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DARK COGNITIONS

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

DARK
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Kimberlee Mendoza

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Dedication

To my mother, Ruth Porter, my biggest fan and a big reason I am who I am. I love you, Mom!

Praise

If you think you've got the plot figured out, think again. Mendoza writes with the mind of a chess champion. She's always at least three moves ahead of her reader ~ Paul McShane, Good News, Etc.

Ms. Mendoza shows the reality of life, with trials and heartache, through her characters giving them a highly believable quality that her readers will remember long after they read the last page~ Bluegrass Romance Reviews

Prologue

The rhythmic sound of the tapping pencil had a hypnotic effect. Dr. Raven's eyes started to glaze over and his brain with it. The phone rang, jolting him back. Tossing the pencil in its cup, he answered the phone. "Yes?"

"Your new patient, Dr. Manifold, is here to see you."

"Send him in."

Dr. Brian Manifold entered the dim counseling office and stood in the shadow of a bookcase.

Raven treated patients like Manifold every day. Something he took pride in—his ability to read a client, and by the slumped manner in which Manifold carried his broad shoulders, Raven could tell that this once successful doctor was now a broken man.

Manifold was dressed well enough; gray suit, black tie, and his brown, slightly gray-salted hair neatly combed to one side. His beard looked to be freshly trimmed and his horn-rimmed glasses seemingly free from smudges. To the naked eye, one might think this man had it together. But the morose expression in Brian's eyes told the real story.

"Hello, doctor. Please be seated." Raven waved to a leather chair to the side of his desk, and then straightened his yellow tie. "Can I get you something to drink? Water? Coffee, perhaps?"

Dr. Manifold shook his head as he slowly peered

around the room, dazed.

“Well then, I guess we’ll just get started.” Raven withdrew a legal pad from his top drawer.

“I’m not sure why I am here,” Manifold whispered. “Dr. Jensen told me this morning you wanted to see me, but honestly, I don’t know what all the fuss is about.”

“We’ll get to that in a minute, but first I need you to sit down.”

The man didn’t budge. “Please, call me Brian.”

“I’m not here to be your friend, doctor. I’m here to determine if you’re still fit to practice psychology. Now, I’ll ask again. Will you please sit down?”

Like a child ordered to his room, Manifold scuffled to the couch and positioned himself on the edge. His gaze then fell to the multi-colored carpet.

This wouldn’t be easy, but that was part of the fun—the challenge. Raven sat in the chair opposite the couch and picked up a file from the coffee table. “I have to admit, I’m quite surprised to find you on my calendar today.”

Manifold folded his arms and offered a tight smile. “You, too?”

Raven stared at him for a moment before opening the folder in his lap. “I see that you came to St. Ruth’s Hospital at the top of your class. Until a few months ago, you were one of the best doctors we had on our staff.” Raven peered over the top of his bifocals. “Which brings me to your visit. What happened? Why are you here?”

The once “great doctor” shifted in his seat, and tugged at his collar. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Here we go. Raven lifted the file in the air to emphasize his point. “It says here that you’ve been late

almost every day for the past few months. There have been several complaints of yelling coming from your office, usually when you're alone. And most recently, you have been accused of drinking on the job." He laid the report back in his lap and leaned forward, emphasizing each word as a teacher might do to a child. "I repeat, Dr. Manifold. What happened to you?"

"Things have been difficult at home," he rasped before his gaze fell back to the carpet.

The air grew still, and the grandfather clock in the corner ticked like a drone in a metal factory.

Raven removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Is that it, doctor?"

Brian shrugged.

"Are you aware that I hold the power to revoke your license? That the hospital board looks to my recommendation to determine your fate? According to my report, your actions have raised a few concerns. And in our business, it's a problem when the counselor exhibits more aberrant behavior than his patients."

"I don't know what you want from me."

"How about the truth? How about sharing what's going on in that head of yours? You're in a lot of trouble, doctor, and I'm the only one who can help you now. Either you're honest with me, or you're through." He tossed the file on the table by his chair, the papers fluttering to rest. "Now, what's going on?"

Manifold folded his arms and pursed his lips, his expression as cold as a day old corpse.

Raven sighed. He wanted to help this man, but he could only help someone who wanted it. Reaching for the file, he shifted to stand.

"OK." Manifold blinked, eased himself into the couch, and then closed his eyes. "But what you're

asking me to do is not going to be easy. Things are happening that are way beyond my explanation. I've been living it for months, and I don't even remotely understand what's going on myself." He cleared his throat. "Coffee."

Raven tilted his head to the side. "I'm sorry?"

"I'll take some coffee."

"Yes, of course," he said. Raven crossed to a brewed pot and poured a cup. "Sugar or cream?"

"Black, please."

He nodded and handed Manifold the foam container. "Please continue."

"Time is a funny thing. To some, it's what they see. A man may notice gray hair and wrinkles taking over his once smooth complexion. A woman may notice her child developing into an adult. Both may realize their pets will soon die. For me, I feel lost in some void. As if time doesn't exist."

"And why's that?"

"I wish I knew." He stared into his cup.

"And why do you suppose you don't know?" Raven sat back in his chair.

"It's all a blur." Manifold seemed mesmerized by the coffee's rising steam.

"Well, why don't you start from what you do know?"

The man finally seemed to relax against the couch cushion, apparently ready to comply.

1

Danielle flipped on a desk lamp and walked behind the desk. The office felt still, just as she liked it. But the peace wouldn't last. The rest of the staff would be along soon to start another—

An explosive blast shattered the quiet.

Her heart lurched as she dropped to the floor. *What was that?* She listened hard in the soft light, afraid to stand. Silence rang in her ears. Slowly, she stood and inched out from behind her desk.

A single light glowed from under Dr. Manifold's door. Did she dare go down there? She eyed the elevator and then her purse. Leaving the building seemed better. But what if he was hurt? Compassion—or maybe curiosity—won out. On tiptoes, she crept forward, her rubber soles squeaking on the tile floor.

"Hello? Dr. Manifold? Are you in there?" Her heart hammered. She lifted a hand to the door, and then closed it in a fist, hesitant to discover what lay within.

The receptionist's telephone echoed down the dark hallway, almost sending her into cardiac arrest. Swallowing, she pushed the door. "Dr. Manifold? Brian?"

A groan sounded from behind the couch.

She leaned forward, keeping her feet planted.

A lock of the doctor's brown hair was draped across the arm of the couch.

"Dr. Manifold, are you OK?" She stepped around the couch and stared in horror.

A diminutive crimson river flowed from the doctor's ear, and a gun hung loosely from his hand.

Timidly, she grabbed the weapon and tossed it into a nearby chair, then pulled off her sweater and pressed it against his wound, before checking his pulse with her free hand. *Weak.*

She pulled her cell phone out. Unable to remember the direct line to the ER on the bottom floor, she dialed the shack below. "Security?" Danielle yelled once someone answered. "Hurry and get up here! Dr. Manifold shot himself!"

In what seemed like hours, two security guards armed with only nightsticks and brawn bolted through the office door.

"What happened?" Bernie, the older of the two guards, ran over and knelt next to them.

"I heard a gunshot." Her lip quivered. She blinked back tears and pointed to the nearby chair. "The gun is there."

The guard lifted his radio. "Mac, get someone in ER to bring up a gurney. We have an injured man and shots fired."

The radio squawked. "Say again."

"Bring a gurney from ER. One of the doctors has been shot!"

"Yes, sir."

The other guard, Les, peeked over the couch with one eyebrow raised. Instantly, his face became grass green. He bolted for a trashcan by the door and expelled the contents of his stomach.

Dani grimaced.

"Les, why don't you check the other offices?"

Bernie asked.

The man nodded without saying a word and stepped into the hallway.

Danielle wanted to join him. Nausea fluttered through her stomach, as well.

“Did you see what happened?” Bernie searched her face.

She shook her head, her gaze lingering on the doorway. “I just heard the shot, and found him with the gun.”

“I see.” He nodded and put a couple fingers to the inert man’s neck. “His pulse is weak.”

An elevator bell chimed in the hallway and clear relief crossed the guard’s face.

Hers, too, she was sure. It took everything in her not to bolt. It wasn’t as if she’d never seen blood before. But this was Brian—her colleague, and once, a friend.

Les entered. “All clear.”

Two medical personnel entered with a gurney.

Danielle stood and stared at her scarlet hands. “May I go home?”

“I’m sorry. Not yet.” Bernie offered a tight smile. “The cops will want to talk to you. Why don’t you go with Les to the ER waiting room, and I’ll let the police know that you’re there.” He faced his partner. “Let her clean up and get some coffee. And wipe your face.” Bernie motioned his hand over his own face in rapid circles. “You’ve got stuff, um... ”

“Yes, sir.” Les wiped at his face with the back of his brown sleeve. “I’m sorry, sir. I’ve just never seen anything like this.”

“No worries, son. It’s your first week.” Bernie patted Les’s back. “Just take care of the lady, OK? I’ll

work this out.”

Les nodded and faced her. “Come on, miss.”

God help Brian. Right now, it didn’t matter that he’d been a jerk; Danielle didn’t want him to die.

2

Three Months Earlier

Danielle hung up the phone and glanced over the counter. Her boss, Merle approached.

"Can I see you a moment?" Merle's expression was unusually stern. She didn't wait for Danielle's answer; she spun around and headed for the conference room.

"Sure." Danielle swallowed as she followed.

"Sit down, please."

Danielle slid into one of the high-backed chairs, toying with her thumb ring. She wracked her brain trying to remember what she might have done to get fired.

"I'll get straight to the point. Are you seeing Dr. Manifold?"

Her heart skipped. She wished. "Not really. I mean, he's shown interest, but we haven't gone out or anything."

"Do you make a habit of dating married men?"

Danielle's chest heaved. "Married?"

Merle stared at Danielle before responding. "Yes. He has a wife named Rhonda. Surely you knew that."

Danielle suddenly felt sick. "We've never gone out. I'm a Christian woman. I would never..." Her eyes welled with tears. She didn't know if it was because she was embarrassed, angry, hurt, or ashamed. She'd

never look at Brian—Dr. Manifold—the same way again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“I’m glad to hear your intentions weren’t depraved. Rhonda is my friend, and...” Merle stood and moved to the door. “I like you, Ms. Tyler. You’re a great assistant. I’d like to see you stay.”

Danielle stood on wobbly legs and tried to offer a smile. “And I’d like to, ma’am.”

Her boss nodded and left.

Danielle’s confused thoughts zeroed in on one thing. Brian’s advances. She’d actually been planning to accept his next invitation to lunch. *What a jerk! Married?*



The clock on the table by his bedside table read 7:00 AM. Brian gazed at the blinking red colon and groaned.

The hum of his wife’s breathing matched the blinking of the colon.

He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on the clock again. 7:01 AM. Brian flopped onto his back and looked at the ceiling. A small crack cut through the blown popcorn. He flexed his toes under the covers, not wanting to face the clock again. Work wasn’t for another hour. Brian turned toward his wife.

Her mouth hung slightly open and hair draped down over her face.

He nudged her shoulder.

She didn’t budge.

“Rhonda,” he whispered.

Still no movement.

“Rhonda, wake up.”

Nothing.

Brian shook his head and faced back to the clock. 7:03.

Close enough. He got out of bed, dressed, and then headed for the kitchen. He stopped in the doorway and smiled.

His ten-year-old daughter sat perched on the edge of the sink, in yellow daisy pajamas, an open white robe, and hot pink slippers, looking like an angel. Her focus seemed drawn to something out the window. Beams of sunlight kissed her hair, causing her honey-blond tresses to sparkle. How quickly she'd grown. At this point, she was all he had.

Lara reached into the whitewashed cupboard, grabbed a cup and filled it with water. Through the bottom of her glass, she must have spotted her father. She jumped. Water splashed down.

"Dad!" She frowned at the droplets that covered her pajamas. "Look what you've made me do!"

"Sorry." He chuckled and handed her a dishtowel.

She grabbed it and rubbed the front of her top. "What are you doing, anyway?"

"Nothing. Just thinking about how proud you make me."

"Why?" She glared at him with slight irritation. "I'm only drinking water."

"You're a good kid. What can I say?" He pulled a tan coffee mug from the cabinet. "And I'm amazed at how much you look like your mother did." He grinned and faced her.

She hopped off the counter and crossed her arms. "You act like mom's dead, when she's only asleep in the other room."

"Of course she is." He turned away and poured himself a cup of coffee. "She's *always* asleep."

“Dad, please don’t get mad at me for saying this.” She took a deep breath. “But it’s your fault she doesn’t get better.”

“Don’t start.” Brian stared at the microwave. He couldn’t look at his daughter. Mainly, because she wasn’t far off.

“But Dad, if you’d just talk to her, then maybe things would change.”

He didn’t have the energy to fight her about this again. “I need to get to work.”

Lara stepped forward with her arms out. “I love you, Daddy.”

Brian hugged her and kissed the top of her head. “And I love you, too, sweetheart.”

“The bus will be here soon, so I’d better get ready.” She pulled away and walked down the hallway, but spun back. “Dad, just to let you know, we’re having Parents’ Night at school next Friday. I hope you’ll go.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” He finished off the last drop of coffee, walked to the master bedroom and nudged the door open.

Across the room lay his wife. Her eyes were open, but distant. Her hair was matted to her head, and her once rosy cheeks were now hollow and gray.

How he missed her. “I’ll be home late.”

She didn’t stir.

“Goodbye.” Brian closed the door and walked toward the entryway. He glanced back at his room and shook his head. He would go to work. That would be enough for now.



Danielle spent weeks washing any feelings of Brian out of her head. The whole idea of her crunching on a married man gave her the willies. But now someone else held her interest. And this time, she confirmed that he was single from several sources.

Peeking around a computer monitor, Danielle watched Dr. Ray Jensen as he talked to one of the residents. *He is so gorgeous.* Tall, dark messy hair, high cheekbones, and the most gorgeous gray-blue eyes. Every time he looked at her, she melted in her ugly white shoes.

But she was nothing more than an assistant. Though he'd always been nice, he kept a healthy distance. Or maybe the rumors about her were too much for him. Chasing after Dr. Brian Manifold did little for her reputation. How was she supposed to know he was married? No one seemed to notice that she put on the brakes the minute she found out. Now the rumors were rampant, the damage done. And it didn't help that Brian still flirted with her in front of everyone.

"Danielle?"

She blinked.

Merle waved a hand in front of her face.

"Sorry. I guess I zoned out for a second. These double shifts are killers." Danielle yawned.

"Well, medical school is terrible compared to double shifts, I've heard. Being a resident is worse than anything." Merle handed over a stack of files and rubbed her swollen torso. "If you'll take these up to the seventh floor that would be great. I need to get off my feet and feed the little one a piece of that chocolate ice cream cake left from Dr. Benton's birthday party."

"Wouldn't you be better eating prenatal vitamins