

DEATH OF A DYING MAN

by

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CHAPTER ONE

I was hearing a confession, I realized. It should have been a simple case—to find Person X, last seen on this date and at this time. I’d ask a few questions. Person X’s birth date, Social Security number (that only happened if I was very lucky), any distinguishing features, that sort of stuff.

But our lives are never simple, so the cases were never simple. Mine—life and cases—were a wide and deep river away from simple. I had arrived at my office shortly before ten just in case Shannon Wild, a journalist who was one of my life’s current complications, came by and—because it needed to be done—started on my tasks of filing and finishing up paperwork, everything from ordering paper clips to sending out bills. A little after lunch, I had even finished the things I needed to do and was starting on the things I wanted to do. Ms. Wild had not shown up, but my desk was beginning to appear from under the paper when I received this phone call.

And even as lapsed a Catholic as I am will admit that listening to confessions is better than doing paperwork.

“I was a real jerk,” my new client, Damon LaChance, told me. “Didn’t believe her. I mean, I’m a gay man, right? Go figure that the one time I do it with a woman, she gets pregnant. Of course, birth control never entered my mind. Sex equals babies just wasn’t part of my reality.”

Damon was a dying man. He wanted me to find out if he had, indeed, fathered a child seven years earlier, sometime in the late 1990s. And to hear his deathbed confessions. He had already told me about his wild youth, drugs, sex, circuits of parties that ended the next afternoon. He had told me about the time he thought he got infected with the

hepatitis C that would kill him in the next six months as his liver failed. When he got infected with HIV, which was making the hepatitis C kill him even more quickly. The times he got gonorrhea—orally, genitally, and rectally. The drugs he used, from skin-popping cocaine and heroin to the expensive wine, bottle after bottle every night.

Damon was a successful man, if you define success as money. He owned four bars in the French Quarter, and Damon may have been decadent, but he was not a fool, and only a fool could lose money in bars in the French Quarter. He'd made his into the kinds of places he liked to go. Three of them were gay bars, and one was a glitzy tourist place that gave people everything they thought they should find on Bourbon Street.

Damon could afford to buy a lot of time in the confessional. "I wrote her back, think I called her a lying bitch. Like I said, a real asshole jerk. I've been hit up through the years by hustlers and money scammers, and I guess I was too quick to lump her in with them."

He hadn't alluded to the one time we met before. Perhaps he had forgotten it. I didn't want to think so, as he had made an impression on me, one that I remembered.

My partner Cordelia James is a do-gooder type doctor, running a clinic in a poor neighborhood, and she was receiving one of those awards that people who do the right thing occasionally get. My spousal duty required that I gussy myself up, paste on my best beatific smile of undying love so no one would suspect that the good doctor rarely remembers to clean out the cat box, hang by her side in case she needed someone to talk to, and not lose the beatific smile as hordes of admirers gushed their congratulations and stepped on my toes as they totally ignored me.

Damon was the master of ceremonies. I knew who he was, or thought I did. Rich, gay party boy. I'd never talked to him in my life, passed him a few times in the French Quarter. But New Orleans has pockets of small town, and the gay community is one of them. Of course I'd heard of him.

But hearing of and actually seeing are different. From behind me, I heard a deep and resonant laugh, the roar of a man who knows how to enjoy life. I turned to see who it was and there was Damon. Tall, movie-star handsome, and in a tuxedo that made him look like he should be

pouring martinis out of a silver cocktail shaker for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Details can tell a story, and the details of the tableau I saw hinted that my quick dismissal of Damon was too facile. He was with a group of women, and at events like this, the girls and boys are often more segregated than at a Catholic middle-school dance. Not just women, but women who wouldn't qualify as anyone's arm decoration. Silver-haired for the most part, and not a single dress or pair of high heels in the bunch. Damon liked women—shocking as it may seem, some gay men are as sexist as the worst of the straight men—and was willing to spend time at a glad-handing event like this talking to them. If he was with those women it was because he enjoyed their company, not because of what they could do for him. They were still talking when Cordelia sent me off to get her something to drink.

When I was coming back, carrying one of those drinks that require a martini glass filled to the rim and therefore the ability of a circus performer to carry it through a packed crowd, Damon and I almost collided. My fault. He was pushing a man in a wheelchair to one of the front tables, and I was so intent on not spilling Cordelia's drink, I didn't notice a man both sitting and moving. I managed to pivot fast enough that Cordelia's pink drink spilled in my direction—direct hit to the cleavage—instead of on Damon or the friend he was pushing.

"I am so sorry," I said, abashed at my inattention and churlish behavior.

"No problem," Damon said, as he wheeled past me. As debonair as Cary Grant, he kept moving and also took a handkerchief from an inside pocket and handed it to me. With a glance at where the drink landed and a rakish smile, he said, "I'm sure one of the women here will help you clean that up."

Then he was through the crowd and I was left with a red face, a sticky pink chest, and his handkerchief. At least I was wearing a black blouse and not the cream one I had considered.

Damon was a smooth emcee, self-deprecating at times, but mostly keeping the focus off himself and onto the awardees. It wasn't his fault that he was taller, handsomer, and wittier than the winners, but the contrast showed. All right, I thought, as one long-winded winner ("And I'd like to thank my parakeet and his veterinarian...") finally exited, I can see why the gay boys like Damon.

Cordelia gave the shortest thank-you speech, taking to heart that brevity is the soul of wit, or at least the less you say, the less chance you have of making a fool of yourself. And she is tall enough that, with dress pumps on, she was almost Damon's height. Then the event was over and I was left trying to manage the beatific smile and watch my toes while hordes gathered around my partner to congratulate her. It was hard with my bra cemented to my chest with triple sec.

An arm was draped around my shoulder. "So, got it licked off yet?" Damon had joined us, with just a brief enough glance at where the drink had landed to let me know what he meant. Unlike most of the others pumping Cordelia's hand, he was willing to acknowledge my existence.

"Saving it for later," I managed to reply. I was still embarrassed at nearly spilling a Cosmo over a man in a wheelchair because I wasn't paying attention to where I was heading.

Damon must have caught the rueful look on my face, as he gave my shoulder a squeeze. Up close he was still as handsome as at a distance—dimples, a roguish grin, full, wavy brownish red hair, well over six feet tall. His arm over my shoulder felt friendly, not invasive, a simple gesture that both let me off from our almost-accident and included me in his congratulating Cordelia, instead of cutting me out as many of the others did.

His "Well deserved. I was happy to see you getting a Spirit Award" came off as sincere. He then bent to give Cordelia a kiss on the cheek and my shoulder a final squeeze.

I offered to wash the handkerchief and return it, but he waved me off.

"It'll be a favor to call in when I really need it," he said, with a wink that Katharine Hepburn would have swooned for, and then he was pulled into the crowd.

That was about four years ago and our paths had never crossed since. Until the phone rang.

"And maybe I was scared...what the hell had I done? Me, with a child? Never planned that, so it was easy to think it couldn't be true," Damon said.

My other phone line glowed accusingly at me. The answering machine could pick it up. I edged up the volume so I could hear who my second caller was.

“She was very attractive, but in an understated way,” Damon continued. “Had a Yankee accent, which I’ve always loved. Sounds so educated and posh, you know?”

Cordelia’s voice came on after my recorded message. “Micky? Are you there? I’ve got a major favor to ask. I hope you’re there and you get this. Lauren and I have been working on the study protocols all day and she mentioned how much she loved shrimp and if I could recommend somewhere to pick some up.”

Damon said, “I guess it was the sound of her voice—and the three bottles of wine. Plus, I’d done the fumbling high-school stuff, probably too hurried and ashamed, even if I did like women, to be fun. But only men after I turned seventeen. Part of me was curious. It may sound odd, but I felt like the queerest thing I could do was have sex with a woman. I’d done everything else.”

Cordelia’s voice carried from the answering machine. “Lauren still seems a bit tired from traveling, plus they’re moving into a short-term apartment right now from the hotel—”

“So you invited them over for dinner,” I muttered.

“So I invited them over for dinner,” my lover continued as predicted. “I mean no one cooks shrimp better than you do, and I know it’s fairly easy to do.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Damon asked. I had muttered a bit too loudly.

“I’m terribly sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you, but I have another client appointment and they’re at the door.” I told this lie so often, I could whip it out without even thinking. “Can we set aside some time to talk? If you want, I’ll be glad to come to you.”

“Nothing really fancy,” I heard Cordelia say, as I jotted down Damon’s French Quarter address and set a time to meet with him. “Maybe if you could stop and pick up shrimp, we could boil them.” We? I thought. Cordelia knows I love her, but I’m still not letting her cook seafood. “And maybe some crabs. And maybe...I don’t know, they may be politically correct types who eschew anything that looks like a real creature. I don’t think Lauren is, but I don’t know about Shannon. Anyway, if you could pick up something safe.” I’m open to suggestions, I thought. Tofu and I have only passed in the grocery store; we don’t have a kitchen acquaintance.

Damon repeated his address to make sure I had it right. Just as I

reassured him that I did have it and he said good-bye, Cordelia ended her long message and also hung up.

I debated whether to call her back. It was a bit late in the day to saddle me with a dinner party, and I wasn't interested in socializing with cocky young Shannon Wild. I wouldn't be a total cad and pretend I'd never gotten her message, but I could let her sweat it for a bit. I also considered stopping by the place that sold turtles and taking one home. No, that was over the top.

I flashed back to the night before and the complications that had just been added to my life.

"You don't really believe in monogamy, do you?" Shannon Wild had asked me.

I glanced around the restaurant. It seemed that she hadn't been overheard. Otherwise a line of both men and women would have been forming at the table. Shannon was a stunningly good-looking woman, with short blond hair, sky blue eyes, a strong jaw, and an expression that gave her a look of sophistication on the border of ennui, but with dimples that hinted she wasn't quite that jaded.

She was seated directly across the table from my lover, Cordelia James. Cordelia, however, didn't hear her question or notice the hand Shannon had put on my thigh for emphasis.

Cordelia was engrossed in a conversation with Lauren Calder, Shannon's presumably not-monogamous partner—Dr. Lauren Calder, the author of *The Vagina Dialogues*, a book that had coasted on the best-seller list for months now. It also managed to be an intelligent discussion of women and their sexuality, what they needed to do to be sexually healthy, and pointed out the gender inequality between men's sexuality research and women's, such as all the money spent to overcome the ageing penis and its erectile dysfunction while we still don't have a better tampon. She and Cordelia had lapsed into doctor speak a while ago and were now avidly discussing Dr. Calder's research.

I had been clearly left the spousal duty of keeping the other spouse occupied.

"Too risky in New Orleans," I answered her. "There are only sixty-four lesbians in this city, and if you don't practice monogamy, it's a mathematical certainty that within six months every single one of them will know just what you do in bed, including how many orgasms you had on Tuesday night."

“And how many orgasms did you have Tuesday night?” she asked, her voice low and teasing.

I had the feeling that her flirting was more sport than any serious attempt to bed me. She, also, had been relegated to the tag-along spouse role, and this was her way of making it interesting. “It was a slow night. Only four.” In fact, last Tuesday, the number was zero, as Cordelia had had a cold and gone to bed shortly after I’d fed her chicken soup.

Did I believe in monogamy? More in soul than in body. Cordelia and I had been together for almost a decade, and I had never cheated on her. That’s not to say that I hadn’t occasionally lusted in my heart or missed the hard, heady passion of a new partner. Before she and I got together, I had been, shall we say, sexually adventurous, in truth, using sex, as well as alcohol, to keep away my demons. I was smart enough to know that the love, stability, and security Cordelia gave me were a large part of banishing or at least de-fanging those demons. I wasn’t about to risk all that for a sexual thrill, although I had to admit that the thought had crossed my mind this evening. Shannon’s hand was still on my thigh. But it was Dr. Lauren Calder that I’d given my second glance to.

Dr. Calder was tall enough to look me in the eye, and she had a figure that showed the muscles of someone who worked out, but also the curves of someone who wouldn’t (and hadn’t) said no to the white-chocolate bread pudding that was this restaurant’s signature dessert. Her hair was a thick, black mane, shot through with steel gray. Her eyes were a sensual brown, the rest of her face a hard plane that signified she was someone accustomed to being in charge, her expression one of intense observation, as if the whole world interested her. Only when she relaxed into a smile or a laugh did her face reveal a different side, a more playful—and dare I think it—sensual side.

I would have preferred to have her explain the importance of control groups to me rather than discuss the pluses and minuses of monogamy with her partner.

“You still haven’t revealed what you really think of being with one person for the rest of your life,” that partner persisted.

“I’ve answered it as much as I intend to with my lover sitting six inches away,” I answered. Six inches and worlds away.

“Then I will have to ask it in other circumstances,” she countered, finally taking her hand off my thigh.

She would have the circumstances to ask again. The complicating thing that had happened that evening was that Shannon was a journalist and was doing a piece on women in nontraditional careers. I'm a private detective. You do the math. In some burst of Southern politeness, I agreed to let her follow me around. Having forged an alliance between us, our respective lovers felt free to head off into the land of medical jargon.

"Do we start bright and early tomorrow morning?" Shannon asked.

"I started my own business to avoid bright and early," I told her. "And tomorrow will be mostly a paperwork day." Actually, tomorrow was a day for me to decide exactly how to handle this bright and bushy-tailed girl reporter. There were some cases and places I had no intention of taking her.

"Don't trust me, do you?" she said as she gave me a direct stare, one she had clearly practiced to be intimidating. "Think I'll be a bother and a pain, asking your clients in the midst of a dirty divorce how to spell their names for the article I'm doing?"

"No, I assume you're more professional than that," I covered, pissed at myself for being so obvious—and at her for calling me so quickly on it. "You're welcome to come by my office and watch me file paper and drink coffee. I'll start around ten. Coffee and chicory, taken black, is as dangerous as it will get."

"I take my work seriously," she said, her voice crisp and professional, all traces of flirting gone. "And I'm on a deadline. Don't waste my time and I won't waste yours. If you're really going to do it, do it. If not, don't play games."

"Games?" I retorted, then thought better of what I was about to say, that a woman who queried me about monogamy in front of my lover and her lover had no right to bitch about game playing. I did a five count, then said, "I take my work just as seriously as you take yours. You want to watch? You'll do it my way."

"You're right, Shannon. New Orleans does know how to eat," Lauren Calder said.

I couldn't tell if she and Cordelia had come to a stopping place in their conversation and finally decided to recognize our existence or if she had realized that her pretty young thing was close to stepping in it.

Lauren—and *The Vagina Dialogues*—paid the bill.

Cordelia finished the last of her cognac and handed the car keys to me. As usual, I was the designated driver. Since Lauren and Shannon had arrived only a few days ago and still seemed to think that north and south had some meaning in a city carved through by a winding river (there are parts of the Westbank you have to go east to get to), we had picked them up. Everyone was full and tired, and it was a sultry summer night, so the block-long walk to our car had little conversation save for a few comments on the meal.

Lauren and Shannon got in the backseat, Shannon quickly snuggling under Lauren's arm. Being a safe driver, as I pulled out I checked my rearview mirror and got a good view of them having a deep kiss. Monogamy did seem so monotonous. Another quick glance told me that Shannon's hand was heading toward Lauren's breast. Then I was a good girl and kept my eyes on the road.

Cordelia didn't even reach out and hold my hand. Although to be fair to her, it was city driving and my car is a stick shift.

Their hotel was close enough they didn't have time to start the orgasm count.

Cordelia and Lauren spent a few minutes reiterating where and when they would meet tomorrow. Shannon merely sauntered up to my window and said, "Call me when you're ready for me to tag along," then went around to the other side of the car to wait for Lauren.

They held hands walking into the lobby.

I had barely pulled away from the hotel when Cordelia said, "I can't believe Dr. Lauren Calder will be at my clinic tomorrow." She then launched into an explanation—in terms that I could understand—of the project. Dr. Calder was doing research on microbicides or, in real-person speak, a chemical barrier a woman could put in her vagina that could help prevent pregnancy or infection with STDs and HIV. The main advantage to these devices was that the woman controlled them. She could put the gel or ointment in her vagina without her partner knowing. It wasn't very profitable research because most of the need was in the developing world, and many of the methods, such as ways to change the acid balance in the vagina, were not things that could be patented.

That explanation took us to our front door. As I opened it to let her

in, she finally broke from her vagina monologue to ask, “I know Lauren and I did get a bit engrossed. Is it going to be okay? Shannon doing that story on you?”

“It’s fine. And she’s not doing the story on me. I’m probably not dangerous enough for her and will be in a paragraph in the end, if I’m not cut entirely.”

“Well, it might be convenient if you keep her entertained while Lauren and I are working together, but you don’t have to. She’s a big girl and can probably take care of herself.” The end of her comment was muffled by a large yawn.

“Tired?” I asked, wanting to change the subject from Shannon Wild.

“A bit. This is a weeknight and I’m usually close to bed by this time.”

“Real tired?” I asked, putting my arms around her and starting to kiss her neck.

She returned my embrace, then as my lips traveled down her throat to the swell of her breasts, she said, “What’s got into you? I’m the one who had champagne and cognac.”

“The champagne and cognac did the trick for the doctor and her young thing.”

“You were watching?”

“No, I was driving. That occasionally requires a glance in the rearview mirror.”

Satisfied that I had seen only what was required in the line of duty, Cordelia asked, “What were they doing?”

I kissed her nipple through her shirt, then answered. “Heavy kissing by the time I pulled away from the curve. I’m pretty sure I saw a hand heading toward a breast.”

“I thought I heard some suspicious rustling back there. Dare I ask whose?”

“Against the odds, Shannon was being the butch.” I gently bit her nipple.

“I *am* tired.” Cordelia sighed. “That tickles more than it arouses.”

“Damn,” I said, lifting my head away.

“Tomorrow is Friday. I’ll make it up to you then,” she said, then took my face between her hands and gave me a good, solid kiss to prove her point. She wrapped an arm around my waist and started pulling me

toward the stairs and our bedroom. “And I need my sleep tonight,” she continued as we maneuvered up the stairs together, “for tomorrow night.”

So it was another night with zero orgasms, at least in my house. But that wasn’t something I planned to share with Shannon Wild.

And I had to meet them again tonight.

I finished up the notations I was making for Damon’s case and got ready to leave.

Damon LaChance wanted to find out if he had a child somewhere. And if he had infected a woman while creating that child. He hadn’t directly said that, only hinted at it with a comment about wanting to make sure she was okay. I would take the case, had already agreed to, but it didn’t promise a happy ending. He could be right, that she was just trying to scam him and get some baby bucks. Even that didn’t mean that she deserved to be infected with the things Damon was carrying in his body. Or she could have told him the truth. She was pregnant and thought the father should know. That she had disappeared after Damon’s jerk letter and sent back the subsequent ones argued strongly for the latter scenario. Which meant that I would find this woman and interject the father who couldn’t be bothered to be around in the beginning back into her life. And tell her, by the way, you need to get tested for all the latest and greatest infectious diseases.

Cooking shrimp for Dr. Calder and young Shannon seemed easy in comparison.