

STUART
WOODS

A palm tree is positioned in the background, its fronds and trunk appearing to be engulfed in a bright, fiery orange and yellow glow. The background is a deep blue sky with some lighter, wispy clouds near the bottom.

L.A.
DEAD

L . A . D e a d

S t u a r t W o o d s

G . P . P U T N A M ' S S O N S

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This book is for Barbara Danielson and Lewis Moore.

L . A . D e a d

C h a p t e r 1

ELAINE'S, LATE. Stone Barrington and Dino Bacchetti sat at table number four, looking grim. Elaine joined them.

"So, what's happening here? You two look like you're going to start shooting any minute."

"I'm getting married," Stone said. "Congratulate me."

"Congratulations," Elaine said. "Anybody you know?"

"Hilarious," Stone said.

"It would be, if it weren't so insane," Dino added.

"You and Dolce are really going to do this?" Elaine asked, incredulous.

"Now don't *you* start," Stone growled.

"He won't listen to me," Dino said. "I've been telling him for a year to stay away from her."

"What've you got against your sister-in-law?" Elaine asked him.

"First of all, she's my sister-in-law," Dino replied. "Second, she's evil. Her old man is the devil, and Dolce is his handmaiden."

"Don't start that again, Dino," Stone said. "I don't want to hear it anymore. We're in love, we're getting married, and that's it. What's wrong with that?"

Elaine shrugged. "You're still in love with Arrington," she said. "Everybody knows that."

"What do you mean, 'everybody'?" Stone demanded.

"Me and Dino," Elaine replied.

"Right," Dino chimed in.

"She's married; she has a child," Stone said.

"So?" Elaine queried. "So, she's married to a movie star; nobody ever took a girl away from a movie star? Happens all the time."

"I'm not breaking up anybody's marriage," Stone said, "and Arrington knows it. I've told her so. Anyway, there's the boy."

"Wouldn't be the first kid raised by a stepfather," Elaine said.

"I think it's Stone's kid, anyway," Dino said.

"Dino, I told you, the blood test was done; I saw the lab report. The boy is Vance Calder's, and that's all there is to it. I'm not taking a kid away from his father. Besides, I like Vance."

"What's not to like?" Elaine asked. "He's handsome; he's the biggest star in Hollywood; he's the most charming man I ever met." She sipped her drink. "Present company included," she added.

"Thanks," Stone said. "I needed that."

"So, when's the happy day?" Elaine asked. "You going to be a June bride?"

"Monday," Stone replied. "In Venice."

"This is Thursday," Elaine pointed out. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"We're leaving tonight," Stone said.

"I got news for you. It's after midnight, all the flights have departed."

"We're taking a private jet, belongs to some friend of Eduardo."

"Not bad," Elaine said, looking impressed. "That way, you get to your hotel late enough tomorrow, so you don't have to wait for the people in your room to check out."

"Eduardo has a palazzo," Dino said. "We're being forced to stay there."

"You're going, too?" Elaine asked, incredulous again.

"He's my best man," Stone said glumly.

"If I don't go, my wife will divorce me," Dino said.

"She's Italian," Elaine pointed out. "She won't divorce you."

"The Bianchi family has found a way around that," Dino said. "Remember how Dolce got divorced?"

"I didn't know she was married," Elaine said.

"A youthful indiscretion. She married a capo in the Bonnano family when she was nineteen. It lasted less than three weeks, until she caught him in her bed with her maid of honor."

"So she got a divorce?"

"Not for some years. When it was inconvenient for her to still be married, the guy turned up in New York dead. Took two in the back of the head, a classic hit."

"Let me get this straight," Elaine said, turning toward Stone. "The girl you're marrying on Monday in Venice had her ex popped?"

"Of course not," Stone said hotly. "That's Dino's theory. In the guy's line of work, it was an occupational hazard. Anybody could have had it done."

"Yeah, sure," Dino said. "Funny, it didn't get done until Dolce decided to throw a bag over Stone's head and lead him to the altar."

Stone glanced at his watch. "Dolce and Mary Ann are going to be here any minute. I want you to decide what you're going to do, Dino; are you going to stand up for me, or not? And if you are, I don't want to hear another word about Eduardo and his connections. You married into the family, too, remember?"

"Yeah, with a bun in the oven and a gun to my head. If I hadn't married her, I'd be at the bottom of Sheepshead Bay right now, with a concrete block up my ass."

"You love that girl, Dino," Elaine said, "and the boy, too. You know goddamned well you do."

Dino looked into his drink and said nothing.

"Make up your mind, Dino," Stone said. He looked up to see Dolce and Mary Ann walk into the restaurant. "They're here." He stood up to greet them.

"All right, all right," Dino said. "I guess I can't let you go over there by yourself."

Stone kissed the gorgeous Dolce. She was wearing a cashmere track suit and a huge smile.

"Everybody ready?" she asked. "The car's at the curb, all the bags are in the trunk."

"Everybody's ready," Stone said, shooting a warning glance at Dino.

Elaine stood up and kissed everybody. "Mazeltov," she said. "Send me a postcard."

"Come with us," Stone said. "There's room."

"And who'd mind the store?" she asked.

"You've got plenty of help here."

"They'd steal me blind. Go on, get going; send me a postcard from Venice."

"You bet," Stone said, hugging her.

The foursome left the restaurant. At the curb a spectacular car was waiting.

"What is this?" Stone asked, running a finger along the glossy paintwork.

"It's a Mercedes Maybach," Dolce replied. "The first one in the country. Papa knows somebody in Stuttgart."

"Papa knows somebody *everywhere*," Dino muttered, collecting a sharp elbow in the ribs from Mary Ann.

They piled into the spacious rear seats, facing each other, Pullman style.

"Not bad," Dino admitted, looking around. "I don't suppose there's a phone? I've gotta check in with the cop shop." Dino ran the detective squad at the nineteenth precinct.

"Oh, leave it, Dino," Stone said. "They can get along without you for a week."

Dolce handed Dino a phone, and he began dialing. "Did you pack all my stuff?" Dino asked Mary Ann.

"Everything's in the trunk," she replied. "I ironed your boxer shorts, too." She winked at Dolce. "They love it when you iron their underwear."

"I'll remember that," Dolce laughed.

"Gladys," Dino said into the phone, "I'm off. You've got the number in Venice if anything really important comes up, otherwise I don't want to know, got that? Good. Take care." He hung up. "Okay, I'm cut loose," he said to the others. "What kind of jet we going in, Dolce? I hate those little ones; this better be a G-Four or better."

"Wait and see," Dolce said smugly.

They drove onto the tarmac at Atlantic Aviation at Teterboro Airport, across the Hudson in New Jersey, and up to an airplane that dwarfed everything on the ramp.

"Holy shit!" Dino said as they got out of the limousine. "What the fuck is this?"

"It's a BBJ," Dolce replied, grabbing her jewelry box and cosmetics case from the backseat. The others took their hand luggage from the trunk.

"Sounds like a sandwich."

"A Boeing Business Jet, the biggest thing in the corporate skies."

Hank Esposito, who ran Atlantic Aviation, was at the airplane's stair door to greet them. "You're fueled for maximum range," he said. "You could make it to Tokyo, if you wanted."

"Not a bad idea," Dino said, boarding the airplane.

"*Dino . . .*" Stone warned.

Esposito helped the chauffeur stow the luggage into a forward area of the interior.

The party stepped into a cabin that looked like the living room of a New York City town house.

Stone was flabbergasted. "Where's the fireplace and the grand piano?" he asked.

An Armani-clad stewardess took their hand luggage and showed them through the airplane. Besides the big cabin, there was a conference room and, behind that, two sleeping cabins, each with its own bathroom.

Dino shook his head. "The wages of sin," he said under his breath, avoiding Stone's glance.

As if from a great distance, there was the sound of jet engines revving, and almost imperceptibly, the big airplane began to move.

C h a p t e r 2

SOMEWHERE OVER THE ATLANTIC, Stone stirred in his sleep and turned over, bringing his chest against Dolce's naked back. He reached over her and cupped a breast in his hand, resting his cheek on the back of her neck. With thumb and forefinger, he lightly caressed the nipple.

At that moment, a chime sounded and the soft voice of the stewardess spoke. "Ms. Bianchi, we're two hours from our destination. If you and your party would like breakfast, it will be ready in half an hour."

"I think we're going to be late for breakfast," Stone breathed into Dolce's ear.

She turned over, put her feet on the floor, and stood up. "No, we're not," she said.

"You mean you're spurning your intended?"

"I mean I've decided to be a virgin until we're married."

"Isn't it a little late for that?"

"I can start over whenever I like," she said, "and I've just started over."

Shortly, they joined Dino and Mary Ann at the breakfast table. Scrambled eggs and smoked Italian bacon were set before them.

"That was the best night's sleep I've ever had on an airplane," Dino admitted.

"We didn't sleep all *that* much," Mary Anne rejoined, poking him in the ribs.

Stone indicated the large moving map at the front of the cabin. "We're just crossing the Portuguese coast," he said. "Nice tailwind; we're doing over six hundred miles an hour."

The moving map dissolved, and CNN International appeared on the screen.

"Turn that off," Dolce said to the stewardess. "I don't need news for a while."

The stewardess pressed a button, and Vivaldi came softly over hidden speakers. "Better?" she asked.

"Perfect," Dolce said. She turned to Stone and the others. "I have a little announcement," she said.

"Shoot," Stone replied.

"Papa is giving us the Manhattan town house for a wedding present."

Stone stopped eating. His fiancée was referring to a double-width brick-and-granite mansion in the East Sixties that Eduardo Bianchi had built. He took Dolce's hand. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I can't accept that. It's very generous of Eduardo, but I already have a house, and we'll be living there."

"Don't I have any say in where we live?" Dolce asked.

"You've never asked me very much about my background," Stone said, "so it's time I told you about my family."

"I know all about that," Dolce replied.

"Only what you read in the report Eduardo had done on me. It doesn't tell you everything."

"So, tell me everything," she said.

"My parents were both from wealthy textile manufacturing families in western Massachusetts, the Stones and the Barringtons; they knew each other from childhood. Neither of them liked the plans their families had made for them. When the crash came in 'twenty-nine, both families were hit hard, and both had lost their businesses and most of their fortunes by the early thirties.

"My parents used this upheaval as an opportunity to get out from under their parents' thumbs. My mother left Mount Holyoke, where she was studying art, and my father left Yale, where he was meant to study law, although the only thing he had ever wanted to do was carpentry and woodworking; they married and moved to New York City. My father's family disowned him, because he had joined the Communist party; my mother's family disowned her, because she had married my father.

"They found themselves very broke and living in a Greenwich Village garret. My mother was doing charcoal drawings of tourists in Washington Square for fifty cents a shot, and my father was carrying his toolbox door to door, doing whatever handyman's work he could find, for whatever people would pay him. He was about to go off and join the Civilian Conservation Corps, just to stay alive, when a wonderful thing happened.

"My mother's aunt—her mother's sister—and her new husband bought a house in Turtle Bay, and my aunt hired my father to build her husband a library. That job saved their lives, and when it was done, Aunt

Mildred and her husband were so pleased with it that they also commissioned my father to design furniture for the house and my mother to paint pictures for some of the rooms. When their friends saw the house, they immediately began offering him other commissions, and before too many years had passed, both my parents had won reputations for their work. I didn't come along for quite a long time, but by the time that accident had occurred, they could afford me."

Dolce started to speak, but Stone stilled her with a raised hand.

"There's more. Many years later, when Aunt Matilda died, having been preceded by her husband, she left the house to me. I was still a cop then, working with your brother-in-law, and I poured what savings I had into renovating the house, doing a great deal of the work myself, using skills learned in my father's shop. Finally, after leaving the NYPD—by popular request—I was able to earn a good enough living as a lawyer to finish the house. So, you see, the house is not only a part of my family history, it is all I have left of my parents and the work they devoted their lives to. I have no intention of moving out of it, ever. I hope you understand, Dolce."

Nobody moved. Stone and Dolce stared expressionlessly at each other for a very long moment, then Dolce smiled and kissed him. "I understand," she said, "and I won't bring it up again. I'll be proud to live in your house."

"I'll be happy to explain things to Eduardo," Stone said.

"That won't be necessary," Dolce replied. "I'll explain it to him, and, I promise, he'll understand completely."

"Thank you, my dear," Stone said.

"So," Mary Ann said, changing the subject, "what's the plan for Venice?"

"We'll go directly from the airport to Papa's house," Dolce said. "We'll have dinner with him tonight; tomorrow, Saturday, the civil ceremony will be held at the town hall, where we'll be married by the mayor of Venice. Then, on Monday morning, a friend of Papa's from the Vatican, a cardinal, will marry us at St. Mark's, on the square of the same name. After that, Stone and I will go on a honeymoon, the itinerary of which I've kept secret even from him, and the rest of you can go to hell."

"Sounds good," Mary Ann said.

"Who's the cardinal?" Dino asked.

"Bellini," Dolce replied.

"Doesn't he run the Vatican bank?"

"Yes, he does."

"How like Eduardo," Dino said, "to have his daughter married by a

priest, a prince of the Church, and an international banker, all wrapped up in one."

"Why two ceremonies?" Stone asked.

Mary Ann spoke up. "To nail you, coming and going," she said, laughing, "so you can never be free of her. The two marriages are codependent; the civil ceremony won't be official until the religious ceremony has taken place, and the priest—pardon me, the cardinal—has signed the marriage certificate."

"It's the Italian equivalent of a royal wedding," Dino said. "It's done these days only for the *very* important, and, as we all know, Eduardo . . ." He trailed off when he caught Stone's look.

"Eat your eggs, Dino," Mary Ann sighed.

Chapter 3

THE GLEAMING MAHOGANY MOTOR LAUNCH, the Venetian equivalent of a limousine, glided up the Grand Canal in the bright spring sunshine. Stone looked about him, trying to keep his mouth from dropping open. It was his first visit to the city. The four of them sat in a leather banquette at the stern of the boat, keeping quiet. Nothing they could say could burnish the glories of Venice.

The boat slowed and turned into a smaller canal, and shortly, came to a stop before a flight of stone steps, worn from centuries of footsteps. Two men dressed as gondoliers held the craft still with long boat hooks and helped the women ashore. As they reached the stone jetty, a pair of double doors ahead of them swung open, as if by magic, and Eduardo Bianchi came toward them, his arms outstretched, a smile on his handsome face. He embraced his daughters, shook hands fairly warmly with his son-in-law, then turned to Stone and placed both hands on his shoulders. "And my new son," he said, embracing him.

"Very nearly," Stone said. "It's good to see you, Eduardo, and it's very kind of you to arrange all this for us. Dolce and I are very grateful."

"Come into the house," Eduardo said, walking them toward the open doors. "You must be exhausted after your flight."

"Not really; it's hard to know how we could have been made more comfortable in the air," Stone said. "Once again, our gratitude."

Eduardo shrugged. "A friend insisted," he said. "Your luggage will be taken to your rooms. Would you like to freshen up, girls?"

The girls, dismissed, followed a maid down a hallway.

"Come into the garden," Eduardo said. "We will have lunch in a little while, but in the meantime, would you like some refreshment?"

"Perhaps some iced tea," Stone said. Dino remained silent. Eduardo ushered them through French doors into a large, enclosed courtyard, which had been beautifully planted, and showed them to comfortable

chairs. Unbidden, a servant appeared with pitchers of iced drinks, and they were served.

"First of all, I must clear the air," Eduardo said. "I quite understand that you may be very attached to your own house; I would not impose mine on you."

Stone was once again astonished at Eduardo's apparently extrasensory intuition. "Thank you, Eduardo. It was a magnificent offer, but you are quite right—I am very attached to my own house. It is much caught up with my family's history in New York. Fortunately, Dolce has consented to live there."

"She is a smart girl," Eduardo said, smiling slightly. "I would have been disappointed in her, if she had begun her marriage by attempting to move her husband from a home he loves."

"I expect she will find my taste in interior decoration inadequate, and I have steeled myself for the upheaval."

"You are smart, too," Eduardo said. He turned to his son-in-law. "Dino, how goes it among New York's finest?"

"Still the finest," Dino replied.

"Are you arresting many innocent Italian-American businessmen these days?" Eduardo asked impishly.

"There aren't many left," Dino said. "We've already rehoused most of them upstate."

Eduardo turned back to Stone. "Dino disapproves of my family's former colleagues," he said. "But he is an honest policeman, and there are not many of those. Many of his other colleagues have also been 'rehoused upstate,' as he so gracefully puts it. Dino has my respect, even if he will not accept my affection."

"Eduardo," Dino said, spreading his hands, "when I have retired, I will be yours to corrupt."

Eduardo laughed aloud, something Stone had never heard him do. "Dino will always be incorruptible," Eduardo said. "But I still have hopes of his friendship." Eduardo glanced toward the French doors and stood up.

Stone and Dino stood with him. A tall, thin man with wavy salt-and-pepper hair was approaching. He wore a black blazer with gold buttons, grey silk trousers, and a striped shirt, open at the neck, where an ascot had been tied.

"Carmen," Eduardo said, "may I present my son-in-law, Dino Bacchetti."

To Stone's astonishment, Dino bowed his head and kissed the heavy ring on the man's right hand.

"And this is my son-in-law-to-be, Stone Barrington."

The man extended his hand, and Stone shook it. "Your Eminence," he said, "how do you do?"

"Quite well, thank you, Stone." Bellini held onto Stone's hand and stared into his face. "He has good eyes, Eduardo," he said to Bianchi.

Stone was surprised that the cardinal spoke with an American accent.

"My son," Bellini said to Stone, "it is my understanding that you are not a Roman Catholic."

"I am a believer, Your Eminence," Stone said, "but not a registered one."

Bellini laughed and waved them to their seats. He accepted a fruit juice from the servant, then reached into an inside pocket and took out a thick, white envelope sealed with red wax, and handed it to Eduardo. "Here is the necessary dispensation," he said. "The Holy Father sends his greetings and his blessing."

"Thank you, Carmen," Eduardo said, accepting the envelope.

If Stone understood this transaction correctly, he now had papal approval to marry Dolce. He was embarrassed that the necessity had never occurred to him. "Your Eminence, I am surprised that your accent is American. Did you attend university there?"

"Yes, and preparatory school and elementary school before that. I was born and raised in Brooklyn. Eduardo and I used to steal fruit together, before the Jesuits got hold of me." He said something to Eduardo in what seemed to Stone flawless Italian, raising a chuckle. He turned back to Stone. "I understand that you are engaged in the practice of law."

"That's correct."

"If I may torture the scriptures a little, it is probably easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a lawyer to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"I tread as narrow a path as my feet will follow," Stone replied.

Bellini smiled. "I should hate to oppose this young man in court," he said to Eduardo.

"Are you a lawyer, as well?" Stone asked.

"I was trained as such at Harvard," Bellini replied, "and my work requires me still to employ those skills from time to time—after which I immediately visit my confessor. I should hate to die with the practice of law on my soul."

"I understand you also dabble in banking."

"Yes, but there is nothing so pure as money, used properly. I am required to ask you, Stone, if you have ever been married."

"No, Your Eminence; I've come close, but I've never been in serious trouble."