

# Web of Deceit

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# I

At 3 a.m., in New York, Jennifer March came awake in the dark, sensing a presence in her bedroom.

A storm raged outside, lightning flickering beyond the window, the rain lashing down in torrents. When she opened her eyes she was already frightened, and suddenly aware of two things: the roar of the storm and the terrifying feeling that there was *someone* near her. Perspiration beaded her face and her breath came in short, rapid throbs. As she pulled back the covers and started to get up off the bed she saw the figure of a man dressed in black standing over her. *'Don't move,'* he ordered.

Despite the warning, Jennifer struggled in panic, but the man slapped her, a stinging blow across the face. *'Stay still!'* A flash of lightning flooded the bedroom and she glimpsed the intruder's face.

*He had no face.*

He wore a black ski mask, piercing dark eyes visible through the slits, and he held a butcher's knife in his leather-gloved hand. When Jennifer went to scream the man's other hand went over her mouth. She cried, curled up with fear, and her nightgown rode up her legs. Carefully, the man placed the knife on the night stand. Jennifer suddenly felt a hand crawl over her flesh as the man forced her legs apart. *'Stay still or I'll cut your throat!'*

Jennifer March was petrified. The man unbuckled his trousers, moved on top of her and entered her savagely. The pain was terrible. She was more frightened than she had ever been in her life and there was something animal and repulsive about what the man was doing, but she was so caught up in the horror of what was happening to her that she didn't dare move. While the storm raged outside the man grunted, taking his pleasure.

And then suddenly it was over. The man sat up, took his hand off her mouth, but Jennifer was too traumatised to scream as he picked up the knife from the night stand and the bloodied steel flashed. She sobbed. 'What . . . what are you going to do?'

*'Kill you.'*

Jennifer March screamed . . .

She woke with a scream, clutching a pillow to her chest. This time the wakening was not a nightmare, but for real. Panting with terror, she gulped air.

Jennifer March let go of the pillow and threw back the covers. She switched on the bedside light, fumbled out of bed, and moved over to the window. Forcing herself to breathe more slowly, she became aware of the harsh murmur beyond the open window. Rain. Heavy, incessant torrents that hissed out there in the coldness of the stormy night.

Staring out, she saw nothing, no silvery lunar light to comfort her, just black icy rain sluicing the glass, washed by a ragged wind. Lightning flashed and a chorus of thunder rumbled. New York was asleep, the entire East Coast bathed in stormy darkness, but she was wide awake, her soul swamped by heart-thumping fear and a terrible anguish. As always, the dream came to her during a storm. And as always, it was so real it distressed her.

Like a sleepwalker, she moved out to the apartment hallway, stepped into the bathroom, grabbed the towel from the ring and dabbed perspiration from her face. Then she found her way to the kitchen, switched on the night light over the cooker hob, took a bottle of water from the icebox, poured a large measure into a tall glass, and clinked in some ice cubes. She took a long drink, then padded back to her room and sat on the bed. Her back to the wall, she placed the ice-cold glass against her forehead, stared at the pale green numbers on the digital clock on her night stand: 3.05.

Almost without thinking, she found the sleeping pills on the night stand, thumbed open the plastic bottle and popped two in

her mouth, washed them down with another mouthful of water. She didn't like taking the pills, but knew she had to now. She wanted sleep, and without the torment of her dreams.

The condo in Long Beach, Long Island, was a one-bed, with a pleasant living room, a kitchenette and a tiny bathroom. On a clear day she could see across the inlet to Cove End, her parents' house: it was deserted and forlorn, a grey-and-white-painted colonial property with its own waterside dock. She had moved to the apartment hoping to make a fresh start, unable to live in the house any more, but really she hadn't made any kind of start at all. She was forever trapped in her past, bound by its chains. The nightmare still came. The memories still haunted. No matter what she did to try to forget, they still came back. And she knew why. Sometimes dreams were all she had. All she had to remember the life she had shared and lost with her father and mother, and the sacredness of their lives together.

But sometimes those dreams disturbed, brought her horror and grief, and tonight they had her in their grip and wouldn't let go. Which was why she knew she needed to hear a human voice, needed to know she wasn't alone, know that she was connected to another living being.

She peered again at the illuminated clock on the night stand: 3.06. She knew there was only one person in the world whom she could talk to about her despair in the middle of the night, or at any other time. She picked up the phone, laid it beside her, punched the back-lit numbers on the keypad. Seven miles away in Elmont, Long Island, the line rang for a couple of seconds before a man's sleepy voice answered. 'Hello?'

'It's me.'

'Jennifer? Are you OK? Is . . . is everything all right?'

Mark Ryan's voice came awake. She could sense his concern. 'I'm sorry, Mark. I know it's been a little while, but I didn't know who else to call.'

'It's OK, Jennifer. I'm here for you.'

'I woke you.'

'It's all right. I only got to bed a little while ago.' He laughed

softly. 'Usually I'd sleep through an earthquake, but I guess I must have been half awake.' A rustle of sheets; he was sitting up in bed. A loud crack of thunder made Jennifer jump. Mark said, 'It sounds like a terrible night out there.'

'It's pretty bad.'

'I guess you were dreaming. Is that why you rang, Jennifer? You were dreaming?'

'It was the same dream. I could see him in the room. He was so real, like always. And my imagination always makes it worse in the dream. I always imagine that the intruder really did succeed in raping me.'

'You're just upset, Jennifer.'

Her voice broke. 'At times it feels like I've cracked, rent down the middle. Tonight's one of them, Mark. I guess I still miss them so terribly, feel lost without them. I used to think it would get easier with time. But it doesn't. It's been two years, but sometimes it's like it all happened yesterday.'

Mark listened, then said softly, 'I know it's not easy, Jennifer, and anniversaries can make us sensitive, especially tragic ones. It gets like that for all of us now and then. But you have to realise that the man isn't going to come back. Not ever. Please understand that.'

She heard the words, let them comfort her as she looked over numbly at the rain sheeting down. A few hundred yards across the wet, stormy inlet Cove End would be smothered by the cold, tarry darkness. Once it had been a warm and welcoming house that had held so many good memories, but not any longer.

'Are you still there, Jennifer?'

'I'm still here.'

'Your mom wouldn't want you to be like this. She wouldn't want you anguished and upset, even on her anniversary. So what I want you to do now is lie down and close your eyes, just try to sleep. Will you do that for me, Jennifer?'

'I took some pills, I feel sleepy now.'

'How many pills did you take?'

'Two.'

She heard the hint of relief in Mark's voice. 'Well, no harm there. Right now you need them. Will you be OK? Are the pills really working?'

'I think so.'

'How about I call you tomorrow, or you call me, whenever you feel up to it or you want to talk?'

'That sounds good.'

'Goodnight, Jennifer. Try and rest.' There was a tiny hint of laughter in his voice, deliberate, as if to try to ease her out of her anguish. 'If I was there, you know, and we had that kind of relationship, I'd offer to rock you to sleep.'

'I know. Goodnight. And . . . and thanks for listening, Mark. Thanks for being there.'

'What's a friend for? We've known each other a long time. Rest now. I'll talk to you soon.'

The last words he said were 'Take care', and then the line clicked.

Silence now, but for the silken lash of water drenching the window and a distant growl of thunder. When she finally put down the phone, Jennifer March lay on her side, her hands under her head like a child, staring out with misted eyes at the dark rivers of rain washing the glass, until finally the velvet grip of the drug took hold and numbed her. Caught there, in the narcotic no man's land between wake and sleep, she knew in her heart that no one could really help her. No one could ever really help her but herself. Someday, somehow, she had to learn to live in peace with the demons that haunted her soul.

Right now, she knew that was impossible, but at least the masked man wasn't there any more and the nightmare was gone. At least there was that. And then the sleep she had longed for finally came, her eyelids flickered, and Jennifer March surrendered herself to what remained of the night.

*JFK International Airport, New York*

Nadia prayed for it to be over.

If she survived these next few minutes, she would live. If not, she was dead. She anxiously clutched the baby to her breast, and held on to the hand of her two-year-old daughter. The airport was noisy and crowded. It was her first time in JFK and she was frightened, even though the men had told her what to expect. She felt perspiration dampen her face, rivulets of sweat running down the back of her woollen dress.

She was twenty-three, with soft blue eyes and an innocent face, which was why the men had picked her. Her daughter Tamara had her mother's looks, a perfect little round face and wide, innocent eyes, and Nadia loved her very much.

It was a difficult life in Moscow. Hard to make a living with eight million people in the streets. Hard to survive in a small room on the fourth floor of a tenement apartment block, with no hot water and the rooms infested with rats and insects.

Nadia Fedov wanted a better life for her daughter. The girl wasn't going to end up like her mother, working in a nightclub that was no more than a brothel; wasn't going to have brutal, drunken men abusing her body for a handful of roubles. She was going to have clean sheets and hot water, a nice apartment in a good neighbourhood and nice children as friends. These were the things Nadia wanted for her daughter. She looked down at Tamara. The child was tired now that the excitement of the eight-hour flight from Moscow was over, her hair tousled. She rubbed her eyes.

'Can I sleep soon, Mama?'

'Soon, Tamara. Soon.'