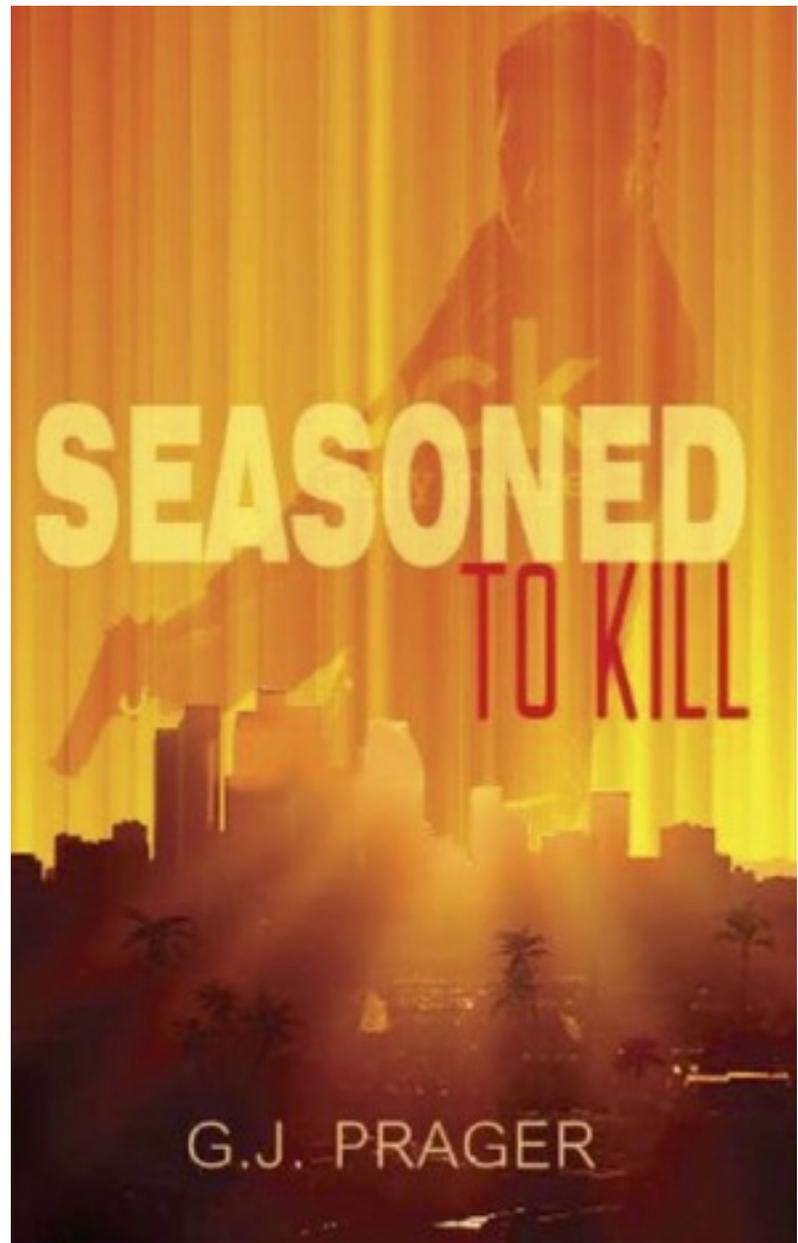


**CHAPTER
EXCERPTS
FROM –**



SEASONED TO KILL

by G.J. PRAGER

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Chapter 1

November's not the best time of year to be hopscotching around New York. It gets colder and grayer by the day, along with my disposition. But I was in town for a week visiting relatives, squeezing them for shelter and hot meals while I hit the pavement seeking out a business opportunity that had recently come my way. I was heading crosstown to seek out an elderly gentleman who lived on the East Side of Manhattan and was purported to be an art dealer of some renown.

My old friend and sometime consigliere, Zeke Stanton, put me up to the task back in L.A., knowing I'd been chomping at the bit for work ever since my parole ended. It was a half-baked but lucrative proposition he put forward, and I agreed to come east to learn the fine details and get moving on it right away. Zeke had known Mr. Howard through some of the Hollywood stars he'd worked for over the years. It seemed this elderly gentleman once sang for a big band during the Swing Era but his career fizzled out after the War, so he took up accounting instead.

Zeke said he held a secret that could make someone very rich.

Mr. Howard lived in one of those pre-war buildings that cost a pretty penny in rent. I peeked through the large glass doors into the lobby; it was laid out in marble made dull by the years, and a chandelier with missing crystals hung from the ceiling. The place had seen better days, as did Mr. Howard, I assumed.

I rang him up on the intercom a number of times before he finally buzzed me in. The only thing missing from this setup was a pricey doorman. I took the elevator to the twelfth floor, and only after knocking a dozen or so times on his door did he get wind of me. I'd read somewhere that hearing was the first thing to go in old dogs

and geezers. His footsteps progressed down a long foyer; I heard a few locks turn.

“Who is it?”

“Robert Klayman. We have an appointment.”

“Who?”

“Robert Klayman,” I repeated, loudly. “You just rang me up on the intercom.”

“Oh, yes, yes.”

He struggled to unclasp the chain and finally got the door open, greeting me with a big smile that showed off a full set of implants.

“Mr. Klayman, it’s nice to meet you,” he boomed in the melodic baritone that once graced the radio waves.

“Likewise, Mr. Howard. I’ve been looking forward to it.”

His mood was light and airy, a sharp cry from the senility he had projected thus far. But I sensed something sinister about him. His gracious facade hinted at a dark secret or two. He might even have some skeletons in his closet. For real. Nevertheless, this wasn’t missionary work I’d signed up for.

“Come on in,” he bellowed.

I stepped inside as he locked the door behind me, then followed him down a long and never-ending foyer; it was dark and narrow and reminded me of a crypt. I had the heebie-jeebies and we hadn’t even gotten started.

The place lit up once we got past the foyer. I sat down on a brown leather sofa that stretched across one side of a sunken living room. He sat stiffly on the edge of a matching leather chair tucked away in the corner, looking like he was about to get back up.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked generously.

“Bourbon?”

“With ice?”

“Yeah.”

“Coming right up.”

He proceeded to the kitchen while I sat around, patiently observing the surroundings. He returned and handed me my drink; it was filled to the top, as was his own spirited concoction. It seemed we were headed for a long session together. I began the discourse.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Mr. Howard.”

That wasn’t really the case, but I did hear him sing once on an old-time radio program early on a Sunday morning when I couldn’t get back to sleep. He crooned pretty well back then, I have to admit.

“Good things, I hope.” He sat back down in the corner chair.

“Oh yes, of course.” I was being tactful.

The place looked to be a small one-bedroom, the sort of place a Manhattan pensioner is apt to live in. The walls were plastered with music memorabilia from a generation before rock ‘n’ roll hit the charts. He was front and center in those black and white photos, with suited-up musicians holding saxophones or trumpets standing amusingly behind him. His furniture was from that era too; and, as with most geezers, his place was dark and dreary, coffins not being too far from their minds, I assumed.

“You must have sung with the great bandleaders of the time,” I gushed.

“I knew a few of them: Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey. They weren’t the nicest people to work for, but they were damn good at their job.”

“They don’t make music like that anymore,” I lamented, though I preferred rock ‘n’ roll.

“No, unfortunately not,” he said impatiently. “Let’s discuss your reason for being here.”

“Go ahead and fill me in,” I said defiantly. I didn’t like the grumpy attitude.

“Mr. Stanton had directed me to that article about you online,” he began.

“Yeah, Zeke’s a great friend. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“I read the piece a few weeks ago. I believe it was first published in the Los Angeles Times back in March.” He began knocking down his drink. It looked like scotch and soda.

“It was a pretty accurate description of my P.I. exploits and all the trouble it got me in.”

Mr. Howard looked back at me as if he knew all my dark and dirty secrets. “I’m aware of that, Mr. Klayman.”

“I received a lot of sympathetic mail from readers but no job offers,” I cracked, trying to make light of it. But failure has no friends.

“Yes, well...once you’ve been scorched by the powers that be,” he began cryptically, “there’s no way back.”

“Huh?”

He didn’t hear me. I noticed a pair of flesh-colored hearing aids tucked inside his ears. They did a good job these days camouflaging those gadgets.

“Don’t let it keep you down,” he said. “The system is no example. They’re all corrupt and rotten to the core.”

“I broke the law, carrying a gun without a permit,” I offered, raising my voice a bit. “I had no business getting involved in a murder case without a P.I. license, or shooting that bum for the couple of dollars he stole from me.”

“You’re underestimating yourself, Mr. Klayman. You showed initiative and resolve, and you defended yourself with courage, in my opinion.”

“The penalty sure didn’t fit the crime,” I said bitterly. “I was railroaded.”

“It was an injustice, plain and simple. But I was impressed with your tenacity. You’re going to need it for this job.” I was getting to like this guy.

“Let’s talk about it,” I said excitedly. “All I know is that it involves a work of art.”

“Not just any work of art, Mr. Klayman.” He paused with dramatic flair. “You’re familiar with Rembrandt?”

“Most definitely,” I tooted. “The famous Flemish painter of the eighteenth century.” He needed to know I was no ignoramus.

“No, but close enough. Do you know how much a Rembrandt is currently worth on the market?”

“A hell of a lot.”

“Exactly.”

“Where do I fit in?”

“Patience, Mr. Klayman. Let me digress.”

He began to relate a tale that was convoluted, mysterious, intriguing, and hardly believable. Yet I sat back and listened like a wide-eyed kid.

It began with an affair he had with a well-placed society lady during World War II who left him to marry a bigwig in the State Department. This lady was also a relative of a former President of the United States, which put her in very high company, indeed.

Having said all that, he began to relate a story about Hermann Goering, the former head of Nazi Germany’s Luftwaffe and the second most powerful man in Germany at the time. Among other things, Goering fancied himself an art lover but didn’t believe in paying for any of it. After the Nazis conquered most of Europe he had assembled quite an art collection for himself. The society lady’s father also happened to be an ardent Bundist back in the thirties. Having a good deal of German blood in his veins, he wished to advance the fortunes of the Aryan race in the United States as well. As if they hadn’t been running things already, I thought.

He’d traveled to Germany a few times before the war and befriended Goering, who offered to sell him a famous Rembrandt at an appreciable discount. The deal didn’t go through, as war broke

out soon after. But it seemed that Goering and the society lady's father had already exchanged some of the money for the sale, and Goering, for the record, wrote out a bill of purchase.

Goering kept the contract in a Swiss bank planning to complete the transaction after the war. He was looking ahead, after all, since he couldn't be sure he'd end up on the winning side, and figured to use the money for safe passage out of Europe. He didn't use his own name, and instead used the name of a former Jewish art dealer in Berlin.

"Very interesting," I chimed in. "But I still don't understand where I come in..."

"Patience, Mr. Klayman."

He went on to say that after Pearl Harbor the society lady's dad had a patriotic epiphany and quickly put his aircraft company to work making instruments that would help tear the Fatherland to pieces just a few years later.

"He more than made up for his apostasy," Mr. Howard noted. "His contribution to the war effort was immense."

"Where is the Rembrandt now?" I was trying to get to the bottom of it.

"There's more to the story."

"Go on."

What choice did I have? This geezer sure liked drawing out a good yarn. I kept looking in my drink, treating it like an hourglass, counting down to the finale. Not that I wasn't interested. I'd always been hungry for postscripts to the machinations of the Third Reich, but all that stuff about Goering was just for starters. Much more befell the Rembrandt as the war came to an end.

"In 1945," he began, "as the Russians swarmed over the Reich from the east, a Red Army grunt found the Rembrandt in a warehouse along with a booty of masterpieces and turned them over to his superior officer. This officer, bravely decorated, rose in rank

over the years and gained quite a standing in the Communist party.” He paused to knock off the rest of his drink, then continued. “A few years ago, a Viennese Jew who survived a concentration camp claimed to have owned the Rembrandt but could not prove it. As the painting was thought to have perished in the war, no more inquiries were made into the matter. After the man passed away, he left no family to do his bidding if the Rembrandt should ever reappear...”

Mr. Howard stopped abruptly, realizing he’d tried my patience a bit too long. “I’m sorry for the length and complexity of the information, but I must relate it all to you.”

“Don’t worry,” I said breezily. “I find the subject fascinating.”

He peered into his glass. “It seems I need some replenishing.”

He took my empty glass along with his to the kitchen, refilling mine with bourbon and his with some expensive port. After handing me my fresh drink, he sat down on the matching leather chair, sipping quietly and lost in thought.

I was trying to pigeonhole this former big band singer. It seemed a thief would have been more calculating in his presentation. This was a Rembrandt, after all, and a lot of greenbacks were at stake. But he stayed cool and detached throughout his improbable tale. I didn’t trust his buttoned up formalities; you’d never guess he’d be so priggish from the way he crooned songs back in the day.

But I hung in – an opportunity like this didn’t come around often. He was trying to reel me in, no doubt, but at least the bait seemed legit.

“Now, getting back to where we were,” he piped up. “Yes, I find the subject fascinating, too.”

“But not for the same reasons I do, Mr. Howard.” He looked back suspiciously. “What I mean is...I have a more visceral attitude about the Nazis than you do.”

“I fought those bastards, Mr. Klayman. I didn’t sit out the war in a sound studio cutting records like Sinatra or Crosby.”

“I’m sorry. I meant no offense.”

“No offense taken.”

I was relieved that he finally showed some passion. It made him seem a little more human.

“I’m thankful for your service,” I said. “It was the one war we fought whose purpose was clear, not like the war we’re waging in the Middle East...”

“Yes, of course,” he cut in. “Now, are you still following the story?”

“I’m trying my best,” I confessed.

“This is where you come in.” We finally got down to business. “I received a call from an art dealer acquaintance who had visited Odessa, in Ukraine, about three months ago. Word had surfaced in the art market that the Rembrandt was being held by a criminal element that was willing to deal. He was sent at the behest of the family I spoke to you about, although the society lady I mentioned earlier died years ago.”

“Did they agree to the sale?”

“The dealer told me they offered to sell it to him for quite a bit of money, as one would expect. He related all this to the family and they agreed to buy the painting. However, they are not interested in paying a ransom for it, which is how they see this Russian gentlemen’s over-the-top asking price.”

“This is where I come in?”

“Our mutual friend, Mr. Stanton, had introduced me to David Abramovich, the man who hired you. We spoke on the phone, and he agreed to facilitate the sale and get the asking price down to what the family is willing to pay. He has contacts with the underworld in Odessa, who don’t need mentioning. You will travel to Ukraine and complete the transaction.”

“You’re suggesting a strong criminal element is involved, correct?”

“Would you like me to refill your glass?”

I looked down at the empty glass in my hand. “Yeah, sure...more ice, too.” It suddenly dawned on me I was getting sloshed.

“I’ll be right back.”

I had a creeping feeling he was sending me straight to the wolves. But like a barroom drunk, I was ready for whatever pipe dreams he put in my head. It seemed any offer of employment was enough enticement for me at the moment. I looked around the place for a clue to his integrity – the sparse décor and a retiree’s austere lifestyle gave me confidence. He probably needed the money as much as I did.

He returned with both glasses full and a big smile. “Here you are. Kentucky bourbon for your pleasure.”

“Yes, it’s good, very good,” I said giddily, as I took a slow, smooth sip before speaking again. “Now, as I was saying...this family you spoke of...they don’t seem very interested in the Rembrandt, if you ask me.”

“I can assure you they want that painting back. In any event, you are to travel to Odessa and transport it out of the Ukraine.”

“How would I know a Rembrandt from a Rubens?”

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” he chided. “As far as I’m concerned you’re a first-rate private detective.”

“I appreciate that.” This guy sure knew how to brown nose, but I wasn’t buying in yet. “Why don’t they plum the art world for guys who specialize in this sort of thing? An art major at UCLA could do the job better than I can.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“Which is?”

“The family only wants it as part of their private collection. They cherish their privacy and want to stay out of the limelight. Someone without an art background and with a low profile like yourself can keep this out of the public sphere. They want complete privacy in

this matter. They're not very proud of their grandfather's role in it. Do you understand?"

I didn't know whether to take that as a compliment or not. The whole idea seemed preposterous. "What if they handed me a fake?"

He looked back in frustration. "You're not following what I said. We have worked that part out already." He took a long sip of his port. "There's money in this for you, Mr. Klayman. I will lay out your instructions. As long as you follow them we will pay you for your services. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure, as clear as daylight. What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Meet this Russian gentleman and pick up the Rembrandt. The money will be transferred through Mr. Abramovich. He will instruct you on the specifics of what to do after you retrieve it."

"Why don't you go there and make the transaction yourself?" I blurted out.

"I've already explained that. Now, do you want the job or not? I'll get someone else if you don't."

He was being coy, and he wasn't making it any easier. But like he said, there was money in it for me.

"If that's all I have to do..."

"That would be all."

"Does this entail a hit? You know, a contract killing?"

"I didn't hear that."

"There's a reason you sought me out, Mr. Howard. You've read about a two-bit, wannabe private detective released from prison with no prospects." I tried to stop myself, but I continued. "Maybe you just don't want to pay a professional, so you hire me on the cheap. Or you might need a patsy, someone disposable after the transaction is completed."

"Make up your mind already, Mr. Klayman." He looked quite angry. This time I'd tried his patience a bit too much.

“Alright, I’ll take my chances,” I said flatly. “I need the money. I’d do anything to pull myself out of the gutter. Anything, you got it? Just be square with me.”

“Are you done?”

“Yeah.”

“I am being square with you. We’ll fill you in as we go along. Now, do you want the job or not?”

I paused, knowing there was more to this than he let on. I looked in my glass and it was empty. It reminded me of my bank account.

“Okay, it’s a deal.”

“I’ll give you five thousand dollars now. Your flight has already been paid for.”

“How much more when the job gets done?” I demanded.

“That’s between you and Mr. Abramovich.”

“Take it one step at a time?” I offered.

“Precisely.”

I couldn’t help wondering why he spoke like a butler on an English estate, but I planned on googling his bio later. I needed the money now.

“When do I start?”

He was fiddling around with some dishes on a breakfast counter that doubled as a bar. He began pouring himself another glass of port. This guy looked to be having a bit of a problem with that.

“A week from today.” He tried to steady his gaze.

“Jeez,” I muttered, “I gotta fly back to L.A. first.”

“Do you want the job or not?” he burst out, forgetting his resolve. I blamed the port for that.

I had to think fast. There were lots of guys who’d jump on the opportunity. But getting involved in a caper of this sort in Ukraine – with all those criminals I’d heard about who had nothing to lose – was like walking into a minefield. Nevertheless, this guy claimed to represent a clique of very wealthy clients. There were a hell of a lot

more greenbacks in this than in chasing after adulterous wives with jealous husbands and thin wallets.

A heist or a hit, I wasn't yet sure, but either one would be quite lucrative on the international stage. What did I have to lose? At some point we all end up dead. Why not call it quits with some real money in my pocket?

“Well, Mr. Klayman, I'm out of patience. What the hell is going to be?” It looked like the booze had put him in a very sour mood, indeed.

“It's a deal.”

He came out from around the counter and picked up a manila envelope that was lying on the coffee table. “Here's your first installment,” he stated very clearly. “We expect you in Odessa on the twenty-fourth of the month. The plane ticket has already been modified to accommodate your point of departure, which I'm assuming will be LAX.” He was beginning to sound like a textbook.

“Right,” I concurred.

He handed me the envelope with a stern look on his face. “There are also instructions as to what you need to do once you arrive.”

“I'll get started on it right away.”

I took the envelope from his hand, opened it, and eagerly peered in. There was a computer printout of my ticket along with a letter of instructions and a bundle of cash. I took the greenbacks out and quickly counted them – five grand, like he said.

I looked back in the envelope. “Hey, there isn't any...” I cried out, checking for a return ticket.

“We'll deal with that as we go along.” He was reading my mind.

My heart was pounding. These people were all business – one little mistake and it was the boneyard for me. This family, or conglomerate, or whoever the hell they were, was certainly not as innocent as he described them to me.

“I’ll be in Odessa on the twenty-fourth,” I assured him. “You can count on that. But I’ll need a return ticket, too.”

“We’ll take care of that, Mr. Klayman. Please read the instructions first.”

“I intend to.”

“Good. I’ll see you out the door.” He followed me down the hall to the foyer. As I reached the door I turned to say goodbye, and an arched expression fell over his face. “It was nice meeting you, Mr. Klayman.”

“Likewise,” I returned.

I shook his hand before taking off and landing back out on the street. An icy, raw wind was blowing off the river, settling on my face like a cold wrap. New York was getting awfully chilly in November. I had a sinking feeling this gig was leading me straight to another kind of freeze box.

Chapter 2

“He’s cute...very cute,” I gushed, peering over the crib at the little tot.

I was laying up at my cousin’s for the week in his small two-bedroom condo on the westside of Manhattan. He and the wife bought it years before real estate prices went through the roof around here. You could fit the whole place in a garage, yet it was worth two million on the market and they were going like hotcakes. Those high-priced Manhattan shrinks sure knew how to earn their keep.

“I’m a grandfather,” Harry piped up. “Can you believe it?”

“That’s quite an accomplishment,” I said. “You should be brimming with pride, pushing sixty with a brood to pass along. Look at me, empty nest and all.”

“I have to say you pretty much missed the boat.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“You should have married and settled down years ago like most people.”

“No law that says you should. I just didn’t plan it that way.”

“No one does,” Harry proclaimed. “We fall into it.” I detected a whiff of regret in his tone.

I suppose he needed a reason to have invested his whole life in one partner. I just thought it smart to hedge my bets. But it takes a certain amount of fortitude to stick to bachelorhood as long as I had. Most people don’t like the sound of being alone.

“My only hope is to snatch up a foreign lady.” I was dead serious. “They’re more forgiving of a man’s bank account.”

He chuckled, and I sensed he sympathized. It must have brought to mind his wife, Barbara, who just then stepped into the room. I put a lid on my musings for a while.

“How are you two today?” she inquired.

“We’re admiring Reid,” Harry said, bursting with pride.

“The kids will be here for dinner,” she began. “They’ll pick the baby up then.” Babs looked me over curiously. “Whatever happened to your roommate, Bob? The cute Shepherd mix you showed us a picture of last time you were here?”

She tried being playful but her tone was downright smarmy. The wrinkles on her face and a sagging throat made her look older than her years, and her once appealing figure had filled out quite unattractively. Perhaps it was watching herself fall apart that made her so resentful.

“Homer’s doing fine,” I said, putting a smile on for her. “The guy who lived next door at my old place is watching him while I’m gone. He took care of Homer while I was in prison, too.”

She threw a dirty look my way. The gal never could get used to having an ex-con in the family.

I continued. “We never got along when I lived next door to him. It’s funny how people change over time.”

“You can never tell who your neighbors are,” Harry offered cautiously. “One day they’re out to get you, the next day they’re your best friends. Remember the Kreugers, Barbara?”

“The couple who lived next door?”

“A perfect example,” Harry declared.

“Very schizo,” Babs whispered back, as if the Kreugers were listening in. “I never knew if they were going to greet us one day and kill us the next.”

“That’s scary,” I said, before turning the conversation back on myself. “When I got out of prison, Homer seemed happy in his new digs. Eric volunteered to take care of him till I got my life back together. Now I just have visiting rights.” Harry smiled. “I don’t live too far away, though,” I continued, “so I’m not...”

I was choking up. It was something I'd been doing when talking about Homer of late, but I pressed on. "I get to share him often enough. In fact, he was staying with me before I flew out here..."

"I'm glad it worked out for you," Babs cut in, turning her attention to the little tot. "Look at him, Harry. Isn't he adorable?"

"Yeah, cute little Reid," he gushed. "What a gift." Harry looked at me suddenly. "Don't you want a family?"

"Sure I do," I replied. I didn't know what else to say.

"How long do you plan on staying, Bob?" his wife inquired. But I'd already told Harry. I guess he didn't want her to know.

"My plans have changed. I have to cut my stay short." I felt a collective sigh in the room. "I just got a call about a new job and it starts right away."

"What sort of job?" Harry looked excited.

"Uh...sales...telemarketing."

"Harry's going out to the west coast in March. One of his Asian suppliers is located in Costa Mesa. Isn't that right, Harry?"

"I'll be going in February, dear."

"We'll start the new year off with a bang," I rang out. "Here's to '07." I raised my hand in a mock toast.

"I don't know if I'll get a chance to visit, Bob. Barbara thinks I take too much time when I go on these business trips." Babs was glaring at him. It looked like he'd just stepped on a land mine. "Don't start in again, dear."

"I'm not saying anything."

There was a strange silence in the room.

"You won't take it personally if I can't find time to visit?" Harry pleaded.

"No, of course not." I put him at ease. "Just knock on my door if you do."

"I just remembered," Babs blurted out. "Susan Epstein's sister is back in town. She's in her forties and single, too."

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