

MURDER AT THE SEXI

CHAPTER ONE

A Bowl of Cherries

Mid-October, 1973

Even before the plane took off, Jonathan Cole had a headache. It was the first one in months, and he was as much upset by the idea that anxiety could still cause him a headache, as he was by the pain itself. He withdrew a bottle of aspirin from his bag stuffed under the seat in front of him. After swallowing two pills, he leaned back and waited for them to do their job.

“I’m Elizabeth Smith,” said the woman sitting next to Cole.

“Jonathan Cole.”

Before the tip of Long Island was out of sight, Cole had learned that Elizabeth Smith was forty-one, a geriatric social worker from Madison, Wisconsin, and had been divorced for two years. They were on the same three week excursion to Spain.

Cole would have preferred to be alone. Be congenial, he told himself. Elizabeth Smith has good eyes, good skin, and could prove to be an interesting woman. Nevertheless, he searched the interior of the 747 for a vacant seat.

“Ever been to Spain?” asked Smith, who, without waiting for an answer, narrated to Cole that she and Harry, her ex, had made the trip ten years ago. “Leave it to Harry to become ill with the German measles in Madrid. Who would have expected that moron doctor to report Harry to the

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authorities?” As a result, they had been quarantined in their hotel for a week. By the time Harry had recovered, they had been able to spend only two hours at the Prado before returning to Wisconsin.

“Too bad,” she added, “it was one of the few times we took a vacation together.” She slid her magazine into the pocket in the back of the seat in front of her and put her glasses into her purse.

Cole told her that it was his first trip to Spain. He remembered the way Susan, with her unflinching hatred of all that smacked of injustice, would grimace when dictatorship countries like Spain and Portugal had been mentioned as vacation possibilities.

“Are you on the tour?” asked Smith.

“Yes.”

“Then I guess we’ll be staying at the same hotel.”

“I don’t think so.”

Cole had already decided to leave the tour and rent a car and drive up the coast. It was to be a vacation without a plan. If things didn’t work out, he’d catch up with the tour. Otherwise, he’d join with them at the airport for the return trip. He didn’t want to explain it to her, and decided not to try.

“Oh.” She seemed slightly bewildered. “Are you meeting someone?”

“I just thought it might be fun to travel around by myself.”

“Are you married?”

“No,” he said too quickly. He saw the disbelieving look. Some men always looked married. “My wife died six months ago.”

How easily he had made that pronouncement. Jacoby would probably have told him that he was finally coming to grips with a reality that he had, for too long, refused to accept.

But then, what did Jacoby know? Did Dr. Jacoby ever live with a woman as good as Susan, and watch her waste

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away until there was only her beautiful face to remind him of the girl he had loved for more than twenty years.

Cole would roam the house when he wasn't staring out the window of his bedroom. For hours he'd look at the naked branches springing from the tall oaks and maples in his backyard. Behind the trees were acres of untouched fields owned by a retired farmer. Cole and Susan would tell those friends who still lived in the city that they had bought this house because they couldn't see another house from their bedroom window. Having escaped the closeness and the noises of the city hardly seemed to matter now without Susan to share it with him.

Occasionally the housekeeper bothered him. "It isn't good, doctor, for you to do nothing." Hortense spoke English with the melodic rhythms of a person whose origins were from the Barbados, and Cole often had trouble understanding her. Still, his underwear and socks would wind up in the correct drawers in his bureau, and the meals she cooked, while sometimes too spicy, were more edible than those he ate by himself at the diner on Route 22.

Cole knew that in time the pain would abate, but for now, what was the rush about resuming his practice? Sam was covering for him. Who was he hurting if he wanted to hang around his home and stare out the window?

Elizabeth Smith leaned back against the seat. "After Harry and I split up, I went back to school and got my Master's. No sense brooding while Harry was swinging with every co-ed on campus." She became reflective before going on: "My clients are old, dying people. Nobody gives a damn about them. They lie around in homes for the aged and wilt away like dried-up plants. The problem with life is death. You grow old; you worry about your turn, and the next thing you know you've got high blood pressure. Vacations—that's the secret. Lots of them. Get away from the misery."

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Her voice was slightly high-pitched, though it possessed a certain melodiousness that appealed to Cole. Maybe he wouldn't meet a better woman during the three weeks of his vacation. Wasn't that one of the reasons he was making the trip—to meet a woman? If he were to judge from what Jacoby preached to him, that without a regular diet of the opposite sex one was doomed to mutate into a curiosity.

"Harry's a drinker," said Elizabeth Smith. "I could have put up with his harmless little sexual forays, but not the drinking. It was like living with a time bomb."

She pulled her magazine back out of the rack in front of her and put on her glasses. She thumbed through several pages before dropping the magazine into her lap. "In Torremolinos, they booked us at the Las Patas. The brochure says it's a three star hotel. I think they could have done a little better, though the agent assured us it was first rate."

He'd drive up the coast slowly, without care. If he came to a town he liked, he'd stay for a day or two. He'd walk along the beach, stare at the sea, try to think about nothing, not about his patients, his two teenage children, the unhappy months since Susan's death. Maybe he'd do a little snorkeling and get himself back into shape. Well, maybe he'd snorkel, and maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd just lie on the sand and let the sun warm his body. The point was—he wasn't making plans.

"How long are you going to mope around the house?"
Larry asked him.

Larry was sixteen, but with his dark, brooding eyes and heavy, black eyebrows, he seemed older. "I don't know," Cole said to his son.

"You're depressing me and Connie."

"I'm sorry," said Cole. "I know it hasn't been easy for you kids. Give me a little more time."

If he could only get a decent night's sleep.

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He'd lie on his side of the king-sized bed and listen for the hum of the electric clock, for the forced hot air being driven through the heating ducts, for the dead leaves blowing against the attached garage. His toes would dig into the sheets. Reflexively, he'd stretch his arms across the empty part of the bed and search for Susan. He'd flip on the FM radio and listen to music or sip a glass of wine and try to read, but his eyes would soon grow weary.

He couldn't concentrate on the written word; other men's thoughts passed through his mind swiftly, without leaving the slightest residue behind. Twenty years of harmony—everything had been perfect. It was supposed to have gone on forever. He felt cheated.

Without being invited, Sam Weiss drove over one evening after office hours. Cole and Weiss had first met at college twenty-five years ago. After attending different medical schools, they did their internships and residencies in internal medicine at the same hospital and decided to go into practice together. Their wives were the best of friends, and their children were like cousins. They covered for each other on weekends and holidays, and seldom would a day pass without their speaking to each other.

"I don't want any lectures," Cole said. "I get them from my children and from the maid. I just want a little time to think things through."

"How much time is a little?" asked Weiss.

Cole shrugged. "I don't know."

"Did you plant that tumor in Susan's kidney? And are you now going to allow yourself to go down the drain because you didn't have the power to cure her? You look like hell! I'll bet you've lost fifteen pounds."

"I'm only asking to be left alone for a while."

"In the meantime, I'm working myself to death covering for you."

Cole turned and faced Sam. Sam Weiss was more than a brother, but even the best of friends can get on your

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nerves. “You’d think I was asking for the moon,” Cole said.

“Don’t expect me to be kind. You’re hurting a lot of people—your children, your patients. Not to mention me.” Weiss stood up and pointed a finger at Cole. “I’ve made an appointment for you to see Ben Jacoby tomorrow. Nine sharp! I’ve already cancelled my morning patients and am driving you there myself, so don’t keep me waiting.”

At their first session, Cole told Jacoby that he couldn’t sleep because he was used to sleeping with Susan. He didn’t think he was all that deranged because he was taking longer to adjust than everyone thought he ought to.

“Why did you agree to come here?” Jacoby asked.

“It was Sam’s idea.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I feel that I can work things out for myself. Emotional breakdowns aren’t unusual after the death of a wife, a parent, or a child. I’ve seen it happen to my own patients. So it’s happening to me. Things will make sense in time, with or without therapy. It’s like when we deal with herpetic sores: we say they disappear with treatment in a week, and without treatment in seven days.”

“You’re no herpetic sore,” Jacoby said. “You may not be as tough as you think you are. How are your children managing?”

“Sometimes I hear Connie crying in bed. I go to her and we cry together. It isn’t fair to be fourteen and lose your mother.”

“And your son?”

“He holds it in. I worry about him a lot.”

“How do they react to your depression?”

“At times they get angry at me. They want me to pretend that everything’s okay and I should go back to being the same person I was before their mother died.”

“They need you to be strong for them.”

“A good night’s sleep would help.”

“Prescribe yourself something.”

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“I don’t want to develop drug dependencies.”

“How about other women? It’s almost three months since your wife died.”

“I’m not interested.”

“You never fantasize?”

“I didn’t say I was a eunuch.”

“One day you’re going to have to take a chance on a new relationship.”

“You think it’s going to take another women to cure my insomnia?”

“What do you think?”

“How about my children? How are they going to react when they find out that their father is running around with other women?”

“Talk to them first. You might be surprised.”

“They’ve been hurt enough. I don’t need to make it any worse for them. Maybe in a couple months, I’ll feel differently.”

“People change,” Elizabeth Smith was saying. “When you’re young, you think life is going to be one big bowl of cherries. I don’t mean to complain. It took me fifteen years in a rotten marriage, plus two long years on my own, to finally become a person I don’t mind living with. Now that’s worth something, don’t you think?”

During the movie Cole dozed. When he awakened, his headache was gone. He looked to his left and saw Elizabeth Smith sleeping peacefully, the magazine lying on her lap, her glasses on top of the magazine. She snorted with every third breath, a minor cracking sound that might have ruined a good night’s sleep for someone with Cole’s sleeping habits. A deviated septum, he diagnosed, but probably not severe enough to bother correcting surgically.

How would it be with Elizabeth Smith?

The snow had melted and the fields behind Cole’s house had turned a thick brown. In another month, they

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would be full and green. He missed hearing the sounds of birds and decided to take a walk.

The next day he went back to his office and began treating patients. He thought it might be difficult in the beginning, but, after the first hour, he knew he'd be okay.

One evening, at the suggestion of a divorced friend, he drove into New York and spent several hours with a group called PWP, Parents Without Partners. The group was mostly middle-aged females. Cole drank coffee and ate cookies and listened to a lecture by a psychologist—Learning to Cope.

After the lecture, a heavy-set woman with clear, intelligent eyes cornered him. She said she was an accountant. Had he incorporated yet? Was he aware of the advantages of professional corporations? Instead of shelling out a fortune in taxes to Uncle, he could be stashing most of it away in a tax-free pension plan. In ten years he'd have enough to retire. She talked slowly, deliberately, and her smiles were like punctuation marks at the end of each sentence.

He walked her to her car. She had driven in from Ridgewood. She said her children were old enough to take care of themselves.

"Mine are too," said Cole, looking for a common denominator on which to broaden the relationship. As she slid behind the driver's seat, he found himself staring at her big, comfortable ass.

"My husband is living with an Iranian belly dancer," she said without cracking a smile. "The divorce won't be final for another month, so I have to be careful." She hesitated before adding, "But we could meet in the city for dinner. You might even want to get involved in a profit-sharing plan." She winked and drove off.

"I decided not to call her," he said to Jacoby during their next session.

"Why not? You admit you were attracted to her."

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“I was forcing myself. I don’t think I can have sex with a woman unless I love her.”

“Are you sure?”

Two weeks later, a friend of a friend arranged for Cole to spend an evening with a call girl in a New York hotel. Reluctantly, Cole agreed. The girl was a young Puerto Rican and though Cole found himself attracted to her thin, dark face and large, seductive eyes, he was unable to achieve an erection.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s not your fault.”

“Not to worry. “We try something else. You relax. I make you happy.”

Cole tried to imagine the prostitute was a young Susan. When he opened his eyes, he saw the long black hair of the girl curtaining the vision. It appeared as if the girl’s face and the lower part of his body had been joined, framed by the hair. The image reminded him of a Munch lithograph, “The Vampire”, which he had viewed with Susan six months before at the Art Museum in Princeton. In the lithograph, the woman’s face was pressed against the man’s neck, her black hair flowing across his head and back like the tentacles of an octopus. Susan had been intrigued by the painting. Cole remembered having to support her as they wandered about the museum and wondering if this might be the last time they would ever walk through an art museum together.

Cole told Jacoby about the incident with the call girl.

“I knew it wasn’t going to work, even before we started. If I don’t have any sexual feelings, why should I try to generate them—even if you say that I’m repressing them?”

“When the right woman comes along, your penis will get fed up with your brain and start issuing a few directives of its own.”

“I can wait. In the meantime, if you have no objections, I’m going to concentrate on taking care of my patients and my children.”

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Jacoby issued a rare smile. "No objections," he said.

As they were passing through customs at Málaga Airport, Cole said goodbye to Elizabeth Smith. She reminded him again that the tour would be stopping at the Las Patas for the first five days. When she moved away to take her place with the excursion group, Cole felt a small twinge of regret.

At the Hertz desk, Cole discovered that it was impossible to rent a car with an automatic transmission. "I haven't driven a stick shift in years," he said to the young woman.

Since the woman's English didn't include the word "stick shift," and she had never driven a car with an automatic transmission, she seemed baffled by his complaint.

"You wish to rent Seāt one-twenty seven, or one-twenty four?" She pointed to the rate schedule on the countertop.

"What is a seat? Is that a car?"

"Pronounced *See-at*. *Este es el major carro Español*. Best Spanish car. How do you say? *Fue hecho en Italia*. They make in *Italia*. Same as Fiāt."

"Does your Seāt have an automatic transmission?"

"We no have that model, *señor*."

"In New York they said they had reserved me a car with an automatic transmission."

"You have car in New York?"

"I arranged to rent the car I am going to drive in Spain in New York." Cole articulated each word as if he were speaking to a lip-reading, deaf mute.

"You drive a car in Spain to New York?"

To the woman's relief, Cole signed the rental papers. As she was stamping a receipt, he looked around and observed a tall young man with a full black beard standing against the wall. The man was staring at Cole.

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“Please wait,” said the rental agent. “I telephone for your car.”

Cole avoided the man’s stare, looking beyond him through the terminal window. In the distance the brown land was flat and barren, extending for miles until it reached a succession of small, sharply delineated mountains. He had expected Spain to be greener.

The stranger approached Cole. “Do you mind if I talk to you?” He was carrying a knapsack and a canvas bag, which he dropped at his feet. The bag made a sharp, wooden thud as it landed on the floor. He extended his right hand. “Philip Poolen,” he said in a slight accent that Cole couldn’t distinguish.

“What is it you want?” Cole asked. Poolen’s fingers were calloused and strong; most of his fingernails were partially black. Cole refused the handshake.

Poolen grinned, then dropped his hand. He was dressed in a dirty, brown sweatshirt and faded, blue jeans torn at the pockets. Beneath the heavy beard was a narrow, taut face. Cole judged him to be in his late twenties.

“I heard you talking to the girl,” Pollen said. “I need a ride up the coast.”

“Sorry, but I’m traveling alone.”

“I can drive a stick.”

Poolen glanced down the long hallway toward the main entrance to the terminal. Several policemen were idling in front of the doors, automatic weapons slung across their shoulders.

“I could use the ride,” Poolen said. “I’d be willing to pay for it.”

“Why don’t you rent a car yourself?”

Poolen shrugged. “Who’s going to rent me a car?”

“You’ve got a point.” Cole’s eyes fell on Poolen’s dusty brown boots. “What’s inside the bag?”

Poolen reached down and untied the bag’s cord, then removed a rough wooden sculpture of two gigantic buttocks.

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“The Cosmic Eye,” Poolen said with a grin.

“I’d be careful if I were you. The Cosmic Eye looks like a bomb inside that bag.”

Cole had also noticed the policemen. Their stiff gray triangular hats reminded him of pictures he had seen of Spanish militia in books on the Spanish Civil War.

Poolen tilted back his long, thin neck and laughed cynically.

The Hertz woman walked over and told Cole that his car was waiting in front of the terminal. Cole picked up his suitcases.

“Will you give me the hitch?” Poolen asked again, shoving the sculpture back into the bag.

“How far up the coast are you going?”

“To Almuñécar.”

Cole pulled out his map and drew a line with a pencil. “I thought I’d go the other way—toward Marbella.”

“Strictly tourists,” Poolen’s tone was dogmatic and irritated Cole.

“I’m just not interested in being with anyone.” Cole folded the map in quarters and tucked it into his back pocket.

“After Almuñécar, you can cut through the mountains and head up towards Granada.” Poolen pointed east. “Spain is that way, man.”

“Sorry,” Cole said.

Poolen inched closer to Cole. He was a few inches taller, though Cole was the huskier. “Goddamnit, man, I need that ride,” Poolen whispered. He put his hands on his hips and faced Cole squarely.

Cole brushed by him and followed the Hertz woman past the cops, through the exit and out onto the street where the Seāt was waiting for him. The woman handed him the keys and he opened the trunk and tossed his bags inside it.

“Everything all right, *señor*?” the woman asked.

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Cole had moved into the driver's seat and begun to practice shifting. "There's no air conditioning," he said. "I was promised air conditioning."

"Air conditioning?" the woman shrugged. "I hope you have very happy trip," she said. "Please drive with care. Sometimes Spanish roads not so good."

She went back into the terminal, leaving Cole to ponder if somewhere along the line the Liberty travel agent hadn't misunderstood his vacation needs.