

Sara Williams

The
Don
Juan
Con



THE DON JUAN CON

By
Sara Williams

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DEDICATION

For my mother, Dorothy Kincaid,
who first nurtured my voice.

PROLOGUE

Banks, FL

Thursday, August 20, 7:40 p.m.

Where were the chimes, the panpipes? Anthony heard none of the arty music that ordered Maria Whitman's life. Instead, he listened to the hum of the refrigerator and the blowing of the cold air return. Could it be that Maria had taken a day off from the New Age?

"Ria? Ria Mia?" He closed the back door and passed through the country kitchen, briefcase and long-stemmed red rose in one hand, paper bag in the other. He poked his head through the swinging doors, expecting to see her at work in the library that took up most of the main floor of her sprawling home. The tall windows that faced the Banks River were shuttered and locked. Her computer was draped in its Tibetan prayer shawl. The incense burner on her desk was cold, thank God. Maria's spicy incense made his eyes run.

But of course. The famous astrologer would be upstairs, packing. Anthony passed the marble planter in the foyer and the phallic orange flames of bromeliads in bloom. Maria had told him their Latin name, which sounded to him like some sort of disease. A venereal disease, he'd said, and Maria had laughed until she choked. Maria loved his racy wit.

He took the winding staircase up to the master suite built into a loft above the lower level. Maria's bags were spread out on the bed. Precious little—if anything at all—had been packed. The creeping shadows of sunset and fronds nodding in a potted palm on the balcony were the only motion in the room. Uneasiness crept into his stomach. Then he noticed light spilling through the doorway to her dressing room and crossed the room with relief.

“Ria, Darling, I'm back at long last,” Anthony called out. “Depositions took much longer than I thought.” He set the briefcase and the paper bag on the credenza.

Across the room a light clicked on, startling him. Maria sat in her wing chair, a sapphire caftan flowing over her bulk. Her brassy hair was wrapped in a matching turban.

“Oh ho. What a surprise, my queen,” Anthony said. “You are stunning. What a sight!” He strode across the room, dropped to one knee and bent to kiss her cheek. “Did I ever tell you how sexy you are?” he murmured, handing her the rose. “And how your theatrics knock me out?” He nibbled at her ear.

“Thank you, Anthony,” she said. Her voice sounded strained. Puzzled, he settled back on his haunches. Where was the melodic laugh? The cheery expression?

“Ah, *poor* Ria,” Anthony murmured. He stroked her rouged cheek with the back of his hand. “You look exhausted, my dear. I’ve rushed you, haven’t I?” He laced her plump fingers into his long ones. “Your Anthony promises he’ll let his pet snooze on the plane, all the way to New York.” He gave her cheek a final pat. “Wait until you see the surprise I brought you, Ria.”

At the credenza, Anthony brought a bottle of Chivas Regal and two glasses from a paper bag. A bell note sounded from one of the glasses when he tapped the rim. “I found these at that little antique shop by the courthouse. Ten dollars each. Worth fifty.” He checked the massive Rolex watch on his wrist. “Just enough time for a toast.”

“Anthony,” Maria said wearily. “I can’t join you, and I don’t want liquor in my house.”

“Ria, darling. Just this once?”

Maria raised her pointed chin in that imperious way of hers. Her mouth hardened into a determined line.

“Right, pet. My last drink ever in this house. I promise.” He poured a shot and downed it in one motion.

Maria got up, swept across the room, capped the bottle and shoved it toward Anthony. “Take this when you leave. Consider it a parting gift. I’m sure I paid for it.”

“Maria—” he protested, backing away.

“Oh, you *are* good, Anthony, or whoever you are.” She set the bottle down and stalked away, putting the bed between them. “I never suspected a thing. Until this morning, that is.” She turned to face him. Her voice faltered as she fought back tears. “Three days I tried to work up a chart for you. The signs were haywire. Your personality was mush.

All I could think of was, I must have gotten your birth date wrong. So I peeked into your wallet, just to check the date. What do I find? Several identities. Conflicting birth dates.”

Anthony laughed. “Maria,” he said, rounding the foot of the bed, attempting to approach her, but she cowered against the wall. “I’m a lawyer. I defend criminals, remember? Clients give me their I.D. for safekeeping.”

“Who are you, Anthony?” Maria’s arms were crossed and her brow was knotted.

He picked up the briefcase and glanced at his watch. “We have no time for this. None. We’ll be late to meet my brother’s plane.”

He headed for the stairway. Maria rushed after him, clutching his arm. “Let’s drop it, shall we? Both of us know your brother isn’t flying in from Los Angeles for our wedding ceremony.” As he turned to her, Maria’s expression softened. “Listen to me, Anthony. Despite what you’ve done, there has to be a reason why our paths crossed. There are no coincidences. I truly believe that. If you’ll tell me who you really are, I can help you.”

Pulling away, Anthony started down the stairs. “Wedding jitters, hon. I’ll go back to the inn and check out. I’ll pick you up in an hour.”

“It’s the alcohol, isn’t it?” Maria said, gathering the skirt of her caftan and trailing after him on spindly heels. “Drink, and your evil side surfaces, Anthony. Mine does, too. I’ve been through it. You can kick it.”

As she rounded the first turn down the stairs, Maria caught up with him. There wasn’t room for both of them. Maria pinned him against the delicate teak handrail that

seemed to float above the treads. Anthony stared into her eyes, brown as old bottle glass and enormous, enlarged as they were by her thick glasses.

“Why steal from those who love you, Anthony? Someone must have hurt you terribly. But listen, dear, I know there’s good in you. In the few days I’ve known you, I’ve never encountered a more sensitive man.”

Anthony wrenched away from her and headed down the stairs.

“Run then, if that’s what you choose to do. But not on my money,” Maria shouted. “I’ll have you arrested.” She started back up the stairs.

Anthony froze. Arrest him? What a bizarre notion. “But Maria. Do you think that’s wise? What about your reputation? A renowned astrologer jilted by her lover?”

“Jilted?” Maria said with a gasp. From the top of the landing, she laughed at him. “But Anthony, I found you out, remember? A complete vindication of my powers.”

Damn the woman! His bad heart was beginning to grind. Nevertheless, he had to settle this. He plodded back up the stairs. He stopped to rest just short of the top.

“You win, Maria,” he panted. “You want your money?” He braced himself on the handrail and taunted her, waggling the briefcase.

Maria started down the stairs, made a grab for the case, but caught the sleeve of his blazer instead. He yanked his arm back. It was shaking.

“Here, take it.” Anthony said, swinging the case back at her, flat alongside her head. The force of the blow sent her over the railing. With a shriek, Maria hit her head on the

corner of the marble planter below.

Anthony stared after her. “Jesus, the damned planter, Ria,” he murmured.

She moaned. Blood seeped from the wound. Her hand reached up for her head, faltered, flopped back. Gripping the handrail to support himself, he crept down the stairs. By the time he made the foyer, Maria was ominously still. The color seemed to be draining from her face. There was no pulse at her wrist, none in the artery at her neck. A trail of blood spilled from the corner of her mouth.

Damn all the luck!

Gasping for breath, Anthony slumped down on the steps. His heart was tearing at his ribs. This was too much. What was wrong with the woman, attacking him like that? He was no killer. Had no heart for it. Neither physically, nor mentally. He was too old for stuff like this. But who would believe a swindler? It was all just a terrible accident. It took him some time before his heart calmed down enough for him to think. He must erase his presence. It would put him well behind schedule, but a thorough cleanup was essential. This was an accident that truly had to look like one. He patted his breast pocket and pulled out his cell phone. God. What was the number? He was too rattled to think clearly. Finally, the right combination occurred to him.

“Anthony?” He detected anxiety in the husky voice. “I just knew it was you.”

“Sweetheart,” he said. “Forgive me, my darling, but something has come up. A business emergency. A client is in terrible trouble and I’m running a little late.”

CHAPTER 1

DeLeon, FL

Friday, August 21

It was always the same. *The ball of light. The deafening sound. The rain of debris. The flight. The fall. The water, swirling at her, choking her. The breath sucked out of her. Her chest crushing in. Gasping. Coughing. The acrid stench. The flames licking at her face.*

“No,” Angie Reynolds sobbed, her body writhing. “*Nooooo!*” She awakened, her face wet with tears.

“Angie? Are you all right?” It was Barbara Baquero, chief esthetician at Salon DeLeon. Barbara raised the lid of the long, clam-shaped steamer where Angie lay baking in a tight wrapping of seaweed.

Angie sat up, wiped her face, and looked around the small white room with the antique butterfly prints hung on the walls. There was a massage table covered with soft white sheets to her left and a shower at the foot of the

steamer. The Armani suit her fiancé had bought her hung in a garment bag on the wall. Anthony wanted her hairdresser to see the sculpted neckline, so that he could make the right decision on her hair. Up or down? Last night he had toyed endlessly with her hair, pinning it this way and that. Barbara handed her a tissue.

Angie blew her nose. "I'm sorry, Barbara. It's a pesky dream. A nightmare, really. I've had it since childhood. For years it went away. Now it's recurring."

Barbara sat down on the edge of the steamer and stroked Angie's arm. "You sure, honey? I thought maybe I had the steam set too high. You scared me to death."

Angie's fingers fluttered to her mouth, then drifted away. Here she was in the finest salon on the Florida Gulf, making a complete fool of herself. "No. Really. This is wonderful. It's just that I've been under such stress."

Barbara shook her head. "A wedding can be hell." Her brown eyes grew big, her perfect mouth dropped in wonderment. "And here you are doing it on three days' notice. No time to plan?" Barbara raised her shoulders and shook her head, the fall of her dark hair rippling. Then she smiled, showing off her perfect teeth. "But it's a heavenly kind of hell, isn't it?"

"It's madness, I know. The whole thing is crazy. I'm completely exhausted, but my fiancé wants nothing less than perfection. It's really his parents' fiftieth anniversary. A big do in Manhattan. Six hundred guests. We're to be married quietly in a private ceremony afterwards."

"I met your Anthony just awhile ago," Barbara said.

Barbara stood up to recheck the settings on her machine

while Angie studied the flawless taupe of Barbara's skin, hoping she would look half as good as Barbara did when they got done with her makeover.

"He came in for a hairstyle with Roberto," Barbara said. "He personally went over with me every single detail of your treatment. Such a concerned man. You know what I think? I think he was checking up. To see you got the best. Such a nice man. So proud of you. He told everyone in the shop about the three-carat solitaire waiting for you when you get to New York. When he left he said he was going to the bank. He needed a suitcase full of cash to pay for the wedding." Barbara laughed, rolling her eyes.

"That's Anthony, all right," Angie said, shaking her head. It bewildered her that Anthony felt compelled to regale everyone with their wedding plans, even complete strangers. But Anthony said she had to get used to that. It was the Italian in him.

"What do you feel like, Angie?" Barbara said, squeezing her shoulders at the base of her neck. "Maybe we should cut short with the body bake and go with the massage?"

"I'll be fine, Barbara. The dream won't come back. Just let me finish the treatment."

"I tell you what. I'll reset the timer. You need an uninterrupted twenty minutes," Barbara said, resettling Angie between the paper sheets that lined the steamer.

Angie rested her head on the small, throwaway pillow as Barbara let herself out. She should consider herself lucky. So why the qualms? She was uneasy. That's what the dream meant. But why? What young widow wouldn't

jump at what Anthony had offered her? The chance to become the wife of a prominent New York attorney; the option to continue her career in interior design. Live on Park Avenue in the same building where his parents had the penthouse. A second home right here in DeLeon. Jason was to have the finest prep school education money could buy.

Yes, Anthony was older, maybe fifteen years, possibly even twenty. He was a little vague about his age. But so what? He was a handsome, fun-loving man with great social presence and he absolutely adored her. There was no doubt of that. Still, Angie felt a little unsure of herself. She didn't think she could measure up to what he wanted her to be. Wasn't that it?

She was attracted to Anthony, infatuated with him, maybe, but it just wasn't what it had been with Alan. She'd adored Alan. He'd been her soul mate, her best friend. One day she was married to a rising young architect, working with him on a daily basis. The next day she was a struggling widow, trying to hang onto the business she and Alan had opened together. She never would have made it if it hadn't been for Dad. And then to lose Dad, so soon after Alan? She couldn't believe it. Thought it was some kind of curse.

Angie's face broke into a sweat as steam filled the booth where she lay. A miasma of seaweed and clay filled her nostrils. Her lips curved into a wan smile. The weedy scent must have touched off that ghastly drowning dream. She wriggled her body, hidden in its clamshell casing, reminding herself to relax. The battle was over, and Angie

had won.

Even though Jane, her mother, had begged her to simply close up her shop and come home, Angie had persevered. She'd scrimped and cut corners at home, and worked so many long hours that Jason had suffered. There were times she hadn't seen how unhappy he'd been. But as of last week, she'd made it. She had accumulated just enough money to pay off the quarterly installment on her bank loan. Then she'd met Anthony at the art auction she'd installed to earn the commission that put her a few dollars in the black. Now she would put this bad time behind her.

Just like the prince in some fairy tale, Anthony had ridden into DeLeon in his white Lincoln, an attorney taking depositions. He'd come into her shop, bought one entire lot of antique Limoges figurines for his parents' anniversary, and the two of them had spent every hour he had available from that day to this.

Anthony had begged her to marry him on their second date, when they'd dined at the new restaurant on Sanibel, Junonia, named for that rarest of shells. They hit all the clubby nightspots afterwards, from Tarwinkles to 'Tween Waters on Captiva, where Anthony stole the show everywhere with his bawdy songs, gossip about movie stars, celebrities and politicians, and lawyer jokes. Then they'd gone for a long stroll on the beach along the causeway, and Angie confessed she wasn't over Alan's death.

Anthony had taken her in his arms. "Angie, I know how you feel. I was devastated when I lost my beloved Maria. I brought up my boys all alone. Twenty years slipped away from me. And now that I've met you, I know Maria would

never have wanted that for me. There are no coincidences, Maria always said. And I know your dear one would want you to be taken care of in the way you so richly deserve.” Angie heard the throaty rumble of his voice against the crackle of the surf and she began to relax in the long steamer. He told her, “I know it’s too soon to expect you to love me as much as I love you. But the way I’ll take care of you, I know love will come.”

Within a matter of hours, the Gulf Stream jet would arrive bearing Anthony’s brother, the software publisher, and his good friend, Nate Tamblyn, star of kick boxer movies, and Tamblyn’s supermodel wife, Iona. Anthony had brought her in here so that she’d look, well, perfect, and so she settled back and forced herself to shut off her rambling thoughts. She drifted off to a peaceful sleep as she heard Paul Anka singing “Put Your Head on My Shoulder” on the salon’s piped in music. Funny. Wasn’t that the oldie that she and Anthony had danced to when he finally arrived last night, so sweet, so apologetic at being hours late for their date?



“Angie, darling, wake up Hon,” Barbara said.

“Already?” Angie moaned. “I felt *sooo* relaxed.”

“I’m really sorry, Angie,” Barbara said, handing her a phone. “It’s a Miss Waters at your bank. They are about to close and they need your approval for something.”

CHAPTER 2

Friday, August 21, 4:47 p.m.

Anthony Abruzzi pulled his white Lincoln Continental up beneath the portico of the Florida Seaboard Bank, right where it said No Parking on the pilasters. Frowning, a security guard in a blue uniform approached the car to wave it off. Seeing who it was, his wizened face split into a grin. He came around to open Anthony's door.

"George, how you be, Buddy?" Anthony said as he emerged from the car to pump the guard's hand. "How's that grandson of yours?"

"Fine, sir. He pitched a no hitter last night."

"You tell him I said keep it up, George." Anthony thumped the guard on the back.

"Good luck at your wedding, sir," the guard replied.

Anthony checked his Rolex. “Just two hours and thirty-three minutes from now, my brother’s Gulf Stream jet swoops down on DeLeon Field to steal Angie P. Reynolds and me off to New York.”

“It couldn’t happen to a nicer girl. Congratulations to you and good luck to you both.”

Anthony flashed the watch, a Presidential model. “My fiancée bought this for me. What do you think of it?”

The guard bent closely to inspect the gold watch. “Outstanding.”

At that moment the bank manager, Ned Wadlow, came rushing forward to take Anthony by the arm. “We’re all ready for you, Mr. Abruzzi. I realize you are in a hurry.”

“And here it is a quarter to five on Friday evening and I’ve put you to all this trouble, Ned,” Anthony said, his hand on Wadlow’s shoulder as they strode across the gleaming expanse of sea green marble, passing what seemed to be miles of walnut paneling. Spare and rangy, Anthony had chosen to look casually elegant. He wore his favorite light gray, Gianfranco Ferre suit over a Karesh turtle-neck with a stretched out neck. Very witty—the perfect thing to set off his dark skin and prematurely gray hair. By comparison the fresh-faced, chunky Wadlow appeared to be trapped in a suit that was an entire generation too old for him.

“Angie’s one of our favorite people. And her mother as well,” Wadlow murmured.

Anthony raised a dark brow, pruned by Roberto at Salon DeLeon earlier this afternoon. The reference to Angie’s mother startled him. “You’ve met Jane Pelham?”

Wadlow's eyes widened. "Why, yes. She was down last winter with her husband." As they reached the head teller's cage, a young woman appeared. "Tell Hilda Mr. Abruzzi has arrived," Wadlow announced.

Anthony leaned toward Wadlow. "I suggested to Angie that I send my brother's jet to fetch Jane for the wedding. But Angie declined. Unfortunately, Jane is under medication for depression. It's been very hard on her since her husband died."

"A shame," Wadlow muttered, his eyes sweeping the cages, where pairs of tellers were in the process of closing out. "David Pelham was only fifty nine. Died a week after a checkup showed he was in perfect health. He was going public with his company."

"Sea Escape Designs?" Anthony said.

Wadlow nodded. "A total shock. Lucky in everything but his genes, I guess."

"I'll have *both* the Pelham women to look after," Anthony murmured. He pulled a wafer of a gold lighter from his pocket and lighted his long cigar within shouting distance of a No Smoking sign.

Noticing Wadlow's raised eyebrows, Anthony showed him the label.

"A Cohiba?"

"Genuine."

"Cuban?" Wadlow's eyes went round. "I won't ask how you got that."

"A grateful client," Anthony said with a shrug. "So I'll send you a box."

"Oh, no. No, I couldn't let you," Wadlow said.

“Come on, Ned. I’m your grateful client.”

“We don’t finish this transaction in the next ten minutes, you might not be so grateful, sir.”

Anthony raised his cigar in a kind of salute as Wadlow took up his pen. “After the wedding, we’ll be taking off for one of the Greek Islands. One of my clients has offered us his villa. Once I get this trial thing out of the way, I’m going to devote a lot of time to Angie. Maybe her mother will join us in Greece.”

“I hope you won’t forget DeLeon,” Wadlow said.

“And I hope you won’t forget to visit us in New York, Ned,” Anthony said. “I got an uncle runs a haberdashery just two blocks from Bloomie’s. I’ll get you into some Italian suits. *Capisce?*”

The banker chuckled. “Wouldn’t I be the talk?”

“Don’t let me kid you, Ned. You’ve got it made here in DeLeon. The beaches. The sunshine...” Anthony paused a beat or two and added his punch line: “The dog track.”

Wadlow guffawed.

“Anyway—and I mean this Ned—please get in touch if you find a good buy in one of the better condominium properties here. Maybe a Villa in The Pines. Or possibly something in White Heron. Nothing too expensive, certainly no more than a million. At the most we’d use it five—maybe six months of the year.”

“I’ll surely do that,” said the banker, glancing around nervously. “Here’s Miss Waters.” A tall woman with a mop of dazzling gold dreadlocks and a mocha complexion spiked with tiny black freckles appeared with a file box full of cash.

“My land, Mr. Anthony. You are some sugar daddy in that outfit,” she said, flashing teeth rimmed in gold.

Wadlow reddened, started to sputter, but Anthony laughed explosively.

“Counselor Sugar Daddy. How do you think the judge would like that?”

“I don’t know, honey. Depends whether the judge be a he or a she.” The shell beads of Hilda’s myriad braids clicked as she swiveled her head and tossed him a sidelong glance.

Wadlow blanched. Seeing that Anthony was amused by Hilda’s antics, however, he brayed right along, but abruptly got back to business. “We have only twelve minutes to get the counting done,” he said. “Sorry to rush you, sir, but if we’ve miscounted we have only minutes to get back into the vault. Everything’s on a timer.” Wadlow rolled his eyes. “Frankly, bankers are slaves to their security systems.”

“Well, we’ll just take your word for it, Ned. Hilda wouldn’t cheat me, I know. Just hand me your paperwork and I’ll sign it. I wouldn’t dare be late tonight—Say? Did I tell you Nate Tamblyn will be coming on the plane?”

Wadlow looked blank. Hilda got him off the hook. “The Karate Kid? Ohhhh, I love his movies,” she said clapping her hands. “Do you think I could get his autograph?”

“Give me your address, Hilda. I’ll take care of it,” Anthony said. Hilda penned her address on the back of one of the bank’s business cards. Anthony read it back to her before he tucked the card in his pocket, noticing Wadlow’s

increasing irritation out of the corner of his eyes. Wadlow pushed a teller receipt beneath Anthony's pen. Anthony scrawled his illegible signature, all squiggles and flourishes, then opened the attaché case he carried.

"Did you see this beautiful briefcase my fiancée bought me?" Anthony said as he stacked bills inside, filling an entire compartment.

Wadlow whistled, "Hermés, isn't it?"

By the time Anthony had packed the case and locked it with flicks of the combination dials, it was five minutes past closing. Wadlow escorted him back across the lobby and the guard unlocked the door.

Saluting, George said, "Be careful now. Hear?"

"The clients I have? I got no choice. They take it very unkindly if I lose their money."

George held the briefcase as Anthony punched in the door lock combination on the Continental. Wadlow hovered on the sidewalk. From his rearview mirror Anthony caught Wadlow's goodbye salute, which he returned with a two-fingered V for victory sign as he sped off.

"Goodbye Wadlow. Goodbye DeLeon," he murmured.

CHAPTER 3

Friday, August 21, 9:40 p.m.

Outside, a car door slammed. Angie darted to the rear window of her second floor condominium, wedged open a slat in the blinds and peered down into the parking lot. It was only her neighbor returning from his courier's job at the library. Embarrassed, Angie stepped back from the window. What if he thought she was spying on him? Angie checked her watch once again.

By their revised schedule, Anthony's limousine was exactly sixty-two minutes late. He would be furious.

She slipped out of the jacket of her Armani suit. With deliberate care she laid the jacket over the back of a chair. If she didn't look absolutely perfect when the limousine finally did arrive, he'd be annoyed.

The limousine bearing Anthony's brother, Salvatore, his brother's wife and the Tamblyns. Where could they be? They should have been here long ago. For two days, Anthony had planned obsessively for this meeting. Angie hated to think how terribly disappointed he would be.

From the Gucci handbag that Anthony bought for her yesterday, Angie pulled the typed schedule she had prepared at his insistence. A Gulf Stream jet was to arrive from Dallas-Ft. Worth at 7:30 p.m. Anthony was to meet the jet with the limousine. Deplane, fifteen minutes. Twenty-five minutes from the airport to Angie's condominium in The Glades, a golf club community just two exits off I-75, just south of downtown DeLeon. Party to arrive no later than 8:15. A short reception, thirty minutes. Have in a few close friends. Stick to people who won't gush over Tamblyn.

At seven p.m. he'd called to say he'd just learned that the jet had left Dallas a half hour late. He advised her to call everybody and cancel out on this party. Luckily she'd reached everyone except her best friends, the Goldheims.

Angie looked at the evening watch with the single diamond Anthony had given her. It won a top design prize at an international jewelry show. It was 9:47. What could have happened? A flat tire? She absent-mindedly arranged her russet blonde pageboy in front of the hall mirror, perhaps for the twelfth time. Normally Angie could depend on her thick hair to hold perfectly. Tonight, even her hair had failed her, despite the fact that Maurice at Salon DeLeon had nervously put a pound of spray on it. Come to think of it, a pound of spray was probably what was wrong. Ap-

palled, Angie saw that her hair lay flat against her head, limp as the strips of the O-Cedar mop she had used on the kitchen floor, not once but three times. What a shame. Maurice had worked so hard to get her thick hair to wave just so, to compliment the curving collar of the suit.

Angie jumped a foot when Jason slipped up behind her, clasping her around the waist, resting his chin on the top of her head. Although he was only eleven, he was already a head taller than she and loved to emphasize the fact.

“Mom? When are we going?” Jason said.

She smiled at her son. His big gray eyes were hers, silvery hubcaps in his narrow Pelham face. He was dressed in the stylish Gap jeans and Polo shirt Anthony had let him select for the plane trip. He had warned Jason, however, that he’d have to go blue blazer and gray flannel preppie for the big social events in New York.

“Any time now, darling,” Angie said, stroking the weight line at the back of Jason’s haircut. This lumpish skater cut drove Anthony wild. When Jason had rebelled, Angie intervened. When Jason was enrolled in prep school, then he could go with a preppie haircut.

“Tired of the Xbox?” Angie said, relaxing a little, allowing herself to be rocked in her son’s arms.

“I beat all the games already,” Jason said.

“I’m grateful you didn’t fuss over the Xbox,” Angie said, first stroking his arms, then gently prying Jason’s grip loose. She was afraid he’d wrinkle her suit.

“It doesn’t matter, Mom,” Jason said. He released his mother and slumped on the sofa. Though Jason had his heart set on the PlayStation computer game system, An-

thony had insisted on getting the Xbox from Microsoft. “Always go for the American product, kid,” he’d growled.

Angie sat down beside him, pinching his earlobe. “Not ready just yet,” she teased.

Jason’s mouth lifted in a tried-for smile. It was an old family joke that Angie would fricassee Jason’s tender earlobes and have them for dinner—when they were ready, which, of course, they never were.

“Honey, you’ve been awfully quiet these past few days. Is something bothering you?”

Jason’s mouth turned down. He refused to look at her. “I know Anthony’s a really rich guy, Mom, but sometimes I think he’s got an attitude,” Jason said. The pair had tangled again this afternoon when Jason came home with scratches on his cheek. Jason had been climbing in his pal’s tree house and fallen out and cut himself.

Anthony fumed, lecturing Jason for carelessly allowing himself to get scarred up. “You’ll need a retouch before we put you in your mama’s wedding picture,” Anthony grouched. Jason hadn’t said a word, but immediately headed for his room and locked the door. He hadn’t emerged until Anthony left.

Angie stroked the scratch on Jason’s cheek. “It’s true, darling, I agree, and Anthony himself knows he’s a little pushy, but that’s the way these high-powered attorneys are. Can you forgive Anthony that?”

“If he makes you happy? I guess so, Mom. I’ll try.”

It was a little rocky between Anthony and Jason, but Angie knew things would work out. After all, Anthony did seem to recognize he had his faults. Last night, cuddled

together in a restaurant booth, they had dined on squab and champagne in the exclusive Seminole Lodge. He'd kept her waiting two hours for their dinner date and seemed distracted during the first part of the meal. Then, sensing her irritation, he had brushed her fingers with his lips and apologized. "I do hope you can learn to be patient, my pet," he said. "I was brought up by a woman who was head decorator for Bonwit Teller. Things simply had to be done to perfection or not even attempted. Unfortunately, I get caught up in a consuming need to take meticulous care of my clients."

Angie pulled Jason close. "I always want you to remember. You come first with me, sweetheart."

She realized how painful it was to watch Jason growing up right now. Every day his hair got darker and his features took on his grandfather's masculinity. His face was going through an awkward stage. His childish jaw line couldn't seem to keep pace with the emergence of the Pelham high-bridged nose. From day one, Jason took after the Pelhams, their height, wiry builds, open faces, thick, burnt-umber hair and sensitive skin.

Angie stared at her watch for the umpteenth time. Even under the revised schedule the limousine should have been here at least an hour ago, and it was very odd that Anthony, usually so considerate and meticulous, hadn't called.

"I tell you what, Mom, call the airport," Jason said.

"Oh, I don't know, darling, whether we should upset Anthony."

"Hey, Anthony's always on the phone. He's probably gabbing on his cell right now."

It was true. Anthony carried a phone in his breast pocket, even the afternoon he took Jason to a baseball game. He received constant calls from his office. He frequently consulted with his mother.

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Deal,” Angie said.

This was a good idea. Let Jason call Anthony. Maybe the two of them would make up. It was a muggy spring night. Angie stepped outside to catch a bit of breeze while Jason phoned, her thoughts racing. Anthony insisted that Mama Regina would love her on sight. But what if Anthony proved to be one of those mama’s boys wrapped around Regina’s finger? Could that be why he had never remarried? Angie had given Anthony a conditional promise. Yes, she would let him go ahead and sweep her off her feet—but Angie had insisted that she have a right to delay the ceremony if she felt too pressured. Anthony himself had suggested she proceed on this basis. “Of course I’m too aggressive and pushy, darling. Every judge in New York has told me the same thing,” he’d said last night.

The memory of Anthony’s earnest confession brought a smile to her face as she sat on her deck, staring up through the screened porch at the full moon. She told herself to stop worrying and enjoy her romance. After all, Anthony had been late before. I am *soooo* lucky, Angie had said to herself. Thank you, God. She was amazed how—in what, less than five days?—a person’s entire life could turn around.

Jason came out to the porch. The moonlight robbed his face of normal color. The Jason she saw in that eerie light

was foreign to her. His trusting young face had become a pallid etching of bewilderment and loss.

“Mom? I don’t mean to worry you, but something doesn’t add up.”

CHAPTER 4

Friday, August 21, 10:30 p.m.

The music on WOLZ, the oldies station he was listening to, was fading out. He punched around on the radio dial looking for a replacement, but nothing held. He hated having nothing to listen to, but the fadeout signaled progress. It meant DeLeon was well behind him and Sarasota was coming up.

“All right. We made it!” he said aloud, whacking at the steering wheel. He eyed the briefcase full of cash beside him on the seat. Angie’s cash. And that of all the others. What sweethearts, one and all!

It was then that he noticed the patrol car in the shadowy tunnel formed by a freeway overpass. Within seconds he felt a tightening behind his breastbone. The white Ford Escort he was driving began to weave. Je-sus, not now! The cop would think he was drunk. He didn’t dare pull over. Sweat rolled down his forehead as pain radiated in his

chest. He gritted his teeth as he felt his fingers grow numb. He eased into the right lane and willed himself to keep a steady pressure on the accelerator, waiting out the pain. Why did his stupid heart have to act up now? He'd been so careful. No speeding. No passing. Jeez! He'd even taken his pills! Nothing like a corpse in your immediate past to make an honest driver out of you.

The blast of a horn on his right rear sent him into a swerve. Damn. He'd wandered into an entrance lane on the far right. As the offended motorist pulled past him shaking his fist, he caught a glimpse of himself in his own rearview mirror. His heavily lidded eyes were slits. His skin seemed shrunken down around his bald head, a ghastly sight, but at least a sufficiently disguised one. His elegant attorney duds were packed away, along with Anthony's piece. What a shame it was. Cousin Anthony in his silver mane would be a perfect spokesman for the Men's Hair Club. Dressed in Dockers, a baseball cap, and a green and orange Gators' jacket, he had two tickets to the college football game in his wallet. It was something to gab about in case he got stopped. He now had everything under control except his own damned heart.

The pain in his chest subsided as he passed another patrolman. No doubt the guy was the second peg of a speed trap. Imagine him being relieved to see a cop. The cop—a kid—was on the radio, and he chuckled with relief. This was no road block set up for him, the way it had been that other time, when he'd been nabbed and sent back to prison. Due to that unfortunate accident in Banks, he couldn't afford to be stopped. Never again.

He studied the patrol car in his rearview mirror, slowing his pace as he did so. A looker blonde in the Corvette behind him tapped her horn in irritation. He had watched her off and on for the last five miles. Too bad he couldn't pick her up. Fortunately, the Friday evening traffic was awful—just as he had planned. The first freeway exit for Sarasota came up and he took it, glancing at his battered Timex as he passed under a streetlight.

Angie, sweet, faithful Angie, would be giving up her vigil about now, her dream shattered—and that was tough for her. He had the feeling she really saw him, or at least the lawyer he pretended to be, as something other than a meal ticket, which is what most women wanted from Anthony Abruzzi. He never felt bad taking from the gold diggers. They were out to con a rich attorney. So what if they got conned themselves?

Angie was a decent kid, however. Strange what life turned up. What amazing luck after all these years to encounter her, Angie Pelham Reynolds. She'd turned out to be a daddy's girl, touchingly grieving the loss of her father.

He lit one of the cheap Cleopatra cigars he always carried to complete his ordinary guy look. Now Cousin Anthony would never touch such a stogie. But his mind was on Pelham—dead by natural causes. How fortunate. David Pelham was a first class bastard if ever there was one. Talk about coincidence.

Only there was no such thing as a chance happening—that was what Maria Whitman had taught him before her untimely passing. The most meaningful events were the most coincidental. If he understood the astrologer's teach-

ings correctly. It was something she called *synchronicity*—that is, when she was in one of her highfalutin moods.

He was on his third or fourth drag on the cigar he wasn't supposed to be smoking and a Road Warrior Inn was in sight, when he had a brilliant idea. What a genius he was. It was no accident that he had found the Pelhams after all these years. He laughed aloud. Cousin Anthony made sure he had Jane Pelham's address. He even had her phone number. Angie's mother was sorely in need of consolation and companionship.

Why not?

He'd been plenty ticked that Angie had never told her mother about her forthcoming wedding. Now Angie would never dare breathe a word about the fact that she'd been dumped. Her mother was too depressed. Bad news from Angie might be just the thing to push Jane over the edge. So perhaps a little romance was just the thing for Angie's mother. Cousin Anthony couldn't woo Jane, of course. That would be a little too awkward. As for himself, he was just an ordinary guy. No, a class ring salesman would never appeal to Jane Pelham. But suppose another cousin appeared on the scene? Someone worthy of Jane's affections?

As he drove along, his thoughts focused on Angie's mother. If only he'd won her away from David Pelham in the first place. For Jane, he might have been something. Without her, he'd wasted his life. As he pulled over in front of the Inn, he tried to calculate what Jane must be worth. Eight? Maybe ten million? Certainly more than enough to see him through his twilight years.

As he plunked down cash for his room, he was careful to remove his bald cap to flash his tonsured skull. He deliberately left the tickets to the Gators game on the counter as he dug the cash for his room out of his wallet. He made a show of coming back to reclaim the tickets after he was halfway out the door of the office. Then he turned around and made a big deal of asking the reservation clerk which exit to take to the stadium tomorrow and which bar in town had the Gators fan club. Nose around a little and he might find a bookie.

He'd had to settle for a second floor room and was soaked with sweat by the time he'd carried three heavy bags up the stairs. He stretched out on the bed, feeling depressed and wondering why. He should have been elated over the fact that Maria Whitman hadn't been found. Not yet anyway. There had been no news flashes on the radio.

He pulled a lumpy pillow out from under a thin spread and yearned for the comforts of a Hilton or a Ritz Carlton, where the linens were crisp and the suites had mini bars with tidbits you could make a meal from. He didn't dare open cousin Anthony's Vuitton bag and get out his Chivas Regal. Integrity of character was the only way he'd stayed on top for so long. The way his heart was acting, he might have to check into the hospital at any moment, in which case he'd have to stay rational enough to take the suitably shabby Samsonite he'd found at a Goodwill store.

He used what remained of his energy to tune in the late news. There was nothing on Maria, and he was safe. If he wasn't too sick to drive tomorrow he'd soon be out of immediate danger. Of course, it would come up soon enough,

the links between Angie and Maria. But in a case like this the next move would be entirely up to Angie. The police would discourage her. After two or three days the coroner would be hard pressed to rule Maria's death anything but an accident.

On the other hand, if Maria were found immediately, then Anthony was one dead cousin. He'd have to bury Abruzzi's effects in some dumpster and move on. As for wooing Jane Pelham, it was stupid. He had to put that idea right out of his mind. He'd had his revenge on David Pelham when he'd jilted Angie. To steal Jane's affections as well? No, it was way too risky, much too arrogant.

Cousin Anthony might dream of pulling off something like that. For sure he would consider it. But wily Anthony wasn't nearly as arrogant as he pretended to be. That was what had kept the bogus lawyer going all these years. He didn't have the strength to raise his arm to put out the bedside lamp. He put a pillow over his head to shut out the light instead.

It took considerable effort to put Jane Pelham out of his mind. He focused on car doors slamming down in the parking lot, the slapping sounds of children chasing past his room, and the clanking of the miserable room air conditioner, the sort of distractions he never heard in a full service hotel.