

CHAPTER

1

DEVON MONROE TORE HIS EYES off the two dead bodies in the powder-blue Bentley convertible, top down, idling not twenty yards away, and glanced at his best friend.

“No movement,” Devon said.

“Lights out,” said Lever Ashford, nodding.

“I don’t know, Lever. This is high profile. Know what I mean?”

Lever said, “C’mon, Dev. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime, straight-up gift from God on top of everything else. We slip in. We slide out. See Waffles. No one knows.”

“I’m telling you, damn white folks get hung for less. Now let’s get out of here.”

Lever snarled, “You owe me, brother, or have you forgotten?”

The young men were both sixteen, African-American, and had their dark hoodies up. It was four fifteen in the morning, and they were standing in the shadows cast by the Harrison Charter

High School in Garfield Heights in Southeast Washington, DC. The parking lot behind the school was dead silent except for their whispers.

Devon grimaced, struggled, but finally said, “Just don’t get prints on nothing.”

“Why we got them,” Lever said, smiling as he groped in his back pocket for two pairs of thin surgical gloves.

They put them on, scanned the area, and saw no movement anywhere around the school, not in the parking lot or on the track and football field.

“Forty-five seconds and we’re gone,” Devon said. “I’m serious.”

Lever bumped his fist. “Forty-five.”

They walked right up to the Bentley, Lever at the driver’s door, Devon going around to the other side. He skidded to a halt by the passenger door, feeling not fear but horror. “I don’t know if I can do this, man.”

“Do it! Take what’s rightfully yours, brother!”

CHAPTER

2

DEVON FELT LIKE HE MIGHT puke but took one step, leaned over, and reached into the back seat, not letting his shirt or pants touch the Bentley in any way.

He tried to keep his eyes off the woman sprawled there, half naked and dead. Lever, however, stared right into the eyes of the dead man lying next to her as he slipped his surgical-gloved hand into his tuxedo jacket. He looked at the man's pants around his ankles, sniffed disdainfully.

"Freak bastard," Lever said. "Serves you right, getting shot like this."

On the other side of the Bentley, Devon smelled a coppery odor and it sickened him. *Blood*, he thought, trying not to breathe through his nose as he felt for the woman's hands, found a big-rock ring, and worked it off her finger. The bracelets, two on the

left, one behind the watch on the right, came off quicker than he'd expected.

Devon was about to call it good when he saw the pale glow of the pearl necklace around her neck. He tilted her head forward, found the clasp, slipped it off, and slid it into his pocket.

"Thirty-eight seconds," Lever whispered from the other side of the car. "I'm done. Watch and wallet."

"Right behind you," Devon said. He tugged the pearls from the dead woman's ears and laid her head back on the seat.

"Alley now," Lever said, pivoting.

They heard scuffling in the gravel behind them. They took off at a sprint and dodged through a hole in the fence into a dark alley, where they stopped to look back. Someone was heading toward the car.

They ran the length of the alley, slowed to a walk across Alabama Avenue, then kept on at a faster pace toward Fort Circle Park. Forty minutes later, as the boys were reaching home, they heard sirens begin to wail back at the school.

CHAPTER

3

IT WAS SEVEN THIRTY IN the morning, and I was standing at the bottom of a granite cliff on Old Rag Mountain in Shenandoah National Park, looking dubiously up at the cracks in the wall and the ropes dangling beside them.

“Biggest one yet, Dad!” said my ten-year-old son, Ali, who stood to my right wearing a white rock helmet and a climbing harness over his T-shirt and shorts.

“You think?” his sister said. Jannie, my seventeen-year-old, was kneeling to my left, retying her climbing shoe.

The man beside her, who was going through a knapsack, said, “Definitely. It’s six stories and technically more challenging. And the rappel down’s a screamer.”

“It’s a screamer, Dad!” Ali said.

“No screamers,” I said. “As far as I’m concerned, if you’re screaming, you’re falling, so no screamers.”

“Sorry, Dr. Cross,” the man said, setting the bag down. “It just means you can take bigger leaps before you tighten up on the rack coming down.”

“I’ll be good, Tom, and locked into my rack, thank you,” I said.

Tom Mury grinned and clapped me on the back. “It’s just cool to see someone like you willing to go on rope.”

“Someone like me?” I said.

“Six two? Two twenty-five? Forties?”

“With all the hiking we’ve been doing, I’m two twenty.”

“It’s still impressive to see a guy your size going up.”

“He is at a disadvantage,” Ali said. “So is Jannie.”

“Nope,” my daughter said, standing. “I’m stronger and got longer arms and legs than you do.”

“Helps to be small and crafty if you want to be a human fly,” Ali said.

“Sometimes,” Mury said. “Who’s up first?”

For the past four days, we’d been taking a course with Mury, who was a certified rock-climbing instructor. It was Ali’s idea, of course, the newest of his obsessions, and Jannie had expressed interest in it right away.

To be honest, I had been less enthusiastic, but with Jannie entering her senior year of high school in two months and her college years looming, I was trying to lead a more balanced life, focusing more on my family and less on murder and mayhem. So I agreed to join them.

We’d been bouldering and climbing less sheer rock for the past two days. Though we’d all spent time prior to the course learning the basics in a climbing gym in Northern Virginia, this would be the first time we had climbed an actual cliff.

“I’ll go!” Ali said, stepping forward.

“Sisters first,” Jannie said.

“Dad?”

“She’s up.”

While my son pouted, Jannie went to the rope and watched Mury intently as he linked her to the line with a small mechanical device called a jumar that was already tied to her harness. The jumar would allow the rope to slip through only when Jannie ascended. If she fell off the rock, the device would lock her in place on the rope.

“Just like we talked about yesterday,” Mury said. “We’re not trusting the jumar, are we?”

“I’ll work the Prusik knot, too, and the cow’s-tail all the way up.”

He picked up the other rope and called, “On belay.”

Jannie turned all business, said, “On rope. Climbing.”

CHAPTER

4

WATCHING YOUR CHILD CLIMB A sheer face, even roped in, is an experience somewhere between breathtaking and panic-inducing. At least that's how I felt seeing Jannie boldly ascend the cliff, sure with her hands and feet, using her safety gear exactly the way Mury had taught us.

"Great job!" Mury called when she disappeared over the top.

Ali and I clapped and whistled, and unseen high above us, Jannie let loose a scream of triumph.

"I'm on now!" Ali said.

My son was less sure as he climbed, but every time he stalled and tried to figure out his next move, Mury would shout up some encouragement or instruction. Twenty minutes after he began, Ali disappeared over the top.

"I am the human fly!" I heard him shout.

Mury laughed. "Your kid's a piece of work, Dr. Cross."

“Call me Alex, and he is that.” I chuckled. “He never ceases to amaze me.”

“Ready, Alex?”

My stomach did a little flip-flop, I’ll admit it. Heights aren’t my thing, but once I commit to something, I commit.

“As I’ll ever be,” I said, going to the rope.

Mury helped rig me. As I climbed, I’d work the jumar on the main line and the Prusik knot on the rope beside it. Like the mechanical device, the knot allowed a rope to pass through only in one direction. Any weight on the safety rope attached to my harness, and the knot would cause it to cinch tight. In the unlikely failure of the jumar, the Prusik would save me a long and potentially fatal fall.

“Enjoy yourself, Doc,” Mury said. “On belay!”

“On rope!” I called back. “Climbing.”

I made it to the top, and I wish I could say it was through a series of well-calculated and smoothly executed moves, but it wasn’t. My climb was tentative and clunky, and I was immediately aware that my hip and shoulder joints weren’t as loose as they needed to be.

“You’re killing it,” Mury called to me when I’d gotten up twenty feet.

“Doesn’t feel like it.”

“What do you need?”

“How about a crash course in yoga?” I said, sweat pouring off me.

“Look for hand- and footholds in your range of motion,” he said. “Remember, not everyone climbs the exact same route. This is about you adapting to the wall.”

“C’mon, Dad!” Ali called.

“You got this!” Jannie cried.

I looked up to see them still some three stories above me, peering over the edge of the cliff. They had such joyous grins on their faces that I was inspired to keep climbing, slow and steady, trying to do everything by the book.

At forty feet, I said, “My hands are cramping. Gimme a second to rest.”

“Use your cow’s-tail,” Mury said. “Tie into that wall nut on your right.”

I reached around, grabbed the short rope with a carabiner dangling off my right hip, and clipped it to the loop of steel linked to a block of steel jammed into a crack in the cliff. Now supported by three lines, I could relax a minute and stretch my fingers and knead my palms.

“How’s the view?” Mury said.

I looked over my shoulder at the lower flanks of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a perfect sea of midsummer green shimmering in the morning light behind and below me. It was kind of thrilling, I decided, to be dangling off the side of a cliff for no reason, enjoying the beauty of nature. I smiled, looked down, and said, “Okay, I’m starting to get the attraction of this.”

Our instructor threw me a thumbs-up, said, “I told you—it’s an acquired taste and then an addiction.”

I doubted the latter would be the case, but I enjoyed the rest of the climb, finding myself thinking more about the mechanics of it than the dangers. A half an hour after I left the ground, Mury’s assistant, Carley Jo Warner, helped me up over the edge.

“Well done,” she said.

“I almost dislocated my hip a few times, but thanks,” I said, gasping. I sat still as she disconnected me from the ropes.

When she was done, I lay down on my back with a silly grin on my face.

“Wasn’t that great?” Ali said, giving me a high five.

“Not at first,” I said. “But yes, eventually it was fun.”

“I can take you to a yoga class, Dad,” Jannie said.

“I’m not exactly built to be a human pretzel, but I’ll think about it.”

Before either of them could reply, my cell phone rang, which surprised me, as we’d had no service at the bottom of the cliff.

I got it out of my shirt pocket and saw my wife, Bree Stone, was calling from her DC Metro Police phone. Bree was chief of detectives and had been under a lot of stress lately.

There’d been a string of unsolved rapes and murders in the DC area, and in just the past week, in two separate incidents, two vocal and well-connected lobbyists had been shot at in Georgetown. To make it worse, there was a new commissioner of police, and everyone’s job, including Bree’s, was on the line.

I got to my feet and answered on the third ring. “Human fly here.”

Bree said, “We’ve got a double homicide, and I want you involved.”

“Why?”

“You know both victims,” she said, and she gave me their names and location.

I felt my stomach lurch and my knees wobble in disbelief and grief. In my mind, I saw them both as I’d last seen them, felt their loss like a blow to the head.

“I’m sorry, Alex.”

“Thanks. I’ll use the bubble and be there in two hours, tops.”

“I won’t be there. Another meeting with the commissioner.”

“Hang tough. You’re still the woman for the job.”

“We’ll see,” she said, and she hung up.

I looked at my kids. “Sorry, guys.”

“It’s okay,” Jannie said. “We’ve had three and a half days and lots of fun.” Ali nodded, and somehow their understanding made me feel even worse about cutting our time short.

“We will be back,” I promised, then I looked at Mury, who’d just reached the top. “Can you teach us how to do screaming rappels? We have to go.”

“Screamers.” Mury smiled. “I can do that.”

CHAPTER

5

THE FEELING OF LEANING AWAY from the cliff, pushing off the rock face, releasing my grip on the rappelling rack, falling a good fifteen feet before my boots hit the wall, then starting the whole process over again was still with me when I got out of my car and headed up the block toward the police lines.

It was July in DC, but it was strangely cool, low seventies, low humidity, with a brisk breeze. The school came into view, shut and empty for the summer. Jannie went to Harrison, and when I saw the circus of media satellite trucks around the school grounds, it made the scene that much more upsetting.

I skirted the trucks and pushed my way through the onlookers, hearing but trying to ignore the vicious gossip and speculation already spreading about the victims and the heinous crime.

In the past I had been both an FBI agent and a DC Metro Homicide detective, and now I was a consultant for both

agencies. I showed my identification to the uniformed officer restricting entry to the crime scene, and he let me duck under the tape.

I made it fifteen yards before an FBI agent asked me for my ID. I gave him my FBI contractor's badge, and he waved me through. John Sampson, my best friend and former partner at DC Homicide, came around the corner.

"FBI?" I said.

"Given the victims, not surprising."

"Right, but who's in charge?"

"Mahoney. He wants you to look at the bodies before they're moved."

"How bad?"

"They weren't shot in the face. You'll recognize both."

We walked around to the lot in the rear of the school, and I saw an FBI forensics van and a DC medical examiner's vehicle parked by the football field and track where my daughter had run some of her finest races. There were at least twenty agents prowling the lot, looking for any and all evidence. I could see a team of them on the field.

"Who found them?" I asked.

"School security guard," he said, gesturing toward dumpsters with yellow police tape around them. "They're out back."

I said, "Time of death?"

"ME says four a.m."

We went over to the dumpsters to find the familiar powder-blue Bentley convertible cordoned off by more police tape, and agents, criminologists, and police detectives milling around the area.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Ned Mahoney, my old partner at the Bureau, separated himself from the pack, came over, and

shook my hand. “We’ve been waiting on you, Alex. It’s been photographed but not scoured by forensics yet.”

“Okay,” I said. “Can I get some breathing room?”

Mahoney clapped and yelled, “All right, now, everyone back off, we need the scene to ourselves for a moment.”

We got odd glances, but they walked off.

I took in the Bentley convertible and the victims in the back seat, and part of me wanted to sit down and cry. But I’d spent the majority of my adult life confronting murder, and there was only one way to do it well: divorce yourself emotionally from the victims. In this case, that was going to be difficult.

Mahoney, seeming to read my thoughts, said, “You sure you’re up to this?”

“I’ll deal with it,” I said as I walked around the car toward the female victim.

I wanted to treat her as an object to be studied and evaluated, but I was having a hard time taking my eyes off Kay Willingham’s face. She was one of the most striking, most interesting women I’d ever known, and here she was dead, sprawled next to a man who had apparently been her lover, unlikely as that seemed.

I had to force myself not to look at her blank expression and instead focus on the two bullet wounds about four inches apart and two inches above her bare left breast. Her rose-lace bra was on her lap; her black dinner dress was tugged down around her waist.

“No sign she had her hands up in a defensive posture,” I said. “I’m thinking she never saw her killer.”

“Neither did he,” Sampson said from the other side of the car. “I think they had other things on their minds.”

Only then did I look at the male victim. He was turned slightly toward Kay, his head slumped on his right arm, which

was extended over the compartment that held the convertible's retracted roof. His pants and boxers were around his ankles. Blood from two chest wounds had drained across his left thigh and pooled between his legs.

"The press is going to have a field day with this," Sampson said.

"For way too many reasons," Mahoney said.

I didn't reply, but Ned and John were right; there were so many reasons for this to blow up, and in ways we couldn't predict.

Kay Willingham was a vivacious Georgetown socialite, a Southern heiress and power broker who had, until two years ago, been married to J. Walter Willingham, the current vice president of the United States.

The man with her, Randall Christopher, was the founder and principal of Harrison Charter High, a charismatic man rumored to have his eye on the mayor's office and, if that went well, higher political aspirations. Christopher was African-American and married with twin girls who were sophomores at his school and friends of my daughter.

"Look at that," I said, shaking my head.

"What?" Sampson and Mahoney said.

"We might be witnessing the birth of a perfect shitstorm."

CHAPTER

6

BEFORE EITHER OF THEM COULD respond, two men in dark suits and shades ducked under the tape.

“Spin around, whoever you are,” Mahoney barked. “And get off my crime scene.”

They both held up badges. The taller of them, the one with the buzz cut, said, “Donald Breit, U.S. Secret Service.”

“Lloyd Price, U.S. Secret Service,” said the other, who was built like a brick with powerful legs and arms. “You are?”

“FBI Special Agent in Charge Mahoney,” Ned snapped. “Now get off my crime scene.”

Agent Price took off his shades, his face softening. In a quieter voice, he said, “Please, sir, and no disrespect, but Kay Willingham is—was—our boss’s ex-wife.”

Agent Breit removed his sunglasses as well, revealing blood-shot eyes. “He’s crushed, the VP. I’ve never seen him like this.

As soon as he heard, he asked us to come down. To find out what we could, Special Agent Mahoney. I know it's crazy...but he still loves her."

Mahoney hesitated for a moment, and then in a reasonable tone he said, "I'll share what I can once I know where the vice president was last night, the entire night."

"So, what, you think J. Walter killed them?" Agent Breit said. "Are you insane?"

"Answer the question," Mahoney said.

Agent Price said, "The VP was seen last night by five hundred people at a ten-grand-a-plate fundraiser at the Hilton. He left at ten thirty-seven on the dot, and I personally drove him home to One Observatory Circle, where he went to bed and remained *all night*."

"You have documentation?"

Breit nodded. "Every minute of that man's day is accounted for."

"Glove up," Mahoney said. "You can take a look. Dr. Cross will brief you."

"Alex Cross?" Agent Price said.

"That's right," I said, shaking his hand.

Agent Breit said, "The boss will be happy you're on the case. He's heard of you."

"I'm flattered," I said and shook his hand as well. "Do you want to take a look? Maybe you'll see something we've missed."

The Secret Service agents nodded and followed me to the blue Bentley. They both stopped and lost color when they saw Kay.

"Jesus," Breit said.

Price said, "I don't want to be the one to tell him."

"Too much?" I said.

“No,” Breit said. He walked closer, saw Christopher’s pants down. “What? Jesus.”

“She’s not wearing jewelry,” Price said. “That’s wrong.”

Breit nodded. “Kay was a jewelry nut, and she’s got no jewelry on. Look at the dress. She should be decked out in diamonds and pearls. And his watch is gone. Check his breast pocket.”

Mahoney did, then shook his head.

Sampson said, “No phones. Either of them.”

“Well,” I said. “That complicates things, doesn’t it?”

CHAPTER

7

WE SEARCHED THE CAR AND the bodies but found no cell phones anywhere. After the medical examiner removed the corpses from the scene, Special Agents Breit and Price left to brief the vice president, and forensic techs went to work on Kay Willingham's Bentley.

An FBI blood-spatter expert soon determined they were shot from less than twenty feet. A tech who specialized in bullet trajectory said the killer probably stood ten or fifteen feet away from the front bumper and was tall enough to shoot over the intact windshield.

"Brass?" I asked.

The tech shook his head. "Smart shooter. Picked up after himself."

"Does that say *I'm a hophead?* Killing two people to grab diamonds and pearls, money, and phones?" Sampson said.

“A hophead wouldn’t care about brass,” I said. “So scratch that killer profile. And even if Kay was wearing one of her really big necklaces, I’m having trouble seeing a pro killing her to get it.”

Mahoney nodded. “Why not just a holdup? Her boobs are out; his pants are down. They’d be compliant.”

“Right,” Sampson said. “So this is made to look like a robbery gone bad.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe a scavenger passed by after the killer left.”

“And maybe the scavenger saw the shooter,” Mahoney said.

“I like that maybe,” Sampson said, pointing at Ned. “I’m gonna work my sources on the street, find out where a scavenger would go to fence jewels in this hood.”

“Good,” Mahoney said, then he looked at me. “After Christopher’s office, I’ll need you at Kay Willingham’s place.”

I said, “Let’s not forget there’s another possible classic-killer profile here.”

“Which one?” Mahoney asked.

“The vengeful wife,” I said. “Where’s Mrs. Christopher in all this?”

Sampson left. Mahoney and I entered the high school and got the janitor to open the principal’s suite of offices, which were dark. We passed the secretary’s desk and went through a door into a nice large office with Christopher’s framed diplomas, citations, and family photographs on the walls between the bookcases. The desk was remarkably tidy.

A door stood ajar on one side. I found a switch, turned it on, and saw a much smaller second office that looked more used. There was a printer but no computer, although there was space for a laptop on the desk crowded with books and correspondence.

This was where he'd really worked. "We'll need agents to go through the mounds of stuff and find his computer."

"Probably at his house—" Mahoney started. His phone buzzed before he could finish. "Great. I have to brief the media."

"How fun," I said. "I'm going to go to Christopher's home and talk to the wife, then I'll go to Kay's house in Georgetown."

When I left, I noticed a gap in the school perimeter fence, and I went through it so I could skirt the media circus.

When I was almost to my car, a man called out, "Dr. Cross? I thought I'd find you somewhere about."

I knew that whiny, nasal voice and waved my hand without slowing. "No comment, Sparkman."

"No comment? I haven't even asked a question."

"See there?" I said, reaching my car. "I'm saving you the time and effort."

"Oh, I think you'll want to comment," he said, and I finally looked at him.

Clive Sparkman was in his early forties, disheveled, and generally a rude pain in the ass who made a very comfortable living running a highly clicked-on website that spread news, gossip, rumors, and outright lies about power brokers of all persuasions in the nation's capital. He also published lurid stories about murder cases, which was how we'd become acquainted.

"I know this case is a twofer for you, Sparkman, politics and homicide," I said. "But I'm not answering any questions about an ongoing investigation. You want to know something new? Go listen to the FBI briefing in ten minutes."

Sparkman cocked his head knowingly. "I'll be there listening to every word, but I'll know something no one else does, something I'm considering publishing on my site tomorrow

morning—a little nasty sidebar about this case for the rabidly interested.”

I opened the car door, started to get in, said, “I’ve got places to be.”

Sparkman said, “Actually, it’s about you, Cross, and…Kay Willingham?”

I froze but looked at him dispassionately.

He took off his sunglasses and smiled. “Did you have an affair with the vice president’s wife, Alex? Were you the cause of the divorce? I’ve seen a photograph of you two together, and I must say, you’re awfully chummy. Care to comment now?”

“Go to hell, Sparkman, and write anything you want,” I said. “But make sure you’re accurate in that rumor or you will hear from my lawyer. His name is Craig Halligan. You remember him, don’t you? The guy who sued you for libel, took you for four million?”

Sparkman looked like he’d swallowed a parasite.

“Thought so,” I said. I shut the door and sped off.

CHAPTER

8

IT ACTUALLY TOOK A BIT of digging to figure out where Randall Christopher lived. The name on the lease of his rented home, it turned out, was Elaine Paulson, Christopher's wife. I rang the front-porch bell on the left side of a duplex on Tenth Street between F and G Streets, but no one answered.

I rang the neighbor's bell next, and a big woman, mid-forties, wearing hospital scrubs and looking weary, opened the door a few inches but left the chain on.

"Yes?" she said.

"I was looking for Elaine Paulson?"

She grimaced. "She's gone."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"No idea."

"Who are you?" I asked.

“Who I am is none of your business,” she said, and she started to close the door.

I put my fingers on it, said, “I work for the FBI and Metro Homicide, ma’am. This is a murder investigation.”

That stopped her. “Murder? Who was murdered?”

“Ms. Paulson’s husband,” I said. “Randall Christopher.”

Her left hand lifted slowly to her mouth. “Oh God,” she moaned. “Oh God, don’t tell me that.”

“It’s all over the news. Or will be, and I need to talk to his wife sooner rather than later.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick. Can you come back?”

“Uh, no, this is a murder investigation, and we need your help.”

She didn’t appear pleased about it, but she slid back the chain and opened the door.

I held out my hand. “Alex Cross.”

Her eyebrows raised in interest, and she shook my hand. “I recognize you now. From the news. I’m sorry. I’m Barbara Taylor.”

“Nice to meet you, Barbara,” I said. “May I come in?”

Taylor closed her eyes for a moment. “I’m going to get sucked into this, aren’t I?”

“I just need to ask you a few questions.”

“My ex got me sucked into things I didn’t want any part of.”

“Mr. Christopher is dead. You can help.”

She hesitated, then stood aside. “Can I get you a cup of coffee? Some iced tea?”

“The iced tea sounds great, thanks,” I said, and I followed her through a tidy living area into a tidier kitchen.

We spoke for a good forty minutes. A surgical nurse at Georgetown Medical Center, divorced, and the mother of two college students, Taylor had befriended Randall Christopher

and his wife the day they'd moved in. The twin girls were nine or ten then, and Elaine Paulson had her hands full while her husband founded and built the charter school from scratch. Taylor described Christopher as "single-minded and evangelically passionate" about his work, starting the school in a small building and then, as enrollment increased, taking over and refurbishing an existing school structure.

"What about the marriage?"

The nurse chewed her lip. "My judgment might be clouded here, given that my husband left me for a twenty-six-year-old, okay?"

"Okay."

Taylor said the marriage seemed loving and supportive in the first couple of years. But as Christopher got involved in various civil crusades, his star began to shine and people in the community began to look to him for leadership on everything from education to addressing the series of rapes and murders that had taken place in Southeast DC over the past fifteen years.

"As a result, Randall was away often," Taylor said. "And there were fights when he was home. Nothing physical, not that I ever saw. But there was a lot of shouting, and I heard her crying more than once."

"Police ever have to get involved?"

"Not to my knowledge. I never called them, anyway."

"Did she confide in you?"

The nurse gave me a strange look. "If I tell you, I'm not keeping her confidence."

"I gather that's a yes."

Taylor did not respond.

I said, "I'm going to ask her these same questions when I find her."

Still no response.

“Have you considered the possibility that Elaine Paulson and her daughters might be in danger? And that they might need the FBI’s protection?”

The nurse thought about that, then swallowed hard. “Please, I adore Elaine as a person, and I would not want to jeopardize our friendship.”

“I just want to understand the situation, ma’am.”

“All right,” she said, relenting. “They hadn’t made love in months. She suspected an affair. She considered hiring a detective to follow Randall.”

“Did she hire one?”

“I don’t know.”

“When was the last time you saw her and the girls?”

“Tina and Rachel? Fourth of July, before they went off to camp. They’re counselors.”

“Is that where they are now?”

“Until mid-August.”

“When was the last time you saw their mother?”

Taylor licked her lips and looked ready to cry. “This morning,” she said in a soft voice. “Early. Twenty to five? I thought I heard her moving around next door even earlier, when I was eating breakfast. But as I was going out the door for my shift, I saw her coming in from a run, climbing the porch steps drenched in sweat. She looked like she’d been crying.”

“Early run and crying,” I said, estimating the distance to the school at roughly two miles. “Describe what she was wearing, please.”

Taylor said Christopher’s wife had on blue running shorts, a long-sleeved white T-shirt, a reflector vest, and a pack with a hydration pouch.

“Did you talk to her?”

“Just to say hello and ask if she was okay. She said she’d been having trouble sleeping, that she was emotional with the girls away, so she’d gone for a run.”

“What else?”

“She said she’d decided to go somewhere for a few days and think things through.”

“She say where?”

“No.”

“Do you have her cell phone number?”

She nodded and went to her phone. She choked as she read the number to me, then she threw her hand up to her mouth and said, sobbing, “You don’t think she killed him, do you, Dr. Cross? The Elaine Paulson I know is such a sweet, sweet soul.”

CHAPTER

9

AFTER TRYING ELAINE PAULSON'S PHONE unsuccessfully several times, I drove to Kay Willingham's brick home in Georgetown. She'd bought two old townhomes decades before and merged them into a small mansion. As I parked, I noted that the front door was still deep green and the brass knocker was still polished to a high shine. A riot of flowers spilled from window boxes to the left and right.

It was so familiar.

I remembered a night, years before, when Kay had had too much to drink at a fundraiser and I'd given her a ride home. I was working a brief stint as a private investigator at the time, and I was single then, a widower. The socialite had gotten her high heel stuck in a crack in the brick sidewalk; the heel broke, the shoe slipped off and landed in a

puddle, and she tripped. I'd caught her before she hit the ground. She'd been gasping and afraid and suddenly there'd been this intense moment of attraction between us that I'll never forget.

Shaking the memory off, I got out of my car and walked to the broad-shouldered young man in a dark suit and glasses standing at the low iron gate across the short path to the front door. "FBI?" I said.

"Special Agent Aaron Tilden," he said, nodding. "I recognize you, Dr. Cross. I heard you lecture several times at the academy."

"I hope I was coherent."

"Very, sir," he said, holding out his hand. "It's an honor to meet you."

I shook his hand, saying, "The honor's all mine, Agent Tilden. Has anyone been inside?"

"Not since my partner and I arrived a half an hour ago. Bill's in the alley. Doors are locked. No one is answering when we knock. Do you have a key?"

"No, uh... we know the location of the spare," I said, feeling a little flustered. I motioned him aside. "Any media been by?"

"Cameraman from CNN," Tilden said. "He shot the front of the house and stayed about two minutes."

"She lived alone," I said, putting on latex gloves. I reached over the iron railing left of the door to the brick face of the house, counted two bricks in and two down, then pressed on that brick. A small door levered open, revealing a shallow slot and the key.

"That's neat."

"Her idea, evidently," I said and unlocked the door.

"Do you need help, sir?"

"I'm sure I will, Special Agent Tilden," I said as a hollowness

formed in my stomach. “But I’d like to take the first look around alone.”

“Of course,” Tilden said.

The door opened on oiled hinges and shut behind me just as quietly. I had not been in Kay’s two-hundred-year-old Georgian townhome since that night long ago when she’d tripped and I’d caught her and she’d invited me in for a nightcap.

But standing there in the foyer that met the long center hallway of her home, I felt like it could have been yesterday. I could smell her scent. I could hear the echoes of her laughter in the air.

I walked down the hall, passing the various paintings on the walls, and stopped at the entrance to what had been Kay’s grand salon. Then I stepped inside the long rectangular room and took it all in with a sweeping glance.

The floors were two-hundred-year-old plankboard interrupted by tasteful squares of cream-colored carpet. The furniture was early sixties glamour, from the Kennedy era; “pieces of restored Camelot,” Kay had called them. The couches were upholstered in wide stripes of indigo blue and mouse gray. Some of the overstuffed wingback chairs were blue, and others were gray. All so familiar I could not help replaying that night in my mind.

We had met at a fundraiser for victims’ rights. This was years ago, when her husband was the governor of Alabama and they were separated and contemplating divorce. The car service that normally picked Kay up was late; she’d had a few drinks, and I’d offered her a ride home in my car.

I’d be lying if I said there was not a genuine spark between us after I’d caught her when she fell. That sense had continued inside the house.

I accepted a brandy. I couldn't remember what music she'd put on, but it was perfect. She'd danced away from me, twirling across the floor and the carpet, barefoot, totally free, and laughing.

"God, she was something," I said to myself and walked over to a built-in shelf in the corner that was crammed with pictures of moments in Kay's remarkable life.

I found one that she'd shown me that night, a framed snapshot of an eleven-year-old Kay cheek to cheek with an African-American girl, both of them wet from swimming, both of them grinning with love.

"That's Althea," Kay had said softly. "Best friend I've ever had. Only person I've trusted completely in my entire life."

"Where does she live?"

"Here and there," she'd said. Her phone rang. She picked it up, listened, and said, "Walter, I'm home before curfew, and yes, I've had a few drinks, but I'm going to bed now. Does that work for you?"

She listened again, her brows tightening. "Good night."

Kay hung up the phone and stood there a long moment as if in a trance. When it broke, she looked at me sadly. "It's time for me to say good night, Alex."

Whatever spark there was between us out on the sidewalk had died. I set my untouched brandy on the coffee table, said her house was beautiful, and got ready to leave.

"Could you check around the house? That's what my driver usually does before I set the alarm and go to bed. Thank you for not letting me fall out there," she said. "I'd have probably broken something irreparably."