

One

LEAVING THE BODY SUBMERGED in the bathtub, Coco entered the enormous walk-in closet wearing black silk panties, elbow-length black gloves, and nothing else. Trained eyes flickered past the casual wear, all fine clothing, to be sure, but not what Coco desired.

Couture gowns. Sleek evening wear. The drama and seductiveness of elegant pieces pulled Coco like a magnet draws iron. Expert eyes and clever gloved fingers examined a mouse-gray, off-the-shoulder dress by Christian Dior and then a white Gucci gown with a plunging back.

Coco thought the designs were brilliant, but the workmanship was not as precise, the execution not as taut, as one would expect for dresses with price tags of ten thousand dollars and up. Even at the high end of luxury, the craft of dressmaking was suffering these days, the old skills all but forgotten. A pity. A shame. An outrage, as Coco's long-departed mother would have said.

Still, both dresses went into a garment bag for future use.

Coco pushed more gowns aside, looking for the one dress that jumped out, the one that stirred deep emotion, the one that made you say, “Ahhh, yes. That’s my dream. My fantasy. That’s who I’ll be tonight!”

A cocktail dress by Elie Saab finally ended the search. Size 6. Perfect. Deep indigo, silk, sleeveless, with a plunging neckline and a diamond cutout in the back, it was spectacularly retro—late fifties, early sixties, right out of wardrobe for *Mad Men*.

Calling Mr. Draper; you may drool now.

Coco giggled, but there was nothing funny about this dress. It was a frock of legend, the kind that could silence all conversation in a three-star Michelin restaurant or a ballroom packed with the rich, the powerful, and the celebrated, the rare type of dress that seemed to have its own gravitational field and was able to draw lust from every male and envy from every woman within a hundred yards.

Coco pulled it off the rack, went to the full-length mirrors at the far end of the walk-in closet, and paused there for a bit of self-appraisal. Tall, lean, with a cover girl’s face and a dancer’s regal stance, Coco noted the oval hazel eyes and the flawless skin. Add to that the barest suggestion of breasts and the slim boyish hips, and if the world weren’t so cruel, this sultry creature would have been the toast of runways from Paris to Milan.

Coco stared for a moment in frustration at the only thing that had blocked a dream life as a glamorous supermodel. Despite the tape strapped beneath the black panties, there was still little doubt that Coco was a man.

Two

CAREFUL NOT TO SMUDGE his makeup, Coco tugged the Elie Saab over his smooth, bald head and feminine shoulders, praying that the flow of the dress would hide any outward evidence of his masculinity.

His prayers were answered. When Coco smoothed the fabric so it clung to his hips and upper thighs, even with the bald head, he was, to all appearances, a stunning woman.

Coco found sheer black thigh-high stockings and slid them on carefully, sensually, before proceeding to the racks of shoes by the mirrors. He stopped counting at two hundred pairs.

What was Lisa, the reincarnation of Imelda Marcos?

He laughed and chose a pair of black stiletto heels by Sergio Rossi. The fit in the closed toe was a bit tight, but a girl had to do what a girl had to do when it came to fashion.

After tightening the gladiator straps and getting his balance, Coco exited the walk-in closet and entered the gigantic master

suite. He ignored the exquisite decor and went straight to a large jewelry box on the vanity.

After rejecting several items, he found a set of Tahitian pearl earrings and a matching necklace from Cartier that complemented but in no way overpowered the dress. As his mother used to say: *Know your focus, then accessorize around it.*

He put the pearls on and picked up the Fendi shopping bag he'd set down by the vanity earlier. He pushed aside tissue paper, ignoring the folded polo shirt, the jeans, and the dock-siders, and drew out an oval box.

Coco removed the lid, revealing a wig. It was more than fifty years old but had been maintained in flawless condition. The hair was lush, human, and not dyed, an ash shade of blond. Every strand retained its natural shine, bounce, and texture.

He sat down at the vanity, reached back into the shopping bag, and found a short strip of rug tape. With scissors from the vanity drawer, he snipped the tape into four pieces, each about an inch long. His teeth tugged off one of the long black gloves.

He stripped off the backing of each piece of tape and dropped the papers into the Fendi bag. Then he fixed the pieces of tape to his scalp, one at the crown, another three inches forward of center, and one above each ear.

After putting the glove back on, Coco removed the wig from the box, looked in the mirror, and eased it onto his head and into position on the tape, just so. He sighed with pleasure.

To Coco's eye, the wig looked every bit as dramatic as it had the first time he'd seen it, decades before. It had been styled by a master in Paris who had parted the hair down the middle, cut the back high, and then tapered the length so the forward locks on both sides were longest. The hair framed Coco's face

in a teardrop that ended just below the jawline and just above the pearl necklace.

Highly pleased with his ensemble, Coco touched up his lip-stick and smiled seductively at the woman staring back at him.

“You are gorgeous tonight, my dear,” he said, delighted. “A work of art.”

With a wink at his reflection, Coco stood up from the vanity and started to sing. “I feel pretty, oh so pretty.”

As he sang, his practiced eye returned to the jewelry box, and he plucked out several promising pieces that featured large emeralds. He put them in the Fendi bag and returned to the closet. There he pushed aside a rack of men’s starched shirts to reveal a safe with a digital keypad.

Coco typed in the code from memory and opened the safe, happy to find ten four-inch stacks of fifty-dollar bills. He loaded them all into the Fendi bag and closed the safe, then he stuffed the bag and its contents into the bottom of the garment bag, zipped it up, and tossed it over his shoulder.

On the way out of the closet, Coco picked up a set of keys. He spotted a geometric, black-and-gold Badgley Mischka Alba clutch purse and snatched it off the shelf. *What luck!*

He put the keys inside.

Out in the suite, he hesitated, then went back into the bathroom, which was the size of a small house, calling, “Lisa, dear, I’m afraid it’s time I go.”

Coco tilted his head toward his left shoulder, gazing in interest and sadness at the brunette woman in the tub. Lisa’s dead turquoise eyes were bugged out, and her collagen-injected lips stretched wide, as if her jaw had been fused open when the plugged-in Bose acoustic radio had hit the bathwater. Amazing

in this day and age—what with sophisticated technology and circuit breakers and all—that home electricity and bathwater still created enough of a jolt to stop a heart.

“I must say, girlfriend, you had much better taste than I ever gave you credit for,” Coco said to the corpse. “When it came right down to it, after a brief inventory of your wardrobe, I see you had the money and you spent it reasonably well. And from the bottom of my heart? You are beautiful even in death. Brava, my dear. Brava.”

He blew her a kiss, turned, and left the room.

Coco moved with purpose through the mansion, padding down the spiral staircase into the foyer. It was late in the day, almost dusk, and the setting Florida sun threw a golden glow through the windows, illuminating an oil painting on the far wall.

Coco thought the artist had rendered Lisa in all her glory, capturing her at the height of her feminine power, elegance, and ripeness. No one could change that. Ever. From this day forth, Lisa would be the woman in the painting, not that lifeless husk upstairs.

He exited through the front doors and stepped out onto a circular driveway. It was late June and insufferably hot inland. But here, so close to the ocean, a breeze blew, making the air quite pleasant.

Coco walked down the drive, past Lisa’s perfectly tended gardens, lush with tropical color and scented with orchids blooming. Wild parrots cackled from their roosts in the palm trees when he pushed a button on the gate and it swung open.

He walked for a block past well-manicured lawns and handsome homes, reveling in the clicking noise the stilettos made on the sidewalk and in the feel of the silk dress swishing against his silk-clad thighs.

A rare old sports car, a dark green Aston Martin DB5 convertible, was parked ahead. The Aston had seen better days and was in need of repair, but Coco still loved the car the way an insecure child will love and worry a favorite blanket until it simply falls apart.

He climbed inside, set the garment bag in the passenger seat, and put the key in the ignition of the roadster. It roared to life. After lowering the convertible top, he put the Aston in gear and pulled out into light evening traffic.

I am beautiful tonight, Coco thought. And it's a spectacular evening in my paradise, Palm Beach. Romance and opportunity lie just ahead. I can feel them coming to me already.

Like my mother always told me, if a girl has fashion, romance, and a little opportunity in her life, nothing else really matters.

Part One

STARKSVILLE

CHAPTER

1

WHEN I SAW THE ROAD sign that said we were ten miles from Starkville, North Carolina, my breath turned shallow, my heartbeat sped up, and an irrationally dark and oppressive feeling came over me.

My wife, Bree, was sitting in the passenger seat of our Ford Explorer and must have noticed. “You okay, Alex?” she asked.

I tried to shrug the sensations off, said, “A great novelist of North Carolina, Thomas Wolfe, wrote that you can’t go home again. I’m just wondering if it’s true.”

“Why can’t we go home again, Dad?” Ali, my soon-to-be-seven-year-old son, asked from the backseat.

“It’s just an expression,” I said. “If you grow up in a small town and then move away to a big city, things are never the same when you go back. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Ali said, and he returned to the game he was playing on his iPad.

My fifteen-year-old daughter, Jannie, who’d been sullen

most of the long drive down from DC, said, “You’ve never been back here, Dad? Not once?”

“Nope,” I replied, glancing in the rearview mirror. “Not in...how long, Nana?”

“Thirty-five years,” said my tiny ninety-something grandmother, Regina Cross. She sat in the backseat between my two kids, straining to look outside. “We’ve kept in touch with the extended family, but things just never worked out to come back down.”

“Until now,” Bree said, and I could feel her gaze on me.

My wife and I are both detectives with the DC Metro Police, and I knew I was being scrutinized by a pro.

Really not wanting to reopen the “discussion” we’d been having the past few days, I said firmly, “The captain ordered us to take time off and get away, and blood *is* thicker than water.”

“We could have gone to the beach.” Bree sighed. “Jamaica again.”

“I like Jamaica,” Ali said.

“Instead, we’re going to the mountains,” I said.

“How long will we have to be here?” Jannie groaned.

“As long as my cousin’s trial lasts,” I said.

“That could be, like, a month!” she cried.

“Probably not,” I said. “But maybe.”

“God, Dad, how am I going to stay in any kind of shape for the fall season?”

My daughter, a gifted track athlete, had become obsessive about her workouts since winning a major race earlier in the summer.

“You’re getting to work out twice a week with an AAU-sanctioned team out of Raleigh,” I said. “They come right to the high school track here to train at altitude. Your coach even said

it would be good for you to run at altitude, so please, no more about your training. We've got it covered."

"How much attitude is Starksville?" Ali asked.

"Altitude," corrected Nana Mama, a former English teacher and high school vice principal. "It means the height of something above the sea."

"We'll be at least two thousand feet above sea level," I said, and then I pointed up the road toward the vague silhouettes of mountains. "Higher up there behind those ridges."

Jannie stayed quiet several moments, then said, "Is Stefan innocent?"

I thought about the charges. Stefan Tate was a gym teacher accused of torturing and killing a thirteen-year-old boy named Rashawn Turnbull. He was also the son of my late mother's sister and—

"Dad?" Ali said. "Is he innocent?"

"Scootchie thinks so," I replied.

"I like Scootchie," Jannie said.

"I do too," I replied, glancing at Bree. "So when she calls, I come."

Naomi "Scootchie" Cross is the daughter of my late brother Aaron. Years ago, when Naomi was in law school at Duke University, she was kidnapped by a murderer and sadist who called himself Casanova. I'd been blessed enough to find and rescue her, and the ordeal forged a bond between us that continues to this day.

We passed a narrow field heavy with corn on our right, and a mature pine plantation on our left.

Deep in my memory, I recognized the place and felt queasy because I knew that at the far end of the cornfield there would be a sign welcoming me back to a town that had torn my heart out, a place I'd spent a lifetime trying to forget.

CHAPTER

2

I REMEMBERED THE SIGN that marked the boundary of my troubled childhood as being wooden, faded, and choked by kudzu. But now the sign was embossed metal, fairly new, and free of strangling weeds.

WELCOME TO STARKSVILLE, NC
POPULATION 21,010

Beyond the sign we passed two long-abandoned, brick-walled factories. Windowless and falling into ruin, the crumbling structures were surrounded by chain-link fences with notices of condemnation hanging off them. In the recesses of my brain, I remembered that shoes had once been produced in the first factory, and bedsheets in the other. I knew that because my mother had worked in the sheet mill when I was a little boy, before she succumbed to cigarettes, booze, drugs, and, ultimately, lung cancer.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw from my grandmother's pinched face that she too was being haunted by memories of my mother, her daughter-in-law, and probably also of her son, my late father. We drove by a seedy strip mall that I didn't remember and then by the shell of a Piggly Wiggly grocery store that I distinctly recalled.

"Whenever my mom gave me a nickel, I'd go in there and buy candy or a Mr. Pibb," I said, gesturing to the store.

"A nickel?" Ali said. "You could buy candy for a nickel?"

"In my day, it was a penny, young man," Nana Mama said.

"What's a Mr. Pibb?" asked Bree, who'd grown up in Chicago.

"A soda," I said. "I think it's carbonated prune juice."

"That's disgusting," Jannie said.

"No, it's actually good," I said. "Kind of like Dr Pepper. My mom liked it. So did my dad. Remember, Nana?"

"How could I forget?" My grandmother sighed.

"Did you notice neither of you ever uses their names?" Bree said.

"Christina and Jason," Nana Mama said quietly, and I glanced in the mirror again, saw how sad she was all of a sudden.

"What were they like?" Ali asked, still looking at his iPad.

For the first time in decades, I felt grief and sadness about the loss of my mom and dad. I didn't say a word.

But my grandmother said, "They were both beautiful, troubled souls, Ali."

"Train coming, Alex," Bree said.

I took my eyes off the rearview and saw lights blinking and safety gates lowering. We slowed to a stop two cars and a panel van from the gates and watched the slow-moving freight cars rumble by.

I flashed on images of myself—eight? nine?—running along these same tracks where they passed through woods near our home. It was a rainy night, and I was very scared for some reason. *Why was that?*

“Look at those guys up on the train!” Ali said, breaking into my thoughts.

There *were* two people up on one of the boxcars, one African American, one Caucasian, both in their late teens, early twenties. As they went through the crossing, they sat down, legs hanging off the front of the container car, as if settling in for a long trip.

“We used to call men who rode the trains like that hoboes,” Nana Mama said.

“Kind of well dressed for hoboes,” Bree said.

As the car the young men were on rolled through the crossing, I saw what Bree was talking about. They wore baseball hats turned backward, sunglasses, headphones, baggy shorts, black T-shirts, and shiny high-top sneakers. They seemed to recognize someone in the car ahead of us, and each of them gave a wave with three fingers held high. An arm came out the driver-side window of that car and returned the salute.

And then they were gone, and the caboose of the train soon after that, heading north. The gates lifted. The lights stopped blinking. We drove on across the tracks. The two cars went right, and I had to slow to let the van take a left at a sign that said CAINE FERTILIZER CO.

“Eeeuw,” Ali said. “What’s that smell?”

I caught it too, said, “Urea.”

“You mean like in pee?” Jannie asked, disgusted.

“Animal pee,” I said. “And probably animal poop too.”

“God, what are we doing here?” she said with a groan.

“Where are we staying?” Ali asked.

“Naomi made the arrangements,” Bree said. “I just pray there’s air-conditioning. It’s gotta be ninety, and if we’re downwind of that smell...”

“It’s eighty,” I said, looking at the dash. “We’re up higher now.”

I drove on by instinct, remembering none of the street names but somehow knowing the way to downtown Starksville as if I’d been there the day before and not three and a half decades ago.

The town center had been laid out in the early 1800s around a rectangular common that now featured a statue of Colonel Francis Stark, a local hero of the Confederacy and the son of the town’s founder and namesake. Starksville should have been a place you’d describe as quaint. Many of the buildings were older, some antebellum, some brick-faced like the factories at the edge of town.

But hard economic times had hit Starksville. For every business open that Thursday—a clothing emporium, a bookstore, a pawnbroker, a gun shop, and two liquor stores—there were two more that stood empty with their front windows soaped over. For Sale signs hung everywhere.

“I can remember when Starksville was not a bad place to live even *with* the Jim Crow laws,” Nana Mama said wistfully.

“What are Crow laws?” Ali asked, scrunching his nose.

“They were laws against people like us,” she said, and then she pointed a bony finger at a defunct pharmacy and soda fountain called Lords. “Right there, I remember there were signs that said ‘No Coloreds Allowed.’”

“Did Dr. King take those down?” my son asked.

“He was responsible, ultimately,” I said. “But to my knowledge, he never actually came to—”

Jannie cried, “Hey, there’s Scootchie!”

CHAPTER

3

MY NIECE WAS ON the sidewalk in front of the county courthouse arguing with an earnest-looking African American man in a well-cut gray suit. Naomi wore a navy blue skirt and blazer and clutched a brown legal-size accordion file to her chest, and she was shaking her head firmly.

I pulled over and parked, said, “She looks busy. Why doesn’t everyone wait here? I’ll get directions to where we’re staying.”

I climbed out into what was, by Washington, DC, standards, a banner summer day. The humidity was surprisingly low and there was a breeze blowing that carried with it the sound of my niece’s voice.

“Matt, are you going to fight every one of my motions?” Naomi demanded.

“Course I am,” he said. “It’s my job, remember?”

“Your job should be to find the truth,” she shot back.

“I think we all know the truth,” he replied, and then he looked over her shoulder at me.

“Naomi?” I called.

She turned and saw me, and her posture relaxed. “Alex!”

Grinning, she trotted over, threw her arms around me, and said quietly, “Thank God you’re here. This town is enough to drive me mad.”

“I came as soon as I could,” I said. “Where’s Stefan?”

“Still in jail,” she said. “Judge’s refusing to set any kind of bail.”

Matt was studying us—or, rather, me—intently.

“Is your friend the DA?” I asked quietly.

“Let me introduce you,” she said, “rattle his chain.”

“Rattle away,” I said.

Naomi walked me over to him, said, “Assistant district attorney Matthew Brady, this is my uncle and Stefan’s cousin Dr. Alex Cross, formerly of the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit and currently a special investigator with the Washington, DC, Metro Police.”

If Brady was impressed, he didn’t show it, and he shook my hand with little enthusiasm. “You’re here why, exactly?”

“My family and I have been through a rough time lately, so we’re on a little R and R to visit my roots and provide my cousin with some moral support,” I said.

“Well.” He sniffed and looked at Naomi. “I think you should be thinking plea bargain if you want to give Mr. Tate moral support.”

Naomi smiled. “You can stick that idea where the sun don’t shine.”

Brady grinned pleasantly and held up his hands, palms out. “Your call, but the way I see it, Naomi, you plead, and your client lives a life behind bars. You go to trial, and he most certainly gets the death penalty.”

“Good-bye,” she said sweetly as she took my arm. “We’ve got to be going.”

“Nice meeting you,” I said.

“Likewise, Dr. Cross,” he said and walked away.

“Kind of a cold fish,” I said when he was out of earshot and we were heading back to my car.

“He’s gotten that way since law school,” she said.

“So you’ve got history?”

“Just old classmates,” Naomi said, then broke into a squeal of delight when Jannie opened the Explorer’s door and climbed out.

In a few moments everyone was out on the sidewalk hugging Naomi, who couldn’t get over how tall and strong Jannie had become and got tears in her eyes when my grandmother kissed her.

“You don’t age, Nana,” Naomi said in wonder. “Is there a painting in an attic somewhere that shows your real age?”

“The Picture of Regina Cross.” Nana Mama chortled.

“It’s just so good to see you all,” Naomi said, and then her face fell slightly. “I just wish it were under different circumstances.”

My wife said, “We’ll figure out the real story, get Stefan released, and have a nice vacation.”

Naomi’s face fell a little further. “That’s easier said than done, Bree. But I know the aunties are waiting for us. Why don’t you follow me?”

“Can I drive with you, Scootchie?” Jannie asked.

“Of course you can,” Naomi said, and she pointed across the street. “I’m the little red Chevy there.”

We left downtown and entered more residential neighborhoods, which were full of sharp contrasts. The houses were ei-

ther run-down or freshly painted. The cars were either brand-new or about to fall apart. And the people we saw on the streets were either shabbily dressed or turned out in the latest urban attire.

We drove onto the old arched bridge that spanned the Stark River Gorge. The granite walls of the gorge were six stories high and flanked the river, which was running fast and churning over huge boulders. Ali spotted kayakers down in the whitewater.

“Can I do that?” he cried.

“Not on your life,” Nana Mama said firmly.

“Why not?”

“Because that gorge is a deadly place,” she said. “There’s all sorts of phantom currents, and there’re shelves and logs under that water. They’ll trap you and never let you out. Growing up, I knew at least five kids who died down there, including my little brother. Their bodies were never found.”

“Really?” Ali said.

“Really,” Nana Mama said.

Naomi kept on straight across the bridge. We bounced back over the railroad tracks into Birney, a very run-down section of town. The vast majority of the bungalows along the streets of Birney were desperately in need of TLC. Kids played in the red-clay front yards. Hounds bayed at our passing. Chickens and goats scattered off the roads. And the adults sitting on the front stoops looked at us suspiciously, as if they were familiar with everyone who came to the starkest part of Starksville and knew we were strangers.

That oppressive sense I’d suffered when I’d seen the sign to town returned. It became almost overpowering when Naomi turned onto Loupe Street, a cracked and potholed road that

ended in a cul-de-sac in front of the only three homes in the neighborhood that seemed well maintained. The three bungalows were identical and the paint looked recent. Each home boasted a low green picket fence around a watered lawn and flowers growing in beds by a screened-in front porch.

I parked behind Naomi and hesitated in my seat when my wife and son got out. Nana Mama wasn't in any hurry either, and I caught the grim expression on her face in the mirror.

"Alex?" Bree said, looking back in the passenger door.

"Coming," I said. I got out and helped my grandmother down.

We went around the car slowly and then stopped, looking at the closest of the bungalows as if it held ghosts, which for us it did.

"You been here before, Dad?" Ali asked.

I let my breath out slow, nodded, and said, "This is the house where Daddy grew up, son."

CHAPTER

4

“**LAND SAKES, IS THAT** you here already, Aunt Regina?” a woman cried before Ali or any other member of my family could say anything.

I took my eyes off the house where I’d lived as a boy and saw an old locomotive of a woman wearing a red floral-print muumuu and bright green beach sandals charging off the porch next door. She had a toothy smile and was shaking her hands overhead as if she were bound for a revival tent and some of that old-time religion.

“Connie Lou?” Nana Mama cried. “Young lady, I believe you’ve lost weight since you came to see me summer before last!”

Connie Lou Parks was my mother’s brother’s widow. Aunt Connie *had* lost weight since we’d last seen her, but she was still built like a linebacker. When she heard my grandmother’s praise, however, her ample body trembled with pleasure, and she wrapped Nana Mama in her arms and kissed her noisily on the cheek.

“My God, Connie,” Nana Mama said. “There’s no need to slobber.”

My aunt thought that was hilarious and kissed her again.

My grandmother got her to stop by asking, “How’d you lose the weight?”

“I went on a cavewoman diet and started walking every day,” Aunt Connie declared proudly, and she laughed again. “Lost forty-seven pounds, and my diabetes numbers are better. Alex Cross, you come here now! Give me some sugar.”

She threw open her arms and bear-hugged me. Then she looked up at me with misted eyes. “Thank you for coming to help Stefan. It means the world to us.”

“Of course. I didn’t think twice about it,” I said.

“Sure you did, and that’s understandable,” she said matter-of-factly, and then she went to embrace Bree and the children, gushing over each of them in turn. Nana Mama always said my aunt Connie had never met a stranger. My grandmother was right. All my memories of her were filled with smiles and infectious laughter.

When the greetings were done, Aunt Connie looked at me and then nodded at the bungalow. “You okay with staying in there? It’s all been redone. You won’t recognize a bit of it.”

Dubious, I said, “Nobody lives here now?”

“My Karen and her family, but they’re down to the Gulf Coast least through the rest of the summer, caring for Pete’s mother, who’s in an awful poor way. I’ve talked to them. They want you to stay if you feel comfortable.”

I glanced at Bree, who I could tell was weighing weeks of hotel costs against a free place to stay, and said, “I’m comfortable with it.”

Aunt Connie smiled and hugged me. “Good; we’ll get you moved in soon as we get you fed. Who’s hungry?”

“I am,” Ali said.

“Hattie’s laying out a spread over to her house,” Connie Lou said. “Let’s get you somewhere you can wash up and we’ll have us a grand time and catch up proper-like.”

My aunt was such a force of nature that Ali, Jannie, and Naomi fell right in behind her when she rumbled off. Bree held out her hand to help Nana Mama and looked at me expectantly.

“I’ll be right along,” I said. “I think I need to go in there alone the first time.”

I could tell my wife didn’t quite understand. Of course, I’d told her very little about my boyhood, because, really, my life began the day Nana Mama took me and my brothers in.

“You do what you have to do,” Bree said.

My grandmother gazed at me evenly, said, “You did nothing to cause any of it. You hear? That was out of your control, Alex Cross.”

Nana Mama used to talk to me like this all the time in the first few years after I went to live with her, teaching me to divorce myself from the self-destruction of others, showing me there could be a better way forward.

“I know, Nana,” I said, and I pushed open the gate.

Walking up to the screened porch, however, I felt as strange and disconnected as I had ever been in my entire life. It was as if I were two people: a man who was a capable detective, a loving husband, and a devoted father who was heading toward a quiet little house in the South, and an unsure and fearful boy of eight trudging toward a home that might be filled with music, love, and joy or, just as easily, screaming, turmoil, and madness.

CHAPTER

5

AUNT CONNIE WAS RIGHT. I didn't recognize the place.

At some point in the past decades, it had been gutted and the configuration of the bungalow totally changed. The porch was the only part I completely recognized. The entryway where we'd leave our shoes was gone. So was a half wall that used to divide the kitchen from the living area, where me and my brothers, Charlie, Blake, and Aaron, used to play and watch television on those occasions when we had one that actually worked.

The new furniture was nice and the flat-screen television large. The kitchen had new cabinets and a new stove, fridge, and dishwasher. There were more windows in there too, and the dim place where we'd eaten our meals at a dreary Formica-top table was now a bright and cheery spot with a built-in breakfast nook.

Standing there, I could almost see my mother on one of her better mornings, dressed in her threadbare robe but glowing like a beauty queen, smoking a filtered Kent cigarette, making

us waffles with sunny-side-up eggs on them, and singing along to Sam Cooke on WAAA 980 AM out of Winston-Salem.

...been a long time coming, but I know a change gonna come...

It was her favorite song, and she had an amazing raspy gospel voice developed in her father's Baptist church. Hearing my mom sing in my head while I stood in the kitchen where she used to sing to us, I choked and then broke down crying.

I never expected it.

I suppose I'd put my mother away for so long in one of those boxes I keep locked in my mind that I thought I was long over the tragedy of her life. But obviously I wasn't. She'd been smart, sensitive, and very funny. She'd been gifted with words and music. She could make up songs right off the top of her head, and on those rare occasions when I witnessed her singing in church, I swear to you, it was as if an angel possessed her.

But there were other times, too many times, when demons took her. She saw her own father commit suicide in front of her when she was twelve and she was emotionally crippled by it her entire short life. She found relief in vodka and heroin, and in the last few years of her life, I rarely remember her stone-cold sober.

I said that demons took her, but really, it was the memories festering in her drug-and-booze-addled mind that created the monster that she sometimes was late at night. From our beds, we'd hear her crying for her dead father, or screaming at him. On those nights, she'd get violent, break things, and curse God and all of us too.

All the children in an addict's family play different roles and have different ways of coping. My brothers retreated into themselves when my mother was using and a danger to us. My job was to stop her from hurting herself and, later, to pick her

up off the floor and put her to bed. In the language of recovery, I played the roles of hero and caregiver.

Standing there, recalling all those times I'd tried to forget, I suddenly saw plainly that my mother had created me in more ways than the physical. From an early age, I'd dealt with chaos and chaotic people, and to survive, I'd had to swallow my fears and force myself to understand and deal with sick minds. Those hard-won skills had inevitably led to my calling in life, to Johns Hopkins for my doctorate in psychology, and then to police work. And for those reasons and others, I realized that despite all the craziness and the loss, I was grateful to my mother and blessed to be her son.

Wiping my tears away, I left the kitchen and went into the hallway that led to the bedrooms. When I was a boy, there were just two in the house, and we had a single sorry excuse for a bathroom. Recently, another bath had been added. The large room where my brothers and I slept had been split in two. There were bunk beds in both of them now.

Staring into my distant past, oblivious to any noises in the house around me, I remembered my father on one of his better evenings, sober and funny, telling me and my brothers about some trip he was going to take us on to hear jazz on Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

Gotta have dreams, boys, he'd always say before he turned out the lights. *Gotta have dreams and you've got to—*

“Freeze!” a man shouted. “Hands up high where we can see them!”

I startled but raised my hands, looking over my shoulder and back down the hall into the kitchen. Two men in civilian clothes with police badges on lanyards around their necks were aiming pistols at me.

CHAPTER

6

“ON YOUR KNEES,” BARKED the taller and younger of the two, a lean, rosy African American in his early thirties.

The other plainclothes cop was Caucasian, fifties, a pasty, pock-faced man with a hank of dyed brown hair and a mopey face.

“What’s going on?” I said, not moving. “Detectives?”

“You are breaking and entering a good friend of mine’s house,” the African American cop said.

“This house belongs to Connie Lou Parks, my aunt, who let me in and who rents it to her daughter, my cousin Karen, and, I would guess, to your friend Pete,” I said. “I used to live here when I was a kid, and by the way, I’m a cop too.”

“Sure you are,” said the older one.

“Can I show you my creds?”

“Careful,” he said.

I reached to push back my jacket, revealing the shoulder holster.

“Gun!” the African American officer shouted, and he and his partner dropped into a combat crouch.

I thought for sure they were going to shoot me if I tried to get my ID, so I eased my hand away, saying, “Of course I’ve got a gun. I am a homicide detective with the Washington, DC, police department. And in fact, I have two guns on me. In addition to the Glock forty, I have a small nine-millimeter Ruger LC9 strapped to my right ankle.”

“Name?” the older cop demanded.

“Alex Cross. You?”

“Detectives Frost and Carmichael. I’m Frost,” he said as he and his partner straightened up. “So here’s what you are going to do, Alex Cross. Strip the jacket, right sleeve first, and toss it here.”

There was no sense in arguing, so I did as he asked and threw my light sports jacket down the hallway.

“Cover me, Carmichael,” the older cop said, and he crouched so his partner could keep me squarely in his field of fire.

They were conducting themselves by the book. They didn’t know me from Adam, and they were handling the situation the way any veteran cop back in DC, including me, would have handled it.

When Frost got to my jacket, I said, “Left breast pocket.”

He squinted at me as he backed up a few feet, still in that crouch, and fished out the folder with my badge and ID.

“Drop your gun, Lou,” Frost said. “He’s who he says he is. Dr. Alex Cross, DC homicide.”

Carmichael hesitated, then lowered his weapon slightly and demanded, “You have a license to carry concealed in the state of North Carolina, Dr. Cross?”

“I have a federal carry license,” I said. “I used to be FBI. It’s in there, behind the ID.”

Frost found it and nodded to his partner.

Carmichael looked irritated, but he holstered his weapon. Frost did the same, then picked up my jacket, dusted it off, and handed it to me, along with my credentials.

“Mind telling us what you’re doing here?” Carmichael asked.

“I’m looking into Stefan Tate’s case. He’s my cousin.”

Carmichael went stony. Frost looked like some bitterness had crawled up the back of his throat.

Frost said, “Starksville may not be the big city, Detective Cross, but we are well-trained professionals. Your cousin Stefan Tate? That sonofabitch is as guilty as they come.”

CHAPTER

7

AS I WALKED ACROSS the cul-de-sac on Loupe Street to the third bungalow, I was mindful of the unmarked police cruiser pulling out behind me, and I wondered about the strength of the case against my young cousin. I'd have to get Naomi to show me the evidence, and—

Aunt Connie's animated voice came through the screen door, followed by the sound of women cackling and men braying over something she'd said. The breeze shifted and carried the mysterious and wonderful odors from the kitchen of my aunt Hattie Parks Tate, my late mother's younger sister. I hadn't smelled those scents in thirty-five years, but they made me flash on boyhood memories: climbing these same front steps, smelling these same smells, and reaching for the screen door, eager to be inside.

This house had been one of my refuges, I thought, remembering how peaceful and orderly it was compared to the routine chaos across the street. Nothing had changed about that,

I decided after peering in through the screen and seeing my family sitting around Hattie's spotless house with plates piled high with her remarkable food, contentment on all their faces.

"Knock, knock," I said as I opened the door and stepped in.

"Dad!" Ali shouted from a wicker couch, waving a bone at me. "You gotta try Aunt Hattie's fried rabbit!"

"And her potato salad," Jannie said, rolling her eyes with pleasure.

Hattie Tate bustled out of her kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron and beaming from ear to ear. "Land sakes, Alex, what took you so long to come see me?"

I hadn't seen my mother's sister in nearly ten years, but Aunt Hattie hadn't aged a day. In her early sixties, she was still slender and tall with a beautiful oval face and wide almond-shaped eyes. I'd forgotten how much she looked like my mom. Long-buried grief swirled through me again.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Hattie," I said. "I..."

"It doesn't matter," she said, tearing up. She rushed over and threw her arms around me. "You've given me hope just being here."

"We'll do everything we can for Stefan," I promised.

Hattie beamed through her tears, said, "I knew you'd come. Stefan knew too."

"How is he?"

Before my aunt could answer, a man in his midseventies shuffled into the room with a walker. He was dressed in slippers, brown sweatpants, and a baggy white T-shirt, and he looked around, puzzled, then became agitated.

"Hattie!" he cried. "There's strangers in the house!"

My aunt was off across the room like a shot, saying soothingly, "It's okay, Cliff. It's just family. Alex's family."

“Alex?” he said.

“It’s me, Uncle Cliff,” I said, going to him. “Alex Cross.”

My uncle stared at me blankly for several moments while Hattie held his elbow, rubbed his back, and said, “Alex, Christina and Jason’s boy. You remember, don’t you?”

Uncle Cliff blinked as if spotting something bright in the deepest recesses of his failing mind. “Nah,” he said. “That Alex just a scared little boy.”

I smiled weakly at him, said, “That boy grew up.”

Uncle Cliff licked his lips, studied me some more, and said, “You tall like her. But you got his face. Where he got to now, your daddy?”

Hattie’s expression tightened painfully. “Jason died a long time ago, Cliff.”

“He did?” Cliff said, his eyes watering.

Hattie rested her face against his arm and said, “Cliff loved your father, Alex. Your father was his best friend, isn’t that right? Cliff?”

“When he die? Jason?”

“Thirty-five years ago,” I said.

My uncle frowned, said, “No, that’s...oh...Christina’s next to Brock, but Jason, he’s...”

My aunt cocked her head. “Cliff?”

Her husband turned puzzled again. “Man, Jason, he liked blues.”

“And jazz,” Nana Mama said.

“He like blues most,” Cliff insisted. “I show you?”

Hattie softened. “You want your guitar, honey?”

“Six-string,” he said, and he shuffled on his own to a chair, acting as if no one else were with him.

Aunt Hattie disappeared and soon came back carrying a