

NELSON
DEMILLE

NIGHT
FALL

A NOVEL



WARNER BOOKS

NEW YORK BOSTON

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2004 by Nelson DeMille
All rights reserved.

Warner Books

Time Warner Book Group
1271 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 0-446-57663-8

NIGHT FALL

A NOVEL

NOVELS BY NELSON DEMILLE

Available from Warner Books

By the Rivers of Babylon

Cathedral

The Talbot Odyssey

Word of Honor

The Charm School

The Gold Coast

The General's Daughter

Spencerville

Plum Island

The Lion's Game

Up Country

WITH THOMAS BLOCK

Mayday

For Sandy
At Last . . .

Author's Note

This is a work of fiction, based on fact: the crash of TWA Flight 800 that occurred off Long Island, New York, on July 17, 1996.

The characters in this novel are fictional, though there are passing references to actual persons.

The events of July 17, 1996, that I describe in this book, and the subsequent investigation of the crash, are based on published accounts as well as my own interviews with investigators who worked on this case, and my interviews with eyewitnesses to the crash.

The official cause of the crash is mechanical failure, though there are conflicting theories that point toward more sinister causes of this tragedy. I've tried to represent all sides of this controversy, and to be accurate in regard to the eyewitness accounts, the forensic evidence, and the details of the subsequent investigation. I have, however, taken dramatic liberties and literary license in cases where there is conflicting evidence.

This book is in memory of the passengers and crew of TWA Flight 800, who lost their lives on the evening of July 17, 1996, and to their families and loved ones as well as to the hundreds of men and women who participated in the rescue and recovery and the subsequent investigations of the cause of this tragedy.

— B O O K O N E —

July 17, 1996

LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

For this must ever be

A secret, kept from all the rest,

Between yourself and me.

LEWIS CARROLL, *Alice in Wonderland*

CHAPTER ONE

Bud Mitchell drove his Ford Explorer along Dune Road. Up ahead was a sign that said CUPSOGUE BEACH COUNTY PARK—OPEN DAWN TO DUSK. It was dusk, but Bud drove through an empty parking field, on the far side of which was a wide nature trail, partially blocked by a roll-up fence. A sign said NO VEHICLES.

He said to the woman sitting in his passenger seat, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Jill Winslow replied, "Yes. It's exciting."

Bud nodded without enthusiasm. He skirted around the fence and continued on in four-wheel drive along the sandy trail flanked by high, grass-covered dunes.

Having extramarital sex should have been exciting enough for both of them, he thought, but Jill didn't see it that way. For her, cheating on her husband was only worth it if the sex, romance, and excitement were better than at home. For him, the taboo of having sex with another man's wife was the turn-on.

Somewhere around his fortieth birthday, Bud Mitchell had come to the startling conclusion that women were different. Now, five years later and two years into this affair, he realized that Jill's fantasies and his weren't communicating very well. Still, Jill Winslow was beautiful, willing, and most important, she was someone else's wife, and she wanted to keep it that way. For him, safe sex meant having it with a married woman.

An added kick for Bud was that he and his wife, Arlene, traveled in the

same social circles as Jill and her husband, Mark. When the four of them were together at a social function, Bud felt the opposite of awkward or guilty; he felt terrific, his ego knew no bounds, and he reveled in his secret knowledge that he had seen every inch of the beautiful Jill Winslow's naked body.

But, it wasn't *that* secret, of course, or it wouldn't have been so much fun. Early in the affair, when they were both nervous about getting caught, they'd sworn to each other that they wouldn't tell anyone. Since then, they'd both hinted that they'd had to confide in close friends solely for the purpose of providing cover stories for their absences from home and hearth. Bud always wondered who of her friends knew, and at social gatherings he had fun trying to guess.

They had driven in separate cars from their homes on Long Island's Gold Coast, about fifty-five miles from Westhampton, and Jill had parked in a village lot where they'd rendezvoused, then driven to a hotel together in Bud's Explorer. At the hotel, Bud had asked her what her cover story was and gotten a one-word answer, so he asked again, "Where are you tonight?"

"Dinner with a girlfriend who has a place in East Hampton. Shopping tomorrow." She added, "That part is true, since you have to get home in the morning."

"The friend is cool with this?"

She let out an exasperated breath. "Yes. Don't worry about it."

"Okay." Bud noticed that she never asked about his cover story, as if the less she knew, the better. He volunteered, "I'm deep-sea fishing with friends. Bad cell phone reception on the ocean."

Jill shrugged.

Bud Mitchell understood that in their own way, both he and Jill loved their slightly boring spouses, they loved their children, and their comfortable upper-middle-class lives. They also loved each other, or said they did, but not enough to chuck everything to be together seven days a week. Three or four times a month seemed to be good enough.

The trail ended at a sand dune, and Bud stopped.

Jill said, "Go toward the beach."

Bud turned off the sandy trail toward the ocean.

The Explorer descended a gradual slope through brush and sea grass as he steered around a high dune. He stopped on the far side of the dune where the vehicle couldn't be seen from the trail. His dashboard clock read 7:22.

The sun was sinking over the Atlantic Ocean, and he noticed that the ocean itself was smooth as a pond. The sky was clear except for some scattered clouds.

He said to Jill, "Nice night."

She opened her door and got out. Bud turned off the engine and followed her.

They surveyed the expanse of white sand beach that ended at the ocean's edge fifty yards away. The water sparkled with golden flecks in the setting sun and a soft land breeze rustled the sea oats on the dunes.

Bud looked around to see if they were alone. Dune Road was the only way in or out of this barrier island, and he'd seen a few cars leaving the beaches and heading back toward Westhampton, but no cars traveling in their direction.

The thin island ended a hundred yards to the west at Moriches Inlet, and on the other side of the inlet he could see the edge of Smith Point County Park on Fire Island.

It was Wednesday, so the Hampton weekenders were back in the city, and anyone left was deep into the cocktail hour. Plus, it was about a half mile back to where vehicles were supposed to stop. Bud said, "I guess we have the beach to ourselves."

"That's what I told you."

Jill went around the Explorer and opened the rear hatch. Bud joined her and together they removed a few items, including a blanket, an ice chest, a video camera, and a tripod.

They found a sheltered valley between two grassy dunes, and Jill laid out the blanket and cooler while Bud set up the tripod and video camera. He took off the lens cap, looked through the viewfinder, and pointed the camera at Jill sitting cross-legged and barefoot on the blanket. The last glimmers of red sunlight illuminated the scene, and Bud adjusted the zoom lens and hit the Record button.

He joined Jill on the blanket as she uncorked a bottle of white wine. He took two wineglasses from the ice chest and she poured.

They clinked glasses, and Bud said, "To summer evenings, to us, together." They drank and kissed.

They were both aware of the video camera recording their images and voices, and they were a little self-conscious. Jill broke the ice by saying, "So, do you come here often?"

Bud smiled and replied, "First time. How about you?"

They smiled at each other and the silence became almost awkward. Bud didn't like the camera pointing at them, but he could see the upside later when they got back to their hotel room in Westhampton and played the tape while they had sex in bed. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea.

They had a second glass of wine, and aware that the light was fading, Jill got down to business. She set her glass on the cooler, stood, and pulled off her knit top.

Bud stood and took off his shirt.

Jill dropped her khaki shorts and kicked them away. She stood there a few seconds in her bra and panties as Bud got undressed, then she took off her bra and slid her panties off. She faced the camera, threw her arms in the air, did a few gyrations, then said, "Ta da!" and bowed toward the camera.

They embraced and kissed, and their hands ran over each other's bare body.

Jill moved Bud at right angles to the lens, then looked back at the camera and said, "Blow job. Take One." She dropped to her knees and began to perform oral sex on him.

Bud got very stiff while his knees went rubbery. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he put them on her head and ran his fingers through her straight brown hair.

Bud forced a smile, knowing the camera was capturing the expression on his face, and he wanted to look happy when they played it back later. But, in truth, he felt somewhere between silly and uncomfortable.

He could be a little raunchy in mixed company, while she was usually soft-spoken and demure, with an occasional smile or witticism. In bed, however, he was still surprised at her sexual nuttiness.

She sensed he was about to come, and she rocked back on her haunches and said, "That's a wrap. Scene Two. Wine, please."

Bud retrieved the bottle of wine.

She lay on her back and thrust her legs into the air and said, "A wife-tasting party." She spread her legs and said, "Pour."

Bud knelt between her legs and poured the wine, then without further stage direction, he buried his tongue in her.

Jill was breathing hard now, but managed to say, "I hope you have that camera pointed right."

Bud came up for air and glanced at the camera. "Yeah."

She took the bottle and poured the remainder of the wine over her body. "Lick."

He licked the wine from her hard belly and breasts and ran his tongue over her nipples.

After a few minutes, she sat up and said, "I'm sticky. Let's skinny-dip."

Bud stood and said, "I think we should go. We'll shower at the hotel."

She ignored him and climbed to the top of the sheltering dune and looked out at the ocean. "Come on. Set the camera up here and get us skinny-dipping."

Bud knew better than to argue, so he walked quickly to the video camera, stopped it, then carried it with the tripod to the top of the dune and set the legs into the sand.

Bud looked out over the sand, ocean, and sky. The horizon was still lit by the dying rays of the sun, but the sea and the water were dark blue and purple now. Overhead he could see stars appearing and noticed the blinking lights of high-flying aircraft and the glow of a big ship on the distant horizon. The breeze had picked up, and it cooled his sweaty, naked body.

Jill looked through the viewfinder and switched to a twilight setting, then set the autofocus on infinity and zoomed out for a wide shot. She pushed the Record button, and said, "This is so beautiful."

Bud replied, "Maybe we shouldn't go down to the beach naked. There could be people around."

"So what? As long as we don't know them, who cares?"

"Yeah, but let's take some clothes—"

"Live dangerously, Bud."

She stepped off the dune, sliding and hopping all the way down the slope to the beach.

Bud watched her, marveling at her perfect naked body as she ran to the water.

She turned toward him and shouted, "Come on!"

He ran down the slope, across the flat beach. He felt silly running naked with his thing flapping in the breeze.

He caught up to her as she reached the water, and she turned him to the camera on the dune. She waved and shouted, "Bud and Jill swim with the sharks." She took his hand, and they splashed into the calm ocean.

The initial shock of the cool water gave way to a pleasant sense of cleansing. They stopped when the salty seawater reached their hips, and they washed each other front and back.

Jill looked out at the sea. "This is magic."

Bud stood beside her and together they stared, mesmerized by the glassy sea and the purple sky spread out before them.

To their right, Bud noticed the blinking lights of an aircraft, about eight or ten miles off Fire Island at an altitude of maybe ten or fifteen thousand feet. Bud watched the aircraft as it drew closer, the last rays of the setting sun reflecting off its wings. It left four white contrails in the deep blue sky, and Bud guessed it had taken off from Kennedy Airport about sixty miles to the west, and it was heading toward Europe. The moment called for romance, so he said, "I'd like to be on that plane with you, going to Paris or Rome."

She laughed. "You panic when you're gone for an hour in a hot-sheet motel. How are you going to explain Paris or Rome?"

Bud was annoyed and said, "I don't *panic*. I'm cautious. For *your* sake." He said, "Let's go."

"In a minute." She squeezed his butt and said, "This videotape is going to burn up the TV screen."

He was still annoyed and didn't respond.

She took hold of his penis and said, "Let's do it here."

"Uh . . ." He looked up and down the beach, then at the camera on the sand dune, pointing at them.

"Come on. Before someone comes. Just like that scene in *From Here to Eternity*."

He had a million good reasons why they shouldn't have sex on the open beach, but Jill had a firm grip on the one good reason why they should.

She took his hand and led him to the shore where the gentle surf was lapping over the wet sand.

She said, "Lie down."

Bud lay on the sand where the sea ebbed and flowed over his body. She lay on top of him, and they made love slowly and rhythmically, the way she liked it, her doing most of the work at her own pace.

Bud was a little distracted by the surf rolling over his face and body, and he was a bit anxious by being so exposed on the beach. But within a

minute, the size of his world shrunk to the area between their legs, and he wouldn't have noticed a tsunami breaking over him.

A minute later, she climaxed and he ejaculated into her.

She lay on him, breathing heavily for a few seconds, then she straddled him with her knees and sat up. She started to say something, then froze in mid-sentence and stared out over the ocean. "What . . . ?"

He sat up quickly and followed her gaze out toward the water, over his right shoulder.

Something was rising off the water, and it took him a second to recognize it as a streak of incandescent reddish orange fire trailing a plume of white smoke. "What the hell . . . ?" It looked like a skyrocket left over from the Fourth of July, but it was huge, too huge—and it was coming off the water.

They both watched as it rose quickly, gathering speed as it ascended into the sky. It seemed to zigzag, then turn.

Suddenly, a flash of light appeared in the sky, followed by a huge fireball. They scrambled to their feet and stared transfixed as pieces of fiery debris began raining down from the point of the explosion. About a half minute later, the sound of two explosions in quick succession rolled across the water and filled the air around them, causing them to instinctively flinch. Then, silence.

The huge fireball seemed to hang in the air for a long time, then it began falling, breaking up into two or three fiery pieces, falling at different speeds.

A minute later, the sky was clear, except for white and black smoke, illuminated from below by the glow of fires burning on the smooth ocean, miles away.

Bud stared at the blazing horizon, then at the sky, then back at the water, his heart beating rapidly.

Jill whispered, "Oh, my God . . . what . . . ?"

Bud stood motionless, not quite comprehending what he'd just seen, but in his gut, he knew it was something terrible. His next thought was that whatever this was, it was big enough and loud enough to draw people toward the beach. He took Jill's arm and said, "Let's get out of here. Fast."

They turned and sprinted across the fifty yards of sand and up the dune. Bud grabbed the video camera and tripod as Jill scrambled down

the far side of the dune. Bud followed and said, "Get dressed! Get dressed!" They both dressed quickly and ran toward the Explorer, Bud carrying the tripod and Jill carrying the camera, leaving the blanket and ice chest behind.

They tossed the video equipment in the backseat, jumped in the front, and Bud started the Explorer and threw it into gear. They were both breathing hard. He left his headlights off, and with wheels spinning, he drove back to the trail and made a sharp right turn. He drove cautiously in the dark, along the nature trail, then through the parking field, and out onto Dune Road where he put on his headlights and accelerated.

Neither of them spoke.

A police car approached from the opposite direction and sped past them.

Within five minutes, they could see the lights of Westhampton across the bay. Jill said, "Bud, I think a plane exploded."

"Maybe . . . maybe it was a giant skyrocket . . . fired from a barge." He added, "It exploded . . . you know . . . a fireworks show."

"Skyrockets don't explode like that. Skyrockets don't burn on the water." She glanced at him and said, "Something big exploded in midair and crashed in the ocean. It was a plane."

Bud didn't reply.

Jill said, "Maybe we should go back."

"Why?"

"Maybe . . . people . . . got out. They have life vests, life rafts. Maybe we can help."

Bud shook his head. "That thing just disintegrated. It had to be a couple miles high." He added, "The cops are already there. They don't need us."

Jill didn't reply.

Bud turned onto the bridge that led back to the village of Westhampton Beach. Their hotel was five minutes away.

Jill seemed lost in thought, then said, "That streak of light—that was a rocket. A missile."

Bud didn't reply.

She said, "It looked like a missile was fired from the water and hit a plane."

"Well . . . I'm sure we'll hear about it on the news."

Jill glanced into the backseat and saw that the video camera was still on, recording their conversation.

She reached back and retrieved the camera. She rewound the tape, flipped the selector switch to Play, then looked into the viewfinder as she fast-forwarded.

Bud glanced at her, but said nothing.

She hit the Pause button and said, "I can see it. We got the whole thing on tape." She ran the tape forward, then backwards, several times. She said, "Bud . . . pull over and watch this."

He kept driving.

She put down the video camera and said, "We have the whole thing on tape. The missile, the explosion, the pieces falling."

"Yeah? What else do you see in there?"

"Us."

"Right. Erase it."

"No."

"Jill, erase the tape."

"Okay . . . but we have to watch it in the hotel room. Then we'll erase it."

"I don't want to see it. Erase it. Now."

"Bud, this may be . . . evidence. Someone needs to see this."

"Are you crazy? No one needs to see us screwing on videotape."

She didn't reply.

Bud patted her hand and said, "Okay, we'll play it on the TV in the room. Then we'll see what's on the news. Then we'll decide what to do. Okay?"

She nodded.

Bud glanced at her clutching the video camera. Jill Winslow, he knew, was the kind of woman who might actually do the right thing and turn that tape over to the authorities, despite what it would do to her personally. Not to mention him. He thought, however, that when she saw the tape in all its explicitness, she'd come to her senses. If not, he might have to get a little forceful with her.

He said, "You know, the . . . what do you call that? The black box. The flight recorder. When they find that, they'll know more about what happened to that airplane than we do, or what the tape shows. The flight recorder. Better than a video recorder."

She didn't reply.