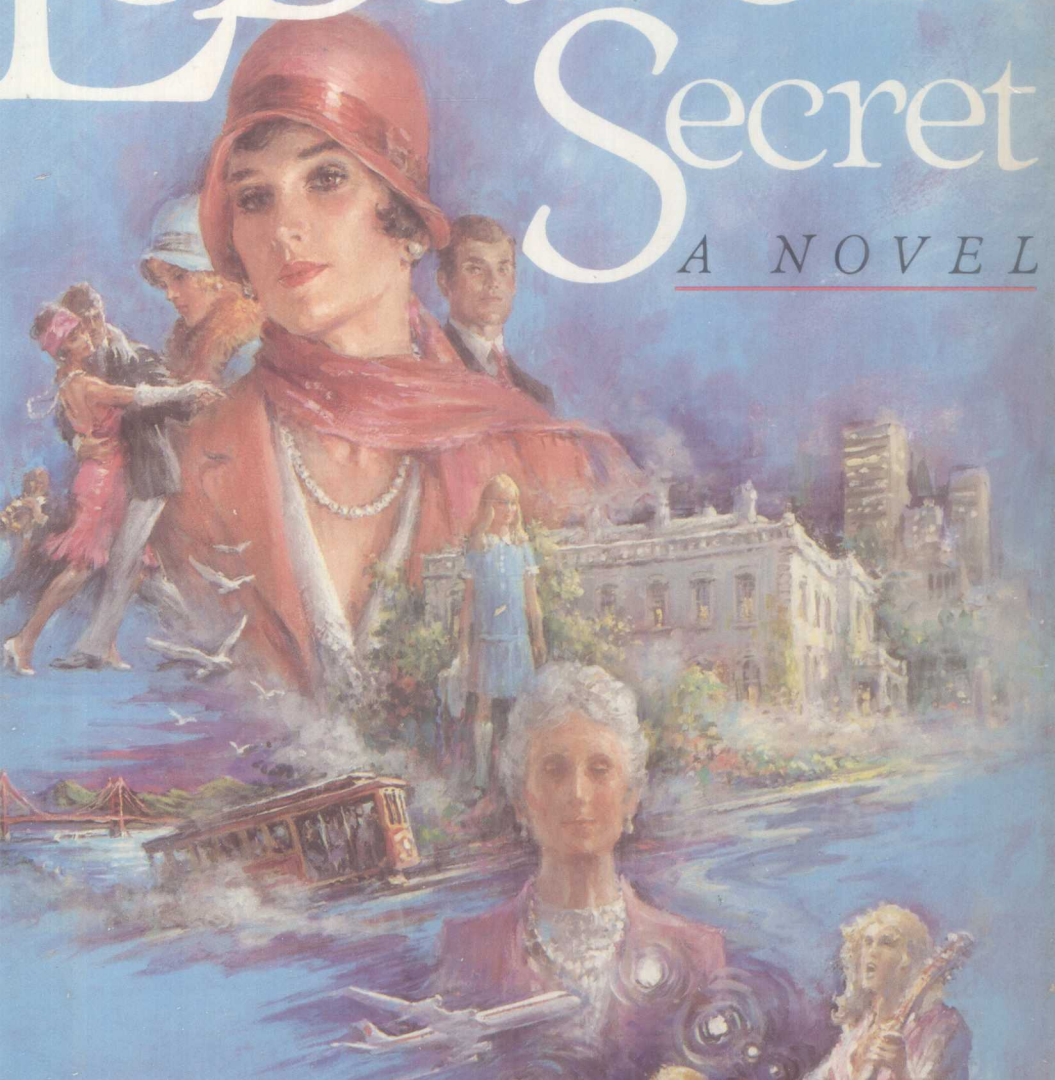


STEPHEN
BIRMINGHAM

THE
LeBaron
Secret
A NOVEL



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A NOVEL

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FIRST EDITION

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BOOKS BY STEPHEN BIRMINGHAM

Young Mr. Keefe
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The Towers of Love
Those Harper Women
Fast Start, Fast Finish
“Our Crowd”
The Right People
Heart Troubles
The Grandees
The Late John Marquand
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Real Lace
Certain People
The Golden Dream
Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis
Life at the Dakota
California Rich
Duchess
The Grandes Dames
The Auerbach Will
“The Rest of Us”
The LeBaron Secret

This book is for Melissa



*The
LeBaron
Secret*

From the will of Peter Powell LeBaron (1905–1955):

Clause 6(a). I hereby direct that all outstanding shares held by me in Baronet Vineyards, Inc., hereinafter referred to as the Company, shall be divided and distributed at the time of my death as follows:

Thirty-five percent (35%) to my beloved wife, Assaria Latham LeBaron;

Five percent (5%) to my beloved daughter, Melissa Margaret LeBaron;

Five percent (5%) each to my two beloved sons, Eric O'Brien LeBaron and Peter Powell LeBaron, Jr.;

Thirty-five percent (35%) to my beloved sister, Joanna LeBaron Kiley, also known professionally as Joanna LeBaron;

The remaining fifteen percent (15%) of said shares in said Company shall be divided, equally, among any and all living issue of my aforesaid sister, Joanna LeBaron.

PART ONE



*Morning,
Noon,
and Night*



One

THIS WAS THE WAY those who were in the audience that night remembered it:

The young lead singer, who always performed bare to the waist, his hairless chest slung with gold chains, suddenly screamed in the middle of his song, flung his guitar across the stage, and shrieked, "*Pythons can be replaced!*" And with that he seized the snake that had been coiled around his shoulders, grasped the animal by its tail, and, brandishing it like a charioteer's whip, proceeded to flail it — thrash it — furiously against the stage floor. Fluid, which was not blood, spurted from the snake's mouth. This, the audience realized, must be the animal's brains, or something even more horrible from its insides. Then, still clutching his bleeding arm, the singer, who called himself Luscious Lucius, stamped down hard, again and again, on the snake's head with the sequined high heel of his cowboy boot until the creature lay limp and lifeless at his feet.

At first, there had been a burst of giggles — nervous and uncertain ones — and an excited squeal or two, as the audience asked themselves if this was a part of the act, if that was real blood flowing down Luscious Lucius's bare arm. Or catsup. The scream, the smashing of the guitar onstage — those had been part of The Who's act, hadn't they? But then, with a collective gasp that was more like a moan of disbelief, the audience of nearly two thousand, mostly teenagers, realized that the bloodshed they were seeing on the stage was very real indeed. For just as Lucius was building up the sound and tempo of his last song, prancing about the stage and humping his guitar, the python, with which he always performed his famous finale, had suddenly drawn its head back and then struck, plunging its fangs hard into his biceps. The music had stopped, there had been the scream, the guitar had been hurled, and, for a beat, the singer, looking skinny and frightened and alone, stared dazedly at his bleeding arm. There were screams from the audience. They had all come for cheap thrills, for something viscerally salacious (there were rumors that Luscious Lucius sometimes exposed himself on stage), and for phony, raunchy horror. But they had not come for this brand of realism, and the shrieks now were like those from a roller coaster when a car has become derailed. Half the audience were on their feet by the time Luscious Lucius began unwinding the snake from around his body, where he had draped it, and beating the creature to death before their eyes. There was pandemonium in the auditorium as a crush of young people filled the aisles and pushed toward the exit doors.

"Look," the singer shouted into his microphone over the noise, one hand cupping his bleeding arm, "stay loose! It's cool. Shit, man, I'm okay! The show's not over. Pythons get old. Like they get mean, man. Like she'll be replaced. Don't go yet . . ." And to try to hold his audience, he tossed a handful of glitter into the air.

But no one was listening, and, in the middle of the singer's plea from the scene of the carnage, the stage manager, realizing that the evening was beyond rescue — the glitter was the curtain cue, anyway — had the good sense to ring down the curtain fast and bring up the houselights.

The *Peninsula Gazette* reported the incident the following morning:

PYTHON BITE DISRUPTS ROCK CONCERT;
SINGER BEATS SNAKE TO DEATH ONSTAGE BEFORE 1800

A seven-foot-long Indian rock python, a feature of the act of the punk rock group that calls itself The Dildos, suddenly turned vicious last night in the middle of a performance at the newly restored Odeon Theatre downtown and bit the group's lead singer, Maurice Littlefield, 23. Littlefield then proceeded to beat the giant serpent to death onstage while a capacity crowd of 1800 screaming fans looked on in horror. Littlefield, who bills himself as Luscious Lucius, was bleeding copiously from the left arm.

The python, called Sylvia by the group, had performed with the group for about three years without incident, and was considered tame and harmless. Littlefield was taken to Mercy Hospital and treated for snakebite and lacerations. He was released about one hour later, and doctors said his wound from the bite is not considered serious. The rock python is not a poisonous reptile.

The audience, meanwhile, reacted to the onstage episode with revulsion. Most were young people, and the reaction of Tracie Hodgman, 17, of 345 Morris St., Menlo Park, was typical. "It was gross enough that the snake bit him," she said. "There was like blood everywhere. But then when he started to beat it to death it was like *really* gross. I threw up after. I used to think The Dildos were a really neat group, and I was a real fan of Lucius. But now I'm not so sure."

While the curtain descended on the performance, the audience rushed to the exits, where a few scuffles ensued, but no serious injuries were reported.

The Odeon Theatre, beneficiary of a \$3 million restoration last year as part of a long-term plan to renovate the Market Street area, had drawn a capacity crowd for last night's Dildos performance. Other cultural events are scheduled throughout the coming year.

Gabe Pollack parks his old Dodge Omni in front of the big White Wedding-Cake House at 2040 Washington Street and, as San Franciscans do automatically, turns his right front wheel hard into the

curbstone before setting the brake and turning off the ignition, even though Assaria LeBaron's house is not set on a particularly steep section of Pacific Heights. It is an automatic reaction. Bite your right front wheel hard into the curb when parking. Prevent runaway vehicles. That duty performed, Gabe Pollack, a little stiffly — his back has been giving him some trouble lately — lets himself out of the car and starts up the short drive to the porte cochere of the White Wedding-Cake House.

It is the rainy weather that is doing it, causing the back to act up. It is not his eighty-one years, he tells himself. It is another damp, chilly February morning in the city, and yesterday's rain has turned into foggy drizzle, and the city — even the White Wedding-Cake House — has a gray, swirly-smoky look. It is what the English call a silver day, though the moisture has given a crisp, shiny look to the green leaves of the lemon-tree hedge that lines Assaria LeBaron's entrance drive. Gabe Pollack's breath comes out in little silver puffs, and just before stepping under the porte cochere Gabe Pollack looks up to the second-floor windows of Assaria LeBaron's sitting room to see whether, perhaps, his arrival is being watched. And sees — or thinks he has seen — the white panel of a glass curtain fall into place, as though someone's small hand has just let it drop. But he cannot be sure he has seen this. He moves, now, under the porte cochere, up the three white marble steps to the front door, and rings the bell.

There is a little wait, and then the door is opened by Thomas, Mrs. LeBaron's majordomo, in his gray morning coat.

"Good morning, Mr. Pollack."

"Good morning, Thomas."

Inside, Thomas assists Gabe out of his raincoat. "Rather chilly this morning, sir."

"San Francisco weather," Gabe says. "Sun was actually shining when I left Palo Alto. Rain started at Daly City."

Thomas says something that sounds like "Chuck-chuck," and bows Gabe toward the waiting elevator.

Stepping inside, Gabe says, "Chilly morning, and I suppose I am to expect a chilly reception from your mistress."

"I couldn't say, sir," Thomas murmurs. He closes the elevator

door. With Thomas's gray-gloved hand at the controls, the elevator, an ancient Otis hydraulic, begins its slow ascent to the floor above. Its wrought-iron cage is a wild tracery of latticework, slung with wheat-sheaves and vines, grape leaves and poppy blossoms, and it performs its assigned tasks so slowly that, as Sari herself has said, two people could consummate a love affair in the time it takes for this apparatus to make its journey from one floor to the next; there would certainly be time enough for them to become very good friends. It irritates Gabe, slightly, that Thomas makes him take the elevator whenever he comes to visit Sari. He could easily handle the stairs. All reminders that he is getting old irritate Gabe Pollack. Such as the young boy — Boy Scout? — who offered to take his elbow the other day to help him across Post Street. The other day. It was a good five years ago. I don't look old, he tells himself. In my shaving mirror I still see a young and, yes, randy fellow in his, maybe, twenties, thirties? Forties, maybe. To make conversation during their upward trek, Gabe says, "I suppose it's about the story in today's paper."

"I wouldn't know, sir."

"Well, I'm in the newspaper business, and my job is to print the news."

"Oh, I'm sure of that, sir."

"Sometimes your mistress doesn't quite understand that."

"I wouldn't know about that, sir."

"I'm sure she's got a bee in her bonnet."

"I just couldn't say, sir."

At last the elevator reaches the second floor, and Thomas opens the door and steps aside. "You're a few minutes early, sir," he says. "Madam isn't quite ready. She asks that you wait for her in the south sitting room."

Gabe Pollack says nothing. He does not mention that his message from Thomas's mistress has been "Come and see me as soon as possible," and he does not ask Thomas how, when one has been asked to come as soon as possible, it can be possible to be a few minutes early. And the south sitting room is a bad sign, a sign of ill omen. It means that he is in for a session with Sari, not a visit. The south sitting room is a room Sari uses to conduct business,

the closest thing to an office-away-from-the-office in her White Wedding-Cake House. The south sitting room, as its designation implies, faces south, faces the street, and has no view to provide any sort of distraction. The large, formal drawing room, with its fine French furniture, faces north, offering a view of the Golden Gate, the Bay, and everything else beyond. In the formal drawing room, he would be served coffee and one of Cookie's splendid sweet rolls. In the south sitting room, there will be none of that. Rebelliously, for a moment, Gabe thinks that he will make his way into the drawing room anyway, ignoring Thomas's instructions, but on second thought he decides he had better not. No point in irritating the old girl any more than he has already. If the south sitting room it is to be, so be it, and he crosses the hall into the designated room and takes a seat in the most comfortable chair the room provides, a stiff-backed Victorian affair by Belter decorated, like the elevator, with a great deal of carved scrollwork and fruited vines. This chair faces the long library table that Sari uses as a sort of desk, and in this position Gabe feels exactly like an errant schoolboy who has been summoned before the principal.

Now the house is strangely silent, no sound of footfalls anywhere, only the sound of the ticking of the gold and black-marble ormolu clock on the mantel. *Ping, ping* goes the clock on the mantel, above the fireplace with its fan-shaped ornamental screen of heavy, polished brass, a fireplace that Gabe Pollack has never known to contain a lighted fire. Outside, dimly, on the street, the day continues drizzly, with blowing fog. Across the street, in their sentry boxes, the two policemen who guard the Russian Consulate have put on waterproof slickers. The guards stamp their wet boots. Sari LeBaron likes to say that she is pro-Communist. The Soviets provide her house with free security.

Except for the ticking of the clock, the house is silent. The White Wedding-Cake House. It has always been called that, locally, since the beginning, and it is appropriate because the house was indeed a wedding present to Assaria LeBaron and her late husband, Peter Powell LeBaron. Architecturally, too, it resembles a wedding cake, all white marble, rising tier upon tier — three tiers in all before the crowning balustrade — Palladian in concept, if not in pure design,