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SHADOW DANCE

PART I

Chapter 1

In their family a single event defined them. Everything in response to it collided and crumbled, indelibly changed forever. Like a rock thrown into a still lake its ripples spread uniformly across the fabric of time.

Through a window in the door, he observed dimly, cast in sunlight, the slumped frame of his patient facing an open window. Her long blonde hair disheveled, cascades in waves over frail shoulders. And, although capable of reciting her medical record from memory, he removes the chart from its clear plastic jacket and inspects for deviation.

Patient's name: Julia Nightingale. Age: 48. Profession: Writer. Condition upon arrival: Suicide Watch. Patient's daughter murdered by poison, spring 1999. No one prosecuted.

Patient distressed, depressed and despondent. Took overdose of sleeping medication on multiple occasions. Patient discovered by cemetery groundskeeper unconscious and lying on daughter's burial plot. Transferred from treating hospital to this psychiatric facility.

Patient remains delusional, resentful, secretive, troubled, agitated, bitter, angry and explosive. Danger to self and others: multiple suicide attempts and psychosis. Refuses visitors, except son, Elijah Nightingale.

Diagnosis: Psychogenic Amnesia; Profound Melancholic Depression; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; and Psychosis. Progress: minimal.

Patient complains of a dream in which she kills the men responsible for causing her daughter's death. She eats meagerly but enjoys an appetite for cigarettes and, when offered, she'll accept.

"Julia," cheerfully announced the tall, husky-built doctor. Startled, Julia closes the black book she reads from and places it beside her on the bed.

Removing a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket, he pulls the cellophane strip unsealing the pack and observes all the books in English and French on subjects from world religions to quantum physics lining the room and staked in corners and on furniture. Like a portal into another world, a large framed print of Monet's woman and child in a sunflower garden suspends between two rectangular windows. He glances as he passes by a framed photograph of a young girl's haunting eyes as he rounds the bed to face Julia.

With a perfectly arched eyebrow, he extends the pack of cigarettes, a peace offering. Symbolizing an unspoken communion bonding them in a silent dance of gestures. She raises a delicate white hand, each finger crowned with a chewed fingernail, and reaches for a cigarette as her steely, gray-green eyes rise to greet his perceptible warmth.

Anxiously she stares at his striking features as though recognizing a path out of the chaos of her mind.

"Let's go outside?" He directs tenderly, and his amber eyes alight to the journal lying beside her on the bed. Snatching it she reaches for his muscular arm with her free hand. Feather-light, she glides along on his arm as they stroll down the hallway leading outside onto palatial grounds. For a long time now, his therapy amounted only to this routine: their special dance.

Yet, today held a special quality, different from the others. In the early pre-dawn hours, she awoke distraught, complaining of the unsettling dream, and directed the staff to send for him. But the staff reports an unusual detail. “She’s clinging to a thin black book, or journal...” they explain. No one previously had observed Julia writing a journal. Its arrival impregnates the air with possibilities.

It might signify a breakthrough. Perhaps, he rejoices, ...the time may be right to share my news with her. Early morning, he instructs the staff to clear his calendar. Aware breakthroughs didn’t equate to time or medications, he intends to objectively make observations before jumping to conclusions.

Lounging on a chaise, Julia gazes down to a meadow divided by a river flanked by tree-covered hills rising to plateaus on both sides. A soft gleam of light now strokes the hilltops casting short shadows. Above them a hawk floats like a glider on motionless wings. Elijah covers Julia with a light blanket and, then before settling to her right, lights her cigarette.

In a lifeless voice Julia asks, “How long have I been here?” But then corrects, “No, what I meant is, how long has it been since any news of Sophie’s case?” She hadn’t asked him about it since arriving, yet, inquires now, precisely, when truly, he’s news.

“Not since you came to this institution around 2001,” he hints.

Stillness settles and, in the gap, he ponders her words, certain she knew the answer to her own question. For she easily could calculate the passage of time since becoming committed as it coincides with physical changes naturally occurring in him over the years. For when she arrived at the institution, Elijah attended grade school and, now, resides at the facility enrolled in a psychiatric program for certification as a doctor of psychology.

Choosing to specialize in transformational psychiatry, he planned to gain a deeper understanding of her maladies. Likewise, residency with her institution permitted unlimited access to her, as well as daily consults with her treating psychiatrists. Prophetically, Julia referred to Elijah, when a child, as “my doctor.” And, so he became.

Plunging into the uncharted waters of her mind, he divulges with an exquisite smile and twinkling eyes, “I’ve news Mother.”

Coughing phlegm, Julia clears her throat and stiffly sweeps a misty gaze from the flowered fields of crimson poppies below. Lugubrious eyes in a dance with shadows from the past, stare solemnly at Elijah

“What?” She sourly snaps in a flat irritable tone as though distracted by dense thoughts.

“It’s Bella,” he continued, pausing to search her aging leaden eyes for any perceptible affect. For, they’d not mentioned Bella—an unspoken trigger—since Julia became institutionalized. Motionless, Julia stares vacantly beyond Elijah, into an invisible world. *The name*, he thought, ... *may stimulate her memory...*

“Bella,” he reiterates, “...she awoke from the coma,” hesitating to allow his words to crystalize. The words course through their bodies like a gong reverberating. Remembering, Julia involuntarily flinches, and abruptly plants her feet on the cool viridian grass.

The blanket sails from her lap displaced. Tears brim mournful eyes threatening to spill as Julia announces her chin quivers.

“What...I...I can’t believe it...this is ah...ah...a miracle...I never...expected her to...recover...” she laments, “...Am I dreaming...again? She persists incredulous.

“...When...when did she recover? How’s she?”

“I received a phone call from her doctor in California a week ago. Apparently, she’s doing well, or better than anyone expected. Bella’s parents died and the hospital has yet to identify any living relatives. They traced us through old contact information you left at the hospital asking them to contact us if Bella revived. Do you recall doing it?”

“Yes,” she said her body racking with shock shivers. She utters rapidly, “I remember...I remember...”

He did nothing. Stunned, he didn’t blink. Her tear-filled eyes shimmering like glassy pools of mirrors reflect light borne of pain. *She remembers*, he rejoiced as she raised her hands motioning frantically like intending to speak, but nothing came out. In seconds, he observed in Julia what previously he’d only read in medical text and journals.

“What do you mean you remember?” He prompts and falls silent not wanting to rush or influence her response with his own interpretations.

“I remember...I remember everything. Everything forgotten...I remember it all...everything too unbearable to utter...” breathing rapidly, “...why I came here...what happened to Sophie...and Bella...all of it...” Tears stream chiseled cheeks like water flowing down cliffs. She again takes a deep breath and closes her eyes steadying her mind.

“We don’t have to talk about it now Mom,” he encourages, sensitive to the unreality of the moment for up until this moment she refused, or denied having any memory of the event.”

“No, no ...I want to talk about it. I want out of here. I want to go to Bella, now. She needs me...I can’t stay here any longer,” she declares through a deluge of tears splattering her thin-skinned face.

“Mom,” he cries empathetically, hopping from his chair to her side on the chaise lounge. Affectionately he places a strong arm around her small rounded shoulders aware of her trembling

frailness. Her hair covers her face damp from tears. His strongest desire is to protect her and affectionately as he tucks errant strands of silver and blonde hair behind her ears.

She'd chosen to remain voluntarily institutionalized most of his life and, now, he'd doubts she might ever again choose life. For he knew she didn't fear death, she feared life.

"We need to go to Bella..." she repeats emphatically. "Bella is our only hope of learning the truth and pursuing justice for Sophie. Bella may recall who poisoned them..."

"Is that so?" he quipped, nailed by an exorbitant thrill. Julia emerged from the twilight of dreams and misty memories. His joy punctured his professional demeanor. For, she understood the impact of his news since Bella remained the key witness who might identify who poisoned she and Sophie in 1999.

Following the contours of his mother's face, Elijah searches for clues to the underlying topography. But, her opaque face much like the surface of a still dark lake told nothing of the debris at the bottom. Patiently, he waited for what might surface. Speaking in a whisper her eyes fluttered nervously in shadow and light.

"I'll never have peace," she growled, "...until those responsible for your sister's death are brought to justice. They deserve their fate. It's time for justice to be served—one way, or another," she emphasized in an acerbic tone.

"What do you mean, "one way or another?" he inquired with piqued interest.

"I mean it may not be first-degree murder, it may be second-degree, or manslaughter but bottom-line, this time they'll won't slip through their lies. Especially if Bella remembers who poisoned them." Her voice cracked in a fit of coughing but she recovered continuing.

"...It's time. I know it. Bella's the missing link—the witness who can speak for Sophie. You've my power of attorney..." she reminds him with a new found interest in life.

“...How rapidly can you arrange my release?”

He shares her enthusiasm but from a medical perspective knows the release will involve an examination by her primary psychiatrists. *They'll expect a recapitulation of what she refused to talk about all these years—the memory of the tragic days following Sophie's death.*

“I'll discuss it with your doctors but I'm confident they're likely to release you to my care if satisfied with your exam.” He encourages, still perplexed by how she managed to kept a journal without anyone knowing, curious, he points and asks, “What's with the black book, mother?”

“Oh, your sister's journal. When I awoke from the dream last night, I remembered where I stored it. I'd put it in a bag I've kept with me since the funeral, but never unpacked. It's been here all along. It's why I ask them to summon you. I want to give it to you,” and she hands Elijah the journal.

Grasping its flat surface, bewildered, he stares at its dull, worn cover like beholding an ancient sacred text. A frayed yellowed newspaper clipping extends from its edge. But, its sudden arrival evokes ambiguity when paired with Julia's sudden recovery.

How are they connected? Coincidence possibly, he toyed with the notion but rejects it, distrusting coincidence. The past is no longer silent and stagnate for its colliding with the present. The past arrived and he held it in his hand.

The journal is a path into his sister's world. He embraces it, conscious its contents are but a glimmer of her life, a mere shadow cast from the light of a lone candle. A piece of a much larger mosaic. He rubs his hand over the rough textured cover aware his sister's hands once touched the same place.

Who murdered Sophie might unravel with Bella's awakening. Sophie's life will be given the dignity denied in 1999. He swiped his cuff across a thin veil of tears clouding his eyes.

"Thank you," he whispered, reverently holding the journal to his chest. "I look forward to reading it when I return to my office. Have you read it?"

Drawn, Julia admits, "Yes, I've read parts of it. But, each time I open the journal, I cry, unable to continue. But now, you take it, and read your sister's own words about her life."

Elijah enfolds Julia's icy hand in his and drew it to his chest as they strolled toward an arched entry. Birds rustle and warble in a nearby tree as fluttering wings take flight.