

CHAPTER 1

Beyond the Stars

TELEVISION cameras, appearing like weird robots, rolled back and forth across the stage as the director signaled for final shots of the chorus. A brilliant spotlight caught the male quartet as it harmonized on the theme song of the hour-long, coast-to-coast program. Then the music faded and the lights dimmed. From the make-believe world of television, Rod Mason, well-known New York producer and director, returned to bleak reality. He slumped uncomfortably in his chair and reached for a cigarette.

"It's over for another week," he sighed, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, "and I'm tired."

"You should be, Mason," said the head cameraman soothingly. "Grinding twelve hours a day for almost six months, with not one, but three productions - when are you going to relax and take time off?"

"I'm weary of it all; I guess I'm losing my grip. Everything seems flat and tasteless. I don't even get a kick out of doing a top program anymore," admitted the thirty-two-year-old director, who gave everything he had to his work. He arose from his chair as the performers, technicians, and orchestra players gravitated toward the exits.

"A great show, Rod," called the petite soloist, the star of the show, as she waved a cheery farewell from the door.

Mason nodded and smiled. He stood for a moment as if trying to decide what to do, when suddenly he tottered. As he

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slumped into the arms of the cameraman, Rod seemed to hear words miles away echoing in his brain, "Come help me, Bill. Mason has passed out."

In a quiet hospital room a nurse bent over the television director counting his pulse. After a pause the patient's eyes opened; he blinked, and then protested weakly, "Don't tell me I blacked out."

"I guess you did, sir; but don't let that worry you," the girl in white uniform assured him. "You're on the way back."

"How long have I been here?"

"About four hours, Mr. Mason. Here is your doctor now."

Dr. Dwight Reynolds stood at the director's bedside, smiling grimly at his patient. "So you've been burning the candle at both ends until it scorched you, eh? It's about time you took my advice, Rod."

"You sound as stuffy as any family doctor," Mason growled, trying to put on a bold front. He felt more alert each minute, yet he didn't think he could be more tired if he lived to be a hundred. "I feel washed up, doc."

"You should at the pace you've been going, young fellow. Now I'll have my say. Three months of rest are coming up for you, son." The gray-haired physician clipped his words emphatically. "Your vacation begins as of now."

"But the program -"

"I've already called the president of your company, and he's concerned about you, too. He agrees with me that the prescription should call for a real vacation. So next week you leave for the West. I have a friend who owns a lodge in the

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high Sierras of Northern California - an ideal place for you. In fact, it's all arranged, so arguments will do no good."

"You feel pretty smug, don't you, Dr. Reynolds." Rod smiled weakly and closed his eyes to hide his emotions. "You brought me into the world, and you've tried to boss me ever since that first day."

"When folks haven't enough sense to care for themselves, it's my business to help them. What's wrong, Rod? It isn't all work that is eating on your nerves." The doctor's steel-gray eyes seemed to probe into the sick man's soul in much the same way he would perform an exploratory operation.

"I don't really know, doc, except that it's more than mere physical weariness. I'm in a sort of daze -" Mason's voice died out as he turned his head away.

"You've had a brilliant career in these last ten years," the physician went on in an easy tone, hoping to find the real Mason behind the barrier. "Success came almost at once for you after you finished the university."

"It hasn't made me happy." The patient spoke from his heart. "When our home cracked up two years ago, and Agnes left me - that took a lot out of me."

"The scars are still fresh," commented the doctor knowingly. "You haven't forgotten, have you, Rod?"

"Should I forget, doc? You know I've been on the loose ever since."

"It's time you tied up some of the frazzled ends, Rod. You aren't a child any longer." Then taking his patient's hand, the doctor added, "You'll have something to relax you

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for a good night's sleep, and tomorrow we'll start on the knots."

The air liner cruising at three hundred and sixty miles an hour on the flight between New York and San Francisco seemed poised over the Continental Divide of Wyoming as Rod Mason glanced out the window. When he traveled by air he did not enjoy reading, and he seldom could sleep in the daytime, so the hours of flight gave him time to think. Looking down on the world from 21,000 feet makes a person feel puny and insignificant, Mason thought. It makes one realize there must be a God. This idea struck the young man's mind with a start. It had been a long time since he had seriously thought about God. In fact, the last time must have been two years before when Agnes, his charming wife, walked out of the apartment after calling the marriage quits. Then Rod had cursed God, declaring that there wasn't such a Being, and if there was, all He did was torture His helpless creatures with pain and suffering. He actually wondered if God had deserted him or if he had failed God.

As the plane's four motors droned steadily, Rod's mind slipped back to memories of his tenth birthday when he had been baptized in the little church in the Bronx. Happiness had wreathed his mother's face when she met him in the pastor's study after the service and gripped her son's right arm. "How God must love you," she had whispered. Yes, he'd never forget the exact words! There had been Bible reading and family worship in the home every day. His mother had wanted him to go to a small Christian college in New England when he finished high school; but, no, he had

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been determined to take a special course at the university. The church was beginning to fade from his life by the time he was a sophomore, and there seemed to be no point of return for him.

Mason reviewed his university years. He had been popular, for dramatics and music were his major interests. He was better than average in both arts, and he determined to use them to enter the radio field. Before he was graduated, at the age of twenty-two, he had made contacts that assured him a good position. From radio it was a natural jump into television; but the change took something out of Mason. The new medium was more exacting, and it required many tension-filled hours of rehearsal.

He had married Agnes Lorentz, a girl whose practical ability blended with delicate taste and tenderness. The Lorentzes and Masons had been friends for years, and it was natural for the two young people to be drawn to each other, especially since they attended the university together.

The wedding had been solemnized in the church that both families attended - the church where Rod had been baptized. He remembered the moment eight years ago as if it were yesterday. Agnes walked down the aisle in a shimmering white satin gown trimmed with misty lace. She had looked into his eyes with devotion as she said, "To love and to cherish till death us do part." He thought, too, of the moment in the pastor's study when Dr. Lovelace had urged the young couple to build a home upon the solid foundation of religious faith. "Build with God, Agnes and Rod, and you'll be happy," the minister had counseled as he shook their hands in a warm farewell.

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"It's strange," said Mason half aloud, "but we never followed that advice." He remembered how Agnes became involved in a social whirl and he had stepped on the treadmill of work that seemed to move faster and faster as the months went by. He became the leading director of the television network, but something happened at the three-room-apartment on East Sixtieth. "We didn't seem to have time for each other after the first year," Mason mused, "and never a moment for religion. I guess we moved into a world where God simply didn't exist."

The mountains that loomed over the wing of the plane were tinged with cerise and purple from the light of the setting sun. The plane was passing over the Great Salt Lake, and lights of cities were already twinkling in the semidarkness some three miles below. When the stewardess served his dinner, Rod ate with a zest. It was the first time he had actually noticed the taste of food in many a day, and he thoroughly enjoyed it.

Less than three hours later Roderick Mason stepped from the plane at the San Francisco airport. As he entered the gate to the covered runway a tall, slender man in the middle forties addressed him. "Mr. Mason?"

"That's right. You should be Morton Hastings from the description given me," said Rod, shaking hands with the new acquaintance. The New Yorker noticed the garb of the West - wool shirt, gabardine slacks, and stout shoes.

"You fit the description they sent me, Mr. Mason. This is my daughter, Karen Sue. We've been taking advantage of the trip to the city to do some shopping, and now we're a sort of welcoming committee."

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"She's the charming part, I would say," the traveler returned with a smile. "I'm glad you came, Karen Sue."

"It's always exciting to meet the planes, Mr. Mason. You came straight from New York today?" The teenage girl spoke easily, and her blonde wavy hair framed a delicately formed face.

"That's right. I left there this forenoon, so I'm over three thousand miles from home right now."

"We'll make you feel at home out here," the girl promised, as the three waited by the station wagon for the luggage to arrive. "You are the director of the television program, 'The Enchanted Mirror'?"

"That's right."

"I saw it once at a friend's home when I was in Sacramento," the girl explained half apologetically. "We don't have a TV set at Cragmont Lodge."

"Perhaps that's good for me, Karen Sue," Mason returned. "It may make it easier for me to forget my work."

Through the city traffic and across the Bay Bridge the station wagon made its way, with Morton Hastings driving with experienced ease. "We won't be home until about two-thirty in the morning, Mr. Mason," Hastings explained. "Do you feel up to the drive?"

"I've been so busy thinking today I couldn't sleep for a while if I went to bed now. Let's get to Cragmont Lodge, for I can do plenty of resting there, from what I hear."

It was almost three o'clock when Hastings stopped the car in front of Cragmont Lodge, where lights were shining a welcome. While he unloaded the luggage, Karen Sue took Rod Mason into the spacious main room, where a log fire

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crackled merrily in a mammoth stone fireplace. "Mother won't be over tonight, Mr. Mason. We didn't want her to stay up after her day's work," the girl explained. "Your rooms are this way."

At the end of a redwood-paneled hall Mason entered a suite of rooms decorated in ranch style. "Here is a private balcony overlooking the lake," Karen Sue continued, opening a door. "You'll enjoy it in the morning when the lake is like a mirror."

"I can tell that you love nature, don't you, Karen Sue?"

"Of course, don't you?"

"I suppose so; but to tell you the truth I've been in a big city so long I've almost forgotten," the man admitted wearily.

"God made everything so beautiful in the great outdoors. Look up at the stars; they seem so near on a clear night. After I look at them I can pray to my heavenly Father who made them."

"They are breath-taking," said Rod in a whisper. Then he added, "I haven't realized how tired I'm getting until now, Karen Sue, so I'll say 'Good night,' if you don't mind."

After Mason had closed the door he turned and faced the mirror over the oak chest of drawers. He knew he looked more than thirty-two years old tonight, or rather, this morning. "What's come over me?" he said to the face in the mirror. "I've been thinking about God today, and now the Hastings girl talks about prayer."

A Rod Mason that had long been hidden seemed to find his reflection, at least momentarily, in the mirror. With a faraway look the director whispered, "What's it all about?"

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Then walking out on the balcony once more, the man looked up into the darkness and said, “I wonder what’s beyond those stars.”