

Chapter 1 THE REQUEST

The cloud I had been running in an hour before had already burned away when I pressed the button to boot my computer. I looked out my north-facing window and saw that the Los Angeles basin below was still covered with its own cotton cloud-blanket that extended over Santa Monica Bay. It made me feel as if I were alone in the world, even though when that cloud lifted I would overlook an area inhabited by several million people.

On a horizontal line from me the Hollywood Hills were particularly sharp this morning. I could make out the Hollywood sign and the Griffith Park planetarium with my "hunter's" eyes. (The disadvantage of having hunter's eyes is that I needed to wear glasses to read and use the computer. Maybe I was born in the wrong age.) More than 50 miles away, more east than north, Mt. Baldy's massive granite peak warmed in the morning sun, and I could even see Mt. San Geronimo, with its higher and even more massive peak, farther east, almost 100 miles away. Haze would obscure it soon, but there was no sign of brown smog.

My view was the opposite of and better than that from most hillside homes seen in movies, which usually face south from the Hollywood Hills. Palos Verdes Peninsula, which tops out at 1,500 feet above sea level, is a well-kept secret from screenwriters. They must all be near-sighted.

I had a positive feeling about this world. After all, I was living in a year ending in three zeroes—and how many people were lucky enough to do that. A sense of anticipation enveloped me. Something good was going to happen before long.

I glanced out of another window, which faces west toward the swimming pool, with my father's castle beyond. (castle: noun. Definition 1.c. A large, ornate building similar to or resembling a fortified stronghold.) To my surprise, the old man himself was striding briskly past the pool toward the guesthouse where I lived. Why was he home at this hour? He was usually in his office in Torrance by seven.

More to the point, why was he coming here? I couldn't remember the last time he had set foot in the guesthouse. When we communicated with each other, which was rarely, it was in the castle. I quickly looked around; I didn't see anything incriminating, except the computer. And there was nothing I could do about that.

Maybe I could keep him downstairs. I raced down the stairs, two at a time; the carpeted steps tickled my bare feet. I arrived at the bottom just as he knocked sharply on the door. I opened it so fast that he stepped back with a surprised look on his face.

"Karl!" he said. "Uh, good morning."

I have rarely seen him flustered, even momentarily. I said, "Good morning, Dad."

"Uh, may I come in for a minute? I need to talk to you."

I was standing there, blocking the doorway. Maybe I was flustered, too. "Sure. Come on in." I stepped back so he could enter.

He stepped into the entryway and glanced at the room I used for a bedroom. The bed was unmade and clothes were strewn about. The sink of a small kitchen was visible through a doorway, or at least the dirty dishes that filled it were.

"Do you have a couple of chairs upstairs where we could sit down?" he asked, regaining his usual self-control.

Apparently, he was planning to stay for more than a minute. And I could understand why he found the downstairs unappetizing. I could offer him a glass of orange juice in the cramped

kitchen, but I didn't think he'd go for that. I wasn't up to arguing with him. In my lifetime I could count on the fingers of one hand the arguments I had won with my father.

"Come on up," I said, turning and taking the steps two at a time.

He followed on my heels, also going two steps at a time. He was in remarkably good shape for a man pushing sixty. He walked four miles in the hills of Palos Verdes every evening with his wife, Jacie, when he wasn't traveling, and there are only two ways you can go: up or down. If you walk a round trip, as he did, you will get plenty of up along with the down.

Upstairs, the guesthouse contained two rooms plus a bathroom. The first room we came to was my office, so there was no avoiding the computer. When my father saw it he stopped and did a double take. It wasn't quite the latest model, but it did have a large monitor, color printer, scanner and high-speed Internet hookup.

Of course he understood what he was seeing. Richard Patterson was founder and CEO of a successful software company and computers were his life. But he didn't say anything and I quickly led the way into the next room, which I used as a living room. I offered him one end of a large couch that once had been in the castle, and sat at the other end so I wouldn't have to face him directly.

I had found through long experience that it was better to let him speak first when he had something on his mind. I tried to look at ease. I noted that his expensive blue suit and silk tie were more fashionable than the ones he had worn before he met Jacie. I felt underdressed in my T-shirt and shorts.

But he had always dressed well; my father had never heard of casual Friday. He looked good, with remarkably few wrinkles, and his short brown hair stubbornly refused to acquire more than a few streaks of gray.

"So what do you use the computer for, playing solitaire and hearts?"

"And Minesweeper." I was prepared for a dig about the computer. "It's a good game." Minesweeper was a Microsoft product, and Microsoft meant Bill Gates, whose fortune was worth some billions more than my father's, but if he caught my drift he ignored it.

"You aren't gambling on the Internet, are you?"

I was silent.

"I hope you haven't run up a ton of credit card debt again. Or worse, dealt with loan sharks. Because I'm not bailing you out."

That wasn't news. He hadn't bailed me out the first time, either. I wasn't about to tell him that I hadn't owned a credit card in two years and the only sharks I knew were at the Long Beach Aquarium. When you don't have anything nice to say, keep quiet. I kept quiet.

"Which brings me to the question of how you can afford the computer? Did one of your gay friends give it to you as a present in return for services rendered?"

The conversation, which had started out as being merely very unpleasant, was getting ugly. Sometimes I wish I had never let that deception get going. It began as a misunderstanding that I didn't bother to correct, since it ended my father's hounding me to come into the business, get married and have children. But it caused more problems than it solved. Now if I told him I wasn't gay he wouldn't believe me. I continued playing the strong, silent type, while boiling inside.

"Why?" he asked, his voice trembling. "Why did you get this way? Was it my fault?"

To my astonishment, my father suddenly burst into tears. He put his head down almost to his lap, placed his face in his hands and sobbed. In all my life I had never seen him cry, not even at my mother's funeral. This was worse than having him browbeat me. I didn't know what to do.

He stopped crying as suddenly as he had started, pulled a maroon silk handkerchief that matched his tie out of his lapel pocket and wiped his eyes with it. He took several deep breaths. Then he said, "I need your help."

Hearing this was almost as surprising as seeing him cry; I couldn't remember when he had ever asked for my help. And I couldn't recover that rapidly from the roller coaster ride down caused by his crying without risking serious effects from g-forces.

He looked at me, composed again, all signs of tears removed from his handsome face.

"What can I help you with?" I croaked.

"I don't like to interfere in the lives of my employees," he said, "but if they are having problems I want to give them assistance."

Ah, the benevolent dictator.

He paused, searching for words, something he didn't have to do very often. He asked, "Do you know who Ned Mackay is?" (He pronounced it Mack-eye.)

"Yes, he's your number two. President and possible successor—if you ever retire. I met him once a long time ago."

My father raised his eyebrows, perhaps surprised that I knew that much about Dionysus Corporation. But my words seemed to loosen his tongue. "Partly right, at least. I'm not convinced yet that he can run the show by himself. But he has been a good president—up to a few weeks ago. Lately, however, he's been acting strangely."

"In what way?" I was struggling to fit myself into this scenario.

"It first came to my attention because he recently exercised all the stock options in which he is currently vested. This isn't confidential information; it's common knowledge. In fact, because he's a corporate officer it may get reported in the Wall Street Journal as insider selling because he exercised in such a way that he bought and sold simultaneously so that he didn't have to put up any cash. I'm talking about thousands of shares."

"And the stock is near its low for the year."

"Not to mention the tax implications for exercising so many shares in one year." What I had said suddenly registered on his face. "I didn't know you followed the stock."

"Just a guess." I'd better be careful or I might give away something about my real life.

"Okay, so he's not the sharpest stock trader in the world. And I'm sure he has an accountant who handles his taxes. Exercising options when the stock is low doesn't by itself mean he's in trouble."

"No, but there's more. Recently, he's been coming in late and leaving early. It's not like Ned; he usually works a minimum of 60 hours a week. Now, even when he's there he seems distracted. His eyes are red and he even fell asleep in one meeting, something he's never done before."

"Maybe he's got a drinking problem."

"No." My father shook his head, emphatically. "Ned never touches the stuff. Maybe a glass of wine once in a while—or a pint of beer. I know he comes from the home of Scotch whiskey, but I swear it's true. I've known him for 20 years."

"How about drugs?"

"Not everyone who was young in the sixties was on drugs."

Case in point—my father. At least he had never admitted that he inhaled. "What do you think it is then?"

"There's still more. My executive assistant was returning from a weekend in Palm Springs when she and her girlfriend decided to stop at that Indian casino beside I-10."

"I know the one."

"I'm sure you do. Anyway, they went in and were wandering around when she saw Ned at a blackjack table. She was going to say hello when she noticed what he was doing."

"Standing on a soft 16?"

"No." My father looked annoyed. "He had a table all to himself. He was playing five hands at a time, and betting a pile of chips on each one. He was very intense and didn't see her. She got close enough so that she could hear some of the conversation between him and the dealer. She thinks he was betting \$500 on each hand."

"How did he do?"

It looked to her as if he lost several thousand dollars in the ten minutes or so she watched."

"Poor capital preservation. And she never talked to him?"

"No. She hightailed it out of there before he spotted her, but she was so shocked by what she saw that she told me about it first thing Monday morning."

"Which was yesterday."

"Yes."

Again, my father showed signs of not being the master of the situation, but this time it was only a shadow passing over his face.

What should I say? "It looks like Mr. Mackay may have a gambling problem."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Did you confront him with it?"

"No." My father's sharp exhalation of breath sounded almost like a sigh. "That would look too much like spying."

"So where do I come in?"

"Well...you know about compulsive gamblers."

Meaning that I was one, myself. Or at least that's what my father thought.

He continued, "You could...get to know him. Talk to him..."

"Ask him if he's a compulsive gambler."

"No, of course not, but you know what I mean. You speak the same language. You know the symptoms. Find out his attitude toward gambling. But I don't want you to actually do any gambling with him."

Because I didn't know when to stop. But could I really accomplish anything? I glanced at my father. I hadn't seen him look so worried in a long time. I owed him something, if only because he hadn't kicked me out of the guesthouse when I was down on my luck. I said, "What about hiring a private detective to follow him around?"

"That's sleazy. Besides, I don't want to bring in an outsider. If word leaked out that our president was a compulsive gambler, that might really tank the stock."

Was the price of the stock all he worried about? I didn't know whether to be flattered or angry. He comes to me once in a lifetime for help and it's because of my gambling.

When I didn't say anything, my father said, "Of course I'll pay you—as a consultant. And your expenses. I'll get you an advance."

I stopped myself before blurting out that I didn't want his money. I was trying to become a businessman so I should act like one. But I still had the need to show some independence, so I said, "I don't need an advance. When would I start?"

"Immediately. You don't have anything else to do, do you?"

Not that I was going to admit to him. "How do you suggest I proceed?"

"Work that out with Arrow. She's my executive assistant."

"Arrow? As in bow?"

"Yes."

"Is she the one who saw Ned playing blackjack?"

"Yes. And she's very sharp. I'm assigning her to help you."

"And if I think he's compulsive, what then?"

"I'll get him treatment. The company provides for it."

Treatment only works if the subject is cooperative. My father had tried to get me to join Gamblers Anonymous and failed. But then, I wasn't a compulsive gambler. "And if he refuses treatment?"

"Karl, let's not slay our dragons until we meet them."

I didn't want to participate in the ruin of Ned Mackay, even though I didn't really know him. But I had to admit that my father appeared to have a problem. And I didn't see any quick and easy solution. In addition, it was a challenge. I like challenges. "Okay, I'll do it."

My father exhaled again; this time it sounded like a sigh of relief. "Arrow can get you access to Ned or any information you might need about him. And she knows what's on his calendar."

"Executive assistant. Is that a glorified name for a secretary?"

"No. That's administrative assistant. And mine is a man. You probably have something in common with him."

I could guess what he meant by that.

"However, Arrow is on a fast track to management. She has an MBA."

One more degree than I had. And two more than my father. He spent the next five minutes exhorting me to be very careful about leaking any negative information about Dionysus. And not to make Ned suspicious about what we were doing. He needed my help, but he still didn't trust me. Even so, he apparently valued my judgment, at least in this one area—my area of expertise—compulsive gambling.

When he left I escorted him downstairs. He shook my hand at the door and then strode rapidly past the pool to his castle, the very model of a modern CEO. I couldn't remember the last time we had hugged.