

Fern Michaels

*Passion was born in TEXAS RICH.
Betrayal smoldered in TEXAS HEAT.
Now, the searing story of a powerful
twentieth-century dynasty continues....*

TEXAS FURY

A N O V E L



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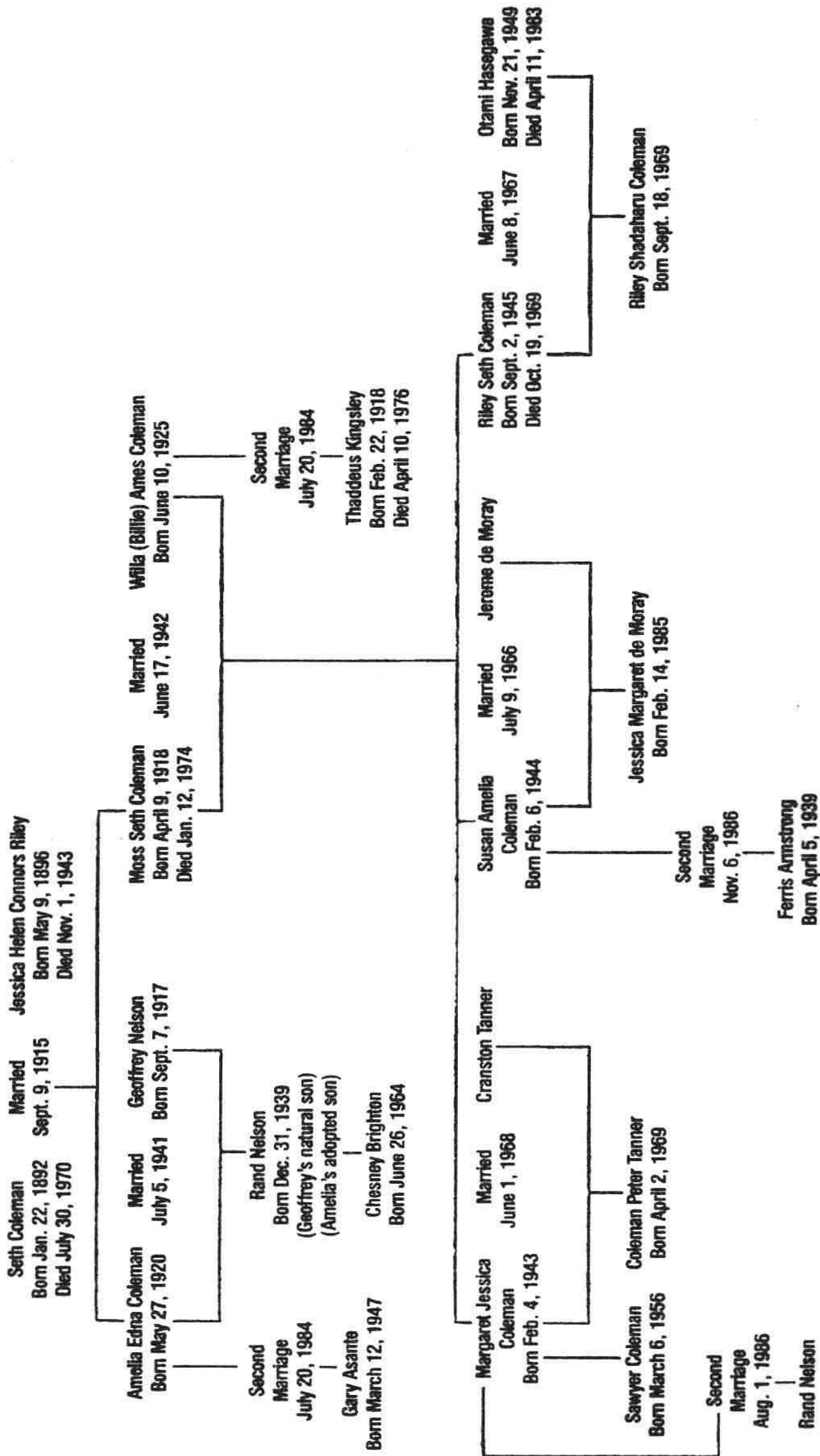
*For Albert Phillip Koval, my pappy, and for my sisters,
Louise Crisostomo and Doris Ferensic; lost to me, but not
forgotten.*

Dink

July 23, 1987

I want to thank Dr. Edwin Baker, my cousin, my friend, my confidant. Your wisdom, your unselfishness, your warmth and caring, as well as your daily tell-it-like-it-is pep talks, will always be remembered. My humble thanks, Juney; you're one of a kind.

The Coleman Family Tree



CHAPTER ONE

It wasn't your ordinary dime store synthetic satin groundbreaking ribbon. This was real French satin ribbon, specially ordered by Amelia Coleman Assante and trimmed with a half inch of Spanish lace. Yards of the opulent ribbon festooned the sequined pylons that were manned by a pair of handsome guards wearing well-fitted cobalt-blue uniforms. The shears, while not overly large for such a momentous occasion, were solid gold. "Nothing but the best for this opening," Amelia cooed to her husband. "The crowd expects it. Smile, darling. We're going live." Cary Assante looked up at the tiny figure standing on top of Assante Towers. He watched as one of the cameramen signalled to the commentator who waited on top of the building.

"This is Dave Harrison of KBT Eyewitness News reporting to you live from atop Assante Towers in downtown Austin. All you armchair viewers should be glad you're viewing this dedication in your warm living rooms. Today's temperature is well below the freezing mark. A record breaker, ladies and gentlemen, but a nice way to start off the Christmas season. I'll be switching you to Neal Tyler, my associate, in just a minute, but first I want to tell you a little bit about today's groundbreaking ceremonies. Cary Assante, the creator of this architectural immensity, this city-within-a-city known as Miranda, will be cutting the ribbon shortly. I was told before airtime that a large crowd was not expected due to this record-breaking cold, but there must be a thousand people down there. Cary Assante is married to Amelia Coleman, and here in Texas, anything the Colemans are involved in is major news. This affair today, ladies and gentlemen, takes the spotlight away from the oil crisis that's paralyzed our state for so long.

"The governor and the lieutenant governor are here, as well as the newly appointed mayor of Miranda. Yes, Miranda will

have its own mayor, and even its own zip code. Senator Thad Kingsley of Vermont is in attendance with his beautiful wife Billie, who was once married to Moss Coleman. Two of our own congressmen are here, and every socialite in the register is down there, all wearing their best furs. The Crystal City Band is down there, too, as well as the fire department and rescue squad.

"This is a wonderful turnout for Cary Assante, who worked more than ten years to complete this magnificent city within a city. KBT News will be taking you inside Assante Towers tonight for the gala opening in the grand ballroom. The color scheme for tonight's festivities is red and silver, with over fifty thousand poinsettia plants flown here from San Diego. Special heaters were required for the planes and the trucks that transported the plants. It's obvious that no expense was spared for this momentous occasion. And the crowd down below is loving it. This is Dave Harrison, reporting live from Miranda. Back to you, Neal."

The Crystal City marching band swung into its third lusty rendition of "Deep in the Heart of Texas" as Cary Assante and local dignitaries mounted the beribboned dedication platform outside the Miranda Tourist and Information Center. The new mayor of Miranda drew himself up to his full six foot four inches. Thin streams of vapor escaped his pursed lips. He tried valiantly not to shiver in the record-breaking cold, but was failing miserably. His teeth chattered as he made his short speech, which was amplified by an echoing sound system.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is indeed a proud day for all of us. This marvelous state-of-the-art complex that has taken ten years and billions of dollars to build is your inner city. You who are privileged to live here will never have to stray outside these boundaries. The creators of this masterpiece have thought of everything. But I won't keep you out in this cold or in suspense any longer—I suggest Mr. Assante cut the ribbon right now! I look forward to seeing you all this evening for the gala in Assante Towers. And now," the mayor shouted, "the creator of Miranda, Mr. Cary Assante."

Cary stepped forward, Amelia at his side. Her smile was brilliant and full of pride as she handed her husband the gold shears. "This is your moment, darling. Your dream is officially a reality."

"*Our* dream, babe," Cary whispered. His hand trembled as he cut the shimmering ribbon. He felt light-headed. All about

him was a babble of congratulatory voices. The band members made a valiant effort to render still another chorus of "Deep in the Heart of Texas."

Amelia stepped back. This was Cary's time, and he deserved all the accolades. All she wanted was to find Billie and Thad and get inside, where it was warm.

Amelia Coleman Assante possessed the kind of beauty that comes only with maturity and being at peace with oneself. She was tall, but not as tall as her handsome husband. She carried her height with dignity and dressed to that dignity with carefully chosen designer clothes that masked a thinness that spoke of past health problems. Her soft gray eyes were almost translucent, a perfect complement to her hair, which was more silver now than chestnut. The fine lines around her eyes and the deeper creases alongside her nose spoke more of character than age, as did the light brown spots unsuccessfully covered with makeup. Perfectly white capped teeth, slightly yellowed now from medication and too much tea, nibbled on a thin lower lip to stop it from trembling with the cold. To those standing in the crowd who knew her, she was every bit as striking and commanding as she'd been in her earlier days.

Billie Coleman Kingsley hugged her sister-in-law. "He really did it, Amelia. I'm so proud. You must be about ready to burst!"

"I am. There were times, Billie, when I thought this was nothing more than a nightmare, but Cary can do whatever he sets his mind to."

"What do you think, Senator Kingsley?"

Thad laughed. "What I think is, I'm glad I invested in this project."

"That makes two of us," said Amelia, smiling. "Without you we'd have run out of money years ago. By the way, where is Mr. Hasegawa? I want to thank him for coming all the way from Japan. He really isn't well enough to be traveling. We also have to thank him for his investment. We really did it, thanks to the two of you."

"Mr. Hasegawa is with Sawyer," Billie said. "I think he's taking him back to Sunbridge. He's very tired after his long flight, and he isn't feeling well. But he'll be back tonight for the festivities." Billie paused a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice was full of awe. "Amelia, I've never seen anything like this, and Thad and I have been all over the world."

"You look tired, Amelia," Thad said, his brow furrowing, his voice full of concern.

Amelia smiled. "Now, I don't want to be fussed over," she said. "I'm fine. The doctor says I'm fully recovered from the surgery. I just hate being cold. And before you can say it, I'm going upstairs and rest for tonight's gala. I really am excited about the library dedication. It was Cary's idea, you know, to dedicate it to Mam. The Jessica Coleman Library. What are you going to do?" Amelia asked Billie as she kissed her on the cheek.

"Corral the family and take the tour, like everyone else." Billie watched as Amelia headed toward the gleaming bank of elevators.

"I'll meet you by the jitney," Thad called over his shoulder.

Instead of moving off through the crowds, Billie remained where she was, her thoughts on Amelia. She didn't look well, and it was more than simple fatigue. Regardless of what she said, it was obvious that the heart bypass surgery had taken its toll. A brief, sharp spasm of worry overcame Billie. She and Amelia were more than sisters-in-law; they'd been intimate friends for over forty years.

Billie'd been so young when she met Amelia for the first time, only eighteen, and so very much in love with Amelia's brother, Moss. She'd been scared, too, of Moss and Amelia's father, Seth. What a tyrant he was. Amelia had confided in her, and in turn, she'd shared her life with Amelia. They were more like sisters than sisters-in-law, drawing together out of need, giving and accepting one another's friendship, sharing triumphs and disappointments.

Forty years of memories leapfrogged through Billie's mind. Accompanying Amelia to a back-street abortionist while she herself was secretly pregnant. Seth's hatred of Amelia because she'd had the audacity to be born a female. Amelia consoling her when Seth treated her like a brood mare, demanding that she produce a son—an heir.

While the war raged in England and Amelia couldn't return to the States in time for her mother's funeral, Billie had stood in her place and prayed for Jessica, just as Amelia would have done.

And it was Amelia who encouraged her, after Moss's death, to become a designer. Thanks to Amelia's support and confidence, she'd started her own successful business, Billie

Ltd., an enterprise that had netted her a seven-figure yearly income.

Until Amelia's marriage to Cary Assante, Billie had felt she was the only one who truly understood Amelia. Amelia had survived her father's hatred of her. She'd survived his bluster and his boasts that he had the United States government by the balls and someday they'd make him a very rich man. How she'd hated those boasts. She'd survived war-torn England, and although she lost her husband in that war, she gained a stepson and raised the boy at Sunbridge. Rand—who was now Billie's son-in-law. How close the bonds were. How long the connection. Forty years!

Forty years was half their life. If she had it to do over again, she wouldn't change a thing—all the tragedies, the sorrows, the happiness that had brought them to this moment.

Thad exited the glass-enclosed elevator. Instead of heading for the jitney, he retraced his steps to the main concourse, where he'd left Billie. He knew she'd still be there. Thinking. How beautiful she was, so serene and gentle. His heart swelled with love. Every day of his life he thanked God for giving him the patience to wait for this woman—this wonderful woman who had been his best friend's wife. Billie was his life. Not the navy, not Congress, and not the Senate. Billie. His partner, his wife, his love. In another year he'd retire from the Senate, and then it would be just the two of them, back in Vermont. Remembering Amelia's recent illness, he prayed silently that nothing would happen to change their wonderful plans.

He knew scores of people, particularly on the Hill, couples who stayed together for political reasons, never letting their mutual disaffection show in public. That was what he despised about Washington—all the blowhards, all the phoniness, the crap you had to wade through, only to find more crap. He was grateful to Billie for refusing to allow the fishbowl life to infringe on their private lives. Everyone on the Hill knew what he stood for, and there was envy in the lot of them, or so Billie said, and he had no reason to doubt her. Every time he heard tales of his colleagues' misconduct he'd shake his head and thank God again for Billie. The woman hadn't yet been born who could make him take a second look.

Billie was every bit as attractive as her sister-in-law, but with a very different kind of beauty. Hers came with sparkling

eyes and vivid color, something she was known for in the fashion world. There was a mellowness, a happiness to Billie that shimmered about her like a giant halo. She was half a head shorter than Amelia and only a few pounds heavier. She glowed with good health, and when she smiled the world seemed lighter, brighter somehow. Billie was truly a happy woman, and it showed. High cheekbones lightly dusted with color and her perfectly shaped nose complemented warm hazel eyes that were her best feature. Today she wore a brilliant scarlet scarf with a sapphire fringe, a Billie original. She looked vibrant, vital.

Soon enough Billie would feel his eyes on her and turn, he thought. And the next moment she proved his thoughts were on target, as he used to say in the navy. Billie turned, her eyes searching the crowd. When she spotted him her face broke into a wide, lovely smile. He mouthed the command: "Hold that smile." He could sense her laughter as he shouldered his way through the crowd.

"I knew you'd still be here," Thad said gently.

"I know you knew. That's why I'm still here. I didn't want you to have to search for me and perhaps miss the tour jitney I was on. We want to do this together." He watched as a worried look shadowed her features. "Oh, Thad, I should have come down here more often to see Amelia instead of relying on phone calls and letters. She looks—" she hesitated, seeking the right word, "—unwell."

"Darling, Amelia hates to be fussed over, unless it's by Cary. Don't take any blame. This last week had to be exhausting for her. She'll take a few days off now and she'll recoup." He felt her begin to tense. "No, Billie, I'm not just saying that to make you feel better," he said, reading her mind. "I'm not discounting the seriousness of her surgery or her recovery, but I'm sure Cary, or Amelia herself, would have said something to us if things weren't . . . up to par. A cup of herb tea and a nap will perk her right up."

"You don't believe that any more than I do," Billie said.

"We have to believe it, Billie."

Billie clutched his arm tightly, her eyes growing moist. "I know, Thad. We've lost so many old friends, and now Mr. Hasegawa so ill . . . and Amelia."

There weren't any words, and Thad didn't try to search for them. He circled her shoulders with his free arm and hugged her tight.

Billie took a long, deep breath and came back to the present. "Let's round up the family, if they haven't already taken their own tour!"

"Now, that's an offer I can't refuse. I can't wait to see this place we helped build. I have trouble, darling, comprehending Cary's vision of this complex. I mean, I saw the plans and then the buildings as they were going up, but nothing prepared me for this glass and steel marvel."

"A city inside a city," Billie said. "So self-contained. The outside world could seem like an alien planet if one wanted to live and die here. I don't know if that's good, Thad."

"Choices. Options. They're available. I think it's wonderful for the elderly."

"If they could afford to live here. Do you know what the rent is in Assante Towers? Five thousand a month, and it's got an eighty-five percent occupancy as of today."

Arm in arm, Thad and Billie climbed the broad steps of the center. At the top they stopped to peer into the crowd below.

"Here we are, but I don't see any sign of Cole or Riley. I thought I saw Maggie a moment ago, but she's disappeared." Thad turned to look into his wife's eyes, a conspiratorial smile on his lips.

"What say, pretty lady, that you and I take this little trip all by ourselves? And I'll hold your hand so you don't get nervous."

A tour guide, commandeered by Cary from Disney World, spoke cheerfully as he shepherded the first tour group into the building. Thad and Billie melted into it.

"Let me start off by thanking you all for coming to this wonderful opening of ACH Enterprises," the guide was saying. "For those of you who don't know what ACH stands for, it's Assante, Coleman, and Hasegawa. Mr. Cary Assante is the man who built Miranda, with the help of the Coleman and Hasegawa corporations. I don't think I need to tell any of you from Texas just who the Colemans are!" Most of the crowd tittered knowingly. "For those of you who don't know who Mr. Hasegawa is," the guide continued, "he's the grandfather of Riley Coleman and the owner of a Japanese publishing conglomerate called Rising Sun."

"From the time Miranda first appeared on paper till this day, it has taken ten years and several billion dollars. This," he said, waving expansively at an immense display table stra-

tegitically positioned in the middle of the vast Miranda City Planning Room, "is the result."

On the twenty-foot-square table, gilded by sunshine from a skylight high above, was an exquisitely detailed miniature rendering of the magnificent city. Thad and Billie smiled as the group shared a delighted sigh.

The guide, with the aid of a long pointer, began his description by indicating an emerald-green park exactly in the middle of the display. "This central area is Grace Park, a seventy-acre wooded and landscaped oval. It was designed and constructed by the renowned Japanese landscape artist, Hing Takinara. In it, among other things, are a zoo, three fine restaurants, cycling and walking trails, an aviary, meditation pools, a slow tramway for older or disabled visitors—or lazier ones." Everyone laughed at this. "Underneath Grace Park is Miranda's ultramodern metro system, a quiet and comfortable one-stop or express ride from the center part of the city to several destinations in each direction. The one stop is the exact middle of the park, where the Jessica Coleman Library and the Lotus Fountain are situated."

Pointing to the street surrounding the park, the guide continued. "This is our Grand Concourse. As you can see, from this street you can go everywhere: Saks, Neiman-Marcus, Martha's. For all you food aficionados, the New Fulton area has fresh produce shipped in daily from all points of the globe. This is where our head chefs from The New Maxim's, La Tut Suite III, and our other fine restaurants buy their food.

"As you know," he continued, pointing to another impressive building at the park's south curve, "Donald Trump managed to grab this prime corner, where he has duplicated his New York effort. Ours is called New Trump's.

"Miranda boasts one each of every well-established bank and large national corporation.

"To your left is Assante Towers, one floor shy of the Sears high rise in Chicago. As you can see, it's a marvel of steel and glass. The ten top floors are residences owned by some of the wealthiest men in the world. There are three penthouse apartments, one owned by Mr. and Mrs. Assante, the second by the Coleman family, and the third by the Rising Sun Corporation. But we're wasting time here—let's go and see the real thing!"

Outside in the clear, cold daylight, everyone clambered

into the sleek new jitney. The tour guide picked up his mike, tapped it once to see if it was on, and continued his spiel. Billie and Thad huddled closer and tuned him out as the jitney moved slowly forward toward the main thoroughfare of Miranda.

In five minutes, the real thing, looming up ahead, took everyone's breath away. From the south curve and Main Street they proceeded onto the Grand Concourse. As far as they could see to their left was a combination of Rodeo Drive and Fifth Avenue, an international shoppers' paradise, with gold-braided and festooned entrance porticoes, parked Rolls-Royces, and liveried doormen. On their right the park beckoned, velvety green and majestically jeweled with flowering entrances and graceful, generously sized park benches.

The jitney came to a halt in front of the Assante Towers building. The guide directed his enthralled charges to its entrance, shepherding them like schoolchildren to the first-floor mezzanine. All eyes were drawn upward to the first five floors, dense with trees and hanging plants, elegant food emporiums, and boutiques of all types. Shining green-tinted glass enclosed it all. Sea-green wrought-iron filigreed causeways and balconies laced the structure, and the sound of gently falling water filled the air. The guide signaled the group to divide into two as he led them to the egg-shaped, glass-enclosed elevators, framed in black wrought iron. Under ceilings sectioned with Tiffany glass, they were slowly carried to the fifth floor.

After giving them a few moments to absorb the wondrous sight below, the guide ushered them toward large iron gates draped in ivy and flowering wisteria.

"This is the Cardinal's Nest restaurant," he announced. "We bring everyone here for coffee early in the tour because the Cardinal's Nest affords the finest bird's-eye view of the entire heart of Miranda."

The guide pointed to New Trump's, directly across the park. "Sparkling and majestic, the entire one-hundred-and-twenty-five-floor building is at once there and not there. It is enclosed in a special mirrored glass that reflects everything around it. This feat is most strikingly apparent when one realizes that the last fifty or so floors reflect the sky and the clouds back to the viewer. . . ."

Billie and Thad couldn't listen anymore. All they could do

was squeeze each other's hands and try not to howl like coon dogs.

"Are you used to the apartment yet, babe?" Cary asked with a smile on his face.

"Darling, I could live in a shack as long as you're with me," Amelia laughed back. "To answer your question, yes, I love it. And we're going to need all eight rooms and three baths. It's amazing what you builders can do. Here we are living high in the sky in an apartment that's bigger than most people's houses."

"It's all for you, Amelia. I had it down on paper right to the last nail. I know you wanted a state-of-the-art kitchen. I kind of like the sunken Jacuzzi myself." He leered at her.

"I know you do." Amelia leered back. "You know what I like best, Cary? The balcony. It's as big as the patio at Sun-bridge. The first thing I did was set out my sundial. It fits perfectly on the pedestal. Cary, I just love it. I know I'm going to spend a lot of time out there when the weather is good."

"We can sit out there all year-round. Did you forget about the special heater I installed? The canopy and the sides are insulated. We'll be as snug as two bugs in a rug."

"I did forget, Cary. There are times when living in an apartment, no matter how big it is, gets to you. The need to walk outside, to touch something green, makes all the difference. Thank you, Cary."

They walked hand in hand through the apartment. Each time they did it they noticed something different—an object with a memory, a special gift, something they'd bought together because it pleased them, the colors they'd chosen after months of looking at fabric and paint samples, a cushion with a petit point cover. All the little things that made up their new home in Assante Towers. In Miranda.

"We're going to be happy here, babe."

"Not going to be happy, Cary. We are happy. I'm so proud of you and all this."

"Couldn't have done it without you," Cary said.

Amelia knew he meant every word. Cary was probably the most honest person she'd ever met. "I love you, Cary."

"And I love you, more than life itself. And because I love you, I am going to carry you to that large sofa we bought so

we could snuggle into it together. If I remember your words correctly, you said we could get lost in it."

"A nap sounds good to me. What are you going to do?"

"Not a damn thing except reflect on Miranda. I might go out to the balcony and try out that heater."

Amelia smiled at her husband as he settled her in the softness of the sofa. He propped bright orange pillows behind her head and covered her with one of her mother's afghans that had seen far too many washings. "Warmer than cashmere," Amelia whispered as she drifted into sleep.

Cary watched the tour bus from the heated balcony of his penthouse apartment. He straightened his shoulders and threw out his chest. He wasn't going to burst, he was going to bust . . . with pride. He'd created it all, lived it all, 365 days a year for ten long years. For a moment he felt like God surveying His creation. God had created the world out of nothing. He, Cary Assante, had taken his imagination, his own money, his wife, Amelia's, faith in him, and had gone to work. Five years into his project, he'd run out of money. Unable to let his dream slip into obscurity, he'd solicited the aid of the Colemans and the Hasegawas. They'd all invested—in him, they said. From that point on he'd doubled his workday, arriving at the building site before first light and returning home long past midnight. Amelia should have divorced him for his neglect; instead, she encouraged him to keep on. He was glad now that he'd listened. He hadn't lied to the Colemans, to Thad Kingsley, and to Shadaharu Hasegawa when he told them their investment would be returned tenfold. Their belief in him made him deliver; it was that simple.

Cary felt like singing. Lyrics bubbled forth. *Come fly with me. . . .* He wished he could remember the rest of the words to the song. He hummed the melody as he leaned on the railing of his balcony. Down below . . . his blood, his sweat, and his tears.

Nothing in his life had prepared Cary for this moment, this day. This was the bubbly. He'd earned this moment—a moment of aloneness to savor his creation. For a little while, until the dedication, Miranda had belonged to him. Now it would belong to the world.

Come fly with me. . . . It sounded right. If only he could take wing and fly over his creation. . . . If only. . . . He wished