

Prologue

In *Collision** we see the rise of Armand Dillon from the leader of a small but growing technical products company to a large multinational corporation with subsidiaries in many countries and a number of industries. Much of this growth was accomplished by acquiring smaller companies and then going after the Alliance for International Communications Inc. (AIC), a much larger target using a variety of devious methodologies, some bordering on shady tactics.

Armand Dillon has a style of leadership that leans heavily on two faithful followers who interpret his often veiled intentions sometimes over zealously. His ordinary business ruthlessness is exaggerated by his followers and cleverly but incorrectly carried out. While Armand means to frighten and discredit his victims, his followers mistakenly arrange a fatal car accident, causing serious injuries and a gruesome death. The injured have a terrible time trying to escape the clutches of Armand Dillon's henchmen as they make a desperate attempt to hide temporarily in a secluded floating houseboat in rural New Hampshire.

Armand's followers eventually discover them and thinking Armand wants them eliminated, they put a trap into motion that would cause the injured president of AIC to perish in a fire. Too late, the faithful Calder realizes his orders are only to frighten and discredit, he rushes to New Hampshire to make a last ditch effort to correct his error. The surprising conclusion is both unexpected and violent.

Fearing for their lives, the group around the president of AIC secretly flee to Brazil to a special place of healing and safety while they consider and plan their next move. Armand Dillon takes over and cleans house at AIC reducing inventories, head count, and real estate expense to

the bone which naturally increases profit in the short term and endears him to the stockholders as share value increases.

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Armand Dillon continues to coddle his spy in the group loyal to Lucinda Brahms. He

keeps three

of his victims on the payroll hoping to find out where the group is hiding and to stay in touch. He admires their enthusiasm and creativity and really wants to convert them into his service. He waits patiently for an opportunity to win them over as the plot continues two years later in *Lonely Expiation* where “collision” becomes intensified and reaches the final shocking redemptive conclusion.

Chapter One

Ambition

Armand Dillon, President and CEO of Technical Communication Products Inc. (TCP) sat hunched in the corner of the company black limousine. He was not at ease nor did he relish the task that lay before him. The sharp lines in his long face were deeper than usual. The black suit that was his daily wear hung loosely on him, wrinkled and long in the sleeves. He stared forward without a sideways glance at Cliff Wexsler, his untitled subordinate in the office of the president.

They had been together a full four years of action-packed leadership driving the growth of TCP Inc. and its predecessor Premium Technical Products Inc. Cliff's loyalty was firmly established. Armand trusted him. Some even thought that Cliff might someday, in the distant future that is, take his place. Right now, in the limousine speeding up the East River Drive toward the connection with the New England Thruway to Connecticut, the roles seemed to be tentatively reversed. Armand needed advice and encouragement from Cliff.

Cliff had a young face, round and rosy cheeked, unmarked by the fast-paced corporate life of TCP Inc. Armand relied heavily on him to implement the steady flow of his ideas and innovations. When Cliff went into action, everyone at TCP moved. There was no question that

he had the power of Armand behind him. At the moment he was unsure of Armand's purpose in this trip.

“Did you actually tell me why we are visiting the Fullingtons at their estate in Connecticut?” he asked.

“No, I didn't, but it's no secret.”

Armand stared out the opaque glass of the window on his side. He was in no hurry to answer. The greenery on the west side of the parkway slid by his view in a blur while he considered his motives. Cliff knew better than to rush him. Finally, he answered. “You told me that Fullington is announcing the marriage of his youngest daughter. The whole family will be gathered at his estate. It would be a good occasion to gain a better understanding of his background,” he explained.

“We know all about him. We have a complete dossier on him from before the acquisition of AIC when we did all the research on every board member. He's wealthy, a major stockholder, and influential with the other directors. He was the one we used to swing the whole board around in our favor. He was already the chairman at that time.” Cliff reminded him. He knew all these as he was the one who engineered the acquisition process on behalf of Armand.

“What do we know about the family? Is this old money we are talking about?” Armand swung his head around to look directly at Cliff.

“Yes, very old! His great-grandfather, Roger T., was the silent partner in what is now Grand Market.”

“The Grand Market we no longer see around?”

“That one.”

“They must have pulled out early and diversified their holdings,” Armand was guessing.

“You bet! Old money gets tired, but it still makes more money at a good clip,” Cliff agreed.

“And he’s one of the biggest stockholders in TCP,” Armand mused.

After a pause Cliff leaned forward, trying to read the expression on Armand’s face. “So the reason we are here is business?”

“In a way,” began Armand, “I find that working solely for increased value and profit does not get me the kind of influence I’d like to have. I think the Fullingtons of the world tolerate me, but they don’t really accept or respect me.”

“Is that what you want? Respect?” Cliff asked.

“A little wouldn’t hurt. They don’t mind associating with me if I make them wealthy, or at least preserve their wealth, but underneath they wouldn’t otherwise want me around. I’m useful to them. I have a hold on them through my business acumen and reliability. Otherwise, I would not be tolerated,” Armand insisted.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Look how you are invited to this party today. The Fullingtons didn’t have to do that. They invited you as a sign of respect.”

“You think so?”

“Of course! What else?” Cliff tried to reassure Armand.

Armand turned his head and stared right at him as his lip curled and he answered, “Don’t smog me! I always want the truth. You hear me?”

Cliff took a deep breath, turned over a few thoughts in his mind and at last spoke, his words careful and deliberate, “The Fullingtons have certain standards that are difficult to live up to. The standards are not behavioral in nature—they are qualitative. They have little invisible tendrils sticking out of their foreheads that sense qualities you can’t even identify. I think it is sometimes called class. Yes, that’s it—classy aura. I have a pretense of it, but you Armand, you don’t have any of it.”

“That’s it!” Armand gestured wildly with his hands. “They know it, I know it, and the whole world knows the difference between me and them.”

Cliff turned to look at Armand. He took in the long face, etched lines making it look carved in stone. The lack of expression perhaps from a lifetime of denying any feelings! The straight eyebrows squaring his forehead and then as he turned the cold, icy cold look of those eyes! Put all that in a crumpled black suit and you have a unique identity. Cliff realized Armand did not belong to any class. He was a class unto himself. He answered carefully, “I’m not sure if it should really matter to you. You’re unusually successful and have many followers. What more could you ask for?” Cliff tried to put him at ease.

“I know all that,” Arman assured Cliff. “My brains . . . they can get me anything I want. Sure—smarts and insight! I should be satisfied, but there is something in the look of Fullington when we are together that I don’t like. He considers himself a notch above me in some way I can’t entirely fathom. He looks down his nose at me as though from a great height. I can just smell his superiority while he uses me to his benefit. I tell you, Cliff, I damn well don’t like it.”

Cliff didn't know what to say in response. He thought it better to be quiet and wait for Armand to make a further move. Surprisingly enough, Armand took a totally different tact. "Didn't you tell me the invitation was to a formal announcement concerning his younger daughter?"

"Yes. She is engaged to be married to one of the Beaverson boys. That will be a major social event. The Beaversons are a notch above the Fullingtons in social rank. The young daughter is to be congratulated for her good taste," Cliff explained.

"You mean he's wealthy?"

"He will be, one day, and so will she, but that's not the point. That boy has class. He stands straight, he has superb manners, always says the right thing at the right time. He is the ideal catch for the Fullington girl."

"A good catch for Fullington too, I gather." Armand sniffed his disdain.

"Very much so. I can see why he wants to make a big show of it. He wants all his associates to envy him and looks forward to their good opinion. You might not understand it since you don't have any children Armand, do you?"

"Hell no. I don't have any use for children. Maybe when they get to be about twenty-one or so, I could bear them . . . you know, when they begin to have some sense!"

Cliff laughed. The idea of Armand on his knees playing with a small child was so incongruous, he laughed even louder so that Armand turned in his direction frowning.

"I don't recall saying anything funny," he growled.

"Sorry." Cliff admitted without any explanation.

“One thing . . .” Armand hesitated before going on, “are there people who specialize in coaching someone like me in getting along with . . . you know . . . people who have . . . class?”

Cliff was surprised. He turned to look at Armand, wondering if he was really serious. Evidently he was.

“Well,” Cliff began, “as a rule, it is something you are born with . . . it comes with the blood through a few generations. I imagine there must be consultants who could spruce you up a bit in appearance as well as manners.”

“I want to force my way into their class. I can only satisfy my ambition if I am accepted by the Fullingtons as well as the Beaversons. I’m willing to spend money to get what I want. See if you can find me the best coach in the world—soon!” Armand decided.

“All right, if that’s what you want,” Cliff answered.

“That’s what I want. TCP Inc. is operating like a well-oiled machine, steadily increasing its share value for the stockholders. What I am after now may require me to put on a good act and for that I need the best coach you can find. Once I’m on the inside, I’ll show them a thing or two!” Armand clenched his fists and clamped his jaws together with frightening determination.

Cliff glanced sideways at him. He sighed his resignation. This time Armand may have too big a challenge. To overcome his appearance, his lack of manners and social grace may need more than coaching. The differences are not just cosmetic. They run deep in his very nature and back into time as far as he could remember. He doubted if much could be changed. This was an impossible task.

“What will you do, if you can’t change enough?” Cliff asked.

“I will change all I can, and then bring my intellect to bear on the problem. If I’m smart enough to put TCP together and run it profitably, I’m smart enough to fool the Fullingtons and Beaversons of the world. And don’t forget . . . I’ve got you to help me!” Armand smiled grimly.

“Yes, sir!”

Robert and Jolene McLane were weeding by hand. He had already run the tiller down the rows of chard. Now they were both needed to pick out the remaining weeds intertwined with the chard foliage. The weeds were quick to regain their dominance in the rich dark loam of the valley floor.

Bending over continuously made their backs ache. They had learned to shift positions to ease the strain. One could lean the left elbow on the left knee while plucking with the right hand and then shifting over and weeding with the left. They stood up every few minutes. The rows seemed to stretch forever into the distance. Robert stood up and arched his neck and back. Jolene imitated him. They were both learning a great deal about farming the hard way.

“You know,” sighed Robert, “learning calculus was easier than growing Swiss chard.”

“That’s because you are more used to using your head than your muscles,” Jolene reminded him. She shifted the backpack strapped to her shoulders with the precious cargo in it. She made small cooing sounds and Emily responded from inside the backpack with her own version.

“Ouch.” Robert stretched his back again and tilted it from side to side and then arched back into a tight convex curve. He had to do this every few minutes to ease the pain.

“Are you sorry now that I got you into this?” Jolene asked him.

Robert thought about it for a moment before answering. “I know it was largely your impulse to work with the soil and at first I went along mostly for your sake. But I want you to know that I really do believe in what we are doing. I care about the earth and I care about what we humans are doing to it.” Robert assured her. “How you can do it with Emily on your back is beyond me. I did it a few times, so I know what it feels like after a little while.”

“I couldn’t bear to leave her alone at the house. She wants to be in our life or why did she come to us? I can see and hear how often she is copying how we behave, what we say and do, and just how we are together. You know, without us even knowing it or trying to do it on purpose, she is shaping herself in our image, our example!”

“I agree. Emily took quite a bit of trouble to get to us, saying nothing about the trouble you took to guide her here, so we should do everything we can together with her,” Robert said.

“I’m so glad we agree. Can you imagine couples fighting over everything? How to do this and what to say when? Not a day goes by that I don’t thank my stars you singled me out in the library at Fairmount University that lucky day.” Jolene stood up to catch his reaction.

“Singled you out! Listen to you, you practically jumped across the library table to entice me into your beautiful web.” Robert laughed his delight that she did.

“There was something about you . . . bent over Peter Drucker’s book. You were so intent, so serious, so handsome, and innocent. Yes, there is something innocent about you . . . as if you

are still new to the world . . . still in love with it. I couldn't resist finding out if you were real.”

Jolene had turned serious. She meant what she said.

“All I noticed at first were your eyes peeping over the top of your notebook—wide, soft brown, and absolutely adorable. You know, it may be hard to believe, but I think I fell in love right at that first moment. Only the word “fall” isn't right. I didn't fall, I woke up. Yes, that's it, in that instant, I recognized in you the one person who belonged with me in my life.”

Jolene wrapped her arm around Robert's shoulder and kissed him. “I love the way you see more and more in hindsight as though you grow more and more aware of the past as you remember it. It's beautiful.” Jolene sighed and reluctantly let go of Robert to bend over again and tug another weed from among the chard.

“Here comes Wilhelm, thank God. Just in time to save me,” said Robert.

A lean tall man darkly browned by the strong Brazilian sun approached them from the end of the field. “Hallow!” he called when he was close enough.

“Hello Wilhelm,” Jolene welcomed him. “How are you today?”

“Juest fine.” His smile was broad as the Brazilian sky.

“I am very glad to see you,” Robert told him. “You are my excuse to stand up and be human for a change.”

“Vorking with the soil is not supposed to be torture.” Wilhelm laughed as he bent over and moved his strong hands swiftly among the chard leaves cropping out weeds and small stones. “You haff to picture to yourself how da earth is filled witt gratitude dat you are gently caring for its fruitfulness. If you feel da gratitude in response to your love, it rewards you witt

strength in your limbs.” As he spoke, his fingers deftly found their way in and out amongst the chard foliage, plucking a stem here and there gracefully. He seemed not to be using any physical strength at all as he worked. Robert and Jolene watched him in silent admiration.

“The way you do that . . . it’s just awe inspiring,” Jolene murmured.

“Love is da super natural strength of da human and will more and more replace physical strength. I have always loved da earth as part of me.” Wilhelm explained in his quiet way as he worked. During these last few years, since Robert and Jolene had miraculously escaped the evil threatening them in New York City, Wilhelm had been their mentor and companion. He had helped to form their vision of what a farm could be and should be.

“I can see that,” Robert said.

“But do you feel it?” asked Wilhelm without looking up.

“I do!” Jolene responded “I think I might actually see it in the connection between your fingers and the plants.”

Wilhelm looked up at Jolene briefly while he continued working without watching what his hands were doing.

It was several years since Robert and Jolene had escaped the clutches of Armand Dillon in New York City. They had learned all too well how ruthless he was. Robert’s mother had been seriously hurt in a willfully arranged car crash that had killed the chauffeur. Thanks to Robert’s father, Charles, they had narrowly escaped the fiery furnace of their hideout and landed here in Brazil. Originally their plan was to explore ways to regain their control of TCP Inc., but the

beauty and peace of this opulent countryside had charmed them into staying and connecting with the land.

Wilhelm had attached himself to them and was a great help. His way of looking at the world, at life, had settled them in and brought them satisfaction in a very different setting. At Fairmount University they would never have dreamed that one day they would both be weeding chard and other vegetables hour after hour on their own farm.

Wilhelm straightened up and noticed Emily who had actually cooed at him quietly and stretched out her arms in a wide open welcoming gesture. Wilhelm melted at the sight of her. “Look at you!” he said delightedly. “Are you glad to be out in da world witt your wonderful parents? Are you enjoying da sunshine, da mild breeze, and da wonderful scent of unspoiled earth? Eh?”

Emily certainly must have understood his joy, for she gurgled happily and touched his arm with one of her small hands, nothing personal, just acknowledging her kinship in existence with him.

“Every time I see da tree of you togedder, I am homesick for my hometown in Bern and da beautiful school I was able to attend. I am so glad you decided to settle here and dat I found you so accidentally.” Wilhelm embraced them and sighed.

“We are so glad you did find us. We would never have dared to clear this valley and start to farm without your advice and encouragement,” Robert said.

“And your friendship,” added Jolene.

Wilhelm looked around at the beautiful farm he had helped them to grow. Between the rows of chard were calendula plantings interspersed with blooming nasturtiums to help avoid aphids and other predators without the use of any chemicals or insecticides. It was amazing to see the lush growth naturally protected simply by combining the right plants. Just to make sure, a dusting of rotenone and rare spraying of chrysanthemum juice also helped. Wilhelm turned to smile with Robert and Jolene.

“It’s amazing, is it not?” Robert extended his arm to take in the entire expanse of healthy growing plants.

“I can’t get over it,” Jolene admitted. “Who would have thought that such simple solutions would have such healing consequences.”

“Healing is the right word . . . the right thought.” Wilhelm added, “I am proud to work with you, Robert and Jolene. I am so glad that we found each other . . . as friends, but also as colleagues. Together, I believe, we are making up a little bit for the damage humanity as a whole is doing to the earth. This soil . . .” he said, stooping to scoop up a handful of the rich loam and bringing it close to his nose. He inhaled deeply before finishing his thought, “is rich with love and bursting with forces of life.”

Slowly Wilhelm let his handful of earth filter through his fingers and fall to rejoin the field from which it came. “Too bad . . .” he murmured.

“Too bad?” Jolene asked startled by the change in mood.

“Yes,” Wilhelm said sadly. “I’m afraid there are changes in the wind . . . changes not for the better. It seems to me the way of the world is finally catching up with us in this remote sanctuary.”

“What do you mean?” Robert was alarmed.

“I guess you haven’t heard.” Wilhelm turned to scrutinize their faces.

“What? Wilhelm, what’s going on?”

“It seems you haff a new neighbor.”

“Where?”

“Right to da north of you. I suppose it might not be too bad, but I feel it in my bones that a different outlook on the world is moving in on us.”

“Who is this new neighbor?” Robert asked.

“It’s not a who, it’s a what! A large corporation has acquired da abandoned property dat used to be the Balead Farm. I remember years ago how beautiful dat property used to be. Lush! You’ve never seen such greens since dey had both sides of the river . . . two t’ousand acres of bottom land.” Wilhelm shaded his eyes and looked to the north as though he could still see it.

“Why did they sell it?” Jolene asked.

“Da old man Johan Balead died and none of da family cared for farming, so off it went . . . in a hurry . . . and cheap to da only bidder. No one seems to know what TCP Inc. will do witt it.”

“TCP!” Robert and Jolene both cried out in horror.

“Yes, you heard of it?”

“You mean him! Armand Dillon! Oh no!” Jolene reached over to take Robert’s hand.

“Armand Dillon?” Wilhelm was confused.

“He’s the mastermind . . . the evil mastermind behind everything that happens in the name of TCP. I can’t imagine anything worse happening than Armand Dillon moving in next door,” Jolene explained.

“It means he knows we are here. He probably has designs on us. It probably means my father and Lucinda are in danger again. We should warn them!” Robert said grimly.

“Maybe we are jumping to conclusions?” Jolene wondered hopefully. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence? Maybe they don’t know anything about us being here? After all, we are new and just two young people trying to do farming?” Jolene sounded tentative.

“Possible,” said Robert, “but most unlikely. “From the little we know about Armand Dillon, I say his move next door has got to be deliberate. We had better get in touch with my father as quickly as possible.”

“Maybe we should first try to find out a bit more?” thought Jolene.

“Dat seems reasonable. Perhaps TCP is juest speculating witt land it acquired cheaply and has no plans at all yet for what to do witt it. Corporations do dat sort of thing.” Wilhelm suggested.

Robert was skeptical, but thought it possible. TCP was large, international with many subsidiaries. It could be Armand Dillon was not directly involved in everything done in the name of the corporation. He made up his mind to find out more before alarming his father.

“I’m afraid, Wilhelm, we’d better bring our conversation to a close. My mother and father are coming on a brief visit and I’m due to fetch them at the airport. I’m sure my father will

want to know about TCP. Jolene, perhaps Wilhelm would enjoy a cup of coffee and some of your homemade scones?”

“Oh no, I don’t want to bodder you . . .” Wilhelm said.

“No bother at all, Wilhelm. The coffee and the scones are already made and I’d love your company.”

“Very gracious of you, sank you.”

The long black limousine pulled into the driveway of the sprawling Fullington estate and was met by a parking attendant brightly dressed in an orange jacket.

“You can pull in over there next to the tennis courts or I would be happy to park your car for you,” the attendant offered.

“We are not entirely sure how long we are able to stay so our chauffer will probably wait with the car for the time being,” Cliff explained. He closed the car door on his side of the car and moved around to see if Armand wanted any help, but he was already out surveying the landscape and buildings of the estate. Cliff consulted briefly with the chauffer and then joined Armand as the chauffer returned to his seat and drove the car away in the direction of the tennis courts.

“I’m not sure you will need those.” Cliff nodded to the briefcase Armand was holding. “This is purely a social occasion and it might be considered impolite to look like you brought your work along from the office.”

“I’m used to having it with me at all times.”

“Well, at least I’m glad you didn’t have anyone drag the two satchels along filled with reports that we are all used to seeing following you around.”

Armand grunted and slowly followed Cliff in the direction of the entrance to the main building. The hum of conversation, punctuated by occasional laughter reached them from behind the building.

“How nice!” Cliff added, “it seems they are outside in the back. You’ll love their garden and the pool area.”

Another limousine pulled up to the entrance and a young couple removed themselves without the help of the chauffeur who drove off immediately in the direction of the tennis courts. At the far end of the driveway still another black Lincoln was turning in and moving slowly in their direction.

Cliff opened the front door and held it for the young couple who bounced in ahead of Armand, eyes shining, laughing, obviously enjoying their outing into the Connecticut countryside. Armand allowed them to pass and he then followed Cliff into the entry. They had no coats or hats to give the attendant by the cloakroom off the entry, so they moved forward into the large open vestibule where Fullington was waiting to greet visitors along with his wife and two young women who were undoubtedly his daughters.

“Armand. Welcome. How nice that you could come. Good to see you Cliff.” Fullington was all friendliness and smiles. “My wife, Adele, this is Armand Dillon. I believe you’ve heard a great deal about him lately. And also Cliff!”

“Nice to see you, Mr. Dillon . . . and Cliff,” Adele greeted them a little stiffly, Cliff thought. He could see she was not impressed with Armand’s appearance.

“We are delighted to be here at your beautiful home. Thank you for inviting us.” Cliff did the honors and his smile quickly won Adele over and she was able to ignore Armand easily.

Adele took Cliff’s arm and moved him into the company of her two daughters.

“Cliff, this is my daughter Rosalyn who is soon to marry Peter Beaverson as you know.” Adele laughed a little self-consciously, savoring the connection. Cliff bowed politely to Rosalyn and was about to shake hands with Peter when he sensed that Peter seemed a little reluctant to put out his hand.

“I have the remnants of a cold. It’s for your sake . . . as well as everyone else in the room.” Peter explained. He stood very erect, shoulders back, head high, quite aware of his position and stature.

“That’s kind of you.” Cliff nodded to him. “Very thoughtful!”

“And this . . .” Adele pulled Cliff a little further along the line, “is my other daughter, Rachel.” Adele sniffed as though to make it clear that Rachel was not nearly as important, at least today, as Rosalyn.

“Charmed,” said Cliff.

“Charmed? Who ever heard of saying that in this day and age?” Rachel challenged him.

Cliff moved a little closer to Rachel as though about to whisper something confidential. “I’ve got to say something, don’t you think?” he murmured as he moved off to join Armand who was by himself in the middle of the crowd.

Rachel’s eyes lit up and she followed him with her gaze. True, he was extremely handsome, obviously a man of importance and good manners in a quiet, thoughtful way. She

liked him and decided he was worth getting to know a bit more. Then she frowned, wondering what on earth he could be doing with that awkward little man in the rumpled black suit. They had obviously come in together. She was going to ask her mother but Adele was already busy welcoming another group of guests.

Armand moved toward a clump of chairs in one corner of the room and Cliff followed him until he was recognized by some friends who pulled him away to meet others. Armand lowered himself into one of the chairs and sat quietly, looking about at the various conversational groupings of the other guests. He had no real interest in any of them and wondered how he might soon leave and return to a setting a little more suited to his own social context.

It wasn't very long before Fullington rang a small bell to get everyone's attention and climbed up two steps in the long staircase leading up to the second floor, from which he smiled at everyone.

“Dear friends and neighbors, thank you all for coming here today to celebrate with us on this wonderful occasion. You all know my daughter Rosalyn and of course Peter Beaverson, who are standing over here just by the piano in front of the lilacs. This little get together is in their honor. We were so happily surprised when Peter asked for her hand in marriage, and who could possibly say no to such a fine man for our beautiful daughter. You will all be invited to the wedding so I ask you to lift high your glasses and join me in wishing them both much joy and happiness in their intended life together.”

The invited guests clapped and oohed and aahed and rushed forward to congratulate the young couple. Most of them forgot to raise their drinks since it didn't actually seem so much of a toast as a kind of victory salute. However, it didn't take long for the champagne to flow

abundantly to everyone's satisfaction. A small band had assembled in a corner of the room and began playing a few sedate dance numbers to which the guests responded by coupling and dancing, some still holding their drinks.

Cliff was standing next to where Armand was still sitting when Rachel marched up to him and asked whether he could untangle himself from his master long enough for a dance. Cliff had intended to ask Adele since he considered it his duty to dance at least once with his hostess, but acquiesced graciously. Rachel was quite tall but the top of her head only reached as far as Cliff's nose. To Cliff's surprise she moved in very close, pressing her body against his.

"I want to find out if you are a good dancer," she explained.

"You're not making it easy for me," Cliff said honestly.

Rachel laughed mockingly in his ear. She pressed even more tightly against him and her hand caressed the back of his head.

"I didn't expect this from a Fullington," Cliff admitted.

"You can't take it?" she asked.

"Are you sure you know what you are doing?"

"I do. I need to find out what kind of a man you are."

"You may find out more than you want to if you are not careful. I see your dad is not happy with your behavior. He doesn't want you disgracing the Fullington name and reputation."

"Ha!" Rachel rejoined. "I'm old enough to do what I want."

"And what do you want?"

“Nothing . . . just yet.” Rachel backed away from Cliff, untangling her hands and arms and walked away as though she is tired of the conversation and the connection with him. Cliff was puzzled. She was clearly a headstrong girl with challenging attitudes, must have been and probably still is a handful for Fullington to control.

Fullington was half way toward her and took her arm, steering her off to the side. “I don’t want you getting too friendly with Cliff,” he muttered to her. “He’s that man’s right hand, under his control and very much in his confidence. Stay away from him.”

“Don’t worry, I can handle him! He’s putty in my arms.”

“So I noticed, but don’t let him fool you. He’ll do what Armand wants him to do, nothing more and nothing less.”

“We’ll see about that!” Rachel tore her arm free and smiled at another young man who happened to be standing near her and they danced off around the room.

Fullington shook his head in disappointment. Rachel had always been difficult, hard to understand and often rebellious toward the family. He was afraid that sooner or later she might yet disgrace the family. He loved her, but had not the foggiest idea what ailed her and why she behaved the way she did. Even her sister seemed unable to talk any sense into her. Her mother had given up long ago. He watched as she twirled the young man around the room, laughing aloud as they barely missed knocking into another couple.

Armand had been sitting quietly, watching every detail of the encounter between Cliff and Rachel and then following her as she flounced away and continued her fun with another man. He had the feeling here was a weak link in the Fullington empire. He wasn’t sure yet how it

might be helpful to him, but his instincts told him he had stumbled on something of value and his brain was racing to take advantage of it in some way.

“That girl seems to like you,” he commented to Cliff.

“She’s trouble, no doubt of that. Fullington can’t seem to manage her and I don’t think anyone else could either.” Cliff decided.

“Nevertheless, she likes you.”

“I suppose so, but who knows what’s going on in her.”

“I think you should find out,” Armand suggested.

“Whatever for?”

“There might be some benefit to knowing . . . having a friend in the Fullington enclave.”

“You’re asking me to befriend the wild card in the family? She’s not looking for friendship. I think she is gunning for a lover.” Cliff was wary.

“So . . . be her lover!” Armand looked up at Cliff and shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Get to know her! Be nice to her! Become her friend and lover! What’s so hard to understand about that?”

“But how does that help you?” Cliff asked. “Maybe you should go have a dance with her.”

“She won’t even look at me. See, even now she’s looking over at you, enjoying your puzzlement over her behavior. No . . . she’s definitely interested in you and I think we should try to exploit her desires.” Armand sounded a bit as though he meant it as an order.

“You know, Armand, I have no interest in her for myself. I doubt if I could fool her into thinking I care for her. She’s not my type and I am definitely not open to any kind of romance with her.” Cliff sounded positive.

“Do it then for the company.”

“You mean for you?”

“Whatever moves you. I want into that family and their like and we’ll have to take whatever opening is available to us. Now do you think you can do that or not!” Armand’s rough voice was low and threatening. Cliff realized that Armand was serious and that he had better do as he was told.

“She may not be as interested in me as you think.” Cliff was hoping for a way out.

“Let’s find out. Go dance with her. I think she’s waiting for your move. She wants to know if her behavior towards you has had any effect. Go now and pretend you have some feelings for her.” Armand made his request quite clear.

“What do you know about feelings?” Cliff muttered under his breath as he left Armand and moved across the floor to intercept Rachel and her partner.

“I’d like to cut in, young man,” he said to her partner. He seemed glad to relinquish her and moved away even before she had entirely left her hold on him.

“You want to dance with me?” she asked.

“Yes. Are you surprised?”

“No.”

“If you don’t really want me to dance with you, I can walk you off to the side and release you. I don’t want to force you into anything you don’t want.”

Rachel smiled then. She moved in very slowly, first curling her left hand around his right, then lifting her right arm over his shoulder and gently fingering the tufts of hair above his collar, and finally melting her body into every curve of his and began to move with the music.

“Are you glad you met me?” she asked, murmuring into his ear.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to see me again?”

“Yes.”

Rachel was quiet. She knew instinctively when to be forward and when to wait for his initiative. These instincts were built into her femininity since childhood. Cliff marveled at her skill and certainty.

“Do you ever manage to get downtown?” he asked.

“You mean Manhattan? Yes. Whenever I want.”

“I’m there every day. I’d like very much to meet you. Perhaps we could have dinner one day next week?” he suggested.

“Thursday?”

“Thursday it is. The Waldorf is right near my office. Do you know it?” he asked.

“Of course. Shall we say seven p.m.?”

“Seven it is, in the lobby. There are comfortable armchairs where either one of us could wait if there’s any delay. Traffic is always a problem.”

“I’ll be there,” she said, “but now, let’s just dance and leave the talking for next Thursday.”

Rachel moved gracefully in his arms. She seemed to anticipate every one of his turns and movements. Cliff noticed Fullington watching them with a frown on his face. He didn’t like them to be together. No doubt he had other plans for Rachel and he didn’t trust Cliff or Rachel for that matter. And why should he? Cliff warmed to her body even though he really didn’t have any interest in her as a person. She was much too forward and erratic for him. She was a little too tall, a nice figure but her hips were a little broader than necessary. If he had to pick out a girl to romance, it wouldn’t be Rachel.

However, he had his orders and there were worse tasks than romancing Rachel. At least she wasn’t boring. In fact, she might make life quite interesting. She had imagination, courage, and seemed straight forward enough. Cliff didn’t have any attachment at the moment, no relationship of any significance right now. He decided if this was what he had to do, he might just as well enjoy himself.