

DANTE'S
WOOD

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LYNNE RAIMONDO

A MARK ANGELOTTI NOVEL



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To my parents

*“Nel mezzo de camin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
ché la diritta via era smaritta.”*

(Midway in the journey of our life
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.)

—Dante Alighieri, *Inferno I*
(Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander,
Doubleday, 2000)

ONE

There was no arguing with the file. Several inches thick and stamped *Confidential*, it sat on my boss's desk like a fresh indictment. In my spare time—I had a lot of it in those days—I relived the contents again and again, treating each chapter like evidence in a trial, searching for a sign that the jury was still out. But as any good lawyer will tell you, evidence seldom leads us to the truth. Even then, more than a year after the slipup that started the whole mess, after the blood tests and the endless examinations, after the weeks of waiting and the final crashing verdict, I still hadn't given up hope.

Septimus Brennan turned the pages slowly.

"Am I allowed one final appeal?"

"Not yet," he said. "When I'm done reading."

While he continued his inspection, I took a mental tour of my surroundings. A few yards to my right, a tall window illuminating a collection of carefully tended miniature bonsai. Directly in front of me, Sep bent over the file, wearing as usual a starched jacket and a tie dating back to the Reagan era. On the wall behind him, a display of African tribal masks bearing an uncanny resemblance to their owner. One of them was always scolding me with a mouth shaped like a big *O*, as though I'd just been caught stealing from a piggy bank. Or, in this case, my employer's payroll.

Sep stopped over the most recent entry. Dated less than a month ago, it ended on a typically negative note. "According to this, nothing's changed," he said, making it sound like an accusation.

I roused myself and shrugged. "You were expecting a brand new me?"

"No, I suppose not." He replaced the paper with a sigh. "But I *was* hoping for a better excuse."

"It's only until the end of the year. I promise I'll be ready by then."

"By the end of the year, I'll have to get down on my knees and beg them to keep you."

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it? I mean, with your arthritis?" Sep made a show of clearing his throat and I thought maybe I'd gone too far. "Besides," I added, "it's not like I'm guilty of extortion. You'd think I was making it all up." Beneath the desk, where I hoped he couldn't see it, my right leg was twitching like the needle on a polygraph.

"No one's accusing you of that. However . . ."

"Go ahead. My skin's pretty thick these days."

"Some have questioned your, ah, sincerity."

"Who? The tyrants upstairs?" Feigning outrage, I waved imprecisely at the file. "Have any of them bothered to read what's in there? Or were they expecting me to do it for them?"

"There's no need to gild the lily. I have the lab reports right in front of me."

"Then why are we still here?"

"I'm waiting for you to give me something I can sell. Put it in terms of a formal history if that helps."

My leg was really going now, so I crossed it over the other and pretended to study the toe of my shoe. It's an old psychiatrist's trick, one I had often used myself: asking the patient to describe himself in the third person. But knowing just what Sep was up to didn't make me feel any better about misleading him. Despite the Dr. Gillespie exterior, Sep was essentially a soft touch who had hired me two years before on the strength of my résumé, with few questions asked about why someone in my seemingly enviable position would suddenly decide to quit and start all over. In the months that followed, I repaid the favor by doing everything possible to challenge the wisdom of his decision, and while I wasn't *technically* responsible for the events that brought us together that afternoon, I still thought I owed him something better.

I sneaked another pass at my watch. It was nearing 4:00 p.m. and a shift change, when the hospital corridors would take on the urgency of a big game stampede. I figured most of the people rushing for the door

would pretend not to see me, but a few brave souls, stirred by sympathy or a sense of fair play, would stop to ask how I was doing. The thought of being trapped in one of these exchanges was enough to make me volunteer for group therapy, so I gamely forged ahead.

“Very well. Our subject today—let’s call him Patient M—is a forty-seven-year-old male employed as a clinical psychiatrist at a large urban teaching hospital. For the better part of a year, M has been on leave of absence following the sudden onset of a rare medical condition, the effects of which are considered by most members of society—with the apparent exception of M’s employer—to impose significant restraints on the patient’s lifestyle and to require a prolonged period of adjustment and rehabilitation.”

I stopped and asked how I was doing so far.

“A little self-serving, but go on.”

“Since that time, M has secluded himself at home and avoided contact with the community at large, except when he is putting in appearances with his social worker or relearning how to cross a street. Although M has been cooperating with his treatment regimen and is making steady forward progress, he has thus far resisted returning to work, insisting he needs more time to become accustomed to his new routines. M’s immediate superior”—here I nodded in Sep’s direction—“while claiming to be sympathetic to M’s circumstances, has imposed a deadline for said return that M considers both unrealistic and punitive.”

Sep made a noise suspiciously like a snort, but didn’t rein me in.

“M has been referred to Chicago Kaiser psychiatric staff for evaluation of suspected malingering. Upon physical examination, M is found to be in general good health, apart from a neuropathology of known origin that is anticipated to persist—” I stopped again, feeling a familiar rise in my throat. “How much longer do I have to keep this up?”

“A little longer,” Sep said.

“—to persist for the rest of M’s life. M is observed to speak candidly about his condition, to acknowledge its frustrations without hesitation or embarrassment, and to be at ease interacting with others who resist the impulse to treat him like a toddler. Fortunately for M, he did not

choose surgery as a specialty, and with certain adaptations not relevant here, should be able to resume the role of a treating physician once he and his superior have agreed upon a more suitable timetable. Done?"

"Hardly. You haven't said anything about M's psychological factors."

"M denies he has any fears about coming back."

"You don't say."

This wasn't going as well as I'd hoped. "OK. How's this, then—when pressed, M admits he is experiencing . . . some minor anxiety of a clinically insignificant nature."

"Is that the best you can come up with?"

"*Jesus, Sep,*" I blurted out, more loudly than I wanted to. "Do I really have to spell it out for you?"

"Good. You're getting angry."

"Is that what this is all about?" I nearly shouted. "Getting me to admit I'm not happy about . . . this?" I steadied myself and sniffed. "I hope you're not going to start parroting that crap about the five stages of grief."

"No. But let me give you my differential diagnosis, so you'll understand why I'm not letting you off the hook."

He paused, allowing me to locate the cane that had slipped from under my foot and rolled somewhere off to the side. I retrieved it and propped it against my shoulder, hoping the picture thus presented might lead to a less protracted sermon.

He began on an uncharacteristically benign note. "M came to this hospital two years ago with glowing recommendations and a solid record of publication. M quickly lived up to his credentials, and in the opinion of a majority of his colleagues, including this supervisor, is a physician of rare skill and insight."

I squirmed under the compliment, which I took to be an effort to soften me up.

"Until the appearance of his illness, M was a diligent worker who did not shy away from challenge and at times appeared to embrace it with excessive enthusiasm." Here Sep let off a little cough. "However, M displays a sharp tendency to overrate his own judgment, and a corre-

sponding resistance to being told what to do, which often causes him to cling to positions long after others would have been persuaded, in deference to their superiors, to abandon them.” I bristled at this, but it was true. “In other words,” Sep said, “he is damned stubborn.”

He went on, warming to his task. “Coworkers have noted that M rarely seeks the advice of others, and when convinced he is right—which is to say, most of the time—can be rather outspoken about his views. Outside of his patients, M tends to be unforgiving of human error, which on occasion has resulted in a failure of empathy and strained relations with his peers—”

“I thought you agreed Jonathan’s research was flawed,” I broke in, feeling more than a little bruised by the character sketch so far. Sep was referring to an incident, a month after I’d joined his staff, in which I’d questioned the methodology of a five-year-long study by one of the department’s top grant-getters. My criticisms had been justified and later vindicated by peer review, but they had earned me the eternal animosity of the study’s author, whom I regarded as professionally overrated and an officious little prick.

Sep replied unperturbedly, “After you showed me why, I did. Though you could have been more tactful in making your case. But to continue, all of the aforesaid traits are indicative of an individual who values his independence highly, who prefers doing things his own way, and who would understandably feel stress, if not panic, at being perceived as—”

I knew where this was headed and cut him off again.

“‘Perceived’ is one way of putting it. Anyway, if that’s your thinking, why does it surprise you I want more time?”

Sep said, “I’m not finished. Fortunately for M, his superior has a high opinion of M’s ability to perform under adverse conditions, is under continuous pressure to meet budget goals by trimming unproductive staff, and cannot afford to let a talented younger associate—and, I like to think, friend—wallow indefinitely in self-pity while he continues to shirk work he could easily do blindfolded—”

“Very amusing,” I muttered.

“—particularly when M denies any psychological effects stemming from his regrettable . . .”



I'll spare you the rest of the lecture, which went on for another thirty minutes and ended, more or less, in Sep agreeing to another few weeks, and me agreeing to think about it. Finally released from my little circle of hell, I was just starting down the hall when my old friend and partner in insubordination, Josh Goldman, bounded up to me. Josh is a short, bearded fellow with a belly that would tempt you to rub it for good luck and the smile to go with it. I'd expected that he or one of his operatives would be doing eavesdropping duty in the coffee lounge nearby so they could report on the score from time to time. Sep and I had intentionally spoken in lowered tones to keep the office gossips nimble.

“Mark,” Josh said innocently, like he was just there by accident. “You're still here.” His voice quickly dropped to a whisper. “How did it go?”

“Major carnage,” I said. “He's threatening to call in hospital counsel.”

“Septic wouldn't do that.”

“I don't know. The old bastard sounded serious.”

“You've got nothing to worry about,” Josh assured me. “There isn't a lawyer in America who would give the OK to firing you. I can just see the headlines now.”

“That *is* what worries me. You up for another cup of coffee?”

“How'd you know I just had one?”

“I can smell it on your breath.”

“OK, but now that you mention Breathalyzers, you look like you could use something stiffer.”

“Our usual joint?” I said, brightening at the thought.

“Where else? I'll grab my jacket and meet you by the elevator.” He stopped short. “That is, unless you want me to take you over there.”

I shot him my best withering look.

Getting into the elevator we bumped into Jonathan Frain—literally in my case—the guy whose study I’d trashed.

“Love the new fashion statement, Angelotti,” he said, referring to the big white stick I was toting at my side. “But isn’t it a bit tall for you?”

“There’s a reason for that,” I said, pushing past him into the car. “It’s supposed to keep me from running into assholes.”



When Josh and I rolled up to the Lucky Leprechaun a little later it was almost silent, in the dead zone just before happy hour. The Double L, as I call it, is my favorite dive, a traditional Chicago tavern where the Christmas tinsel hasn’t come down since the elder Daley left office, the floor underfoot feels like superglue, and the management frowns on anything more exotic than Old Style. As best I can tell, it staves off insolvency only because of its proximity to the hospital where Josh and I work. Inside, the place was close and dim and smelled of old stogies, an aroma that was still hanging around long after the city council outlawed smoking indoors. It was just the therapy I needed. I let go of Josh’s elbow, trailed him over to our usual booth in the back, and sidled in.

“First round’s on me,” Josh said. “What’ll it be?”

“Whatever they’re trying to pass off as bourbon today.”

While Josh was off getting our drinks I stared into space and listened to the Cubs’ one o’clock start on the television set over the bar. It was the usual demoralizer. A four-run lead until the bottom of the seventh, when the shortstop had blown an easy grounder up left field. In the natural order of things this was followed by two walks, a grand slam homer, and another three RBIs before the inning mercifully ended on a pop-up over the mound. The Cubs had rallied to tie the score in the eighth, only to fall behind again in the ninth. Now, with one out left to go, the score stood at 10–8, with players cooling their heels on second and third. It was the kind of game that reminded me why I’d

stuck it out as a New York fan after moving to Chicago, in certain quarters an allegiance considered only marginally less belligerent than the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was only recently, in fact, that I'd felt safe wearing my '69 World Series cap outdoors again.

Josh returned some five minutes later, slid my glass over the table, and said, "Jesus sends his regards." Jesus was not an emissary from heaven, but the strapping Columbian who tended bar on alternate weeknights and worked a sideline as a sales representative for the colorful girls who closed the late-night shift. I turned in his general vicinity and waved.

"*Hola, amigo*," Jesus called out in reply. "*¿Que tal?*"

"*Como veas*," I said, with a shift of my shoulders. "*¿Y tu?*"

Jesus and I exchanged small talk over the chatter of Len Kasper and his fellow jesters—improbably, the Cubs had moved ahead again—while I sipped at my drink. I don't speak much Spanish, but it's similar enough to Italian that I can get by, which comes in handy when my housekeeper, Marta, periodically decides she doesn't understand English anymore. We went on until Jesus had to turn his attention to a loud group that had just wandered in the door.

"He wants to fix you up with someone," Josh said.

"So that's it. I wondered why it was taking you so long to come back with our drinks. Don't tell me it's one of his accounts. I think my Hep. B is out of date."

"No. A cousin of his. She's got a brother with your issue, so he figures she'll know what to do."

"That's disgusting," I said.

"I don't mean sex—I mean the other stuff."

"Great. So now I should seek out dates based on whether they would make good Labrador retrievers."

"Don't be like that. Jesus just wants to help you out."

"I'll bet. She's probably three hundred pounds and has a harelip."

"I don't think so. Jesus says she's a lawyer."

"Which, everyone knows, is incompatible with being fat and ugly. Besides, I don't need that kind of complication in my life right now."

“I agree with you about women being complicated,” Josh said, finally taking the hint that I wasn’t interested in becoming one of Jesus’s experiments in noncommercial matchmaking. “You remember that orange juice we bought last weekend?”

“Sure. Was something wrong with it? Tasted OK to me.”

“That’s because you couldn’t read the packaging. I was supposed to get the fresh-squeezed, Vitamin A and D added, low acid, reduced sugar, lots of pulp kind.”

“I take it that’s not what we got.”

“Low acid wasn’t on my list. But I was supposed to remember anyway.”

Josh and I continued to chat about the intricacies of the female mind until the Cubs game ended, as I’d predicted, with a loss, and the Channel 9 Evening News came on. The lead story was a human-interest item about the birth of a baby giraffe at the Lincoln Park Zoo. I assumed this meant there were no murders, arsons, or tornadoes to pump up Nielsen ratings that afternoon. The Double L was starting to fill, and I had just turned my attention to the more interesting human-interest stories going on around us when a news flash came on. I was wrong about there being nothing gruesome to report on:

“Police are still declining to release details in the fatal stabbing of Gloria Jackson, whose body was discovered at six o’clock this morning in a DePaul neighborhood alley, the latest in a series of slayings that are already being compared to the killing spree of mass murderer Richard Speck.

“The deaths of two other nurses, also occurring in the early-morning hours, appear to be the handiwork of the same killer, who is believed to be a male in his early twenties based upon the description of an eyewitness who reportedly observed him fleeing the scene. All three victims were hospice workers at area nursing homes, and police speculate that revenge for the death of a loved one may be a motive in the killings.

“Today Jackson, age twenty-eight, was remembered by family and coworkers as a caring professional who helped terminally ill patients make it through their darkest hours . . .”

The broadcast switched to footage of Jackson's parents, who could be heard sobbing on the screen.

"Ugh," Josh said. "That could be my daughter in a few years."

I downed the rest of my drink in a gulp.

"Makes you consider how random life is," Josh continued. "You know, I've always thought that had to be the worst—burying your own child. I don't see how you ever get over it."

I mumbled something about not having an opinion.

"That's a first. Sometimes I envy you still being a bachelor. You were never tempted?"

"Who would put up with me?"

Josh laughed, a little too heartily. "I see your point. Buy us another?"

"I'll get them," I said, suddenly feeling an overwhelming need to be on my feet.

On my way over to the bar, I wished I'd come clean with him. The trouble was, I wouldn't have known where to begin.