CHAPTER ONE

Paul is dead. Call home.

Peter Russell, stocky and graying, stood on the sidewalk and squinted at the text message on his cell phone, barely visible in the afternoon sun on Ventura Boulevard.

He lifted his round glasses above small, amused eyes, and brought the phone closer to see the display more clearly.

Paul is dead. He flashed on his youth, when for a week he had sincerely believed that Paul was dead: Paul McCartney. *I am the walrus*. But he had misread the phone's blocky letters. The message was actually *Phil is dead.*

That shook him. He knew only one Phil. Peter had not talked with Phil Richards in a month, but he refused to believe that the message referred to his best friend of thirty-five years, the kinder, weaker and almost certainly more talented of the Two P's. Not the Phil with the thirty-two foot Grand Taiga motor home, keeper of their eternal plans for the World's Longest Old Farts Cross-country Hot Dog Escapade and Tour.

Please, not that Phil.

He hesitated before hitting callback. What if it was a joke, a bit of cell phone spam?

Peter drove a vintage Porsche 356C Coupe that had once been signal red and was now roughly the shade of a dry brick. He fumbled his key and almost dropped the phone before unlocking the car door. He did not need this. He had an important appointment. Angrily, he pushed the button. The number

rolled out in musical beeps. He recognized the answering voice of Carla Wyss, whom he had not heard from in years. She sounded nervous and a little guilty.

'Peter, I just dropped by the house. I took the key from your bell and let myself in. There was a note. My God, I never meant to snoop. It's from somebody named Lydia.' Lydia was Phil's ex-wife. 'I thought I should let you know.'

Peter had shown Carla the secret of the bronze Soleri bell, hanging outside the front door, after a night of very requited passion. Now, upset, she was having a sandwich and a root beer from his refrigerator. She hoped he didn't mind.

'*Mi casa es su casa*,' Peter said, beyond irritation. He tongued the small gap between his front teeth. 'I'm listening.'

Carla's voice was shaky. 'All right. The note reads "Dear Peter, Phil died. He had a heart attack or a stroke, they aren't sure which. Will let you know details." Then it's signed very neatly.' She took a breath. 'Wasn't he another writer? Didn't I meet him here in the house?'

'Yeah.' Peter pressed his eyes with his fingers, blocking out the glare. Lydia had been living in Burbank for a few years. She had apparently made the rounds of Phil's LA friends. Carla rattled on, saying that Lydia had used a fountain pen, a folded sheet of hand-made paper, a black satin ribbon, and Scotch tape.

Lydia had never liked telephones.

Phil is dead.

Thirty-five years of kid dreams and late night plans, sitting in the back yard in old radar-dish rattan chairs on the dry grass between the junipers. Shooting the bull about stories and writing and big ideas. Phil hanging out on movie sets and model shoots – not so selfless – but also helping Peter carry his bulky and unsold wire sculptures to the dump in the back of the old Ford pickup they had often swapped.

Only the truck, never the women, Phil had lamented.

Slight, wiry Phil with the short, mousy hair who smiled so sweetly every time he saw a naked lady. Who longed for the female sex with such clumsy devotion.

'Are you okay, Peter?' Carla asked from far away.

'Heart attack,' Peter repeated, lifting the phone back to his mouth.

'Or a stroke, they aren't sure. It's a very pretty note, really. I'm so sorry.'

He visualized Carla in his house, locked in her perpetual late thirties, leggy as a deer, dressed in pedal pushers and a dazzling man's white dress shirt with sleeves rolled up and tails pinned to show her smooth, flat tummy.

'Thanks, Carla. You better leave before Helen comes over,' Peter said, not unkindly.

'I'll put the key back in the bell,' Carla said. 'And Peter, I was looking through your files. Do you have some glossies of me that I can borrow? I have a new agent, a good guy, really sharp, and he wants to put together a fresh folio. I'm up for a credit card commercial.'

All of Carla's agents had been good guys, really sharp; all of them had screwed her both ways and she never learned. 'I'll look,' Peter said, though he doubted cheesecake would help.

'You know where to find me.'

He did, and also what she smelled and felt like. With a wave of loose guilt, Peter sat on the old seat in the car's sunned interior, the door half open and one leg hanging out. The hot cracked leather warmed his balls. A cream-colored Lexus whizzed by and honked. He pulled in his leg and shut the door, then rolled down the window as far as it would go, about half way. Sweat dripped down his neck. He had to look

presentable and be in Malibu in an hour. His broad face crinkled above a close-trimmed, peppered beard.

Peter was fifty-eight years old and he couldn't afford to take ten minutes to cry for his best friend.

One hand shielded his eyes from sun and traffic. 'Damn it, Phil,' he said.

He started the car and took the back road to his home, a square, flat-roofed, big-windowed fifties rambler in the Glendale hills. Carla was gone by the time he arrived, leaving only a waft of gardenia in the warm still air on the patio. Helen was late, or maybe not coming after all – he could never tell what her final plans might be – so he took a quick shower. He soon smelled of soap and washed skin and put on a blue-and-red Hawaiian shirt. He picked up his best briefcase, a maroon leather job, and pushed through the old French doors. The weedy jasmine creeping over the trellis had squeezed out a few flowers. Their sweetness curled up alongside Carla's gardenia.

Peter stood for a moment on the red tiles and looked up through the trellis at the bright blue sky. He pressed his elbow against a rough, sun-battered post, breath coming hard: The old anxiety he always found in tight places, in corners and shadows. When events fell outside his control or his ability to escape. A minute passed. Two minutes. Peter's gasping slowed. He sucked in a complete breath and pressed the inside of his wrist with two fingers to check his pulse. Not racing. The hitch behind his ribs untied with a few solid pushes of cupped fingers under the edge of his sternum. He had never asked a doctor why that worked, but it did.

He wiped his face with a paper towel, then scrawled a note for Helen on the smudged blackboard nailed below the Soleri bell. Reaching into the oil drum that served as an outdoor

closet, mounted high on two saw horses, he tugged out a lightweight suit coat of beige silk, the only one he had, a thrift-store purchase from six years ago. He sniffed it; not too musty, good for another end of summer, soon to turn into autumn.

Peter let the old Porsche roll back out of the garage. The engine purred and then climbed into a sweet whine after he snicked the long, wood-knobbed shift into first gear.

Last he had heard, Phil had been traveling in Northern California, trying to unblock a novel. They hadn't seen each other in months. Peter tried to think why friends wouldn't stay in touch from week to week or even day to day. Some of his brightest moments had been with Phil; Phil could light up a room when he wanted to.

Peter wiped his eye and looked at his dry knuckle. Maybe tonight. But Helen might drop off Lindsey, and if he started crying with Lindsey around, that might rip open a wound that he could not afford to even touch.

Numbness set in. He drove toward the ocean and Salammbo, the estate of Joseph Adrian Benoliel.

CHAPTER TWO

The sunset beyond the hills and water was gorgeous in a sullied way: lapis sky, the sun a yellow diamond hovering over the gray line of the sea, dimmed by a tan ribbon of smog. Peter Russell pushed along in second gear, between lines of

palm trees and golf-green lawn spotted with eucalyptus. Flaubert House cast a long cool shadow across the drive and the golf-green approach. Crickets were starting to play their hey-baby tunes.

Salammbo covered twenty acres of prime highland Malibu real estate. She had survived fires, earthquakes, landslides, the Great Depression, the fading careers of two movie stars, and tract-home development. In more than thirty years in Los Angeles and the Valley, Peter had never encountered anything like her – two huge, quirky mansions set far apart and out of sight of each other, looking down descending hills and through valleys rubbed thick with creosote bush and sage to Carbon Beach.

Here was illusion at its finest: the fantasy that peace can be bought, that power can sustain, that time will rush by but leave the finer things untouched: eccentricity, style, and all the walls that money can buy. Life goes on, Salammbo said with sublime self-assurance, especially for the rich. But the estate's history was not so reassuring.

Salammbo was a nouveau-riche vision of heaven: many mansions 'builded for the Lord.' The lord in this case had died in 1946: Lordy Trenton – not a real lord but an actor in silent comedies – had risen from obscurity in the Catskills for a good twelve-year run against Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd. His character – a drunken aristocrat, basically decent but prone to causing enormous trouble – had palled on audiences even before the onset of the Depression. Trenton had gotten out of acting while the getting was grand. One grand, to be precise, which is the price for which he had sold all rights to his films in 1937.

During the Depression, Lordy had invested in sound equipment for the movies and made big money. In the

mid-thirties, he had built Flaubert House and then started to erect what some architectural critics at the time referred to as Jesus Wept. Trenton's friends called it the Mission. The Mission featured a huge circular entry beneath a dome decorated with Moorish tile, high vaulted ceilings, bedrooms furnished in wrought iron and dark oak, an austere refectory that could seat a hundred, and a living room that by itself occupied two thousand square feet. It consumed much of his fortune.

In the early forties, beset by visions of a Japanese invasion of California, Lordy connected Flaubert House and the Mission with a quarter-mile underground tramway, complete with bomb shelter. He lined the smoothly plastered stone-and-brick tunnel with a gallery of nineteenth-century European oils. At the same time, he became involved with a troubled young artist and sometime actress, Emily Gaumont. After their marriage in 1944, she spent her last year obsessively painting full-sized portraits of Lordy and many of their friends – as clowns.

In 1945, during a party, a fire in the tunnel killed Emily and ten visitors and destroyed the tram. Four of the dead – including Emily, so the story went – were burned beyond recognition.

A year later, alone and broken by lawsuits, Trenton died of acute alcohol poisoning.

The next owner, a department-store magnate named Greel, in his late sixties, acquired a mistress, allegedly of French Creole descent. To please her, he spent a million dollars finishing the Mission in Louisiana Gothic, mixing the two styles to jarring effect. The name Jesus Wept acquired permanence.

Greel died in 1949, a suicide.

In 1950, the estate was purchased by Frances Saint Claire,

a Hitchcock blond. Blackballed by the studios, her career ruined by allegations of leftist sympathies, Saint Claire had married a savvy one-time pretty boy named Mortimer Sykes. Sykes, playing against type, wisely invested her money and endlessly doted on her. In 1955, they built the third and final mansion of Salammbo, the trendy, Bauhaus-inspired Four Cliffs. In 1957, just six months before Saint Claire's death from breast cancer, a grove of eucalyptus trees caught fire. The flames spread to two of the mansions. Four Cliffs burned to the ground. Most of Jesus Wept survived, but the refectory lay in ruins. A police investigation pointed to arson, but friends in local politics hushed up any further investigation, suggesting there was already enough tragedy at Salammbo.

In 1958, Sykes put the estate up for sale and moved to Las Vegas. A broken man and heavily in debt, he tried to borrow money from the wrong people. Two years later, hikers discovered his body in a shallow grave in the desert.

The estate lay vacant for five years. In 1963, Joseph Adrian Benoliel became Salammbo's newest master. A lifelong bachelor, Joseph had made his fortune producing beach flicks and managing a chain of real-estate franchises.

And between 1970 and 1983, he had secretly financed four of Peter's titillation movies; lots of nudity but no actual sex.

Peter parked the car, got out, and pulled his coat down over a slight paunch. Broad-shouldered, he carried the extra weight well enough, but he was starting to look more like an aging bodyguard than an artist. No matter. The Benoliels didn't care.

Peter lifted and dropped the bronze fist on the striker plate mounted on the huge oak door. A young man with short black hair, dressed in an oversized blue sweater and beige pants, opened the door, looked him up and down, and held

out something as if making a donation to the poor. Peter had never met him before.

'Here, Mr Benoliel doesn't seem to want one,' he said in a clipped tone of British disappointment. 'They're free. Who are you?' He pressed a black plastic ovoid into Peter's hand and stood back to let him in.

'That's Peter,' Joseph said. 'Leave him alone,' He walked into the entryway with a persistent poke of his rubber-tipped cane, moving fast for a man with a limp. 'I hate the goddamned things.' He did not sound angry. In fact, he smiled in high good humor at Peter. In his early seventies, with a football player's body gone to fat and the fat carefully pared away by diet, the flesh of Joseph's arms hung loose below the short sleeves of his yellow golf shirt. Bandy legs weakened by diabetes stuck out below baggy black shorts. His bristling butch-cut hair had long since turned white. 'Hate them when they beep in restaurants. People driving and yakking. Always have to be connected, like they'd vanish if they stopped talking. There's too much talk in the world already.' He waved his hand in a gesture between permission and irritated dismissal. 'If you take the damned thing, turn it off while you're here.'

'They don't turn off,' the young man explained to Peter, drawing closer. His wide blue eyes assessed Peter's character and the size of his wallet. 'You can turn the ringer down, however.'

Peter smiled as if at a half heard joke. 'What is it?' he asked.

'Free talk,' Joseph said. 'But it doesn't work. Where's Mishie?'

'She told me to get the door,' the young man said.

'Well, hell, Peter has a key. Mishie!'

The young man regarded Peter with newfound but uncertain respect.

Mishie – Michelle – walked out of the hall leading back to the drawing room. 'I'm here.' She smiled at Peter and hooked her arm around Joseph's. 'Time for his lordship's monkey nut shots,' she announced with thespian cheer. 'Come along, dear.'

Joseph stared gloomily at the small elevator to the left of the long flight of stairs, as if doom awaited him there. 'Don't ever leave me alone with her, Peter,' he said.

'You two fine young bucks wait in the drawing room,' Michelle instructed primly. 'We'll be down in a whiffle.'

'I'm *down* now,' Joseph said. 'If there's anything I hate, it's monkey nuts.' He patted Peter's arm in passing.

'Nice couple,' the young man said as they sat in an alcove looking over the west lawn. The wistful last of the day faded far out over the cliffs and the ocean. 'They were joking, weren't they?'

'I think so,' Peter said. 'I'm Peter Russell.'

'Stanley Weinstein.'

They stretched out of their chairs and shook hands. Chairs throughout Flaubert House were always set shouting distance apart from one another.

'Scouting for an investment?' Peter asked.

'An invest*or,*' Weinstein corrected. 'One million dollars, minimum. A pittance to finance a revolution.'

'In telecom?'

Weinstein cringed. 'Let's please avoid that word.'

Peter raised the plastic ovoid to eye level and twisted it until he found a seam, then tried to pry it open with a thumbnail. It wouldn't budge. 'If it's not a phone, what is it?'

'We call it Trans,' Weinstein said. 'T-R-A-N-S. Plural, also Trans. Invest a little, and you get one to use. Invest a lot, and you get more to hand out to friends. Very chic, extraordinarily

high tech, nothing like them on the market. Feel that weight? Quality.'

'It's a cell phone,' Peter said, 'but not.'

'Close enough,' Weinstein agreed with a lean of his head. 'They'll be free for the next year. Then we go public and open booths in every shopping mall in the world.'

'Joseph won't invest?' Peter asked.

Weinstein shrugged. 'Our demo did not go well. Something seems to be wrong with the house.'

'There's a steel frame. Lots of stone.'

'Trans will work anywhere from the center of the Earth to the moon,' Weinstein said, puffing out his cheeks. 'I don't know what the problem is. I shall have to ask my boss.'

'And your boss is . . .?'

Weinstein held his finger to his lips. 'Mr Benoliel trusts you?'

'I suppose,' Peter said. 'He trusts me not to hit him up for money too often.'

Weinstein looked funny at that, then wiggled his finger in the air. 'Monkey nuts?'

'That *is* a joke,' Peter said. 'I do stuff for them. I'm nobody, really.'

Weinstein winked. 'You have influence. They trust you, I can tell,' he said. 'Keep the unit. In fact, let me give you more. Hand them out to your friends, but if you would, please give one to a good friend of Mr Benoliel's, or better yet, Mrs Benoliel's.'

Peter shook his head. 'I already have a cell phone,' he said. 'I get calls every week about new service plans.'

'What about *no* service plan?' Weinstein thrust out his fingers like a magician. 'A Trans unit lasts for a year, and then you replace it with another, price yet to be established – but

less than three hundred dollars. Unlimited calling day or night, anywhere on the planet. Better than digital – in fact, pure analog sound quality, just as God intended. Do you like vinyl LPs?'

'I still have a few.' In fact, Peter had hundreds, mostly jazz, classical, and 1960s rock.

'Then you know what I mean. Lovely, like a soft whisper in your ear. No interference, just clean sound. If you can convince Mr Benoliel we're on to something, you'll get free units for life. You and five – no, ten of your friends.'

Peter gave a dry chuckle. 'And?'

Weinstein lifted an eyebrow. 'Five thousand shares, IPO guaranteed to be set at twenty-three dollars a share.'

Peter raised his own eyebrow even higher. He hadn't survived a career in films for nothing.

Weinstein grinned devilishly. 'Or five thousand dollars, up front, your choice, payable when Mr Benoliel invests.'

'How about ten thousand?'

Weinstein's smile remained, tighter but still friendly. 'Okaaay,' he said, mimicking Joseph's deliberate drawl. 'Pardner.' He pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and began scrawling on it with a fountain pen. 'Do you have an agent?'

'He hasn't heard from me in a while.' Peter examined the short, neatly penned document. The address was in Marin County. He would probably need to go north anyway, for Phil's funeral – if there was going to be one. He asked for the fountain pen and signed. 'What the hell,' he said. 'Joseph rarely changes his mind.'

Weinstein excused himself and returned a few minutes later with a white cardboard box. In the box, buried in layers of foam, were ten plastic ovoids in various cheery colors.

'All active and good for a year. Push the help button for instructions.'

'How do you open them?' Peter asked.

Weinstein demonstrated. Pressing a barely visible dimple on one side released the upper half, which swung aside with oily smoothness. There were no buttons. A screen covered most of the revealed face and lit up pearly white with black touch keypad and letters, different from his Motorola. The unit was neatly made and felt just right in his hand, slightly warm, slightly heavy.

'It's not a gift from aliens, is it?' Peter asked.

'It should be,' Weinstein said, chuckling. 'No, it's entirely human. Just . . . people.'

Weinstein handed Peter the box and looked around the drawing room. 'Quite a place,' he said. 'Have you worked here long?'

Peter smiled. Joseph did not like to be talked about, in any fashion, by anybody.

Weinstein turned serious. 'Get this done, Mr Russell, and you'll rate a visit to our new headquarters, as well as your bounty money. Then you'll meet the man behind Trans.'

Peter folded shut the top of the box. 'I'll put these in my car,' he said.

'That lovely old Porsche?' Weinstein asked. 'Is it a replica?'

'Nope,' Peter said.

'Then it's older than I am,' Weinstein said.

After Weinstein's departure, Peter followed Michelle up the long curve of marble stairs to the second floor. Flaubert House was huge and quiet, as solid as a tomb but cheerful in its way. 'That was awkward,' Michelle murmured. 'Joseph knew someone's daddy way back when. Now one of his boys

sends a salesman to hit him up for ten million dollars.'

Peter walked beside her for the last few steps, silent. It had taken him into his forties to realize that the true art of conversation was saying almost nothing.

'Joseph's been a little down. I mean, not that he's ever a ball of fire, you know? But a little less twinkle.'

In truth, Joseph had never struck Peter as being capable of twinkle. Blunt honesty, sharp conversation, an uncanny ability to pin down character – and a good joke every now and then – defined his few charms. Over the years, Peter had come to like Joseph; honesty and the occasional joke could make up for a lot.

Michelle looked tired. 'Says he has a palooza of a chore for you. Won't tell me what. Man stuff, do you think?' Her long legs carried her more quickly over the thick Berber carpeting in the broad hallway.

'Monkey nuts,' Peter said.

Michelle smirked. 'I'll tell him you're here.' She left him standing between walls covered by framed glossies of movie stars. Most of the stylish portraits were autographed, souvenirs of Joseph's days as a producer. Peter recognized them all: beautiful or soulful people brooding or sunny, feigning humor or dignity, looking inaccessible or seductive, but all seeking approval no matter what attitude they copped. Long ago, he had realized an almost universal truth about actors. They became real only when they were being witnessed, when they were on-screen. Hidden behind doors, alone, or looped around a reel and locked in a dark metal can . . . For an actor, not being seen, not having an audience, was worse than limbo.

'All right,' Michelle said, returning. 'He's decent.' She opened a door near the end of the hall. 'Joseph, it's Peter.'

'Who else would it be, Eliot Ness?' a voice bellowed in the dark beyond.

Michelle sighed. 'Ten percent bonus if you leave him a contented man.'

'I heard that!'

Michelle sighed loudly and closed the door behind Peter.

Joseph sat in a huge leather chair near full-length windows opening onto a false balcony about a foot deep and faced with black wrought-iron railing. Lights from the front drive and the last of the sky glow drew him in broad grainy strokes like chalk on velvet. The room also contained an antique oak bar from a saloon in Dodge City, so the legend went, and two brown leather couches separated by a square black granite table. 'Goddamned awkward,' he said. 'Did Weinstein try to suck you in?'

'Yeah. Ambition,' Peter said.

'In spades.'

Peter nodded. His eyes adjusted slowly to the twilit gloom.

'Offer you stock to convince me?'

'And cash.'

Joseph chuckled. 'They've been yammering at me for a week. Goddamned things don't work. You'd think they would check that out before they try to hit up a rich old fool.' There was a strange set to Joseph's words. 'Old trumps rich,' he murmured. 'And fool trumps old.' He was staring fixedly through the windows. Peter stood about six feet from the chair. 'Anyway, I'm glad you're here. I need you to go see a woman. Interested?'

'For you, always,' Peter said.

'She may be the most charismatic female on the planet. Certainly one of the smartest. If I went personally, she would play me like a farm trout. You, however . . . You know women better than any man alive. You'll survive.'

Peter gave a small, dubious laugh.

'Well, you will. You've made it with over two hundred women, photographed maybe two thousand, and Michelle genuinely likes you. That's a résumé no other man in my experience can equal.'

'Who gave out my track record?'

'We've known each other a long time,' Joseph said. 'I did some research before bankrolling your films.'

'A bit exaggerated,' Peter said. 'I never kept count.'

Joseph lifted his hand, spread his fingers, then let it drop back to the chair arm. 'Before she met me, Michelle used to know a lot of photographers. Long-haired sacks of fermented pig shit. That's what she called them. But not you.'

'I'm respectable?' Peter asked.

'Not if you work for me, you aren't.' Joseph shifted in his chair. 'This woman you're going to meet is seventy years old. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, bar none. I've watched her on TV. Her teeth aren't perfect, but she smiles like some sort of Eastern saint, whatever you call that.'

'Kwan Yin,' Peter offered.

'Yeah, maybe. Her name is Sandaji. Used to be Carolyn Lumley Pierce. She's from the Bay Area, started out as a New Age groupie, but I checked up on her, and she's been through hell and come out wiser. Amazing story. She's holding meditation seminars in Pasadena.'

Joseph's voice became a low, assertive bellow. 'I want you to drop a roll of money, ten thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills, into her collection plate. Then ask her my question. Bring me the answer tomorrow morning.'

Peter's errands for Joseph were varied and often peculiar, but he had never done anything like this. Peter was not fond of New Age types, followers or leaders. They had disappointed him.

'Directions. Loot.' Joseph held out a folded piece of paper and a thick roll of money. 'Don't tell Michelle. She's still mad at me for paying a quarter of a million dollars for a watch last week.'

'Jesus,' Peter said involuntarily.

'It's a good watch,' Joseph said with petulance. He pulled back his sweater cuff to reveal a wide flash of platinum. 'Maybe I'll will it to you when I die.'

'I'm a humble man,' Peter said.

'Well, Michelle's already in my face, so don't tell her how much this time, okay?'

'All right.' He pocketed the money and the directions. The money pushed against the Trans.

Joseph shuddered. 'Goddamn, it's cold in here. Peter, you look gloomy. Worse than me, and I feel like an old cabbage. What's up?'

'My friend died. A writer named Phil Richards.'

'Sorry. Friends . . . can't afford to lose them.' Joseph's eyes moved beyond Peter to the far corner of the room. 'Water out there somewhere, reflecting moonlight,' he murmured. Peter looked up over his shoulder and saw a dim, milky flare play across the ceiling. Then it was gone.

'What should I ask her?' Peter asked.

'I've arranged for a private audience. You will absolutely not tell anyone else. I trust you, Peter . . . but I want you to promise me anyway. Swear to me as much as one atheist can swear before another, all right?'

'Cross my heart, hope to die,' Peter said.

Joseph seemed to accept this. He folded his hands in his lap like a schoolboy about to recite. Peter had never seen him so vulnerable. 'Ask her if she believes it is possible for someone to live without a soul. Ask her in private, not in front of all those salivating white-collar geeks she cultivates.'

'Someone, live, without a soul,' Peter said.

'Don't mock me, Peter Russell.' Joseph's voice was hard and clean. In the glow of the rising moon, his face was the color of an expensive knife.

'No disrespect, Mr Benoliel,' Peter said. 'Just getting my lines straight.'

'He has been such a *lemon* lately,' Michelle said in the entry, holding the door. The veranda lights cast a dull golden glow over the stonework. 'Please make him feel better.'

'Isn't that your job?' Peter asked.

'You're short tonight,' she observed.

'My best friend just died,' Peter said.

'Oh, shit, really?' Michelle was shocked and saddened. On her face, the effect was of a curtain drawing open to a new play. She stood straight and let go of the door. 'How much time do you have?' she asked. 'Time for a drink?'

'You know I don't drink.'

'A small glass of sherry for me, ginger ale for you,' Michelle said with studied grace. 'We'll toast your friend.'

They went into the huge kitchen and Michelle sat Peter at the marble-topped counter. Only the counter lights were on and the rest of the kitchen fell back into olive-colored shadows. Peter felt as if he were under a spotlight. Michelle poured two glasses as described and sat at the corner next to him. 'To your friend,' she said, lifting her sherry.

'To Phil,' Peter said, and felt his shoulders make a quaking motion. He sucked the ginger ale down wrong and started to choke. He used that to disguise the tears, and coughed until the impulse was almost gone.

Michelle gave him a napkin to wipe his eyes. 'Want to talk about him?'

'I don't think there's time.'

'Your appointment isn't for another hour and a half,' Michelle said. 'Was he famous?'

'Not really,' Peter said. 'He was a better writer than me. Maybe a better man.'

'Do you still write?' Michelle asked.

'When I need the money,' he said.

'I admire people who do something with their talents.' Michelle put down her glass. 'What did you think of Weinstein?'

'A hustler,' Peter said. He reached into his pocket and took out the Trans. It slid smoothly past the roll of hundred-dollar bills. 'Haven't tried it.'

'Give me your number,' Michelle said. 'Weinstein left a box of them. I'll pick out a nice blue one.'

'Do they even work?'

'Not in the house, apparently,' Michelle said. 'But I need to get outside more. Besides, Weinstein will pay you if we convince Joseph . . . won't he?'

Peter smiled ruefully, tilted his head, and nodded. He opened the unit and read her the number from the screen. It was odd, seven sets of two digits separated by hyphens.

Michelle wrote the number on a slip of paper. 'See?' she said, and patted his hand. 'I was hard up once. Cast adrift. I know how life goes. It isn't easy finding a safe harbor.' She shook her hair and shoved out a hand toward the kitchen walls, as if to push them back. 'I just get lost here. It's been thirteen years with Joseph, and I still haven't explored all the rooms.' She shook her head. 'Half aren't even furnished. I can do whatever I want with the houses, but it's just the two of us, and you, and the cleaning people once or twice a week. Joseph doesn't want servants living on the estate.'

'It's quiet,' Peter said.

'Very quiet,' Michelle said. She took Peter's Trans and opened it. 'Weinstein explained it to me a few days ago, before he spoke with Joseph,' she said. 'Is this the only one you have?'

'He gave me nine more,' Peter said. 'Should I throw them away?'

'No, no. Maybe it's the weather and they'll work inside the house later. We'll just spread them around. They're no use sitting in a box. Then I'll talk to Joseph again and try to convince him. For your sake, not Weinstein's.'

Peter leaned forward. 'I don't know what to say. You're treating me like a brother.'

'You might as well be a brother,' she said. 'You know your boundaries. You give me more respect than my real brothers ever did. You understand that I have a tough job, but it's one I intend to stick with. We've seen a lot of the same old world, from different sides of the fence. And we both mean what we say.'

'Wow,' Peter said. 'That's something I can, I don't know, cherish.'

Michelle's lips twitched. 'You're my project, Peter Russell.' She sipped her sherry. 'When you toast the dead,' she said, 'they feel comforted and don't bother you, and you have only good thoughts about them.'

'You sound like an expert,' Peter cracked.

Michelle smiled. 'That's what my grandmother told me when I was a little girl. She was French, from Louisiana.'

Peter took up his glass and they toasted Phil again.

'May he sleep tight,' Michelle said.