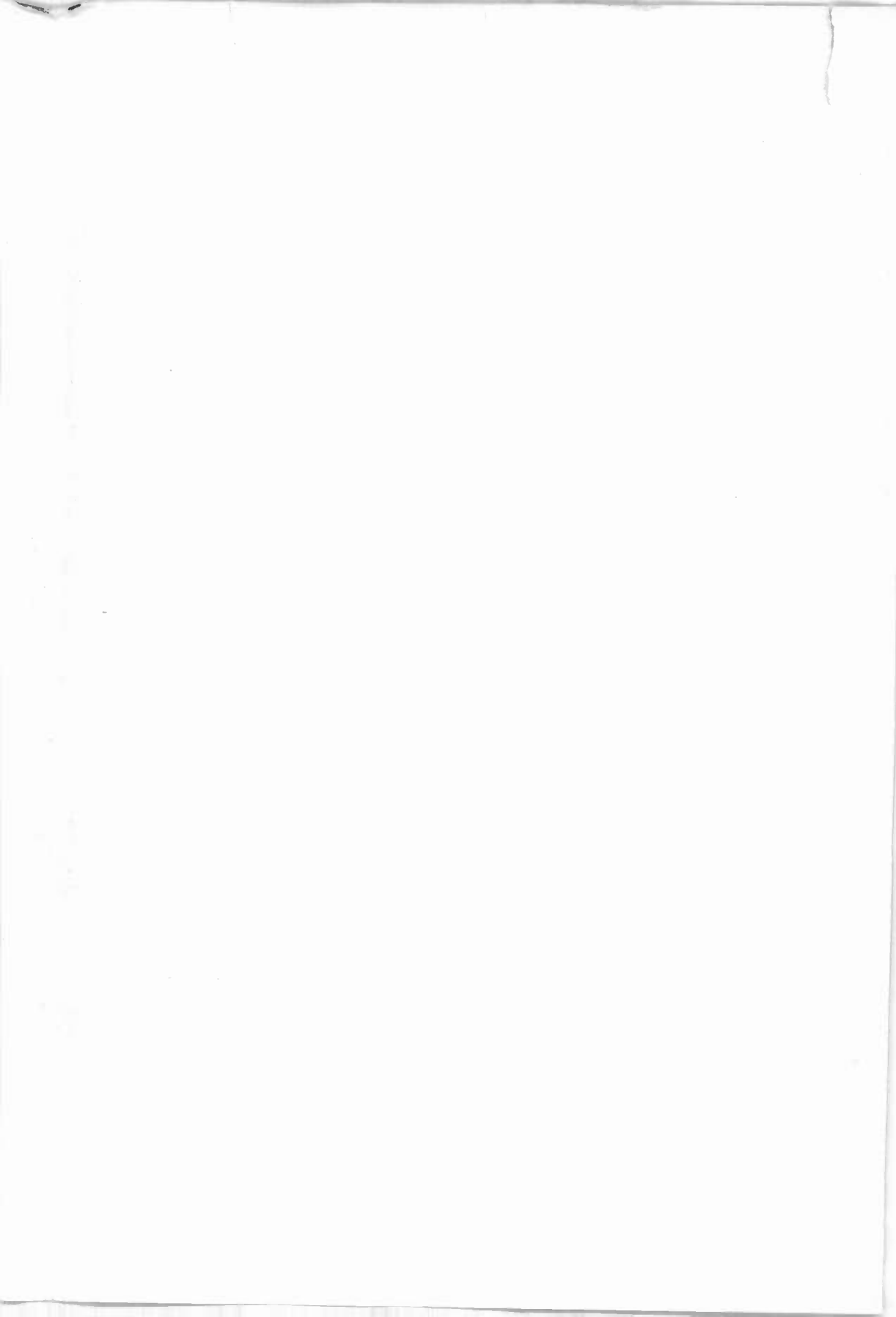


PAYOLA!



A Novel By
GERRY CAGLE



\$17.95

PAYOLA!

The body of Bobby Holiday, vice president in charge of programming for the giant Media Communications, one of the largest radio companies in the country, was found last night in a Los Angeles hotel room. Local police are calling the death a suicide. A note was found next to the body, supposedly written by Holiday, outlining his own involvement in payoffs from record promoters and naming several others, specifically implicating one independent promoter in Philadelphia and many others across the country as well. Investigators said that the note further documented the involvement of an organized crime ring located in the Miami area.

The spokesperson would not reveal the exact contents of the note until the investigation has been completed.

According to the FBI Holiday had been receiving cash payments in return for playing certain records over the past year, was deep in debt, a known gambler and a habitual user of drugs. The coronor's office said that the death was caused by an overdose of cocaine.

The body was discovered by R. T. Williams, publisher of The Report, a trade magazine followed closely by many who are associated with the radio and record industries. Williams told a group of reporters that Holiday told him of his involvement with the payola scheme earlier in the day and had then agreed to turn himself over to the FBI last night. When Holiday failed to show up for their appointed rendezvous in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel, Williams, accompanied by one Phillip Crawford, a local independent record promoter who had been secretly working with the FBI in the payola investigations, went to the room and found the body.

Williams and Crawford said they were totally unaware of Holiday's involvement in the scandal. Other associates of Holiday in the radio and recording industry expressed shock over his death and the news of the current investigation. Alvin Irving, who manages the nation's leading rock group The Falcons, said "Bobby Holiday was probably the brightest young man in radio. I considered him a close personal friend. His death leaves a deep void. He will be missed."

Paul Johnson, the president of Media Communications, refused comment.

Holiday had been separated from his wife and five year old daughter for the past several months. Although thought to be residing in the New Orleans area, police had not been able to locate them at press time.

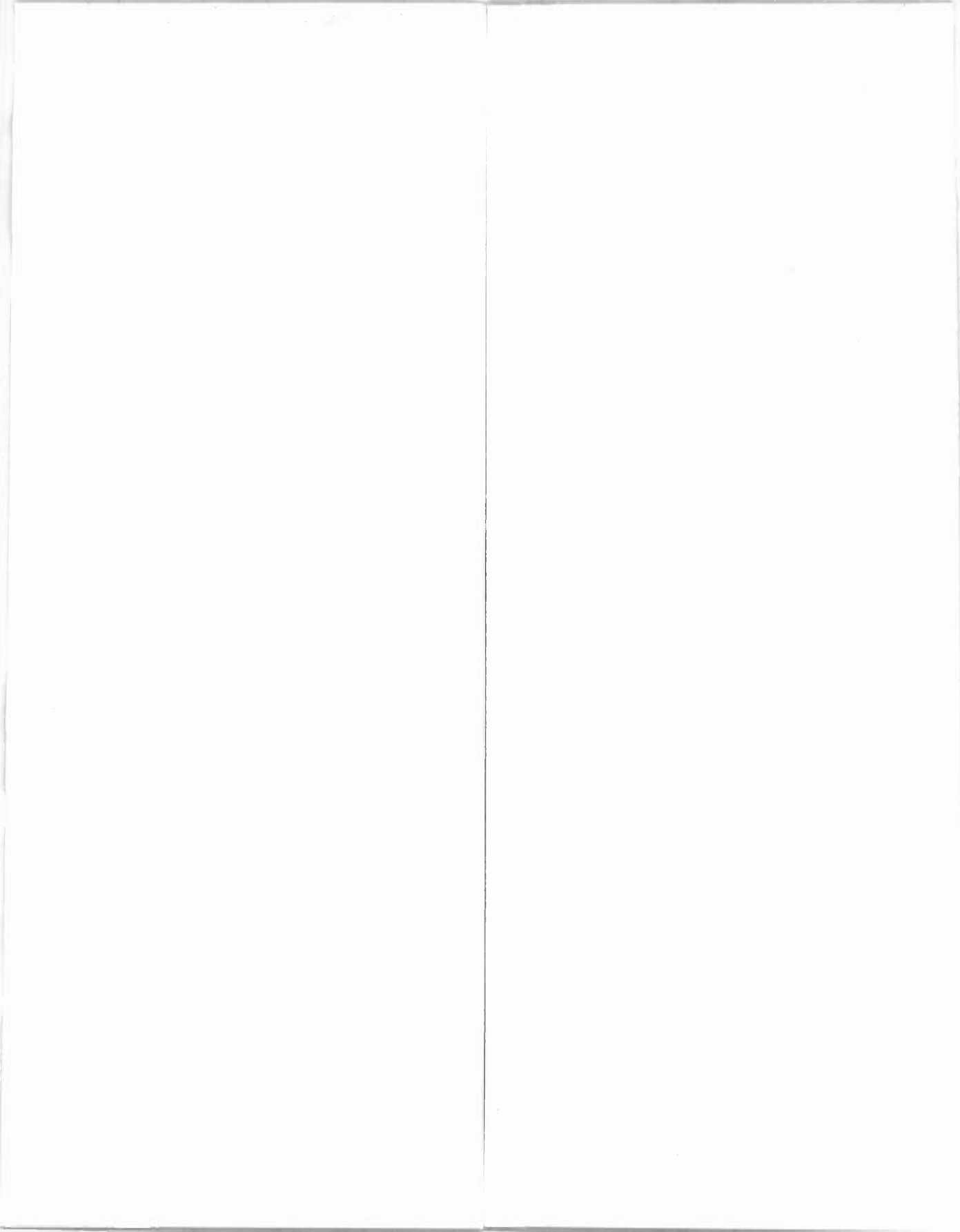
A news conference has been scheduled for tomorrow by the FBI. At that time, complete details regarding arrests and warrants will be issued.

* * *

Gerry Cagle is an award winning, nationally known program director, one of the true legends in the radio industry. He has programmed some of the country's biggest radio stations, including KFRC in San Francisco, KHJ in Los Angeles, WAPP in New York City, WRKO in Boston and KCQB in San Diego. During his career, Gerry has rubbed shoulders with the top names in the entertainment business, rock stars, their managers and record company presidents. These contacts spawned the idea for his book.

PAYOLA! is Mr. Cagle's first novel.

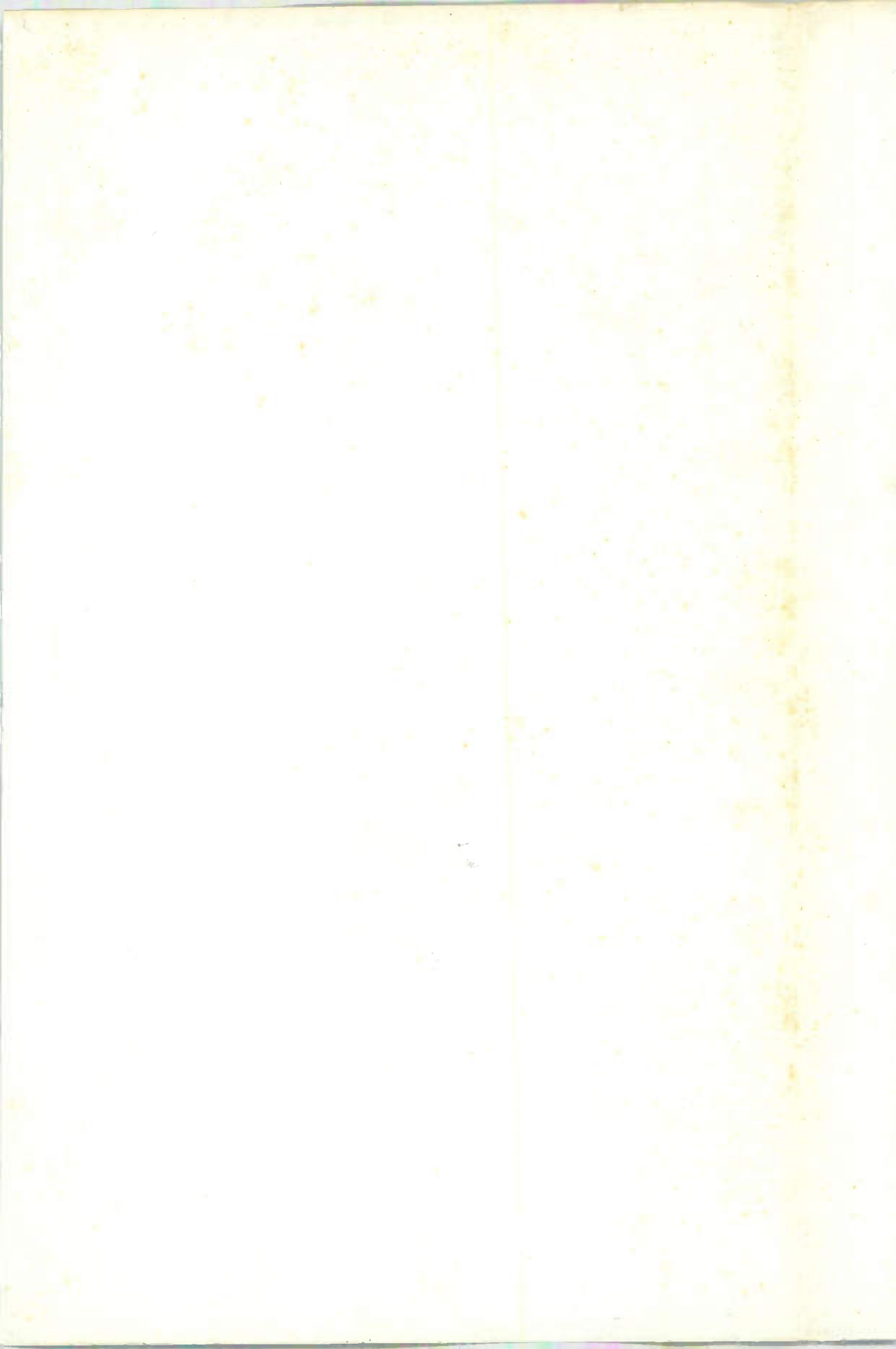
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Gerry Cagle

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John Long
Most people read
this book and say it
can't be true - this
happens. You'll read it and say
this isn't true - we did it and say
thank God now those stories are in
here -

John Long
1/27/89

PAYOLA!

by

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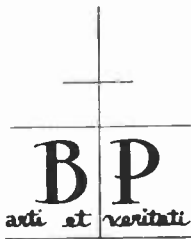
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To
Bruce, Ernie and Harry
for always being there.



PAYOLA SCANDAL ROCKS
LOS ANGELES RADIO!

(Los Angeles) Local police, working with agents of the F.B.I. and the I.R.S. have uncovered a payola scandal that threatens several Los Angeles based radio and record companies.

CHAPTER ONE

It was almost midnight. Only one car was in the parking lot of the small, suburban post office. The driver watched and waited for twenty minutes to make sure he was alone. Finally satisfied, the dark figure walked briskly inside, shoulders hunched against the damp, chilly, Northern California night.

Three turns to the right to A, a couple to H, then back to A. The post office box clicked open and he reached inside, pulling out a thick, white envelope with no return address. It was post-marked Las Vegas.

He waited until he was locked safely in his car before ripping it open. Ten one-hundred dollar bills were folded neatly between a piece of white paper. There was no letter.

None was needed.

* * * * *

"Bobby, I'm so proud of you."

He shifted in the darkness, rolling his arm to one side, feeling her snuggle comfortably against his body, her head nestling on his shoulder.

"Just think back on the past eight years, how we've struggled, the different jobs, moving from place to place, never getting all the boxes unpacked . . ."

Her voice droned in his ear as he relived the memories with her words.

"And now you're flying to Los Angeles tomorrow. It's all beyond our wildest dreams."

He smiled and closed his eyes, his chest filling with pride.

"I'm so proud of you, Bobby."

He turned on his side, enveloping her in his arms. "I couldn't have done it without you, Bev. You were right by me, every step of the way, picking me up when I fell, shining beside me when I got up and tried again."

He kissed her gently on the lips. "It's going to take a lot of hard

2 PAYOLA!

work, darling.”

“As long as we’re together, I don’t care what it takes.”

“We’ll always be together, Bev.”

He meant it.

* * * * *

The phone beeped quietly on the desk in the fashionable estate in Beverly Hills. The owner of the home was sitting comfortably in the shade of the enclosed back yard by a large pool. Hearing the phone, the man moved quickly, but not urgently, inside, through the sliding glass doors that led into his office. The phone that was ringing was not the office set with several rows of buttons and different lines taking up the right corner of the large, mahogany desk. It was a small, tan, princess model that sat beside it’s bigger cousin.

He picked up the receiver. “Yes?”

A voice crackled on the other end. “Johnson’s called a press conference for five o’clock this afternoon. He’s going to announce that Bobby Holiday is the new vice president in charge of programming for Media Communications.”

The man looked at his watch. “How do you know?”

“I make it my business to know these things.”

“That’s in about fifteen minutes.”

“Exactly. I suggest you be there when the announcement is made.”

“Bad idea.”

“Why?”

“Simple. It’s a press conference and I haven’t been invited. It’ll be much better to meet with him later.”

There was a moment of silence on the line.

“Very well. You know your business. I just wanted you to be aware of the change.”

The phone clicked as the caller abruptly hung up.

The man looked out across his back yard and frowned.

* * * * *

“It gives me a great deal of pleasure to announce to all of you that our new vice president in charge of programming for Media Communications is Bobby Holiday.”

Paul Johnson, the president of the largest radio company in the United States, was addressing a crowd of reporters in the conference room on the seventh floor of the Media Communications building in Los Angeles. Bobby Holiday, the newly-appointed vice president, slouched comfortably in a chair directly behind him.

"As most of you know, Bobby Holiday joined Media Communications eighteen months ago as program director of our Boston station, WMC. He took a radio station that was rated fifth in the market to number one in six short months, changing the profit picture from a million dollar yearly loss to a two-million dollar positive cash flow in the process. One year ago, Bobby began overseeing the operation of our New York property as well. Although it's not number one yet, WNMC has gone from twenty-third to fifth in the ratings and it, too, is now turning a healthy profit."

Paul Johnson hesitated behind the podium, turning slightly to face the person he was praising. "I'm sure he'll lead our company to new heights, so, without further ado, let me introduce the vice president of Media Communications, Bobby Holiday."

There was polite applause as Bobby stood up and shook Paul's hand, the two men striking an interesting contrast. Paul Johnson was in his mid-fifties, short, chubby, bald and unassuming, dressed in a blue, three-piece suit.

Bobby Holiday was a study in carefully controlled, arrogant self-confidence. Not yet thirty years old, he stretched a shade over six feet tall, weighing about one hundred and seventy-five pounds. A full head of light, brown hair outlined a face that was unremarkable, except for rather large, sensitive lips, a feature that gave him character. When he smiled, as he did now, his perfect, white teeth sparkled with a brilliance that matched the flashing, green eyes, causing most everyone touched by the glare to share in the emotion.

He was dressed casually, as usual, in a white shirt, unbuttoned down the front, tucked into tight, designer jeans that were pulled over a pair of blue, ostrich-skin cowboy boots.

The room was filled with reporters from the Los Angeles newspapers and industry trade magazines. Bobby smiled when he caught the eye of Robert Williams, publisher of *The Report*, the most powerful entertainment trade publication in the business. Robert smiled back and gave him a mock salute. The two men had known each other for several years.

The applause died down as he approached the podium to speak. He felt quite comfortable, under the circumstances.

"Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate your applause and I know that when I stop Media Communications from reporting to any of you, you'll still feel positive about my promotion."

There was good natured laughter at Bobby's attempt at cutting the ice. The truth was, they needed him. The trade magazines made their money by publishing information gathered from each radio

station in the country. Every week, when a station added new records to its playlists, the trade magazines used this information to publish their own charts. If a record moved high on the charts, record companies would be happy, more radio stations would begin playing it and more albums would sell. Without data from radio stations, the trades would be unable to produce an accurate chart and would therefore be of no use to the record companies that paid them millions of dollars in advertising revenue. And, as one of the largest radio chains in the country, Media Communications could literally run a trade magazine out of business by refusing to report its activity.

Although *The Report* was by far the most important trade publication in the industry, the others, *Billboard*, *Gavin*, *Record World*, *Radio And Records* and *Cashbox*, served a purpose as well. Each catered to a specific portion of the industry and each had a chart. A record doing well on all of them was a sure sign of success.

Robert Williams stood up. "Do you plan to restructure the company in any way to match your personality?"

Bobby took a deep breath before answering. "I don't know about any restructuring, Robert. I just agreed to take this job this afternoon so I haven't had time to give a lot of thought to particulars."

"What about the status of the Media Communications radio stations?" Robert continued. "Are you satisfied with the position each has in their respective markets?"

Bobby's face tightened. "Each station will be given the necessary attention to put it at the top of the ratings. It is no secret that we are not satisfied with the stance of Media Communications on the national level. If all the stations were doing great, I wouldn't have this job. Before the year is out, I would like to see each of our stations in a position of dominance. That is my number one goal. I don't have a number two goal."

The reporter from *The Los Angeles Times* raised his hand. "I'm sorry I haven't done my homework before coming here. I just took this job last week."

"No problem," Bobby said. "You've got seven days up on me. What's your question?"

"What stations does Media Communications own?"

"KMC here in Los Angeles, KFMC in San Francisco, KMCQ in San Diego, WRMC in Chicago, WDMC in Detroit, WMMC in Miami, WVMC in New York and WMC in Boston."

"Bobby?" It was Tom Jamison from *Cash Box*. "What do you see in the future regarding Media Communications' relationships with the record companies?"

"Quite frankly, I don't see a relationship."

There was a quiet murmur through the room.

"Media Communications is not in the business to sell records. Although we recognize the unique way the two industries sometimes intertwine, it is not our intent to tell the record companies how to conduct their business and we don't need any suggestions from their side on how we should run ours."

"Wait a minute." It was Buddy Gilmore from Billboard. "That sounds kind of antagonistic to me."

"I really don't care what it sounds like to you, Buddy," Bobby said, his face a picture of arrogance. "Media Communications has radio stations in every major city in the United States. We've been running our stations as independent entities rather than as part of a large network. That practice will cease tomorrow. By operating this company as the chain that it is, we will be able to flex our own muscles without depending on anyone or anything else."

"How will that effect your relationship with record companies?"

Bobby scratched his jaw carelessly and raised one eyebrow. "I told you. We will have no relationship. Record company promoters will be able to visit all of our stations in each market. But, although we will take into account the individual situations of each city, beginning tomorrow, all music played on all Media Communications stations will be decided on in my office. Our playlists will be restricted and we will be adding only those records that have a proven track record. In short, we won't be in the business of exposing new product, as have so many Media Communications stations in the recent past."

Bobby was altering the rules just a little. Until now, each program director at each station exercised control over what music he played.

"Are you trying to tell me that Mark Lowery in San Francisco, a man who knows that city like the back of his hand, a man who's been there for five years and has proven himself, will now have to go through you for approval of everything he does?" It was Bernie Kalumet from Gavin.

Bobby tried not to let his irritation show. "I'm aware that Mark is a friend of yours, Bernie. Fact is, KFMC has been running third in San Francisco for the past eighteen months. I want better than that for all of our stations and I'm sure the program directors all want to win. We anticipate no problems."

"Are we talking chain adds?" Robert Williams asked.

Bobby noticed the confused look on the face of the reporter from The Los Angeles Times. "Chain adds are records that are added at the same time to all of the radio stations in the Media Communi-

cations group." His eyes shifted back to Robert. "Yes, I'm talking about chain adds . . . and chain drops."

Robert smiled. "You're aware that a record cannot reach the top ten on any chart in this room unless the stations from Media Communications are playing it."

"I am aware of that fact . . . but I'm not making this decision to punish or reward record companies. We want to program each station in our chain alike, almost identical. This will enable us to move personnel from station to station without changing the basic sound."

"It will also centralize the power." Robert again.

Bobby looked down at his friend, his lips twisting into a self-satisfied grin. "Exactly."

Paul Johnson stood up. "Gentlemen, my assistant will be passing among you with a bio of Mr. Holiday. The man has answered enough questions for one day. Now it's time for him to go to work."

Paul put his arm around Bobby's shoulder and they stepped down off the podium, moving toward the door. Reporters gathered around, pressing him with more questions. Bobby waved them off and pushed through the group, looking for Robert. He was mildly disappointed when they made it to the elevator without finding his friend. Evidently, the publisher of *The Report* had more important business.

He and Paul took the elevator to the ninth floor, the hub of the Media Communications operation.

"I'll leave you to find your own way," Paul said. "You know everyone already. Set your own pace. If I were you, I'd just spend the rest of this week getting used to the furniture. Next week you can start really moving."

Bobby shook his head. "I'd rather replace the furniture immediately, Paul. That way I don't have to waste time getting used to it!"

Johnson turned down the hall toward his own office. "Have it your way. I'll meet you tomorrow morning and we'll go over the budgets."

Bobby watched Paul disappear, then turned and walked down the short hallway to his suite of offices. He felt light headed. Things were happening so fast. Yesterday he was the program director of a radio station in Boston. Today, the vice president in charge of programming for Media Communications. He slapped his cheeks lightly a couple of times to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

He came to the end of the hallway and turned left into a large reception area. Two desks were on either side of the room, and another, slightly larger desk sat at the far end. At the desk on his right sat one of his employees, Sandy Luther.

"Congratulations, Bobby," she said.

"Yeah, congratulations Bobby, you little schmuck!"

He glanced left at the other secretary, Jane Downey. They both ran around the desks and crashed against him, throwing their arms around him.

"Wait a minute," he protested weakly. "I'm the new vice president here. Show me a little respect."

They backed off a little.

"New vice president, huh," Jane smirked. "That's funny. You don't look any different."

Bobby smiled. "Perfect. Neither do you."

And they didn't. Jane was tall, five-six or seven and a real smart-ass. She had long, light brown hair that fell past her wide shoulders. She was very attractive, with a big smile and clear, blue eyes that twinkled almost as much as Bobby's. Sandy was Jane's opposite, both in physical appearance and personality. She was short, barely five feet tall, with jet black hair cut close to a square, unattractive face.

"Damn, this is gonna be fun," Jane said.

Bobby looked around. "That it is, ladies. That it is."

He pointed to the door behind Jane's desk. "Is Bill in?" Bill Lerner was the chief engineer for Media Communications and a good friend of Bobby's.

"Nope," Jane said. "He's in New York working on the transmitter. He doesn't know about your appointment. Hell, we just found out half an hour ago."

"When's he due back?"

"He's taking the red-eye, tonight. He'll be in the office tomorrow morning."

"What about Nancy?"

Sandy dropped her head and looked at the floor nervously. "Ah, she's not in, Bobby."

"What? Is she in New York too?"

"No. She went out for a farewell drink with Bill McMan after Paul fired . . . I mean after he resigned."

"Did she say when she'd be back?"

"Ah, no. She said to tell you she'd catch up with you in the morning."

Bobby tried not to show his annoyance. Nancy Marion was the music coordinator for the Media Communications chain and, in theory, his assistant. He was surprised that she wasn't here to greet him. Then again, maybe he shouldn't have been. Paul had hired her years ago when he took over programming. She'd been a fixture ever since.

Nancy was giving him a message by not being there. The message

was that she didn't care who the new vice president was. She knew Paul Johnson would protect her job.

"Yeah," Jane piped back in, "I'll bet your heart's just broken up about it. You don't have a secretary either. I guess you'll have to hire your own."

"I guess you're right." He grinned. "You guys will just have to help me out until I get somebody."

"You got it," Jane said.

Sandy nodded. "Whatever you need."

"Right now I need to check out my new office," he said. "I'll catch up with you later." He started walking toward the door located at the end of the room.

"We'll wait around as long as you need us," Jane said.

"Go on home," he called out over his shoulder. "I'll just putter around a minute then head for the hotel myself."

He opened the door and walked in.

His office!

He closed the door and leaned against it, staring across the room through the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the Sunset Strip. To his left was the huge desk that had been occupied by Bill McMan, the former head of programming. He turned his head slowly.

"What the fuck!" Robert Williams was sitting on the couch at the other end of the office, smoking a cigarette.

"You'll look good in that chair, Bobby," Robert said.

"How in the hell did you get in my office?"

Robert put out his cigarette. "Privileges of the press, my dear boy." He stood up and walked toward Bobby quickly, throwing his arms around him. "Congratulations, you ass-hole. I'm proud of you."

Bobby hugged him back. "I looked for you after the press conference."

"I slipped out early and waited for you in here."

Bobby frowned, wondering exactly how Robert had gotten into his office. Robert was a friend, but even so, he was publisher of the most important trade magazine in the business and it wasn't good for Bobby's business to have a reporter with complete access to his office.

Robert stepped back slightly and clapped his hands together. "And, to celebrate your becoming the head man, I'm taking you to dinner tonight at Mr. Chow's. I'm sure all the record guys are going to be trying to get their hooks into you early so let's give them a chance to look, but not touch."

"I don't know, Robert."

"Come on, buddy, this is Hollywood and you have got to move with the right crowd. Tonight is the night to set the stage. Why I've even got two lovely ladies to accompany us."

"Who's that?"

The door flew open behind him and Jane and Sandy jumped in. "Us!" They yelled.

Robert grabbed his arm. "Come on, man, let's party!"

Bobby started to protest, then relaxed. The hell with it. He deserved a celebration!

"How can I say no?"

He let himself be pulled through the door, making a mental note to have Jane and Sandy on the carpet the next day for allowing someone into his office without his permission.

* * * * *

The phone beeped again at the house in Beverly Hills. This time the man was sitting behind his desk.

"Go ahead."

"He's having dinner tonight at Mr. Chow's with Robert Williams."

"I'll take care of it."

"I knew that you would." Click.

He picked up his coat from the back of the chair and headed out.

* * * * *

It had taken them only fifteen minutes to get from the headquarters of Media Communications to their destination. Mr. Chow's was a small, quiet restaurant on Sunset Boulevard with a spectacular view of the valley below. They'd been seated at one of the best tables with an unobstructed view of the sparkling lights of the Los Angeles suburbs. Bobby and Robert sat across from each other in the booth, the girls stuffed in between them.

They were on their second drink when Robert ended the small talk with a toast.

"To the best . . . from the best."

"I'll drink to that," Bobby said.

They all drained their glasses.

"So, Bobby, your promotion was a big surprise," Jane said.

He shrugged.

"To you, maybe," Robert said, "but not to me."

"Yeah, but you know everything, Robert," Jane smirked.

"True, but this one was easy."

"How so?" Sandy asked.

"Bobby Holiday is the best qualified programmer in the business."

"We think he's the best," Jane said, nudging him in the ribs with her elbow.

"Where were you before Boston, Bobby?" asked Sandy.

"Let me," Robert waved, cutting Bobby off before he could begin. "Bobby Holiday was attending college in Louisiana when he got a job working at the local radio station. Six months after that, he'd dropped out of college and was playing the hits in New Orleans. Next, he got a job programming a station in Miami. He took that one to the top, then moved to Denver, accomplishing the same thing. After Denver, he ran a station in Phoenix to the top of the ratings and then, Media Communications called, putting him in charge of their Boston station. The rest is history." He held up his drink again. "Ladies, you're looking at the youngest and brightest programmer in the country!"

"Here, here!" Sandy said.

Bobby tried to look humble after the glowing tribute from Robert, but he couldn't quite pull it off.

"Excuse me, Bobby, I've got to go to the bathroom," Jane said. He stood up and let her and Sandy out as Robert signaled to the waiter for yet another round.

Robert looked across the table. "We've come a long way, buddy. If you ever need anything, you just pick up the phone and ask."

"Well, I do need something, Robert."

"What?"

"I need the address changed on my subscription."

Robert laughed. "That's easy. What's the new address?"

Bobby grinned. "Now comes the hard part. You tell me."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's your town, buddy. I don't know a thing about Los Angeles and I need a place to live. So why don't you notify your friends in the real estate business to find me an acceptable house."

"I'll tell you what I'll do. When's Beverly coming in?"

"Good question," Bobby answered, thinking about his wife for the first time in several hours. "I guess she'll be on her way in a couple of weeks. There's no need for her to stay in Boston."

"I'll get Pamela working with a realtor. As soon as Bev gets here, Pamela will have a bunch of houses for her to look at."

"Sounds great!"

"What price range?"

Bobby ducked his head. "Nothing that compares with yours. This job pays one hundred thousand a year."

"You're kidding!"

"Why would I kid about a thing like that?"

"I can't believe it. I thought it would pay twice that."

"It's not chicken feed."

Robert shook his head. "Well, you don't need to worry. After you change the attitude of the chain, the sky will be the limit."

"I hope you're right."

"I'm always right."

Bobby smiled and took a sip from his fresh drink, the ice clinking on the side of the glass as the straight bourbon slid past his lips. He felt the cool liquid change to a roaring fire as it shot down his throat, changing again when it hit his stomach into a warm glow that spread throughout his body, making his cheeks red and his mind lazy.

He had to be careful or he would get a real buzz on. Then the whiskey spoke to him. Why be careful? He was the man now! He took another swig to keep it talking.

Robert leaned across the table and lowered his voice. "You were pretty hard on the record companies today weren't you?"

Bobby was mildly surprised at the question. "What do you mean? I don't think I said anything profound, but I'm getting a little curious as to why you and everyone else seems so concerned about the relationship of Media Communications and the record companies. What gives?"

Robert reached out and patted Bobby's arm. "It's no big deal."

"It must be."

"Look Bobby, it's just that the record companies are concerned with how they will be treated. As you know, when Johnson was head of programming, he made all the decisions about what records went on what radio stations in the chain. Then when he got booted upstairs, he gave individual stations the ability to make their own decisions. It makes it a little easier on the record companies. They're working all the stations rather than just one company head. If Los Angeles doesn't like a record, they've still got a shot in Boston or New York. Before, if Johnson didn't like the record, they were finished."

"Yeah, and before, every Media Communications station was number one in every market. Now we've got problems. I think going back to the old way of doing things will help straighten us up."

Robert shook his head slowly. "Well, that's why the record companies are concerned. They wonder if you're going to cut the playlists of the stations and make their jobs tougher."

Bobby stared across the table. "I can understand why they might

be concerned, Robert, but why do you give a shit?"

"It's just good journalism, Bobby."

"Bullshit. You can't even spell journalist."

"J-O-U-R-N-A-L-I-S-T!"

Bobby grinned. "Close enough." He held his drink up as a salute.

"Bobby Fucking Holiday! Where in the hell have you been, bud?"

Bobby turned his head and grimaced. It was Tommy Russo, head of promotion for Ekstra Records. Tommy was one of the most obnoxious people in the business, but one of the people Bobby liked the most. Short and thin with a paunchy stomach and receding black hair, Tommy was loud, profane and funny.

He stood up as Tommy approached the table.

"Don't stand up, bud. I ought to get down on my hands and knees and kiss yore ass. You the new guru!"

Tommy threw both arms around him. Bobby reached around and patted the man on the back. As he did, he saw some of the other people in the restaurant taking notice of what was going on. Mr. Chow's was an industry hangout and just about everyone there was in the music or radio business. Tommy had just made points with everyone by showing how close he was to the new head of Media Communications. Tommy was crazy all right, crazy like a fox.

He pushed the man away gently. "Good to see you, as always, Tom. How are you doing."

"Fuck how I'm doing, bud. It's you that's going straight to the top. Or should I say you're already at the top. You just landed the number one job in the country and now you're having dinner at Mr. Chow's with Robert Williams. You shiftin' in high cotton, bud."

Bobby couldn't help but smile. Tommy had a way of putting things that made him laugh. It also made some think Tommy was stupid ... the way he talked and acted. He played that stupid hick part to the max.

"Move over, bud. Let me buy you a drink."

Bobby shook his head. "Sorry, son. These seats are taken."

"What is it, bud. You got some pussy with you tonight?"

Bobby made a face. "Jesus, Tommy, put a lid on it, will you? We're just trying to have dinner with some friends. Do you mind?"

"If I did, it wouldn't make no difference." Tommy looked down at Robert. Robert wasn't smiling. It was plain the two men didn't like each other. "Well, congratulations, bud." He slapped Bobby on the shoulder. "I'll call you tomorrow morning at your office. You gonna be in?"

"I'll be there." He watched Tommy strut off through the restaurant.

Before he had a chance to sit down, Jane and Sandy returned to the table. They slid around in the booth and he joined them.

"I don't see how you can stand him," Robert said.

"Aw come on, Robert, relax," Bobby laughed. "Tommy's a real card. I get a kick out of him."

"I just don't like how he makes our business look."

"You're turning into a real snob, Robert. Just because Tommy won't wear a three-piece suit like you is no reason to come down on him."

"I think he's cute," Sandy said.

"There you have it," Bobby grinned.

Robert stared at Sandy. "You just like him because he's the only guy you can look in the eye without standing on your toes."

They all laughed.

"Exactly what does Tommy do, anyhow?" Jane asked.

"Makes money," Bobby said.

"Lots of it," Robert added.

"No, really," Jane said. "I know he works for a record company, but just what is it that he does?"

"He's head of promotion for Ekstra Records," Sandy said.

"That's what he does, basically," Bobby went on. "He promotes records for his record company. Those in the promotion departments get to know the program directors at different radio stations to try and get a break when it comes to adding records. Only three or four slots are available on each radio station every week. It's a pretty tough job."

"I don't understand," Jane said. "How do they get someone to add their record?"

"If you knew that, Jane, you'd be worth millions to these record companies," Robert said.

"It's very seldom that anyone would add a record just because a record promoter asked him to," Bobby said. "The record has to have some merit."

"Unless he's taking payola," Robert said.

Bobby frowned. "Cut the bullshit, Robert."

"What's payola?" Jane asked.

"It's when someone pays you to play a record," Sandy chimed in.

"That doesn't happen any more," Bobby said.

"Now it's my turn to call bullshit," Robert said.

"Come off it, Robert."

"No, Bobby. You see Jane, about twenty years ago, a bunch of people got busted for taking money to play records on the radio.

Since then, both record companies and radio stations have guarded against the practice. It's just that in the past five years, with competition so fierce, it's coming back."

"You mean people offer cash money to play their records?" she asked.

"Cash, drugs, women . . . you name it," Robert said.

"Drugs?" Jane's eyes lit up. She punched Bobby's arm. "Come on, Bobby, add someone's record and let's get some good drugs."

Bobby grinned and shook his head. "You know I don't do that shit!"

"What a red-neck," she said. "All he wants to do is drink."

"And fuck," Robert said.

Sandy spit her drink out on the table. Bobby almost choked.

"Damn it, Robert," Bobby said, mock anger in his voice.

"Drinking, drugging and sex," Jane cried. "Well, two out of three 'aint bad."

"Can we change the subject?" Sandy asked.

"Definitely," Bobby said.

They were interrupted by the waiter. He began setting up champagne glasses in front of each of them. In buckets of ice on the edge of the table he set down two bottles of Dom Perignon champagne.

Bobby looked at Robert. "You've got a lot of class, son."

"You're right, of course," said Robert. "But I didn't order the champagne."

The waiter nodded over his shoulder. "From Mr. Phillip Crawford, sir."

"Perfect!" Robert snorted. "The buzzards are really circling here tonight."

"Don't forget that this was your idea, Robert," Bobby said. He looked across the room and found Phillip Crawford watching from a seat at the bar. He waved a greeting and motioned him over.

"Jesus, Bobby, not him," Robert whined.

"Relax. Phillip won't bite. I've known him for a long time."

"That doesn't change the fact that he's a sleaze," Robert said softly.

Bobby stood up to greet the man responsible for the champagne. Phillip Crawford was from Louisiana, like Bobby. He'd gone into the record business about fifteen years before Bobby began his career in radio. Bobby knew him from many of the conventions they had both attended. They also shared some of the same friends from their home state.

Phillip was maybe five-eight, of medium build, a neatly trimmed, salt and pepper beard accenting a rather square face. He looked to

be in his mid-forties, impeccably dressed in the finest casual clothes you could find on Rodeo Drive. A heavy gold chain hung around his neck, diamonds glistened from the rings on each of his hands and a huge Rolex watch peeked out from under a monogrammed cuff. Phillip Crawford was wealthy . . . and he dressed the part.

"Thanks for the champagne, Phillip," Bobby said, shaking the shorter man's hand.

"No problem, Bobby," Crawford said quietly. "I'm glad I ran into you. I heard about your promotion today. Congratulations."

"Thanks." He nodded to the table. "Do you know everyone here?"

"I know Mr. Williams," Phillip said, reaching out his hand. Robert hesitated only a moment before grabbing it. "I've never had the pleasure of meeting the lovely ladies."

Bobby introduced him to Jane and Sandy.

"Thanks a lot for the champagne, Mr. Crawford," Jane said. "I just love Dom . . . but it's so expensive. Eighty dollars a bottle, isn't it?"

"A hundred and a quarter at this rip-off joint," Robert growled.

"I appreciate it, Phillip," Bobby said. "But you know I can't accept."

"Why not?" Phillip asked.

"Nothing over twenty-five dollars from record companies. Media Communications rules."

Phillip laughed. "Since you're the new head man over there, I thought maybe you'd make an exception."

"I wish I could."

Phillip glanced around the table. "Well, I'll tell you what, I wasn't sending you the champagne anyhow. You see, I noticed these two beautiful ladies when they walked in the place and I decided to send the champagne to them. The waiter must have gotten confused. If you'd like a bottle for yourself, I'll be glad to send another over, otherwise, I guess you'll just have to share with the ladies."

Bobby shook his head. "I'm sorry, but . . ."

"Come on, Bobby, don't be an ass-hole," Jane said, popping the cork from the first bottle. "Ask Phillip to sit down with us and have a drink."

Bobby felt the heat rising along his neck. Jane was close to pissing him off. First letting Robert into his office earlier today and now paying no attention to his obvious problem with Phillip Crawford. She was fast overstepping her bounds.

Robert caught the look. "Relax, Bobby," he said. "It's no big deal."

Bobby took a deep breath and sighed. "You're right. Besides, tonight is a celebration of sorts. Phillip, would you care to join us?"

Bobby was instantly relieved when the man shook his head. "No,

but thanks for the invitation. I just wanted you to know I was happy you got the job. I hope we can have dinner sometime soon. In the meantime, enjoy the bubbly." He nodded again to the table and returned to his seat at the bar.

"What record company does he work for?" Jane asked. "I like him."

"All of them," Sandy said.

"What do you mean?" Jane asked again.

Robert looked at Bobby. "He's an independent record promoter, Jane," he said. "One of the true low-lives of our business. Different record companies hire him to work specific records."

"I don't understand," she said, gulping down a glass of champagne. "I thought the record companies had people working for them that did that."

"They do," Robert said. "Sometimes they need extra help. The record companies have rules as to what they can and cannot do in promoting records to radio stations. Sometimes they need to break these rules to get records played. So they hire independents who aren't bound by any rules. That's where people like Phillip Crawford come in."

"How so?" she asked once more, motioning for another refill.

Robert smiled. "With money, drugs and women."

"Bullshit!" Bobby said.

"I knew I liked him," Jane giggled.

"Robert," Bobby began, "You are totally full of shit. Those days are gone forever. It's against the law."

"Bobby, you're a real piece of work and I like you for several reasons," Robert said. "I like you because we both started out together with the same high standards, you always say what you think, you're true to your own ideals and you are incredibly naive. Shit's happening out there. Not as much as in the past, for sure, but it's happening."

"Name one person. Give me some tangible proof."

"I don't have anything concrete, yet, but it'll happen. Trust me. Independents are working specific stations and getting records on too easily every week. Money's changing hands somewhere."

"I say bullshit, Robert."

Robert shook his head. "Let's forget it, Bobby."

"No! You know so much. What are you doing? Trying to break a story?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing and when I've got the story, I'll break it. But I don't have it yet, Bobby."

Bobby took another pull from his drink. He was getting too drunk

to argue anymore. Besides, this was supposed to be his celebration. "Enough! Let's rock and roll, shall we?"

"Indeed," said Robert.

"Go for it," yelled Jane.

"I propose a toast," Sandy said.

"Go ahead," laughed Bobby.

She held up her glass unsteadily. "To Bill McMan, the former vice president of programming for Media Communications, without who's total ineptitude we wouldn't be here tonight. Let's drink to a complete fool!"

"The king is dead," shouted Robert. "Long live the king!"

It was two in the morning when they finally left Mr. Chow's.

* * * * *

Brrriing!

The jangle of the phone by his head brought him awake instantly.

Brrriing!!

He looked around quickly, the sudden movement causing his head to explode, the events of the previous night crashing back into his consciousness. He was lying on the bed in his hotel room. He didn't even remember how he got back.

Brrriing!!!

The phone screamed from its perch on the nightstand for the third time and he reached over and picked it up.

"Hello," he mumbled.

"Damn it, Bobby, why didn't you call last night?"

He sat up quickly. It was his wife calling from Boston.

"Sorry, baby. I went out with Robert and it got very drunk out last night."

He heard her chuckle. "I figured as much. Did you two get into any trouble?"

Bobby cleared his throat, trying to chase away the sleep and the momentary twinge of guilt. "I'm not sure. I don't think we caused too much of a nuclear holocaust. I'm back in my room this morning. This is my room, I think, and it is morning isn't it . . . I hope?"

She laughed again. "Yes it's morning, you dope. It's ten o'clock here. That makes it seven in Los Angeles. You better thank me. I should have called you two hours ago."

"I don't guess you could call me back in an hour and let me sleep a little longer could you?"

"Get up out of bed right now, Mr. Vice President. You've got work to do. I've already started packing. I want to get out of here and join

you as soon as possible.”

“I’ve got Robert looking for a house for us already.”

She gasped. “Oh Bobby, we’re finally going to buy a house? Now you’ve really made my day.”

“Then pack up and don’t worry about all that crummy furniture. Just keep our good stuff. We’ll start from scratch out here and really do things right.”

“I’m so proud of you. And I can’t wait to see you.”

“What does our daughter think about all of this?”

“You won’t believe it. She’s out telling the neighborhood now that she’s moving to Hollywood to become a five-year-old movie star.”

Bobby laughed. “She just might do it.”

“Get up and get ready for work. I’ve got some more things to do here. Give me a call tonight and don’t forget, I love you.”

“Thank you, darling. I love you too. I’ll call you tonight.”

He leaned over and hung up the phone.

“Last night it was me that you loved.”

Bobby whirled around quickly in the bed. Jane’s head was on the pillow next to his. She was smiling up at him.

“Surprise.”

Bobby groaned. “Surprise is right. I thought I’d dreamed it all.”

Jane chuckled. “It was no dream, baby. It was real and it was fantastic.”

The guilt he’d faked away was back. “Here,” she said. “Can you get these off now?” She moved her arms from under the covers, holding her hands up towards Bobby’s face. Her wrists were handcuffed together.

“Jesus,” Bobby winced. He fell back on the pillow, his face getting warm as the events of the previous night rushed back into his mind.

“Come on, come on . . . where’s the key?”

“Did I really do that?” he asked.

“Sure you did . . . and I liked it, but enough is enough, Bobby. Where’s the key?”

He grinned. “I didn’t even know I had handcuffs . . . much less a key.”

Her eyebrows jumped over her flashing eyes. “We bought them as a gag. I think you put the key in your pants pocket, unless you swallowed it like you threatened last night.”

“Oh no,” he groaned. He rolled out of bed and padded carefully across the room to where his pants were folded over a chair. He found the key, returned to the bed and leaned over to grab Jane’s hands, releasing first one, then the other.

"All right," she said, rubbing her wrists. She stretched her arms high above her head and as she did, the sheet slipped off her shoulders and down to her stomach, exposing her breasts.

Bobby leaned over and kissed one of her nipples, gently biting and sucking on it.

She grabbed his head in her hands. "Cut that out, Bobby. I don't want you to start something you can't finish."

He grinned up at her. "Who said I couldn't finish?"

"We don't have time. It's seven-thirty already and we've both got to be to work by nine."

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it. I know the new boss. He'll let us be late the first day."

She sat up, pushing him away. "Not now, Bobby. Bill gets back this morning and I want to be there when he walks in. Besides, this is your first day. It's gonna be real interesting."

He fell back on the bed, not really disappointed. He was too tired . . . and hungover. "Okay. But you don't know what you're missing."

"I know exactly what I'm missing. I spent the better part of last night finding out, you know. You might not remember, but I do."

"I wish we'd taken pictures," he laughed.

Jane laughed with him. "Next time . . . next time."

Their laughter faded and the room was silent for a few moments. Jane cleared her throat. "Bobby, there's one thing I don't quite understand."

"What's that?"

"Well, you spend all night in bed with me, yet your wife calls first thing this morning and you tell her you love her."

"So?"

Jane sighed. "It's really strange to me. If I was married, I wouldn't want to be with anyone but my husband."

He tried to look hurt. "Not even with me?"

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Well, maybe if you had the handcuffs," she giggled.

He reached out for her, but she slid off the other side of the bed and ran across the room to where her clothes were lying on the dresser. The guilt was gone, replaced by a familiar tightening in his stomach as he watched her body move, unencumbered by any clothes.

"I swear, Jane, you've got a beaver butt."

She gave him a sideways glance as she searched through her purse. "Beaver butt?"

"Yeah," he laughed. "No butt at all . . . just like a beaver!"

She made a face at him. "I don't recall your bitching about it last night."

"I'm not bitching now. I'm just pointing it out. Besides, I've always been an animal lover."

"Honey, you are an animal." She pulled a small vial of cocaine out of her purse. "Want a pop to get you up this morning?"

He frowned and his body stiffened. "Put that shit away."

"What?"

"I said, put it away!" He got out of bed and stalked toward the bathroom, the excitement he'd felt from her naked nearness now history. "I don't give a shit what you do when I'm not around, but I'm not into drugs and I'm not into having anyone working for me that's into drugs. If you're going to do them, I'd appreciate it if you didn't do it around me, then we'll all be happy."

He closed the door behind him and reached into the shower to turn on the water. He wasn't really pissed at Jane. He knew most of his friends did drugs and he really didn't care. He did object if the people who worked with him used drugs in front of him. It worked best if he just pretended not to know about it.

He'd been in the shower about five minutes when Jane came in.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, sliding the shower door back.

"Come on," he said, moving over to make room.

"Are you still mad at me?"

"No, just forget it." How could he stay mad at a beautiful, naked woman who'd been in handcuffs until a few minutes before? He turned around and closed his eyes, trying to pretend that he wasn't bothered by her wet body pressing against him.

"Here, let me help you," she said, taking the soap in her hands. She rubbed his neck and shoulders, working her way down the small of his back.

He felt himself relaxing under the kneading of her fingers. "That feels great."

"Turn around and let me get your front." He kept his eyes closed, feeling her fingers again on his neck, sliding down across his shoulders to massage his arms, then back up across his shoulders and down his chest. He could feel her breath on his face and occasionally her breasts would brush against him, her hardened nipples scraping against his skin.

He took a deep breath. Her hands moved down his chest and across his stomach. He couldn't pretend any longer. He was getting excited.

"Let me get you up for the day," she whispered. Her hands moved

across his hips as she dropped to her knees. The heat of the water beat against his chest as her fingers scratched gently across his thighs. Her lips parted, her tongue flicked out and he felt a different heat scorch his lower body.

"Jesus Christ," he moaned, leaning back against the wall of the shower. He felt her nose touch his stomach as her hands grabbed his buttocks, squeezing him even closer.

"I can't take much more of this," he muttered, his hips jerking involuntarily under the domination of her lips, as if she was a puppet master, tweaking hidden strings that controlled his movements.

Her hands massaged his buttocks, slipping between the cheeks, tickling downward. He felt the pressure of her fingertip push against him.

"Don't!"

She didn't listen. He grabbed her hair and yelled as he went over the top, his muscles twitching spastically, knotting to the limits of their tension before releasing completely, causing his feet to slip on the tile as he lost his balance and crashed to the shower floor, his head banging against the side.

He didn't move for nearly a minute. When he finally opened his eyes, he saw Jane lying between his legs, her cheek resting against his crotch, a big smile on her face.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he whispered.

"Breakfast of champions," she grinned.

He reached up and ran his fingers gingerly across his scalp. "You hurt my head."

"No, Bobby, I gave you head."

He groaned. "I'm going to have to learn the difference."

She stood up and shut off the shower. "Come on, let's go to work."

He reached up for her outstretched hands, his eyes level with her dark pubic hair. Resisting the urge to jerk her back down again, he pulled himself to his feet.

"Well?" she teased.

"Hooray for Hollywood!"

A spokesman for the Chief of Police stated that several, well-known Los Angeles radio and record company executives were involved.

CHAPTER TWO

Phillip Crawford was sitting by the pool at his house in Beverly Hills turning the events of the past couple of days over in his mind. Changes were coming down in the radio industry, big changes, that could have a dramatic impact on his business. Phillip's business was records . . . or more precisely, getting records played on radio stations. When Phillip succeeded, he got paid. And paid well.

Some of the stations he was hired to promote were in the Media Communications chain. The restructure of the high command at Media Communications would cause concern among the record companies. It would also cause concern among the other independent record promoters across the country. Some might now try and seize the opportunity to horn in on Phillip's business.

Phillip Crawford had been in the record business for most of his adult life. As an independent promoter, he was hired to work nearly every record that was released. And he worked hard, developing relationships with program directors at radio stations all over the West Coast. The program directors were the keys, as they were in charge of adding records on their radio stations. So he traveled from one city to another, taking them out for dinner, getting them tickets to concerts, setting them up with hookers, doing whatever he had to do to gain their confidence. Once they trusted him, Phillip was able to sway them into playing the records he was promoting. The more program directors he became friends with, the more stations he could influence and the more money he could make. Phillip made a lot of friends.

When he first started out, there were literally hundreds of independent promoters all over the country, but now there were only four. So much bad blood had risen out of different stations being "claimed" by different promoters that five years before, the larger independents met in Chicago to solve the problem.

The four independents divided the country up into quarters, each man responsible for his section. The most powerful of all the independents, Joe Preston, lived in Philadelphia and controlled the action on the East Coast, including the important New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore and Boston areas. It was Joe, with the help

of some well-connected "businessmen" from New York, who dictated that each independent have a section of the country and the others should stay out.

It had become quite an effective organization. Where five years before, record companies usually hired independent promoters only to work special projects, now they were hired for almost every record. The record companies had little choice.

A case like Media Communications was special. In the past, the different program directors at all the Media Communications stations had been responsible for adding records on their individual stations. Each independent worked and "claimed" the stations in his area. Now that Bobby Holiday had taken over command of Media Communications and stated that all record ads would come out of his office, it was a new ball game. Whoever could get to Holiday and establish a relationship with him would be able to "claim" the whole chain.

Before Bobby Holiday was made vice president, Phillip had "claimed" the Media Communications stations in Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco. Now, if one of the other independents got to Mr. Holiday first, Phillip could lose all three of those stations. And that meant money out of his pocket.

Big money.

Since Media Communications owned stations in eight major markets, and an independent record promoter was paid an average of five thousand dollars for every record that was added to stations located in major markets and radio stations usually averaged adding five records a week, the Media Communications chain could be worth millions of dollars a year to the independent record promoter who developed a relationship with Bobby Holiday.

The next month would prove interesting.

His thoughts were interrupted by his secretary's voice. "Phillip . . . Mark Lowery's on the phone."

He pushed himself out of the chair and walked leisurely back inside. He had bought the house five years before, preferring to work from home rather than an office. He converted the family room and one bedroom into connecting office space and with the help of his attractive, young secretary, Shirley Rogers, did quite well from that location.

Actually, he needed no real office. His business was generally conducted by phone or out of town. All Shirley did was field phone calls, send bills, make travel arrangements and go to the bank, plus, look good on the arms of different radio executives who visited Los An-

geles from time to time.

He stepped through the doors that opened out onto the pool deck and picked up the phone.

"Good morning, Mark. How's everything with you?"

"Pretty good, so far, Phillip. I've got no complaints yet, but I'm expecting some soon."

Phillip chuckled. He had known the current program director of KFMC in San Francisco for about three years. Although neither man would call the other a good friend, through a relationship formed and nurtured by Phillip, they were close business associates. Mark often called when he needed help or advice. Phillip was sure this call would prove no different.

"What's the problem, Mark?" Phillip asked.

"Bobby Holiday."

"How's that a problem? Has he talked to you?"

"Not yet, but I know he's going to be on the phone shortly."

"What for?"

"You heard what he said about me yesterday at the press conference. Of all the people in the Media Communications chain, he picked me to single out for criticism. I know he's going to be trouble."

"Relax, Mark. He didn't single you out. Your good friend Bernie Kalumet did."

"How'd you know what happened? Were you there?"

"In a manner of speaking." Phillip picked up a cassette from his desk. The tape of the press conference had been delivered to his house fifteen minutes after the meeting was completed the day before.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Phillip, switching back to the original subject, "I mean Bernie got you into trouble. He was trying to show everyone there that he had a close relationship with you so he brought up your name . . . not to make you look good, but so he could be the big shot. Anyhow, Holiday, who's got a pretty healthy ego himself, put Bernie down, and burned you in the process."

"Damn."

"That pretty well sums it up."

"I wonder what's going to happen?"

"I wouldn't make any plans based on what went down in the meeting yesterday. Besides, don't you know Holiday pretty well?"

"No, I don't. I mean, I've seen him at different company meetings, but I never shared a drink or dinner with the guy. I didn't think he'd amount to anything."

"It's amazing what good ratings will do."

"No shit."

"But you shouldn't have to worry too much. Aren't your ratings pretty good in San Francisco?"

"Nope. We aren't doing that bad. We're ranked third in the market, but Holiday wants every station in first place, so by that criteria, I'm not doing so hot."

"Well, don't worry. He won't be making any changes quickly."

"Don't be so sure. I tried to call Johnson this morning."

"Yeah? He's the one who hired you anyhow, right?"

"Yeah, he hired me, but his secretary wouldn't put me through. She told me that Johnson said all calls from program personnel in the chain were to be routed directly to Holiday's office."

Phillip was silent for a moment. It sounded like the new kid was taking immediate charge.

"He's just flexing his muscles, Mark. Why don't you give him a ring?"

"I've already tried, but he's not taking any calls. I'll tell you Phillip, I've got a bad feeling about this whole thing. What do you know about him?"

"I don't know him at all, Mark. I've met him a couple of times, that's about it."

"Well, I'm worried about my job, and about other things."

Phillip sat up straighter in his chair. "You don't have to worry about your job. If you lose KFMC, you'll find something else and I'll help you out until you do."

"Maybe so, but Holiday's always been very vocal about record promoters and that's got me worried."

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't think program directors should spend a lot of time with record people. He says it destroys their ability to reason accurately about record ads."

Holiday had that right, Phillip thought.

"At every meeting I've attended, he's been harping on the different program directors' relationships with record guys. I don't want him looking into my business and finding out about the real estate deal."

Phillip stood up and tightened his grip on the phone. "Nix that rap, partner," he hissed. "You've got nothing to worry about. If you need conversation, I'll fly up there and we'll talk . . . but not on the phone."

Mark hesitated for a moment before continuing. "No, I don't need to talk. Well, I guess I do, but I've got a feeling all the program directors will be flying to Los Angeles to meet with the new crown prince in a couple of days, so we'll get together there."

"All right, Mark." Phillip was interrupted by the beep of his private line. "I've got to run. Call me if you need me."

"Thanks, Phillip."

He had already picked up the other phone.

"Yes?"

"You got the tape?" The familiar, flat, unemotional voice crackled through the phone, not really asking the question as much as stating a fact.

"Yeah, thanks."

"What do you think?"

Phillip sighed and sat down. "I don't know what to think, yet. I'll have to play this one by ear."

"What do you know about him?"

"Not a lot. He was cordial enough last night when I bought him a couple of bottles of champagne."

"Listen carefully."

Phillip picked up a pen and began making notes.

"He's twenty-nine years old, birthday's on May first. He's the youngest vice president in Media Communications history, probably the youngest in the country, period. The man knows exactly what he's doing when it comes to programming a radio station. He's taken stations to the top of the ratings in Miami, Denver, Phoenix and Boston. In these accomplishments, he's turned losing operations into tremendous money makers, but he does not know his value. He's got a tremendous ego, but it's based on his ability to turn ratings around. He has no idea how much money he's made for Media Communications."

Phillip cut off the narrative. "I'm familiar with his professional record. What's he like personally?"

If the caller was irritated by Phillip's abruptness, it wasn't apparent. "He's been married six years to his wife, Beverly. They met in Miami. They've got a daughter that turns five in four months, her name is Pat. Wife's a real looker, former beauty queen in Florida. She's straight and so is he."

"How so?"

"Doesn't smoke. Doesn't do drugs. Plays poker, but has never bet on football or the horses, as far as we know. Has never been in a casino. No really bad habits. Holiday loves to drink, but so far it hasn't gotten him into any trouble."

"What do you suggest?"

"Media Communications doesn't pay a lot. Holiday's starting salary is one hundred thousand a year."

"You've got to be kidding. He's got to be worth five times that amount."

"I don't joke about these things. He was overheard last night at the table talking about buying a house in Los Angeles. Maybe he'll need a loan, but I doubt it. If you could get close to him in a hurry and show him the finer things of life that he can't afford, it might provide an opening."

"How about the ladies?"

"Meaning?"

"Does he like to fool around?"

"He seems to be happily married."

"Well, maybe he's never been tempted by some of Hollywood's finest."

"That's your business."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. One of his best friends is Robert Williams."

"No!"

"Yes. Williams is stirring up a lot of trouble with the payola campaign he's on. He could get a lot of people in hot water."

"He's sure not making things easy."

"You maybe want some help in that area?"

Phillip shook his head. "No, no. So far, he's got nothing and anything we could do would only focus more attention on it."

"It's your call."

"I'll be aware of it."

"I'm sending you a packet overnight with all the information we can gather."

"I'll look for it."

"What else?"

"I just got off the phone with Lowery from San Francisco. He's a little panicked already. Mentioned that he hoped Holiday wouldn't find out about the real estate deal."

"Can he?"

"Not easily, but anything's possible."

"You think Lowery could be a problem?"

"Could be. He's not handling the pressure well so far, and it hasn't even gotten hot yet."

"Keep a close eye on it."

"I will."

"I'll be in touch."

The line went dead. Phillip hung up the phone and his secretary stepped inside the office. When he was on the private line, a red light

went on outside his door. She knew not to enter until the light went off.

Shirley Rogers had been working as Phillip's secretary for a little over a year. She had come to Los Angeles from Washington to be an actress, but hadn't made it. His was the first job she had applied for and she liked her work. It wasn't difficult and she loved the action, especially traveling with Phillip to San Francisco, Las Vegas, New York, Hawaii. She was great on the phones with his different radio contacts, although she really didn't understand his business. And she looked good. She was twenty-five with a slim figure, a beautiful face and red hair. She was perfect for the job.

"You've got a ton of messages," she said, holding up a stack of slips.

Phillip smiled. "Separate them into two piles . . . one for radio, the other for records. I'll start with the radio calls."

"O. K." She sat down beside his desk and started to work on the slips. The phone rang and she leaned across to answer it. "Phillip Crawford Promotions." She listened for a moment, then, "Just a moment please."

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It's a woman. She insists on speaking with you. Says it has to do with M. C. and you'd know what it meant."

He took the phone and punched the button connecting him with the caller. "Hello."

"It's me."

"I figured."

"We need to talk."

"How about lunch?"

"Fine, where?"

"Fables."

"Too risky. Someone might see us."

"All right, Larry's in Beverly Hills."

"Twelve-thirty?"

"I'll be there."

"Great."

"What's happening now?"

"He's in a meeting with Johnson in his office."

"Anything going on?"

"I haven't talked with any of them."

"All right, I'll see you for lunch."

"Twelve-thirty."

"I need to know where he's staying."

"I'll find out and tell you at lunch. I've got to go now."

* * * * *

Bobby came out of Paul Johnson's office feeling on top of the world. Basically, Paul had told him to do whatever he needed to put the radio stations in the Media Communications chain back on top in all of the markets. The company was financially solid so additional expenditures for talent and promotions was not a problem.

Bobby would be in charge. He would meet with Paul every Monday morning to keep him abreast of his plans. Otherwise, the ballgame was his to win or lose.

Jane Downey had a special smile for him as he passed her desk. "Bobby, Bill wants to see you when you have a minute."

Before he could answer, Sandy spoke up. "Nancy said she wanted to meet with you as soon as you came in."

He smiled. "Tell Bill I'll take him to lunch. Nancy I'll get with in a few minutes. Which one of you has been taking my messages?"

"We both have," Sandy said.

"Tell the receptionist to put my calls through to you, Jane. Sandy, you've got enough work to do without dealing with my calls."

"All right."

"Jane, get all my messages and come into my office, please."

He walked through the door and stood silently for a moment, staring out of the windows at the city of Los Angeles. The brown haze of the morning smog didn't dull the beauty in his eyes. Palm trees, sunshine and beautiful women. Washington was the city of power, New York the city of money and Los Angeles, the city of entertainment! He couldn't wait to go to work.

Jane came in behind him and closed the door. He turned to face her, leaning against his desk.

She smiled. "About last night . . ."

He cut her off abruptly. "Last night was last night. It's Thursday now . . . that's all that matters. Give me my messages."

The smile faded quickly from her face. "I just wanted to tell you I enjoyed it," she stammered.

"I assumed that you did, Jane," he said coldly, turning to walk around his desk. "What about my calls?"

A dark cloud passed quickly over her face as she looked at the stack of messages in her hand. "All of the program directors have called and just about every record company. There are some more radio people I've never heard of, I guess they're either calling to congratulate you or ask you for a job."

"Or both."

"Yeah. You've got six plants and forty-seven telegrams out front. Everybody seems to be happy you're the man."

"That'll soon wear off."

She nodded. "I can vouch for that."

"Jane?"

"What?"

He took a deep breath. "I want nothing to interfere with the job I'm planning to do. If we just keep it simple and uncomplicated, everything will be perfect."

She looked up at him, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. "You are an ass-hole aren't you?"

He grinned. "Yep, but a perfect ass-hole."

She laughed.

"I'm going to make a phone call, then I'd like you to get all the program directors on the phone for me, one at a time, you pick the order. Call a moving company and tell them I want my furniture and stuff out here from Boston on the double. Give them my home phone number and tell them to contact Bev. Call her and tell her I'm running, but I'll get in touch with her later. And cancel my lunch with Bill. Tell him to grab some sandwiches and we'll eat here in my office between phone calls. I don't have time to go out."

"You got it."

He looked across the desk at her. "Are you finished yet?"

He waited until she walked out the door, then returned to his desk, picked up the phone and punched out a number.

"Bobby Holiday's office." It was Debbie Bower, his secretary in Boston.

"Not any more," he laughed.

"Bobby!" she squealed. "Where have you been? What is going on?"

"Miss me?"

"You know I do. What's happening?"

"I guess I've got them fooled. They gave me the big job."

"We know, we know. Everybody's been calling, trying to get me to get in touch with you. I never knew you had so many friends."

"Yeah," he laughed. "All of my close, personal friends are trying to get in touch with me now. Just take messages."

"Don't worry. When are you coming back?"

"I don't think I am."

"Awww," she whined.

"Why don't you come out here."

"For a visit?"

"No, jerk. For a job. I know the new vice president of this place and I could put in a good word for you."

"Bobby!"

"I'm serious, Debbie. I want you out here in a hurry."

"Dang, Bobby. My mom will crack!"

"I'll talk to her." Debbie was only nineteen years old, still living at home.

"I don't know."

"Debbie, there's nothing to know. I'll double your salary and put you up in a place to stay close to the office until you find an apartment. You come out here and help me get started and if you don't like it, I'll send you back to Boston in your old job."

She laughed. "How can I turn you down, Bobby?"

"Call your mom after we get off the phone. Tell her what's going on. Hell, Debbie, you're nineteen now, time for you to cut those apron strings. I'll bet she'll give you her blessing."

"Don't count on it."

"I'm not counting on it . . . I'm counting on you."

"When do you want me there?"

"Fly in Sunday night, start work Monday morning."

"Damn it, Bobby, that's not enough time. I've got to make plans and pack and . . ."

"Then what are you still talking to me for? Get off the phone and make the plans. Don't worry about it. You can sleep when you're old."

"Sure."

"Where's Harris?"

"Standing right here at my desk waiting to talk to you."

"Tell him to go in my office and pick up the phone."

"All right," she said and put him on hold.

Nelson Harris was Bobby's oldest and dearest friend. When Bobby had started hitting it big, he had brought Nelson along with him as his assistant, first in Denver, then Phoenix and now Boston.

"Fuck you!"

Bobby laughed. The two men were much too close to let a change in jobs effect their attitudes toward each other.

"No, fuck you!" Bobby snarled back.

"What do you want?"

Bobby tried to stop laughing. He took a deep breath and got as serious as he could. "As my first official act as vice president of Media Communications, I'm firing you."

"Fuck you, boy, I quit!" Harris hadn't even hesitated. "I don't want

to work for any company that would hire you as a vice president.”

“Listen ass-hole, I’m firing you as the afternoon dee jay on WMC and hiring you as the new program director. You better find a replacement for yourself pretty quickly.”

“Fuck you, boy, that seals it. Any company that would have you as a vice president and me as a program director is going straight to hell and I don’t want any part of it!”

“Can you believe it?”

“Damn right, I believe it. I just don’t know why it took Johnson so long to figure it out. Hell, he should have made this move six months ago.”

“Well, now’s all right by me.”

“How’s Los Angeles?”

“I think we were made for each other.”

“Got your dick hard, has it?”

“Blue steel!”

“You are a sick human being,” Harris laughed. “Are you sure you want me to run this one?”

“I’m positive.”

“Thanks, Bobby,” Nelson’s voice cracked. “I won’t let you down.”

“Since I don’t expect anything from you, I know you won’t let me down.”

“Fuck you!”

“This is where I came in.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Like I said, take yourself off the air and find someone to replace you.”

“You got it.”

“I’m taking Debbie.”

“I figured.”

“I need her help out here.”

“Yeah, sure. Has she fucked you yet?”

“Hell no! That’s why I like her!”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, I don’t want to come back to Boston. If you can walk across the street and help Bev with the packing and everything I’ll sure appreciate it.”

“Done.”

“I’m flying all the program directors out here next week for a meeting.”

“Should be fun.”

“Loads.”

"I'll get started, Bobby. If there's anything else you need, just call."

"I'll be calling, Nelson. Congratulations!"

"Thanks, Bob. I'll do you proud."

He hung up, feeling confident. So far, so good.

The intercom buzzed. "Jerry Saxton on line one."

"Bring me some pens and legal pads," he snapped, then picked up the phone.

"Saxton."

"Yes sir."

The first call would be easy. He had hired Jerry Saxton to work New York when Paul had given him more input in the station several months before.

"New ballgame."

"Not the way I see it. Just a new manager. Same game."

"There'll be some major format changes at the other stations, but it won't effect you and Boston at all. We're going to set up all the stations the same way you're set up now."

"Makes sense. We're the only ones that are winning."

"Not for long."

"You know it."

"I'm going to have a meeting here in Los Angeles next week. Have your secretary make plane reservations for you to fly out Wednesday night. We'll meet Thursday and Friday."

"No problem."

"Keep everything as is on your station until then. I'm freezing the lists on all stations next week."

"Problem."

Bobby frowned. If not adding any records to the radio stations the following week was going to be disputed by Jerry, it was going to be disputed by everyone. Next to Harris, he was closest to Jerry.

"It's not a suggestion, Jerry." It was best to establish the ground rules early. He was no longer one of the boys. He was the man running the company and as soon as they all recognized the fact, the better.

There was a moment's hesitation on the line. "You're the boss."

"Anything else?"

Again there was a slight hesitation. "Nothing that can't wait until next week."

"Good! See you then. Call me if you need me."

Bobby hung up without saying goodbye and hit the intercom. "Jane, stop the calls. Ask Nancy to come in my office, please."

He moved around his desk and stood again in front of the windows. He had been staring out at the scenery for only a few minutes when

the door opened behind him. He turned around.

"Where's Nancy?"

Jane was placing the legal pads and pens he had requested on his desk. "She said she'd catch you after lunch."

"What?"

Jane smiled, evidently enjoying herself. "Said she already made a luncheon appointment."

He frowned. "Has she left yet?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. She was still in her office when I walked in here."

He moved quickly past her, out into the reception area. Three long strides took him to the door of Nancy's office. He pushed it open without knocking.

Nancy Marion, music coordinator for Media Communications, was leaning over her desk, looking for something in her purse. She straightened up quickly as Bobby walked in.

"Hello, Bobby," she stammered.

"You and I need to talk."

She smiled. "I've got a lunch. I'll let you know when I get back."

Bobby's eyes narrowed. "Not after lunch, Nancy, now."

The smile was frozen on Nancy's face. "Bobby, this lunch has been set up for quite a while."

He stared coldly across the room, trying to control his anger. He wasn't succeeding. "Cancel it!"

"But, Bobby . . ."

"Cancel it!" He was almost shouting.

The smile left her face and she slumped down in her chair. She picked up the phone and quietly told Sandy to cancel her luncheon plans.

Bobby stood near the door, watching from across the room. Nancy was almost attractive. She was in her mid-thirties, about five feet five inches tall with a wiry, muscular, build. Her blonde hair was cropped short around her face. She dressed too conservatively for a woman of her age, leaning toward suits and blazers that would look better on a man.

"What's the problem?" Bobby asked.

She looked up at him and painted the smile on her face again. "I don't know what you mean."

He snorted his annoyance, striding across the room until he was leaning over her desk. "What kind of game are you playing here?"

She looked down at her hands clasped in front of her. "I'm not playing any games."

"Fine. We'll play it your way. I want you to call each program director in the chain and tell them to make flight reservations to Los Angeles for next Wednesday night. Have cars waiting for them at the airport. Get them from Budget. They're the only company that will lease a Mercedes. Let's make the guys feel important. Book them into the Hyatt House on Sunset. Set up a meeting agenda for me to approve this afternoon for next Thursday and Friday, complete with ratings and revenue breakouts of each market. Freeze all the lists for next week."

She looked up. "We can't freeze the lists Bobby, we've already made commitments to some record companies."

He stared at her. "Freeze the lists!" he hissed.

She shook her head. "What about if we added only . . ."

"Damn it!" he shouted, slamming his hand down on her desk. "I said freeze the fucking lists and I mean freeze the fucking lists!"

Nancy looked at her hands again.

Bobby took a deep breath. He enjoyed confrontations, reveling in his anger and power. "Nancy, in case you haven't noticed, I'm running this company now. From this point on, I want you to do what I say, when I say it. If you disagree, you'll have a turn to voice your opinion. But for the time being, until I get things headed in the right direction, I suggest you agree a little more than you disagree."

She said nothing, her eyes still on her hands.

Bobby went on. "I know Paul hired you and I know you've been a fixture here for a while, and if you want to remain a fixture, take my advice and listen carefully to everything I tell you. If you don't think I have the power, I suggest you walk down to Paul's office and talk with him. But before you take that walk, think about it. Because if you try and pull a power play on me and you don't have the juice, your lights will go out."

He turned and stomped toward the door, stopping with his hand on the knob. "You meet with all the record company representatives every Monday?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely over a whisper.

"Standing appointments?"

"Yes. Fifteen minutes apart from eight in the morning until seven at night with an hour off for lunch."

"Same people have the same appointments week after week?"

"Yes. It's been set up since before I was here."

He smiled. "Cancel all appointments for this Monday. Bring your appointment book in my office at three o'clock this afternoon and we'll begin re-scheduling."

This time she finally looked up, her mouth open in shock.

Bobby grinned. This would set the record companies on their ears.

"Any questions?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He walked out into the lobby. "Bill!" he shouted. "Lets eat!"

* * * * *

It was three o'clock in the afternoon before he had finished going over the engineering specs and financial statements of all the stations. He had gotten a handle on most of the problems faced by the company and now it was time to concentrate on the individuals in place to see if they could be motivated to perform better.

Nancy Marion was seated across his desk. In her lap were several folders.

"All right, Nancy, where do we stand?"

She moved forward slightly in her chair and pushed the folders onto his desk. "Here are playlists and music clocks for all of the stations for the past nine months, as you requested. Also in the folders are the complete music lists of each station. You'll be able to tell exactly what each station is doing, as far as music is concerned, once you go through these reports."

Bobby looked down at the stack of papers. "Don't we have these on computer."

Nancy shook her head. "McMan didn't like them. Everything is done by hand, as in these reports."

"What's the computer terminal on your desk used for?"

The corners of her mouth twitched. "Mostly to play games. Actually, each stations is hooked up with an IBM PC- XT with programs for the music and related information already in place. They just aren't being used."

He punched the intercom. "Jane, get me Elliot Stevens at WMC in Boston." Looking down at Nancy, he continued, "I've got a computer whiz that worked for me at WMC. I'll get him out here next week to get the system operational and show everyone how to use it."

"Are you sure that's necessary, Bobby? We've been doing all right without it."

Bobby didn't answer.

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Ah, Bobby, can you sit down?" He had been standing behind his desk the entire time she had been in his office. "You're making me nervous."

He relaxed, the tension draining from his face. Chewing absently on a fingernail, he said, "Sorry, Nancy. You'll just have to get used to

me. I don't sit down when I'm in the office."

"What?"

"That's right. I work better standing up."

She shook her head. "Strange."

"I'm thinking about making it mandatory for all Media Communications executives."

She looked up at him in alarm.

"Only kidding." His eyes were playful.

The intercom cracked. "Your call is on line one."

Bobby leaned across the desk and picked up the phone. "Elliot, make some plane reservations and get to Los Angeles as quickly as possible."

He winked at Nancy. "Yeah, tomorrow night will be fine. Make sure you bring enough clothes for a couple of weeks. I need you to design the programs to put all our computers on line."

He stared out the window as he listened to the man respond. "I'll catch up with you later then, good-bye."

Nancy cleared her throat. "So we're about to enter the computer age, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess I'll have to drag this company kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. There's really nothing you should worry about, Nancy. After a week or two, you'll be a regular "chip-head."

"What's that?"

He laughed. "Never mind."

The intercom interrupted them again. "Bobby, it's Robert Williams on line six."

"Excuse me for a second," he told Nancy, reaching again for the receiver. "What do you want?" he smiled.

"Just wanted to see how you were doing." Williams' voice came through the phone. "What's going on?"

"Nothing you'd be interested in. I'm just sitting here with Nancy trying to find out where we're headed."

"Can't talk with that bitch around, huh? I really just wanted to know if you'd like to have dinner at my house Saturday night?"

"I'll have to check my busy schedule, but I think I can make it."

"When's Beverly coming out?"

"Not until the middle of next week."

"I guess Pamela and I will just have to put up with you alone until then."

"I know it'll be tough, but see if you can gut it out!"

"Look. Why don't we make a weekend of it. I'll pick you up at your hotel just after noon on Saturday. We'll lie out by the pool all

afternoon, have dinner, then you'll spend the night and we'll play some tennis at the club Sunday morning. I'll drive you back to the hotel sometime after lunch."

"Sounds great, Robert. Thanks."

"Where are you staying?"

"Hyatt on Sunset."

Bobby hung up.

"All right, Nancy. Let's get to work. We've got a big job to do to get this company turned around. I want a maximum effort from this end to make sure each station is provided with enough information to have the jump on the competition. With the power we have and the information we gather in all of our markets, there's no reason why each of our radio stations can't be number one."

"I agree."

"Then let's start by making you more effective. Pretend I'm a newcomer to Media Communications. Take me through your week, starting on Monday."

She took a deep breath and shifted in her chair. "On Mondays, beginning at eight in the morning, I meet with all of the record promoters."

"Where?"

"In my office?"

"Why?"

"Well, they want Media Communications stations to play their records so they meet with me to try and accomplish that aim."

He interrupted again. "Why would they talk with you? I thought each program director was responsible for adding records on his radio station."

"Each program director is responsible, but the more information we have, the better decisions the individuals will make."

He smiled. "That's why I want the computers up and running. Go on."

She sighed. "Anyhow, each record promoter has fifteen minutes. He plays the records he's working and tells me how the record is doing ... what other radio stations are playing it, how it's doing in smaller markets, other things that might influence our decision. After the final meeting of the day, I assimilate my notes, listing what I believe are the top ten records we should be considering. I then compile a listing of the charts in the important trades. I also chart the individual records being played by the Media Communications stations, showing how the records are doing in our different markets."

He smiled. "Then what?"

She smiled back. "Then I go home and get a little rest. On Tuesdays, I begin taking music information from all of our stations, beginning with those on the East Coast. They give me the top forty sales reports along with their top twenty requested songs of the previous week. I take this information from all the stations, then try and put it together in a fashion where I can get a look at how records are doing across the country, based on our record information and the charts from the trades. I then call back the stations and the program directors tell me what records they are adding and give me the top forty charts for each station. After I get all of the information, I begin calling the trade magazines, starting with *The Report*, and give them our charts. After that, I go home."

He walked around the desk and stood by the window, looking out at the sun getting lower toward the west. "Monday and Tuesday are a bitch. What happens on Wednesday?"

Nancy swiveled around to face him. "I come in around ten o'clock and assemble all of the information I gathered from our stations the day before, then I send it out by overnight mail to each station. That usually takes up the whole day. Thursdays and Fridays are pretty slow. I talk with our program directors about additional music information, I see different record company promotion people who want more time than their fifteen minutes on Monday, go see acts appearing in the area, read the trades on Friday and rest on the weekend."

He rubbed his eyes. "One of the reasons I want to go on computer is to get our information to and from the radio stations quicker. Elliot will amaze you."

The intercom buzzed again. "Debbie on line one."

He crossed quickly to his desk and picked up the phone.

"Well?"

"Mama Bower isn't exactly walking on air, but I'm ready to be a California girl."

He slapped his hand down on the desk. "That's the best news I've heard all day."

"Get a pen."

"Shoot."

"I'm on American, flight 299, arrives in Los Angeles at 4:50 on Sunday afternoon."

"I'll pick you up."

"Don't worry about it, I'll take a cab."

"Right. Like I said, I'll pick you up. And tell Mama Bower I'm picking you up."

Debbie giggled. "She'd probably be happier if I was taking a cab."

"Sure ... fine ... make me feel good."

"I'm teasing."

"I'll see you Sunday, Debbie. I can't wait until you get here."

"I'm going to have to dye my hair blonde and say things like, wow, you know it's really far out and like it's super cool and like I'm suuuuuurrrree."

He laughed again and shook his head. "Goodbye, Debbie." He hung up the phone.

Looking back at Nancy, he said, "You know Debbie, my secretary from Boston?"

"Just to talk with her on the phone."

"She's coming out here to work with us."

"So I gathered."

"You'll like her."

Nancy shrugged.

Bobby cleared his throat. "Let me see the list of all of your appointments for Monday."

She shuffled through the folders. "Sandy is canceling them all right now. There's going to be a great moaning and knashing of teeth over this move, Bobby."

"Just for a week or so. We'll see who's got a sense of humor and who hasn't."

"Don't expect to hear a lot of laughing."

He grinned wider. "Just my own." He looked down at the list, noticing a familiar name. "Barry Friedman's first on the list?"

She nodded. "Yes, why?"

"I knew this fool in Phoenix. Great guy. One of the few I liked."

"You knew Barry?"

"Yep. Took me up in the mountains to some place to eat a steak. I ordered mine well done and they brought me a boot." He laughed, remembering his embarrassment. "Barry Fucking Friedman. I can't believe it!"

"He never even mentioned that he knew you."

"That's one of the reasons I like him. Who's he working for now?"

"Capstan Records."

"Let him keep his appointment. He'll be the only one and it'll make everyone else nuts."

She leaned forward and made a note on one of the pads. "Whatever you say."

"Who's the last name?"

Nancy squirmed in her chair. "Libby Meridith?"

Bobby's lips tightened. He thought Nancy was acting just a little too nonchalant. "Yeah."

Nancy looked out the window. "Arista. Works the Los Angeles area. Seems to know her job."

"Are you and she close?" He was watching her intently.

She shook her head. "Not particularly."

He didn't press it. He continued down the list, then tossed it on his desk.

"There's a name that's missing."

Nancy looked up. "Who?"

"Phillip Crawford."

This time she was visibly agitated. Her cheeks turned red. "Well, I don't know, I mean, ah, he hasn't made an appointment since I've been here."

Bobby tilted his head. "Are you trying to tell me that the biggest independent on the West Coast doesn't call on Media Communications?"

She nodded.

He frowned. "Doesn't that strike you as a little funny?"

She cleared her throat. "No, ah, not really. He'll sometimes call on Thursday or Friday. But since individual program directors have been adding their own records, I guess he's been calling on them directly."

"Then why doesn't everyone do that. Why does anyone call on you?"

Her face was flushed. "I guess they think I have some power over the different program directors."

Bobby smiled. "And Phillip Crawford doesn't?"

She peered over his head, her lips pulled across her face in a straight line.

Bobby snorted. "So Phillip Crawford is either real smart or real dumb." He raised his left eyebrow. "Which do you think it is?"

She looked at the floor.

He stared silently at her for several moments, then clapped his hands together. He was rewarded when she jumped from the sound. He loved to fuck with people. "Let's get to work. I want to set up an agenda for the meetings next week."

Nancy started taking notes and he forgot about the record people, focusing his attention on the next week's meetings.

* * * * *

Phillip Crawford was sitting with his feet propped up on his desk, sucking ice out of a glass in his hand when his secretary buzzed him.

"Yeah?"

"Same woman from M. C. Says you'd know what it was about."

He punched the blinking line on the phone. "Hello."

"He's staying in the Hyatt on Sunset."

Phillip bit down on one of the ice cubes in his mouth. "I know."

"How'd you find out?"

"It's not important. Why are you whispering?"

She took a deep breath. "I don't want anyone hearing me."

"Relax."

"Another thing."

"Yeah?"

"He's freezing the lists next week."

Phillip sat up. "What?"

"Yeah. All of them. I've got to run."

Phillip hung up the phone. "Shirley!" he yelled. When she came through the door he said, "I need dinner reservations at the Hyatt tonight on Sunset. Make them for two at six-thirty. You know that restaurant, half the tables are back in the big room, the others are on the veranda that opens out on the lobby. I want one on the railing right next to the lobby."

"All right," she said.

He put his feet back on his desk and sucked another piece of ice into his mouth. Tonight would be important. Everything had to be right.

* * * * *

It was nearly eight o'clock by the time Bobby left the office. He walked through the deserted Media Communications building and took the elevator down to the lobby. It was only half a mile or so down Sunset Boulevard to his hotel. He decided to walk.

The sun had just set as he strode briskly down the famous street, not that he needed the light of the sun to see. Sunset Boulevard billboards, more per square foot than any other street in the nation, blinked brilliantly, pushing the new record by Phil Collins and the latest album by the Rolling Stones. Cybil Shepherd's face smiled down, reminding him to watch "Moonlighting" on Channel 9. There were movies he shouldn't miss, concerts he must see, perfume he must buy and more records he just had to listen to. What a city!

The night was humid and warm, the girls he met on the sidewalk were pretty, the cars that passed him were beautiful, even the stars that twinkled through the haze above seemed to shine brighter than those in Boston. Los Angeles was wooing him. Everything here was

his . . . all he had to do was take it. Bobby grinned. He was ready to take it all with both hands.

It took him only fifteen minutes to make it to the hotel. As he stepped through the revolving doors, his stomach rumbled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since noon. He started toward the restaurant, but changed his mind. He had been on his feet all day. Better to go up and take a shower, then order room service.

He was walking toward the elevators when he saw the girl sitting in the restaurant that adjoined the lobby. Even from the distance, he admired her perfection. She was one of those untouchable creatures, often seen on the arms of movie stars or rock musicians, with long brown hair pulled back from a perfect face, high cheekbones and a full, pouty, mouth, under a little pinch of a nose. He was twenty feet away, still strolling slowly toward the elevators, trying to check her out without anyone, especially her, noticing. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that she was seated with another man.

She suddenly swiveled her head and locked eyes with him. Evidently she had felt his stare. He started to turn away when she smiled and he almost tripped! Flashing a stupid grin, he swept his eyes away, continuing past her table toward the elevators.

"Bobby!" a voice called out. "Bobby Holiday!"

He stopped, turned, and did a double-take. It was Phillip Crawford, sitting with the girl he had been admiring.

He swallowed. "Hello, Phillip," he said, making no move toward the table.

Phillip stood up and reached across the railing. Bobby had no choice but to go back and shake his hand.

Phillip smiled. "Are you following me around Hollywood?"

Bobby was taken aback. "What do you mean?"

Phillip laughed. "Last night I ran into you at Mr. Chow's. Now, tonight here at the Riot House. I think maybe you're tailing me!"

Bobby let his breath out quickly and relaxed. "No, no. At least I don't think so. I'm staying here for a couple of days."

"You just get in from work?"

Bobby shrugged. "Yeah. Long first day."

Phillip motioned him around. "Come on up and join us for a drink."

Bobby looked at the girl again for the first time since approaching the table. She was even more beautiful up close. Her brown eyes sparkled up into his, burning into the back of his head, silently asking him to say yes. He looked quickly back at Phillip. The independent record promoter made him nervous. He didn't need to begin a relationship that might cause problems in the future. That's what his

head said. His body was singing a different tune.

"No . . . thanks very much Phillip, but I haven't eaten yet. I'm just going to run up to my room and order a little room service." He was proud of himself. What a terrific exhibit of self-control.

"That settles it," Phillip said. "Waiter . . . set another place for dinner," he called. Looking back at Bobby he continued, "You're joining us for dinner. We were just getting ready to order."

"No, I really can't," Bobby stammered. He watched the waiter setting another place for him next to the girl. "I don't want to interrupt."

"Come on around," Phillip said. "You're not interrupting anything."

"I feel like I am," Bobby said.

"Please join us." That did it. Her voice floated up as she reached out and touched the hand he rested on the railing. "I've been trying to talk Mr. Crawford into hiring me, and it isn't going very well. I'd welcome another presence at the table."

"Well," he stammered. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Come on up here, Bobby," Phillip boomed. "And I promise no shop talk."

"All right." Bobby reluctantly pulled his hand from under the girl's, walked around the lobby, entered the restaurant and returned to the table.

Phillip stood up. "Bobby, let me introduce you to Susan Scanlon." The girl started to stand.

"Please don't get up," Bobby said.

She smiled and held out her hand. He bent forward at the waist and kissed it.

"My, my," she said softly, "what a gentleman."

"Be careful, Susan," chuckled Phillip. "This gentleman will charm your panties right off if you're not careful."

Bobby felt his cheeks redden. He glanced up and saw a light flush spread across Susan's features. She pulled her hand away slowly.

"I'll have to remember that," she said.

He slid into the chair, painfully aware of the beautiful girl sitting so close by his side.

"So," said Phillip. "How do you like Los Angeles?"

He cleared his throat. "So far, so good. I haven't seen much of it."

"You're not from around here?" Susan asked.

A sheer, ivory, silk blouse draped across her upper body. Although she was small, her breasts were ample, pushing against the fabric, her nipples clearly outlined. Bobby struggled to keep his eyes on her face and tried to remember what she had said.

"Ah, no, I just got in from Boston."

She twisted toward him and as she did so, her knee came in contact with his thigh. "What do you do?"

He smiled. What did he do? "I just . . ."

"Don't let him bullshit you, Susan," Phillip interrupted. "Bobby here is the vice president of Media Communications, the largest radio company in the free world. This man is one of the most important men in show business, as of two days ago."

Bobby ducked his chin, trying to look humble. He still couldn't pull it off.

Her fine, perfect eyebrows formed two half-circles over her eyes, her chin tilting slowly to one side. "I'm sorry. I don't know anything about radio." She smiled. "But, congratulations."

Bobby smiled back. He couldn't help it. Caught in the glow of her beauty, he could only mimic her expressions, as if he was in some mad, mating dance, like the penguins he watched on *Wild Kingdom*. "You don't know anything about radio and you're trying to get a job with Phillip Crawford? What's the deal?"

She wrinkled her tiny nose and Bobby almost lost it. "I met him when I first came to Los Angeles a couple of years ago. I'm trying to be an actress and I'm not doing too well, so I'm bugging him for a job. I want to answer his phones, make appointments, you know."

Bobby looked across the table. "Hire her, Phillip."

"I don't have an opening."

"Make one."

Phillip shook his head, his lips pinched across his teeth, trying not to smile. "Hell, Bobby, she doesn't even type."

"I told you I'd learn," she squealed.

They all laughed and Phillip signaled for the waiter to take their order.

Ninety minutes, two bottles of wine and several cocktails later, they were finished with dinner. Bobby had really enjoyed himself. The conversation was stimulating and fun, and as Phillip had promised, there was no mention of either radio or records.

Of course, Susan Scanlon had a lot to do with his enjoyment. She was one of those "touchy" people, the type that would put her hand on his arm or wrist as she talked. She made him feel totally at ease. She also made him feel something else!

The waiter cleared the table and brought the snifters Phillip had ordered.

"Here's to a better life," Phillip said, holding his glass up.

Bobby smiled. "Phillip, may you and Susan live forever . . . and may

the last voice you hear be mine.”

They all drank. Bobby felt the brandy burn past his lips, over his tongue and down his throat, igniting his taste buds and taking with it all residue of the earlier meal. The fire rested in his stomach for only a few seconds before it spread through his body, relaxing his muscles and rocking his head. He closed his eyes and leaned back gently in the chair. He was getting looped.

Phillip looked at his watch and frowned. “Well, boys and girls, I hate to bring up the subject, but I must talk a little about work.”

Bobby snapped his eyes open, instantly irritated. Phillip had promised no shop talk. He had been enjoying the evening, up until this point. Had it all been just a ploy so Phillip could pitch his records?

“Wait a minute, Phillip,” he growled.

Phillip looked at him with a bemused expression on his face. “Excuse me, but I was talking to Susan.”

Bobby winced. He forgot that Susan had been talking with Phillip about employment before he joined them.

Phillip continued. “It’s late and we don’t need to decide anything now. Why don’t you just get a good night’s sleep and I’ll pick you up in the morning. We’ll have breakfast and see if we can put something together.”

Susan smiled. “Sounds good to me, Phillip. You’ll pick me up in the morning?”

“Yep. Around nine.”

Bobby began moving in his chair, preparing to get up. He was disappointed that the evening was ending so quickly. He hoped to have a chance to get to know Susan a little better and maybe even take her home.

“Oh, hell!”

“Excuse me?” Susan said.

“I’m sorry.” He glanced at her shyly. “I was going to offer to take you home, but I remembered I’d left my car at work.”

Phillip stood up. “Well, it’s getting too late for me. I’ve got to run.”

Bobby began to stand when Phillip put his hand on his shoulder.

“You don’t have to leave, Bobby. Stay and enjoy yourself.”

Bobby gently moved the hand away and got to his feet. “I don’t like to drink alone, Phillip. But thanks anyhow.”

Phillip grinned. “Who said anything about drinking alone? Susan hasn’t finished her drink. You guys enjoy another and then you can see her home.”

“But Phillip, I just . . .”

“I’m staying in the hotel, Bobby,” Susan said.

"What?"

She smiled. "I've been here since Monday. I told Phillip I wasn't leaving until he had a job for me."

"I thought you were from Los Angeles."

"I am . . . well I was . . . sort of. I'm living in San Diego now. I have been for the last couple of months. I moved down there with my boyfriend, but things didn't work out."

Phillip shoved him gently back into his seat. "Like I said, enjoy yourself partner. And try and talk her into working for minimum wage."

Bobby sat down and sighed.

"Then you're staying, Bobby?" She had her hand on his arm again.

Of course he was staying. "Yes."

"Great!" She squeezed his arm. "Can I have another drink?"

"Absolutely."

Phillip motioned for the waiter. "Two more doubles for my friends . . . and bring me the check please."

The waiter soon returned with two more snifters of brandy as Bobby and Susan gulped down the rest of their drinks. He didn't even object when Phillip paid the tab.

"Have a nice night," Phillip said, shaking Bobby's hand. "See you in the morning, Miss Scanlon." He walked out of the restaurant and through the lobby.

Now, they were alone.

He held up his glass. "Author, author." He clinked it against hers and took another sip.

She put her glass on the table and studied it, rubbing her finger around the top. "I really hope I get this job."

Bobby leaned closer to her. "Don't worry. I'm sure you will."

When she turned to face him, her nose almost brushed against his.

"That's easy for you to say. You just got the job you wanted."

"And you'll get this one." He reached out and touched the tip of her nose with his finger.

"I'm glad you're sure of it."

"I'll put in a good word for you."

She laughed. "Thanks a lot," she said, the tone of her voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm sure that will seal the deal."

He picked up his glass again. "Actually, it would." He took another sip.

"What do you mean?"

He grinned cockily. "Don't you know what Phillip does?"

"Sure. He's got something to do with the record business."

Bobby laughed. "Something? You bet he's got something to do with the record business. His job is to get records played on radio stations. I'm vice president of one of the largest radio companies in the United States. If I recommend you for the job, he's going to hire you."

Her eyebrows rose again. "Really?"

"Really," he said. This time it was he who was sarcastic.

She put her hand over his. "Would you do that, Bobby?"

He took a deep breath and squeezed her hand. "Well if I do that for you, what are you going to do for me?"

She pulled away abruptly. "What?"

Bobby scrambled. He had made her angry. "Come on, I was just teasing."

She stared at him for a moment, then picked up her glass and drained the brandy that remained. "I don't think so."

This time it was Bobby who grabbed her arm. "Come on, Susan, you know I was just teasing."

She looked at him, contempt slitting her eyes slightly, her upper lip twitching in the beginning of a sneer.

"Really," he continued quickly. "What am I? A complete idiot? I'm going to try and get you in bed with me by telling you I'll give you a job recommendation? Give me a break."

She tilted her head to one side. "I was starting to like you."

"Then don't stop," he said. "Listen Susan, you're going to find that I'll fuck up enough on my own. Don't let this little misunderstanding mess us up before I get a chance to screw it up real good on purpose."

Her face relaxed. "You nut!"

He breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm more than just a little drunk and I apologize. I was just teasing. You don't know my sense of humor yet."

She drew back slightly, her lips pursing as her eyes widened. "You sound as if you think I'm going to give you enough time to find out."

He grinned. "I'm sure going to try."

She smiled. "Well, Bobby. I've had just about as much fun as I'm going to have tonight."

"Don't turn in just yet," he said quickly. "Let's have another drink."

She shook her head. "You said you were a little drunk. I can assure you that I am very high myself. I've had enough for tonight . . . but there's always another night."

He rubbed his cheeks with his hands. "Oh well. If you insist." He looked at her through his fingers. "I don't suppose begging would work?"

She grinned. "Not tonight, sweetheart. But why don't you walk me to my room?"

Bobby nodded. "Sounds right to me."

She put her hand on his arm. "Just to my door, Bobby. Don't expect anything else."

He pointed his thumb toward his chest. "Me expect anything more? Of course not. You're talking to the perfect gentleman."

"Fine," she giggled.

"And I'll still recommend you to Phillip."

This time she laughed out loud.

They walked together to the elevator, took it up to the third floor and headed for her room. She let him hold her hand as they navigated the halls with more than a little difficulty. When they reached her door, she couldn't get the key to fit.

"Let me," he said, taking the key out of her hand. He had a little trouble too, but he finally opened the door.

"Thank you," she said.

He made a face. "I guess this is good night?"

She looked up at him for a moment. "Why don't you come on in for a minute."

His face lit up.

She shook her head. "None of that. I said a minute and I mean a minute. And I just want to talk."

He held his hands up. "I got the message. I won't try and attack you." He followed her through the door and sat uncomfortably in a chair near the television, across the room from the bed.

She eased down on the bed and kicked off her shoes. "I didn't mean you had to stay on the other side of the room." She patted the bed next to her. "Come sit by me and tell me your life story."

He jumped up quickly and crossed the room. "Well, it all started in a hotel room with a girl I'd just met."

She groaned, moving her hands behind her neck, twisting her head and stretching. "Are you any good with back rubs?"

"The best," he said, struggling to keep his voice from rising in pitch.

She rolled over on her stomach. "I've got a pain in my neck that is just about to kill me. Would you rub it for a minute?"

"Sure," he said, shifting on the bed until he was sitting beside her. He moved her hair out of the way and placed his hand on her neck, kneading his fingers into the muscles.

"God, that feels great," she said.

He kept massaging her neck with his hand. With the other, he

reached up and covered her fingers, gently rubbing her palm, sending her a message. She raised her head off the pillow and turned toward him as he moved his head down, his lips parting slightly. This time his nose did brush hers and she tilted her head slightly, as if inviting a kiss, but as their lips touched, she moved back abruptly, rolling over on her side.

"No, Bobby. I asked you to rub my back."

He sighed. "I'm sorry. I just want to hold you."

He struggled to control his emotions as she stared at him thoughtfully, chewing absently on her lower lip. "I know how you feel. I can't say I don't feel the same way, but you know we just met. I don't feel comfortable yet. I'm too tense. Let it rest."

He nodded. "Sorry."

She stretched her arms over her head. "Oh, don't be. It's probably me, anyhow. I'm just all jittery and nervous over this job situation." She hopped off the bed. "Maybe I'll just take a quaalude."

"A what?"

"A quaalude. Muscle relaxer." She was rummaging through her overnight bag by the television set. "Haven't you ever heard of them?"

Bobby frowned. "I thought they were heavy drugs like heroin or something."

"Oh, Bobby," she squealed. "You're precious."

Precious. He liked that. He watched as she went into the bathroom and returned with a glass of water. She walked back across the room and hopped on the bed.

"Here's the heroin," she laughed, holding up a small, round, white tablet.

He took it from her and looked at it closely. "So this is a quaalude, huh?"

"That's it. Lude, vitamin Q, disco biscuit, gorilla pill."

"Why do you take them?"

She licked her lips. "You don't know a thing, do you boy?"

He threw his arms in the air. "Guess not. When it comes to drugs, I'm just a precious novice."

She winked at him. "Hey, me too. You wouldn't catch me doing heavy speed or downs. But once in a while, I like a quaalude." She took it from him and popped it in her mouth, chasing it with the water. "You want one?"

He shook his head. "Hell no. I take that and I'd be out for a week. Two aspirin make me sleepy."

She turned over on her stomach again. "Rub my neck some more, will you."

"Okay." He moved closer to her on the bed.

"And this time, nothing extra."

"I got the message."

He used both hands this time, gently rubbing each side of her neck. He moved his hands from the top of her neck to her shoulders, but went no further.

He had been at it for almost ten minutes, his arms and shoulders beginning to burn, when she reached around and grabbed one of his hands.

"That feels so good." She raised off the bed slightly and began to turn over. "Let me get on my back."

He watched as she twisted around, trying not to notice as the skirt crept up her thighs, almost half-way to her hips.

"O. K. come here," she said, motioning him toward her.

"What?"

"I want you to straddle me and rub my neck."

This was going to tax his self-control to the limits. He threw one of his legs across her body, resting his weight gently on her stomach.

"Gimmie," she said, grabbing his hands.

Her speech was slurring slightly. Evidently, the pill was taking effect. She pulled his hands on either side of her neck and he began rubbing again.

He looked into her eyes and she stared back, her lids half closed, a crooked smile on her face.

"Whatcha' lookin' at?" she said.

He smiled. "You."

She blinked her eyes slowly. When they opened, he could tell she was having trouble focusing. "Whatcha' see?"

"The most beautiful girl in the world."

"Oh yeah?"

He nodded.

She tried to focus again. "This lude is really kicking my ass."

"Want to go to sleep?"

"No." She reached up and grabbed him behind his neck with both of her hands. "I want you to kiss me," she whispered, pulling his head down and mashing her lips against his. Her lips parted and she moaned into his mouth.

"Bobby," she whispered, breaking the kiss.

He looked down at her and smiled. "Yes?"

Her pointed tongue darted across her lips. "Take my blouse off. I want to feel your body against mine."

"What?"

She grinned her crooked grin again, reaching up to unbutton his shirt. "Take my blouse off."

She didn't need to ask again. He pushed up on his knees and reached down, pulling the bottom of her blouse out of her skirt, trying to get it over her head.

"Wait," she said. "I'm not finished with your buttons."

"Hurry up, damn it!" He was through trying to be cool. He just wanted to be quick, before she changed her mind.

Her fingers were fumbling with the third button. "Aw fuck it!" She grabbed his shirt and ripped it apart, the remaining two buttons popping free.

"There," she grinned.

He pulled out of his sleeves while she slipped her blouse over her head. Then she fell back on the bed.

"God, you're beautiful."

He leaned forward and kissed her again, moving his hands down to explore her body while his tongue searched her mouth. He cupped the firm, perfect breasts, feeling the nipples harden under his palms.

While he explored, she was busy also. Without breaking the kiss, she worked her hands down between them and began tugging on his belt. He reached lower and found the clasp and zipper on her skirt and quickly freed them, his teeth scraping against hers as they kept their lips together. Bobby wouldn't break the kiss, afraid if he did, the mood would be broken.

Besides, with his tongue in her mouth, she couldn't say no.

She arched her back, helping him slide her hips from the skirt, then wriggled out of her panties. He kept his eyes shut tightly and tried to keep his mind on nothing except the mechanics of his movements.

She reached up and grabbed a handful of hair on either side of his head. "Bobby," she moaned. "Eat me!"

That did it!

She pushed his head and he slid down her breasts, across her stomach and between her outstretched legs. Slowly, he let her pull his face closer, his nose brushing through the silky hair between her thighs. He stuck out his tongue.

She moaned and writhed on the bed, grinding herself against him. He was trapped, luxuriously, in her warmth, nibbling and licking as she opened wider, catching quick breaths when she occasionally fell back. He was moving his hands to push her legs further apart when she abruptly pulled his head back across her stomach.

"Quickly," she said. "I've got to feel you inside of me."

He reached down to push off his pants as she pulled him roughly onto her body. It was no use. He left the pants around his ankles. He reached between them to guide himself into her, but it was another wasted effort. She looped her legs quickly around his hips and thrust forward.

"Bobby!" she cried. She bit hard into his shoulder and raked his back with her nails.

"Jesus!" he shouted.

Her body bucked against his as she started shaking and sobbing. "Oohhh. Now! Now! Now!"

He didn't even try to hold back. Her muscles went tense and she grunted . . . then sighed deeply and fell back against the bed, continuing to hold him tightly.

"My, my," he whispered into her ear.

She rubbed his back and sighed again.

"That felt so good," he said.

"Quaaludes make me crazy," she whispered.

"And I thought it was all me."

She giggled and pulled gently on his hair. "A combination of the two."

He pushed up on his elbows so he could look at her. "I'll go crazy with you anytime." He started to roll over.

She grabbed his shoulders. "No."

He smiled. "What?"

Her hips ground against him again.

"Do me, baby," she whispered.

He reached up and grabbed her hair, twisting her head around. "Don't you want to rest?"

She bit his lip, as her legs scissored around him, grinding closer. "No, I don't want to rest. I want you to take me and use me and do everything you've ever thought about doing tonight."

He shoved back against her, feeling his excitement rise again with her words.

"Do you want to do that Bobby? Do you want to make love with me here, then let me get on top, then put me on my hands and knees, then do anything you want?"

He moaned and slammed into her.

She raked her nails across his back again. "Fuck me, Bobby! Fuck me!!"

* * * * *

The shrill sound of the phone woke Phillip from a deep sleep.

"Hello," he mumbled.

"He just went up to his room."

Phillip stared sleepily at the clock. "What time is it?"

"Four-thirty," she giggled.

"Damn!"

"Everything went as planned."

Phillip smiled. "He bought it?"

"Every last bit."

"You'll get a big bonus for staying up this late."

"I didn't mind."

He laughed out loud. "Somehow I didn't think you would."

"I guess you're going to have to hire me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He promised he'd call you before you picked me up this morning."

"Great."

"I'm going to sleep."

"Thanks, doll. I'll talk to you later."

He hung up the phone and rolled over, still smiling as he drifted back to sleep.

Sources connected with the investigation say seventeen separate subpoenas are now being prepared by a special grand jury and will be served later this afternoon in Los Angeles County.

CHAPTER THREE

Bobby walked slowly through the doors of Media Communications.

"Good morning, Mr. Holiday," the receptionist said.

He nodded painfully from behind dark glasses. He was nursing one hell of a hangover. His eyes were bloodshot, his head was pounding and his stomach churned, threatening to overflow with each step. Every muscle in his body ached. And he was happy as he could be.

Susan Scanlon had torn him apart. They had spent the night making love in every conceivable position, in every way he had ever dreamed about. It had been worth getting only three hours of sleep.

He eased down the hall and into his outer office, trying not to whistle through the pain.

"Bobby." Jane was sitting behind her desk, looking at him in amazement.

He tried to smile. "Yeah?"

"Paul wanted to see you as soon as you walked in."

He tried to straighten up and was only mildly successful. "All right, tell him I'm here and I'll be down as soon as he's ready." He walked toward his office.

"Beverly called twice. She said she needed to speak with you first thing this morning."

He felt the skin on his cheeks tighten. Damn! He should have called her last night. He had phoned her before he left the office and told her he was heading straight for the hotel. Then, when it had gotten hot and heavy with Susan, he called the front desk and had them hold all of his calls. As he opened the door to his office, he considered the fact that he could be in real trouble. It didn't take much consideration.

"And one more," Jane called over his shoulder. "A Susan Scanlon called. She said you'd know what it was regarding."

He took a deep breath and closed the door. It had still been worth it, no matter what kind of trouble he was in. He crossed the room gingerly and fell down on the couch, resisting the urge to prop his legs up and go to sleep.

The intercom broke through his drowsy thoughts. "Bobby, Paul's on his way down."

He stood up and walked quickly toward the bathroom, slapping his cheeks sharply. Turning on the cold water, he cupped his hands under the faucet, splashing the water on his face again and again until he felt the cobwebs slowly clear. His brain still felt as if it was wrapped in gauze. He had just toweled off and closed the door when Paul entered his office.

"Good morning, chief," Bobby said.

Paul nodded and threw a copy of *The Report* on his desk. The trade magazine came out every Friday afternoon.

Bobby picked up the advance copy and smiled. His picture was on the front. Bold headlines across the top of the page said, "BOBBY HOLIDAY HEADS M. C. PROGRAMMING."

"Congratulations," Paul said dryly. "Nice article."

Bobby read the story regarding his appointment. It was a nice feature, filled with praise for both him and Paul.

He looked up and winked. "We did pretty good on this one."

Paul wasn't smiling. "Keep reading. It's continued on the inside cover."

Bobby's eyes narrowed as he turned the page. What was bugging the bastard? A smaller headline in the upper left hand corner caught his eye. "Holiday Freezes Music."

"What the fuck!"

The article went on:

"The Report has learned that Bobby Holiday's first act as vice president is to freeze the music lists on all of the Media Communications stations for next week. More music changes will be forthcoming."

Bobby looked up at Paul, deep lines creasing his face into a frown. "How in the fuck does he know this?"

Paul shook his head. "With the possible exception of the word fuck, that was going to be my question to you."

"Maybe one of the program directors told him."

"No," Paul said. "The Report goes to print Wednesday night at midnight."

"That's right," Bobby whistled. "I just told Nancy and the others about the freeze yesterday."

"Who else did you tell?"

Bobby closed his eyes for a second, then blinked them open again. "Not a soul." He stared at Paul. "You and I talked about it Wednesday

in this office when we were discussing my contract. I didn't mention it to anyone else until yesterday when I informed the others."

"Are you sure?"

Paul's question irritated him. "Of course, I'm sure. How about you? Who'd you tell?"

Paul ignored the question. "What about Beverly?"

"No one, Paul."

"Come on, Bobby, think. You must have told someone. I told no one. You must have let it slip."

"Didn't happen, Paul. I know I didn't mention it to a soul." Bobby tilted his head and squinted at Paul through one eye. "And I don't appreciate your continuing to make that accusation. I told no one!"

"Then how?"

"I don't know. Unless somebody overheard us."

Paul nodded slowly. "Maybe. Maybe that's what happened. But even so, anyone in our office shouldn't be giving information to The Report. We can't have leaks like this getting out."

"Don't I know it?"

Paul rubbed his chin. "Find out about it, Bobby. This freezing the list thing isn't that big of a deal. It just bothers me that Robert got this confidential information. What if it had been something important?"

Bobby nodded. "All we need is one of the record people getting our information early. It could only cause big problems."

Paul smiled. "Otherwise . . . good press."

Bobby smiled back and shrugged.

"Everything else all right?"

"Yeah. So far so good."

Paul rubbed his hands together. "I'll be out of town for a couple of weeks working on the television side. If you need me for anything, my secretary can find me."

"Have a good time."

Paul turned and left the office.

Bobby immediately hit the intercom button. "Get me Robert Williams!"

It was crazy. How could Robert have known about his decision to freeze the lists on the stations the following week? There was no way Robert could have known what was happening unless Paul told him, and Bobby doubted that.

"Robert Williams on line one, Bobby."

He picked up the phone.

"Thanks for the article, son," he said. "You made me look real

good.”

Robert chuckled. “It was tough getting a picture that made that face of yours look handsome!”

Bobby grunted his appreciation, hesitated, then continued. “The second page is a problem.”

“How’s that?”

Bobby cleared his throat. “How’d you get the information about the music freeze?”

Robert laughed. “Come on Bobby, I’m a reporter. Someone told me.”

“Who?”

“It might have been you. You were pretty drunk at Mr. Chow’s when we were celebrating.”

“You know better. I never get that drunk. Who told you? It’s important.”

“I know it’s important Bobby, and it’s just as important that I keep my sources confidential.”

Bobby let out his breath. He had been holding it, waiting for Robert’s answer. “Come on, Robert. This isn’t Watergate. Spill it. Only two people knew about that decision on Wednesday, Paul and myself. Was it him?”

Robert laughed loudly. “Give it up, Bobby. You know better. Paul doesn’t even talk to his wife.”

“If it wasn’t him, who was it?”

“I’m sorry, Bobby, but I can’t help you.”

“Robert, only five people could have overheard Paul and me talking. If you won’t let me know how you found out, I swear I’ll fire all of them. I will not have people telling reporters inside information about this company.”

There was a moment of silence on the line. Finally, Robert spoke. “I won’t tell you how I got the information, but I will tell you this much. No one was breaking a confidence. It was really an accident. You don’t have an informer in your office. This one was just dumb luck.”

“I don’t know whether to believe you or not, Robert.”

“Come on, Bobby. I’m not going to lie to you. I want you to succeed at this job more than anyone.”

Bobby rubbed his eyes, squeezing them tightly behind his fingers. That was true. Robert had been pushing for his appointment with Paul for months.

“Well, I guess it’s not that important.” But it was. Too many people knew too much about his business. And he didn’t like that.

"You're right. What is important is that your picture is on the front page of The Report. You are a genuine star now, my boy. Don't screw it up."

Bobby laughed. "Don't worry. I won't."

"I'll pick you up tomorrow at noon."

"See you then. And thanks again for the article."

He hung up the phone, shook his head and was rewarded with a splitting pain that jabbed behind his eyes, then back to the base of his neck. Again he smiled. It had been worth it! He rubbed the soreness in his neck, the fingers of his right hand digging deeply into the muscles, pushing against the bones of his spine.

His thoughts moved idly back to the conversations with Robert and Paul. He didn't need an informer in his office. Yet, if what Robert had said was true, there was no need to turn over the entire staff. Robert enjoyed an intimacy with his office personnel that would have to end, but rather than fire anyone, he'd just have a meeting and lay down the law. The job was going to be hard enough without worrying about someone from the outside knowing his moves.

"Bobby?"

It was the intercom.

"Yeah?"

"Beverly's on line two."

He closed his eyes. First Paul, now Beverly. He wondered how many times she called the night before.

He picked up the phone. "Hi, honey," he said, with the ease of someone who'd become accustomed to lying to his wife.

"Bobby, I've been so worried."

"What's the matter?"

"Don't ask me what's the matter," she said, her voice changing from one of concern into one of anger. "You know what's the matter."

"Beverly, what's this all about," he said, feigning ignorance and indignation.

"Damn it, Bobby, I tried calling you all last night and you had the hotel stopping your calls. They wouldn't put me through."

"What?"

"Don't tell me you didn't know about it."

"Of course I knew. I told the desk to hold all of my calls. It seemed like everyone knew where I was staying and the phone was ringing off the hook with all of the record guys calling," he lied. "I got something to eat, then went to my room and tried to call you, but the line was busy."

He was playing a finesse here, taking the chance that she had been

on the phone. He held his breath, waiting, hoping for a confirmation.

"Well," she said hesitantly, "I was talking to my mother for a while."

"For a while?" Now that he had an opening, he'd push through it. "I called three times."

"Well, I guess I was on longer than I thought." She was almost apologetic now.

"Anyhow," he hurried, "I was dead tired so I told the front desk to hold all of the calls except for yours. I left instructions that you were to be put through, no matter what time you called."

"Well, they didn't put me through."

"Darling, I'm so sorry. I don't want you to worry. I sure as hell don't want you angry at me. I guess when the shifts changed at the front desk, they got the message screwed up."

"Well . . ."

"It won't happen again, baby. I'll tell you what. Tonight, I'll get the manager on the phone while I'm talking with you, and we'll both tell him he's to always put you through, no matter what. You'll have his name so you can contact him if you have any trouble with an operator."

"Oh, Bobby, that's not necessary."

He breathed a deep sigh of relief. He had gotten past this one. "Of course it's necessary. I don't want you worrying about a thing."

"Bobby, there's no need for my wheels to turn, is there?"

He chuckled. "Of course not, darling. Hell, even if I wanted to look at another woman, which, by the way, I do not, I wouldn't have the time. This company is really screwed up and I'm working my ass off trying to get it straight."

"I know. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Perfect. Now she was apologizing. "Come on. You don't have anything to be sorry for. It's all the hotel's fault. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again." He quickly changed the subject. "Now, tell me what's going on in Boston."

He listened absently as she told him of her problems with the movers. He was staring out the window into the brilliant California morning, thinking about the brilliant California night he had failed to sleep through. He forced himself to tune back into her conversation.

"So it looks like I'll be there a week from Monday."

"That's great! I'm really glad you're coming so quickly, darling. I miss you and I need your help."

"You do?" She sounded pleased.

"Yes I do. I need you to help me figure out the cowboys from the

Indians before I get scalped.”

“Oh, Bobby,” she laughed

“But most of all, I need you to pick out a house.”

He heard her quick intake of breath. “I’m just so happy.”

“I’m going to Robert’s tomorrow. He said Pamela would help you look.”

“Can we afford it?”

“Of course not,” he joked. “But that’s never stopped us before!”

“I love you so much.”

“I know.”

“And Pat can’t wait to get to California.”

“Let me talk to her.”

“She’s in kindergarden.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.”

“Bobby, I’ve got to run. I see one of the moving people pulling up. I’ll call you tonight.”

He hung up, feeling relieved and guilty at the same time. He had a wonderful wife and child and everytime he fooled around with another woman he put that relationship in jeopardy. He knew that. But he fooled around anyhow. Maybe the fact that he shouldn’t became the reason that he did. It was something he never tried to rationalize. It was just a fact of life. Or more accurately, a fact of his life.

He opened his little black address book and searched for Phillip Crawford’s phone number. He had written it down the night before.

“Phillip Crawford Promotions.” A female voice answered on the first ring.

“Hello, this is Bobby Holiday. Is Phillip in?”

“Just a moment, please.”

He felt terribly nervous making this call. Putting in a good word for Susan was something he had promised when he was drunk. The reality was much harder. Asking Phillip for a favor meant Phillip could then ask him for one in return. He didn’t like the precedent.

“Hey, Bobby. How are you doing?”

Bobby’s brows knit together in the beginning of a frown, caused by Phillip Crawford’s too familiar tone. He forced himself to relax. He was, after all, the new vice president of Media Communications. It was Phillip, not he, who should be feeling nervous.

“Fine, Phillip, how are you?”

“Doing good, Bobby.”

“I just wanted to thank you for dinner last night.”

“No problem. Anytime.”

"I also wanted to thank you for the introduction to Susan. She's a remarkable woman." Bobby listened to himself and tried not to laugh out loud. He was sounding so proper and strained.

"I agree with you there."

"Ah," Bobby chewed on his lower lip, searching for the right way to phrase the next statement. "I told her I'd put in a good word for her with you. I don't want to tell you how to run your business or anything, but if you're looking for someone to hire, I'd give her high marks."

"Bobby, if you want me to hire her, it's done."

He relaxed, drumming his fingers on the desk. Now he was on familiar ground. Phillip was negotiating. The conversation was back in the ballpark and Bobby knew how to play this game.

"If I wanted someone to hire her, Phillip, I'd hire her myself. I just told her I would put in a good word for her and that's what I'm doing. What you do from here is up to you."

"Well a good word from you is all I need, Bobby. Based on your recommendation, I'll put her to work."

Bobby grunted. This guy was good, all right. Phillip wouldn't let him off the hook. Time for the knockdown pitch. He spoke quickly, biting off the words in short, staccato bursts. "Who you hire is your own business, Phillip. I'm just doing what I told the lady I'd do."

"You got it, Bobby, and I appreciate it. Anything else I can do for you, you let me know."

The bastard just dusted himself off and climbed right back into the batter's box without missing a beat! Anyway he put it, Phillip was going to say he was hiring Susan because Bobby wanted it done. Which was true. Sort of.

"Thanks. I'll keep it in mind." Damn! Now he was thanking Phillip. "I'll let us both get back to work. Goodbye."

* * * * *

The private line hummed on Phillip Crawford's desk. He grinned confidently and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"What did you think about the information I sent?"

"It was interesting, but it didn't tell me anything I didn't already know."

"There will be more."

"It's not important."

"No?"

"No. I'm more concerned with where he's going than where he's

been.”

“You sound convinced that things will work out in our best interest.”

“I feel like the first few steps have been rewarding.”

“It’s not the beginning, but the end that is important.”

“So far, I’m satisfied.”

“Then I shouldn’t worry about this situation any more?”

“You shouldn’t have worried about it to begin with.”

“It’s my nature. I’m a worrier.”

“I’ll talk with you next week.”

Phillip hung up the phone. He was feeling confident indeed.

* * * * *

Bobby had been busy, working with Nancy, plotting out the agenda for his meeting with all of the program directors the following week. He wanted few questions asked. The meetings needed to go without a hitch. His men had to have immediate confirmation that the new vice president knew what he was doing and the direction they were taking would lead them all to the top of the ratings.

They worked right through lunch, not leaving the office except for a few minutes when Elliot Stevens had arrived from Boston. Nancy had shown the computer whiz the IBM-XT and he had begun work on the programs needed to link all the Media Communications stations together. They left him on his own and continued their efforts in Bobby’s office.

He was looking over Nancy’s shoulder, making changes on a format clock for San Francisco when the intercom buzzed.

Bobby frowned and hit the button. “Jane, I told you we weren’t to be interrupted.”

“I’m sorry Bobby, but there’s someone in the outer office who said you had an appointment today.”

“I didn’t make any appointments. Who is it?”

“Susan Scanlon.”

He tried not to show his surprise. He could feel Nancy studying his face carefully.

He looked at her and shrugged. “I forgot. Ah, would you mind excusing me for a little while?”

She got up quickly, gathering some papers off the desk. “Not at all, Bobby. I think we both need a break.”

He waited until she left the office, then punched the intercom. “Jane, please go get Miss Scanlon and bring her back.”

“Right away, Bobby.”

He tried to wipe the silly grin off his face, but he couldn't. He was excited about seeing Susan again, even if she had come to his office uninvited.

He walked over to the window and stood with his back to the door, trying to look casual. He took a deep breath. Then another. He was on his fifth when he heard the door open behind him.

"Bobby?"

"Hello, Susan," he said, turning from the window.

He took another deep breath. He couldn't help it. She was a picture of provocation, leaning slightly against the door, a clinging, black knit dress painted over her body. Her hair hung casually across her face, brushing against cheeks that were crinkled from the big smile she wore below her twinkling eyes.

They stood staring at each other for a few moments before she moved toward him. He took a quick step forward and she was in his arms, hanging on his neck, looking up at him. He grinned back and spun her around.

"Oh, Bobby," she squealed, "I hope you don't mind that I dropped in to see you, but I couldn't wait." She kissed him, her full, moist lips sucking teasingly on his before she broke the kiss to hug him tighter.

"Of course I don't mind," he stammered. He did, but he didn't . . . the 'did' becoming more prominent as the closeness of her body pushed the 'didn't' further into the background.

"I just wanted to thank you."

"Thank me? For what?"

She grabbed his face in her hands, her fingers pinching his cheeks. "Phillip Crawford hired me today."

He feigned surprise. "That's great! But you don't need to thank me for that. You got the job on your own."

"Oh you silly . . . Phillip told me you called."

He pushed his chin out, knitting his brows, trying to look indignant. "Didn't I tell you I'd call him? You doubted me?"

"Oh, Bobby," she whispered, pulling him closer again, breathing into his neck. "So many people in this town tell you they're going to help you, then they just look out for themselves. I was hoping you would be different." She nibbled lightly on his ear. "And you are."

He turned his head slightly, kissing her neck gently. "I'll never lie to you, Susan," he lied. "I told you I'd put in a good word, but really, I'm sure I had nothing to do with your getting the job. You must have earned it."

Her tongue circled his earlobe. "He told me you were the deciding factor. If you hadn't called, he might not have hired me."

Bobby snorted. "Well, whatever the reason, I'm happy for you."

Her tongue left his ear feeling cool and wet as she gazed around his office. "So this is where the important people work, huh?"

"No," he laughed. "Just me."

She laughed with him.

"How about a little celebration?" he asked, forgetting all about the work he was doing. "I've got some white wine in the fridge."

She shook her head. "A little celebration is fine, Bobby, but no wine. I'm still moving a little slow from all the booze last night."

"I guess you're right."

Raising one eyebrow, she stared at the door. "Does that thing lock?"

Uh oh. "Why?"

"Because I want you to lock it."

"Why?"

His heart was pounding again, all of his blood rushing from his head to his crotch. Surely she wouldn't do anything here in his office.

She swished slowly over to the door, exaggerating the sway of her hips because she knew he was watching, bent slightly to inspect the lock, then twisted the lever carefully until the latch settled noiselessly into place. Flashing a seductive smile, she walked back across the room, put her small purse down on his desk and spun around to face him.

* * * * *

"Bobby!"

He felt an elbow digging into his ribs.

"Bobby, wake up!"

He heard the voice, louder now, yet still somewhere in the fog that was his mind.

"Rrrriinnnggg!"

"Bobby! It's the phone!"

This time he heard the ring and the voice. He opened his eyes slowly. Actually, he opened his right eye. His left one was stuck shut. He hoped it was because he had been sleeping on it and not that he was going blind, which was a distinct possibility.

"Rrrriinnnggg!"

"Bobby!!"

This time she grabbed a fistfull of his hair and pulled, opening his right eye wider and even getting a crack out of the left one.

"Uumph!" he mumbled.

Susan reached across him on the bed and picked up the receiver, laying it on the pillow by his ear. He still wasn't sure where or who or why he was.

"Uumph!" he mumbled again, this time into the phone.

"Good morning, Mr. Holiday," the cheery voice on the other end crackled. "This is your nine o'clock wake-up call."

"Uumph!" he said, tossing the receiver toward the phone on the table beside his bed. He was in his hotel room. Susan was with him. It was nine o'clock. That was about all he needed to know. Now he'd just drift back to sleep.

"Bobby!"

Her fingers were digging into his ribs, waking him again. She was trying to tickle him, but it wouldn't work. He was too tired to tickle. He opened his eyes once more, trying to focus.

She was standing by the side of the bed, wearing the same black dress she had worn the day before. She bent down and kissed his cheek.

"I've got to run, darling. It's ten-thirty. I ordered you breakfast from room service. It'll be here at eleven. You're expected in the lobby around noon. Jump in the shower and you'll be fine."

He watched through his one open eye as she walked toward the door. Before she left, she turned, smiled and blew him a kiss.

"I'll call you at work Monday morning."

"Uumph!" he groaned into the pillow.

He started to close his eye again when the plans for the day entered what was left of his mind. Robert Williams was picking him up at noon.

"Uumph!" The bed smelled like sex.

It wasn't until he had been under the shower for ten minutes that he could utter an intelligent sound.

"Jesus!"

He was sore all over. Every muscle in his body ached. His back stung from her nails. His tongue was throbbing from where she had sucked it, his head pounded from the champagne. And that wasn't all.

"Jesus!"

He smiled, bits and pieces of the previous night flicking through his thoughts like an old news reel. He groaned. Again, he had never felt better. After her visit to his office, they made plans to meet back at his hotel room for dinner. They never ate. Was it four, five or six bottles of champagne they drank? He had lost count.

She took another lude. As a matter of fact, she took two. He asked

her why she took the pills and she told him that when she ate a lude, she had to make love.

Maybe he should get some!

He grinned into the shower, the water beating inside his mouth, washing away the musty taste of the night before, as a muffled, warning bell sounded distantly in his brain. He should be more careful. He had been around more drugs since coming to California than in the entire time he had been in radio. It wasn't like him.

Ah, but Susan . . . the thought of her was more powerful than any drug . . . or the risks involved. He should be careful. He should also feel guilty because of Beverly. But Beverly wasn't with him. And besides, Susan knew he was married and didn't care. He could have the best of both worlds. As long as Beverly didn't find out. And she wouldn't.

He wouldn't let her find out.

He was on top of the world, on top of his profession, the youngest vice president in Media Communications' history. He could handle anything!

He started to whistle . . . his headache was going away. There was no room in his head for his ego and a hangover.

* * * * *

"Robert, this is unbelievable!"

He was lying on a raft in the middle of Robert Williams' pool in Bel Air Estates, the most expensive suburb in California. Robert was sitting under a huge umbrella on the patio.

"Believe it. And you made it all possible."

Bobby grinned up at his friend. "I had nothing to do with this."

"Sure you did," Robert said. "You helped me start The Report. Without your help, I probably wouldn't have made it."

"Bullshit!"

"It's true."

It wasn't. And Robert knew it. As president of Media Communications, it had been Paul Johnson, not Bobby, that had put The Report on the map.

But, maybe Robert didn't know that. Maybe Robert thought he had been instrumental in Paul's decision.

Bobby closed his eyes against the glare of the sun. Let Robert keep thinking that. It would only help. Besides, maybe it was true. Maybe he had more influence than he thought.

"Well, Bobby, you sure look like you've learned to love California."

He squinted up at Pamela Williams, Robert's wife. Like her husband,

she was pale and a little overweight. Also, like Robert, she preferred to sit under the umbrella rather than to get in the water.

"Pamela," he said. "I don't know why you and Robert have this pool. Neither one of you looks like you ever get in it."

She smiled. "We keep it for our friends like you, Bobby. This way, we just put you in the pool and we don't have to entertain."

He laughed.

"Darlings," she said to both her husband and Bobby, "I want to invite some friends over for drinks tonight, if the two of you don't mind. There are a lot of nice people in this town that Bobby should meet."

Robert grinned. "Look out, Bobby. She's out to show off her newest toy."

"Fine by me, Pamela." Although he didn't know her as well as he did Robert, she was making him feel comfortable. In the past, he had felt a little beneath the two of them. Now, with his new job and title, he seemed to fit in.

"Isn't it a little late to be asking people to a party?" Robert said.

"Not when the guest of honor is the new vice president of Media Communications," Pamela sniffed. "Besides. I'd already asked a few friends over when you told me Bobby was staying with us this weekend. Now I'll just expand the list."

"Pamela, you're too much," Robert snorted.

She looked down her nose at him. "Really, Robert. Someone has to do it. You're so wrapped up in that magazine of yours that the only way you'd know people in this town if it weren't for me is by their picture."

Bobby laughed.

"Don't make her feel good, Bobby. It'll just egg her on."

Pamela stood up. "Did you bring anything to wear?"

Bobby drained his bloody mary and slid off the raft to stand in the chest-deep water. "That's where I draw the line, Pamela. I brought blue jeans and a sweat shirt. That's all I wear to any party."

"Holiday, you're such a red-neck," Robert groaned.

"Really," Pamela snipped jokingly.

Bobby cupped his hands and slapped them into the water, causing a splash that got both of them wet.

"You bastard!" Pamela shrieked, running toward the house. Robert just raised his arms and dripped, shaking his head like the principal at a high school.

Bobby waded toward the shallow end of the pool, climbed the steps and walked toward Robert, picking up a couple of towels from

where he had left them in a chair. He threw one to his friend and slouched down into a lounge under the umbrella.

"Well, son, you've done it now," Robert said through the towel as he dried off his face. "Pamela's going to invite everyone she knows to this informal get-together. You're about to be inspected by Hollywood's finest."

Bobby leaned back and shook his head, sending rivulets of water spraying away from him. "Ah, let her have fun. Besides, I'm a little interested in seeing how Hollywood reacts to this country boy."

"You'll find out soon enough. You want another drink?"

Bobby looked at the empty glass in his hand. "Sure."

Robert refilled it from a large pitcher on the table.

"Robert, you've really got it made."

"Yeah, and now it's time to make you."

Bobby sighed. "It'll be a while before I'll have it this made. What did this house cost you?"

"Almost a million!"

Bobby whistled. "Damn. I probably can't even afford to buy a house out here."

Robert took a sip from his drink. "Well, you can't afford to live in Bel Air on the salary you're making, that's for sure. But we can get you a house in Coldwater Canyon. As a matter of fact, Pamela's already seen this place. Hal Courtney owns it. He's president of Capstan Records and just bought another house down the street so he's got to sell. It went on the market last week. She spoke to him and he said he'd hold off selling it until you saw it."

"What's it like?"

"Pamela says it's beautiful. Two bedrooms, huge kitchen and living room, two car garage and a swimming pool."

"Sounds too good to be true. How much does it cost?"

"Five hundred thousand dollars."

Bobby choked on the drink he was swallowing. "Five hundred thousand dollars? Get real, Robert. I can't afford that."

Robert smiled. "Try not to choke on prices out here, Bobby. If you do, you're going to be choking a lot."

"You know what I'm making, Robert. I can't afford a place like that."

"You're the new vice president of Media Communications. You can't afford not to live in a place like that."

"Well, I'm going to have to."

Robert sipped on his drink and stared silently at Bobby. "How much money do you have in the bank?"

"Not much," Bobby squirmed. He was embarrassed. "About ten thousand dollars."

"If you put fifty thousand down on the house, your payments would only be about four thousand a month."

"Robert, I make a hundred grand a year. That's maybe sixty-five thousand take home. I can't be making four thousand dollar house payments. Besides, I couldn't come up with fifty thousand dollars if I had to."

"Yes you can. I'll loan it to you."

"Bullshit! I couldn't pay you back."

"Yes you could."

"How?"

Robert's eyes sparkled. "I'm going to offer you a job."

"What?"

"I want you to write a by-weekly column for The Report. The column can be on anything you want. As a matter of fact, I can even have it ghost-written for you. Just tell me the topic and I'll have someone on the staff write it under your by-line."

"Robert . . ."

"And I'll pay you fifty thousand dollars a year to write it!"

Bobby choked on his drink again. "What?"

Robert laughed. "Sure. Fifty thousand dollars. And I'll loan you another fifty to make the down payment. Since you'll be working for me, I know you'll pay it back."

He shook his head. "Come on, Robert, quit fooling around."

"I'm not fooling."

"No column I could write would be worth fifty thousand dollars. You're just trying to do me a favor."

Robert continued to smile with his lips, but his eyes narrowed slightly. "Bobby, I like you, and I want you to succeed. I will help you succeed if I can. I will do you favors by giving you advice, by introducing you to the right people and so forth. But when it comes to money, I don't do favors."

Robert swept his arm around, pointing to the house and spacious back yard. "This cost me a million. The Report earned the money because it's the best and we charge the highest rates. You're right, of course. A column written by you wouldn't be worth fifty thousand dollars. But a column by the vice president of Media Communications would be. As a matter of fact, I think I'd be getting a bargain."

Bobby frowned. It was a lot of money for very little effort on his part. "I don't know."

"Darling!" Pamela's voice calling from the house interrupted them.

"Telephone."

Robert got up and walked toward the cabana at the end of the pool. "Think about it," he said.

Bobby nodded. He would.

* * * * *

He was sitting in the terminal at the busy L. A. airport, waiting to meet Debbie. Her flight was thirty minutes late, giving him time to relax and reflect on the events of the weekend.

The small group of people that Pamela Williams invited to her house the previous night had turned into a full-blown, Hollywood party. Nearly a hundred guests showed up and the wine and champagne flowed until the early hours of the morning. True to her word, Pamela had introduced Bobby to all of the important people that she said he needed to meet. Managers, agents and record company presidents had shaken his hand, each and every one full of congratulations. They all promised to do whatever they could to help him succeed and wanted to take him to dinner to get to know him better.

Bobby was proud of himself. He met the movers and shakers in the record business and had more than held his own. Adding a record on the Media Communications chain of radio stations could make or break recording acts, thereby making or breaking those in charge of the record companies or managers of the groups. Bobby was an important person now, one to be courted. He recognized this fact and was acting accordingly.

Hal Courtney had promised him a great deal on the house in Coldwater Canyon. Alvin Irving, the manager of the mega-group The Falcons, wanted Bobby as his guest back stage at their concert at the Forum later in the week. Sherman Edwards, the attorney for some of the biggest acts in the business, offered his services and David Mack, the country's hottest singing star, invited Bobby to the taping of his weekly television show.

The most important people in the business had sought out his company. He had been the hit of the party, impressing them with his knowledge of the business and his cocky demeanor. They had hung on his every word and laughed at all of his jokes. He was pleased at how easily he had been accepted. All in all, it had been an interesting evening.

After breakfast, when Robert had driven him back to the hotel, he took the offer of writing the column in "The Report". He could see no conflict with his position. In fact, as he saw it, it could only enhance the image of Media Communications. He hadn't decided about the

loan. He'd wait to see the house.

"Hey, boss! Get up and welcome me to Hollywood!"

He was jarred out of his thoughts by Debbie's voice. He looked up and saw her walking across the terminal, a big smile on her face.

Debbie was a striking, young lady. About five feet five inches tall, she was a hard-body, athletically built with wide shoulders, a tiny waist, flaring hips and large breasts. Long, black hair was pulled back from a model's face, dark eyebrows, flashing brown eyes, a small, thin nose and puffy, sensual lips. Although not as starkly beautiful as Susan Scanlon, Debbie had an animal-like quality about her that attracted Bobby, and just about every other male he knew.

He jumped up and threw his arms around her, hugging her close.

"God, it's good to see you!"

She squeezed him back, her arms tightening around his neck.

"I didn't think the plane would ever get here," she said.

He relaxed his grip and pushed her away gently. "Here, let me look at you."

She smiled coquettishly and spun around daintily. "You like?"

She was wearing a billowing white blouse, cut low over her breasts, tucked into skin-tight blue jeans.

He grinned. "Now you're a California girl!"

"Am I going to have to dye my hair blonde?"

"Not until you've been here a month. Then it's mandatory."

They laughed together and walked arm-in-arm down the terminal, talking excitedly, each filling the other in on what had been happening during the past week. It took almost half an hour for them to collect her baggage and put it in the car, and another forty-five minutes to get from the airport to the hotel.

Debbie was really something special to Bobby. He had hired her right out of high school as a gofer in the programming department at WMC. He loved her youthful enthusiasm and rewarded her hard work by making her his secretary and assistant in a few short weeks. He was her Svengali, teaching her the radio business.

"Bobby, I can't believe it!" They were in her hotel room. The bellman had just left after putting away her bags and she was looking out the window. "It's everything I ever dreamed it would be . . . palm trees, blue skies and beautiful people."

"Welcome to Hollywood," he said. "This calls for a toast. I've had a bottle of Dom Perignon chilling since I left for the airport."

He crossed the room and pulled the bottle out of the ice bucket on the table, quickly stripping away the wrapper and popping the cork, spilling only a little on the carpet as he filled their two glasses.

"You sure know how to make a girl feel welcome, Bobby," she smiled, holding her glass up.

He grinned back at her. "To fucking up," he said.

"To fucking up," she laughed back, clinking his glass, then draining all the champagne from hers.

He did the same. "Don't throw the glass in the fireplace. First of all, there isn't any fireplace, and second, we don't have any more glasses."

"Oh, Bobby," she cried, throwing both of her arms around him.

He grabbed her waist and lifted her off her feet. She screamed playfully as he spun around and threw her on the bed, falling on top of her. He reached up, pulled her hair, tilted her face toward his and kissed her on the lips. She didn't resist. As a matter of fact, he felt her returning the pressure just a little.

What the fuck was going on? Since he had come to Los Angeles, women just didn't seem to be able to say no. First Jane, then Susan, now Debbie.

Parting his lips slightly, he pushed his tongue out and was pleasantly surprised when it met hers. The kiss was turning passionate. Debbie opened her mouth wider, sucking his tongue across her lips. For the first time, he tasted her, exploring gently, sliding between her teeth. He moved his hips tentatively, grinding his body softly into her and she abruptly broke the kiss.

Hugging him, she whispered in his ear. "Now, Bobby, you know better than that. No pelvic thrusting."

He had to laugh in spite of himself. "Damn it, Debbie, let me make your nipples hard!"

She laughed in his ear and pushed him over on the bed, rolling on top of him. "No, no, Bobby. If I let you get my nipples hard, your little dick will get hard and then the next thing you know we'll both be naked in this bed having our way with each other."

They had always talked openly and teasingly about sex, maybe because they never engaged in it. He raised his eyebrows. "And what's wrong with that?"

She punched him playfully in the stomach and jumped off the bed, making her way across the room toward the champagne. "Everything. You're married. You're a fool. You're my boss. Pick any one of them." She filled her glass again. "Besides, Bobby, you've got Beverly, you don't need me."

"Bring me some champagne, please," he said, changing the subject and lying back on the bed. He watched as she refilled his glass and walked back toward him. He tried half-heartedly once more. "You're the only girl I want, Debbie, you know that."

She stuck out her tongue. "I don't even want to hear it! You know I love you, but I'm not going to have sex with you."

He sipped some of the champagne. "Debbie," he looked over the rim of his glass, his eyes sobering. "I get you in bed and it's all over."

She flipped him the bird. "That's why it will never happen, Bobby."

"Never say never, baby!" He bounced off the bed and took her in his arms. "Just say not today!"

She laughed and kissed him hard on the lips. "All right. Not today!"

They fell back on the bed again, laughing and tickling each other until Debbie finally pushed him away and sat up. "All right, what's the score here?"

Bobby sat up too, leaning back against the headboard next to her. "Well, kiddo, we've got a little work to do."

Over the few hours, in her room and through dinner together downstairs, Bobby filled her in on everything that was going on in the company. He was glad she had accepted the job. She was very young and inexperienced, but her youth gave her a special insight. She had no patience and wanted things done quickly and he liked that. Too often, the patience one gained with age wasn't so much patience, but an excuse for putting things off.

After dinner, Bobby walked her back to her room. "It's your first night in Los Angeles. I think I should sleep with you to make sure you're all right."

She screwed her face into a pathetic mask. "Somehow, Bobby, I think I'll manage . . . but thanks so much for your caring. It's not like you to want to spend the night with me."

He put his hands together in front of him as if in prayer. "I'm just trying to help."

"Yeah, help me out of my clothes."

"Debbie! I could sleep next to you and never try anything."

She laughed in his face. "Bobby, you are full of it."

"I'd like to fill you with it," he growled.

She stood on her toes and gave him a kiss. "I'll see you in the morning."

"If you need me, call me. I'm in Suite 601."

She looked surprised. "You mean you're not in an adjoining room? I'm shocked!"

This time he gave her the finger and turned down the hall.

One detective who was close to the investigation, told The Times that additional subpoenas might be issued later this afternoon for another twenty-five persons in other states as well.

CHAPTER FOUR

The first part of the week went quickly. Bobby was busy planning the meetings with the program directors and outlining his plans for the company. He had no time for play. He had talked with Susan Scanlon on the phone a couple of times, but had made no effort to see her. The events of the week were more important than being with her . . . at least for the time being. Besides, there would always be next week. And the next.

"Hi, boss," Debbie greeted him as he walked into the outer office Wednesday morning.

"Hi, yourself," he said. "I missed you at dinner last night. I even called your room a couple of times and you weren't in. What's up? Have you found a little California boy friend already?"

Debbie tilted her head and smiled like a little girl who had a secret. "No. I was working late."

"On what? We were finished yesterday at five-thirty."

Her smile got bigger and she stood up behind her desk. "Remember on Monday you told me that my first project was to redesign your office?"

Bobby nodded.

Debbie came around from behind her desk with a red bandana in her hand. "Well, all of us stayed here late last night and met the interior decorating people. We've been meeting secretly with them all week. Last night they moved in the new furniture and shaped up the office. We didn't get out of here until four o'clock this morning."

A stupid grin spread across his face. He was embarrassed and, as usual, tried to hide it behind false bravado. "Okay, open up the door and let's get a look at it. I'm anxious to see how badly you fucked it up!"

Debbie shook her head. "No chance, Bobby." She held up the bandana. "I want you to put on this blindfold first."

"Come on, Debbie."

"You come on, Bobby. Besides, I'm not letting you in unless you do. I've had the locks changed on the door."

He groaned.

"Aw, cut the dramatics," she snorted. "Turn around and let me get this thing on."

Reluctantly he turned around, knowing he had little choice. She tied the blindfold around his head, shutting out all the light. He heard the others in the reception area moving closer, waiting to see his reaction. Debbie took him by the hand and led him around her desk and into his office. The door shut softly behind them.

"Ready?"

He took a deep breath. "Yep."

He felt her fingers untie the knot behind his head. The bandana loosened, then dropped.

He took a quick breath of total astonishment. "Debbie!" he whispered.

"You like?"

He let his breath whistle out between his teeth. "I love it." It was magnificent.

It was the same room, yet it wasn't. To his left, in roughly the same place the old desk used to sit, was his new desk, all chrome and glass, legs higher than normal, the top about four feet off the ground.

Debbie read his thoughts and grabbed the crook of his arm. "I know you work standing up and I was worried that you'd have back trouble because you were constantly having to bend over. This desk will change all of that."

"It's beautiful," he said.

"It has only one drawer, Bobby," Debbie laughed. "Now you'll have to keep your desk clean. You can't just drag everything off into drawers like you used to do."

In front of the glistening desk sat two large stools, providing visitors a place to sit that would put them on a level with him as he stood. Behind, the drab wall had been replaced by mirrors from the ceiling to the floor. The floor, the one with the worn, green rug, had been covered by a deep, gray, wool carpet that added depth and class.

The far right end was where he could gather with members of his staff or other guests for more intimate conversations. A deep cushioned, L-shaped couch dominated the wall. Set into the wall opposite the windows was a huge, wet bar with chrome and glass shelves stretching almost to the ceiling. In the middle of the shelves sat the controls for a state-of-the-art sound system, including a 40-inch, color television set, complete with a VCR. Large lamps, sitting on glass tables at either end of the couch, gave that end of the office a com-

fortable, homey look.

"I can't believe it."

"You really like it?" Debbie's eyebrows were arched high over her eyes, her face radiating happiness.

He smiled. "Debbie, you done good. You done real good!"

She squealed and jumped into his arms. The others shouted their enthusiasm and grabbed the two of them.

"Wait, wait," Debbie shouted. The gathering quieted down a little and she backed up toward the wet bar. "Bobby, I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of ordering some champagne to share with everyone who made this possible."

"I don't mind."

"Great! Break it out, Jane."

Jane and Sandy ran quickly to the wet bar, opened the refrigerator and brought out the bottles. Soon, everyone in the office had a glass and was toasting. Ten minutes of congratulations and glad-you-like-it's later and everyone was back at their desks, leaving Bobby alone in the office with Debbie. They were both sitting on the couch.

She threw herself back against the pillow, spreading her arms out. "Bobby, I'm so glad you like it. If you hadn't, I think I would have killed myself."

He felt a warm glow of pride, both in her, and in himself. Sweeping one hand out toward the other end of the office, he said, "Come on. How could I have not liked this."

She took a deep breath. "It's easy, now that it's done. But it was a bitch getting all the ideas sorted out and getting all the pieces to the puzzle put together. Plus, the faggot decorator wanted to do something avant guard. I knew you'd have loved soft pastels and antiques!"

"Ha!"

"I swear to God," she laughed, leaning over and grabbing her knees. "That's what he wanted to do. I almost had to kill him to keep him from screwing it up. But I knew this was you as soon as I got it all finished this morning. And I was completely satisfied when Robert agreed with me."

He rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling. "Robert?"

"Robert Williams. I couldn't have done it without him, Bobby. He and his wife knew where to go and who to call to get this done."

"He saw it before I did?"

"Calm down. I know how you feel about outsiders fooling around in our office, but I broke the rule to get all this done in time for your first meetings."

Bobby forced a smile. He was forcing more and more smiles regarding the looseness with which his office operated. Robert Williams seemed to be more involved in Media Communications than he.

"Well, in this case, who really cares. It's fantastic, Debbie."

It took her half an hour to point out the different features of his office. Debbie knew he loved gadgets and had managed to have several that caught his attention. A new intercom had been installed, enabling him contact the different people in the other offices with the touch of his finger. A special system made it possible for him to listen to any of the radio stations in the Media Communications chain by merely pushing a button on his desk. Two more buttons were located on his desk; one locked the office door, the other controlled large drapes across the windows, letting him shut out the sunlight if he wished.

After she filled him in on all the features, she left him alone. He stood quietly for a few minutes in the center of the room, soaking up the ambiance. He was a corporate executive now, and he had an office that underlined that fact. He felt important. He took a deep breath, inhaling the fragrance of newness. He was important!

He hit the intercom on his desk. "Debbie, get Nancy and come in here right away. I want to make sure we're perfectly prepared for the meetings."

A few minutes later, Debbie and Nancy were seated on the stools across from him. "All right, run it down."

Debbie looked at a notebook in her lap. "Everyone arrives tonight. We've got the cars from Budget lined up at the airport. In each of their hotel rooms is an agenda for Thursday and Friday." She slid a copy across the desk. He followed along as she continued. "Tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, we all meet in the conference room. You'll give a pep talk to the group and accept their congratulations. You'll also outline our new programming policies." She slid some more papers across the desk. "The new format procedures and record rotations will be given to them and you'll explain how you want them carried out. Enlargements of these sheets will be on the visual boards in the conference room. The meeting will last until noon. They're on their own for lunch."

"At two o'clock, we'll assemble again in the conference room and Nancy will explain the reports that will be required from each station. Elliot Stevens will go over the new computer programs and then Bill Lerner will discuss engineering problems and how they can be solved. The meeting is scheduled to end at six."

"After that meeting, they've got two hours to themselves. Then

we all go to dinner at Franco's on the Strip. We've got a special room reserved. Friday morning you have individual, one-hour meetings with each program director starting with Lawrence Macky at nine o'clock and ending with Nelson Harris at five. After the meetings, we gather in the lobby of the hotel at seven o'clock. Then we've arranged limos to take us to The Falcons' concert at the Forum. When the concert is over, we'll go backstage and meet the members of the band."

She looked up. "After that, we're finished with them!"

Bobby smiled. He was pleased with the way things were going. "Debbie, you and Nancy have done a hell of a job."

"Well, we've planned it well, Bobby," Nancy said. "Now all we have to do is make it come off!"

"Piece of cake," he said. "Anything else?"

"How do you think all the program directors are going to react when you tell them they won't be controlling the music on their stations anymore?" Debbie asked.

He shook his head. "I don't think they're going to break into a round of applause. Anytime you diminish someone's power, egos get a little bent out of shape. But I really don't care. Like it or not, they don't have much choice."

Debbie's face lit up. "Your way or the highway, right boss?"

He laughed. "You got it! Now get out of here. I've got work to do."

He watched them leave, then turned and went into the bathroom. It was the only part of the office he hadn't inspected since the renovation. He splashed water on his face, admiring his reflection in the mirror.

"You good looking son-of-a-bitch," he grinned confidently, "Don't you never die!"

There was no towel on the rack so he bent down and opened the doors under the lavatory. He found several, stacked neatly along with extra rolls of toilet paper, shaving accessories and soap. When he pulled out a towel, he noticed two telephones sitting behind the other stuff. He carried them out to his desk.

"Debbie!" he yelled, not using the intercom.

She stuck her head in the door. "Yeah?"

Pointing to the phones, he said, "What are these?"

"Oh," she walked toward the desk. "I forgot. Those are the old phones. They didn't match the new decor. I didn't know what you wanted to do with them so I put them in the bathroom."

"Why didn't the phone company take them?"

"They belong to us. You don't rent phones anymore, Bobby."

"Oh, yeah."

"I'll take them down to Bill. I'm sure he'll have some use for them."

"Bullshit!" Bobby grinned. "I don't want anything around that was left over from the last regime."

He pulled the chrome wastebasket out from under his desk and dropped the phones into it. As they fell, one of the handsets caught the edge and broke, the pieces scattering on the carpet.

"Nice shot," Debbie said sarcastically, bending down with him to finish the job.

Bobby reached for the broken receiver and was about to toss it in with the others when something caught his eye. A round, silver cylinder had been exposed when the handset had cracked. It was the part that transmitted a person's voice from the bottom of the set. He was familiar with the insides of telephones, having experimented with them as a young boy. Removing this cylinder enabled you to listen to someone's conversation on another phone without them being able to hear you. But there was something different about this one.

Attached to the middle of the cylinder was a black piece, about half an inch square and maybe a quarter of an inch thick. He touched it with his thumb and it came free, falling to the floor. Mildly puzzled, he picked it up and studied it closer. One side was sticky, where it had been attached to the cylinder, the other side was topped with small louvers. A tiny wire hung down from the back.

"What's that?" Debbie asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know."

Debbie made a face. "It looks like a little bug."

Bobby flinched, her words making him suddenly aware of an unknown dread. "Go get Bill," he whispered.

"What?"

"Do it!"

He put the small object on his desk and waited, trying to fight the obsessive feeling that something was very wrong. A few minutes later, Debbie returned, followed by the chief engineer for Media Communications.

"What's up, Bobby?" Bill said cheerfully.

He pointed to the desk. "What's that?"

Bill picked up the black gadget and his face lit up. Evidently he was pleased. "It's a transmitting device. Where'd you get it?"

"What do you mean, transmitting device?"

Bill held his hand up, pointing to the black square between his

thumb and first finger. "Just what I said, a transmitting device. The little square here works like a tiny microphone . . . the wire there is the antenna. You talk into this and your voice is transmitted to a receiver somewhere."

Bobby felt the muscles in his jaw tighten as the weight of Bill's answer turned his worst fears into reality. "Jesus!"

Bill was still smiling. "What's the matter?"

"That's a bug?" Bobby asked.

He watched the smile fade slowly from Bill's face. Now he shared Bobby's feelings. "Yeah."

Bobby tried to swallow, but couldn't. His mouth was dry. He tried to discipline his voice, to maintain some sort of control. "I found it attached to the handset of the old telephone that was in here."

"Show me," Bill said. His serious tone of voice matched the look on his face. He wasn't smiling anymore.

Bobby picked up the small cylinder. "It was right here. In the middle. I found it by accident when I broke the set."

"Wasn't there another one?"

Bobby pointed to the waste basket. Bill reached down and retrieved the other phone. Taking the handset, he twisted the bottom off, shook it gently and another cylinder fell into his palm. Attached to the center was a second transmitting device, identical to the one Bobby had found earlier.

Bill stared up at him. "What's going on, Bobby?"

Bobby spoke slowly, unsure of how to answer. "I was going to ask you the same question."

The room was like a graveyard, quiet and forboding.

"Somebody's listening to your conversations."

Bobby felt a chill sweep across his shoulders as Bill verbalized his thoughts. "What?"

"Someone has bugged your office."

"Jesus!"

"Yeah."

"You mean someone could listen in on my phone conversations?"

"Not just your phone conversations, Bobby. These things transmit everything that's said in this office."

Bill picked up the other bug and went into the bathroom. He placed the two transmitters next to the sink and turned on the water before coming back into the office.

"All they can pick up now is running water."

Bobby paced back and forth across the room silently, his hands clasped behind his back, his body bent at the waist. What the fuck

was happening? Bugs in his office? This was something he had only seen on television!

He stopped abruptly. All he had were questions. He needed answers. "What does this mean?"

Bill shrugged. "It means someone bugged this office, Bobby. I don't know how or why. I don't know enough about this kind of thing to give you an accurate answer. All I know is what I've told you."

"Can we find out who's doing it?"

Bill shrugged again. "I don't know. But I know someone who can."

"Who?"

"Investigator friend of mine. He's into this kind of stuff. I suggest we call him and get him up here."

"Do it."

Bill started toward the door, then stopped and turned around. "I wouldn't work out of this office until my friend gets here."

"Why's that?"

"There might be more of these little boogers hidden around."

Bobby and Debbie followed Bill silently out of the office.

"I don't want a word of this mentioned to anyone," he snapped when they had closed the door.

"Why?" Debbie asked.

"We don't know who did it."

Bill nodded and headed toward his office.

"What now?" Debbie asked.

Bobby cracked his knuckles. "I don't know. Go back to work, I guess." He started across the reception area.

"Where are you going?" Debbie called.

"For a long walk."

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon and Bobby was sitting on the couch, a glass of wine in his hand. Bill's investigator friend had spent three hours going over all of the offices, checking for more bugs. None turned up. He had told Bobby that the transmitting devices were in working condition and someone had been monitoring the conversations in the office. The bugs were capable of transmitting their signals only three or four hundred feet, so the receiver had to be close, but there was no way to find it. It could be a small tape recorder located in a desk somewhere adjacent to Bobby's office or on the floors directly above or below.

He sipped the wine, trying to figure out who and why. The whole thing was unbelievable. Robert Williams? Was that how he got in-

formation for "The Report"? It didn't seem possible. Why go to so much trouble to get information that Bobby would probably give him anyhow? One of the record companies? Someone in the office? Again the question, why?

Paul Johnson? The man was paranoid and meticulous. He wanted to know anything and everything that went on in the company. Maybe this was the way he monitored what the vice president in charge of programming was doing, making sure his wishes were followed.

That was the only answer that satisfied Bobby, the only possible answer that gave him any sense of relief. Besides, the bugs were on the old phones. Maybe Paul had them installed because he hadn't trusted the man Bobby had replaced. But if this was true, why hadn't he removed them when Bobby took over?

He took another drink. The truth was, he just didn't know. And that fact gnawed in his gut. He wouldn't mention the bugs to anyone, not even Paul. If Paul had placed them, he wouldn't admit it. If he hadn't . . .

Bobby tipped the glass, killing the contents in one, large gulp. Things were getting way too serious!

* * * * *

"Fuck, man . . . this is the life!"

Phillip Crawford sat on a deck chair behind a small, round, aluminum table near the edge of his pool. He tried to keep the disgust from showing on his face as he nodded toward the man that made the statement. Mark Lowery, program director for the Media Communications radio station KFMC, was sprawled across a lounge chair a few feet away. Phillip had picked Mark up at his hotel earlier in the evening. He had wanted the two of them to spend some time alone before the meetings at Media Communications headquarters the following day.

Mark was a large, ugly man, four inches over six feet tall and bordering on obese. He had a full, unkempt beard that sprouted across his cheeks, hiding a face that would never be described as handsome. The hair continued across his white, flabby body, causing him to look more like an animal than a member of the human race. Beady eyes darted back and forth behind thick glasses, never resting on one object in particular, choosing instead to flick about in a never-ending motion that underlined the nervous nature of the northern California program director.

As had many in radio, Mark Lowery chose his profession because

he couldn't face life head-on. Starting at an early age, he found he could play out his fantasies as a radio disc jockey. Behind the microphone, he could pretend to be the person he could never be in real life. He could be handsome. He could be skinny. He could be cool. He could be hip. He could pretend to be all the things he wasn't.

As he grew older and learned his trade, Mark became a program director. Now he was in charge of other dreamers and could play on their insecurities and weaknesses to hide his own. He added records and made record companies happy. They told him he was great, and the walls he built to shut out the real world got higher and higher.

Phillip traded heavily on Mark's insecurities. The independent record promoter played to Mark's gigantic ego, plying the man with all the ingredients that made him more dependent on outside sources and less dependent on himself. Phillip used booze, women, drugs, money and anything else it took to keep Mark happy and to keep Mark happy with him.

Phillip had been sending him cash for the past eighteen months. Every Thursday, Mark would get a letter from Phillip Crawford Promotions. Inside the envelope were ten, one hundred dollar bills. Mark received the money because he added records on KFMC that Phillip asked him to add. Phillip, in turn, got money from the record companies to get records added to the playlist at KFMC.

Everyone was happy.

Now this joyful situation was about to come to an end. The next day, Bobby Holiday was taking away Mark's ability to make Phillip happy. And if Phillip wasn't happy, Mark was not going to be smiling very long either.

"Give me some more of that blow, man."

Phillip pushed a mirror across the table. On it was a gram of cocaine, cut into thin lines about two inches long.

"You better go easy on that stuff," Phillip warned. "You've got a busy day tomorrow."

Mark dismissed Phillip's concern with a wave of his hand, bending over to snort two of the lines into his nostrils.

"There 'aint nothing to worry about," he said, falling back onto the lounge chair. "Nothing to worry about at all."

Phillip knew the man was full of false bravado and the cocaine would only accentuate that feeling. Phillip never used cocaine . . . or any drug. Actually, he never took any drug. But he did use them, by providing them to others, if it fitted his needs.

Phillip cleared his throat. "How do you feel about the meetings tomorrow."

Mark grunted. "What do you mean?"

"Cut the bullshit and level with me, Mark. You know exactly what I mean. Holiday's going to be laying down some new rules tomorrow. How do you think it's going to go?"

"I think it's going to be fine."

"How so?"

"I don't think he's going to fuck with San Francisco."

Phillip studied his fingernails carelessly. Could this idiot be so stupid? "Why not?"

"Because I'm not going to let him, that's why."

Phillip stretched his arms lazily toward the twinkling stars high above him. "Come on, Mark. The guy's your boss. You aren't going to have a say."

"The fuck I'm not!" The bearded man swung around on the lounge chair so that he was facing Phillip, his eyes darting back and forth behind his glasses. "I'll tell him if he fucks with me I'll quit."

Phillip smiled. "And he'll take your resignation."

"Like shit!"

Phillip slumped down in his chair, observing Mark closely without seeming to do so. "You need to calm down and think a minute or two. The last thing you need to do is challenge the man first thing out of the chute. You need to be a good soldier and gain his trust."

Mark didn't say anything for several moments. He twisted around again, his back once more to Phillip. "I don't know if I can do that."

"You don't have a choice."

"I don't need this job."

"Mark, you don't need the job, but you sure could use it."

Silence.

"I thought you said you'd take care of me if anything happened."

Phillip's lips tightened. He knew where the conversation was heading.

"I'll take care of you, Mark, but it'll be better for both of us if you kept your job. That way, we both make out."

"Then you're saying you won't take care of me?"

"You heard what I said. I'll give you a job. But I can't pay you anywhere near what you're making now, plus, you're a radio hound, you're not into promoting records. And if you go to work with me, your career in radio would be over. No one's going to hire a former independent record man to program a radio station."

Phillip watched Mark reach up and absently scratch his back, his

flabby fingers parting the hair, searching for a spot that was bothering him. "All right. I'll try and take it easy, but Holiday better not push me too far. I won't take too much of his bullshit."

"You won't have to take too much."

Mark twisted around nervously. "What about the money?"

Phillip's eyes narrowed. "What about it?"

"Are you still going to send it?"

Phillip shifted slightly in his chair. This could get ticklish. "I can't afford to send you money if I'm not getting paid by the record companies. You know that."

The fact was, if Mark lost his job the next day, Phillip wouldn't even call him on the phone, unless he thought the guy had a chance of landing another gig that could help both of them.

Mark continued to stare out across the pool, his back toward Phillip. "I need the cash."

"I need to get paid by the record companies, Mark."

Again the silence. Phillip studied the man's hairy shoulders, trying to get a feeling on where the conversation would end.

"And the land?"

Phillip sighed. He purchased some land in northern California and promised it to Mark if things went well. The fool had believed him.

"I'll try and keep making the payments," Phillip said. "It depends on what happens here in the next few weeks. If I get cut out of Media Communications, a lot of things are going to change."

Mark cleared his throat. "If I get cut out, things are going to change too, Phillip."

There was an ominous tone to the last statement.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just what I said," Mark continued quietly. "I won't take the fall alone. I told you on the phone."

"Go on."

"If I'm out and you don't help me, I'll go to Holiday and tell him everything." Mark turned around slowly and looked at Phillip, his darting eyes now still and staring straight ahead. "You'll never do business with Media Communications again."

Phillip grunted. So this was the bastard's trump card! He fought the urge to reach over and hurl the cocaine into the fat, bearded face. That would make him feel good, but it wouldn't help his business. And that was really what it was all about. Business. And money. Mark was making this threat because he mistakenly thought it would scare Phillip into taking care of him, no matter what.

Phillip forced a smile. "What in the hell are you threatening me

for?" He reached across and grabbed the man's hairy shoulder. "You and I have been pals for too long for anything to get between us." He patted the shoulder comfortingly. "We'll see this through, just like we have everything else . . . together."

Just for a second, the arrogant face froze and Phillip thought he wouldn't get off so easily. Then the beady eyes started darting again.

Mark smiled. "I'll snort to that."

Phillip waved toward the cocaine. "Double up, son. Double up!"

When Mark leaned over the mirror again, Phillip looked back toward the house. "Shirley!"

The door opened and his secretary came out to join them. She was wearing a skimpy bikini that showed more than it covered.

"Knock back a line or two and lets have a little party," Phillip told her.

"Yeah!" Mark chimed in.

Shirley leaned over the table, put the straw in her nose and quickly inhaled two lines of the coke.

"Sit with me," Mark yelled, pulling her down in his lap without waiting for an answer.

Phillip watched as she put her arms around Mark's neck and spread her legs so his hairy fingers could dig beneath her suit. She looked at Phillip and rolled her eyes, pretending to be turned on by the bearded, fat man for whom she felt nothing but contempt.

Phillip blew her a kiss as he walked silently back to the house, leaving them alone.

Shirley hated Mark Lowery, but she understood Phillip's business. She also understood the extra five hundred dollars Phillip gave her for special parties like this. Enough money and enough cocaine could almost make what she had to do enjoyable.

Almost.

Phillip closed the door to his office and picked up the private phone. It was three hours later on the East Coast and he needed to make plans. Something had to be done about Mark Lowery.

* * * * *

Back at the hotel, Bobby was knocking on Debbie's door. He worked late at the office, putting everything in place. Now he wanted to make sure everything was set on her end.

Actually, that wasn't really the truth. He could have called. He wanted to drop in on her like this, hoping he'd get lucky.

He heard a movement in the room, then Debbie's muffled voice filtered out into the hallway.

"Who is it?"

"It's me. Open up."

"Bobby, what do you want?"

He could hear her clearly now. She was standing close to the other side of the door.

"I want to talk."

"I'm in my nightgown, Bobby."

"That's a bonus."

"Come on, I've got to go to sleep."

"I know . . . so do I. I promise not to attack you. I just want to make sure everything is planned."

She hesitated for a few seconds. "Just a minute, let me get things straightened up."

He waited, listening to her shuffling back and forth across the room. Finally, the door opened.

"Hello, there," he said. Debbie was walking away from him toward her bed. She had on a large T-shirt that stopped halfway down her thighs. When she turned and sat down, he could see her breasts bounce freely.

He started to join her on the bed when he stopped half way across the room in mid-stride and sniffed, inhaling deeply.

He looked at her like a teacher would look at a child who was talking in the back of the class. "Debbie."

She made a face, her eyes closing, her lips twisting from side to side. "All right, Bobby. You busted me."

"Debbie," he said disapprovingly. She had been smoking pot.

She covered her face with her hands and fell back on the bed, giggling. "Bobby, you sound like my dad."

He was intent on being angry, but when she fell backwards, her legs spread slightly and he could see her white panties peeking out from underneath the shirt. He walked heavily across the room and stopped, his knees touching hers.

"Damn it, Debbie!"

She took her hands away from her face and threw her arms out, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, Bobby, I'm sorry." She looked up at him and started giggling again.

Bobby had to smile. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Beat me?" she grinned.

"No," he grinned back. "You might like it."

He fell on top of her, sitting on her stomach, pinning her hands above her head. "Why?"

She batted her eyes slowly. "It's no big deal, Bobby. I just like to

smoke a joint occasionally after a long day. It helps me relax and makes me not take life so seriously.”

“You know how I feel about drugs.”

“I know, Bobby, I know. But there’s nothing wrong with a hit or two off a joint. You’re such a fucking red-neck about drugs. You ought to take a hit. It would cool you right out.”

He pulled his mouth in at the corners. “Yeah. All I need to do is smoke a joint now and freak out in the meetings tomorrow.”

She squealed and tried to jerk her hands free from his grip. “You wouldn’t freak out.”

He tightened his fingers around her wrists. “All right. Where’d you get it?”

A huge smile split her face, her eyes dancing up into his. “Nelson gave it to me when I picked him up at the airport tonight.”

“I knew it,” he barked, trying to sound angry.

She wriggled under him. “Come on, Bobby. Let me up.”

He looked down at her. This time his eyes were twinkling. “No. You have to be punished.”

“Oh God!” she giggled.

He leaned down quickly and bit her neck gently, smelling the clean fragrance of soap as he sucked softly on her skin.

“No, Bobby,” she laughed. “That tickles.”

He kept sucking for a moment, then slid his lips up over her jaw, searching for her lips. When he found them, he kissed her deeply, his lips parting when her tongue moved against his, twisting and tasting as she sucked him deeper into her mouth.

He opened one eye in surprise, trying to focus on the blurry outline of her face. She had allowed him to kiss her before, but she had never responded with this much passion. She twisted her wrists free, and instead of pushing him back, she locked both her arms around his neck, pulling him tighter against her.

He continued to kiss her, maneuvering his legs down her sides until he was lying on top of her. He might as well push it to the limit. It was sure to end at any second. His right knee moved between her thighs and she spread her legs, allowing his lower body to rest between them.

She wasn’t kissing him anymore. Her lips were open and she moaned into his mouth, her breath coming in short gasps as she tightened her arms around his neck. He pushed his hips against hers. His heart beat against his ribs and his breath caught in his throat when he felt her grind back against him.

Debbie moaned into his mouth again, dry-humping back and forth

as her calves looped around his legs. He had no time to think now, reacting instead on pure instinct and excitement, sliding his palm off her shoulder and across her chest, capturing her breast. He was moving quickly with the understanding that his good fortune would end soon.

He was massaging her breast, his fingers searching for her nipple when she grabbed his shoulder and twisted, rolling him over on the bed. Pulling her lips away, she jumped on top of him and sat on his stomach, pinning his arms back as he had done to her earlier.

She was trying to frown, but her eyes gave her away. She took a deep breath. "Whew! I warned you about that pelvic thrusting."

He grinned up at her, knowing the moment was gone. "Come on, Debbie. Kiss me."

She smiled and leaned forward, kissing him gently on the lips. It wasn't what he had in mind. When he tried to kiss her deeper, she jerked back and jumped off the bed.

"All right, boss. It's time for you to leave."

"Debbie," he whined.

She laughed. "Don't give me that pitiful look of yours, Bobby. It's not going to work on me. You know that."

He groaned and tried to look pitiful anyhow, making his eyes sad, pouting with his lower lip. "Come on, Debbie. Let's get into your bed together. You know you'd like it."

She looked at him silently for a few moments. "I'd probably love it, Bobby, but it's not going to happen. You know the rules. I won't fool around with a married man. Especially when the married man is my boss."

"Debbie!"

She started laughing again and he had to join her. "Look at us. We're like a couple of school kids." She pointed towards the door. "All right. Out!"

He stood up slowly. "That's about as close as we've come."

She nodded. "You caught me in a weak moment."

He smiled. "If that's what smoking a joint does to you, I might be tempted to buy some."

She grinned. "It does get me horny. Almost like a lude."

He stopped short. "You take ludes?"

She raised her hands. "Don't get serious on me, Bobby. I only took one once. My old boyfriend and I shared one last year." She laughed. "It made me crazy."

"Debbie."

"Don't preach, Bobby. It was one time on a special occasion."

"I wasn't going to preach."

"What?"

"I was going to get you one."

Her jaw fell open in shock. "You're going to get me a lude? I'm sure."

"I'm serious."

"Give me a break."

"I told you, I'm serious. If you'll make love with me, I'll get you a lude."

Debbie shook her head, her long, black hair swishing back and forth. "I'm not going to do that and you know it." Her face lit up. "But, I'll make a deal with you."

"What's that?"

"You score some and we'll stay up one night and party."

He grinned. "You've got a deal."

"But there's a catch, Bobby?"

"What's that?"

Her smile widened. "You'll have to take one with me."

"I can't do that, Debbie."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Too bad."

He stared at her for a moment, then shook his head.

She laughed. "Come on, Bobby, get out of here. We've got to be sharp tomorrow."

She walked him to the door, then stood on her toes and kissed him softly on the cheek. "Happy dreams," she whispered.

* * * * *

"All right, let's begin."

Bobby was standing at the head of a long table in the conference room. Seated around the table were all the program directors in the Media Communications chain.

"For those of you who haven't been formally introduced, the young lady passing among you is my secretary, Debbie Bower." He watched as she finished handing out the packets that contained the new policies. "If you'll open up your folders, you'll find our new game plan. The information is self-explanatory, so if you'll just follow along as I run it down, I don't think you'll have any problems."

He glanced briefly at the papers in front of him. "As you can see, we're consolidating our efforts to make the entire chain function more smoothly. All of the radio stations will be programmed in basically the same fashion. The new time clocks and record rotations are spelled out in the first fifteen pages. When you return to your

stations, you will divide your existing music into the categories that are listed. Beginning Monday, the music on each of our stations will be reflective of the chain as a whole.”

Bobby glanced around the room, trying to gauge the reaction of the program directors from their facial expressions. What he was suggesting was, indeed, a change from the way they had been operating.

“Starting next week, all additions to your playlists will be approved by the home office, meaning me. The procedures are spelled out for you, beginning on page fifteen. On Fridays, your music assistants will canvas the local retail outlets in your markets, determining record sales in your regions. Monday, you will meet with the record promoters in your market. After the meetings, you will input additional information into the computer, giving us the local feedback, what the record promoters are working, what records are being added to other stations in your market and how records are moving in the regions surrounding your area. Requests for songs from the previous week will be tabulated and fed into the computer also.”

“Tuesday morning, you will study a print-out of all the information supplied by each station in the chain and call Nancy to discuss your feelings about specific records. At the conclusion of this call, you’ll give Nancy five records, in order of importance, that you feel should be added to your playlists.”

He paused and reached for the water glass on the table in front of him. With the exception of Nelson Harris, who was staring back at him with a wicked grin on his face, all of the men were looking through their folders.

Bobby cleared his throat. “After you’ve made your recommendations, we’ll decipher all the information and call you back. At this time, Nancy will give you the records you are to add to your playlists. Nancy will make all reports to the trade magazines.”

Bobby glanced around the room again and smiled. “Are there any questions?”

There was silence. No one wanted to be the first to gripe, though he knew each of them wanted to object.

“You mean, I’ve explained everything so completely that you have no questions and everyone agrees totally with our new policies?”

“Well, yeah, Bobby, I’ve got some questions.”

Bobby tried not to look at Debbie. He told her earlier that the first person to bitch would be Mark Lowery and sure enough, it was Mark who was now speaking up from the far corner of the table.

“Go ahead, Mark.”

He fixed his eyes on the large man shifting in his chair nervously. Mark wouldn't meet his gaze, staring instead at the papers in front of him.

"I don't know why you've decided to dictate record adds to us. It seems like we've been doing pretty well by ourselves."

Bobby continued to stare at Mark for a few moments, filling the room with tension. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"I don't know where you're drawing your conclusions from, Mark. I don't think we're doing well at all." He reached down and picked up a piece of paper from the folder in front of him. "In the past eighteen months, your station has dropped from first place in the San Francisco market to third. That's not acceptable to me . . . and I hope it isn't acceptable to you. We're fifth in Miami, fifth in Detroit, fourth in Chicago, second in San Diego and sixth in Los Angeles. In the past year, the only stations in this entire chain that have shown growth in ratings and revenue are Boston and New York."

He threw the paper down on the table. "It's evident to me that we all need help. As I see it, each of you can either recognize that fact and welcome additional input, or refuse to accept the obvious. If each station in our chain was rated number one, I wouldn't be in charge and we wouldn't be having this meeting."

His eyes swept the room, resting briefly on each person. "You can either be part of the future, or part of the past. It's up to you."

"Well, I don't know if I speak for the entire group, but as for myself, I welcome the help." Lawrence Macky, the program director of the Los Angeles station was looking up at him. "We haven't exactly been setting the world on fire at KMC and I'll gladly accept any additional help I can get."

Bobby smiled. Lawrence was a capable program director, not flashy, but steady, a good soldier who would follow orders. He was the oldest member of the group and had the most to lose. Failing in Los Angeles would signal the end of his career, so he'd do whatever Bobby asked to insure his job.

"I appreciate your vote of confidence, Lawrence, and I hope the rest of you will accept the new guidelines with the same feelings. Media Communications was a giant in the industry at one time, and it can be a giant again. I promise you that. I'd like for each of you to examine your operations and see where we've been coming up short in the past few years."

Bobby moved to the side of the room and signaled Debbie. She dimmed the lights and switched on a projector. As he continued to talk, different slides appeared on a large screen at one end of the

room, giving visual effects to his words.

"We need to operate as one unit, giving us additional strength in individual markets. Not only will our music be added across the chain, but our promotions will be done simultaneously, also. This way, if we want to give away Corvettes, we won't be trying to make a deal with a local Chevrolet dealership in, say, Boston. Instead, we can go directly to General Motors and get the best deal by buying a fleet of cars. If we decide to send our contest winners on trips, we will coordinate our efforts so we can get the best deals for all of our stations by purchasing a number of trips."

The click of the projector was the only sound in the room as the others concentrated on Bobby's narrative. It will work to our benefit in the sales area also, allowing a major advertiser to purchase time on all of our stations rather than just cutting a deal for one market."

The slides changed with Bobby's carefully, scripted talk, illuminating his points on the large screen.

"And by adding records as a chain, we can get the greatest benefit from the record companies. Let's say we want Billy Joel for a concert in Boston. Well, Billy Joel would probably not appear if we promised to add his record just in Boston; but if he thought he stood a chance at getting the entire Media Communications chain, then he'd be more than happy to play for us."

The screen went blank and Debbie turned up the lights. "Are there any questions?"

"Yeah," drawled Nelson Harris from the other end of the table. "There's one point everybody's missing."

"What's that?" Jerry Saxton from New York asked.

Nelson smiled. "Now we won't have to listen to the local record promotion guys bitching and moaning when we don't add one of their records. We can just blame it on that ass-hole Holiday!"

The room was filled with laughter. Bobby glanced quickly at Nelson, flashing his appreciation. Leave it to his old friend to pick exactly the right time to break the tension with a joke.

"I've been called worse, Harris," he said.

"And you most assuredly will be called much worse in the near future," Nelson grinned.

The room broke into laughter again. Bobby noticed, however, that the only person that wasn't joining in the merriment was Mark Lowery. The man hadn't even cracked a smile.

The bearded program director from San Francisco shifted in his chair. "I hate to be the one to rain on this parade, but I've still got some problems."

Bobby tried to control his anger. It wouldn't do to get into a loud argument at this first meeting. He took a deep breath and tried to keep his voice as pleasant as possible. "Let's hear them."

"Well, I don't want you to get the idea that I'm bucking you on these new ideas, I just want to make sure we identify all of the problems that might arise."

"Don't worry about speaking out, Mark," Bobby said. "That's what this meeting is for . . . to go through all of the new policies and make sure they work for everyone."

"The main problem I envision is that by adding records from Los Angeles, we might lose the local feel for the individual markets." Bobby's words had evidently made the man feel comfortable. His voice was now confident, almost cocky. "Each city is different. What goes well in New York just might not do worth a damn in San Francisco."

Bobby hesitated briefly before answering. The room almost echoed with nervous silence, waiting to see how he would react. "Although I don't totally agree with your statement, Mark, I understand what you're trying to say. Good radio will work in any market and the differences are very minor. But I think you're talking about particular records that have a local appeal. In these cases, you will have the leeway of adding certain records by artists that live in your area that might not be right for the entire chain."

Bobby was lying through his teeth. He had no intention of giving anyone, especially Mark Lowery, the ability to add records on their radio stations. It would jeopardize his entire plan. But there was no sense lancing that boil in this meeting. Let Mark believe he would retain his power. He'd find out soon enough when Bobby refused his suggestions for record adds.

"As long as you understand the importance of each of us being in charge of our own ships, we won't have any problems," Mark smiled confidently.

Bobby grinned back. You'll have plenty of problems, you bastard, he thought to himself. You have no idea of the problems you'll be having with me in the very near future.

The rest of the day's meetings went smoothly. All of the program directors seemed to welcome most of the changes Bobby had implemented. After lunch, the afternoon meetings were taken up with engineering studies and explanations of the new computer programs. When the meetings were finally adjourned, Bobby found himself whistling as he left the office with Nelson, going back to the hotel to get ready for the evening dinner they had planned. All in all, it had been

a pretty good day.

* * * * *

“So, when was the last time you saw him?”

Phillip Crawford was in his living room, talking with Susan Scanlon. She was sitting on the huge couch, dressed in tiny, white shorts and a tight, red T-shirt.

“Not since last weekend.”

Phillip shook his head. “We’ve got to keep closer contact than that.”

She shrugged. “I’ve called him a bunch of times. He’s been real busy this week with some meetings.”

“It’s your job to take his mind off his business.”

She smiled. “I’m doing the best I can. When he gets his mind on his business, he’s hard to side track.”

Phillip stared across at her. “I’m sure you can find a way to turn his head.”

She smiled wider and stretched her arms over her head, pushing her breasts out against the thin material of her shirt. “I’ve got to get to him, first, and getting to him has been a problem the past few days.”

“It’s going to be even harder after this weekend.”

“How so?”

“His wife arrives Monday. She’s going to cut down on his party time. That’s why it’s important to get as close to him as possible while he’s footloose and fancy free.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I’ll think of something.” He looked at her admiringly, his eyes slowly moving down her chin, across her breasts to her legs, then back up again. When his gaze returned to her face, she was licking her lips.

“Like what you see?”

He grunted. “You’ll do in a pinch.”

She laughed and stretched again for his benefit. “Well, he’s busy at some dinner tonight and I can’t get with him, so why don’t you and I have a little party.”

His eyebrows twitched and he nodded slowly. “That doesn’t sound like a bad idea. Break out the blow and fix me a drink.”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She jumped off the couch and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “Where is it?”

He motioned toward the kitchen. “In the cabinet by the refrigerator.”

“Vodka on the rocks for you?” she asked, walking across the room.

"Yeah . . . in a tall glass."

She had almost made it to the kitchen when the phone rang in his office. "Want me to answer that?"

"Nope. I'll get it." He went into the other room, closing the door behind him.

She busied herself by fixing his drink and chopping the cocaine into several lines on the mirror. Returning to her seat on the couch, she snorted almost half of the white powder before he came back into the room.

"Finished?" she asked.

He picked up his drink and took a long sip, staring down at the mirror in front of her. "Yeah," he said dryly. "Are you?"

Susan smiled. "Not yet, but I will be." She leaned over and snorted more of the cocaine.

"It seems as if my boy Mark has crossed wires with your boy."

She wiped her nose. "What do you mean?"

He jerked his head toward his office. "I just got word that Mark Lowery tangled with Bobby today in the meetings. Bobby told a couple of people tonight at the dinner that Mark was going to be the first casualty of his regime."

Susan whistled. "How did you find out all of this?"

He stared flatly at her, his left cheek twitching slightly. "You aren't the only person I've got that's close to Mr. Holiday."

She opened her eyes in mock surprise. "You mean he's going to bed with someone besides me?"

Phillip had to laugh. "Of course not. But I've got other ears listening."

"You're too much, Phillip."

He drained the rest of his drink. "They're going to finish dinner in about an hour and a half. I want you waiting at the hotel when Bobby gets back. He's going to be a little drunk, I've seen to that. But in the meantime, let's get our little party on the road here."

A pout spread lazily across her lips as she stood up and began pulling her shirt over her head. Phillip slumped deeper into the chair as she began fondling her nipples.

* * * * *

Bobby stumbled into his hotel suite and closed the door behind him. He had just returned from dinner with the program directors and corporate staff and was more than a little bit drunk. He grinned into the darkness. Another success! After the day's meetings, everyone had seemed a little tense. The informal dinner had taken the

edge off and as time passed and drinks flowed, most of the people had gotten into a festive mood. He even allowed himself to get drunker than he normally would, trying to show them he was one of the gang, someone to be respected, but not feared. The ball was rolling.

He staggered through the living room, heading for his waiting bed, dropping his clothes as he went. He was completely naked when he turned on the lamp on the bedside table.

"Hi, there."

He jumped away from the bed at the sound of the voice, knocking the lamp to the floor.

"Jesus!"

Susan Scanlon was in his bed, the covers pulled down to her waist.

"I thought I'd surprise you."

He tried to get his bearings. His heart was beating in his throat, blood rushing to his head. He swallowed hard.

"What are you doing here?"

Her hands fluttered down to her breasts as she gently rubbed her nipples, still tender from her earlier party with Phillip. "Waiting for you."

"How'd you get in here?"

Her tongue snaked across her lips slowly. "I bribed the bellboy."

He stood silently, staring down at her. His heart was returning to its rightful place in his chest and his breathing was slowing down.

"Why?"

Her lips curled up into a seductive smile. "Isn't that pretty clear?"

Bobby frowned. "I told you I'd call you when I had time to see you, Susan. This isn't the week for me to be fooling around."

She stuck out her bottom lip. "I've missed you, Bobby. Besides, I figured you needed a little tender, loving care and I knew this would be the only way I could see you. I thought you'd like the surprise."

"I don't like surprises." His voice was cold.

Susan's eyes widened and she sat up straighter in bed. "Oh, no. I guess I screwed up."

"I guess you did, Susan. This little surprise could have turned out a disaster. What if I had brought some of my business associates back to the room with me?"

"I thought of that. I knew you wouldn't bring them into the bedroom. They never would have seen me."

"Yeah? Well what if I had brought someone else, maybe a lady friend back with me?"

She tilted her head slightly, a hurt look crossing her features. "I'm

sorry. I didn't think."

"No, you didn't. And I don't like anyone making decisions for me. I told you I'd call you when I could see you. I haven't called because it hasn't been right."

Folding her hands across her stomach, she looked down. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to see you so bad. It looks like I screwed up. I'll get my clothes on and leave."

She pulled her legs out from under the covers, slid across the bed and quickly stood up in front of him, naked. She swayed unsteadily, then abruptly sat back on the side of the bed.

"What's the matter?"

She waved her hand and shook her head. "Nothing. I took a lude about fifteen minutes ago and I guess I stood up too fast. I'll be all right in just a second." She fell back across the bed, one arm crooked across her face.

Bobby looked down at her and felt his anger ebbing. He touched her stomach lightly, his fingers circling across her smooth skin, dipping into her navel, scraping gently down to her soft, silky, pubic hair, then back up to her navel again. He ducked his head and kissed her stomach where his fingers had been, his tongue swishing back and forth, teasing, tasting.

"Bobby," she said, one hand touching the back of his head, twirling in his hair. "I thought you were mad at me."

"I was," he mumbled against her skin. He looked up between her breasts, his eyes locking on hers. "But I couldn't let you leave in your condition." He grinned. "You might go out and attack the bell-boy."

"Again?" she joked.

He laughed and fell on top of her, grabbing her shoulders and rolling underneath her. "You bitch!"

"Oh, I love it when you talk dirty to me."

He kissed her roughly, his tongue stabbing deep into her mouth as his fingers dug into her buttocks.

"Do me, Bobby," she moaned. "Do me!"

Later, as they were lying in each others arms, he asked, "Can you get me a couple of those things?"

"I thought you weren't interested in drugs?"

"I'm not. I just thought it would be nice if I could keep a couple in reserve, so in case you ever ran out, I'd have some."

"That's a nice thought. But I get them from Phillip. And he only gives me one occasionally."

"Oh."

Silence.

"Maybe you should ask him for some, Bobby. I'm sure he wouldn't say no to you."

He rolled against her, pulling her close, imagining it was Debbie lying naked beside him. He closed his eyes, letting the liquor take control as he fell gently into sleep.

Maybe he would.

Jonathon Conley, the agent in charge of the investigation for the Los Angeles office of the F.B.I. would not confirm the number of subpoenas, but he did say the continuing investigation could implicate more suspects in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Oh Bobby, I just can’t believe it!”

Beverly Holiday was sitting in the back seat of the limo, her eyes opened wide, a huge smile splitting her face. Bobby smiled back, his eyes glistening. He had picked up his wife and daughter at the airport, renting the limo to add a touch of class to the welcome. Taking another sip from the glass of champagne in his hand, he slumped back in the seat, marveling at how lucky he was.

Here he sat, in the back of an expensive limousine, riding through Los Angeles with his beautiful wife and child. And beautiful was an apt description for Bev. A former Miss Louisiana beauty queen, she had the chiseled look of an ice maiden, her long, blonde hair accentuating her sharp, perfect, facial features. Except for a few, tiny wrinkles around her eyes, she looked the same as when she had worn her crown, eight years before. They had been married for seven years and two years after the marriage, Pat had been born. Now his five year old daughter, an almost exact replica of her mother, sat gazing out of the window, her eyes taking in every aspect of the California scenery that swept by.

“Oh, Daddy, look!” the little girl shouted. “Palm trees.”

Bobby’s eyes sparkled. He had it all. The best job in the country and the perfect family to share the rewards.

He held his glass up in a toast to Bev. “Unfucking real, isn’t it?”

“Bobby!” Bev shushed, nodding toward his daughter.

He grimaced and looked at the little girl out of the corner of his eye. If she heard his curse, she didn’t acknowledge it.

Bev’s elbow poked sharply in his ribs. “Be careful, Bobby.”

He nodded. He’d have to watch his language around his daughter, and his wife. Bev was the perfect mate, but she could get religious from time to time. It didn’t bother him. He was brought up in a Southern Baptist home that taught him to thank God for his blessings. He just forgot sometimes. A lot of the time. More, lately.

He had the driver take them on a tour of the famous Hollywood landmarks on the way back to the hotel, giving them the full treat-

ment. By the time they arrived at the suite, Bev and Pat were awestruck by what they had seen. He had changed rooms the night before, switching to a two-bedroom suite on the top floor to give them more room, and more importantly, to keep any surprise visitors from spoiling their reunion. He had left explicit instructions with the hotel manager not to give out his room number to anyone.

Bev was standing in the living room of the huge suite, shaking her head in disbelief. "Bobby, it's just beautiful. I know I keep saying it, but I just can't believe all the things that are happening."

He put his arms around her and pulled her close. "I know, I know. It took me a while to believe it myself, but it's all real."

"Daddy, Daddy." Pat was tugging on his arm. "Is all this ours?"

He laughed and picked her up, lifting her toward the ceiling. "Yes, my little movie star. It's all ours. Until we get a house."

"Let me down," she squealed. "I want to see everything."

He watched as she ran from room to room, touching the furniture and jumping up and down on the beds.

He reluctantly took his eyes off his daughter and turned to Bev. "I've got to get back to the office, honey. Why don't you get unpacked and relax. I'll take care of a little business and be back in a couple of hours."

She hugged him tightly. "Go ahead, darling. Pat and I will make ourselves at home. You do whatever you have to do and come back as soon as you can."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Anything you need, just call room service. It's all free for a month. By then, we'll be in our own place. And be sure and call Pamela Williams. She's all set to take you house hunting."

"Oh, Bobby, I'm so excited."

He smiled happily. "Me too. If you want, you can ask them to join us for dinner tonight."

She leaned up and kissed him softly on the lips. "Not tonight, darling," she said quietly. "I'm putting Pat to bed early so we can spend the night making love. It's been too long."

Bobby raised his eyebrows and curled his upper lip, his eyes twinkling. "Well, I guess we could put them off for a day or so."

She slapped his arm. "Get out of here. The sooner you leave, the sooner you'll get back."

* * * * *

He returned to the office and spent the next two hours studying information on the new computer programs. He went carefully over

each station's playlists and charts, making notations as he went along. When he was satisfied, he sent for Debbie and Nancy.

Now he stood behind his desk, looking across at the two women sitting on the cushioned stools. "Nancy, we've been talking about changes for the past week or so and it's time to put them into operation. I've asked Debbie to sit in on our initial meeting so she can be up to date on everything we're doing. When you go on vacation, she'll be able to fill in for you without us missing a beat."

Nancy glanced at Debbie and cleared her throat. "Ah, I've always had Sandy do that in the past."

Bobby ignored her implication. She was guarding her turf, carefully. "Keep Sandy informed, but Debbie will be filling in for you whenever you're absent."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders.

"Now," he continued, "I want to follow a regimented schedule concerning record additions. Each Monday, following your meetings with the record people, you and I will meet here in my office. Bring all the information you feel is important. We'll listen to all the new releases you feel might be strong enough to add to our stations. We'll make our initial decisions in this meeting. After we get feedback from the other program directors on Tuesday, we'll decide exactly what records to add. Got it?"

She nodded.

"I've asked Elliot Stevens to move to Los Angeles so he can provide us with the computer information we need. He'll have all of the reports done in time for our meetings on Mondays."

He pointed to the stacks of computer printouts. "I've gone through the initial reports from each of our stations. I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say, they're all fucked up. We've got independent stations playing whatever they want. Most of the playlists aren't even similar."

He reached for his notes. "So, I want you to contact all of the stations tomorrow and give them these record lists. We gave them the hour-by-hour format clocks in last week's meetings that will match the categories. As you can see, the records are broken down into three categories: Currents, Recurrents and Golds. The Currents are the records that are popular now. The Recurrents are the records that have been added to our playlist during the past year, and are popular enough to be played again from time to time. The Golds are the older songs, going back three years. Any questions?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "We've been playing oldies going back seven years."

"Well," Bobby said abruptly, "we won't anymore." He handed her the lists. "These are the records I want on each station, broken down by category."

Nancy shuffled through the papers quickly. "Bobby, these are radical changes."

"No shit."

"You've got only a hundred Golds, fifty Recurrents and thirty Currents."

"I know that."

"But our stations now average about four hundred and fifty Golds, a hundred Recurrents and fifty Currents."

"And they're all losing."

"And this is going to make them win?"

"It'll help."

"I don't know."

Bobby snorted in disgust. He was tired of Nancy's negative attitude. "You aren't paid to know, Nancy. I am." He watched her face turn bright red. "You're paid to help me arrive at my conclusions and back up my decisions. If you can't find it in your heart to do that, then just do what I tell you."

She dropped her eyes. "I was just telling you what I feel."

He took a deep breath. "I'm tired of your negative comments, Nancy. It's evident that we're going to be making massive changes. You've been doing it differently a long time, but times have changed. If you can't do it my way, maybe you should look for another job."

She looked back up at him quickly. "No, Bobby. I've been with this company for too long. The changes you're making are just taking me by surprise. I'll work with you and try to catch up with your thinking as quickly as I can."

Bobby's jaw tightened. The bitch just might be coming around. "All right. Give these lists to Sandy and have her put them in the computer. I want them sent to each station first thing in the morning. Instruct all the program directors to have the changes completed by midnight tomorrow night."

Nancy nodded. "All right. But what about record adds for this week. Since we didn't add anything last week, the lists are getting a little stale."

"We're trimming them all to thirty. It's on the sheets. The thirty records I've listed are what I want on all the stations."

"I understand. Do you want me to play you the records I think we should add this week?"

Bobby shook his head. "We won't be having a meeting today. The

only addition will be the new Fleetsides.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all. And that’s all of this meeting. It’s lasted long enough. You guys get out of here and get to work!”

He grinned confidently as they walked out of his office. The changes he was making were massive. Most of the stations in the Media Communications group had been much too loose, playing too many records. That was the main reason the ratings had slipped. Bobby had learned his lessons the hard way. Playing fewer records sometimes took the excitement away from his stations, but he had never lost a rating for playing too few records. Wait, make sure, and repeat them as often as possible. That was his policy, and so far, it had worked well. Let the others have their ego stroked by the record companies by playing records early, before they were proven. He’d take the ratings. If his stations sounded stale, then so be it. They also sounded like winners.

He had to share his feelings with someone. He was on the verge of pushing his concepts on all the stations throughout the country and it was exciting. He picked up the phone and dialed Robert Williams’ private line. It rang only once before Robert answered.

“Hello?”

“Fuck you!”

“Holiday. How are you doing?”

“Not bad. How about you?”

“Just a little busy, preparing The Report. I didn’t know I’d given you my private line number?”

Bobby laughed. “You didn’t.”

“Then how . . .”

“I’ve got my ways, Robert. I’ve got my ways.”

It was Robert’s turn to laugh. “Well, it hasn’t taken you long to start moving and shaking, buddy.”

“Tit for tat. I might even give you mine some day.”

“I won’t hold my breath. By the way, Pamela called. She said she talked to Beverly. I guess she got in all right.”

“Yes. Everything’s fine.”

“Good. Pamela’s taking her out to look at houses tomorrow, but I think she’s got it narrowed down to Hal Courtney’s place. If you guys like it, we’ll beat the bastard down in price.”

“I hope I can afford it.”

“You will, you will. How’re things at the office?”

Bobby snapped his fingers. “I just had a meeting with Nancy and informed her of all the changes.”

"How'd she take it."

"She cracked . . . but who cares."

Robert chuckled. "I can tell that you're really broken up about it."

"I really don't care what she thinks. It's my ballgame now."

"That it is. What changes did you make?"

Bobby strutted back and forth behind his desk, his cocky attitude evident in his voice. "Not for publication, now Robert."

"Totally off the record, Bobby. I'm just interested."

"I cut the Golds to one hundred, the Recurrents to fifty and the playlists to thirty."

The publisher whistled. "That's going to get a lot of people's attention."

"Yes it will. I'm informing the program directors the first thing in the morning."

"You expect any problems?"

"Only from Lowery. And he's not long for the world anyhow."

"Well, it'll be interesting. The record companies are going to go crazy. You're taking away twenty slots from them."

"I'm not taking away anything from them. This is designed to make my stations better, not inflict pain on the record companies. However, it may really crack them when the only record I add this week is the one by The Fleetsides."

"Just one add after freezing the lists last week?"

"Yep, just one."

"They are going to crack."

"Fuck 'em and feed 'em fish."

"Spoken like a true genius."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

Bobby looked at his reflection in the big mirrors as he prepared to go back to the hotel. He had created enough panic for one day!

* * * * *

It was eight o'clock when Phillip Crawford called Hal Courtney at home.

"What is it, Phillip?"

"What's it worth to you to get The Fleetsides added to the Media Communications chain tomorrow?"

The Fleetsides were signed to Courtney's company, Capstan Records.

"You can do that?"

"If the price is right."

Courtney didn't answer for a moment. Phillip could almost hear

the man calculating the dollars.

"Twenty grand."

Phillip snorted. "Come on, Courtney, that's not even half what you'd normally pay."

"Yes, and I'd normally have to pay five different independent promoters as well as my own staff. Everyone will be claiming that add."

"Yeah, but I'm the only one calling you before the record is added."

"You know it's going on?"

"Only if I give the word."

"You've gotten to Holiday already?"

Phillip choked back a laugh. The bastard was trying to find out everything. "I'll make you a special deal. For forty thousand dollars, I'll get The Fleetsides added to all the Media Communications stations, and I will make sure it will be the only add any of the stations make."

"Only one add after they froze the list last week? That's not going to happen."

"Try me."

"All right, you've got a deal. If my record goes on all the Media Communications stations tomorrow, and if it is the only add, I'll pay you forty thousand."

"Plus a twenty thousand dollar weekly retainer for the next year to work your records on the Media Communications chain."

"That's pretty strong."

"If you don't go for it, I'm going to make the same offer to the other companies."

"How do I know you'll come through?"

"If it doesn't happen, you don't pay and I work your product free for the next year."

Courtney hesitated for only a second. "You've got a deal."

Phillip hung up the phone and grinned into the darkness. So far, everything was going according to his plans.

* * * * *

Bobby was standing behind his desk, looking out the window at the bright California sun that was heating up the morning. Thank God for the windows. He spent more time staring out than he did working. Today, there wasn't even much smog. It was as if nature herself was joining in his happy mood. He had spent a wonderful night at the hotel, playing with his daughter, then later, making love with Bev.

It was good having her near him. It kept him away from himself.

The intercom buzzed. "Mark Lowery's on line one, Bobby."

He closed his eyes and groaned. Chicken salad was turning into chicken shit.

He picked up the phone. "Yeah?"

"Bobby, we've got to talk." Mark's voice was nervous and high-pitched.

Bobby took a deep breath. "What about?"

"These music changes aren't going to fly."

Bobby snapped his eyes from the window, staring down at his desk. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, they can't happen here in San Francisco."

Bobby's lips tightened. The battle was going to be joined early. "I don't understand, Mark. Exactly what do you mean?"

"I mean, I can't cut back on my music like you're suggesting. Our audience expects more from us than this limited list you're proposing."

He was silent for a moment, letting Lowery stew.

"Hello . . . are you there?"

Bobby drummed his fingers on the desk. "Yes, I'm here."

"Well?"

"Well, what?" He would let Lowery hang himself.

"Well, I can't implement these changes you're proposing."

Bobby turned and began pacing back and forth behind the desk, gathering momentum from his movements. "Mark, listen carefully. This isn't a proposal of mine. I'm telling you what I want done. And I want it done now, immediately, without any delay and without any further comments from you. We went over this last week in the meetings. There's no need for any further discussion. I expect the changes to take place at all stations, San Francisco included. If you can't make them, and make them in a positive manner, then I'll replace you with someone who can. Do you understand?"

"But . . ."

"No buts, Mark. Do you understand?"

"No," Mark sputtered. "I want to talk about . . ."

"No more talk," Bobby interrupted. "Do you understand?"

There was silence on the line.

"Last chance," Bobby said.

Mark sighed heavily into the phone. "I guess I don't have any choice."

"You're right about that," Bobby snapped. "Anything else?"

Mark hesitated before answering. "No."

"Then get on it." He hung up the phone, scratched his shoulder

absently, then forced himself to relax. Today wouldn't be that bad. All he'd have to do was work on a replacement for Mark Lowery.

He hit the intercom button. "Debbie, get in here."

The door opened almost immediately and Debbie came into the office. "Hi boss," she said cheerily. "What's up?"

"The question is, what's out? And the answer is Lowery."

Debbie perched on one of the stools. "I didn't figure he was calling to wish you a good day."

"Yeah, he pitched a bitch about the music changes."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. The changes we talked about yesterday."

"I know what you're talking about, but how does Lowery know?"

It was his turn to ask, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, how does Lowery know? Did you call him yesterday?"

"Of course not. He got them off the computer. Sandy sent the information to all the stations today."

Debbie shook her head. "She hasn't done it yet, Bobby. Nancy told her to wait until ten o'clock so all the stations would get it at the same time. That way the East Coast people wouldn't find out about it before those on the West Coast."

Bobby slammed his fist down on the desk. "What?"

She winced. "The information hasn't been sent yet."

He hit the intercom again. "Nancy," he yelled, "I want you and Sandy in here on the double!"

He stared silently at Debbie until the others came through the door. Shifting his eyes, he glared, first at Nancy, then Sandy.

"Have you sent the music changes to the stations yet?"

Sandy shook her head. "No, Nancy wanted me to wait until . . ."

"I told her to wait, Bobby," Nancy interrupted.

"None of the information has been sent?" he asked, his eyebrows pulled downward, a deep frown clouding his features.

"No," Nancy said.

He spun around quickly, walking to the mirrored wall behind his desk, where he leaned forward and rested his forehead against the cool surface. It was happening again.

"What's the matter?" Nancy asked.

He took a deep breath and stretched his arms over his head, trying to relieve the tension that was building in his neck. He took three steps back to the desk and leaned over, resting his weight on his hands. "Lowery got the information this morning. He just called me about it."

"No!" Nancy shook her head quickly back and forth. "That's im-

possible.”

He grimaced in disgust. “Don’t tell me it’s impossible. The man just called me bitching about the changes.”

Nancy looked quickly at Sandy, silently questioning. The dark haired girl shrugged her shoulders and said, “They have not been sent, Bobby. I finished inputting all the information about five minutes ago. I was waiting until ten o’clock to send it to the stations.”

Bobby shot her a look of contempt. “Well, Lowery didn’t just dream the changes.” He shifted his stare to Debbie. “I have to ask. Did you tell anyone about our discussion yesterday?”

“Nope.”

“Not even Harris?”

“No one, Bobby.”

“Nancy?”

She met his gaze evenly. “Not a soul, Bobby, other than Sandy this morning.”

“I didn’t tell anyone, Bobby,” Sandy said. “I haven’t even had a phone call since Nancy gave me the lists. I swear.”

Bobby stared out the window again. Someone was lying. Someone had gotten the information to Lowery. But who? And why?

“Damn it!” he cursed. “Sandy, you and Nancy go back and check the computer. Get Elliot and see if there is a way that the information could have been sent by accident when you were inputting the information. Debbie, you call every program director, except Lowery, and ask them if they’ve received the information, either by computer or by phone from anyone. And have Bill check the computer terminal to see if anyone has tapped into our system.”

Debbie slid off the stool and headed for the door with Sandy close behind her. Nancy hung back.

“Bobby,” she said.

He looked up. “Yeah?”

“I just wanted you to know that I didn’t tell a soul.”

He stared at her silently.

She looked down at the carpet, then up at him again. “I know you don’t totally trust me, but I promise I wouldn’t let anyone know what’s going on in this company. I’ve been here too long and I love Media Communications too much to do anything like this.”

She sounded convincing. But then, so did he when he lied.

“Besides,” she continued, “I certainly wouldn’t tell anything to Mark Lowery. The guy is my least favorite person in this company.”

Bobby’s lip curled up and his face brightened a bit. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

"Just so you know." She turned and walked out of the office.

He stared at the closed door for a moment, then picked up the phone. This was becoming more and more like a Hollywood soap opera and he didn't like how it was turning out.

"Hello?"

"Have you got a second, Robert?"

"Just a second, Bobby. Tuesday is our busy day, what with getting all the reports from the stations. What do you need?"

"Did you share our conversation about the music changes with anyone?"

"Bobby, you know better."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. I would never put our relationship in jeopardy by doing something like that. What's the problem?"

Bobby hesitated for a moment. "Mark Lowery knew about the changes before we sent the information to him."

"Damn!"

"My sentiments exactly."

"Who else knew?"

"Debbie, Nancy and Sandy."

"Was it one of them?"

"It has to be, unless the computer is tapped."

"My vote goes to Nancy. I don't think she's very happy with you."

"I agree, but it would be pretty stupid of her, don't you think?"

"Yes, but being intelligent isn't one of her strong suits."

"I guess. Well, I'll let you go."

"You need to find out where the leak is, Bobby."

"Don't I know it? This is getting absurd. I don't know why people are so intent on spreading my business around."

"You don't realize it yet, but what you do effects a lot of people in a lot of ways. If Media Communications coughs, the record industry comes down with a cold. Information, especially concerning you and your actions, is very valuable."

"I don't know what to do."

"You'll handle it."

"I guess."

"I'll see you tonight."

"Good-bye."

He hung up the phone and sat on the edge of his desk. He still had no answers for his questions.

* * * * *

Phillip Crawford picked up the phone in his office. "Hello?"

"I told you not to give out those music changes."

The question caught him off guard. "What?"

"Lowery called Holiday screaming about what was happening."

"I just told him the lists were going to get tight. I didn't give him any specific information."

"Well, you put me in a bind. Bobby's trying to find out who tipped Lowery."

"I'll handle it."

"I've got to go."

The phone went dead. Phillip's right hand moved up to his chin, his fingers gently stroking his beard. He reached down and punched out Lowery's number.

"Yeah?"

"I told you not to use that information until you got confirmation from Holiday's office."

"I didn't."

"Don't lie to me, Mark. I know you called Holiday."

"Oh, all right, I did. But I didn't get specific about anything. He could have thought I was talking about things he brought up in the meetings last week."

"Well, he didn't."

"Hold on a second."

Phillip heard him lay the phone down, then inhale loudly. His eyes narrowed. The man was snorting coke and it wasn't even ten o'clock.

"Okay."

"Don't you think it's a little early to be getting high?"

"Who the fuck are you, my mother?"

Phillip's grip tightened on the phone. "No, just your friend, trying to help."

"Well, you better hurry. I know I'm on Holiday's shit list and I'm not going to get fired."

"I don't have any control over that."

"You said you would always take care of me."

"You're making it hard, Mark."

"Listen, Phillip, I don't care how hard I'm making it, you've got to do something. We've already talked about this. If Holiday tries to off me, I'll take you down with me."

"That sounds like a threat, Mark."

"I don't give a shit what it sounds like, you just do something."

"I'll try."

"I don't want to get fired."

"I'll work on it."

"Do that."

"In the meantime, do me a favor."

"What?"

"Get out of the office. I don't want you talking with Holiday again for a while."

"Why?"

"I don't need any more hassles. Just go home and don't answer your phone."

There was silence on the line.

"Okay."

"I'll get in touch with you in a couple of hours. I'll call and let the phone ring once, then call back. Got it?"

"Yeah, but I want you to do something, Phillip."

"Don't worry. I won't let you get fired."

"Well, whatever you say. And I'm sorry I blew up a minute ago. I'm just upset."

Phillip tugged on his beard again. It was too late for an apology.

"Don't worry about it. I'll be in touch."

He hung up and quickly grabbed the other phone on his desk. He didn't have a lot of time.

"Yes?" The tone of the voice on the other end was always the same, quiet and even, almost lifeless.

"We've got to move on Lowery immediately," Phillip said.

"Why?"

"He's about to self-destruct."

"All right. When?"

"Today."

"That's going to be tough."

"If it was easy, I wouldn't be calling you."

"No, I don't guess you would."

Phillip thought he almost detected a smile in the voice.

"Can you take care of it?"

"Yes. Any suggestions?"

"It must be done quickly. I want him taken out in the next couple of hours."

"Where is he?"

"He'll be at his house in about fifteen minutes."

"It could be expensive."

"It will be more expensive if it's not done."

"I'll handle it."

* * * * *

Bobby was standing behind his desk, listening to Bill Lerner. The

chief engineer was explaining the actions they had taken to determine how the music information had reached Mark Lowery earlier.

"We ran a complete check on the computer terminal and there is no possible way that anyone could have tapped in."

Bobby let out a heavy sigh. "So the problem is not in the computer?"

"No."

"Then somebody talked."

Bill nodded. "You've got it."

"Who?"

"That's not a part of my job, Bobby. I don't have the slightest idea."

"Any hunches?"

"Not really. I can't see anyone taking such a risk. Particularly after everything we went through last week when you found your phones tapped."

Bobby slapped his hands together. "Oh, well." He glanced down at his watch. "Damn, it's almost three o'clock. Have you eaten yet?"

"No, and I was hoping you'd invite me."

"Why don't we run downstairs and get a sandwich?"

"Let me get my coat."

Bobby picked up his beeper and put it in his pocket so Debbie could reach him if anything important came up. He was walking toward the door when the intercom buzzed.

"Beverly's on line one, Bobby."

He returned to his desk and picked up the phone. "Hi there."

"Bobby, I hate to bother you, but we just got back to the hotel. Pamela took us over to look at Hal Courtney's house."

"And?"

"And it's perfect. I can't believe it. It's got two bedrooms, a huge living room, the kitchen is just fantastic and most of all, it's got a pool with a slide."

He laughed. "Of course. That's the most important thing."

"According to Pat, that's the only thing that matters."

"Then let's do it."

"Can we afford it, Bobby?"

"No, but does that matter?"

"Of course it does."

"I'm just kidding, darling. We can afford it. I'll tell you what. Set up a meeting for tomorrow morning at nine. I'll go look at it with you, and if we all agree, we'll get it."

"I'll call Pamela now and make the plans. Don't forget, we're having dinner with them tonight at the hotel."

"All right, but remember, it's Tuesday, I can't be there until eight."

"I've made the reservations for eight-thirty."

"Perfect."

"Bobby, you work until ten on Mondays and eight on Tuesdays, am I ever going to get to see you at a decent hour?"

He laughed again. "Every third Wednesday I can make it home at six!"

"You jerk."

"I've got to run. I haven't had lunch so I'm going to grab a sandwich."

"O. K. honey. See you later."

He hung up and went to join Bill in the restaurant located on the ground floor of the building. They were almost finished eating when the beeper in his pocket sounded.

He washed down the last bite of hamburger with a swig from his coke. "Bill, can you get the tab? I'll just run upstairs instead of calling since we're so close."

Bill nodded and Bobby took the elevator back to his office. When he walked in, everyone was smiling, Sandy and Jane, Nancy standing just outside her door and Debbie sitting back with her feet propped on her desk.

He folded his arms and looked silently around the office, waiting for an announcement. "What's going on?"

Debbie threw her arms into the air. "Good news, boss."

"What?"

She came toward him, holding out a piece of paper. "This telex just arrived for you."

He took it out of her hand and read it.

TO: MR. BOBBY HOLIDAY
VICE PRESIDENT
MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS
HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA
FROM: MARK LOWERY
PROGRAM DIRECTOR
KFMC
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, I RESIGN MY POSITION AS PROGRAM DIRECTOR OF KFMC. I HAVE ACCEPTED A SIMILAR JOB AT WPHL IN PHILADELPHIA.

I PHONED YOU THIS MORNING, ANTICIPATING MANY CHANGES IN THE PROGRAMMING AS WE DISCUSSED IN LAST WEEK'S MEET-

INGS. AFTER OUR CONVERSATION, I THOUGHT I COULD LIVE WITH THOSE CHANGES. WHEN I RECEIVED THE EXACT INSTRUCTIONS TWO HOURS LATER BY COMPUTER, I REALIZED I COULD NOT.

I WISH YOU AND MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS THE BEST.

Bobby's face lit up, a huge grin spreading from ear to ear. "Touch-down!" he shouted.

The staff laughed and began to applaud.

"Champagne in my office in an hour," he said, walking through the door. He picked up the phone and called Robert.

"Lowery resigned."

"Yeah, I know. He just called me."

"That's a relief."

"You're living a charmed life, boy. Who are you going to put in his place?"

"I don't know. I haven't had time to think about it. I might bring Harris in from Boston."

"What's that going to do to Boston?"

Bobby laughed. "Fuck it up, probably."

"Funny, very funny. What do you want me to print?"

Bobby thought for a few moments. "Just that we're looking for a replacement. I won't decide until later this week."

"Oh yeah, I may have stepped out of line, but I asked Lowery how he had gotten the information on the changes before you sent it this morning. He said he hadn't gotten it when he made the call. He had been up the whole weekend worrying about everything you talked about in the meetings last week. He sounded pretty strung out to me. Anyhow, he had a chance at the Philly opening and decided to take it."

"Wise move."

"Yeah."

"I didn't realize WPHL had an opening."

"Me either. They fired their program director this morning and offered the job to Mark."

"As long as he's out of my hair, it doesn't matter."

"I'll see you tonight."

* * * * *

Phillip Crawford picked up the phone. He was anticipating the call. "Well?"

"He bought it."

"Great!"

"The telex was a great touch, but I think he was so relieved Lowery resigned that he would have believed anything."

"Perfect."

"I've got to get back to work."

"I'll talk to you later."

Phillip leaned back in his chair and smiled. Another crisis averted.

Shirley stuck her head in the door. "Joe Preston is on line one."

The smile faded as he leaned forward to take the call from the east coast independent record promoter.

"Hello, Joe."

"Phillip, it's done."

"I know, and I appreciate it."

"It wasn't easy, getting the program director fired and Lowery hired in one day."

"I know, I know."

"And you got the terms."

"Yeah. I pay you half of everything I get from any records added to KFMC for the next year."

"It's a business doing pleasure with you, Phillip."

"Right. The check's in the mail."

He hung up. He hated to pay the money, but he had no choice. Phillip knew that Joe hadn't pulled the strings at the Philly station. It took more power than even Joe had. But he also understood that he had to keep the peace. That was the price of doing business. Besides, the best part was that now, Mark Lowery was Joe's problem.

His face lit up again. "Shirley!" he called. "You and Susan break out the champagne!"

* * * * *

It was after six o'clock. Bobby was leaning against the desk in his office, smiling at Debbie. The rest of the staff had filtered out a little while earlier after finishing off three bottles of champagne. He and Debbie were alone.

He set his empty glass down. "Come here."

Debbie walked slowly toward him, raising one eyebrow as she got near. "What?"

He reached out and grabbed her, pulling her close. "Give me a kiss."

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked lazily.

He grinned wickedly. "Putting the move on you."

"Not here."

He dropped his jaw, as if her words had shocked him. "You mean

if we went somewhere else it would make a difference?"

She shook her head. "I didn't say that."

"Come on, give me a kiss."

A shadow crossed briefly over her face, her lips tightening as her eyes squinted slightly. She looked over her shoulder. "I feel like someone's watching us."

Bobby's eyebrows came together, lines creasing on his forehead. He had the same feeling. Forcing himself to relax, he said, "Aw, it's just because the curtains are open, but don't worry, this building is higher than anything else in this area. No one can see in."

"I don't know, Bobby."

"Let me close the drapes."

She shook her head. "No. I've got to get out of here before something happens."

"Let's make it happen."

She stared at him for a moment, then smiled. "Bobby," she teased, "I know and you know this isn't the time or the place. Besides, Beverly came in yesterday. Why don't you just be a good boy and go on home?"

He ignored the last question. "When is the time and where is the place?"

"Give it up, Bobby."

"Why don't we get together this weekend and discuss work. There are a lot of things we need to talk about."

"Bobby!"

He smirked. "Besides, I have it on good authority that I'll be holding a couple of ludes Saturday afternoon."

She looked at him, tilting her head slightly. "I told you before, I'll take one only if you do."

"I'll knock on your door at one o'clock."

"How are you going to get away from Bev?"

"That's my problem. Are you game?"

Her lips pulled back. "Sure Bobby, I'll call your bluff. But I'll bet you don't show up . . . and if you do, you won't have any ludes."

"Deal."

"But remember, I won't take one until you do."

She spun around and walked out the door, tossing a grin across her shoulder. He picked up his briefcase and prepared to leave the office, trying to keep pictures of the coming Saturday out of his mind.

* * * * *

"Bobby, can we afford it?"

He was lying in bed with the lights off, Beverly by his side. They had come back from dinner with Robert and Pamela Williams where most of the talk had centered around the house he was to look at the following morning.

He sighed deeply. "Yeah, we can afford it."

"How?"

He turned in the darkness, resting his head on his elbow. "Robert has made a deal for me to write an article for *The Report* every other week. He's going to pay me five thousand dollars a month. Courtney wants five hundred thousand for the house, so if we put fifty grand down, our monthly payments will be about four thousand a month, including insurance and taxes."

"Where are we going to get fifty thousand dollars to put down on the house?"

"Robert has agreed to loan me the money."

"Can you do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, can you borrow money from Robert. What will Paul say?"

He rolled over onto his back and frowned. "First of all, it is none of Paul's business. If I was borrowing from someone in the record business, it would be different. But *The Report* doesn't pose a problem."

"Whatever you say, Bobby."

He put his arms around her. "It might be a little tight, but it'll work."

She nestled her head against his shoulder. "Bobby, things are already working out perfectly."

He took a deep breath. "That they are, darling, that they are."

"Except that you're working too hard."

He turned his head and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Just at the start, Bev. As soon as things settle down, we'll be able to spend a lot of time together."

"I can't wait."

"And speaking of working, I've got dinner tomorrow night with Lawrence Macky."

"Oh, Bobby."

"I won't be too late. The station here in Los Angeles is in trouble and I've got to pull it up quickly."

"Can't you do these things during business hours?"

"I told you, Bev. For the first few months, every hour is a business hour."

She sighed. "I understand."

"And while I'm on the subject, I'll also be working Saturday afternoon, putting in some computer programs with Elliot."

"Saturday afternoon? Pamela's invited us over for a swim."

"You take Pat and I'll join you as soon as I can get free. I should be able to shake loose by five."

Beverly was quiet for a few moments. Finally she took a deep breath and said, "All right, Mr. Big Shot, have it your way. Do you have time to make love to me right now, or should I take a number?"

He smiled and buried his face in her hair. "I've always got time for that."

* * * * *

"Phillip Crawford Promotions."

"Susan Scanlon, please."

"May I tell her who's calling?"

"Bobby Holiday." He stood behind his desk waiting for her to come to the phone. It was almost one o'clock and he had just gotten into the office. He had spent the morning looking at the house and signing papers for the purchase.

"Hello, Bobby."

"Hi there."

"I thought you had forgotten about me."

"Now how could I forget about you?"

"Well, I didn't think it was possible, but you never know."

"Trust me. That is not possible. But what is possible is you and I getting together tonight. At least it's possible for me. What about you?"

"I'd love it."

"I'm going to have to work late so I hoped you could meet me here at my office, say six o'clock?"

She giggled. "At your office? Isn't that going to cramp our style?"

"It didn't the last time."

"You're right about that. Is there anything special that you want me to bring?"

"Can you get me a couple of extra ludes?"

"Why Bobby, I didn't think you approved."

"I'm not sure I do, but I'd like to find out."

"I'll have to get them from Phillip, but let me see what I can work out."

"I'll be happy to pay for them."

"Don't be silly. I'll see you at six and I'll bring you a couple."

"I'll be waiting."

"Good-bye."

He hung up the phone just as Debbie stuck her head in the door. "I've made the copies for you, Bobby." She walked across the office and put a stack of papers on his desk. "Anything else?"

He grinned. "Yeah. I'd like to see you naked."

Debbie shook her finger at him. "Now, Bobby, control yourself."

He laughed as she walked back to her desk. He looked down and absently leafed through the papers she had left. They contained the contracts he had signed earlier for the house. They made the deals he had discussed with Beverly, paying fifty thousand down and financing the balance. He had forgotten to add in the closing costs, which ate up just about all of his savings, but it didn't matter. He signed the contract with Robert to do the articles so he had the money. Actually, he didn't sign with Robert personally, but with the holding company, The Report, Inc. He did the same with the fifty thousand dollar loan. This way, he owed the corporation, not Robert.

The intercom barked. "Paul Johnson on line one."

He picked up the phone and began giving Paul a run-down on the week's events.

* * * * *

"He wants me to bring two extra ludes."

Phillip Crawford smiled. "Good job." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key, fitting it into the deep, bottom drawer of his desk. It took him only a second to locate the large bottle he had locked away. He shook several tablets into his palm.

"Here's three, one for you and two for Mr. Holiday." He leaned back in his chair. "Now don't you go and gobble up all of them."

Her nose crinkled up into a smile. "If you're worried about that, why don't you give me six?"

"I don't think so," he said, shutting the drawer. "Then I would be worried."

* * * * *

"Conference call is ready, Bobby," Debbie said, her head sticking through the office door.

This was another part of his management plan, a regular Friday afternoon conference call with all of his program directors. He wanted them to keep their mind on business the entire weekend.

"Everybody here?" he asked, listening absently as they checked off. "First order of business is the music. Are all of you up-to-date on the changes I sent down on Tuesday? Have we had any problems?"

He knew there would be no negative comments. Had anyone harbored second thoughts, Mark Lowery's forced resignation made them keep quiet.

"This weekend, I want each of you to monitor your competition. Spend a total of eight hours listening Saturday, and another eight on Sunday. Record their rotations and any special features they program. Also, find out what promotions they have on the air, what prizes they offer and how well their air staff stacks up against yours. If there is a dee jay working for your competition that you want out of the market, make a tape and send it to me. We'll try and get him an offer from one of our other stations."

He smiled. That would keep them busy.

"Send your reports on the computer by five o'clock Monday afternoon. Any questions?"

"Yeah, Bobby, this is Charley in San Diego. Who are you going to put in San Francisco to replace Mark?"

"You want to pitch for the job, Charley?"

"The thought crossed my mind."

"If any of you want the job, call me Monday and we'll discuss it. I will tell you that I feel more comfortable with each of you staying put for the time being, but I'm not against listening to what you have to say. Is there anything else?"

There was nothing, so he clicked off, wishing them a nice weekend.

"Nice touch, Bobby." Debbie was standing in the doorway.

"What?"

She grinned. "Giving them all of that work, then wishing them a nice weekend."

He shrugged. "It's a dirty job, but they have to do it."

"How about you? Are you going to have a nice weekend?"

"Of course I am. I've got lots of work to do."

"How's that?"

"My number one priority is to teach my assistant a thing or two about the radio business."

"I thought you were going to teach me how to take drugs."

He grimaced. "Keep your voice down. I don't want the staff knowing what's going on."

She waved her hand. "Nobody can hear me."

"I hope not."

She glanced at her watch. "It's almost quitting time. It has been a good week, hasn't it?"

He nodded. "Yes, it has. The start of many good weeks."

"Well, I'm heading for the hotel. Do you need a ride?"

He shook his head. "I've got a little more to do before I can call it a day."

"Fine," she said, turning her head and talking louder so the others in the outer office could hear. "I'll see you Monday."

He stared at her as she turned toward him again. "One o'clock," she whispered with a wink.

Bobby went happily back to the computer sheets in front of him, concentrating completely on the figures to keep his thoughts from racing ahead to the next day.

* * * * *

"All right, Bobby. Pat and I are going to Pamela's for a swim, then we're meeting the designer over at the new house to go over some furniture plans. We'll be back at Pamela's at five."

It was Saturday, just after noon, and he was walking his wife and daughter through the hotel lobby. Pamela was waiting out in front. When they stepped outside, he was surprised to find how hot it was.

"Jeeze, it's a burner."

Bev looked at him and shook her head. "It's been this way all week, Bobby. You've just been getting up at the crack of dawn and not coming home until late. You haven't been in the sun since I've been here. You keep holed up in that air conditioned office of yours."

He tilted his head back, momentarily basking in the warmth. "I've got to get some sun. Maybe tomorrow."

Bev got in the front seat beside Pamela. "Yes, maybe tomorrow," she said sarcastically, leaning out of the window to give him a kiss. "Now don't be late today. We can take a quick swim before we cook out this afternoon."

"That's right," Pamela said. "I've told Robert the same thing. You know, he's working this afternoon, too. You both be at the house at five."

"Sure, sure," he waved. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I love you, Daddy," Pat called from the back seat.

"I love you too, honey," he shouted. He watched until the car cleared the parking lot and headed up Sunset Drive before he turned and walked back into the hotel.

He stopped by the liquor store in the lobby and bought two bottles of chilled champagne, then headed up to Debbie's room. He knocked on the door at ten minutes before one.

"Who's there?" she called.

"Eckert Drugs," he answered.

The knob twisted and she peeked at him through the crack.

"Can I trust you enough to let you in?"

"Absolutely not," he said, pushing through the door. She was wearing baggy, green shorts and a white shirt. The top three buttons were undone, giving him a glimpse of her soft, brown skin. She was not wearing a bra.

"What's in the sack?" she asked.

He reached in and pulled out one of the bottles.

"Oh, goody," she squealed. "We're going to get drunk too."

"What do you mean, drunk too?"

"You got the ludes, didn't you?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't score."

Her face fell. "Aw, shit."

He reached into his pocket and held out his hand. The two tablets were in his palm.

Her lips turned up and her eyes danced as she grabbed them. "You bastard, Bobby."

He laughed. "Get us a couple of glasses while I break open this bottle."

He sat on the edge of the bed and waited for her to return from the bathroom. "I've only got these water glasses."

"Who cares, as long as they don't leak." He began to pour the champagne as she sat down beside him.

"Cheers," she said, tipping her glass back.

He clinked her glass with his and took a sip. The bubbles tickled across his tongue and down his throat.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Ready for what?"

She raised her eyebrows and held up her hand, the two white tablets resting between her thumb and first finger.

He shook his head. "Why don't you just take both of them?"

"You made a deal."

"I know, I know. But I'm not sure about this."

"Come on."

"Wait a minute, Debbie. I've never done anything like this before. What's this shit going to do to me?"

"It's no big deal. They just make you relax. It's like getting drunk, except better."

"Why don't you take them and I'll just drink the champagne?"

She held one of the tablets out toward him. "We had a deal."

"Isn't it dangerous to mix these things with booze?"

"Quit stalling."

"You go first."

She shrugged her shoulders and popped the pill into her mouth, chasing it with a gulp of champagne.

She grinned. "Breakfast of champions."

He took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling.

"Go ahead," she said.

He opened his lips and placed the lude on his tongue, then took a drink. The tablet caught briefly in the back of his throat before sliding down, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Aggh."

"Great, isn't it?"

"Wonderful."

She shifted around on the bed, leaning against the headboard. "Pour some more champagne while I find something on television for us to watch." She picked up the remote control as he reached for the bottle. "How about an old movie?"

"Sounds fine to me," he said, handing her a glass. He slipped out of his sneakers and moved up beside her, shaking his head. "I'm really starting to get a buzz on. Do these things work that fast?"

Debbie chuckled. "No, you're just high from the champagne. It'll take about fifteen minutes for the ludes to kick in."

He leaned back against the pillows and tried to concentrate on the movie, an old black-and-white western starring John Wayne, while he waited guardedly for the effects of the pill. He wasn't really happy about what he was doing. He had no idea what the lude would do to him and he was more than a little worried. It showed how far he'd go to get Debbie in bed with him. He sat up straighter, analyzing his muscle movements and thoughts. So far, nothing was happening.

They had watched through two commercial breaks when he felt Debbie snuggle closer to him.

"I just realized something," he said.

"What?"

"I've been lying here on the bed with you and haven't even tried to kiss you."

She smiled lazily. "Well?"

He tilted his head and brushed his lips against hers. Her mouth opened immediately and her tongue snaked out, the tip swishing back and forth across his teeth. He found himself comparing kisses, even as he shared one with Debbie. Susan Scanlon sucked on his tongue, using her mouth like a vacuum, while Debbie preferred to attack with hers, as did he. They licked as much as they kissed. He didn't know why this comparison was important. Actually, it wasn't. His mind was just wandering.

Uh-oh.

He moved his hand up to her face, his fingers caressing her cheeks, smoothing her dark hair back against the pillows.

"You're beautiful."

The corners of her lips twisted up. "You're fucked up."

"I am not."

She swiveled her eyes and looked at him across her nose. "You aren't thinking that we're going to make love, are you?"

"Me?"

She lowered her lids, peering at him through the slits. "Yes, you."

"The thought did cross my mind."

"Well, cross it out. We are not going to make love, Bobby. A little kissing and hugging, maybe even a pelvic thrust or two, but nothing else."

"How about a lot of kissing and hugging and thelvic prusting?"

Debbie giggled. "Bobby, you are fucked up."

He shook his head, trying to focus his eyes. He was experiencing the strangest feeling. His head felt like it was floating three feet above his body. "No, I'm not."

She held up her empty glass. "Pour me some more champagne, will you?"

"Of course." He grabbed the glass and leaned over her body, reaching for the bottle on the table. He didn't even come close. Losing his balance, he tumbled off the bed and fell heavily on the floor.

"Bobby!"

He laughed and started rolling across the carpet, stopping only when he hit the wall on the other side of the room. He turned his head and stared at her, or rather he stared at where he thought she was. The room was a blur.

She struggled off the bed. "You idiot. Are you all right?" She took one step and staggered, almost falling. "Whoa." She fell back on the bed, a crooked grin plastered across her face.

"Ah ha!" he said. "It seems like I am not the only one here that is fucked up."

She shook her head. "Jesus! These things are strong."

He got on all fours and crawled slowly back across the room. "Aw, there's nothing to them. You've just got to know how to handle yourself."

"And how's that?"

"Don't try to walk."

She stretched out on the bed and he pulled himself slowly up on top of her, resting his body on hers as his head floated across the

ceiling.

"Hello?"

He leaned back and tried to focus on her face. "What?"

"You looked like you were a thousand miles away."

He smiled. "No, just on the ceiling."

"What?"

"Never mind." He leaned forward and kissed her.

She opened her mouth, her lips feeling puffy and wet, her tongue moving against his. Small dots of bright, blue lights were exploding behind his eyelids.

He pushed his hips against hers and she pushed back, moaning slightly into his mouth. He felt her legs part and he slid between them, grinding his pelvis into hers.

"I want you," he rasped.

"I want you too, Bobby," she whispered.

Through the haziness of the drug, her answer seemed right. He was in no condition to consider the significance of her words. It was all he could do to concentrate on his actions. He reached down with both hands and grabbed her blouse, trying to rip the buttons free. He couldn't

"Damn it," he chuckled.

"Here, macho man," she giggled, "let me help."

She reached down and worked on the buttons. Together, it took five minutes to get her shirt unbuttoned. She moved her arms back over her head as he gently reached down and pulled the blouse away from her body, exposing her breasts. They were perfect . . . big, firm and nineteen. The large, dark nipples hardened under his stare and he dropped his head quickly, capturing one of them between his lips.

He tongued it briefly as Debbie's hands moved to the back of his head, stroking his hair. He switched to the other nipple, giving it the same treatment as she pulled his head closer, shoving her breast against his face.

He slid dreamily down her body, his tongue forming a wet trail between her breasts, across her stomach and into her navel. She had fine, dark hairs, like the outline of a path, starting just below her navel, trailing down to where they disappeared under her shorts.

He continued stabbing her gently with his tongue as his hands slid across her hips, searching for the opening. He found the zipper on the side and ripped it open. She lifted her lower body slightly off the bed as he pushed the torn shorts over her hips, across her thighs and down to her ankles where she quickly kicked them off.

Now he slid lower, his tongue tickling through the hair beneath her belly button, following the trail to the top of her sheer, pink, silk panties. He moved his tongue under the elastic, probing deeper, but he couldn't reach far. He slipped out from under the elastic and kissed down her panties until his lips rested directly on her crotch. He licked and blew his hot breath against her.

Debbie moaned and shoved her hips against his face, her hands moving down once again to tangle in his hair. He continued kissing and licking, his tongue snaking along the edge of her panties, searching for an opening, darting back and forth against her thighs. He could feel the coarse, pubic hair that poked out from under the elastic rub against his cheeks. He reached up and traced the outline of her panties between her legs with his fingers, rubbing gently on her mound through the silk.

"Bobby, please," she moaned.

He moved his hand directly between her legs, twisting his fingers under her panties and pulling them to one side, exposing her sex. The musty smell of her body washed against his face, filling his nostrils. He could tease no longer. He quickly dropped his head, burying his tongue inside her.

"Oh, God."

Her legs kicked out against the mattress as he continued licking and sucking for what seemed like hours until she abruptly yanked his hair and pulled him up across her stomach.

"I want you inside of me," she stuttered.

He fumbled with his pants as she got out of her blouse and panties. He ripped the jeans off his legs and pulled the shirt over his head.

"Now," she said. "Quickly."

He moved on top of her and she spread her legs wide, making it easier.

"Let me," she whispered.

Her hands reached down, feeling, measuring. She placed him gently at her entrance, then grabbed his buttocks and jerked.

He slammed deep into her. Nothing, no one, had ever felt this good.

He rocked back and forth, out of control, concentrating only on his own pleasure as her breath came harder and quicker in his ear.

"Debbie?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him, her lids closing slightly at his every thrust. "Bobby, you're so big."

"Debbie, you feel so good. You're so hot and wet."

She parted her lips and flicked her tongue out. "I think I'm in love."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," she said, wrapping her legs around him, pulling him even deeper. "I love you."

He grinned. He was back on familiar ground. "You love my dick."

She smiled. "That too."

He moved one hand between them, searching for her nipple. When he found it, he twisted it between his fingers, scratching the rubbery nub roughly with his nail.

"Jesus, Bobby. You're driving me crazy."

He kissed her, his tongue driving deep into her mouth in time with the movements of their bodies.

"Debbie," he grunted. "Are you ready?" It really didn't matter. He was.

She pulled him closer. "You'll have to touch me down there," she whispered.

"What?"

"You know, on my spot."

"What spot?" The intensity of his excitement had abated somewhat with their conversation. He could hold off maybe a little longer.

She grabbed his hand and moved it between them, shoving it against her pubic bone. "Down there."

"You want me to rub your clit?"

She made a face. "God, Bobby. I hate that word."

He grinned and moved his fingers.

"Yes," she moaned.

"Is that it?"

Her body shook violently with the answer. She raked his back with her nails and her hips began to spasm.

"Arrgh!" she screamed.

Bobby's scream was silent, but it filled his mind, echoing back and forth, as he spiraled off into oblivion.

They lay in each others arms for a long time, barely breathing. He was in a state of total euphoria, relaxed and satisfied, needing only to stay that way forever.

It was Debbie who moved first, stretching her shoulders as she gently rubbed his back. "That was fantastic."

He sighed deeply, not wanting to pull himself from the contented state he was enjoying. "I agree."

"Sit up, Bobby. I want to taste you."

He rolled off her and tried to sit up. He couldn't. His arms and legs would barely move and he had trouble keeping his eyes open.

"Jesus, I'm really fucked up."

Debbie giggled. "I'm glad you finally agree." Her words were slurred. "I'm a little wasted myself."

"I can't move."

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll do all the work, just lay on your side."

He closed his eyes and felt her shifting on the bed. Soon, her hair was brushing against his stomach and he felt her tongue moving between his legs. Opening his eyes slowly, he found himself staring at the dark patch of her pubic hair. She had maneuvered around until they were lying head to toe. He reached over her hips and grabbed her buttocks, pulling his face against her.

"Open your legs," he muttered.

She raised her leg and he slid his head underneath, nestling on her thigh. He moved his face against her, inhaling deeply the sweet aroma that stirred his innermost senses as he reached up and pulled her leg down, smothering out all other sights and sounds.

Before he could take another breath, he fell sound asleep.

* * * * *

He awoke with a start! He had no idea where he was. He sat up quickly and a wave of darkness engulfed him. He was dizzy. Everything was blurry. He felt like he was moving in slow motion. He closed his eyes tightly, then opened them slowly, rubbing a hand across his face.

Now he could see. Barely.

He smiled. Debbie was lying on her back, snoring quietly, her breasts moving up and down in rhythm with her breathing. Her legs were spread wide, exposing the thick, patch of matted hair he had been using as a pillow.

He looked lazily across the room. The sun was pouring in through the curtains, indicating that it was much later in the afternoon than when they had started. He knew that information should be important to him, but he couldn't remember why. He shook his head again as his eyes stopped on the face of the clock sitting on the table next to the bed.

It was six o'clock! He had fucked up again!

"Debbie," he said, shaking her leg. She moaned groggily. "Debbie, wake up!"

She moved her hands to her face, rubbing her eyes. Looking up at him with a smile, she raised up on one elbow.

"Debbie, it's six o'clock."

She fell back on the bed, stretching her arms over her head. "Thanks for that bit of information, Bobby, but who gives a shit?"

"I do!" He rolled over her legs and reached for the phone. He had to call Robert. The phone crashed off the table and onto the floor. He was still unsteady.

Sliding off the edge of the bed, he cradled the phone in his lap and slowly dialed Robert's number. He held his breath, counting the rings.

"Hello?"

"Thank God it's you, Robert."

"Where are you, Bobby?"

"I'm on my way, that's where I am."

"No problem."

"How's Bev?"

"She's plenty pissed off, but don't worry, I just got home a few minutes ago. I haven't even put the steaks on."

"Well, put them on. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"You want to talk with Bev?"

"Yeah, I guess I'd better."

He stared at Debbie while he waited for Bev to come to the phone. She grinned and pulled her fingers through her hair, looking at him sexily.

"Bobby, where are you?"

"At work, where do you think I am?" He tried to sound as authoritative as possible.

"I've been calling your office for the past hour and you haven't answered."

"I've been working in Nancy's office on the computer. I'm sorry I'm running a little late, it's just when I get on that thing I forget all about time."

"Seems like you're forgetting the time a lot lately, Bobby."

His jaw tightened. "Look, Bev, this job I've got isn't easy. You know that. I don't need you bitching at me, I need your help. I'm in over my head and I've got to burn to make it work. Don't be coming down on me."

She hesitated a moment before continuing. "You said you'd be here by five at the latest."

"I already said I'm sorry. What do you want from me?"

"I want you to do what you say you're going to do, that's all."

"I said we'd move to California and we did. I said we'd buy the house you always wanted and we did." May as well add a little guilt. "I also said there would be sacrifices to get what we want."

Again she hesitated. "Oh, Bobby," she sighed, "I just don't want you slipping away from your family. Pat and I love you very much."

He won. Again. "Then try and understand."

"I'll try."

"I told Robert to put the steaks on the grill. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"All right, darling. Drive safely."

He put the phone back on the table and stood up carefully, his upper body swaying unsteadily. He had used up all of his energy on the call.

"Bobby, you aren't going to make it."

He turned to look at Debbie. She hadn't moved. "Thanks for that vote of confidence."

She laughed. "You're still fucked up from the lude."

It was true. His mind had cleared from its earlier fog, but he couldn't function like he should. He felt drunk.

"The worst thing you could do is show up at Robert's house stumbling around." Debbie pulled herself into a sitting position, her legs crossed in front of her.

"I'll take a cold shower."

"That's not going to help."

He knew she was right.

"What the fuck am I going to do? I've got to get to Robert's." He sat back gently on the bed.

"There's only one thing you can do."

"What is that?"

She smiled. "Fight fire with fire."

"Speak English, Debbie."

She opened the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a vial of cocaine.

"Jesus!" he said. "Does everybody out here carry that shit around with them?"

"Everybody but you."

He shook his head. "I'm not doing any of that crap."

Debbie twisted the top off the amber vial. He watched as she used the silver spoon, attached to the top by a small chain, to dig into the powder, hold it under her nose and inhale quickly. She repeated the procedure, this time snorting through her other nostril.

She opened her eyes wide. "Straightens you right up, Bobby."

He stared at her, then at the vial she was holding toward him. What the fuck. He didn't have a choice.

"All right, what's this shit going to do to me?"

"Turn you into a new man . . . and he'll want some too," she giggled.

"No, really."

"Really."

"Come on, Debbie."

"Bobby, there's nothing to this. I can't believe you're hesitating, after you gobbled up the lude."

He took a deep breath. "Six hours ago I couldn't even spell junkie. Now I am one."

Debbie laughed, her voice tickling higher.

He took the vial from her hand and looked at it.

"Well?" she said.

"What's it going to do to me?"

"It'll brighten you up a little. It's kind of like speed, but not nearly as heavy. It'll only last about twenty minutes."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck it!" Before he could change his mind, he dug the spoon into the vial, coming up with the powder. He held it under his nose and sniffed quickly.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" He felt the cocaine bite past his nose, down his throat and into his lungs. He fought back a sneeze as his right eye began to water.

"Now the other side," Debbie said.

He dug the spoon into the vial again, held it up to his nose and snorted once more. This time he was ready for the jolt. He didn't feel a need to sneeze, but his left eye watered.

Debbie grinned. "It didn't take you long to become an expert."

"It is amazing what you can do when you have no choice."

"How do you feel?"

He straightened his back and examined his emotions. "I feel the same, maybe a little less foggy. And the back of my throat's getting numb."

"Here, let's do one more."

"I'm not going to overdose, am I?"

"Bobby, you're such a jack-ass." She packed her nose again and he followed suit.

He was feeling better. As a matter of fact, he was feeling great. He jumped off the bed and began putting on his clothes.

Debbie made a face. "Bobby?"

"What?" He was pulling his pants up, tucking in his shirt.

She leaned back against the headboard, stroking her stomach. "Do you have to go right now?"

He grinned and sat down on the edge of the bed, grabbing his sneakers. "We don't have time."

She frowned. "Damn."

He looked over his shoulder. "Next time."

"Sure," she said sourly.

He finished lacing his shoes, then stood up, looking at Debbie with a wink. "Thank you for a very enlightening afternoon. We've got to do this again, soon."

She gave him a half-smile. "I enjoyed it too, Bobby. I just wish it could have lasted longer."

"Next time, I promise."

He leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips. When he did, she reached up quickly and grabbed him around the neck, mashing her mouth into his.

He pulled away and stood beside the bed, taking a deep breath. "Whoa," he said huskily. "That was close."

She pursed her lips together. "Evidently not close enough."

"Debbie, I've got to go. We wouldn't have time to get into it."

"I wouldn't care if it was quick."

He looked down at her. "But I would."

She looked up, smiled evilly and began caressing her breasts. "I guess I'll just have to stay here and take things into my own hands."

He grinned and headed for the door. "Save it for the next time."

He put his hand on the knob, then turned around and looked back. She was gazing at him between her legs, one hand rubbing her breast, the other stroking her pubic hair.

He bounded back across the room, his heart pounding in his head. "Get on all fours."

"What?"

"You heard me. Get on your hands and knees with your ass facing me."

"Bobby . . ."

"Do it!"

She scrambled around quickly, raising her hips as her head dropped to the bed. He unsnapped his pants and pushed them down around his thighs. Stepping to the edge of the bed, he grabbed the fleshy mounds of her buttocks and jammed inside her once again.

Three minutes later, he was in the elevator on the way to the lobby.

Payola occurs when someone illegally makes a payment to a radio station to insure that a record gets played on that particular station. These payments often come in the form of cash, drugs and sex.

CHAPTER SIX

Three weeks later, Bobby was in his office, wrapping up a phone call with Paul Johnson.

"So, everything is looking good. All the stations are tight, the promotions are in place for the ratings sweeps and I feel pretty confident."

"How about San Francisco?"

"Well, it's the shakiest. Like I told you, I promoted the assistant program director, David Duke. So far, he's doing a pretty good job. I'm keeping a close eye on it."

"Good. Anything else?"

"Nope, that's about it."

"I heard you and Bev found a house."

"Yeah, we bought Hal Courtney's old place."

"Did he give you a good price?"

"Not good enough."

Paul laughed. "I just don't want to see you adding a lot of his records as payment."

Bobby snorted. "Sure. That bastard wouldn't come a nickel off the price."

"When are you moving in?"

"We're almost finished. We'll be out of the hotel on Friday."

"Great. I know you'll feel better when you're sleeping in your own bed."

"You've got that right."

"Oh, I read your story in The Report."

Bobby's first article, on radio promotions, had appeared the week before. "What did you think?"

"Excellent."

Bobby smiled. "Glad you liked it."

"I liked the writing and I also like the job you're doing, Bobby."

"Thanks, Paul."

"Keep up the good work."

Bobby hung up the phone. He had been putting in a lot of hours, but they were paying off. The stations were doing fine under his

direction. He was quite proud of himself.

"Bobby?"

Debbie had walked in the office while he had been daydreaming.

"I've typed up your next article for The Report. There are also some memos for you to sign."

She put the papers on his desk, then leaned over and kissed him softly on the lips.

"Am I going to see you again this Saturday?"

He nodded. "Absolutely." They had been getting together regularly since the first time three weeks before.

"Are you going to have the drugs?"

He made a face. "Sometimes I think the only reason you're with me is because I bring the ludes and the coke." As well as ludes, he had been getting half a gram of coke from Susan Scanlon every Thursday night.

"You know better."

He raised his eyebrows. "Do I?" He pulled her close and kissed her again.

"Of course," she murmured into his mouth.

"Then let's do it right here, right now, with no drugs."

"Bobby!" she said, pushing him away. "You are unreal."

He held his hands out, palms upward. "Well?"

"Well," she said, turning to leave, "Robert Williams is holding for you on line two."

"I'll call him back."

She closed the door behind her.

"Robert, what's going on?"

"Big time poker game tonight and you're playing."

Bobby's eyes lit up. "What?"

"There's eight of us that play every other Wednesday night. One of the regulars moved to New York. I told the rest of the gang that you couldn't play cards for shit so you're in."

Bobby thought for a second. "I'd love to, Robert, you know that, but with Bev doing all the work getting into the house and everything, I've got to go home and help her. We're trying to move in the day after tomorrow."

"I've already got you covered. Pamela's taking her interior decorator over to your place tonight. Bev's all excited. I told Pamela I'd talked with you and you approved. The guy's a fag, but he's the best. The three of them are going to have the time of their life spending your money."

"Interior decorator? Damn, Robert, I can't afford what I'm doing

now, much less what an interior decorator is going to do.”

“You’ll just have to win big tonight.”

Bobby grinned. “Sounds like I can’t refuse.”

“Pamela and I will be over to get you guys at the hotel at seven-thirty. She’ll take Bev and Pat and you and I will go to the game.”

* * * * *

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

He was standing in front of the hotel, talking to Bev through the window of Pamela Williams’ car.

“Only a little, Bobby,” she smiled. “Go ahead and enjoy yourself.”

He leaned through the window and kissed her.

“And win big, Bobby,” Pamela said. “After Crew gets finished with your house, you’re going to need all the money you can find.”

“Don’t worry, honey,” Bev said. “I won’t let him go crazy.”

Bobby frowned. “Any time an interior decorator named Crew Seasons gets his hooks on my house, I’m in trouble.”

“I’ll watch out for him, Daddy,” Pat said from the back seat.

“You do that, baby.”

The car slid away from the curb as Bobby waved. Robert slapped him on the shoulder. “Lets go.”

They jumped into Robert’s car and headed up Sunset into Bel Air. Bobby shook his head, watching the million dollar mansions slide by outside the car.

“Where is this game?”

“It switches from house to house. Tonight we’re playing at Alvin’s place.”

Bobby remembered meeting Alvin Irving, the manager of The Falcons, first at Robert’s house, then later at the Falcons’ concert. The man had also called his office several times, seeking an appointment. So far, Bobby had put him off.

Robert weaved across traffic and into a driveway, stopping abruptly in front of two huge, iron gates that barred further entry. He leaned out and punched a button on the intercom box, identified himself, then continued up the driveway when the gates hissed silently open. Robert stopped in front of a large, palatial estate, behind several other cars in the drive, the least expensive of which was a 450SL.

“Jesus,” Bobby said, getting out, “I think I’m in over my head.”

Robert put his arm around him and guided him through the front door. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll do all right. None of these guys knows how to play cards . . . with one or two exceptions.”

Bobby cocked his head and looked sideways at Robert. “Who are

the exceptions?"

Robert laughed. "You'll find out soon enough."

They were ushered through an ornate, living room by the butler, who took them downstairs to the game room. It was a long, wood-paneled room with a low ceiling, pinball and video machines of all makes and models around the sides. In the middle, a white ball hung down, combining with hidden tracks to light the green felt that covered an expensive, eight-sided card table. Behind the table, set against the far wall, was a small, mahogany bar, complete with a white jacketed bartender to serve the players whatever they wanted.

"We've been waiting on you."

Alvin Irving stood up to his full five feet, four inches in height. Bobby moved over and shook his hand and was introduced to the others at the table. Tommy Russo was there, along with Hal Courtney, Sherman Edwards, the attorney, and David Apston, head of promotion for Webster Records. David was one of the sharks. Bobby had played poker with him before at several industry conventions they had both attended. He remembered David winning big on more than one occasion. The other member of the group was a music publisher Bobby had never heard of.

"Let's play cards," Alvin said, motioning Bobby and Robert to a couple of the open chairs. "We've got one more player, but he won't be here for another hour or two."

Bobby sat down and tried not to act nervous.

"We play two kinds of games here Bobby, and two only. Five card draw and seven card stud. The deal passes after every hand and it's dealer's choice. The game starts with a ten dollar ante and a twenty-five dollar maximum bet, three raises. The price goes up a ten-thirty. There's a five hundred dollar buy-in to start. You can buy more chips, as many as you like, but the minimum is five hundred.

Bobby reached for his billfold. Robert had told him the rules before they arrived and he was ready.

Alvin held up his hand. "You don't need to show your cash in advance, Bobby. We all know each other here." He nodded toward another man sitting away from the table. "Bruce Hicks, my business manager, will give you all the chips you need when you want them. He'll keep account of the money you owe. After the game, we all settle with checks." He smiled. "This keeps everything under control and the lack of large amounts of cash around diminishes the chances of any thugs trying to knock off our little game."

"Shit," growled Tommy Russo. "Like any thugs would stand a chance getting into this fortress you call a house, Alvin."

Irving shrugged his shoulders.

"I almost didn't get through the fucking gates myself tonight," Russo continued.

The men around the table laughed.

"It's always touch and go as to whether I'll actually let you in, Tommy, but tonight, I felt real lucky and I needed your money."

"Fuck you and deal, Alvin," Tommy snorted.

Two hours later, Bobby's nervousness was gone. He felt comfortable and right at home. He had cemented some good relationships with the men around the table and he was winning fifteen hundred dollars. He didn't know which was more responsible for his feeling at ease . . . the conversation or the money. Probably the money. He looked down at the chips in front of him. Definitely the money.

Robert was wrong. The men around the table weren't bad poker players, but with the exception of Tommy and David Apston, they weren't great. As with most men of power and money, they tended to stick with hands a little too long, hoping to draw a card that would make them a winner. Winning in business made it inconceivable to them that they couldn't draw exactly the right card to fill an inside straight or a full house. They played with more luck than skill. By playing conservative poker, Bobby had managed to run his stake up three-fold without having to sweat many hands.

"Deal me in."

Bobby turned in his chair. The eighth player had arrived. It was Phillip Crawford.

"About time you got here," Tommy drawled.

"Unlike the rest of you bastards, I've got to work for a living," Phillip returned.

Alvin leaned back in his chair, looking at his watch. "Perfect timing, Phillip, it's time for the ten o'clock stretch."

The other men stood up slowly and began walking around the room, trying to loosen muscles that had begun to stiffen around the table.

Bobby got up and walked over to shake Phillip's hand.

"Good to see you again, Bobby."

"Same here, Phillip."

"I've been meaning to give you a call and take you out to dinner, but I've been so busy, I just haven't had the time."

Bobby folded his fingers together, then pushed his palms outward, cracking his knuckles. "It's just as well. I've been pretty busy myself."

Phillip nodded. "I know. But you're doing a hell of a job, Bobby. KMC sounds better than ever. I was up in San Francisco last week

and the same goes for KFMC. You can tell just by listening that the stations are winners."

Bobby glowed under the compliment. "Thanks a lot."

"Excuse me, Bobby." It was Robert. "Can I talk with you for a minute?"

"Sure." Bobby turned toward Phillip. "I'll be right back."

"Take your time," Phillip waved. "Hello, Robert."

Robert barely nodded in reply to Phillip's greeting, pulling Bobby toward a corner of the room.

"I'm going to leave."

Bobby's face darkened. "Come on, Robert. I'm on a roll. I don't want to leave now. What's the matter?"

Robert shrugged. "I've already dropped a thousand dollars and that's my limit."

Bobby was surprised. In concentrating on his own game, he hadn't noticed that his friend had been losing. "Damn, Robert, I'm winning fifteen hundred. I don't think I'm going to be very well liked if I take an early powder my first night here without giving these pigs a chance to get it back."

"You can stay."

"Now how can I do that? I came with you. I don't have a car."

"Hell, Bobby, all of these guys are in the record business. Any of them would probably pay five hundred dollars just to be alone in the car with you for half an hour. All you have to do is ask."

He thought for a few moments. It was true, he'd have no trouble getting a ride. "What about Bev?"

Robert shrugged. "Why don't you call her?"

"Good idea. She'll understand."

"All right, I'm going to hit it then."

"You really lost a thousand, Robert?"

Robert pulled Bobby closer to the corner and dropped his voice lower. "Look, losing is only half the reason I want to leave."

Bobby grimaced and took a deep breath.

Robert sighed. "I just can't stand Phillip Crawford, Bobby."

"Here we go."

"Really," Robert continued, "I just don't like the bastard."

"Come off it, Robert. Phillip's all right."

"Don't you believe that for a second, Bobby. The man is a slime."

He laughed. "We're all slimes, Robert."

"Not like him."

"You're full of it, Robert."

"Maybe. But you know I don't like him or what he stands for."

"He's just a record guy."

"Not just a record guy, Bobby, the strongest independent on the West Coast."

"So?"

"I just don't like his methods."

"Such as?"

Robert looked around nervously. "He'll do anything to get one of his records played."

"So will every one in this room."

"Not like him. He's into heavy payola."

"You don't know that, Robert."

"I can't prove it, but I know it."

"Since when are you the watchdog for the industry?"

"I care about these things, Bobby."

"So do I, damn it!" he said angrily. "I care that people like you keep making accusations that you can't prove. You're doing a lot of talking about payola and shit and it's pissing me off."

"You're living in a dream world, Bobby."

"Maybe I am." His voice was getting louder. "All I know is that I would never take payola or hang around anyone who does."

"I never said you would."

"Then quit getting up tight about something you know nothing about."

"It's happening, Bobby."

"Bullshit!"

Robert shook his head. "You don't understand."

"I do understand. I know you care, but you're going overboard."

Robert sighed. "Maybe you're right."

"I know I'm right. Besides, what difference does it make if everyone is taking money, as long as you and I don't?"

Robert stared at him for a few seconds, then smiled. "That's all that matters, I guess. I just don't want you to get caught up in it."

Bobby grinned and put his arm around Robert. "You know better. Now come on back and let's play some poker."

Robert shook his head. "No, I'm going. I still don't like Phillip Crawford, even if he's as pure as the driven snow, which, by the way, he isn't."

Bobby threw his head back and laughed at the ceiling. "Then go home you ass-hole, while I take these poor bastards for everything they've got."

Robert took a deep breath. "You sure you'll be all right?"

"I'm a big boy, Robert."

"I know. You're the biggest."

"You've got that right."

"That's why I'm worried about you."

He pushed Robert toward the stairs. "Let my momma worry about me Robert, it's her job." He watched his friend leave, then turned and mingled with the rest of the group.

"Did Robert cut out?" It was Phillip Crawford.

Bobby nodded.

Phillip shrugged. "Seems like every time I walk into a room, I see Robert Williams leaving."

Bobby pursed his lips. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"I don't. What's he got against me, anyhow?"

Bobby smiled. "He said you were slime, Phillip."

A curtain seemed to fall across the man's eyes, the spark now hidden behind a carefully controlled veil, giving no hint as to the inner feelings. "Do you agree with him?"

Bobby grinned. "Absolutely."

Phillip's face remained impassive and for a moment Bobby thought he had made a mistake. Then the lines at the corners of the man's eyes began to crinkle, the tightened jaw slackened and Phillip opened his mouth wide and began to laugh. "Well, as long as we all agree, I guess it's all right. Come on, let me get you another drink."

"I've got to use the phone, first."

He sauntered over to the bar, picked up the phone and called the hotel. Beverly answered.

"Hi, babe, how's it going?"

"Oh, Bobby, it was great. Crew has just taken over the decoration of the house. He seemed to know just what I wanted."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I just walked in. I'm looking through catalogues for furniture."

Bobby frowned. "Furniture?"

"Yes. And drapes and carpeting."

"Damn, Bev, what's the matter with the carpets and drapes already in there?"

"A lot, honey," she giggled. "But don't worry about the cost. Crew is going to do our house for half his usual fee and all of the stuff we order will be discounted also. He's got a lot of contacts. And we can pay it by the month."

"Don't go overboard, Bev."

"I'm not, Bobby. It's just fun. How's the game going?"

"I'm winning fifteen hundred so far."

"What about Robert?"

"He lost a thousand and headed home."

"Do you need me to pick you up?"

"No, I'm going to play for a while longer. I'll catch a ride."

"How much longer?"

"The game breaks up around one. Don't wait up."

"I'll still probably be awake looking at the things we're going to buy."

"All right."

"Keep winning, honey."

"It looks like I'm going to have to," he laughed. He gave her the phone number in case she needed him and went back to join the others.

"Like I told you earlier, the game changes at ten- thirty, Bobby," Alvin said across the table. "Ante goes up to twenty-five dollars and it's pot limit."

Bobby nodded. He needed to play carefully. Pot limit meant a player could raise any amount equal to that in the middle of the table. With seven players putting in twenty- five dollars at the start of each hand, the next raise could be one hundred and seventy-five dollars, then three-fifty and higher and higher as the raises continued. He'd have to concentrate. And that was not going to be easy. He had been drinking while the game had been going on and now his eyes were blurring just a little. He was feeling sluggish. He shook his head, trying to clear it. He would have to pay close attention.

By eleven-thirty, Bobby had lost a little over three hundred dollars. He hadn't gotten any good hands and had folded early in most of the games. Still, making the twenty-five dollar ante was cutting into his stash.

"I've got to take a leak." He excused himself from the table and went into the bathroom. A quick break might change his luck.

He was washing up when Phillip Crawford walked in.

"Excuse me, Bobby. I had the urge too."

Bobby continued splashing the water against his cheeks, trying to freshen his mind. He heard the man finish using the toilet, then listened to the now familiar snorts as Phillip evidently freshened up in his own way by using cocaine.

Bobby was drying his face when the man came out of the stall.

"Ah, Bobby, I don't want you to get the wrong idea, but would you like a pop?"

Bobby looked through the folds in the towel. "What?"

Phillip swallowed and glanced at the mirror. "I've got some coke, if you'd like to do some."

Bobby's mouth went dry. He monitored his motions, trying not to let his emotions show. "No thanks, Phillip. I don't do the stuff."

Phillip smiled. "I wouldn't tell anyone."

"I know you won't Phillip, because I don't do it."

Phillip continued to smile at him. "Look, Bobby, Susan told me you had been known to have a pop on occasion."

Bobby felt his face get warm. He should have known the girl couldn't keep a secret from her boss. "I don't care what Susan told you, Phillip," he said evenly, "But if she said she had ever seen me doing cocaine, then she's not telling you the truth."

Phillip held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Okay, okay. An honest mistake. I was just trying to help."

"I'll stick to the water."

"I hope it works, Bobby, but a little pick-me-up doesn't hurt. You're the only guy in this group that isn't wired."

"Really?"

"Hell, Bobby. You think all of these guys have been going to the bathroom so often because they've got weak kidneys?"

Bobby laughed. "I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, look." Phillip reached into his pocket and took out a folded square of white paper. He set it down on the lavatory. "I know you feel uncomfortable about this, so I won't press it. If I was in your position and some slimey, independent record guy offered me drugs, I'd be a little suspect too. But I'm going to leave this here. It just fell out of my pocket. What you do with it after I walk out of here is up to you."

Without giving Bobby time to say anything, Phillip reached for the door. "Just don't leave it there. Toss it if you don't use it." He stepped out.

Bobby stared at the paper for a few seconds, then reached down and picked it up. Phillip was smart. The independent promoter made the offer in a way that didn't put Bobby on the spot. He went into the stall and opened the paper, exposing the cocaine. He grinned. Phillip was real smart. He had left only a small amount of the white powder, just in case Bobby chose to flush it.

He didn't.

The thought never crossed his mind. Since he began using the drug with Debbie, he had become accustomed to its effect. It would come in handy now, clearing his head and making him more alert.

Taking a book of matches out of his pocket, Bobby tucked the edge into the coke, gathering enough to snort quickly. He repeated the procedure, inhaling all of the drug into his system before licking

the residue off the paper, then putting it into the toilet. He took a deep breath, feeling the usual jolt sizzle through his head, taking the cob-webs with it. A month ago, he had never done the drug. Now here he was in a stranger's bathroom, trying to get a freeze!

"Damn, son, we were about to send out a search party for you," Tommy said as he returned to the table. "We thought you might have flushed yourself down the commode!"

"Shut up and deal, Tommy!" he grinned.

By one o'clock, Bobby had managed to increase his winnings to just under two thousand dollars. He won a couple of small hands, but couldn't seem to catch the right cards when the pot was loaded.

Phillip was dealing five card draw. Bobby checked his cards, two aces, two kings and a six of clubs. It wasn't a bad start. There would be one round before he could discard the six and hope for a full house.

It was Tommy's bet. "Twenty-five."

"Make it one hundred," David Apston said, sitting on his right."

"Call." Bobby slid his chips into the pot.

"Too much for me," Hal Courtney said disgustedly, throwing in his cards. Irving did the same.

"Raise a hundred." Sherman Edwards was in.

Bobby's eyes flicked around the table, measuring the players still in the hand. Phillip was sitting directly across from him, studying his cards. He set them face down on the table.

"Make it three hundred."

"All right!" Alvin chortled.

In every long, poker game, there were one or two hands that were played for big money. Several players held good cards and the pot would be large. This would be one of those hands and the entire table knew it, even those already out of the game.

"Fuck you!" Tommy said, throwing his cards in.

David took a little more time, but finally pushed his chips into the middle. "I'm in."

"So am I," Bobby said, throwing in his three hundred.

Sherman quickly followed suit.

"Cards," Phillip said, picking up the deck.

Bobby followed the action closely. What the players drew would often tip off their hands.

"One," said David.

Bobby figured he was holding two pair or four of the same suit. If Bobby didn't hit, he could beat David if the man held only two pair.

His would be higher. If David hit the flush and he didn't score, Bobby would be sunk. But that was poker.

"One of your best," he said. Phillip dealt him the card. He made no move to look at it, placing it face down with the others in his hand. He wanted to concentrate on what the remaining players were drawing.

Sherman took one also. Bobby figured him for the same as David. Now Phillip.

"Dealer takes two," Phillip said, dealing himself two cards.

Bobby measured him carefully. Phillip must have three of a kind and was trying to add to them.

The room was silent as each man checked his cards. Bobby quickly thumbed through his hand, searching for another ace or king.

He found the queen of spades; it did not improve on the draw.

"Your bet, David," Alvin said.

"Fuck off, Alvin, you're not in the game," David muttered.

"It's still your bet," Alvin chirped.

"Check."

David hadn't hit. Bobby knew it or the man would have bet big. He made an instant decision, taking a chance that Sherman hadn't hit either. He'd play this hand as if he had hit the full house. The bluff was on!

"Bet a thousand." He tossed the chips into the center of the table.

"Jesus Christ!" Alvin said. "This is going to be a big one."

"Alvin, will you shut the fuck up?" Tommy said. "If you wanted to play, why didn't you stay in the game?"

"Too rich for me," Sherman said.

Bobby looked across the table. Phillip was staring at him.

"What the fuck are you holding?"

Bobby grinned. "Just bluffing, Phillip."

Phillip stared at him for a few more seconds. "I think maybe you are. How much is in the pot?"

Bobby's heart sank. Phillip was going to bet it all. Now what? Should he fold or run the bluff to the end?

"Twenty-three-fifty," said Alvin's business manager, counting the chips.

"I bet it."

"I'm gone," said David.

Now it was all up to Bobby. He grinned at Phillip, trying to keep his nervousness from showing. He kept his hands loosely on the table, giving no indication of the volcano of emotions he was feeling inside.

"I can't cover it, Phillip. I've only got about five hundred."

Phillip shrugged his shoulders. "Your credit is good with me."

Bobby stared across the table into Phillip's smiling eyes. Did the man have three of a kind? Most surely he did. He wouldn't bet that kind of money if he didn't. Or was he running a bluff also?

Bobby took another sip from the drink by his side, feeling the alcohol rush through his system, giving him the courage to do what he normally wouldn't think of doing.

"How much in the pot?"

"Jesus!" Alvin said.

"Four thousand, seven hundred dollars," Bruce said.

Bobby grinned across at Phillip. "Bet it."

"All right." It was David Apston, voicing his encouragement. "Take him down, Bob."

"Your bet, Phillip," Tommy said.

Bobby continued to stare at Phillip, a grin plastered on his face in what he hoped was a confident manner. Phillip held his gaze.

"I think you're bluffing."

Bobby shrugged his shoulders as Phillip had done earlier. "It only costs five grand to find out."

Phillip looked down at the chips in front of him, stacking them with his fingers.

"Well?" Alvin asked.

"Tell him again, Tommy," Phillip said.

"Fuck you, Alvin, you 'aint in the game."

"I am," Bobby said, his heart pounding so hard he thought it might be heard around the table. He knew Phillip was on the edge and he had to force him into a decision, one way or the other. "Well?"

Phillip picked up the chips in front of him and began counting. If he called, Bobby would lose.

"How much in the pot?"

"Nine thousand and change."

He was going to raise!

Phillip looked across the table and raised his eyebrows. "Well, Bobby?"

He tried to keep his voice from cracking. "Well, Phillip?"

Phillip suddenly threw his cards face down into the center of the table. "Take it!"

"All right," David shouted.

Bobby tried to keep his hands from shaking as he reached across the table and pulled all the chips toward him.

"Good hand," Tommy said.

"Thanks."

Phillip was staring at him. "What did you have, Bobby?"

He grinned. In a friendly game like this one, it was not uncommon for players to show their cards after a pot was won. "Two pair."

"Bullshit!" David said.

Bobby turned over his cards.

"Son of a bitch!" whistled Tommy.

"Great bluff!" David said. "My man's got nerves of steel."

"What did you have, Phillip?" Bobby asked.

"Doesn't matter, I lost." Phillip shoved his cards in with the rest of the discards and quickly mixed them up. He pushed back from the table, sweeping the others with his gaze. "Well, that's it for me."

Bobby glanced down at his watch. "Me too." He looked up at Phillip. "Can you give me a lift? Robert left me without wheels."

"Sure, let's go."

"What are you guys gonna do? Chop us up in the parking lot?" Tommy grinned.

Bobby grinned back, then he and Phillip said their goodbyes and left the house. Bobby was feeling good, having won almost five per cent of his yearly salary in one, short night.

"You play poker pretty well, Bobby."

He grinned into the darkness as Phillip drove toward his hotel. "Just lucky."

Phillip shook his head. "There's very little luck involved with you."

The two men were silent as they drove, each involved with his own thoughts.

"Bobby, how about dinner next week?"

Here it comes. Phillip is making the big move. "I'll be busy moving into my house for the next few days, Phillip."

"Then how about the week after?"

Bobby turned and looked at his companion. "Fine, Phillip, I'd like that, as long as we get the ground rules straight."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, no business talk. I don't want any pressure from you about any records you're working. I won't play that game."

"You've got it all wrong, Bobby. You won't get any pressure from me. I work all the records you eventually add, anyhow. That's the joy of being an independent, I don't have to concentrate on just one line. I won't be harping on you to play any of my records."

"Fine."

"But if you ever need any information on how a particular record is doing, don't hesitate to call me. Like I said, I work them all and I

don't have any ax to grind. If you want to know the straight skinny on a record, ask me and I'll tell you the truth."

"I might just do that." What the man said made sense. Often Bobby needed to know exactly how a record was selling. If he asked the record company, they'd tell him anything just to get it on the Media Communications chain. Maybe Phillip could provide some useful information.

"I'll give you a call next week," Phillip said, stopping the car in front of the hotel.

"You got it. And thanks for the ride." Bobby watched the car as it pulled off into the night, then went upstairs.

* * * * *

"What do we add?"

Bobby was in his office with Nancy and Debbie, the sun going down on another Monday. They had gotten all the record information from the stations across the country and Nancy had finished all of her meetings with the record promoters.

"Bobby, for over a month, we've added just one record a week to our lists," Nancy said.

Bobby nodded.

"I think the stations may be getting a little stale," she continued.

"And what do you propose to rectify that problem?" he asked.

"There are three good records out there that we should add this week."

"Three?"

Nancy swallowed nervously. It was clear that she still didn't feel comfortable around Bobby. "The Proud is good, although it's brand new, and the Michael Denver and The Falcons are at the top of the charts on the stations that are playing them."

Bobby took a deep breath. "Three records? And they're all on Webster aren't they?"

"Yes."

He looked at Debbie. "What do you think?"

"I agree, Bobby. The stations are sounding a little stale. KMC is so predictable that I can hardly listen for more than an hour or so."

Bobby scratched his arm. Maybe it was time to loosen up just a little bit. They had been extremely selective since he had taken over. Maybe too selective. He had to keep his stations current. Being too late on too many records would chase their audience to their competitors.

"All right, let's do it."

Nancy breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"But let's make the program directors think they've talked me into it," Bobby said. "Don't let them know we're thinking about adding more than one. I'll talk to each of them tomorrow and get their opinions, then late in the day, you give them the adds Nancy, and convince each one of them that their belief in the records was what pushed me over the top."

She nodded.

"We might as well let them believe they're important," he smiled.

He watched the two women leave his office and began preparing to leave also. He'd miss dinner again. Between working long hours, playing poker and fooling around with Susan and Debbie, he was spending less and less time at home.

Bev had completed furnishing the house with the interior decorator and Bobby had to admit they had done a terrific job. He had to pay the man five thousand dollars, but that was easy. He won that much at the first poker game. The furniture and drapes had run up another thirty thousand, but as Bev had promised, they made a deal to pay by the month.

He was living in a fantastic house with a wonderful wife and child, hanging out with the "in" people in the entertainment business, running the largest radio company in the country and fucking his brains out regularly. Things couldn't get much better!

* * * * *

The private line rang once in Phillip's office.

"Hello?"

"Three adds for tomorrow."

Phillip's eyes lit up. "Three?"

"Yes. And they're all on Webster."

"Perfect. What are they?"

"The Proud, The Falcons and Michael Denver."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

Phillip hung up and dialed David Apston.

"Yeah?"

"It's Phillip. What are you working on this week?"

"I'm trying to close The Falcons and Michael Denver. We're pushing The Proud out of the box."

"How's it going?"

"Everyone but the Media Communications chain is on the Denver and Falcons."

"Think you'll get them?"

"Probably not. Holiday's tighter than a gnat's ass. He hasn't added more than one record since he took over. I don't see him going on both of them."

"What about The Proud?"

"Out of the box? No fucking way."

Phillip began making notes on a pad in front of him. "What would it be worth to you to get all those records on all the Media Communications stations tomorrow?"

David grunted. "Get real, Phillip, you must be taking acid."

"I'm asking, David."

"Make up a figure, Phillip. It doesn't matter, we're talking pipe dreams here."

"Forty thousand apiece for The Falcons and Michael Denver and since The Proud is brand new, double bonus that one for eighty grand."

"That's a little steep, schpein."

"That's what you'd pay if you worked them through individual independents across the country. I'm trying to save your phone bills."

"Yeah, but you're a little high on The Falcons. It's even money he'll add that anyhow."

"But what about the Denver?"

"We'll just have to wait until next week."

"You might lose it."

"A distinct possibility."

"All right, let's make it thirty for The Falcons, forty for Denver and eighty for The Proud."

"I can't make that deal, Crawford. If he goes on just The Falcons, like I think he will anyhow, you pick up thirty grand for doing nothing."

"You don't owe me anything unless he adds all three."

"You mean it's free if I don't get all of them?"

"You pay air if it's not a trifecta."

"You're on."

"Plus," Phillip said, "if I come through on this one, you give me a twenty thousand dollar a week retainer to work all of your records for the next year."

"No bonuses?"

"Yes, I want bonuses. This just keeps your records at the top of my list."

"And if you don't come through?"

"I work your whole line for the next year for nothing."

"You've got a deal."

"Save us both a lot of time. Put the check in the mail tonight."

"You've got Holiday wired already?"

"Just read The Report and take all the credit for your records going on."

"I'll be more than happy to do that."

"I knew you would."

* * * * *

"Hi Bev."

He walked through the door of their new house.

"Bobby, you're late again."

He shrugged, dropping his briefcase and coat into a chair. "I know, where's Pat."

"I put her to sleep an hour ago."

"Anything left over from dinner?"

"I'll warm up the roast."

He followed her into the kitchen and sat at the table while she prepared his meal.

"I wanted to talk to you about putting Pat into a private school next month."

"Why?"

"Robert and Pamela send their kids to this school and so does just about everyone else we know. It's much better than public school. And Pat really wants to go. All her friends will be attending."

He shrugged his shoulders again. He really didn't care. "How much will it cost?"

"Five hundred dollars a month."

He stared down at the table, then took a deep breath. "Go ahead and sign her up."

"Bobby, you've just made your daughter and her mother very happy."

He smiled.

"Now if you could just try and spend a little more time with us, everything would be perfect."

"Damn it, Bev . . ."

"I know, darling," she interrupted, kissing him softly on the cheek. "It'll get better soon."

* * * * *

"I told you I wanted a whole gram."

Bobby was lying on the couch with Susan Scanlon at their regular

Thursday night meeting in his office. They had made love once and he was looking at the two quaaludes and the half gram of coke she had put on the table.

"It's all I could get, Bobby. I'm sorry."

He made a face. Half a gram wasn't enough for his Saturday afternoon parties with Debbie any more. He could do half a gram himself.

He leaned down and snorted two of the lines of cocaine she had brought for them. He had started snorting with her the week after Debbie had introduced him to the drug. He liked the feeling of power it gave him. He also liked the effect it had on his ability to make love. With a little coke, he could go for hours.

"Look, if you can't come up with a gram, I'm going to have to find someone who can."

Susan dropped her head. "I'm sorry, Bobby, I really am."

He looked at her disgustingly. As beautiful as she was, he was growing tired of her. Maybe it was time to find a replacement.

He reached across the couch and grabbed her chin in his hand, pulling her face up towards his. "Are you going to be able to get me a gram next Thursday or not?"

"I'll try," she stammered.

It was unlike him to be cruel, but he enjoyed what he was doing. He felt strong, invincible and powerful. Part of it was the confidence he felt in his job. He was doing so well. Everyone in Los Angeles was at his beck and call, tripping over themselves to do him favors so he might add their records. Part of it was the drug. It accentuated his belief in himself, his arrogance, his power.

He bent down quickly and inhaled two more lines.

"Get on the floor," he said.

She forced a smile, then slid off the couch and onto the carpet.

"On all fours," he commanded. He loved ordering her around.

She got up on her hands and knees, looking over her shoulder as he dropped down behind her. "Bobby," she whispered, "you get me so hot."

He moved behind her and she arched her back, making her body more accessible. He grinned and moved closer, using his hand to guide him.

He felt her body stiffen when she felt his touch, her buttocks lifting.

"Wrong place, Bobby," she giggled.

He reached up and grabbed her hair roughly, jerking her head back. "Right place, Susan."

She wriggled her hips, trying to move away. "No Bobby, not there, it'll hurt."

He lunged, pulling back on her hair while thrusting forward.

"No, Bobby!" she yelled. "You're too big!"

He grabbed her hips with his hands as he jammed forward again, forcing himself painfully inside of her.

She screamed, her voice echoing through the empty office. She fell forward on her stomach and he followed, his weight crashing down on her, forcing him even deeper. Before she could scream again, he covered her mouth with his hand.

God he felt great! He gritted his teeth together, his lips curling back into an snarl. "You love it, don't you," he whispered.

Susan shook her head and moaned through his fingers. "Nooo," she mumbled. "It hurts so bad . . . please stop."

He didn't stop, instead he increased his tempo, sawing brutally in and out of her. It didn't matter how she felt. It only mattered how he felt. And he felt great! This merciless rape adding to and enhancing the egotistical feeling of absolute power that hummed through his veins.

"Tell me I'm the best baby," he growled. "Tell me I'm the greatest." Sweat was dripping off his face, falling on her cheeks, mingling with her tears.

"You . . . you are th-the best, B-B-Bobby," she stuttered. "You're the g-g-greatest!"

Bobby lunged forward. He was the best! He was the greatest!! He was the king!!!

* * * * *

The princess phone rung in Phillip Crawford's office.

"What?" he said confidently.

"You haven't missed a beat since the new man took over, have you?"

Phillip smiled. He looked down at the latest copy of The Report. All three records had been added to the Media Communications chain.

"Not yet."

The flat, unemotional voice continued. "How did you get him wrapped up so quickly?"

"I haven't. I'm working around him."

There was a slight hesitation on the line. "Is that wise?"

"It's the only route now. I'll take it direct when I have too."

"As long as it works out."

"It will."

"I have the utmost faith in you."

"That makes my whole life complete."

"No need to get touchy."

The voice seemed to raise slightly in pitch. Or was it just his imagination?

"Sorry."

"Don't be. My associates and I think you are doing an admirable job, under the circumstances."

"Thank you."

"Keep up the good work."

Phillip hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. So far, so good. Even without Bobby's help, he managed to lock in two record companies for a tidy sum of cash. But he needed more. And he needed a lock on Mr. Holiday.

He leaned forward and picked up the phone. It was time to put the next phase of his plan in motion.

* * * * *

"All right, Bobby, where have you been?"

It was ten o'clock on Saturday night and Bobby had just walked in the door after spending the whole day and part of the night with Debbie.

"Working," he mumbled.

"Bobby, you've got to stop this."

"Stop what?" he said, staring angrily at her. "Stop making money? Stop trying to be a success? Stop making house payments?"

He walked toward the bedroom, Bev following behind. "No, you've got to stop treating your family like we're third on your list."

He flung himself down on the bed. "What are you talking about? I'm doing this all for you?"

"Oh, Bobby, stop it," she said, sitting down on the bed next to him. "You've got to start including us in on your life. You treat us like we don't exist sometimes."

He took a deep breath and covered his face with his hands. She was right. He had to make some effort to spend more time with the two of them.

"You told Pat you'd go swimming with her tonight," Bev said softly.

"Damn," he moaned, remembering the promise he had made to his daughter. But when he was looking at Debbie's naked body, all other thoughts disappeared from his mind.

Bev leaned over and rubbed his head. "She waited up until nine o'clock."

He felt tears stinging his eyes. He couldn't stand to think of his

little girl waiting for a daddy who didn't come home. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I know, Bobby, I know. But you've got to be more than sorry. I've made all the excuses I can for you, but she's a little girl and she doesn't understand. All she knows is what her daddy tells her. Please don't let her down again."

He sat up and buried his face against her shoulder. His head was pounding. He had drunk too much champagne. The throbbing in his skull combined with the guilt he was feeling to make him sick to his stomach.

"I'll make it up to both of you, I promise."

She pushed him back against the pillows. "All right, darling, relax. Just go to sleep and we'll spend the whole day together by the pool tomorrow. Is that all right with you?"

"Wonderful," he said. "My head is killing me. I just need to rest."

She got up. "I'll get you some aspirin, then you can nod off."

He pulled the pillow over his head as she walked out of the room. The fact that he had dodged another bullet soon helped force the feelings of guilt away, replaced by thoughts of his afternoon with Debbie. She had been a tiger as usual, and the sex had been great, but it was what she said as he was leaving that replayed over and over in his mind.

"Bobby," she said as she walked him to the door of her new apartment, "bring two grams of coke and four ludes next week."

"Isn't that a little much for the two of us?" he asked.

She smiled mysteriously and said, "I want you to meet a friend of mine next week."

"Friend? What friend?"

She cocked her head and wrinkled her nose. "A girlfriend of mine wants to meet you."

"Debbie, exactly what have you got in mind?"

She grinned even wider. "Just show up with the drugs next week and you'll find out." Then she closed the door, leaving him to wonder exactly what was going to happen.

"Here's the aspirin, Bobby."

Bev's voice jolted him out of his thoughts and back into reality. He sat up and washed down the aspirin, hoping the pills would wash away all thoughts of Debbie and her friend.

Until next Saturday!

* * * * *

Bobby shut off the turntable in his office. He had been listening to

music since nine o'clock and it was almost noon. So far, he'd heard nothing that excited him. He hoped Nancy was having better luck in her meetings with the record promoters.

"Bobby, Alvin Irving is on line one."

"All right."

"Is that a real person?" Debbie asked through the intercom.

He had to laugh. "Almost." He picked up the phone. "Hello, Al."

"Bobby, you're the best."

"I know that, Al," he said sarcastically.

"I just wanted to call and thank you for adding The Falcons last week."

"Don't thank me, Alvin, just keep them putting out hit records and you'll have no trouble getting me interested."

"How about getting interested a little sooner on the next release?"

"It'll go number one, what do you care?"

"I'd just like it to go a little quicker."

"Yeah, wouldn't we all."

"Listen, Bobby, I wanted to hip you to another group I just signed that I think you'll enjoy."

"Who's that?"

"A group called The Bandits. They're all studio musicians from Los Angeles and they've been playing on some of the biggest sessions for years. I got them together and we're releasing an album on Wednesday."

"I'll be glad to listen to it."

"I'm going to send you an advance copy today by messenger."

"Fine."

"I'd like you to meet the group, you know, kind of get to know them first hand."

"I don't know that I've got the time for that."

"I know you're busy, Bobby. I also know that you've been working like a dog. You need a vacation. The Falcons are playing a concert in Honolulu this weekend and The Bandits are the opening act. I want to fly you and your family over, get a big suite, spend the weekend and go to the concert."

Bobby hesitated. He had never been to Hawaii. Neither had Bev. "Jeeze, Alvin, that sounds just great, but I can't do it."

"Why not?"

"Against company policy."

"Hell, Bobby, you're the man. Change the policy."

Again, he hesitated. It would be a wonderful weekend, he and Bev and Pat soaking up the sun in Hawaii. It would make up for the time

he had been spending away from them. They spent the previous afternoon relaxing by the pool at the house and he really enjoyed it. It had been the first time in several weeks that he hadn't been worrying about the radio stations ... or about coming home late smelling of perfume.

"I can't do it, Alvin."

"All right, how about this? Why don't you sign a management deal with me. Make me your manager. That way, you can go to Hawaii without worrying about a conflict of interest."

"It won't work, Alvin."

"Then suppose we meet in Hawaii to discuss my managing you, you listen, then say no. In the meantime, you enjoy the islands and get to meet the group."

Alvin sure knew how to close a deal. Bobby was almost tempted to take him up on it. "I'm sorry, pal, it just won't work."

"Bobby, you're a putz."

He laughed. "You're right, Alvin, but I can't go. I do appreciate the offer."

"Think about it, Bobby. You can change your mind."

"If I do, I'll let you know."

He hung up the phone. Maybe he was a putz. Who'd care if he went to Honolulu, compliments of Alvin Irving? Except Paul. And the FCC. And the IRS.

"Bobby?"

It was Debbie again on the intercom.

"Talk to me."

"Tommy Russo is here to see you."

Bobby closed his eyes. He hadn't met with any of the record promoters in his office since he had taken the job. But he was tired of listening to music and it was almost time for lunch. Maybe Tommy would be a relief.

"I don't recall making an appointment with Tommy."

"If he'd take my damned phone calls, maybe I could make an appointment." It was Tommy, talking over Debbie's shoulder.

Bobby grinned. He was relaxing already. "Send him in."

Tommy Russo came swaggering into his office like he owned the place. "Damn it, bud, what in the hell is wrong with you?"

"Fuck you, Tommy," Bobby said, fighting back a grin.

"We got to talk."

"So I assumed." Bobby motioned toward one of the stools. "Have a seat."

Tommy eyed the stools with distrust. "What the fuck are those?"

"They're called chairs, Tommy. People usually sit on them."

"Where do you sit?"

"I don't. I like to stand while I'm working."

Tommy looked at Bobby, then started laughing. The man had an infectious cackle, his face crinkling, eyes almost closing, his body bent over as he slapped his knee.

"Holiday, you are a fucking piece of work."

Bobby couldn't keep from grinning. Tommy was nuts. "I've got work to do, man. What do you want?"

Tommy twisted his face into a frown, but his eyes kept gleaming. "I want some pussy, but it's too late for that. I also want a fucking drink, but it's too damned early for that. So I guess I'll just have to get hot!"

Bobby was laughing openly now, his shoulders shaking as he tried, and failed, to keep his composure.

"What are you upset about, Tom?"

The man's head snapped back. He stared at Bobby down his nose. "I'm not upset, bud, I'm hot. I'm really hot!"

Bobby rubbed his face with his hands, fighting back the tears. "All right, Tommy, talk to me."

"I 'aint talking standing up."

Bobby pointed toward the couches on the other end of the office. "Let's go sit down."

"Now that's better, bud, that's a whole lot better."

Tommy walked across the room and slouched down in the cushions. Bobby sat across from him in one of the chairs.

"Now what is it, Tommy?"

"Bud, you and I have known each other for a long time, haven't we?"

Tommy was stretching it, but Bobby was willing to concede the point. He nodded.

"Well, you've been on this job for a couple of months, and I haven't bugged you about one record, have I?"

Bobby shook his head.

"I've left you alone, letting you do your job while mine has gone straight to hell."

Bobby raised his eyebrows.

"That's why I'm hot."

"Because your job has gone to hell?"

"No. Fuck no! Because you 'aint adding any of my records."

"Tommy, the records you're putting out aren't hits."

Tommy bowed his neck, pulling his chin closer to his sunken chest.

He looked like an angry rooster.

"How the fuck would you know? You 'aint playing any of them."

"Tommy, your top priority is the David Martin. It's stiffing big time in Minneapolis and St. Louis. You're getting a little action in the South on the Nightmares. You've got sixteen tiny stations on the Mary Aston and it's not doing anything."

"Wait a minute, bud . . ."

Bobby held up his hand. "You released three new records last week. One's a slow ballad that doesn't do anything for me, the other is heavy metal, which doesn't fit my format and I won't even comment on the Joan Valendez."

Tommy stared at him for a few seconds, an angry look on his face. Then his lips twitched and he broke into a grin. "You've done your homework, bud."

Bobby smiled back. "I did it in the office, Tommy. I wouldn't take any of your product home with me."

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck you!" Bobby laughed. He stood up. "Come on, bud," he said, using Tommy's euphemism for everyone he met, "it's time to eat. I'll let you buy me lunch."

Tommy jumped off the couch. "You got a deal, son."

He walked out of the office and into the reception area, past six record promoters waiting to see Nancy, Tommy strutting proudly by his side. Putting a blank look on his face, he stared straight ahead as he walked quickly through the room. He always avoided leaving the office on Mondays because the record promotion people hung around like vultures, trying to get a chance to see him.

"Bobby, baby, it's good to see you."

He hadn't made it. Charlie Minion, head of promotion for A And B records stood up quickly in front of him. Bobby forced a tight smile and shook the man's hand.

"Good to see you, Charlie."

"How long has it been? Since the NAB convention last September, wasn't it?"

Bobby shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't remember. And he was sure Charlie couldn't either. Charlie was one of the flashy promoters, always traveling in a limo with good looking women, flashing silver and gold around his neck, always talking. He was harmless and loud.

Charlie put his arm around Bobby's shoulder. "I've got to talk to you, Bobby."

He turned out of the man's grasp. "Sorry, Charlie, I'm busy."

"How about lunch?"

He pointed to Tommy. "My dance card's already filled."

Tommy beamed.

"Then let's get together for dinner later this week?"

Bobby shook his head and headed for the exit. "Can't. I'm all tied up. Check with Debbie. See when I'm free." He went through the door leading to the hallway.

"I'll call you next week."

He glanced at Tommy as they waited for an elevator.

"Now 'aint that a kick in the ass, bud? You the king of the hill."

Bobby smirked and nodded. He didn't need to be told.

* * * * *

It was the usual oppressive, humid, smoggy Los Angeles morning outside his office window, but the temperature was not responsible for Bobby being warm under the collar.

Susan Scanlon had stood him up the night before. Their usual Thursday meeting had not gone as planned. She hadn't showed.

He picked up the phone and called Phillip Crawford's office. He could not understand why she had stood him up. They had talked at noon the day before and she seemed anxious to get together with him. He waited until seven o'clock before giving up and going home.

At least the night had not been a total loss. He had gotten home earlier than usual. Bev had been happy. They even made love, something he had been increasingly too tired to accomplish in the past few weeks.

"Phillip Crawford Promotion."

"Susan Scanlon please."

"I'm sorry, Miss Scanlon is no longer with us."

Bobby was stunned.

"May someone else help you?"

He swallowed.

"Hello?"

"Ah, no, I guess not."

"Pardon me, is this Bobby Holiday?"

He hesitated. "Yes."

"Bobby, this is Shirley Rogers, Phillip's secretary. I've been trying to reach you this morning. Phillip wanted to talk to you. Can you hold a moment?"

"Sure." What the hell did Phillip want?

"Bobby, how are you?"

"Fine, Phillip, and you?"

"Real good. Look, I tried to get you on the phone yesterday after-

noon and this morning but I couldn't break through your secretary."

"What did you need, Phillip?" He tried to act cool.

"I wanted you to know that I had to let Susan go."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I know you were seeing her from time to time, and I wanted to let you know before you found out from anyone else."

"Sorry it happened."

"I'm sorry too. Confidentially Bobby, I caught her stealing yesterday afternoon."

"No." He attempted to keep his voice calm and emotionless.

"Yes." Phillip dropped his voice, speaking quietly into the phone.

"I found her going through my office desk, taking some of my nose spray, if you know what I'm talking about."

Bobby did indeed. "That's too bad."

"Yes, I was sorry I had to do it. But I really had no choice."

"I can understand that." Bobby's grip tightened on the phone. He tried to sound casual. "Do you know how I can get in touch with her? I'd like to say goodbye." It sounded lame, even to him.

"I don't have the slightest idea, Bobby. I put the fear of God into her when I fired her. I wouldn't be surprised if she drove all the way back to San Diego last night."

"Thanks anyhow, Phillip."

"Anything I can do for you, Bobby?"

He was tempted to ask for the drugs. Very tempted. But no . . . no way. "Nothing, Phillip. She was just supposed to meet me last night and didn't. I was worried about her. Now I know why I didn't hear from her."

"She was probably too embarrassed to tell you. And I'm sure she knew you'd find out the truth from me."

"Well, thanks for the info, Phillip."

He hung up the phone and buzzed Debbie on the intercom. "Call San Diego information and see if they show a listing for a Susan Scanlon."

* * * * *

"What now?"

Phillip looked across his desk at Susan. He smiled, then reached into his drawer and pulled out two envelopes.

"Your bonus, like we agreed." He tossed one of the envelopes across the desk. "One thousand dollars in cash, and," he handed her the other, "one month, all expenses paid in Hawaii. Your airline tickets are there along with some front row seats to The Falcons'

concert. They play in Honolulu on Saturday."

She grinned mischievously and picked up the envelopes. "I should get an extra bonus for the academy award performance I put on last week in his office, crying and pretending to be hurt when he so brutally took me on the floor!" She giggled.

"If you enjoyed it so much, maybe I should get a refund," Phillip said.

She ran a finger over her lips and opened her eyes wide. "Why, maybe you should." She tore open the envelope with the money in it, her thumb fanning across the top of the bills. "How much do you think is fair?"

He smiled. "Half?"

She looked at him, scratching her head as if actually considering the offer, then shoved the money in her purse. "No, I've changed my mind."

He laughed at her act. "Have a good time in Hawaii, kid."

"I'll do that," she said over her shoulder as she walked out of the office. "I'll call you when I get back to San Diego."

"Well?"

Phillip turned and looked at Shirley. She had been sitting near the sliding glass doors. He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair, his eyes shifting to the ceiling. "Now we wait."

"Do you think he's going to come to you?"

He rubbed his chin, stroking his beard. "In time." He put his feet up on the desk. "All in good time."

* * * * *

Debbie walked into his office. "No listing for a Susan Scanlon in San Diego, Bobby."

He stared silently out the window. The brown smog that hung just over the top of the buildings matching his mood. "Damn!"

"What's the matter, Bobby, one of your ladies get away?" The corners of her mouth raised slightly as her eyes danced.

He shook his head. "It was nothing like that."

She walked across the room and patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Bobby," she cooed mockingly, "I'll make it all up to you tomorrow."

He brushed her hand away. "Don't patronize me, Debbie."

"I'm sorry you lost your true love, Bobby." She was still ribbing him.

"You're sorrier than you think."

She tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

His lips twitched into a humorless grin. "That was my fucking drug connection. She took a hard left on me."

"Meaning?"

He took a deep breath and let it out, blowing the air through his clinched teeth. "Meaning I didn't score."

Her face fell. "Damn it, Bobby, why didn't you say anything earlier? I could have done something."

He frowned, his eyebrows lowering. "I just found out about five minutes ago."

"Shit."

"You said it."

"Damn it."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to see how we fare without the drugs."

She stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "I guess."

"I'll keep trying. Maybe I can come up with something."

She turned and started for the door. "I won't hold my breath." She turned around. "Ratings come in next week, don't they?"

Bobby stared out the window again. "Yep. We get our report cards. Los Angeles and New York come in Monday, the rest later in the week."

"We're going to do good, boss."

He looked at her and snorted quietly. "I hope you're right."

"How do you feel about them?"

"Boston and Los Angeles should do well, I feel good about them. New York will be all right. The rest?" He shrugged. "I just don't know."

"It sure was easier when we just had one to worry about, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "Yep." He turned away from the window and grinned. "But not nearly as much fun!"

* * * * *

"Bobby? Bobby wake up."

He felt a nudge in his ribs, Bev's voice coming to him from somewhere out on the edges of his sleep.

"Come on. Get up."

He opened his eyes slowly, the puffy lids slitting enough to let in some of the light. His mouth felt like it was full of cotton. His throat was thick and dry.

"What?"

Bev was standing next to him. "Come on, Bobby. I let you sleep an extra hour. You've got to get a move on. Church starts in an hour."

He closed his eyes. His stomach was churning. She nudged him again.

"Bobby."

He flung his arm down, knocking her hand away. "Leave me the fuck alone. I'm not going to church this morning."

"Bobby." Something about the tone of her voice caused him to open his eyes again. She was looking toward the foot of the bed. There, standing in her very best dress, all prettied up to go to church, was Pat. She was looking down, her face scrunched up, her lower lip trembling.

"Oh, God," he mumbled. "Come here, baby." He pushed himself up on one elbow, holding the other arm out toward his daughter. She took a couple of steps, hesitating, her eyes still on the floor.

"Come here, darling," he said softly. She took two more steps and he pulled her close against him. "Baby, I'm sorry I acted ugly. It's just that I don't feel well. I'm sick. When your mom woke me up, I was still half asleep." He pulled her closer, resting his head on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

He felt her tiny arms snake around his neck. One hand petted his head gently. "That's all right, Daddy. I'm sorry you're sick."

He clinched his eyes tighter.

Her small voice tinkled against his ear. "You don't have to worry, Daddy. Mommy and I will pray for you at church. I'll ask God to make you all better."

He felt tears burning his eyes. He was such an ass-hole.

"Come on, Pat, let your father rest."

He felt her arms relax around his neck. He opened his eyes and watched as the two of them tiptoed silently out of the room. Just before they closed the door, Pat waved and said, "Good-bye, Daddy. I hope you feel better."

He gave her a weak wave and fell back onto the pillow. Instead of lying here with his head pounding, he should be going to church with them right now, but, he was an ass-hole.

He took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling, revisiting the past twenty-four hours that ended with him cursing like a sailor in his daughter's presence. He had gone to Debbie's the day before, anticipating the meeting she had mentioned with her secret friend. When he arrived at her apartment, he found a note on the door.

"Something came up, Bobby. I'll see you at work on Monday."

He started back to the office to actually do some of the work he had been using as an excuse to Bev, but pulled into a bar instead. He stumbled into the house at two o'clock in the morning after drinking himself into oblivion and taking an ugly barmaid to a cheap motel.

What an ass-hole! He hadn't even called home.

He got carefully out of bed and walked gingerly toward the bathroom. After spending nearly an hour in the hot shower, he made a promise to himself. He would stop the parties. He would concentrate on work and his family, starting as soon as they got back from church.

* * * * *

"Bobby, it's someone from Arbitron on line one."

Bobby held his breath and stared at the phone. This was it. He looked at his watch. Nine-twenty-five. Monday morning. Report card time. He slowly let out his breath and picked up the receiver.

"Bobby Holiday."

"Mr. Holiday, this is Bob Sherwood from the Arbitron Ratings Research Firm calling. I've got the advances from New York, Los Angeles and Chicago in front of me. I thought you might be interested."

"Mildly," said Bobby, his heart pounding. His future was on the line.

"All I have are the twelve-and-over ratings, total people, you'll get the break-downs for age and time groups later today."

"Shoot." Bobby picked up a pencil to note the ratings.

"In New York, WNMC has a 7.9, Z-100 a 7.1, WPLJ a 6.2, WAPP a 4.8..."

Bobby didn't hear the rest of the figures. He had heard all he needed. WNMC, the Media Communications station in New York, was number one!

"Are you interested in any station out of the top ten?"

Bobby swallowed. "No, that's enough. How about Los Angeles?"

He heard the man shuffling papers. "Los Angeles, same figures, twelve-plus... KMC has a 9.6, KIIS a 7.2, KABC a 6.1..."

Bobby was delirious. KMC had been ranked sixth, behind KIIS, its main competitor and three other stations. He was now number one in L.A!

"What about Chicago?" Bobby interrupted.

"Let's see. Here we are. Same figures, Chicago, WLS has an 8.7, WRMC an 8.5, WFYR a 5.1..."

"That's enough!" Bobby couldn't have written the script better.

"The complete reports will be delivered later today?"

"Just after noon, if everything works out the way we plan."

"Thanks for the early warning."

"I don't ever mind calling with numbers like these."

Bobby hung up the phone. "Debbie!" he shouted.

She came running into his office and jumped into his arms. "I was listening in Bobby, congratulations."

He spun her around several times and kissed her. "Can you believe it?" His cheeks were flushed, his neck was red, his eyes were sparkling. "Number one in New York, number one in Los Angeles and number two in Chicago. All fucking right!"

Debbie jumped up and clapped her hands above her head. "You did it, boss, you did it!"

He grinned and shook his head. "Fucking-A right, he had done it! "Get the staff in here. We're going to have a party!"

Conley stated that the FBI has strong evidence that indicates the involvement of organized crime figures across the country.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Bobby was sitting on the edge of his desk, reading a Telex that had just been delivered from Paul Johnson.

“YOU’VE SUCCEEDED BEYOND MY WILDEST EXPECTATIONS. NUMBER ONE IN NEW YORK, LOS ANGELES, BOSTON AND SAN DIEGO. NUMBER TWO IN CHICAGO AND DETROIT. NUMBER THREE IN MIAMI AND SAN FRANCISCO.

THE KING IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE KING.

BOBBY, YOU ARE THE BEST.”

Bobby grinned. Paul was right. He was the best. He put the Telex down on his desk and paced around the office. He had been worried to death about the ratings. In his career, he had done well, but he always thought he had been more lucky than good. Now, these ratings were proof that he was good. He was real good.

Bobby stretched his arms above his head. He’d have been satisfied with half the gains the stations had shown, but the ratings were higher than his wildest dreams! It was as if he could do no wrong. All the trade publications had said it, and now he was beginning to believe it . . . he was a genius.

“Robert Williams on line three, Bobby.”

He leaned over and picked up the phone. “Yep?”

“I can’t believe it.”

Bobby glowed. “You don’t have to believe it. Just print it.”

“Pretty strong, Bobby.”

“Yeah. For my next trick, I’m going to set myself on fire.”

Robert chuckled. “Pack your bags.”

“What?”

“Pack your bags.”

“Why?”

“I’ve already made reservations for your family and mine. I’m taking the nation’s number one programmer and my number one writer to Las Vegas for the weekend.”

“What?”

“The plane leaves at noon from Burbank. Pamela and I will pick

you up at at eleven. You should leave right now.”

“Las Vegas?”

“Come on, Bobby. You deserve to treat yourself to a reward and Las Vegas will be the perfect place. I’ve booked us two suites at the MGM Grand Hotel. It’s going to be a blast.”

Why not? He needed to blow off some steam, and what better place than Las Vegas. Both he and Bev had always wanted to go, but so far, they hadn’t. He could change all of that with a simple yes.

“You’ve got a fucking deal, buddy. Don’t be late!” He slammed down the phone and ran out of the office.

* * * * *

“Where are you going now, honey?”

Bev was lounging by the pool at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. He smiled. “Back to the casino.”

She frowned. “Don’t you think you’ve lost enough already?”

He made a face. “Come on, gimme a break. I don’t think five hundred dollars is exactly our life savings.”

She took her eyes off him and glanced out into the pool where Pat was playing on a float. “Just save enough for dinner tonight.”

“Not to worry. Where’s Robert and Pamela?”

Bev shaded her eyes against the glare of the desert sun. “Oh, you know them. They dodge the sun like it’s a sin. I think they’re having a late lunch in the dining room. I’m supposed to meet Pamela at three to go shopping.”

“Fine. I’ll be back in the room before then to baby sit Pat.”

“No need, we’re taking her with us.”

“All right, I’ll see you around six o’clock, then. We’ve got reservations at seven for the dinner show.”

She turned back to her book and he walked inside the hotel and hurried to the casino. God how he loved it! Row after row after row of slot machines, blackjack and crap tables, all waiting for him to make a bet. He was hooked early. The energy he felt from just being inside a place like this was more than he could have imagined.

Unfortunately, that energy had not transferred to winning. He had not told Bev the truth. He was, in fact, down close to fifteen hundred dollars, but wasn’t worried. He felt sure Paul was going to give him a bonus for the ratings. He was just spending it early.

Sliding into an open chair at one of the blackjack tables, he asked for change for a hundred. He brought five hundred dollars to gamble with, but had lost that in less than an hour the night before. He had gotten a fifteen hundred dollar advance on his Visa card and had

roughly five hundred dollars left before he'd have to ask Robert to cash a check for him. It was only Saturday so he would have to find a way to make his money stretch until their plane left the next afternoon.

He played about an hour and was doing pretty well, having won a little over one hundred dollars while limiting his bets to five dollars. He was sipping on his first drink of the day, watching the dealer shuffle the cards, when a voice interrupted his idle thoughts.

"Anyone sitting next to you?"

He turned around. Phillip Crawford was standing slightly behind him.

"Hi, Phillip." He stood up, nonchalantly glancing at the girl on Phillip's arm. "Have a seat."

Phillip shook his hand and clapped him on the shoulder. "Let me introduce you to Shirley Rogers, my secretary and traveling companion."

Bobby shook hands with Shirley, squeezing her hand affectionately, staring deeply into her eyes. She smiled back, tilting her head to one side.

"Nice to meet you, Shirley."

"The pleasure is all mine, Bobby." She looked at Phillip. "Now I know what Susan was talking about."

Bobby raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

Shirley glanced at him again. "She told me you were just about the best looking man she had ever seen. Now I know why."

Bobby grinned cockily. "I don't know about that," he mumbled.

"That's not all she told me either, Bobby." She winked slyly at him. He winked back.

"Cards?"

It was the dealer. He finished shuffling the decks and was asking for their bets. It gave Bobby a reason to take his eyes off Shirley.

He sat down and pushed a five dollar chip out.

"Change, please," Phillip said.

Bobby watched as the man pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket, counted ten hundreds off the top and threw them on the table.

"Change one thousand," the dealer said.

"All black," Phillip said.

When the dealer slid the ten, black, one-hundred dollar chips toward him, Phillip took one off the top and bet it.

Bobby was impressed.

"So, what brings you to my favorite city?" Phillip asked as the dealer gave everyone at the table their cards.

"Celebrating," Bobby answered, trying not to look nervous as he glanced down to see what he had been dealt. "How about you?"

Phillip ignored the cards in front of him. "I'm here at least twice a month, Bobby. This is my absolute, favorite place in the whole world."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. There's nothing, short of sex, like the action in Vegas. And if you have sex too, you just can't beat it."

"I'll buy that. Where are you staying?"

Phillip nodded. "Across the street at The Golden Pyramid. Are you staying here?"

"Yeah."

"Family with you?"

"Yeah. We came up yesterday with Robert Williams and his wife."

"Cards?"

It was the dealer again. Bobby glanced at his two cards. A ten and a six. He never knew what to do on a hand like this. He looked across the table and saw that the dealer had a queen showing.

He waved his hand. "Stand."

Phillip flipped over his cards. An ace and a king. Blackjack! The dealer paid him one hundred and fifty dollars, then quickly went around the rest of the table. For Bobby to have a chance, the dealer had to draw another card and hopefully go over twenty-one. The man turned flicked over his hole card. Another queen.

"Pay twenty-one," he said, taking his chip and most of the others on the table.

"Play much blackjack?" Phillip asked as the dealer dealt another hand.

Bobby shook his head. "This is my first time in a casino. I've played in private games, that's all."

Phillip nodded. "It's a different game here."

"No joke. Maybe I'll watch you and pick up a few pointers."

Phillip grinned. "Don't watch too close. You know the old story about Las Vegas. Some guy ran out of money and decided to just make mental bets. An hour later and he lost his mind."

Bobby laughed. Phillip was funny.

They made small talk for another hour as they played. Bobby managed to stay about even, but Phillip did quite well, winning over a thousand dollars.

"There you are."

Bobby looked up from his cards. Robert Williams was standing at the end of the table.

"I figured I'd find you here."

Bobby smiled sheepishly. "What can I say, partner, I'm hooked."

Robert just shook his head and grinned. "How are you Phillip, Shirley." He nodded toward the record promoter and his secretary.

"Fine, fine," Phillip waved. "Why don't you join us?"

"I might do that in a minute. I feel like losing a little more cash." He looked at Bobby. "Are you doing all right?"

"I'm getting a little of it back," Bobby said.

"You better get more than a little. Our wives are out shopping and unlike this casino, they don't have a limit."

Bobby snorted and shook his head. "Unless she tries to put in on our Visa. She'll find that limit soon enough."

"Are you losing, Bobby?" Phillip asked.

"Just a touch."

"Damn, you should have told me." He grabbed all of his chips and handed them to Shirley. "Go cash these in." He reached across Bobby and grabbed his chips also. "These too."

"Hey," Bobby protested. "What are you doing?"

Phillip got to his feet. "Bobby, if you're serious about gambling, this isn't the place to be."

Bobby glanced up at him, puzzled.

"Look," Phillip pointed toward the dealer. "Here, they play out of a shoe, using six decks. That increases the odds for the house. We need to find a place where they play one deck. We'll get the odds in our favor and I'll teach you how to play this game. Come on."

Bobby looked toward Robert. His friend shrugged. "If the man's going to make us winners, I say we go."

They left the table and headed toward the front of the hotel, Shirley joining them halfway across.

"Here, Bobby," she said, handing him some cash.

"Wait a minute, Shirley," he said, counting the money. "I think you gave me too much." She had handed him four hundred and five dollars.

"Nope, that's all yours, Bobby."

"Let's see," he said as they continued walking, "I cashed in for one hundred dollars and I thought I'd won about a hundred and fifty, but you've given me over four hundred."

"I think you had a few twenty-five dollar chips you hadn't counted, Bobby."

He pursed his lips. If she had made a mistake, it was certainly not his problem. He smiled as they stepped out of the air conditioned casino into the hot, desert afternoon. Phillip was right. He was winning already.

It took them only a few minutes to walk up the street and go up the drive to the famous Golden Pyramid. As they walked through the lobby and casino, Bobby was impressed by the opulent interior, more garish than that of the MGM. Big money was here. You could feel it. The lights were lower and the tables crowded as the din of gamblers voices rose and fell with the luck of the draw or the roll of the dice. They followed Phillip past the main area of the casino to the back, where several blackjack tables sat empty, no players in the chairs, only lone dealers standing at loose attention behind the rows of chips. Each of the tables was adorned with a "reserved" sign. Phillip walked past the first of these tables, then slid into a chair at the second.

"Hello, Mr. C." the dealer smiled.

"Edna, how are you doing?" Phillip said. He looked at Bobby and motioned for him to sit next to him.

Bobby pointed to the sign. "What about that?"

The dealer, a tall, black lady with a large afro, leaned down and picked it up, setting it behind her. "We've been keeping this table especially for Mr. C."

Bobby sat down and looked at Phillip questioningly.

Phillip waved his hand. "The Golden Pyramid caters to the high rollers, Bobby. They keep several tables reserved for the fools like me that want to play for big money." He looked up at Edna. "Get me a marker, darlin', and deal some cards."

She turned and caught the eye of one of the men standing behind her. "Mr. C needs a marker."

One of them hurried over. "Yes sir, Mr. C. How much?"

"Ten thousand," Phillip said casually. "Bert, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Bobby Holiday. Bobby, this is Bert Baumgarner."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Holiday."

Bobby reached across the table to shake the man's hand.

"You've got to be careful with the men in the suits, Bobby," Phillip said, scribbling his name on a pad. "They're the one's with the power."

The man in the suit smiled. "Not so, Mr. C. It's not my money."

"Can you set Mr. Holiday up with a line of credit, Bert?"

Bobby shook his head. "Pass, Phillip. I'll just play with what I've got."

"Relax, Bobby. Get a line of credit here anyhow. It looks good on your record."

"Just fill out a card, Mr. Holiday and I'll be glad to set you up with a line."

Phillip waved the man away. "Business time. Come on, Edna, let's play cards."

"How do you want your marker, Mr. C?"

"Five hundreds," Phillip said.

Bobby watched as the woman quickly counted out ten thousand dollars, using the white, five hundred dollar chips, and slid them across the felt toward Phillip. He just as quickly counted them again, then put five hundred dollars on two squares in front of him.

"I play two hands at a time here, Bobby. This way I can double my chances of winning."

"And losing," Robert said behind them.

Phillip threw a glance over his shoulder. "Ah, the voice of gloom in the background. Have a seat and play with us, Robert."

"No thanks. I'll just hang back here with Shirley and watch."

Bobby gave the dealer a one hundred dollar bill. "Change please." She handed him four, green, twenty-five dollar chips.

"Ah, could I have some fives?" he asked.

Phillip grinned. "It's a one hundred dollar minimum bet on this table, Bobby." Looking up at Edna, he continued, "Edna, let's let this young man play for twenty-five a hand, okay?"

She looked back across her shoulder at her boss, who nodded. Bobby was mildly surprised. The man was standing at least fifteen feet away in a group of other pit bosses, but was following everything that had been going on at the table without seeming to notice anything at all.

Bobby swallowed. "That's still a little rich for my blood, Phillip," he said quietly.

"Don't worry about it, Bobby. If you lose, I'll cover you until we get back to Los Angeles."

"I can't take any money from you, Phillip." He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Go ahead, Bobby. I'll cover any of your loses." It was Robert.

Phillip turned around again. "Oh, a banker?"

Robert smiled. "No, just an interested party."

Phillip twisted back toward the table. "Then let's rock. Deal Edna."

The black woman quickly dealt their cards. Bobby noticed she was holding the cards in her hand rather than dealing from a shoe like the dealers at the MGM. He also noticed that she was dealing from a single deck. This was what Phillip had been talking about. The odds were to be better with the one deck. He followed her rapid movements with the cards. Two to Bobby, face down. Two to each of Phillip's hands. She dealt one to herself, face down, the other

she placed face up on the table. It was a king.

Bobby glanced at his cards. A ten and a five. "Stand."

"Wait a minute, Edna," Phillip said. "Bobby, let me see your cards."

Bobby showed his hand.

"Take a hit," Phillip said.

"What?"

"First rule of blackjack, Bobby. Always play the dealer for a face card underneath and work your hand accordingly."

"I don't . . ."

"Play the dealer for a face card underneath. If she has a seven or over showing, you hit on anything under sixteen. If she has a six or under, you stand pat on anything under a seventeen, unless you've got less than twelve, in that case, you always hit."

"Why?"

"Odds."

Bobby was reluctant. Like most novice players, he waited too often for the dealer to bust.

"Okay," he said, "I'll take a hit."

Edna dealt the card. A six of spades.

"Outstanding," Robert said.

Bobby waved his hand. "Nothing to it . . . just playing the odds."

Phillip laughed and played his hands.

Bobby leaned closer to the table, studying Phillip's moves. Maybe he could learn something.

* * * * *

It was ten-thirty. Bobby was sitting at the same table, concentrating on his hand. He had two sixes and the dealer showed a three. This was one of the times Phillip said he should draw. But should he? He had been lucky so far, following his intuition from time to time, though usually sticking by the rules Phillip had laid out.

"Hit it," he said.

"Bobby Holiday, I can't believe you."

He turned slightly in his chair. Beverly was standing beside him, her face red, her eyes flashing.

"You embarrassed me to tears," she hissed, "making me sit by myself through dinner and the show while you were over here gambling."

He frowned. "Didn't Robert . . ."

"Yes, he told me you'd be late, so I kept waiting and waiting. Well, we finished dinner and then sat through Hail to Hollywood and you still didn't show. Damn it, Bobby, if I'd known gambling was so

important, I wouldn't have bothered to come here with you."

"Take it easy, Bev."

"No, Bobby, you take it easy. What are you winning? Fifty bucks?"

She looked down at the chips in front of him. He saw her eyes widen. Her mouth dropped open.

"Ho-how much are black chips worth?"

He raised one eyebrow. "A hundred."

"And white?" she stammered.

He smirked. "Five hundred."

He watched as she took a deep breath, held it, then swallowed hard. Her lips were stretched tightly across her clinched teeth. "Excuse me," she said, backing up from the table.

He turned toward the table and flipped his cards over. "I said hit me, Edna."

"Yes sir, Mr. H," she said, dealing him a card. It was a nine!

He stood up and turned toward Beverly. She was standing about five feet away from him, staring at the chips on the table. "Come here, honey." He held out his arms and she stepped into them.

"Bobby," she whispered, "what have you done?"

He turned and began stacking the chips in front of him. "That's enough for one night, Edna." He flipped a twenty-five dollar chip toward her.

"Thank you, Mr. H," she said.

"Here, Bev," Bobby said, handing Bev three, giant stacks of chips. "Go cash these in."

Beverly looked down at the black and white chips in her hands. "Where?"

Shirley grabbed her arm. "Come on, I'll show you. I've got to cash these in for Phillip."

"I'm sorry, honey," Bobby said. "Let me introduce you. This is Phillip Crawford, a friend of mine from Los Angeles, and his secretary, Shirley Rogers."

Bev nodded.

Phillip bowed. "I am pleased to meet you, Mrs. Holiday. Bobby told all of us how beautiful you were, but we couldn't believe anyone could be as pretty as he described. Now that I see you, I can tell you that your husband's description does not do you justice."

Bobby watched as Bev blushed.

"Why, thank you," she said.

"Come on, Beverly. Let's go get their money." The two women started toward the cashiers' windows at one end of the casino.

Bobby looked at Phillip. "Well, my man, I can't thank you enough

for teaching me this little game.”

Phillip grinned. “Don’t thank me, buddy. Once you had the system down, you played pretty well yourself.”

Bobby swelled up. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Yeah,” Phillip continued, “but don’t think it’ll be this easy every time. We had an incredible string of luck.”

“I know, I know. It seemed like every time I needed a card, I got it.”

“Some nights are like that. Other times, you can sit here for hours and never get the card you need.”

Beverly and Shirley rejoined them. Bev was staring at him, a look of astonishment on her face.

“Well?” he asked.

She swallowed again. “Bobby, I can’t believe it.”

“How much?”

“Bobby, I can’t believe it.”

He laughed. “Damn it, Bev. How much?”

She held out her hand. In it was a stack of one hundred dollar bills over eight inches high. “Fifteen thousand, six hundred and eighty-five dollars.”

“Aaceeoohhh!” he howled.

Bev grabbed him by the arm, pinching him tightly. “Fifteen thousand, six hundred and eighty-five dollars.”

He howled again.

“Bobby,” she shouted. Her face was flushed, her eyes were sparkling, a grin showing her teeth from ear to ear. “Fifteen thousand, six hundred and eighty-five dollars!”

He threw his arms around her and turned her in circles. He tried to kiss her, but succeeded only in smashing his teeth against hers. They were both grinning insanely.

“Way to go,” Phillip said.

He spun around to face Phillip, one arm still around Bev. “How’d you do?”

“I won a little over ten grand.”

“Aaceoohh!” he howled, slapping his thigh.

“Aaceoohh!” Shirley and Bev screamed in unison.

“Come on, man,” Bobby said. “Let me buy you a drink.”

“No, let me buy,” Phillip said.

“I’ll settle the argument.” They turned. The pit boss was standing next to the table watching them. “I’ll buy,” He motioned toward the bar. “Drinks are on the house, compliments of the Golden Pyramid. There are two bottles of Dom Perignon on ice waiting for you.”

* * * * *

Bobby and Beverly didn't return to their hotel room until two o'clock. After they paid the baby sitter and made sure Pat was all right, Bobby covered their bed with the cash and threw Bev down on top of it.

"Bobby," she whispered as he threw up her dress and yanked off his clothes. "What are you doing."

He fell down on top of her, took her head in his hands and gave her his most serious look. "I've always dreamed that I would come into money."

He did.

* * * * *

In the weeks that followed, Bobby took over absolute control of the programming of all the Media Communications stations. Where before, he consulted with the individual program directors about music, promotions and formats, he now dictated their every move. No changes, not even the slightest deviations from his directives, would he tolerate. He insisted that he, and he alone, make all the everyday decisions he once delegated to them. He was responsible for the ratings increases. He was responsible for the success. Only he knew what was best.

He became more demanding of his office staff, making sure that his every whim was carried out to the letter. Where he once took advice from Nancy and Debbie regarding music, he now only dictated his beliefs. Where he once poured over research information, he now relied more and more on his own feel as to what records he would add. If he liked a record, he would add it. That was the only criteria. If he didn't like it, no matter what the research showed, he would keep it off his list.

He used the money he won in Las Vegas to make a down payment on a 450SL Mercedes. The rest had been financed. He was spending all of the money he was making, but it didn't matter. He was on a roll. He was winning consistently in the weekly poker games and he made two more trips to Las Vegas where he won again.

He was also using cocaine more heavily. Debbie had found a connection and he was spending nearly five hundred dollars a week on coke and ludes. It was too much money, he knew that . . . too much cocaine, he knew that too . . . but it didn't matter. He could do no wrong.

He had also become close friends with Phillip Crawford. They began having dinner every week and true to his word, Phillip had

never mentioned work when they were together.

* * * * *

“Well, what’s the boy genius adding this week?”

Bobby grinned, walking around his desk as he talked with Robert Williams on the phone. “What are you so interested for? Are you going into the independent business?”

“Screw you. I’m just playing radio, seeing if I can out-guess you on the music.”

“You’re too good in the publishing business to dirty your hands with the trivia of radio, Robert.”

“I’ve got to keep my hand in.”

“Well, what do you figure?”

“It’s got to be The Falcons. The group is red hot and this single is the third cut off their number one album. Your stations are just about the only ones that aren’t playing it.”

“Nope, I’m only adding one record this week, and it’s not The Falcons.”

“What then?”

“Bobby Gee.”

“On Ekstra?”

“That’s the one.”

“Jeeze, Bobby, that’s a strange add. It’s brand new, right out of the box.”

He felt the hair bristle on the back of his neck. “I don’t care if it hasn’t been released yet. I know the record is going to be a hit.”

“Take it easy. No need to get angry with me.”

“You asked, Robert, and I told you. I don’t need my playlist critiqued by The Report.”

“It’s just that The Falcons are so huge, Bobby, and there are a lot of other records out there that deserve airplay more than the Bobby Gee.”

“Robert, if what I add is going to upset you, why ask?”

“Come on, I’m just trying to help.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I don’t need your help.”

Robert laughed. “That much is true. The game is at my house Wednesday night. Am I going to see you there?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. You guys are too easy.”

“The way you’ve been winning, I’m astounded that the others haven’t threatened to bar you.”

“That’ll happen soon enough.”

“Bobby?” It was Debbie on the intercom.

"Hold on, Robert," he said. "Yeah?"

"Paul Johnson on line four."

"I've got to run, Robert. See you Wednesday."

He punched down another line.

"Hello, Paul."

"How's everything going, Bobby?"

"Fine, I can't complain."

"How are the stations going?"

"They all look good. I've got a small problem in San Francisco with Duke. He wants to play more oldies than I allow, but otherwise, I don't see any hassles."

"Are we going to be number one in all markets?"

"Please, Paul, give me a break. I'll be happy to maintain the status quo through the next ratings."

"That will be dandy with me, Bobby. Other stations in our markets are really spending a lot of promotional cash to try and take back the territory we gained."

"That's what it's all about, Paul."

"Don't let them."

"I won't."

"I have been getting some grief from the individual stations managers regarding your management style."

Bobby grimaced. "What kind of grief?"

"The managers are telling me that you won't let anything happen in the stations without your approval, even little things like T-shirt designs and the hiring of research people."

"They're right."

"Do you think you're being a little heavy-handed?"

"Before I did all the little things, the stations weren't winners. If they had rather design T-shirts than win, I'll be glad to give them back the power."

Paul laughed. "That's basically what I told them. But keep it in mind that the long-term success of a good leader is his ability to delegate."

"Bullshit!" Bobby snorted. "The long-term success of a good leader is his ability to train . . . then delegate. I'm still on the training part."

"Have it your way." Paul, as was his nature, abruptly changed the subject. "How's the family?"

Bobby frowned. "Fine," he lied. Things were not going well at home. Each day seemed to distance himself more and more from his wife. She couldn't seem to understand that his work was all consuming.

"Word has it that you bought a new Mercedes?"

"Word's right."

"I didn't think I was paying you that well."

"I'm a terrific manager of money."

"And a good gambler."

"So you've heard."

"I heard you're doing as well in Las Vegas as you're doing with the ratings."

Bobby grinned. "Better."

"Just remember, luck runs both ways."

"I'll keep that in mind, Dad," Bobby said sarcastically.

Paul chuckled. "All right, sermon's over."

"And not a minute too soon."

"Keep in touch, Bobby."

"I'll keep winning, Paul."

"Even better."

* * * * *

The phone rang in Bobby's bedroom, waking him instantly from a deep sleep. Rolling over, he quickly switched on the light next to the bed and looked at the clock as he reached for the receiver. Two o'clock in the morning. Who in the hell could this be?

"Hello."

"Buuuuddd!"

Bev was looking at him, one eye opened sleepily. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Bud . . . it's Tommy?"

Bobby groaned. "Tommy Russo," he whispered to Bev, covering the phone. He sat up a little straighter in bed. "What is it, Tommy."

"Bud, I'm having a little party here, you know, kind of celebrating," Tommy slurred. He was obviously drunk . . . and high on coke or he wouldn't be calling at this time of the morning.

"Fine, Tom, but why in the hell are you calling me?" He wondered how Tommy had gotten his home phone number, then remembered that the poker game had been at his house two weeks before and he had given the number to the guys in case they needed to be reached. A mistake on his part.

"Hey, bud," Tommy whispered. "Why don't you come on down to the hotel and join us. I got three hookers, champagne, ludes and an ounce of blow."

"Pass, Tommy. It's two o'clock in the morning and I've got a big day ahead of me."

"I'm sorry I woke you, bud, I just had to call and thank you."

"Thank me for what?"

"For adding my record."

Bobby was instantly wide awake. "What?"

"You know, the Bobby Gee. You're going on it out of the box this week. Son, you just made my day and I wanted to thank you."

"Who told you I was adding your record?" He hadn't even told the program directors yet. They wouldn't know until later in the day when they got the adds.

"Ah, I, I mean, we, ah, I just heard it, that's all."

He could tell by Tommy's tone that the man had sobered up. Through the haze of drugs and booze, it was dawning on him that he had made a mistake in calling Bobby.

"Who, Tommy?"

"Ah, bud," he was whispering again. "I got to go. These hookers need attention. I'll talk to you tomorrow. And thanks again."

The line went dead.

Someone was leaking information out of his office again!

He felt Bev's hand on his arm. "What is it, darling?"

He jerked his arm away and shut off the light. "Nothing," he said. "Business."

He heard her sigh in the darkness.

* * * * *

Bobby was pacing back and forth in front of the big window in his office. It was the same story as before. He confronted Debbie and Nancy, the only two people who knew about the addition of Bobby Gee. Both emphatically denied they had told anyone about it. He hadn't bothered to call Robert. He knew the publisher of The Report had nothing to gain by sharing information Bobby gave him.

Nancy walked through the door. "Bobby?"

He turned and stared at her. "What?"

She turned red and dropped her eyes to the floor. "What about the add? It's time to notify the stations. Do you want to change it?"

He glared at her for almost a full minute, weighing the options. He could add another record, but that would be changing his mind. He had made the decision that the Bobby Gee was the best record for his stations. Although it made him angry, he wouldn't change the add because someone got the information before it was official.

"Call it in."

She turned silently and hurried out of the office.

He walked over to his desk and fished through the top drawer until

he found the vial of cocaine. He quickly dipped the spoon into the bottle and filled first one nostril, then the other.

Dropping the vial back into the drawer, he closed his eyes and threw his head back, inhaling deeply, drawing the drug into his system.

There . . . that was better.

* * * * *

"You almost blew it." Phillip Crawford was on the phone with Tommy Russo.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb, Tommy. You called Holiday in the middle of the night to thank him for the Bobby Gee add."

"Yeah, well I got a little fucked up, bud."

"That's not good for business."

"Sorry."

"Let's just be more careful."

"He added it, that's all that's important. And you get paid."

"What's important is that we keep getting records added, Tommy."

* * * * *

"Bobby, can we talk?"

He was in his bedroom, tucking in his shirt, getting ready to meet Debbie on Saturday afternoon.

"Sure," he said breezily. Bev was sitting on the edge of the bed, her eyes on the spread.

"I've been thinking about going back home for a while."

Bobby stopped what he was doing. "What?"

She looked up at him sadly. "We've been here almost six months, Bobby, and in that time our relationship has been deteriorating week by week. We hardly see each other any more, we never talk, we never go out, you spend all of your time working."

"Damn it, Bev, we've been through all of this before. I'm working hard because I have to work hard. This company was in shambles when I took over . . ."

She waved her hand weakly. "I know, I know. I've heard it all before, and before I believed it, Bobby. I thought that you'd only have to work long hours for a while, then you'd be able to relax and we'd be a happy family again. But the more you work, it seems, the more you have to work. You get the stations going good, then they have to do even better." She shook her head slowly. "I don't think it's going to get any better."

He put his hands on the side of his head, pushing against his temples as he shut his eyes tightly. He didn't need this. "Bev, why don't you try and understand my side of it. I've got one chance in this business, and it's right here and right now. I've got to make the most of it while I have the opportunity."

"Bobby, I really don't mind you working. Well, I guess I do mind, but I could deal with that. It's just that you've totally shut your family off from your business. You never discuss your work with me. You treat Pat and me as if we were some big inconvenience. And maybe we are."

He moved quickly to the bed and sat down beside her, taking her shoulders in his hands. "No, Bev. You aren't an inconvenience. I love you. I want you near me. It's just that I've been so busy with work, I have neglected you."

She threw herself into his arms. "I'm trying to understand, Bobby, really I am, but I'm not doing so well. I know I should be more supportive of you, but I just sit at home and wonder if all of this is worth it."

He hugged her closer. "Baby, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise. I'll start working less. The stations will have to just learn to get by on their own and if they fail, well they just fail." He hoped he sounded convincing. He almost meant it.

Bev pushed back away from him, wiping tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. "No, Bobby. I don't want you to fail. I want you to succeed. But I want you to succeed without losing your family. That's why I thought I'd just take Pat for an extended vacation back to Louisiana."

"No, baby, don't go, I need you here. I wouldn't be right if you weren't here with me. What good is my success if I can't share it with you?"

"Oh, Bobby, do you really mean it?"

He hung his head to one side, giving her his most sincere look. "I swear I do, Bev." He almost meant it.

She hugged him again. "Then let's work together, Bobby. I'll try and be more understanding of your work and you try to spend more quality time with us. Is that a deal?"

He squeezed her against him. "That's a deal."

"You know, when your daughter was asked to describe her father to her class, she said you were a workaholic."

"No."

"Yes," she giggled. "But don't be too upset. Half her class described their fathers in the same way."

He fell back on the bed. "Damn it, some things have got to change. And I'll start right now." He looked at his watch. "Let me try to get Steve before he leaves his house. We were supposed to meet at the office to go over this week's research. I'll just cancel."

He sat up to reach for the phone, but Bev stopped him. "Don't bother, Bobby. I already made plans to take Pat to Pamela's for a swimming lesson this afternoon."

He tried not to let his face betray his feelings. "Well, all right," he sighed, "but I'll make it a short meeting. You guys buy some steaks and I'll meet you back here at five and we'll have a cook out."

Bev's face split with a huge smile. "That'll be great."

He got up and went into the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind him. He reached into his pocket for the vial of cocaine that he now kept with him all of the time. Grinning into the mirror, he snorted back two spoonfulls. He looked at his reflection, taking care to wipe the excess powder off his nose.

"You good looking son-of-a-bitch," he said, repeating his favorite phrase. "Don't you never die!"

He left the bathroom and walked arm-in-arm with Bev through the house and out to his car.

"Bobby," she said, leaning over the red convertible, "you'd never fool around on me, would you?"

He gave her his best smile. "Not a chance, darling. You are the most wonderful person in the whole world. Why would I waste my time trying to find anyone else?"

She cocked her head to one side. "I know you've got to be tempted Bobby, with all of those beautiful women around."

"Don't worry, Bev."

"I do worry. Especially since we hardly make love any more."

"We'll fix that tonight."

Her cheeks wrinkled as her lips turned up at the corners. "Just don't ever fool around on me, Bobby."

"I won't, Bev."

"If you did, that would be the end, you know. I would have to leave if you did that."

"Come on, Bev, stop talking like that. It will never happen."

Her face brightened. "All right, Bobby, hurry back."

He did. He was only an hour late when he pulled back into his driveway at dusk.

* * * * *

Bobby was proud of himself. He was going to surprise Bev and Pat

by getting home early on a Monday night. True, he was bringing a lot of his work with him, but he thought it might be fun for them to go over the music research and help him decide what records to add to the chain. Doing it this way solved two problems. First, it kept anyone from leaking the record information early, and second, he would be spending time with his family. He even left his supply of cocaine in the office.

Debbie and the rest of the office staff had already gone. He said goodbye to Nancy, who was in her office with Libby Meredith, the record promoter she seemed to be always hanging around with, and walked out of the office.

He had driven half-way home when he realized that he had left his briefcase. He turned the car around and headed back.

As he walked through the now deserted lobby, it occurred to him that the seasons had changed rapidly. When he first moved to Los Angeles, the sun hadn't set until nearly eight o'clock. Now, at seven, it was dark. He didn't bother to turn on any lights, instead just feeling his way quickly through his office door.

He reached for his briefcase, intending to pick it up and hurry out, when he changed his mind. One little pop before driving through traffic wouldn't do him any harm. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out the vial, sitting on the edge of his desk. Although his office was dark, the faint glow from the window enabled him to see just well enough to shovel the coke into his nose. He was putting the cap back on the bottle when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

He turned his head and stared. At the far end of his office, about seven feet up the wall, he could detect a ray of light. He frowned. It must be a reflection from outside. He moved his head to see if the reflection disappeared with his movements. It didn't.

Quietly, he eased off his desk and walked to the other end of the room. He could still see the light. Using the couch for a stool, he stood up on the cushions to get a better look. What he found almost stopped his heart.

It was a tiny hole, maybe big enough for his little finger to fit through. He held his breath and eased his face up closer, shutting one eye and peering into the hole.

The other end opened into Nancy's office! He could see her and Libby Meredith sitting at her desk. The two women were laughing about something. Bobby could see them clearly, but he couldn't make out what they were saying.

He moved his head slightly, placing his ear over the opening. Now

their conversation was clear.

"Come on," Nancy said.

"Nancy," Libby answered.

Bobby held his breath, intent on their every word.

"Everybody's gone," Nancy continued, "there's nothing to worry about."

"What about Bobby?"

"He's not coming back. Once he leaves the office, he's history. This is the first time I can ever remember him leaving this early on a Monday night, though."

He heard movement and quickly looked through the hole. Nancy had walked around the desk and was standing next to Libby's chair. He put his ear back against the wall.

"I still feel funny, I mean, being here and everything," Libby said.

Nancy laughed. "I think it will be poetic justice. I watched him enough with that tramp from Phillip Crawford's office, not to mention all the times he's played kissy-face with Debbie."

His face tightened. So it had been her. She was the one he had felt watching. All that time and money he spent looking for bugs, and this bitch had been spying on him through a fucking hole in the wall!

"Come on, it'll be fun."

He heard them moving and quickly put his eye to the hole. Just as quickly he moved away. They were walking toward him. He flattened against the wall and discovered he could still hear their muffled conversation.

"Uh-oh," Nancy said "I forgot to put the cork back in when I checked to see if Bobby had left."

Bobby heard her moving against the wall, then saw the light momentarily shut out from the tiny hole.

"All's clear. Nobody's in his office."

He guessed Nancy had been looking through from her side. He saw the light again, then it was shut off as she evidently plugged it.

"Why don't we go in his office?" he heard Libby say.

"I don't have a key."

"Well, all right, but turn off the lights and open your drapes so we can look out."

"I'll do it."

Now what were they up to? Bobby moved slightly away from the wall and examined the hole. It had been drilled, or punched, in a very clever way, right where two of his panels joined. Unless you were right on top of it, as he was, it looked just like a knot in the wood. If Nancy hadn't left the plug out of her side enabling him to

see the light coming through, he might never have found it.

He stepped lightly off the couch, planning his next move. His mind was racing. He could leave and pretend he had never seen the hole, then play to her spying, giving her incorrect information. Or he could fire her. He had the evidence. She wouldn't even object. She would have no choice. And he might as well confront her now. If he figured right, she and her friend were in her office right now either smoking a joint or snorting cocaine.

Cocaine. That was the first choice. He walked over to his desk got his bottle again. This time he put two spoons up each nostril. He needed the extra kick.

He stepped quietly out of his office. He wanted his entrance to be a surprise. Moving to her door, he put an ear against the wood, trying to pick up their conversation. He could only make out muted noises.

Silently, he fitted his master key into her lock and turned it slowly, twisting the doorknob at the same time. The door opened without a sound. Bobby held his breath and pushed it further, waiting for them to notice and say something.

He slid into the darkness of the office on his tip-toes, his eyes already adjusted to the shadows. Feeling for the light switch, he looked across the room, trying to locate the two women. He thought he saw something on the floor against the wall that separated his office from hers, but he couldn't be sure. His fingers touched the switch and without hesitating, he flicked it quickly upwards, flooding the room with light.

"Jesus!" His breath rushed out of his chest.

Libby Meredith was sitting on the carpet, her back against the wall, her legs spread apart. Her skirt was pushed over her hips and her blouse was open, exposing her breasts. Nancy Marion was naked from the waist up, crouched on her hands and knees between Libby's legs, her face buried between the girl's thighs.

Libby shrieked and shoved at Nancy with one hand, reaching with the other for her blouse. Nancy spun around, still on her knees, her face a mask of terror and astonishment.

"Bobby!" she cried.

"Don't move!" he shouted. Both women froze, not knowing what to do. Neither did he.

He pointed his finger at Nancy, his lips twisting into a snarl. "You bitch," he spat. "I can't believe you. Spying on me through a hole in the wall and probably selling our music information to the highest bidder."

"Bobby," she whimpered, trying to cover her body with her hands.

"It's not what you think."

"Shut up."

Libby started scrambling against the wall. "I'm getting out of here."

"Hey!" he yelled. "I said not to move, damn it!"

Again the girl stopped, leaning back against the wall and tugging her shirt over her knees.

Bobby put his hands on his hips. His mind was spinning. The cocaine, combined with the adrenaline rush of sneaking into the office and the animal excitement of catching the two women was almost more than he could handle. Almost.

"Bobby," Nancy was sobbing, tears filling her eyes and dropping down her cheeks, rolling across her face and falling on her breasts. "What are you going to do?"

He took a deep breath. "I don't know whether to kill you or fire you, Nancy."

"Oh, Bobby, please let me explain."

"Fuck you. You've got nothing to explain. You've been spying on me, jerking me off with your bullshit while you've been watching me in my office. Are you taking payola, bitch? Who the fuck is paying you." He was shouting at the top of his voice.

"Look," Libby said quietly. "You guys have a problem that does not include me. I'm just going to get back into my clothes and let you two solve it."

"Shut the fuck up, lesbo," Bobby shouted, staring angrily at the record promoter. "You open your mouth once more and you'll never work in this business again." The gravity of the situation made even the hollow, old Hollywood threat ring true. Libby pressed her lips tightly together.

"Bobby, please," Nancy said. "Don't. I'm sorry. Don't fire me. I know I don't have any right to ask you for anything, but please don't fire me. I screwed up. I'll make it up to you. I'll do anything you ask, just don't fire me." The words were tumbling out of her mouth as she babbled on.

Bobby nodded his head up and down. "Right. Sure. How in the fuck could I even think about trusting you. I'm going to fire you and tell everyone it was because I caught the two of you going down on each other in this office. Hell, I might even give tours."

Libby turned bright red. She looked as if she were near tears also.

"Bobby, please," Nancy said. "You can trust me. I'll prove it to you. I'll do anything."

Bobby stared down at the pitiful woman on the floor. She was begging. And she should. If he fired her, she'd never again be in the

position of power she occupied now. And if he spilled the beans about her lesbian friend, it would be worse.

He sneered. Nancy was at his mercy.

"Please, Bobby."

He whipped out the vial of cocaine, dumped a generous supply on the back of his hand and snorted it. He wiped his mouth.

"You're going to have to prove your trust to me, Nancy."

Her eyes opened a little wider and her lower lip quivered as hope dance across her face.

"God, Bobby, I'll prove it to you. I'll do anything."

He grinned cruelly. "Anything?"

She nodded. "Anything at all, Bobby."

He was going to love this.

He swaggered over to where she was kneeling, stopping directly in front of her, his hips even with her eyes. He reached down and unfastened his pants, then grabbed her head and shoved his crotch against her face.

* * * * *

"Phillip, Nancy Marion is on the phone."

He looked up from his desk and frowned. "Hello."

"Phillip, it's Nancy."

"Do you have any information for me? I expected to hear from you yesterday. Waiting until Tuesday really puts me up against it."

There was a moment of silence before she answered. "I don't have any information for you today, Phillip, and I won't be giving you any more."

He sat up straighter in his chair. "What's the problem?"

"No problem, I've just decided that I won't give you any more information on our record adds."

He took a deep breath. "Tell me what's going on, Nancy."

"Nothing is going on, Phillip, I've just changed my mind. I won't be talking to you any more."

This was really strange. He shifted tactics. "What about the money I've been sending you?"

"I'll just do without it, like I did before I gave you information."

"Come on, Nancy."

"No, you come on, Phillip. I'm telling you it's over. Let's just accept it and let it go at that."

"I can't do that, Nancy. I've got a business to run."

"Well, you're going to have to run it without me."

"I can do that, Nancy, but it won't be as easy."

"Phillip, I have to go now."

"Wait a minute. Let's meet somewhere and talk this over."

"Phillip, there is nothing to talk about."

"I believe there is."

"Goodbye, Phillip."

"Just a second. I didn't want to do this, Nancy, but how do you think Bobby Holiday would react to knowing about your little secret. What do you think he would do if I sent him some of the pictures I have of you and Libby Meredith?"

He heard her breathing into the phone.

"Phillip, I thought you told me you'd never use those pictures against me."

"I wouldn't normally, but you're giving me little choice."

"Well, you have to do what you have to do. Go ahead and send the pictures, but it's not going to matter."

"What do you mean?"

"He found out."

"What?"

"He found out. He knows all about me and Libby."

"How?"

"It's not important."

"Did he fire you?"

"No."

"Does he know about our arrangement?"

"You mean our former arrangement? No. That wouldn't do either of us any good."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, Phillip, I'm sure you are."

"No, really."

"Goodbye, Phillip."

He hung up the phone and stared silently into space for a few moments. The plans he had laid so carefully were coming apart.

"Shirley," he called.

His secretary came through the door.

"You're on," he said.

* * * * *

A month had passed since Bobby's confrontation with Nancy and things were going well. All indications pointed toward continued rating gains for each station in the Media Communications chain. The corporate office was running smoothly, even Nancy seemed to be enjoying herself. He had gotten together with her and Libby three

times since he first caught them. Although they preferred each other, they had no problem giving him pleasure.

His life was consumed with work, sex, drugs and gambling and he was loving every minute of it. Despite his promise to Bev, he was once again spending less and less time at home.

"Bobby, it's Phillip Crawford on line one."

He picked up the phone in his office. "What's new, Phillip?"

"Nothing much, Bobby, how's it by you?"

"Things are fine so far."

"You took everybody down at the poker game again last night. Exactly how much did you win?"

Bobby's lips twitched. He had done well, as usual. "Almost two grand."

"Damn, son, if you keep winning, they're going to accuse you of cheating."

"I couldn't win that much if I was cheating, Phillip. I've just been getting the cards."

"Seems like you always get the cards."

Bobby smiled. "I have been on a roll."

"What are you doing at six o'clock tonight?"

"I don't know, going home, I guess, why?"

"I'm sending a little present to your office tonight at six and I wanted to be sure you'd still be there to get it."

"You know I can't accept gifts, Phillip."

"It's not something you keep, Bobby."

"What then?"

"I can't tell you. It would spoil the surprise."

"I'm not hanging around until six o'clock unless I know what's going down."

"Trust me. It'll be worth it."

"I don't trust you, Phillip."

"All right, I'll give you a hint. I just got a new project to work, a record on Websters called "The Stripper." You remember the old song. Well, they've updated it with a disco beat and they're chasing it. I thought it would be great to send a real stripper over to make you aware of the record."

"Come on, Phillip. No stripper is going to make me play a record."

"You know that and I know that, but Websters is footing the bill. They think it'll help, so what's it to you? All you have to do is sit behind your desk and look at some big, giant titties. What do you care?"

Bobby picked a pencil up off the desk and twirled it in his fingers.

"Who's the stripper?"

Phillip laughed. "That's the secret."

"Anyone I know?" It was no secret that Bobby had wanted to get together with Phillip's secretary, Shirley Rogers. He thought he had gotten the same feeling from her, but they had never been in the right place at the right time for anything to happen.

"Find out at six, tonight."

"Are you coming?"

"Nope. It'll just be you and the stripper."

"I may be here and I may not."

"Fine. If you're not there, I'll just have her come over to my house and dance for me."

Bobby laughed. "I've got to go, Phillip. Are we still on for dinner tomorrow night?"

"I'll meet you at Franco's at eight-thirty."

Bobby hung up and stared out the window for a minute. He really should go home tonight. Things were getting worse with Bev. He needed to spend some time just relaxing with her and Pat.

He reached into his top drawer and packed his nose with cocaine. Oh well, he'd be with them this weekend. Besides, he wanted to see who would show up tonight. He hoped it would be Shirley.

He picked up the phone and called home.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Bev."

"Hi, Bobby, what's up?"

She even sounded cold on the phone. "I'm not going to make it home for dinner tonight."

"I'm not surprised."

"I'm really sorry, Bev."

"You're always sorry, Bobby."

"Come on Bev, let's not get into this."

"I'm not getting into anything. You're always calling to say you won't be home and you're always sorry. If you were really sorry, you'd be home more often."

"Something came up."

"It always does."

"I think Lawrence Macky wants to quit."

"Resign his programming job at KMC? Why?"

"I don't know. I just talked with him and he said it was imperative that we get together tonight right after work." Bobby was lying. He hadn't talked to Macky in a week. The man was on vacation.

"Don't forget, I've got your car. Do you want me to pick you up

later?"

He remembered she had driven him into work that morning. Her car was in the shop. Debbie had to unlock his door because he'd left his office keys on the ring in the car.

"No, I'll make him bring me home."

"Fine. I'll talk to you later."

* * * * *

Bobby was standing in the doorway of his office. The reception area was deserted, the office staff having left at five-thirty. The security guard had buzzed him from downstairs at six-fifteen, telling him a visitor was on the way up. He looked around the empty room. It reminded him of the time he caught Nancy. He grinned. There was no worry of her or anyone else watching him tonight. He had filled in the hole in his wall. It would be just him and the stripper, whoever she was.

"Hello, there."

Bobby looked across the lobby. Shirley Rogers had walked through the door.

He took a deep breath. "I was hoping it would be you."

She smiled. "You knew it would be me."

He nodded. She was stunning, dressed in a full length, grey fur, her flowing, red hair pulled back behind her ears. As she walked closer, Bobby could see that her face was caked with make-up, her eyes outlined garishly in green, her cheeks covered with rouge, a black, beauty mark painted on her chin, her full, pouty lips smeared with deep, fire-red lipstick. She was holding a record in one hand.

He whistled. "We're a little made up tonight, aren't we?"

She reached out and tickled his chin with a finger. "I'm a stripper, baby," she said, her voice deep and husky. "I've got to look right under the lights." She walked past him into his office. He followed.

She held out the record. "Why don't you put this on, have a seat on the couch and let me promote you."

He tried to keep the smile off his face. "Sounds right to me."

He placed the record on the turntable, then sat down. She stood directly in front of him, her feet spread apart, her hands on her hips, her foot tapping in time with the music as a disco beat filled the room. Soon, the drums gave way to the familiar refrain of "The Stripper." Although it was a dance mix, the old tune was impossible to miss.

Shirley kept tapping her foot and moving her hips slightly in time with the music, making no move to take off her coat. Bobby was puzzled. He listened through at least half of the tune and she had done nothing. He opened his mouth to say something, but she quickly

shushed him, putting a finger to her lips.

He waited and watched for three minutes. Shirley kept tapping and shaking. The song ended. He looked up at her and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," she asked, "what did you think?"

"About the song?" He made a face. "A piece of shit."

"No, about my dance."

He tucked his chin against his neck. "Not exactly what I expected."

"What do you mean?"

He rubbed his hand across his chin. "Phillip said he was sending a stripper over here. Unless I missed something, you didn't strip."

"Oh. Well, you see, I volunteered for the job. He was going to hire someone to do a strip tease for you, but I told him I could do it."

"And?"

"Well, I'm not good at stripping, particularly to music. I mean strippers wear lots of clothes and take them off piece by piece. I couldn't start taking my clothes off while the music was playing because this is all I'm wearing."

She grabbed the collar of the fur and pulled it back across her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. She was naked.

"All-fucking-right," Bobby breathed.

She ran her hands up over her stomach, cupping her breasts and holding them out, pointing them toward his face. "You like?"

"I like."

She reached down into a pocket in her fur and came up with a vial of cocaine. "I also brought some star dust."

He grinned. "I'll take some of that."

She grinned back. "Blow or me."

"Both. Give me a pop."

She sat down beside him. He reached for the cocaine. "No," she said. "Let me."

With a sly look on her face, she twisted off the top of the bottle, then sprinkled an ample supply onto her left nipple. "Here," she said, shoving her chest out toward him, "have some."

He leaned forward, cupping her breast in his hand, and snorted.

"Lick it all off, Bobby."

He stuck out his tongue, running it over her nipple, licking the residue of cocaine from her skin.

"Suck it off, Bobby."

He took the nipple between his lips and did as he was told, using his teeth to gently bite on her flesh as she pushed her breast into his mouth.

"Now the other one." She pulled back from him and dumped more coke on her other nipple. Seconds later, that one was in his mouth also.

She pushed him back on the couch. "Now, my turn." She reached down and unsnapped his jeans, jerked the zipper and pulled his pants around his thighs. He sprang to life. She took him with one hand and looked up. "That's a hell of a coke spoon, isn't it?"

He put both hands behind his neck, lifting his head from the couch so he could watch her. As she had done with her nipples, she spilled the cocaine out onto his tip. Still holding him with one hand, she leaned down and sniffed the drug into her nose.

"Lick it all off, Shirley," he whispered.

She stared into his eyes and snaked out her tongue, licking the cocaine into her mouth.

"Suck it," he said.

"Love to," she smiled, opening her mouth and dropping her head.

Bobby felt the intense surge of power and sex wash over him. He knew Phillip was responsible for Shirley being in his office, but he also knew that he was responsible for her current actions. She had just been hired to strip. His presence made her do more. Until he became head of Media Communications, he hadn't realized how much women were attracted to him. Now he knew. And he constantly used this knowledge to his advantage.

He reached down and grabbed her hair, shutting his eyes tightly, concentrating so completely on her ministrations that he didn't hear his office door open.

"BOBBY!"

His eyes snapped open as he twisted around. Bev was standing in the doorway, his keys in her hand, a look of pure hatred on her face.

"You bastard!" Her eyes were mere slits, her lips pulled away from her teeth as she snarled.

He sat up quickly and flung his legs to the floor, shoving Shirley against the table as he did. "I can explain."

"You can explain nothing," she hissed. She tilted her head. "Lawrence Macky called the house about thirty minutes ago. He's on vacation, but he was changing plans, going to Colorado Springs for the weekend, so he wanted to let you know where you could get in touch with him."

"Wait a minute, Bev."

"Don't you talk to me," she shouted. "I've listened to you long enough. Don't you say a word. I came down here tonight knowing what I would find, knowing, but hoping it wasn't true."

He stood up. "Bev, hold on a second."

Her eyes flicked down to Shirley. "Who's the tramp, Bobby?" He watched her face suddenly fall. "Cocaine? Oh, Bobby."

He held out his arms.

She looked up at him. "Who are you?"

"Bev, let's talk."

Her face contorted back into the angry look she had been wearing before she saw the drugs. "Bobby, it's over. I don't ever want to talk to you again." She turned and walked out, slamming the door behind her.

Bobby stood numbly, his arms hanging by his sides, his shoulders slumped, his chest sunken. How could he be so stupid. God Almighty! Now what?

"Bobby?" It was Shirley. She was rubbing his leg softly. "Sit down."

He fell back on the couch, his mind blank, eyes staring into space.

She leaned up, resting her elbows on his thigh. "I'm sorry."

He sighed. "It sure as hell isn't your fault." She patted his leg and he reached down and grabbed her hair, rubbing her head absently. He sighed heavily again.

"I'd better go talk with her," he said.

"A little advice?"

"Sure."

"Give her a little time. Don't chase her down right now. Give her some time to think about what's happened. It'll give you some time to think also, to come up with what you're going to say."

He nodded. "Maybe you're right."

She reached back to the table and picked up the vial of cocaine. "Want some?"

He shook his head.

She cracked a little smile as she moved the spoon up to her nose. "You know, you might as well. You've already been blamed for it."

He felt the corners of his mouth twitch. "I guess you're right." He held out his hand. "I'll take a pop."

He quickly packed his nose, then handed her the bottle.

"There's another thing you've been blamed for that we should finish."

He looked at her and again shook his head. "I don't think so."

She ran her hand up his thigh and touched him. "She's already caught you. You can't get into any more trouble."

He shrugged his shoulders. His passion was gone. There was no way he could get excited again.

Her lips followed her hand up his thigh.

He was wrong.

"And then she walked in and all hell broke loose." Shirley was pacing up and down in Phillip Crawford's office, stopping every now and then to take a sip from the glass of wine on his desk. "She screamed at him, he tried to apologize and she walked out. I tell you, we blew it."

Phillip walked to the sliding door that led out to his pool and fiddled with the drapes. "Did he go after her?"

"No, I told him to give her some time. I gave him some more coke and convinced him to make love with me on the couch."

Phillip turned and grinned. "You devil you."

She tossed her head. "Well, like I told him, he had already caught hell for it, might as well do it."

"Then what?"

"I took him home, dropped him at the end of his driveway and drove straight here."

They were interrupted by the buzzing of Phillip's private line. He walked quickly back to the desk and picked up the phone.

"Yeah?" He looked up at Shirley. "Bobby, what's going on?"

He was quiet, listening to the other man talk for nearly a minute.

"Settle down. There's nothing you can do tonight. Have you got a lude?" Pause. "Good, just take it and try and get some rest. I'll pick you up at your house in the morning at eight and we'll go have breakfast and try to straighten this whole thing out."

Phillip hung up the phone and drummed his fingers on the desk. "We may not have blown it after all."

* * * * *

Bobby sat in the darkness of his living room, waiting for the drug to take effect. He held a glass of straight whiskey in one hand, in the other, the note Bev had written him.

She had left . . . and taken Pat with her. She wrote that she was getting a hotel room for the night, then catching a flight to New Orleans the next morning. She didn't want to talk to him. She wanted time to be alone. To think.

He felt empty and alone . . . yet relieved at the same time, almost happy.

His wife and child had left him because of his actions. He took another pull from his drink. He should be sad . . . he should be shattered. He tried to push himself into a deeper depression, tried to force tears into his eyes.

He couldn't.

According to a press release handed out at the briefing, payoffs that include drugs, sex and cash totalling over a million dollars have been documented.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“So, what are you going to get me for Christmas?” Debbie was stacking papers on his desk.

“It’s still two weeks away, Debbie. I haven’t decided.”

“Well, I know what I’m giving you.”

He looked at her sideways. “What?”

“It’s a surprise,” she said gaily, shaking her shoulders.

“I was thinking I’d take you to Lake Tahoe for the holidays,” he said. “Just the two of us, running through the snow, frolicking in a winter wonderland.”

She smiled. “That would be nice, but I’m spending Christmas in Boston, Bobby. And you should go and visit your family in Louisiana.”

A cloud passed quickly over his features. He hadn’t seen Bev and Pat in almost two months. The note she left had been no idle threat. She had gone back to New Orleans, put Pat in school there and was having little communication with him. He called often, talking with his daughter, but when he attempted to talk with Bev, she was cold, telling him she didn’t know whether or not she could ever forgive him.

He agreed to send her twenty-five hundred dollars a month until they decided what to do. He agreed because he thought they wouldn’t be apart very long. He was wrong. He knew in his heart that he could put their marriage back together, but he wasn’t really trying. He could go back, beg her forgiveness and promise never to screw up again and she would take him back, but he wasn’t ready for that.

He liked the life he was living, free now to do everything he wanted. He could party all night long. He could sleep with a different woman every night. He could get drunk and do as many drugs as he wanted in his own house.

He didn’t miss Bev. Except at night, when he couldn’t find a party, when he couldn’t find someone to stay with him, when no amount of booze or drugs would chase away the loneliness. When no one was around, when he was forced to be himself, to confront his inner feelings, then he missed her. And did more drugs and made more

phone calls until he could find someone, anyone, to keep the loneliness at bay for a few hours until the sun came up.

And now the money was a problem. Even winning at poker couldn't keep him even. What with sending Bev the cash she needed, keeping up with the house and car notes plus the additional outlay for cocaine, he had charged up to the limit on all of his credit cards. He was two payments behind on his Mercedes and fifteen days late on the house loan.

"What do you want for Christmas, Bobby?"

He blinked, bringing himself back to reality. "Good ratings."

Debbie grinned. "Well, the man from Arbitron is on line one."

Fuck. Here it was. They had been waiting all morning for the call. It seemed like only yesterday when they were waiting for the summer ratings and now the fall sweeps were over. His grades were once more waiting on the phone.

"Bobby Holiday."

"Mr. Holiday, I've got the results from Chicago, New York and Los Angeles for you."

Bobby held his breath. "Shoot."

"I won't bother you with the summer figures. Let me just get it all over with quickly. In New York you've got a nine share, nine point five in Chicago, and get this, a twelve in Los Angeles. You're number one in all markets."

Bobby let out his breath and clinched his fist in the air. "Thanks for the call."

"The rest of the nation will be in later this week."

"All right!" Bobby slammed down the phone and stared at Debbie, his teeth bared, his eyes shining.

"Well?" she said.

"Number fucking one in L. A., New York and Chicago!"

"All right, boss, we did it!"

She jumped in his arms and he spun her around the office.

"Bobby?" It was Jane buzzing on the intercom.

"What is it?" he said, letting Debbie down lightly.

"Paul Johnson wants to see you in his office right away."

He winked at Debbie. "I guess he wants to congratulate me on the ratings." He pecked her quickly on the lips. "Let me just run right down there and accept my due reward."

He walked through the lobby and headed down the hall to Paul's office, fighting the impulse to skip. Number one in the top three markets. Johnson was probably going to give him a huge bonus for this one.

Paul's secretary looked up when he walked into the corporate

suite. "Go right in, Bobby. He's expecting you."

He opened the door and bounced into the room. Paul was sitting behind his desk. In one of the chairs in front of him sat James Molendi, the corporate attorney. It flashed through Bobby's mind that Paul might want to draw up a new contract. Maybe his money problems were over.

"Have a seat, Bobby," Paul said soberly.

He should have known from the tone of Paul's voice that something was wrong, but he was too elated with the news of the ratings to notice anything.

"First, I want to congratulate you on the ratings. Pretty strong numbers."

Bobby grinned. "Strong, hell. They're fantastic numbers."

Paul shrugged. "Yes, I guess you're right. Anyhow, congratulations."

For the first time, Bobby noticed the president of the company's demeanor. Something was not right. "What's up, Paul."

The older man took a deep breath. "It's come to my attention that you're receiving money from another company, another company that causes a conflict of interest with Media Communications."

Bobby was stunned. "What?"

"You're being paid for writing articles in *The Report*, are you not?"

Bobby swallowed. "Why, yes."

Paul shook his head. "That's in direct violation of your contract with us, Bobby. You cannot accept any outside source of income, other than investments, from any other person or company without the written approval of Media Communications."

"Wait a minute." Bobby was confused.

"It's right here in your contract," the lawyer said smugly, leafing through some papers on his lap. "Page three, article five."

Bobby looked up at Paul. "You knew I was writing for *The Report*."

"I knew, but I didn't know you were being paid for it."

"Hold it a second. Are you telling me that I can't make outside money?"

"That's what your contract states, Bobby, the contract you signed. You can't make outside money unless we approve it."

Bobby shrugged. "Then approve it."

Paul looked down and shook his head. "No can do. You're getting paid by a trade publication is viewed by Media Communications as a direct conflict of interest, plus it's money you would not be paid unless you were vice president of this company. *The Report* didn't want you for any writing until you landed this job."

Bobby's eyes flashed. "Hold on just a second, here. I don't view it as a conflict of interest."

"That doesn't matter, Bobby. I do. And I run this company. You can't do it any more."

Bobby stiffened in his chair. "What if I do?"

"You'd be in violation of your contract and I would have no choice except to terminate your employment."

"You wouldn't do that."

"I'd have no other choice."

"You'd fire me after the ratings I've gotten?"

Paul leaned across the desk. "The ratings WE'VE gotten. You're part of that success, Bobby, a large part, but the commitment of this company and the others who work here make up the rest of the team. I appreciate what you've done. You've done an incredible job, but no one person is bigger than this company. You have to play by the rules."

The air rushed from Bobby's lungs. He felt as if someone had hit him in the stomach. His mind was racing, trying to find a solution to the problem, but he couldn't. Deep inside, he had known that sooner or later this confrontation would take place. He had just hoped it would have happened later.

He raised his hands from his lap, palms upwards. "So what now?"

Paul leaned back in his chair. "You discontinue your relationship with The Report, immediately."

Bobby sighed heavily. "I don't see that I have a choice."

"I'd rather you didn't look at it that way, Bobby. Under the terms of your contract, I could force you to return the money The Report has already paid you, but I'm not going to do that. I just want to chalk this one up as a mistake and go on from here."

Bobby was defeated. "Fine," he said quietly. "Whatever you say."

Paul smiled. "Besides, it isn't that bad. I brought James in here to sign you to a new contract."

"What?" The shifts and turns of the meeting were more than Bobby could follow.

"I told you I thought you were doing a hell of a job, and now I'm going to show you. You'll lose money by not writing for The Report, but I'm sure the raise you'll be getting will more than make up for it."

Bobby shook his head and forced a smile.

"Just sign right here," James said, pushing some papers on the desk in front of him. "It's the same contract, the figures are just different."

Paul beamed. "Congratulations, Bobby. I'm raising your pay to one

hundred and twenty-five thousand a year, effective today.”

Bobby tried to keep the smile frozen on his face. The Report was paying him five thousand dollars a month. The raise wouldn't come close to making up the difference.

“Thanks, Paul,” he said, trying to sound grateful.

“No, thank you, Bobby.”

* * * * *

“Let me call Paul, Bobby.”

He was slouched down in a chair in Robert Williams' office, located in the same building, one floor above his, staring gloomily out the window. He shook his head. “Won't do any good, Robert. He's made up his mind. And there's nothing I can do about it anyhow. It's in the contract.”

“I don't see how he can see The Report as a conflict of interest.”

Bobby chewed on his lower lip, then stretched his neck, trying to ease the tension that was knotting his body. “You write about the radio and record industries. You take money from the record companies for the ads they buy. He sees it as a potential conflict.”

“Your radio stations take advertising dollars from the record industry.”

Bobby snorted. “I made the same point. He wouldn't buy it.”

“Damn.”

Bobby stood up. “My sentiments exactly.”

“I'll pay you for December anyhow.”

“Thanks, my friend, but I can't accept. The man's laid down the law and I've got to abide by it. I can't afford to lose this job.”

“He wouldn't dare fire you.”

Bobby fixed Robert with a level stare. “In a heartbeat.”

Robert met his gaze for a few seconds, then dropped his eyes. “You're right. The bastard would do it.”

“Yes indeed.”

“But you could get another job.”

“Not like this one. There's no other company with the potential of Media Communications. Any other job I took would be a step down. I've got to keep doing this and keep doing it right. Sooner or later it'll pay off.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Nope. I've got to go see about borrowing some money from the bank.”

“If you need me for anything, just call.”

“Thanks, Robert.”

He left the offices of The Report and took a long walk, window shopping along Sunset Boulevard. He tried to keep his mind away from his problems, focusing instead on the displays in the store windows. It didn't work. In five short hours, he had gone from the top of the hill to a deep valley. Losing the money from The Report was going to cost him almost half his income. He couldn't make it up. He didn't know how he was going to keep the house or the car.

Damn! What in the hell was he going to do?

* * * * *

"Have another drink, Bobby."

He shrugged. Sitting in the approaching darkness by the edge of Phillip Crawford's pool, Bobby still couldn't come out of the depression he felt.

Shirley leaned over and refilled his glass. He forced a smile. He was doing that a lot lately.

She reached down and pinched his cheek affectionately. "Cheer up, Bobby. Things will get better. They always do."

He closed his eyes and sighed.

"How about a swim?"

He looked up at her and shook his head.

"Now there's an idea," Phillip said. "Why don't we jump in the pool and wash all the troubles away?"

"I'm not in the mood, Phillip."

"Well, I am," Shirley said. "I'm going to go in and put on my bathing suit and see if I can't change your mind."

His mouth twitched. "You go ahead."

He watched her walk back to the house and disappear inside as Phillip leaned over from his perch in another lounge chair.

"Bobby, I'm really sorry about your money problems, but it's not that big a deal."

"Maybe not for you, Phillip."

"Not for you either."

Bobby took another swig from his glass. "How so?"

Phillip shifted around in his chair until he was facing Bobby. "Look," he said quietly, "I can give you the money."

Bobby shook his head. "Just a second."

Phillip held up his hands. "Now wait a minute. Hear me out."

Bobby stared at him intently.

"Every week your ratings get higher and Media Communications makes more money. Every week you add records and the record companies make more money. You're the one responsible for all of

these companies making more and more money, and yet you can't earn enough to meet your house payments."

"You've identified the problem, Phillip," he said dryly, "what's the solution."

Phillip cleared his throat. It was plain that the man was uncomfortable. "Record companies pay me a lot of money to get records on the radio, Bobby, a lot of money. If I can make money from you, it's only right that I share some of it with you."

Bobby stiffened in his chair. "You're talking about payola, Phillip."

Phillip shook his head back and forth. "No, no. I'm talking nothing of the kind."

Bobby was puzzled. "What then?"

"Like I said, record companies pay me to get their records on the radio. I work just about every record, so no matter what you play, I usually end up getting paid. But if the record companies thought I had more influence with you, they'd pay even more."

"It still sounds like payola to me."

"Keep listening. All you have to do is tell me on Monday what records you're planning to add on Tuesday."

"You mean let you know a day early?"

"You got it."

"How does that help you."

"If I know in advance what you're adding, I can go to the record companies and make a deal for those records you'll be going on."

Bobby nodded. "I see, they'll think you're actually getting the records added, when in reality, they're already on."

"Exactly. And I'll share the money I get with you."

"Phillip, no matter how you cut it, it's still payola and I won't have any of it."

"I don't follow, Bobby. Payola would be me paying you to play a specific record."

"That's what you're suggesting."

"No, I'm not. I'm asking you just to tell me what you're adding twenty-four hours in advance. I don't care what you add. You don't even need to discuss with me the records you're considering. Just give me the information early."

"And it doesn't matter what they are?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't want you to jeopardize your stations or your own sense of morality. But doesn't it get to you just a little bit that you are making Media Communications and several record companies, not to mention groups and managers, very wealthy while you don't get a dime more?"

Bobby drained his glass. "It doesn't seem fair, somehow."

Phillip leaned over and patted him on the knee. "I'm just trying to get you what you should have in the first place."

"And you'd never ask me to play a specific record?"

"Never."

"Who would know about this?"

"Just you and me."

"It sounds tempting."

"Think about it."

Shirley came out of the house wearing a tiny, yellow bikini. She stepped into the shallow end of the pool and waved. "You guys come on in."

"Maybe in a minute," Phillip called.

She dove into the pool, the ripples from the splash making tiny waves that crashed gently into the sides. Bobby watched as she swam from one end to the other, weighing Phillip's offer in his mind.

Finally, he broke the silence. "I appreciate the offer, I really do. But it's something I just can not do. Everything you say is true. Media Communications and a lot of people in the record business are getting rich from my talent, but I just can't take money from you. It's not legal."

"I could argue that point with you, Bobby, but I won't. Whether or not it's legal is not what's important. It's right. You should be sharing the money."

He nodded. "I agree, but if I get caught, my whole career goes down the drain. Hell, I could even go to jail."

Phillip laughed. "First of all, you wouldn't go to jail, and most important, you wouldn't get caught."

"How could you be sure?"

"Only you and I know. I give you cash money every week. No checks, no paper trail."

Bobby stared at Phillip for several seconds. "It sounds like you're familiar with this operation."

"Not everyone in the business thinks the way you do. There are a lot of radio people out there that are sick and tired of getting the short end of the stick and I just help them get a better grip. Nobody's selling their soul."

Bobby frowned. "A lot of people are taking money?"

Phillip nodded. "And you should too."

Bobby dropped his head, focusing his eyes on the cracks in the concrete beneath his feet.

"Well?"

Again Bobby shook his head. "I appreciate it, Phillip, but I can't. The answer is no."

"No problem. But you keep thinking about it. It's there if you change your mind. If not, what the hell, we'll just have to go to Vegas and take them down again."

Something soft and wet hit Bobby's ankle. It was the top of Shirley's bathing suit. He reached down and picked up the sopping, yellow cloth, then looked at her in the pool.

"Come join me."

Bobby grinned. "I can't. I don't have my suit."

Her arms dropped under the water and she wiggled around, finally ducking her head. When she came up, she threw the bottom part of her suit up on the side.

"Now we're even," she said. "Get your clothes off and come on in."

Bobby looked at Phillip. "You go ahead," the man said. "I've got a phone call to make."

Bobby smiled and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"It's about time we got a smile on your face," Phillip said.

"Wait 'til you see it in about five minutes," Shirley called.

* * * * *

"I'll call."

Bobby wasn't having much luck at the regular, Wednesday night poker game. He wasn't losing badly, but he certainly wasn't winning.

"Aces over."

Damn. He lost again. He watched Alvin Irving rake in another pot.

"You're running pretty hot tonight, Alvin."

The manager of The Falcons stared across the table at him.

"I just wish I was this good in getting you to play my groups' records."

Bobby looked away. It was an unwritten rule that business would not be mentioned at these games, but the game was at Irving's house, so there was little he could say.

"I'm serious, Bobby. What's the problem with my records?"

"Deal the cards, Irving."

Irving set the cards down in front of him. The man's mannerisms were definitely hostile. "No. I want to know why you aren't playing my records."

Bobby took a deep breath and frowned across the table. He didn't like being interrogated by anyone, especially this little weasel. "Deal the cards."

"Not until you answer the question."

Bobby slammed his hand down on the table. "Hey, fuck you, Irving. This is a poker game, not a business discussion."

"Yeah, come on Irving," Tommy chimed in. "No shop talk at the table."

"Blow it out your ass, Tommy," the little man snapped. "This is my house. I'll do what I want."

"Cool it, Irving," David Apston said. "You've had too much to drink."

That much was true. Bobby had noticed from the beginning that Alvin had been drinking heavily. He had too, for that matter, but his frequent trips to the bathroom had cut the effects of the liquor.

"Fuck all of you guys," Irving said. "I'm talking to Bobby."

"I'm waiting to play cards."

Irving leaned back in his chair. "Not until you tell me what's wrong with my records."

Bobby was at the boiling point. He was sick of Alvin Irving and his antagonistic attitude. He had enough problems on his own without dealing with the insecurities of the little bastard. Fine. If Alvin wanted to be a jerk, he'd just throw gasoline on the fire that was burning in the manager's gut.

"Your records suck, Alvin," he said evenly.

"Oh shit," Tommy muttered.

Irving's face turned bright crimson. His eyes narrowed, a vein just above his right eye started pounding, visible even to Bobby across the table.

"What?"

"You heard me, Alvin. Your records suck. You wanted an answer, you got it."

"Suck?" Irving stammered. "Suck? I've gone double platinum with the latest album and you say it sucks?"

Bobby shrugged. "If it's double platinum, why do you care whether I play it or not?"

"Because without your stations, you no-talent fuck, I can't break the top ten on any national chart. If you would have played any of the singles I've released off the album, it would be twice as big as it is."

Bobby was hot. "And you'd make twice the money."

"Fuck you," Irving shouted.

"Come on you guys, lighten up," Robert said.

"No Alvin, fuck you," Bobby shouted back. He stood up. "I don't have to take this shit from you or anyone else." He glanced over at

Irving's ever-present business manager. "How much do I owe? I'm out of here."

Alvin jumped up quickly, the force of the movement knocking his chair back on the floor. "You don't owe a fucking thing, Holiday. I'll cover your loses here. I don't want to see your money."

Bobby was clenching his teeth together, trying, and failing, to remain calm. He had to leave, and leave quickly. "Don't do me any favors, Irving," he said, reaching into his pocket for a wad of cash. He threw three, one hundred dollar bills down on the table. "This should cover it." He started for the door.

"Wait a minute." Alvin grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. Bobby's fists clinched.

"Don't you ever touch me again, Alvin," he growled.

"Don't you give me any orders, you punk," Irving shouted. The little man was leaning forward, his finger pointed in Bobby's face. "I could buy and sell you with the cash I've got in my pocket right now."

"I'm impressed," Bobby said sarcastically.

"You worm," the man shouted, spit flying out of his mouth as he formed the words, "you don't have shit for brains."

"Good night, Alvin," Bobby said, as calmly as possible. He turned to leave. Again Alvin grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

The rest of the men around the table had gotten up, sensing the argument had gone too far. They stood uncomfortably, half-way across the room.

"I told you to keep your hands off me, Alvin," Bobby hissed.

The little man was hysterical. "Come on, Bobby. What's it going to take. Cash? Is that it?" Irving was screaming at the top of his lungs. "I've been losing money to you at this game for months, throwing away hands like everybody else here so you could be a big winner, hoping you'd understand and give me an early break on some records, but maybe you just want the cash up front!" He reached into his jacket and pulled out a handfull of bills. "Is this what it takes Mister Know-It-All? Then here!" He threw the money in Bobby's face.

Bobby's composure snapped.

"Alvin, you're way out of line," Robert hollered, rushing over to where they were standing. The others were following.

"Take the money," Alvin screamed.

Every muscle in Bobby's body tensed. His fists were clinched tightly at his side, adrenaline pumped through his veins. "Fuck you, Alvin." It was the only thing he could say.

Alvin reached out, grabbed Bobby's shirt and pushed him against

the wall, ripping the fabric. Bobby's head snapped back and hit the paneling, stunning him momentarily. The smaller man shoved him again.

This time Bobby was ready. He planted his foot against the wall, dropped his right shoulder slightly and swung his fist up under Alvin's outstretched arm as hard as he could, catching The Falcons' manager squarely on the chin.

Bobby felt the force of the blow all the way down to his toes.

As if in slow motion, Irving's head rocked back, his jaw went slack, the lips forming a small 'o'. His head continued backward, taking the rest of his body with it. His feet left the ground and he seemed to fly across the room before falling flat on his back on the floor, the breath rushing out of his body with a loud whoosh.

"Holy shit!" Robert cried.

"Good God Almighty!" Tommy yelled.

Bobby saw Alvin's manager reaching for the phone on the wall.

"Hey," Phillip said, pointing at the phone. "Leave the bodyguards out of this one, Bruce. It's over."

The man stared at Phillip for a second, then ran over to kneel down beside his boss.

Phillip grabbed Bobby by the arm. "Come on, let's get out of here." He let himself be hustled up the stairs.

"The little fucker's out cold," he heard Tommy say as they went through the door.

* * * * *

Phillip was beating his fist against the steering wheel, laughing hysterically, as he drove Bobby home. "I can't believe it. You decked Alvin Irving. That little bastard has had it coming a long time."

Bobby rubbed his hand in the darkness, kneading the knuckles. "I think I broke my hand."

Phillip glanced over. "Naw, you can move your fingers. If it was broken, you wouldn't be able to move them. Besides," he started laughing again, "it's Alvin's heart that's stone, not his head."

Bobby grinned. He hadn't hit anyone since high school. He clinched his fist and looked at it. He guessed he had shown them that he couldn't be pushed around.

* * * * *

"You've got to be kidding."

Bobby was standing in front of Robert Williams' desk, staring at the publisher of The Report who was slouched in the chair, his head

hanging down on his chest.

"I'm sorry, Bobby."

"Damn it. How can this be?" He dropped his hand wearily to his side and shook his head. "What is going on?"

Robert leaned forward in his chair. "Bobby, I'm sorry. It's out of my hands."

Bobby slumped down into the chair in front of his friend's desk. "I don't understand, Robert. Why are you calling in the loan?"

Robert shook his head. "It's not me, Bobby. It's the board of directors of the company. You remember you insisted that the company loan you the money so you wouldn't be responsible to me personally. Under the terms of the loan, it can be called in at any time. I never expected this or I would have drawn it all up differently. But the board met this weekend and voted to call it in."

"Why?"

Robert looked down at his fingernails, picking at them nervously. "I don't know."

Bobby was confused. "I thought you owned this company."

Robert shook his head. "I own forty-nine percent. I'm president, but the board of directors has the power to make these decisions. I argued against it, but they voted me down."

"You mean they tell you what to do?"

"Only how to spend the money. I have complete freedom in what I write and how The Report is run."

"Why, all of a sudden, do they change their mind about the loan?"

Robert looked away, avoiding Bobby's eyes. Bobby leaned back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest and stared across the desk.

"Who's on the board?"

"Just some guys."

"Who, Robert?"

Robert coughed nervously. "Me and four other people."

"Names, Robert."

"It's not a known fact, Bobby."

"What?" he fumed. "You mean it's a secret board?"

"Not exactly, we just don't want it to be public knowledge."

"Who is on the board, Robert. I've got a right to know."

Robert took a deep breath, closed his eyes and dropped his head in his hands.

"Who?"

"Me, Tom Randall, Peter Sholtze and Pat Norman."

"I've never heard of any of them."

"They're lawyers."

"Why did they vote to call in the loan? They don't even know me."

"They always vote with the chairman of the board."

Bobby raised his head, slightly. "And who is that?"

Robert stared at him.

"Well?"

Robert looked away.

"Give, Robert."

"Alvin Irving."

"No!"

Robert nodded.

"Damn it!"

Robert rubbed his hands together, his eyes on the desk.

"Why, Robert? Why him?"

"He put up the money for The Report."

"What?"

"When I first had the idea for The Report, he put up all the money to back the venture. I couldn't afford to do it alone. The members of The Falcons are minority stock holders. They're represented by the lawyers on the board."

Bobby leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. "Fuck. That little bastard. You know I'm going to bury him with this."

"The way he figures it, you can't do anything more than you've already done. You haven't played his records anyhow, so what does he care."

"I could go public with what he's done."

"What good would that do? You'd only get in more trouble with Paul."

"Ahhh shit." Bobby leaned over, his elbows on his knees. "The past seven days have been hell."

Robert got up and walked around the desk, putting his hand on Bobby's shoulder. "Don't let it bother you, Bobby. Here." He was holding a check. "I've written you a personal check for fifty thousand dollars. You can just owe me. Pay me back whenever you can."

Bobby looked up. "Robert, I really appreciate that."

"Take it."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

He shook his head. "I don't want to get you into any trouble with Irving. You've got to worry about your own skin."

"He doesn't tell me what to do with my own money, Bobby."

"He'd find out."

"So?"

"He'd let Johnson know somehow."

"So?"

"I'd be right back in the same barrel."

"I don't agree with you, Bobby."

He stood up. "Doesn't matter, Robert. I'll handle this by myself." He threw his arm around his friend's shoulder. "I appreciate your help."

"I'm sorry, Bobby."

"Don't worry about it."

"Where are you going to get the money?"

"From my father," Bobby lied. "When's the loan due?"

Robert ducked his head again. "Wednesday."

Bobby grinned. "I'd better get on the phone to Daddy." He walked through the door and headed back to his office.

* * * * *

"What are we going to add, boss?"

Debbie and Nancy had been waiting for him to return from the meeting with Robert. He shrugged. The last thing he wanted to think about this morning was music. "What do you guys like?"

"It's just another Monday music morning," Debbie sang cheerfully. "We've got the hits for you."

"What?"

"Johnny Rogers, Tom Collins and The Falcons."

He let out a humorless laugh. "The Falcons?"

"Yes," Nancy said. "I know you're not in love with the group, but this single is really doing well."

He walked wearily to the end of the room and sat down on the couch. "I don't care," he said. "If you guys are confident, go with the Johnny Rogers and the Tom Collins."

"Jeeze, Bobby, what's wrong?" Debbie asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. I'm just tired of making all the decisions around here. You guys decide."

"Outstanding!" Debbie cried.

"What about The Falcons?" Nancy asked.

Bobby ground his teeth together. "No way."

"But, Bobby," Nancy began.

"Be quiet, Nancy," Debbie said. "Two out of three 'aint bad."

Bobby snorted. "Meatloaf, nineteen-seventy-eight."

Debbie pointed at him. "You got it."

"Get out of my office."

* * * * *

"So tell me again how this would work." He was sitting nervously in the living room of Phillip's house.

"You tell me on Mondays what records you'll add on Tuesdays and I'll do the rest."

"What's the rest?"

"I'll cut the deals with the record companies."

"Phillip, no one can ever know about this."

Phillip waved his hand. "No one will ever know. Why would I tell? It's in my best interest to keep it quiet. Don't worry, Bobby. You're doing the right thing. You aren't jeopardizing your integrity, you're just getting some of the money that you're due."

"I don't see it that way, Phillip. But as long as you don't ask me to play specific records, I don't guess it will hurt. I'd never do this if I wasn't in a bad bind."

"Exactly how bad of a bind are you in, Bobby?"

Bobby grunted. "I was going in the hole even when I was getting money from The Report. Taking away that five grand, even with the additional thousand or so I get from my raise, add the money I'm sending Bev and I've got to come up with another six grand a month. And that doesn't count the fifty thousand I've got to pay back to The Report the day after tomorrow."

Phillip smiled. "That's not so bad, son."

Bobby muttered. "Maybe not for you. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Phillip stood up abruptly and left the room. Bobby bit his lip and took a sip from the glass he was holding. The whiskey didn't even burn as it was going down. He was knocking back another swallow when Phillip returned and tossed a large, brown envelope on the coffee table.

Bobby looked up. "What's that?"

"Call it the start of a long and profitable relationship."

Bobby opened the envelope. His heart jumped into his throat. It was packed full of one hundred dollar bills. "Jesus, Phillip, there's thousands of dollars here."

"Fifty-seven thousand to be exact."

"Jesus Christ."

"It's not a miracle, Bobby, just money."

"A lot of it."

"I'll give you seven thousand dollars every month for giving me the record information on Mondays."

"That's a ton of money."

Phillip shrugged. "Don't you worry. I'll still be making out."

"What's the extra fifty for?"

"Call it a loan. Pay off Irving. You can repay me when you have it."

"I don't know how to thank you, Phillip."

"You don't have to thank me, Bobby, we're partners."

Bobby stared at Phillip. "No one can ever know."

"They won't."

"Not even Shirley."

"No one."

Bobby sighed. He didn't like the arrangement, but the feel of the money in his hands made it a lot more comfortable. It would solve most of his problems. "All right. Tomorrow we add Johnny Rogers and Tom Collins."

Phillip nodded.

Bobby winced. "It's funny. I was going to add The Falcons, but after what Irving did, he can fuck himself."

"Why's that?"

"Fuck him," Bobby grumbled. "He can rot in hell before I play another one of his records."

"Think about that, Bobby."

"I don't have to think about it."

"Listen. You have to look at this as a business. By not adding The Falcons, you're cutting off your nose to spite your face."

"How so?"

"You aren't using your judgment. If the record works for your stations, add it."

"Yeah, but . . ."

"No buts. If I asked you to add a record that wasn't right for your stations, you wouldn't do it, right?"

"You said you would never do that."

"I know, but follow my point. If I did ask, you wouldn't play a record that wouldn't fit, would you?"

"No."

"Then by not playing a record that's right for you because of your feelings for the manager, you're hurting yourself, right?"

Bobby sighed. Of course he was right. "But damn it, Phillip . . ."

"Follow me now. You were going to add The Falcons tomorrow if Irving hadn't fucked up, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Then add it."

"Awww."

"It's the right thing to do."

Bobby took another sip of whiskey and sighed heavily. "I guess you're right."

"And I'll make a deal with the record company to get paid for the add."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And they will get the money from Irving. I'll tell you what. Add The Falcons, I'll get ten grand up front from Websters plus a forty thousand dollar retainer and you won't have to pay me back for the loan."

A smile gradually spread across Bobby's face. "It'll be like Irving paying me to pay him back."

"Exactly. And it's good business."

Bobby finished his drink. "I'm liking this more and more."

* * * * *

"Here's a check for the fifty grand I borrowed, Robert. Tell Alvin I'm really grateful."

Robert took the check Bobby offered and stuck it in his desk drawer. "I'm still sorry about all of this, Bobby."

"Don't sweat it."

"How'd you get the money?"

"Not that it's any of your business, Robert, but I borrowed it from my father."

"I thought you told me your parents weren't wealthy."

"They aren't Robert, but the old man had a few thousand put away and he let me have it."

Robert narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure everything is all right?"

"Of course."

"It's just that the last time I saw you, you were down and depressed. Now you're smiling and happy."

"Well, you've got to admit I had a rough week. But it's over. Everything is fine. You know, blue skies and all of that. Besides, with so much bad news last week, it was pretty hard to concentrate on the good news."

"Yeah, those ratings were fantastic."

"Number one in every city except San Francisco and Miami, and we're number two there. I can't complain."

"So that's why you're happy?"

"No, I'm happy with my life."

"And you're not worried about money?"

"Fuck no. Paul even gave me a raise."

"That's fantastic, Bobby. How much?"

Bobby grinned. "None of your business. Enough to ease the pain from the money I was making from you. And I don't have to write any articles for it, either."

"You're sure you're all right?"

Bobby made a face. "What the fuck's with you?"

Robert shrugged. "I just worry about you."

"What's the matter, Robert. Are you afraid I might get some money from someone in the record business to back me in a venture?"

Robert's face turned red. "That's different and you know it."

"How so?"

"I don't operate radio stations."

"I know that."

"So there's a difference."

"Legally maybe. Morally, it's the same."

"Not in my book."

"Well, you don't have to worry Robert. It seems like I just passed the acid test anyhow. If I had been adding Irving's records, I wouldn't have had to ask my dad for the cash."

Robert nodded. "I'll bet Alvin's teeth fell out when he found out you added The Falcons yesterday."

"Just shows you I wouldn't sacrifice my principles, no matter how I feel personally."

"I guess you're right. Am I going to see you at the game tonight?"

Bobby shook his head. "Hell no. As long as Alvin is a member of that group, you won't find me there."

"Why don't you come by and bury the hatchet. It's at my house."

"The only place I'd bury the hatchet would be in his skull."

* * * * *

Bobby was lying naked on the big, round bed at The Golden Pyramid. Shirley was with him, her head on his stomach, her hands and tongue fondling his crotch. He watched their reflection in the mirror on the ceiling as he took another hit of cocaine.

It had been Phillip's idea to get a suite and spend the New Year's holiday in Vegas. Bobby had one of the bedrooms, but he wasn't listed on the hotel registry. This way, Phillip could pick up the tab without anyone ever knowing that Bobby had been staying with him.

Bobby had been partying for three straight days, drinking and drugging and gambling as much as he could. Phillip had even arranged for him to get a line of credit. And he needed it. So far, he had lost almost ten thousand dollars, but he wasn't worried. He had a month to pay it back. He'd get the money somehow. Maybe just come back

and win it.

He spent four days over Christmas with Bev and Pat in Louisiana. It had been strange. He and Bev had tried to put on happy faces, but Pat knew something was wrong. He told her that soon they'd all be back together again, as quickly as he could finish up with his work. She accepted that. Bev was more difficult.

She told Bobby that the only way their marriage could ever be put back together was that he would have to give a total commitment to her to cut down on his work, curb his drinking and stop doing drugs. Of course he denied that he was still using drugs. Of course she hadn't believed him.

He really wanted to quit the drugs. Sometimes. The more he did, the more he didn't want to do any more, and the more he wanted. It was a strange feeling. The only way to stop thinking about it was to do more.

He sat up in bed and did another bump.

Grabbing Shirley gently by the hair, he pulled her back toward him. "It's not going to happen." She had been working on him for almost an hour, yet he couldn't get excited. That was another aspect of his cocaine use that was beginning to bother him. More often than not, he found himself unable to perform sexually.

She kissed him on the cheek. "I think you've just had a little too much blow."

He shook his head. "There's no such thing."

She giggled and took the bottle from him, filling her nose. "I know what might work."

He raised his eyebrows. "What?"

"Something a little kinky."

"I'm game."

She snuggled up closer to him and whispered in his ear. "Remember what you did with Susan in your office?"

He looked down at her. "How did you know about that?"

She licked his ear. "She told me."

"She didn't seem to like it."

"Some people don't, but I do."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Her hand moved down his chest and across his stomach. She began to stroke him. "Would you like to do that to me, Bobby?"

He looked down at her hand. "That would be pretty difficult with the shape I'm in." Her words excited his mind, but his body wasn't responding.

She sat up. "We'll just have to do something about that."

"What?"

She smiled. "How would you like to tie me up."

"What?"

"You heard me, Bobby. How would you like to tie me to this bed, spank me, then take me any way you want."

He felt himself beginning to stir. "I've never done anything like that before."

"I want you to do that."

"Sounds like fun to me. But how do I tie you up?"

She jumped off the bed and ran to his closet, rummaged around for a few minutes, then returned with two of his ties. "Put these around my wrists."

He sat up and tied each end of the ties to her wrists. She fell down in the middle of the bed, her arms stretched wide. "Now tie the ends to the bed frame."

He rolled off the bed and looked under the covers. Finding the edge of the frame, he looped the tie around the metal and tightened it into a knot.

"Now the other. And make it tight."

He moved to the other side of bed. When he was finished, she lay flat on her stomach, her arms pulled straight out toward the edges.

She wiggled around, testing the knots. "Perfect. I can't move."

"Now what?"

"Whatever. I'm your slave, Bobby."

The sight of her lying there tied to his bed was beginning to excite him. She was at his mercy, his to do with as he chose. He liked the feeling. Kneeling down, he kissed her between her shoulders, running his tongue down her back, across her buttocks, then back up again.

"Spank me, Bobby."

"Do what?"

"Spank me."

"How do you want me to do that?"

"You know how. Use your hand. Slap my ass." She wiggled her hips suggestively.

He moved down lower on the bed. Stretching one hand out, he rubbed her buttocks, kneading and pinching the flesh.

"Spank me, Bobby."

What the hell. He raised his hand and slapped down lightly.

"That's it."

He repeated the action.

"Harder."

He slapped her again, this time with a little more force.

"More. Harder."

He raised his hand about two feet above her and swung down hard. His hand stung as it bounced against her cheeks. When he lifted it, he could see the red outline of his palm where he had hit her.

Things were getting pretty twisted!

She moaned. "That's it."

He slapped her again. Harder still. And again.

She was moaning and writhing on the bed, her hips lifting off the covers with the anticipation of each blow. Bobby leaned over and quickly snorted back more coke. Now he was getting excited. The power he felt and the pain he was inflicting worked together to make his blood hot.

He jumped across the bed and pulled Shirley's legs apart, kneeling down between them. He raised his arm and slapped her again, the sharp 'whap' echoing around the room.

"Yes! Yes! Spank me, baby! Hurt me!"

Her words egged him on and he hit her again and again, each blow making him harder and harder.

"Yes, baby, yes."

He fell across her, grabbing her hair with one hand while he guided himself into her with the other, spreading her buttocks apart, his stomach pounding against the fleshy cheeks that were bright red from the spanking he had given her.

"That's it, baby, pull my hair," she moaned.

He raked his fingers down her back.

"Yes . . . yes!"

* * * * *

Bobby stepped out of the pool, drying the water from his back with a towel. He looked at Phillip, stretched out on his stomach on the diving board.

"Thanks for the New Year's party, partner. That was quite a weekend."

Phillip dropped his arms in the water, his hands splashing aimlessly. "My pleasure, Bobby. We sure had a good time." He rolled off the diving board and into the water, swam quickly to the edge of the pool and climbed up the ladder. "I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight?"

Bobby chuckled. "I don't know and I don't care." He looked around. "Where's Shirley?"

"I gave her the day off." Phillip fell back on one of the loungers, rubbing his face with a towel. "She looked like she needed it."

Bobby grinned, sitting down in a chair beside Phillip. "I wish I could have taken the day off. Do you know what she wanted me to do to her Saturday night?"

"What?"

"Tie her up and spank her."

"No."

"Yeah."

"Did you?"

Bobby buried his face in his hands. "Yeah."

"Damn. How was it?"

"It was great."

"I wish I could have seen that."

"Maybe next time."

Phillip sat up. "What brought that on, Bobby."

He sighed. "To tell you the truth, I couldn't get a hard on so she brought it up."

"You couldn't get your dick hard? Mr. Superman couldn't perform?"

"That's about it."

"Too much cocaine."

"Bullshit."

"It's the truth. Too much of that shit makes you impotent."

"It's never happened to me before."

"You've never done this much blow before. How much are you doing?"

"Fuck off, Phillip."

"No, seriously. How much?"

"About three grams a week," Bobby lied. It was more like five.

"Well, you better watch that stuff."

"Yes, Dad."

"I'm just trying to look out for you, buddy."

"Don't."

"How much money did you lose?"

Bobby lay back on the lounge and closed his eyes. He didn't want to think about it. "Eighty-five hundred."

"I thought it was closer to ten grand."

"It was until yesterday afternoon. I got a little back."

"Can you cover it?"

Bobby hesitated. "No."

"Don't worry about it, I'll take care of it."

Bobby shook his head. "I don't want to borrow any more money from you Phillip."

"It won't be a loan, I'll just give it to you."

"No, I'll find some way to cover it."

"How?"

"I don't know, but I feel bad borrowing it from you."

"There's another way."

"How's that?"

"Irving's offered a double bonus on The Bandits record. You add that tomorrow and we could both have ten grand in our pockets."

Bobby jumped up, his face flushed, the tendons in his neck bulging. "Fuck off, Phillip, I told you never to try and get me to play a special record for you. You said you'd never bring it up."

"Take it easy, Bobby. You brought it up. I thought that's where you were leading the conversation."

"No way," he said angrily.

"Relax," Phillip said. "It's no big deal. I'll loan you the nine grand and you can pay me back whenever."

"How about a thousand a month for nine months?"

"Whatever."

"You can only give me six grand a month until it's paid off."

"I'll give you the seven, Bobby. You pay me back when you can."

Bobby felt uncomfortable about borrowing more money, but then, what did it matter. As long as he didn't make any compromises, any more compromises, it would be all right. He dried his hands carefully and reached for the vial of coke Phillip always had handy.

"Just keep that, Bobby."

"You sure?"

"I've got plenty."

He stood up. "I'd better get going. I've got some work to do at home."

"What are the adds?"

Bobby grinned. He had almost forgotten the reason he was there. "John Hardy and Totally Pink."

Phillip gave him a salute and he walked into the house to change.

* * * * *

Several hours after Bobby had left, the private phone in Phillip's office rang.

"Yes."

"How is everything going?"

"According to plan."

"I must ask you to step up the plans."

Phillip's face tightened. "Why? What do you want me to do?"

Phillip knew his caller didn't like to be questioned. "Whatever you think is necessary. Don't jeopardize the whole operation. But we're running a little behind."

"How can that be? I'm beating my projection."

"We have no direct quarrel with you, it's just that the others aren't doing as well."

"It sounds like their problem to me."

"Indirectly, it's yours."

"How so?"

"Last year, different independents were working the individual Media Communications stations. With one exception, they were getting full price for each. Now, you're working the chain. They're cut out, yet you're not making up the difference."

"Like I said, their problem."

"No, it's our problem. If you can lock in the chain, getting full price for all records that go on, plus more for the selected ones, it'll make up the difference."

"I'm working on that, but it will take a little more time."

"I trust your judgment. There's another thing."

Phillip was aware of the change in the man's tone. "What?"

"We're having a small problem with your friend Joe Preston."

The mention of the East Coast independent brought a frown to Phillip's face. "He's no friend of mine. I thought he was tight with you."

"He is. Or was. As you know, Joe was instrumental in involving us in this operation. But now Joe is not satisfied with the arrangement ... and we're not satisfied with Joe's attitude."

The hair stood up on the back of Phillip's neck. This was not something he wanted to think about. "How can I help?"

"Just keep on doing what you're doing. You understand that this is a business. We have no quarrel with you. Just know that my associates and I want you to be aware of our problem."

Phillip sighed heavily. "I get the message."

"I knew that you would."

Phillip hung up the phone and stared vacantly across the room, trying, without success, to make his mind go blank.

* * * * *

Bobby and Debbie were at a private party at the Roxie, a fashionable nightclub on Sunset. They were there, with everyone else, to hear a special performance by The Falcons, who were going to preview their new album for selected people in the industry. They

listened and laughed through a thirty-minute opening by a new comedian, recently signed to a recording contract by Alvin Irving, and now they were milling around with the rest of the guests, killing time for forty-five minutes until The Falcons came on.

"Isn't this exciting, Bobby?"

He gazed around the room, trying to focus his eyes. He was really fucked up. "Yeah, loads."

She grabbed his arm tighter, trying to steady him. "I think you've had a little too much to drink."

"Bullshit. I just need another pop. Let me go to the bathroom."

"No, Bobby, stay here with me."

"I said I've got to go to the bathroom," he sputtered, pulling away from her grasp. He staggered through the room, trying to avoid the other people, and pushed his way into the bathroom. Fortunately, it was almost empty. He went into one of the stalls, closed and locked the door behind him and pulled the cocaine out of his pocket.

Sitting on the edge of the toilet, he carefully unfolded the paper, trying not to spill any of the white powder. When he got it open, he reached into his coat pocket for a book of matches to use as a spoon. That's when he dropped it.

"Shit!"

The paper fell to the floor, the cocaine pouring out on the tile. He quickly reached down and picked up the paper, hoping there was some left. There wasn't. Angrily, he flung the paper into the toilet and stared down at the floor. The coke was scattered across the grimy tiles along with the dirt, water and dried urine usually found in bathroom stalls.

"Motherfucker," he moaned.

He had to have the blow. Kneeling down in front of the toilet, he scraped the floor with the back of the book of matches, making a small pile of the white powder in the center of one of the tiles. He lowered his head to inspect his work. It looked as if he had managed to save a quarter of a gram of the cocaine, that's if he counted the dirt and hair scooped up with it. It looked nasty.

He didn't hesitate. Ducking his head, he put his cheek on the floor and stuck his nose as close to the pile as he could, stopped up one nostril with a finger and inhaled deeply.

He started coughing, immediately. The large amount of coke, mixed with whatever else he scraped up, flew past his nose to the back of his throat, nearly causing him to gag. He bent over the toilet, hawking and spitting, trying to get the taste out of his mouth. It almost worked. The drug, however, did. He salvaged enough from

the floor to give him quite a jolt.

His head began to clear as his eyes watered. After a few seconds, he was able to focus. He was still looking through a fog, but at least the fog was in focus.

He staggered out of the bathroom, past the people milling around in the main room, looking for Debbie. He spotted her with a group of people that included Robert and Pamela Williams, Alvin Irving and the comedian who'd just completed his act.

Bobby pushed his way through the crowd, grabbed the comedian and spun him around.

"Man," Bobby stammered. "I just wanted to tell you how fantastic you are."

The man blushed and dropped his head. "Why thank you, but if you'll excuse me, I was talking to these people."

"Fuck those people," Bobby said. "They all work for me," he looked over his shoulder at them and grinned drunkenly, "in a manner of speaking."

"Well, still."

Bobby spun back around, took the man by both shoulders and pushed him against the wall, shoving his nose into the comedian's face. "Man, you are the greatest, I want to tell you, and you can go far . . . with my help you can go all the way to the top."

Bobby felt a hand on his arm. He turned slightly. His eyes were losing their focus again.

"Bobby." It was Debbie. She was talking quietly, but forcefully. "Stop it. Come over here with me."

"Fuck you!" he slurred, pulling out of her grasp. When he turned, the comedian was walking away. "Hey," Bobby yelled. "Don't you walk away from me." The man turned his head, but kept walking. "Hey!" Bobby screamed. "Don't you know who I am?"

"Bobby!" Debbie grabbed his arm again. He was vaguely aware that he had become the center of attention in the room. Everyone was staring at him. He looked around wildly.

"Don't any of you mother-fuckers know who I am?" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Easy, Bobby." Robert grabbed his other arm and together with Debbie, they pushed him against the wall.

He tried to fight them off but he was too weak. "Let go of me."

"Bobby, get a hold of yourself," Debbie hissed. "You're causing a big scene."

"I don't give a fuck," he muttered.

She grabbed his hand. "Wipe your nose. You've got coke all over

your face.”

“I said I don’t give a fuck.”

She licked her fingers and ran her hand across his nose and lips.

“There.”

“Bobby,” Robert said, “you need to go home.”

“Hey, fuck all of you.”

“I’ll take him,” Debbie said.

“Can you?” asked Robert.

“Yeah, just help me get him to the car.”

* * * * *

“God, Bobby, did you make a scene,” Debbie laughed.

He was sprawled across his bed. She managed to help him out of the car and into the house without breaking anything. Now she was bending over him, pulling off his boots.

“Hurry up and get my clothes off and get in bed with me,” he said.

She slipped off his other boot. “No, no. Not tonight.”

“Yeah, tonight. I want you to spend the night with me.”

“No, Bobby, not tonight.” She was standing at the end of the bed, both hands on her hips.

“Come on, Debbie.”

“No way. I’m leaving. I’ll pick you up in the morning at eight.”

“Debbie, please don’t leave. I need you to stay with me tonight.”

She shook her head. “Don’t give me that hang dog look, Bobby, it’s not going to work.”

“Debbie, I don’t want to be alone.”

“Sorry, boss,” she said, turning and walking toward the door, “I’m outta here.”

“Debbie.” He tried once more.

“Go to sleep, Bobby.” She shut the door behind her.

Bobby lay quietly on the bed for a few minutes, fighting to keep his eyes open. Every time they closed, his head started spinning, making him sick. He listened to the darkness, the lack of activity making his ears prick at every little sound. Movements in the shadows, imagined and real, kept him on edge. Paranoia, accentuated by the after effects of his cocaine ingestion, caused his mind to work overtime. He could feel his lungs rise and collapse, hear his heart beating . . . and stopping.

“No!” He sat bold upright in bed. His skin was clammy from a light sweat that covered his entire body. Had he fallen asleep and dreamed it? He clutched his chest, massaging his heart. Was he going to die?

He rolled over and fumbled for the phone in the darkness, punch-

ing out the numbers of Bev's apartment in New Orleans. She answered sleepily.

"Bev?" he cried, tears dripping onto his cheeks.

"Bobby? Are you all right?" The sleep was gone from her voice.

"Beverly," he moaned.

"Bobby. What is the matter?"

"Oh Bev, I miss you so much."

He heard her breathe heavily into the phone. "Bobby, you're drunk."

"Maybe just a little. Maybe it's only when I get drunk that all the walls come down and I finally see what's wrong with me."

"What is wrong with you, Bobby?"

"I'm scared," he whimpered.

"Oh, Bobby, what are you afraid of?"

"Dying."

"Bobby, is everything all right? Are you okay?"

"Everything is not all right. I'm lonely. I need you and Pat here with me."

"I miss you too. I wish everything could be like before."

"It can, Bev. It can."

"Not until you want it to, Bobby."

"I don't like what's going on Bev."

"What do you mean?"

"Work and everything."

"Then quit."

"I can't quit, Bev. I've got to make payments on the house and the car and the furniture and everything."

"Bobby, we did without that stuff before, we can do without it again."

"But I don't want to, Bev."

She was quiet for a few seconds. "That's the problem."

"Is it wrong to want all these things?"

"It's wrong when you have to sacrifice your family and your principles to get them."

"I'm not sacrificing my principles."

"Maybe not yet, but you sacrificed your family, Bobby. Your principles won't be far behind."

"Bev, I need you here with me."

"And we need you, Bobby, but not there."

"You mean you won't come back to California?"

"No, I mean I won't be with you until you change your lifestyle, your friends and your habits."

"I'll try."

"Not good enough. When you've succeeded, call us back. I just hope we'll still be waiting for you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I won't wait forever. I've got a life to live also."

"Don't leave me, Bev."

"I didn't leave you, Bobby."

"Yes, you did. You went back to Louisiana."

"You left Pat and me weeks before we moved. I won't put her through that again."

"Bev, please."

"I have to get off the phone, now. It's three o'clock here. If you're truly serious about changing and putting our family back together, call me tomorrow night. If you're just drunk and feeling sorry for yourself, I guess I'll hear from you the next time you feel alone."

"Bev, I..."

"Goodbye, Bobby."

She hung up.

He fell back on the bed and cried, deep sobs racking his body. He yelled into the pillow, cursing himself for what he had lost, promising to make changes. He rolled over onto his back, forcing himself to be calm, to stop crying. He would change. It was time. He'd call Beverly tomorrow night and discuss when she would move back out. He would quit doing all drugs. He would stop drinking. He would stop sleeping with other women. He would be a good husband and father.

He finally drifted off to sleep, proud of the commitments he had made.

He didn't break the first one until the following morning when Debbie offered him a pop on the way to work.

It would be two months before he spoke to Bev again.

* * * * *

"I wish you wouldn't use that stuff around me."

Bobby sneered. He was sitting in the shallow end of Robert's pool, snorting cocaine. "When did you get so conservative?"

"I haven't changed, Bobby. It's you."

"Please, Robert, no sermons, all right?"

"After the scene you pulled in the Roxie, someone has to try and slow you down."

Bobby snorted back the coke and pulled the hat he was wearing lower over his brow. "This is what I love about Los Angeles."

"What?"

"You can swim year round, you can make a fool out of yourself in a public place and you can snort blow anywhere. And nobody cares."

"I care."

"Oh yeah, I forgot. My priest."

"Wise up, Bobby. Look what's happening to you."

"What's happening to me, Robert?"

"You've lost touch with reality. You're running Media Communications like some dictator, all the program directors are ready to revolt, you're snorting cocaine all day, every day, your wife and child left you and you're chasing women every night."

Bobby dropped his lips into the water, blowing bubbles in the pool.

"And you're acting like a child," Robert said.

"That's the way you see it?"

"Yeah, Bobby, that's the way I see it."

Bobby smiled. "Well, I see it differently. I see me running Media Communications right to the top, number one in almost every market. If the program directors want to revolt, let them. I can replace every one of them tomorrow and not drop a point. Because they're not important. I am. I make the decisions in that company and so far I've been right. I snort cocaine from time to time because I want to, not because I need to. I'm temporarily separated from my wife and child because I've made a commitment to my work. And yes, I escort some of California's most beautiful women around nightly, and I go to bed with nearly all of them."

Bobby winked and tipped his hat toward Robert. "That's the way I see it."

Robert just shook his head.

"Lighten up, my friend. You take everything too seriously. Look at you. You're making ten times the money I am, you live in a beautiful home, drive a fine car, and yet you won't even get in the sunshine. Come out from under that umbrella and enjoy what Hollywood has to offer."

"What's that? Wine, women and song?"

"You don't have to sing, Robert."

"Bobby, you are a piece of work."

"I was saying that to myself, just the other night, when I was going down on your wife's best friend." He took a deep breath and went under water, swimming the length of the pool before coming to the surface again.

"There's something else I want to talk with you about, Bobby."

"Go ahead, get it all out of your system."

"It's about Phillip Crawford."

"Hold it, Robert. I'm not going to be able to bear this one without another pop." He swam briskly to the shallow end of the pool, picked up his vial and joined Robert under the shade of the umbrella.

"What about him?"

Bobby was carefully drying his hands. He didn't want to get the coke wet. "What about what?"

"Your relationship with Phillip Crawford."

Bobby dipped the spoon carefully into the powder, lifting it just as carefully to his nose where he emptied it with one, swift snort. "What relationship? You sound like you're accusing me of having an affair."

"An affair would be easier to explain."

Bobby snorted back a second spoonful of coke. "Give it a rest. We're just friends."

"He's not the kind of friend to have."

"Oh, so I should hang out with your friends? Like maybe the guy who called in my loan because I wasn't playing his records?"

Robert blushed. "Low blow, Bobby."

"I prefer Phillip's company."

"That's an error in judgment."

"Fuck you, Robert. You're just a snob. You hang with Alvin because he gave you money to start The Report."

"Is that why you hang with Phillip? Because he's giving you money?"

Bobby stared off into the distance. "You're the only person who could say that without me whipping their ass."

"I'm asking you the question, Bobby."

His eyes shifted, focusing on Robert. "You should know better."

"I'm asking."

Bobby rocked back and forth in his chair. "I'm going to answer your question, this time, and this time only, Robert, because we're friends." He paused. "The answer is no. Fuck no."

"Talk around town has it that the answer is yes."

"Talk around town has it that you're a faggot, Robert. Surely you don't believe everything you hear."

"Word is that if you want a record on the Media Communications chain, you have to hire Phillip Crawford."

"Then test me, if you don't believe me. Let Alvin hire Phillip to work a record and see if I add it."

"I don't have to test you, Bobby. I just want you to tell me the truth."

"I've told you, Robert, and you keep asking."

"All right. I'll shut up."

"Thank you."

"It's just that I don't like to see you hanging around with him."

"You've made your position clear on that Robert, but I choose my own friends."

"That you do."

"And I like Phillip. We don't talk business."

"Whatever you say, Bobby. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"I'm not going to get hurt."

"I've heard that the FBI is secretly investigating payola in our business, and I don't want you to get caught up in anything."

"I hope they are investigating, Robert. Then, when they find nothing, you'll finally get off of my case."

"They're going to find something, Bobby."

"Maybe so. But they aren't going to find me. I don't do it."

"All right."

Bobby laughed, motioning toward the bottle. "Come on Robert, relax. Have a pop," he joked.

Robert reached across the table and picked up the vial of cocaine.

Bobby's eyes lit up. "I didn't know you snorted blow."

He watched as his friend unscrewed the cap. "I don't snort. I throw it."

Bobby's mouth dropped open. "What?"

Robert grinned and tossed the opened bottle over his shoulder and into the pool.

The subpoenas issued today were the result of a secret investigation begun two years ago involving agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Internal Revenue Service and different local law enforcement officers across the country.

CHAPTER NINE

“Hit it.”

Bobby was sitting with Phillip at the blackjack table in the Golden Pyramid.

Edna dealt him an eight.

“Fuck!” He threw his other cards over. A ten and a five.

“Sorry, Mr. H,” she said, taking his cards and the five hundred dollar chip he had bet.

“This sucks.” He turned toward Phillip and looked down at the chips stacked in front of his companion. “At least somebody’s winning.”

“Yeah,” Phillip grinned. “As long as one of us wins, we’re all right.”

“Give me another marker,” Bobby said.

The pit boss approached the table. Leaning over towards Bobby, he said quietly, “Ah, Mr. H, you’ve already signed for fifteen thousand. That’s your limit.”

Phillip patted Bobby on the shoulder. “Why don’t you take a short break, Bobby. Go take a sauna and relax. After dinner we’ll come back down and give it another try.”

Bobby sighed. “Yeah, maybe I’ll do that. Where’s Shirley?”

Phillip was concentrating on the next deal. “She went shopping. Said she’d be back in the suite in a couple of hours.” He threw down his cards. “Blackjack! Pay me.”

Bobby got up from the table and walked across the casino, weaving his way through the maze of slot machines, heading for the gym. Maybe a sauna and rubdown would change his luck. Then a romp in the bed with Shirley. That was probably just what he needed. He was too wired. He was up to two grams of coke a day and even he knew that was too much. He made a silent promise to cut back after this weekend.

He dodged into the bathroom. One quick pop before the sauna wouldn’t hurt anything.

* * * * *

"Please fasten your seatbelts and move your seats to their upright position. We'll be landing at the Los Angeles International Airport in just a few minutes."

Bobby stared out at the twinkling lights of the huge city below. They were flying back from Las Vegas, the flight seeming to take longer than usual because of his state of mind. He lost seventeen thousand dollars that he didn't have, fifteen thousand he had signed for in the casino plus another two grand from Phillip. Tomorrow was the first of February. The house and car payments were due and he didn't have five hundred dollars in the bank. Plus he owed Debbie's dealer a thousand dollars for the coke he bought the week before.

Phillip nudged him in the ribs. "What did you do to Shirley, boy?"

Bobby glanced across the aisle. Phillip's secretary was lying on her side across two seats, snoring gently. He shrugged. "Looks like I put her to sleep."

"When I got to the suite last night, it sounded like you were whipping her ass."

Bobby grimaced. "You could hear?"

"Hell, it's a wonder the entire hotel wasn't listening. I heard you whacking her, then I heard her screaming and then I heard both of you groaning."

"She wanted me to spank her with my belt."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"And you did?"

Bobby grinned. "Hell yes."

"Damn."

The smile faded from Bobby's lips. "That's about the only way I can get a hard-on lately. Kinky stuff."

Phillip nodded. "It's the cocaine."

"It's my libido. I'm just a kinky son of a bitch."

"That you are, my son. That you are."

"I wish I could have beaten the casino like I did her."

Phillip chuckled. "Yeah, I think they kind of beat your ass."

"That's for sure."

"How much are you down?"

"Fifteen, plus the two I owe you."

"Don't worry about it, I'll cover you."

"I already owe you nine grand, Phillip."

"Don't worry about it."

"I have to worry about it. Plus I've got payments to meet tomorrow and I'm tapped out."

"How much do you need?"

"Counting the house and car notes, plus the money to Bev, about six thousand dollars."

"You get paid tomorrow, don't you?"

Bobby nodded. He hadn't told Phillip he had already earmarked that money to pay the drug dealer.

"When we get to my house, I'll give you another ten grand, that'll cover your payments plus give you a little extra. And I'll take care of your note at The Golden Pyramid."

"That'll put me into you over thirty thousand, Phillip."

"Don't worry about it. You're good for it. Besides, your luck has got to change."

Bobby stared silently out of the window, weighing his thoughts. He really had no choice. It seemed as if he was making more and more decisions, not because they were right, but because he didn't have a choice. He took a deep breath. "What about those bonus records you mentioned earlier?"

"I thought you didn't want to get into that."

"I don't want to, I have to."

"No you don't. I said I'd cover you."

"Fuck it, Phillip. I don't want to keep borrowing from you."

"Whatever you say."

"How does it work?"

Phillip looked cautiously around the plane. Bobby followed his eyes. The only other passenger in first class was a man sitting directly behind them, but he seemed totally absorbed by the magazine he was reading.

Phillip leaned closer. "There's a double bonus on The Bandits' record this week. You add it to the chain, we can both make ten thousand."

"Cash?"

"Cash."

"What's a double bonus mean?"

"The record company pays twice the going rate, sometimes more, for a specific record for one week only." Phillip didn't mention that the companies paid double for each station in the chain. No sense in letting Bobby know how much money was being offered.

"And there's one of those a week?"

"At least one. Usually, two or three. Depends on the product."

"So I could add The Bandits tomorrow and two more next week and you and I would be even?"

"Yeah."

Bobby gazed out the window again. The plane was approaching the runway, about to touch down. "Let's do it."

"Consider it done."

"A couple of records here and there can't hurt anything."

"My sentiments exactly."

* * * * *

"Bobby?"

He was leaning over his desk in his office, snorting a line of cocaine when Debbie buzzed him on the intercom.

"Yeah?" he sniffed.

"Do you know what this Saturday is?"

Bobby looked at his calendar. It was Wednesday, the twelfth. "March fifteenth, why?"

"It's my twentieth birthday, you nut. What are you going to do for me?"

"I didn't know it was your birthday."

"How quickly we forget."

He needed a long weekend party. "Tell you what. Don't make any plans for the weekend. I'm going to do something special for you."

"Jane wanted to take me out for dinner on Saturday."

"Tell her you won't be in town."

"Where are we going?"

"Las Vegas."

"I've never been to Vegas."

"We'll have a ball."

"And we'll have fun too, Bobby," she giggled.

"We'll leave Friday afternoon."

"I can't wait."

"You'll have to wait. We can't leave today."

"Why not?"

"Goodbye, Debbie."

She buzzed him again.

"What?"

"I forgot to tell you. Robert Williams is on line three."

He picked up the phone and punched the blinking button. "Hello, Robert. Long time no hear from."

"Bobby, where have you been hiding?"

"I've been working, son, I've been working."

"How've you been? I haven't seen you in over a month."

"Everything's fine. How's by you?"

"No complaints."

"Glad to hear it."

"Pamela wanted me to call and invite you over to a party we're having this Saturday night."

"I'd love to come, Robert, but I'm going to be out of town."

"Vegas again?"

"How'd you know?"

"Everytime anyone goes to Vegas, they run into you, Bobby."

"Yeah, I am there a lot." He had been spending just about every weekend in the desert city, trying to get his luck back.

"I'm surprised you haven't bought a house there."

"With the money I've been dropping in the casino, I think I own the tenth floor at the Golden Pyramid."

Robert chuckled. "I'm sorry you won't be able to make it. Alvin Irving's coming and he wanted to talk to you."

"What about?"

"In the past two months, you've added three of his records out of the box. He wants to try and mend the fences."

"Tell him I'm not interested."

"I don't know, Bobby. Word's getting around that if you want your records on Media Communications early, you should pick a fight with the vice president."

"Funny, Robert, very funny."

"What are you trying to do, ruin your reputation as the last person to play a record?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've added more brand new records in the past two months than you have in your whole career."

It was true. He had been adding a lot of new records. After the first time, it was easy. Getting ten thousand dollars in cash every Monday for the double bonus records made it even easier. He paid Phillip back, gambled with his own money, made all his payments and even had eleven thousand dollars in the bank.

"I just thought our stations needed a little freshening up."

"Well, you're making a lot of people in the record business very happy, Bobby."

"Right. And you know that's all I care about, Robert. As long as the vultures are happy, I can sleep at night."

"Did you hear the latest?"

"What?"

"Word has it that a secret grand jury has been called to investigate payola in New Jersey."

"That's a perfect place for it. New Jersey."

"They say they've got proof of payoffs on the East Coast."

"That's fine, Robert. You're fascinated by that stuff. I'm not interested."

"I just wanted to let you know."

"Thanks for the useless information, son. I've got to get back to work."

"One more thing."

"What?"

"Do you know about Mark Lowery?"

Bobby hadn't thought about the former San Francisco program director in months. "What about him?"

"He was killed in a car accident today in Philadelphia."

"No." Bobby frowned. He hadn't liked the man, but he never wished death on anyone. The information put a damper on his emotions.

"Yeah. Too bad, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"Well, at least it's not you or me."

"Thank God for small favors."

"I've got to run."

He hung up the phone and poured some more cocaine onto his desk, dividing it into two, long lines with a credit card. He quickly rolled a one hundred dollar bill into a straw and snorted back the first line.

"Bobby?" It was Debbie on the intercom again.

He snorted back the other line and wiped off his desk. "Yeah?"

"Paul Johnson is here to see you."

Bobby wiped his nose hurriedly and ran his palm over his desk again, making sure none of the white powder was visible. "Send him right in."

Paul came through the door, dressed in his usual grey suit. He shook Bobby's hand, then settled into one of the stools. Bobby sat on the edge of his desk.

"This will only take a minute, Bobby. Then you can get back to work."

"Take your time, Paul."

"How are the stations doing?"

"Fine."

"Expecting good ratings?"

"Absolutely."

Paul shifted around, facing Bobby, staring intently at his face. "I wanted you to know that a grand jury has been impaneled to take

testimony regarding payola on the East Coast." The man's eyes narrowed slightly and he rubbed his nose.

Bobby cleared his throat. "That's just what Robert Williams told me."

"I want to make sure we're perfectly in the clear on this thing."

"You don't have to worry."

Paul wiped at his nose again. Bobby's breath caught in his throat. He wiped his beak before Paul entered the office. Had he missed some? Did he have powder on his nose?

"Are you keeping a close watch on our stations? Is there any way any of our program directors could be giving information to anyone?"

Bobby resisted the temptation to wipe his hand across his face. His heart was beating faster. "No way, Paul. As you know, I make all of the decisions regarding music adds. The program directors have little say in the matter. All they give is advice."

Paul continued to stare at him and again moved his hand to his face, brushing the tip of his nose with his fingers. "And there's no way they could be giving out the adds early?"

Bobby's whole body felt clammy. He could feel tiny beads of perspiration forming on his upper lip. "No way. Nancy reports all the info to the trades. They have nothing to do with it."

Paul shrugged. "All right then, if you're satisfied."

"I'm satisfied. The only person that could be taking payola would be me."

Paul smiled. "I know you better than that, Bobby." He wiped his face again. "You have been adding a lot of strange records lately, though."

"Strange?" Bobby was going crazy. He tried to look down the tip of his nose without it being obvious.

"Well, you're on a lot of things early."

"Just trying to freshen up the sound."

Paul nodded. "Probably a good idea." He stood up and reached for Bobby's hand again. "Well, I just wanted you to know what was going on. Keep a close watch on our eastern stations. Maybe even have all the program directors sign affidavits stating that they understand the law and take no payola."

"I'll do that, Paul."

Bobby waited until the door closed behind his boss before running into the bathroom. He flicked on the light and stared in the mirror.

"Whew," he said aloud. There was nothing on his nose. Paul's itch, combined with his normal state of paranoia, had nearly cause him heart failure. He was going to have to cut down on the blow.

He walked back to his desk and reached into his drawer. After that scare, he needed a pop.

* * * * *

The tan, princess phone rang in Phillip Crawford's office. He picked it up before the ring was completed.

"Hello."

"You left word for me to call?"

Phillip leaned forward on the desk. "Yes. I need your help."

"What is it?"

"Holiday wants to party this weekend in Vegas."

"And?"

Phillip took a deep breath. "And I see this as the time to put the cobra on him."

"Put the cobra on him?"

"Yeah. Lock him in."

The caller laughed. Phillip's mouth dropped. Never, in all the years they had done business together, had he ever heard the man laugh.

"Your way of putting things sometimes amuses me."

"Thank you. I guess."

"I understood that we were doing pretty well with Mr. Holiday."

"Not well enough."

"How so?"

"I've got him adding about one bonus record a week, but that's no sure thing. If we position ourselves properly, I can pull him in for the whole nine yards."

"And that is?"

"Two, maybe three bonus records a week, kick his total adds to five a week and lock in all the record companies on long term deals."

"Fine. What do you need from me?"

"Edna."

"The blackjack dealer?"

"Yes."

"That's no problem. Call Bert."

"I already did. She's on vacation."

"I see. Couldn't someone else do the job?"

"I don't think so. Holiday's used to us playing with her. He hasn't the slightest idea that she's been stacking the deck against him after letting him win the first couple of times. I think he might run if we played with another dealer. Besides, Edna's the best in the business at dealing seconds."

"One of the best, anyhow."

"Well?"

"Bert didn't know where she was?"

"I don't know. I didn't really push it. I didn't know how much he knew about all of this."

"He knows enough to find her if it's necessary."

"I think it's necessary."

"I agree."

"Then you'll handle it?"

"She'll be at the table Saturday night."

"Fine."

"One more thing."

"Yes?"

"Are you getting any information regarding a payola investigation?"

"I've just heard rumors. Why?"

"They're getting a little tough on the East Coast."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. The FBI has been talking to some radio people, trying to pressure them into giving out information."

"Any problems?"

"No, but we had to move on your friend from San Francisco."

"I heard."

"Seemed like he was trying to do to Joe what he was attempting with you."

"It figures."

"Yes, it's too bad. He had a terrible accident. He was struck down by a car. Police said it was a hit and run."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I knew you would be. Anything else?"

"No."

"Keep in touch. And be careful of snake bites."

"What?"

"When you put the cobra on Mr. Holiday."

The phone went dead in his hand. Phillip smiled. Maybe the man did have a sense of humor.

The smile faded as he thought about Mark Lowery's death.

* * * * *

"Bobby, this is the life."

Debbie was lying in the huge, round tub in their room at the Golden Pyramid, the bath bubbles keeping her body hidden except for her neck and head. He was sitting on the edge, in his underwear, snorting cocaine.

They had spent their first night casino hopping and going to a couple of shows, drinking and partying until the sun came up. Debbie had wanted to make love at dawn, since it was her birthday, but he excused himself by saying he was too tired. They had tumbled into bed, sleeping until Phillip had called them at four o'clock.

"Tonight is going to be a blast," he said.

"It better be. It's my birthday."

"Want some?" he asked, holding up the bottle.

"Of course." He leaned over the water and carefully spooned the coke into her nose, taking two more hits for himself before putting the lid back on.

"What are we going to do, Bobby?"

He smiled. "When you get out of the tub, I'm going to give you your present."

"What's that?"

He got up and went to the closet, pulling out a long, silk evening gown he had bought for her with Jane's help earlier in the week. He held it up for her to see.

"My God, Bobby. It's beautiful."

"And you're going to be beautiful in it."

"It must have cost you a fortune."

He shrugged. "A mere bag of shells."

"What do we do after we get dressed?"

"We go down to the restaurant, where Phillip and I have arranged a private table for us to celebrate your birthday. There will be no dinner, only Dom Perignon and . . ."

He reached into his pocket and held out his palm.

"Ludes! How'd you get them, Bobby?"

He smiled. They hadn't been able to get any since before Christmas. Their source had dried up. But Phillip had found some. He found twenty!

"My secret."

"Let's do one now."

"Why not?" He popped one into his mouth and handed her another.

"Then what?"

"Then we go to the casino where a special blackjack table is being prepared with only room for three players, me, you and Phillip. There we will win thousands of dollars."

"I hope our luck is better than last night."

He nodded. In their running around from casino to casino, he dropped eight grand, all the cash he had brought with him. No problem, though. He could sign at The Golden Pyramid.

"And after that?"

He smiled. "Then, my dear, at the stroke of midnight, I will bring you back to this room, lock the door, tear off that dress and make mad, passionate love to you all night long."

"You won't be too tired?" she teased.

"Debbie, please."

She sat up a little in the tub, her breasts bobbing up past the bubbles. "How about a little practice right now?" she asked coyly, her fingers rubbing her nipples.

"Debbie, please."

She reached over quickly and yanked him into the tub, water spilling on the carpet as he splashed between her legs. He fought to his feet, a mock frown on his face, water dripping into his eyes.

"Debbie, please."

She reached up and jerked his shorts down, pulling him once more into the water with her.

"Let's wait," he said, his knees and elbows slipping on the tile as he struggled to get out.

"Let's don't."

He was afraid he couldn't.

Her hands snaked under the water, between his legs.

He was surprised.

Maybe it was the lude.

* * * * *

"Hello, Edna."

The dealer looked up and smiled. "Why Mr. H. and Mr. C. How are you tonight?" She moved the reserved sign from the middle of the table.

"Fine, so far." Bobby sat down, spilling a small amount of champagne from the glass he was holding, wetting the felt on the table. "Opps. I'm sorry."

"No problem," Edna said, quickly whipping out a towel and mopping up the moisture. "Are we partying tonight?"

Bobby turned toward Debbie, who was sitting down in the chair on his right. "Yes, we are. I want you to meet Debbie, Edna. It's her birthday tonight and we're celebrating."

"Well let's hope the cards give you something to celebrate."

"Give me five thousand, Edna, and give Debbie a hundred in fives. We're going to let her play for nickels tonight."

"It's your table, Mr. H. Whatever you say. How much for you, Mr. C?"

"I'll take five thousand, Edna."

She looked over her shoulder at the pit boss. He nodded and started filling out the forms. She counted the chips and shuffled the cards.

"Blackjack!" Debbie shouted. "Oh, look Bobby, I got blackjack on the first hand."

He nodded and looked at his cards. He couldn't see them. He blinked his eyes hard, hoping it would help. He had taken two, or was it three, ludes in the restaurant and they had drunk three bottles of champagne. It was hard for him to detect colors, much less cards.

He held his cards away from him slightly. There. He could see. An ace. And a jack. "Son of a bitch! Blackjack!"

Edna smiled. "See. This is going to be your lucky night."

"Bert," Phillip called, "get us another bottle of champagne."

"Coming right up Mr. C."

Edna pushed a five hundred dollar chip next to the one Bobby had bet. She stacked two-hundred-and-fifty next to it. Bobby pushed the two-fifty towards her as a tip.

"Thank you, Mr. H. What about the other five hundred?"

"Let it ride," he said.

She dealt another hand, quickly.

"I've got twenty, Bobby," Debbie said.

"So do I." He turned over two tens.

"I'll hold on nineteen," Phillip said.

Edna turned over her hole card. "Dealer stands on seventeen."

"All right!" Bobby shouted. Maybe his luck was turning. "Let it ride." He was betting two thousand on the next hand.

Bobby struggled to stay alert. The qualudes and the champagne were really working on him.

"I've got nineteen," Debbie said.

He stared at his cards, willing them to come into focus. He set them down. "I've got to stay on seventeen."

"I'll stay," Phillip said.

Edna turned over her cards. A nine and a four. "Dealer hits on thirteen." She turned over a queen. "Dealer busts."

Bobby thrust his fist into the air. Debbie started clapping. The pit boss brought the champagne.

"Let's take this place down," Phillip said.

Edna quickly shuffled the cards and dealt again. Bobby left three thousand on the line.

"Twenty," Debbie said.

He turned his head. "Jesus, Debbie. Why don't you draw some cards?"

"What do you have, Bobby?"

He flipped his cards over without even looking.

"Blackjack!" she cried.

He looked down at his cards. An ace and a king.

"Jesus, Bobby, why don't you draw some cards?" Phillip laughed.

"Pour me some champagne," he said. They had been sitting at the table less than ten minutes and already he was ahead over five thousand dollars. His luck had changed.

He took a strong swallow from the drink he knew he shouldn't have ordered and watched the cards being dealt. Twenty. Edna pushed more chips into the middle. He won the next hand holding nineteen. The one after that with another blackjack.

Edna shuffled the deck.

"Watch my chips," he slurred. "I've got to go to the bathroom."

"Bobby," Debbie said, "you shouldn't leave the table while it's hot. It might cool off while you're gone."

He waved and staggered off. He had to have a pop. He pushed his way into the bathroom and found an empty stall. Being extra careful so he wouldn't spill his stash, he generously poured the cocaine onto the back of his hand and packed his nose. He looked at the bottle. He had probably done too much. He poured some more out and snorted again. What the hell. He had to do something to counteract the ludes. He took a deep breath and felt the drug kick in. Not the jolt he usually got, but enough to cut through the haze of the champagne and downers. He clapped his hands together. Now he was ready!

By the time he made it back to the table, Edna was shuffling again.

"Well?" he asked, falling heavily into his seat.

Edna shrugged. "I lost every hand."

"I told you not to leave, Bobby."

"The luck hasn't changed, Debbie." He pushed five thousand out to one spot, another five thousand to another. "Play two hands for five each."

"Bobby, that's all you've got," Debbie said.

"That's all I've got now. After this hand, I'll have twenty thousand."

"Maybe it's not a good idea to bet it all, Mr. H," Edna said.

"Yeah, Bobby. Why don't you slow down a little. We've got all night," Phillip advised.

"Fuck it and deal. I don't have all night. I've got to have Debbie in bed by midnight." He watched her blush as she elbowed him in the ribs. "If I lose, I just sign for more."

Edna shrugged and began the hand.

"Another blackjack!" Debbie cried.

"God Almighty, woman," Bobby said.

He looked at his first hand and smiled. Two tens. He turned the cards face up on the table. "That's good."

He carefully picked up the others. A king and a queen. His smile turned into a grin as he flipped them over with the others. "These too."

"I'll stand," Phillip said.

Bobby watched Edna's cards. The dealer had a nine, showing. She flipped over her hole card. A four. She would have to draw.

"Dealer hits on thirteen."

Bobby held his breath, wishing for a face card.

"Ace. Dealer hits on fourteen."

Bobby still held his breath.

"Deuce. Dealer hits on sixteen."

Bobby clamped his lips tighter. Anything but a five.

"Five. Dealer has twenty-one."

Bobby's breath rushed out. "Shit!"

"Sorry Mr. H," Edna said.

He shrugged. "Marker!"

Bert hurried over. "How much, Mr. H?"

"Ten thousand."

"All right, Mr. H, but remember, that's your limit."

"Not tonight, Bert. I want to take it up."

"I'm not authorized to do that, Mr. H. I'll have to call the cage and talk to the manager."

"Do it then."

The man walked back to his desk and picked up a phone.

"Deal," Bobby said, sliding two stacks of five thousand each onto the table.

"One hand or two, Mr. H?"

"One."

"Bobby," Debbie said. "You're too much."

He grinned at her. "I got the cash, babe. We're gonna take 'em down tonight."

She leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Just remember, you've got to take me down in half an hour."

He laughed.

"Deal, Edna."

"Blackjack!" Debbie cried.

"Damn, Debbie. Maybe I should back you."

"What do you have, Bobby?"

He looked at his cards. A nine and a three. Twelve. He glanced across the table. Edna had a jack showing. He had to play the dealer for twenty.

"Hit it."

A king.

"Twenty-two. You're over. Sorry Mr. H."

He looked at Debbie and shrugged. "Fuck it."

"You want to leave, Bobby?"

"Hell no."

"Pardon me, Mr. H."

Bobby swung around. "The cage says I can give you another fifteen grand, but you'll have to sign this authorization."

Bobby scrawled his name on the paper the pit boss put in front of him.

"Give him fifteen thousand."

Edna counted out the chips and pushed them toward him. He pushed the back to the line.

"Big chips playing," she called over her shoulder, shuffling the cards.

The pit boss came back over, standing by the side of the table to watch the action.

"Bobby, that's too much," Debbie said.

"She's right," Phillip said. "Play a few hands for five hundred, Bobby."

"Deal," he grumbled.

He watched Debbie look at her cards. "You get another blackjack?" The coke was wearing off. He was slurring his words again.

"Nope. Just nineteen. What do you have?"

Bobby picked up his cards. An eight and a three. Eleven. He threw them down by his chips. "Down for double."

Edna looked at the pit boss.

"You're at your limit, Mr. H."

"Take it up."

"I can't."

He pointed toward the phone. "Go make a call."

The man turned and walked toward the desk.

Edna smiled and waited for an answer, making no move to deal the cards. She had a seven showing.

Phillip leaned over. "Why don't you just take a hit, Bobby. You don't need to double down."

"I want to get even, now, partner. Besides, you taught me how to play this game. You said always double down when you're holding eleven."

"All right, Mr. H." The pit boss had returned. "The cage says you

can have another fifteen grand. But only if Mr. C countersigns for it.”

Bobby looked at Phillip.

“I shouldn’t do it, Bobby.”

“Yes, you should.”

Phillip shrugged. “It’s your money.” He signed the card.

Edna stacked the fifteen thousand behind the chips already on the table, then dealt a card face down on top of the others.

“I’ll stand,” Phillip said.

Edna turned over her hole card. A ten. “Dealer stands on seventeen.”

“Pay me,” Debbie cried.

Bobby’s heart was pounding. He was staring at the back of the card he needed. He had eleven. The dealer had seventeen. A seven, eight, nine, ten or face card and he’d win. A six and he would tie.

Edna flipped the card over.

“God!”

It was a five.

* * * * *

Bobby tripped and fell, his head hitting the edge of the bed, Debbie crashing down on top of him.

“Bobby,” she laughed. “I told you not to try and carry me over the threshold.”

He rolled over on top of her, her face swimming in front of him. He was really fucked up.

“I told you I’d have you in bed by midnight.”

She giggled. “You missed the bed.”

He held up his arm, trying to focus on his watch. It was no use. “Well, it’s not midnight, yet.”

She scrambled up to her feet, standing unsteadily. She was over the edge too. “Then let’s get in it.”

“First, another lude.”

“Here, here,” she said, pointing to her mouth.

He fished around in his pocket for the tablets, popped one in her mouth and another in his. He reached down and grabbed the bottle of champagne where he had dropped it on the floor. It was still half full.

“Good, there’s some left.” He washed down the pill and handed the bottle to her.

“Where’s the blow?”

He pointed to the baggie on the nightstand. “There’s half an ounce there.”

"Goody, goody." She sat down on the edge of the bed and began struggling with the packet.

"Here, let me," he said, snatching it from her hands. He tore open the top and poured the contents on the table.

"Bobby!"

He grinned. "Have a pop."

"I don't have anything to do it with."

"Scarface it."

"What?"

He leaned over and buried his nose in the mound of cocaine, as he had seen Al Pacino do in the movie, Scarface. He took a deep breath.

"Jesus!" He staggered back, the cocaine filling his nose, clogging his throat on the way to his lungs.

"Are you all right?"

He shook his head. "Never better."

She leaned forward and imitated his action, sniffing gentler than he had. She fell back and began coughing.

"God Almighty is right," she sputtered.

"Are you all right?"

She grinned. "Bever netter."

"What?"

She rolled over on the bed, laughing hysterically. Turning on her back, she looked up at him and winked. "Bobby, I've never had so much fun in my life."

"Me too."

"Did you really lose all that money downstairs?"

He nodded. "I think so."

"How much?"

"Forty-five thousand."

"Oh my God."

"Happy Birthday."

"Has a woman ever cost you that much before?"

"Hell, no."

She crooked her finger. "Come here. Let me convince you I'm worth it."

He took a step backward. "Stand up, first."

"Why?"

"Just stand up."

She edged her way to the side of the bed, kicked off her shoes and got to her feet. She started to sway and reached out, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, Bobby, I'm really fucked up."

"No shit." He grabbed the front of the dress between her breasts and jerked forward. The fabric ripped down the center, tearing off her shoulders and into his hand.

"Bobby!"

She was standing in front of him, naked except for a pair of sheer, black panties.

"You ruined my dress!"

"I told you I was going to rip it off of you."

"But Bobby, it must have cost you a fortune."

He threw what remained of the silk dress across the room, into the empty tub. "What's five hundred dollars compared to forty thousand?"

She hooked her thumbs in her panties. "Are you going to tear these off, too?"

"No, I'm going to eat those off."

She fell back on the bed laughing as he ripped off his clothes, tossing them into the tub with her dress.

"We'll wash them in the morning," he said, jumping down on the bed. He bared his teeth. "Now, let me at those panties."

"No," she said, sitting up and reaching between his legs, "let me do you first." When she touched him, she looked up in surprise. "Why Bobby, what's wrong." She was smiling up at him. "I don't excite you?"

He shoved her hand away. "I'm just saving myself."

"For what?"

He pushed her back on the bed. "I want to do something different, tonight."

She raised her eyebrows. "Like what?"

"I want to tie you to the bed."

"What?"

"I want to tie you spreadeagled on this bed, play with you, drive you out of your mind, then make mad, passionate love to you."

"You mentioned the mad, passionate love before, but you left out the part about tying me up."

"What do you think?"

"It sounds nasty, Bobby."

"Be my nasty girl."

She put her hands behind her head. "I've always fantasized about being tied up."

"Then let's do it."

"I don't know."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm scared."

"Of me?"

She took a deep breath. "No, of me. I'm afraid I'll like it."

"Let's find out."

She hesitated for just a second. "All right. But Bobby?"

"Yes?"

"Promise you won't hurt me."

"Debbie, come on."

"You're pretty fucked up and you know how you get. Sometimes you don't know what you're doing."

"I'm not going to hurt you. It'll be fun."

"I'll do it on one condition."

"What?"

"Don't tie me too tight so if I start to freak out, I can get loose."

"Deal."

He went to the closet and rummaged through his suitcase, coming back with the four ties he had bought for the occasion.

"Bobby, silk ties."

He grinned. "Nothing but the best for your birthday."

She giggled. "This is going to be fun."

"Turn over."

"What?"

"Turn over on your stomach."

"No way, Bobby. I'm not going to let you tie me down with my butt in the air."

"I just want to spank you a little."

"Bullshit. You just want my ass. You know how I feel about that."

"Have it your way. Spread your legs."

She scooted down to the center of the bed and laid back, her legs stretched wide apart. He knotted the tie around one ankle and quickly attached the other end to the bedframe. He grabbed her other leg, stretching her even further apart as he fastened the end of the tie to the other side of the bed.

"Hey, I thought you said you were going to tie me loosely."

He grinned. "I'll tie your arms, loosely. I want your legs tied tight."

"All right."

"Close your eyes."

She giggled again and shut her eyes. He made a knot around one of her wrists and tied it around the headboard.

"Bobby, it's too tight."

"I'm just going to tie the other around your wrist," he said as he

did it. "I won't even attach it to anything."

She nodded, her eyes still closed.

He moved up and slipped the end of the tie around the other side of the headboard. Before she could move, he jerked it into a knot, stretching her arm out.

"Bobby!" She opened her eyes and strained her neck, looking to see how he had tied her up. She pulled against her bindings. They didn't slip. "You said you'd leave one loose. Untie me."

He shook his head.

"Damn it Bobby, let me up."

He leaned over, his nose touching hers. "No," he said quietly. "You're all mine, now, to do with as I wish."

"Come on, Bobby, you're scaring me."

"There's nothing to be afraid of Debbie." He stuck his tongue out, running it down her chin, across her neck and over her chest through the valley of her breasts.

She squirmed under him, trying to get free. "Let me up, Bobby."

He continued to lick her body, across her stomach, pausing for a few seconds to explore her navel, then sliding downward, stopping over her panties.

"Untie me, Bobby."

He shifted his position, moving between her legs, as he blew softly on the silk fabric, stroking her mound through her panties with his fingers.

"Bobby," she said softly, "please let me up."

Gently he slid one finger under the legband, lifting and moving the black garment away from her crotch. He blew again, watching the dark pubic hair bend and blow beneath his breath.

"Bobby."

He pushed his head forward, parting his lips and burying his tongue into her warmth.

"Oh, Bobby." She arched her back sharply, shoving her hips against his face.

He ripped away her panties, shoving his hand against her, his fingers working in tandem with his tongue. He smiled into her musky scent. He was getting excited. And he hadn't even hurt her yet.

Abruptly, he lifted his head from between her legs, raising back on his haunches. He leaned forward and grabbed her breasts, pinching the nipples with his fingers.

"Aawwoo!"

"Hurt?"

"Yes, you bastard!"

He smiled and edged up a little on the bed, his hips moving forward, almost touching hers. She felt his hardness and raised her hips up, trying to capture him.

"Not yet," he whispered. He reached for her nipples again. This time he pinched hard, wrenching them painfully.

"Awww! Stop, Bobby, that hurts!"

He jerked his hips forward and down inside of her.

"Oh God, Bobby. That's so good."

She moved back and forth against him, bucking her lower body up, moaning in his ear.

"Yeah, Bobby, you feel so nice and warm."

He frowned. Through his drunken, drug-hazed mind, something was not right. He felt his excitement ebbing. What was wrong?

He looked at Debbie's face. Her eyes were closed, her lips were parted, her chin was moving up and down with her movements. She was enjoying herself! And he was not in control.

He leaned back on one elbow, raised his right hand and slapped her across her cheek.

Her head jerked up and her eyes snapped open. "Get off me you son of a bitch!" she hissed.

He rocked his hips forward. He was getting excited again.

"I said get off me."

He leered down at her, looking at the imprint of his palm on her cheek. "Move your ass."

"Bobby, I don't want to do this any more. Let me up."

Without warning, he slapped her again. Harder this time. She screamed.

"Move your ass, bitch!"

She looked up at him wildly, fear dancing in her eyes as tears gathered behind her lids. She moved her hips a little, her eyes never leaving his face.

"Bobby, please."

He slapped her again. Again she screamed. Louder this time.

"Shut up."

She screamed once more. This time he backhanded her, whipping his knuckles across her face. Her head snapped against the mattress, the blow cutting off her scream. He watched her shake her head slowly, then saw the blood trickling down her lip. That made him even more excited.

He ground into her, trying, but failing, to reach the pinnacle. He couldn't get any higher. He seemed stuck, three rungs from the top.

"Bobby," she moaned.

He slapped her quickly again, then jerked his hand back across her face.

She cried out again.

That was it! He felt himself moving higher, up to the second rung. Just a little farther now.

He looked down at Debbie. He saw her eyes widen as he drew back his fist.

"No, Bobby!" she cried.

He hit her as hard as he could, his knuckles crushing her lips back, scraping against her teeth. His breath was coming in ragged gasps, his excitement continuing to rise as he looked at Debbie's face, her jaw slack, her mouth open, her lips pouring blood.

She yelled at the top of her lungs, "Help me, oh somebody help me!"

Bobby jerked his hips forward, at the same time smashing his fist down against her face. This time he hit her nose, the cartilage bending beneath the force of the blow, blood gushing out of her nostrils.

She grunted and moaned, jerking her arms and kicking her legs, trying to fight free from the ties. He grinned. The knots would hold. Vaguely, through the haze, he heard her whimpers, her begging only serving to excite him more. He also thought he heard other muffled sounds, like someone beating on the door, calling his name. He did not care. He was now on the last rung, seeking the ultimate release. Just a few more seconds, just one more thrust and he would be over the top.

He pulled back his arm and swung with all his might. His fist caught Debbie squarely on her left cheekbone. Her eyes rolled back into her head. He thought he heard a crash somewhere behind him, but he didn't know. His excitement surged up and over the top, climaxing perfectly with the timing of his final blow. He fell forward on Debbie's shoulder, closed his eyes and slipped off into blackness before he could sense the rough hands on his shoulders, pulling him back and rolling him off the bed.

* * * * *

He was lying on the beach, the sun beating down from high in the cloudless sky, one lone bird circling slowly overhead. He concentrated on the bird, following its seemingly aimless flight as it lazily floated on the currents of the wind, spiraling down, ever closer. As the circles grew tighter and the bird drew nearer, he noticed that it was watching him also, the one, beady, unblinking eye boring into his forehead, directly above and between his eyes. He tried to shield

his face from the glare with one hand when he realized that he couldn't move. Jerking his eyes away from the bird, he looked at his arms and legs. Stakes had been driven through each hand and foot, nailing him to the sand!

He could hear the bird now, screaming its cry of death as it dove straight down, talons tensed, reaching out for his chest. He stared at the huge, feathered, black creature, knowing there was nothing he could do to ward it off. It was over. He opened his mouth to scream.

"Easy, Bobby."

He awoke with a start, his eyes blinking spastically, his mouth agape. He was lying in his hotel room. Phillip had a hand on his shoulder.

"God." He fell back against the pillow, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his heart pounding in rhythm with his head. Although his throat was dry and parched, his body was covered with sweat, the sheets around him sticking to his skin, soaked with his moisture.

He tried to move a hand to his head and almost cried out when he found he could lift it. Rubbing his fingers against his eyes, he twisted his chin, stretching the muscles in his neck.

"Bobby?"

He opened his eyes. The room was almost dark, the shades pulled tight against the windows, the only light coming from a standing lamp in a far corner. Phillip was sitting in a chair beside the bed.

"Jesus, Phillip," he whispered. "What a nightmare."

"Yeah."

Bobby rolled over gently on one side, rubbing his face. He felt as if he had been asleep forever.

He opened his mouth, his thick tongue scraping against his cracked lips. "What's going on?"

"How do you feel, Bobby?"

"Like I fought the Iranian army in the desert sand and lost. What time is it?"

Phillip looked at his watch. "Four-thirty."

"In the morning?"

"No, it's Sunday afternoon."

Bobby groaned and fell back against the pillows. "I feel like I've been drugged."

"You were."

"What?"

"Ah, Bobby, do you remember what happened last night?"

Bobby closed his eyes, pressing the lids tightly together, trying to roll back the fog from his memory.

Debbie!

He sat up abruptly in bed, staring vacantly across the room.

"Phillip . . . Debbie!"

He felt Phillip's hand on his shoulder again. "You remember?"

"Oh, God! I thought it was just a dream." Bobby clinched his fist and stared down at his bruised, skinned knuckles.

"No, Bobby," Phillip said quietly. "You beat her up pretty badly."

"No!"

Phillip nodded. "I heard the commotion when I came in last night. I tried to call to you through the door, but you didn't hear me. I finally had to kick it in."

Bobby's eyes locked on the door, ripped off its hinges, leaning against the far wall. He tried to focus his mind on the events of the night before. He couldn't, or wouldn't, remember.

"Both of you were out when I got in. Debbie was tied up to the bed, her mouth and nose busted. I called the hotel doctor. He came up and took care of her. She's got a mild concussion, but she's going to be all right. Her nose wasn't broken, but he took six stitches in her lip and she'll have a huge shiner for about a week."

Bobby was rigid, his mind blank, his breath coming in short gasps.

"You weren't in real good shape, yourself. We almost had to pump your stomach. I have no idea how many pills you took or how much blow you snorted."

He turned his head slowly. "Where's Debbie?"

"I put her on a plane for Los Angeles at noon."

"What . . . how does she . . ." His voice trailed off.

Phillip shook his head. "She didn't say much. I told her to go home and get in bed, not to even think about going in to work until we sorted this whole thing out.

Bobby nodded.

"Anyhow, we've got to get you up and at 'em. Can you move?"

"I think so."

"All right. I've booked you on a six-thirty plane back to L.A. You need to get back to your house, get yourself together and go to work tomorrow." He sighed deeply. "I know this seems like it's a bad situation, but trust me, in a couple of days, we'll be laughing about it."

"I don't think so."

Phillip patted him on the back gently. "Sure we will."

"What about the casino? I think I really fucked up."

"Well, you didn't exactly take them to the cleaners, if that's what you mean."

"How much did I lose?"

"Forty-five thousand dollars."

Bobby took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Don't worry about it, Bobby. Look at it this way. That's just five records tomorrow and you'll be five hundred dollars ahead."

Bobby opened his eyes and shook his head slowly. "How did all of this happen?"

"You just had a little too much to drink."

"No. I mean the whole thing."

Phillip cocked his head. "I don't understand."

Bobby looked up at the ceiling. "Neither do I," he whispered. "Neither do I."

* * * * *

There was little talk in the cab on the way to the airport. Bobby heard nothing Phillip said, nodding uncommittedly as Phillip put the ticket and boarding pass in his pocket.

The car slid to a stop and Phillip reached over and opened the door. "I've got to stay here and clean a few things up. I'll fly in first thing in the morning and call you at the office about noon."

Bobby got numbly out of the car and shut the door.

"Cheer up, Bobby," Phillip called through the window. "Everything will be fine tomorrow."

Bobby turned and walked through the doors leading into the terminal. He didn't even start down the corridor that led to the gates. Instead, he took a sharp right, striding quickly to the Delta counter.

"May I help you?"

He didn't look up at the agent. "When is your next flight to New Orleans?"

"I can connect you through Dallas. The flight leaves in forty-five minutes."

"Fine."

"And when will you be returning, sir?"

"I won't."

Although an FBI task force had been operating a sting operation for the past few months, they were lacking crucial information that prevented them from making any arrests. Yesterday the agents got the break they had been looking for in a bizarre turn of events.

CHAPTER TEN

The phone rang in Bobby's house.

"That didn't take long," Bev said.

He smiled and shook his head.

"Hello?"

She looked across the room at him.

"No, he's at the office. Can I give him a message?"

She listened for a few moments, then said, "Fine. I'll tell him you called."

She hung up the phone. "It was Phillip Crawford."

"Here we go."

"Bobby, are you sure you can do this?"

He walked across the room and took her in his arms, holding her close. "With you by my side, I can do anything."

She kissed him quickly on the cheek. "Let me put Pat to bed. I'll be right back."

Bobby watched her leave the room, then fell back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He could do it. He had to.

He rolled over and looked at the clock. It was almost midnight. He hoped he'd be able to sleep. It wasn't going to be easy. The last few days had been a nightmare.

He had flown straight to New Orleans from Las Vegas two weeks before, knocked on Bev's door in the middle of the night and told her everything. Well, almost everything. He held back only a little to keep from hurting her feelings more than he already had. He went through his dealings with Phillip, keeping the particulars to a minimum, told her of his drug habit, his gambling and his running around.

He cried and held her until the sun rose. She comforted him, listening to his story, crying with him. Together they made a pact to return to Los Angeles and straighten everything out. It would be tough, but they would be together. Holding each other up, they could make it.

Giving up the cocaine hadn't been easy. Everyone said it wasn't an addictive drug. Everyone that hadn't had to stop. He slept almost

constantly for the first two days, then had been nervous and edgy for the rest of his stay. Visiting his parents had helped, spending time in the country, sorting out his actions. Now he was back. Now his plans would turn into reality. The future was up to him. He knew that. Bev knew it. He could control what happened next. He just had to be strong.

* * * * *

"Bobby, wake up."

He opened his eyes slowly, rubbing his hand across his face, clearing the sleep from his mind. Bev was standing by the bed, already dressed. He smiled lazily.

"Nothing like the sleep of a man who's cleared his conscience," he mumbled.

"You snored the whole night."

"Like I said, nothing like the sleep of . . ."

"Get up and go to work," she interrupted. "I'm taking Pat to school. I'm going in with her this morning to take care of any problems her absence may have caused. Then I'm meeting with the real estate lady to put the house on the market. After that, I'm checking on some cheaper apartments."

"Not too cheap," he said. "We can live quite comfortably on my salary."

"Comfortable is the operative word."

"Come back to bed for a minute."

She slapped his arm. "Out of bed this minute, Captain. You've got troops to guide."

"Bye, Daddy." Pat was standing in the doorway.

He raised up on one elbow. "Are you happy to be back in California, darling?"

"I'm happy we're all together again."

"Come give me a kiss."

The little girl ran across the room and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

"Have a wonderful day, Daddy."

He kissed her cheek. "You too, baby."

"All right, Bobby, you've stalled long enough. Get out of bed and get to work."

He stretched his arms over his head and watched them walk out the door. Bev was right. He was stalling. Time now to get up and get 'em. Whoever they were.

* * * * *

"We thought you and Debbie had run off and gotten married."

Bobby smiled at Jane. "Nope. Just separate vacations. It would be kind of hard to marry her when I've got a wife and kid at home."

"Whatever."

Bobby had called Jane from New Orleans, asking her to look after his calls until Debbie returned. "Did you take care of everything?"

"No problems."

"Hello, Bobby."

He turned around and smiled at Nancy Marion. "How'd the music go?"

"Fine. I'll bring all of the reports in for you to check out when you're ready. I only added two records to the chain."

"Take your time," he waved, heading toward his office. "I'll holler at you in a little while."

Jane and Nancy stared at each other. This was not the Bobby Holiday they were used to.

He walked around his desk, looking at the mail stacked almost a foot high. Pink phone messages were nearly as high as the mail.

The envelope on top contained a letter from Debbie. He could tell her handwriting. He hadn't talked to her since their visit to Las Vegas. Swallowing hard, he ripped open the envelope, his hands shaking slightly as he pulled out the single sheet of paper.

Dear Bobby,

Things have gotten a little too crazy for me and I think it's best that I resign. I have strong feelings for you, but we can never be together again. Working with you would be impossible.

I was angry over what happened in Las Vegas for quite a while. Then I understood that what happened was as much my fault as yours. One day I'll be able to forgive you. One day I'll be able to forgive myself.

I hope you'll straighten out your life, Bobby. You need help. So do I. That's why I'm going back to Boston. Please don't try and contact me. I do not want to talk with you.

Don't worry. I won't tell anyone what happened. I don't even want to think about it myself.

Debbie

He closed his eyes, fighting back the emotion he felt inside. He had wondered how he would handle his relationship with Debbie. It looked as if she were more capable than he had been in handling her life.

Tearing the letter into tiny pieces, he hit the intercom button. "Jane, come in my office for a minute, please."

She came through the door seconds later.

"Debbie is no longer with the company," he said, watching her face for any reaction. "I need you to take over her duties. You can field my calls and Phil's from her desk. If you need any help with the letters and stuff, call in a temporary assistant. We'll decide on what final move to make next week."

"Sure thing, Bobby."

He smiled. "Thanks, Jane."

"No problem. Actually, I won't have to call in a temp. I can handle all the work myself. And if you're looking for a full time replacement for Debbie, I want the job."

"If that's still your decision next week, the job is yours."

This time, she smiled. "All right."

"And Jane?"

"Yeah?"

"Get me a chair."

Her smile turned into a grin. "Getting old, Bobby?"

"What?"

"They say your legs are the first things to go."

"Thanks for that uplifting thought. Go answer the phone."

She walked out of the office, whistling softly as she closed the door behind her.

He had nearly finished going through the mail when Jane buzzed him on the intercom.

"Phillip Crawford on line one, Bobby."

He stared at the blinking light on the phone. He'd have to face the music sometime, but now was not the time. "Tell him I'm in a meeting and I'll get back with him."

"You got it."

"And if he calls back, I'm still in the meeting. I'll get in touch with him later today."

Bobby took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds before letting it out. Dealing with Phillip was going to be tough. Real tough. But it had to be done. He picked up the phone again and dialed Robert Williams' number.

"Hello?"

"How are you, Robert?"

"Bobby! I thought you must have hit it rich in Vegas and decided to work from there."

"I leave for two weeks and the whole town goes crazy."

"You're the man, Bobby. We missed you."

"Robert, I need to talk with you."

"Great, why don't we have lunch Wednesday?"

Bobby frowned. "It's got to be today, Robert."

"I can't do it, Bobby. I've got meetings all afternoon and a dinner tonight."

"Cancel the meetings."

"What's the matter. You sound tense."

"I'm not tense, I just need to talk with you today."

"You sound serious, Bobby."

"I am. How about one o'clock?"

He heard Robert shifting papers on his desk. "I'll move my meetings around. You want to have lunch?"

"No. I'll meet you in your office at one."

He hung up the phone and Jane buzzed him again.

"Yeah?"

"Tommy Russo's out here. He says he's got to speak to you for two minutes."

Bobby shook his head, his lips twitching. Maybe a short meeting with the clown prince would put a whiter shade of pale on the day.

"Send him in."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the office door swung open.

"Bud, where in the fuck have you been?"

Tommy, as usual, skipped right past the pleasantries and into his act.

Bobby laughed. "What's so important?"

"I got a record you just got to add this week."

Bobby shook his head. "Now why did I know that before you walked in?"

Tommy's face split into a wide grin. "Then why don't you just add it and I'll get out of here."

"What is it?"

"New group. All girl band with big tits."

Bobby wiped his hand across his face. "Can they sing?"

"Who gives a shit, bud. You add their record and we can all get laid."

"What's the group?"

"The Girls That Play."

"Aptly named."

"You'll love it."

"Anybody else on it?"

"Just came out last week, but I know I'm gonna get a lot of adds this week."

Bobby raised his left eyebrow. "How can you be sure, Tommy. Do you have it double bonused with all the independents?"

The grin slid off Tommy's face.

"What?"

"Tommy," Bobby grunted. "Don't play stupid with me."

The little man stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at Bobby slyly. "I didn't think you dealt with independents."

"I don't deal with record people, you included, you little bastard, but I do know what's going on."

Tommy pulled his hands from his pockets and slapped them together. "Then why don't I bypass the independents and you and I can just split the cash."

Bobby laughed. Tommy didn't miss a trick in trying to get his records played. "It'll take more than ten grand to get a record added on Media Communications."

"Who the fuck's talking about ten grand?"

"Come on Tommy, cut the shit. You double bonus an independent for the Media Communications chain and it's twenty grand. You and I split, that leaves ten apiece."

Tommy stared at him.

"Of course," Bobby continued, "you know this is just bullshit. I don't take money for adds. I'm just making conversation."

Tommy walked slowly over to his desk, stopping a couple of feet away. "Well, you got the conversation right, son, but your figures are a little wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"You want me to give you a little lesson in the economics of independent promotion people?"

Bobby glanced at his watch. "You've got a minute left. Use it as you will."

"I pay independents five thousand dollars if they get a record on a big station in a major market. Double bonus means it's ten grand. You got eight stations in your chain, Bobby. An independent that brings in Media Communications in one week gets five thousand dollars . . . per station. That's forty thousand dollars. Double bonus makes it eighty big ones."

Bobby was stunned. "Eighty thousand dollars?"

Tommy nodded. "If you're gonna sell your soul, bud, make sure you get the going rate."

Bobby sat down on the edge of his desk and stared out the window.

Eighty thousand dollars!

"Well, bud?" Tommy interrupted his thoughts.

"What?"

"You thinking about selling your soul?"

Bobby grinned. "The thought has crossed my mind, Tommy, but I think the devil's already got the right of first refusal."

"Whatever you say."

"I'll listen to your record."

"Can I ask you a question, off the record?"

Bobby nodded. It was evident from Tommy's actions that there was something on his mind.

"Should I hire an independent to work this group?"

Tommy was staring intently at him, and Bobby knew why. Phillip had been collecting money for all these adds he had been making in the past few months. Tommy was trying to guard his investment.

He sighed. "Nope. If I like it, I play it. No other reason, Tommy."

"All right, bud." Tommy clapped his hands together again. "Let's go grab some lunch."

Bobby shook his head. "Can't, Tom, but thanks. Another time. I've got too much work to do."

"Whatever you say, bud. I'll catch you later."

Bobby stood alone in the office, staring at the door as it closed behind the record promoter. Slowly he walked to the other end of the room and sat down on the couch.

Eighty thousand dollars!

Phillip had told him twenty thousand. This meant that Phillip had been pocketing hundreds of thousands of dollars for the records he added since he had begun making deals. He tried to remember each record he had gone on early over the past three months. There had been at least twenty. That added up to one million, six hundred thousand dollars. No! It couldn't be! That much money had passed through Phillip Crawford's fingers because of his relationship with the vice president of Media Communications?

It was hard to fathom. No wonder Phillip always picked up the check.

"Bobby?"

He hit the intercom button on the table.

"Yeah?"

"Your chair's here."

* * * * *

"My God, Bobby, that's hard to believe!"

He was sitting across from Robert Williams, his feet propped up on the desk, his eyes on the sparkling sunshine outside the window. He told Robert his story, leaving out the scene with Debbie.

"That's the straight skinny, Robert. The way I figure it, Phillip Crawford has made almost two million dollars in the past three months, working the record companies on my record adds." He had gone back and checked his figures. He had added twenty-four records for Phillip since their dealings had begun. Assuming they were all double bonus records, the total would be somewhere in the neighborhood of a million, eight, not counting the other adds that he gave Phillip a day early. The money still boggled Bobby's mind. He had no idea record companies would pay so much to get their records on his radio stations.

"And Phillip provided you with money and got you hooked on cocaine and gambling?"

Bobby shook his head sadly and shifted his gaze to his friend. "No, let's don't give Phillip all the credit. I hooked myself. I got way too big for my britches." He smiled. "I started believing all the crap you wrote about me in your paper. Phillip didn't hook me on anything. He just reeled me in." Bobby snorted. "Hell, I even suggested the deal after one of our trips to Las Vegas."

"You told Bev?"

"Yeah."

"Everything?"

"Almost. I left out the gorey little details. But she knows the overall picture."

"How'd she take it?"

"Like a champ. She came back to Los Angeles with me. We're putting the house on the market. I won't be living the high life for a while."

"She's back in Los Angeles?"

"Yeah."

"Pat too?"

"Yeah, in the same school. It's costing me more than I can afford, but she deserves it."

"You need any money, Bobby?"

He grinned. "Borrowing money was what got me in this hole, Robert. I'll dig my way out with a small, used shovel, paid for out of my salary."

"I just wanted to help."

"I appreciate it. But you can help just by being my friend."

Robert shifted in his chair. "What do you want me to do?"

Bobby gazed out the window again. "Nothing, I guess. There's nothing you can do. I just wanted to share what has happened to me. I wanted to let you know, because you warned me about all of the pitfalls, and I ignored your warnings. You said payola was alive and well, and I didn't believe you. Now, I know it for a fact."

"What about the investigations that are going on?"

Bobby sighed. "I only hope that my little venture into the world of darkness won't be noticed. It's over. In and out. And it won't happen again."

"You don't want to testify?"

"Absolutely not! I've got one chance, and one chance only, to save my career. With a little luck, the whole thing might just go away."

"Your secret is safe with me, Bobby. I won't breathe a word of this to anyone."

Bobby looked at Robert. "I know you won't, but I don't know what Phillip is going to do when I call a halt to all of this."

"What can he do?"

Bobby shrugged his shoulders. "Like I said, I don't know. But there's too much money at stake for everything to sink quietly into the sunset. I guess I'll find out later when I talk with him."

"Are you going to the police?"

"Don't be a fool, Robert. That would end my career in a heartbeat."

"I guess you're right. But if you decide that you have to do something like that, come to me. I'm familiar with the investigation and I could steer you to the right person."

Bobby stood up. "That's not going to happen. I just wanted you to know the whole story, Robert, in case anything strange occurs."

Robert got to his feet. "You aren't expecting any rough stuff, are you?"

Bobby grinned. "No, no. But if anything leaks out, I want to be on record with you, before anything blows up. You know what I mean?"

"I understand."

Bobby stuck out his hand. Robert grabbed it firmly.

"Bobby, I still think you're the best."

"You're a good friend, Robert. I appreciate your understanding."

"Anything I can do, you just let me know."

"I will."

Bobby turned and headed back to his office. One down, one more to go.

* * * * *

"Bobby, where have you been? I've been worried to death about

you.”

Bobby leaned back in his new leather chair and gripped the phone tighter. “I’ve been fine, Phillip. I just had to take a little time to myself.”

“Yeah, I can understand. But you’ve had two weeks off now and it’s just like I told you, everything is all right.”

“Everything will be, Phillip.”

“How’s Debbie?”

“She’s resigned and gone back to Boston.”

“That’s probably best.”

“I think so.”

“Shirley says she misses you and wants you to come over tonight for a back home celebration.”

Bobby took a deep breath. “I don’t think so, Phillip.”

“What’s the problem, Bobby?”

“No problem, Phillip, I just won’t be partying any more.”

“Oh, you’re going to take a rest?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, when can you and I get together?”

Bobby gripped the phone even harder, his knuckles turning white under the pressure. “We can’t.”

“What?”

He fought to stay calm. “We won’t be doing any more business Phillip.”

There was a slight hesitation before Phillip continued. “Bobby, just because things got a little out of hand the last time we went to Vegas doesn’t mean the whole world has to stop.”

“Things got out of hand long before that, Phillip, and that’s why we won’t be doing any more business. I enjoy your company, but my career means too much to me. And my sanity. I won’t go through it again.”

“Wait a minute, Bobby.”

“No, you wait, Phillip,” he said evenly. He had been going through the different scenarios of this phone call for most of the afternoon. What happened with this conversation would color the rest of his life. Everything had to be done perfectly. He knew it was important to keep his cool and not let his anger cause him to say anything he’d later regret. “We will not do any more business.”

There was silence on the line. Bobby fought the urge to break it. He looked down at his hand, gripping the edge of the desk almost as hard as his other held the phone.

“What about the markers at the Golden Pyramid?”

Bobby almost smiled. He knew this would come up. And he was

ready for it.

"You take care of the markers, Phillip."

"That's no problem, Bobby, you know that. But we'll have to add some records to cover it."

This time Bobby did smile. He was relaxed. The game was going according to plan, now. He had anticipated Phillip's reactions accurately. "There will be no more records, Phillip. You cover it."

"I don't know, Bobby. That doesn't seem fair to me."

Time to play the ace. "It doesn't seem fair that you've been making eighty thousand a record for every one we've added, yet I got only ten."

There was more silence on the line. Bobby could almost hear the man's mind working.

"That's not exactly right, Bobby. Each company pays different amounts, plus there's my overhead."

"Phillip, I expect you to pay the markers, in cash, and I want them paid by five o'clock tomorrow."

"And if I don't."

"I'll go to the police."

"Easy, Bobby."

"I'm serious, Phillip," he bluffed.

"You go to the police and you'd be in as much trouble as I would, plus, you'd still owe the Golden Pyramid."

"I wouldn't be in as much trouble. I'd probably never work again, but neither would you. The way I figure it, you've got a lot more to lose than I do. You can still make a lot of money from the record companies until they find out you have no more influence on me. And I won't bring that fact to their attention, Phillip. You can milk it as long as you can."

"I don't know."

"You told me a long time ago to look at everything just like a business. That's what this is . . . a business proposition."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Understand this, Phillip, I'm ready to go to the police or the FBI or whoever I have to tomorrow at five. I've already made that decision. If I don't have a letter from the Golden Pyramid confirming that I have paid all my markers in cash by five p.m. tomorrow, I'll make the move."

"I don't think I can do it that quickly."

"You don't have a choice, Phillip. Fly out right now."

"I don't know, Bobby."

"Know this. Tomorrow by five o'clock or everything goes up in

smoke.”

Bobby hung up the phone. It was only after he released the receiver that he realized how tight his grip had been. He massaged his palm and forearm, easing the cramps out of his muscles. His heart was beating in his ears, his jaw clenched with tension.

He took out his keys and opened his desk drawer, searching for the small notebook in which he kept records of his gambling loses. He wanted to know exactly how much he had dropped since coming to Los Angeles. Plus, going over the records would take his mind off Phillip Crawford.

He saw the book nestled against the back of the drawer, reached down and pulled it out. As it came free, his eyes focused on the small, white envelope lying underneath. His eyebrows knotted together. Picking it up, he put it on the top of his desk and slowly unfolded the slick paper, exposing the contents: a gram of cocaine he had stashed weeks before and forgotten.

He tilted the paper, causing the sparkling powder to shift and slide, the white flakes winking brilliantly. He hadn't had any of the drug in over two weeks. It was one of the promises he made to Bev. And to himself.

He held the paper closer to his face. One little pop wouldn't hurt anything. Bev wouldn't have to know. If ever there was a time that he needed it, that time was now.

Quickly, before the urge became too strong, he went into the bathroom. Lifting the toilet lid, he spilled the cocaine into the swirling water, watching it disappear instantly. He threw the paper in, watching until it, too, vanished down the pipes.

The next twenty-four hours would pass very slowly.

* * * * *

“Bobby, the conference call is ready.”

He leaned back in his new chair and winked at Nancy who was sitting across the desk.

“This should blow a few minds.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes opening a little wider. “You've already blown mine.”

That was a fact. It was Tuesday, music day, and Bobby had met with Nancy earlier, as they usually did. Unusual was the way he handled the meeting. She went through all of the records she felt should be added to the chain and, for the first time ever, he asked her to give him the list of the records suggested by each of the different program directors. Then he told her that they would go

with her suggestions, and those of the program directors in each market. No chain adds, no chain drops.

He reached over and punched the speaker phone. "Is everybody on?"

A chorus of voices came garbling through the speaker. Bobby smiled.

"I'm going to keep this call brief so you can all get back to work. I just wanted each of you to know, first hand, that I'm changing the music policy of Media Communications, effective today."

He could almost hear a collective sigh on the phone. They probably thought the lists would be getting even tighter.

"Beginning this week, each station in the chain will have more control over individual records you feel viable for your markets. Your suggestions over the past several months have been followed closely by Nancy and me." He looked over at her and winked again. They both knew he paid absolutely no attention to any suggestions in the past. "You've all convinced me you're on top of things and deserve more input in your formats. I don't want you to get the wrong idea. All of your suggestions will go through Nancy, and she and I will discuss each potential add, but your input, unless it's really off the wall, will be the deciding force in adding records in your market."

He leaned back, folding his hands together behind his head. "Any questions?"

"Yes. Bobby this is Jerry in New York. Does this mean no more chain adds?"

"No. Occasionally, there will be records that, for a variety of reasons, need to be added to the chain at one time. But rather than the norm, as has been in the past, these adds will be exceptions."

"Bobby, it's Ron in Miami. What about the charts?"

"You'll make up your own charts, phone the numbers into Nancy and she'll alert the trades. I still want all of the information coming out of the home office."

"Charlie in San Diego, Bobby. Why the change? Things have been going good the way we were."

"I want them to go even better, Charlie, and I'm in Los Angeles. You guys know what's going on in your markets. I want our stations to reflect local knowledge." He leaned forward. "Let's just say I need your help. I have full confidence in the ability of each one of you to do a terrific job. I'm sure this change will make a major impact in ratings. You guys are the best. Go out and take charge. Any more questions?"

"Yeah, Bobby, just one."

"Who's speaking?"

"Nelson in Boston."

"What is it Harris?"

"Are you drunk?"

Bobby laughed, throwing his head back and looking at the ceiling. Leave it to Nelson to put things in perspective.

"No Harris, I'm dead sober. And that's a pretty scary thought in itself."

"Yeah, when you hang up the phone and realize what you've done, you'll probably go out and get drunk and rescind the whole thing."

He hung up the phone and looked at Nancy. "What time is it?"

"Almost one."

"Let's listen to some music."

"I thought we were going to let them add what they wanted this week."

"We are. I want to hear what we might add next week."

Her face brightened and she left the office quickly to get records she had set aside for later consideration. As soon as the door closed behind her, the smile left Bobby's face. It was nice to change the way he had been selecting the music, giving others a voice in the decisions. But his thoughts were on the five o'clock deadline he had imposed on Phillip. He hoped his bluff would work. If not, he didn't know what he was going to do. He didn't have the money to pay the markers and he sure wasn't going to the police.

He and Bev had stayed up half the night, talking about the choices they might face, but until Phillip made a decision, they could do nothing.

Nancy came back in and he forced a smile, trying to concentrate on the music she began to play as his thoughts ticked as slowly as the clock.

* * * * *

"What time is it?" he asked Nancy for at least the fifth time.

"Two-thirty, Bobby. Are you on medication or something?"

"What?"

"You keep asking the time. I thought you might have to take a pill."

He shook his head. "No, put I probably should. I'm just expecting a call, that's all."

"Bobby?" It was Jane on the intercom.

"Yes?"

"It's your wife on line three."

"Can you excuse me for a few minutes, Nancy?" She nodded and left the office. He picked up the phone.

"Hi babe."

"Bobby, did you have Pat picked up at school today?"

He could tell instantly by her voice that something was wrong.

"No." He leaned forward, sitting straight in the chair, an uneasy feeling building in the pit of his stomach. "What's the problem?"

"Oh my God, Bobby, oh my God!"

A cold chill went up his spine. "What's going on, Bev."

"Bobby, oh Bobby." Her voice was cracking. He could hear her fighting back the tears.

"Bev, what is it?" he almost shouted.

"I went to pick her up from school, like I always do, and she didn't come out. I waited for almost fifteen minutes, then parked the car and went inside. Her teacher said you sent a limo to pick her up early from school. She left with the driver."

Bobby's chest felt like it was gripped in a vise.

"Wait a minute. You mean someone else picked her up."

"Oh God, Bobby, she's been kidnapped."

Bev was on the verge of hysterics . . . and Bobby wasn't far behind.

"Get a grip on yourself, Bev. I'm sure there's got to be some explanation."

"There's no explanation, Bobby," she cried. "Someone picked our little girl up from school and they've taken her away."

"Listen to me, Bev. Listen carefully." He tried to sound calm. They both couldn't go over the edge. "Did anyone get a look at the limo."

"Yes. The teacher walked Pat to the car. It was a big, white Cadillac. She said the driver was very nice and knew everything about you so she didn't think anything was wrong. Bobby, what are we going to do?"

"Stay calm. Maybe Robert or one of her friends had her picked up."

"No, no. I already checked that out. I called Pamela before I called you. She knew nothing about it. I'm calling the police, Bobby."

His mind was racing. "Not yet, Bev. It might be nothing. I'll make some calls here, then get home. If nothing has happened by then, we'll call the cops."

"Bobby, it's our little girl. Don't let anything happen to our baby."

He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing them with his fingers, trying to blot out the thoughts that forced their way into his mind, the countless newspaper stories about young girls being raped and killed by insane vultures haunting schoolyards.

"Bev, hang up the phone and wait for it to ring. If somebody did kidnap Pat, they're going to call. If not, we notify the police."

"Hurry, Bobby."

He slammed down the phone and dialed Phillip Crawford's number. Shirley answered on the second ring.

"Is Phillip there?"

"Hi, Bobby, how are you doing?"

"Shirley, is Phillip there?"

"No. He left about one-thirty and didn't say when he'd be back."

"Where can I reach him?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me where he was going."

"God!"

"Bobby, are you all right?"

"Shirley, do you know if Phillip might have picked up my daughter at school this afternoon as a surprise?"

"He didn't say anything to me about it. Is anything wrong?"

"Yes Shirley, a lot is wrong. Tell Phillip to call me at home the second you hear from him. It's an emergency."

He slammed the phone down and raced out of his office. "I'll be at home if anyone needs me," he shouted to Jane as he ran down the hall. He didn't bother with the elevator, bounding instead down the stairs two and three at a time. When he got to the parking garage on the fourth floor, he was winded, but not tired. He flew between parked cars toward the space that was reserved for his Mercedes.

"Shit!"

He skidded to a stop beside his car. All four tires were flat. He jerked his head around, looking for anyone who might be watching him. The parking garage looked deserted, but he felt as if his every move was being monitored. Still cautious, he walked slowly back toward the door, breaking into a trot, then into a full run before he was halfway there.

He ran down the remaining four flights of stairs, through the lobby and out into the sunlight, resisting the almost unbearable urge to look behind him to see if he was being followed. The hair on the back of his neck stood at attention, acknowledging in physical action the paranoia that was taking over his inner thoughts.

"Taxi!" he shouted, holding up his hand. Catching a cab in Los Angeles was nothing compared to New York, but maybe he could get lucky.

"Taxi!" he cried again, spotting a yellow cab moving up the street in the middle lane. He ran through the traffic and jumped into the backseat before the car came to a complete stop.

"Hey mister," the cabby griped, "you're not supposed to get in until I pull to the curb."

"I've got fifty dollars if you can get me to my house in Beverly Hills in ten minutes," Bobby gasped.

The driver jammed his foot on the gas, hurtling the car forward with a screech of the tires. "Why didn't you say so sooner?"

Bobby gave the man his address and slumped over in the back of the speeding cab, biting his lip, fighting back the horrible thoughts of his daughter with a strange kidnapper. Surely Phillip wouldn't do something like this? He almost hoped it was Phillip. At least he knew what the man wanted. But if it was some stranger . . .

"Come on, man, faster!" he urged the driver.

The tires squealed as the cab skidded down Bobby's street, two wheels on one side momentarily leaving the ground before slamming back onto the pavement, rocking the car from side to side.

"The brick house on the left," Bobby pointed.

The driver slammed on the brakes, the car sliding to a stop in his driveway.

Bobby quickly tossed the man a fifty and ran up the sidewalk.

"Any time you want a cab," the driver yelled, "just call the company and ask for T. C. I like your style."

Bobby heard the tires scream again as the driver took off up the street. He tore open the front door and ran through the living room.

"Bev?" he cried. "Bev?"

The kitchen door banged open and she ran toward him. Her face was chalky white, her eyes red from crying. "Bobby, Bobby. What's happening?" She threw her arms around his neck, crushing her head against his chest, sobbing.

He grabbed her shoulders, pushing her away slightly. "Bev, have you heard anything?"

She shook her head. "No, Bobby," she cried. "Nothing." Her shoulders began to shake, her face contorted into a helpless, anguished look. "Bobby!" she wailed.

In some odd way, her hysterical panic seemed to serve as a calming balm to his jagged emotions. He couldn't go to pieces. Someone had to take control.

"Get a grip on it, Bev," he barked. "Have you called all of her friends?"

The tone of his voice seemed to jerk her from the grips of the panic she felt. She stiffened slightly and took a deep breath. "It's not any of her friends, Bobby. The teacher told me the limo driver said you had sent him. This isn't a joke. No one would do this as a joke."

Bobby's eyes narrowed, his jaw was set, lips pulled in a tense line across his clenched teeth.

"I'm calling the police."

He turned and moved toward the phone. As he was reaching for the receiver, he heard the front door open.

"Mommy?"

"Pat!" Bev screamed.

Bobby turned and saw Bev running across the living room. Standing just inside the front door was his daughter, holding a huge bag in one hand. Bev fell to her knees and threw her arms around the little girl, crumpling the bag between them.

"Pat!" she sobbed. "Oh, Pat!"

"Mommy," Pat squeaked, "you're squishing my presents."

Bev continued sobbing, alternating between hugging Pat's neck, then pushing her away, staring into her face, smoothing her hair and pulling her close again.

Bobby inhaled deeply and said a quick prayer of thanks. Forcing an air of calm, he walked casually over to his wife and daughter and stood silently. His knees were shaking. He felt dizzy.

Pat looked up at him. He smiled faintly and rubbed her head.

"Daddy," she said, "what's wrong with Mommy?"

Before he could answer, Bev cried, "Pat, where have you been? Where have you been?"

Bobby quickly put a reassuring hand on his wife's shoulder. He didn't want to scare his daughter.

"Mommy was worried about you, baby. She went to school to pick you up and you had already left."

The little face beamed up at him. "Daddy, it was so neat, you sending that big limousine to get me. I had such a great time."

Bev's eyes locked on his and he told her silently with a glance not to say anything. She swallowed hard and continued squeezing Pat's hands.

"Well," he said with a smile, trying to emote a much calmer attitude than he felt, "there was a little mix-up and we didn't know what happened. Who picked you up?"

The little girl's eyes danced. "Tony, the driver, Daddy. He said he was a friend of yours, that you had told him to pick me up and take me shopping. It was so much fun, Daddy."

Bobby sat down on the floor by Bev, leaned over and kissed Pat gently on the cheek, resisting the urge to pull her into his arms and break down.

"Where did the man take you?"

Her face lit up again. "To Rodeo Drive. We went in three different stores. Look!" She pulled her little hands free from her mother's and dug into the bag, holding up a red sweater. "He let me buy anything I wanted. He said you had paid him for it. I got this, and," she reached into the bag again, "and this jacket and these necklaces and these scarves."

Bev reached into the bag, coming up with three receipts. Bobby stared at her questioningly.

"The sweater and jacket came from Le Boutique, the necklaces and scarves from Tommie's."

He frowned.

Bev handed him the receipts. "The bills add up to about five hundred dollars. They were paid in cash."

Pat grabbed him around the neck. "Oh thank you, Daddy. You're the most wonderful Daddy in the whole wide world."

This time he didn't fight the urge. He hugged her tight, taking a deep breath, his senses tickling from the scent of her hair. Little girls' hair always smelled like birds' nests to him. At this moment, the aroma was equal to the most expensive perfume.

"Daddy?" she said.

He relaxed his grip and leaned back on his heels. "Yes?"

"I'm so happy. Don't ever go away."

"Oh, God," Bev gasped, grabbing her again. He joined them, encircling both with arms.

The phone rang, jolting him out of his reverie. He caught Bev's eye as he pushed up from the floor and headed across the room.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Bobby. It's Phillip Crawford."

Bobby's breath caught in his throat.

"Bobby?"

He couldn't talk. His lips refused to move, his vocal chords were so tight they threatened to choke him.

"Bobby?"

He swallowed. "Phillip..." He couldn't continue.

"Bobby, are you all right?"

He tightened his death grip on the phone. "My daughter..." he whispered.

"Pat? She's all right, isn't she. She's o.k.?"

In one chilling moment, Bobby knew. It couldn't be anyone else. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly. "Why, Phillip?"

There was silence on the line.

"Phillip, why my little girl?"

More silence.

"Phillip?"

"I'm sorry, Bobby."

He snapped. "Sorry?" he yelled. "Sorry? What kind of fucking answer is that?"

"Bobby!" Bev called.

He stared at her and pointed, then turned his back. He heard, more than saw, Bev taking Pat into the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, Bobby," Phillip said.

Bobby tried to control his temper, his anger burning white hot. "I won't accept that!" he spat.

"It's not me, Bobby."

"What the fuck do you mean, it's not you. Who the hell is it?"

He heard Phillip breath into the phone.

"It's the people I work for."

"You don't work for anyone, Phillip."

"I'm afraid I do, Bobby. Important people. People who have a vested interest in my business."

"Kidnappers? Is that who you work for, Phillip? People who would grab a little girl?"

"And worse, Bobby, to get what they want."

Phillip's calm answer froze his anger. His chest heaved and his shoulders hunched, as if someone had poured ice water down his back.

"Bobby?"

"What?" he whispered.

"Pat's all right, isn't she."

"Yes." He answered automatically, his mind not even attempting to decipher the depth of the question.

"Today was just a warning. Just a little attempt to get your attention."

Suddenly, Bobby was scared to death, fear grabbing his heart like an icy hand.

"Nothing more needs to happen, Bobby."

"What do you mean?" Bobby's voice was thin and high-pitched.

"Just play ball and everything will be fine."

"What do you want?"

"It's not what I want, Bobby. It's what they want."

He bit down hard on his lower lip. "It's the same thing."

"Maybe. It doesn't really matter."

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing more than you've been doing. Just tell me what records

you're considering and from time to time I'll give you a special record to add."

"I see."

"You'll still get paid, just like you have in the past."

Bobby tried to regain his composure. He couldn't.

"There's really nothing to worry about, Bobby. It'll just be business as usual."

Bobby said nothing.

"And just to show you we're honorable men, your daughter has an envelope in her purse. You'll find all of your markers from the Golden Pyramid have been paid."

Bobby cleared his throat.

"Can I tell my people we have a deal?"

"It doesn't look like I have a choice."

"It's not the end of the world, Bobby. We'll talk again in the morning. Tell Bev I said hello."

The phone went dead.

Bobby stood stiffly for nearly five minutes, the phone dangling from his fingers. Finally he moved.

"Bev?" he called weakly.

She came through the door and walked quickly to where he was standing.

"It was Phillip," he said.

Her eyes widened, the fear he felt earlier now showing in her features.

"Sit down," he said quietly, placing his hand on her shoulder and guiding her to the couch.

"I've got a big problem."

He watched the color drain from her face as he repeated his telephone conversation. Her hands were clenched tightly in her lap, the knuckles white from the force of her grip.

"That's it," he shrugged when he finished.

She closed her eyes. "What are we going to do?"

Bobby was strangely calm. His emotions had been on such a rollercoaster for the past few hours. Voicing his thoughts about the conversation with Phillip served to strengthen his resolve. His decision was made. Phillip's call had made it for him.

"I'm going to the FBI."

Bev nodded, her lips drawn tightly across her teeth.

He forced a crooked smile. "Well, you've been after me to get out of radio for the past couple of years. It looks like you're going to get your wish."

She leaned forward and put her arms around his neck. "Bobby, I love you."

He hugged her back, nuzzling his nose into her neck. "I'm sorry I got you into this mess, Bev."

She rubbed the back of his head, smoothing his hair down. "It's all right, Bobby," she cooed. "I know it's tough, but we'll make it."

"I hope you're right."

She pushed back, tilting her head and staring straight into his eyes. "Are you scared, Bobby?"

He avoided her eyes. "No."

He looked at her and shrugged. "Well, maybe just a little."

She pulled him close again. "Me, too," she whispered.

It was he who comforted her this time. "Not to worry, darling." He patted her gently on the back. "I don't care who's behind Phillip, we'll get protection."

* * * * *

The tan phone rang in Phillip's office.

"Yeah?"

"Well?"

"I talked with him."

"And?"

"And I think it'll work out."

"I hope you're right. What kind of feel did you get?"

"He's scared to death."

"Good."

"I think he's confused. He won't get any sleep tonight, that's for sure. When I talk with him in the morning, I'll know better, but I think he'll play along. I'll calm him down a little, let him know that he's not dealing with cold hearted criminals. I'll let him feel like he's a part of the operation, which he will be."

"In a limited way."

"Of course."

"Any chance he'll go to the police?"

"No, I'm positive he won't."

"Only fools are positive."

"They're only fools if they're wrong."

"What if he does?"

"He won't."

"Humor me. What if he does?"

"I'll handle it."

"We've got other problems."

"What?"

"Joe Preston. He's getting out of hand. We might have to do something there. He's been making overtures to another organization in Miami."

"What are you going to do?"

"We haven't decided yet. I'll notify you if there are any changes. Be careful if Joe contacts you."

"I'll do whatever you say."

"Do we need to put a tail on Holiday tomorrow?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I know Bobby Holiday. He won't go to the police. He's got too much to lose."

"If you're satisfied, then I am."

"I'll call you after I speak with him tomorrow morning."

"Fine."

Phillip hung up the phone and stroked his beard thoughtfully. He hoped he was right. He had as much to lose as Bobby Holiday. Maybe more.

* * * * *

"What is it, Bobby?"

Robert Williams was sitting in his office. He had called his friend as soon as he arrived at work.

Bobby walked slowly over to the big, picture window and stared silently out, grimly realizing he might never have the opportunity again. The weather, like his mood, was foul. It was trying to rain. Not a common sight in Los Angeles, but one that he almost welcomed.

"I've got a big problem, Robert." He heard the man shift in his chair behind him. He took a big breath and began. "Yesterday, Phillip Crawford had Pat picked up at school. When Bev went to get her, she was gone. We didn't know what had happened. I thought she had been kidnapped."

"My God!"

Bobby turned slightly. Robert was staring at him, mouth agape, eyes wide. He shifted his gaze back to the clouds outside. "I went to get my car in the garage. All the tires had been slashed. By the time I got home in a cab, Bev was in hysterics, and I've got to tell you, I wasn't far behind. I was just going to call the police when Pat came in the front door."

"Was she all right?"

Bobby nodded. "She thought I'd sent the limo. The driver took

her to Rodeo Drive and bought her a bunch of presents.”

“Did he . . .”

Bobby shook his head. “No, she was unharmed. She didn’t know anything was wrong. Anyhow, right after she got to the house, Phillip called.” Bobby turned again and faced his friend.

“And?” Robert said.

Bobby stuck his hands in his pockets and stared at the floor. “And, he told me that unless I did what he told me, things could happen.”

“My God, Bobby. What things?”

Bobby locked eyes with Robert. “Nothing specific. Just things.”

“I can’t believe even Phillip Crawford could do something like this.”

“According to Phillip, it’s not him.”

“What?”

“Phillip says it’s his business associates.”

“You mean . . .”

Bobby nodded.

“Jesus Christ!” Robert said. “Organized crime.”

“I guess. I’m scared, Robert.”

Robert leaned over in the chair, resting his weight on his elbows. “What are you going to do, Bobby.”

“The only thing I can do. I’m going to the police.”

“Jesus!”

“You got a better idea?”

“No!”

He took a deep breath. “You told me that you might know someone, Robert.”

“I do.” Robert moved his hand to his face, rubbing his cheek. “The FBI has been investigating payola on the West Coast for some time. I’ve talked with them. I know the guy that heads up the investigation.”

“What’s his name?”

“Inspector Gary Ellis.”

Bobby turned to the window again. It was easier to talk if he didn’t have to look at Robert. “Will you call him for me and set up a meeting.”

“Are you sure you want to do that, Bobby?”

“I don’t have any choice.”

“You want his number?”

Bobby shook his head. “No, I don’t want to call him. Hell, I don’t trust the phones. I don’t trust anything. I feel like I’m being watched.” He forced out a mirthless laugh. “My paranoia is at an all time high. I feel like I was followed to work this morning.”

"What do you want me to do."

"I need you to call the guy and set up a meeting. Tell him what you have to tell him, then go with me and let me get all of this off my chest once and for all."

"You've got a lot of guts, Bobby."

"Lack of choices makes heroes, Robert. If I knew any other way, I'd do it."

"You want me to call him from here?"

"No. If they can kidnap Pat, they can tap my phone. They did it before."

"You think . . ."

"Of course it was them. Who else?"

Bobby twisted around and looked at Robert. "Do it now, Robert. The sooner, the better. Maybe I can get some kind of protection. Phillip said he'd call me this morning. I don't have any time to waste."

Robert stared at Bobby for almost a full minute. "I never, in my wildest dreams, thought anything like this could happen."

Bobby shrugged. "It's done."

"How do you feel?"

Bobby grinned, ruefully. "Almost relieved. For the first time in nearly a year, I'm in control of my own actions. I'm not happy, that's for sure, but it's something I've got to do."

"Does Bev know?"

"Of course. I couldn't, and wouldn't, keep something like this from her."

"How about Paul?"

"No."

"You haven't told him?"

"What purpose would it serve? He would only be interested in protecting the company."

"Bev's the only person that knows?"

"And you."

Robert stood up. "I'll go make the call." He held his hand out. Bobby reached over and grasped it. "I'll help you in any way I can, my friend."

"Thank you, Robert."

Robert turned for the door. "As soon as I talk to Ellis, I'll call you."

"No," Bobby said emphatically. "Don't call. Come back and tell me."

Robert nodded and left.

He didn't have any time to think. As soon as the door closed, the intercom buzzed.

"Bobby, it's Phillip Crawford on line five."

He walked mechanically to his desk and picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

"How are you, Bobby?"

"I think I'm going to live, Phillip."

"I told you everything would look fine today."

"Yeah."

"We're going to do business?"

Bobby took a deep breath. It was important that Phillip believe he was taking the bait. But he couldn't sound too anxious. "I guess. I don't like it, but like you said, it's not like we haven't been doing it before."

"I'm glad to hear that, Bobby."

"And let's face it, I do need the money."

"Bobby, it's going to be . . ."

"Phillip, excuse me, can I call you back?" he interrupted. "Paul's coming in."

"No problem, I'll talk to you later."

Bobby let out his breath and hung up the phone. It had gone well. Using Paul as an excuse to get off the phone before any heavy conversation could develop was perfect. Phillip would think everything was all right. He'd talk with the FBI before the man would have a clue.

Bobby returned to the window and let himself be drawn into deep thought. His career was over. When this broke, he could never again get any kind of job in radio. Hell, he might not be able to get any kind of job at all. He was going to be famous . . . for all the wrong reasons.

He sighed. Maybe he could write a book.

* * * * *

"It's zero hour, Bev." He was standing nervously by Bill's desk, holding the phone against his ear as he stuffed papers into his briefcase. "I'm going with Robert to meet with an Inspector Ellis of the FBI."

"Bobby, you're doing the right thing."

"I know that, Bev, I just feel a little strange."

"Do you think you should get a lawyer?"

"I thought about that, Bev. I'm going to talk with this guy, and if it gets heavy, I'll call Sherman. But I don't think I'll need a lawyer."

"Whatever you think."

"Pamela is going to pick you and Pat up in about an hour and take

you to her house.”

“Is that necessary?”

“I just want to know that you’re safe. As soon as we finish, Robert and I will come and get you.”

“I’m scared, Bobby.”

He sighed heavily. “So am I, Bev, but it’ll all be over in a few hours. We’re meeting the Inspector at the Century Plaza Hotel.”

“Why there, Bobby?”

“He told Robert it would be best if we met somewhere other than his office, in case I was being followed or something. Besides, they’ve been using the hotel in the payola investigation they’ve been doing.”

“Oh, I see. I guess that makes sense.”

“Darling, I’ve got to run. He’s waiting on us.”

“Bobby, I love you and I’m very proud of you.”

He took a deep breath. “I love you too. Give Pat a big hug and kiss for me. I’ll see you guys in a couple of hours.”

* * * * *

They drove to the Plaza Hotel in silence. Bobby was lost in his thoughts, trying to play out in his mind the events that would soon be unfolding. He went over and over the story he was going to tell, wondering whether or not he should involve other people, like Susan Scanlon, Shirley and Debbie. He had made no firm decision when Robert stopped the car in the back parking lot.

“We’re here,” he said.

“Let’s go.” Bobby got out of the car and together they walked around the side of the large building, through the huge lobby and into the elevators. He resisted the urge to look behind them to see if he was being followed.

“It’s room 2043,” Robert said, punching the button.

Bobby watched the buttons for the different floors light up as the elevator carried them toward the top of the hotel where his future waited. A tone sounded and the elevator bumped to a stop. The doors slid open and they stepped out.

Bobby looked at Robert and grinned. He was going out with a smile on his face. “Here we go.”

They walked down the hall and knocked on the door of room 2043. Seconds later, it was opened by a large, swarthy man dressed in a tan suit.

Bobby followed Robert into the room.

“Hello, Mr. Williams,” the man said.

Robert nodded. “Hello, Inspector. This is Bobby Holiday. Bobby,

Inspector Gary Ellis.”

Bobby shook the outstretched hand and smiled. “You’re not what I expected.”

“No?” the Inspector said.

Bobby looked the man up and down. He was about three inches over six feet and weighed at least two hundred pounds, dark complected with thick, black hair and matching eyebrows. He looked to be as hard as a rock.

Bobby coughed nervously. “I worked with a guy named Ellis once. Short, fat and bald. Somehow I pictured you the same way.”

The Inspector’s lips parted in what might be called a smile, though there was no amusement associated with the facial movement. He patted his flat stomach. “I have to guard against that myself.”

“What’s that?” Bobby asked. “Your hair and height?” They could screw up his life, but they weren’t going to get his sense of humor. Not yet anyhow.

The Inspector motioned toward the couch. “Let’s have a seat and find out what’s happening.”

Bobby followed the man’s pointing finger, noticing for the first time the hotel room they were occupying. It looked to be the living room of a suite, though he didn’t know if there was an adjoining bedroom or not. A wet bar was on his right, a large television resting next to it. Near the window was a small couch and two chairs with a coffee table set between. He saw a tape recorder with two mikes on the table, several notepads stacked beside it. An ashtray with a burning butt rested on the end closest to one of the chairs. He sat down on the couch.

“Mr. Williams has told me a little about your situation,” Ellis said, picking up the cigarette and easing down into the chair. Robert sat in the other, across the table. “I want to help.”

Bobby took a deep breath. This was not going to be easy. “How do we do this?”

Ellis cleared his throat. “Do you mind if I turn on this tape recorder?”

Bobby shrugged.

The Inspector reached over and fiddled with the machine, pressing a couple of buttons.

“What we’ll do is get a statement from you. From what Mr. Williams has told me, you’ve been involved in payola. This statement is not a confession of any kind and will not be used against you. After I get your story, we’ll decide on our next move. At that time, you might need to notify an attorney.”

Bobby glanced sharply at Robert.

Ellis caught the look. "There's really nothing for you to worry about, Mr. Holiday. As I said, this won't be an official confession. You won't incriminate yourself in any way. I've already talked with my superiors, and since you're coming forward with this information on your own, we're prepared to grant you total and complete immunity if you'll testify against the people you implicate. You will need an attorney only to work out the details of your immunity." He tilted his head slightly and stared at Bobby. "Mr. Holiday, Mr. Williams has told me a little bit about what you've been through. I'm here to help. It sounds like you've gotten in over your head with some of the scum we deal with every day. I'm here to make sure that from this day forward, you won't have to worry about their threats or tactics. I'm on your side, sir."

Somehow, Bobby felt comforted by the man's speech. He glanced down at the tape recorder in front of him. This whole nightmare was about to end.

"Fine," he said. It was too late to change his mind anyhow.

The man leaned over and spoke into the microphone closest to him. "This is a conversation between Mr. Bobby Holiday of Media Communications and Inspector Gary Ellis. The conversation is taking place in room 2034 of the Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles, California. It is approximately three o'clock. Also present is Mr. Robert Williams, publisher of The Report."

He looked up at Bobby. "Please state your name for the record."

Bobby leaned forward and spoke into the mike. "My name is Bobby Holiday."

Ellis took one of the notepads in his hand. "Mr. Holiday, please tell me all of the events leading up to this meeting of today."

Bobby took a deep breath, closed his eyes and blew slowly through puffed cheeks. "Almost a year ago, I was appointed vice president in charge of programming for Media Communications company," he began. Ellis and Robert settled back in their chairs.

* * * * *

"He told me bad things could happen if I didn't play ball. He said it wasn't just him, but the people he worked for that I had to worry about."

An hour had passed since Bobby had begun his story. The ashtray in front of him held twelve butts that Inspector Ellis had crushed out. Except for one brief minute when he had interrupted to change the tape in the machine, the Inspector had remained silent, content

to listen to Bobby's narration of the events of the past several months.

"I went to work this morning and called Robert and told him to set up this meeting. I talked briefly with Crawford on the phone, telling him, in essence, that I would work with him." Bobby leaned back on the couch. "And that's it."

Bobby felt tired and relieved. It was over. He had told the Inspector everything he could remember. His secrets were out. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. For the first time in months, all the tension had left his body.

Robert cleared his throat. "You want something to drink, Bobby?"

"Yeah," he said quietly, opening his eyes. "A glass of water would be great."

Ellis leaned over and shut off the tape recorder, then stood and walked toward a closed door that evidently led to an adjoining bedroom. "I'll be right back. I've got to go to the bathroom."

Robert returned from the wet bar and held the glass of water out toward Bobby. He leaned forward, took it and drained it in one long gulp.

"I'm sorry, Bobby," Robert said. He was standing across the coffee table, a dejected look on his face, his shoulders slumped, hands dangling loosely by his side.

Bobby grimaced. "It's not your fault, Robert. I got myself into this mess."

Robert shook his head, his eyes on the floor. "That's not what I'm talking about."

Bobby's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"Bobby," Robert glanced up at him, a look of extreme anguish on his face. "Bobby," he almost sobbed, "I'm really sorry."

Bobby was confused. "Robert, what is the matter with you?"

The bedroom door opened again. Bobby looked casually across the room. Through the door walked Phillip Crawford!

"What the fuck?" He jumped up from the couch.

Phillip stopped just inside the door, shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Hello, Bobby."

He whipped his eyes toward Robert. His friend was standing in the same position, staring at the floor. What was going on? Was Phillip testifying also? Why was he here?

"Phillip . . ." he began, but his voice caught in his throat, as the icy grip of fear from the day before clutched his heart again. His questions were answered. Gary Ellis had followed Phillip into the room. He was holding a gun. The barrel was pointed at Bobby's chest!

He looked around wildly, his eyes whipping around the room! He

had to get out! Something was wrong . . . dead wrong. He started around the coffee table.

"Sit down, Bobby!"

He froze in mid-stride, the ominous click of the revolver paralyzing him. He looked at Ellis. The man was holding the gun at arms length, the muzzle now pointed directly at his face.

"You heard the man," Phillip said calmly. "Sit down."

Bobby couldn't move.

Ellis took a couple of steps across the room and grabbed his arm, the strong fingers clamping into his biceps.

"Bring him in here," Phillip said.

Bobby felt his arm being jerked roughly and followed the pressure. He was reacting numbly, his brain unable to comprehend what was happening. As he stumbled across the room, it occurred to him that he wasn't breathing. Maybe his heart wasn't beating either. His body had simply shut down in shock. His vision was blurred and there was a tremendous roaring in his ears.

Ellis pulled him into the adjoining room. Phillip followed a few steps behind. The man shoved him forward and he stopped, gazing vacantly in front of him, refusing to turn around to face his captors. Maybe if he didn't turn around, they would just disappear.

"In the chair," Ellis barked.

Bobby felt a hand shove between his shoulder blades and he stumbled forward again. It was then that he first noticed the chair sitting in the middle of the room. It was straight-backed, made of stainless steel and leather, similar to those he had seen at the wet bar in the living room.

He felt the hand on his back again. "In the chair!"

He took a couple of steps, dragging his feet across the carpeting. "Sit!"

Bobby sat down, turning as he did to face Ellis and Phillip. He sat straight, his arms resting on the sides of the of the chair, his fingers clutching the armrests nervously. Ellis was standing perhaps five feet in front of him, the wicked looking black revolver pointed at his nose. Phillip was coming toward him, holding a package in his hand.

"Bobby, Bobby," Phillip clucked, kneeling on one side of him. "I sure wish it hadn't come to this."

Bobby saw Phillip out of the corner of his eye, opening the package. He didn't, or rather, couldn't, remove his eyes from the barrel of the gun that stared silently in front of his face.

He felt pressure on his left wrist as Phillip grabbed his arm, pinning it to the chair. He tore his eyes from the gun and looked down.

Phillip was wrapping his wrist with gauze, tying him tightly to the chair.

"Hey!" he said, uttering his first sound since the nightmare had begun. He reached quickly across and grabbed Phillip's arm. "What are you doing?"

His head was suddenly jerked back. Ellis had grabbed a fistful of his hair, snapping his neck against the chair. The barrel of the gun jabbed into his right ear painfully.

"Make another move, ass-hole and I'll end it right now."

Bobby didn't move, his entire consciousness focused on the cold steel pressing into the tunnel of his ear. His head was on fire from the man's grip in his hair. His neck stretched painfully. He was vaguely aware of Phillip's movements as he felt his other arm being secured. A few seconds later and his ankles were bound to the legs of the chair as well.

"You can let him go now."

Bobby felt the hand leave his hair. He twisted his neck in circles, trying to relieve the knotted muscles. He took a deep breath, then focused on the two men. Ellis was standing in front of him, the gun held carelessly in his hand, the muzzle pointed toward the floor. Phillip was to his right, sitting on the bed, unzipping a small, brown bag.

He tested his bonds carefully. He needn't have bothered. The gauze, circled several times around his limbs, held him helplessly to the chair.

Phillip coughed and leaned forward on the bed. "You just couldn't play ball, could you?"

Bobby shifted his gaze, staring flatly into Phillip's eyes. Please God, he said silently, let this all be a dream. Let me wake up in my bed with Bev by my side.

His first prayer went unanswered.

Phillip's head rocked from side to side in an easy motion. "I guess you're wondering what this is all about, aren't you?"

Bobby didn't answer. He was still in a state of total confusion. He had no idea what was happening.

"Robert!" Phillip yelled. "Get in here."

"No!" Robert's voice carried through the open door from the living room.

Phillip looked up at Ellis. "I said get in here."

Bobby heard a slight movement in the other room, then Robert's shape filled the doorway. The man stopped half-way in, leaning against the door jam, his eyes still on the floor.

"I thought you might go to the police," Phillip said quietly. Bobby

shifted his eyes to look at him. "If you did, I knew you'd confide in your good friend Robert Williams."

Bobby swept his gaze back toward Robert. The publisher hadn't moved.

"So I had Robert introduce you to the FBI Inspector, played by my associate."

Ellis bowed at the waist. Bobby's mind was slowly catching up with the events. He had known it since the man had come back from the bathroom. The big guy with the gun was not associated with the FBI, except maybe that he was wanted by them.

"I don't understand."

It was his voice. He had thought the words, his lips had moved, but the sound he heard was unfamiliar, as if another person had taken over his vocal chords.

"Then I'll explain," Phillip said. "Robert Williams and I are partners."

Bobby was stunned by the words, although after what had happened in the past ten minutes, nothing should have shocked him.

"What?"

Phillip nodded. "You heard right. Robert and I play on the same team."

"Robert!"

Williams stood like a statue, leaning against the door, staring at the floor.

"Not that it's any consolation to you," Phillip continued, "but you were set up from the start."

Bobby continued to stare at Robert.

"It was Robert who was feeding me information from the first day you started work. It was Robert who planted the bugs in your office. He could hear everything that went on."

Bobby's mind began to function. Before, he had been slow to comprehend. Now, his brain was working overtime, trying to match Phillip's words with earlier actions. Robert had the bugs. His office was located in the same building. That's how he had gotten the first story about the playlist freeze.

"Robert set you up with the loans for your house. He mentioned to Paul Johnson that you were getting paid for the column. When you got into that fight with Irving, it fit perfectly to call in the loan."

"I thought Irving called in the loan."

Phillip laughed. "Irving's not on any board of directors. There is no board of directors of The Report. Robert runs it from top to bottom. Like mine, his partners are hidden."

"Robert!"

Williams finally moved. He shifted around against the door, crossing his arms in front of his body. "I'm sorry, Bobby."

"Sorry?"

Robert looked at him with bloodshot eyes. "I couldn't help it," he cried. "I wanted to start The Report more than anything in the world. I didn't have the money. Phillip loaned it to me, just like he loaned you money. I didn't know about his partners until this week. And then it was too late."

"And all this talk about payola? Just bullshit, Robert?" Bobby's fear was being replaced by cold anger. He tugged again at his bindings.

"Just bullshit is right," Phillip smiled. "We figured that if Robert spearheaded the payola talk, we'd always be one step ahead of the investigation. And we are."

"You told me you hated Phillip, Robert," Bobby spat.

"Another ploy," Phillip said. "It was easier to get next to you if you thought Robert didn't like me. This way, it wouldn't look like a set-up when I showed up while you were with Robert."

Bobby's mind shifted into high gear again. How many times had he run into Phillip when he was in Robert's company? The first night at the restaurant, the poker games, Las Vegas. He closed his eyes. How could he have been so stupid?

"It was Robert all along?"

"He had some help in the beginning. Nancy was mighty helpful until you found out her secret."

Bobby opened his eyes. "Now what?" he said softly.

Phillip fished into the bag in his lap. "Now, it's over."

"I'm leaving," Robert said.

"You'll stay here to the end," Phillip barked.

"I can't!"

Bobby's head swiveled back and forth between Robert and Phillip. What was next? The righteous anger that had burned through him earlier faded quickly, replaced by a dull feeling of dread.

Phillip shrugged. "You had your chance, Bobby."

"What do you mean?" He was frightened, stone scared. He tried to swallow but his mouth was suddenly dry. His throat refused to work.

Phillip's hand came out of the bag. He was holding a syringe.

"I'm leaving," Robert cried again.

"Michael!" Phillip nodded and the big man walked over and stood next to Robert.

Bobby couldn't breathe. "Wha . . . what's going on? What are you

going to do?" He stared into Phillip's eyes, eyes that showed nothing ... no emotion, no feelings, no life.

"You're going to die, Bobby."

Oh, God. Bobby's head spun as a wave of nausea passed through his body. His stomach heaved. He thought he was going to throw up.

"No, Phillip, please, no."

"I'm sorry, Bobby, but I gave you a chance. There is too much money involved to let you ruin our operation. Too many people that could go down."

"I'll play the game, Phillip. I'll do anything you tell me." Bobby was talking rapidly, the words tumbling out of his mouth, as if by the sheer volume of syllables, he could prevent Phillip from carrying out his plan.

"I can't trust you, Bobby."

"Yes, you can. I swear." Tears were filling his eyes.

"No deal."

"Please, Phillip, I'm begging you." Bobby's mind was gone. The strangest thoughts were running through his head. His mother ... pictures of his childhood, how he played cops and robbers ... how he died in those games, full of bravado with his boots on ... Clint Eastwood movies ... the hero always spitting in death's eye ... the dreams he had of dying and how he always faced it like a man ... he'd never beg.

Reality was much different. It always was. He was begging, sobbing, out of control.

"Everybody knows you're a coke-head, Bobby. When they find you in a hotel room that you booked, dead of an over-dose, no one will be too surprised, especially when they check your finances and find you're thousands of dollars in debt. Especially when they find the note you left, typed on the typewriter in your office."

"Phillip, please!" Bobby looked wildly at the little man sitting on the bed, holding the syringe up, testing it, a small stream of clear liquid squirting out of the needle. He swung his eyes across the room. "Robert, help me!" he screamed.

"Bobby, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Robert sobbed, his hands held out helplessly.

"If you try and scream, Bobby, I'll just gag you," Phillip said calmly. "Actually, this isn't going to hurt a bit. You might even like it." He moved off the bed and kneeled by the chair. His hand clamped down on Bobby's right arm, holding it tightly against the armrest.

Bobby's mind, spinning out of control, suddenly locked. Instead

of the helpless panic that had almost overwhelmed him only moments before, he was now strangely calm. Was this how it was when you knew you were going to die? When your mind finally realized that nothing could be done? Did everyone then revert to the calm, cold feeling he was now experiencing and had seen on the faces of those convicts being escorted to the electric chair? Was this how the brain preserved the human dignity when there was no way out?

He watched in slow motion as Phillip knotted a rubber tube around his upper arm, cutting off his circulation, causing a vein to bulge in the crook of his elbow.

He looked at Robert. "Take care of Bev and Pat, Robert." He suddenly felt totally lonely. "Let them know I love them."

Even as he made the statement, he clung to the faint hope that the whole thing was just being done to scare him. Surely Phillip wouldn't go through with it.

Robert's face contorted, sobs racking his body.

Bobby felt a dim prick on his arm. He was wrong.

Please, God, don't let me die.

He watched Phillip's thumb push the syringe, the contents emptying into his vein.

"Anything else, Bobby?" Phillip said, his fingers on the rubber tubing.

Bobby's lips twisted up. "Fuck you, Phillip!"

The tubing popped free. Bobby felt a burning sensation sizzle up his arm, turning into an expanding ball of fire around his shoulder. The drug rushed through his chest, exploding in his heart.

His second prayer went unanswered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The body of Bobby Holiday, vice president in charge of programming for the giant Media Communications, one of the largest radio companies in the country, was found last night in a Los Angeles hotel room. Local police are calling the death a suicide. A note was found next to the body, supposedly written by Holiday, outlining his own involvement in payoffs from record promoters and naming several others, specifically implicating one independent promoter in Philadelphia and many others across the country as well. Investigators said that the note further documented the involvement of an organized crime ring located in the Miami area.

The spokesperson would not reveal the exact contents of the note until the investigation has been completed.

According to the FBI Holiday had been receiving cash payments in return for playing certain records over the past year, was deep in debt, a known gambler and a habitual user of drugs. The coronor's office said that the death was caused by an overdose of cocaine.

The body was discovered by R. T. Williams, publisher of *The Report*, a trade magazine followed closely by many who are associated with the radio and record industries. Williams told a group of reporters that Holiday told him of his involvement with the payola scheme earlier in the day and had then agreed to turn himself over to the FBI last night. When Holiday failed to show up for their appointed rendezvous in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel, Williams, accompanied by one Phillip Crawford, a local independent record promoter who had been secretly working with the FBI in the payola investigations, went to the room and found the body.

Williams and Crawford said they were totally unaware of Holiday's involvement in the scandal. Other associates of Holiday in the radio and recording industry expressed shock over his death and the news of the current investigation. Alvin Irving, who manages the nation's leading rock group The Falcons, said "Bobby Holiday was probably the brightest young man in radio. I considered him a close personal friend. His death leaves a deep void. He will be missed."

Paul Johnson, the president of Media Communications, refused comment.

Holiday had been separated from his wife and five year old daughter for the past several months. Although thought to be residing in the New Orleans area, police had not been able to locate them at press time.

A news conference has been scheduled for tomorrow by the FBI. At that time, complete details regarding arrests and warrants will be issued.

THE END

