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You Belong to Me

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#1
NEW YORK
TIMES
BESTSELLER

THE QUEEN OF SUSPENSE



YOU BELONG
TO ME

Mary Higgins Clark - You Belong to Me

Prologue

He had played this same game before and had anticipated this time out it would be something of a letdown. It came as a pleasant surprise then to find that it gave him even more of a thrill.

He had boarded the ship in Perth, Australia, only yesterday, planning to sail as far as Kobe, but he had found her immediately, so the extra ports would not be necessary. She had been seated at a window table in the liner's paneled dining room, a discreetly elegant space typical of the Gabrielle. The luxury cruise ship was the perfect size for his purposes, and in fact he always traveled on smaller ships, always chose a segment of a deluxe world tour.

He was cautious by nature, although in truth there was little likelihood of his being recognized by previous shipmates. He had become a master at altering his appearance, a talent he had discovered during his college drama club fling at acting.

As he studied Regina Clausen, he decided that she could use a makeover. She was one of those fortyish women who could have been quite attractive if she only knew how to dress, how to present herself. She was wearing an expensive-looking ice-blue dinner suit that would have been stunning on a blonde, but it did nothing for her very pale complexion, making her look washed out and wan. And her light brown hair, her natural and not unflattering color, was so stiffly set that even from across the wide room it

seemed to age her, and even to date her, as though she were a suburban matron from the fifties.

Of course he knew who she was. He had seen Clausen in action at a stockholders' meeting only a few months ago, and he had also watched her on CNBC in her capacity as a stock research analyst. Certainly in those moments in Greenwich venues she had come across as forceful and very sure of herself.

That was why, when he had spotted her sitting wistfully and alone at the table, and later had witnessed her tremulous, almost girlish pleasure when one of the male hosts asked her to dance, he knew right away how easy it was going to be.

He raised his glass, and with the faintest movement in her direction, offered a silent toast.

Your prayers have been answered, Regina, he promised. From now on, you belong to me.

Three years later

Barring a blizzard or something bordering on a hurricane, Dr. Susan Chandler walked to work from her brownstone apartment in Greenwich Village to her office in the turn-of-the-century building in SoHo. A clinical psychologist, she had a thriving private practice and at the same time had established something of a public persona as host of a popular radio program, Ask Dr. Susan, that aired each weekday.

The early morning air on this October day was crisp and breezy, and she was glad she had opted for a long-sleeved, turtleneck sweater under her suit jacket.

Her shoulder-length dark blond hair, still damp from the shower, was windblown, causing her to regret not wearing a scarf. She remembered her grandmother's long-ago admonishment, "Don't ever go out with a wet head; you'll catch your death of cold," then realized that she seemed to think about Gran Susie a lot these days. But then, her grandmother had been raised in Greenwich Village, and Susan sometimes wondered if her spirit wasn't hovering nearby.

She stopped for a light at the corner of Mercer and Houston. It was only seven-thirty, and the streets weren't crowded yet. In another hour they would be teeming with Monday morning, back-to-work New Yorkers.

Thank God the weekend's over, Susan said to herself fervently. She had spent most of Saturday and Sunday in Rye with her mother, who had been in low spirits-understandably so, Susan thought, since Sunday would have been her fortieth wedding anniversary. Then, not helping the general situation, Susan had had an unfortunate encounter with her older sister, Dee, who was visiting from California.

Sunday afternoon, before coming back to the city, she had made a courtesy call to her father's palatial home in nearby Bedford Hills, where he and his second wife, Binky, were throwing a cocktail party. Susan suspected that the timing of the party was Binky's doing. "We had our first date four years ago today," she had gushed.

I dearly love both my parents, Susan thought as she reached her office building, but there are times when I want to tell them to please, grow up.

Susan was usually the first to arrive on the top floor, but as she passed the law offices of her old friend and mentor, Nedda Harding, she was startled to see that the lights in the reception area and hallway were already on. She knew Nedda had to be the early bird.

She shook her head ruefully as she opened the outer door-which should have been locked-walked down the hallway past the still-dark offices of Nedda's junior partners and clerks, then stopped at the open door leading to Nedda's office, and smiled. As usual, Nedda was concentrating so intensely that she was not even aware that Susan was standing there.

Nedda was frozen in her usual work pose, her left elbow on the desk, forehead resting on her palm, and her right hand poised to turn the pages of the thick file that was spread out before her. Nedda's short-clipped silver hair was already rumpled, her half glasses were slipping down her nose, and her solid body gave the impression of being ready to leap up and run. One of the most respected defense attorneys in New York, her somewhat grandmotherly appearance offered little indication of the cleverness and

aggressive energy she brought to her work, never more apparent than when she cross-examined a witness in court.

The two women had met and become friends ten years ago at NYU, when Susan was a twenty-two-year-old second-year law student and Nedda was a guest lecturer. In her third year, Susan had scheduled her classes so that she could work two days a week clerking for Nedda.

All her friends, Nedda being the only exception, had been shocked when, after two years in the Westchester County District Attorney's office, Susan quit her job as assistant D.A. to go back to school and earn her doctorate in psychology. "It's something I have to do," was her only explanation at the time.

Sensing Susan's presence in her doorway, Nedda looked up. Her smile was brief but warm. "Well, look who's here. Good weekend, Susan, or should I ask?"

Nedda knew about both Sulky's party and Susan's mother's anniversary.

"It was predictable," Susan said wryly. "Dee got to Mom's house on Saturday, and the two of them ended up sobbing their hearts out. I told Dee her depression was only making it harder for Mother to cope, and she blasted me. Said that if two years ago I had watched my husband swept to his death in an avalanche the way she had watched Jack die, I'd understand what she was going through. She also suggested that if I lent Mom a shoulder to cry on instead of always telling her to get on with her life, I'd be

a lot more help to her. When I said that my shoulder is getting arthritic from all the tears, Dee got even angrier. But at least Mom laughed.

"Then there was Dad and Binky's party," she continued. "Incidentally, Dad now requests that I call him Charles,' which says it all on that subject." She sighed deeply. "And that was my weekend. Another one like that and I'll be the one who needs counseling. But then I'm too cheap to hire a therapist, so I'll just end up talking to myself."

Nedda eyed her sympathetically. She was the only one of Susan's friends who knew the full story about Jack and Dee, and about Susan's parents and the messy divorce. "Sounds to me as though you need a survival plan," she said.

Susan laughed. "Maybe you'll come up with one for me. Just put it on my tab, good friend, along with all I owe you already for getting me the radio job. Now I'd better get going. I've got stuff to prepare before the show. And by the way-have I said thanks recently?"

A year earlier, Marge Mackin, a popular radio host and a close friend of Nedda's, had invited Susan to sit in on her program during a highly publicized trial to comment, both as a legal expert and a psychologist. The success of that first on-air visit led to regular appearances on the program, and when Marge moved on to host a television program, Susan was invited to replace her on the daily radio talk show.

"You're being silly. You wouldn't have gotten the job unless you could handle it. "You're darn good and you know it," Nedda said briskly. "Who's

your guest today?"

"This week I'll be concentrating on why women should be safety conscious in social situations. Donald Richards, a psychiatrist specializing in criminology, has written a book called *Vanishing Women*. It deals with some of the disappearances he's been involved with. Many of the cases he solved, but a number of interesting ones are still open. I read the book and it's good. He covers the background of each woman and the circumstances under which she vanished. Then he discusses the possible reasons why such an intelligent woman might get involved with a killer, followed by the step-by-step process of attempting to find out what happened to her. So we'll talk about the book and some of the more interesting cases, and then we'll generally discuss how our listeners might avoid potentially dangerous situations."

"Good subject."

"I think so. I've decided to bring up the Regina Clausen disappearance. That one always intrigued me. Remember her? I used to watch her on CNBC and thought she was great. About six years ago I used my birthday check from Dad to buy a stock she recommended. It turned into a bonanza, so I guess I feel oddly like I owe her something."

Nedda looked up, frowning. "Regina Clausen disappeared about three years ago, after disembarking from a world cruise in Hong Kong. I remember it very well. It got a lot of publicity at the time."

"That was after I left the district attorney's office," Susan said, "but I was visiting a friend when Regina Clausen's mother, Jane-she lived in Scarsdale at that time-came in to talk to the DA. to see if he could help, but there was no indication that Regina had ever left Hong Kong, so of course the Westchester County District Attorney had no jurisdiction. The poor woman had pictures of Regina and kept saying how much her daughter had looked forward to that trip. Anyhow, I've never forgotten the case, so I'll talk about it on air today."

Nedda's expression softened. "I know Jane Clausen slightly. She and I graduated from Smith the same year. She lives on Beekman Place now. She was always very quiet, and I gather Regina was also very shy socially."

Susan raised her eyebrows. "I wish I had realized you know Mrs. Clausen. You might have been able to arrange for me to speak with her. According to my notes, Regina's mother had no inkling that her daughter might be involved with someone, but if I could get her to talk about it, something that didn't seem important at the time might come out and provide some clues."

Nedda frowned in concentration. "Maybe it's not too late. Doug Layton is the Clausen family lawyer. I've met him several times. I'll call him at nine and see if he'll put us in touch with her."

At ten after nine, the intercom on Susan's desk buzzed. It was Janet, her secretary. "Douglas Layton, an attorney, is on line one. Brace yourself, Doctor. He doesn't sound happy."