

RODERICK THORP

RAINBOW DRIVE



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A NOVEL BY

RODERICK  
THORP



SUMMIT BOOKS  
NEW YORK

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places  
and incidents are either the product of the author's  
imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to  
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THE DETECTIVE  
DIONYSUS  
SLAVES  
THE CIRCLE OF LOVE  
WESTFIELD  
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JENNY AND BARNUM

FOR MY SON STEVE

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FOR MY SON STEVE



1962



THE UNDERTAKER WAS WORRIED about getting his money. After twenty-four years in the business in Southern California, he believed he knew when someone was thinking of skipping out on him. The deceased had borrowed heavily against his life insurance policy, and the widow knew there was not going to be much left of the proceeds after she paid the undertaker's fee. The widow was distraught and panicky, but she was thinking about finances, too.

The undertaker knew that because he had overheard a conversation between the widow and a sister from New York. The dead man's son, Michael, would be taken back East on the sister's return trip. At the age of twelve the boy was going to live permanently with the New York sister. The widow had said she was making an economic decision. Maybe there was panic in her choice, but she was trying to be realistic. Realism was a bad, bad sign for an undertaker. Upon the death of any man, guilt carried the day—the undertaking business was built on that principle—with anger setting in later. But in this case the anger was setting in early, and the undertaker had to protect himself. If the widow was beginning to think that in the initial hours of her grief she had spent too much money on the relatively opulent arrangements she had made for her husband's funeral, the undertaker would be firm indeed in showing her that there was nothing she could do about it now except pay the bill.

Apparently the deceased had been a man who liked to live high. According to what the widow had admitted to the undertaker, there was little in the estate besides the insurance—some equity in the house, no stocks, only a few small government bonds. Nobody in his thirties expects to die. This had been a hit-and-run death, and a real beauty, too: the man had been hit by a truck traveling at a speed of about fifty miles an hour.

Whether or not the widow thought she was going to pay too much,

the undertaker did not believe she could complain about what she had gotten, including a clear day. The weather was perfect for a high-on-the-hill Forest Lawn burial. You could see for miles across the San Fernando Valley, across the orchards and bright subdivisions, to the purple mountains beyond. The mourners seemed to be enjoying the view, even the gangly son of the deceased, whose attention wandered from time to time from the business at hand. Maybe he was uncomfortable in his new blue suit, which must have been bought in a hurry. At the funeral parlor the undertaker had noticed that the cuffs were too wide and broke too much on his shoes. The undertaker wanted to like the kid, but he seemed to have nothing to offer, too quiet even under these circumstances, too ordinary, maybe he'd even become one of those men who spend their lives permanently lost.

The fact was, the undertaker did not like any of these people. There wasn't much to like in a man who left a woman and a child with financial problems. And the toughness in Mrs. Gallagher's voice was more than just her New York accent. Obviously she was a high roller, too, like her late husband. She was over thirty-five, a tall, full-figured woman who knew she was attractive to men. Gray was beginning to show in her jet-black hair. She was someone beyond the undertaker's experience, and he knew it. The undertaker was from Indiana, Hoosier born and bred, as he often said himself. A woman like her laughed at a man like him, fifty-five years old, fifty pounds overweight. He was not attractive to women, with pale, puffy eyes and thinning gray hair that was limp, like that of a corpse. The undertaker knew he could never handle a woman like her. That made him feel like a fool, and he could not help finding ways to despise her. At least he knew how to take care of his family, the undertaker thought.

He was more pleased with the perfect weather, if the weather was what had brought out the good crowd. All of the people at the graveside had been at the funeral service, and most had put down their addresses in the space provided when they had signed the guest register. The undertaker was having his secretary copy and verify every name and address in the book, to make it easier to find Mrs. Gallagher in case she decided to skip. That sort of thing happened often in Los Angeles. For that matter, she could be married again in three months. That sort of thing happened often in this city, too.

Standing next to his mother beside the grave, his collar too tight and his suit too warm, Michael Gallagher was not in tears. This morning the tall, thin, fair-haired boy had awakened resolved to show as little emotion as possible. He had thought he would fail, but now, in the last moments

of the ceremony for his father, Michael was having difficulty keeping his mind on what was going on around him. It was strange, and he was very ashamed of himself, but questions were crowding into his head—too many questions—and he could not help being distracted by the view across the Valley. In the four years the Gallaghers had been in Los Angeles, Michael had never seen anything like it. He was hoping nobody would notice him turning his head toward the view.

He could not look at any of the adults gathered at the graveside without asking himself what they knew about his father. There were secrets. Maybe his father's death could have been prevented. A month ago Michael had heard him telling his mother as much. Everyone had his secrets, his father had said. Exactly that. Now he was in his grave.

"Prepare yourself," Michael's father had whispered across the kitchen table to his mother that evening, stopping at the end of every sentence as if he were out of breath. Michael was listening in the hall, sleepy and frightened, in his pajamas, curious about his father's late-night comings and goings, the car rumbling in and out of the garage. Michael was frozen into alertness, like a startled cat. "Something's going to happen. It was the way they looked at me when the meeting was over. I wasn't supposed to see what they're up to. There'll never be any public housing in Los Angeles like back East. You'll see. Too much money is involved—hundreds of millions of dollars. You have to understand, for that kind of money, people take no unnecessary chances. I saw the way they looked at me."

That had been a month ago. Now Michael was coming to understand that his parents had been living an unusual life here in California, one that had gone faster and faster. Two nights ago, he had overheard another conversation, in the funeral home, between his mother and his aunt who had flown in from New York, a conversation almost as chilling as the one he had heard a month before.

"I wanted you out here to take Michael back to New York with you. I have to get a job. It's the best thing for me."

"I understand that," Michael's aunt said.

"It's the only way I can help myself," his mother said. "If I put the house on the market and sell everything else, I still won't clear enough to go back East and start over. In New York, I can't even earn enough to cover ninety dollars a month for a two-bedroom apartment in a neighborhood in Queens that isn't full of the niggers or the guineas. So there you are. I can't think of another way out."

"We figured something like this," Michael's aunt said. She was shorter and plumper than Michael's mother, and now the tone of the voice was sharp. "You bit off more than you could chew out here. You two had everything while Joe and me ran around to doctors trying to find out why



I can't have kids. We can't send Michael across the country every time you get lonely for him. Do you understand? It's too much emotional strain on me. If you want to stay out here, you're making a permanent decision. Everything has its price."

Michael's mother was silent.

"You like it out here, don't you?" his aunt demanded suddenly, her voice rising. "You have to be honest with me. If I know you're being honest with me now, maybe I can believe you're not going to give me trouble about this later. I won't have you tearing up my feelings. You like it here, even now, after what's happened."

"I'm being honest with you," Michael's mother said. "You don't have to tell me about the price of things. You be fair with me, I'll be fair with you, okay? I want what's best for him."

It was as if her words had floated out of the room, she sounded so strange and remote. For a moment Michael wanted to shout to his mother that he had heard his father warn her, but then he shrank back and stayed hidden.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," the minister intoned on the sunny hillside and everyone in the sweaty crowd looked down except, as Michael observed, Michael himself. His mother held his hand. Maybe, like everybody else, Michael was supposed to pretend he didn't know what was happening. His father was dead, probably murdered by somebody, somebody he knew in business, that part of his parents' life that had really been so different from others'. Nobody was doing anything. Were they all too scared? Why did his mother want him out of town? He was old enough to take care of himself. Michael had made up his mind: he wasn't going back to New York, not now, not ever. They wouldn't try to get him on the plane if he was kicking and screaming in front of other people. That's what he would do if he had to, and he would tell them that this afternoon. Michael was scared, but he would be able to tell them, even though actually throwing a tantrum at the airport would probably be easier.

He knew he was not doing it for himself. He was not doing it for his mother either—she would know, but that didn't bother him. Michael was going to do it for his father, who wasn't supposed to be dead. Everybody knew it, but only Michael seemed to care. He wasn't going to say anything at all about it, not ever, but he was going to stay in Los Angeles and find out why his father had died, no matter what it took, no matter how long.

The undertaker was paid in full for the funeral before he left Forest Lawn. He had to wait until the last of the family moved away from the