

SIDNEY SHELDON

**ARE YOU AFRAID
OF THE DARK?**

Version 1.0

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FOR ATANAS AND VERA

WITH LOVE

*My special thanks go to my assistant,
Mary Langford,
whose contribution was invaluable.*

PROLOGUE

Berlin, Germany

Sona Verbrugge had no idea that this was going to be her last day on earth. She was pushing her way through the sea of summer tourists overflowing the busy sidewalks of Unter den Linden. *Don't panic*, she told herself. *You must keep calm.*

The instant message on her computer from Franz had been terrifying. *Run, Sonja! Go to the Artemisia Hotel. You will be safe there. Wait until you hear from—*

The message had ended suddenly. Why had Franz not finished it? What could be happening? The night before, she had heard her husband saying to someone on the telephone that Prima must be stopped at all costs. Who was Prima?

Frau Verbrugge was nearing Brandenburgische Strasse, where the Artemisia was located, the hotel that catered to women only. *I will wait for Franz there and he will explain to me what this is all about, she thought.*

* * *

WHEN SONJA VERBRUGGE reached the next corner, the traffic light had turned to red, and as she stopped at the curb, someone in the crowd bumped against her and she stumbled into the street. *Verdammt touristen!* A limousine that had been double-parked suddenly moved toward her, grazing her just hard enough to knock her down. People began to gather around her.

'Is she all right?'

'Ist ihr etwas passiert?'

'Peut-elle marcher?'

At that moment, a passing ambulance stopped. Two attendants from the ambulance hurried over and took charge. 'We will take care of her.'

Sonja Verbrugge found herself being lifted into the ambulance. The door closed, and a moment later, the vehicle sped away.

She was strapped onto a gurney, trying to sit up. 'I am fine,' she protested. 'It was nothing. I—'

One of the attendants was leaning over her. 'It is all right, Frau Verbrugge. Just relax.'

She looked up at him, suddenly alarmed. 'How do you know my—?'

She felt the sharp sting of a hypodermic needle in her arm, and a moment later, she gave herself up to the waiting darkness.

Paris, France

MARK HARRIS WAS alone on the observation deck of the Eiffel Tower, oblivious to the rain swirling around him. From time to time a streak of lightning shattered the raindrops into dazzling diamond waterfalls.

Across the Seine River stood the familiar Palais de Chaillot, and the Trocadero Gardens, but he was unaware of them. His mind was focused on Prima and the astonishing news that was about to be released to the world.

The wind had begun to whip the rain into a frenzied maelstrom. Mark

Harris shielded his wrist with his sleeve and looked at his watch. They were late. *And why had they insisted on meeting here, at midnight?* Even as he was wondering, he heard the tower elevator door open. Two men were moving toward him, fighting against the fierce wet wind.

As Mark Harris recognized them, he felt a sense of relief. 'You're late.'

'It's this damn weather, Mark. Sorry.'

'Well, you're here. The meeting in Washington is all set, isn't it?'

'That's what we need to talk to you about. As a matter of fact, we had a long discussion this morning about the best way to handle this, and we decided —'

As they were speaking, the second man had moved behind Mark Harris, and two things happened almost simultaneously. A heavy, blunt instrument slammed into his skull, and an instant later he felt himself being lifted and tossed over the parapet into the cold driving rain, his body plunging toward the unforgiving sidewalk thirty-eight stories below.

Denver, Colorado

Gary Reynolds had grown up in rugged Kelowna, Canada, near Vancouver, and had had his flight training there, so he was accustomed to flying over treacherous mountainous terrain. He was piloting a Cessna Citation II, keeping a wary eye on the snow-capped peaks surrounding him.

The plane was commissioned to carry a cockpit crew of two, but today there was no co-pilot. *Not this trip*, Reynolds thought grimly.

He had filed a false flight plan for Kennedy airport. No one would think of

looking for him in Denver. He would spend the night at his sister's home, and in the morning he would be on his way east, to meet the others. All the arrangements for eliminating Prima were complete, and—

A voice on the radio interrupted his thoughts. 'Citation One One One Lima Foxtrot, this is the approach control tower at Denver International Airport. Come in, please.'

Gary Reynolds pressed the radio button. 'This is Citation One One One Lima Foxtrot. I am requesting clearance to land.'

'One Lima Foxtrot, say your position.'

'One Lima Foxtrot. I am fifteen miles northeast of the Denver airport. Altitude fifteen thousand feet.'

He saw Pike's Peak looming up on the right side. The sky was bright blue, the weather clear. *A good omen.*

There was a brief silence. The voice from the tower came through again. 'One Lima Foxtrot, you are cleared to land at runway two-six. Repeat, runway two-six.'

'One Lima Foxtrot, roger.'

Without warning, Gary Reynolds felt the plane give a sudden, high bounce. Surprised, he looked out the cockpit window. A strong wind had come up, and within seconds, the Cessna was caught in a violent turbulence that began to toss the plane around. He pulled back the wheel to try to gain altitude. It was useless. He was trapped in a raging vortex. The plane was completely out of control. He slammed down the radio button.

'This is One Lima Foxtrot. I have an emergency.'

'One Lima Foxtrot, what is the nature of your emergency?'

Gary Reynolds was shouting into the microphone. 'I'm caught in a wind

shear! Extreme turbulence! I'm in the middle of a goddamn hurricane!

'One Lima Foxtrot, you are only four and a half minutes from the Denver airport and there is no sign of air turbulence on our screens.'

'I don't give a damn what's on your screens! I'm telling you—' The pitch of his voice suddenly rose. 'Mayday! May—'

In the control tower, they watched in shock as the blip on the radar screen disappeared.

Manhattan, New York

At dawn, at an area under the Manhattan Bridge along the East River not far from pier seventeen, half a dozen uniformed police officers and plainclothes detectives were gathered around a fully dressed corpse lying at the river's edge. The body had been carelessly tossed down, so its head was eerily bobbing up and down in the water, following the vagaries of the tide.

The man in charge, Detective Earl Greenburg, from the Manhattan South Homicide Squad, had finished the official prescribed procedures. No one was allowed to approach the body until photographs had been taken, and he made notes of the scene while the officers looked for any evidence that might be lying around. The victim's hands had been wrapped in clean plastic bags.

Carl Ward, the medical examiner, finished his examination, stood up, and brushed the dirt from his trousers. He looked at the two detectives in charge. Detective Earl Greenburg was a professional, capable-looking man with an impressive record. Detective Robert Praegitzer was gray-haired, with the laid-back manner of someone who had seen it all before.

Ward turned to Greenburg. 'He's all yours, Earl.'

'What have we got?'

'The obvious cause of death is a slashed throat, right through the carotid artery. He has two busted kneecaps, and it feels like a few ribs are broken. Someone worked him over pretty good.'

'What about the time of death?'

Ward looked down at the water lapping at the victim's head. 'Hard to say. My guess is that they dumped him here sometime after midnight. I'll give you a full report when we get him to the morgue.'

Greenburg turned his attention to the body. Gray jacket, dark blue trousers, light blue tie, an expensive watch on the left wrist. Greenburg knelt down and started going through the victim's jacket pockets. In one pocket, his fingers found a note. He pulled it out, holding it by its edge. It read: 'Washington. Monday, 10 a.m. Prima.' He looked at it a moment, puzzled.

Greenburg reached into another pocket, finding another note. 'It's in Italian.' He glanced around. 'Gianelli!'

One of the uniformed police officers hurried up to him. 'Yes, sir?'

Greenburg handed him the note. 'Can you read this?'

Gianelli read it aloud slowly. 'Last chance. Meet me at pier seventeen with the rest of the dope or swim with the fishes.' He handed it back.

Robert Praegitzer looked surprised. 'A Mafia hit? Why would they leave him out here like this, in the open?'

'Good question.' Greenburg was going through the corpse's other pockets. He pulled out a wallet and opened it. It was heavy with cash. 'They sure as hell weren't after his money.' He took a card from the wallet. 'The victim's name is Richard Stevens.'

Praegitzer frowned. 'Richard Stevens . . . Didn't we read something about him in the papers recently?'

Greenburg said, 'His *wife*. Diane Stevens. She's in court, in the Tony Altieri murder trial.'

Praegitzer said, 'That's right. She's testifying against the *capo di capos*.'

And they both turned to look at Richard Stevens's body.

CHAPTER 1

IN DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN, in courtroom thirty-seven of the Supreme Court Criminal Term building at 180 Centre Street, the trial of Anthony (Tony) Altieri was in session. The large, venerable courtroom was filled to capacity with press and spectators.

At the defendant's table sat Anthony Altieri, slouched in a wheelchair, looking like a pale, fat frog folding in on itself. Only his eyes were alive, and every time he looked at Diane Stevens in the witness chair, she could literally feel the pulse of his hatred.

Next to Altieri sat Jake Rubenstein, Altieri's defence attorney. Rubenstein was famous for two things: his high-profile clientele, consisting mostly of mobsters, and the fact that nearly all of his clients were acquitted.

Rubenstein was a small, dapper man with a quick mind and a vivid imagination. He was never the same in his courtroom appearances. Courtroom histrionics were his stock-in-trade, and he was highly skilled. He was brilliant at sizing up his opponents, with a feral instinct for finding their weaknesses. Sometimes Rubenstein imagined he was a lion, slowly

closing in on his unsuspecting prey, ready to pounce ... or a cunning spider, spinning a web that would eventually entrap them and leave them helpless. . . Sometimes he was a patient fisherman, gently tossing a line into the water and slowly moving it back and forth until the gullible witness took the bait.

The lawyer was carefully studying the witness on the stand. Diane Stevens was in her early thirties. An aura of elegance. Patrician features. Soft, flowing blonde hair. Green eyes. Lovely figure. A girl-next-door kind of wholesomeness. She was dressed in a chic, tailored black suit. Jake Rubenstein knew that the day before she had made a favourable impression on the jury. He had to be careful how he handled her. *Fisherman*, he decided.

Rubenstein took his time approaching the witness box, and when he spoke, his voice was gentle. 'Mrs. Stevens, yesterday you testified that on the date in question, October fourteenth, you were driving south on the Henry Hudson Parkway when you got a flat tire and pulled off the highway at the One Hundred and Fifty-eighth Street exit, onto a service road into Fort Washington Park?'

'Yes.' Her voice was soft and cultured.

'What made you stop at that particular place?'

'Because of the flat tire, I knew I had to get off the main road and I could see the roof of a cabin through the trees. I thought there might be someone there who could help me. I didn't have a spare.'

'Do you belong to an auto club?' Yes.

'And do you have a phone in your car?' Yes.

'Then why didn't you call the auto club?'

'I thought that might have taken too long.'

Rubenstein said sympathetically, 'Of course. And the cabin was right there.'

'Yes.'

'So, you approached the cabin to get help?'

'That's right.'

'Was it still light outside?'

'Yes. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon.'

'And so, you could see clearly?'

'I could.'

'What did you see, Mrs. Stevens?'

'I saw Anthony Altieri—'

'Oh. You had met him before?'

'No.'

'What made you sure it was Anthony Altieri?'

'I had seen his picture in the newspaper and—'

'So, you had seen pictures that resembled the defendant?'

'Well, it—'

'What did you see in that cabin?'

Diane Stevens took a shuddering breath. She spoke slowly, visualizing the scene in her mind. 'There were four men in the room. One of them was in a chair, tied up. Mr. Altieri seemed to be questioning him while the two