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SANDRA  
BROWN

A NOVEL

DEADLINE



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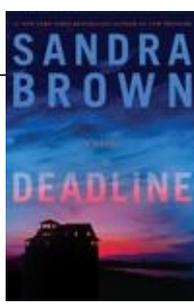
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BROWN

**DEADLINE**



GRAND CENTRAL  
PUBLISHING

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[Begin Reading](#)  
[Table of Contents](#)  
[Newsletters](#)  
[Copyright Page](#)

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## Prologue

Golden Branch, Oregon—1976

The first hail of bullets was fired from the house shortly after daybreak at six fifty-seven.

The gunfire erupted in response to the surrender demand issued by a team of law enforcement agents.

It was a gloomy morning. The sky was heavily overcast and there was dense fog. Despite the limited visibility, one of the fugitives inside the house got off a lucky shot that took out a deputy U.S. marshal whom everybody called Turk.

Gary Headly had met the marshal only the day before, shortly after the law enforcement team comprising ATF and FBI agents, sheriff's deputies, and US marshals met for the first time to discuss the operation. They'd been congregated around a map of the area known as Golden Branch, reviewing the obstacles they might encounter. Headly remembered another marshal saying, "Hey, Turk, grab me some Coke while you're over there, will ya?"

Headly didn't learn Turk's actual name until later, much later, when they were mopping up. The bullet struck half an inch above his Kevlar vest, tearing out most of his throat. He dropped without uttering a sound, dead before landing in the pile of wet leaves at his feet. There was nothing Headly could do for him except offer up a brief prayer and remain behind cover. To move was to invite death or injury, because once the gunfire started, the open windows of the house spat bullets relentlessly.

The Rangers of Righteousness had an inexhaustible arsenal. Or so it seemed that wet and dreary morning. The second casualty was a red-headed, twenty-four-year-old deputy sheriff. A puff of his breath in the cold air gave away his position. Six shots were fired. Five found the target. Any one of three would have killed him.

The team had planned to take the group by surprise, serve their arrest warrants for a long list of felonies, and take them into custody, engaging in a firefight only if necessary. But the vehemence with which they were fired upon indicated that the criminals had taken a fight-to-the-death stance.

After all, they had nothing to lose except their lives. Capture meant imprisonment for life or the death penalty for each of the seven members of the domestic-terrorist group. Collectively the six men and one woman had chalked up twelve murders and millions of dollars' worth of destruction, most of it inflicted on federal government buildings or military installations. Despite the religious overtone of their name, they weren't faith-based fanatics but rather wholly without conscience or constraint. Over the relatively short period of two years, they had made themselves notorious, a scourge to law enforcement agencies at every level.

Other such groups imitated the Rangers, but none had achieved their level of effectiveness. In the criminal community, they were revered for their audacity and unmatched violence. To many who harbored antigovernment sentiments, they had become folk heroes. They were sheltered and provided with weapons and ammunition, as well as with leaked, classified information. This underground

support allowed them to strike hard and fast and then to disappear and remain well hidden while they planned their next assault. In communiqués sent to newspapers and television networks, they'd vowed never to be taken alive.

It had been a stroke of sheer luck that had brought the law down on them in Golden Branch.

One of their arms suppliers, who was well known to the authorities for his criminal history, had been placed under surveillance for suspicion of an arms deal unrelated to the Rangers of Righteousness. He had made three trips to the abandoned house in Golden Branch over the course of that many weeks. A telephoto lens had caught him talking to a man later identified as Carl Wingert, leader of the Rangers.

When this was reported to the FBI, ATF, and US Marshals Service, the agencies immediately sent personnel, who continued to monitor the illegal weapons dealer. Upon his return from a visit to Golden Branch, he was arrested.

It took three days of persuasion, but under advice of counsel he made a deal with the authorities and gave up what he knew about the people holed up inside the abandoned house. He'd only met with Carl Wingert. He couldn't—or wouldn't—say who else was sequestered with Wingert or how long they planned to harbor there.

Fearing that if they didn't move swiftly, they'd miss their opportunity to capture one of the FBI's Most Wanted, the federal agents enlisted help from the local authorities, who also had outstanding warrants for members of the group. The team was assembled and the operation planned.

But it became immediately obvious to each member of the team that Wingert's band had meant what they'd said about choosing death over capture. The Rangers of Righteousness wanted to secure their place in history. There would be no laying down of arms, no hands raised in peaceful surrender.

The lawmen were pinned down behind trees or vehicles, and all were vulnerable. Even a flicker of motion drew gunfire, and members of the Rangers had proven themselves to be excellent shots.

The resident agent in charge, Emerson, radioed the operations post, requesting that a helicopter be sent to provide them air cover, but that idea was nixed because of the inclement weather.

Special Ops teams from local, state, and federal agencies were mobilized, but they would be driving to Golden Branch, and the roads weren't ideal even in good weather. The team were told to stand back and to fire only in self-defense, while men in safe, warm offices debated changing the rules of engagement to include using deadly force.

"They're playing pattycake because one of them is a woman," Emerson grouched to Headly. "And God forbid we violate these killers' civil rights. Nobody admires or respects us, you know."

Headly, the rookie of the team, wisely held his own counsel.

"We're feds, and even before Watergate, *government* had become a dirty word. The whole damn country is going to hell in a handbasket, and we're out here freezing our balls off, waiting for some bureaucrat to tell us it's okay to blast these murdering thugs to hell and back."

Emerson had a military background and a decidedly hawkish viewpoint, but nobody, especially not he, wanted a bloodbath that morning.

Nobody got what they wanted.

While the reinforcements were still en route, the Rangers amped up their firepower. An ATF agent took a bullet in the thigh, and, from the way it was bleeding, it was feared his femoral artery had suffered damage, the extent of which was unknown, but on any scale it was a life-threatening wound.

Emerson reported this with a spate of obscenities about their being picked off one by effing or unless...

He was given the authorization to engage. With their assault rifles and one submachine gun—in the

hands of the wounded ATF agent—they went on the offensive. The barrage lasted for seven minutes.

Return fire from the house decreased, then became sporadic. Emerson ordered a cease-fire. They waited.

Suddenly, bleeding from several wounds including a head wound, a man charged through the front door, screaming invectives and spraying rounds from his own submachine gun. It was a suicidal move and he knew it. His reason for doing it would soon become apparent.

When the agents ceased firing, and their ears stopped ringing, they realized that the house had fallen eerily silent except for a loose shutter that clapped against an exterior wall whenever the wind caught it.

After a tense sixty seconds, Emerson said, "I'm going in." He levered himself up into a crouch as he replaced his spent clip magazine with a fresh one.

Headly did the same. "I'm with you."

Other team members stayed in place. After checking to see that their guns were loaded with fresh magazines, Emerson crept from behind his cover and began running toward the house. Headly, with his heart tightly lodged in his throat, followed.

They ran past the body sprawled on the wet earth, took the steps up to the sagging porch, then stood on either side of the gaping doorway, weapons raised. They waited, listening. Hearing nothing, Emerson hitched his head and Headly barged in.

Bodies. Blood on every surface, the stench of it strong. Nothing was moving.

"Clear," he shouted and stepped over a body on his way into an adjacent room, a bedroom with only a ratty mattress on the floor. In the center of it, the ticking was still wet with a nasty stain.

In less than sixty seconds from the time Headly had breached the door, they confirmed that five people were dead. Four bodies were found inside the house. The fifth was the man who'd died in the yard. They were visually identified as known members of the Rangers of Righteousness.

Conspicuously missing from the body count were Carl Wingert and his lover, Flora Stimel, the only woman of the group. There was no sign of the two of them except for a trail of blood leading away from the back of the house into the dense woods, where tire tracks were found in the undergrowth. They had managed to escape, probably because their mortally wounded confederate had sacrificed himself, taking fire at the front of the house while they sneaked out the back.

Emergency and official vehicles quickly converged on the area. With them came the inevitable news vans, which were halted a mile away at the turnoff from the main road. The house and the area immediately surrounding it were sealed off so evidence could be collected, photos and measurements taken, and diagrams drawn before the bodies were removed.

Those involved realized that a thorough investigation of the incident would follow. Every action they'd taken would have to be explained and justified, not only to their superiors but also to a cynical and judgmental public.

Soon the derelict house was filled with people, each doing a specialized job. Headly found himself back in the bedroom, standing beside the coroner, who was sniffing at the stain on the soiled mattress. To Headly, it appeared that someone had peed in addition to bleeding profusely. "Urine?"

The coroner shook his head. "I believe it's amniotic fluid."

Headly thought surely he'd misheard him. "Amniotic fluid? Are you saying that Floral Stimel—" "Gave birth."

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## Chapter 1

Present day

What's with the hair?"

"That's how you greet a man returning from war? Nice to see you, too, Harriet."

Dawson Scott resented her summons—no other word for it—and made his resentment plain as he took a seat, then sank down into a bona fide slouch. He propped one ankle on the opposite knee, clasped his hands over his concave stomach, and yawned, knowing full well that his attitude would crawl all over her.

It did.

She removed her jeweled reading glasses and dropped them onto the desk. Its polished surface symbolized her new status as "boss." His boss.

"I've seen soldiers who just returned from Afghanistan. None looked like something a cat threw up." She gave him a scathing once-over, taking in his three-day scruff and long hair, which, since his time out of the country, had grown well past his collar.

He placed his hand over his heart. "Ouch. And here I was about to tell you how good you look. You're carrying those extra ten pounds really well."

She glowered but didn't say anything.

Twiddling his thumbs, literally, he took a long, slow survey of the corner office, his gaze pausing to appreciate the panoramic view through the wide windows. By craning his neck just a bit, he could see the Old Glory hanging limp atop the capitol dome. Coming back to her, he remarked, "Nice office."

"Thank you."

"Who'd you blow?"

Under her breath, she cursed him. He'd heard her say those words out loud. He'd heard her shout them down the length of the conference table during editorial meetings when someone disagreed with her. Apparently with her new position came a certain restraint, which he immediately made his personal goal to crack.

"You just can't stand it, can you?" she said, gloating smile in place. "Deal with it, Dawson. I'm above you now."

He shuddered. "God spare me an image of that."

Her eyes shot daggers, but she obviously had a speech prepared, and even his insulting wisecracks weren't going to rob her of the pleasure of delivering it. "I have editorial control now. Full editorial control. Which means that I have the authority to approve, amend, or decline any story ideas you submit. I also have the authority to assign you stories if you don't come up with your own. Which you haven't. Not for the two weeks since you've been back in the States."

"I've been using up accumulated vacation days. The time off was approved."

"By my predecessor."

“Before you took his place.”

“I didn’t *take* anything,” she said tightly. “I earned this position.”

Dawson raised one shoulder. “Whatever, Harriet.”

But his indifference was phony. The recent corporate shakeup had measured a ten on the Richter scale of his professional future. He’d received an e-mail from a colleague before the official blank notification went out to all *NewsFront* employees, and even the distance between Washington and Kabul hadn’t been enough to buffer the bad news. A corporate asshole, somebody’s nephew, who knew slim to none about news-magazine publishing, or news in general for that matter, had named Harriet Plummer as editor-in-chief, effective immediately.

She was a disastrous choice for the position, first because she was more corporate animal than journalist. On any given tough editorial call, her top priority would be to protect the magazine against possible lawsuits. Stories addressing controversial topics would be watered down or canned altogether. Which, in Dawson’s opinion, amounted to editorial castration.

Secondly, she was a card-carrying ball breaker who had no leadership qualities. She harbored scornful dislike for people in general, an even stronger antipathy toward the male of the species, and big-time loathing for Dawson Scott in particular. As humbly as possible, he recognized that her animosity was largely based on jealousy of his talent and the respect it had earned him among his colleagues at *NewsFront* and beyond.

But on the day she was appointed editor-in-chief, the source of her hostility had ceased to matter. It was there, it was robust, it was enduring, and she was now in charge. That sucked. Nothing could be worse.

Or so he’d thought.

She said, “I’m sending you to Idaho.”

“What for?”

“Blind balloonists.”

“Excuse me?”

She pushed a file folder across the desk toward him. “Our researchers have done the heavy lifting for you. You can acquaint yourself with the program on the flight out there.”

“Give me a hint.”

“Some group of do-gooders started taking blind people up in hot-air balloons and showing them the ropes. So to speak.”

The cheeky add-on didn’t get a smile out of Dawson, who kept his expression impassive. Leaving the folder where it lay, he asked, “And this is hard news?”

She smiled sweetly. Or tried. On her face, coyness didn’t quite work. “To the blind balloonists, it is.”

Her smugness made him want to vault the desk and wrap both hands around her neck. Instead, he mentally counted to ten and looked away from her, toward the windows. Four stories below, the broad avenues of Washington, DC, baked under a midday sun.

“Despite your belittling description of the program,” he said, “I’m sure it’s worthy of national notice.”

“Yet I sense a marked lack of enthusiasm on your part.”

“It’s not my kind of story.”

“You’re not up to it?”

An invisible gauntlet landed on her desk alongside the untouched file. “I come up with my own stories, Harriet. You know that.”

“So come up with one.” She folded her arms over her wide bosom. “Let me see that reputed genius of yours at work. I want to witness in action the writer everyone knows and loves, who’s hailed for always taking a fresh approach, who writes with rare insight, who lays bare for his readers the soul of the story.” She gave it a count of five. “Well?”

With as much equanimity as possible, he unclenched his teeth and said, “I still have vacation days. At least a week’s worth.”

“You’ve had two weeks off already.”

“Not long enough.”

“Why’s that?”

“I just returned from a war zone.”

“No one forced you to stay over there. You could have come home at any time.”

“There were too many good stories to tell.”

“Whom do you think you’re kidding?” she scoffed. “You wanted to dress up and play soldier, and you did. For three quarters of a year. On the magazine’s nickel. If you hadn’t come home on your own when you did, I, as incoming editor-in-chief, was going to haul your ass back.”

“Careful, Harriet. Along with your dark roots, your envy is showing.”

“Envy?”

“Nothing you wrote was ever short-listed for a Pulitzer.”

“But you’ve yet to be nominated for one, ergo you’ve never been awarded one, so big fucking deal about those rumors, which you probably started yourself. Now, I’ve got other things to do that are much more important.” She arched a penciled eyebrow. “That is, unless you want to turn in your keys to the men’s restroom here and now, in which case I’m more than happy to call Bookkeeping and request your severance check.”

She paused for several seconds, and when he didn’t move, she continued. “No? Then your butt is on seat eighteen-A on a flight to Boise tomorrow morning.” She slapped an airline ticket on top of the research folder. “Regional jet.”

\* \* \*

Dawson pulled to the curb in front of the neat Georgetown townhouse and cut his car’s engine. Raising his hips, he fished a small bottle of pills from the pocket of his jeans, shook out a tablet, and swallowed it with a gulp from the bottle of water in the console cup holder. After recapping the pill bottle and returning it to his pocket, he flipped down the sun visor and checked his reflection in the mirror.

He did look like something a cat threw up. A very sick cat.

But there was nothing to be done about it. He’d been sorting through all the mail that had piled up on his desk, when he got Headly’s text: *Get over here. Now.* Headly wasn’t that imperative unless something was up.

Dawson had left the remainder of his mail unopened, and here he was.

He got out and made his way up the flower-lined brick walk. Eva Headly answered the doorbell. “Hello, gorgeous.” He reached across the threshold and pulled her into a hug.

A former Miss North Carolina, Eva Headly had aged admirably well. Now in her early sixties, she retained not only her beauty and shapeliness but also her dry wit and natural charm. She hugged him back, hard, then squirmed out of the embrace and slapped him none too gently on the shoulder.

“Don’t ‘gorgeous’ me,” she said, rounding off the *r* to sound soft. “I’m mad at you. It’s been two weeks since you got back. Why are you just now getting around to seeing us?” Her expression was

laced with concern as she took him in from head to toe. "You're as thin as a rail. Didn't they feed you over there?"

"Nothing like your Brunswick stew. And they've never heard of banana pudding."

She motioned him into the foyer, saying, "That's what I missed most while you were gone."

"What?" he asked.

"Your b.s."

He grinned, cupped her face between his hands, and kissed her on the forehead. "I missed you, too. Then he released her and tilted his head in the direction of the den. Lowering his voice, he asked, "he getting used to the idea yet?"

She matched his confidential tone. "Not even close. He's been—"

"I can hear the two of you whispering, you know. I'm not deaf." The gruff shout came from the den.

Eva mouthed, "Be afraid."

Dawson winked at her, then walked down the hallway in the direction of the den, where Gar Headly was waiting for him. When Dawson stepped into the familiar room, he felt an achy tug of nostalgia. Countless memories had been made here. He'd raced his Matchbox cars on the parquet floor, his mother warning him not to leave them for someone to trip over. His dad and Headly had patiently taught him how to play chess with the set on the table in the corner. Sitting with him on the sofa, Eva had coached him on how to win the attention of his sixth-grade crush. For the first time since leaving Afghanistan, he felt like he'd arrived home.

The Headlys were his godparents and had forged a bond with him on the day he was christened. They'd taken to heart their pledge to assume guardianship of their best friends' son should the need ever arise. When his mom and dad were killed together in an auto accident while he was in college, even though he was legally an adult, his relationship with the Headlys had taken on even greater significance.

Headly was wearing a parental scowl of disapproval as he took in Dawson's appearance. He was considerably shorter than Dawson's six feet four inches, but he exuded confidence and authority. He still had all his hair, which was barely threaded with strands of gray. A daily three-mile run and Eva's careful supervision of his diet had kept him trim. Most sixty-five-year-old men would covet the figure he cut.

He said, "By the looks of you, it was a tough war."

"You could say," Dawson replied. "I just had a skirmish with Harriet and barely survived it."

As Dawson took the offered seat, Headly said, "I was referring to Afghanistan."

"It was tough, yeah, but Harriet makes the Taliban look like pranksters."

"How about a drink?"

Dawson covered his slight hesitation by consulting his wristwatch. "It's a little early."

"Five o'clock somewhere. And anyway, this is a special occasion. The prodigal has returned."

Dawson caught the slight rebuke. "Sorry I haven't gotten over here sooner. I've had a lot to catch up on. Still do. But your text had a ring of urgency."

"Did it?" At the built-in bar, Headly poured shots of bourbon into two glasses. He handed one of them to Dawson, then sat down facing him. He raised his glass in a toast before sipping from it. "I'm drinking more these days."

"It's good for you."

"Stress reliever?"

"So they say."

"Maybe," Headly mumbled. "At least it gives me something to look forward to each day."

“You’ve got plenty to look forward to.”

“Yeah. Old age and dying.”

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“Better not let Eva hear you talking like that.”

Headly grumbled something unintelligible into his tumbler as he took another sip.

Dawson said, “Don’t be so negative. Give yourself time to adjust. It’s been less than a month.”

“Twenty-five days.”

“And counting, obviously.” Dawson sipped the liquor. He wanted to chug it.

“Hard to come to a dead stop after being in the Bureau all of my adult life.”

Nodding sympathetically, Dawson felt the warmth of the bourbon curling through his gut, settling his nerves, which the pill hadn’t yet had time to do. “Your retirement doesn’t become official until when?”

“Four more weeks.”

“You had that much vacation time saved up?”

“Yep. And I’d have just as soon sacrificed it and stayed on the job for as long as possible.”

“Use this time as a period of adjustment between your demanding career and a life of leisure.”

“Leisure,” he said morosely. “Soon as my retirement is official, Eva’s got us booked on a two-week cruise. Alaska.”

“Sounds nice.”

“I’d rather someone pull out my fingernails with pliers.”

“It won’t be that bad.”

“Easy to say when you don’t have to go. Eva’s ordered me a prescription of Viagra to take along.”

“Hmm. She wants you to make up for all the nights you couldn’t come home?”

“Something like that.”

“What’s the downside? Knock yourself out.” Dawson raised his glass.

Headly acknowledged the toast and, after a moment, asked, “So, how’d it go with Dragon Lady?”

Dawson told him about the meeting and the story Harriet had assigned him.

“Blind balloonists?”

Dawson shrugged.

Headly leaned against the back cushion of his chair and studied him for an uncomfortable length of time.

Irritated by the scrutiny, Dawson said, “What? You got a comment about my hair, too?”

“I’m more concerned about what’s going on inside your head than what’s growing out of it. What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

Headly just looked at him, not having to say anything.

Dawson left his chair and moved to the window, flipping open the shutters and looking out onto the well-manicured patch of lawn. “I talked to Sarah when I passed through London.”

The Headlys’s daughter was older than he, but, while growing up, the two families had spent so much time together that they’d been much like brother and sister, grudgingly caring about each other. She and her husband lived in England, where they worked for an international bank.

“She told us you’d ‘passed through’ without staying long enough to go see them.”

“Flight schedule didn’t allow time.”

Headly harrumphed as if he didn’t accept that as a plausible excuse to forgo a visit. And it wasn’t.

“Begonias are thriving.”

“They’re impatiens.”

“Oh. How’s the—”

“I asked you a question,” Headly said with annoyance. “What’s the problem? And don’t tell me ‘nothing.’”

“I’m fine.”

“Like hell you are. I watched a zombie movie on TV last night. You’d fit right in.”

Dawson sighed over his godfather’s tenacity. He didn’t turn around, but he propped his shoulder against the window frame. “I’m tired is all. Spend nine months in Afghanistan—trust me, it’ll wear you out. Hostile terrain. Temperature extremes. Bugs that bite. No booze. No women except for the service members, and hooking up with one of them is tricky. A good way for both partners to get into some seriously deep shit. Hardly makes getting laid worth the hassle.”

“You’ve had time since you got back to find an obliging lady.”

“Ah, but there’s a problem with that.” He closed the shutters, turned around, and grinned. “You got the last great girl.”

The levity fell flat. The worry line between Headly’s thick eyebrows didn’t relax.

Dropping the pretense, Dawson returned to the chair, spread his knees, and stared at the floor.

Headly asked, “Are you sleeping?”

“It’s getting better.”

“In other words, you’re not.”

Dawson raised his head and said testily, “It’s getting better. It’s not easy jumping back into the thick of things, returning to an ordinary schedule.”

“Okay. I’ll buy that. What else?”

Dawson pushed back his hair. “This Harriet thing. She’s gonna make my life miserable.”

“Only if you let her.”

“She’s sending me to Idaho, for chrissake.”

“What have you got against Idaho?”

“Not a damn thing. Nor do I have anything against the vision-impaired. Or hot-air balloonists. But it’s not my story. It’s not even my *kind* of story. So forgive me if I’m finding it a little hard to work up any enthusiasm for it.”

“Think you could work up some for a better story?”

Headly hadn’t asked that casually. There was substance behind the question. So, in spite of his dejection, Dawson felt a tingle of anticipation. Because Headly hadn’t been only his godfather and a lifelong good friend, he’d also been his invaluable and unnamed source within the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Taking his silence for interest, Headly continued. “Savannah, Georgia, and its environs. Marine Captain Jeremy Wesson, a decorated war veteran, one tour in Iraq, two in Afghanistan. After returning from his last deployment, he retired from the corps, and, by all accounts, went off the rails.

“Fifteen months ago, give or take, he got tangled up in a messy affair with a married woman, one Darlene Strong. Husband Willard caught them, and it didn’t end well for the illicit lovers. Willard Strong goes on trial for murder the day after tomorrow. Chatham County Courthouse. You should be there to cover the trial.”

Dawson was already shaking his head.

“Why not?” Headly asked.

“Summertime in Savannah.”

“Look at your calendar. As of today, it’s September.”

“Still, no thank you. It’s hot down there. Humid. I’d rather go to Idaho. Besides, crime isn’t my

specialty. And frankly, I've had enough of the military for a while. I don't want to write about a dead Marine. I've been doing that for the past nine months.

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"In fact, maybe Harriet's assignment is a blessing in disguise. That feel-good story may be just the tonic I need. Something hopeful. Positive. Uplifting. No severed limbs, or blood-soaked fatigues, flag-draped caskets involved."

"I haven't told you the hook."

Sourly, Dawson asked, "What's the hook?"

"Police obtained Wesson's semen off Darlene's clothing. This, of course, to help make the prosecutor's case against the cuckolded husband, Willard."

"Okay."

"So the RANC in Savannah is a Bureau buddy of mine, former New Yorker, big baseball fan named Cecil Knutz."

"'Rank'?"

"Resident Agent in Charge. Top dog in the resident agency there."

"Okay."

"Anyway, Knutz saw the report from CODIS. Wesson's DNA got a hit, a match."

"He was already in the system?"

"He was. Has been for a while, in fact."

Headly paused to take a sip of his drink. Realizing that was a tactic used to build suspense, Dawson said, "I'm on pins and needles."

He set down his glass and leaned toward Dawson. "Captain Jeremy Wesson's DNA matched the sample which we retrieved off a baby blanket found inside the Golden Branch house."

That wasn't a mere hook. It was a grappling hook that found purchase in the center of Dawson's chest. Dumbfounded, he stared at Headly.

Headly said, "Before you ask, there's no possibility of mistake. The match was ninety-nine-point-nine-and-down-to-the-nth-degree identical. In other words, the recently obtained sample and the one from 1976 came from one and the same individual. We got Flora's DNA that day, too. We know she mothered the child whose DNA was on the baby blanket. And Jeremy Wesson's age fits. Indisputably, he was Flora and Carl's son."

Dawson stood up, paced a few steps, then turned back to Headly. As though reading the myriad questions racing through Dawson's mind, he said, "Judging by your expression, I see that I don't need to spell out the significance of this to you."

Although Gary Headly had enjoyed a distinguished career, to his mind all his accomplishments had been overshadowed by what he perceived as his one failure—to bring Carl Wingert and Flora Stimler to justice. It had plagued his career, and now it was contaminating his retirement.

That was a cruelty that his godfather didn't deserve, and it made Dawson angry. "This Knutz, why would he tip you to this?"

"He knows my interest. Worked with me when I investigated one of their jobs in Tennessee in the late eighties. He's aware of my impending retirement and notified me only as a courtesy to a colleague. He was careful not to divulge too much, but he did tell me that he's been digging into Jeremy Wesson's background looking for a link to Carl and Flora."

Dawson raised his brows in silent query.

"Nothing. Jeremy Wesson's birth certificate—a copy he used to enlist—is from Ohio. Says he was born to and reared by Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So Wesson. He graduated high school in the town where he grew up. Earned a degree at Texas Tech. Joined the Marines. His history looks commonplace until he

wiggled out and got mixed up with a redneck's wife."

"No leanings toward domestic terrorism?"

"None apparent."

"What's Knutz's take?"

"He advised me to leave it alone. The Bureau has bigger fish to fry these days. Nobody really gives a shit about Carl and Flora anymore. The consensus is that they're probably dead. That burglary at the armory in New Mexico was the last crime attributed to them. That was in '96."

"Seventeen years ago. A lot can happen in that amount of time."

"Doesn't mean they're dead."

"But with no indication that they're still alive, it's logical to assume otherwise."

"Logic and assumption be damned. I want to know, don't you?"

"At this late date, what possible difference does it make?"

"It makes a hell of a difference to me!"

Dawson sliced the air with his hands. "Okay. I get that. But this decorated Marine, who might have been their son—"

"He was. I know it."

"No you don't."

"The DNA says he was."

"It isn't foolproof."

"As good as."

"All right, even if he was their kid—"

"Aren't you curious to know what happened to him after Golden Branch, where he's been?"

"Not in the least."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it. What good would digging into it—"

"I thought you'd want to."

"I don't."

"Then do it for me."

"Why? He's *dead*. End of story."

"It could be the biggest story of your career."

"It's certainly the biggest of yours!"

Simultaneously, they realized they'd been shouting. Headly glanced toward the door as though expecting to see his wife there, coming to check on the commotion. Dawson brought his voice down to a more reasonable level. "If you want to know the rest of the story, why don't *you* go to the trial in Savannah?"

"Because Eva would divorce me," he grumbled. "Besides, like I told you, I'm as good as out of the Bureau. If I went meddling down there, I'd look pathetic. Like a hanger-on who doesn't know when his time is up."

Dawson ran his fingers through his hair and released a sigh of agitation. He loved Headly. He knew how badly his godfather wanted closure on the defining incident of his career. But he was asking too much. Dawson was exhausted and disheartened by his experiences overseas. Even on his good days, his nerves felt raw and exposed. The last thing he needed was additional aggravation, like dredging up this unfinished saga. What possible good could come of it? Whether or not Jeremy Wesson was Carl and Flora's child, it didn't make one iota of difference.

Quietly he said, "I'm sorry. Even if there was no Harriet in my life sending me someplace else o

another assignment, I wouldn't go to Savannah. Your pal Knutz is right. Some things should be left alone."

---

Headly gave him a searching look, then his shoulders slumped with acceptance of Dawson's mind being firmly made up. He tossed back the remainder of his drink and said no more about it. Shortly after that, Eva extended Dawson an invitation to stay for dinner. He declined, using as his excuse the need to pack for his trip to Idaho. Keeping eye contact with them to a minimum, he beat a hasty retreat.

He was leaking anxious sweat by the time he got into his car. At the first traffic light, he took another pill, washing it down with the lukewarm water left in the bottle. Rush-hour traffic out of DC into Virginia didn't improve his mood, making him really on edge by the time he let himself into his Alexandria apartment.

He was tugging off his boots when his cell phone chirped, alerting him to a text message. It was from Headly: *There's a clincher.*

He knew he was being baited, but curiosity won out over his better judgment. He texted back: *What's the clincher?*

The reply was quick in coming. *J Wesson only presumed dead. Body never found.*

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## Chapter 2

Mr. Jackson, are you ready to call your next witness?”

The assistant DA stood. “I am, Your Honor. I call Amelia Nolan.”

Like the other spectators, Dawson turned as a bailiff opened the double doors at the back of the courtroom and motioned in the former Mrs. Jeremy Wesson.

Today was the third day of the trial. The first witness this morning had been a veterinarian, a D Somebody—Dawson had his name in his notes for referral if needed—who had droned on forever about the digestive processes of dogs, specifically pit bulls.

It took the better part of two hours for the prosecutor to wade through all the scientific rigmarole and get to the crucial point: bits and pieces of Darlene Strong had been found in the digestive tracts of three of Willard Strong’s pack of illegal fighting dogs, which had been put down in order to search for evidence.

The second person to testify, the county medical examiner, had confirmed that those bits and pieces corresponded with the ones missing from what had been left of the victim’s cadaver, which police had discovered locked inside the dogs’ pen.

Darlene hadn’t been killed by the dogs, but the state was asking for the death penalty, so Lemuel Jackson, a shrewd and meticulous prosecutor with a double-digit number of convictions, had wanted to impress upon the jury how heinous the crime had been. He’d wanted it on the record that her body had been fed to Willard’s dogs, and since the animals were half-starved in order to make them fierce competitors in the fighting rings...

The implication had made many of the jurors go a little green.

Blood samples taken from the ground inside the caged area, as well as a piece of scalp with hair attached found inside one dog’s intestines, suggested that Jeremy Wesson had met the same fate.

By the time the defense attorney, Mike Gleason, had stumbled through an ineffectual cross-examination of the ME, it was almost twelve o’clock. The judge called for a lunch recess until one thirty, although Dawson thought it doubtful that anyone in the courtroom would have much of an appetite. Certainly not one that would require an hour and a half to appease.

But now they were back, and the third witness of the day had been summoned into the courtroom.

For background, Dawson had read news articles about the crime. He supposed he’d glanced at the photographs of the ex Mrs. Wesson that had accompanied some of those write-ups, but he really hadn’t paid attention.

Suddenly he was.

The woman walking up the short center aisle wasn’t at all what he’d expected. He’d seen Flo Stimel’s Wanted posters and had imagined that Jeremy Wesson’s ex-wife would be of a type similar to that of his mother. He’d expected her to be coarse, tough, and hard-looking.

But from her delicate bone structure to the pale right hand she raised to be sworn in, this woman was the polar opposite. She outclassed everyone in the courtroom, Dawson included. Dawson

especially.

She was dressed in an ivory-colored form-fitting skirt, with a blouse of the same color but of soft material, topped by a sapphire-blue jacket. Her auburn hair was pulled into a low ponytail, but not so tightly as to prevent a few loose strands from framing her face. Her only visible jewelry were a pair of diamond stud earrings and a wristwatch. She struck the perfect note for a courtroom appearance, being neither too feminine and fussy nor too structured and severe.

As a journalist, he would have been interested in Jeremy Wesson's ex no matter what. There were a thousand questions he wanted to ask her, if not for his own elucidation, then certainly for Headly's.

But the woman about to testify awakened a different kind of curiosity in him, and he resented it because he didn't need an additional complication, the worst possible one being the loss of his professional objectivity, on which he prided himself.

He cursed Headly again for dragging him into this. He hadn't wanted to come, but knew he had to. After receiving the taunting text from Headly, he'd packed his duffel bag. The following morning, rather than using the ticket to Idaho that had been foisted on him, he'd boarded a flight to Savannah.

While waiting in the rental-car line, he'd called Harriet.

"Are you already in Boise?"

"I took a detour."

He envisioned her seated behind her desk, smoke coming out her ears. "I assigned you a story on Dawson."

"I've got a better one."

"What is it?"

"For now, it's a secret."

"Where is it?"

"I'm hot on its trail."

"Dammit, Dawson!"

"I'll be in touch." And he clicked off before the people around him could hear the obscene invectives being shouted through his phone.

For the time being, he was covering his own expenses, so he'd booked a room in a midpriced downtown hotel. After taking a cold shower, he'd raided the minibar, turned on ESPN, and settled down on the bed with a room-service cheeseburger and his laptop.

He'd searched out websites that contained material pertaining to the crime for which William Strong was being tried. On every level, it was a disturbing case, and by the time Dawson had finished researching it, he'd developed a tightness in his chest that he wanted to attribute to the Tabasco with which he'd doused his cheeseburger. But he knew that wasn't the cause of the constriction.

He asked himself for the hundredth time why he'd let Headly rope him into becoming involved. But when he had stripped away all the plausible explanations for his capitulation, the truth stood alone and it had nothing to do with Headly, but everything to do with himself.

Truth be known, he'd practically dared himself to come, as a kind of therapy.

Since his return from Afghanistan, he'd been unable to shake off the effects of spending almost a year in a war zone. They clung to him like a spiderweb, so fine as to be invisible, yet as tenacious as steel and, so far, impossible to escape.

Of course he was nowhere near as gone as Jeremy Wesson had been. No doubt the captain had suffered from the real thing, PTSD. It had cost him his family and ultimately his life, making him an ideal subject for a timely and relevant article, one certain to induce strong emotions in the reader.

But it was also the subject Dawson wished most to avoid. It cut too close to home.

And then there was the other element that made this story personally involving. Had Jeremy Wesson been Carl Wingert and Flora Stimel's son? Were they or were they not dead? Dawson didn't care. But Headly did, and he felt an obligation to his godfather to take the investigation at least one step further.

So, he'd come. And looking at it from a strictly journalistic standpoint, Jeremy Wesson's life was a treasure trove of material. How could he possibly pass up writing the provocative story of a man who'd entered the world as the offspring of fugitives from justice, had experienced a seeming normal upbringing in the Midwest, had honorably served his country, had returned home from war emotionally and psychologically wrecked, and then had been violently murdered?

It was an American version of a Greek tragedy.

With that in mind on his first night in Savannah, he'd shut down his laptop, washed down a sleeping pill with a slug of Pepto-Bismol to neutralize the Tabasco, and gone to bed. Five minutes later, he got up and took another pill, swallowing it with a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the minibar.

He'd had the nightmare anyway. Twice.

Consequently he was groggy and ill-tempered for the first day of Willard Strong's trial. He'd arrived at the courthouse early—not to claim a front-row seat, but to secure one in the back row near the exit so he could make a speedy and unobtrusive getaway if he felt the need.

As soon as court had adjourned that first day, he'd headed straight for River Street, where he spent the remainder of the evening cruising the bars. Women were available, and sex would provide at least a temporary reprieve from the morbid thoughts that haunted him, but he hadn't acted on any of the invitations, subtle or overt, that he received.

He made friendships that lasted only for as long as a drink or two, limited conversations on impersonal topics, and stretched out the time until the bars closed and he had nothing else to do except return to the hotel room, and to the hard, unforgiving pillow where night sweats and bad dreams awaited.

Up to this moment, he'd been bored with the trial and was trying to devise a graceful way to disengage himself from everything relating to it.

The appearance of Wesson's ex-wife changed that.

\* \* \*

Amelia's left palm felt damp against the Bible on which she swore to tell the whole truth. Then she stepped up into the witness box and took her seat.

Jackson approached her. "Ms. Nolan, thank you for appearing today. Will you please state your name for the court?"

"Amelia Nolan."

"That's your maiden name?"

"Yes. Following my divorce from Jeremy, I reverted to using it."

He smiled. "Nolan is an honorable name in this state."

"Thank you."

He glanced over his shoulder toward the defense table. "Ms. Nolan, do you recognize the defendant?"

For the first time since entering the courtroom, she looked toward Willard Strong. He sat with his shoulders hunched, his eyes peering at her from beneath the ledge of his prominent brow. His hair had been neatly combed. He was dressed in a suit that appeared to be two sizes too small. If she had to use a single word to describe him, it would be *brutish*.

She acknowledged recognition. "Jeremy introduced us."

"When did this initial meeting take place?"

"February twenty-second of 2011."

"You recall the exact date?"

"It was my older son, Hunter's, fourth birthday."

"Can you please tell the court the circumstances of this meeting?"

"Jeremy and I were separated. I had temporary custody of our two sons while our divorce was pending, but I had agreed to let Jeremy attend Hunter's party. When he arrived, Willard and Darlene Strong were with him."

"You hadn't met them before then?"

"No, but I knew their names. Jeremy had talked about them."

"How would you describe them that morning?"

"You mean—"

"The condition of the three when they arrived at your home."

"They were intoxicated."

The defense counsel stood. "Objection."

"I'll rephrase," Jackson said before the judge could rule. "Ms. Nolan, did you get the impression that the three of them had been drinking excessively?"

Gleason was about to object again, when the judge held up her hand. "Ms. Nolan may answer."

Jackson motioned for her to proceed.

"I'd seen Jeremy intoxicated before," she said. "Many times. He wasn't a pleasant and happy drunk. On the contrary. So I'd started watching for the signs. When he arrived for the party, I saw right away that his eyes were bloodshot. His smile was more like a sneer. His attitude was aggressive. The three of them laughed..." She paused, but could think of no other words that would adequately describe them. "They laughed drunkenly and inappropriately."

"What time of day was this?"

"The party was scheduled for noon. They got there shortly before that."

"Did you confront Mr. Wesson about these visible signs of intoxication?"

"Yes."

"Did he offer an explanation?"

"He said they'd come straight from a party of their own, that they'd been celebrating all night."

"'They?' He, Mr. Strong, and Mr. Strong's wife?"

"Objection. Leading the witness."

Jackson acknowledged the judge's ruling in favor of Gleason's objection, but he'd got his point across to the jury. The party referred to had been among the three of them exclusively.

Out the corner of her eye, Amelia saw Willard Strong mutter something to his lawyer. Gleason sternly shook his head as though admonishing him to keep quiet. It made her shudder to surmise what he might have said, but she seriously doubted that it could have been flattering to her.

Jackson continued. "I think the jury will agree that we've established that the defendant, his wife, and your estranged husband showed up drunk to your son's birthday party. Could you please tell the court what happened next?"

She put herself back into that scene, seeing again Jeremy's insolent grin. "I asked Jeremy to leave. Other guests had already arrived. They were in the courtyard at the side of the house. I was embarrassed for Jeremy, for myself."

"How did he respond to your request that he leave?"

“He became belligerent. He said that he had a right to see his son on his birthday, and that I wasn’t going to stop him from doing so.”

---

Gleason came to his feet. “Your Honor, I object. Why is this testimony relevant to this trial?”

“I’m getting to the relevance,” Jackson calmly replied.

“Objection overruled,” the judge said, but she asked Jackson to move it along.

He nodded and turned back to Amelia. “For the sake of time and defense counsel’s limited patience, can you tell us how this confrontation was resolved?”

“I told Jeremy that he wasn’t fit to be around children. Or anyone for that matter. I ordered him to leave. He refused. So I threatened to call the police. I also threatened to get a restraining order preventing him from coming near our sons.”

“What was his reaction to the threat?”

“He cursed at me. Called me names. He said that our sons were his flesh and blood and that nothing would or could keep him from being with them. He caused a terrible scene.”

Friends of Hunter’s from preschool, their parents, Hunter himself had heard Jeremy’s profanity shouting and had come inside to see what it was about. She would never forget the fear in her son’s eyes as he watched his ranting father. Grant, her younger, was only a year and a half old at the time. He began to cry.

Amelia looked down at her cold, damp hands, which she’d subconsciously clasped tightly in her lap. She forced herself to relax them, reminding herself that her sons would never have to fear Jeremy again.

“Ms. Nolan?”

She raised her head and squared her shoulders.

“Ms. Nolan,” Jackson repeated, “what were Willard and Darlene Strong doing while this scene was unfolding?”

She darted a look toward the defense table and felt the full brunt of Strong’s animosity. “Mr. Strong was egging Jeremy on.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“He was saying things like ‘Darlene would never get away with talking to me like that.’”

“Did he indicate that she would suffer physically if she—”

“Your Honor, objection,” Gleason whined. “Prosecution is leading the witness again.”

“Sustained.”

Jackson apologized, rather insincerely Amelia thought. Then he turned back to her. “Do you recall a specific threat made by Mr. Strong toward his wife?”

She closed her eyes for a moment, but when she opened them, she looked directly toward the judge’s box. “Jeremy had taken a grip on my arm. Here.” She placed her hand around her biceps. “He was shaking me. Mr. Strong said, ‘You’re letting her off light. If Darlene threatened me like that, it would be the last thing she ever did.’”

\* \* \*

The statement created a vacuum in the courtroom. It was several moments before the spectators began to breathe again. Feet shifted, clothing rustled as people readjusted themselves in their seats, someone coughed.

Dawson noticed the same was so with the jurors. They had seemed transfixed by Amelia Nolan, at least by her story. Lem Jackson was no fool. He milked the tension by looking each of them in the eye before he walked back to the state’s table and picked up a legal pad, flipping through several

pages as though searching for a note. Dawson doubted he needed the reference. It was a plausible way to kill time while his witness's pertinent statement took root in the minds of the jurors.

Before he could pose another question, Amelia Nolan asked for a glass of water. While she was taking the short break, the judge invited everyone to stand up and stretch. Dawson used the time to send two texts. The first went to Headly.

*Wesson's ex testifying. Very effective. Used the Viagra yet? I want salacious details.*

The second text was sent to a researcher and fact checker who'd been at *NewsFront* since the magazine's first issue was published thirty years ago. She was scrawny, cranky, and always smelled of the cigarettes she claimed she no longer smoked, but Dawson trusted her speed, accuracy, and most of all her discretion. Every Christmas he corrupted her with a five-pound box of chocolate-covered cherries and a case of equally sweet wine.

*Glenda, sweetheart: Amelia of the GA Nolans? Why "honorable"? Facts desired asap, please.*

He used an app to tack on hearts and flowers at the end of the text.

No sooner had he pressed Send than the judge tapped her gavel and instructed everyone who'd stood to be seated. When everyone had resettled, she instructed Jackson to continue with his witness.

The prosecutor was ready. He set his legal tablet on the table and approached the witness box. When he addressed her, his tone was somber. "Ms. Nolan, how did this scene that you described eventually pan out?"

"One of the other parents called nine-one-one."

"The police responded?"

"Two officers arrived in a matter of minutes. But Jeremy and the Strongs had left before they got there."

"They left without further incident?"

"Grant was wailing. Hunter was cowering against one of the fathers there. I think their frightened reactions bothered Jeremy. And he was aware that everyone was witness to his grip on my arm, the shaking. I think he might have felt ashamed. I'm guessing. I don't know. In any case, he let go of me."

"When Mr. Strong told him he ought to do something about me and my 'smart mouth'—that's a quote—Jeremy told him to shut up and to mind his own business. With an expletive. Then he opened the front door and shoved Mr. Strong out onto the porch. Mr. Strong cursed him, and I believe he would have retaliated if—"

"Objection."

"Sustained."

Jackson asked quickly, "Did Mr. Strong retaliate to Mr. Wesson's shove?"

"No. He was too unsteady on his feet. He staggered off the steps and nearly fell down. Jeremy grabbed Mrs. Strong's hand and pulled her behind him through the door. The two men were angry, pushing and shoving each other as they made their way to Jeremy's car parked at the curb. I shut the door and didn't see anything more. When the police arrived, they were gone."

Jackson returned to the table to once again consult his notes, probably unnecessarily. He was letting his witness take a breather and giving the jury time to imagine the scene and the antagonism that obviously had existed between the two so-called friends.

Ms. Nolan took a sip from her glass of water. Even from the back of the room where Dawson sat, he could see that her hand was trembling.

As Jackson walked toward her, he frowned and slid his hands into his pants pockets, looking rueful as though regretting the direction his questioning was about to take. "Ms. Nolan, you had a second encounter with Willard Strong, is that correct?"

“Yes.”

“When was that?”

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“The third of May last year.”

“Again, you remember the exact date.”

“Yes.”

She lowered her head, causing a loose strand of hair to fall against her cheek. Absently she reached up and tucked it behind her ear. Dawson wondered if that was a nervous gesture, specific to the circumstances, or if it was an unconscious habit with her. He would bet the latter.

“Ms. Nolan, why do you remember that date with such clarity?”

When she raised her head to answer Jackson’s question, Dawson realized that he, along with most everyone else in the courtroom, including the accused, was leaning forward in anticipation of her answer.

She cleared her throat delicately. “That was the day Mrs. Strong and Jeremy went missing.”

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## Chapter 3

Jackson asked her to describe that day.

“It started out like any other weekday. I dropped the boys off at their preschool at Saint Thomas Episcopal Church and went to work.”

“You work at the Collier War Museum?”

“I’m a curator. I specialize in the Civil War.”

“It’s a full-time job?”

“Yes, but the museum allows me a lot of flexibility, which, as a single parent, I require.”

“On that day of May third, did anything out of the ordinary happen to alert you to what was coming?”

“Nothing. Not until I got a call from the school. It came shortly after one o’clock in the afternoon. The museum director, George Metcalf, and I were in his office.”

\* \* \*

*“Because, George, it’s crap.”*

*“Humor him, Amelia. Humor me.”*

*“It has no value. Either on the open market or to the museum.”*

*“That may be.”*

*“Not ‘may be.’ Is.”*

*“Okay. It’s little more than a trinket. The Confederate Army handed out hundreds—”*

*“Thousands.”*

*“Thousands of them. But the medal is valuable to Patterson Knox. It came down through his family from his great-great-great-grand something or another, and he’s named after that particular ancestor. I don’t need to remind you—”*

*“But you’re about to.”*

*“—that Patterson Knox contributed over one hundred thousand dollars to us last year. Mrs. Knox —”*

*“On our board of directors. I’m not stupid, George. I get it. It’s just that you and I approach these issues from different directions. As a curator, it’s my job to protect the integrity of the museum.”*

*“That’s my priority, too.”*

*“Yes, but as director you must also pander to people who keep our doors open. It galls me to display junk in order to ensure that a large donor continues donating.”*

*“I hear you. But—”*

*“Never mind. I recognize a dead end when I run into one. I don’t concede defeat, but I acknowledge the futility of further argument, which I believe you had won even before it commenced. However, I had to give it my best shot.”*

*“I would expect nothing less from you. Put Mr. Knox’s medal in a corner somewhere.”*

“With a spotlighted brass plaque extolling his and Mrs. Knox’s generosity?”

“It doesn’t have to be a large one.”

---

\* \* \*

Continuing her testimony, she said, “We’d just concluded our meeting when my cell phone rang. I recognized the school’s number and answered immediately. It was Mrs. Abernathy, the headmistress. She was extremely upset.”

“Why?”

“A man had come to the school, barged his way into her office—”

“Objection. Hearsay.”

Lem Jackson countered. The judge ruled in his favor and Amelia was asked to continue.

“The man demanded to know if Jeremy had been to the school that day. He hadn’t, but Mrs. Abernathy had difficulty convincing him of that. Finally he left, but only after she threatened to call the police.”

Jackson reminded the jury that Mrs. Abernathy earlier had testified to the same, and that she had identified Willard Strong as the irate man. He then asked Amelia if it had been her ex-husband’s habit to visit Hunter and Grant at the school.

“No. To my knowledge he’d never gone there, not even on visitation days. Our divorce had become final. Given the incident at the birthday party, his visits with the boys were supervised. He resented that, bitterly, and hoped to have the restriction revoked. But in the meantime, he was adhering to it.”

“Did this call from the school’s headmistress alarm you, Ms. Nolan?”

“To put it mildly. When she described the man to me, I recognized him as Willard Strong. My knee-jerk reaction was to go immediately to the school. But Mrs. Abernathy assured me that Hunter and Grant were in her office, that they were safe, and that they knew nothing about the incident.

“Nevertheless, I wanted to see them myself and make certain that they were all right. Mrs. Abernathy offered to personally deliver them to me at home. I left the museum immediately to meet her there.”

“Did you talk to anyone?”

“I tried to reach Jeremy. I wanted to know what was going on. But my repeated calls to his cell phone went straight to voice mail. I also tried his workplace. I was told he had called in sick that morning. No one at the construction firm had seen or heard from him since the day before.”

“You went home?”

“That’s right.”

\* \* \*

*In terms of mileage, the museum wasn’t that far from her townhouse, but it seemed to take forever to cover the distance. The streets were familiar, so she could drive them without having to concentrate. But that only allowed her mind to spin wildly with chilling thoughts. Jeremy’s relationship with Willard and Darlene Strong was obviously volatile, and the possibility of it endangering her sons to any extent and on any level was untenable.*

*Would she have to get a restraining order after all? Should she appeal to the family-court judge to deny Jeremy all visitation rights until he got himself sorted out? Perhaps a drastic move like that would wake him up to how self-destructive his behavior had become. Maybe withholding his son would compel him to seek treatment, to get counseling, before he completely ruined his life.*

*Such were her thoughts as she pulled onto Jones Street, which looked absurdly placid. Enormous*

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