Chapter 58

Technology Holds Many Traps for the Sly Man
A Mountain of Troubles Turns the Thoughts to Home

The fourth performance of *La Gioconda* was the day before Jake's Christmas party. Margaret stayed the night in Chicago and flew back to New York the next day; but her flight was delayed by a snowstorm, and by the time she reached the apartment on Fifth Avenue the party was well under way. Jake came to greet her as soon as he saw her in the living room, taking her in his arms and kissing her on the lips in front of everybody.

"Missed you, baby." Looking into her eyes.

"Oh, Jake. I've had such a bad time."

"I know, sweetie, it was in the papers."

"Oh, dear. 'Diva Plagued by Hostile Claques'?"

Jake laughed. "They've moved on. Big ponderous essays about the decline of civility. Forget it. Come on, party! I'll have Rogelio get your bags. Here's Jennifer."

Jennifer had come over as soon as she saw Margaret. She kissed Margaret on the cheek—a real kiss, not the Air Head air kiss Jake liked to make fun of—lifted up one of Margaret's hands and patted it.

"Those bastards," she said, "giving you such a hard time. What *is* it? Is it because you're Chinese? Some racist thing? I really wonder which way this country's going."

Jennifer knew nothing about William. Nobody outside Margaret's immediate circle knew those things. Jennifer was, in addition to her show

business activities, politically involved somehow, and spent a lot of time doing what Jake called 'fund raising', apparently in opposition to the current leadership of the country, toward which she was bitterly hostile.

"It's one of these right wing racist groups, I'm sure," repeated Jennifer. "Why else would they pick on you?"

"They don't pick on the black singers," pointed out Margaret.

"Oh, then it's an anti-immigrant thing. Who knows how their sick little minds work, out there on the lunatic fringe? Never mind, honey. Have a drink. How about a Bellini? That's your fach, isn't it?" Jennifer squeezed her hand and pealed laughter, pleased to have shown she had absorbed some of the opera jargon Margaret had taught her in Southampton.

Jake had invited Johnny Liu, who was standing at one side with Maisie, looking a little out of it. Margaret took Jennifer over to them.

"Dear old friends of mine," she introduced. "Johnny and I were voice students together in Beijing. Before I married Jake the three of us used to go bicycle riding in Central Park. Now Johnny's a dissident. Trying to bring down the Chinese government." She laughed, to show Jennifer this was not to be taken too seriously. Jennifer, however, could never take politics less than seriously.

"Me too!" She yelled delightedly, clapping her hands together and favoring Johnny with a big smile. "We're fellow spirits! I'm a dissident myself!"

Maisie didn't quite get this. "Are you trying to bring down the Chinese government, too?" she asked.

At this point Margaret saw Jake over in one corner. He was in conversation with one of the Air Heads, a pretty young girl with Jewish or Italian looks, referred to in her occasional appearances in the gossip columns of the *Post* as a "singer-songwriter". They were too far away and the room too full of voices for Margaret to hear what they were saying, but the girl seemed upset, and Jake seemed to be trying to pacify her. A small group shifted left to let one of the waiters go by, and obscured Margaret's view. When she could get away from Jennifer and Johnny (Johnny had found his conversational stride and was trying to get a donation out of Jennifer for the Bitter Herbs movement) Jake was alone, and the singer-songwriter girl seemed to have left. Troubled suddenly by dark thoughts, Margaret

wanted to ask Jake about the girl, but Jake swept her away to a group that included a famous Austrian conductor, who bowed and kissed her hand and lavished endless heavily-accented praise on her fioritura.

* * *

The fifth performance of *Lucia,* at the beginning of January, was a disaster of unusual comprehensiveness. It was not so much the claque, though they made themselves known every time Margaret opened her mouth, as a general systemic failure of the kind that sometimes afflicts large, complex operations—house-movings, product launches, battles. Fischel had taken ill and the replacement conductor had not properly rehearsed his orchestra. They first played much too loud, so that the singers had to yell over the music; then, realizing his error, the conductor instructed them to play piano, a thing it is very difficult for an orchestra to do without long and careful rehearsal. The strings wobbled, the horns cracked, the woodwinds went flat and the harpist could not be heard at all. Everything else that could go wrong did. Spots wandered, curtains got stuck, doors failed to open, and the prompt had a noisy sneezing fit. The little TV screens set in the wings out of sight of the audience, whose purpose was to make the movements of the conductor's baton visible from any position on stage, went out of commission, and the singers, terrified of losing tempo with an unknown conductor and incapacitated prompt, sang the whole of Acts Two and Three standing square-on to the orchestra, hardly bothering to act. Nobody was very surprised when, in the melancholy final scene, as the death bell tolled for Lucia while Edgardo was wandering broken-hearted among the graves of his ancestors, he knocked over two different tombstones, the loud thumps of their falling precisely in counter-time with the tolling of the bell. The audience only tittered embarrassedly at the first one; they laughed out loud at the second.

"Post-holidays hangover," said Arturo, shaking his head as the cast scattered after the lone curtain call.

"Leo'll have a screaming fit," commented Alisa, heading for her dressing room.

Whether Fischel had a fit of any kind, Margaret did not discover.

That there were grave conferences, at which matters of moment were discussed, was soon apparent. Colman called Margaret at home with the astonishing news.

"*Canceling* me?" she wailed into the phone. "What do you mean, *canceling* me?"

"Dear girl, dear girl, don't take it so badly. I'm sure this is something we can sort out."

"But they can't *do* that! I'm under contract, aren't I? Seven performances. We've only done five. They can't *cancel* me!"

"I'll be going over the contract today with Kevin. They're saying you have voice problems." (Kevin was Colman's lawyer.)

"Of course I have voice problems! It's these damn claques. *This,* I mean—there's only one, I'm sure. Why don't they do something about the claque?"

"Well, in their own way, they are, my dear, do you not see? The claque is following you, that's clear to everybody. The management feels: no Margaret, no claque. That's the real reason they're canceling you, I'm sure."

"But they can't *do* that! Where is the reason in it? It's not my fault this damn claque is following me! Why should I be the one to suffer? This is just blaming the victim!"

"My dear Margaret, pray do not panic. I'm sure we can sort it out. Let me get Kevin's opinion. I'm sure the law must be on your side here. Then we can go to the Met and show them that, and they will reinstate you, so they will. I have no doubt of it. Patience, my dear, patience."

Margaret practiced patience all that afternoon, never straying far from the phone, wanting to hear what the learned Kevin had to say. Jake was in Miami at some gathering of the Rinpoche's followers for three days, Rogelio was sitting the Southampton house. Maria spoke only a primitive utilitarian English and with the best will in the world was poor company. Patience exhausted, Margaret called Colman's number, but got only his answering machine.

Jake was something of a technophobe. He even hated to drive, and had spent a small fortune on driving lessons for Rogelio, eventually getting him through the test on his fifth attempt. He had owned an an-

swering machine when they were first married, but had consigned it to the top shelf of a closet in the master bedroom, claiming he could not operate it. Now Margaret fished it out. After much fiddling she got it hooked up, in case Colman called back, and then left the apartment to pay a call on Old Shi.

Old Shi was out. Margaret made a mental note—one in a long series—to phone ahead, like an American, before going to see people. She walked the streets of Greenwich Village aimlessly for twenty minutes, but a bitter continental wind was blowing across the river from New Jersey, assaulting her ears, face and ankles, and she took a cab over to Chinatown and ate a glum solitary dinner at Gao Hwa, a Shanghainese place favored by Johnny Liu.

Back at the apartment the answering machine was blinking. Margaret pressed PLAY MESSAGES.

"Hi, Jakey. It's Lucy. It's official, you knocked me up. Guess my diaphragm sprang a leak. Sorry I guess, but I want you to deal with it, Jake. Somebody decent, Jewish of course, with a clinic I can stay a couple of days, picture window with a view of the Poconos kind of thing. Call me for Christ's sake, I want you to DEAL WITH IT! Asap. Call me, Jake. Don't fuck me over on this one, PUR-LEEZE. Okay?"

* * *

"What happens now?" Margaret asked thirty-six hours later, when all had been exposed and all confessed, and she had demanded what, she knew, she should have demanded the previous September.

"Oh . . ." Jake shrugged. ". . .The attorneys move in with brooms and shovels."

"Attorneys? It sounds awful."

"It is. But they work most of it out between themselves. We don't have to get too much involved."

Margaret looked out across the park. The bitter wind had brought a snowfall in its wake, and all the contours seemed to be emphasized by the snow, by the play of the dull sunshine on their slopes and curves. Some hardy joggers were pounding along on the circuit road. Margaret felt as

inwardly cold as the scene beyond the window, and as tired as Jake himself looked.

"I suppose this is what they call an amicable divorce."

"That's entirely up to us," said Jake softly, and a little carefully.

Margaret turned to him. He was sitting in a relaxed position—both arms up on the back of the sofa, rucking up the shoulders of his jacket and spreading it wide around him—but did not actually look relaxed. She considered. She understood nothing of the mechanics of divorce, but was aware that she had a momentary advantage over him somehow.

"Did you really love me, Jake?"

"Yes, honey, I really did."

"I can't understand that. Now you say you really loved me. And yes, I can see it's true. Then, a few months later, you love somebody else."

"I didn't love her, Maggie. It was while you were in Chicago the first time. I just needed some relief."

"Self-control's really not your strong suit, is it, Jake?"

Not your strong suit. In spite of all the desperation and hopelessness, Margaret could still find herself pleased at having deployed a newly-learned English idiom. Though this particular one had an edge: she had read it in the *Post,* in a gossip-column piece about Lucy Melton, the singer-songwriter whose voice she had heard on the answering machine. "Nobody ever said money management was her strong suit . . ." But Jake was discreet, at least—Lucy's episode with him had not come to the *Post's* attention, though her previous one, with an elderly rock star, had received several notices. What a slut! Margaret thought she might not have minded so much if it had been someone with class, though she thought she would still have wanted the divorce. What is marriage without fidelity? Especially now, when she had needed him so much.

Yet still she could not dislike Jake. Seeing him pretending to be at ease there on the sofa, looking as if, in fact, he was all tensed up for her to start screaming at any moment, Margaret thought of what he had said about Kennedy when she had asked him, over one of those restaurant meals early in their courtship, what the President had been like.

"Why, he was a rogue, same as his father. If you knew Jack was going to come calling you locked up the silverware. And your wives and daugh-

ters, too. *Especially* your wives and daughters. But, oh, he was the sweetest rogue you ever met. I never knew a man so hard to dislike, never mind how much you thought you *should* dislike him. I cried for a week after Jack was shot."

She felt the same about Jake, in spite of everything. She ought to hate him at this point, she knew she ought; but she could not. He was just what he was, that was all. The whole marriage was a silly mistake, made on the rebound, when she was lonely and disoriented. It had been more her fault than his. Still she felt her advantage, and determined to seize it.

"I want the Southampton House, Jake. I don't want anything else. I don't want your money—I can make my own living. I don't want this place. I don't want anything else. But I want the Southampton house."

"Honey, all that stuff we have to set before the attorneys."

"Fuck the attorneys!" Margaret was shocked, hearing herself curse. She had muttered that American word to herself once or twice, in moments of stress, but did not think she had ever spoken it in conversation. "I'm telling you now," (she went on) "I want the Southampton house."

She had startled Jake with her rough speech. He had pulled his head right back against the sofa, and widened his eyes. Now he smiled, and raised his hands an inch from the sofa back, spreading the fingers in surrender.

"You've got it, honey. I won't fight that."

"And the car," she said on impulse, seeing how far she could go. Southampton was a long way out, after all.

"Sweetheart, you can't drive."

"I'll learn," said Margaret. "I'll damn well learn."

* * *

Lunar New Year fell on a Monday in early February. On the Sunday Margaret went to Old Shi's for the New Year's Eve feast. Old Shi's boyfriend was there, and Johnny Liu and Maisie, and someone Johnny had brought along, a dissident recently out of China.

The dissident's name was Zheng. He was an intellectual, of course: shabbily-dressed and spectacled, but with a cheerful expression. He had

held a minor teaching position at Fudan University in Shanghai but had got in trouble with the authorities over an attempt to help the students start their own newspaper. Visiting the States, he had been one of a group of expatriates who had called a news conference in New York to repudiate the Chinese Communist Party, of which all had been members. Granted political asylum, afraid to return to China, but with little English (his field had been Chinese literature), he now faced thirty years of selling life insurance to computer programmers. He did not seem depressed by the prospect, though, and in fact would not admit the possibility that his exile was permanent.

"There are great changes coming in China," he said, over Old Shi's Peking duck. "This communist system will not last. The people will not stand for it."

"Do the people really have a choice?" wondered Old Shi. "The Communist Party may be corrupt, and it may have lost its moral authority, but it still controls the army. 'Political power comes from the barrel of a gun'." [Quoting Mao Zedong.]

"'When the people no longer respect the rulers, how can government be carried on?'" dissident Zheng countered, quoting one of the ancient sages. "Moral authority has always been at the heart of our system. In the West, everything is done by law. In our culture, everything depends on moral relationships. America has seven lawyers for every engineer; in Japan the ratio is exactly opposite. That is the difference between a western democracy and an eastern one. We don't need so many laws, or so many lawyers. We expect our leaders to give a good example. When they don't, we discard them—as Americans do when their leaders break the law."

Old Shi shook his head. "This discarding is not such a neat business. It can last more than a hundred years and produce a mountain of corpses. The fall of a dynasty has always been a terrible disaster. I do not think we should hope for that."

There was a pause while Old Shi translated the gist of their conversation for the boyfriend, who still spoke no Chinese. Margaret lapsed into her own thoughts. The talk about politics had bored her; but hearing of events in the home country stirred a vague nostalgia. She thought of

skating with Baoyu on North Lake, walking up the drive to the Dance Academy early one ice-misted Beijing morning, a hillside flushed with yellow.

"I would like to go back to the ancestor country for a visit," she said to Johnny Liu, while Old Shi was still translating. "It's been, oh! more than four years."

Johnny nodded. "I think it's a good idea. Take your mind off things."

Margaret had told Johnny Liu all her troubles, marital and professional. Neither category had improved in the twelfth lunar month. Chicago had canceled her, too, using the same excuse as the Met—"voice problems". Jake had gone to the west coast while the attorneys began their negotiations, leaving her in the Fifth Avenue apartment with Maria. Colman's efforts to sound optimistic on the telephone were less and less convincing. Why not go to China? She owed it to Mother, at the very least.

"See this recent change of Presidents here," Old Shi was saying to dissident Zheng (the Inauguration had been held a few days previously). "One fellow moves out, they hold a little public ceremony, the new fellow moves in. Now: can you imagine such a thing in China? He he he he! Impossible! Nobody would ever move out so quietly. He would have sandbags all round the White House, machine gun nests on the roof, and his own regiment of troops there, and he would say: 'If you want me out, come and get me out!' He he he he he he! We Chinese are a mad, jealous people. We can never have democracy. We have not got the democratic temperament. We are a wild, unruly, vengeful people. Democracy was invented by the English, a famously cold race."

Zheng frowned. "You do an injustice to our people. When have we had the opportunity to practice democracy? Give Old Hundred Names" [i.e. the common people of China] "the right to supervise their leaders, they will behave wisely, I'm sure."

Old Shi shook his head again. "No. Old Hundred Names has been making *koutou* to despots and warlords for five thousand years. They have accustomed themselves to it. You might even say they like it. Without a dictator, our country will disintegrate. Every Chinese person, in his bones,

3794-DERB

wants a dictator, and is ready to worship a dictator. I myself, I confess it, loved Chairman Mao for many years. Didn't we all?"

"Yes," said Margaret. "I loved Chairman Mao with all my heart. I still believe he was a great man, a great leader."

"But your position was privileged," said Johnny Liu. "You can't be taken as representative of Old Hundred Names. Army people were shielded from the worst excesses. Nobody in *your* family was ever struggled, I am sure. You are *Ivy League,* Little Sister." Johnny Liu chuckled, pleased with himself for knowing this American idiom. *"Ivy League,"* he repeated, to augment his satisfaction.

There was another pause for translation. Zheng and Johnny Liu fell to arguing about tactics. Margaret had China clearly in her thoughts, now. Not only her personal China—ice mist and coal smoke, terraced fields and groves of bamboo, snow on the Qinling peaks seen from a train window, skating North Lake beneath the great white stupa—but China in the abstract, the pot-bellied dragon shape that had been on every schoolroom wall all through her childhood, the sages and poets, emperors in their glory, the bones of her ancestors for ten thousand generations dwelling in the mud, the soil, the coal dust, the fruits of the earth. At some point in the evening she had decided—in the way we often do, without there having been any one moment of decision—to go back to China for a vacation.

"Oh!" said the boyfriend, glowing with enthusiasm, "I should love to see China! The Great Wall, the Summer Palace, the buried army. I do so want to go, but he just won't." (He made a mock grimace at Old Shi.) "Says he's had enough of China to last several lifetimes."

Old Shi nodded. "Dead place," he said in English. "Museum culture, no living culture. All living culture copied from America. May as well stay in America. This the original, that the photocopy. China dead place, dead, dead. Creation—what? Adjective? Yes, *creative.* Creative thinking only in West. Most in America. America creating for whole world, dreaming for whole world. In China, dreams only of past. He he he he he!"

* * *

Margaret went to see Colman at his office, to tell him of her decision.

"It's giving in, I know. But with the divorce and all, I really can't face things right now."

"My dear Margaret, I beg you to reconsider. At this point in your career . . ."

"My career? What career? This madman is wrecking my career! And the houses are letting him do it! Why don't they call the police and arrest these claques? Why don't they . . .?" Margaret could not help herself; she began to weep.

Colman came out from behind his desk and stood by her, patting uneasily at her shoulder. "There, my dear, there, there. Won't you think of going to speak to him? If he sees you . . ."

"No, no, no," sobbed Margaret. "No, I won't."

"There now, there, and of course you won't. It's all right. In any case, I'm sure your Mr Leung cannot continue this nonsense for long. His own circumstances are more and more pressing. I understand a grand jury is to be impaneled. Sure I have no idea what that means, but it sounds mighty forbidding, does it not? If you could only be patient a while."

Margaret took a tissue from her pocketbook and blew her nose. "I'm all right. All right." She looked up at him and tried a smile. "Please, Colman. I'm all right now. Sit down, please."

Colman went back to his desk. Probably just from discomfort, he opened his mighty cathedral of a diary and absently turned some leaves.

"How long is it now since you were back home in China?" he asked, still turning.

"Four, four and a half years."

"You haven't seen your family for so long?"

"No. My mother, my brother. . . No."

Colman left off fiddling with the diary and looked across the desk at her. His fat pink face wore a frown, the small pale eyes reproving her. At last he looked down, tapped the flat of his hand on the desk once or twice, and sighed.

"Well, if you must, you must, I suppose. Perhaps it is for the best, after all. How long are you planning to be out of circulation?"

"Oh, I don't know. A few months. Let's say until the fall. I'm sure things will have sorted themselves out by the fall season."

Colman nodded, apparently reconciled. "I hope so, my dear. I do hope so. But you must keep in touch, let me know."

"I'm sorry, Colman. It seems so ungrateful. After all you've done for me."

Now Colman laughed, his pink chins wobbling. "Think no more of it, my dear. Singers cancel all the time, so they do. You get poorly, you get pregnant. It's a feature of our lives. Not altogether a bad one, either. It rolls the dice, you see. Gives young singers an opening. Your own career, my dear—and I mean no slight on your undoubted abilities—was much accelerated when Anna canceled that time in, what was it? *Puritani?*"

"*Capuleti.*"

"Ah yes. The houses will manage without you for a while. But not too long, please."

"It won't be too long. I just need to get away from these troubles for a while. Recharge my batteries."

"Just so. Please, do not worry about Mr Leung. I shall do my best to have it put in the papers what he has been doing. We shall shame him out of it, if the G-men don't keep him busy enough. And relax, dear Margaret. Put these troubles out of your mind."

"That's what I want to do, Colman."

"With my blessing, dear girl." Colman stood up and reached across the desk for her hand, nodding gently. "With my blessing."