

DANTE'S DILEMMA

ALSO BY LYNNE RAIMONDO

Dante's Wood

Dante's Poison

DANTE'S DILEMMA

A MARK ANGELOTTI NOVEL

LYNNE RAIMONDO



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To my husband

*“Ma ficca li occhi a valle, ché s’approcia
la reviera del sangue in la qual bolle
qual che per violenza in altrui nocchia.”*

(But fix your eyes below, for we draw near
the river of blood that scalds
those who by violence do injury to others.)

—Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* XII
(Translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander,
Doubleday, 2000)

ONE

I was the victim of a thief.

Or a practical joker.

How else to explain that my door lock had gone missing?

Shivering on my porch, I pondered this latest riddle. I was already late for the party and needed to get a move on. The last time I used it, the keyhole was just above the handle. Roughly at chest height and a hand's width from the frame. Was it only my imagination that it was no longer there? Or was I thinking of the one I had recently left behind? For the umpteenth time since the closing, I cursed my dull wits. Why was it so hard to remember where things were?

At last I found it, though it seemed to have jumped several inches from its prior location. After setting the deadbolt, I rattled the door to be on the safe side. My left wrist still ached where it had been shattered a few months before. The townhome had a security system, but it was presently useless, an accessible keypad not being among the amenities insisted upon by the former owners. The alarm company had promised to send someone out to help me with it the first thing Monday morning. In the meantime, I could take solace from the fact that the last household intruder who had tried to kill me was now resting peacefully six feet under.

Moving homes had been more challenging than I'd imagined. My new place was only a block from the old, but that was where the similarities ended. Three stories tall, it stood in a gated courtyard development just north of the Chicago River. It was more room than I needed, but the opportunity to buy had come up quickly, and I'd jumped at the chance to stay in the same neighborhood. In fair weather I could walk

to work, and on foul days a cab ride was only a shout away—at least on those occasions when I found one willing to pull over for me.

Still, I was having a rough time of it. As cramped as my former quarters had been, I could sail from one end to the other without scraping so much as a knuckle. In contrast, getting around my new home was like trying to chart a course through the Bermuda Triangle. Adding to the mayhem, the movers I hired must have studied organizational science in a rummage shop. It had taken a solid hour to find the closet where they'd stashed my tuxedo, and I still wasn't sure what they'd done with half my shoes. If the collection of bumps and bruises I was accumulating didn't kill me, going barefoot in a Chicago winter surely would.

I tapped the porch step with my cane and started gingerly down the walk. The storm that began as freezing rain in the afternoon was now turning into a blizzard. If the Eskimos had dozens of different words for *snow*, I thought I deserved my own special glossary. *Sno-Cone*, I decided, as I pulled my foot from another pile of slush. By the time I reached the street, my shoes were soaked and I was sure the creases in my trousers were a thing of the past. The cane was fine for avoiding solid objects, but what I really needed on a night like this was a divining rod.

Fortunately Boris, my driver, was waiting for me just outside the gate.

"You are late," he said in mild rebuke as he rushed to position an umbrella over my head.

"I know. It's been hell sorting out where the movers put everything."

"You should ask Yelena's help."

Yelena is Boris's wife, as well as my office assistant. On fleeting occasions—according to some mysterious alignment of the planets I have yet to divine—she condescends to open my mail, answer the phone, and usher patients in and out of my office. More often, getting her to lift one of her well-manicured fingers for me requires the skills of an experienced hostage negotiator. Understandably, I was skeptical of her eagerness to assist with the unpacking.

"I can't afford to give her any more time off. Besides, I don't want to interfere with your rekindled marital bliss."

Boris grunted in reply. Married and divorced once before, the couple had recently retied the knot in a lavish affair involving a virtual Red Army of guests and enough imported vodka to float the battleship *Potemkin*.

I took hold of Boris's elbow and followed him over to the town car. "If you don't mind my asking, what on earth made you sign up again?"

Boris let out a sigh as he opened the passenger door for me. "Food is better."

This was terse even for Boris, and I took it as a signal that the second honeymoon was already wearing thin. I slid into the car, hauling the cane in behind me and folding the sections so I could store it on the seat next to me.

Boris gunned the engine, and we swung out onto McClurg Court. The drive was only a mile or two, but long enough to get me thinking about the toast I'd been commissioned to give on the unhappy (for me anyway) occasion of my boss's retirement.

I had many reasons to be grateful to Septimus Brennan. A crusty septuagenarian who managed the warring factions in our department with tact, fairness, and the occasional loss of temper, Sep had come to my rescue at some of the darkest moments in my life. I had him to thank for my present job as a clinical psychiatrist in a large Chicago teaching hospital, where I'd fled after losing nearly everything but my license. Other prospective employers might have questioned why a middle-aged shrink in a privileged East Coast practice would suddenly decide to quit and start all over, but Sep had accepted my excuse of needing a fresh challenge, even while suspecting there was a great deal more to my story than I was telling him.

Sep was also the person I'd turned to when I got the second-worst blow of my life.

I frowned, thinking back on the scene in his office three years ago now, on a stunningly beautiful day in September.

"There's no doubt about the diagnosis?" Sep said, eyeing me intently from behind a desk stacked with memos and folders. With his hooked nose and gaunt cheeks, he looked like Uncle Sam without

the top hat, which was fitting because I was about to be drafted into a whole new life.

“The blood tests were . . . definitive.”

“Tell me again what it’s called?”

“Leber’s Hereditary Optic Neuropathy.” In other words, a disease caused by a defective gene that had just robbed me of the sight in my left eye and was gearing up to do the same thing in the other.

“And there’s nothing that can be done, no treatment whatsoever?”

I eased up on the tissue I had been turning into pulp in my lap and shook my head. “They gave me some vitamins that might slow the process down, but . . .” I shrugged my shoulders in a helpless gesture.

Sep sighed wearily and turned his face toward the window overlooking Lake Michigan. “How much time do they reckon?”

I followed his gaze with the eye of mine that still worked. Outside, the sun was shining brightly and wisps of cloud were speeding ultramarine shadows across the water. “No one can say. Maybe a month. Maybe tomorrow.”

Sep faced me again, and I thought I detected a shiny spot on his lined cheek. “You know you’ll have my full support and that of everyone else here.”

I managed a weak smile. “Let’s not be dishonest with each other.”

Sep smiled too—or tried to. “Perhaps you’re right. I’ve never met anyone who—” He stopped and shook his head. “I should be ashamed of myself. This is hardly the time for another lecture about alienating your peers.” He pointed a gnarled finger at me. “But while we’re on the subject of honesty, I’ll expect you back.” He paused and added less sternly, “When you’re on your feet again.”

For most of the next year, I defined being on my feet as crossing the room to pour myself another shot of bourbon. Once again I had Sep to thank for seeing through my stall tactics and forcing me back on the job. In a perverse way, he was also responsible for the expert-witness work that now took up a third of my time.

I shook off the memory and turned to watch the passing street-lights, which I could still make out, if only as brief flashes in an other-

wise impenetrable dusk. In better lighting I could see more. Contrasts and shadows, some shapes and a few, washed-out colors, but nothing to get excited about. Except when I was asleep and dreaming, the world I'd once viewed and effortlessly recorded with my photographic memory was gone, sucked into oblivion by a microscopic strand of DNA. I wasn't reconciled to it—not by a long shot—but I still needed to eat. And now that I was spending time with my son again . . .

Boris broke through my reverie with the announcement that we'd arrived at the "Cliff Hangers" club.

"Cliff Dwellers," I corrected him. "But I think your name is an improvement."

The Cliff Dwellers belongs to the venerable Chicago tradition of private eating clubs, each with its own distinct pedigree. Unlike those that started out as ethnic enclaves, it has a long history of catering to artists and supporters of the arts, most famously the film critic Roger Ebert. It was a natural choice for Sep, whose collection of late-century figurative paintings was said to be the best in the city. The club, once housed on top of Orchestra Hall, now occupied the penthouse of a skyscraper at the corner of Michigan and Adams.

A footman beat Boris to the town car's door and opened it for me, sending a wintry blast across my face.

"You want I come back later?" Boris asked from the front.

"No. I should be able to find someone who can give me a lift. Go home and keep Yelena company. Maybe it will put her in a better mood next week."

The footman escorted me up a carpeted walk and into the lobby, where from the sound of things only a few other tardy arrivals were waiting for the elevator up. One of them was my colleague of six months, Alison DeWitt, who called my name and came over to peck me on the cheek.

"Thank God I'm not the only one who's late," she said.

"We can always claim we got stuck on an ice floe," I said. "How goes it with the new arrival?"

"Oh, Mark," Alison said, sounding frazzled. "I'm so tired I can

barely work up the energy to comb my hair. All he ever does is cry. Or spit up. And I'm not even the one who pushed him out."

Alison and her partner, Gina, had recently welcomed the birth of their first child, a baby boy.

I tried to cheer her up. "It's brutal at first. But it will get better."

"Do you really think so?"

"I know so," I said, though my own history gave little evidence of that fact. "You just need to give it some time. It won't be long before he's smiling at you like there's no tomorrow."

"What really worries me is what it's doing to us," she confessed. "I hardly even recognize Gina these days. All we do is snap at each other—like animals in a cage. I'm starting to think I should have paid attention to all those studies saying childless couples are happier. And I'm feeling so guilty about leaving the two of them alone tonight." She sounded on the verge of tears.

"There, there," I said, moving back in to give her a hug. Up close she smelled of curdled milk and eau de Dref. "Try to relax. You deserve some time out with friends. And motherhood certainly becomes you. You look beautiful tonight."

She accepted the compliment without surprise. Possibly because she was a member of several minority groups herself—half African American and half Native American, as well as an uncloseted lesbian—Alison belonged to the minuscule population of people for whom my handicap was barely remarkable. It was another one of the reasons we were fast becoming close friends.

"But here I am all wrapped up in my own problems without giving a thought to yours," Alison hastened to add. "Are you nervous?"

"At the moment, the only thing worrying me is whether my tie is on straight. It's been ages since I had to dress up like a penguin. Though it does make me feel more at home in the weather."

Alison stepped back to survey me. "You look fine. But that's not what I meant, Sir Nonchalant. This change has to be rough on you."

I shrugged. "I'm sure the new regime will be a model of truth, liberty, and justice for all."

“Bullshit,” Alison said. “Jonathan hates your guts.”

“Don’t overdramatize the situation. He’d like to see my guts being used to teach first-year anatomy.”

“And I’d like to see his—”

“Ssshhh,” I stopped her. “We’re talking about our new Führer. His spies are everywhere. And if we don’t head upstairs soon, it will be another black mark on our already-tarnished records.”

We took the elevator to the penthouse and deposited our coats with the coat checker, who nervously asked me whether I wanted to hang on to my cane. In answer, I folded it up and stuck it pirate-style in my cummerbund. Alison steered me over to the nametag table, where a young staff member was waiting.

“Dr. *Dante* Angelotti?” she asked after I had identified myself. Predictably, some overzealous assistant had inscribed the tag with my seldom-used first name.

“If that’s the only ‘Angelotti’ in your stack, I guess that’s me,” I said.

“I can cross it out for you,” Alison offered.

“No thanks. It would only draw further attention to the fact that my father hated me. I’ll just attend anonymously.”

“Fat chance of that,” Alison said, laughing.

We moved out into the ballroom, which was packed as tightly as a subway platform, with me hanging not so discreetly onto Alison’s elbow. Here and there I could pick out a snippet of conversation above the partygoers’ boisterous roar. “*Has to be good for the department. He’ll bring some much needed discipline to the table.*” And “*The old boy should have relinquished the chair years ago. Too soft on the dissident faction. Angelotti and DeWitt, for example . . .*”

“You hear that,” I said to Alison. “You’re already getting a reputation.”

“If so, I consider myself in good company.”

Halfway over to the bar, we were confronted by my other good friend and comrade in arms, Josh Goldman.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demanded. “They’ve been asking you to come to the mike for the last thirty minutes.”

“Just trying to live up to my reputation as a nonconformist. I’m on

my way, but get me a double, will you? I'm going to need it when this is all over."

Moments later, I was stepping cautiously onto a small platform, where one of the event coordinators pushed a microphone in my hand. I tested it and made an effort to appear as though staring blindly into a large audience was something I did every day. Which, in a way, it was.

I pulled my Braille notes from my pocket and got underway. "It's great to see all of you here this evening. . . ." There were a few nervous titters. "Sep asked me to keep it short, which is good, because to paraphrase Shakespeare, I am 'no orator but a plain, blunt man'" —heartier chuckles this time—and I'm here tonight 'not to bury Caesar but to praise him.'" More laughter. "As you know, it has been our great good fortune that many years ago a young graduate of a second-rate medical school in . . . where was it again?"—I pretended to consult my notes—"ah yes, Cambridge, Massachusetts, that this young man from Peoria, with job offers from every major hospital in the country, turned them down to return to the state where he was raised . . ."

I proceeded to outline some of the highlights of Sep's career: his decorated service as a trauma specialist in a MASH unit during the Vietnam War; the dozens of cutting-edge studies he authored upon his return; his participation in not one, but three of the committees charged with revamping the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*; his numerous awards and recognitions, including the Miriam H. Taub Chair in Clinical Psychiatry at the hospital where we both worked; and last, but not least, the decades spent overseeing, developing, and raising our department to its present status as a leader in the field.

"I know I speak for all of us in praising these accomplishments as the life's work of both a brilliant physician and a great humanitarian. But I would also be remiss in not mentioning what I know for Sep was, and always will be, his greatest achievement: his thirty-year marriage to his beloved wife, Edna, who passed away a few years ago after a long battle with cancer. During her illness, and despite his overwhelming professional obligations, Sep was never absent from her side."

I ended on a personal note. "In closing—because I can hear Sep

harrumphing at me to get on with it—let me say that I have ‘neither wit, nor words, nor worth’ to express what Sep has meant to me personally. Rarely have I had the privilege of working under a superior with such a temperate disposition”—very loud laughter—“or, one who, when confronted with extreme provocation, if not outright mutiny, was so capable of keeping a lid on his emotions. I have Sep to thank for the profound wisdom—some might say, rampant foolhardiness—that led to my finding a home here, and I will be forever grateful to him for the gentle scolding”—Sep, only a few feet away, nearly choked on this—“that prodded me back to work with my friends and . . . er, colleagues.” Gales of laughter this time. “Sep has been a true friend and mentor, and I hope you will all join me in toasting this outstanding leader and the finest human being it has been my privilege to know.”

The room erupted into thunderous applause.

“Good job,” Josh said, coming up to press a glass of bourbon into my hand. I downed it in a single gulp.

“Yes, very,” Sep said, announcing his presence with a hand on my shoulder. “Thank you, my boy. I’ll be red-faced for the rest of the party.”

“I meant every word of it,” I said. “You’ll be sorely missed.” By me, most of all, I thought morosely.

“Perhaps. However, while I shouldn’t quibble with such unrestrained encomium, the references to *Julius Caesar* were a tad unsubtle.”

“You think he picked up on it?”

Sep lowered his voice. “I doubt it. He’s too busy basking in the imagined glory of his new position. But if you’ll take my advice, it’s time to start mending your fences with him.”

“I don’t see how—”

“No arguing,” Sep said. “Go over there right now and congratulate him. He’s standing ten feet to your left.”

“Sep, I . . .”

“Just do it,” he commanded.

I followed his order—the last he would ever be in a formal position to give me—and went over to shake the hand of my new boss.

My archenemy, Jonathan Frain.