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Case of Lies

Perri O'Shaughnessy

Published by Piatkus Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2006 by
Piatkus Books Ltd of
5 Windmill Street, London W1T 2JA
email: info@piatkus.co.uk

First published in the United States in 2005
by Delacorte Press, A Division of Random House, Inc.
New York, New York

The moral right of the author has been asserted

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7499 3682 7

Data manipulation by
Phoenix Photosetting, Chatham, Kent

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham Ltd, Kent

PART ONE

The behavior of fundamental particles is essentially random.

—Heisenberg

Chapter 1

Nina Reilly lay on her stomach, her eyes closed, a white washcloth draped over her backside. The endless mental lists had fled from her head, lulled by Chelsi's electronic ambient music and her soothing hands on Nina's back. Now Nina kept slipping into a snooze, the kind where you disappear and then snap back your head as your senses return.

Let's see, she had dreamed a little dream about an old woman approaching, babbling something. This apparition had a dreadful aspect, as though if Nina ran away she would become gigantic and even more frightening. She kept coming closer, the hideous old witch, whispering so low Nina couldn't quite—then she understood, and deep dream relief came over her.

All the old lady wanted was a piggyback ride, then she'd go away. Nina crouched and the old lady hopped on—

"Lots of my clients take naps," Chelsi said as the snap thing happened and Nina's eyes jerked open.

"And miss the whole massage? No way," Nina said.

"Your body will remember."

"Big deal. This is too good to spend asleep."

"We could talk a little if you want. Some people just like to relax." She was stroking Nina's sides, almost lifting her up from the table, her hands strong and the points of her fingernails digging in now and then. Chelsi was a tall ponytailed girl in her early twenties, and the smile she always wore seemed to be for real.

"You talk," Nina said. "I'll just moan here and there."

"All right. Let's see. Well, last week when I worked on you for the first time, I thought, She's somebody. I even thought you might have used a fake name. That would have been fine, by the way. LeAnn Rimes came here when she was appearing at Caesars last year and wrote down that she was somebody named Ms. Exter. It's not an insurance situation, so who cares what you want to call yourself?"

Chelsi waited, but her hands kept working and Nina didn't respond.

"Dr. Whittaker sends me all his headaches. He says ninety percent of the time it's tension and he says I have good hands. He comes to me himself. Oops, I'm not supposed to say that. Anyway, my dad says I got the curious gene. He says I ought to be a detective. Wow, you are so tight around the neck."

"Mmm."

"For instance," Chelsi said, then pressed hard, her hands making tiny squeezing motions on the back of Nina's neck. She was using kukui-nut oil to baste her. One could die at the beginning of the hour and Chelsi would never know it until her chime went off. "I'm gonna say you're a swimmer."

"Whenever I can," Nina managed to say.

Chelsi laughed in delight. "I knew because you have these excellent muscles in your shoulders, square shoulders and a tiny waist. A swimmer's back. I am so good. Now, your neck, I've seen

that a lot with people with big pressures at work. Last week when I did that scalp massage you practically melted. It's definitely the cause of your headaches. That or your eyes. I'll work on them in a minute.

"And then there's this." Chelsi's finger delicately traced the scar along Nina's side, still sore after almost three years. "You don't have to tell me or anything. I'm putting oil on it because you may not have incorporated that place back into your body and you need to have it witnessed. It's part of you and it's nice and neat—"

"It's ugly, come on." Nina's voice came out harsh.

"Never mind, I'll move on, just let me touch it again next week, okay?"

"It's an exit-wound scar," Nina said. "From a thirty-two-caliber pistol fired by a woman in a courtroom."

"I knew. I just knew it. You're a policewoman!"

"What if I said I'm a bank robber?"

Chelsi's hands paused. "I don't believe that. It wouldn't bother me if it was true, though, I have to admit. I had a guy from Vegas in here who told me about how he embezzled from his boss at a credit agency. Even hustlers suffer from stress and hold it in their muscles. But you're not a bank robber. Your haircut is too primo. Long layers, really nice, no spray. And you don't wear much makeup. Your style is all wrong for a bank robber."

Nina didn't answer. She imagined Chelsi's big-haired mama of a bank robber.

"Let's work on your neck some more." She dug her fingers under Nina's skull at the back. It should have hurt. Instead, it was a catharsis, a stream of accumulated tension breaking up and flowing away. "You *are* kidding me, right? Although you don't work at Tahoe long before you realize we're all running some kind of hustle. Look at all the rich people who rent a garage on the Nevada side and claim they're Nevada residents so they won't

have to pay state income tax in California. I hustle a little myself. You're paying me on the cash-discount basis, right? It's a tax-free zone up here. The showgirls make so much money outside the shows doing entertaining, you wouldn't believe it. No offense, but I also know you're not a showgirl."

"Because?"

"Too petite. And, you know, not in your twenties anymore. So what do you really do?"

"Law. I'm a lawyer." The hands stopped, and Nina wondered if Chelsi would slide out of her cheerful mood. Confessing her profession at a cocktail party often resulted in a step back and eyes averted from hers, as though she'd admitted she was a hooker.

Both necessary evils, she said to herself.

But Chelsi took no offense. "Right! Nina Reilly. I read about you in the paper. You do murder trials. Keep your head down. Relax."

"I do all kinds of law work. Whatever comes through the door. Not just murder trials."

"Well, that might explain your neck. Is that where the headaches start?"

"Actually, they start right in my temples, even when I haven't been reading," Nina said.

"Let me try something," Chelsi told her. She rolled Nina over and began massaging her face, starting with her forehead and temples, circling the eye sockets with expert fingers, prodding under her jaw. "It's a Tibetan technique. Kum Nye." Again, the relief was both subtle and intense. Nina felt her jaw go slack for maybe the first time since childhood.

"You poor thing. You need to come in at least once a week for a couple of months. I can do more for you than those pills you were prescribed. You have stored-up tension everywhere."

"It's a deal," Nina muttered.

There was a long silence while Chelsi did some acupressure

on Nina's cheekbones and around her sinuses, then did that dainty pressing around her eyes again. "I'm sorry you got shot," she volunteered finally.

Nobody had ever said that to Nina at the hospital or afterward. Her brother, Matt, had been furious with her for taking the murder case in the first place. Her son, Bob, had been inarticulate with shock. She had been given flowers, kudos for catching a killer, but not a lot of sympathy. In fact, looking back, there had been a tinge of "you asked for it" in the reactions of the courtroom personnel. You take murder cases, you take your chances, was the attitude.

Nina realized that she still felt resentful about that, but even as the realization came, the resentment was going away, in waves accompanying the long strokes of Chelsi's hands.

So it was true, you did hold emotions in your muscles.

Chelsi was as healing in her speech as in her hands. She was working Nina's jaw hinges again. "Whenever you start to feel tense, yawn. Do you like what you do?"

"When I win. When I do good work."

They lapsed back into silence for some time while Nina's shoulders and biceps got a final workout, Chelsi leaning over Nina from above like an angel of mercy.

"Let's give you a foot rub. Are you good at it?"

"At what?"

"Your work."

"Yes."

"Now, see, I ask women that, and hardly ever do they say yes. The guys never hesitate. They say, 'Sure.' You're awesome to have that kind of confidence. What is it really like? I mean, really?" She oiled Nina's foot and started tweaking and pulling on her toes, as if they had muscles too.

"Practicing law? Well, a case starts with an immediate problem. Your client is in jail, or your client's about to be evicted, or

your client's marriage is falling apart. You try to organize this real-life chaos into a theory or story that calms things down and will resolve the problem in a fair and orderly way. You get all the information and you try to work the system so your client has the outcome he or she deserves."

"How do you come up with this theory?"

"You read other legal cases and try to organize the facts so that your client comes out the hero, not the villain. Then you try to convince the judge that your version is the best version. Because the other guy always has a good story, too."

"You don't try to get the client what they want?"

"Sometimes they don't know. Sometimes they are unrealistic. Sometimes the system can't give them what they deserve. All the system can really do is lock people up or transfer money around. It can't bring back a loved one, for instance, and sometimes that's all the client wants. What's the matter?" Chelsi's hands had faltered, and she sighed.

"You make me think of a loved one I lost," she said.

The chime rang.

"That darn thing," Chelsi said. She gave Nina's feet one final squeeze and said, "You take as long as you need to get dressed." The door shut behind her, the soft New Age chords switched off abruptly, and Nina, deposited back into rude reality, blinked open her eyes to a shelf of unguents and towels and strong mountain sun filtering through the pines outside Chelsi's window.

She sat up reluctantly and slid off the table. While she dressed, she thought about Chelsi. She pulled on her blue silk jacket last and brushed her hair in the mirror above the sink, then consulted her watch. Court in thirty minutes.

She opened the door.

In the cubbyhole office, Chelsi hung up the phone and said, "Feeling better?"

"Much better. There's one thing I wanted to ask you. For

about two minutes, when you were working on my face, I suddenly got the most splitting headache. Then it disappeared like air, and now I'm fine."

"That was your headache quota for the week. It let go all at once. You'll have a good week."

"Thanks. Really. I'm glad I found you. What do I owe you today?"

"Nothing."

"Excuse me?"

"Not a thing. And nothing next week, either." Chelsi folded her arms over the flowers embroidered on her smock. "I'd like to ask you a favor instead. My uncle Dave has—he needs—he has a legal thing. Would you talk to him?"

Nina put on her sunglasses and laid her business card and fifty dollars on the desk. "Like I said, Chelsi, anything that comes through the door. The first consultation is free."

"It's urgent. My dad and I have been trying to help him find a lawyer fast." *Fast* usually meant *too late.* Nina grimaced. "He's charged with a crime?"

"No! No! He was a victim. He and my aunt Sarah. Two years ago. There was a robbery in a motel they were staying at near Prize's and—and my aunt Sarah was shot." Chelsi gave Nina's body a look and Nina could almost feel her curious fingers on the scar again. "The South Lake Tahoe police couldn't find the shooter. Uncle Dave went to a lawyer who helped him file a suit against the motel. For—for—"

"Negligent security?"

"Right. Something like that. And he put in a bunch of John Does like the lawyer said, so when he found out who the robber was he could do a—"

"Substitute in the robber as a defendant," Nina said. "There must be a wrongful-death cause of action too."

"That sounds right. Even if the police didn't feel they had

enough evidence to arrest the robber, Uncle Dave could still sue him for damages. But now there's a court deadline or something where the motel is going to have the suit thrown out. Uncle Dave drinks too much, you know? He's broke and he's broken. My dad and I can put in some money to help, but—anyway, would you talk to him and look at his papers? For two massages?" She handed Nina her money back.

"I'll be getting the better of the barter," Nina said. "Have your uncle Dave call my office and set up a time with Sandy, my secretary."

"Great! My aunt Sarah was such a good person. It can't happen that the universe could let her die and not punish anyone. She was only thirty-eight, and here's the worst, it still makes me choke up to talk about it, she was pregnant. Their first baby. They had been trying so long. It makes me so sad and mad. My mother left us when I was three, and Aunt Sarah was always there for me. Anyway, I appreciate it."

"I'll see you next week, then."

"We won't talk about it during your next massage. It's bad for relaxation."

"I'm sorry about your aunt, Chelsi," Nina said.

Chelsi gave her a pained smile.

"Thanks. I can tell you mean it. I know you can't bring her back, but—anyway, thank you. Now here's your assignment for the week. Yawn whenever you feel tense," Chelsi said.