



Former sheriff's detective Michael Crawford has night terrors allowing him glimpses of the future. His wife Michelle has intuitions. They start a detective agency which leads them to a serial killer targeting a unique group of victims.

The Spider Web Charmer

By Lawrence R. Deering

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A woman is lying on her back on a dark wooden floor. She is wearing a floral patterned top. Her right arm is extended, and on her forearm, there is a red tattoo that resembles a spiderweb. The tattoo consists of a central vertical line with several horizontal lines crossing it, and a small 'X' mark at the top. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the wood and the skin.

LAWRENCE R. DEERING

THE SPIDERWEB CHARMER

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CHAPTER

1

*M*y doctors couldn't agree on a proper diagnosis, so they settled on night terrors. My dreams are so excruciatingly real I can feel my lungs fill with water as I descend into the ocean depths. I've crossed the line between reality and unconsciousness so many times I have difficulty distinguishing between the two. I've tried more pharmaceuticals than I can remember. They blur the lines even further, making my waking hours cloudy and unfulfilling. Hours of therapy uncovered many suppressed feelings, phobias, and quirks but did nothing to relieve me of my dreams.

Having a serious relationship was out of the question. Susan was the first girlfriend I let sleep over. We'd been dating for a couple of months and usually went to her place for sex, and then I went home. She'd been to my apartment a few times, but we never spent the night together.

We were getting serious, so when she suggested we have a romantic dinner at my place, I agreed. It turned into a special occasion. I bought a couple bottles of good wine and Susan combed through her cookbooks looking for something special to prepare. I was nervous, but soon the wine, good food, and the prospect of an evening of lovemaking relieved me of my trepidation.

After an amazing dinner, we retired to the couch. I turned the CD player on with the remote. I had given the night's music a great deal of thought. I started with Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get it On" and closed with Barry White's "Can't Get Enough."

We finished our wine and began kissing. We started removing each other's clothes and moved into the bedroom. Our lovemaking was sweet and passionate. I never wanted her to leave.

Susan curled up in my arms and kissed my cheek. "Michael, I love you," she whispered.

It was a big moment. I had thought about saying "I love you" first, but I hadn't found the right occasion.

"I love you, too," I replied.

Susan fell asleep with her head resting on my shoulder while I stared at the ceiling. As much as I tried, I knew that, eventually, I would succumb to exhaustion.

It began with a bone-chilling scream. I called out for Susan, but she didn't answer.

"Michael, wake up."

A man appeared. His charcoal hair was matted against his large skull. His eyes were devoid of life. He had dark stains on his blue jeans and a torn pocket on his worn plaid shirt. His arms were thick and covered with bristly hair. He held Susan tight with one arm, pressing a knife against her neck with the other.

"What do you want?" I screamed.

"You know."

"I'll give you whatever you want, just let her go."

I saw fear in Susan's eyes as she begged me to save her. I watched in horror as the beast's lips stretched into a horrific grin, revealing two tiers of deformed yellow teeth.

"Noooo!" I screamed as he sliced through skin, muscle, and then bone.

I lunged toward them, only to be sprayed with blood from the gaping wound. I felt the warmth of every drop and the metallic taste on my tongue.

"Michael, you're scaring me. Please wake up."

Susan's lifeless body fell to the ground. I managed to get my hands around the beast's neck, trying to extinguish his life just as he had extinguished Susan's.

“Michael, stop it! I can’t breathe.”

Needless to say, that was the beginning of the end. It didn’t happen all at once. Susan and I talked about my problem. I told her I’d had night terrors for as long as I could remember. She went through a long list of things I should try. I told her every doctor (and, eventually, my parents) had given up. She should, too. Susan wanted a loving husband and father for her future children. It wasn’t going to be me.

I still dated—quite successfully, I might add, but I never allowed things to get too serious, and I never stayed over. My hope for marriage and a family had long been replaced with the reality of my situation. I lived each waking hour to the fullest. I loved my work and my friends, and I enjoyed my dating life. I had accepted my affliction. In fact, I’d learned to embrace it.

★

I didn’t plan on becoming a cop; it just suited my lifestyle. The long hours and unpredictable schedule proved to be the perfect excuse to leave after a sexual encounter. My parents insisted I get a college education no matter what I ended up doing, so I partied through four years at Colorado State and earned a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice. I aced the entrance exam and entered the police academy. I finished second in my class and was offered a position with the Colorado Springs Police Department. I loved the uniform. It was definitely a chick magnet.

My father, Spencer Crawford, was ecstatic at my career choice. He’s a third-generation immigrant from the old country and had a deep respect for law and order. My mother, Martha, worried about my safety but bragged about her son, the policeman, to her friends.

My parents adopted me when I was two and a half years old. I knew virtually nothing about my birth parents. I had been told they were killed in a car accident. I did some digging around when I became a cop but their records had been sealed, and even I, their biological son, didn’t have the authority to open them.

The four years after becoming a cop were the best of my life. I loved the adrenaline-filled evenings cruising the lonely streets of the Springs at three in the morning. That's when the underbelly of society emerges from their cardboard boxes, abandoned cars, and underpasses to ply their trade. Rape, murder, robbery, domestic assault, drugs, the list is endless.

My rapid rise through the ranks began when my partner, Richie, and I caught a call for a 187: homicide with multiple victims. We were first on the scene. We found a neighbor standing in the victim's yard screaming. Ritchie tried to calm the woman down as I pounded on the door.

"Police!" I yelled, but no sound came from inside the house. Ritchie joined me at the door, and I kicked it in. I cleared the room, and the two of us searched the house until we reached the back bedroom.

We found a woman lying on a bed, fully clothed, her arms by her sides. I checked her pulse. She was dead with no apparent sign of injury. I went around the other side of the bed with my firearm still drawn and discovered two more bodies: a young boy and a girl lying side by side. Each had a gunshot wound to their head.

I called for an ambulance to transport the bodies. We secured the crime scene and checked for a weapon. The place was clean. We waited for the homicide detectives to show up, gave them our statement, and got the hell out of there.

Over the next couple of weeks, I checked in with the detectives. They hadn't come up with anything. The woman had died of a heroin overdose. The kids were shot in the back of the head with a 9 mm handgun. There were no prints, no witnesses, no motive, bupkis.

The detectives interviewed the screaming neighbor. She had heard gunshots and called 911. She knew the family well. The woman had been a single mom raising her two kids and went to her job as a factory worker while her kids were in school. She picked them up from an after-school program when she finished her shift. There was no history of drug use, and the neighbor had never seen any male visitors. The mother didn't even drink alcohol. There was no reason why she and her children should have been

victims of such a violent crime. The case was quickly heading for the cold case files.

Since I had arrived upon the crime scene, my dreams were filled with images of the woman and her kids. Every night I started off where the previous night's dream ended. I saw the mother come home to her kids begging for pizza. They seemed to live comfortably on the woman's modest wage and appeared to be a happy family.

The screaming neighbor was cleared along with everyone else on the street. The dead woman had no romantic relationships, and her ex-husband had left the state years ago. There were no leads.

My dreams began to fixate on the neighbor. I decided to do some off-the-clock surveillance. It didn't take long to discover she had a nice business running out of her house. I watched a boy, grade school age, give her door the ol' double knock. The neighbor invited the boy inside the doorway and gave him something that he put in his pocket. He ran off and returned an hour later with a pocketful of cash. The neighbor peeled off a couple of bills and gave it to him. They repeated the process four more times before he left for the day.

I knew the detectives had run her prints to see if she was in the system. She had no priors.

I knocked on a few doors and found out that everyone knew the woman as Birdie Johnson, which was not the name on her driver's license. I ran the name through the national database and got a hit. She had two priors for intent to sell narcotics: one for possession and being under the influence of a controlled substance and one for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. It appeared that Ms. Johnson had a history of using young kids as drug mules.

That night I dreamt of the little boy.. I thought I knew what happened, but I had to find the evidence to prove it.

The next day I went to the school the kids had attended. I was directed to the school counselor, Mrs. Tyrell. She had met with the slain woman about her son less than a month earlier. The mother was worried he was

falling in with the wrong crowd. Suddenly, he had a pocketful of money and was buying toys and expensive electronics. When she questioned him, he said he was doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. She never mentioned her neighbor specifically, but she did say she wasn't going to let the street scum ruin her son.

I went back to the office and wrote up a full report. I didn't know whether I should give it to the detectives in charge or my supervisor. I figured I would let my boss decide what to do with it.

My sergeant felt there was enough evidence to get a search warrant, so he gave the file to the Assistant District Attorney. Two days later a team, including the case detectives, rummaged through Birdie's house. They found a large amount of prescription and illegal drugs, packaging supplies, scales, cash, and a 9 mm handgun. Ballistics got a match on the gun. It had been used to kill the two children.

Birdie sang like a nightingale to avoid the needle. The slain woman had confronted Birdie about using her son to sell drugs and threatened to call the police. Birdie wasn't about to let that happen. The next day she asked the kids where their mother was. They said she was taking her afternoon nap, like she did every Saturday afternoon. She gave the kids a couple of bucks for ice cream and sneaked into the house. He stuck a syringe in the base of the mother's skull, hiding the puncture mark in her hairline. The woman never woke up.

When the kids returned, Birdie told them they had to change their shirts before their mother saw them. She followed them into their bedroom, where she put a slug in each of their heads. She positioned the children's bodies next to each other. They were such sweet kids.

Birdie got a life sentence, and I got promoted to detective. No one knew how I solved the case or why I took such an interest in it, but it was rumored that I had a sixth sense or could read minds. I solved a lot of cases as a detective. A Native American officer gave me the nickname the "Spider Web Charmer," which is another name for "dreamcatcher." It's stayed with me ever since.



My new partner was Herbert A. Kohn, a.k.a. Herbie. He joked he had made detective, because the department had to have at least one Jew. He spoke Yiddish when it benefited him. He was like a chameleon, which was what made Herbie such a good detective.

He was a family man who had married at thirty. His wife, Gloria, seven years his junior, bore him three kids: a girl and two boys. He loved his family and his work. Nothing excited Herbie like breaking down a door or crashing through a window. He loved the adrenaline rush.

We had a huge caseload and were working crazy hours. Gloria didn't seem to mind. Herbie called her throughout the day and stopped by the house to check on her when he could.

After finishing another twelve-hour shift, Herbie wanted a steak and a drink before he headed home, so he pulled into the parking lot of MacKenzie's Chop House on Tejon Street.

"Herbie, I can't afford this place," I said.

"It's on me, partner. Order anything you want."

I assumed Gloria came from money. Herbie had a nice house and two late-model cars. He wasn't paying for them on a detective's salary.

The place was packed. People were seated on both sides of the long red benches in the waiting area. Herbie looked around the restaurant and found the owner, Gus, surveying the restaurant from his seat at the bar.

"Hey Gus, you got a table for two hungry cops?"

"For you, Herbie, anything."

Voila. Just like that, we were sitting at a nice, quiet table in the rear of the steakhouse.

"How the hell did you do that?" I asked.

"I investigated a robbery here a few years back when I was still a beat cop. I found out Gus's right-hand man had been skimming off the top for years. He was in big to the wrong guys for a gambling debt. He grabbed a wad of cash from the cash register, and then the schmuck showed up the next night like nothin' was wrong. Not only did I bust him, I busted the

muscle that was puttin' the screws to him. Gus even got some of his money back. He owes me."

Gus brought over a couple of menus and told us our waitress would be right over to take our order.

"Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Michelle. I'll be taking care of you. Can I start you off with a beverage?"

I still had my head in the menu trying to decide between the eight-ounce filet and the twenty-four-ounce New York strip. I knew Herbie was good for it, but I didn't want to stick him with a huge bill. I looked up and lost my ability to speak. Standing in front of me was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She had her natural blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes were a shade of green that I didn't know existed. She looked to be in great shape, as evidenced by her well-toned arms. I didn't get a look from the waist down, but I envisioned long, shapely legs. Herbie ordered a Johnnie Walker Blue. I tried to get the words out, but they wouldn't come.

"He'll have the same," Herbie said.

Michelle left with our drink order.

Herbie leaned across the table. "I gotta admit that little Shiska is one hot number, but you can't ask her out if you can't get the words out your pie hole."

I just stared after her in shock. "That's never happened to me before."

Michelle came back with our drinks and took our order. This time I managed to say, "Filet, medium rare."

Herbie devoured his steak and was ready to go home.

"Come on, my Goy friend, eat up."

"Take the car home, Herbie. I'm going to stay and savor each bite of this steak I may never be able to afford again."

"Oh, I see. You think you gotta chance with the waitress? Well, good luck findin' a ride home."

"I can take care of myself."

I thanked Herbie for dinner. I really did want to finish my steak. I also wanted to think of something clever to say to get Michelle to go out with me. She came back and found me sitting alone.

“Did your partner abandon you?”

“Looks that way. He even took the car. Listen, I know you probably get hit on all the time, but would you have a drink with me when you get off?”

“Well, it looks like we’d be sitting at the bar, since you don’t have a car. I don’t like to socialize where I work.”

I felt kind of stupid. “I’m sorry. I forgot I’m temporarily without wheels. If not tonight, I would really like to see you sometime.”

Michelle gave me a faint smile. “How far do you live from here?”

“A mile and a half, just off Main Street.”

“I’ll tell you what: I get off at nine. If you wait for me at the bar, I’ll take you to a local dive on the way. One drink, and then I’ll give you a ride home. Deal?”

“Deal.”

I sipped sparkling water for forty-five minutes until Michelle reappeared at the bar.

“Ready to go?”

We got into her vintage Volkswagen Beetle.

“Cool car. What year is it?”

“Nineteen seventy-eight. My dad restored cars for a living. This one was in bad shape until he got hold of it.”

I looked at the dash, the leather upholstery, and the headliner. “He did a beautiful job.”

We drove to a corner bar/restaurant just a few blocks from my house.

“You know, I’ve passed this place a million times and have never been inside.”

“It’s just a neighborhood joint. It’s pretty laid back.”

We walked inside, and the bartender waved to Michelle. We found a small table in the back. The waitress took our drink order.

“So, what do you do when you’re not saving the world?” Michelle asked.

“How’d you know I was a detective?”

“Gus told me to take care of the best detective in Colorado Springs.”

“That would be Herbie. He helped Gus out a few years back. To answer your question, I like to run and hike. I play a little golf and travel when I have time. What about you?”

“The waitress job pays the bills. I spend most of my time volunteering at the animal shelter. When I’m not working, I swim, bike, anything outdoors.”

“You look like you’re in shape.”

There was an awkward silence.

“So, you date much?” she asked.

“A fair amount. It’s difficult to have a serious relationship with my job.”

“Sounds like an excuse to me. Is it because you don’t sleep?”

My mouth must have hit the floor. I stared into those beautiful green eyes looking for a clue. “Why would you say that?”

Michelle looked down at the table. “Sorry. Sometimes I just blurt things out. My mother says I have a gift. It’s more of a curse. I have this sort of intuition.”

“What do you sense about me?”

Michelle stared into my eyes. “You have a good heart, but you’re very guarded. You have a secret you don’t want people to know. You use your work as an excuse to keep people from getting too close.”

I sat up in my stool. How could she know any of that?

“That’s really creepy.”

“I must have hit the mark. That’s why I’m twenty-seven and spend most of my time with animals. It’s tough getting someone to trust you when you keep telling them things they don’t want to hear.”

I gazed at her beautiful face and saw the pain in her eyes. I wanted to know everything about her. I felt a connection I hadn’t had for a long time, so I took a chance.

“The doctors call it night terrors. I’ve had them my entire life. I have dreams that feel more real than when I’m awake. I feel, smell, and hear everything in hypersensitive detail. I trash my bed almost every night.”

I looked up to see if I’d scared her off. She was listening intently, so I continued.

“Sometimes I dream about the cases I’m working on. I see snippets of things that happened. I’ve solved a number of cases because of the clues I’ve gotten from my dreams.”

“Wow. That’s incredible. See? You’ve taken something you think is bad and used it to help people. I wish I could do that.”

I looked off into a corner of the room. “No, you don’t want this. It’s not something I can control. It just happens.”

I switched subjects and learned everything I could about Michelle. She grew up in Southern California, until her dad bought an auto body shop in Colorado Springs when she was twelve. She had a brother, Dylan, living in North Carolina with his wife, Cheryl, and their two kids. She went to college at Fresno State and had a degree in English. She joked that it was a real moneymaker.

Before we knew it, the bartender was shouting, “Last call!” We had talked non-stop for over three hours.

Michelle took me home. As we pulled up outside, I looked over at her. “Michelle, I don’t want you to go.”

She leaned in. “Let me watch you sleep.”

CHAPTER

2

Herbie picked me up the next morning. I jumped in the car. Herbie didn't say a word. He just sat there staring with a big shit-eating grin.

"What?" I asked.

"Did she spend the night?"

"She did, and she's still here, but it's not what you think. We didn't have sex."

"You shmendrik. What kind a guy has a girl spend the night and doesn't touch her? Michael, you have something you want to tell me?"

"No, I don't have a problem. She's a nice girl. I'd like to get to know her first."

Herbie's substantial belly jiggled up and down so hard he had to swerve to avoid oncoming traffic. "Now I've heard everything. There's no better way to get to know a girl than hitting her pirog."

"Herbie, you're a real charmer."

We were eyeball deep in another murder investigation. A drug dealer named Deshaun Jefferson had been shot execution style in his luxury apartment. It didn't feel like a drug deal gone bad. Deshaun was too high up the totem pole to get his hands dirty. No, this was a message; maybe from the cartel. Play ball or end up with a .22 slug in the back of your head—or so I

thought. The crime scene was clean, as we expected. The DEA took a look, but it was a murder case—our case.

We started with our list of snitches. I stopped by the office to pick up a stack of twenty-dollar bills. You have to grease the wheels to get them to turn. The first three CIs gave us nothing. The fourth, a little guy named Darion, a.k.a. weasel, said he heard Deshaun was whacked by a professional. He didn't have a name, but supposedly the guy was from the Denver area. We called it in and initiated a search on any known hit men in Denver with ties to the drug cartel. An hour later we had a list of seven. Three were in prison, one was dead, and the other three's whereabouts were unknown.

We put out an APB for the three persons of interest. We weren't going to hold our breath. It was noon, and Herbie never missed a meal. He summoned the food gods, who told him to find a taco stand. Herbie had a nose for fast food. He turned down one street and then made a sharp left turn. Sure enough, there was Tito's. Herbie went for a monster pork burrito with rice and beans. I told him I wasn't going to get in the car with him. I ordered three ground beef hard tacos and smothered them in hot sauce. Payback's a bitch.

We were finishing our meal when the radio squawked. One of our three men had a Colorado Springs address. I wrote it down as Herbie started the car. We made it a couple of miles before Herbie lowered his window.

"I'm going to apologize in advance," he said, half laughing.

We rolled up in front of a shoddy looking single-family house in a very suspect neighborhood. Kids, who should have been in school, ran up to the car.

"You gonna arrest somebody, man?"

"No, we're just looking for information. Do you guys know Antoine Barker? He lives in that house," I said, pointing to the dilapidated structure.

"You mean Mama's Boy? Yeah, he lives there. He's probably still asleep. He don't get up until after three."

We thanked the boys and knocked on the front door.

“Mr. Barker, this is the Colorado Springs Police Department. We need to ask you some questions. Please open the door.”

We heard movement within the house. Finally, the door opened. Mr. Barker had his hair in curlers and was wearing a ratty, old bathrobe two sizes too small.

“Yeah, what you want?”

“Mr. Barker, do you know a Mr. Deshaun Jefferson? He was murdered two nights ago. It has your signature all over it.”

“I don’t know what you talkin’ ‘bout, man. I don’t know no Deshaun Jefferson.”

“Mr. Barker, where were you between ten p.m. and one a.m. on Tuesday night?”

“I was playing cards with my boys at the club. The bartender will tell you I was there all friggin’ night.”

Herbie took down the information, but Mama’s Boy provided so many details he was likely telling the truth. We were running out of leads. We had so many cases open that if we didn’t get a lead soon, we would have to turf it. Herbie drove back to the station. I used the opportunity to text Michelle.

Hi gorgeous. I really enjoyed talking last night. Are you available for dinner? I could pick you up around seven.

My phone dinged.

Only if you don’t make me watch you sleep again. I’m still tired from seeing you get beat up by your sheets.

Sorry, I warned you. See you at seven.

We hit the precinct and rode our desks for a couple of hours. I was working three other cases, but I had a hard time giving up the Deshaun Jefferson case. I hated to lose. The cartel was winning, and we were hardly in the fight.

I went home, showered, and threw on some jeans and a blue blazer. I thought I'd take Michelle to an upscale Thai place that had just opened. I passed a grocery store and impulsively stopped to buy flowers. I looked at the flower lady like I was clueless, which I was.

She sighed. "How long you been goin' out?"

"Second date."

"You're already gone, ain't you?"

"I think so."

"Too soon for roses. I'd go with lilies."

I knocked, and when Michelle opened the door, I froze. She was wearing a white pressed, collared shirt and dark blue jeans. Her hair was pulled back from her face, highlighting her eyes. My mind went blank, so I handed her the flowers.

"How sweet. Come in. I'll put them in a vase."

Her apartment was on the second floor. The living room was furnished with an inviting overstuffed couch and chair. The walls were covered with pictures of dogs and cats, I assumed from the animal shelter. The only personal pictures were of her brother and his family and another of her standing with her parents.

"That's my family."

"They look like nice people."

"They are. You'd like them. My parents retired to Sedona two years ago. They fell in love with the red rocks. I see them whenever I can. My brother not so much."

"Do I detect some tension?"

"Little bit. Dylan was a jerk growing up. He was always smarter, more driven, better at sports. I gave him the benefit of my intuition, and he never forgave me. We're civil. We exchange Christmas cards, birthday cards, stuff like that. I haven't seen him in a couple of years."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. That's life."

We got to the restaurant and started where we had left off the previous evening.

“So, what did you learn watching me being tormented by my demons?”

“I like your Colorado Rockies shorts.”

I felt my face redden.

“Do you always remember your dreams?” she asked.

“I think so. I make it a point to try to understand what they’re telling me. Last night I kept seeing the face of the murder victim in a case I’m working. He was a big-time drug dealer who was executed, we think by a professional hit man. It was like he was trying to tell me something.”

Michelle grabbed my hand and closed her eyes. Then she opened them with a start.

“Michael, it’s not what you think. Look at the person he cared about.”

I was in shock. I didn’t know whether she was crazy or if I should be calling Herbie.

Michelle shrugged. “I could be wrong.”

“Are you ever wrong?”

She smiled. “No.”

We enjoyed our pad Thai. We were too full for desert.

“Do mind if we make a stop?” Michelle asked on our way out. “I’d like to show you something.”

She drove to the parking lot of the Colorado Springs No-Kill Animal Shelter. It was after hours, so she rang the bell. A fresh-faced young girl let us in. I followed Michelle to the back, where the animals were boarded. The dogs started going nuts as soon as she walked into the room.

Michelle looked at the dogs and made a clicking sound. One by one they stopped barking.

“Isn’t she wonderful?” Sara, the girl who had let us in, said.

“Yes she is,” I replied.

Michelle gave me the tour. She had an effect on animals like I’d never seen before.

“Thanks for bringing me here. You’re amazing.”

“Thank you. It’s definitely a mutual admiration society. I’ve always loved animals.”

“No, I think you’re amazing.”

I leaned over and kissed her. It took everything inside of me to stop from telling her I loved her. How crazy is that? I’d known her for two days, but it was like I’d known her forever. I had to stop myself from coming on too strong.

Michelle reached over and put her hand on my arm. I knew she felt the same way. That night she invited me to spend the night, the entire night.

“You sure you want me to stay over?” I asked.

I followed her into the bedroom, where she stood on the balls of her feet to kiss me. I held her in my arms and led her to the bed.

“Michelle, I don’t know how I found you, but I’m in love with you. I want to be with you forever. I hope that doesn’t scare you.”

She kissed my forehead. “I knew you were the one before you opened your mouth. I’ve been looking for you for a very long time. I love you, Michael.”

Most people would have thought us crazy. There were probably psychiatrists who would have certified us as such.

So began one of the greatest partnerships in the history of investigative services. Six months later Michelle Connolly became Michelle Crawford. Herbie was my best man. He cried during the ceremony. I love that mensch. Michelle’s parents came from Sedona, and Dylan came with his family from Charlotte.

Michelle and Dylan had a chance to bury the hatchet. Her parents were lovely people. My parents loved Michelle. They were already talking about little Crawfords, which was way too premature.

When I married Michelle, I no longer enjoyed the long hours and constant stress of being a detective. When I expressed an interest in opening my own shop, she encouraged me. That’s when I came up with the brilliant idea for a new kind of partnership. Three months later we formed Crawford and Crawford. Michelle was a natural. She was smart, organized, and had that intuition thing going on.

I cleared all my cases before I left the department. Michelle had been spot on. Deshaun Jefferson had been two-timing the wrong woman. His girlfriend, Monique, found out he was doing one of his drug groupies. It was her .22 caliber bullet, not the cartel's, that ended his life. I should take back what I said about the cartel, but I won't.

★

We purchased a small office building that had once been a doctor's office. It suited us perfectly. There was a small, two-bedroom apartment on the top floor. Michelle had her own bedroom to escape to before I turned into the Hulk each night. We put in a new kitchen and updated the bathrooms. I did most of the work with some help from a buddy of mine. The bottom floor had three offices, a small conference room, a kitchenette, and a waiting area with a desk for a receptionist.

Our first order of business was to find an office manager. We needed someone to answer the phone, pay the bills, keep the books, type, and do whatever else needed to be done. We put a "help wanted" ad in the local paper and posted it online with various job sites.

Most of the candidates had little or no experience, so we were thrilled to receive a resume from Betty Hamilton. She was a retired attorney who had spent the last few years doing office work. I was about to call her when I saw she had been disbarred twelve years earlier; no details. I talked it over with Michelle, and we decided to bring her in and hear her side of the story.

She arrived promptly at 9:00 a.m. in a nice suit and carrying a leather handbag and a small briefcase. Michelle brought her into the conference room and offered her coffee, which she declined. I joined them and sat next to Michelle. I let her get the basic questions out of the way, and then I hit Betty with the big one.

"Mrs. Hamilton you noted on your resume that you were disbarred twelve years ago. Would you please give us the details?"

"Certainly. I was working at Gaines, Stewart, and Mosley. I was up for partner and rarely left my desk. My husband, Frank, felt neglected. He took solace in the arms of a neighbor. I drove him to it. I promised I would

cut back my workload to save the marriage. Of course, I never did, and he divorced me. I made partner and was miserable. I had no personal life, was working a zillion hours, and had no time to spend the obscene amount of money I was making.

“I was so wired when I came home in the evenings that I would have a couple glasses of wine. At first it was just to calm my nerves. I couldn’t sleep, so I popped a couple of prescription pills. Pretty soon I was drunk all week-end and could barely function at work. I screwed up a case I was working on and was fired. The client sued me for malpractice, and I was disbarred.

“I went to rehab and have been sober for eleven years. I didn’t want to go back to that high-pressure lifestyle, so I took jobs running offices, which I’m really good at. I married a great guy named Ted three years ago and am in a good place in my life. My last job ended when the place went out of business. I’m looking for a new opportunity.”

I would have offered her the job right then and there, but Michelle had a few more candidates. We thanked her and told her we would make a decision by the end of the week. The next day, we made her an offer, and she accepted. Betty Hamilton became the anchor of Crawford and Crawford. She was extremely professional, skilled, and loyal. We hit the jackpot.

We had a few word-of-mouth referrals from people I had worked with on the force. Our first significant case came from a woman who saw our advertisement in the *Colorado Springs Gazette*. Her name was Trudy Russell, and she was a piece of work.

She walked in without an appointment demanding to see the owners. Betty looked at her in her short skirt, high heels, and plunging neckline, which revealed perfect breasts that didn’t move, and told her to take a seat. Michelle and I interviewed her together.

“Mrs. Russell, what can we do for you?” Michelle asked.

“I want you to find my husband, Tony.”

“Is he missing?” I asked.

“Hell yes he’s missing. Why else would I be here?”

I knew this was going to be painful. I started scribbling notes on my legal pad. “When did he go missing?”

“Two weeks ago. I filed a police report. The police have done squat. I know something terrible has happened. Tony would never leave me.”

Michelle and I tag-teamed her with a series of questions. What did he do for a living? He was an investment advisor. Had there been any activity on their credit cards or bank accounts since he went missing? None. Had he been in any kind of legal trouble? No. Had he made any enemies? No. Any extra-marital affairs? No, Tony and she were soul mates and deeply in love.

“When did you last see your husband?” Michelle asked.

“He left for the office two weeks ago Friday, like he did every morning. I kissed him goodbye, and he said he’d be home for supper.” Trudy dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief that was at the ready.

“Mrs. Russell, does your husband have a life insurance policy?”

“Just what are you implying?”

“We’re not implying anything. We need all the details if we’re going to find your husband.”

“Okay. Yes, he took out a five-million-dollar policy last year.”

I resisted the temptation to look at Michelle. “Mrs. Russell—”

“It’s Trudy.”

“Trudy, have you contacted a lawyer?”

“Of course. We have a family friend that handles our stuff. I asked him for advice. He’s the one who suggested I hire a PI.”

Michelle handed Trudy a piece of paper and a pen. “Trudy, would you please give us your attorney’s name and telephone number? I would also like the contact information for your husband’s business associates, your close friends, and anyone else you think might be able to help us.”

We left Trudy working on her assignment and went to my office.

“So, what do you think?” I asked.

“I think we need to talk to her lawyer. Why don’t you do that, and I’ll see what I can get at her husband’s office. We can split up the business associates and friends.”

Trudy gave us a \$10,000 retainer, and we set off to find Frank Russell. I made an appointment with Mr. Thomas A. Ferguson, Esq. He had a small

legal practice with another lawyer. They primarily handled routine civil matters: divorces, wills, contracts, and the like. A dowdy secretary led me into Mr. Ferguson's office.

"Mr. Ferguson, thank you for seeing me."

"It's Tom. I'm glad to do anything I can to help Trudy and Frank."

"How long have you known the Russells?"

"I've handled Frank's affairs for about eight years. He married Trudy four years ago, and now I handle both of their legal matters."

"What can you tell me about Frank's business?"

"He manages the portfolios of a select number of high-net-worth individuals. He's been extremely successful."

"So, as far as you know, no clients have lost money and could be unhappy with Frank's advice?"

"On the contrary, his clients are loyal and have been with him for many years. He turns away potential clients all the time."

"I'm assuming Frank has a will. Who's the beneficiary?"

"Yes, since no children are involved, Trudy gets everything."

"Did you draft the will?"

"Yes. It was updated last year when Frank bought a new insurance policy."

"Why did he do that?"

"He wanted Trudy taken care in case anything happened to him."

"How's the marriage?"

"Frank adores Trudy. Bought her a four-carat diamond ring for their fourth wedding anniversary."

I ticked off my list of questions. "How did Frank and Trudy meet?"

"Trudy had just gone through a nasty divorce. One of Frank's clients hooked them up on a blind date. They've been together ever since."

"So they have a happy marriage, Frank has a thriving business, and they're living the good life. What do you think happened to Frank?"

"Hell if I know."

I called the precinct where I used to work to see who had caught the case. It was Detective Charlie Hanson, who I'd known for years.

“Charlie, it’s Michael Crawford. How’ve you been?”

“Overworked and underpaid. How’s the new business?”

“Good, in fact we’ve been engaged by Trudy Russell to investigate the disappearance of her husband, Frank.”

“Michael, we have no reason to believe a crime has been committed. Maybe he’s on a beach in Tahiti suckin’ down piña coladas with a new hottie.”

“Charlie, that’s your fantasy,” I said, laughing.

“So true. We haven’t come up with anything. You know the rule: no body, no crime. Unless we find evidence of foul play, we’re going to assume Frank Russell’s MIA by choice.”

“If you hear anything, would you give me a call?”

“Sure, if you do the same.”

I met Michelle at our favorite Mexican restaurant. She was already sitting in a booth sipping a margarita. She waved at the waiter to bring another.

“Hi beautiful. How was your day?”

“Interesting,” she said. “I went over to Frank’s office. There’s a secretary and another investment professional working there. I talked to them both. The secretary, Jeannie, was guarded at first, but I took her to lunch, and she opened up. It seems that Frank often complained about Trudy’s spending habits. She was a professional shopper and loved to show off her new jewelry at the club, where she spends much of her time. Frank put her on a budget, which did not go over very well.”

“Any indication of any hanky panky going on?”

“Not directly, but Jeannie said Frank and his attorney, Tom Ferguson, had a falling out. He received a bill with several hours billed to Trudy. She even suggested he may have been looking for new counsel.”

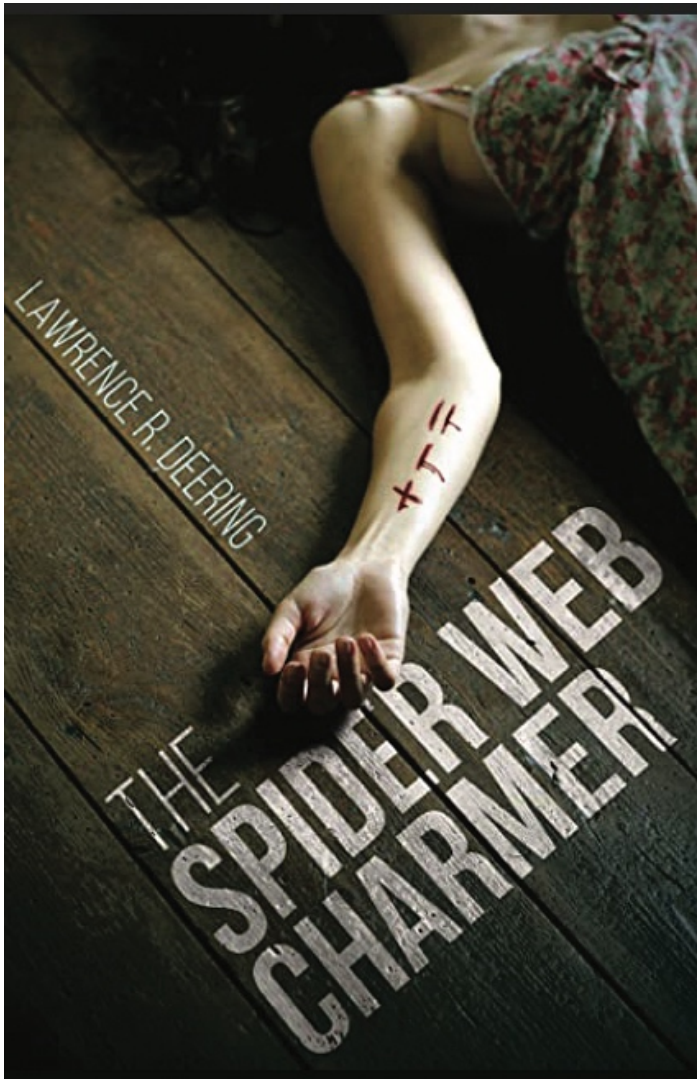
“Now that’s interesting.”

“One of Trudy’s friends from the club told me she had seen Tom and Trudy having lunch. She didn’t think anything about it, since he was her attorney.”

“I think I need to follow up with Tom tomorrow.”

We ordered fajitas. I watched Michelle take a tortilla, spread a layer of refried beans, place several pieces of chicken on it, then layer it with salsa, lettuce, tomatoes, and sour cream. I laughed as she struggled to take a bite.

We went home and forgot the case. I was reluctant at first, but Michelle got me into *Downton Abbey*. We rented the first four seasons. We sat next to each other on the couch covered with a blanket. Michelle limited us to two episodes an evening or else I would have stayed up all night. I couldn't wait to see what happened next.



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