

MICHAEL MORLEY

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will keep you hooked'

Simon Kernick

SPIDER



MURDER IS
JUST THE
BEGINNING



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Spider
by
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PROLOGUE

Saturday, 30 June

Georgetown, South Carolina

At the cool, dusky end of a sizzling day, barbecues spit flames while party laughter rolls along the banks of South Carolina's winding Black River.

Across town, in the sombre silence of Georgetown cemetery a solitary figure searches for the grave of someone once dear to him. He's travelled for days to make this pilgrimage and is already physically and emotionally drained. In his arms he carries a bundle of flowers, her favourite Rocky Shoals Spider Lilies. The first time he'd spoken to her, she'd been in a local park surrounded by thousands of them, and the flower had taken on a special meaning for both of them.

The headstones of the crowded cemetery bear names almost as old as America itself. Locals have been burying people in these plots since the country's first Spanish settlers grew old and died here, way back in the mid sixteenth century.

The grave he's looking for belongs to no one famous; there's no towering statue, no ornate family tomb to mark her place. Her anonymity disappeared only when her mutilated young body turned up bloated

and decomposing in the Tupelo Swamp offshoot from the Black River, a stretch of ancient tumbling water that was once the conduit of commercial colonialism and the main waterway of South Carolina's plantations.

Finally, he sees her gravestone. Simple black marble, paid for by the community out of special grants for the poor. Engraved in gold lettering is her name: Sarah Elizabeth Kearney. But that wasn't what he called her. To him she was only ever 'Sugar' and he knew that to her he was only ever 'Spider'. Barely twenty-two years old, she was, like the Spider Lilies that had brought them together, just blossoming, just realizing her beauty and planting the seeds of her dreams.

Spider pulls out some weeds growing among the pebbles on her grave and lays down the big flowers. His mind slips back to their wonderful meeting twenty years ago this very day.

Sugar was so special.

She was his first.

The first he kidnapped.

The first he murdered.

PART ONE

Sunday, 1 July

I

San Quirico D'Orcia, Tuscany

Jack King's nightmare catapulted him from his sleep.

He sat bolt upright in bed and, despite being dazed and disorientated, he instinctively grabbed for his holstered gun. Only there was no gun, and there hadn't been one since he quit his job as an FBI profiler more than three years ago.

'Wake up!' urged his wife. 'Wake up, Jack! You're okay; you're just dreaming again, it's only a dream.'

But Jack wasn't okay. He was far from okay.

He tried to slow his breathing, get his heartbeat down to normal, but his head still fizzed with images: bleached-white bloodless corpses floating in the Black River – the buzz of flies around dismembered young limbs – bold type headlines announcing the Black River Killer's latest kill. The horror show ran like some grainy speeded-up old movie that he'd seen far too many times.

Nancy got out of bed and switched the lights on.

'These nightmares of yours, they're scaring me to death. Jack, you've really got to go and see someone.'

Most days Jack looked as though he was living the dream, owning and running a small boutique hotel in

a Tuscan village that time had barely altered and crime hardly touched. But some nights – well, some nights he just couldn't keep up the pretence. And this sure as hell was one of them.

Jack squinted into the ugly brightness of the bedroom lights, sweat soaked his bare chest and ran down his back.

‘Did you hear me? *Jack?*’

The visions had gone but now his head was filled with sounds: women screaming in pain, their desperate cries for help echoing out from the dark pits of his memory, and finally the unmistakable sound of razor-sharp steel slicing into human flesh.

Jack let out a hot, slow breath. ‘I hear you, Nancy. Just give me a minute.’

It had been three years since his burnout, and despite a change of continents and lifestyles, the past and all its horrors were still haunting him.

Maybe his wife was right. Maybe he finally had to see someone.

Georgetown, South Carolina

Sometimes, late at night, when he's teetering on the edge of sleep, his mind soft with secret thoughts and emotions, Spider is able to turn the clock back and return to his favourite time.

The first time.

Right now, with so many exciting things happening to him, he's keen to go back, eager to revisit the moments that have made him what he is.

Lying on his bed, his special bed, the room is dark and his eyes lightly closed. Soon months, years and decades flash by, until it is twenty years ago.

He's in sunny Georgetown, down on the Harborwalk at the waterfront. A young woman strolls past, happy and carefree. She's slim bodied, dark-haired, respectable and simply dressed in a pink T-shirt, stylishly faded jeans and trainers. It's her week off work and she's chilling out, oblivious to the world, oblivious to the man she's just magnetised to her.

Spider watches her dine, alone.

Watches her go to her apartment above the baker's shop, alone.

And for days he watches her living there, alone.

Alone – and vulnerable. Just as he hoped.

Sarah Kearney never sees him, Spider's very careful about that, so careful he's almost invisible. But he's around. Always there. There, brushing by her in supermarkets, as she grocery shops for one. There, as she queues in the cinema for her solitary seat at the latest romcom. There, as she browses in the bookshop, and finally buys the cookery book, with its special recipes just for one.

The memories are delicious. Spider savours every second of his mental feast. My, oh my, remembering the old ones, especially the first one, is almost as good as planning the new ones, the next one.

But Sarah had been sweet. As sweet as Sugar.

Spider's heart races as he recalls how he followed her in his old Chevy as she caught a bus out to Landsford, a 400-acre state park off US-21 out towards Richburg. He had been his usual invisible self as she'd sauntered around the nineteenth century canals, sat a while near an old lock-keeper's cottage and finally headed out of the crowds to a solitary spot near the Catawba River.

Twenty years later he could still remember every word they'd spoken.

You never forget your first kill. Not a single second of it.

The air had been fresh with pine and grass, the sun hot and high, and Sugar, well Sugar had been sitting sweetly on a carpet of white flowers, cherishing

one of the massive spiky blooms in the cup of her hand.

Pretty as a picture.

And then he'd shown himself. Confident and calm, polite and unthreatening. Just like he'd planned. Just like he'd dreamed.

'They're beautiful,' he said, walking confidently towards her. 'What are they?'

For a second she seemed startled, then she spoke up, just like her daddy had taught her. 'Lilies. Rocky Shoals Spider Lilies.' There was a warm drawl in her hesitant voice. A voice he'd craved to hear. A voice he knew he would soon be the last to listen to.

They sat and talked; he made her laugh, flattered her with compliments and even made her blush a little. It was a perfect afternoon. Just as he'd hoped.

They had coffee in the crowded café and he told her how he worked as a company auditor, a stuffy job that he hated. He had to come to the park for some space and air.

She knows just what he meant; she loved to be outside too.

When it got to the point where they should go, he'd told her that he'd had a lovely time, in fact he couldn't remember the last time he enjoyed himself so much. She blushed again and said she'd had fun too. It damn near broke his heart that he had to leave, had to deliver some boring accounts to some boring businessmen east of Georgetown.

She looked disappointed. He was sure of that. She'd *wanted* to spend more time with him, he could remember that clearly. In fact, looking back, it was almost as though she'd picked him, as much as he'd picked her.

Don't people always say that in the end it is always the women who do the choosing?

They'd been together for almost three hours when they finally passed through the park's gates and, looking back now, well it seems incredible, but if truth be known, for a moment he'd thought of not going through with it.

That made him smile.

Not gone through with it? How could he have thought that? My, how things would have been different if he'd simply said goodbye and gone his own way.

San Quirico D'Orcia, Tuscany

Neither Jack nor Nancy could get back to sleep. That had become routine too. His wife was the only person he could bring himself to talk to, the only one who could even begin to understand what had happened to him, and how it had left him.

The real nightmare had started long before the nocturnal ones. Overworking and over-caring had led to Jack's collapse at JFK, after a cold case conference in LA, right in the middle of the hunt for BRK and just days before the birth of their son.

Now, he and Nancy went over the ground again, searching for a way to find some peace: Jack's weeks in intensive care, unable to speak or walk properly, afraid that he'd die or be crippled for the rest of his life; Nancy's fears that he'd let his job ruin their marriage, her thoughts of leaving him, taking Zack to her parents' house and starting over again. As usual, they didn't leave a stone unturned. And as usual they didn't make any real progress.

Nancy King was tall, trim and tough. The daughter of a Marine, she knew how to deal with a crisis. Or at least she thought she did. After Jack's crash and

burn, they'd seen La Casa Strada on an Internet auction and she'd just known that they had to buy that hotel and start over in a new country.

A new beginning. A new way of life.

That's what she'd said they'd needed, and that was what she'd been determined they'd have. Only now, well now, it seemed that new beginning was on hold.

And *on hold* was something Nancy wasn't going to settle for.

Dawn was filtering through the shuttered windows when she finally got back to the prickly suggestion that Jack seek some professional help. 'The Bureau gave you a number for a psychiatrist in Florence, a good one who said she'd see you at the drop of a hat. Ring her in the morning.'

'The female trickcyclist -,' Jack tried to joke his way out of it, '- you really think I need to see this shrink?'

His wife raised an eyebrow. 'Honey, we both know you need to see a shrink. Now please get it done, yeah?'

He gave in. 'Yeah, I'll get it done.' He sounded defeated, but even as he spoke, he felt slightly better at hearing himself admit that after all this time there might just be some help on its way. 'You want some breakfast?' he asked, standing in front of an open window in his boxers, patting his belly.

Behind him, Nancy could see the sun shimmering and rising across the velvet green valley. Below them, she could hear their chef, arriving in the kitchen,

opening his giant fridges for supplies and starting his routine preparations before his staff arrived. She loved this place, loved her new beginning and she so wanted Jack to love it too. 'Paolo's in, he'll cook us eggs, maybe some pancetta as well.'

Jack leaned over his wife and kissed her. 'I'll get coffee too, I think we both need it.'

She watched him pull on tracksuit pants and a T-shirt. Despite his emotional vulnerability, he still looked every inch the college athlete she'd fallen in love with. 'Eleven years, Jack King. In a few days' time we'll have been married for eleven years. How did it all fly by so fast?'

Jack didn't have the answer. 'I guess the good times always seem to go the quickest and the bad times stick around too long.'

He kissed her again and she squeezed his hand reassuringly. 'Don't worry, honey, everything will be better soon.'

Jack smiled at her, and as he headed for the kitchen he tried hard not to dwell on the fact that July the eighth, the day of his wedding anniversary, was also the day the Black River Killer had claimed his sixth and youngest victim.

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Georgetown, South Carolina

Much in the manner that old men remember their first love affair, Spider finds himself comforted and aroused by his recollections of his first kill. Eyes still shut, his mind almost slipping into sleep, he rolls back twenty years and remembers the last moments of his momentous meeting with Sarah Kearney.

The summer sun and sweet floral smells of the South Carolina parkland sting his senses once more; he and Sugar stand inches apart, a delicious awkwardness at the end of their first meeting.

‘Looks like rain,’ he’d said, glancing up at the battleship-grey cloud heading their way. ‘You got ta ride?’

Sugar had shaken her head. Her pretty black hair swished as she did. ‘No, I came out by bus.’

Of course you did, my darling, of course you did.

‘Where you going? Can I drop you somewhere?’

‘Hey, would you mind givin’ me a ride to Georgetown? It’s not outta ya way or nothin’. In fact, you go right through it and I can show ya a short cut an’ all.’

‘Course not. Nothing would give me more pleasure.’

The walk back to his car had been so exciting. Anticipation had crackled through his veins like a broken electric cable in a thunderstorm. But he hadn’t forgotten himself. Oh no, he’d been the perfect gentleman, right up to the end.

He’d opened the passenger door for her, and closed it carefully once she was safely inside.

‘Why thanks, that’s really nice of you.’

What happened next had been the best bit. He’d pictured it dozens of times, even acted it out in his garage to make sure it would work properly.

‘First rule of the road, better safe than sorry, always buckle up.’ He said it with a smile and pointed at her seat belt.

She’d laughed at him.

Fancy that, she’d actually laughed at him. ‘You’re a real gent, aren’t ya,’ she’d said, ‘real kind to ladies, that’s pretty unusual these days.’

Pretty unusual. He smiled again at the recollection, she’d certainly been right there.

Then she’d done as he asked. Good little Sugar had clunked the seat belt into place and started to sit right back to make herself comfortable with her new gentleman friend.

Poor Sugar.

She’d never made it to comfortable.

As she tossed back her hair, Spider had made his move. Two fingers, bent double at the knuckles,

driven deep into her throat, either side of the wind-pipe. An unbreakable choke-hold.

Just remembering it made him tingle. He flexed his hand and relived the excitement of pressing harder and harder, pushing her neck back against the headrest and blocking off her airway.

Sugar had struggled but the seat belt had pinned her back – just as he'd figured it would. She clawed at his arm, but he'd thought of that as well; the sleeves of his wool jacket just snapped off her nasty fingernails.

He'd thought of everything. He always did. Always would.

And that final kiss? Wow! He'd never forget it.

His lips to hers at the very moment he choked the final breath from her body and caught it in his mouth. Like he was eating her soul.

He breathes out. Feels her warmth again, feels that part of her, still inside him – maybe even attached to his own soul.

God it had been exciting. The most exciting, wonderful moment of his life.

And then she had been his. Truly his.

Was it really twenty years ago that all that happened? He could hardly believe it.

My, how time flies so fast.

It only seemed like yesterday that he'd looked across at Sugar's dead body in the passenger seat and realized that they were joined for ever, as surely as if they were man and wife.

Spider opens his eyes in the dullness of the present day and smiles. Sugar had indeed been special. It was so good to have her back in his life.

Georgetown, South Carolina

Fifteen-year-old Gerry Blake and his younger cousin Tommy Heinz couldn't believe their eyes. Day or night, they regularly cut through the graveyard. The old tombstones and creepy church had never held any fears for them.

Until now.

Today, they were in a rush to get to their friend Chuck's and go fishing with his dad in his boat out on the Black River. They both skidded to a halt on the rough shale path halfway through the churchyard; Tommy stumbled to his knees.

'Muuutherfucker!' screeched Gerry, drawing out the obscenity as he'd heard rappers do on MTV.

Tommy was already on his feet, panting like a dog, ready to run for the hills. He'd be out of there just as soon as Gerry came to his senses and got his ass into gear. For a second though, both boys instinctively huddled shoulder-to-shoulder and simply stared. What they saw was already branded into them for the rest of their lives.

The grave in front of them had been dug up.

A cheap pine coffin was splintered open and the

skeleton of a young woman in a soil-stained dress was upright, resting against the headstone. Blackened bony arms and legs dangled from the filthy cloth. But the image that would haunt the teenagers until their own dying days was that of the head. Or rather, the space where the head should have been.