

DEATH LEGACY

A Novel By
JACQUELINE SEEWALD



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About the Author

Dedication

This novel is dedicated to my husband, Monte, who supports me in every possible way. A special thanks to family and friends as well—in particular Andrew and Daniel, and their wives and children, as well as my cousins Myrna and Max Spinrad.

Epigraph

Call no man happy till he is dead.

—Aeschylus

One

“Here’s the check we talked about.”

Michelle Hallam’s eyes opened wide as she read the amount. “And we still have no idea who our mystery client is?”

“None whatsoever. As you see, the check’s drawn on a Swiss bank account. They do have a reputation for discretion,” Henry Biggs said, his cultured, upper-class English accent resonating.

His dark blue eyes focused on her intently. “Do you want me to lurk about?”

“No, you have other matters to deal with.” It was important that she carry out her responsibilities independently. Otherwise, how could anyone in the agency respect her? She hadn’t been an MI6 operative like her uncle or her father. It was incumbent upon her to earn the respect and confidence of her associates by being thoroughly competent.

“Well, do take care.”

“Of course.” She handed Henry back the check. “Please deposit this.”

Henry took it and left as quickly as his massive frame allowed.

She’d been asked to meet the unknown party by herself at this hotel precisely at two o’clock in the afternoon, to wear a yellow dress and order a Napoleon brandy at the outdoor café overlooking the pool. There were unusual clients from time to time, but these requests struck her as eccentric, and her opinion became stronger when the client failed to show at the appointed time. Bugger cloak-and-dagger nonsense!

At two-thirty, she ordered fillet of sole. The waiter suggested the chef’s special salad, and she agreed. She supposed the client deserved her patience. Besides, she loved the South of France and this hotel in particular. There was no need to rush away. She was dining out on the terrace by the swimming pool overlooking the sea. The view was spectacular, the summer breeze intoxicating. The hotel, built up on a hill, gave a perfect view of the sparkling beach below. Sunlight pirouetted gracefully on the shimmering aqua waters of the Mediterranean.

Removing her floppy saffron hat, she placed it carefully on the chair opposite her, keeping the small handbag containing her tools of the trade nearby on the fine white linen tablecloth. While waiting for her

meal, she studied the sea, noting that the storm clouds which had threatened earlier in the day had disappeared without depositing so much as a single drop of rain. She admired the beautiful fresh flowers set in decorative brick casements all around the pool. What a shame she couldn't stay longer. She was reminded it had been quite a long time between holidays.

Michelle had finished her meal when she first became aware of being watched. She looked around and saw a handsome man studying her. He was seated two tables away.

She glanced at him covertly. He had dark brown hair and eyes and what appeared to be a thoughtful expression on his face. Although he was well-built and muscular, something about the long forehead suggested that he was more scholar than athlete. She returned his bold stare now, directing her gaze into his eyes. Yes, she could see a keen intelligence in those dark orbs, and there was strong character implied in his chiseled, well-defined features.

He gave her a dazzling, potent smile as steady and sure as a sunrise. She found her breath catching. Was he simply flirting? She so rarely let down her guard that it was difficult to tell. She smiled back in a cool, noncommittal manner meant to show that she was flattered by his attentions, but not interested.

Her uncle had taught her to be careful, how vital alertness was to survival. After the shock of her parents' tragic deaths had worn off, it was her uncle who'd taken her in hand, tutored her in how to bury grief, along with all other forms of strong emotion.

Michelle called for her check. She'd waited long enough for the mysterious client, too long, in fact. It was time to go. Still, she felt the attractive stranger's eyes on her, studying her movements. How uncomfortable he made her feel. Could he be the mystery client?

"Merci beaucoup, mademoiselle," the waiter said with a big smile as he surveyed the generous tip. She got up to leave, but not without taking one last wistful glance at the pool. It really had become a warm afternoon.

Someone came up behind her. She spun around quickly. Him! Her heart was beating rapidly as she waited to see what he would say or do. He was even more arresting up close.

"Care to join me for a swim?" He was a little over six feet tall, topping her by several inches. Dressed casually in faded, cut-off denim jeans and a knit shirt open at the throat, he was broad-shouldered, lean-hipped, and looked young and virile. In fact, he oozed testosterone.

"Have you been waiting for me?"

"Forever, gorgeous." The brilliant smile seemed meant to mesmerize.

He ought to be shot down. She rolled her eyes in annoyance, turned around without further comment and walked rapidly away. He was just a rude American tourist looking for a summer fling after all.

“Wait, I know you speak English. Your French is very good but I detected a British accent when you were ordering. Why won’t you go for a swim with me?”

She glanced back at him circumspectly. His look gave her pause. It was a hungry expression, as if he was a starving man and she was a banquet. She shook her head to clear away such a foolish notion.

“I’m not a guest at the hotel.”

“Well, I am, so that solves the problem.”

“I don’t have a bathing suit with me.”

“There’s a little shop right off the lobby selling them. My treat.” His eyes darkened.

“I’m afraid not,” she said firmly.

“How about taking pity on a lonely fellow traveler. I barely speak the language.” The warm, still air between them vibrated, alive with a hum of sensual awareness.

“Do hire an interpreter,” she responded with all the cold hauteur she could muster and resumed walking with determination.

He fell into step beside her, apparently undaunted by her attitude. “You know you want to give in to the temptation just as much as I do. I see it in your eyes no matter how much you choose to deny it.”

She tried her best to ignore him, but then he took her arm. The touch of his hand on hers was provoking. She reacted without thought. Trained reflexes took over automatically as she drove her right elbow into his hard abdomen. Then she slipped her right arm around his waist and, grasping his right arm with her left hand, threw him into the pool. *There, since he’s so eager to be in the pool, I’ve given him exactly what he wanted.* She turned to leave.

“Help!” he cried out breathlessly. “I can’t swim.”

Fear seized her throat like an attack dog. What had she done? She quickly looked around for a lifeguard, but didn’t see one. He cried out again. Doubting his sincerity, she nevertheless kicked off her shoes and jumped into the water. Her arms went around him, grasping him by his neck. Her swift, precise movements got them both out of the deep end of the pool in record time. By then, a small crowd had gathered.

“*Vous êtes mal?*” demanded a young man who was likely the lifeguard.

“*Merci, mais non. Il est bien.*”

She went on to explain that her friend had a little too much wine with lunch and needed to lie down

for a while. The lifeguard nodded his head knowingly. Meanwhile, the American put his arms around her for support.

He was gasping and breathing heavily. "Can you help me to my room please?"

"Is that really necessary?" She tried to keep the alarm out of her voice.

He coughed loudly and the lifeguard looked back at them again.

"Oh, all right." She helped him through the lobby. The air conditioning made her shiver in her wet clinging dress. At least she'd had the presence of mind to retrieve her purse and shoes, but she'd left the hat behind, floating in the shimmering water. Several people threw questioning looks in their direction. How bloody awful this was! She always cultivated an inconspicuous demeanor. They were anything but inconspicuous, she and this handsome American.

Luckily, they didn't have to wait long for the elevator. They entered, dripping. He pressed the button for the fourth floor. More puzzled stares from other guests greeted them as they walked down the hall. She was relieved when he finally indicated his room.

"I'll go now," she said tersely.

"No, you can't. Help me inside, please. You do owe me that much. Although I won't insist. My stomach hurts too much from our last encounter. You're some sort of martial arts expert, aren't you?"

She averted her gaze, noting that he framed his question skillfully. He was clever; perhaps too clever?

"I believe every woman should know how to defend herself," she said, following him into his room.

"And then some, in your case," he said with a wry smile. "You ought to slip out of those wet clothes and let them dry." He smiled again, betraying an attractive dimple in his right cheek. His dark brown eyes twinkled slightly as if he could read her thoughts. "I'm a medical doctor by profession, not a voyeur." He went to the bureau, opened the top drawer, and withdrew a deep burgundy robe in terry cloth and handed it to her. "You can change in the bathroom."

She found his conduct suspicious. Was he trying to lure her into going to bed with him? However, she was shaking with chill and did not feel like arguing the matter. If he didn't realize it already, he'd soon discover she didn't believe in casual sex with strangers. She knew she should leave, yet something about him made her want to stay. It was only to understand the motive for his puzzling behavior, she assured herself. Professional curiosity. Her instincts told her there was something more to his motives than sexual chemistry. She did as he'd suggested, changing into the robe in the bathroom, then hanging her wet clothes over the air conditioning vent.

He was on the phone when she came out of the bathroom but put the receiver back into its cradle immediately.

“I hope you like brandy. I’ve ordered two of them. I think we could both stand some warming up.”

She seated herself in a straight-backed chair positioned beside a desk. Both pieces were French provincial. The room was quite nice, light, airy, and well decorated. But she would have expected nothing less at this hotel. It was as modern and luxurious as it was expensive.

He sat down on the bed, having changed into tennis shorts and a white knit shirt similar to the one he’d worn before. The clothes served to emphasize his excellent tan. She was aware that her own complexion was painfully pale by contrast.

“You lied about being unable to swim, didn’t you,” she said matter-of-factly.

He raised one dark brow in surprise. “How did you know?”

“As soon as I came in after you, I realized you were in no danger of drowning.” She studied his smoothly muscled arms. “In fact, you look like a man who can swim quite well and probably does it often.”

He gave her a disarming, boyish smile. “You’re very observant. I’m from New York, Brighton Beach. I’ve lived near the ocean all my life and I love the water. Now I have a question for you. If you knew I could swim once you got in the water, why didn’t you just dump me and leave?” He seemed to sense her discomfort and didn’t push her further. “If you want to take the Fifth Amendment, it’s okay. Just one thing though. Were you trying to kill me back there?” He was staring at the side of her right hand. Self-consciously, she slipped her hand into the pocket of the robe. He’d observed the callus on the side of her palm. She stood up and walked over to the window.

“I don’t recall when I’ve met a man as audacious as you.”

He responded with an easy grin. “Just my natural charm. I already know two things about you: one, violence comes naturally to you, and two, you’re well-educated.”

“How could you possibly know that I’m well-educated?”

“You have a classy British accent and you speak French fluently.”

“Are you a detective?” Her cool eyes surveyed him with a level gaze.

“Not exactly.” He studied her with such frank interest that she felt compelled to turn away from him and look out the window.

“You’ve a marvelous view of the Mediterranean from here. Nowhere else in the world is quite like it. But then so many things are lovely at a distance. Getting too close can be a mistake. It destroys the illusion

of beauty.”

“Is that the way you feel about people, too?”

He really did ask peculiar questions.

“I consider myself a very private sort of person.”

“Reserved? Shy?”

“Both I think.”

“Do you have close family or friends?”

She was tense and on her guard despite the fact his eyes gazed innocently into hers. “Actually, I have no family.”

“What about friends?”

“Many acquaintances, few of whom I could in all honesty call friends.”

“You consider yourself a loner?”

“An introvert. I keep my own counsel.” Yes, she was a loner, but no need to explain anything more to this probing stranger. No family, no friends, no pets, no vulnerabilities, no Achilles’ heel. Nothing to keep her from her work, from what really mattered in life. Others might consider what she did dangerous, but it was forming attachments to people that posed the real threat. Thank God her work saved her from exposure to that sort of agony and pain.

“You’re a fascinating woman, but puzzling.”

His eyes were so intense that she uneasily looked away. “Perhaps you’d like it if I hopped on a microscope slide for closer inspection?”

“A little too kinky for my tastes.” His eyes danced with amusement.

She found herself smiling without meaning to do so.

“But you could hop in my bed anytime.” He was eyeing her with longing in a way that made her heart beat faster and heat rise to her cheeks. If it was an act, he was a talented thespian.

Michelle’s instincts warned her this was a potentially treacherous situation. She must be very careful. What was this man up to?

Two

There was a knock at the door. Their brandy arrived in large snifters and she breathed a sigh of relief. She viewed him thoughtfully. An unusual man. For a time, they concentrated on their brandies and drank in silence. She preferred that. The warmth began to glow in her throat and chest almost immediately. At last the gripping chill dissipated.

“I’ve answered most of your questions. Now it’s time for you to answer mine. Why did you persist in following me after I clearly communicated that I did not wish it?”

The charismatic smile appeared again. “You’re a beautiful woman. I’m sure many men have admired you. Some must have even followed you.”

She met his gaze squarely, narrowing hers. “Not all that many.”

“Now you’re being modest. You must know what a stunner you are.”

She was suspicious of his flattery and knew she should tell him to stuff it, but she had to admit he was appealing. Too appealing! “And are you really a medical doctor?”

“I have a diploma that says I am.” His voice was mellifluous.

“What sort of a doctor?”

“I specialize in psychiatry.”

“That explains it.”

He watched her intently. “Explains what?”

“Several things. Your expertise at formulating incisive questions, and also your ability to pay for such an expensive hotel room.”

He had a wonderful laugh, as warm as the brandy. “I won’t be starting in private practice until September.”

“Then you must be very certain of your earning capabilities to invest in such an expensive vacation at this time. Or is your family shockingly wealthy?”

Finally, it was his turn to look uncomfortable. “No rich family. Someone paid me to come over and work here briefly. In fact, someone I hardly know.”

“Then we have that in common,” she told him.

“Shall we drink to the kindness of strangers?”

She found herself smiling at him again. “Of course, let’s.” So saying, she finished the last of her brandy. “What is your family like?” she asked, and then wondered why she’d put the question to him. Why should she care about him, or his family, for that matter?

He put down his glass, and looked her directly in the eye. “After my mother died, my father remarried. I was raised by my maternal grandparents. I was much happier living with them. They’re very good people, although old-fashioned in many ways. But I don’t think I became independent as early as most men. In fact, this trip represents a kind of symbolic declaration of independence for me.”

She found his confession troubling. “You shouldn’t tell me things like that.”

“Why not?” His dark eyes were quicksand. “I’d like to tell you a whole lot more.”

“I have no intention of becoming personally involved with you. I don’t want you to consider me a confidante.” She had come out sounding a lot harsher than she meant and regretted it, but he seemed to take it in stride.

“I’m sorry if I make you uneasy. I don’t mean to. You obviously don’t trust me.”

“Why should I? You’re a total stranger.” Their eyes met again; she was the first to turn away from his hypnotic gaze.

“Do you think I’m a stalker, a rapist, or maybe a murderer?”

He moved close to her. She felt his warm breath on her cheek and had an oddly electric reaction that sent heat rushing to her face. She made herself pull away from him, although it wasn’t easy.

“I think I might be able to protect myself better if you were one of those dreadful creatures. Charming men are dangerous. You are charming. Therefore, you are a decidedly dangerous man.”

“I hope so.” He gave her a look that made her blood burn. “Coming from a woman with your talents, that’s quite a compliment.”

“How is your stomach feeling?” She somehow managed to keep her voice controlled, walk to the bureau, and place her empty brandy snifter on top of a magazine.

“Much better. No internal injuries.”

“Good, then perhaps I should be on my way.”

“I sense a sudden relapse.”

She was convinced that he used his charm in a deliberate manner, fully aware of just how disarming his boyish smile was. “I don’t suppose you’ll be needing the services of a physician, since you are one

yourself.”

He moved toward her. “There is something you could do for me before you leave.”

“And what would that be?”

His eyes sparkled mischievously. “I’m afraid if I told you, you might try one of those blows on me again.”

Perhaps bluntness was called for. “I don’t go to bed with men I barely know.”

“Too bad,” he said with that special smile, and she realized that he’d been teasing her.

“Why don’t you lie down and get some rest.”

“And end our uplifting conversation?”

His innuendo was clear. He was playing a game with her, she decided. Possibly it was all part of some bizarre mental test. She wasn’t certain what to make of him. Yet the attraction between them seemed real enough.

“We didn’t meet by chance, did we?” She waited but got no response. “I think I’d better change now.”

He stood directly between her and the bathroom. “You know what your problem is? You take yourself too seriously. I thought the English were known for a sense of humor. Wasn’t it Sartre who said life is absurd? Didn’t you ever feel the desire to do something mad, reckless?” His expression was so intense, so imploring.

Inside, she quaked. She did want him, but she wasn’t a fool. “Sartre, as you may recall, was French. Americans who can quote Sartre are definitely not to be trusted. And I’m only half-English. My mother was American by birth.” She took several more small steps toward the bathroom, but he continued to block her path. “Please excuse me. You’re in my way.”

“I wouldn’t dare try to stop you. Who knows what you might do to me?” But suddenly his body moved fluidly against her own.

She was in his arms before she knew it, and he was kissing her, his mouth warm and moist against hers, his arms wrapped tightly around her. She stiffened and pulled away.

“I don’t believe this is a good idea.” Her voice sounded husky and breathless to her own ears.

“It’s the best idea I’ve ever had.”

She placed the palm of her hand against his chest, attempting to put some distance between them, breaking the contact. Then she pushed him away, pulling herself free of his embrace.

“I can’t,” she said in a firm but breathless voice.

He excused himself and went into the bathroom. Instantly she turned to scrutinize the room more closely. She went to the bureau, opened it, and examined his things. There seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary, no weapons of any kind. What would she expect to find? He returned more quickly than she anticipated and caught her.

“And you were...?”

“Looking for some aspirin,” she said calmly.

He gazed at her questioningly, one eyebrow raised.

She licked her suddenly dry lower lip. “Real women aren’t afraid to go through men’s drawers.”

He smiled. “Fair turnabout. We guys are always trying to get into women’s drawers.”

She groaned.

“Okay, I can do better.”

“Spare me.”

“Haven’t you heard puns are for groan-ups?”

“I believe you’ve missed your calling,” she said. “Perhaps you should do stand-up comedy for a living.”

“Couldn’t handle the rejection. Besides, haven’t you heard laughter is the best medicine? I have it on the authority of *Reader’s Digest*, and they wouldn’t lie.” He tossed her a wolfish grin.

“I suppose if you can’t cure your patients you can always make them laugh.”

“Does wonders for depression. What do you do, professionally speaking?”

She shifted uncomfortably. “I’m a consultant.”

“So who do you consult?”

“I really must be going or I’ll miss my plane.”

She slipped hurriedly into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. She was trembling all over. Deep breathing, that’s what was called for. She took several shaky gasps of air. The filmy summer dress reminiscent of yellow sunflowers was almost dry. She dressed as quickly as her shaking fingers would allow.

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He was standing at the window looking out with his back to her when she emerged. She quietly rushed toward the door. There was a perceptible creak as she opened it, and he spun around.

"Wait!" he called out. "Where are you going?"

"To the airport. I told you, I have a flight to catch."

"I'll go with you."

"No."

"You can't go without giving me your name and address. Do you live in England?" He moved rapidly toward her and she was reminded of a sculpture of the Roman god Mercury she'd studied at the museum. His strides were the sure, easy movements of a natural athlete.

"Better for you not to know anything about me." She started to walk through the door, but he caught her arm. Amazing, even the touch of his hand caused her skin to tingle. "Please let me go. Don't force me to hurt you. I wouldn't like that at all."

"I'd like it even less. But I can't let you go, not like this."

"Don't try to pressure me. It simply won't work."

His hands tightened on her arms possessively. She felt herself becoming angry.

"I ought to have done you some real damage, just to teach you a lesson. I don't appreciate oglers."

"Ogling? Was that what you thought I was doing at the restaurant? My eyes were riveted to your face the whole time, a purely metaphysical exploration, more like goddess worshipping."

"You're bloody pushy and aggressive."

"Never thought of myself in those terms."

His tone was placating, but she could see that he wasn't taking the matter seriously by the amused expression on his face. No one had ever infuriated her to such an extent. Had the kiss they'd shared affected him the way it affected her? The passion he'd stirred had made mush of her brain. What had he felt? Probably nothing more than momentary lust.

"You've got an awfully suspicious nature. All right, stay a woman of mystery if that's what you want. But at least let me give you my name and address in case you want to contact me." He got a piece of hotel stationery and a pen and wrote on it: *Daniel Reiner*.

"I won't take your address."

"Okay, you'll find me listed in the Manhattan phone directory. I'm going to share a practice with a friend. He's already set up an office on Park Avenue."

"A bit pricey."

"Especially for a Brooklyn boy like me, but I've decided to give it a try. You know New York?"

“Quite well.”

“Call me day or night. There’s an answering service.”

“Don’t expect to hear from me, Dr. Reiner.”

“Why not?” His eyes were so earnest, so inviting.

Perhaps she had misjudged him. “You’re too young for me,” she said in a near whisper, which was all she could manage.

“I’m nearly thirty. That probably makes me older than you.”

“I wasn’t talking about physical age.” With that, she left him, hurrying away as if the devil were chasing her. And perhaps he was.

Three

Daniel never thought he'd see or hear from his mystery woman again. Being a reasonably sensible man, he tried to put her out of his mind. Since his days were busy, doing so wasn't all that difficult. It was the nights that gave him problems. There were dreams, vivid and erotic, filled with her. And when he woke up in the morning, he'd find himself reaching for her, aroused, hard as granite, longing to have her in his arms.

What was that quotation? Physician, heal thyself. He knew an obsession when he fell over one. He could have discussed it with a colleague, but he preferred just holding on to it. He could have satisfied his physical needs if not his psychological one with a host of eager and desirable women. So why didn't he? Holding out, waiting for a woman who claimed to have no interest in him, didn't make any sense at all, did it? But he couldn't stop thinking about the way he felt when he had her in his arms. And she'd wanted him just as much; he was certain of it. Thinking about her that way, did that make him sick?

No, there had been incredible chemistry between them. When he kissed her, he felt as if he'd been hit by a thunderbolt. He hadn't imagined it, and he wasn't going to doubt himself. Maybe she could try to deny their attraction to each other, but he would not, could not.

When summer turned into autumn, he despaired that his mystery woman would never contact him. He tried dating a few other women, but felt no real interest. Finally, one day in late October when the rain was coming down in gunmetal gray torrents, something happened that made her burst through his mind again like dammed waters at flood stage.

A new patient came to see him. She appeared to be in a highly agitated state. He tried to set her at ease as quickly as possible. His assistant handed him her form to peruse. The woman's name was Nora Jane Parker, fifty-two years of age, married, and the mother of two adult children. She had never visited a psychiatrist before. He saw that the space requesting the name of a referring physician had been left blank.

"Mrs. Parker, who referred you to me?"

She wrung her delicately flowerlike hands. "Someone who said she thought you were the sort of doctor who could help with my problem." She leaned forward in her chair and then spoke in a barely audible

whisper. "You will be discreet, won't you?"

"All conversations between doctor and patient are held in the strictest confidence." He spoke in his most reassuring, professional manner. "Our communications are privileged."

She smiled and seemed a bit more at ease.

"Just for the record, may I have the name of your friend?"

"I'd rather not say. You don't know her name anyway."

"Yet she knows mine? How come?"

Mrs. Parker seemed nervous again. "She said you'd met each other under unusual circumstances this summer."

He suddenly felt a rush of excitement, a peculiar surge of anticipation. "This woman, does she possibly have red-gold hair and green eyes, and is she approximately in her late twenties?"

Mrs. Parker nodded her head. He could read distress in her watery blue eyes, as if she were upset because she'd somehow conveyed to him information he wasn't supposed to have. He knew that he ought to stop there, but he couldn't.

"And this woman's name?" He saw Mrs. Parker's reluctance but urged her on. "It's important that I know."

"Her name is Michelle Hallam. She's going to be very displeased that I told you."

"You did the right thing," he assured her. "Mrs. Parker, may I call you Nora? Ms. Hallam and I are on good terms. There's no reason I shouldn't know. Don't worry about it."

"All right, if you say so, Doctor. But Ms. Hallam values her anonymity."

"I understand. Now let's talk about the reason she suggested you see me."

"I hardly know where to begin. I'm not even certain that you can be of any help to me. My problem isn't likely to be similar to any you've ever encountered before."

"Let me be the judge of that," he said reassuringly. He encouraged her to recline on the couch, but she refused.

"I prefer sitting in a chair. It's so difficult to discuss this with a stranger as it is." She wrung her delicate hands again. Her voice was soft, with a trace of Southern gentility.

He could imagine her sitting beneath a magnolia tree sipping mint juleps on the veranda of an antebellum Southern mansion.

"Just tell me whatever you feel like saying. I'm here to listen. Where and when did your problem

originate?"

"I think I ought to start at the end rather than the beginning."

He gave her an encouraging, accepting smile. "Whatever you prefer."

She took a deep breath and then let it out in a shaky gasp. "You see, Doctor, a few months ago, I was told by the police that my husband was dead. They said it was likely that he committed suicide. But I didn't believe them then, and I don't believe them now. I think I'm being lied to. In fact, I think everyone involved has been lying to me."

"You believe there's some sort of conspiracy?" He started to take notes. Was this woman paranoid, possibly suffering from delusions of persecution?

She looked up at him, and he could see tears welling up in her eyes. "I suppose I've just convinced you that I'm some sort of a lunatic. Are you ready to call Bellevue?"

"No," he responded in a gentle, soothing voice, "I want you to tell me your reasons for thinking the way you do. I'm willing to listen to anything you want to say."

"Thank you, Doctor. You see, there were just too many things that didn't make sense." She sat stiff and straight, biting down on her lower lip.

"Go on."

"Well, about a year ago, James—that was my husband—he started behaving very oddly. We had what I always considered to be a very solid marriage. It lasted over thirty years. James was a fine man, a good husband, a devoted father. He was in his middle fifties, and everything seemed to be going very well for him. Then he became nervous and irritable, as if he were very worried about something. He wasn't himself at all. One day, he announced that he was leaving me. The next thing I knew, he was living with a very young woman. No reasons, no explanations."

"These things do happen, Nora. We just have to go on with our lives and learn to accept them."

She shook her head. "You had to know James. It was all so incredible. He was not an impetuous man by nature. None of it made any sense. And then he retired from his job quite suddenly. He loved his work. He was so devoted."

"What did he do for a living?"

She lowered her eyes. "He worked for the CIA."

The woman caught him by surprise with that disclosure. "In what capacity?"

"I couldn't really say. I mean, I was never actually certain."

The tension in her voice warned him not to prod her any further on the subject.

“Why do you think he changed his lifestyle so drastically in the final year of his life?”

“I don’t know. Oh, you’re probably thinking what most people did, that he was just experiencing dissatisfaction with his mundane life and wanted to have some fun before it was too late, but James wasn’t like that at all.”

“Is it really important to you to know why he left you?”

“Of course, it is!” Her eyes misted.

“Suppose, just suppose, he left for the obvious reasons. Is it a possibility?” He kept his tone gentle, nonthreatening.

She shook her head vehemently. Her short, frizzy gray hair, tinted a pale shade of robin’s egg blue, barely budged an inch.

“I lived with that man for a lifetime, and I know something was troubling him, something he couldn’t talk about, something he might have been afraid to confide.” Her eyes were circled by iridescent purple shadows. “I want to tell you about how they say he died.”

There was a stillness in the room, and then she began to speak in a soft, almost childlike voice. “He bought a sailboat. He liked to go sailing. He was very good at handling his sloop. That was where he died, on board the boat.” Tears were running down her face. She looked like a blasted white rose whose petals were slowly beginning to fall away.

He took her hand. “If this is too painful for you, we can talk about it another time.”

“No, I must go on. I need to discuss this with you. We lived in Maryland. Since our estrangement, since he left me, I sold our house and moved in with my daughter here in New York. My older girl and her husband have a lovely converted brownstone in Brooklyn Heights. I have my own small apartment in the building and they have theirs. I don’t intrude on them, but still, it is nice to know that Katherine and Brian are around. My husband remained in Maryland living with that dreadful girl. One Sunday morning, he took his boat out on the Chesapeake. He was never seen alive again. The sailboat ran aground the following day. He wasn’t on board. The weather was excellent. He knew how to handle the boat. The question of an accident was far-fetched. The coast guard informed the Maryland State Police, who in turn notified the CIA, and then me.”

“One week later, the coast guard located a man’s body in the bay. The man was clad in a T-shirt and jeans. James had been described as last being seen dressed that way. Two diving belts were strapped

just below the armpits and at the waist. The body was full of gas, which allowed it to float to the surface in spite of the weighted belts. The CIA man who was in charge of the investigation, a Mr. Kirson, did the courtesy of paying me a visit when I arrived back in Washington. From the beginning, he seemed certain that the man they found was James. He was sure that James was dead. Mr. Kirson told me that there was a gunshot wound in the head that was clearly self-inflicted. I don't know, maybe I should have just accepted what he said at face value, but I couldn't. James wasn't the sort of man who would kill himself. For one thing, he was Catholic. It went against his religious beliefs. And no one let me see the body."

"There may have been a good reason for that."

Her eyes met his. "Mr. Kirson did say the body was badly decomposed, that he was protecting me."

"But you didn't believe him?"

"I just couldn't accept what he said. It wasn't so much the words. That part actually made a lot of sense. It was his manner. I never trust a man with a dirty smile."

"I don't understand."

"He seemed to be holding something back. I don't know, maybe I have become paranoid after all, but it seemed to me the man was lying."

"Was there anyone involved in the investigation that you considered honest?"

"Not really. The experts confirmed what Mr. Kirson said. He even showed me a wristwatch that I'd given James some years ago and said they found it on the body. Mr. Kirson urged me to dispose of the remains quickly. His suggestion was cremation. At first, I refused, but he convinced me that it was best. He even handled all the arrangements for me. But since then, I've had some second thoughts."

"Why's that?"

She sighed deeply, wearily. He could see the subject was terribly painful for her.

"About a week ago, I had a call. It was a man's voice, in kind of a hissing, insinuating whisper. I think it was purposely disguised. He said: 'James Parker was not your husband. James Parker never existed. There was no James Parker. The man who called himself James Parker is still alive.' I asked him where James was. Then he said something even stranger than what he'd said before: 'Your husband has gone home. He is not dead, but you will never see him again.' I begged him to tell me where James was, but he hung up. The conversation still haunts me."

Was there ever such a call? Was it merely wish fulfillment, or could it have been a dream? He decided to reserve judgment for the time being.

“You believed this man?”

“I don’t know. He could have been some sort of crank. I realize that. There are so many sick people in this world. Except he sounded so convincing. Besides, he confirmed some of my own doubts and suspicions. I’ve been torn apart. You see, I don’t know exactly what James did for the agency, but he was far more important than Mr. Kirson led me to believe. Mr. Kirson told me James was just a minor bureaucrat, that his job was ordinary, white-collar work.”

“And you think he lied?”

“The air was redolent of mendacity.”

“What makes you say that?”

Nora Parker dabbed at her watery eyes with a twisted tissue. “James took several trips to what was then the Soviet Union some years ago. They wouldn’t have sent him there if he were a mere clerk, would they? We always lived a simple life, that’s true. But James had put away quite a bit of money in savings—for our old age, he used to say. I never asked any questions. However, I knew he’d received several promotions. Important people would come over and spend time with him in his study. Occasionally, we’d be asked to elegant parties, and he was always treated with respect.

“In this last terrible year that I’ve been without James, I’ve had too much time on my hands to dwell on the past. I’m not sure I did the right thing at all. I shouldn’t have given him up without a fight. I am in agony, Dr. Reiner. I feel to blame for what happened. Maybe I just want to believe James is alive even if he isn’t.”

“You told all of this to Michelle Hallam?”

“Yes. You see, I asked her to help me, too.”

“In what way can she help you?”

Mrs. Parker looked uneasy again.

“I suppose I can tell you. Michelle operates a private consulting agency that specializes in discreet inquiries, among other things. It used to be run by her uncle until his death not long ago. Michelle’s uncle was at one time an important figure in British intelligence. James knew the man and respected him. We had him to dinner on occasion when James was working with him, and he left us his card. I understand he passed away not long ago. His niece has operated the firm since then. I’ve employed Michelle to represent me because, thanks to her uncle, she has connections all over the world. She knows how to obtain sensitive information. She’s also bright and committed. If anyone can find out the truth about what happened

to James, I believe it would be her.”

“I don’t understand why she recommended that you see me.”

Nora Parker lowered her eyes. “I haven’t been able to sleep very well lately. Even pills and tranquilizers don’t seem to help very much. I keep wondering if it was my fault that James turned to someone else. Do you think it was?”

“No, I don’t, Nora. It’s never any one person’s fault.”

She began to weep softly. He gently patted her back in a gesture of comfort. Most psychiatrists believed there should be no physical connection between doctor and patient. Daniel wasn’t one of them. Small, physical expressions gave comfort.

“As you yourself realize, all the facts are not known. In fact, they may never be known. You are just going to have to learn to deal with the possibility that you’ll never learn the full truth. And there’s no point accepting blame you don’t deserve.”

Before the hour was up, he wrote her a tranquilizer prescription but refused to issue her sleeping pills. Nora accepted that gratefully. She seemed much calmer by the time the session ended. He felt optimistic about alleviating her depression.

Nora Parker’s story stayed with him as he left his office for the day. More than ever, he wanted to know his mystery woman. At least now he finally had a name and some information about her.

It was still raining as he walked toward the lot where his car was parked. His mind was preoccupied as he drove across the Brooklyn Bridge. It was a dark, gloomy day. The sky and sea merged together, both brain-matter gray. The bridge, like a long spinal cord, connected Manhattan to Brooklyn. He glanced in his rearview mirror several times and noticed the same car was sticking close behind him all the way.

He disliked being tailgated. It was some sort of a black limo, and the glass was tinted so that he could not make out the driver’s face. He didn’t think about it again until he reached Ocean Parkway and found a spot near his grandparents’ apartment building. Then he looked into the mirror and happened to catch sight of the very same limo pulling over not more than half a block away.

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