewitt pushed. Laird still had a problem with the ritual—even though he’d been member of the Order for sixteen years. Of course, Laird wasn’t the only one. They all did—when came to being the one in the hot seat. All of them except Hewitt. He actually enjoyed it. Each time reminded him of the ritual’s simple beauty, its incredible tradition. “We’re brothers here, blood brothers. No one will ever tell your secrets as long as you don’t tell the Order’s. You believe that don’t you, Mr. Laird?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So?”

Laird took another gulp of Scotch. “I watched her have sex with the pilots.”

Laird’s fantasies didn’t usually involve him having sex. He liked being a voyeur, confessing to the others a few years ago that he had kept an extensive collection of pornography in his office at the Federal Reserve so he could watch it whenever he wanted to. Even more startling, he’d admitted paying an aide to have sex with a woman in a private bathroom connected to his office at the Fed—and secretly videotaped the act.

“What was her name?” demanded Blanton McDonnell. McDonnell was CEO of Jamison & Jamison Pharmaceutical, the largest medical device manufacturer in North America.

“Carolyn.”

“Did you get her number?”

“No.”

“Did you try?”

“Yes.”

Hewitt motioned for the others to refrain from asking any more questions on this subject. “Anything you want to tell us about your personal life?”

Laird glanced toward the head of the table, fear in his eyes. “Yes.”

“Go on.”

“A few weeks ago I hired a personal assistant. A twenty-seven-year-old blond woman,” Laird continued, his voice trembling. “She’s very capable.”

“And beautiful,” someone assumed.

“Yes,” Laird agreed quietly. “*Very* beautiful.”

“Have you had sex with her?”

Laird drew tiny circles on the table with his index finger. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Have you videoed that for us yet, Mr. Laird?” asked Stewart Massey. Massey was a grizzled ex-United States senator from Texas. He’d been a prosecutor before going into politics.

“No,” Laird admitted.

“Do,” Hewitt instructed. “Within the next thirty days.”

“All right.”

“Does she have any fetishes?” Massey wanted to know.

Hewitt watched Laird struggle. He was so obviously uncomfortable, which was exactly how it was supposed to be. The founders of the Order were brilliant, Hewitt thought to himself. It was a beautifully conceived ritual—with a little modern technology baked in over the years.

Laird took a deep breath. “She likes to be tied up.”

“Make certain you get *that* on tape,” Hewitt ordered, glancing around the table at the others. “I think that’s enough. Thank you, Mr. Laird.”

Laird eased back from the table into his chair, smiling like a man who’d won a reprieve from the electric chair.

It was *such* a beautifully conceived ritual, Hewitt thought to himself. Such a beautifully conceived ritual for the Order.

ELIJAH FORTE was one of the wealthiest black men in America, one of the wealthiest *men* in America. And he hadn’t achieved his success by wasting time on indecisive people. But this was important, critically important, so he was forcing himself to be patient. “You okay?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I was approached.”

“By who?” Forte asked.

The other person hesitated.

“Who approached you?” Forte asked again, dialing up the pressure in his voice.

“Someone who wanted to know about Jesse Wood.”

Forte glanced over at Heath Johnson, his executive vice president. Johnson raised one eyebrow and nodded. “What did this person want to know?” Forte asked.

“Whatever I was willing to say.”

“What did you say?”

“That I had to think about the offer.”

“What was the offer?”

“Money.”

Forte’s eyes narrowed, anticipating the shakedown. “Is that what you want from me? Money?”

“No.”

Forte looked up from an old ballpoint pen he’d pulled out of his shirt pocket, surprised by the response. “Then what *do* you want?”

“I want you to protect Jesse Wood. I want the dream to come true. I don’t want this person to hurt Jesse or keep Jesse from getting what we all want him to get. What we’ve all worked so hard for him to get.”

Forte rarely felt deep sentiment. He’d endured a brutally hard childhood and his emotions were buried deep, but this was an amazing display of loyalty. He felt a warm moistness coming to his eyes. He coughed and looked away for a moment. “Do you think this person would hurt Jesse?”

“If that were the only alternative, the only way left to stop Jesse, I think this person would have Jesse killed.”

Forte let out a long, concerned breath. “I’ll protect Jesse,” he promised, “but I’ll need your help.”

“I’m willing to do anything.”

“Good.” Forte leaned forward in his seat. “Tell me the name of the person who approached you.”

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