PALACE COUNCIL

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To Eric, Leslie, Lisa, and John,
who lived it with me

"O, that the years had language!"

—Eloise Bibb

PALACE COUNCIL

PROLOGUE

The Council

THE LAWYER WAS NERVOUS, and that was odd. His hands trembled on the steering wheel, and that was odder still. He had learned in the war that there was no sin in being afraid as long as the others never knew. He understood that courage was a discipline. As was confidence. In the marble caverns of Wall Street, the lawyer intimidated all around him with his breadth of knowledge and speed of mind. In the boardrooms of his clients, he had no equal. On his rare forays into the courtroom, he charmed the judges with his wit and persuaded them with his force. He had commanded a company of Rangers in North Africa and Europe. He provided his adoring wife and children with a house in the suburbs, equipped with every modern convenience. It was the summer of 1952, the era of such men as himself. The United States was about to elect a military man its President. The nation's steelmakers had just crushed a nationwide strike. The Congress was about to add the words "Under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. American science had invented a way to phone from California to New York without using an operator. Some people insisted on calling attention to the nation's imperfections. But the lawyer believed in quiet progress. Quiet, gradual progress. The nation would move forward in its good time. So calm down, he commanded himself, annoyed to discover that he was drumming his fingers on the dash.

He tightened his grip on the wheel.

The driveway was full of cars. The house was long and low. Golden light spilled invitingly from the windows. Still the lawyer hesitated. August air, loamy and rich, drifted into the car. Clouds hid the moon, but the forecasted rain had yet to arrive. The lawyer glanced at the glowering sky and endured a shivering premonition of death. Fighting

his growing unease, the lawyer focused his mind on the image of his wife's glowing face. He shut his eyes and listened to her teasing South Carolina drawl. Calmer now, he reminded himself why he was here.

Dinner and conversation, his host had said, smiling, over coffee in Manhattan. *And stag only. No wives.*

Why no wives? the lawyer had asked, not unreasonably.

Trust me.

The lawyer had been too savvy to press. His host knew people, and the kind of people he knew, knew other people. Then, too, his host had raised the return of favors to an art form. Everyone wanted to be in his good graces. As successful as the lawyer's career might have been so far, there were always higher rungs on the ladder. Courtesy and curiosity pushed him forward. When his host mentioned the name of some of the others who were expected to attend, the lawyer was hooked.

He climbed out of the car.

Laughter wafted from the house, and, beneath it, music, scratchy and low. The lawyer practiced his courtroom smile. The music was classical but fluffy. The lawyer fortified himself with the knowledge that his host was no Renaissance man. The disciplined confidence he had learned in the war was returning. He mounted the steps jauntily, ready to be the star of the evening.

About to ring the bell, he noticed a much younger man standing at ease on the grass, his face in shadow, his smooth hair pale and bright in the light from within. Odd. No aides, tonight's host had insisted. No drivers. No bodyguards. And this in a crowd whose members tended to possess several of each.

The lawyer rang, then turned to the stranger to say hello. But the blond man had vanished so thoroughly into the inky darkness that the lawyer began to doubt whether he had seen him at all.

Never mind. Focus. Scintillate. Intimidate.

The door swung open. The lawyer stepped inside.

When he emerged, it was well past four in the morning. He was dizzy from lack of sleep, and too much good food and excellent claret. He was among the last to leave. Their host had worked out a departure schedule, according to some scheme none of them understood. And yet they did as he proposed, accepting without a murmur of complaint his insistence on security against threats he refused to disclose. He had a hypnotic aspect, the lawyer decided. Mesmerizing. He would have been fantastic in the courtroom. He planned everything with

care. Even the number of guests turned out to be a symbol of their undertaking.

The lawyer stood beside his car, fingers touching the door without quite opening it. The dew made the surface shine. He was shivering harder now than he had been on arrival. And not from cold. The host had unveiled his plan, and it turned out to be, like the man himself, brilliant, complex, efficient. The lawyer had sat there with the others, the whole room entranced as their host strode up and down in front of the fire, eyes bright and alive, filling in some details, leaving others for later discovery. One by one, the men at dinner had nodded. Some of the most powerful men in the country, and they had all nodded. Yes. Yes. And yes again. They were on board. The lawyer had nodded along with the rest, but his nod had been a lie.

The lawyer thought the plan, for all its brilliance, was evil.

There was no other word.

The plan might even accomplish its ends. Many evil plans did. The lawyer had seen enough of life to know that the triumph of good was anything but inevitable. The triumph of good in the last war had cost the world millions of souls.

The lawyer slipped behind the wheel. What was it about him that had made their host think he would join willingly so wicked a plan? Did the man really think so little of him? Maybe so. Maybe with reason. He thought about the men in the room, smoking their cigars, drinking their wine, nodding their heads. His career would likely skyrocket if he went along with them. The future stretched ahead of him, an endless golden band.

With brimstone waiting at the far end.

He knew what his wife would say. She was a wonderful woman, but she had been pampered and sheltered all her life. She did not understand how, in the world of men, sometimes you had to sup with the devil at least for a while, in order to—

"Did you need anything, sir?"

The lawyer turned, startled. The blond man was leaning close, smiling politely through the open window. He had crept up on the car without giving the smallest hint of his approach. Even in the Rangers the lawyer had known no one as stealthy. The lawyer started to answer, then hesitated. The cobalt eyes said that the blond man knew his every thought. The gaze was at once pitying and spiritless, the gaze of an executioner.

"I'm fine," the lawyer said, after his stomach finished twisting and turning. "Fine, thank you!"

"Good meeting?"

"Oh, yes. Absolutely."

"Travel safely, sir."

"I will. Thanks again."

Driving off, the lawyer felt a flooding relief, as if he had escaped from Hell. His murder was still thirty months away.

PART I

New York/London/ Boston 1954–1958

CHAPTER I

Hitting the Town

(I)

HAD EDDIE WESLEY BEEN A LESS RELIABLE MAN, he would never have stumbled over the body, chased Junie to Tennessee, battled the devils to a draw, and helped to topple a President. But Eddie was blessed or perhaps cursed with a dependability that led to a lack of prudence in pursuing his devotion. He loved only two women in his life, loved them both with a recklessness that often made him a difficult man to like, and thus was able, when the moment arrived, to save the country he had come to hate.

A more prudent man might have failed.

As for Aurelia, she arrived with her own priorities, very conventional, very American, and so from the start very different from Eddie's. Once they went their separate ways, there was no earthly reason to suppose the two of them would join forces, even after the events of that fateful Palm Sunday and what happened in Hong Kong—but join they did, by necessity more than choice, fighting on alone when everybody else had quit or died.

Almost everybody.

(II)

EDWARD TROTTER WESLEY JUNIOR breezed into Harlem in May of 1954, just days after the Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in public schools, a landmark decision that Eddie was certain must conceal some sort of dirty trick. He possessed a degree from Amherst, a couple of undistinguished years of graduate work at Brown, a handful

of social connections through his mother, and a coveted job on the *Amsterdam News*, although he quit in disgust three months after starting. He had not realized, he explained in a letter to his beloved sister Junie, how very small and unimportant the position was. Junie, in a mischievous mood, forwarded his letter to their awesomely disapproving father, a Boston pastor and essayist. Actually, he was at this time in Montgomery, Alabama, helping to organize a boycott of local businesses that refused to call Negro patrons "Mr." and "Mrs." Wesley Senior, as he liked to be called, was a distant relation of William Monroe Trotter, the Negro journalist once arrested after tossing pepper to disrupt a speech by Booker T. Washington, and had inherited some of the fire of that clan. Upon his return to Boston, he answered Junie at once, sending along a surfeit of citations from the New Testament, most on the subject of hard work, commanding his daughter to share them with her brother. Eddie read them all; Second Thessalonians 3:10 sufficiently stoked his fury that he did not write his parents for a month, for Eddie was rather fiery himself. When he at last pulled together enough money from odd jobs to afford a phone, he refused for weeks to give his parents the number. Wesley Senior thought Eddie lazy. But Eddie, to his own way of thinking, was simply focused. He did not want to write about car wrecks and speeches by the great leaders of the rising movement for Negro rights. He wanted to write short stories and novels and decided, in the manner of many an author before him, that earning a living would disturb his muse. So, for a time, he mooched.

His mother sent money, cars were washed, meals were served, papers were sold. Around the corner from his apartment on 123rd Street was a Jewish grocery—that was what they were called, Jewish groceries, a reference to ownership, not cuisine—and Eddie for a time earned a second income working nights behind the cash register, reading and writing there on the counter because custom was thin. But a better offer came his way. In those days the seedier side of Harlem was largely run by a worthy named Scarlett, who had risen to power after the legendary Bumpy Johnson, king of the Negro rackets, was sentenced to prison for the third time. Scarlett owned a nightclub on 128th Street and much else besides, and was said to pay his dues to Frank Costello, the successor to Lucky Luciano and, at the time, the most powerful Mafia leader in New York. Scarlett was an elegant Jamaican who had come out of the old Forty Thieves gang along with

Bumpy. He was popular along the streets. He liked to walk into shops and pull a huge bankroll from the pocket of his tailored suit, make a small purchase with a large bill, then tell the delighted proprietor to keep the change, thus cementing his reputation for generosity—never mind that a week later his people would be around to collect protection money from the very same store. At twenty-seven, a joyless term of military service behind him, Eddie Wesley was not known to be a scrapper. Still, he had a friend who had a friend, and before he knew it he was doing occasional odd jobs for bluff, secretive, boisterous men who were, or were not, connected to Scarlett. It was a living, Eddie told himself, but not his parents; it was only until he was discovered as a writer; besides, it would provide meat for the tales he would one day spin. He reminded himself, whenever moral doubts assailed him, that Richard Wright, in *Black Boy*, had confessed to a youthful life of crime. True, Wright stole no more than the occasional fistful of tickets from the proprietor of a movie house, and Eddie was carrying mysterious packages across state lines, but he consoled himself with Wright's dictum that the white man had done so many horrible things that stealing from him was no breach of ethics. And if part of him suspected that, whoever Scarlett was stealing from, it wasn't the white man, Eddie suppressed the thought.

"Where do you go all these nights?" asked Aurelia, his unattainably highborn girlfriend, whom he often wooed by reciting Andreas Cappelanus on the art of courtly love: medieval literature having been among his best courses at Amherst. They were canoodling, as it was called, in a shadowed booth at Scarlett's club, not the sort of place where Eddie's friends ever went, or, more important, Aurie's. "You're so secretive"—as though she herself was not.

"If I told you, you'd never believe it."

Aurelia was much quicker than Eddie, and always had been: "Then it can't possibly be another woman."

"You're one to talk," he said.

"I know." Sipping her pink gin fizz with Kirschwasser, the drink for which she was known throughout Harlem. She was a columnist for the *Seventh Avenue Sentinel*, the second-largest Negro paper in town, and wrote about everyone's scandalous peccadilloes but her own. "I am one to talk," she said, and leaped to her feet, tugging at his arm. "Dance with me. Come on."

"We shall be conspicuous," said Eddie, in the peculiar elocution

he had developed at Amherst. His friends mocked him, but women adored it.

"We shall not," she teased, echoing his cadences, and perhaps she was even right, because Scarlett's was also the sort of place that always remembered to forget you were ever there. But before they could have their dance, one of the boisterous men tugged Eddie aside for a whispered conversation. Eddie, excited, told Aurelia they would have to make it an early night, conveying through his body English what he dared not speak aloud. Alas, Aurie was not so easily impressed: included in her family tree, as she would remind you at the drop of a hat, were villains galore, as well as a Reconstruction Era congressman and the first Negro to make a million dollars in real estate.

"You can't be involved with these people," Aurelia said as they walked through the sooty Harlem rain. She wore cheap plastic overshoes, but her umbrella was from Paris, where her aunt sang jazz.

"It isn't involvement in the usual sense."

She knew his excuses, too: "Let me guess. Research for the great novel."

"Something like that."

They had reached the public library on 135th Street, three blocks from the apartment Aurie shared with two other women. Cars were jammed so tightly along the curb that it was a miracle they ever got out again. This was as far as Eddie was ever allowed to go. Aurelia kissed him. She had feathery eyebrows and a roundish chipmunk face. When she was happy, she looked like a playful imp. When she was earnest, the roundness hardened, and she became Hollywood's image of a schoolmarm. This was schoolmarm time.

"My family has certain expectations of me," she began. "I'm an only child. My future matters to them. A lot."

"So you keep telling me."

"Because it's true." The brow crinkled. "You know, Eddie, my uncle's hotel business is—"

"I'm a writer."

"They own hotels in seven different—"

"I cannot do it."

"He makes good money. He'll always make good money. I don't care what the Supreme Court says. We'll need colored hotels for the next fifty years. Maybe more." Eddie stroked her cheek, said nothing. "I wanted to ask you one last time, because—"