

Are You Afraid of the Dark?

Sidney Sheldon

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ONE

In downtown Manhattan, in Courtroom 37 of the Supreme Court Criminal Term building at 180 Centre Street, the trial of Anthony (Tony) Altieri was in session. The large, venerable courtroom was filled to capacity with press and spectators.

At the defendant's table sat Anthony Altieri, slouched in a wheelchair, looking like a pale, fat frog folding in on itself. Only his eyes were alive, and every time he looked at Diane Stevens in the witness chair, she could literally feel the pulse of his hatred.

Next to Altieri sat Jake Rubenstein, Altieri's defence attorney. Rubenstein was famous for two things: his high-profile clientele, consisting mostly of mobsters, and the fact that nearly all of his clients were acquitted.

Rubenstein was a small, dapper man with a quick mind and vivid imagination. He was never the same in his courtroom appearances. Courtroom histrionics were

his stock-in-trade, and he was highly skilled. He was brilliant at sizing up his opponents, with a feral instinct for finding their weaknesses. Sometimes Rubenstein imagined he was a lion, slowly closing in on his unsuspecting prey, ready to pounce . . . or a cunning spider, spinning a web that would eventually entrap them and leave them helpless . . . Sometimes he was a patient fisherman, gently tossing a line into the water and slowly moving it back and forth until the gullible witness took the bait.

The lawyer was carefully studying the witness on the stand. Diane Stevens was in her early thirties. An aura of elegance. Patrician features. Soft, blonde flowing hair. Green eyes. Lovely figure. A girl-next-door kind of wholesomeness. She was dressed in a chic, tailored, black suit. Jake Rubenstein knew that the day before, she had made a favourable impression on the jury. He had to be careful how he handled her. *Fisherman*, he decided.

Rubenstein took his time approaching the witness box, and when he spoke, his voice was gentle. ‘Mrs Stevens, yesterday you testified that on the date in question, October 14, you were driving south on the Henry Hudson Parkway, when you got a flat tyre and pulled off the highway at the 158th Street exit, onto a service road into Fort Washington Park?’

‘Yes.’ Her voice was soft and cultured.

‘What made you stop at that particular place?’

‘Because of the flat tyre, I knew I had to get off the main road, and I could see the roof of a cabin through

the trees. I thought there might be someone there who could help me. I didn't have a spare.'

'Do you belong to an auto club?'

'Yes.'

'And do you have a phone in your car?'

'Yes.'

'Then why didn't you call the auto club?'

'I thought that might have taken too long.'

Rubenstein said, sympathetically, 'Of course. And the cabin was right there.'

'Yes.'

'So, you approached the cabin to get help?'

'That's right.'

'Was it still light outside?'

'Yes. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon.'

'And so, you could see clearly?'

'I could.'

'What did you see, Mrs Stevens?'

'I saw Anthony Altieri –'

'Oh. You had met him before?'

'No.'

'What made you sure it was Anthony Altieri?'

'I had seen his picture in the newspaper and –'

'So, you had seen pictures that resembled the defendant?'

'Well, it –'

'What did you see in that cabin?'

Diane Stevens took a shuddering breath. She spoke slowly, visualising the scene in her mind. 'There were four men in the room. One of them was in a chair, tied

up. Mr Altieri seemed to be questioning him while the two other men stood next to him.' Her voice shook. 'Mr Altieri pulled out a gun, yelled something, and – and shot the man in the back of the head.'

Jake Rubenstein cast a sidelong glance at the jury. They were absorbed in her testimony.

'What did you do then, Mrs Stevens?'

'I ran back to my car and dialled 911 on my cell phone.'

'And then?'

'I drove away.'

'With a flat tyre?'

'Yes.'

Time for a little ripple in the water. 'Why didn't you wait for the police?'

Diane glanced toward the defence table. Altieri was watching her with naked malevolence.

She looked away. 'I couldn't stay there because I – I was afraid that the men might come out of the cabin and see me.'

'That's very understandable.' Rubenstein's voice hardened. 'What is *not* understandable is that when the police responded to your 911 call, they went into the cabin, and not only was no one there, Mrs Stevens, but they could find no sign that anyone had *been* there, let alone been murdered there.'

'I can't help that. I –'

'You're an artist, aren't you?'

She was taken aback by the question. 'Yes, I –'

'Are you successful?'

‘I suppose so, but what does –?’

It was time to yank the hook.

‘A little extra publicity never hurts, does it? The whole country watches you on the nightly news report on television, and on the front pages of –’

Diane looked at him, furious. ‘I didn’t do this for publicity. I would never send an innocent man to –’

‘The key word is *innocent*, Mrs Stevens. And I will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Mr Altieri *is* innocent. Thank you. You’re finished.’

Diane Stevens ignored the *double entendre*. When she stepped down to return to her seat, she was seething. She whispered something to the prosecuting attorney, headed for the door, and walked out to the parking lot, the words of the defence attorney ringing in her ears. ‘You’re an artist, aren’t you? . . . A little extra publicity never hurts, does it?’ It was degrading. Still, all in all, she was satisfied with the way her testimony had gone. She had told the jury exactly what she had seen and they had no reason to doubt her. Anthony Altieri was going to be convicted and sent to prison for the rest of his life, and yet Diane could not help thinking of the venomous looks he had given her, and she felt a little shiver.

Diane handed the parking attendant her ticket and he went to get her car.

Two minutes later, Diane was driving onto the street, heading north, on her way home.

There was a stop sign at the corner. As Diane braked to a halt, a well-dressed young man standing at the

kerb approached the car. 'Excuse me. I'm lost. Could you –?'

Diane lowered her window.

'Could you tell me how to get to the Holland Tunnel?' He spoke with an Italian accent.

'Yes. It's very simple. Go down to the first –'

The man raised his arm and there was a gun with a silencer in his hand. 'Out of the car, lady. Fast!'

Diane turned pale. 'All right. Please don't –' As she started to open the door, and the man stepped back, Diane slammed her foot down on the accelerator and the car sped away. She heard the rear window smash as a bullet went through it, and then a crack as another bullet hit the back of the car. Her heart was pounding so hard that it was difficult to breathe.

Diane Stevens had read about car jackings, but they had always been remote, something that happened to other people. And the man had tried to kill her. Did car jackers do that? Diane reached for her mobile phone and dialled 911. It took almost two minutes before an operator answered.

'911. What is your emergency?'

Even as Diane was explaining what had happened, she knew it was hopeless. The man would be long gone by now.

'I'll send an officer to the location. May I have your name, address, and phone number?'

Diane gave them to her. Useless, she thought. She glanced back at the shattered window and shuddered. She desperately wanted to call Richard at work and

tell him what had happened, but she knew he was working on an urgent project. If she called him and told him what had just occurred, he would get upset and rush to her side – and she did not want him to miss his deadline. She would tell him what had happened when he got back to the apartment later.

And suddenly a chilling thought occurred to her: had the man been waiting for her, or was this just a coincidence? She remembered the conversation she had had with Richard when the trial began: ‘I don’t think you should testify, Diane. It could be dangerous.’

‘Don’t worry, darling. Altieri will be convicted. They’ll lock him away for ever.’

‘But he has friends and –’

‘Richard, if I don’t do this, I couldn’t live with myself.’

What just happened had to be a coincidence, Diane decided. Altieri wouldn’t be crazy enough to do anything to me, especially now, during his trial, she concluded.

Diane turned off the highway, and drove west until she reached her apartment building on East Seventy-fifth Street. Before she pulled into the underground garage, she took a last careful look in the rear-view mirror. Everything seemed normal.

The apartment was an airy, ground-floor duplex, with a spacious living room, floor-to-ceiling windows and a large, marble fireplace. There were upholstered floral sofas, armchairs, a built-in bookcase, and a large television screen. The walls were rainbowed with

colourful paintings. There was a Childe Hassam, a Jules Pascin, a Thomas Birch, a George Hitchcock, and in one area, a group of Diane's paintings.

On the next floor was a master bedroom and bathroom, a second guest bedroom, and a sunny atelier where Diane painted. Several of her paintings were hanging on the walls. On an easel in the centre of the room was a half-finished portrait.

The first thing Diane did when she arrived home was to hurry into the atelier. She removed the half-finished portrait from the easel, and replaced it with a blank canvas. She began to sketch the face of the man who had tried to kill her, but her hands were trembling so hard that she had to stop.

Driving to Diane Stevens's apartment, Detective Earl Greenburg complained, 'This is the part of the job I hate most.'

Robert Praegitzer said, 'It's better that we tell them than have them hear about it on the evening news.' He looked at Greenburg. 'You going to tell her?'

Earl Greenburg nodded, unhappily. He found himself remembering the story of the detective who had gone to inform a Mrs Adams, the wife of a patrolman, that her husband had been killed.

'She's very sensitive,' the chief had cautioned the detective. 'You'll have to break the news carefully.'

'Don't worry. I can handle it.'

The detective had knocked on the door of the Adams' home, and when it was opened by Adams's

wife, the detective had asked, ‘Are you the widow Adams?’

Diane was startled by the sound of the front doorbell. She was not expecting anyone. She went to the intercom. ‘Who is it?’

‘Detective Earl Greenburg. I’d like to speak to you, Mrs Stevens.’

It’s about the car jacking, Diane thought. The police got here fast.

She pressed the buzzer and Greenburg entered the hallway and walked to her door.

‘Hello.’

‘Mrs Stevens?’

‘Yes. Thank you for coming so quickly. I started to draw a sketch of the man, but I . . .’ She took a deep breath. ‘He was swarthy, with deep-set light brown eyes and a little mole on his cheek. His gun had a silencer on it, and –’

Greenburg was looking at her in confusion. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t understand what –’

‘The car jacker. I called 911 and –’ She saw the expression on the detective’s face. ‘This isn’t about the car jacking, is it?’

‘No, ma’am, it’s not.’ Greenburg paused for a moment. ‘May I come in?’

‘Please.’

Greenburg walked into the apartment.

She was looking at him, frowning. ‘What is it? Is something wrong?’

The words would not seem to come. ‘Yes. I’m sorry. I – I’m afraid I have some bad news. It’s about your husband.’

‘What’s happened?’ Her voice was shaky.

‘He’s had an accident.’

Diane felt a sudden chill. ‘What kind of accident?’

Greenburg took a deep breath. ‘He was killed last night, Mrs Stevens. We found his body under a bridge along the East River this morning.’

Diane stared at him for a long moment, then slowly shook her head. ‘You have the wrong person, Lieutenant. My husband is at work, in his laboratory.’

This was going to be even more difficult than he had anticipated. ‘Mrs Stevens, did your husband come home last night?’

‘No, but Richard frequently works all night. He’s a scientist.’ She was becoming more and more agitated.

‘Mrs Stevens, were you aware that your husband was involved with the Mafia?’

Diane blanched. ‘The Mafia? Are you insane?’

‘We found –’

Diane was beginning to hyperventilate. ‘Let me see your identification.’

‘Certainly.’ Detective Greenburg pulled out his ID card and showed it to her.

Diane glanced at it, handed it back, and then slapped Greenburg hard across his face. ‘Does the city pay you to go around trying to scare honest citizens? My husband is not dead! He’s at work.’ She was shouting.

Greenburg looked into her eyes and saw the shock

and denial there. 'Mrs Stevens, would you like me to send someone over to look after you and -?'

'*You're* the one who needs someone to look after you. Now get out of here.'

'Mrs Stevens -'

'Now!'

Greenburg took out a business card and put it on a nearby table. 'In case you need to talk to me, here's my number.'

As he walked out of the door, Greenburg thought, Well, I handled that brilliantly. I might as well have said, 'Are you the widow Stevens?'

After Detective Earl Greenburg had gone, Diane locked the front door and took a deep, shivering breath.

The idiot! Coming to the wrong apartment and trying to scare me. I should report him, she thought as she looked at her watch. Richard will be coming home soon. It's time to start getting dinner ready, she told herself. She was making paella, his favourite dish. She went into the kitchen and started to prepare it.

Because of the secrecy of Richard's work, Diane never disturbed him at the laboratory, and if he did not call her, she knew it was a signal that he was going to be late. At eight o'clock, the paella was ready. She tasted it and smiled, satisfied. It was made just the way Richard liked it. At ten o'clock, when he still had not arrived, Diane put the paella in the refrigerator, and put a Post-it note on the refrigerator door: *Darling, supper is in*

the fridge. Come and wake me up. Richard would be hungry when he came home.

Diane felt suddenly drained. She undressed, put on a nightgown, brushed her teeth, and got into bed. In a few minutes, she fell sound asleep.

At three o'clock in the morning, she woke up screaming.