

# A Reason to Live

by Dale Larner

The massive gray-stone mansion appeared deserted, so I left my briefcase on the front porch and stepped between a pair of untrimmed arborvitae and made my way around to the back, picking up grass seeds on my pant legs from the high grass as I went along.

A pebbled-walkway led from a covered patio near the house down to a pool enclosed by a low wall topped with pink azaleas. On a table near the pool sat an empty glass with a lemon wedge on a napkin. I pushed past a short gate to get in.

The water in the pool was green, and looking down as I walked along its edge, I could see dark masses of algae shifting around near the bottom. I buttoned my overcoat and headed for a set of stone steps that dropped off the back of the pool area. I stopped before taking the steps and blew warm air into my cupped hands and looked out over a vast field of brown grass that broke off in the distance. A dark figure of a woman stood alone at the edge. Beyond her, only gray sky and the wide expanse of a mercury blue ocean. I crammed my hands into my coat pockets and took the steps down and started across the field.

The woman faced the ocean, and her dark hair lifted and lowered in gentle tangles from the wind. She wore a long black dress and no coat. Her arms hung at her sides with the left wrist bandaged. As I neared, I could feel the ocean wind as it curled up over the cliff and pushed against my chest. It brought up the salty smell of the creatures that lived beneath it. The ground began to slope towards the edge, and I felt a thrill of danger I hadn't felt in a long time, and I stopped.

The woman was only a few yards away from me and the same distance from the edge. I tried clearing my throat, but the wind carried away the noise, so I held my hands around my mouth and shouted. I thought she hadn't heard, but then her head turned slightly.

"I don't want to be bothered, please go away," she said, almost too softly to hear.

I eased closer until I was at her side and looked over the edge. Far below, the raging ocean crashed against giant rocks that jutted up above its surface, and the water sprayed out on either side, giving the impression that we were looking down from atop an enormous ship as its hull cut through the waves.

She kept her eyes on the rocks below, and I turned and got a good look at her face. Her youth was a surprise. I expected the widow of Claude Deauville to be older, closer to his age. It was clear that behind her gaunt and vacant stare she possessed a deep beauty, but at the moment it was only a haunting beauty.

"I'm with the firm that is handling your husband's estate, Mrs. Deauville," I said loudly, but my voice hit the wind and came back small. "We haven't been able to get in touch with you, so I came out to get a few papers signed."

"I said I don't want to be bothered."

She still wouldn't look at me.

"It'll only take a few minutes. It's really for your own benefit. We can't release the money until—"

She turned suddenly towards me with her eyes narrowed and her fists clenched, but then, just as suddenly, the lines between her eyes relaxed and she unclenched her fists.

"Do you have the papers with you?"

"They're in my briefcase on your front porch."

She took her eyes off me and looked back at her lonely mansion. It sat above the field of brown grass like a mounding threat of dark clouds against the gray sky. She then seemed to drift away from the edge with the wind, and I followed her back across the field.

She walked me back up the steps and by the green pool and up and under the covered patio through a sliding glass door and into a large library with high, book-filled shelves. She ran both hands through her hair and let it drop back down and kept her quick pace out of the library and through an anteroom. Her stride was long and smooth, and I realized she was nearly as tall as I was.

A musky scent of budding roses trailed behind her, and I followed her through a room with red paisley wallpaper and dark brown leather furniture. She continued into the foyer, where a wide staircase rotated up to the second floor. Then, all in one smooth motion, she reached for the large oak front door, twisted its deadbolt, pulled it open, and turned back to the paisley room.

“Bring the papers in here, and let’s get it over with,” she said, as she reentered the room.

My suitcase had blown over. I snatched it up and shut the door and followed her into the room. A maple coffee table with fat lion’s feet at its base sat in front of an oversized couch. She nodded to the couch and asked me to sit, and then brought over a tall glass of something with a lemon in it.

“Here. It’s only iced tea,” she said, handing me the glass. I took a sip. It tasted strong, but then the lemon evened it out. I set the glass on a silver coaster and dug through my briefcase and pulled out her papers.

She sat in the corner of the couch and tucked one leg under the other and held her glass in a napkin with both hands.

“That’s more than a few papers,” she said.

“Well, these explain all the details of your husband’s holdings, but we only need your signature on a few documents.”

I spread the papers out on the coffee table and unbuttoned my overcoat and fumbled in my suit pocket for a pen. I found it, and at that same moment caught the smell of her perfume again. As I made marks next to where she needed to sign, I felt she was staring at me, and I watched her sip her tea from the corner of my eye.

“There you go,” I said, and I turned and held out the pen. “I just need you to sign and initial those areas I’ve marked, and I’ll have a check for you.”

She put her glass down and wiped her hands on the napkin and took the pen from my hand and signed each page without reading any. I took out a check for over twelve-million dollars and handed it to her, and she traded it for the pen.

She looked at the check and her face darkened. She began to sob, quietly and controlled, as someone can do who has been crying for a long time.

She put the check on the table and was about to reach for a box of tissues, but I told her I would get it and handed her the box. She wiped her eyes with her left hand and a strip of gauze fell down from around her bandaged wrist. She looked at it and then at me. I looked away and put the signed papers and pen in my briefcase and fidgeted to get it closed. She tried to tuck the strip back into place but couldn’t get it and gave up and let it hang loose.

“I just don’t want to live anymore,” she said suddenly with a resigned sadness, and a line of tears ran down one cheek.

I tried to think how my firm would want me to handle this, but when I looked at her again, I saw a woman who knew what it meant to be in love and then lose that love, and I wanted

to do whatever I could to help her—as a man with a heart would do, and not as some wooden representative from the firm would do.

Unexpectedly, a sudden boldness lifted me off the couch, and I stepped over and sat close to her and took her left hand and carefully tucked the strip of gauze back into place.

“There’s always a reason to live,” I said, but I couldn’t believe I had said it. “We just have to find new reasons to go on.”

I felt a familiar sting in my eyes, but I held steady and let go of her hand and peeled back the left sleeve of my coat. She took my hand and rubbed a finger along the thin scar on my wrist and smiled warmly.

---