

## Prologue

“You could buy a Rolls-Royce for what I paid for this bottle.” Robert Samberg shrugged and smiled as he held up the bottle with a hand-drawn label, *Macallan 1926*, at the bar at the Hotel Crillon.

A shapely Vietnamese woman in a sheer black silk dress that left little to the imagination moved to the leather barstool next to his. “Just how much?” she asked coyly as she took the bottle and placed her hand lightly on Robert’s knee.

“A Silver Cloud...vintage... that’s how much.”

“What year?” she asked.

“You know about Silver Clouds?” Her soft, sultry voice had garnered Samberg’s full attention.

She smiled. “I’ve been in a few.”

He smiled.

“Or...the down payment on a stallion—mine just won the Kentucky Derby—made a fortune,” Robert said and took back the bottle.

“You love that horse?” she asked as she slid her hand from his knee up along his thigh.

“I do. Beauty, high value, good listener, a loyal friend—rare as this bottle of *Macallan*. That’s what I call him.”

The barman approached—Robert’s old friend, Pierre Le Rest, a large, jovial, mustachioed Frenchman from Nice. He was a veteran of the French War in Indochina, who used to wait on Robert during his student days in the Latin Quarter in 1968. Twenty-two years had passed, and

Pierre had moved to the high temple of old-world Paris elegance, the bar at the Hotel Crillon, where he catered to Robert's every need like a doting uncle and manservant.

"Robert is celebrating, mademoiselle," Pierre said. "He just bought fifty radio stations in America. You're sitting next to the owner of America's largest broadcast company."

He poured another round for Robert and one for his new female acquaintance.

Robert held up his glass. "This is the *Glencairn* glass, designed with one purpose."

"Which is...?" she asked.

"To capture the aroma. Look at the shape, the taper," he gushed. Then, raising his glass, he bellowed, "To the Samberg Group!"

She, too, held up her glass and clinked his. They imbibed the rare single malt whisky and followed it with a swig of spring water.

"Only twelve bottles in the world!" Pierre said.

"So smooth!" she smiled and snuggled closer.

Pierre brought over a plate of hors d'oeuvres and looked at Robert. "Could you have imagined this in 1968?"

"Of course, I knew all along," he said as he winked and lifted his arms like a maestro leading an orchestra.

"Oh yes, I remember that scruffy student leader throwing cobblestone," Pierre said as he turned to address the smiling mademoiselle. "Robert was quite the radical in those days. He led the charge on Rue Saint-Jacques. A real hero!"

"I don't know that street. I'm from Hanoi," she whispered.

"Hanoi?" Robert looked up at her. "I have a friend—uh, *had* a friend in Hanoi."

"What's the name?"

“We lost touch.” His voice dropped, signaling his unwillingness to provide any additional information.

“He opposed the war, too—way before most Americans,” Pierre said in an obvious attempt to raise his friend’s suddenly sagging spirits.

“I knew the war was a disaster. I knew it,” Robert said.

“The American War? That’s what we Vietnamese called it.”

“We called it the Vietnam War—a tragedy by any name,” he said.

“I was just a child,” she replied as she sighed and ran her tiny fingers through her long black hair.

Robert laughed, then turned to her. “I was a student back then, and I tried to stop it.” He looked off in the distance, past the confines of the gilded bar room to images of a jungle exploding from napalm. It was a dreadful scene from a dream he’d had again and again.

Recognizing the stress on his face, she gently poked him.

“Hey, come on back,” she said playfully. “What did you do? Throw cobblestones, set cars on fire?”

“I met in that room with a member of Vietnam’s Politburo.” Robert pointed. “Right over there.”

“That sounds—well, I wasn’t...how do you say, born yesterday?”

“No, it’s true—we had dinner right over there.” He pointed to the table by the window.

“Was My Hanh there?” Pierre asked.

Robert shifted awkwardly on his barstool.

“Your friend?” she asked.

Robert looked away. “Let’s break open another bottle!”

Pierre chimed in. “Robert, we only have four left—maybe take your time?”

A bellman approached. “Monsieur, you have a long-distance call from Washington. You can take it at the front desk.”

Robert got up and followed the bellman to the lobby. He was steady on his feet despite having drunk so much—a skill he’d developed over the years.

The bellman handed him the phone.

“What’s up?” he yelled into the receiver.

“What’s up with *you*, sweetheart?” It was Allen Hoffers, Robert’s old boss in the Senate, now the Undersecretary of State for South Asia and a top advisor to Secretary of State James Baker.

“Sweetheart, eh?”

“Yeah—you made that sweetheart deal.”

“How the hell did you find me?”

“Andi—that efficient wife of yours!” She was also the executive vice president of Robert’s company and handled the details of both their personal and professional lives. “I ran into her at Clyde’s in Georgetown, having lunch with one of your attorneys...Jack, somebody...”

Robert laughed. He pulled the phone away from his ear. *Damn, I asked her to keep the trip private! The bitch never gets it right!*

“Have you been drinking?” Allen asked.

“Celebrating!”

“The case of *Macallan 1926*... I heard about that. Cost you almost as much as the stations!”

“How do you know?”

“*Wine Spectator*—a big spread,” Allen said.

“The press loves me! Speak up, the connection sucks!”

Allen raised his voice. “I hear you fine.”

“Remember when I called you from the post office in the Latin Quarter?”

In 1968 when he was in trouble. In those days, you had to go to the post office to make a transatlantic call.

“No espionage on this visit, I hope,” Allen said.

And back then, as he was certain Allen remembered, he had passed secret intelligence to Allen that could have changed the outcome of the presidential election that year.

“Why are you calling...Mr. Undersecretary?”

“Well, I wanted to congratulate you on the radio deal of the century!”

“The millennium . . .”

“Okay, the millennium!”

“You’re talking to America’s radio tycoon!”

“How’s your father?” Allen asked.

“Unhappy I bought his radio station.”

“He’ll get over it.”

“You don’t know my father. What’s happening at State?” Robert asked.

“Got our hands full with Saddam Hussein.”

“Eyeing the black gold in Kuwait?”

“Afraid so. We’re doing contingencies if he crosses the line.”

“What, you guys didn’t get enough war in Vietnam? Now you want to fight Arabs!”

“All in a day’s work for a superpower,” Allen said.

“Did you see the Hubble photo?” Robert glanced at the cover of a French weekly magazine on the front desk that showed the first photo of our galaxy from the space telescope.

“All that tax money and we got a blurry photo.”

“NASA should have put you in charge.”

“Well, if they had, it wouldn’t be blurry,” Robert said.

“I have no doubt.”

“Hey, anything else? I’ve got a celebration going on here.”

“There are a couple of things we need to discuss,” Allen said.

“Like what?”

“Not on the phone.”

“Ooh, top secret shit?”

“Can you stop in D.C. on your way home?”

“I can do that.”

“Good, I’ll get your return flight from Andi and arrange a meeting.”

“Okay, Boss—now can I go back to my party?”

“Good night, Robert!”

“Bye, Allen!”

Robert handed the phone back to the bellman, then lingered for a moment and gazed at the ancien régime decor of the lobby—the glass chandeliers, ornately painted ceiling, and reliefs bordering the marble walls.

*What couple of things?* He tapped his index finger on the front desk. Then, he returned to the bar and handed Pierre a wad of Francs, nodding to the empty stool where his new friend had been.

“Is it arranged?” Robert asked, with the look of a teenage boy in heat.

“Yes, another twenty minutes—”

“Is that enough?” He looked at the money.

“More than enough,” Pierre smiled as he fetched the bottle of *Macallan* and poured another round. Robert savored the aroma, then drank the glass as if it were a cheap shot. He felt the hot flush of the whisky. He glanced at his watch repeatedly, rose from his stool, and before departing, looked over to the window table where he, My Hanh, and her father, Thành, had sat on that evening in May long ago. Her smile flashed before his eyes; her voice still whispered to him. He shook his head, trying to block out the memories, and made his way upstairs to the suite.

He unlocked the door and walked in.

The stunning mademoiselle lay naked across the king-size bed. He dove into her arms, devouring her without once looking at her face.