

THE ORIGINAL SIN

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1. The Package, 1973

The package arrived at eight o'clock on a beautiful summer's evening.

It came by motorcycle courier, directly from Barcelona airport. The rider refused to give it to the concierge at the gate-house, but insisted on delivering it into the hands of the woman to whom it was addressed, Mercedes Eduard.

This meant that the four guard dogs would have to be rounded up and kennelled. On a notorious earlier occasion the Rottweilers had pulled a man off a motorcycle in the grounds and had mauled him. The police had been called in, and Señora Eduard had given strict instructions that the episode was not to be repeated.

The gatekeeper telephoned the main residence and was put through to Maya Duran, Señora Eduard's personal secretary.

"There's a delivery man from Barcelona, Señorita Maya. He has a package. He won't leave it with me. He says he has instructions to give it to Señora Eduard alone."

Maya glanced at Mercedes, who was sorting through her correspondence. "Very well. Let him come up to the house. But see that the dogs are in their compound first."

"Yes, Señora."

She replaced the receiver. In answer to Mercedes' interrogative glance, she said, "A mysterious package that has to be delivered into your hands alone."

"Let's hope it's not a bomb."

Maya studied her with a half-smile. Mercedes Eduard was fifty-five years old. Her face was handsome but not soft. Those who saw beauty in it saw the beauty of power, the magnetism of a spirit that knew discipline and purpose. She was a woman who had exercised wealth and power; also, a woman who had known suffering. Such experiences leave their trace, and for those who knew the signs they were obvious at a glance. Her dark eyes were ruthlessly intelligent. In her youth, the deeply carved mouth had been mobile, but she had long since learned to conceal her emotions, and these days it was usually held in a still line. She had never dyed her hair, and the black was now streaked liberally with silver.

Her body was still lithe, slim-hipped, with small breasts that had not lost their upwards tilt. To some, she was a woman of allure. Others chiefly saw something to respect, and perhaps also something to fear.

“Thank God the weekend is over,” Maya said.

“Don’t you find the company of our upper classes stimulating?”

“They’re nauseating. Especially the duchess.”

“Ah, yes,” Mercedes said. “Her Grace.” The duchess had eaten and drunk enormously over the weekend. Her youthful third or fourth husband had offered hashish cigarettes from a gold case. They were evidently a couple who enjoyed the good things of life.

It gave Mercedes some bitter amusement to entertain such people in her house: fat cats, lapping the creamy benefit of Franco’s Spain without ever having bared a claw or received a scratch in battle. She sometimes wondered whether they knew what she had been. Whether they would care, if they did.

“They imagine themselves so cultured and sophisticated,” Maya said, “but all they can talk about is their money. And they eat and drink like pigs. What was the jefe de policia whispering to you about all weekend?”

“He wants me to get him a kilogram of cocaine,” Mercedes said, raking in her papers to file them.

Maya’s eyes opened wide. “My God! Did he ask you that?”

“He specified top-quality material. For investment purposes.”

Maya wasn’t amused. “Mercedes!”

Mercedes smiled. “Don’t let such things worry you. The man was trying to put the bite on me. But I’ve fought off bigger crocodiles than that.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him the truth, that I had no access to that kind of commodity. I suggested he ask his immediate superior, who imports directly from Colombia—in crates of little plaster Madonnas.”

Maya shook her head slowly. “These people never stop astounding me. Their greed, their rudeness, their crassness—”

“I think the jefe may have just been indulging himself in a little thrill,” Mercedes said. “He likes the idea of being a devil under the uniform.”

Far away, they heard the dogs barking. Maya walked to the door. “That’s the courier. I’ll bring him up.”

The courier rode up through the avenue of cypresses to the white house, the late afternoon sun gleaming on his machine. He parked the motorcycle on the gravel and stood admiring the dramatic architecture of the house, with its high glass dome and its rows of white marble columns. He often delivered items to the houses of rich people, but this house was something special. The size of the grounds, the level of security, the grandiose architecture, all breathed great wealth.

The young woman who came out to meet him was beautiful. She was of a distinctively Sevillian type, as tall and slender as a wax taper, with large dark eyes and a full mouth. His eyes followed her buttocks appreciatively as she led him up the stairs. His boots echoed among the expanses of white marble.

Mercedes Eduard was waiting for him in her study. The package was postmarked Los Angeles and bore the stamp of a commercial delivery company. She signed the receipt, and Maya led the courier out again. Mercedes opened the package and took out the manila folder it contained.

Inside the folder was a single photograph. It was a grainy black-and-white print, taken in poor light. It showed a girl of around twenty sitting on an upright steel chair, facing the camera. She was naked to the waist. Her upper body was lean, the ribs showing clearly. Her small breasts were brought into relief by the way her arms had been roped tightly behind her. On one shoulder was a livid bruise. The girl’s eyes, partially obscured by her snaking dark hair, stared vacantly into the lens.

She wore jeans, slightly ragged at the knees. A dark stain suggested she’d wet herself. Her ankles had been chained to the chair; a padlock dangled between her thin, dirty bare feet. The background was featureless.

Mercedes’s heart was clubbing at her breastbone. She looked at the back of the print. A single sentence was printed across it in block capitals: GO TO THE POLICE AND SHE DIES.

Mercedes felt the glacial calm that had come over her at other moments of her life; the numbness of knowing that the earth had moved beneath her and nothing would ever be the same again.

She reached for the telephone. She watched her own fingers punch in her daughter's Los Angeles number. She sat listening to the call tone. There was no reply. After two minutes the line went dead and she replaced the receiver.

Maya Duran returned to the room. "Well?" She smiled. "What is this important package?" Her smile faded as she saw Mercedes's face. She crossed quickly to the desk and looked down at the photograph.

"It's Eden," she whispered. "What does this mean?"

Mercedes shook her head, unable to answer. Overcome by sudden nausea, she stumbled to the toilet and retched dryly over the basin. Too stunned to help at first, the younger woman could only stare at the picture. Then she went to the bathroom and passed Mercedes a towel.

Mercedes wiped her face with it and leaned unsteadily against the tiles. From somewhere deep inside came a memory. Another time she had rested against bathroom tiles in shock and pain, long, long ago.

"How did this happen?" Maya asked, her voice trembling. "Have they kidnapped her? What do they want? Money?"

"I don't know." Mercedes walked over to the desk and stared down at the photograph.

"She's in pain," Maya said. "You can see that."

"Yes."

"Is there a note?"

"Just what's written on the back."

Maya turned the photograph over. Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, God. Have you called the ranch?"

"There's no one there. I'll call Dominic." Mercedes reached for the telephone again.

Nobody was stirring in the grounds of Dominic Rey's Santa Barbara home.

It was set in almost five acres of lush estate, smoothly lawned and planted with groups of tall date palms. The distant Pacific was a sliver of ultramarine.

The house had been built in 1960, before the property boom. It was a spectacular Spanish-style villa. Many of the decorative features had been imported from Spain at the time the house was built. The handsomest artefacts had been taken from an abandoned convent, like the massive oak door, with its ornate hinges, studded with great iron nails. The smooth-worn clay tiles on the floor and the terracotta balustrade that surrounded the terrace had come from the same convent.

At 6:30 A.M., fountains of diamonds rose out of invisible spigots in the turf to ensure that the emerald blades stayed emerald through another roasting summer day. In the master bedroom, the distant hiss of the sprinkler was enough to edge Dominic Rey out of the nightmare that had been making him mutter restlessly for the past few minutes.

He rolled onto his back, groaning, and swallowed the sour taste of last night. His head was splitting, and his skin was burning like fire despite the fact that he'd thrown off the sheet long ago. He sat up and surveyed the evidence of last night's party. There was an empty bottle of Armagnac on the floor, and the glass-topped table looked as though someone had been scraping patterns in talcum powder on its surface.

The girl was asleep on her stomach, head turned to one side to show a pink cheek and an open, cherubic mouth. Her back was tanned and smooth. She was considerably less than half his age, but he flattered himself by thinking she was not just here for the cocaine he had supplied her with. He was still a handsome man, after all. The years had not been unkind to him. A cosmetic surgeon had discreetly reduced his double chin and all in all, Rey felt he was a remarkably presentable package for sixty-eight.

Fortified by this thought, he turned the air conditioner up and lay back down. He was almost asleep again when the telephone rang.

"God damn."

He clawed the receiver to his ear and grunted.

“Dominic?” The line was hollow, distant, but he recognized the voice at once.

“Mercedes, for Christ’s sake. You know what time it is?”

“This is an emergency,” she said tautly. “Eden’s been kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped?” he repeated incredulously.

“I’ve just received a photograph by special courier from Los Angeles. It shows Eden, half-naked, shackled to a chair.”

He rubbed his face. “Some kind of sick joke.”

“It’s not a joke. I’ve called the ranch. There’s no one there.”

He struggled upright. “Ah, Christ.” The girl was stirring beside him. He slapped her buttock. “How much money?”

“There is no demand. Just the picture.”

“Just the picture? She must have been so stoned she forgot to put in the ransom note.”

“You think Eden set this up herself?”

“Of course. This has her style written all over it.”

“I can’t believe that.”

The girl, now awake, rolled out of bed and wandered to the bathroom. She didn’t bother to close the bathroom door, and Rey watched her perch on the toilet seat. “I can.”

“Eden is incapable of doing that. Whatever she is, she isn’t that cruel. What could she possibly gain?”

“Money, of course,” he said dryly. “She’ll do anything for extra money these days.”

“Not this.”

“So who’s taken her?”

“Los Angeles is full of crazy people.”

“Don’t let’s make a melodrama out of this. This is exactly the reaction Eden wants.”

“I find it hard to believe you’re talking about your own daughter, Dominic!”

The girl flushed the toilet, washed her pretty face, and dried it carefully. She was not interested in the argument Dominic was having over the telephone. Sex with an old

guy like him was gross, but there was almost nothing she would not do for the kind of uncut Colombian pure that he seemed to have so much of.

“Well, what the hell do you want me to do about it?” Rey was saying coldly into the receiver. “Call the cops?”

“No! Go to the ranch and try to find out what happened.”

“I don’t have time for that!”

“Be a father to her for once in your life, Dominic. God knows you owe her that.”

“Well, God knows you’ve got room to talk,” he replied bitterly.

“Have you forgotten how sick she is?”

“Ah, Jesus. I’ll go to the ranch, if that’s what you want.”

“It’s what I want. Don’t contact the police. Call me back at midnight, your time.”

Dominic Rey heard her disconnect. “Shit,” he said wearily. He slammed the receiver down and rubbed his face.

The girl had been rapturously snorting the remains of the drug off the glass-topped table. Now she came around to Rey’s bedside and stood smiling at him, bright-eyed. In the morning light, her body was flawless.

“Remember me?” she asked sweetly. “You haven’t said good morning yet.”

He grunted. “You shouldn’t snort before breakfast. That’s for addicts.”

She eased her loins forward invitingly, her flat belly almost brushing his face. Her teenage voice softened into what she thought was an inviting drawl. “Let’s do it again.”

“I have to be somewhere.”

She rolled onto the bed, graceful as a cat. Her thighs parted. “Are you sure about that?”

*

In Madrid, the minister was easing on the jacket of his tuxedo. The evening stretched ahead of him uninvitingly.

Like all dinners given by the ageing dictator of Spain, the occasion would be sombre, formal, and deathly dull. Franco and his wife were the most boring hosts he

had ever known. He could not remember one hour of jollity he had ever spent in their company, and he had known them for thirty-five years. Now that Franco was eighty and increasingly frail, he was more tedious than ever. The interminable lectures in the quavering, piping voice were sometimes almost more than the minister could bear.

He sighed and studied his face in the mirror. He had once been a very handsome man. He was now seventy-four, and all that remained of his looks was authority. These days, the heavy features were almost always expressionless. The hair was thin and white. So was the cropped military-style moustache. Only the dark eyes, glistening in their pouches of skin, hinted at inner fires that had not died down.

He was corpulent these days, too. The starched shirt was tight on his frame and creaked when he sat. A lump of ageing lard, he thought dryly. But, by God, a powerful man yet. He clenched his right fist, as though grasping at some tangible symbol of the authority he had exercised for three decades. A diamond flashed at his cuff.

Yes. Ageing they might be, but the power was still theirs. Of course, Franco could not last forever, and when he went, they would all go. There was perhaps only a year or two left.

But they had had a good run for their money, a damned good run. For him, the exercise of power had been the ultimate gratification. It did not matter where he was now, where the journey had led. He had enjoyed the ride. Immensely.

And this twilight was far from unpleasant. The afflictions of old age were painful. Most of all, the loneliness. But power soothed all hurts: having it, using it, exploiting it.

A secretary peered around the door. "Minister? There's a call for you from Catalonia. Señora Eduard."

He nodded brusquely. He brushed some specks from the lapels of his jacket and picked up the telephone beside his bed. "Mercedes?"

"Gerard!" He was instantly aware of the anguish in her voice. "Gerard, I think Eden has been kidnapped. I've received a photograph of her, tied to a chair. No ransom note, just a warning not to go to the police. It came from Los Angeles."

He was silent for a moment but, apart from that, gave no sign of shock or dismay. "Does the photograph seem genuine?" he asked in his gravelly voice.

"Yes." Her voice almost broke. "Yes, it seems genuine."

"Is there a date on the package?"

He heard her take a deep, trembling breath. "The postmark says it was mailed two days ago."

"How long can she survive without the drug?"

"I don't know. Perhaps a few days."

"And then?"

Mercedes did not answer.

"Have you spoken to the girl's father?"

"He doesn't believe it's genuine. He thinks Eden is trying to get money from us."

"No," he said decisively. "That's not her way."

"I know it's not. But he refuses to believe."

"The kidnappers haven't contacted him?"

"No."

"They probably won't approach him," the minister said. "He's irrelevant."

"He has more money than I do."

"But he would not pay. Don't count on him for help, Mercedes."

"I won't."

The minister grunted. "I know a man here in Madrid. A South American. He specializes in this kind of thing. His name is Joaquin de Cordoba. Don't speak to anyone in the meantime. Not the police, not anyone. Understand?"

"Yes."

"I'll call you back in a few minutes."

*

Chained to her bed in the cellar, the girl starts to call out again.

There is no sun down here, only the dim light of a naked bulb set high in the concrete ceiling. For the past few hours she has been getting too sick to do anything but lie still and cry. She is very weak, and now the only sound that comes out is a croak. Her throat is raw. Even if she had her voice, the cellar is deep, the cell has been

soundproofed, and up above is empty desert. The mattress is soaked with sweat. She is trembling so violently that the iron bedstead rattles and the manacles clatter like castanets. How long can she bear it? Yet she has no option but to bear it

Upstairs in the house, no one is stirring. Her jailer has gone out. The door is locked, the windows are shuttered against the sun. It is going to be a beautiful day. The desert already shimmers with heat, although the sun has only been up an hour or two. The tall saguaro cacti stand like sentinels, like a silent army, for acres around the house. No breeze stirs.

A lone coyote lopes cautiously up to the porch. Sometimes there are scraps of food here. But not today. He sniffs and pokes around the door fruitlessly. His huge ears never stop moving, hunting for the tiny sounds that can mean food or imminent death. He catches a faint whisper, a noise no human ear could detect. It comes from deep in the ground. He pauses, brown eyes alert. But his interest quickly fades. The sound is recognizably human.

He watches a pair of desert sparrows hopping in the dust, uttering their plaintive farewell: "Adios! Adios! Adios!" But they are too wily to let him approach them.

He needs to find a meal before the day gets too hot and he has to curl up, panting, in whatever scant shade he can find. He turns and trots back into the desert.

In the cellar, the girl's spine arches into a trembling bow.

*

The two women sat in silence.

When the telephone rang, Mercedes picked it up swiftly. "Yes?"

The old man's voice was blunt, forceful. "Colonel de Cordoba will be on the noon flight from Madrid tomorrow. Can you meet him at the airport?"

"Yes."

"Tell him everything," the minister commanded. "He is a man to be trusted. He is not young, but his brain is as sharp as a scalpel."

“Very well.”

“Try not to worry about Eden. She will survive this.”

“How can she?”

“She’s a survivor. Like you. You’re going to need dollars, Mercedes. I have money, both in Liechtenstein and in America.”

“If I need it, I’ll ask you,” she said. Then, after a hesitation, she added, “Thank you, Gerard.”

“You’re my flesh.”

Mercedes Eduard’s eyes blurred. She hung up quickly, before she could betray any further emotion. “He’s sending an advisor,” she told Maya. Her face was a pale mask with glittering black eyes. Her hands were clenched into fists, so that the well-manicured nails dug into her palms. “I want nothing of this to be known, by the servants or anyone else. You understand?”

“Yes, Mercedes.”

Mercedes rose and walked to the window of her study. If only my life had been different, she thought. Oh, Eden, if only I’d taken better care of you. Sin and death. Crime and punishment. Retribution following me all my life, as night follows day, as one link of a chain follows another.

Her land stretched, park-like, towards a distant vista of the Pyrenees, their blue folds unlined with snow now that summer was here. She had built this house facing the mountains, not the sea, an orientation that was now almost obsolete among the rich people who had come here to erect their summer palaces. Unlike them, she had felt no desire to stare at the Mediterranean. Like her ancestors, it had been the mountains she’d wanted to see, every morning, when she rose.

She had sunk a fortune into this property. She had watched, four years ago, as the bulldozers had ploughed the clay earth into a landscape of her own devising for sixty thousand square meters all around. Thousands of trees had been brought in and planted at her command, rows of olives, orchards of peaches and apricots, groves of almonds and lemons and oranges.

She had watched as the lawns and rockeries and flower beds had been laid, the fountains brought to life, the pergolas and walks set out. She'd created here the green Catalan garden that she'd dreamed of in exile.

And now, it seemed to Mercedes that a cyclone had torn through it all, leaving only devastation behind.

Eden! She thought with an inner cry of agony. Eden, my child. What have we done to you?

*

He comes down the stairs, carrying a tray of food. The cellar is cool, roomy, well-organized.

He has built a brick cell in one corner. The brickwork is neat and regular. The structure has not intruded much into the useful space of the cellar.

The walls of the cell reach to the ceiling, completely enclosing a space just big enough to accommodate the girl's bed, with enough floor-room for her to use the toilet. The door is steel, steel-framed.

There are, of course, no windows to the outside, though there are two grilles that allow the cool air of the cellar to get in.

He stares at the brick cell he has built.

What is wrong with her?

It looks like some kind of fever to him. It could be a game. He does not think so.

What if she is dying or dead in there? He forces himself to keep calm. He thinks best when he is calm. When he gets upset, disturbing things happen. He has to keep a hold of himself.

He listens for a long while. He can hear no sound. He puts on the hood and goes in.

Her green eyes meet his dark ones with startling intensity. She is propped up against the wall, her knees drawn up tight against her chest. Her face has grown gaunt

and grey. She is shivering more violently than before. Her teeth are rattling in her head. She looks very ill, even sicker than before. But she is conscious now.

“Are you going to let me die down here?”

He checks the trays without answering. The food has still not been touched. But she has drunk the remaining jug of water, all of it.

“Is it a kidnapping? Are you asking my father for ransom money?”

The muscles of her legs and face are convulsing. They jerk as though invisible wires are yanking on them.

“Did you send him that photograph you took?”

He continues to study her, as though she were an insect pinned to a board for study.

“Don’t ask for too much. It’s not that he hasn’t got it. He just won’t pay. He’ll let me die. It would be a waste.”

He can smell her now. Not just the vomit. A smell of sweat. A strange, chemical sweat. Bitter. A sick smell.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asks. “Are you sick?”

“No,” she replies.

“If you’re sick, I can get you some medicine.”

She stares at him, her mouth trembling. “Codeine.”

“So you are sick,” he says angrily. “Why are you lying to me? What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m afraid!” she screams back at him. “I’m afraid! That’s what’s wrong with me!”

“You shouldn’t be shivering like that,” he says, more quietly. He knows something is wrong with the girl, but there is no sense in arguing about it now. “I’ll bring some aspirin next time I come,” he says.

“No! Codeine.”

“I’ll see.” He picks up the tray and turns to go.

“Please—”

He turns.

“Paper. For the toilet. Please.”

He goes out. The steel door slams shut behind him. She hears the lock click and the bolts slide home.

It is very silent in the cell. She lowers her head onto her knees and starts to sob.

*

Mercedes gave de Cordoba the folder. "This arrived on Monday evening."

He opened it and took out the photograph inside. He looked at the picture, his expression unchanging. "Just this? And you've received no telephone messages since?"

"Nothing."

He looked at the back of the picture.

GO TO THE POLICE AND SHE DIES.

He studied the photograph, assessing the expression on the bound girl's face. Stress and exhaustion. And a swollen bruise on the shoulder. Someone had hit her with a rifle butt or something like that. He replaced the photograph and took a sip of coffee, composing his next words. He was sixty-three years old, Argentine by birth, a handsome man with silvered hair. He sat erect and spoke with a musical Latin American accent.

"The first thing to understand," he said, "is that the primary consideration is money. Money first. Money last. Always money."

And money was all around, he reflected. He put the cup carefully back in the saucer. It was exquisite Meissen, part of a service that had to be worth thousands of dollars. The room they sat in was decorated in shades of yellow that glowed in the evening sunlight. The comfortable chairs and sofas were upholstered in a Regency stripe. Heavy curtains of saffron silk hung at all the windows. On the floor was an immense wool Kashan, a magnificent field of scarlet and turquoise flowers on an ochre ground.

The collection of English and German porcelain was exceptional. The paintings, too, were fine. The largest, hanging on the far wall, was a massive Victorian sunset, its rich tones binding all the colours in the room together.

De Cordoba's profession took him into the homes of many wealthy people. He always tried to assess how conspicuous the wealth was. In this case, the answer was the usual one—too conspicuous.

He studied the two women. Both were wearing expensive suits in pastel linen, suited to the weather and the time of day. Both wore costly jewellery, the younger woman a diamond bracelet, the older a Baume & Mercier watch.

Mercedes Eduard was perhaps fifty-five. Her body was lithe and supple. Maya Duran, sitting beside her, could not be more than thirty. She had been a fashion model, de Cordoba suspected. Her devotion to Mercedes Eduard was clear. Adoration, he felt, would not be too strong a word. He went on:

"Kidnapping is a business. The sellers have a product for which they are determined to get a good price. You, the buyers, have the capital, which you must use in the best way possible."

"How much capital?" Mercedes Eduard interrupted dryly.

"They will try to clean you out."

She stared at him with black eyes. "Thank you for being so honest."

He nodded. "But the important thing is not to abandon your own bargaining position, whatever happens."

"It won't be necessary to bargain," Mercedes said. "I'll pay what they ask. Within my capabilities."

"They won't begin with a price that is 'within your capabilities.' They'll start with a price they believe to be impossible. They'll expect you to bargain with them until they're sure you have reached the very limits of your finances."

"You're telling me to haggle over my daughter's life?"

"For her sake, yes," he said gently. "They will certainly use every marketing ploy they can think of to raise the price." He indicated the photograph. "You can see their style."

The younger woman, Maya Duran, was pale. Her eyes were huge in her beautiful face. Mercedes, however, showed no emotion whatsoever. "Yes. I see."

"They intend to extract the last drop. If we make sure they feel they have got everything they can, the possibility of injury to your daughter will be greatly reduced. May I ask whether you have contacted the police?"

"Not yet."

De Cordoba nodded. "My position is that of an advisor. I do not make any attempts to locate hostages during kidnappings. If you wish, I will talk directly with the kidnappers, on the telephone or in any other way. I have considerable experience in dealing with such people. I have assisted with fifty-two cases of kidnap in South America, Europe and the United States. Of those, twenty-six had a successful outcome."

"Half," Mercedes said.

"In this business, that is an excellent statistic." He pushed a piece of paper across the coffee table. "My fees are a flat weekly rate. That does not include expenses or travel. Nor is it in any way linked to the outcome. I am paid solely as a consultant, for as long as my services are required, or until I decide to withdraw."

Mercedes glanced at the figures. "You do well out of kidnapping, Colonel de Cordoba."

He inclined his head. "It is an odd career, I agree. But you have never been through this before, and I have been through it many, many times. My experience is valuable."

Mercedes rose to her feet. "You must be tired. Maya will show you to your room. We dine at eight-thirty. Please join us for drinks an hour before, on the terrace."

"That would be delightful."

They were all on their feet now. Joaquin de Cordoba looked down into Mercedes's face. Beneath that controlled, handsome mask, he thought, is a woman suffering the torments of the damned. "I assure you," he said softly, "that with the correct approach and patience, your daughter's suffering can be minimized. She may be back with you very soon."

Mercedes nodded. He bowed over her hand with military gallantry and followed Maya out.

His room was upstairs. It opened out onto a balcony, with a superb view of the mountains. A valet had already brought up his suitcases.

"I hope you'll be comfortable," Maya said.

"I'm sure I shall be."

"If you need anything, please ask me, or one of the servants."

"Thank you." Maya wore very little makeup, no more than a shimmer at her eyelids and lips. The lines of her face and throat were emphasized by her glossy hair.

"May I ask how long you've been Señora Eduard's secretary?"

"For the past three years. In case you're wondering, I am her lover."

He hid his surprise. "I can see you are a great support to her."

"And in case you are wondering, I had nothing to do with the kidnapping."

"That never crossed my mind," de Cordoba said gravely. "Tell me, how old is Eden?"

"She'll be twenty-one this year."

"She was born in America?"

"Yes. Mercedes went to California after the Spanish Civil War. She met her husband in Los Angeles. Eden was born there."

"I see."

"I'll leave you to unpack in peace," she said.

He bowed over her hand. She closed the door as she left.

*

In Santa Barbara, Dominic Rey was breakfasting on the terrace, fresh orange juice, papaya and a mango. Brilliant sunshine flooded the lush garden. Peace reigned.

He thought about the telephone call from Mercedes. Eden kidnapped? With Eden's little problem, she'd be dead in three days. He refused to even consider the

possibility that it was true. The whole thing had her signature written all over it. Just the kind of trick she would pull.

He had barely seen her in the past six months. Well, who needed that kind of shit? You couldn't be a parent to a daughter like Eden.

Chained to a chair? Yeah, right. She'd be hiding out with some of her hippie friends, laughing her head off and planning what she would do with the ransom money.

It had been a long time since anyone had last whipped Eden into line. He picked up the keys to the Porsche.

Midday heat and midday traffic made the freeway unbearable. By the time he was driving through the Agoura Hills, Rey had put the Porsche's top back up and had the air conditioning going full blast. He hated coming into the smog and the tension these days, seeing all those black and brown faces, all those peeling buildings. He'd loved this city twenty years ago, but the developers, the immigrants and the Mob were turning it into a shit pile.

He swung off onto Sepulveda Boulevard. This was one of the few parts of Beverly Hills, he reflected, that remained uncorrupted. No condos, no sordid urban sprawl. Just hills and trees and canyons, beautiful stretches of California and comfortingly wealthy white people. He turned off onto Chalon, which wound through groves of eucalyptus and conifers into the Canyon.

The wide drive of 3301 Chalon Road was not marked. You had to go thirty yards up before you met the sliding electronic gate and saw the chain-link fence behind the eucalyptus. Stopping in front of the gate, Rey honked his horn until he saw the camera swing to study him. The gate rumbled open and he drove in.

They'd always called the place "the ranch," though it was only a large, pleasant house, facing a collection of outbuildings across a big cobbled yard. Behind it were a couple of acres of scrub and trees that backed onto Topanga State Park. The stables were the most agricultural thing on the property.

The first building, on the right as you came in, was Miguel Fuentes's house. Miguel was standing on his porch, a spruce figure all in white. Rey stopped next to him and lowered the window. Miguel stooped to peer into the low-slung car.

"Hello, boss. Long time no see, huh?"

“Hello, Miguel. I’ve come to see Eden. Is she in?”

“Uh, I don’ think so.”

Rey studied the man. Miguel was poker-faced. There was something odd about him. “I’ll go take a look.”

“Sure, boss.”

“Do you have a key?”

Miguel produced one from a bunch in his pocket. Rey took it and drove on.

Eden’s red Dodge van was parked outside opposite the group of four stables. A horse trailer was hooked up to it. Rey parked the Porsche next to it and got out. To his left was another house, quarters for staff during Mercedes’s time, but now empty. The garden looked neglected. Monaco, Eden’s horse, had his big brown face at the door of his box.

“I see you’re still here,” Rey commented. Monaco’s ears flicked indifferently and he returned to his hay.

Rey walked across the yard to the main house.

He knocked at the front door, but there was no reply. He opened the door with his key and went cautiously inside.

*

Eden wondered where she was. She was a long, long way from Los Angeles, that was for sure. The journey had lasted at least twelve hours. Maybe eighteen. Maybe twenty.

When he’d come into the kitchen with the M-16 pointed straight at her chest, she’d thought at first she was hallucinating. Then her heart had begun to lurch. She’d gasped the first inane words that came to her mind: “Hey. How’d you get in here?”

Of course, that had been easy to answer. He’d had no problem at all getting in. Miguel was away. The old man’s presence always made her feel safe, even these days, even now that he was white-haired. The staff quarters opposite the main house were also empty. Miguel had let the gardener and his wife go, and the replacements hadn’t

arrived yet. And she'd been there alone, preparing her last shot of the night, the extra big one that let her sleep through till morning.

The kidnapper had just walked in.

He had a ragged half-beard and ragged, uncombed hair. In between, his face was a streaked mask of green and black camouflage paint. For a moment of blank terror she'd thought he was going to fire, tear her body apart. She'd risen to her feet, holding her arms out, as if to stop the bullets. The butt of the weapon had slammed into her shoulder. She'd stumbled and sprawled onto the floor. He'd stood over her, pointing the muzzle of the gun at her face. She'd seen his black eyes half close in that bizarre mask of a face, and had felt the void open inside her, the empty anticipation of imminent death.

She remembered the smell of the wax on the pine floorboards. Had seen his finger curled around the trigger. She'd lain frozen, waiting. Rape, murder, pain had flashed through her mind. Miguel, she'd thought in anguish. Then he'd hauled her to her feet. She'd screamed at the wrench to her shoulder, and he'd pushed the muzzle of the rifle into her throat. "Shut up. Not a sound. You understand me?"

She was choking, her eyes staring blind with terror. She'd managed to nod.

He'd stared at her, eyes black as midnight. "Come on, Eden," he'd commanded. "You're coming with me."

Shackled to struts in the back of the van, her hands and feet had gone numb. By the time they'd got here, wherever here was, agony had become stupor. She had wet herself twice. She'd been numb and shocked, and starting to jitter for her fix. He'd had to carry her out of the van. He hadn't spoken.

The air had been warm. She'd heard outside noises. Birds, wind. A sort of dry, sweet smell. Then he'd pushed her into a building of some kind, and down a set of wooden stairs into what she'd guessed must be a cellar or a store room. She'd felt his strength, heard his unsteady breathing.

When he'd started undressing her, she'd thought he was going to rape her and had tried to fight. But he'd only pulled off her shirt. She hadn't been wearing a bra. He'd shackled her to the chair.

Her blindfold had come off. She'd started screaming, then. She didn't want to see his face, because she knew if she saw his face he would have to kill her, so she couldn't identify him afterwards. If she saw his face, there would be no afterwards.

He'd cursed her angrily and had pulled on her hair, hard. But she hadn't opened her eyes until he'd promised that he was wearing the hood. Even then, she'd raised her face with dread, slowly.

The flashlight had exploded in her eyes, blinding her more effectively than the blindfold had done. Then he'd unshackled her from the chair and had shackled her to the bed. He'd taken the chair out. The black hood stared at her through neatly cut eyeholes. Nothing more had been said until the steel door clanged shut and the lock had clattered, and she'd looked around her and started screaming again. Screaming her head off. There had been no answer.

Why had he pulled her shirt off to take that picture? To increase the impact of the photograph, of course. By now her father would have received it. She wondered how Daddy had taken it.

She wondered whether the police were hunting for her, whether it was in the papers, on television. Or whether it was being kept quiet, and no more than a handful of people knew she was missing. She wondered how much he had asked for. Fifty thousand? That was too little. Hardly worth the risks. Double that. Maybe as much as a quarter-million. That would have given Daddy a jolt. For once in his life, he would be really hurting on her account.

She wondered dreamily how you quantified the value of a human life. Was she worth a million bucks? What was the value of a Vietnamese child in some burning village? An American President? A murderer on death row? Did they all have different values, or maybe the same value, or no value at all?

*

Rey walked into Miguel's house.

Miguel didn't rise from his armchair, just grinned up at Rey amiably. Rey stared at Miguel in distaste. He'd once been afraid of this man's brute, cruel strength. He'd ordered Miguel to perform a number of violent acts and had been nauseated by the results. But Miguel had been effective.

Now that Miguel was growing older, starting to shrivel in the way old men do, he saw that Miguel had never been anything more than a crude and unclean tool that he had used to do some crude and unclean jobs. But there was something oddly dapper about him today, something almost dandyish. Something Rey hadn't seen in him before. His eyes shifted away from Rey's as Rey studied him.

"Eden's car is still there."

"Si."

"And the horse is still there."

"Si."

"Mercedes called me this morning. She's concerned about Eden. She thinks something may have happened to her."

"Happened?"

"Yes. Despite your unsleeping vigilance. When exactly did you last see Eden?"

"Well—uh—last Tuesday."

"That's a week ago. You're telling me Eden's been gone a week?"

"Well, that's not necessarily so. She could have gone the day before we got back."

"Before you got back from where?"

"Uh, from Mexico."

"You and who else?"

Miguel's mouth worked. Rey got up suddenly and walked out onto the back porch. A dark-skinned young woman was sitting on a towel in the sun. She was wearing a pink bikini bottom, reading a comic. Shiny breasts jostled like fat brown puppies as she folded her arms protectively. A frolicsome young thing of eighteen or nineteen, with a body that was already overblown. She smiled uncertainly.

"Buenas tardes, Señor."

He turned to Miguel, who'd come padding after him. "Who is this?"

Miguel cleared his throat. "Yolanda, boss. The new housekeeper."

"Where's she from?"

"Puerto Rico."

"You let the old housekeeper go?"

"Well, sure."

"The garden's pretty shabby. You let the gardener go too?"

"He was no good, boss. Sleeping on the job, smoking weed in the stables. He—"

"You're quite an old devil, aren't you," Rey said thinly, looking at the girl.

"Come on now, boss."

"No, I mean it, Miguel. I'm impressed. So you've been on a little trip to Mexico together? When did you leave?"

"Tuesday."

"And when did you get back?"

"Yesterday, I swear it. I looked in on Eden, but she wasn't there. But I didn't think anything..."

"So, in fact, an army of Black Panthers could have marched in firing bazookas and you wouldn't know a thing."

"No, Señor! Maybe she went to a show-jumping thing."

"Without Monaco?"

Miguel gestured. "Maybe demonstrations or parties. She'll be back."

Rey stared at him. He spoke clearly, calmly. "Has Eden cooked up some kind of a scheme with you or anybody else, Miguel? You know anything about that?"

"Scheme? What kind a scheme?"

"A scheme to get money out of Mercedes."

"I don't know what you talking about, boss."

Yolanda, deciding that she looked ridiculous clutching her puppies, rolled onto her stomach and lay on them.

"Has she a man these days? A boyfriend?"

"Nobody, boss."

"No clever sort of boy? Like Rusty Fagan?"

Miguel grinned. "Nobody like Rusty at all." The old man came to the door of the house. "Eden's okay, ain't she?" he asked Rey. "I mean, nothing happened?"

Rey walked briskly down the steps, towards his car. There he turned and looked back up at Miguel. "If anything has happened, Miguel, you'll be the first to know. Believe me. Open the gate, will you?"

*

"There are some complexities," Mercedes said on the terrace.

It was a warm evening. Cicadas shrilled in the velvety darkness. De Cordoba was hot in his blazer and military tie. He envied Mercedes in her sleeveless dress, her slim arms exposed to the slight breeze. Maya had not yet joined them.

He nodded. "Tell me about the complexities."

"The first complexity concerns money. This is not a good time for me, financially."

"I see."

"You may look around you and doubt what I say," Mercedes went on. "But I have just finished building this house and filling it with art. I was stupidly extravagant. I wanted to please Maya. To keep her at my side. I spent a great deal more than I should have done. I have very little cash. Only the possessions you see."

"That's unfortunate."

"I will sell whatever I have to. But as you know, things that cost money to buy are usually worthless when one is forced to sell."

"And Eden's father?"

"He will not part with his money for our daughter's sake," she said bitterly, "I assure you."

"So they have singled you out for the ransom demand."

"Of course."

"I see."

"There's another complexity. My daughter is a sick woman." She paused. "Eden is a heroin addict."

De Cordoba felt suddenly cold, despite the mildness of the evening. "How long can she go without the drug?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Do you have any precise idea when she was kidnapped?"

"My ex-husband is trying to find that out. It may be difficult to say. She lives alone, and her life is not always... orderly."

Maya Duran now joined them, a slim figure in a black evening dress. De Cordoba rose to greet her, then sat back down. "Any way of telling whether she has any supplies of heroin with her?"

"Even if she has, it would soon run out."

"If the gang are professionals, they'll have studied your daughter carefully before the snatch. You can expect them to play up her addiction to the hilt. Abusing the emotions is what kidnapping is all about." He spoke slowly and calmly, trying to instil confidence. "But they want to keep their victim alive. She's their stock-in-trade, their only commodity."

"Until the money is paid," Mercedes said calmly.

"Yes. Until the money is paid. What I'm trying to say is that despite the heroin addiction, we must proceed as usual. For Eden's sake. You'll have to steel yourself against what you may be told or shown and follow the general guidelines I lay down."

"I can't take chances," Mercedes said. "As soon as I receive a ransom demand, I intend to meet it in full, whatever it costs me. That seems to me the only hope of getting Eden back quickly."

"I must advise you most strongly to reconsider that. In my experience, that has never produced a quick solution. Never," he repeated. "It has only prolonged the agony immeasurably."

"Eden's agony may not be immeasurable." Her dark eyes stared out into the night. "This experience must be made as brief as possible, for my daughter's sake. I believe that if they have the money and see she's unwell, they may release her quickly."

"Please," he said gently, "consider this line of thought. If you immediately pay the initial demand, without haggling, they'll assume they've underestimated your wealth and demanded far too little. They will in all probability immediately demand the same amount again. Perhaps double that."

"Oh, God," Maya said quietly.

“They will apply more pressure,” he went on. “They will threaten to rape or torture her. If we mishandle the negotiations, they may carry out their threats.”

“People like that deserve the death penalty,” Maya said in a tight voice. “They’re animals. Filth.”

“Filth, yes,” de Cordoba agreed. “If they think there’s more money left in the pot, they may sell your daughter to another gang, who’ll start the whole process afresh. She is a product to them. Nothing more. It’s as important to your daughter as it is to the kidnapers that you pay the correct price, at the correct time.”

“I will consider that.” Mercedes’s face was taut, concealing God knew what pain. He wanted to tell her it was permissible to cry, to show emotion. “My husband doesn’t believe that this is a real kidnapping. He thinks Eden may have staged it.”

He touched the photograph. “To support her habit?”

“All addicts are short of money,” Mercedes replied dryly.

“Is she capable of such a callous stunt?”

“Eden is somewhat... erratic. She’s been through a difficult phase lately. Our contacts haven’t been close in the past year.”

He studied her. “Eden’s addiction— how long has she had it?”

“She began using drugs during her teenage years. I don’t know when exactly she graduated to heroin.”

He nodded, intelligent eyes watching her. “We must operate under the assumption that this is a genuine kidnapping, and not a stunt.”

“I agree.”

“Tomorrow we’ll connect a recording machine to the telephone. I’ll answer all incoming calls from now on. In the meantime, we must ready ourselves for the likely pattern of events. We need an operating procedure. With your permission, I’ll begin preparing you now.”

*

The kidnapper is experiencing his first real panic of the whole operation.

Whatever is wrong with her, it is reaching its peak. She is conscious, but she can hardly speak to him for the chattering of her teeth and the jerking of her limbs. She is like a marionette whose strings are in the hands of demons. He gives her the pills and she gulps them down, choking on the water.

He lays the extra blanket over her and tucks her in. There is terror in her eyes. Not of him, but of what is happening to her. He is unable to do anything. Her clothes and the mattress are soaked with sweat. He lays his hand on the girl's forehead. Her skin is icy cold. She flinches when he touches her, as though her nerve endings are raw.

"Please. I need some more painkillers."

"Where do you have the pain?"

"In my back. In my legs."

"In your back and in your legs?" He stares down at her. "Where else?"

"In my stomach. God, I feel so sick. Oh, God."

"Do you know what this is?"

"I'm so frightened. I think I'm dying."

Her trembling has affected him. He has caught it too. He feels his own body start to shiver. "You're not dying!"

"Get me out of here."

"What?"

"You could drop me near a hospital," she says unsteadily. She looks up at him, the green eyes ghostly in the hollow sockets. She was beautiful. Now she looks deathly. "Blindfold me, like you did when you first took me—"

"No."

"Do it at night. Drive me to a clinic somewhere and just drop me off a mile or two away—"

"You're staying. You either cure or die right here."

"I can't go through with it!" Her face is agonized. Her fingers are claws that have seized his forearms. "You can't let me die here!"

"Get your hands off me," he snaps. "I'll get you some more codeine."

“Chocolate. Bring me some chocolate.” Her eyes burn into his. Her face is awful. The smell in there is starting to make him ill.

He opens the door and goes out. He turns to look at the brick cell. There is a total silence. It and the girl inside it are starting to terrify him.

*

Maya went to the kitchen and collected the breakfast tray to take up to Mercedes: orange juice, black coffee and a freshly-baked croissant. Mercedes was sitting up in bed, reading the newspaper. The curtains had been drawn, and the morning sun made the bedroom glow.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, querida.” Mercedes looked frail, the lines of her face drawn.

“You look tired,” Maya said, pouring the coffee. “Did you have a bad night?”

“I’ve had better.”

“What time is Dominic going to call you?”

“In about a quarter of an hour.”

“Are you anticipating anything positive?”

“I’m hoping for a few answers. But anything positive, no. Not now.”

“I’ve been thinking about Eden. When she’s back, maybe you could make a fresh start with her. Really tackle her problems. Maybe I could help. I’m much nearer her age than either you or her father. I know I’m not very close to Eden. But I’m not her enemy, either. At least we’ve never quarrelled. Perhaps I could persuade her to get help. Go to some kind of.. .” She hesitated over the word. “Some kind of institution.”

“We’ve tried that. Remember?”

“On a new basis. With a new attitude.”

“Let’s get her back first. Then we’ll think about things like that.”

Maya nodded and left.

Rey’s call, as Mercedes had predicted, came through within the quarter-hour.

“Well, she’s not there,” Rey said bluntly. “The house is like the Marie Celeste. Miguel says that’s normal.”

“Was there any sign of a struggle?”

“No. And there’s no note, either. It’s as if she just walked out. But I did find her medicine kit in her bedroom. Looked like the whole shooting match.”

“She wouldn’t leave that behind.”

“Unless she had more someplace else.”

She closed her eyes tiredly. “What does Miguel say?”

“Miguel has a Puerto Rican cutie of around nineteen to occupy his time these days. She’s called Yolanda. He says she’s his housekeeper. He’s let all the other staff go. He and this Yolanda took themselves off to Mexico last week. He claims he saw Eden Tuesday morning, just before he left. He says he got back yesterday and went around to see her, but she was gone.”

“He was away five days? And nobody else was there?”

“Yes.”

“They took her while he was gone, then.”

“The fact that Miguel’s screwing this girl doesn’t mean the kidnapping’s genuine.”

Mercedes was silent for a while, trying to digest it. Eden had been abandoned. By her father, by Miguel. By her mother. She’d been all alone, a plum ripe for picking.

For some time after the call she sat immobile. How could Miguel have done this to them?

She’d trusted Miguel to watch over Eden. Once, Miguel had been a rock. A man loyal as steel, who had done all Dominic’s dirty work. But Miguel had gone rotten, softened by ease. She’d thought of letting him retire last year. But then he had handled the Rusty Fagan episode so neatly, so cleanly, that she had changed her mind. She’d been over-impressed. It had been a terrible error.

Had the Puerto Rican girl been put up to it? Was she part of some elaborate plot? Or was it just coincidence?

Beneath her anger was the bitter knowledge that she herself was ultimately to blame.

Tears welled through her lids and ebbed slowly down her cheeks. She thought of what Eden was going through. She thought of Eden's unformed mind feeling that monster. Her butterfly will, being strapped to that rack.

Eden was not yet twenty-one. Without strength. Without any schooling in pain, or singleness of purpose, to sustain and fortify. For once in her life, for the first time since babyhood, Eden needed her.

She reached for the telephone again.

*

Miguel Fuentes was still fully dressed when the telephone began to ring at 1:45 A.M.

"Si," he said into the receiver.

"Miguel, it's Mercedes. Did I wake you?"

"No. I was waiting."

"Good." Mercedes's voice was calm, uninflected. "Where is Eden, Miguel?"

"Maybe she went off for a little fun."

"What kind of fun?"

"Maybe a Vietnam rally somewhere."

"The Vietnam War has been over for six months, Miguel."

"I swear I'm gonna find out, Mercedes. Nothing happened to her, you'll see. She'll be okay. She'll turn up. I'll find her by tomorrow."

"Miguel, someone sent me a picture of my daughter Monday. Half-naked. Chained to a chair."

Miguel closed his eyes, listening to the calm voice. The pain in his chest was intense, robbing him of breath.

"Eden did not go off for a little fun," she said dispassionately. "Girls who have Eden's problem never go anywhere for a little fun. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"Yes," Miguel whispered.

"This girl, Yolanda. How did you meet her?"

“She’s got nothing to do with it!”

“Was it her idea to go to Mexico?”

“I—I can’t remember. No, I think we both came up with it together.”

“That means it was her idea. How did you meet her, Miguel?”

He closed his eyes. “I got this friend, Alvaro. Yolanda’s his cousin. He brought her round to me because she had no place to go and no papers and she was going, you know... on the streets. I took care of her awhile. And she ended up staying. I love her, Mercedes. She has nothing to do with this. I swear.”

“Is that why you betrayed Eden? For a Puerto Rican hooker?”

“I didn’t betray you, for Christ’s sake! Maybe I wasn’t thinking straight, maybe I was foolish, but—”

“You left my child unprotected to go on holiday with a whore.” Mercedes’s voice had become hard, all the more terrifying because of the quietness that had preceded it.

“Oh, Jesus, Mercedes. I didn’t know it was going to happen. The poor little thing. I’m so sorry, I could cut my right arm off.”

“Find out if the Puerto Rican girl is involved in this.”

“I swear she isn’t!”

“You won’t know until you have applied sufficient pressure.”

Miguel felt the pain spreading upwards into his shoulders, into his throat and jaw. He started massaging his breastbone with a trembling hand. “You mean hurt her? Jesus, Mercedes, what are you asking me? I couldn’t do it!”

“You must do it. When you have finished with her, do the same with your friend Alvaro. Find out what they know. Whether someone paid them to do this. Above all, I need to know where Eden is, fast, because she may be dying.”

“Mercedes, for the love of God!”

“I will wait to hear from you, Miguel.”

“Mercedes!”

She disconnected.

Miguel Fuentes put the receiver down and rested his head in his hands. The pain was terrible, restricting his breath like a vice around his chest. He rose and stumbled to the bedroom.

He needed Yolanda, needed her warmth, her comfort. At least until tomorrow, he desperately needed to forget Mercedes Eduard's quiet, commanding voice.

*

She is curled up on the bed with her back to him. He stares at her. She has not eaten any of the food he brought her last time. The beans have congealed on the plate. She has drunk a little water and that's all. Her ribs are sticking out. Her hip bones are sticking out.

"If you don't eat, you're going to die."

She seems not to know that he is here. He picks up her left wrist. It is shackled to the other with a long steel chain that loops through the iron bed frame. She whimpers a little, but her eyes do not open. He checks her pulse against his wristwatch. It is very fast and it seems to flutter irregularly. The skin burns feverishly. He is uneasily aware of how frail she is. He does not like touching her.

When he releases her wrist, it flops back onto the bed lifelessly. "Time for another photograph," he says to her.

There is no response. He repeats the words, more loudly. "Come on, wake up." He shakes her shoulder, hard. "Don't screw around. Sit up."

He hooks his arms under her body and tries to haul her upright. At last, there is some sign of consciousness. She begins to whimper again, hands weakly beating at him.

"No," he hears her moan. "No, no, no!"

"Come on." The chain is tangled around her. He pulls the links free. He notices that her wrists have been chafed bloody by the manacles.

He props her against the wall. For a moment she stays there, though her eyes remain tightly closed. But her head lolls forward, long black snakes of hair trailing over her face. He catches her with a curse and tries to sit her up again. Her eyes open slightly, but the eyeballs are rolled back. Her mouth is open and he sees a strand of saliva crawl down her chin. Her hands flop sideways.

Now he is sweating.

“Jesus,” he mutters. “Come on, Eden. Snap out of it. You were okay when I brought you here.”

She has started the whimpering sound, wordless and persistent.

“I know you’re screwing around,” he tells the girl. He props her up again and this time holds her in place with one hand. With the other, he picks the plastic jug off the tray and tries to make her drink. The water runs down her chin, soaking her soiled T-shirt.

“Drink,” he commands. “You’ll get dehydrated.”

He coaxes a little water into her mouth. She chokes violently. He feels her lean muscles tense as she coughs, eyes rolling back in her head.

“Drink. Or drown.”

He forces her head back and pours water into her mouth. Again, she chokes and starts to flap at him with her manacled hands. Not much water has gone down.

He is enraged. He hurls the plastic jug against the wall. It does not break, of course. He has carefully selected everything to be unbreakable. A gout of water splashes the supine girl.

She slides back down onto her side. He rises to his feet and looks down at her. He cannot take a picture of her like this. She looks dead. He does not want her to look dead in the photograph.

He has an idea. He takes the jack-knife out of his pocket and pulls out the sharp blade. His hands start to tremble. He rolls the girl onto her back. Her ghostly face twitches in her coma, or whatever it is.

His hands are shaking badly. His breathing is unsteady. He has to force himself to concentrate. This place stinks. The smell reminds him of other places, evil places, where pain and death had their empire.

He grasps a lock of her hair in his fingers, saws jerkily. The blade is sharp and it cuts cleanly. But the shaking makes him clumsy. The point of the knife grazes her cheek and before he knows it a bright ribbon of blood streaks across the sweaty skin.

“Shit.”

He stares at the blood, swallowing. His mouth is dry. In his hands is a thick strand of black hair. He reaches out, unthinkingly, and smears the hair with the blood.

He studies the lock of black hair, with its smear of blood. It will do better than a photograph.

*

Maya went downstairs to the indoor swimming pool. There she slid into the cool blue water.

When the house was being planned, they'd decided to include the pool as an integral part of the structure. It had been placed in the crux of the house, between the sleeping quarters and the living areas. It was in reality a vast conservatory, covered with a high glass dome.

To Maya it was a piece of heaven. There was always a luxuriant summer in here. The pool was set in a thicket of plants, a humid indoor jungle that Maya had created and continued to tend. It contained tall tropical trees, some of which flowered or made bright fruit in their season. The plants towered upwards, embracing, twining, their glistening leaves unfolding in riotous growth. It was a Douanier Rousseau jungle, with pool by David Hockney.

She'd wanted lianas, monkeys and exotic birds too, but Mercedes had laughed her out of that. As it was, she spent hours each week in here, tending to what Mercedes called her rain forest.

She paused for breath at one end and saw Joaquin de Cordoba's tall figure standing at the poolside, watching her. He was wearing a bathrobe and holding a towel, evidently wondering whether to join her.

"Hello," she called. "Join me for a swim?"

"I don't want to disturb you."

"You won't."

He swam companionably at her side for a few lengths. Though he was a fit man, he only stayed in the water for a few minutes before hauling himself out. He was already seated and wrapped back in his robe by the time she decided to emerge. The wet swimsuit delineated the athletic perfection of her figure. De Cordoba passed her a

towel. His brown eyes followed the pure, unself-conscious movements of her body as she dried herself.

In some women, he was thinking, beauty is an open thing, as candid and simple as the face of a daisy. Maya Duran's beauty was a thing of dark subtlety. A jungle flower. No wonder Mercedes Eduard had expended a fortune to keep her close.

"This is a wonderful place," he told her. "Like something from the jungles of Peru."

"It's an eccentricity," she smiled, "for which I have to take partial blame. I'm the gardener in this domain."

"This is one of the most beautiful gardens I've ever seen."

She sat down beside him. "You are very kind."

"Tell me something: When did Señora Eduard and her husband divorce?"

"In 1966. She married him in California. That's where Eden was born. But the marriage was never a happy one. It ended acrimoniously. Dominic was not a good father. He has no deep feelings for Eden any more. Mercedes has almost no contact with him now and she doesn't even like to hear his name spoken. She certainly doesn't trust him."

"Yet she left Eden with him?"

"Eden was at a boarding school when the divorce was finalized. The arrangement was that Dominic was to look after her in Santa Barbara on the weekends and she was to come to Spain for her holidays. But Dominic neglected her. He was too busy enjoying himself. He thinks only of his own pleasure. Eden stopped going to Santa Barbara and he didn't care where she was or what she was doing. She ran wild. By the time Mercedes found out what was really going on, it was too late. Now, of course, Mercedes blames herself for what has happened."

"Where is her home now?"

"Mercedes bought a place for Eden in Beverly Hills. It's a country house with some big fields and some wild land. It was perfect for Eden's horses."

"She lived alone?"

"She had Miguel to look after her. Miguel is an ex-employee of Dominic's, a security specialist. When she left America, she appointed him watchdog over Eden."

“What sort of businesses did Dominic run?”

“Import-export. He shipped consumer goods to South America and brought back fruit and curios.”

“And they split it all at the time of the divorce?”

Maya’s mouth turned down in distaste. “He kept everything. Mercedes made her money in her own right, Colonel.”

“I have not called myself ‘Colonel’ since 1955. It makes me feel extremely ancient. Perhaps you could call me Joaquin.”

“And I prefer Maya.” She rose and he stood up with her. “I’m going to her now. How long do you think we will have to wait before we hear from the kidnappers again?”

“Not long,” he said. “I’m confident of that.”

*

Before Mercedes on the desk was a folder she had taken from the safe. In it was a single sheet of drawings dating from the last years of the fifteenth century. They were by Hieronymus Bosch, a page of pen-and-ink studies of cripples and beggars.

She had paid a great deal of money for the work at a New York art auction some years ago. She’d wanted it because she considered it a unique work of art, but she had seldom looked at it since. Now she stared at the tiny details absently.

Every kind of deformity was here, perfectly drawn. Amputated and twisted limbs. Patches. Rags. Faces that suffered or leered. Jaunty hats. Crutches, sticks, ingenious props fashioned to dangle ingenious aberrations. All the pain and the bitter humour of the world, captured by a great, twisted genius.

The door opened and she heard Maya come into the study.

“You look exhausted, Mercedes.”

“Yes,” she replied. “I am tired.”

Maya’s eyes rested on the drawing. “What are you looking at that for?”

“I’m going to sell it.”

“Oh, querida! You spent so much money on me! You did it all for me. This breaks my heart.”

“It breaks my heart to take it away from you.”

Maya put her arms around Mercedes. “As long as Eden is saved, nothing else matters. You have me. And I have you.”

Mercedes tapped the Bosch sheet. “Which one of these drawings affects you the most?”

“That one,” Maya said. “I hate it.”

It showed a man both crippled and blind. Under each armpit was a crutch to support his deformed legs. In his mouth he held a stick, protruding forward, with which to feel the way in a dark world. At his heels, their teeth fastened in his coat, were two angry hounds.

Mercedes smiled grimly. “That’s the one I like best. It contains the greatest truth.”

*

Joaquin de Cordoba was standing on the balcony of his room, smoking a cigar. The weather had cooled perceptibly overnight, becoming clouded and damp. His back ached, a sign of worse weather to come. The sky was grey and heavy with rain. A sombre shadow had fallen over the magnificent grounds of the estate, over the orchards and the woods and the gardens.

He heard the knock at his bedroom door and tightened the cord of his dressing gown before turning.

“Yes?”

The door opened and Maya Duran came in. She was wearing a bright yellow dress, her short hair tied back with a matching ribbon, the colours of summer. But as he tossed his cigar away and came towards her, he saw that her face was white as paper.

“Another package arrived this morning,” she began without preamble. “There was a lock of Eden’s hair in it. And some—” She swallowed. “Some blood.”

He stood very still. “Any message?”

She nodded. "Just the amount. Five million dollars."

"Five million!" De Cordoba had seldom come across a demand of that magnitude. "I'll get dressed right away," he said.

*

She awoke crying, lathered in sweat. She knew where she was before she opened her eyes. The knowledge didn't leave her, not ever. Even when she slept, her nightmares were about this place. She moved from sleeping nightmare to waking nightmare.

She watched the glowing filament of the light bulb until her eyes were blinded by a host of incandescent worms. Then she closed them and watched the afterburn fade.

It felt like morning. It felt like early, early in the morning. She wondered if the sun was rising up above, in the world she had left. She preferred the idea of dawn to, say, late afternoon. Or worse, late in the night. It was absurd to feel that such things mattered. But they did.

She'd expected to die, but she hadn't. She'd expected to go mad, but she hadn't done that either. Not yet. She'd endured. Lessened, pared down to the green bones, she endured this morning too.

She opened her eyes and lifted her thin arms to study them. Under the manacles, the skin was puffy and scarred. She could see the muscles of her forearms clearly under the grey skin. She must have lost a lot of weight in this hole. Withdrawal was something she had experienced often. But never as bad as this.

Deprivation had seldom gone beyond minor discomfort before. She'd always had enough money to buy as much heroin as she wanted. An addict's paradise. Because of that, her habit had grown without limits, a monstrous plant whose huge, rank blossoms had required huge feeding.

She had learned that tolerance to the drug was almost without limits too. The more she shot up, the more she had needed. It was almost impossible to overdose, once her tolerance had grown sufficiently.

Of course, everything else had lost its importance. Her exterior life had steadily crumbled as heroin became her god, took her soul. It had all gone.

The real suffering consisted not of the pain so much as of the anxiety. Like someone holding her head under water until the need for air was gigantic, making her whole body kick and flail.

She fell into these holes three or four times a day. The need would begin to gather in a knot at the base of her skull, an unbearable tightening of the consciousness. Like the onset of madness, like the desperation of a breakdown. A craving for release that had no limits and no bottom. She would be able to smell it, taste it. She could feel it tingling in her blood, but it would never reach her brain.

She would remember huge scores she had made in the past, remember towering highs she had been on. The needle-tracks would start to itch and burn. She would remember the feel of the needle, popping into the skin. Then it would start scraping at her stretched nerves until they shrieked, scraping them right down to the bones.

Lately, she'd been crouched around one bleak thought: that he was working on his own. And that was very bad. Bad for her.

Working on his own, it would be far easier for him to just kill her, rather than to work out any complicated routines for keeping her alive and letting her go.

*

Joel Lennox walked out onto the porch.

At ten o'clock in the morning it was already fiercely hot. It would reach 105 degrees down on the valley floor today, maybe 130 degrees in the sun.

He was used to it, of course.

No, not used to it. He loved it. He loved the heat and the solitude, the purity and the cleanness of the desert. He loved the height of his aerie, towering above Tucson. It was his home, his garden, his refuge. His immense and glorious fortress.

He thought of the girl down there in the cool dark. If he brought her up here, she would shrivel, with that frail skin and those huge night eyes. She was a creature of the dark.

She'd been sleeping when he'd taken down the last tray. But she had seemed a little better, breathing easily. A normal sleep. No shivering or whimpering.

He leaned against the wooden railing. When he'd seized the girl, he'd felt emotions that had been dead in him for years. Feelings of excitement. Of vindication. A feeling that he was fighting back. He'd lost a lot of that since she'd got so sick.

Now he had to regain his balance.

He had been monitoring the California press carefully. There was no hint that Mercedes or Dominic Rey had contacted the police. He was pleased by that, though he felt he had little to fear from the police. It was impossible that the girl could be traced to this isolated house in the desert, hundreds of miles from Los Angeles. Almost nothing could link him to the crime. But the publicity, a massive police enquiry, would have cramped him a little and he hoped they would continue to keep silent.

That a local missing-person enquiry had begun in LA was, of course, possible. But there was no way that could affect him. Eden Rey would be no more than one of dozens of missing girls in Los Angeles this summer.

He walked around the back of the house, to the shed he had built. The sun smote his shoulders like a familiar old friend. He squinted at the cobalt sky. No clouds were in sight. A shimmer hung over the ground, making the saguaro seem to wobble.

In the cool of the shed, he let his eyes adjust to the shade. Sheets and blocks of stone were stacked neatly at the back, beside the big masonry saw he had bought second-hand in Phoenix. His tools, electric and manual, lay in neat rows on the benches. Pieces of work lay around, some half-finished.

The new carving he had been working on lay on its tree-side. He lifted the sheet of canvas off it. It was very big, a wide, flat slab of pale stone on which he was carving a Navaho woman and a flock of sheep. She held a lamb in her arms, against a backdrop of craggy hills. The subject was well-worn, the sort of western kitsch he tried to avoid; but he had breathed something special into it, an authenticity, a tenderness.

She was looking up into the sky, as though maybe the lamb was going to be a sacrifice. Her attitude expressed some dynamic emotion, hope, or perhaps fear.

He had made the drawings from life. He would have preferred the model, a young girl who worked in a store in Tucson, to have posed for him while he cut the stone, but he couldn't take the chance of bringing anyone up here who might notice something odd. He was known to like solitude, and not to like visitors. A solitary artistic temperament. He

knew some people tapped their foreheads behind his back. They had always done that, ever since his childhood. Fuck them. It suited him fine.

He picked up the hammer and the slender, sharp chisel and sat in front of the work. The stone was a commission. It was going to be set into the wall of a house being built in the foothills by Keith Hattersley, a rich man who saw himself as a patron of the arts. He had little empathy with Hattersley, the owner of a fast-food chain, but he knew the carving would be standing there in pride of place long after patron, artist and model were all dust.

He began to work. As he chipped, his thoughts fell into place, tranquil and ordered.

He worked on the drapery for a while, then turned to the woman's face again, pecking at the stone, flaking away the dross, bringing out the smooth lines of youth.

After an hour and a half, he rose to his feet, took the hose and washed the stone down, rinsing away the chips and the dust. The carving came up clean and crisp, darkening as it soaked up the water. He played the jet over it awhile, then turned the hose off.

He watched the water evaporate. In this heat, it took only a minute before the stone paled and dried again. It was coming along fine. His eyes drifted over the flowing lines he had sculpted.

He had touched the stone and was bringing out the spirit in it. There was sorcery in his fingers.

He reached out and caressed the work and felt good.

Dominic Rey contemplated the day ahead as he showered. He'd just had his morning toot and he was feeling cool, alert, happy.

Plenty to do this morning in Sunny Santa Barbara. Friends to see, shopping to do, a lunch appointment. A busy schedule. And then, this afternoon, he was going to the polo match. He was pleased at the prospect and was whistling as he towelled himself dry. The internal telephone buzzed discreetly and he scooped it up.

"Yup?"

"Mr. Rey, Señor Fuentes is here."

"Miguel? Okay, I'll be out in a few minutes."

He chose fawn cotton slacks with a matching shirt and slipped on a lightweight cashmere cardigan against the cool of the air conditioning. He was still whistling.

He shoehorned a pair of lizard-skin pumps onto his feet and walked out of the bedroom. Miguel was waiting in front of the carved stone fireplace in the salon. He stood holding a panama hat in both hands. His shoulders seemed to have sagged since Rey had last seen him. He looked shrunken somehow.

"Good morning, Miguel," Rey said briskly. "Found Eden yet?"

"No, Mr. Dominic."

"No news at all?"

The old man's eyes were swollen and red, as though he'd been crying. The lines in his face were deeper-cut. "I did what Mercedes asked," he said in a low voice. "I questioned Yolanda. She had nothing to do with it, Mr. Dominic."

"You're sure?"

Miguel looked up. For a moment, a hot bitterness washed over the filmy eyes.

"Yeah. Sure."

Dominic smiled faintly. "You gave her the third degree, did you? Pulled out a few fingernails?" Miguel looked out of the window without speaking. "Well, that's the sort of thing you do best. If you couldn't get anything out of her, there was nothing to be got. I hope you weren't excessive, Miguel. She's not disfigured, or anything?"

Miguel mumbled something.

"What's that?"

"She gone. Back to Puerto Rico. Back to her family."

"Ah, well. And what about your friend Alvaro?"

"He had nothing to do with it either."

"You questioned him too?"

"Si."

Dominic considered the old man's wretched face. "Okay, Miguel. I'll tell Mercedes you've done well. In the meantime, keep looking for Eden. She won't have gone far."

Miguel nodded and walked slowly out. Dominic went onto the terrace for breakfast. He shook the newspaper open. There were two main news stories. One was about heavy fighting between North and South Vietnamese troops, only 25 miles north of Saigon. The other was about Richard Nixon's recovery from a bout of viral pneumonia. Nixon would soon, a spokesman said, be returning to the Watergate-embattled White House.

Beneath the lead stories was an item about the disappearance of Paul Getty III. Rey read it attentively.

"Italian police," the report concluded, "continue to classify John Paul Getty III as a 'missing person,' rather than as a kidnap victim. They point out that young Paul, heir to the world's greatest fortune, had openly speculated about 'staging his own kidnapping' in order to get money out of his grandfather. 'We are not ruling out the likelihood,' one police official said, 'that this is a crudely-planned attempt by some of Paul's friends to get cash.'"

Rey snorted and flipped the page. Damned right it was. How peaceful life was without Eden! The longer she stayed out of sight, the more peaceful it would get. Really, it was the answer to a prayer.

Mercedes was a fool to fall for Eden's games. After all they'd been through with Eden. Mercedes must be losing her touch. Not that the world wasn't full of crazy people. Charles Manson. The Symbionese Liberation Army. Black Panthers. God knew that was the sort of thing she was prone to. The best thing about the Vietnam War ending, as far as Rey was concerned, was knowing he didn't have to bail Eden out of police stations after riots any more.

Well, he thought philosophically, squeezing lemon onto his papaya, she would turn up again, one way or another. She was the original bad penny.

In the meantime, the thing to do was just enjoy the serenity of her absence. He checked his watch. He would leave in a few minutes. He would snort a little more coke first, make sure he was extra primed for the morning's activities.

*

"I've assembled a million dollars in cash," Mercedes said. "It can be transferred to America in a matter of a day or two. I've also been offered a further million dollars, if I should need it, by a friend in Madrid. That makes two million dollars. The remaining money is going to be much harder to raise."

De Cordoba was in her study, facing her across the desk. The curtains had not yet been drawn against the evening that was closing in. In the light of the desk lamp, Mercedes Eduard's hands were clasped, immobile. They were still youthful hands, strong and smooth. But they gripped one another so tightly that the oval nails were bloodless.

"You already have far more," he said quietly, "than you are likely to need. "

"I have other assets. The cars. The boat. This house and its contents. Maya is going to Amsterdam tomorrow, to dispose of some other things."

"I would strongly advise against your disposing of any more assets for the time being. With two million dollars at your disposal, we are in an excellent position to negotiate."

"To barter? To haggle for Eden's life?"

"To manipulate them, rather than let them manipulate you. Letting them know you have so much money available would be a terrible mistake. To have the money in reserve is good. But as I said before, we should be aiming at a settlement figure of far less. Well under a million, if we can. At most, around the half-million mark."

"If they agree to negotiate."

“They will. Besides,” he added gently, “if you can’t raise the money, you’ll be forced to compromise, anyway.”

“I will try, nevertheless. I keep thinking of her going through withdrawal, all alone. With no one who loves her nearby. Maybe in some cramped place. Maybe without air, without light.”

He saw the tears that glistened on her dark lashes. “Please. Don’t torment yourself.”

Her eyes were blurred. “So much of it is my fault. I blame myself for what has happened to Eden. For the addiction. For everything. If I’d been a better mother, she’d never have turned to drugs. The blame, ultimately, is mine.”

He wasn’t sure how to comfort her. Sometimes kidnap relatives were corroded by an irrational guilt. A sense of having failed to protect their loved ones.

“We have in strange times,” he said. “Our children are angry with us. Perhaps with reason. We have been materialists. We allowed things to go wrong. The war in Asia, the problems of poverty and drugs...”

“Do you have children?”

“I had a son. He died a young man.”

She turned her dark gaze on him. For a long while they looked at one another. Then she reached out and laid her hand gently on his chest. “Thank you for your patience, Joaquin,” she said.

For a moment he felt the full power of the woman’s personality. It rocked him. “I’m glad to help,” he said huskily. “We will get her back.”

She took her hand away. But he thought he could feel the warmth of it burning into his flesh through his clothes.

*

Eden stared up at the ceiling.

She felt naked, as though her very substance was draining away from around the bones, leaving her skeletal, raw. She needed the drug. She needed it so badly. It was the only thing that could enrich her blood, give her back life.

She took a long, shaky breath. The walls had started to press in on her, the way they always did. But today there was a difference. A lessening of intensity. At first she would not recognize it. She cringed. Yet the attack was less venomous. All the sensations were a little less cruel.

She pushed against the walls with her will, timidly, driving them back. She thought they obeyed. A tiny victory. The feeling of panic subsided in her throat a little.

Eden rolled onto her side and stared at the tray. He had brought her some cereal in a bowl, milk in a plastic jug, sourdough bread spread with butter and some kind of jelly. A mug of black coffee.

Breakfast. It was morning again. Another day had passed. She squeezed her eyes shut and fought against the need in her. I don't want to think about you. Go away. Leave me alone.

"Go away," she said aloud, then repeated the words, more strongly.

It seemed to work. The walls were not pressing in so ominously. The trembling was still there, but it wasn't dominating her whole body, as before. Maybe he had been right. Maybe she was getting better. She tried not to think about cooking up a shot, about the feel of the needle popping into the vein ...

She reached out and picked up the bread. She touched the spread with the tip of her tongue. It was strawberry jelly. The taste was hauntingly sweet. It made a colour flood her mind, a pale transparent pink, like the inside of a strawberry. She could actually taste the fragrance of the fruit under the sugar and the preservative and God knew what else.

It was the first thing she had been able to taste since she'd been brought here and now taste was like a new sense to her. It endured on her tongue, that tiny scrap of confectionery, with a long, honeyed note. It made her think of bracken, and cool woods and leaves.

Slowly, a scrap at a time, she licked the jelly off both slices of bread until it was all gone. She heard her own stomach gurgle in astonishment. The bread itself was damp and unappealing by the time she'd finished.

She turned to the cereal. Some kind of flakes, coated with sugar. She let one dissolve on her tongue.

Another kind of long, sweet note. She chewed the flake when it was moist, and it tasted golden-brown, wheaty. She ate half the bowl, without milk. Then she poured in some milk and ate some more.

The coffee was acrid. She couldn't drink it. But she drank a little water and lay back on the bed with a sigh. She felt full. She was aware of energy seeping into her veins.

How wonderful. She had eaten. The wonder of it persisted, only dimmed by the fact that after ten minutes she threw up again.

*

When he came down with her evening meal, after dark, he saw that she had eaten some of her lunch too, the egg and bacon. She was sitting on the bed, turned towards the door. She looked ill, but alive. Not dying any more. He had the odd feeling she had been waiting for him.

As he changed the tray, she lifted her manacled hands.

"Please," she said.

It was the first time she had spoken in days. He glanced at her warily. "What?"

"Take these off."

"No."

"Why not?" she asked quietly. "Look at what they're doing to my wrists. They're rubbing the skin raw." She showed him the chafed places. "It's inhuman to keep me like this."

"They stay on," he said shortly.

"Why?" she demanded.

He didn't answer. She was staring at him, something she had never done before. And her eyes, he noticed, were brighter and clearer than he had seen them before.

It made him uneasy. He was going to have to stop coming into the cell. He was going to have to go back to the system he had originally planned, that of pushing food in through the flap. He'd only started coming into the cell because she was so sick. Now she was improving, he didn't want to see her any more.

"You don't need the handcuffs," she said. "You've got me locked up in here. I'm not going anywhere. Are you afraid I'll be waiting behind the door to strangle you with shit paper and make a dash for freedom?"

She was pleading, but her voice was stronger. Almost angry. He put the tray of food down on the floor without a word and picked up the old tray.

"How can you keep me down here, chained like an animal?" She was glaring at him, her slight body trembling. "Do you think I'm not human? Is that it?"

He had another distrustful moment, wondering whether she could see the shape of his face under the hood, maybe tell enough about him to give a description, or recognize him later. "It'll work best this way," he said in a toneless voice. "There's the least danger for both of us."

She gritted her teeth. "What am I going to do to you, break your arm? I must weigh ninety pounds. You probably weigh twice that. What're you, six-three, six-four?"

Anger licked at him. She already knew his voice. Now she had picked up his height and weight. He had been a fool. He had to get out of here, now. He turned to go.

"You lousy son of a bitch." Her eyes were blurred with tears. Her mouth trembled. "You lousy, heartless son of a bitch."

He unlocked the door, went out and slammed it shut behind him. She sat staring at the blank sheet of steel with blurred eyes.

She wondered whether her father was going to negotiate, and felt a spasm of fury at the thought. Don't argue, Daddy, you bastard. Don't haggle. Just pay him what he wants and get me out of here.

"I'm so sorry," Maya whispered.

"Don't be," Mercedes said gently.

"I tried so hard..."

"You did your best."

"I failed you!"

"Hush." They were sitting on the bed in the blue light of early evening. Maya's suitcase lay still waiting to be unpacked on the floor.

That the diamonds and the drawings had brought in only a paltry few hundred thousand had been a bitter disappointment. But she had not been profoundly surprised. She had long ago learned the truth of the maxim that there was one price when you were buying, another when you were selling.

At least the money was now available, deposited by Maya in a Swiss bank account before re-entering Spain. "I'm the one who should be sorry, for having sent you on such an errand." She brushed the hair away from Maya's face. Maya's eyes were swimming with tears. "Don't cry anymore," Mercedes said. "Let's not think about it. The money is nothing. I'll find it somewhere else."

"How much more do you need?"

"Even if I accept the million Gerard has offered me, almost three million."

"My God. It's so much. So much. Where will you find it?"

"The house. The estate. I've contacted an agent. I'm putting it all up for sale. The house and land. The paintings. The carpets. The furniture. But it will be under-priced," she added bitterly. "We've already seen what happened with the diamonds and the drawings and they were the most readily disposable assets."

"There's nothing else?"

Mercedes shook her head. "Nothing."

"That leaves Dominic," Maya said slowly.

"Yes."

"He hasn't even called since they sent the hair."

"No."

Maya looked into her face. It was a mask. The narrow, straight nose and calm mouth were almost severe. Only the eyes, dark and enigmatic, held pain in their depths.

It seemed to Maya that the streaks of silver in Mercedes's hair had intensified over the past weeks. "You'll have to ask him," Maya said. "Won't you?"

*

De Cordoba had never been a heavy sleeper. The ringing of the telephone at his bedside penetrated his sleep at once. He switched on the light, started the recording machine and groped for the handset.

"Digame?"

There was a pause, filled with the echoing noise of a long distance line. Then he heard a harsh American voice say, in English, "Give me Mercedes Eduard."

De Cordoba's heart was suddenly pounding. He heard a slight click as Mercedes lifted the receiver in her bedroom. He leaned forward to make sure the tape was turning in the machine. "Señora Eduard is unavailable," he said. "Who is this?"

"She's available to me," the voice said. "I'm the one who has the girl. Put her on."

De Cordoba waited to see whether Mercedes would speak.

"Put her on." The voice had risen sharply.

He gave Mercedes another moment to reply. When she did not, he began speaking again. "My name is Joaquin de Cordoba," he said carefully. His voice sounded odd in his own ears, strained. "I am the family's representative. Señora Eduard has given me full powers to negotiate on her behalf—"

"Fuck you!" The voice cut in savagely. "Fuck you and your negotiate. I don't want to talk to anyone but her. Put the bitch on. Now."

Still Mercedes said nothing. "Please," de Cordoba said gently. "Keep calm. Before anything else, we need some kind of assurance from you that you have Eden and that she is safe and well—"

"She's not safe! I'll cut her to fucking ribbons!" The voice was shaking. De Cordoba bit his lip in silence. "I'm going to call back in fifteen minutes. If anyone answers the phone but Mercedes Eduard, you'll never hear from me or the girl again."

The line clicked dead. De Cordoba sat immobile for a while, then slowly reached out and stopped the tape recorder. He checked his bedside clock. It was 3:15 a.m. Still daylight over most of America. "What do you want to do?" he said into the telephone.

"I'll come to your room," Mercedes replied and hung up.

He rose and wrapped a dressing gown around his lean frame. As he combed his hair in front of the bathroom mirror, his own face looked sallow and weary. But he felt the adrenaline circulating through his system. So it had begun. They had made contact at last.

Mercedes arrived with Maya. Mercedes was in a silk robe, the younger woman had pulled on a tracksuit.

"The waiting is over," he told Mercedes. He played them the tape he had just made and they listened in silence. Maya's face tautened at the crude threat, but Mercedes seemed icily calm, unruffled by the abrupt awakening and the savage voice on the tape machine. Without makeup, her face was oddly youthful, the skin smooth and soft. There was no trembling of the mouth or fingers.

She went to sit on de Cordoba's bed, beside the telephone.

"Do you want to go through the drill again?" de Cordoba asked her.

"No. I remember what to say."

"Good. The important thing is to stick to the lines we've agreed. Don't let them frighten you with threats. Don't be distracted by what they say they'll do. That's all part of the technique. You understand?"

"Yes."

"They will try and exert control over you from the start. They'll try and give all the orders, make all the arrangements. You must show them you won't be browbeaten."

"I know what I have to do, Joaquin." Unexpectedly, Mercedes reached out and touched his arm, as though it were he, and not she, who needed comforting. "Don't worry. I'm capable of dealing with it."

"I know you are," he said with a brief smile.

Maya spoke for the first time. "He sounds so... unstable. So emotional. What if he's some kind of madman?"

“He’s tightly strung. At this stage, they’re as tense as we are,” de Cordoba said. “There’s always abuse and hostility at first. Later, they’ll grow familiar, make jokes. At the end, they’ll be impatient and frightened. Try and deal with it all calmly.”

She set the recording machine to simultaneous playback, so they would all be able to listen in on the conversation. She checked her watch. “Five more minutes, if he’s punctual.” They sat in silence.

The great house was as still as a tomb. Not even the night noises of the garden penetrated the double-glazed windows. De Cordoba watched Mercedes Eduard. She had slid one foot out of its slipper. It was a small foot, with slender toes. The toenails had been painted the same pale pink as her fingernails.

Her face was expressionless, the eyes unfocussed. He wondered whether he should have written her a script to follow. He hoped she was going to be able to deal with whatever they threw at her, and wished it were he, and not she, who was going to field the call. They would want to terrorize her at first. That was why they had insisted on speaking to her. They would want to show her how vicious they were.

Perhaps it would be better if she broke down. Showed them how willing she was to cooperate. That would simplify things, in one sense. They might feel she was not holding back.

When the telephone began ringing again, Maya’s body jolted. Mercedes started the tape machine and picked up the receiver.

“This is Mercedes Eduard,” she said in her fluent, accented English. There was no reply. They all heard the echoing silence on the other end. “I am listening,” she said.

The voice that came out of the echoes was mocking. “I’ve got your daughter, Mercedes.”

“I would like to speak to her, please.”

“You’d like to speak to her?” There was a crackle down the line, that might have been a laugh. “That will cost you. Have you got the money?”

“I want you to understand one thing,” she said unemotionally. “I am not going to deal with you, whoever you are, until I have proof that my daughter is alive and well.”

“I can always let you hear her scream.” They heard the rasp in the voice. “Is that the kind of proof you want?”

“No,” Mercedes said quietly and coldly. “I want something more specific than that. I need evidence that you have Eden and that she is alive. I gave my daughter her first horse when she was five years old. Ask her his name. Ask her what breed he was. Second, I need a name for you. So I can be sure I’m not dealing with hoaxers. From now on, you must identify yourself as Paul.”

“Are you crazy?” The voice was rising. “Who do you think is in charge here?”

“Nobody is in charge. Contact me again when you have the answers to the two questions. And don’t forget. Paul.”

“I can do what I like with her. Anything! You hear me?” His ragged breathing was audible down the line. “I can starve her. Beat her. Rape her.”

De Cordoba saw Mercedes’s naked toes dig into the soft pile of the carpet.

“I can kill her if I want to. I can cut her open—”

Mercedes slammed the receiver down, silencing the venomous voice. This time, her hand was shaking slightly.

“Jesus,” Maya whispered. She had risen involuntarily. “Mercé, what are you doing?”

“You took a chance,” de Cordoba said dryly. “You should have let him calm down.”

“No,” Mercedes said. “He didn’t want to calm down. You heard his voice.”

“I warned you to ignore threats and obscenities,” he said patiently.

“I’ve shown him he can’t frighten me as easily as he thinks he can.” She looked at the other two wearily. “At the moment, that seems to be what he wants, rather than the money.” She looked at de Cordoba. “He didn’t mention anything about her addiction. You noticed?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps they haven’t found out yet,” Maya suggested.

“Perhaps.” There was a silence. Mercedes rose to her feet. “I’m going back to bed.”

“He might call again,” de Cordoba said.

“I don’t think so. He’ll wait. He’ll want to punish me. But he’ll do as I say in the end.”

“Don’t you want to re-play the tape?” de Cordoba asked.

“You play it if you want to. I’ve heard what he had to say.”

De Cordoba was awed by her composure. He opened the door for her. “You did well,” he said. “Very well.”

“Eden is my daughter.”

The Argentine closed his bedroom door. The two women had left a warm scent of perfume in his room. He walked over to the recording machine. He ran the tape back and listened intently to the crackling voice.

The intonation did not seem particularly provincial to him, though he was no expert on North American accents. The voice was strong, youthful. Not a crude voice. A confident, authoritative voice. But there was something that vibrated in it, making the hairs stand up on the nape of his neck.

I can kill her if I want to. I can cut her open—

He listened to the tape again, then again. On the re-listening, he was struck by the glacial calm that Mercedes had maintained. By contrast, his own voice in the first conversation was quivery and nervous.

But there was no question about the other voice. The emotion that vibrated in it was recognizable now. It was hate.

Feeling slightly sick, de Cordoba reached for the whisky bottle.

*

The dark holes of the hood turned on her grimly. She could sense the anger that had come into the cell with him, could feel danger vibrating in the air.

“Your first horse. What was it called?” With the hood on, he was like a medieval executioner. His fists were clenched, the veins prominent. “What breed was it? Come on, don’t screw me around!”

She stared at him for a moment. “His name was Alfie. Alfie. He was a Shetland. He was brown and white, skewbald—” The words were tumbling out of her. “Did they tell you to ask that? Are they going to pay? Just tell me if—”

“Your mother’s playing cute,” he said. His voice was tight. He took a small tape recorder out of his pocket and sat on the bed. He put the machine down in front of her. “She thinks this is a hoax. So you’re going to send her a little message.”

“My mother?”

“You’re going to tell her not to be smart. You’re going to tell her just how bad you feel. I think you know what I mean.”

“You’re tapping my mother? Not my father?” She was stupefied. “Why her? Why not him? He has much more money.” Her green eyes were wide. “How much are you asking for?”

He paused for a moment. “Five million dollars,” he said.

She was stunned. “Five million? You’re crazy! She’ll never be able to find that much money!”

He stared at her. “You better pray she does,” he said. “Now shut your mouth and concentrate on what I’m telling you. You’ve got ten seconds to speak to your mother. Ten seconds. Understand? Tell her how much you want to be out of here. Tell her not to be clever with me. Just remember, the more you cooperate, the quicker you’ll be home.”

“No!”

He switched on the tape recorder and held the microphone to her mouth. “Ten seconds. Starting now.”

Eden stared at the microphone. It had never occurred to her that he would ask her mother for the money. She’d always assumed Daddy was the target. For the first time in days, she felt the impotent rage rise in her. She shook her head. “I won’t do it,” she said in a low voice.

“You want me to get rough with you?”

“I don’t care. I’m not doing that to her.”

He lowered the microphone slowly. “We can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way. But we’re going to do it. If I have to hurt you, I will. Now, talk.”

She shrank back against the wall, shaking her head. “I won’t do it,” she whispered.

He grasped for her and she screamed involuntarily. She tried to roll off the bed, past him.

“Talk to her!” He caught her arm, making her scream. She had forgotten his frightening strength. “Tell her how much you love her!”

“No,” she gasped. “Fuck you! I won’t!”

“You have to do everything the hard way,” he said bitterly. “Don’t you?”

“You’re despicable,” she said, cowering away from him.

He grasped her wrist and twisted her elbow up behind her back. The excruciating pain in her shoulder made her scream. With his free hand, he held the microphone up to her mouth. “Tell your mother to get you out of here.” His breath panted hot against her ear. “Tell her to make this stop. She loves you so fucking much, doesn’t she? Beg her.”

Eden shook her head, her teeth clenched. He twisted harder until the pain grew unbearable. Blackness swelled up in her vision. Then something broke in her. “Mama,” she sobbed. “Mama, please. Get me out of here! Please! Please!”

He released her and she curled up into a foetal ball, her arm limp at her side. The pain spread slowly through her body, leaving her shoulder hot and numb. She was crying silently. He was shaking and the tape machine rattled in his fingers. He ran the spool back a short way, then played it. Eden heard her own voice, wailing tinnily from the machine.

He rose and stood over her. She could hear his rasping breaths.

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” he said.

He slammed the door shut as he went out.

She cradled her dead left arm and stared at the steel slab that shut her in. He must be negotiating with her mother, right now, or he wouldn’t have wanted the tape.

The silence flooded around her. Had it really happened? Or had it been a dream, a hallucination brought on by her solitude? Already, the reality was fading. How long had she been here? As long as a month? No, surely far less than that. But her past, the outside reality, was starting to fade. It was growing hard to remember a time when she hadn’t been in this cell, chained to this bed. Her life had shrunk.

Five million dollars. The sum was too vast to comprehend. It would destroy Mama to have to pay that. Guilt loomed over her, a giant crow. She had never been anything to Mama but trouble. How much pain had she caused her? Their relationship had been so fucked-up for so long.

God, how badly she wanted a hit right now. She wanted it with a violent longing that choked her. She was a tiny, flickering light in an ocean of empty blackness. The overwhelming emptiness of the universe was crushing. It echoed around her, an infinity of loneliness and guilt. Her own meaning had vanished. She was naked. Defenceless.

She wanted the shelter of her drug. She wanted to pull that warm, loving embrace around her, to protect her, to isolate her from pain, from solitude, from the fear of death. She wanted to be back in the pleasure dome, back in the bright white heat.

Like an exile at the gates of paradise, she covered her face with her hands and wept as though her heart would break.

*

Dominic Rey was alone by the poolside. His housekeeper brought the telephone out to him.

He accepted the instrument. "Hello?"

"Dominic, it's Mercedes."

"Mercedes?" He lifted his legs onto the chair in front of him and waggled his white loafers. "Hello. How are things? Any news from Eden?"

"Do you care?" He could hear the bitterness in her voice and smiled slightly. "You haven't even bothered to call in a week."

"You seemed to have everything so well in hand. What's new? Another hank of bloodstained hair in the mail?"

"Eden's kidnappers have contacted me by telephone."

"Ah. To what purpose?"

"To threaten. I've demanded that they give me some proof that Eden's still alive before I go any further."

"Alive? Don't be so Latin. Of course Eden's alive. She's the one who's planned the whole escapade."

"This is not an escapade."

“Well, you’re entitled to your opinion. Just as I’m entitled to mine. I believe she got the idea from the Getty kid, and now she’s trying it on with us.”

“Can’t you understand that Eden is incapable of doing something like that to us?”

“Eden is capable of anything.” He laughed. “I never thought you, of all people, would fall for something so transparent. You must be losing your grip. If you’re so sure it’s for real, go to the police.”

“No police.”

“Just pay up?”

“I see no other way out.”

“Then pay the five million bucks, sweetie, and set your mind at rest.”

“Paying five million dollars is not so easy, Dominic.” The strain in her voice was clear.

“I’ll bet it isn’t. She’ll probably settle for five thousand. That’ll keep her in junk for a couple of months, at least.”

“You know what I am asking you.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “You’re asking me to squander millions of dollars. That’s what you’re asking me to do.”

“I’m asking you to lend me the money.” Again, he felt that her teeth were clenched around the words. “I undertake to pay it back.”

“How?” he asked succinctly.

“I will sell everything I have. I just need time to get fair prices.”

“Don’t you think it rather odd,” he said, “that they’re asking you for the money, and not me? It’s almost as if they had singled you out for... punishment. Hmmm?”

“Nothing can be ruled out,” she said quietly.

“True. Except that, if you fall for this, you’ll be financially ruined. And Eden will have won her little game.”

“Dominic,” she said, “you cannot hide behind the pretence that none of this is real. Eden has never been a perfect child. But then, neither of us have ever been perfect parents. She had very little chance of finding stability—”

“No, Mercedes. No. I’m tired of heaping ashes on my head over Eden. The truth that you won’t face is that she’s rotten.”

“That’s an atrocious thing to say!”

“Is it?”

The silence stretched out. “You can believe what you choose to believe about the reasons for Eden’s problems,” Mercedes said at last, her voice weary. “The fact remains that if the kidnapping is real, and I don’t come up with the money, they’ll start mutilating her. They’ll kill her in the end. Can you face that?”

“Put it this way, Mercedes. I am fond of my house and my lifestyle. I am no longer fond of Eden. I am not prepared to risk my financial security on what is almost certainly a vicious prank on her part.”

“Your financial security? Is that what you care about?”

“Oh, yes. Very deeply. But while we’re on the subject of relative values, let me say this.” Anger was churning in him now, worms in his gut. “In the unlikely event that Eden has got herself into deeper waters than even she can navigate, then let her sink or swim, Mercedes. Let her rescue herself for once, without our footing the bill.”

“How can she rescue herself?”

“That’s her problem. You, of course, may pay whatever you want to pay. Just don’t ask me to part with a penny. Not one red cent. I want nothing to do with it. That’s my last word.”

He slammed down the receiver.

*

The second call came late on Tuesday night. Joaquin de Cordoba in his bed, and Mercedes in her study, lifted their receivers simultaneously. As before, de Cordoba spoke first. “This is Joaquin de Cordoba. Who is calling?”

“Get me the woman.” The voice was unmistakable.

This time she came on the line directly. “This is Mercedes Eduard. Who is calling?”

“Paul. The horse’s name was Alfie. He was a Shetland pony.”

“Yes,” she said, and relief made her voice catch slightly. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Just to convince you,” the voice went on bleakly, “here’s a little message from Eden herself.”

A scream of pain came down the line. Then they heard Eden’s voice sob, “Mama, Mama, please. Get me out of here! Please! Please!”

The voice was abruptly cut off.

“Eden.” Suddenly, the weeks of self-control, of emotional abstinence, came to an end. De Cordoba, sitting on his bed, heard her voice break as she cried out. “Don’t hurt her! Please! You don’t have to hurt her!”

The Argentine, in his room, stared at the carpet as he listened to her weeping. There was no other sound on the line. Her tears were bitter, harsh. They took a long time to subside. “Please—” Mercedes whispered at last. “She has never done you any wrong. Don’t harm her.”

“I’ll do as I want with her. She is mine.” The voice was exultant. “She is in my power.”

“Yes. Yes.”

“I hurt her because you got clever with me.”

“I had to know—”

“I can make your daughter’s life just as easy or just as painful as I want. You understand that fully now, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Mercedes said. “I understand that.”

“You have only one way to ensure that she stays in one piece. Do as I say. Exactly, to the letter.”

“Yes. Yes, I will.”

“Cooperate, and she stays well. Get clever, and she bleeds. Understand?”

“I understand.”

“If I have to hurt her again, it will be your fault. Again.”

“I want to cooperate. I want Eden back. Believe me.” Whether faked or not, de Cordoba thought, the broken tone of Mercedes’s voice was masterful. There was none of the arrogant coldness of last time. Her obvious submission was making the kidnapper relax.

“Are the police listening in on this?”

“No, I swear it. The police know nothing.”

“It doesn’t matter, anyhow. Have you got the money?”

“I’m trying. I’m trying so hard. But it’s difficult. Almost impossible.”

The voice was a snarl again. “You want me to cut off one of your daughter’s fingers?”

“I can’t raise so much capital so soon!”

“Don’t lie to me. You have the money.”

“You’re wrong. Why do you think I am a rich woman?”

I’m not. You’re asking for so much. I don’t know where I will get it from.”

“Sell your house!”

“I’ve been selling everything I can—” Her voice trembled, grew even more urgent. “Please. For Eden’s sake, listen to me. I can pay you what I have, now. It’s a great deal of money. It’s all I have. Accept it. Let my daughter go. You could wait for a long time and get very little more.”

“The sum is five million. Nothing less.”

“I can never raise that kind of money. It would take me years.”

“Jesus!” The explosion of distorted sound made them both jump. The man was literally screaming into the telephone. “You’re dangling your daughter’s life on a string, you know that? What kind of woman are you? You’re haggling over your own flesh and blood. This is not some fruit stand.” The voice descended slowly from its furious peak. “I know how rich you are. I know how you made the money. I know more about you than you can possibly imagine. You think you can fool me? I know you. Don’t plead poverty with me, you bitch.”

The last words had come out in a savage hiss. Mercedes was silent. De Cordoba’s mouth compressed. Argue with him, he urged her silently. Don’t let him browbeat you.

Then, astonishingly, a laugh came down the line, slow, malicious. “I can wait until you see sense,” he said. He sounded almost relaxed after the outburst. “Your daughter isn’t expensive to maintain. She doesn’t eat much. I just hope she’s alive—and sane—by the time you decide to stop being clever.”

“Sane?” Mercedes said abruptly. “What do you mean by that?”

He ignored her. "When you have the money—all the money—put a private ad in the New York Times classifieds. The ad will say, "Wanted, castle in Spain. Any price paid.' Then put your telephone number. Understand?"

"Please! Tell me how she is. How her health is—"

"Nothing. Nothing until I see that ad."

The line went dead.

"Joaquin?" Mercedes's voice was tight. "Are you in bed?"

"Yes. I'll come to you."

"No. Stay there. I'll come to you."

Her face was white and tense against the dark blouse and slacks she wore. Her eyes were bruised-looking. She was alone.

"You did very well," he said. "Wonderfully well."

Her eyes pleaded with him. "You think so?"

"You let him get to you with that recording. But otherwise you were almost perfect."

"But he is not prepared to negotiate, Joaquin. He wants it all."

"He wants a lot, yes. But he will negotiate," he said, with rather more confidence than he felt.

"How can we negotiate with him? He is insane. And he said he wouldn't contact us again!"

"We'll contact him. We'll wait a week. Then—"

"A week," Mercedes gasped.

"Yes," he nodded. "A week. Long enough to let him cool down. Then we'll take out the advertisement. The wording will go something like this: 'Castle in Spain. Cannot raise full price but will pay what I can. Please get in touch.'"

She was crushing her fingers together. "What if he doesn't buy it?"

"He will. He'll get in touch with more abuse, more threats. That will be the time to mention a concrete figure. Say one million. From there, it should be much easier. We can plan to settle at around one-point-five million. Which," he added dryly, "will make one of the highest kidnap premiums ever paid."

She was looking at him with dark, haunted eyes. "He sounded so adamant."

De Cordoba felt how much she was depending on him, trusting him. "The question is how much they expect," he said gently. "The going rate, as it were, is between a quarter and half a million dollars. They will have known that before they started. The five million figure is an opening bid. I told you that when we first began. Didn't I?"

"Yes."

"It's important—for Eden's sake—that you sound plausible. They have to believe there is no more money."

She nodded. "He still hasn't mentioned her addiction. What does it mean?"

"Perhaps she has been through the withdrawal syndrome without his noticing."

"Could he be so blind?"

"She might have been able to hide it from him."

He saw Mercedes's eyes swim suddenly. She raised a shaky hand to cover them, but was too late to prevent his seeing the tears spill out and slide down her cheeks.

"Please. Mercedes ..." He touched her arm. "Her voice was recorded," he said quietly. "In all probability faked."

"It was Eden's voice. The pain was real."

"You must try not to let it upset you. You must try and get back your self-command."

"It's my fault," he heard her whisper. "My fault."

"Of course it isn't."

"But it is. It is."

He released her and gave her his handkerchief. "That isn't logical, Mercedes. You're not to blame for Eden's kidnapping, any more than for her addiction."

"You don't know me," she said in a voice that throbbed. She dried her eyes. Her face was strained. She looked suddenly old. "You don't know what my life has been."

He was nonplussed. "Of course, we all have our dark side."

"We are all chained together."

"I don't understand."

"I have been many things. Perhaps now I am being asked to pay for what I have been. I will pay. I will pay. I am just terrified that Eden will have to pay the final price, rather than I."

He felt a shadow cross his mind. "Are you saying this man knows you personally? That he's connected with you in some way?"

"I don't know. Anything is possible."

"He said he knew how you had made the money. He implied something. What did he mean by that?"

For a moment he thought she was going to answer him. Then she shook her head. "Not now," she said.

"I hold many secrets, Mercedes. If there is something I don't know, something that affects Eden, you should tell me now."

"I will tell you, but not tonight. Later. I've had enough tonight. I'm going to bed, Joaquin."

De Cordoba nodded reluctantly. Her face was lined with weariness and stained with tears. She was hiding much from him. Perhaps it was time for him to confront her. Demand that she share her private suspicions, her private knowledge with him. And then, if he felt he was in over his head, he should withdraw discreetly and hand over to someone else.

After she had departed, he turned in. Back in his shallow sleep, he heard her voice again. We are all chained together.

2. 1909

Most of the nuns have been taken away already. Paco Massaguer, the local squire, has sent wagons to rescue them. Two of his men have been beaten senseless for their pains, but the terrified sisters of San Lluc have been allowed to leave.

The mob pelted them with filth as they left. With filthy words too. Some threw stones as well as dung.

Mother Josep, the Mother Superior, has refused to go. She remains behind, with four of the staunchest, huddled in the Lady Chapel.

Despite Massaguer's dire warnings of rape and murder, the rioters have not yet harmed any of them physically. Five or six men, boys really, chase poor Sister Dolores across the courtyard with a smoking firebrand. But when the old woman breaks down in terror, they take pity on her.

"Come on," one of them says as he helps her to her feet, "this isn't the end of the world. It's the beginning of a new one. Go and hide yourself somewhere safe."

San Lluc is by no means a rich convent, but the mob have already taken everything that has the slightest value. They seem to be intent on plunder, sacrilege and wanton destruction, in that order. They have made a bonfire of prayer books, chests, hard mattresses and harder benches, dour furnishings of monastic life. Mother Josep is praying that the flames will not reach the thirteenth-century roof timbers of the convent.

While she prays, she wonders whether this really might be the beginning of the terrible new world of Revelation. Or the return of the Dark Ages. Nothing worse than this has ever happened in living memory. In Barcelona, in the past week, thirty churches have already been burned to the ground.

The convent of San Lluc stands on a hill and its stones are visible from far out to sea. It commands sweeping views of the Mediterranean in front and the Pyrenees behind. Also of the ancient tiled roofs of the village of San Lluc, which straggles a little way down the hill.

The mob must have come from these narrow streets, or from the surrounding farms. She knows what they are—radicals, anarchists, antichrists—but as human beings she cannot find anything familiar in their faces, though she has lived here and known this area since she was a teenage novice. Rage has transformed them.

“What have we done to them?” Sister Dolores is wailing as she nurses her grazed hands. “Mary, Mother of God, what have we done to them?”

The sound of the uproar outside abruptly changes pitch. Mother Josep pauses in her prayers as she hears the sound of ragged music and wild laughter. There are also screams.

“Stay here,” she hisses at the others and, gathering her habit around her ankles, hurries to the chapel door to peer out. There she stops, stupefied. “Unthinkable,” she whispers, crossing herself.

They have been to the crypts where seven centuries of nuns have their last repose and have disinterred a dozen or so coffins that they have knocked open with their spades. Now the pitiful contents are being carried into the courtyard, amid great excitement.

The village fiddler strikes up a tune; and as she watches, one of the men scoops a ragged bundle into his arms. He begins to dance to the fiddler.

Mother Josep recognizes him at once. He is Francesc Eduard, the blacksmith. A big, strapping man of twenty-two or twenty-three, he is laughing uproariously as he dances. He loves to laugh, throwing his head back and shouting with amusement. He is handsome, strong, dark. His blue eyes flash. He is very popular with the women of the town. The ragged bundle in his arms is the disinterred corpse of a nun.

A ring has formed around him and the rioters are clapping in time, stamping their feet, howling with laughter.

The nun too, seems to be laughing. Like all the nuns of San Lluc, she has been buried in her habit. Within the rusty black folds, her withered body is as light as a bundle of sticks and as rigid. The tissues of her face have shrunk into a brown monkey mask that barely veils the skull. Noseless, it peers out of the stained wimple with empty sockets and grinning yellow teeth.

"It's Pilar," she hears Sister Catalina say in an odd voice. The others have crowded around her in the doorway of the chapel and are staring at the incredible scene. "Sister Maria del Pilar," the nun repeats in the same scraping voice. "We buried her in 1897. She died of a cancer."

"Maria del Pilar," Sister Dolores whispers. "God rest her soul."

Mother Josep's eyes fill with tears. She too, can now see a caricature of Pilar's features in the monkey skull as it bobs round and round. Pilar, that sweet child. Pilar, her friend, resting with God these twelve years.

She knows why they have done this. Not just to insult. To prove that there is no God, no ultimate rest in His bosom, only this obscene declension of the flesh.

"Get back inside," she commands, turning on the others fiercely. "What are you gawping at? Get back inside and pray for these lost souls!"

The nuns scuttle back into the chapel, leaving the Mother Superior alone. She forces herself to watch Francesc Eduard, the blacksmith, who not six months forged a new set of double iron gates for the convent. The gates are beautifully wrought. The uprights and cross-bars are snakes that twine and writhe among flowers and leaves. At the centre of each gate is a cross.

Francesc Eduard made too, the great iron door knocker in the form of a winged ox, the symbol of St. Luke. He sang, she remembers, as he worked and his muscular arms dripped sweat.

But the young blacksmith has a fiery head on his broad shoulders. He served his apprenticeship in Barcelona and was infected with anarchy and trade unionism there. He is said also to be lewd, though that is often said of young persons who are only alluring and merry. But this....

Sister Maria del Pilar, though he does not know it, was young and appealing when she died. Now her face, once sweet, is a horror that he does not shrink from kissing. The women among the crowd scream with mingled revulsion and delight.

Then Francesc swings the corpse round too roughly and with a little dry snap, Pilar's head detaches itself, popping out of the wimple like a sparsely-tufted football. The music falters as the skull rolls on the cobblestones.

Francesc meets Mother Josep's eyes. He bursts into laughter at her expression and lays down Pilar's desecrated trunk. "Come and dance, Mother," he shouts to her, holding out his arms. "The socialist revolution is here, don't you know that?"

But it is not the revolution, only what the newspapers will call *Semana Tragica*, Tragic Week. Dozens of churches will be burned before it is over and scores of people will be killed. But the state will be unshaken.

Later today, soldiers will arrive to disperse the mob that is looting the convent. Francesc is dancing his last dance. The soldiers' bullets will break his hips and shatter his thigh this evening and he will never walk again without two sticks. It will, of course, be the intervention of Mother Josep that will save his life, not once, but twice.

First, she will insist that he remain in the convent's small infirmary, rather than be taken to prison with the others.

Her scrupulous notions of cleanliness will save Francesc from the infections that would surely have killed him otherwise.

And second, as Francesc Eduard lies in a fever in the convent, Mother Josep will bar the police from coming in to arrest him. She will point out that he has been crippled forever, which is punishment apt and sufficient for his crime and that, after all, he has harmed no living soul. And hers is a voice that carries weight.

So he will be spared trial, but not the butchery that will be needed to save his life, nor the pain that will hammer him like iron on the anvil.

And like iron hammered when it is white hot, he will forever bear the fashion of the blows. He will hobble out the rest of his days at the forge, a crooked man, iron willed and iron faced, never again to flash his smile at a pretty young woman.

But Francesc does not know any of this and as Mother Josep turns to go back into the Lady Chapel, he retrieves Sister Maria del Pilar's skull and, with it under his arm, begins again to dance....