



Jason Grimmel, a young and gifted professor at Chicago's *Winslow Homer Academy of Fine Arts*, who stood even a chance to be elected as the institutions president, sees his career thrown into jeopardy when he ends a love affair with one of his female students, a beautiful but slightly unhinged girl named Amber Sherman. Enraged, she accuses him publicly of seduction and rape, an allegation fanned and enlarged out of all proportions by the young woman's grandfather, Jasper Sherman. The latter is CEO of a giant corporation and an important sponsor of the Academy who dislikes Jason and wants him out. When the girl retracts her accusations, Jason is reinstated, but the affair has seriously affected an already precarious relationship with his ambitious wife whose high-powered government job is unjustly hampered by the scandal. As a result she relies always more on psychotropic drugs and in the end commits suicide. Deeply shaken, Jason resigns and retreats to his cabin somewhere on the shores of Lake Michigan, there to spend two solitary years.

After managing finally a measure of inner calm and professional fulfilment, is his solitude upset by the arrival of Dione Dar, a junior lawyer with the renowned Baldwin & Myers solicitors. She brings with her a proposal by Jasper Sherman constructed on the fact that Amber, who went to France five years ago and still lives there, has asked her grandfather without giving any explanations for a large sum of money which must be delivered to her in cash by Jason and nobody else. Sherman is highly reluctant to have any dealings with the former target of his slanderous campaign, being fully aware that Jason will gladly seize the opportunity to revenge himself, yet has no other choice since Amber refuses to reveal her whereabouts. It is decided that Dione Dar accompanies Jason on his journey, partly to organize the legal aspects of the money transfer, partly to monitor his movements. Jason has meanwhile learned that Amber owns by way of an inheritance a substantial batch of shares in one of Jasper Sherman's more secretive enterprises. Based in Paris but registered as a Guernsey off-shore company, is it rather small and obscure, yet owns, as it later turns out, an inordinate amount of highly valuable patents which were actually developed by US-scientists who made significant advances in the field of genetic engineering. It is this information that provides the first clues to a sinister scheme which slowly begins to unravel itself.

Arriving with Dione in Paris, both are met by Lucien Leclair, an inspector of the French *Sûreté*, who is investigating the company as well because of murky dealings that seem to reach into the highest

echelons of the French government. He offers Jason a measure of cooperation while insisting to keep Dione in the dark about their next movements. Jason accepts, since he is not only bent on unravelling old Sherman's dark secret, but also thrown into confusion by the two women that form part of the operation. One is of course Amber whose memory he tried in vain to eradicate during the past years. The chance to meet her again has overwhelmed him with a burning desire, even though he is aware that her fragile mind might not have improved but deteriorated. The other woman is Dione Dar, whose calm beauty, obvious intelligence and strong character have made a profound impression on him which he is still trying to fathom.

While checking with Leclair a particular clue, he weathers an attempt on his life, then receives a message from Amber which gives an address in southern Italy. He leaves without taking Dione along, but she manages by way of a hefty bribe to catch up with him, and during a furious reunion both end up in bed together, a development that unsettles him even more. After some weird preliminaries, some hilarious, Jason meets Amber who has become a member of an occult society. Its leader, a gentle man of strange powers named Marcellus, seems to hold sway over her, but Jason's nightlong and fairly devastating encounter with his former lover tells him that she has not improved but is more disturbed than before. Yet it also turns out that her anguish is at least in part caused by a cataclysm which somehow connects with her grandfather's sinister enterprise in Paris. She orders Jasper Sherman's money to be paid to the master of her sect, which is the reason why Dione must fly to Genève to prepare the formalities of the transfer. Jason, who has been purged of all his illusions where Amber is concerned, tries nevertheless to help her and find out what darkens her life so much, but is only left with a disturbing suspicion. As to his emotional commitments, he is forced to admit what he subconsciously knew all along, namely that it is Dione who has irrevocably conquered his heart.

When Amber and a member of the sect depart secretly for France after the sect's haunting Midsummer-night Celebration in Southern Italy's *Castel del Monte*, Jason decides to unravel the entire plot. He returns to France as well and meets Dione in a small hotel in Burgundy where they celebrate a glorious reunion. Next it is decided to follow different trails, and Dione drives to Paris for a meeting with Leclair, while Jason visits the Island of Guernsey in the hope to find some clues regarding Sherman's mysterious company. He succeeds by way of a stroke of good luck, which nevertheless saddles him briefly with the corpse of Sherman's favourite thug. The clue he has found appears to be at first misleading, but then lands him straight in the den of the lion. Who turns out to be an immensely rich, amiable but entirely amoral stock-broker named Stein who is the co-owner of Sherman's secretive company, but apparently has managed to take control of it entirely. This is why a furtive but furious war has broken out between the two men, backed up by their respective gangs of legal shysters and illegal assassins. It is also the reason why Stein has seduced Amber five years ago after she arrived in France, in this way securing the control of her shares. He furthermore has fathered, or believes he has, her daughter whom he keeps captive in his magnificent castle. That is why Amber has returned to him, even though she knows that he is engaged with the help of a mad scientist into a hideous and utterly illegal genetic engineering scheme.

Stein, like any respectable atheist, nourishes under his easy-going deportment a terrible fear of dying and therefore funds a clandestine scientific research programme that will, as he believes, guarantee him longevity if not eternal life. He offers Jason to join the dreadful plot, provided the latter executes Dione first to prove his loyalty. Jason only laughs and calls him insane. Whereupon Stein, whom Jason has lured with a Homeric ruse into an entirely flawed assessment of his capabilities, succumbs to a bout of megalomania and orders a duel with pistols between the two men that must commence at the first stroke of the midnight hour.