

# Chapter 1

It all began, as Ken perceived it, with a sudden fit of precognition, and he knew instantly that the mooring lines that stabilized his life were about to show the first signs of major slippage.

He had been observing this couple just coming out of the slanting April rain all aflutter and out of breath as they shook off drops from their raincoats before handing them over to the hatcheck girl at Pumpkins, the pricey restaurant on Second Avenue, Maggie's choice, where the cooking was West Coast eclectic and the atmosphere luxury-liner Art Deco.

Ken, who was sitting facing the restaurant's entrance, saw her first in profile as she patted her cheeks dry with a tissue. Couldn't be, he decided at first, realizing suddenly that he had actually searched for her face in crowds for more than two decades.

Of course, he tried denying it, knowing it was the trigger to this precognition. No way. This could not be Carol Stein. The process of aging cannot stand still. Yet he could not tear his gaze away. There was that same easy grace of the floating swan, the same question-mark dancer's posture, the same high-cheekboned cat's face, the same angled head, emphasizing the sharp line of tilted chin overhanging the long, thin, white neck.

Aside from the emotional power of this hard punch to the solar plexus of his psyche, his physical reactions, too, took him by surprise. His heart seemed to skip a beat, many beats. His back broke out into a cold sweat and his throat ran dry.

Then his wife, Maggie, waved and the tall man in the blue double-breasted wide pinstripe and elegant gold-and-blue-striped tie beside this replica of Carol Stein acknowledged the gesture with a movement of his own, tapping the shoulder of the woman who could not be Carol Stein.

He watched her move toward him with a ballerina's dainty precision, her body gliding in step with some inner rhythm that made her long challis skirt seem driven by a gentle breeze over soft kid boots. The movement seemed to have a remembered signature, vibrating an old erotic chord within him.

Was this Carol Stein walking into his life after twenty-three years? He felt a blast of heat from that old furnace, firing up the passion and possession that had inflamed his youthful soul.

As she came closer, denial faltered and he felt trapped with all exits closed off. He would be an exhibit for her to observe and gloat over. Another tide of anxiety washed over him as he imagined the bloated remains of his former being lying on a cold slab awaiting Carol Stein's coroner's knife. Who could hide one's failure from that kind of scrutiny? He felt ashamed, the bitter bile of his lost dreams on the verge of exposure. Suddenly there was no place to hide.

Ironically, Ken had resisted this dinner. Earlier, he had

been overflowing with self-satisfaction and self-esteem. A top client of the agency had approved his campaign. His butt was bruised with kisses. He had been showered with praise, accolades, the usual exaggeration that was the idiom of the advertising business. They had, in fact, used the familiar buzzwords: *creative genius, a gargantuan talent, awesome brilliance.*

Of course, he understood the hyperbole. It was all part of the self-congratulatory culture of the advertising game. And the truth of it was that he had actually exhausted himself by feigning humility. An advertising copywriter could feign that often. It was expected. It telescoped to others that he knew he was good.

For this present exercise in painful knife-in-the-flesh truth, he had had to turn down his colleagues' celebration dinner in which he would be the trophy guest, able to bask all evening in the warm syrup of their admiration. This getting-to-know-you appointment with Maggie's client, the formidable Eliot Butterfield, would be strictly Maggie's show.

And here was the sight of this facsimile of Carol Stein, steering his thoughts into these dark cobwebbed corners, and forcing a confrontation with the dead past. Except that it wasn't dead, could never be dead. It flushed out reminders of the glory days of possibility and promise, and directed his attention to the reality of his defeat.

It had been the moment he had feared for more than two decades.

How old had he been in the season of Carol Stein? Twen-

ty-one, was it? It was still a time when he had been dead certain of his talent and his future. Hadn't his teachers, his friends, his mother especially, through elementary school, high school, and college, assured him that he had the literary right stuff?

He had thought of himself as Hemingway incarnate. Hemingway in those years was his literary god, and the imitative rhythms of his prose reflected it. Ken had a way with words, they all said, stretching his confidence, feeding his ambition and all those secret fantasies of fame and celebrity.

If encouragement was judgment, he was destined, according to them, to walk in his master's footsteps. Of course, he believed it. Doubt is not a serious issue at sixteen. Even at twenty-one, in the season of Carol Stein, the dream was reasonably intact, although hard reality, the so-called real world, had already begun to rattle the foundations of certainty.

Had she made it, scaled the heights, become the prima ballerina of her young obsession? Had the sacrifice of their love been worth the candle? For her? For him? Actually, he could not remember a time when he was so acutely embarrassed by his failure. Especially since, in the narrow world of advertising, most people considered him a success. It had been a comfortable illusion.

God, he hadn't felt such obvious regret for what might have been for years. Perhaps this was not *the* Carol Stein, he thought hopefully, but an apparition. Go away, he begged it. Only it still kept coming, challenging his vanity, his sense

of himself, his essence.

He dared not face her, dared not allow himself even to consider jogging her recollection. He could not bear the idea of showing her his failed self, especially if she had been successful, was successful. Worse for him, on the arm of this solid-looking, confident fellow, she looked successful.

Twenty-three years ago, still at least five years too late to be trendy, he wore the Jesus look, a beard, long hair, and little round glasses. Now he was slightly balding in front, the jet black was flecked with peppery gray, and he had shaved the beard. Now he wore contacts, the extended-wear kind. He wished he were wearing sunglasses to further hide his eyes from her. The eyes, he asked himself, the good old windows on the soul, would they be the dead giveaway?

She was coming closer now, moving in tandem with this tall, elegant man who had acknowledged Maggie. He felt himself flush, the heat dampening the thinning wisps on his forehead.

Would she recognize him? Him? At twenty-one, America's greatest unknown writer. First would come the novels, the prose sharp and clean. True sentences marching like determined battalions across the page as true as "Up in Michigan," as true as "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," truer maybe than "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." He had pretensions then. True, indeed.

As for Carol Stein, she was to be a prima ballerina, the heiress to the mantle of Margot Fonteyn, Moira Shearer, Maria Tallchief. It was she, Carol Stein, who would be the half-bird, half-woman of Stravinsky's *Firebird*, the equal of

Markova's Giselle, the Sugar Plum Fairy of *The Nutcracker*. Not maybe. Assuredly. Talk about dreams that burn, Carol Stein's was as hot and focused as nuclear fusion. Like his.

Put on this the added burden of addictive love, consuming passion, red-hot lust, Kismet, or however one describes unquenchable hormonal eruption, and you get a flame too greedy to compete with other obsessions. Like ballet. Like literary achievement. Discipline demanded they end it. Didn't it? He tried his best to ridicule the idea in the light of later events. What, after all, had all that burning ambition achieved?

But then, twenty-three years ago, to part seemed the only logical alternative, the only cure, which resulted in a necessary, cruel, wrenching but brave and courageous act. Cold-turkey amputation. How else to describe it? Try as he might to drive the memory away with ridicule and sarcasm, it was just too powerful to fully obliterate.

The parting was bad enough. Worse, he recalled the promise. In keeping with the passion of their relationship, they took solemn oaths to pick up the reins when they had "become," made it. In two, three years, maybe five, bemedaled and enshrined, they swore reunion, fealty, and faithfulness. Even in the recollection, the melodrama of it was beyond excess.

From the beginning it was all excess, magnified and multiplied. Everything was ritual and ceremony. Sex was holy. Their lovemaking had the fury of exorcism.

"You must," she had cried that first time, urging him to thrust forward past the pain of what they then called that

tight, unopened palace of her womanhood. Oh, God. To suffer that purple image now was a mortification.

But still she came forward and he remained frozen and fearful, unable to take his eyes off that smooth, chiseled, almost ageless alabaster face, probing his memory for clues. Is she or isn't she? Since he was not going to melt or disappear, he girded himself for this surreal reunion.

"The cab service was a half hour late," Eliot said, offering a smooth apology in an accent that resonated with upper-crust schooling, making it clear by implication that he was not one to chase cabs on rain-swept New York streets. Certainly not like Ken had done.

Eliot took Maggie's hand, Maggie looking up at Eliot's craggy features, all ruddy with charm and good cheer. He was extraordinarily tall, with steel-blue eyes and a sweeping ski-run nose. His forehead was high and shiny, crowned by a full head of dark wavy hair with distinguished gray sideburns. Thin lips tightened over large teeth in what passed for a smile but seemed suspiciously insincere. Ken, perhaps in order to avoid facing the real or ersatz Carol, was actually studying him comparatively, which embarrassed him. He was older than Ken, perhaps by a decade, big-boned, his hands large and hard, not fleshy.

"My husband, Ken," Maggie said as the men's hands joined. Eliot's glance lingered for a proper moment until his hand disengaged and touched Carol's shoulder.

"And this is Carol," Eliot said with a lilting air of pride and possession, as if he were showing off a prized greyhound. Not *the* Carol. Surely not.

“So nice to meet you at last,” Carol said to Maggie.

She was never a broad smiler with her mouth. It was her eyes that always danced a greeting, hazel eyes that often picked up any green within sight. As they did now. She wore an emerald pin on a cream-colored jewel-necked cashmere sweater. Her black hair, parted in the center, ballerina-style, was, slicked back severely, emphasizing her sculpted features.

After acknowledging Maggie, the woman’s eyes shifted toward him and he braced himself. There was no question in his mind now. Here she was. Carol Stein, reborn. His stomach lurched as his eyes, after the briefest flicker, evaded hers. In that split second he knew that he had not the courage to make the first move of recognition. Perhaps he would escape, he told himself, vowing to let her make the first move.

“My husband, Ken,” Maggie said. Ken forced himself to lock into her gaze. Here’s your chance, he told himself. She offered not the barest hint, not an iota of recognition.

“Pleased to meet you,” Carol said.

He had taken her hand, feeling for signals. None came, although for him the touch had had the impact of a lightning bolt.

Despite his desire not to be recognized, he was crushed by the lack of it. How was it possible? Perhaps it merely mirrored his self-image, made even more self-critical by this event—that of the failed man whose only attainment had been anonymity.

Then, suddenly, as quickly as it had come, the idea of



his failure slithered like a snake back to its dry and rocky den. He was reclaiming his courage. His coping mechanism was activated. He assured himself that in his universe, the advertising world, he was looked up to, considered enormously creative, an appellation of great prestige value. There were times when he had loved it, believed it, had gamboled in the swill of its cachet and status. All right, against the old dream, the dream of becoming the great writer, the "creative" label was, in a sense, a debasement of the term, not to be confused with the real thing. He had always known it was bullshit. But in the increasingly junky American culture it had its place. Who could tell a great writer from a hack these days? And in terms of labels such as "creative," a "best" seller was rarely really best and half of them were skewered to pander to fantasies of suburban females. Weren't they?

"A Stoli Gibson on the rocks with three onions," Ken told the waiter, feeling the salutary effects of his venting. Eliot ordered a bottle of French red, fussing over the wine list with half-glasses, showing serious interest, as he probed the waiter for explanations about the year and the vineyard.

Maggie listened raptly, her long blonde hair rustling as her head moved between Eliot and the waiter. Ken was suddenly aware of the contrast between the women. The one delicate, black-haired, swanlike; the other large-boned, yellow blonde, blue-eyed, sculpted out of northern-clime Norwegian stock.

"Suit everyone?" Eliot asked, choosing the wine finally. Carol nodded.

"Sounds great," Maggie said. "But Ken isn't much for wine."

"Make mine a double," Ken called to the waiter as he moved away. Maggie cut him a glance of disapproval, then turned back to Eliot.

Maggie, no question about it, was impressed with Eliot Butterfield. She was a software consultant, installing and creating computer programs for various clients on a free-lance basis. Eliot Butterfield was a client. Maggie, wearing her midwestern openness on her sleeve, was often an enthusiast about people, and when she was impressed with one or another of her clients, the invariable game plan was to drag Ken out to dinner as a first step to greater intimacy.

Unfortunately, Ken was rarely cooperative and the follow-through usually fizzled after a few encounters. The objective for Maggie was always to have "couple" friends, so far a fruitless endeavor. Ken was not a natural friend-maker, although he was forced by circumstances to allow a truncated form of friendship with some of his co-workers at the agency.

Carol, in keeping with a genuine memory lapse, sincere nonrecognition, or an obvious determination not to acknowledge her past, barely looked toward Ken during the aperitif session. Mostly, this was filled with the small-talk and information exchange of new acquaintanceship. Ken, as if he were consciously exercising some form of spite, maintained a deliberate silence while Maggie and Eliot carried the main dialogue and Carol answered only questions put to her by each of them.

But while Ken's façade might have seemed to register a shy reticence, inner turmoil persisted and he listened carefully to the exchange. The Butterfields lived in an apartment on Fifth Avenue in the seventies facing the park, which usually meant old money and big bucks. Wasps, of course, never ever acknowledged such crass numerical facts.

Maggie, on the other hand, always volunteered their own circumstances, which were hardly lavish but seemed so in the recounting. The fact was that they had been living above their means for years and, after deducting private-school tuition for their daughters, their high co-op fees, designer clothes, entertainment expenses, and other "necessities" of the New York life-style, they were forever in debt.

"Mother's place in Maine suits us fine when the thirst for change of place seizes us," Eliot pointed out with a nod toward Carol.

"Wonderful," Maggie volunteered in response. "We seem to be running counter to the second-house trend. We don't have a Connecticut house or a place at the beach."

She hadn't said it in a resentful or whiny way, but Ken, nevertheless, felt a twinge of shame, as if somehow it characterized other shortcomings as well. He offered no response, suffering through the revelations, knowing he was helpless to offer any refutation. Any comment of his would be a surrender to recognition.

He simply had to live with the fact that Maggie and Eliot had undoubtedly exchanged such surfacy social information during breaks from their computer consultations. Again his stomach churned with the realization that Eliot,

on the basis of Maggie's information, would simply have dismissed him as hardly worthy of any real interest. Was it possible that he had conveyed this to Carol?

Maggie had told Ken what Eliot "did."

"He researches, offers papers, is active in organizations that promote his wide-ranging interests. Mostly he is a thinker."

"Nice work if you can get it," Ken had said sarcastically. Her enthusiasm over Eliot had rankled him.

"Eliot doesn't work, not for money," Maggie had explained. "He is an independent. As I told you, he thinks."

"Profound thoughts, no doubt?"

"Quite profound," Maggie had countered patiently. "Alternatives to war. Disintegrating ecological systems. The preservation of wildlife. This is his most pressing and fervent cause."

"Man included?" Ken had asked, not without a twinge of intimidation. The man, after all, was independently wealthy.

"He has a very brilliant mind. The breadth of it is extraordinary. That's why the computerization process is essential. We are creating a vast data bank."

"Of thoughts?" Ken had responded, snickering over the idea that a man could have the bent, leisure, and gall to label his occupation "thinker." Later Ken had suspected that the source of his irritation was his jealousy over the man's ability to do this. If he had the wherewithal, not forced by circumstances to pump water uphill like oxen on the Nile, he could use that leisure to truly create, articulate the great

stories lying just beneath the surface of his mind, like mining some valuable mineral deposit.

"As long as he pays you on time," Ken had muttered.

Maggie, wisely, avoided any response to his sarcasm. Evasion was her weapon of choice. Actually, Ken preferred confrontation, but he rarely got that kind of a reaction out of Maggie. Just evasion. But from Maggie's description of Eliot he had concluded that the man was both an intellectual snob and a prig. Then he had been guessing, and yet now, studying Eliot across the table, he was certain he had been on target. But to Ken the real mystery of the man was how in the world he had landed Carol Stein.

The waiter came with the wine and poured it into Eliot's glass. He picked it up, whirling the liquid around the glass with a flick of his wrist. Then he sniffed it, sipped, and seemed to gargle with it. Ken thought for a moment that he was about to spit it out, as he had observed connoisseurs do at various wine-tasting events. The only receptacle for such an act was the centerpiece of flowers on the white tablecloth. He was relieved when Eliot, after a long gargle, swallowed finally. Then he nodded his approval to the waiter who then poured. Ken covered his empty glass with his palm. He would stick to his double Gibsons.

So Carol had married a man with a lot of money who had pretentious tastes, thought profound thoughts, and wanted to save wild beasts and mankind, Ken reflected as he fished with his fingers among the slippery ice cubes of his drink for the last onion. Snaring it, he popped it in his mouth, then washed it down with the liquid dregs. He caught the

waiter's eye and signaled for another one. He'd need the extra jolt to get him through this dinner.

"So it's advertising, is it? I suppose it's a necessary evil," Eliot said, chomping a breadstick. Ken had dreaded the revelation, although the quick rush of the vodka was already working its dulling magic.

"Ken contends that it gives people choices," Maggie said, a bit too quick to defend him.

"We could argue the merits of the choices," Eliot said. Was it his imagination or did Ken note a slight twitch of the nostrils as if a distasteful odor had been detected.

"Ken practically invented Slender Benders," Maggie volunteered. "You know, 'the splendor of Slender Benders.' You've seen the commercials where the candy does these complicated acrobatics. Probably win an award. Actually, it's a whole new way to market low-cal licorice."

"Christ, Maggie," Ken sighed, sipping his drink. Again he resisted looking directly at Carol. An advertising man? You've sold out for *that*, he imagined her saying to herself. He had decided, halfway through his first drink, that she had indeed recognized him but was faking it for her own secret reasons. But why? Had he changed that much? Or was she being kind? Sparing him?

"Always hides his light under a bushel," Maggie said, shaking her head. Ever-nurturing Maggie. Was she really as proud of his career as she made out? Admittedly, her unflagging support of him had made it easier to rationalize his predicament, but was it real, or, like her lovemaking, merely practical and efficient, but undeniably nurturing.

It was as if she had been built for that, with high, large, billowing breasts that hadn't drooped, the kind that could envelop and soothe a man.

Her belly had stayed flat and her buttocks full, flaring out from solid hips down to legs that were sturdy and well turned. To lie between them also offered a comforting quality. Yes, Maggie's body and emotions had a compatible Earth Mother quality. Often, he thought of her as a place of refuge. Freud, he knew, could do wonders with these secret images, especially considering that he had lost his beloved mother early, before he was out of his teens.

Seventeen years before, he had crawled into Maggie's warm cocoon and had learned how to preserve hope. Now that the vodka had partially restored his courage, he had the urge to explain this to Carol, to say that he had, indeed, kept his dream alive and that someday, when all this prologue is over, he would become the great writer of his earlier aspirations and his mother's unshakable prediction. He had merely postponed. Not failed. He held his tongue, having at least the insight to understand that the drinks had given him only Dutch courage, not real courage.

"Advertising has its place, of course," Eliot said. "In the system as it is now constituted, consuming goods and services keeps our society afloat."

"Like Slender Benders," Ken said, his hand reaching out to grasp the drink the waiter had just delivered. "Makes their teeth rot." He felt a ball of irritation begin to form deep inside himself, expanding painfully in his gut. "Then we sell them toothbrushes, pastes, powders, mouthwash.

Good for dentists, too. Dental equipment..."

"And gold," Eliot interjected with a soothing smile, as if he had picked up on the sarcasm and was determined to avoid any alarming response that would create a distasteful scene. "Remember gold."

"And mines."

"Exactly," Eliot said. "Which nature created and is also finite." He was unstoppable in his pedantry, Ken decided, determined to attempt some repression of darker feelings. The fact was that what he had finally determined was that Carol's deliberate snub was making him angry.

"The unfortunate part," Eliot went on, "is that the entire process is based on perpetual motion. A never-ending spin. At some point it will run down. The environment simply won't support it."

"And we'll all be charcoal when the ozone layer goes kaput," Ken muttered.

"Exactly," Eliot agreed. "The tragedy of it is not that it's inevitable if we follow our present course. We all know that. The tragedy is that we're not going fast enough to replenish ourselves before Armageddon arrives."

"That bad?" Ken said.

"Problem is we're all connected. All life interacts on all life." Eliot whirled the wine again, sniffed, sipped carefully, then swallowed. "Environment deteriorates," he went on, looking into his glass. "No grapes, no more wine."

"Heavy stuff," Ken said, feeling somewhat belittled by the man's smooth sense of confidence and annoyed at his own resort to sarcasm. Rather than risk offending, he re-



sorted to silence.

"And you, Carol?" Maggie asked, filling in the gap. "Eliot tells me you're a dancer." Eliot had undoubtedly informed her of that and it provided the kind of status worth repeating.

Had it happened? Had she become a prima ballerina? Ken wondered, remembering Carol in her leotards and warm-up stockings practicing at the bar for hours on end. Loveliness and grace in human form. God, there was beauty there. And obsession. Like his. No room for love and loving getting in the way of that avalanche of intensity. After all, a writer wrote and a dancer danced. Everything else was extraneous to that, trivial. Loving, too.

Not once during the conversation with Eliot had Carol turned his way. His reaction was to respond in kind, relying on his peripheral vision to study her.

"Were you with a ballet company?" Maggie asked, not one to leave a loose end.

"Principal ballerina, the Ballet Company of Sydney, Australia," Eliot volunteered.

"For a bit. A few seasons only," Carol added quickly. "I had this injury."

At first Ken decided she was merely being considerate, self-effacing, sensitive to his own predicament. Hadn't she really danced longer than a few seasons? He was suddenly ashamed, searching himself for its source. Actually, he was happy for her, felt good for her. So she had made it and this, he decided, might be at the heart of her not acknowledging him. She had seen into his heart and was sparing him. Only

a caring person could do that.

"A tough business, ballet," Eliot said. "She's still at it. Practicing for hours. We've got a studio in the apartment where she gives lessons."

There had been a time when he had pored over names whenever a ballet was reviewed and had failed to see hers, leading him to believe that she might have changed her name or gone abroad, which apparently was the case. Why hadn't he tried to find her? He did not have to dig too deeply for the answer. Simply put, he felt diminished by his defeat and too devastated to reveal his surrender. That was it. Or was it because he feared that she had been successful? He a failure; she a success. Could he have coped with that?

Well, now he knew. His reaction surprised him. He hadn't expected himself to have such generosity of heart. Good for her, he thought. He picked up his drink and silently toasted her.

Maybe such generosity was stirred by her self-effacing comment "for a bit." All right, it wasn't worldwide celebrity. But it was a victory of sorts, a vindication of one's talents and hard work. Better than he had done. What had come of his efforts? A few hundred pages worth of manuscript and an outline that went nowhere. His solace was to convince himself that he was a talent unrecognized. He had even devised a litany of logic to explain it: bad timing, changing tastes, American culture's downhill slide, and the usual cast of knaves, fools, and idiots who couldn't tell a diamond from a zircon but had the power to bar the door. But he also knew, emptying his glass again, that those excuses

had worn thin over the past two decades.

The waiter, a slim actor type, appeared with the inevitable catalog of specials, spoken with serious and well-trained intensity. Ken barely listened. He detested this ritual of the specials, a process that Maggie adored. There was something promotional about it, manipulative. Like advertising. It was a firm policy of his, whenever possible, to avoid buying anything that was advertised.

Carol kept her eyes hidden behind the menu. Ken noted that she had barely sipped her wine. Years of bodily discipline had apparently become second nature. Time, too, had been especially kind. She would be exactly forty now, four years younger than he was. She looked ten years younger, perhaps more.

"...sautéed shrimp cakes with lime herb butter and rocket salad," the waiter chanted. "Another appetizer is home-smoked salmon with dill cream on toasted brioche."

Eliot and Maggie listened as if the young man's rendition were a holy chant.

"And the pasta special is duck-filled herb raviolis with zinfandel rosemary butter."

"Not doughy raviolis?" Eliot asked.

"I've had them," Maggie said. "Light as feathers."

"For pizzas," the waiter continued, "the chef suggests a pizza with artichokes, shiitake mushrooms, eggplant, and caramelized garlic."

"As long as the chef is not too light-handed on the garlic," Eliot said seriously.

"Eliot is a gourmet," Maggie said.

"Obviously," Ken offered, unable to control his sarcasm. Then he said, "I'm more of a gourmand."

"There is a difference," Eliot said. His amused tone struck Ken as nasal, as if the tip of his nose were angled slightly upward.

"For a main dish," the waiter continued, "we have farm-raised chicken with Italian parsley and double-blanchéd garlic. We also have the sautééd sweetbreads with arugula salad and sherry wine vinegar butter."

Ken felt a tickle of nausea and he washed it away with the melted ice of his drink.

"How is that prepared?" Eliot asked. "Too much oil would be fatal."

The waiter went into elaborate details, with both Maggie and Eliot offering various comments. Odd, Ken mused, how the subject of food reveals character. It struck Ken that Maggie's interest in it had an intensity he hadn't quite noticed before.

"I'm inclined toward the sweetbreads," Eliot announced. "And I'll start with the salmon."

"And I'll do the other, the chicken and begin with the duck-filled raviolis."

"And your pleasure, darling?" Eliot said, addressing Carol.

"A little green salad, dressing on the side, and angel hair with garlic and basil."

"Boring but effective," Eliot sighed.

Carol ignored his comment. Still, she did not look toward Ken.

"I'll have the same as this lady," Ken said, pointing to Carol. He also pointed into his glass. "And another of these."

He caught Eliot's sudden raised eyebrow and blink of disapproval.

"Calls for white," Eliot said, with a barely perceptible flutter of disdain.

The booze was giving Ken an edge, exaggerating his sensitivity. Something was beginning to trouble him and he began to feel a subtle shiver of irritation. Why was she deliberately not recognizing him? Soon his mind was racing for reasons. Perhaps he had misread her. Maybe her success "for a bit" was really an embarrassment to her. Maybe the injury that apparently had cut short her career was merely an excuse for failure. Maybe she genuinely had not recognized him. But if she did know who he was, well, then, her failure to acknowledge him could only be interpreted as an insult. Now that she was married to this super-tight-assed employer of his wife, why dredge up the banal acquaintances of her lower-class origins? Booze could also induce a mild paranoia, he decided, groping his way back to balance.

The waiter came with the white wine and Eliot tasted it, making odd expressions as he sloshed the liquid around in his mouth.

"Too much acid," he said.

"Perhaps I should have recommended the Ggrich," the waiter said.

"I wish you would have earlier," Eliot replied with flouncy superiority. They agreed on Ggrich and the waiter scur-

ried off. "Probably getting a commission on the other," Eliot sneered.

"The American way," Ken chuckled sarcastically, wondering if his words were beginning to slur. He picked up his fresh drink and sipped. Maggie's eyes flickered a sharp warning. With good reason. A snootful, a rarity for him, could make him caustic, his words barbed and insulting.

I'll be fine, his eye reply to Maggie said as he aborted a deeper sip on his drink, fishing with his fingers for the onions instead. He had tried to catch Carol's expression from the corner of his eye, to see if she had observed the caretaking exchange with his wife. No sign. He was relieved by that. It wouldn't do at all for her to see how mother-smothered he had become, not he, her manly deflowerer.

"So how long have you guys been married?" Maggie asked as the waiter peppered her duck raviolis.

"Ten years," Carol said, chewing daintily on a lettuce leaf.

Ken calculated that that would have put her at thirty, a chronological watershed for most dancers who weren't established by that age.

"Are you a New Yorker?" Maggie asked. Off and running now, she had a passion for personal history. Another mark of their social inferiority, Ken supposed. He had married a busybody. Once he had thought this quality attractive, a characteristic of her open and giving nature.

"I was born in Frankfurt," Carol replied. "My father was an American army officer stationed there."

"French ancestors. Titled. Le Roc was her maiden name. Great-grandfather was a marquis," Eliot said.

Ken felt an odd rearing sensation. Le Roc. American army officer. Great-grandfather a marquis. What elaborate, unmitigated bullshit. Carol was from Forest Hills. Born and bred. When he suddenly looked at her full face she did not stir, her gaze still hidden. What's going on here? Ken thought, glancing at the others, who ignored him. Eliot was intently sampling Maggie's raviolis, nodding approval.

"Where did you study?" Maggie asked sweetly without looking up.

"Paris, actually," Carol said. "My mother insisted. Then I studied in San Francisco. I didn't get to Sydney until I was twenty-three."

"Twenty-three? You don't look much more than that now," Maggie said with obvious sincerity.

"Fact is, I'm thirty-one."

Jesus, Ken thought. She's lopped off ten years. The alcohol buzz receded. Perhaps his own powers of recognition had been faulty.

"Robbed the cradle," Eliot said. "She's a few years older than my son."

Ken reached for his glass and observed her over the rim. Was this really Carol Stein? Or an alcoholic fantasy? The old Carol, the one engraved in his memory, was not a dissembler. If this was the real Carol, she was lying through her teeth.

"Carol's father was killed in Vietnam," Eliot interjected casually.

The declaration caught Ken in mid-swallow, although he prevented himself from coughing. Mr. Stein, Carol's father,

was an accountant, an older man with thick glasses and badly fitted false teeth, hardly a warrior and very overage for Vietnam.

“Tough break,” Ken heard himself say.

“You poor girl,” Maggie said with her Earth Mother sincerity.

Ken felt absolutely compelled to join the investigation, if only to validate his own sanity. He studied Carol’s face. She still kept her eyes hidden, but her hands, which had been transparent with blue veins showing, were still transparent with blue veins showing, without a hint of the spots of age that were beginning to sprout on the backs of his own hands. And when she talked he saw that one crooked eye-tooth which she thought flawed her smile, but didn’t as far as he was concerned.

For further identification there was a circle of brown frecklelike beauty marks just above the areola of her perfectly shaped right breast. This was hardly the place to go searching for that. There was also a tiny half-moon scar at the upper end of her inner thigh just at the spot where her public hair began. How’s that for details, he thought, taking another sip of his drink in self-congratulation. And there was more. He felt his skin temperature rise as his mind began to search for some clever question that might explode this preposterous myth. Then it came.

“Been to the Washington wall, Carol?”

She showed no reaction, nor did she raise her eyes to acknowledge the question, concentrating instead on the lettuce in her barely touched salad. When she didn’t answer



after an appropriate interval, he pressed the point.

"You know the one. The Vietnam Memorial wall. All those engraved names."

"Too painful, I'm afraid," she whispered.

"I might be going next week. I could make a rubbing of your father's name." An inspired idea, he decided. He took out a ballpoint from an inner pocket. Gotcha, he told her silently.

"To Washington, Ken?" Maggie asked. "You never mentioned it."

"Research," Ken shrugged, his mind turning over, alert, shocked to sobriety. Not once had Carol's eyes met his. "New candy product. Minty marzipan. They want to make it look like real silver dollars. Get the mint angle."

"And they pay you for this," Eliot said sardonically, sipping his wine.

"Really," Ken pressed, ignoring Eliot's comment, addressing Carol. "What was your father's name? Le Roc, was it?"

Only then did she look up at him, her eyes flashing a brief, unmistakable warning to cease and desist. Whatever her reasons, this particular subterfuge had been a mistake. Now he was dead certain. She hadn't forgotten him at all. No way. She was hiding, all right. For reasons known only to her, she had reinvented herself. A wry chuckle escaped his throat.

"I really would prefer you didn't," she said.

"Sure," he shrugged, retreating quickly, putting the ballpoint back in his inside pocket. It was over. He had gotten

what he needed.

The waiter came with their main dishes.

"Marvelous," Maggie said, looking at the concoction on her plate.

"You must try some," Eliot said, spearing a sweetbread and popping it into Maggie's mouth. She did the same with her chicken. They offered a chorus of appreciative oohs and ahs over the food.

Both Ken and Carol picked at their pasta, growing silent, leaving the conversational field to Maggie and Eliot, who started on computers, then turned to wildlife. Carol listened with rapt attention as Eliot's intensity grew. No question about it, Ken could tell. The man was a fanatic about his causes.

"Greed is endemic. Whole herds of elephants are being massacred for their ivory. The rhinoceros is almost beyond saving. The leopard is having lots of trouble coming back." He had adopted a slightly pompous, pedagogic tone, lecturing in his superior, nasal voice. Maggie, Ken could tell, was enthralled and Eliot was encouraged by her interest.

"Africa," Eliot continued, "is the standard by which we must be judged. It's our most vulnerable continent. If our greed destroys Africa, then we are all doomed. Not only is African wildlife threatened, Africa itself is an endangered species."

"Africa is Eliot's particular interest," Maggie said, turning to Ken, as if this lecture were for his benefit alone, which was apparently true. He was the only real outsider in this group. "They've been three times."

"Carol loves it as well," Eliot said, glancing toward his wife. Then he launched into a long diatribe against man's methodical destruction of Africa, "the planet's most important asset."

Maggie listened with rapt attention.

"He is inspiring when he gets going," she said to Ken.

Not like me, Ken supposed she meant. By comparison, he felt bested by Eliot's cool eloquence, his touted wisdom, his sense of purpose and personal fulfillment. He was certain that Carol thought that as well. It was obvious that Maggie did. On a scratch sheet Ken Kramer would show a lot longer odds than Eliot Butterfield.

But on reflection, Ken decided that Eliot couldn't be all that smart to fall prey to Carol's reconstituted history. Too much into yourself to see the truth, eh tight-ass, Ken thought, feeling the bile of his nastiness building again.

He was, in fact, puzzled by Carol's lies. They were public lies, checkable lies. The business of the birth date alone. And the elaborate convoluted personal history. Never mind the Le Roc on the wall memorial. Where and how had Carol journeyed for two decades to bring her to this?

"We're off to Kenya again in a few months," Eliot said. "Another safari. I try to go every two years. Draws me like a magnet. Makes me sad, too, watching it go downhill." He turned to Maggie. "Ever been?"

"No. But I'd love to," Maggie said, looking toward Ken.

"We tent," Eliot said. "Not exactly the Ritz, but remarkably comfortable. And I've got this fabulous guide. Former white hunter until they banned it in 1977. Nobody like Jack

Meade. Right, Carol?"

"The best there is. It's a bit Spartan, very nineteenth-century, but that's part of the charm."

"Ken's not much of a rough rider," Maggie laughed. "He likes his creature comforts."

Must you. Now she was making him out to be a self-indulgent weakling.

"Did the primitiveness bother you, Carol?" Maggie asked.

"It took some getting used to," Carol said. There, for a fleeting moment, was the old Carol, the one that didn't dissemble.

"Going downhill in a hand basket," Eliot said. "Unless we do something drastic."

"We'd better hurry over, then," Ken said, unable to hide the pique that had been building inside him. Don't, he warned himself, rolling the pasta on his fork, stuffing his mouth to shut it up.

"We share our planet with lots of competing forms of life," Eliot said. "We need a plan to balance it all, but first we need to decide that we must have a plan. You see..." He was plunging into it now, offering all that his thinking had wrought on this subject.

While Eliot spoke, barely pausing between bites and sips, Ken's thoughts raced along another path.

Down memory lane.

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