

THE INTRUDER

“We agreed that you were never going to come here,” Lauren told him the moment that he stepped foot inside the house. “If anyone sees you, you will ruin everything for us.”

Her soft voice and petitioning manner could not conceal her angry resentment that he had come here so unexpectedly, complicating the scheme that they had been devising together, even though in these days they were often apart.

He knew her too well to accept this petition as anything more than her fear of him. There had been other times when she had more persuasively disguised her fear or, with carefree words and a light caress of his arm, kept her fear at bay. But always her fear held her words in its chains. Always, the memory of how rough he could be with her subdued any impulse that might impel her to cross him. That she loved him despite this fear intrigued him. Such love, as far as he understood it, was a perversity of the will. It drove its energies against safe convention and against the expectation of quiet happiness.

For the moment, he met her softness with his own subdued response, a disguise that lent conviction to his husky voice and nearly affable manner.

“There’s no need to worry,” he said. “Most of the summer people have left the area. Besides, if any of the regulars here do recognize me, they will accept me as a friend of yours who happens to be passing through.”

“But I do worry, Bryce,” she said. “I do worry. One wrong move and everything we have worked for will be ruined.”

The late September sun flowing through the panoramic window touched the whole lithe form of her: her long, curly black hair and dark brown eyes; her smooth olive skin; her exotic face with its turned-up nose and full lips; her firm, round breasts; and her sensual hips and legs. For a moment, standing before him in a green tweed jacket and tan jodhpurs and riding boots, she looked otherworldly and mysterious. Even in his brooding suspicion, he had to admit that her beauty still excited him. As if she were casting a spell, she stirred him in ways that surprised him. But on this Tuesday morning in 1977, as he observed her every move, he found her mystery to be very much of this world. No longer was she open with him. No longer did her words and gestures seem spontaneous. She was withholding herself from him. She was not being true. In these last months, something had happened to her. Someone had compelled her to hide her feelings. That someone, he was convinced, was Aaron Dowling.

Now he drew closer to her, his tall muscularity casting a shadow over her wary face. The thought that, by falling in love with their intended victim, she had betrayed the plan that could set them free goaded the fury that he had carefully concealed. Yet he gave her no clear sign of his anger. Instead, he harnessed his words to playful intonations while he gently pressed his large, rugged hands upon her shoulders. She knew where he stood. She knew him well enough to recognize the undercurrent of menace.

“If anyone makes a wrong move, baby, it will be you.”

She held herself still, accepting the ambivalent press of his hands as a show of affection. He could read her well. She was too smart to try to break free of him. That gesture might incite his anger. Not being able to break away, she would have to admit that his press of hands was telling her that he could do with her as he willed. Instead, she met his gaze directly, her eyes gleaming with their matter-of-fact apprehension of who he was and of why he had come here so abruptly.

Now, he was aware, she chose words meant to placate his unease.

“I’ll never make a wrong move,” she said, after touching his mouth with a fleet kiss, “...not when we can win so much.”

He pressed his hands more firmly upon her shoulders. Still he kept his voice low, yet insistent.

“I don’t think you are leveling with me,” he said.

She placed her head against his chest, trying to conceal the nearly imperceptible look of fear that was overtaking her face.

“What makes you say that?” she asked him, all the while maintaining her show of serenity.

His right hand clasped the back of her head now, her sunlit hair falling through and around his fingers. Once more he brought her face to face with him. He wanted to study her as she spoke to him. He wanted to watch her as she lied and schemed. The low timbres of his voice were making his words guttural and abrasive.

“You’re playing your own private game with Dowling. You’ve fallen for him. You like going to bed with him.”

She did not permit herself to move. No frown creased her brow. Nor did her voice rise in protest. Determined and resourceful, she chose to act nearly amused by his words.

“Dowling means nothing to me. He’s a means to an end, that’s all.”

The hint of a smile touching her lips roused his anger. She was playing a game and leaving him at the edge of it. He was outside, peering into what he did not understand. For all he knew, she might be laughing at him. If she were playing him false, he had to put a stop to it.

He released her from his hold upon her and then, in the same instant, began slapping her while he spewed through his teeth a volley of questions and accusations.

“Why haven’t I heard from you in more than a month? Why?” he asked her, his caustic voice dangerously low and threatening. “Tell me that, baby. Then explain why you left New York weeks ago in such a hurry. Make me believe that you are not trying to hide something from me.”

She lifted her hands as if to deflect the next slap and to protect her face, which was already flushed and bruised from his assault of her.

“Don’t do this,” she gasped, as he lurched forward to slap her again. “Don’t do this. You will ruin everything that’s good between us.”

In his anger, he heard her words as a threat.

He grabbed her now and began shaking her violently.

She twisted her body, trying to escape from his pinioning hold of her. For an instant, right after she kicked him in his left ankle, she nearly broke free of him.

“Stop it, Bryce!” she screamed. “Stop it!”

This time he slapped her so hard that she fell across the long, richly upholstered sofa that dominated the south corner of the room. Only when he noticed the blood seeping from the corner of her mouth did he draw away from her. He held his body taut, as if with hair-trigger energies he was prepared to subdue any new adversary. Bitter now and unrepentant, he hurried to the bar to pour himself a scotch. Here, within the intimate north corner of this spacious reception room and in the midst of her glamorous circle of friends, Lauren and he had in times past shared a few drinks as well as an intense need for each other. The memory of that intensity goaded his bitterness. His need for her still lived, urgent and distended, within the deepest secrecies that hid his real self, even from those who thought they knew him well. But, with almost imperceptible alterations and with nearly casual dissembling, Lauren had changed toward him. Her tightly

controlled wariness, her undercurrent of fear, and her contrived exhilaration incited his doubt of her.

That he desired her so intensely, yet was willing to kill her if she crossed him gave him pause. He was not surprised by the savagery of his instincts or by the hardened will that pushed him to kill. What did surprise him was his fear of himself and of his willingness to kill this beautiful woman who roused his desire in a way that few women had ever done. Whether that desire was a form of love, he could not say. Though he had slept with many women, he had made no lasting commitment with any of them. But Lauren was different. Working through her subtleties, she had gradually imposed herself upon his cold detachment. She had disarmed his inability to love anyone. The bond that they had made involved not only their bodies, though their frequent copulation deepened and excited the urgency of the bond. Their pact also involved murder. Aaron Dowling was going to be their victim.

At first, their plan seemed a simple one. With her patrician background, Lauren could smoothly enter the world to which Dowling belonged. His world was also hers. Their meeting at a dinner party in a penthouse that overlooked Central Park or at a Manhattan supper club would be regarded as a natural thing. Observers with a romantic disposition might even call the pairing inevitable. Some of the wealthiest men who saw or conversed with Aaron Dowling and Lauren at these clubs and parties might favorably mention the two of them afterwards. They would refer to them during a game of billiards at their private club, maybe, or at the close of a business lunch at The Pierre, where they had spoken of many things including the current Wall Street merger and the success of a Broadway show in which they had made a substantial investment. He could imagine some prominent banker or a top-notch lawyer who had sighted Aaron and Lauren together later insisting that the collaboration of the Dowlings with the equally prominent Winters family from which Lauren derived was inevitable. He knew them well, these bankers, lawyers and other power brokers. For four years after his boxing days, he had worked for them. In different seasons, he had been their valet and their chauffeur. He had been their personal trainer and their bodyguard. Sometimes, he had lied for them when the business partners or the wives or the tax people whom they were stringing along suddenly closed in on them. They had paid him well for his skills. They had even looked the other way on those occasions when he calmed their troublesome mistresses by bringing them into his bed.

But he was not of their kind. He did not belong to their privileged class. Even when he was taking risks for them, these bankers and brokers and lawyers offered him curt directives and grim-faced reminders that he was strictly on his own if he failed in his assignments and drew to himself the attention of the police or of some sharp-eyed detective. Even then, when he was rescuing them from the backfiring effects of their crimes, they regarded him with the contempt that hides its loathing within cautious formality. He was the necessary intruder upon their secrets. He was the temporary interloper who could make things right for them.

Lauren belonged to their class, not his. She had been born into the wealth that anchors its powers to privilege and security and that makes life a freewheeling adventure. Though her family now placed heavy constraints upon her use of that privilege, she enjoyed nonetheless the prestige of her family's name and the easy acceptance of the well-to-do who, even had they been aware that she was living off an annuity that suppressed her luxurious tastes, knew that by birth and blood and family connections she was one like themselves. Lauren's access to this world of wealth and privilege made possible the plan that, together with her, he had devised to murder Aaron Dowling and get away with it. She was going to make Dowling fall in love with her and then ask her to marry him. For a few months, she would will herself to be his dutiful wife. Then,

like a thief hurrying into a night when Lauren was away and Dowling was alone, he would break into their Manhattan apartment and kill him with a Beretta pistol or a Colt semiautomatic handgun. For a while after that, she was going to play the role of a widow who was so grief-stricken she didn't seem to care that she had inherited the bulk of Dowling's vast holdings. She would also inherit part of her parents' fortune, because she had married the right man and because she had stayed with him to the end. Later in the same year, while she was traveling away from the places that knew her well, she would meet him in Hawaii as they had planned. There, they would begin a new life, never looking back at the wreckage they left behind.

A year ago, they turned their plan into a living thing. Lauren and Dowling were now sleeping together and, more than a few times, he had spoken to her about marriage. But they had not yet married. Lauren had failed to meet the timeline of their plan to murder Dowling.

"I can't hurry Dowling into marriage," she whispered to him on more than one occasion when, appearing in public as strangers who by chance were standing near each other, they exchanged quick remarks. They sometimes stood behind the topiary of a heroic soldier carrying a rifle in a secluded corner of Central Park. Occasionally, they stood in front of a famous canvas in a private art gallery and once behind an array of roses in a florist shop. During each of these contrived encounters, Lauren would not look at him. As if she were an actress making wise choices for this intricate role she was required to play, she maintained her poise and offered him temperate words that were meant to calm him.

"Hurrying Dowling will rouse his suspicion," she would murmur. "Before our plan can work, I need to build his trust in me."

Always, he received her words with blunt, soft-spoken protests.

"You're stalling. You're making excuses. You're holding out on me."

Hearing his muted anger, she would keep her gaze upon the topiary or the canvas or the roses.

"Give me more time. That's the only way we'll get what we want."

Try though he had, he could not believe her. Lately, he had not heard from Lauren for weeks at a time. At first, he told himself that she was using this time well. Desirable and seductive, she was making Dowling believe that she was the most important person in his life. Without her, he could not live happily.

"Dowling is a romantic," she said, right after she met this wealthy man whom they were planning to make their victim. "He won't give me any trouble. He's going to play right into my hands."

"Don't be too sure," he warned her. "This Dowling knows the score. He's rich. He probably enjoys being a scoundrel. It's in his blood. It's the badge his class wears."

Confident and even lighthearted, she had parried his remark. He knew what she was thinking. By making their plan an active thing, she had entered an adventure to her liking.

"I'm not worried," she said. "You and I are going to be smarter scoundrels."

She had spoken those words seven months ago. Since then, a change had quietly overtaken her. No longer did she tell him every detail of her meetings with Dowling. No longer was she accelerating the plot that would bring her to a marriage with Dowling and bring Dowling to an early death. She had gone soft on Dowling. She had allowed him to take control of who they were together and of where they were headed.

When he first confronted her with these accusations two months later, declaring with his husky voice and the quiet undercurrent of threat that she was backing away from their plan to murder Dowling, Lauren had acted surprised. But she was careful not to display her anger or to

take refuge in a fake protest of his accusations. Instead, she chose to be amused and to tease him with words that made her contrived response almost plausible.

“You’re jealous,” she said, caressing his shoulder and bringing into his grim awareness the gleam of her brown-eyed watchfulness. “I suppose that I should be pleased. But, frankly, I’m disappointed. I thought that you and I had gone past being the playthings of our feelings. You and I have made a plan to get everything that we can from this world that loves nobody. I’m doing what I need to do to make that plan work. It is going to take time to get what we want, and both of us have to be patient.”

On that spring afternoon, sequestered as they were within a solitary room of a Manhattan art gallery different from the one where they had met weeks earlier, she had brushed his cheek with her light kiss and clasped his right hand with the warm flesh of her own.

“Don’t give in to feelings, Bryce,” she whispered. “They’ll mess up everything for us.”

He did not believe in her lightheartedness. He resisted the rousing effect of her touch upon him. He saw her charming manner as yet another disguise that meant to put him off his accurate understanding of her.

“It’s *your* feelings that I’m thinking about,” he said while he held her in his steely gaze. “It’s what you feel for Dowling that may ruin things for us.”

She softly laughed.

“Nobody knows what I feel better than I do,” she answered him. “I’m setting up Dowling just as we planned. He believes in me, and that is the important thing. I have him in the palm of my hands. Any day now, he’ll ask me to marry him.”

He grabbed her wrist and began twisting it until she winced with the pain that he was inflicting upon her. But she did not cry out. Only the frown that creased her brow and the uncertainty in her rebellious eyes disclosed her fear of him. Tough-minded and jaded in her perception of who they were together, she played out the scene with a flippancy that stayed at the edge of cordiality. She knew that she must not go too far. She must not incite his fury.

“Stop worrying,” she whispered. Her voice was tremulous now because of the pain cutting into her wrist. “Dowling is going to marry me.”

In this moment, he hated her for her self-assurance and for believing that she could fool him if she had to. He was no Dowling. He wasn’t the chump who was going to be murdered. Now, more than ever, he wanted to hurt her. He wanted to remind her of just how rough he could be with her

He pressed his big hand deeper into her wrist and, for one wild moment, thought of breaking not only her wrist, but also her arm—right there, in the secluded room where portraits by Rembrandt and Vermeer peered from the walls. But his own apprehension held him back. She might scream and draw from distant rooms the attention of the security guards and of the other visitors to the art gallery. Still, he would not let go of her wrist. When the pain of his grasp became unbearable, she began to whimper. More certain now that he was in control of what was happening between them, he released her from his hold.

Before she looked away from him, disguising her latest submission to his brutality by bringing her attention once again to the canvas in front of her, he saw that her face had turned pale and unhappy. His own face, he imagined, revealed a tight-lipped bitterness and a vague disdain of the remorse that made him feel like a stranger to himself. Quickly, he altered the look of his face, selecting as an appropriate identity a tough and unsentimental countenance. He was careful to keep the harsh undercurrent in his voice and to temper with grating insinuation the words he threw out to her as a warning.

“Maybe you’re right,” he told her while she continued to look away from him. “Maybe Dowling will ask you to marry him. But don’t make me wait too long.”

This meeting in the Manhattan gallery had taken place five months ago.

For several weeks afterwards, Lauren reported to him regularly about her dealings with Aaron Dowling. Her fear, he was certain, had compelled her to explain even the small details of her meetings with the man who was going to be their victim.

“Our plan is working like a charm,” she assured him at their most recent meeting, which had taken place on a morning in June within the gardens of Central Park, shortly before she left the city for her summer retreat here at her aunt’s home in Vermont. She was wearing a cobalt blue blouse, white slacks and slip-on loafers, a matching white turban that covered her hair, and dark glasses that concealed her eyes. He, too, wore dark glasses, as well as a white short-sleeve shirt that revealed his rugged arms, blue denims that closely fitted his long legs, and light brown penny loafers. He was carrying a Leica and put it to good use as he impersonated a tourist or, maybe, a newspaperman who had come to the park to capture on film the emerging summer day. He paused near the bench on which Lauren sat reading a book and now and then looked up as if she were admiring the vivid colors of the flowers and the imaginative shapes of the topiaries. Never did he look at her. Instead, he kept taking pictures and listened to everything that she had to say about Dowling and her, while she pretended to read the book. Nobody strolled by. No passerby saw them. But never did they let their guard down.

“Aaron Dowling believes in me,” Lauren whispered to him on that afternoon. “He keeps telling me that he and I were meant to be together. Fate had a hand in it.”

On that afternoon, she put a special lilt in her voice as she worked to convince him that, with smooth precision, she was advancing the scenario which would bring them everything that they wanted. Yet, even with the lilt, he detected the tension that she was trying to conceal—the harnessed fear that made her words sound rehearsed and artificial. Hers was an ambivalent fear, bound as it was to her perverse need to be degraded and even beaten by him. The need had become sensual in its masochism. It roused and it disconcerted her. That he held such power over her roused him, as well. At times, it made even him uneasy. He wondered whether the ambiguous love they felt for one another would turn out to be a trap—the tripwire or snare that brought them to a bad end.

So, in those solitary hours when his brooding made the ghostly image of Lauren a nearly visible presence, he told himself.

The furtive meetings with her kept at bay his doubts of her. But then she suggested that they not meet while she was away in Vermont. It would be hard for her to leave Stowe without drawing to herself her friends’ questions and maybe even Dowling’s curiosity.

He did not like the idea. But he went along with it when she promised that she would phone him two or three times a week. At first, she had kept her promise, calling him when no one was around her and when she felt confident that none of her friends could hear all that she had to tell him. But he still did not like this new setup. Hearing her voice wasn’t enough. He needed to see her. He wanted to look at her when she explained to him the ways that she was advancing their plan to get Dowling to marry her. He wanted to search her face for the half-truths and the subtle lies that she might be telling him about the hours she and Dowling were spending together.

Then, the phone calls stopped. Lauren had denied him even the sound of her voice. During these four weeks when she had retreated to an unexpected silence, his doubts once more assailed him. Despite the fear that shadowed her relationship with him, Lauren was breaking

their pact. She was leaving him behind. Not once in all these four weeks had he heard from her. That she had betrayed his pact with her became a troubled conviction, a disquieting certainty that she was closing him out of her life. She was abandoning the plan that was supposed to make them rich together. Instead, she was teaming up with Aaron Dowling, the man whom they agreed they were going to murder.

He felt trapped, caught as he was inside his agony of doubting her. No longer anticipating her call and wary of drawing suspicion to her if, when he called, Dowling answered the phone, he waited until now to make his move. The summer season was over, and most of her friends had returned to their busy lives in New York. But she had not returned to her apartment there. The security guard who was assigned to protect her apartment building from trespassers and who believed that he was her brother told him that Lauren had decided to remain in Stowe. She planned to return to the city in a few weeks.

The news angered and alarmed him. He knew that Dowling had returned to New York. He also knew that Lauren's aunt was traveling in Europe. That Lauren was still in Vermont convinced him that she was avoiding him. He was more certain than he had ever been that she was double-crossing him. If that were the case, he was determined to kill her. Arming himself with a snub-nosed revolver, he made the six-hour drive from New York as if hastening through a nightmare. He arrived at the doorstep of this mountain style home at ten in the morning, just as Lauren was preparing to ride her favorite Tobiano or Arab bay across the early autumn landscape of Stowe.

So here they were now.

He had questioned her, and he had roughed her up a little. Maybe Lauren was staying on the level with him. Maybe, after all, they would win the jackpot.

Only after he poured himself a second scotch and quickly swallowed it, allowing its comforting sting to appease his wrath, did he direct his glance toward her. There, still on the sofa and with a gold cosmetic case that she had brought from the pocket of her jacket, she was skillfully applying powder and lip gloss to conceal the bruises on her face and on her lips. She had shed no tears, nor did she reveal the fear of him that lived inside her. Instead, with a steady glance and confident voice, she hurried back into this dangerous game that they were playing with each other.

"Pour me one, too," she said. "Straight up."

He knew that she wanted him to see how tough she could be. She also wanted to calm him.

She joined him at the bar, while the light of the morning sun streaming through the panoramic window caught within its radiance the sinuous movements of her body. Her dark hair glistened, and her brown eyes gleamed. The sheen upon her olive skin and her delicate bones made her look otherworldly. When he handed her the scotch, she lifted the glass and saluted him. She was smiling now and drawing him into her lightheartedness.

"Here's to our partnership," she said. "Here's to making it work for us."

He was not ready to be lighthearted. Her words drew from him, instead, a blunt declaration that hovered about his anger and his despair.

"It *has* to work," he said. "I'm killing Dowling to get the big prize."

She set her glass on the counter and moved closer to him, so that she could touch his right hand.

"We are both going to get that prize," she said. "We are in all of this together."

He clenched his hand into a fist and lightly tapped her chin.

“Keep remembering that, baby,” he said. “Then there won’t be any trouble between us.” She brought his rough hand to her lips and kissed it.

“There will never be any trouble between you and me,” she said. “That’s a promise.”

Her conciliatory manner pleased him, even though he did not really believe her soft words. But he allowed himself an ironic smile as he answered her.

“Maybe you’ll keep your promise. Maybe you won’t. I’ll go a few more rounds with you in this thing. Let’s see what happens.”

She frowned, even as she kissed his hand once again. Then, wily and resourceful, she petitioned him.

“You have to trust me, Bryce,” she said. “Our plan won’t work unless you trust me.”

He did not answer her. Instead, he withdrew his hand from her caress and silently drank his scotch.

Now Lauren lightened the mood once again and invited him to go horse riding.

A year and a half earlier, he had often gone riding with her and had hobnobbed with her friends. They did not really like him, despite his Ivy League veneer, because he was not of their class. But they never made a move against him, intimidated maybe by his streetwise muscularity. Or, possibly, they were waiting to see just how long Lauren would accept him as her latest adventure.

The rules changed for him once she met Dowling. It was important that he not be seen with Lauren. Dowling had to believe that there was no other man in her life. He had made certain that Dowling stayed unaware that Bryce Thompson existed. He had followed the rules strictly, and so had Lauren. His meetings with her were indirect and secretive. Even when they were in each other’s presence, they were never together. That, on this September morning, the risk of his being seen with Lauren suddenly did not matter to her impressed him. She was trying. She wanted to dispel his anger and his suspicion. She wanted to convince him they were still a team.

“I thought that you didn’t want me here,” he said. “What if somebody sees me?”

“I’ll take the risk,” she said. “Besides, you and I need to spend a few hours together.”

So, they spent that morning riding her aunt’s Arab bays across the autumn flare of the land. For that brief time, he felt free. He was a man who had suddenly escaped from the prison that he had made of his life. He was racing out of his own body. He was leaving everything behind him—all the grueling hours and days and years that had battered him and all the good ones that he had eventually betrayed. He was rushing away from even this hour, leaving in his wake the flickering imagery of Lauren sitting tall in the saddle and leaving also, as a spun velocity upon his seeing, the gleaming whiteness of the large main house on her aunt’s property. Galloping now, he glimpsed as careening blurs quick verdant slopes and fieldstone retaining walls, ornately paved and planted surfaces, and many tiered, bluestone terraces. He saw as flashes of color and animation young men and women picking apples in a teeming orchard. Paddocks and stables and barns hurled themselves away from him. Houses and farm fields were another flare upon his senses, rising and instantly vanishing. Trees and hills and lake soared, wavered aloft, and disappeared. Even the mountains whirled past him, the pale sun tilted, and the cloud-laden sky darted, loped, and vaulted. He felt freed from all of it. He was someone new. He was claiming a totally different existence. The reality toward which he was hastening was another disguise that might hide who he was from all the people coming into his life and maybe from himself.

His Arab bay was galloping even faster now, at full stretch with body and neck lengthening and each leg fully extended as it powered along the winding trail. Behind his horse’s

neck, he tucked his upper torso precisely and fused the outline of their forms. He lifted himself out of his saddle, so that he could drop his weight down into his heels and push it further back, allowing his upper body to tuck in behind the horse's neck. Onward and more swiftly he went galloping, riding with shorter stirrups to make it easier to lift his weight out of the saddle. He kept his lower legs on the girth and kept his arms extended forward, as his horse stretched its neck within each stride.

Other teeming orchards, colorful brush, and wild flower fields went flashing by him. Women and men were harvesting a passing field, and a rugged man was driving a tractor over a northerly hill. Now five or six gray-haired couples canoeing on the distant lake leaped into his vision and just as quickly scattered away. A flight of black-backed gulls overtook fleecy clouds, entered their pockets, and then soared above the white cliff that rose out of the lake. He felt himself soaring, too—rushing out of the reach of the self that he was shedding even as he chased the self that was unknown to him.

Only when he saw in the looming distance two horses grazing in a paddock did he push his lower leg forward while still squeezing both legs against his horse's sides. He braced himself against the stirrup, shortened up his reins, and put the hand that held one of the reins tight into the horse's neck. He used his other hand to keep a strong hold on the second rein, as the horse started to listen and to slow down. The world that he had eluded for a quarter of an hour instantly reassembled its imagery for his seeing. His past hovered by him, ghostly and insistent. The brooding thoughts came back to taunt him. But he fought back. He stayed tough. His bitterness spurred his resolve. He wanted to hurry forward to the new, disguised self that he had only begun to devise.

"I'll do all right," he told himself. "So will Lauren. I've made a plan that can win her and me everything that we want. I'll keep pushing her. I'll make her do everything that she needs to do, so we can win the game."

Now he dismounted and led his horse into the paddock that was encircled by a cedar wood fence. After closing the fence, he waited for Lauren. That she would follow him here, he was certain. This secluded spot had always been their private meeting place on all the other afternoons when they had been out riding her aunt's Arab bays or Tobianos. When she joined him a quarter of an hour later, there was no need to call forth new words that might validate the bond between them. There were no words that could keep at bay his doubts of her or that could disguise the equivocal nature of their collaboration. Instead, they walked side-by-side along the trail that was flanked by lavender fields and scented meadows, accepting the silence between them as a reprieve from his dangerous anger and from her wily submissiveness. Only when this trail left the fields behind and led them to the top of a promontory did she break the stillness between them.

Standing there with him, upon one of the highest hills in the area, Lauren spoke words that revealed more than what his eyes perceived as her simulated elation.

"I love this place," she said, as she looked out upon a blue mist greenery of hills beyond hills, cloud laden implications of mountains, and the sun spotted expanse of corridors of space wheeling freely around and below and above them. "Whenever I come here, I believe in myself more than ever. Maybe, that's because the place gives me the illusion of concealment and a promise of safety. Being here gives me time to rally my forces. It convinces me that one day I will be rid of all my troubles. I will be absolutely free."

She was playing with him again. She was trying to fool him with her make-believe talk of escape hatches and happy endings. Swiftly now, with husky inflections that yoked themselves to a vague and quiet menace, he reminded her of the way things really stood.

“That won’t happen without me, baby. You need me to get your freedom.”

She turned to him with casual seeming attention. Her brown eyes gleamed, and her lips parted in a smile, showing her perfect, white teeth and enhancing her demure consent to his will.

“Of course I need you,” she said. “That is why you are here.”

Her gaze turned back to the colorful panorama that apparently solaced her. He, in turn, studying her every move, saw what, with clarified awareness, she was observing. Below them, a motorboat was speeding across the lake, leaving in its wake the spume and ripples of blue-green waters. In the faraway distance, at the edge of the sun tinted forest that stood across from the lake, Chilean willow trees, Scotch elms, and blueberry ash trees were bringing flares of excited color to the autumn morning. Higher than that, though still within the opaque blue furling of distance, a stray herring gull was curving the dark flash of its wings against the tumescence of ponderous clouds. After an instant’s pause, it plummeted with wily skill to the consenting lips of lake waters, the better to pluck for its meal a raw, ample fish or a tiny, mackerel-tinted seabird.

Though the vision gave him back what he had not sought, a predatory image shown natural and insistent, he grasped comfortably its familiar message and found again his realistic measure for understanding things. Turning once more, still toward the east, he was not surprised to sight the zinc-white hang of a wind-bleached cliff glaring like the bones of a devoured world. The limestone solidity of the gargantuan form impressed him, as did the cliff’s having endured a wilderness of centuries. The imagery put him in mind of his own resilience, as willful and time trapped as that was. In a world of uncertainty and violence, his capacity to withstand brute adversaries and wrenching betrayals was, he felt, his most essential weapon. The stark message he took from the cliff quickened his senses more acutely than any of the colors of the earth that surrounded him.

He noticed, too, across and above the disquieted lake and on the crest of sun glanced fertile hills—right there, at the wavering margins of the shadow-laden woods—a gray-blue immensity of swaying larches that apparently grew into the sky and, before his troubled eyes, joined all of heaven’s restless and eerie motion. The sudden wind was billowing now, like a flare of wings lifted by lower winds and pushing upward against moist, lake-scented air. This feeling of space actively stirring, this sense that here on a sun-hued promontory the wind had come sweeping through the day’s intricate layers and, spinning always its rapid coils, had come to claim him—it was this feeling that stopped his firm gait and held him in taut surprise back upon his heels while cliff and clouds and festive autumn colors went wheeling by him. The earth itself seemed to revolve with visible motion. He noticed once more the receding diagonals of the forest across the lake—a shadow-flecked welling of foliage and trees, an instant’s ambiguity of surface and space. He noticed, too, Lauren’s scrutiny of that same sequestered place. He wondered whether in this moment she was maintaining her realistic sense of things. In so many ways, she was just as knowing as he about the world’s equivocal promises, just as canny about its bruising, addictive textures.

She turned to him now, eyeing him steadily, as though she were coming back to him after a long absence. Her flowing black hair and olive-skinned radiance, partially concealed by the light that shimmered around her, gave her the spectral look of a mirage or an apparition. Then, because the whorls of slanted light began slowly to recede from her, he saw more clearly her

enigmatic face and heard, with muted skepticism, her matter-of-fact appraisal of their surroundings.

“I’ve taken from this place what I need,” she said. “It has served me well. Maybe it has done the same for you.”

“Maybe.”

She laughed lightly, giving herself completely to the pleasure of this moment.

“Oh, Bryce, it is wonderful to be happy here with you. Let’s promise always to be happy together.”

Her brown eyes were misty with tears as she touched his lips with a delicate kiss.

“That’s an easy promise to make,” he answered her, his words as direct as they were even-tempered. “I’m all for that. Just be certain that you do your part to make us happy.”

“You know that I will,” she said, her voice still touched with exhilaration. “I’ll always do everything to make us happy.”

He observed her quietly, but only for an instant. He was not ready to share her exhilaration. His ingrained cynicism required here-and-now proof of the happiness they were seeking. That happiness, spawned from a murder, would cost them their souls. Had she allowed herself to forget? Or, in the most secret recesses of her heart, was she more treacherous than he was? Was her contempt of people more furious than his? Was her despair more deeply rooted? He wondered, even as he persuaded himself to press his lips against her lips and, afterwards, found words to please her.

“Sure,” he said. “You’re my woman. You are going to make me very happy.”

“Let’s ride back together,” she said, apparently satisfied that this hour had dispelled his brooding at least a little. “We’ll change our clothes and then go on to Burlington for lunch. You can drive the Bentley that you like so much.”

“I do like the Bentley,” he answered her. “And I am ready for lunch.”

They walked back to the paddock and deftly mounted their horses. They cantered along the trail in unison. Though they spoke no words to each other, she imparted through her gleaming smile the lighter spirit that she had permitted to attend her from the moment they reached the promontory. He, too, consented to a modulated variation of this lightheartedness. During their brief stop at her aunt’s home and all through the drive to Burlington and even during their lunch at a fashionable lakeside restaurant, he joined her in good-humored talk of the new happiness they would know after Aaron Dowling was out of the way. There would be an exciting life in Hawaii, occasional trips to the Bahamas, weekends of skiing in Vermont, and their frequent co-piloting of a Piper Cherokee. But there would be new happiness now, as well. Seductive and serene, she kept whispering romantic words, promising him in the hour or two they spent in Burlington that, when they returned to Stowe, she would bring him into her bed. They would see the colored lights again, as they had when they first made love together.

Their lightheartedness, a pre-moral complicity, temporized but could not dispel his distrust of her. With her, he would always be on his guard. That was the best way to handle her. That was how he was going to win this game that they were devising every time they were with each other and all the times they were not.

To make their plan work, Lauren had to stay in it with him all the way. Her continued need of him was essential to his remaining in the game and to his gathering the rewards of the killing. That she might be distancing herself from their scheme pricked his anger once again. He had worked too hard to perfect the scheme to have her discard it because of a carnal whim or because she had convinced herself that her unanticipated love for Dowling was the real thing. He

preferred Lauren's harder edge. He knew where he stood with her when she was being herself, the tough-minded realist who disdained conventional sentiment and fairy tale unions. Each of them had traveled far away from the safe paths of convention and fairy tales. Though she was reluctant to tell him all the disappointments and scandals of her past, he had drawn from Lauren enough of the story to understand that she had made a mess of her life. But her being the daughter of a wealthy man protected her. The privileged circle that had spawned her continued to receive her as one of their own.

He had enjoyed no such protection. In October of 1938, he had entered this world as a foundling. Within the same hour of his birth, he had been left at the darkened rim of a slum's alley, the blanketed bundle containing him perched upon garbage cans. He had come into the world anonymously. He was illegitimate and abandoned. Without parents or known identity, he belonged to no one. Nor was he wanted by anybody. His very presence was an intrusion upon the acceptable order of things. From the start, the world treated him harshly and offered him a makeshift existence. Even the name that the state orphanage assigned him was makeshift. A cold-hearted supervisor appropriated his first name from a war movie that she had recently seen. The name Thompson, she took from an obituary. Later, when he was nine years old, he began telling himself that he was carrying the name of a dead man because in some mysterious way he, too, was dead. Only if he escaped from the orphanage would he have a real chance to live.

He escaped five times, hiding inside the back of trucks after their drivers delivered food, medical supplies, and furniture to a building on the grounds of the orphanage where by chance he had been placed on a work detail—scrubbing floors, maybe, or cleaning toilets. A few times, his getaway truck made a delivery to a farm that was located three or four miles from the orphanage. On those mornings, he jumped from the truck before the driver had left his seat and scurried to a hiding place in the hayloft of a barn or inside a distant forest of elm trees. On three occasions, when he jumped from the truck right after it came to a stop, he found himself in the center of town, where he disappeared into a crowd of shoppers. At the end of the day, he concealed himself inside a large department store and, after it closed its doors in early evening, fed his hunger by breaking the lock of the glass case at the soda fountain that contained cupcakes, cookies, and candy.

Always, he was caught—usually by a night watchman or a store detective and sometimes by a cop—but not before he tried to punch and kick his way out of their rough handling of him. Though he was only nine and later eleven and thirteen, they punched him back, leaving him doubled up with the pain shooting through his stomach or his chest. Because he was big-boned and tall, the men who came searching for him may have thought that he was one of the older boys at the orphanage. The cop was the cruelest of his captors, with a crazed fury breaking his jaw and his left arm. This ugly cop, who was more rugged than the watchman and the detective, jeered at him, a gangly teenager slumped on the floor while he was bleeding and moaning in pain.

“Don't take it so hard, kid,” he said. “The orphanage isn't such a bad place. They give you a bed and three meals a day. Besides, nobody in this town wants you.”

Each time that his pursuers returned him to the orphanage, the nightmare began again. No sooner did he recover from the injuries that they had inflicted upon him than a sadistic barracks guard began beating him for no reason except the pleasure that he found in causing him pain. One time, when the pain was too excruciating to bear, he fought harder than ever before and knocked out the guard. By then, he was fifteen and stood six foot, two inches. His body had filled out and, from his workouts in the gym, was rock-solid. Grown uneasy by the imposing

sight of him, the head supervisor and the board of trustees wanted to expel him from the orphanage. They planned to press assault charges against him and recommend that he be confined to a detention hall for wayward youth.

But, after questioning him about his fight with the guard, Irwin Baxter, one of the gym teachers at the orphanage, defended him. He convinced the trustees and the senior supervisor that they would do wrong by pressing charges against a youth who had defended himself against the sadistic guard. In fact, they would draw the attention of the press, who were very likely going to create a scandal that would tarnish the staff and the trustees.

Baxter saved him from a prison sentence. Then he and his wife took him into their home as a foster son. By that time, Irwin and Clara Baxter were in their sixties. Their three sons were married and had their own children. Now living in Colorado, they had built successful careers as a team of architects. Though they missed their parents, they had settled in the faraway place where they could start their firm and then expand it.

When he became a part of their home in the spring of 1954, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter needed a foster son to replace the three sons who, born from their own flesh, had gone forward to independent lives. Baxter was a hard man, but fair. Mrs. Baxter was warmhearted and gentle.

“Always be true to your word,” Baxter advised him. “Always follow the rules. Remember this: You identify the person you are through your actions. Strive to be good. Stay clean. Don’t let the world corrupt you. Never let anger and bitterness destroy your goodness.”

“I’ll be all right,” he had answered him. “I’ll never make you ashamed of me.”

In the same month that he began living with these temporary parents, Baxter persuaded him to train for the high school boxing team. He coached him and, for a time, turned his life around. In the fifteen years when he grew to believe that he really was the fourth son of the Baxters, he became an honor student and won an athletic scholarship to New York University. He was on the boxing and fencing teams there, and he majored in American history. His years at NYU were his happiest, because the Baxters were his safety net and because he knew that he was moving up. His graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania also kept him on his proper course, guiding him to a Ph.D. in British and American literature and to a tenured slot on the faculty of Columbia University.

Then, in the autumn of 1969, everything changed for him.

Meredith Templeton, one of the beautiful students with whom he had been sleeping, made the mistake to fall in love with him. She loved him with an intensity that he neither wanted nor comprehended. When she discovered that he had been sleeping with two other beautiful students in the same semester, she swallowed twenty sleeping pills. Hours later, her university roommate discovered her sprawled on the bathroom floor. She called in the medics, but they could not save Meredith. Then she telephoned the girl’s father and told him everything that she knew about the affair involving Meredith and her literature professor, Bryce Thompson. Meredith, her roommate explained and the autopsy report later verified, was four months pregnant with Thompson’s child. It did not matter that he was in London on a sabbatical from his teaching assignments at Columbia. Nor did it matter that guilt and remorse racked his conscience and that his muted sorrow chained him to sleepless nights. The scandal that erupted brought him down.

Ian Templeton, who was a Wall Street broker and a major donor to Columbia’s alumni fund, demanded his resignation. Nearly crazed with grief over the loss of his daughter, Templeton also gave newspaper and television interviews in which he spoke on behalf of his lost daughter. Bryce Thompson had used her. He had lied to her. He had driven her to an early death.

“Thompson doesn’t belong at Columbia,” Templeton said. “He belongs in the gutter that spawned him.”

The newspapers and television had a field day. The young women at Columbia held a rally, demanding that Professor Thompson be fired.

The general public, choosing to forget its own sexual adventures, also protested against him.

The university fired him. In spite of his effective teaching and his highly praised biographies of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, he had—the president of the university told him—failed his students, his community, and himself.

Eventually, Ian Templeton caught up with him. In a seamy bar in the West End of London, the angry father, maddened by his grief over his daughter’s death, shot him.

“You killed my daughter,” he shouted. “You drove her to a bad end. You were her death trap!”

He shot him again and again. But three physicians saved him for the makeshift life to which he had condemned himself.

After the scandal of Meredith’s death and the news stories that sympathized with her grief-stricken father, he could not get a teaching post. Nor could he return to the Baxters, who had died within months of each other—Mrs. Baxter from cancer and Coach Baxter from a heart attack. During the scandal that brought him down, they had refused to see him. They could not forgive him for what he had done to the girl who had taken her life because of him. They could not forgive him for what he had done to himself. For a long time afterward, despite their turning away from him, he grieved because they had died. He grieved for them, even though they had left all their estate to their three sons. He understood. He knew the score. He had come into their lives as a displaced person—a young rebel and an outsider. They had rescued him. They had nurtured him. They had given him their guardian care. But, even though they had shown him genuine affection and had helped him in so many important ways, they had at the end not loved him. They could not forgive him his transgressions. They no longer regarded him as their son.

Once more his fate had tossed him asunder. The world he had been creating for himself was gone.

But he stayed strong. He stayed tough. He had a few good seasons as a boxer. Eventually, with muted regrets and some wily plans for duping others, he became a bodyguard and a chauffeur for the rich and, if need be, their convenient alibi.

Then, on a September evening in 1975 at an upscale bar in Manhattan, he met Lauren. On that same night, she took him into her bed. Their fates having cast them adrift, they saw in each other the promise of a rescue. Together, they could break free of all the conventions that were imprisoning them. Self-willed and rebellious, they could devise their own destinies. They could make their own rules. So, he told her in the summer of 1976, nearly a year after they had met, as she studied him with penetrating gaze and listened to his words with implicated willfulness. It wasn’t long before he drew her into his murderous plan. They could win the jackpot if she collaborated with him. She had to choose a wealthy bachelor that fitted their scheme.

“Choose carefully,” he told her. “Make the guy fall in love with you. Get him to marry you. Then leave the rest to me.”

That she would choose the man who was going to be murdered intrigued her. Her bitter nature and her inbred perversity incited her consent to the plan.

“We’ll play God, you and I,” she said. “We’ll treat this man that we have not yet met as harshly as God or Fate or Chance has treated us.”

Not even a month later, she met Aaron Dowling, a thirty-year-old corporate executive, and began setting him up to be murdered. First, though, she had to marry him. Quickly enough, she had won Dowling's love. But he had not yet asked her to marry him. Whether it was Dowling or Lauren who was avoiding the subject of marriage, he was not certain. A day earlier, his distrust of Lauren had roused his anger to a fever pitch. He was certain that she was playing him for a fool. He had convinced himself that she had betrayed him. She had fallen in love with Dowling.

But these new hours that they had spent together dissuaded him from such thoughts.

He rose—naked and satisfied—from his place beside her in the oversized bed. A nightlight glowed from a table nearby, illuminating the soft flesh and sensual contours of her nakedness. During the night, she had tossed aside the scented sheets, and he wondered if in those moments hers had been an uneasy sleep. Now she lay deep in her sleep and apparently contented. He paused to look at her for only an instant. He did not want his sexual need of her to trap him. He could not afford to confuse that need with the vague stirrings of love that he sometimes felt for her. Turning from her sleeping figure, he hurried to shave and shower and to begin the ride back to New York. Today, he believed once again that he and Lauren were succeeding in their plan to use Aaron Dowling for their purposes. For today, at least, he could push away the fury that had impelled him to thoughts of murdering her. Her death, he knew, would mean the end of everything. If he killed Lauren, then right afterwards, with the wildness that made him his own enemy, he'd kill himself.