

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STUART WOODS

BELOW THE BELT

A STONE BARRINGTON NOVEL



BOOKS BY STUART WOODS

FICTION

Below the Belt[†]
Sex, Lies & Serious Money[†]
Dishonorable Intentions[†]
Family Jewels[†]
Scandalous Behavior[†]
Foreign Affairs[†]
Naked Greed[†]
Hot Pursuit[†]
Insatiable Appetites[†]
Paris Match[†]
Cut and Thrust[†]
Carnal Curiosity[†]
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Doing Hard Time[†]
Unintended Consequences[†]
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Santa Fe Edge[§]
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Hothouse Orchid^{*}
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Choke
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Palindrome
Grass Roots[‡]
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Deep Lie[‡]
Under the Lake
Run Before the Wind[‡]
Chiefs[‡]

COAUTHORED BOOKS

Smooth Operator^{**}
(with Parnell Hall)

TRAVEL

A Romantic's Guide to the Country Inns of Britain and Ireland (1979)

MEMOIR

Blue Water, Green Skipper

^{*}A Holly Barker Novel

[†]A Stone Barrington Novel

‡*A Will Lee Novel*
§*An Ed Eagle Novel*
***A Teddy Fay Novel*

**BELOW
THE
BELT**

STUART WOODS

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PUTNAM

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Author's Note
About the Author

1

S TONE BARRINGTON LANDED the CJ 3 Plus smoothly at Santa Fe Airport at midafternoon. Holly Barker sat next to him in the copilot's seat. "Very nice," she said.

"Thank you," Stone replied, and taxied to the ramp, where a rental car was waiting for them. He transferred their luggage to the car, and Stone went inside and made arrangements for regular hangar space. Back in the car, he drove through the automatic gate.

"Excited?" Holly asked.

"I guess so, yes."

"If I had just bought a new house, sight unseen, I'd be terrified."

"It's not exactly sight unseen," he replied. "I've visited there a few times. It was owned by Ed Eagle's wife's sister."

"Are we going to have a bed to sleep in?"

"We are. I bought it substantially furnished."

"What does that mean?"

"We're going to find out in about twenty minutes," he said, turning onto the Santa Fe bypass. Twenty minutes later they turned off the main highway at the Tesuque exit.

"What street is it on?"

"This one—Tesuque Village Road." They passed the Tesuque Village Market, and a quarter mile later, Stone turned into a drive and reached out his window to enter the gate code into the keypad. The gate slid silently open, and they drove up a fairly long drive and parked in front of the house.

"From here it looks like every other house in Santa Fe," Holly said.

"It's true, all Santa Fe houses look a little alike—it's the architectural style and the mock adobe finish." He unloaded their luggage, carried it to the front door, and saw that the key was in the lock, as promised. They entered a long

hallway and found a large living room on their right. The big pictures that had hung over the fireplaces at either end were gone. Otherwise, things seemed as he remembered them.

He gave Holly the tour of the kitchen, dining room, and his study, then led her to the master suite and showed her her bath and dressing room, where he left her luggage, then he took her into the bedroom. “Look,” he said, “a bed to sleep in.”

“Now?” Holly asked mischievously.

“Later. Unpack.” He found his own bath and dressing room and unpacked his things, and they met in the study for drinks.

“Thank God she left liquor,” Holly said, sipping her bourbon.

They had hardly sat down in the comfortable leather chairs when the phone rang. “I expect that’s for the previous owner,” Stone said, “but I’d better answer it.” He pressed the speaker button. “Hello?”

“Mr. Stone Barrington?” a woman’s voice asked.

“Yes.”

“This is the White House operator. Will you accept a call from President Lee?”

“Which President Lee?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon, the former President.”

“Of course.”

“Stone?”

“Will, how are you?”

“Very well, thank you. How’s the new house?”

“I moved in half an hour ago. How the hell did you find me here?”

“Didn’t you know? The White House operators can find anybody.”

“How’s the other President Lee?”

“Thriving.”

“And William Henry the Fifth?”

“Rambunctious. I wanted to invite you to something in Santa Fe tomorrow evening—a fund-raiser, actually, but never mind that. It’s dinner at the home of friends, followed by an evening at the Santa Fe Opera—*La Bohème*.”

“Sounds wonderful, we’d love to.”

“Oh, yes, and give Holly my best.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” Holly said. “You’re the only person at the White House who will talk to me.”

“I’m not talking to you, I’m talking to Stone. We all have orders from the commander in chief not to speak to you.”

Holly sighed. “Yes, I know.” President Kate Lee had told her to take two weeks off and not to call the office, just to have fun. She had gone to New York

to see Stone, but then he had bought the house and they had flown west to see it.

"We'd love to come," Stone said. "It's my favorite opera."

"It's everybody's favorite opera," Will replied. "And you and I will have to find a private moment during the evening. There's something I need to talk to you about."

"I'll look forward to it," Stone said.

"Six o'clock for drinks, followed by dinner. The opera begins at nine—sundown."

"See you then," Stone said, then hung up.

"I'm annoyed," Holly said. "The White House will talk to you, but not to me."

"That's because Kate knows you well enough to know that given an inch of access, you'd take a mile. It would be as though you weren't on vacation at all."

"I'm unaccustomed to vacations," Holly replied. She was the national security advisor to the President and, as such, chaired the National Security Council. "And there's no telling what those people are screwing up in my absence. I'll probably return to find that the nation is at war."

"Remember, you chose many of those people. They're perfectly capable of running the council in your absence."

"That's not what a girl wants to hear," she said moodily.

"I think what you need is another drink," Stone said, picking up the bottle and refreshing her glass.

"You're a mind reader." She took a gulp. "I'm hungry."

"That's because it's two hours later in New York. Let me see what I can find." He went into the kitchen and found the refrigerator well stocked and returned with some cheese, crackers, and salami.

"That's better," Holly said. "What are we doing for dinner?"

"We'll go up to the Market. It's a grocery, a restaurant, a pizzeria, a bakery, and, not least, a bar."

"Everything we need for survival," she said.

Stone saw an envelope on his chairside table, addressed to him, and he opened it and read it aloud.

Dear Stone,

Welcome to your new home! Everything you see in the house is now yours. My L.A. house is already furnished, so all I took with me were my clothes and a few pictures. You'll have fun shopping for replacements. I've attached a list of numbers for the best restaurants, the maid and cook, the gardener, a handyman, and

others you might need. By the way, the hot tub is set to 100 degrees. Feel free to call for advice, and enjoy yourself!

Gala

“That was sweet of her,” Holly said. “I like the sound of the hot tub.”
“Then let’s go find it,” Stone said. “Bring your drink.”