



CHAPTER ONE

PHILADELPHIA, DECEMBER 2000

The door to the psychiatry department stood ajar. Ashley Parnell dabbed her eyes and knocked. In a black cashmere suit and creamy silk blouse, she looked more like an MBA intern than a fourth-year medical student. But her shoulders were slumped, her eyes puffy and red. It wouldn't take a psychiatrist to tell that all was not right in her world.

"Dr. Welton?" She called beyond the door labeled Acting Chief, Psychiatry.

"Come in." The voice inside distinctive, yet annoyed.

Psychiatry had not been her favorite rotation. Talking to crazies all day had started to make her question her own mental stability.

"I'm sorry to interrupt —"

"I assume you're the medical student who called?" Dr. Welton glanced up, fixing ice-blue eyes on her. "I don't have much time. What can I do for you?" He signaled for her to take the chair across from his pristine desk.

For an instant, Ashley felt her eyelids flutter and her knees start to wobble. Why? The man inspecting her looked remarkably like her father. A trim, muscular build, tanned face, and silver-tinged sandy hair, so much like Dad, maybe fifteen years ago.

"The reason I'm here is that my father died yesterday, and I need to hand in my patient report so I c-can —"

"I see. Did you bring it with you?" Brusque, to the point, Dr. Welton held out his hand.

Ashley fumbled in her bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers. Once she submitted these reports, she'd complete her psychiatry rotation two days early, free to attend her father's funeral.

Important to make eye contact, Ashley reminded herself as she handed the professor the packet, one sheet for each of the seven schizophrenic patients she'd been assigned. Psychiatrists always make a big deal about eye contact, but when she tried to engage his eyes, a surge of new tears made her blink hard and clamp down her jaw. Even if this guy did remind her of her dad, she would get out of here without a crying jag.

She groped inside her purse for Kleenex, and when she looked up, Dr. Welton was staring at her. His index finger stabbed at her signature at the bottom of the first page.

"You're Miss *Parnell*?"

He rose from his swivel chair and came around the desk. He whisked a snowy-white, monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket and held it out to her. "I didn't realize. I am deeply sorry about your father. Such an admirable man."

He tucked the handkerchief in Ashley's hand. It felt stiff with excess starch, but she accepted it, wondering whether she should actually use it to blow her nose. Before she could decide, he grasped one arm in a protective gesture and assisted her across the room to a paisley upholstered couch. The couch symbolism didn't even register as Ashley fought to contain her tears. She had never considered herself overly emotional, but today she felt desperately alone.

"Miss Parnell, please. Let's sit for a moment." Dr. Welton's voice was now warm and comforting. "I just want to make sure you're okay. I'll get you some water."

"I'm okay." Ashley had intended to leave right away, but she found herself moving robotically under his touch. She clamped the cool glass of water in both hands as Dr. Welton joined her on the couch.

"Do you want to tell me about your father?"

Ashley, always a private person, found herself pouring out her life to Dr. Welton: her father's two-year battle with pancreatic cancer, losing her mother to cancer three years before her father, how she had always wanted to be a cardiologist like her mother. When she finished, she found herself encircled in Dr. Welton's arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

There was a knock at the door and a muffled voice interrupted, "Dr. Welton, you have patients waiting in the clinic."

“I am so, so sorry.” Ashley jumped up, wringing her hands. “I’ve taken too much of your time. I need to get home.”

“Miss Parnell, you’re too upset to drive. Let me run you home.”

“Thank you, but my driver is waiting,” she said. Again, he took her arm. “I’m so sorry. Naturally, I’ll come back after the funeral and,” she pointed to the stack of papers on his desk, “and f-finish.”

“No need, Miss Parnell. I’ll handle everything with the psych department.”

She felt a slight shudder. “Thank you,” was all she could think to say.

“Let me escort you to your car.”

Ashley ignored the raised secretarial eyebrows as Dr. Welton walked her out of the office and down the corridor.

Under the flutter of wet snowflakes, Conrad Welton stood transfixed as the chauffeured, forest green Mercedes merged into traffic, Ashley Parnell ensconced in the backseat. Attractive, not stunning or sexy, but classy. Medium height with a bit of a slouch, average weight — maybe 120 pounds — light auburn hair pulled back, sad brown eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses. A conservative designer suit. No jewelry, but med students rarely wore rings or bracelets.

The girl had sounded intelligent, but introverted. From her actions, Welton detected a lack of self-esteem, quite unexpected given her position of privilege. Despite the frigid winter air, Conrad felt a surge of warmth course through his veins. An heiress had stumbled into his office at the most propitious of moments: she had an Oedipal complex at a most vulnerable stage; was under extreme emotional stress; and would be susceptible to imprints that defied her own logic and personality. There’d been no doubt that she’d felt the chemistry between them. He’d felt the quickening of her heart and the heave of her chest as he’d held her close.

After enduring a banal clinic session, Conrad hurried back to his office. He instructed his secretary to hold all calls so he could turn his attention to the Internet. The object of his study: the recently deceased Paul Parnell, world-renowned billionaire and philanthropist.

Paul had been the retired CEO of Keystone Pharmaceutical. According to the annual reports, he'd amassed stock worth close to a billion. He'd been a founding partner of Gene-Tech which went public, another quarter of a billion. He'd been a primary investor in Computer Appliances. When it went public, another quarter of a billion. Inheritance from his father's estate with appreciation, at least eight million. Real estate, an art collection, lots of other luxuries including a jet and a helicopter accounted for another eighty million or so. And there was that Nobel Prize, a status symbol to add to the money.

At six thirty p.m. when Welton logged off the computer, he found a haphazard arrangement of pink message slips taped to the back of his door. The usual trivia that plagued him. An admission to the psych unit — suicide watch. A consult request from the floor — panic attack — would he use hypnosis? A call from the dean: had he sent over the monthly department update? He hadn't. The dean had as much as told him he'd never be chairman of the department now that the National Institute of Mental Health had terminated his research grant. He didn't intend to play this demeaning game much longer. His reputation was second to none in the field of medical hypnosis since the passing of his mentor, Milton Erickson, and he had tenure, so the university couldn't fire him. But the whole field of psychiatry bored him now.

Crumpling the handful of notes, Welton tossed them into the trash.

The Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Philadelphia was crowded with dignitaries, political leaders, and business icons. The day was brisk but sunny, the streets cleared of the light snow of the day before. A day much too cheery for a funeral. Welton debated whether or not to attend. He needed a natural way to reconnect with Ashley Parnell, and was anxious to glean as much inside Parnell information as he could. As a psychiatrist, he was trained to observe how people deal with stress, and today's insights could be valuable to his plans.

The vestibule was crammed with flowers and people. Conrad disliked crowds, but he calmed himself, nodded to fellow attendees, and wended his way toward the Parnell family. He found Ashley standing between her sisters. One was definitely older, and fat compared to Ashley. The other, who Welton knew from his research was a professional

model, had that typical emaciated look. All three women wore black dresses and wide-brimmed black hats as they greeted the snaking line of mourners. Welton joined the procession, noting how the chubby sister slowed the process down, sharing the details of the old man's death, singing the praises of the hospice. Waiting to get to Ashley, he got a good look at the skinny sister. She didn't look anything like the glamorous photos he'd seen on the Internet. Leaning heavily on Ashley, she was either consumed with grief or she was stoned. The latter, he surmised.

Murmuring, "I'm sorry," Welton passed along the family in the line of mourners. When he stood in front of Ashley, he paused long enough to make sure she recognized him. This time she wore no glasses, he noted. Reaching to press her hand, he was rewarded with a gentle squeeze. He then abruptly left the cathedral, the stench raised by so many flowers sickening him.

The adulation of the masses, including the press, for the over-privileged, self-absorbed, pompous dead man disgusted Welton. All these people wanted a piece of the Parnell influence and money. Even a scrap would do. Well, no scraps for him, he had much more in mind.

Escaping the cathedral before the service began, Conrad had to step aside to avoid brushing against one of the two Parnell brothers, Senator Frank Parnell, junior U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, Ashley's half brother. The senator's face was flushed and his jaw clenched. An expression of anger, not grief, Conrad surmised. He was tempted to follow the senator back inside the cathedral, but the sickening floral odor deterred him.

As Welton retreated, his attention was directed to a stage-whispered conversation between a sophisticated-looking woman, whom he recognized from his Internet search as Meredith Parnell, the senator's wife, and a partner in one of Philadelphia's most prestigious law firms, and a frail old man with very black hair.

"Frank's upset, Carl," said the Parnell woman, as if defending a petulant child. "He expected Paul to be buried next to his own mother, not Vivian."

"What can I say?" The old man's shoulders slumped further forward. "Paul and Vivian were married for twenty-three years. It's been thirty-seven years since Frank's mother, Kay, died. It's what Paul stipulated."

Welton knew exactly what this overheard tiff was all about. Which wife to be buried next to: wife number one or wife number two?

“I know there’s nothing that you can do, but Frank is irate,” the woman said. “Maybe after the will is squared away this afternoon, Frank’ll come out of his funk.”

As Welton turned to watch the senator’s wife and the old man return to the family, he noticed a look of panic flash across the face of the other Parnell brother, who must be Daniel, the oldest of Paul’s children, reported to be a recluse in Florida. Following Daniel’s troubled gaze, Conrad observed two dark-haired women, both attractive, one younger than the other, and a young man enter through a side door. Not much to note in and of itself. But why did the Parnell brother look like he’d seen a ghost? So much to learn about these Parnells. And learn he would.