

The Lotus Resurrection

Book one of the Nimbus series

By C. P. Spencer



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To Gail. Thank you for the birthday gift that opened the door.

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The Nimbus series has been over 12 years in the making. As we've travelled the world and met people from many different walks of life, we've constantly seen situations and scenarios that we believed would make great stories. This series is the culmination of those experiences.

WASHINGTON D.C.

“There are two places a potential victim is at his or her most vulnerable,” visiting professor Mark Trent paused, allowing his students a moment to form their opinions.

“On the shitter,” he hesitated again for the expected snickering.

“Okay, settle down,” he waved his hand at the room. “Everyone knows that one by now. What’s the other one?”

“In the shower,” someone shouted from the back of the room.

“Incorrect. There, the target has access to many weapons within easy reach. Soap or shampoo to blind their attacker, a razor to slash out with. Worse, they are standing, which makes them mobile. Of course, it all depends on the victim’s ability to react with *instantaneous* speed to the attack.”

“In bed?”

“Doing what in bed?” Mark asked as the room erupted again.

“No, sex heightens the endorphins, can make someone stronger, faster, more alert, more aggressive, and angry after being interrupted.”

“How ‘bout sleep?”

“No, not sleep either. A startled person can jerk awake, react with unusual aggression, so that’s not it either. Come on people, what *else* do you do in bed?”

The suggestions came rapidly from all over the room. “Watch TV? Paint your toenails? Brush the dog’s hair?”

A tentative voice from the back of the room broke through the din. “Read?”

Mark pointed at the correct student, “That’s it! Reading in bed is dangerous to your health.”

“That’s ridiculous, Professor. What makes someone reading a better target than someone sleeping?”

Mark responded to the student's challenge with a crooked, tight smile. "That's a good question, and I'm glad you asked it. The answer is on page ninety-three of the workbook on the desk in front of you."

He eyed the room, allowed a brief moment for the students to find the page, become invested, and then shouted, "Throw your book on the floor!"

There were two loud thumps, then many all at once, accompanied by papers flying off desks and nervous laughter as the students settled back down.

Mark drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Think about your actions during this exercise. Of the twenty in this class, only *two* of you reacted instantly and threw the book down. As to the rest of you, almost everyone hesitated long enough to glance at where you stopped reading. A little over half of you delayed long enough to note your place *and* close your book before throwing it, and a handful of you still have it sitting on your desk."

Mark slowly swept the room with his eyes.

"Often, you have a *split* second to react to a stimulus, be that a sound, a word, a smell, or even a flash of movement that your eyes or ears notice before the brain engages to make a reactive choice. You need to understand how critical this instinctive reactive ability is to your future. If a situation arose requiring an *instant* action that would save your life, almost all of you would now be in a fight for your life, incapacitated or dead."

Many of the students in the room looked down, some looked at each other, but none looked at Mark.

"So, what does this mean? Given your failed instantaneous reaction to a simple direction, you need to seriously question the feasibility of your continuation in the program."

The room was completely silent. Everyone, except for the two students who had thrown their books immediately and who also looked immensely proud of themselves, was pondering the consequence of their lack of action.

Mark loved this point in the class where the implied danger of the months leading up to its final lesson was savagely realized.

“Don’t be embarrassed, we’re *wired*, we’re *conditioned* to keep track of where we are in a given task. But in order to be an effective operative, and by effective I mean to stay alive long enough to actually do some work, you have to be able to overcome that conditioning. You have to react to changing variables without delay, and you either have that ability naturally or you don’t. It can’t be taught. Now, the answer to why reading in bed is dangerous is because....”

Mark spotted a student who still appeared to be reading, no doubt page ninety-three of his workbook, like he would actually find the answer on that random page. In spite of the unnatural silence Mark’s freezing stare was causing in delaying the class from hearing the rest of the explanation, the student didn’t possess enough awareness of his surroundings to realize he was being watched.

This dipshit wouldn’t be the only one in the room who wouldn’t notice if I killed him right now.

With supreme effort, he controlled himself from putting his observation into practical action. “When we’re reading something engrossing, especially for our pleasure, forcibly tossing it out of the way instead of carefully marking your spot and placing it neatly on a nightstand or whatever is nearby is completely alien to us. Particularly for a habitual nighttime reader. An e-reader is especially vulnerable to the careful placement syndrome, as we’re afraid of breaking our device.”

Mark shrugged, “It’s such a simple thing, but combining reading with lying prone while wrapped in bedding is an awkward arrangement against nimbly springing out of the way of a potential assassin.”

He watched as some of the students nodded, as though their agreement with him would somehow convince him that they had skills; that they just didn’t *expect* the lesson, and so he was wrong about their innate capabilities.

He wasn’t wrong.

“So, there you have it! The toilet and reading in bed are the assassin’s best options, and in that order.” Mark stepped from behind the podium and again scanned the room, making eye contact with as many students as would meet his gaze.

He cleared his throat. “Coming fresh from your various colleges and universities, I know that you’re used to the traditional final exam, and that one was even scheduled for you next week. However, how you react to a situation or command without hesitation are hard-learned lessons that, somehow, must also be incorporated into the learning process. Today was that exam, the final test of your true skills as a potential field operative.”

Mark heard one student whisper to another that this asshole professor was full of shit, and if he was so damn good, why the hell was he teaching a class?

Why indeed?

“Reach under your chair and you’ll find an index card taped to the bottom, which by the way, only *one* of you noticed and asked about at the beginning of today’s session. Fill the card out with two pieces of information only. Write down your student ID number, and evaluate yourself by including one of the following three words, *continue*, *transfer*, or *resign*. I recommend that you not select your option for your work during all of the class sessions, but *only* on your actions during the test today. I personally expect to see only two continues on those pieces of paper, and a very small handful of transfers, which if approved, you will be assigned to a different aspect of the program.”

Students looked around at one other, completely shocked.

“I leave it up to you how you proceed, and I will not interfere with your choice, no matter what you write on that card. But be aware, this is not a game—you take the risk of your life ending in a thousand different, and mostly painfully creative ways from this moment on if you proceed. The best advice and mentoring I can give you is that it’s imperative to be honest with yourself.”

He took one last look at the entire room of students, scrutinizing each student’s face in turn.

This is it.

Could I really be okay with this life, teaching instead of doing?

He frowned as he thought about the students, the dusty classroom, and his mundane university office. That ridiculous office with its dingy and dinged furniture, the floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with a random assortment of books from previous occupants, a window so filthy he doubted anyone had

seen the view since the university had been built in the late 1800s.

He reflected on the letter he had received yesterday afternoon from the university.

In summary, Professor Trent, please be advised that your three-year temporary professorship is at an end, and you must tender your decision to the administrative office no later than November 30.

Hereby signed, dated, and notarized by:

*Martha T. Jones,
Coordinator of University Special Programs.*

They'd given him three months to make the decision. Stay and teach permanently in the program, or go out of it forever.

Then go on to what?

To most of the university staff, students, and residents of the surrounding area, the university was just a university. One step below an Ivy League, but one of the Washington D.C. elite educational institutions, nonetheless. However, unlike the other institutions scattered around the city, this particular university had some unusual courses of study available.

Mixed into their offerings of the standard and usual classes was a very special program, one that very few had experienced or even guessed existed.

There were rumors, of course, but no one that shouldn't have ever been able to officially confirm the program existed, which was impressive as it had been in existence in its present location for over thirty years. Students in the program were there only by invitation, recruited from specific circumstances, and all had signed non-disclosures so terrifying, there had never, ever been a leak.

The teachers were pulled from an even more exclusive pool. They, like Mark, had once lived an existence very different from the traditional educators on campus.

He bent his head, a slight bow to the class to indicate it was over, and moved to the instructor's desk along the side of the room, resting on the edge in a welcoming pose to receive the cards and see how many would actually make *skin* contact with him through a handshake. It usually wasn't many since he had

tricked them, betrayed them, and shown them their inadequacy. Unlike other instructors on the regular university staff, he never received the rousing cheers and clapping for a session well enjoyed, the furious hand pumping and claps on the back for a well-completed course.

They hated him now. He was their dream crusher. Most of these students would now, and should, withdraw from the operative program.

This pleased him, not because of the power his influence played in that decision, but because it would save their lives.

2

Professor Andrew Trent made his way through the crowded university hallway towards his brother Mark's classroom. Unlike Mark, however, Drew was a Professor of Economics on the regular university staff. He dodged a pack of swiftly moving students, lifting his arm high so they could move through the door at the same time, though in different directions.

"Jesus, Mark, what did you do to them? If they're fleeing in terror now, what will it be like after their final?"

Drew reached down and picked up a workbook, one of several that had been inexplicably discarded on the floor. He frowned when he saw the workbook's title page was *Deep Sea Explorations in a Balloon, a Retrospective & Manual*. He was about to ask what these odd materials were and why they were lying on the floor when Mark answered.

"Like that. I just gave them their final."

Stunned to see that Mark was already on his way out of the classroom door without Drew having noticed that he had even moved at all, he hustled to catch up.

"Isn't it a little early for their finals?" Drew asked, simultaneously forgetting all about the odd workbooks.

Mark moved rapidly down the hall, stopping at an office door with a poorly installed nameplate that read, *Visiting Professor, Mark Trent*. Under that sign was another one, held on by a single piece of tape, that read, *No set hours, by appointment only*.

Without a visible key in his hand, Mark quickly opened the previously locked door and just as swiftly slipped inside his office. After months of asking, to no avail, how Mark opened the door seemingly by magic, Drew had finally discovered that pushing on the door handle while at the same time wrenching it in the opposite direction before turning it back popped the lock. He had no idea if the office door had come with that quirk, or if Mark had introduced it himself.

"So few of them have the instincts to survive the game, maybe even none, so why keep screwing around like that'll change?" Mark grumbled, dropping the index cards on his desk and flopping down into a cracked leather desk chair that made an

alarming wailing noise from his weight. He began organizing the cards into three piles, the third of which was significantly larger than the other two.

Drew made a scoffing noise. “Nice attitude, hard ass. You ever worry you’ll get it wrong?”

Mark didn’t answer, and the silent moment stretched.

Drew stared at his brother through narrowed eyes. He was sometimes surprised that they were true biological brothers, as they had no physical features in common. Mark, the older by three years, measured in at six foot one and had an athletic build unlike Drew’s somewhat too slender, three-inch taller frame. Mark’s thick, medium-brown hair was parted on the left and combed down over his forehead in an elegant, but somewhat old-fashioned style, whereas Drew sported longish blond hair that was artfully styled to resemble an old-school California surfer dude. In contrast to Drew’s blue, Mark had medium-brown eyes and overall presented an unremarkably generic attractiveness that wasn’t particularly noticeable nor memorable.

Drew, on the other hand, was an *adonis* as many females pointed out, and unlike his thirty-five-year-old brother, received a great deal of attention when entering a room. Drew worked hard at keeping in good shape and spent the required amount of time at the gym to make sure of this. While it wasn’t obvious from his physical appearance, Drew knew that Mark possessed a stamina and endurance that Drew could never match. Mark was stronger and more fit than anyone Drew had ever known, like a top athlete in perpetual training. Part of that old job of his, though he was fuzzy on the precise details of what that old job actually was.

One thing the brothers did share in common was an affinity for custom-made clothes, and both had well-stocked closets. The only difference in that area was that Drew was flashier in his choices than Mark. Today, Drew admired his brother’s impeccably pressed white shirt and tan pants, the Rolex watch that each son had received from their parents upon their college graduations and each wore every day, and Mark’s highly polished brown loafers and tan socks. He wondered how Mark had the ability to always appear as if he had just dressed, and not been in the same outfit all day. This always bothered Drew, as by the end of every day, he looked somewhat ruffled.

Abruptly, Mark stood and shot a look at Drew, their eyes meeting in what suddenly felt like a battle. The intensity of it was

unnerving, and no matter how often Drew saw this expression on his brother's face, it never failed to startle him. Drew fought the urge to look away, tired of revealing just how insignificant that particular look made him feel.

What always puzzled Drew was that so few people recognized this hard, dark edge in Mark's eyes. Mark's seemingly mild demeanor well-disguised it, but in reality, he possessed a cool, dangerousness fueled by a rapier-sharp mind and a diabolical cleverness that rivaled satan, that is, if satan had also possessed an unwavering do-good moral compass like Mark's. If anyone had looked carefully enough to catch a glimpse of the inner workings of Mark's mind, Drew thought they would probably flee the area to avoid him without consciously realizing they were afraid. It was an interesting dichotomy to Mark's personality, this blend of ruthless coldness combined with an unwavering commitment to always doing the right thing in any situation.

Also unlike Drew, Mark was prone, like now, to strong silences. After years of trying, Drew had never been able to fully draw him out of that until Mark was ready. It was as though Mark carried the weight of the entire world on his shoulders, and it rendered him copiously mute.

Even so, Drew loved the fact that as different as they were physically and emotionally, they were still as close to one another as identical twins, often sharing the same basic thoughts, merely expressed differently.

Drew remained quiet for a moment longer, irked but not surprised that Mark still hadn't responded in any way, and yet neither brother had broken their eye contact through the silence.

Drew decided with Mark's mood, a direct approach would be best. "Why the hell are you doing this?"

"Why the hell are you?"

Drew blew out a breath. "I teach Economics to desk jockeys, which is not the same thing. You shouldn't be teaching the field to these wannabes; you should be back in it."

Drew grabbed a glass paperweight from the desk, tossing it back and forth in his hands. *Love, Jenny*, was engraved on the bottom.

Mark sighed. "Well, those who can't, teach."

“Bullshit, you used to...” Drew didn’t finish. Mark again pinned him with the characteristic icy stare, with an even harder flash of the eyes this time. This more menacing variation of the death stare said, with no debate whatsoever, that the topic was at an absolute end.

The heft of the paperweight suddenly became too much for Drew, and he gently put it back down on the desk, no longer interested in baiting Mark.

Instead, he changed tactics. “Are you done with all your goddamn paperwork yet? You have like what, twenty cards there with nothing on them? It’s the weekend; I’ve got a date. If you don’t come now, you’ll have to take public transport because I’m not blowing her off just to have the privilege of schlepping your sorry ass home while your car’s in for service. When the hell are you going to replace that old POS anyway?”

“Never, I have it broken in just the way I want it.”

“Yeah, *broken* being the critical word in that statement. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

As Mark at last readied himself to leave his office, Drew’s mouth curled up at one side. “So, who’s Jenny?”

He expected, and was therefore not surprised when he received no answer, but thought he saw Mark roll his eyes.

3

Alma Mae Berrie glanced towards the wooden steps on the front porch of her Georgia farmhouse. She wondered why a pile of mail was lying there, wildly spread about like it had been thrown. Then she looked around and wondered what *she* was doing crumpled in a heap next to the mess.

The heat and humidity were unbearable, and she couldn't remember it *ever* being this disgusting. Her clothes were dripping, her hair was dripping. Even her fingernails bore a wet sheen. Why was she outside instead of in, where it was much cooler?

"Oh, dear Lord! I went out to get the mail. Why in heavens I went at the height of the day's heat, I have no earthly idea. I must have fainted out here from the darn heat."

She rolled over and pushed herself up into a seated position. She felt weak and nauseous but figured if she could grab the leg of a nearby chair, she could hoist herself up into it, rest, then eventually get moving.

She tried, but quickly realized she didn't have the strength.

"Well, I'll just give myself another minute," she mumbled as she ran her hands up and down her arms, "and then I'll be fine."

As she sat, waiting to recover enough to hoist herself up, it occurred to Alma Mae that it was August. The dreaded, no-good-for-anything-nor-anybody August. She hadn't thought about it for years, but suddenly the memories came at her in a rush.

She despised the month of August, and over the years, she had come to understand that the month shared an equal loathing of her.

Their contentious relationship began on August 4, 1908, on the very day of Alma Mae's birth when her grandmother collapsed in the kitchen while making pancakes, reportedly dead before she hit the floor.

August of 1917 delivered the news that her father was killed in action during the First World War, leaving the nine-year-old Alma Mae and her mother to make their way on their own.

1927's August took both her beloved mother along with her own infant son to a disease that was said could be cured one year later with the discovery of penicillin.

Alma Mae registered the fact that a full twenty years had passed between that awful time and August's next attack in 1947. It had been long enough for Alma Mae to have forgotten about August, but not long enough for August to have forgotten about her.

Her husband, Harold, had made it a little further than halfway through the month when he passed to the great heavens above. His passing shouldn't have come as such a shock since Harold had been doing very poorly with illness for a long time and yet, Alma Mae was completely stunned.

Of course, Alma Mae didn't show her emotions to outsiders. It wasn't any of their damn business how she felt inside. Instead, she projected a calm tranquillity that was as far away from how she really felt as the distance from the Earth to the Moon. Pastor Parsons had mistaken Alma Mae's calm demeanor as a sign that she was at peace with God's will in that the souls of her husband and long-deceased son would at last be reunited in heaven. He felt pride that he himself had convinced her of this comfort.

The truth was, Alma Mae had already concluded that the month of August was a construct of the devil and that she would simply no longer give that Devil the satisfaction of her tears. But for all her boldness in making that decree, it didn't help free her of its disastrous events in a practical way. She still faced a terrible dilemma.

When Harold died, Alma Mae felt all her previous August disasters were simply a precursor to that one, as that one had been the worst. His death had left her utterly alone in the world, and she missed Harold with a deep pain that surprised her given that he had been sick for so long. Besides missing him, she had to make decisions on issues she had never previously involved herself in regarding the operation of their five-hundred-acre farm.

To her amazement, she'd found herself brimming with bitter regret at having been content to merely manage the domestic domain in the sprawling farmhouse Harold had built with his own hands, instead of learning how to actually farm around it as well. But how could she have pressed Harold to educate her when he fell sick? Asking him to teach her would defeat their absolute confidence that he would be made whole once again.

So they never spoke of it, and Alma Mae continued on, content inside her home, as she'd always been.

That fateful day, as Alma Mae sat by her husband's coffin during the church service, she was forced to face the fact that everything had drastically changed in her settled life.

She'd been trying to remember a word that could describe how she felt at that time.

What was that term the sailors used? Adrift, that was the word.

"Indeed, I was adrift," she mumbled.

Things were looking hopeless. Then the nice young man from the city arrived two weeks after her husband's funeral. He'd offered a handsome sum of money to purchase four hundred and ninety-eight acres of her farm to plant a crop of corn that he himself would be managing.

Miraculously, Alma Mae had been saved. Strange that her savior had come to her before that awful August ended, but he had, and August had never attacked again.

Until now. Seventy-seven years later, after a simple and satisfying life.

"I see you aren't done with me yet," she barked, finally rising to her feet, "since the heat of you is so busy trying to kill me off."

She shook her fist at the sky. "August, you've taken nearly everything else from me, but you haven't gotten me, and I'm not ready to go just yet. So you can just wait until I am."

She bypassed sitting in the chair she'd used to lean on, and shuffled into the cool air of the farmhouse.