

NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STUART WOODS

A STONE BARRINGTON NOVEL

CUT AND THRUST



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TRAVEL

MEMOIR

Blue Water, Green Skipper

**A Holly Barker Novel*

†A Stone Barrington Novel

‡A Will Lee Novel

§An Ed Eagle Novel



STUART WOODS

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[*Author's Note*](#)



Stone Barrington was about to leave his house for Los Angeles and the Democratic convention when the phone rang. “Just put the bags in the car and I’ll be right down,” Stone said to Fred Flicker, his factotum.

“Righto, sir,” Fred replied, and started moving cases.

Stone answered the phone on the third ring. “Hello?”

“It’s Ann.” He had been seeing a lot of Ann Keaton. She was deputy campaign manager for the presidential effort of Katharine Lee.

“Hi, I’m just leaving the house to pick you up.”

“Something has come up.”

Stone hated those words; he didn’t like changes in his plans, especially when they involved a transcontinental flight. “What is it?”

“Kate needs a lift.”

Katharine Rule Lee, in addition to being a candidate for president, was also the first lady of the United States, running to succeed her husband, William Jefferson Lee, and she never needed a lift anywhere.

“What, to the airport? Has the Secret Service run out of black SUVs?”

“No, to Los Angeles.”

“Whatever happened to Air Force One?”

“It’s just fine, thank you, but the Marine helicopter sent to take her to Dulles, where she was to meet Air Force One, is down with a broken wing, or something, and it would be much more convenient for her if she could fly with us. Is there room?”

“How big a party are we talking about?”

“Her secretary and two Secret Service agents.”

“No further entourage?”

“Just me, and I was going with you anyway.”

“Hold the phone and I’ll call Mike.”

“Right.”

Stone pressed the hold button, chose another line, and called the cell phone of Michael Freeman, chairman and CEO of Strategic Services.

“Mike Freeman.”

“It’s Stone. I have a request—feel free to say no, but you’ll regret it the rest of your life.”

“In that case, yes.”

“You have just agreed to fly the first lady of the United States, her secretary, and two Secret Service agents to Los Angeles on your Gulfstream with us.”

There was only the briefest of silences. “Yes,” Mike said again. “I can do that.”

“Thank you, kind sir. See you at the airport.”

“I’m already at the airport.”

“Am I late?”

“No, I’m meeting with a client who’s passing through.”

“All right, I and my party will be on time. I can’t speak for the first lady.”

“That’s the beauty of owning an airplane—our ETD is whenever I say it is.”

“See you there.” Stone disengaged and pressed the hold button again. “The answer is a resounding yes.”

“Oh, good,” Ann said with a sigh.

“Next question, is she ready to leave for Teterboro?”

“She’s sitting in a black SUV at the East Side Heliport and she doesn’t have anywhere else to go. She may beat us there.”

“Tell her to meet us at Jet Aviation. It’s the one with the very large white airplane parked just outside the door. I’ll let them know she’s coming.”

“Don’t do that, she doesn’t like any fuss. She’ll just want to pee and get on the airplane.”

“Tell her she can pee on the airplane, it’s equipped for that, and she’ll save the bother of the Secret Service throwing everybody out of the ladies’ room at Jet Aviation.”

“I’ll pass that on,” Ann said.

“I’m leaving and I’ll be there in ten minutes,” he said. “Let Dino and Viv know, will you?” Dino Bacchetti, Stone’s old NYPD partner, now chief of detectives, and his wife, Vivian, were coming to the convention with them, and, conveniently, they lived in the same Park Avenue apartment building as Ann.

“Certainly.”

Stone hung up, grabbed his jacket, and followed Fred and the luggage down to the street, where the Bentley Flying Spur sat idling at the curb, Fred already at the wheel. Stone got in. “Go. We’re picking up Ann Keaton and the Bacchettis on the way.”

“Righto, sir.” The car glided away. “By the way, sir, my New York City gun license arrived in this morning’s mail.”

“Congratulations.”

“All I need now is a gun.”

“There’s a gun shop downtown that all the cops use. Joan will give you the address. Take your license with you. And bring me the bill for whatever you choose.”

“Thank you, sir. And please thank Chief Bacchetti for me.”

HALF AN HOUR after collecting his guests, they pulled to a halt at the Jet Aviation FBO (fixed base operator). Dino, Viv, and Ann went ahead to the airplane while the doorman and a lineman unloaded all their luggage. Stone took the doorman aside. “Have you seen a couple of”—he looked up to see three black SUVs pull into the parking lot—“those?”

“I see them, Mr. Barrington.”

“One of them contains the first lady of the United States. Please take a couple of carts and whisk her straight through the terminal and onto the G650 on the ramp.” He gave the man a hundred, which always brought a doorman to attention.

“Yes indeed, sir!” The man grabbed two carts and pushed them quickly toward the caravan.

Stone waited for Kate to get out of the car and make sure all her luggage was aboard the carts, then she came and kissed him on a cheek. “Stone, you’re so kind to do this.”

“Save your thanks for Mike Freeman, who’s waiting for us aboard the airplane.”

“You haven’t met my secretary, Molly Cannon.” She and Stone shook hands. “And these are my Secret Service detail, Tom Brennan and Christy Thomas.” He shook their hands, too.

He offered Kate an arm. She took it, and they practically sprinted from the front door to the back door, without attracting too many stares, and out onto the ramp, where the big jet sat, one engine running. The linemen got the luggage stowed while the two Secret Service agents raced aboard and made sure that no members of al-Qaeda were flying with them. Shortly, they were all settled aboard and introduced, and the airplane’s other engine started.

“I’m sorry it’s not Air Force One,” Mike said.

“Oh,” Kate said, “it will do very nicely. And for purposes of this flight, we can call it Air Force One-point-Five.” She took the aisle seat next to Stone and across the table from Ann. “May I join you?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“There’s something I want to talk to you about while we’re en route.”

The airplane began to taxi up the ramp toward Taxiway Lima. As they reached it, Stone saw a dozen jets lined up and waiting for the Gulfstream to take the runway while ground control cleared it for immediate takeoff. “That’s something I’ve never seen before,” Stone said, nodding toward the waiting airplanes.

“I expect the Secret Service had a word with the tower,” Kate said. “They hate my waiting in line on the ground. Somebody might take a shot at us.”

“Now, that’s a thought that had never crossed my mind,” Stone said as the Gulfstream began accelerating, pressing him back in his seat. A few seconds later they were climbing and turning to the west.

“Oh?” Kate said. “We’ll be cleared direct to Burbank. No routing or delays.”

Twenty minutes later they leveled at cruising altitude, and mimosas were served.

“From now on,” Stone said, “I’m going to tell Air Traffic Control that you’re aboard all my flights.”

“Feel free,” Kate replied with a big smile.



Kate Lee waited until they had finished a salad-and-omelet lunch before placing her hand on Stone's arm. "Now," she said, "to business—or rather, to politics."

"Tell me all."

"I know from Will's experience at conventions that after our arrival and throughout our stay there will be people who will wish to talk with me who I will wish not to talk with—not because I don't like or respect them, but because their messages will sometimes be so important that they are better conveyed through intermediaries. Sometimes my messages to them will fall into the same category. Do you understand?"

"Of course. It's one of the principal reasons why people have attorneys."

"Exactly. On these occasions I will not want a campaign or staff member to act as intermediary. That would add a political edge to conversations that might be better conducted in a more civilian manner. That's why I would like you to represent me on these occasions."

"I would be very pleased to help in any way I can," Stone replied.

"Sometimes you may receive messages, at other times you may send them—sometimes both."

"I understand."

"I will always try to alert you when a call will be coming, but I won't always be able to. If someone calls you, that means he very likely got your number from me, so don't blow him off—at least, not immediately."

Stone nodded. "So if someone calls me and asks if you would accept the vice presidential nomination . . ."

"Let's hope it will be me offering it to someone else. But I hear there are other things brewing that may not surface for a few days, so be on the qui vive."

"I haven't heard that expression for decades."

"Now you're making me feel old."

"Never."

"You haven't met my chief of staff, Alicia Carey, have you? She works out of my Washington office."

"I believe I may have shaken her hand on a visit to the White House."

"Of course you would have. I hope you will have an opportunity to get to know her this week. When Alicia speaks, she speaks for me."

“I’ll keep that in mind. I hope you and Will can come to dinner at my house—maybe tomorrow evening?”

“We’d both like that, but let me clear it with him.”

“And, by all means, bring Alicia and whoever she’d like to bring. We’ll do a buffet by the pool.”

“That sounds lovely. Oh, my ears just popped, we must be descending into Van Nuys.”

Molly came over. “I’ve just had a message—the president has landed at Van Nuys and will wait for you there. We’re twelve minutes out.”

“Thank you, Molly, that’s good. One caravan is enough.”

Stone noticed that the airplane never turned until it lined up on Runway 34 left. This was the way to travel. They touched down with a nearly imperceptible squeak of tires on pavement, and as they exited the runway, Stone saw the big 747, Air Force One, parked on the ramp, surrounded by people with weapons.

The Gulfstream came to a stop, the engines died, and the airstair door was opened. Kate was the first out of the airplane and into the arms of her husband.

“Hi, Stone,” the president said, offering his hand. “Thanks for giving a girl a lift.”

Stone shook his hand. “Hello, Mr. President. Thank Mike Freeman.”

“It was a wonderful flight,” Kate said to her husband. “Mike’s food is better than ours.”

A line of cars pulled up to the airplane and someone held open the door of the presidential limousine. The Lees got in. Ann kissed Stone goodbye. “See you later.”

“We’ve got your luggage,” he said.

She and Molly got into the car, following the president, and the procession moved away. Two Bentley Mulsannes from The Arrington moved into place and linemen loaded their luggage. Shortly, they were on their way.

Stone and Mike took one car, the Bacchettis the other.

“Thank you again for taking Kate,” Stone said to Mike.

“It was a pleasure having her on board.”

“I’ve asked them to dinner tomorrow night. And of course Ann and I would like you there, too.”

“Mind if I bring a date?”

“Why would I mind?”

“I was thinking of asking Charlene Joiner.” She was a big-time movie star who, many years before, had had a brief fling with Will Lee when he was a Senate staffer and still single.

“Ah, Mike,” Stone said, “Charlene’s presence near Will seems to put things a bit on edge. Do you know someone else?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks for understanding. Charlene always seems to have an ax to grind when she sees Will. For the longest time she was trying to get him to commute the sentence of her old boyfriend who was on death row for rape and murder.”

“And did she get it?”

“Yes, but not from Will. When he declined, she moved down a couple of rungs and got herself fixed up with the governor of Georgia, who was happy, after a night with her, to commute the sentence to life.”

“That sounds like Charlene,” Mike said.

They drove on toward The Arrington.



Security was already tighter than usual at the gate to The Arrington, and Stone, even though he was a major stockholder and board member, was not spared. The search of the cars was thorough.

The hotel was built on land that had been owned by Arrington's first husband, the movie star Vance Calder, and his house had been incorporated into the guest-arrival center. As part of the lease of the land to the hotel corporation, Stone had negotiated the building of a new house for Arrington. Completed after her death, he had used it as his L.A. base since the hotel opened.

His car was met by the now elderly Manolo, who had been Vance Calder's butler, and he oversaw the unloading and routing of luggage to the various rooms.

"Drinks in half an hour," Stone said to everybody, and they went to freshen up.

When he had the opportunity, Manolo approached Stone. "A man from the Secret Service was here half an hour ago," the Filipino said.

"Details?" Stone asked.

"He said he would return to brief you after the arrival of the president," Manolo said.

Brief him? About what? Stone went upstairs to his bedroom and got into some casual clothes, then he went back downstairs. A man in a suit with a lapel button was waiting to see him.

"Mr. Barrington, I'm Special Agent Mervin Beam of the Secret Service. I'm in charge of the L.A. office." They shook hands. "May I speak with you in private?"

Stone took the man into his study and they sat down. He didn't bother offering the man a drink since he knew it would be declined. "What's going on?" he asked.

"It arrived as an e-mail sent to me personally." Beam took a sheet of paper from an inside pocket and handed it to Stone. "This is a copy."

Stone read the message: *At some time before the end of the Democratic convention, Katharine Ru Lee will die. We are patriots who have sworn to return the United States to a strict, constitutional republic, and we regard Mrs. Lee as a clear and present danger to her country, since she will slavishly support the criminal policies put into effect by William Jefferson Lee.*

We have supporters in both houses of Congress and in the government bureaucracy, and even in the Secret Service, and we have the means and expertise to carry out our promises. We are quite willing to die in pursuit of our ideals, if that should become necessary.

There will be nothing you can do to stop us. It was signed, *The Patriots.*

“WHAT DO YOU make of this?” Stone asked.

“I’m no psychologist,” Beam said, “but I’ve seen a lot of this stuff over the years. The writer is probably an individual and there is probably no group involved. He exaggerates or, more likely, simply lies about his support in the Congress and the government.”

“What about his claim of someone in your service?”

“I believe that is in the realm of preposterous.”

“And his claim of the means to kill Mrs. Lee?”

“Anybody with a gun has the means to kill anybody else.”

“Do you believe this man is a serious threat or just crazy?”

“Conceivably both, but in any case we will take his threat seriously, as we do all threats. The part about being willing to die is probably true—in fact, that may be what he intends.”

“How did he get your e-mail address?”

Beam looked at his shoes for a moment. “That is the single most disturbing thing about the threat I’ve got a tech team working on where his e-mail came from, and I’ve got two agents working on how he could have discovered my secure address.”

“How many people have that address?”

“Knowledge of it is restricted to our director, two deputy directors in Washington, and in L.A. to three supervisory agents. It’s used for the most confidential communications.”

“How about secretaries, clerical workers, cleaning ladies?”

“None of the above, but an employee might root it out if he had access and enough time.”

“What are your chances of backtracking to find the sender?”

“Fair to good, unless he’s very, very smart and capable. We’ll assume he is.”

“Is there anything you’d like me to do?”

“Mrs. Lee tells me she and the president are having dinner in this house tomorrow night. I just want you to know that, from eight A.M. tomorrow, my agents will be all over the house and the property. We’ll be as unobtrusive as possible.”

“Actually, we’ll be having dinner outdoors, by the pool, weather permitting.”

“Then we’ll set up a perimeter.” Beam extended a hand. “May I have the e-mail back, please?” Stone handed it to him.

“Who will be attending the dinner tomorrow night, besides the president and first lady?”

“Whoever they would like to include, plus my guests. They are Chief of Detectives, NYPD, Dino Bacchetti and his wife, Vivian, who is an executive at Strategic Services, Michael Freeman, chairman and CEO of Strategic Services, and he may be bringing someone, you can ask him. Also my son, Peter Barrington, his girlfriend, Hattie Patrick, Ben Bacchetti, the chief’s son, and his girlfriend, Tessa Tweed. I’ll let you know if any other guests are added to the list.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barrington.” Beam stood up. “I’ll keep you posted if there are further developments.”

“I would appreciate that.” Stone shook the man’s hand, received his business card, and watched him leave. Stone was not unduly alarmed about the threat, but its presence would add an edge to their evening that he didn’t like. He would tell Dino and Mike to come armed.

The phone rang; Manolo answered and buzzed Stone. “Mr. Peter is on the phone,” he said.

Stone picked up. “Good afternoon, kiddo!”

“Glad to hear your voice, Dad. I got your message about dinner tomorrow, and we’d all like to

come.”

“Great!”

“I’d also like to bring Billy and Betsy Burnett.”

“Of course, I’d love to see them.”

“What time?”

“Six-thirty, seven?”

“And, Dad, the night after that, we’d like to have you all over here for dinner. You haven’t seen our place yet.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Stone said. “How’s the flying going?” He had given Peter his old Citation Mustang.

“Very well. Billy has got Ben, Hattie, and me type-rated in it. Tessa hasn’t shown any interest.”

“Good news. You’ll get lots of use out of it.”

“When does your new Citation M2 arrive?”

“In a few weeks. There was a delay in certifying the avionics.”

“I can’t wait to see it.”

“I can’t wait to see you,” Stone said. They said goodbye and hung up. Stone called Mervin Beam and got his voice mail; he added the Burnetts to the guest list.

As they were having a drink before dinner, Ann turned up. “I finally got free,” she said.

“Your things are in your dressing room,” Stone said. “Top of the stairs, first door on your left.”

“I’ll go up after dinner,” she said. “Right now I’d like a martini.”

Stone buzzed Manolo and ordered the drink, and it appeared quickly.

“Now that I’ve got you all together,” Stone said, “I want to tell you about my conversation with the Secret Service.” And he did so.



Stone woke the following morning to find Ann in her dressing room, putting her things away. He liked it that she did these things naked.

“Good morning,” he said from the doorway.

She smiled. “And good morning to you.”

“If you’d like anything pressed, just leave it out and tell Manolo.”

“I’ll do that. Oh, by the way, Kate told me to tell you that they accept your invitation to dinner tonight with pleasure.”

“The Secret Service already told me.”

“Who else will be here?”

“My and Dino’s sons and their girlfriends, and a couple who work for Peter in his production company at Centurion Studios, named Billy and Betsy Burnett.”

“Oh, I’m supposed to tell you that Senator Sam Meriwether and his wife, Dorothy, will be coming, too.”

“I’ve met him,” Stone said, “but not her.” Sam Meriwether, a former congressman from Georgia, had been elected to Will Lee’s old seat and was Kate’s campaign manager. His sobriquet in the Senate was “the new Sam Nunn.” “They’re welcome.”

“Technically, he’s my boss, but he’s been working out of D.C., so I haven’t seen a lot of him, just a lot of phone calls.”

“Is he the right guy to run Kate’s campaign?”

“He is. Kate wanted a southerner, preferably a Georgian, and he’s the sort of senator who gets along with people on both sides of the aisle. Kate and I pretty much run the day-to-day operations, and Sam is more of a strategist. He also is good on television and gets along very well with the press.”

“The accent helps, I think,” Stone said.

“It certainly does. It’s an old-fashioned Georgia accent, and it sounds good on him.”

“Does Kate know about the death threat?”

“Sure, and she’s unfazed. She’s used to that sort of thing, and she knows she’s well protected.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I wouldn’t want her to worry unnecessarily. What time do you have to be back with Kate?”

“Not until eight-thirty or so,” she said.

“Then you have time to come back to bed for a little while, don’t you?”

She smiled. "I'll be right there."

THEY HAD BREAKFAST sent up on trays and ate in bed, watching the morning shows and reading the papers. A **BREAKING NEWS** title came on the screen.

"We've just had news that Senator Eleanor Stockman has taken a turn for the worse," an anchorwoman said.

Ann put down the papers and listened. "Uh-oh," she said.

"Senator Stockman went into the hospital after collapsing at her home last week, and was diagnosed with an operable brain tumor. She had the surgery and was said to be recovering well, but the early hours of this morning she arrested and had to be revived and intubated. She has been on a respirator for several hours now, and a spokesman says that she is in critical condition."

"That's so sad," Ann said. "I saw her in New York a couple of weeks ago, and she looked tired, but healthy. She was scheduled to speak at the convention."

"It sounds very serious," Stone said. "Who will they get to replace her?"

"My guess is Governor Richard Collins might appoint himself to the seat. He's one of our bright younger stars, and it would be a good opportunity for him to become better known nationally."

"He was the mayor of San Francisco, wasn't he?"

"That's right."

"Would he make a good vice presidential running mate for Kate?"

"Too soon. He's only thirty-eight, and he hasn't finished his first term. Pedro 'Pete' Otero of New Mexico has had two terms as governor, and—don't tell anybody this—he's the favorite for VP in our camp, if he doesn't beat us for the nomination!" She looked at her watch. "I've got to get into a shower and run over to the presidential cottage," she said, getting up and trotting toward her bathroom.

Stone finished the papers and was just getting up when she left. He showered, shaved, and dressed and got downstairs in time to see Mike Freeman and Dino about to leave.

"We're off to a security meeting with the convention managers," Mike said. "Chief Rivera of the LAPD has asked Dino to come along and kibitz."

"Good for you to get to know your future peers around the country," Stone said.

"Don't start," Dino said.

"We'll be back in time for a drink before dinner," Mike said. "Oh, I didn't make another date for dinner."

"How did Charlene take your breaking your date?"

"Like an arrow in the chest, I think."

"I wouldn't be surprised if she just showed up," Stone said.

"You really think she'd do that?"

"She won't if I alert the Secret Service."

"Do that, and I'll never get laid again," Mike said.

"Don't worry, Charlene will have you back in the sack in no time," Stone said.



The kids arrived a little early for the dinner party, and they sat out by the pool, waiting for the other guests.

“Tell me about these houses you’ve bought,” Stone said to Peter. “You’ve been pretty quiet about it.”

“Ben and I bought two adjacent properties in Brentwood,” Peter said. “We’ve taken down the fencing between them and combined the landscaping, so that it seems like one larger property with two houses. We have nearly four acres, altogether. Hattie and Tessa have done the decorating, and we’re ready for what amounts to a double housewarming tomorrow evening.”

“I can’t wait to see the place,” Stone said.

“Neither can I,” Dino said. “Are you sure you can afford this, Ben?”

“Dad, I’m a successful movie producer,” Ben replied. “You’d be surprised at what I can afford.”

Billy and Betsy Burnett arrived, Billy introduced Betsy to the grown-ups. It suddenly occurred to Stone that having the former Teddy Fay at a dinner with the first lady and the president who had secretly pardoned him could make for some discomfort. He was about to take Billy aside and talk with him about it when the presidential party arrived.

Introductions were made, and Stone watched Kate carefully. Will Lee had never seen Teddy Fay, but Kate would have when she was at the CIA. The moment passed without incident, and Stone breathed a little easier.

Stone found himself sitting between Senator Sam Meriwether and Kate Lee.

“You heard about Senator Eleanor Stockman’s illness?” Kate asked.

“Yes, this morning on TV.”

“I spoke with her son a few minutes ago. Eleanor is showing no sign of brain activity, and the family are discussing now whether—or rather when—to take her off the respirator.”

“That’s very sad,” Stone said. “I had to face something like that with my mother. She died before we could bring ourselves to turn off the machine.”

Kate nodded. “So many families have to face that.”

Sam Meriwether spoke up. “This means we’re going to have to face another event,” he said. “When Eleanor dies, her Senate seat comes available, and Governor Dick Collins will appoint someone to replace her. She was reelected two years ago, so there’s a four-year term before the appointee would have to face reelection.”

“You see where this is going, Stone?” Kate asked.

Stone took a sip of his drink. “~~Might Martin Stanton be a candidate to fill her seat?~~”

“That’s astute of you,” she said. “We have to make some suppositions here, and without as much information as we’d like before doing so.”

“You think Stanton would accept if it’s offered?” Stone asked.

“No, I don’t—at least, not before the convention.”

“What if his support begins to crumble in the California delegation?”

“That would certainly point him in the right direction, but we don’t see that happening, at this point.”

“The thing is,” Meriwether said, “if Marty knows there’s a safe Senate seat waiting for him if he isn’t nominated, he may not fight quite so hard to get the nomination.”

“Is there someone you’d like me to speak to?” Stone asked, cognizant of his conversation with Kate on the flight out.

“Do you know Dick Collins?” Kate asked.

“I met him at a cocktail party in San Francisco five or six years ago when he was still mayor. I don’t know if he’ll remember, but we had a nice conversation for a few minutes.”

“He’ll remember,” Kate said. “He has a phenomenal memory for names and faces.”

Peter was sitting nearby. “Excuse me, Dad, but did I hear you mention Governor Collins?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Ben and I gave him a tour of Centurion Studios a couple of days ago. We invited him to the housewarming. He said he’d get back to us. He hasn’t yet.”

“You have a better network than you know, Stone,” Kate said. “Peter, don’t ask him again. Don’t worry, he’ll get back to you, he never forgets anything. If he shows up, Stone, then there’s an opportunity.”

“Does he know that you and I are acquainted?” Stone asked.

“Stone, after that stupid rumor the opposition started about you and me, the *nation* knows we’re acquainted. And Dick knows we’re staying next door to you at The Arrington.”

“Peter,” Stone said, “when the governor calls back, tell him I’m looking forward to seeing him again at your housewarming.”

“Sure, Dad.” Peter went to get another tonic water, his usual drink.

“If he doesn’t make the party,” Kate said, “we’ll find another reason for you and the governor to rub elbows.”

“He’ll be here for our gala,” Stone said. The Arrington was hosting a big fund-raiser, where the singer and actress Immi Gotham would be performing in the hotel’s amphitheater for an invited audience of 1,500 of the top party contributors.

“I think Peter’s housewarming would be better—more intimate,” Kate said. “Too much backslapping going on at the gala, too much flesh to press.”

“We’ll leave the gala for a backup, then,” Stone said. “I’ll see that we sit in the same box—that will cut the crowd down enough for us to have a word.”

“These things have a way of working out,” Kate said, “if we work hard enough to make them happen.”



They were seated at half a dozen tables by the pool, having served themselves from the buffet, when Stone looked up and saw two Secret Service agents where they had not been before. Then there was another pair, and another. Kate affected not to notice, but Will Le crooked a finger at Mervin Beam, and he approached the table. They exchanged whispers then Beam walked around the area with another agent.

“Everything all right?” Stone asked the president, who was sitting across the table from him.

“I think so,” Will replied quietly. “If there are any further concerns, they’ll move us inside.” He quickly changed the subject. “By the way, Stone, you recall the drone strike we watched together at the Carlyle a few weeks ago?”

“How could I forget that?”

“We’ve confirmed since that our effort was successful with all six of the subjects.”

“Congratulations. I hope you don’t have to take any heat for that.”

“You know, during World War Two, we and the British killed tens of thousands of civilians during bombing raids on strategic targets in Europe—and a hundred thousand in Tokyo in a single night—and though people thought civilian raids were regrettable, they understood the reason for them. Now, when a terrorist’s wife or child become collateral damage, there’s an uproar.”

“When an active terrorist hides in the bosom of his family, he’s responsible for putting them at risk, isn’t he?” Stone asked.

“My view exactly,” Will said. “Unstopped, those men would have been responsible for hundreds of deaths in Middle Eastern and European cities, and perhaps some in this country. While I’m still in office, I’ll keep hunting them down.”

AS THE TABLE was being cleared, Beam approached the president again and whispered. Will spoke up. “You know, it’s beginning to be a little chilly in this desert air, why don’t we have dessert in the house?”

Stone herded the group inside, and they settled around the big living room while waiters served them dessert. Will came and sat next to Stone.

“You know, I took that e-mail to Beam more seriously than Kate did. I’m not sure what it was, but something in that message raised the hair on the back of my neck.”

“I’ll certainly trust your instincts, Will,” Stone said. “Nothing wrong with being cautious.”

“Kate can be a little too cavalier about these things,” the president said.

The party broke up around ten, and the Lees’ group walked back to the presidential cottage.

“We’ve got to go, too, Dad,” Peter said when they had gone. “This is an early town, you know.”

“I’ve heard that,” Stone said.

Peter handed him a card. “This is the address. It’s a couple of blocks off Sunset. Come at six.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Stone said.

The kids said their good nights and left, then Stone ordered after-dinner drinks for his guests. Billy and Betsy Burnett stayed on for a drink.

“What was that about?” Dino asked. “The thing with the Secret Service?”

“They got a death threat on Kate e-mailed to them last night,” Stone said. “I expect it was something to do with that, but at least nobody had to draw a weapon.”

“What we need,” Dino said, “is a secret method for instantly determining the location that any e-mail is sent from.”

“It’s being worked on,” Mike Freeman said, “but don’t expect to read about it in the papers. The political climate isn’t good right now for new intelligence initiatives.”

“I’m happy for them to read my e-mails and track my phone calls,” Stone said. “We live in a new and dangerous world, and it’s not going to stop anytime soon.”

“I wish I could disagree with you,” Mike said.

“How did your security meeting go today?” Stone asked.

“The Democrats are going to have the most secure convention in history,” Mike replied. “And Staples Center is going to be the most wired and camera-ready venue ever. Not to mention the shoe leather on the ground.”

“Sounds good to me,” Stone said.

“We’re going to have a new shield system in operation,” Mike said. “We press a button and a two-inch-thick bulletproof glass wall will rise from the floor to a height of ten feet and protects about the central third of the stage. If you see that coming up, you’ll know there’s a very real threat.”

“Do the candidates know about that?” Stone asked.

“The Secret Service is certainly in on it—whether they’ll share it with the candidates is up to them, but it will certainly go up when the nominee and the president speak.”

“Very good.”

“Where are your convention seats?” Mike asked Stone.

“I’ve got a skybox,” Stone replied. “Remember? You helped me get it.”

“So you have,” Mike said. “From there, it will be like watching the world’s largest flat-screen TV.”

“And we can turn down the noise during the demonstrations on the floor. That’s the part of conventions that has always bored me rigid.”

“And the glass window in your box will be the same as for the platform shield,” Mike said.

“That’s very comforting,” Stone replied. “You’ll have to join us.”

“I’ll be in our control center,” Mike said, “or patrolling the floor with a handheld radio.”

“We’ll wave,” Stone said.

LATER, AS BILLY and Betsy were leaving, Billy called Stone aside. “I have some thoughts about the e-mail sent to the Secret Service office,” he said.

“Tell me.”

“It’s an inside job.”

“Why do you think so?”

“No one on the outside would even know of the existence of that e-mail address, but if there are half a dozen insiders who know about it, then there’s a very good chance others in the office know about it, too.”

“You have a very good point, Billy.”

“I’d be willing to bet that if they can trace the e-mail back to one computer, it will turn out to be one in their offices.”

“Then I hope they trace it back soon,” Stone said, “because they’re very short of time.”

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