Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Cemetery Dance

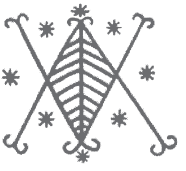
Written by Douglas Preston & Lincoln Child

Published by Orion

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CEMETERY DANCE



DOUGLAS PRESTON
& LINCOLN CHILD



1

Can you believe it, Bill? I still can't. They told me almost twelve hours ago and I still can't believe it."

"Believe it, sweet thing." William Smithback, Jr., unfolded his lanky limbs, stretched out on the living room couch, then draped one arm over his wife's shoulders. "Any more of that port?"

Nora filled his glass. He held it up to the light, admiring its garnet color. Cost him a hundred bucks—and well worth it. He sipped, exhaled. "You're a rising star at the museum. Just wait. In five years, they'll make you dean of science."

"Don't be silly."

"Nora, this is the third straight year of budget cuts—and here they've given your expedition a green light. That new boss of yours is no fool." Smithback nuzzled Nora's hair. After all this time, he still never failed to find its smell—a touch of cinnamon, a hint of juniper—arousing.

"Just think: next summer, we'll be back in Utah on a dig. That is, if you can get the time off."

"I've got four weeks coming to me. They'll miss me desperately at the *Times,* but they'll just have to make do." He took another sip, swirled the liquid around in his mouth. "Nora Kelly: expedition number three. You couldn't have asked for a better anniversary present."

Nora glanced at him sardonically. "I thought tonight's dinner was my anniversary present."

"That's right. It was."

"And it was perfect. Thanks."

Smithback winked back. He'd treated Nora to his favorite restaurant, Café des Artistes on West 67th. It was the perfect place for a romantic meal. The soft, seductive lighting; the cozy banquettes; the titillating artwork of Howard Chandler Christy—and then, on top of everything else, the sublime food.

Smithback realized Nora was looking at him. There was a promise, in those eyes and that sly smile, of another anniversary present to come. He kissed her cheek, pulled her closer.

She sighed. "They gave me every dime I asked for."

Smithback mumbled his response. He was content to snuggle with his wife and perform a mental postmortem on the meal he'd just consumed. He'd sharpened his appetite with a brace of dirty martinis, followed by a charcuterie plate. And for a main course he could never resist the steak béarnaise, rare, accompanied by *pommes frites* and a savory dollop of creamed spinach—and, of course, he'd had a hearty helping of Nora's loin of venison . . .

". . . And you know what that means? I'll be able to complete my analysis of the spread of the Kachina Cult through the Southwest."

"That's fantastic." Dessert had been chocolate fondue for two, accompanied by a plate of delightfully malodorous French cheeses. Smithback let his free hand settle lightly over his stomach.

Nora fell silent and they lay there a moment, satisfied to enjoy each other's company. Smithback stole a glance at his wife. A feeling of contentment settled over him like a blanket. He wasn't a religious man, not exactly; and yet he felt blessed to be here, in a classy apartment in the world's greatest city, holding down the job he'd always dreamed of. And in Nora, he'd found no less than the perfect companion. They'd been through a lot in the years since they'd

first met, but the trouble, and the danger, had only served to bring them closer. She was not only beautiful, svelte, gainfully and eagerly employed, immune to nagging, empathetic, intelligent—she'd also proven to be the ideal soul mate. Looking at her, he smiled despite himself. Nora was, quite simply, too good to be true.

Nora roused herself. "Can't let myself get too comfortable. Not yet, anyway."

"Why not?"

She disentangled herself and walked into the kitchen to grab her purse. "There's one more errand I have to run."

Smithback blinked. "At this hour?"

"I'll be back in ten minutes." She returned to the couch and leaned over him, one hand smoothing his cowlick as she kissed him. "Don't go anywhere, big boy," she murmured.

"Are you kidding? I'll be a regular Rock of Gibraltar."

She smiled, stroked his hair again, then headed for the front door.

"Be careful," he called after her. "Don't forget those weird little packages we've been getting."

"Don't worry. I'm a grown-up girl." A moment later, the door closed and the lock turned.

Smithback put his hands behind his head and stretched out on the sofa with a sigh. He heard her footsteps recede down the corridor; heard the chime of the elevator. Then all was quiet save for the low hum of the city outside.

He could guess where she'd gone—to the patisserie around the corner. They made his favorite specialty cakes and were open until midnight. Smithback was particularly partial to their praline génoise with calvados buttercream; with any luck, that was the cake Nora had ordered for tonight's celebration.

He lounged there, in the dimly lit apartment, listening to Manhattan breathe. The cocktails he'd consumed had slowed everything down just a little. He recalled a line from a Thurber short story:

drowsily contented, mistily contented. He had always felt an unreasoning fondness for the writings of fellow journalist James Thurber. Along with those of pulp fictioneer Robert E. Howard. One, he felt, had always tried too hard; the other, not hard enough.

For some reason, he found his thoughts spiraling back to the summer day when he'd first met Nora. All the memories returned: Arizona, Lake Powell, the hot parking lot, the big limo he'd arrived in. He shook his head, chuckling at the memory. Nora Kelly had seemed like a bitch on wheels, a freshly minted PhD with a chip on her shoulder. Then again, he hadn't exactly made a good impression, acted like a perfect ass, that was for sure. That was four years ago, or was it five . . . oh, God, had the time really gone that fast?

There was a shuffling outside the front door, then the rattle of a key in the lock. Nora, back so soon?

He waited for the door to open, but instead the key rattled again, as if Nora was having trouble with the lock. Maybe she was balancing a cake on her arm. He was about to rise to open it for her when the door creaked open and he heard steps cross the entryway.

"As promised, I'm still here," he called out. "Mr. Gibraltar. But hey, you can call me Rock."

There was another step. Somehow, it didn't sound like Nora: it was too slow and heavy, and it seemed to be shambling, as if uncertain.

Smithback sat up on the couch. A figure loomed in the small foyer, framed in the light of the corridor beyond. It was too tall and broad-shouldered to be Nora.

"Who the hell are you?" he said.

Quickly, Smithback reached for the lamp on the adjoining table, snapped it on. He recognized the figure almost immediately. Or he thought he did—there was something wrong with the face. It was ashen, puffy, almost pulpy. It looked sick . . . or worse.

"Colin?" Smithback said. "Is that you? What the hell are you doing in my apartment?"

That was when he saw the butcher knife.

In an instant he was on his feet. The figure shuffled forward, cutting him off. There was a brief, awful moment of stasis. Then the knife darted forward with terrible speed, slashing at air Smithback had occupied less than a second before.

"What the *fuck*?" Smithback yelled.

The knife shot forward again, and Smithback fell over the coffee table in a desperate attempt to avoid the blow, overturning the table as he did so. He scrambled to his feet again and turned to face his assailant, crouching low, hands apart, fingers spread and ready. Quickly, he glanced around for a weapon. Nothing. The figure stood between him and the kitchen—if he could get past, he could grab a knife, even the odds.

He ducked his head slightly, extended an elbow, and charged. The figure fell back under this attack, but at the last moment the knife hand came around, slashing at Smithback's arm and cutting a deep stripe from elbow to shoulder. Smithback wrenched to one side with a cry of surprise and pain—and as he did so he felt the exquisitely cold sensation of steel being driven deep into his lower back.

It seemed to keep sinking forever, plucking at his innermost vitals, piercing him with a pain that had been matched only once before in his life. He gasped, staggered to the floor, trying to get away; he felt the knife slip out, then plunge in again. There was a sudden wetness on his back, as if someone were pouring warm water on him.

Summoning all his strength, he rose to his feet, grabbing desperately at his attacker, pummeling him with his bare hands. The knife slashed again and again at his knuckles but Smithback no longer felt it. The figure fell back under the ferocity of his charge. This was his opportunity, and Smithback wheeled around, ready to retreat to the kitchen. But the floor seemed to be tilting crazily under his

feet, and there was now a strange boiling in his chest with every breath he took. He staggered into the kitchen, gasping, fighting for balance, slick fingers scrabbling at the knife drawer. But even as he managed to pull it open, he saw a shadow fall over the counter . . . and then another terrible blow landed deep between his shoulder blades. He tried to twist away, but the knife kept rising and falling, rising and falling, the crimson gleam of its blade dimming as the light began to fail him . . .

All fled, all done, so lift me on the pyre; the feast is over and the lamps expire . . .

The elevator doors slid back, and Nora stepped out into the corridor. She'd made good time, and with any luck Bill would still be on the couch, perhaps reading that Thackeray novel he'd been raving about all week. Carefully, she balanced the cake box in her hands as she reached for her key; he'd no doubt guessed where she'd gone, but it was hard to mount a surprise on somebody's first anniversary . . .

There was something wrong. She'd been so preoccupied with her thoughts that it took her a moment to realize what it was: the door to her apartment was wide open.

As she stared, somebody stepped out. She recognized him. His clothes were smeared and soaked with blood, and he held a large knife in his hand. As he stood looking toward her, the knife dripped copiously onto the floor.

Instinctively, without thought, she dropped the cake and the key and rushed at him. Neighbors were coming out of their apartments now, their voices raised in fear and terror. As she ran toward the figure he raised the knife, but she knocked his hand aside, punching him in the solar plexus as she did so. He lashed out, throwing her against the opposite wall of the corridor, slamming her head against the hard plaster, and she fell to the floor. Spots

danced before her eyes as he shambled toward her, knife raised. She threw herself out of the way as it slashed downward; he kicked her viciously in the head, knife rising again. The sound of screaming echoed in the hall. But Nora couldn't hear it; there was no longer any sound, only blurry images. And then those disappeared, as well.