

The Grave

by

Rebekah Blackmon

Why was I so cursed to be enamored with the wife of my best friend? I had loved Jacqueline before William had even met her, but he had stolen her heart, and I had been left to desire her secretly. My timid personality contrasted William's ambition, and fate is to blame for having given me such a trait. Fate is too often unkind to me.

The attraction refused to fade. For years I maintained my friendship with William while stealing glances at his lovely wife. Then she began to notice. Occasionally I would look up at her while eating dinner with them and find her watching me. She would then immediately give me a subtle smile as if there were a secret being shared between us. One day, she discreetly placed a note in my hand which instructed me to meet her by the river. It was there that the affair began.

Jacqueline and I continued to meet for almost a year. We were both certain that William had no knowledge of our love. Of course, our eyes were clouded. When one is guilty of a crime, he either believes that every action he makes gives himself away, and that anyone who looks at him knows exactly what he has done, or he is fooled into thinking that he had been clever enough in the execution and concealment of the crime that

nobody is aware of it. The latter applied to Jacqueline and me. We had always been so careful whenever we met that we could not imagine that William would ever have reason to suspect us.

William was more intelligent than we had thought. A few months after the affair began, he started to reveal his knowledge of the situation.

"So, Nicolas," he said to me one day as the three of us sat conversing in his living room. "It's about time you found a woman, wouldn't you say?"

I merely shrugged.

"Of course, it is. I happen to work with someone you might find attractive."

"I'm not interested," I told him.

"Oh, sure you are. She's very pretty, you know. Long, dark hair, grey eyes, small features, medium height—just the way you like them, right?"

I gave him a peculiar look. He had just described his own wife. His countenance did not reveal any trace of animosity, however.

"You really need to hurry up and find someone before you're too old to be wanted," William continued. "And before all the good ones are taken."

He continued to occasionally make remarks such as that, which made Jacqueline and I first wonder if he knew, and then blame our guilty

consciences for possibly incorrectly interpreting his communication. Then the signs increased. Soon both Jacqueline and I were completely aware that William knew.

But he did not try to stop us.

In fact, he did not even sever his friendship with me. We continued to go hunting and fishing together, laughing and talking as we had done for years. My affair with Jacqueline was never mentioned.

Then, one day, I received news of his death.

I was completely surprised to read the letter, because William had shown no previous signs of impending demise. Jacqueline had written it, and though she did not mention the cause of death, I immediately knew that he had most assuredly died of a broken heart. Though he had been open enough with his emotions to win Jacqueline before I'd had a chance to confess my love to her, he had grown increasingly passive over the years. He'd become more of a man who would hide his feelings. Obviously, he had discovered the affair, but he had not settled the matter by confronting us. Instead, he had inwardly mourned the fact that his best friend and his wife had both betrayed him. He'd probably neglected bodily needs, and he'd lost the will to live.

I tried as much as I could not to entertain the thought that I had been the cause of my friend's

death, but it was a difficult task. I reminded myself that there were many other ways he could have died. He could have had an accident, and Jacqueline, in her grief, had simply forgotten to mention it. But I could not convince myself.

The time and place of the funeral was mentioned in the letter. I knew immediately that I must attend, and I also knew that Jacqueline would certainly be there. I did not know how I was to approach her. Did she blame me for her husband's death, or was she glad to be free to see me openly? The hardest thing to do would be to talk to her in a manner that everyone expected the best friend to talk to the widow. I could not appear a stranger to her.

The time I spent worrying about our image was in vain. I never even had a chance to speak to Jacqueline at the funeral.

I walked into the church building. There were surprisingly fewer people in attendance than I had expected. William's ambitions had made him become very influential, and he had a lot of connections. However, even in the somewhat small church there was still room to move around freely. Perhaps Jacqueline had only notified select individuals.

I became nearly indistinct in a crowd of similar people dressed in dark colors and wearing expressions of sorrow, whether feigned

or true. Occasionally one would put a silent hand on my shoulder, acknowledging the fact that I had been William's best friend and had known him longer than anyone in the building save his parents.

My demeanor was exaggerated. Indeed, I mourned his loss, but I probably did not quite feel as I should have. My true feelings were closer to joy than sadness, because I was certain that now Jacqueline and I would be free to exist together without worrying about William. It was cruel of me to feel that way, but I could not help the fact that my love for Jacqueline far surpassed my love for my friend. I told myself that I had not killed William. He had forfeited his own life when he'd chosen to marry the object of my desire. Guilt had no right to try to torment me.

And now I commenced the solemn march down the crimson carpet of the church. I became a part of the line of grim-faced individuals patiently waiting to view death encompassed in satin. Tears increased their flow down the cheeks of every person who had just seen William. For what reason do we inflict such pain upon ourselves? We insist upon seeing our dead just one more time, though we are aware that the vision will be painful. Yet tradition commands us to open the lid of the coffin and to look inside at what we have lost and what we will all ultimately become.

Jacqueline was sitting in the corner of the first pew. Not long after I found her, she turned and began to look around. Her eyes soon met mine, and our gazes remained fixed upon each other. The expression on her face was that of sorrow, or perhaps of worry. However, I couldn't imagine what reason she would have to worry, unless she was concerned that people would begin to talk if they saw us together now that William was dead.

Watching Jacqueline, I did not realize that my turn in line had come. I was given a gentle nudge by the man behind me. My gaze left Jacqueline and fell upon the body of the man with whom I had been acquainted for many years. His face forced to my mind the many memories I had shared with him. My covetous thoughts temporarily left me as I fully realized what had happened. He had been kinder to me than any other person I had known. Even after discovering my affair with his wife, he had still treated me like a brother. I truly missed him, yet I was still glad that he was gone.

I reached out my hand. Was I allowed to touch him? I doubted anyone would protest.

His cheek was soft and warm. A single tear traveled down my face as I whispered his name: "William."

And his eyes opened!

I froze, startled and frightened. I stared into

those eyes which were now wide, full of life, and looking directly into my own. I thought that it surely must be an illusion, or maybe an ill-timed accident. Perhaps the eyes of the dead were often known to open at any moment, and I had simply never been alerted of such a fact.

But he was looking at me. His eyes were opened wide, and I knew what expression I beheld. He was pleading with me. Desperately pleading.

I took my hand away from his face.

"He's not dead!" I wanted to cry. But I did not. I looked around at the others in the church. No one else seemed to notice that anything was wrong. I looked again at William.

The eyes were still fixed upon me.

Certainly I was imagining it. However, even if I was, the sight so unnerved me that I could not remain in the church. I turned and walked briskly down the aisle and out the door of the building, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. They must have thought that I had not been able to stand the sight of William's dead body, but what they did not know was that he was not really dead!

My hands were shaking so much that I could barely hold my car keys steady. I knew that I had not imagined anything. I was not the type of person to hallucinate, even under moments of extreme stress. William's eyes had indeed

opened, and he had been looking at me.

“Save me!” he had silently pleaded. “Save me from being buried alive!”

I knew that I should go back, but I could not. I hoped that someone else would see the eyes open, and that he would alert the others so that William could be saved. I knew that I could not do it.

Why couldn't I? Of course it was because I wanted him dead. What a horrible thought to have toward such a dear friend, but it was he that had committed the first sin in our friendship by marrying Jacqueline! I had never declared my feelings for her to him, but he should have known. A true friend would have realized I was in love with Jacqueline. I'd been the first to see her! He had betrayed me when he'd taken her to be his own. Therefore, I would return the favor by letting him be buried alive.

I could not sleep that night. I would be on the brink of slumber when images of William would come to my mind. I would then immediately open my eyes for fear that the images would inevitably turn into nightmarish dreams.

I stared at the ceiling. I saw him awaking in his coffin, suddenly fully coherent and realizing his predicament. I saw him clawing at the box around him, frantically, desperately.

I had to help him! As much as I longed to be with Jacqueline, I could not let William die in

such a way!

I jumped out of my bed and went outside. The black of night surrounded me. With hardly a moon and no streetlights, there was not much to penetrate the darkness. I went to my garage to get my shovel and a flashlight, both of which I placed in my car. I then drove quickly to the cemetery where I knew he was buried.

We lived in a small town, and the cemetery was not very large. With the help of my flashlight, it wasn't terribly long before I was able to find the only freshly-dug grave. As I regarded it, I could picture William underneath, calling in vain for help while feeling around for a way to escape.

Quickly, I thrust the shovel into the soft earth. I threw the dirt aside as I dug deeper, getting closer to the box which imprisoned my friend.

After an unknown length of time that felt like hours to me, the coffin was fully exposed. I expected it to burst open at any moment, but it did not. Perhaps William had fallen asleep.

I jumped into the hole. I knelt in the spot that I had dug for myself beside the coffin. I grasped its lid with both hands and lifted it.

The box was empty!

Had he managed to escape? But that was impossible! Surely I would have seen signs of his success. And he would not have had a

chance to get out of the coffin before it was buried without his being seen.

I peered inside. What was that piece of paper lying in the far corner? I picked it up and read it.

*Because you remained silent, no one will
ever hear you speak again.*

I heard a familiar laugh. William! I stood and turned to see him standing at the edge of the hole. He had my shovel in his hand.

Before I could say a word, the world went black.

When I awoke, my mind was cloudy, and it took me a moment to recall the events that had just occurred. Then I opened my eyes and beheld nothing but darkness.

A wave of terror went through my body. I was afraid to move. I knew what I would feel, and I did not want to feel it. I did not want my fears to become reality.

But I did move. I did reach out, and I *did* feel the soft satin and the hard walls behind it.

I desperately ran my hands along the coffin as I had imagined William doing. I tried to push the lid open, but it was unmovable. My breath was quick and heavy. I was panicking, because I knew that I would not be able to escape. He had

tricked me! I had wronged him, and, rather than to confront me, he had fooled me into thinking I had killed him, and he had witnessed my killing him *a second time* in the church by my refusal to tell anyone he was about to be buried alive. So he had avenged himself by killing me in the very way I had been willing to let him be killed.

I heard a sound. It was a dull pounding, as if someone had jumped on top of the coffin, or—there it was again! And again. It was the sound of dirt hitting the top of the coffin. The grave was being refilled!

“William!” I cried. “William, I’m sorry! Let me out! Help me!”

But my cries were unanswered, and the refilling did not cease. I tried to push the lid again, but I had no luck. He must have had something holding it closed before he started shoveling the dirt on top of it.

“William!” I shrieked.

The pounding was becoming softer and farther away. I began to feel smothered. I wondered how long I would last with the amount of air in the coffin.

I ran my hands along the walls again, hoping for any way to escape. As I felt behind my head, I found a peculiar tube that protruded about an inch into the interior of the coffin. I imagined that the tube extended to the surface, where it was allowing me to access the air above.

He meant to preserve my life. But was he trying to prevent my death or prolong my torture?

Of course, he wouldn't leave me there. He would surely come back for me after he thought I had learned my lesson.

But hours passed. My claustrophobia was becoming worse. After periods of calm, I would suddenly start thrashing wildly, screaming his name and pounding the lid with my fists. Then I'd give up and lie silently.

During one of those calm moments, I replayed in my head what I thought must have happened. William, upon discovery of my affair with his wife, had decided to admonish me by making me believe I had caused his early death. He had used his connections to arrange his own funeral, and he had somehow convinced Jacqueline to go along with it. Jacqueline had probably consented out of guilt and devotion.

When William's eyes had opened in the coffin, I was supposed to exclaim that he was alive. Everything would have ended then. Perhaps everyone else had known what was going on and would have begun to laugh. At the same time, it was very possible that he had not told anyone but the people necessary to know. It was difficult to determine which was true.

When I had instead fled, William realized that I was willing to let him die so that I could

have Jacqueline for my own. It was an unpardonable sin. Therefore, since his first attempt at my repentance had failed, he would instead teach me an eternal lesson.

But surely he would return. He would not leave me here to die!

I had no way of calculating how much time had passed, but it had been too much. I felt as if I had been in the coffin for weeks, though I knew that was impossible. My thirst was unbearable. I knew that one could not go very long without water. William knew it as well.

I lay in the coffin in despair. I had wronged him. He had given me a chance to redeem myself, but I had not. I had been heartless, clouded by my lust for a woman that did not belong to me. I deserved to die in the grave.

I lost all hope of William's coming to free me. I had been in the grave for much too long, and I knew that I would soon expire. There was nothing I could do. I had no chance of escape.

Sleep was tempting me. I allowed my eyes to close, and soon dreams of William and Jacqueline swept me away. In one, William and I were laughing and talking in a car as we drove to a destination my dream did not reveal. In another, Jacqueline had fallen asleep in my arms while William sat across from us, talking to me as if nothing were wrong. Then suddenly William and I were both in the woods during

one of our many hunting trips, except he had turned his gun toward me.

"I'm sorry," I told him, not desperately, but sadly and in a soft voice that I wasn't even sure he had heard.

And then there was a loud noise, followed by a blinding light.

My eyes quickly adjusted to light, and I began to be able to see. I found myself looking up into the face of a man whose hand was outstretched toward me.

"Take my hand, Nicolas," said William, looking down into the grave. "Let's go."