

A NOVEL BY THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DAVID
BALDACCI



FIRST
FAMILY

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Absolute Power

Total Control

The Winner

The Simple Truth

Saving Faith

Wish You Well

Last Man Standing

The Christmas Train

Split Second

Hour Game

The Camel Club

The Collectors

Simple Genius

Stone Cold

The Whole Truth

Divine Justice

*To my mom,
my brother, and my sister,
for all the love*

PROLOGUE

HER FOOTSTEPS were unhurried. Down the street, making one left, a two-block straightaway, and then a slight right. There was a pause at one intersection, a longer stop at another. Just from habit, really. The radar in her head showed no danger and her pace picked up. There were people around though the hour was late, but they never saw her. She seemed to ease by like a breeze, felt but never seen.

The three-story cinderblock building was right where it had always been, stuck between a high-rise on the left and a concrete shell on the right. There was security of course, but it was basic, not the best. A typical package, it would slow down a journeyman for a few minutes, a pro for much less.

She selected a window in the back of the building instead of breaking in the front door. These entry points were almost never wired. She popped the swivel latch, slid up the window, and wriggled through. The motion detector was handled with ease; she was humming as she did it. Yet it was a nervous hum. She was getting close to it, what she was here for.

And it scared the hell out of the lady. Not that she would ever admit that.

The file cabinet was locked. She cracked a smile.

You're really making me work here, Horatio.

Five seconds later the drawer slid open. Her fingers skimmed over the file tabs. Alphabetical. Which left her smack in the middle of the pack, something she'd never considered herself to be. Her fingers stopped skipping and curled around the file. It was a thick one; she'd never doubted it would be. She obviously wasn't a mere ten-page head case. A lot more trees had fallen because of her. She pulled it free and glanced at the copier on the worktable.

Okay, here we go.

Horatio Barnes was her shrink, her mind guru. He'd convinced her to enter a psych hospital a while back. The only mystery that voluntary incarceration had solved was one that did not involve her problems at all. Later, good old Horatio had hypnotized her, taking her back to her childhood, as any shrink worth his sheepskin invariably does. The session apparently had revealed many things. The only problem was that Horatio had decided not to fill her in on what she'd told him. She was here to correct that little oversight.

She slid the pages in the feeder and hit the button. One by one the events of her life whooshed through the heart of the Xerox machine. As each fresh piece of paper was catapulted into the catch bin her heart rate seemed to increase by the same single-digit measure.

She put the original file back in the drawer, popped a rubber band around her copy, and held it in both hands. Constituting only a few pounds, its weight still threatened to sink her right through the floor. Out the same way her boots made a clunking sound as they kissed asphalt. She walked calmly back to her SUV, a breeze again, invisible. Nightlife going on all around here; they never saw her.

She climbed in her ride, revved the engine. She was ready to go. Her hands played over the steering wheel. She wanted to drive, always loved to rip her eight cylinders down some new road to where she didn't know. Yet looking through the windshield, she didn't want new, she desperately wanted things to be the way they were.

She glanced at the file; saw the name on the first page.

Michelle Maxwell.

For a moment it didn't seem to be her. In those pages was someone else's life, secrets, torments.

Issues. The dreaded word. It seemed so innocuous. Issues. Everyone had issues. Yet those six letters had always seemed to define her, breaking her down into some simple formula that still no one seemed capable of understanding.

The SUV idled, kicking carbon into an atmosphere already bloated with it. A few raindrops smacked her windshield. She could see people start to pick up their step as they sensed the approaching downpour. A minute later, it hit. She felt the wind buffet her sturdy SUV. A spear of lightning was followed by a long burp of thunder. The storm's intensity forecast its brevity. Such violence could not be sustained for long; it used up too much energy far too fast.

She couldn't help herself. She cut the engine, picked up the pages, ripped off the rubber band, and started to read. General info came first. Birth date, gender, education, and employment. She turned the page. And then another. Nothing she didn't know already, not surprising considering this was all about her.

On the fifth page of typed notes, her hands began to tremble. The heading was "Childhood—Tennessee." She swallowed once and then again, but couldn't clear the dryness. She coughed and then hacked, but that only made it worse. The swells of saliva had solidified in her mouth, just like they had when she'd nearly killed herself on the water rowing to an Olympic silver medal that meant less and less to her with each passing day.

She grabbed a bottle of G2 and poured it down her throat, some of it spilling on the seat and the pages. She cursed, scrubbed at the paper, trying to dry it. And then it tore, nearly in half. This made tears creep to her eyes, she was not sure why. She pulled the rent paper close to her face though her eyesight was perfect. Perfect, but she still couldn't read the script. She looked out the windshield and couldn't see anything there either, so hard was the fall of rain. The streets were empty now, the people having scattered at the first bite of water bent nearly horizontal by the wind.

She looked back at the pages but there was nothing there either. The words were there of course, but she couldn't see them.

"You can do this, Michelle. You can handle this." Her words were low, sounded forced, hollow. She refocused.

"Childhood, Tennessee," she began. She was six years old again and living in Tennessee with her mother and father. Her dad was a police officer on the way up; her mom, was, well, her mom. Her four older brothers had grown and gone. It was just little Michelle left at home. With them.

She was doing fine now. The words were clear, her memories also crystallizing, as she crept back to that isolated wedge of personal history. When she turned the page and her gaze flickered over the date on the top it was as though the lightning outside had somehow grounded right into her. A billion volts of pain, a shriek of anguish you could actually see, and feel, as it pierced her.

She looked out the window, she didn't know why. The streets were still empty; the rain now racing to earth so hard the drops seemed to be connected, like trillions of strings of beads.

Yet as she squinted through the downpour she saw that the streets weren't empty. The tall man stood there, no umbrella, no overcoat. He was soaked right through, his shirt and pants melted to his skin. He stared at her and she did the same right back. There was not fear or hatred or sympathy in his look as he eyed her through the walls of water. It was, she finally concluded, an underlying sadness that easily matched her own despair.

She turned the key, put the SUV in drive, and hit the gas. As she raced past, she glanced at him as another thrust of lightning cracked and briefly made night into day. Both their images seemed solidified in that blast of energy, each of their gazes frozen onto the other.

Sean King never attempted to speak and didn't try and stop her as she roared by. He just stood

there, his waterlogged hair in his face, yet his eyes as big and invasive as ever she'd seen them. They frightened her. They seemed to want to pull her soul right out of her.

An instant later he was gone as she turned the corner and slowed. Her window came down. The bundle of pages was hurled out, landing squarely in a Dumpster.

A moment later her SUV was lost in the punishing face of the storm.

CHAPTER 1

BIRTHDAY BALLOONS and submachine guns. Elegant forks digging into creamy goodies while toughened fingers coiled around curved metal trigger guards. Gleeful laughter as gifts were unwrapped floated into the air alongside the menacing *thump-thump* of an arriving chopper's downward prop wash.

The facility was officially designated by the Defense Department as Naval Support Facility Thurmont, yet most Americans knew it as Camp David. Under either name, it was not a typical venue for a preteen's birthday party. A former recreation camp built by the WPA during the Great Depression, it was turned into the presidential retreat and named the U.S.S. Shangri-La by FDR, because it was essentially replacing the presidential yacht. It had acquired its current and far less exotic moniker from Dwight Eisenhower, who named it after his grandson.

The hundred-and-thirty-acre property was rustic and had many outdoor pursuits, including tennis courts, hiking trails, and exactly one practice hole for presidential golfers. The birthday party was in the bowling center. A dozen kids were in attendance along with appropriate chaperones. They were understandably excited about being on hallowed ground where the likes of Kennedy and Reagan had trod.

The chief chaperone and planner of the event was Jane Cox. It was a role she was accustomed to because Jane Cox was married to Dan Cox, also known as "Wolfman," which made her the First Lady of the United States. It was a role she handled with charm, dignity, and the necessary elements of both humor and cunning. While it was true that the president of the United States was the world's ultimate juggler of tasks, it was also a fact that the First Lady, traditionally, was no slouch in that department either.

For the record, she bowled a ninety-seven without gutter bumpers while wearing patriotic red, white, and blue bowling shoes. She clamped her shoulder-length brown hair back into a ponytail and carried out the cake herself. She led the singing of "Happy Birthday" for her niece, Willa Dutton. Willa was small for her age, with dark hair. She was a bit shy but immensely bright and wonderfully engaging when one got to know her. Though she would never admit it publicly of course, Willa was Jane's favorite niece.

The First Lady didn't eat any cake; Jane was watching her figure since the rest of the country, and indeed the world, was too. She'd put on a few pounds since entering the White House. And a few pounds after that on the hell-on-a-plane they called the reelection campaign her husband was currently engaged in. She was five-eight in flats, tall enough that her clothes hung well on her. Her husband was an inch shy of six feet and thus she never wore heels high enough to make him look shorter by comparison. Perception did matter and people liked their leaders taller and more robust than the rest of the population.

Her face was in decent shape, she thought, as she snatched a look in a mirror. It held the marks and creases of a woman who'd given birth multiple times and endured many political races. No human being could emerge unblemished after that. Whatever frailty you possessed the other side would find and stick a crowbar in to lever every useful scrap out. The press still referred to her as attractive. Some went out on a limb and described her as possessing movie-star good looks. Maybe once, she

knew, but not anymore. She was definitely in the “character actress” stage of her career now. Still, she had progressed a long way from the days when firm cheekbones and a firmer backside were high on her list of priorities.

As the party continued, Jane would occasionally glance out the window as serious-looking Marines marched by on patrol, weapons at the ready. The Secret Service had of course traveled up here with her, but the Navy officially ran Camp David. Thus all personnel, from the carpenters to the groundskeepers, were sailors. And the bulk of the security duties fell to the permanent barracks of Marines deployed here. In truth, Camp David was better protected than 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, though you wouldn’t find many who would admit that on the record.

Security wasn’t uppermost in Jane’s mind as she watched in delight while Willa blew out the dozen candles on her two-tier cake and then helped hand out slices. Jane moved forward and hugged Willa’s mother, Pam Dutton, who was tall and thin with curly red hair.

“She looks happy, doesn’t she?” said Jane to Pam.

“Always happy around her aunt Jane,” replied Pam, patting her sister-in-law’s back affectionately. As the two women stepped apart Pam said, “I can’t thank you enough for letting us have the party here. I know it’s not, well, it’s not the norm, what with Dan, I mean the president not even being here.”

Not being a blood relation, Pam still found it uncomfortable calling her brother-in-law by his first name, whereas the president’s siblings, and Jane herself, often called him Danny.

Jane smiled. “The law provides for joint ownership of all federal property between the president and the First Lady. And just so you know, I still balance our personal checkbook. Danny’s not that good with numbers.”

Pam said, “It was still very thoughtful.” She looked at her daughter. “Next year she’s a teenager. My oldest a teenager, hard to believe.”

Pam had three children. Willa, John, who was ten, and Colleen, seven. Jane also had three children but all of them were older. The youngest was a nineteen-year-old son in college and her daughter was a nurse at a hospital in Atlanta. In between was another young man still trying to figure out what to do with his life.

The Coxes had had their family early. Jane was still only forty-eight while her husband had just celebrated his fiftieth.

Jane said, “Based on my own experience, boys will mess with your heart and girls with your head.”

“I’m not sure my head’s ready for Willa.”

“Keep the lines of communication open. Know who her friends are. *Gently* insert yourself into everything that’s going on around her but pick your battles cautiously. Sometimes she’ll pull back. That’s only natural, but once you’ve laid the ground rules it’ll be okay. She’s very intelligent. She’ll get it pretty quickly. She’ll be glad of the interest.”

“Sounds like good advice, Jane. I can always count on you.”

“I’m sorry Tuck couldn’t make it.”

“He’s supposed to be back tomorrow. You *know* your brother.”

She shot an anxious glance at Pam. “It’ll be okay. Trust me.”

“Sure, right,” the woman said quietly, her gaze on happy Willa.

As Pam walked off, Jane focused on Willa. The girl was a curious mix of maturity coupled with frequent flashes of the preteen she still was. She could write better than some adults and discourse on subjects that would befuddle many folks far her senior. And she possessed a curiosity about things that was not limited to issues common to her age group. Yet if one watched her, one would see that she

giggled impulsively, used “like” and “wow” liberally, and was just starting to discover boys with impulses of both disgust and attraction typical of the preadolescent girl. That reaction to the opposite sex would not change much when Willa became an adult, Jane well knew. Except the stakes would be far higher.

The party ended, goodbyes said. Jane Cox stepped on board the chopper. It wasn't designated as Marine One because the president wasn't riding on it. Today, it was strictly ferrying the B-team, Jane knew. And that was perfectly fine with her. In private, she and her husband were equals. In public, she walked the obligatory two steps behind.

She strapped in and the door was swung shut and secured by a uniformed Marine. Four stoic Secret Service agents shared the ride with her. They lifted off and a few moments later she was staring down at Camp David, or the “Birdcage,” as the Secret Service had code-named the retreat, where it was cradled in the Catoctin Mountain Park. The chopper turned south and thirty minutes from now she would land safely on the lawn of the White House.

In her hand she held a note that Willa had given her before they'd left the party. It was a thank-you letter. She smiled. It was not unusual that Willa already had one prepared. The note was written in a mature voice and said all the right things. Indeed, some of Jane's staff could have taken a page from her young niece's etiquette handbook.

Jane folded the letter and put it away. The rest of the day and night would not be nearly as pleasant. Official duty called. The life of a First Lady, she had quickly learned, was one of a frenzied perpetual motion machine buffered often by bursts of tedium.

The chopper's skids touched grass. Since the president wasn't on board there was little fanfare as she made her way to the White House. Her husband was in his working office near the ceremonial oval one. She had made few demands on him when she'd agreed to stand by him in his run for the nation's highest office. One of them was that she could enter his inner sanctum without announcement, without being on the official visitor's list.

“I'm not a visitor,” she'd told him at the time. “I'm your wife.”

She approached the president's “body man,” officially known as the Special Assistant to the President. He was at that moment looking through the peephole in the door to the Oval Office prior to going in and breaking up a meeting that was running behind. He was the person charged with keeping her husband on schedule and functioning at maximum efficiency. He did so by rising before dawn and devoting every moment of his waking life to whatever the man needed, often by anticipating these needs even before the president. In any place other than the White House, Jane thought, the “body man” would be simply called a wife.

“Get 'em out, Jay, because I'm coming in,” she told him. He moved with alacrity to do just this. He had never once “peeped” her. And never would if he wanted to keep his job.

She spent a few minutes with the president and told him about the birthday party, before going to their living quarters to freshen up and change her clothes for a reception she was hosting. As darkness fell a few hours later she returned to her “official” home, tugged off her shoes, and drank a much-needed cup of hot tea.

Twenty miles away, newly twelve-year-old Willa Dutton screamed.

CHAPTER 2

SEAN LOOKED at Michelle as they drove along. A brief look, a sizing-up glance. If she felt it, she didn't comment. Her gaze stayed straight ahead.

"When'd you meet them?" she asked.

"When I was in protection. Kept in touch. Really nice family."

"Okay," she said absently, staring out the windshield.

"Have you seen Horatio lately?"

Michelle's hand tightened around her cup of Starbucks coffee. "Why did you follow me down to his office?"

"Because I knew what you were going to do."

"Which is what exactly?"

"Break in to try and find out what you told him when you were hypnotized."

Michelle remained quiet.

"Did you find out?"

"It's pretty late to be going over to someone's house."

"Michelle, I think we need to talk this—"

"What you need to do, Sean, is not go there."

Sean stared out at a night that seemed to be closing in on him.

"You didn't answer my question," she said.

"You didn't answer mine either," he said in an annoyed tone.

"So about going over to their house this late?"

"It's not my call."

"I thought you were dropping off a birthday present?"

"I bought the present *after* she phoned. I suddenly remembered it was her birthday today."

"Why then?"

"It might have to do with a job for us."

"Your really nice family needs a private investigator?"

"And she didn't want to wait."

They turned off the winding country road and pulled into the long drive, passing trees on both sides.

"Boondocks," muttered Michelle.

"Private," Sean amended.

The next instant the large house came into view.

"Nice place," she said. "Your friend obviously does well."

"Government contracting. The Feds apparently throw money at people."

"Wow, what a surprise. But the house is dark. You sure you got the time right?"

Sean eased the car to a stop in front.

Michelle put down her coffee and pulled out her pistol from its belt holster. "That was a woman's scream."

"Wait a minute. Don't go off half-cocked," he said, putting a restraining hand on her arm. The

crashing sound from inside the house made him reach in the glove box for his own weapon. "Let's confirm before calling the cops."

"You hit the back, I got the front," Michelle said.

He climbed out and hustled to the rear of the brick colonial skittering next to the side-load garage and stopping for a few moments to scan the terrain before heading on. After doing her own recon of the area, Michelle was next to the front door a minute later.

No more screams or crashes. No other vehicles in sight. She could call out, see if everything was okay. Only if it wasn't she might be giving some bad guys a warning. She tried the front door. Locked. Something made her pull her hand back, she wasn't quite sure what, only she was glad she had.

The bullet blast ripped through the door, sending shards of painted wood spinning into the air. She could actually feel the slugs race past before they riddled Sean's car.

She leapt off the front porch and did a roll, coming up and hitting full sprint two steps later. Her hand dug into her pocket and her fingers drilled 911 on the keypad. The dispatcher's voice came on. Michelle was about to speak when the garage door blew open and the pickup truck cut a tight turn and bore down on her. She turned, fired at the tires, then the windshield. Her phone flew out of her hand and she catapulted to the side and rolled down an embankment. She landed in a pile of leaves and mud at the bottom of a runoff ditch. She sat forward and looked up.

And fired.

Her aim, as usual, was unerring. The bullet hit the man dead in the chest. There was only one problem. Her jacketed 9mm round didn't drop him. He staggered back, then brought his weapon up, took aim, and fired back.

The only thing that saved Michelle Maxwell that night was that she deduced her attacker was wearing body armor, and then was nimble enough to roll behind a monster oak before the MP5 round headed her way. Dozens of slugs slammed into the tree, shredding its bark and sending pieces of oak tailings whipsawing away. Yet wood that thick always won out, even over submachine gun bullets coming in waves.

She didn't pause, because it only took a practiced hand seconds to eject and then slap in another clip on the MP. She jumped out, both hands on her pistol grip. This time she would aim for the head and drop him for good.

Only there was no one there for her to kill.

Mr. MP5 had pinned her down, then fled.

She cautiously made her way up the slope, her pistol pointed straight ahead. When she heard the truck start to race off she scrambled up, pulling at roots, branches, and vines. The pickup was out of sight by the time she reached the driveway. She hustled toward Sean's car thinking she would take up pursuit, but stopped when she saw steam rising from under the hood. Her gaze drifted to the bullet holes in the sheet metal. They weren't going anywhere.

They?

"Sean," she screamed. "Sean!"

"In here!"

She sprinted up the steps, kicked open what was left of the shattered front door, and barreled into the living room, her gun making precise grid arcs.

Sean was kneeling on the floor, hovering over the woman. She was lying on her back. Arms and legs spread-eagled like she was frozen in a jumping jack. Her eyes were open but hard and flat because she was dead. The red hair touched her shoulders. It was easy to see what had killed the woman. Her throat had been shredded.

“Who is she?”

“Pam Dutton. The woman we were going to be meeting with.”

Michelle noticed the writing on the woman’s bare arms. “What’s that?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just a bunch of letters.” He leaned closer. “Looks like they used a black Sharpie.”

“Is anybody else in the house?”

“Let’s find out.”

“Can’t screw up the crime scene for the cops.”

He countered, “And we can’t let someone die who we could otherwise save.”

It only took a few minutes. There were four bedrooms on the top floor, two on each side of the hallway set catty-cornered from one another. There was a young girl in the first bedroom they reached. She was unconscious but with no apparent injuries. Her breathing was steady and her pulse weak but steady.

“Colleen Dutton,” said Sean.

“Drugged?” Michelle said as she gazed down at the little girl.

Sean lifted the girl’s eyelid and noted the dilated pupil. “Looks to be.”

In the second bedroom lay a young boy in the same condition as the girl.

“John Dutton,” said Sean as he checked the child’s pulse and pupil. “Drugged too.”

The third bedroom was empty. The last bedroom was the largest. It wasn’t empty.

The man was on the floor. He had on pants, a T-shirt, and was barefoot. One side of his face was swollen and badly bruised.

“It’s Tuck Dutton, Pam’s husband.” Sean checked his pulse. “Knocked out but his breathing’s okay. Looks like he took quite a blow.”

“We really need to call the cops.” Michelle grabbed the phone off the nightstand. “Dead. They must’ve messed with the outside box.”

“Use your cell phone.”

“I lost it when they tried to run me down.”

“When *who* tried to run you down?”

“A driver and a guy with a submachine gun. Didn’t you see anybody when you came in?”

He shook his head. “I heard gunfire, then I came in the back door. Then another loud sound.”

“That was them crashing through the garage door. Looks like I had all the fun tonight.”

“Pam dead. Tuck knocked out. John and Colleen drugged.”

“You told me they had three kids.”

“They do. Willa’s apparently gone. Her bedroom was the empty one.”

“In the truck? Kidnapping?”

“Can’t be sure. What’d you see?”

“It was a Toyota Tundra, double cab, dark blue. Didn’t see the plates because I was busy trying not to die. Driver and a shooter. Both guys. Oh, and there’s at least one bullet hole in the windshield.”

“Did you see them well enough for an ID?”

“No, but one of them was wearing some serious body armor, like military level. Took a jacketed round from my Sig with no problem. And he was wearing a black ski mask, which made an ID problematic.”

“And no sign of a twelve-year-old girl in the truck?”

“Not that I saw. Probably drugged her too.”

Sean used his cell to call 911 and relay all the information. He slipped it back in his pocket and

looked around.

“What’s that?”

Michelle strode across the room to check out the piece of luggage that was sticking out of the closet. “Garment bag, half open.” She bent lower. “It has a tag on it. United Airlines Flight 567 into Dulles with today’s date on it.” She used a washcloth snatched from the bathroom to cover her hand while she slid the zipper open a few inches and peered inside. “Men’s clothes. Must be Tuck’s.”

Sean looked down at the unconscious man’s bare feet and his T-shirt. “He gets home, probably sees Pam, heads up here to drop his bag, starts to change, and wham.”

“Something is bugging me. That Tundra that came out of the garage. Either it belongs to the Duttons or the bad guys drove their own vehicle in there.”

“They might have done it so no one would see them put Willa in it.”

“In the boondocks? At this hour? You can’t even see another house from here. I’m not even sure there is another house.”

“And why take Willa and not one of the other kids?”

“And why would they kill the mom and leave everyone else alive?”

Sean tried to rouse Tuck, but got no response.

“Better leave him alone. He might have some internal injuries.”

They walked back downstairs and then Sean veered toward the kitchen and through it into the garage. There were three garage doors. In one bay was a late-model Mercedes four-door sedan. In another bay was a Chrysler minivan. The third bay was empty.

Michelle pointed to the destroyed garage door. “Truck was parked in this space, obviously. Do you know if the Duttons owned a blue Tundra?”

“No. But the odds are it was theirs.”

“Because the bay is clear?”

“Right. Just about every garage is packed with all sorts of crap, sometimes even including a car. The fact that all the bays were clean meant they had three vehicles, otherwise the third bay would be used for storage.”

“Wow, you really are a detective.”

Sean put his hand on the hood of the Mercedes. “Warm.”

Michelle ran her finger over one of the car’s tires. “Tread’s wet. We had some rain this evening. Must be Tuck coming from the airport.”

They walked back to the living room and stared down at Pam Dutton. Sean used his elbow to flick on the light switch, pulled out his notepad, and copied down the letters on the woman’s arm.

Michelle bent lower and examined Pam’s hands. “Looks like she’s got some blood and skin under her nails. Most likely defensive trace.”

“Noticed that too. Hope they can trip something on a DNA database.”

Michelle said, “But shouldn’t there be more blood?”

Sean examined the body more closely. “You’re right. The rug should be covered. Looks like they severed her carotid. She would’ve bled out pretty fast.”

Michelle saw it first, the plastic piece protruding out from under the dead woman’s elbow. “Is that what I think it is?”

Sean nodded. “It’s an empty vial.” He glanced over at his partner. “Did they take her blood with them?”

CHAPTER 3

TALBOT'S WAS HAVING A SALE. Diane Wohl had left work at four to take advantage. A new dress, a few blouses, maybe some slacks, a scarf. She'd just gotten a raise at work and wanted to put it to good use. There was nothing wrong with pampering yourself every once in a while. She parked her car in the shopping mall garage and walked about four hundred feet to the store. She left two hours later after trying on several outfits and buying two bags full of clothing, doing her patriotic duty to stimulate an otherwise lousy economy.

She hopped in the car after tossing her bags in the passenger seat. She was hungry and was thinking about picking up some Chinese take-out on the way home. She had just put the key in the ignition when she felt the small circle of metal against her head. A strong odor made her forget about kung pa chicken with all white meat and egg drop soup. It was a mixture of gun oil and cigarettes.

"Drive," the voice said quietly but firmly. "Or you're dead."

She drove.

An hour later the suburbs had disappeared. The only thing visible was lined asphalt, a harvest moon, and walls of trees. Not another car, not another person. Diane Wohl was completely alone with whatever monster was sitting in the back of her Honda.

He spoke again. "Turn off here."

Her gut tightened and stomach acid driven by fear heaved up her throat.

The car bumped along the dirt road for a few minutes. The mass of trees seemed to swallow up the car.

"Stop."

Diane slid the gearshift lever to park. As she pulled her hand back the woman eyed her purse with a sideways glance. Her cell phone was in there. If she could somehow turn it on. Or her keys. She had a big wad of them. She could pull them; gouge him in the eyes like she'd seen on TV shows. Only she was so terrified she couldn't. Her entire body was trembling like she had Parkinson's.

The monster of few words said, "Out."

She didn't move. Her throat was crusted dry but she managed to say, "If you want my car and my money you can have them. Just please don't hurt me. Please."

The monster was not persuaded. "Out." He wedged the gun muzzle against the back of her head. A piece of her hair caught against the bump of the gunsight and was pulled out root and all. Tears trickled down the woman's cheeks as she confronted the last few minutes of her life. It was like all the warnings had said:

Know your surroundings. Be alert. It only takes a second.

From Talbot's to death on a lonely strip of dirt.

She opened the car door and started to slide out, her hand clutching her purse. She gasped and let go when the gloved fingers closed around her wrist.

"You won't need that."

She closed the door behind her.

Her hopes sank when he joined her outside the car. She had been praying that he would merely climb over the front seat and take her Honda, instead of stealing her life.

He was older, with thick, longish white hair that looked sweaty and dirty. And his face appeared carved from solid rock with rivulets running all over the surface. He was older, but he was also a big, tall man, well over two hundred pounds with broad shoulders and huge, veined hands. He towered over the petite Wohl. Even without the weapon she had no chance against him. His gun was pointed right at her head. The fact that he wasn't wearing a mask terrified her; she could clearly see his face.

He doesn't care. Doesn't care if I know who he is. He's going to kill me. Rape and then kill me. And leave me out here. She started to sob.

"Please don't do this," she said as he took a step forward and she took a step back, bracing for the attack.

She never noticed the other man come up behind her. When he touched her shoulder, she shrieked and turned. He was smaller and wiry, his Hispanic features clearly defined. Yet she never saw this because he held up the canister and the dense mist hit her squarely in the face.

Choking, Diane took a deep breath to clear her lungs. It didn't work; her senses quickly leaving her, she slumped in his arms. They put her in the back of a rental van parked nearby and drove off.

CHAPTER 4

THE LAW ENFORCEMENT ARMY was here in full, splendid force. Sean and Michelle watched from one corner of the pine needle–strewn yard as cops, techs, and suits swarmed over the stricken Dutton home like ants on a carcass. In certain important respects that analogy was exact.

The ambulances had come and taken the living members of the Dutton family to the hospital. Mrs. Dutton was still inside enduring the swarm. The only doctor she would be seeing later was one who would cut her up even more than she was already.

Sean and Michelle had been questioned three times by uniforms and then tie-and-jacket homicide detectives. They methodically gave detailed answers and notebooks were filled up with their descriptions of the night's horrific events.

Michelle's attention turned to two black sedans skidding into the driveway. When the men and women popped out she said to Sean, "Why's the FBI here?"

"Didn't I mention? Tuck Dutton is the First Lady's brother."

"The First Lady? As in Jane Cox, wife of President Cox?"

Sean just gave her a look.

"So that means her sister-in-law was murdered and her niece was kidnapped?"

"You'll probably see the news trucks pull up any minute," he said. "And the answer would be, 'No comment.'"

"So Pam Dutton wanted to hire us. Any idea why?"

"No."

They both watched as the Fibbies talked to the local detectives and then marched inside the house. Ten minutes later they came back out and headed toward Sean and Michelle.

She said, "They don't look too happy about us being here."

They weren't. It was clear after the first three minutes that the FBI agents were having a hard time believing that the two had been summoned by Pam Dutton but didn't know why.

Sean said for the fourth time, "Like I said, I'm a friend of the family. She called me and said she wanted to meet. I have no idea why. That's why we were coming tonight. To find out."

"At this hour?"

"She set the time."

"If you're so *close* to them maybe you have an idea who could have done this," one of them said. He was a medium-sized guy with a thin face, buffed shoulders, and an apparently permanent sour expression that made Michelle think he was either plagued by ulcers or had jumpy intestines.

"If I had any idea I would've told the county suits when they asked me. Any sign of the truck? My partner here put a round through the windshield."

"And why does your *partner* carry a gun?" Sour Face asked.

Sean slowly reached in his pocket and pulled out his ID. Michelle did the same along with her concealed weapons permit.

"Private detectives?" Sour Face managed to make it sound like "child molester" before handing the IDs back.

"And former Secret Service," Michelle said. "Both of us."

“Good for you,” Sour Face snapped. He nodded at the house. “In fact, the Secret Service might take some heat for this one.”

“Why?” Sean asked. “Siblings of the First Family don’t qualify for protection unless there’s been a specific threat. They can’t guard everybody.”

“Don’t you get it? It’s perception. Mom slaughtered, kid snatched. It won’t play well in the papers. Particularly after the Camp David party today. First Family goes safely home. Last Family gets run over by a freaking tank. Not a great headline.”

“What party at Camp David?” Michelle wanted to know.

“I’m asking the questions,” he shot back.

And for the next hour Sean and Michelle again went through what they’d seen and done in minute detail. For all of Sour Face’s irritating characteristics, they both had to admit the man was plenty thorough.

They ended up back in the house staring down at Pam Dutton’s corpse. One forensic photographer was snapping close-ups of the blood-spatter patterns, the death wound, and the trace under Pam Dutton’s nails. Another tech was typing into a laptop the string of alphabet letters on the dead woman’s arms.

“Anybody know what the letters mean?” Michelle asked, pointing to them. “Is it a foreign language?”

One of the techs shook his head. “It’s not any language I’ve ever seen.”

“It’s more like random letters,” suggested Sean.

“There’s good defensive trace under her nails,” Michelle pointed out. “Looks like she was able to scratch the perp up.”

“Nothing we don’t know,” said Sour Face.

“How’re Tuck and the kids?” asked Sean.

“Heading to the hospital now to get some statements.”

“If they had to knock the guy out because he was fighting with them, he might have seen something,” said one of the agents.

“Yeah, but if he did see something you wonder why they didn’t give him the same treatment they gave his wife,” said Michelle. “The kids were drugged, probably saw squat. But why leave an eyewitness?”

Sour Face looked unimpressed. “If I want to talk to you two again, and I probably will, I trust I’ll be able to find you at the addresses you gave?”

“Not a problem,” said Sean.

“Right,” said Sour Face as he and his team trudged off.

Sean said, “Let’s go.”

“How? They shot up your car. Didn’t you notice?”

Sean walked outside and stared over at his ruined Lexus before whipping around to glare at her. “You know, you could’ve told me that before.”

“I’ve had so much time on my hands.”

“I’ll call Triple A, how about that?”

As they waited for the ride, she said, “So are we just going to leave it like this?”

“Like what?”

She pointed to the Duttons’ house. “Like this. One of the pricks tried to kill me. I don’t know about you, but I take that personally. And Pam wanted to hire us. I think we owe it to her to take the case and see it through.”

“Michelle, we have no idea that what she called me about has anything to do with her death.”

“If it doesn’t I’d call that the mother of all coincidences.”

“Okay, but what can we do? The police and the FBI are involved. I don’t see much room for us to operate.”

“Never stopped you before,” she said stubbornly.

“This is different.”

“Why’s that?”

He didn’t say anything.

“Sean?”

“I heard you!”

“So what’s different?”

“What’s different are the people involved.”

“Who? The Duttons?”

“No. The First Lady.”

“Why? What does she matter?”

“She matters, Michelle. She just matters.”

“You sound like you know her.”

“I do.”

“How?”

He started walking off.

“What about Triple A?” she called after him.

Michelle didn’t get an answer.

CHAPTER 5

SAM QUARRY loved his home, or what was left of it. The Atlee Plantation had been in his family for nearly two hundred years. The property's footprint had once extended for miles with hundreds of slaves working it. It now had been reduced to two hundred acres with migrant laborers from Mexico doing the bulk of the harvesting. The plantation house itself had seen better days, but it was still sprawling, it was still livable, if one didn't mind the leaky roof, the drafty walls, or the occasional mouse scurrying across the brittle wooden floors. These were surfaces that had encountered the boots of Confederate generals and even Jefferson Davis himself on a brief stopover during the losing effort. Quarry knew the history well, but had never revealed in it. You didn't pick your family or your family history.

He was now sixty-two years old with a cap of thick snowy hair that seemed even whiter because of his sun-beaten skin. Long-boned and strongly built with a big, commanding voice, he was an outdoorsman both by choice and necessity. He made his living off the land but also enjoyed the rustic trappings of the hunter, fisherman, and amateur horticulturist. It was just who he was; a man of the earth, he liked to say.

He sat behind his cluttered and scarred desk in the library. It was at this same desk that generations of Quarry men had perched their behinds and made important decisions that affected the lives of others. Unlike some of his ancestors who'd been a bit freewheeling in their oversight, Sam Quarry undertook this responsibility seriously. He ran a tight ship as much to provide for himself as for the people he still employed here. Yet in truth, it was more than that. Atlee was really all he had left now.

He stretched out his six-foot-four-inch frame and settled wide, callused, and sun-reddened hands over his flat stomach. Gazing around at the bad portraits and grainy black-and-white photos of his male ancestors hanging along the wall, Quarry took stock of his situation. He was a man who always allowed the time to think things through. Almost nobody did that anymore, from the president of the United States to Wall Street barons to the man or woman on the street. Speed. Everybody wanted it yesterday. And because of that impatience the answer they got usually turned out to be wrong.

Thirty minutes went by and he didn't move. However, his brain was far more active than his body.

He finally hunched forward, slid gloves on, and under the watchful eye of the portrait of his grandfather and namesake Samuel W. Quarry, who'd helped lead the opposition to civil rights in Alabama, he started tapping the faded keys on his old IBM Selectric. He knew how to use a computer but had never owned one, though he did have a cell phone. People could steal things right off your computer, he knew, even while they were sitting in another country. When he wanted to use a computer he traveled to the local library. To get his thoughts from his Selectric, though, they would have to invade his domain at Atlee and he seriously doubted they would walk out alive.

He finished his two-fingered pecking and pulled out the paper. He read over its brief contents once more and then placed it inside an envelope, sealing it not with his saliva but with a bit of water from a glass on his desk. He was not inclined to give folks any way to track him down, from DNA in his spit or otherwise.

He slipped the envelope into his desk drawer and locked it with the turn of a nearly one-hundred-year-old key that still worked just fine. He rose and headed to the door, out to daylight to oversee his

little crumbling kingdom. He passed Gabriel, a skinny eleven-year-old black boy whose mother, Ruth Ann, worked for Quarry as his housekeeper. He patted Gabriel on the head and gave him a folded dollar and an old stamp for his collection. Gabriel was a smart boy who had the ability to go on to college and Quarry was determined to help him try. He had not inherited any of the prejudices of his grandfather or those of his father, who'd hailed George Wallace, at least the unrepentant George Wallace, as a great man who "knew how to keep the coloreds in their place."

Sam Quarry believed all humans had strengths and weaknesses and they weren't tied to pigment type. One of his daughters had actually married a man of color and Sam had happily given his daughter away at the wedding. They were divorced now and he hadn't seen either of them in years. He didn't blame the breakup on his former son-in-law's race. The fact was, his youngest daughter was damn tough to live with.

He spent two hours going over his land, riding in a battered and rusted Dodge pickup with over two hundred thousand proud miles on it. He finally pulled to a stop in front of a dented decades-old silver Airstream trailer with a tattered awning attached. Inside the trailer was a tiny bathroom with toilet, a propane cook top, a six-cubic-foot under-the-counter fridge, a hot-water heater, a miniscule bedroom and an air conditioner. Quarry had gotten the trailer in a barter exchange off a produce wholesaler short of cash one harvest season. He'd run an underground power line to it from a junction box cabled to the big hay barn, so it had electricity.

Under the awning sat three men, all members of the Koasati Indian tribe. Quarry was well versed in the history of Native Americans in Alabama. The Koasatis had inhabited parts of northern Alabama for centuries with the Muskogee, Creek, and Cherokee to the east and the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes to the west. After the Great Indian Removal during the 1800s most Native Americans were expelled from Alabama and forcibly moved to reservations in Oklahoma and Texas. Nearly all who spoke the Koasati language now lived in Louisiana, but some had managed to return to the Yellowhammer state.

One of the Koasatis had come here years ago, long after Quarry had inherited Atlee from his father and he'd been here ever since. Quarry had even given him the little trailer as his home. The other two had been here for about six months. Quarry wasn't sure if they were going to stay or not. He liked them. And they seemed to tolerate him. As a rule they did not trust white men, but they let him visit and share their company. It was technically his land after all, though the Koasatis had owned it long before there were any Quarries or any other whites in Alabama.

He sat down on a cinderblock chair with an inch-thick rubber mat over it and shared a beer and some rolled cigarettes, and swapped stories with them. The one whom Quarry had given the trailer to was known as Fred. Fred was older than Quarry by at least a decade or so, small and stooped, with straight white hair and a face right out of a Remington sculpture. He spoke the most of the group, and drank the most too. He was an educated man, but Quarry knew little of his personal background.

Quarry conversed with them in their own language, at least as best he could. His Koasati-speaking skills were limited. They would accommodate him by talking in English, but only with him. He couldn't blame them. The white men had basically crapped all over the only race that could call itself indigenous in America. He kept this sentiment to himself, though, because they didn't like pity. They might kill a man over pity.

Fred cherished telling the story of how the Koasati had gotten their name. "It means lost tribe. Our people left here in two groups long ago. The first group left signs for the second group to follow. But along the Mississippi River, all signs from the first group disappeared. The second group continued on and met up with folks who didn't speak our language. Our people told them that they were lost. And I

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