

Chapter One

[i]

It had been a tough, sometimes desperate year, but for many in the Pacific Northwest Free Zone in the summer of 2177, life had become comfortable enough to bathe the future in a glow of rosy expectations. Among these numbered Martha Greenglass.

Lulled by the steady drone of the bus's tires on the asphalt, the chatter of the other women buzzing in the background, Martha drowsed in the heat. She jerked into awareness only when she felt the bus slow to a halt. She opened her eyes and blinked; the bus, she saw, was swinging onto the country road that would carry them northwest from Sedro Woolley.

"Man," Jess said. "Will I be glad to get back to Seattle?"

Martha woke to full alert. She looked at Jess and sent her a silent warning to watch her mouth. She said, "You mean you aren't visiting the Whidbey settlement first?" Jess seemed oblivious of the need to be careful of how she talked on their trips away from Seattle. A few words more and she might have dropped some careless remark that any number of the women on the bus— including the teenagers— would have heard, likely been offended by, and spread around Bellingham when they returned there later. In Martha's opinion, a woman over the age of thirty should understand such things and not need to be steered away from careless blunders by someone four years younger.

"I thought you knew I was going straight back to Seattle, Martha," Jess was saying. "There's so much work waiting for us already, a side trip to Whidbey would just—"



“Yeah,” Martha said, deliberately interrupting. “I’ve got so much to do that I should be getting back now, too. But I have to say, I’m looking forward to having a weekend on Farley’s farm.” It had been three weeks since she’d seen Louise.

“I guess it’ll be pretty quiet there.” Jess had never been to Farley’s before. In fact, Jess had probably never spent so much as a day in any rural or semi-rural place before she’d moved to Seattle. Hadn’t she once said that before coming to Seattle she’d been outside of L.A. only three times in her life— twice to New York City and once to Houston?

“Quiet it won’t be,” Martha said. “Wait until you see it. It’s enough to make a nonviolent anarchist go gray. They’ve set aside several acres for weapons training, you know. It’s not just aikido and karate.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth Martha wondered if *she* had just been indiscreet. And then she mocked herself for being paranoid. Every soul on the bus was going to Farley’s, and once there they’d see all that soon enough for themselves. Besides, if anybody had spies out looking for such things, they’d already know about Farley’s.

The bus pulled off the main road onto a rutted single-lane dirt track. “Boy, we *are* out in the sticks.” Jess looked faintly appalled by the flat expanse of fields planted in corn and soybeans. “This must be the flattest land I’ve seen in the entire Free Zone.” Her brow wrinkled, and she reached for the emery board she kept in her shirt pocket and went to work touching up her already perfect manicure.

“Hey, Jess. That’s why they call it the Skagit Flats.” Martha winked at the woman two seats up and across the aisle who kept looking back at them and was unsuccessfully trying to conceal a smile at Jess’s city-slicker remarks.

They jounced past fields being worked by women. Martha peered at the plants and decided that what the women were handpicking must be cherry tomatoes. Cherry tomatoes could not be harvested by machine— at least not by the machines the people in the Northwest Free Zone had available to them. A couple of the teenagers, nudging one another and pointing, giggled, probably because they had never seen women working shirtless before. Martha’s lips curved into a small, privately amused smile. Within the week they themselves



would likely be working shirtless and would think no more about it, except perhaps later to regret the conventions when they were back home in Bellingham.

The bus crunched up the long, thinly graveled drive and parked at the end of the row of vehicles lining one side of the wide, thickly graveled area in which the driveway ended. The women in the bus slipped on backpacks to which they had tied bulky items like sleeping bags, guitars, and tennis rackets. Jess examined her nails one last time and put the emery board back in her pocket. Neither she nor Martha made a move to retrieve their packs.

Martha's breath caught in her throat as she sighted Louise rounding the corner of the barn; she watched Louise tramp toward the bus, then momentarily lost sight of her. And then Louise was inside, standing at the front of the bus, holding up her hand for quiet. "Greetings, women. Welcome to Farley's." She spoke in a clear, well-projected voice. All chatter ceased, though backpacks still rustled and creaked. "My name is Louise Simon. Feel free to ask me anything you think I can tell you. But for now, I want you to listen up. Those who are here for one week belong to Group A, those here for two weeks to Group B, and those here for a month to Group C. So what I want all of you to do when you get off the bus is to organize yourselves into those groupings as quickly and efficiently as you can." Louise stepped off the bus, and the chatter resumed.

Martha watched the women file to the front and debark and wondered how they would do at this their first test. Louise and the other trainers made a point of not giving the women taking the workshops explicit instructions (such as: "everyone in Group A stand on the right side of the bus," and so on). "This isn't kindergarten," Louise liked to say when some of the workshopers inevitably asked why she wasn't more explicit— and thus more efficient. Martha conjectured that given Bellingham's development of a hierarchical so-called democracy since the withdrawal of Executive forces, a leader would swiftly emerge who would tell everyone what to do. She toyed with laying a bet with Jess— only to realize that doing so would be tactless and that Jess wouldn't know what she was talking about, anyway.



When everyone else had gotten off, Martha and Jess moved into the aisle and put on their own packs. Alighting from the bus, Martha flashed Louise a broad grin, and Louise— her lips pressed together, her eyes dancing— nodded. Martha moved off to the side to watch.

Jess hung back. “What are we waiting for?”

“Go on into the house, Jess. I want to say hello to Louise first.”

Jess grinned. “Right. Pretty dumb of me to forget about your, ah, vested interest in stopping here.” Stooped under the weight of her backpack, she staggered toward the house. Before this trip Jess had never worn a pack in her life.

The people from Bellingham eventually divided themselves into three groups, but only after five minutes of wrangling and a successful takeover by a woman Martha judged to be about Louise’s age, who stood with the group that would be taking the month-long course. Louise gave each group directions for finding their dorms and suggested they unpack, change into loose clothing, and start warming up, mentioning jogging and yoga as possible activities. She then turned to Martha. As Martha had seen happen before, Louise’s turning her back on the women disconcerted them. Several stared fixedly after Louise as she moved toward Martha.

Louise took Martha’s arm, pulled her around to the other side of the bus out of sight of the others, and— notwithstanding the encumbering backpack— folded her into a tight, sweaty bear-hug that loosened into a tongue-tangling kiss. “I missed you, Martha,” Louise said into Martha’s ear when she came up for breath. Her hand brushed over the curve of Martha’s breast.

Martha inhaled Louise’s smell and rubbed her face against Louise’s. “I missed you too.” She hardly noticed what she was saying because her cunt was practically melting.

“The cabin’s finished now— come see.”

Arms linked, they set off around the corner of the house in the opposite direction from which the Bellingham people were heading, toward the large stand of trees bordering the river. Martha tried to get a grip, tried to take an interest in all the changes since her last visit.

Louise and the other trainers had begun building two single-room cabins six months earlier. Their lack of organization and time had



made Martha wonder if they would ever get the cabins finished. But Martha crowed when she saw the A-frame nestled in the dazzlingly sunlit clearing that had been carved out of the thick grove of cedar, hemlock, and Douglas fir. “Hey, it’s even got windows! And solar panels—which must mean you’ve got electricity! That does it, Louise. I’ll come stay with you here any time.” On Martha’s previous visits, wanting privacy, they had slept in a tent they had pitched in the grove, slathered with insect repellent to keep the mosquitoes at bay. *This* night would be both comfortable and sweet.

Louise flung open the heavy wooden door and stepped back to let Martha enter first. “Oh,” Martha said in wonder. The cabin had a fireplace, a cozy bed-alcove, bookshelves along one wall, a hooked rug with a pair of rockers set before the fireplace, floor cushions, a small refrigerator and hot-plate, a sink . . . Clearly, if she chose to, Louise could live independently from the others. Martha squeezed her hand. “I love it, Louise. It’s perfect!”

Louise smiled proudly. “Take off your backpack, woman, and stay a while.”

Martha’s eyes scanned the room. “Is there by any chance a toilet?” Her bladder felt stretched to its absolute limit, and all the sexual excitement wasn’t helping.

Louise chuckled. “One of the workshop people who happened to be a plumber noticed what a rough time we were having with the plumbing and installed it for us. I’ve promised to give her follow-up lessons for years to come.” Louise stepped into the bed-alcove and whipped aside the curtain from a place Martha had thought must be a closet. “Voilà, Madame.”

“What more could a woman ask for?” Martha dropped her backpack and propped it against the wall beside the bed.

“What more indeed?”

[ii]

Half an hour into the monthly meeting of the Combined Governing Council of the University of Washington, Kay Zeldin excused herself and left. As the Council’s liaison with the Co-op’s Steering Committee, she had been obliged to put in an appearance; but she knew that the



other members of the Council would not appreciate her taking an active role in its business. The chair had a reasonable grasp of the Steering Committee's concerns. And Kay had too many meetings to attend as it was.

Walking from Suzallo Library to Padelford Hall, she cast a wary eye around her— at the young woman propped against the thick, venerable trunk of a cedar, a book open on her knees; at the lovers entwined on the grass in front of the Hub, oblivious to everything but one another; at the service-tech pushing a cart brimming with individually-wrapped rolls of toilet paper in the direction of Savery Hall, belting out *La Donna é mobile*. Everyone she laid eyes on looked content, if not happy. But although the clarity of the air and the sun's radiance made the sky and trees a brilliant feast for the eyes, the beauty of the moment did nothing to ease Kay's fear of being watched. She never for an instant forgot that even in the Pacific Northwest Free Zone her safety could not be assured. Sedgewick might send a thousand Security operatives to Seattle to run ten thousand agents, and no one would lift a finger to stop them.

The Free Zone did not keep people out.

Kay stepped inside Padelford and paused for a few seconds to let her light-dazzled eyes adjust. She chose the stairs over the elevator as safer. When she emerged from the stairwell on the fourth floor, she listened to the quiet and noted that every door on her corridor was shut except the one directly across from her office. Nothing unusual about that, of course.

Outside her office, she knelt on the linoleum and checked the dark brown thread she had left stretched from the lower hinge across the door to the staple she'd embedded in the doorframe so that the slightest movement of the door would break the thread. Over the months, this practice had become just one part of her daily routine. So that afternoon when Kay found a short portion of the thread on the floor and the rest of it missing, she stared at it in disbelief. But slowly the possible implications of the broken thread sank in, and her mouth went dry. Rising to her feet, she glanced up and down the corridor. *This is the opening move I knew would eventually come. I know it is. It's*



a wonder it's taken them so long. Kay folded her arms tightly over her chest and reviewed her movements on leaving her office two hours earlier. She was confident that she had not broken the thread when pulling it through the staple, confident that it had been whole and secure when she'd finished the set-up. Her eidetic memory never failed her; she had no reason to doubt its accuracy now.

Kay knocked on the open door of the office opposite. Her thin, bearded colleague glanced up from his monitor, then frowned. "Kay, what is it? Are you all right?"

"Have you had your door open for long, Mike? And if so, did you happen to see anyone lurking outside my office, or even entering it?"

He gave her an odd look. Of speculation, she supposed— or of remembering something in her damned book. "I've been here about forty minutes, I guess. And no, I've seen no one hanging around in the hall, much less entering your office."

Kay pulled her personal handset from her rucksack and speed-dialed Campus Security. "Captain Morrison, please," she said. "This is Professor Kay Zeldin. Tell him it's urgent."

After a short delay, Morrison's voice came over the line. "Professor Zeldin? Lew Morrison here. How can I help you?"

"I have reason to believe someone has made an unauthorized entry into my office, Captain. And I'm concerned that they may have left me an unpleasant surprise. Is your explosives expert available?"

"She's on call. If this is the scenario you warned us about, I'll give her a buzz and have her run right over. In the meantime, we'll want to start evacuating the building at once. You can help us do that by pulling the fire alarm. And we'll give the fire department a heads-up ourselves."

Evacuate *all* of Padelford? She couldn't imagine even Sedgewick's goons using that much power to take out one thin human target. But Kay said, "I'll do that at once." She switched off her phone and looked at Mike. "The head of Campus Security has just requested me to pull the fire alarm in order to get Padelford evacuated." The words left her throat choked up. Brusquely, almost angrily, Kay worked to clear her throat. "It may be a false alarm, but we can't take any chances. I know



what we're up against, Mike. And I know that they wouldn't care if others were killed besides me."

Mike's eyebrows rose, and Kay saw something like disquiet flicker in his eyes. She wondered if he was thinking that the department shouldn't have let her come back, after all. But he said only, "It sounds a little extreme, but I'm sure they're right, that it's best to play it safe."

While Mike packed his rucksack, Kay walked up the hall and around the corner to the nearest alarm box. She studied the set-up, then took the small hammer attached by a cable to the side of the box, used it to break the glass covering the alarm, and pulled the lever. All over the building bells clanged. It's lucky, Kay thought, that it's summer, when the building's population is relatively sparse.

As she joined the people filing down the stairs to the first floor, she considered the situation with a modicum of detachment. It was possible that someone was lurking inside her office, lying in wait for her—in which case the fire alarm would send them flying and they'd make another attempt to waylay her in the near future. But it was also possible that they'd booby-trapped her office with explosives—with timed explosives, explosives triggered to go off at the sound of her voice, explosives wired to a desk drawer, explosives wired to the door. In her gut, Kay believed this the most likely scenario. The SIC had a long history of taking out enemies beyond US jurisdiction with bloody—and dramatic—bomb blasts.

Warning that the bomb squad was on the way, Kay urged everyone milling around the front of the building to stand on the other side of the street. "Who would bomb Padelford?" a Comparative Studies professor said to Kay. "Is it a disgruntled student?" a graduate student asked. "Did you actually *see* the bomb?"

A fire truck arrived just as three Campus Security vehicles pulled up with sirens blaring and lights flashing. A few minutes later, a small unmarked van parked behind the Campus Security vehicles, and a service-tech in khaki pants and tunic got out, leading a German shepherd on a leash. Relieved to escape the barrage of questions she felt com-



pelled to stonewall, Kay led Dora Mink and her dog into the building and up the stairs as she explained about the thread.

The dog sniffed at Kay's door and at the crack below it. Mink told Kay that the door was "probably clean." Kay hated that "probably." "Please move back," she said, "and let me unlock it. In the event that it isn't clean, there's no point in more than one of us getting it."

The other woman raised her eyebrows, but took her dog a couple of yards down the hall and waited for Kay to open the door. "I really do think it's safe," she said.

Kay unlocked the deadbolt and nudged the door open. When nothing happened, she opened it wide. On first, cursory inspection, everything looked just as she had left it. She stood back and let Mink and her dog inspect the room.

Mink watched her dog nose about the office, then said, "I don't believe there are any explosives in here, Professor. It might have been a common, garden-variety thief, you know. I'd check to see if anything has been taken."

Kay panned her gaze around the cramped little room jammed with file cabinets and bookshelves. She supposed she should feel relieved that she'd raised a false alarm. And maybe embarrassed for having caused such a ruckus. But she still felt anxious. She didn't want to turn into a paranoiac, shrilly crying wolf, and yet she knew that if she didn't exercise the greatest caution and vigilance—

Oh.

Yes. There it was, propped against the monitor. One purple envelope with her name written on it. It had been inscribed by hand in thick black ink. She knew that high spidery handwriting; she knew it well. Kay stared at it, and gooseflesh rose all over her body. She had just *known* they had been here. She had *felt* the intrusion.

"What is it?"

Kay pointed to the envelope. "They've left a calling card."

"Let Simeon check it out first." Mink brought the dog forward. "It's probably alright, or Simeon would have noticed it, but still, it's better not to take chances."



The dog showed no interest in the envelope. Mink said, “We’re done here. I’m going to give the all-clear so that people can be allowed back into the building.”

“Thanks very much,” Kay said, suddenly overwhelmed by the awareness that she would have to face the envelope alone. She shook Mink’s hand, and the expert and her dog went around the corner to the elevator. Drenched now in a cold sweat, Kay shivered in the stuffy warmth of the office. She could not stop staring at the envelope. It looked so sinister propped against the monitor that she wondered why she hadn’t noticed it at once.

“Professor?”

Kay turned. The raspy tenor sounded familiar.

The stocky, visibly middle-aged man wore a Campus Security uniform; his pepper-and-salt nappy hair had been trimmed close to his bullet-shaped skull. “Lew Morrison.” He offered his hand, and she shook it. “Do you need any additional assistance?”

Kay exchanged a long look with Morrison. “Let me open the envelope the intruder left before I answer your question.” She rubbed her arms, to try to warm them, and sat down at the desk. She drew a deep breath, steeled herself for something terrible, and reached out and picked up the envelope. The purple, tissue-thin paper shook in her hand as she studied it. Only her name had been written on the outside. The envelope itself was plain, lacking the embossed logo usual to such stationary. She slipped her index finger under the flap, tore the envelope jaggedly across the top, and pulled out the single sheet of purple paper.

The note was unsigned but handwritten:

Zeldin: If you are interested in S.M.’s welfare, cooperate with us. You will be contacted in due course.

Kay’s throat closed. She refolded the page and jammed it back into the envelope. She stared down at it until she got her face under control. Then she met Morrison’s sharp brown gaze. “Thank you, Captain Morrison, but I find I don’t need your help after all.” She laid



the envelope on the desk and stood up. "I can't tell you how greatly I appreciate your coming to my assistance. I assume you know why I'm so jumpy?"

His eyes glinted. "Like everyone else in the Free Zone, I read your book, Professor," he said. "If even half of what you wrote is true—"

"Every word is true," Kay said fiercely. "Every word."

His head tilted, and she suspected he didn't believe her. "I don't know," he said. "Some of it's a little unbelievable. Like that stuff you wrote about what those men get done to themselves. I asked the head of the Medical School about it, and he said it was possible. But it sure is hard to believe."

"We're fortunate not to have those people running our lives now," Kay said as she always did, anxious to preserve the hostility against the Executive that she feared would fade into indifference and leave them vulnerable to resubjugation.

"I guess. Though life's gotten a tad rough around here, any way you look at it."

"The people living in the rest of the country aren't having a picnic, you know."

"Yeah, I guess." He held out his hand, on which Kay now saw he wore a small diamond pinky ring. "Well, Professor, if there is ever anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to call on me."

For the second time, Kay shook his hand. Service-techs, she thought, believed that hand-shaking demonstrated social equality. And inspired confidence and trust besides. "I appreciate that, Captain," she said in a tone that carefully blended the earnest with the rueful. "Unfortunately, it seems all too likely I'll be needing your help again. Considering the enemies I have."

"Well, as I said, any time. That's what Campus Security is here for."

Kay closed the door after him and sat down at her desk. Bitterly she stared at the purple; its very presence in her office violated her. She put her hands to her face and slumped down in the chair. She had been expecting them to use Scott to blackmail her, had been surprised they hadn't done it months ago. But she'd thought it would be



Military who would be doing the blackmailing. Surely it was Military Scott had been working for. Could Sedgewick somehow have gotten control of Scott? Or had the day arrived that the two factions had achieved rapprochement or had at least become trusting enough to do deals with one another?

Sedgewick's note raised many questions, but it also sent a pointed message. Whoever had penetrated her office and delivered the purple meant her to understand that she wasn't safe.

She sat motionless for a long time, locked into a mind-numbed, stupid dread. It was almost five o'clock when she returned to her senses. Slowly she stood up and looked around her office, trying to see it as an intruder would have.

As she packed her rucksack it occurred to her that they might have penetrated her apartment, too. Would she have to go through this trauma every time she returned to either home or office? She strapped on the rucksack and wheeled her bicycle into the hall, where she propped it against the wall while she fastened a new length of brown thread between the door and its frame. Everywhere she went now she would know she was a sitting duck. Sedgewick had likely assigned an entire team to her case.

If they wanted to they could shoot her while she was bicycling around Seattle. All it would take would be a single well-placed sniper. But they weren't at that place yet. The note talked about "cooperating." And about her being contacted "in due course." Very Sedgewickian, that phrase.

She could hardly wait.

[iii]

The car jerked at a forty-five degree angle off the highway onto the twisty, sharply descending tarmac. Allison closed her eyes in exhaustion. Almost there. Never had she thought to see the day when landing at Monterey would be such an ordeal. In some ways the gauntlet at that dinky little airport had been worse to run than the one at LAX. Things had changed so drastically since her last trip to the States that she felt bereft, poignantly nostalgic for the image of



home she had been carrying inside her, homesick for what apparently no longer existed.

Frank pulled the car up to the front door. "I'll bring your luggage in right away, Madam, after I put this thing in the garage," he said as she swung her travel-weary legs out of the car.

The front door opened. Vivien Whittier catapulted down the steps and flung her arms around Allison. "You're actually here," she said. "My baby!"

Allison kissed her mother's cheek. "Yes, Mother. Bloodied but unbowed."

Vivien drew back in alarm to examine at her. "Bloodied, Allison?"

"Just a figure of speech." She extricated herself from her mother's embrace. "You can't begin to imagine what it's been like."

"Oh, foreign travel is so exhausting," Vivien said, as if that generalization covered everything. She took Allison's arm and led her into the house.

Allison declined to let the subject drop. "It wasn't the foreign part of the trip that was grueling."

"This way, dear," Vivien said, steering Allison to the back of the house.

"They kept me hung up at the Monterey Airport for a good hour and a half while they debated my bona fides. With service like that, I'm not surprised the airport was empty." Allison stopped to stare at the view of the ocean through the double-glazed windows spanning the thirty-foot length of the room. Peace. There would be peace here. Even if the price of it was her mother and Joceyln Poole's company.

"Allison," Vivien said insistently.

Allison dragged her gaze from the window. "Yes?" she said—and saw her. For a moment she couldn't speak.

"You do remember Elizabeth Weatherall, dear?"

Even if she hadn't had occasional job contact with Elizabeth, Allison could never not remember Elizabeth Weatherall.

"Hello, stranger," Elizabeth said. A smile warmed the sea blue eyes.



Allison's mouth gushed with saliva. She swallowed a couple of times and smiled back. "Elizabeth, hello. How are you?"

"All right, I guess. You, though, from all appearances, have a terrific case of jet lag."

"More like a surfeit of officious morons making life difficult for weary travelers. Did you come in through LAX?" Allison said, thinking to compare war stories.

Elizabeth shook her lovely golden head. "No, I flew nonstop from Denver."

Allison flushed. Of course Elizabeth wouldn't travel on a public or even semiprivate airline. "Well," she said, trying to overcome her idiot awkwardness. "LAX is crammed to the gills with armed guards, with a few grimly bean-counting officials sprinkled in for good measure, and almost no travelers. Bizarre, going through that." Allison shoved her hands into her pockets and leaned her shoulder against the window. "And because I was carrying my personal weapons they made me jump through any number of security hoops. Some of the people at LAX were downright unfriendly."

Elizabeth said, "Yes, well considering it's a bi-factional site, it would have to be heavily guarded and contain an equal number of officials from both sides. That place is a bloodbath waiting to happen. Those kinds of sites unnerve me. It seems to me we're just asking for trouble. But the powers that be..."

Allison snorted—and then coughed in an attempt to conceal the snort after the fact. Who did Elizabeth think she was kidding, talking about "the powers that be" as though she, Elizabeth, weren't among them?

"Is there anything I can get you, dear?" Vivien said. "Some tea?"

Allison considered. "A long dip in the Jacuzzi will fix me up fine. And then maybe a nap." She had a couple of bottles in her luggage. She could sneak a drink in her room.

Vivien said, all maternal approval, "That sounds very therapeutic, dear. If there's anything you want, don't hesitate to ask the staff. Dinner will be at eight."



Allison glanced at her watch and saw with shock that it was already four-thirty. Where had the day gone? “That sounds fine, Mother.” She walked to the door, then turned. “See you later, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Yes. And after dinner we shall talk.”

[iv]

During dinner Allison let Vivien, Elizabeth, and Joceyln do most of the talking, though when called upon she offered a few spare descriptions of post-Blanket Europe. How could it be, Allison wondered, staring at that perfect aristocratic profile, that Elizabeth Weatherall continued to maintain contact with her mother after all these years? Having been bosom buddies in boarding school and college hardly seemed reason enough for two such different women to carry on a forty-year relationship. Had she underestimated her mother? Perhaps Elizabeth saw something in Vivien Whittier that she, Vivien’s daughter, could not. But Allison had to admit that part of the reason she found their compatibility incredible was the difference in the lives they had chosen for themselves. Elizabeth—ambitious, energetic, astute—had chosen to be career-line and had driven straight to the top of what executive women could achieve; while Vivien had chosen the maternal-line—preferring security, leisure, emotional ties. What did they think of one another? Throughout the meal, Allison’s gaze moved back and forth between them, watching Elizabeth’s fingers tear at her roll, deftly, gracefully, ruthlessly, watching Vivien taking delicate, modest bites of fish, as though eating in public verged on the indelicate.

You must be careful, dear, the female nature tends toward wild uncontrollability, and that is why you must never never allow yourself a sexual interest in anyone who is not very definitely your inferior. Only in such relationships can one be certain that one will not lose oneself in a kind of madness. I know of what I speak, dear... I have seen those things happen, and the resulting devastation to executive society and to the women themselves... You must promise me, Allison, never to become sexually involved with another executive. It is the rule, dear, though it is never spoken of except from mother to daughter...



How long ago it seemed that her mother had spoken those words to her. And now they echoed in her head. Because of Elizabeth?

After three courses of light conversation and gossip Allison began to find the non-mention of the current state of affairs almost eerie. What she most wanted to know was what the situation in the States was in general, and here in particular. Obviously Security had control of this strip of the coast, or she and Elizabeth wouldn't be sitting here dining in unconcerned tranquility. But what were things like— in the cities, for instance? European newspaper reports on the subject had been vague and infrequent. Was it as violent here as it was in Europe? Something inhibited Allison from asking: she sensed that a pointed question would be the equivalent of brandishing a grenade and threatening to pull its pin. But then her mother had always pretended nothing existed outside her own small world.

“Do you know, I've eaten so much I think I'd like to walk along the shore,” Elizabeth said when they had finished dessert. “Allison, would you care to join me?”

Under the light of the full moon they picked their way around the stacks of driftwood littering the length of beach stretching between the two rocky promontories marking the borders of the property. As they walked Allison marveled at the calmness, so utterly different from the strain of hanging on she had constantly experienced while overseas. The worst had been the excising of her controller a year and a half ago. She should have gotten over that by now, but she hadn't. In times like these members of one's operational team were occasionally killed, as was to be expected. But when one's *controller*— the person in charge, the person pulling all the strings— was excised, that was something different. And worse, when one knew that people supposedly joined with one against the opposition had done the excising...

“We have a job for you,” Elizabeth said, breaking into Allison's thoughts.

Allison stopped; despite the darkness, she strained to see into Elizabeth's eyes. “A job? Here?”

“In the States. Not here in Big Sur, but in Seattle.”

Seattle. Allison had once lived in Seattle.



“Do you remember any of your professors at the University of Washington?”

“That was thirteen years ago. I suppose so. Anyone in particular?”

“Kay Zeldin. European history.”

Allison concentrated and conjured up the image of a woman seated at the head of a seminar table. “I have a vague memory of taking a seminar with her,” Allison said. “Something to do with perceptions of the East-West conflict in European politics in the mid- and late-twentieth century.”

“Not bad,” Elizabeth said. “Your job will involve her. Specifically, you will be handling her.”

“Fascinating.” Allison muttered this below her breath, too low for Elizabeth to hear over the roar of the surf— and then remembered. “Good *god!* Kay Zeldin! I never made the connection with my professor. Isn’t she the one who wrote that scabrous book about the Executive’s response to the Marq’ssan invasion?”

In the moonlight Allison saw Elizabeth’s mouth curve into an enigmatic smile she could not begin to interpret. “She’s the one. I wasn’t thinking— I should have realized that the entire American intelligence community— Military and Security alike— would have read that book by now.”

Allison grew uncomfortable. If she remembered correctly, Elizabeth herself figured in it. “It was something of a scandal,” Allison said apologetically.

“Yes. And scandals are always irresistible, especially to those who know the principals involved.”

Allison listened for a moment to the roar of the surf and savored the tiny drops of spray the wind flung against her skin. The setting was so beautiful and romantic. One of her first sexual experiences had taken place on this beach. But there was nothing beautiful or romantic about this conversation. She bit her lip, then said, knowing she skirted the edge of what Elizabeth would permit her, “In light of that book, I’m a little confused, Elizabeth. How am I to handle Zeldin if she’s with *them?*”



Elizabeth stared out at the churning moonlit water. “We are compelling her cooperation.” Her voice was cold. “Your controller will do the compelling. You need not know all the particulars involved, but one of our leading priorities is to locate and either capture or excise the Marq’ssan. They are the sole obstacle to our getting this country under control. I believe the divisiveness between Security and Military would vanish if the Marq’ssan themselves vanished. But certainly the Pacific Northwest Free Zone would collapse without them.”

Elizabeth moved to a mammoth log of driftwood and perched on it. Allison, quite a bit shorter than Elizabeth, had some trouble boosting herself up beside her. “That’s quite a goal,” Allison said. She looked at Elizabeth. “But perhaps you should know, I’ve never before handled someone hostile. Wouldn’t it be better if someone with that kind of experience—”

Elizabeth interrupted her. “But the point is that your controller will be the coercer, not you, Allison. In fact, we’re expecting you to make a sympathetic contact for Zeldin. You see, in the first place she tends to identify with women, and in the second place I’m going to tell you a lot about her psychological makeup so that you’ll be able to handle her with the utmost subtlety and sophistication.”

Allison stared at Elizabeth but could make out little of her face, for a cloud had drifted in front of the moon. “You mean I’m supposed to befriend her while the controller comes on with rough stuff?” Allison’s heart sank. So this was why Elizabeth was here, this was why she’d been called home from Europe?

“Something like that. You’ll have to be subtle, though. Zeldin is extremely clever. I’d suggest, for instance, that you drop heavily disguised intimations that you personally have problems with the controller— while on the explicit level displaying the utmost loyalty to him. Do you see the sort of thing I’m talking about?”

“Yes,” Allison said, afraid that she did. *Mind-fucking and psychological treachery*. “What will my cover be? Since I’ll be in enemy territory.”

“Ah. Your cover,” Elizabeth repeated with a grin in her voice. “You’ll get yourself outfitted like a service-tech, cross over the border,



and hitch up to Seattle. Once there you'll make contact with your CAT, but you'll tell the locals you meet that you've heard all about the Free Zone and just had to move there, to get out of executive territory— and let them think you come from an area run by Military. Lots of people have been migrating to the Free Zone, you know, in spite of border-post security. You'll be one of many. You'll say you were a word-processor for a Dowsanto facility, that you haven't had work since the Blanket."

"You don't think Zeldin will remember me?"

Elizabeth said, "It doesn't matter whether she remembers you or not: she won't have any choice in being run by your CAT."

"Elizabeth, may I ask about something that's puzzling me?"

"Of course you may ask."

Allison held her face rigid. One may ask but not always get an answer: that was the rule. "You have been saying 'we.' Who is it who's ordering all this— ordering me back from Europe, ordering me to Seattle. I mean," Allison said, suddenly breathless, "who is your superior now?" The rumors, oh the rumors about whether Sedgewick was alive or dead or active or retired... There had been nothing but rumors for the last year and a half, nothing but rumors since Scanlon and Percy had been excised.

"Your security clearance isn't up to that kind of information," Elizabeth said. "Just accept that I have the authority to give you orders. And I might point out that the less an operative knows about what is going on inside Security, the better. If you were captured that'd be the first sort of thing either Military or the Free Zone people would try to get out of you."

Allison swallowed. "Understood," she said.

"But one name you do need to know, and that's your controller's. You'll be working for Henry Lauder."

The beach's damp chill crept into Allison's heart. Worse and worse. "Henry Lauder," she said. "Is that as in Mr. Clean?"

Elizabeth chuckled. "The very same, Allison."

So. This was a very big deal. A very big dirty deal. The thought of working for Mr. Clean scared her half to death. She had heard about



him, of course. What Company operative had not? But he had always been safely away on the deepest secret and the most critical of Covert Action operations. With Mr. Clean on the job they might well expect to take the Marq'ssan. One way or another.

"I'm getting chilly," Elizabeth said. "Shall we go in?"

"Yes," Allison said. "I think I'd like to have a fire." And a drink. Yes, a drink here in her mother's house: what decent self-respecting executive woman would drink alcohol? as her mother would say if she knew. But then she couldn't be that decent or self-respecting, could she, or they wouldn't be assigning her to Mr. Clean's CAT.

Turning their backs on the ocean, they trudged up the sandy wooden steps back to the house. Allison wished she had never left Vienna.

