

One

HANNAH WILLIS WAS a second-year law student at Virginia, and everything that lay ahead of her seemed bright and promising—except, of course, that she was about to die in these dark, gloomy, dismal woods.

Go, Hannah, she told herself. Just go. Stop thinking. Whining and crying won't help you now. Running just might.

Hannah stumbled and staggered forward until her hands found another tree trunk to hold on to. She leaned her aching body into it, waiting for the strength to take another breath. And then to move another burst of steps forward.

Keep going, or you'll die right here in these woods. It's that simple.

The bullet lodged somewhere in her lower back made every movement, every breath an agony, more pain than Hannah had ever known was possible. It was only the threat of a *second* bullet, or maybe worse, that kept her on her feet and going at all.

God, the woods were almost pitch-black back in here. A quarter moon drooping over the thick forest canopy did little to light the ground below. Trees were shadows. Thorns and brambles were invisible in the underbrush; they pierced and raked her legs bloody as she pushed through. What little she'd been wearing to begin with—just an expensive black lace teddy—now hung in shreds off her shoulders.

None of that mattered, though, or even registered with Hannah anymore. The only clear thought that cut through the pain, and the panic, was *Go, girl*. The rest was a wordless, directionless nightmare.

Finally, and very suddenly—had it been an hour? more?—the low canopy of trees opened up around her. “What the . . .” Dirt turned to gravel underfoot, and Hannah stumbled to her knees with nothing to hang on to.

In the hazy moonlight, she could make out the ghost of a double line, showing the curve of a country road. It was like a miracle to her. Half of one, anyway; she knew she wasn't out of this mess yet.

When a motor sounded in the distance, Hannah leaned on her hands and pushed up off the gravel. Summoning strength she didn't know she still had, she stood again, then staggered into the middle of the road. Her world blurred through sweat and fresh tears.

Please, dear God, don't let this be them. This can't be those two bastards.

You can't be so cruel, can you?

A red truck careened around the bend then, coming at her fast. Too fast! Suddenly, she was just as blind as she'd been before, in the woods, but from the truck's headlights.

"Stop! Please stop! Plee-ase!" she screamed. "*Stop, you sonofabitch!*"

At the last possible second, the tires squealed on the pavement. The red pickup skidded into full view and stopped just short of flattening her right there into roadkill. She could feel heat coming off the engine through the grille.

“Hey, sweetheart, nice outfit! All you had to do was stick out your thumb.”

The voice was unfamiliar—which was good, really good. Loud country music was blasting from the cab too—*Charlie Daniels Band*, her mind vaguely registered, just before Hannah collapsed onto the pavement.

The driver was down there on the road a second later as she regained consciousness. “Oh, my God, I didn’t... What happened to you? Are you—*what happened to you?*”

“Please.” She barely mustered the word. “If they find me here, they’ll kill us both.”

The man’s strong hands wrapped around her, grazing the dime-sized hole in her back as he picked her up. She only exhaled, too weak to scream now. A cluster of gray and indistinct moments later, they were inside the truck and moving really fast down the two-lane highway.

“Hang in there, darlin’.” The driver’s voice was shaky now. “Tell me who did this to you.”

Hannah could feel her consciousness slipping away again. “The men...”

“The men? *What men*, sweetheart? Who are you talking about?”

An answer floated vaguely through Hannah's mind, and she wasn't sure if she said it out loud or maybe just thought it before everything went away.

The men from the White House.

Two

HIS NAME WAS Johnny Tucci, but the boys back in his South Philadelphia neighborhood all called him Johnny Twitchy, on account of the way his eyes jumped around when he was nervous, which was most of the time.

Of course, after tonight, the boys in Philly could go screw themselves. This was the night Johnny got into the game for real. This was man time. He had “the package,” didn’t he?

It was a simple job but a real goody, because he was alone and had to take full responsibility. He’d already picked up the package. Scared him, but he’d done just fine.

No one ever said so, but once you started making deliveries like this, it meant you had

something on the Family, and they had something on you. In other words, there was a relationship. After tonight, there'd be no more running numbers for Johnny, no more scrapping for crumbs in southside neighborhoods. It was like the bumper sticker that said, *Today is the first day of the rest of your life.*

So naturally, he was pumped—and just a little bit nervous.

His uncle Eddie's warning kept playing like a tape in his mind. *Don't blow this opportunity, Twitchy*, Eddie had said. *I'm way out on a limb here for you.* Like he was doing him some kind of big favor with this job, which Johnny supposed maybe he was, but still. His own uncle didn't have to rub his face in it, did he?

He reached over and turned up the radio. Even the country music they played down here was better than listening to Eddie's nagging in his head all night long. Turned out, it was an old Charlie Daniels Band tune, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia." He even knew some of the words. But the familiar lyrics couldn't keep Eddie's voice out of Johnny's head.

Don't blow this opportunity, Twitchy.

I'm way out on a limb for you.

Oh, fuck!

Blue flashers danced off his rearview mirror—coming out of nowhere. Two, three seconds ago, he could have sworn he had I-95 all to himself.

Apparently not.

Johnny felt the corner of his right eye start to twitch.

He goosed the gas; maybe he could make a run for it. Then he remembered the piece-of-shit Dodge he was driving, lifted out of a Motel 6 parking lot back in Essington. *Goddamnit! Should have gone to the Marriott. Got a Jap car.*

Still, it was possible the stolen Dodge hadn't been flagged yet. Whoever owned it was probably sleeping back at that motel. With any luck, Johnny could just eat the ticket and no one would ever have to know.

But that was the kind of luck other people had, not him.

It took the cops forever and a day to get out of their cruiser, which was a bad sign—the worst. They were checking the make and the plates. By the time they came up on either side of the Dodge, Johnny's eyes were going like a couple of

Mexican jumping beans.

He tried to be cool. “Evening, officers. What seems to be—”

The one on his side, a tall dude with a redneck accent, opened the driver’s door. “Just keep your mouth shut tight. Step out of the vehicle.”

It didn’t take them any time at all to find the package. After they checked the front and back seats, they popped the trunk, pulled the spare-tire cover, and that was that.

“Holy mother of God!” One of the troopers shone his light down on it. The other one gagged at the sight. “*What the hell did you do?*”

Johnny didn’t stick around to answer the question. He was already running for his life.

Three

NOBODY HAD EVER been any deader, or dumber, than he was right now. Johnny Tucci knew that, even as he broke across the tree line and started slip-sliding down a ravine at the side of the highway.

He could hide from these cops, maybe, but not from the Family. Not in jail, not anywhere. It was a fact of life. You didn't lose a "package" like this without becoming one yourself.

Voices came from up the slope, and then dancing flashlight beams. Johnny dropped down low and threw himself under a clump of bushes. He was trembling all over, his heart was going so fast it hurt, and his lungs were heaving from too many cigarettes. It was almost impossible to keep still and keep quiet.

Oh shit, I am so dead. I am so, so dead.

“You see anything? See that little bastard? That freak?”

“Nothing yet. We’ll get him. He’s down here somewhere. Can’t be far.”

The troopers fanned out on either side of him, working their way down. Very deliberate and efficient.

Even as he caught his breath now, the trembling only got worse, and not just because of the cops. It was because he’d started to figure out what he had to do next. Strictly speaking, there were only two real options. One involved the .38 he had holstered to his ankle. The other, the package—and who owned it. It was only a question of which way he wanted to die.

And in that cold moonlight, it didn’t really seem like much of a question at all.

Moving as slowly as he could, he reached down and pulled the .38. With a badly shaking hand, he fitted the barrel in his mouth. The damn metal clacked hard against his teeth and tasted sour on his tongue. He was ashamed of the tears coming down his face, but that couldn’t be helped, and who would ever know but him anyway?

Jesus, was it really going down this way? Crying like a punk, all alone in the woods? What a crummy world this was.

He could just hear the boys now. *Sure wouldn't want to go out the way Johnny did.* Johnny Twitchy. They'd put it on his gravestone—just for spite. Those heathen bastards!

The whole time, Johnny's brain was saying *pull*, but his trigger finger wouldn't do it. He tried again, both hands on the grip this time, but it was no go. He couldn't even do this right.

He finally spit the gun barrel out, still crying like a little kid. Somehow, knowing he was going to live another day didn't do a thing to stop the tears. He just lay there, biting his lips, feeling sorry for himself, until the cops got as far as the stream at the bottom of the ravine.

Then Johnny Twitchy crawled real fast back up the way he'd come, ran across the interstate, and dropped into the woods on the other side—wondering how in Christ he was going to make himself disappear off the face of the earth, knowing that it just wasn't going to happen.

He'd *looked*. He'd seen what was in “the package.”

Part One

FIRESTORM

Chapter 1

I CELEBRATED MY birthday with a small, very exclusive, very festive and fun party on Fifth Street. It was just the way I wanted it.

Damon had come home from boarding school in Massachusetts as a special surprise. Nana was there, acting large and in charge of the festivities, along with my babies, Jannie and Ali. Sampson and his family were on hand; and of course Bree was there.

Only the people I loved most in the world were invited. Who else would you want to celebrate another year older and wiser with?

I even made a little speech that night, most of which I forgot immediately, but not the opening few words. "I, Alex Cross," I began, "do solemnly

promise—to all those present at this birthday party—to do my best to balance my life at home with my work life, and not to go over to the dark side ever again.”

Nana raised her coffee cup in salute, but then she said, “Too late for that,” which got a laugh.

Then, to a person, everybody did their best to make sure I was aging with a little humility but also a smile on my face.

“Remember the time at Redskin stadium?” Damon cackled. “When dad locked the keys in the old car?”

I tried cutting in. “To be fair—”

“Called me out of bed past midnight,” Sampson said, and growled.

“Only after he tried breaking in for an hour because he didn’t want to admit he couldn’t do it,” Nana said.

Jannie cupped a hand around her ear. “Cause he’s what?” And everyone chorused back, “America’s Sherlock Holmes!” It was a reference to a national-magazine piece from a few years ago that I will apparently never live down.

I swigged my beer. “Brilliant career—or so they say—dozens of big cases solved, and what

am I remembered for? Seems to me, someone was supposed to have a happy birthday tonight.”

“Which reminds me,” Nana said, somehow taking the bait and cutting me off at the same time. “We’ve got a piece of unfinished business here. *Children?*”

Jannie and Ali jumped up, more excited than anyone. Apparently, there was a Big Surprise coming for me now. No one was saying what it was, but I’d already opened a pair of Serengetis from Bree, a loud shirt and two minis of tequila from Sampson, and a stack of books from the kids that included the latest George Pelecanos and a biography of Keith Richards.

Another *clue*, if I can call it that, was the fact that Bree and I had become notorious plan cancelers, with one long weekend after another falling by the wayside since we’d met. You might think that working in the same department, same division—Homicide—would make it easier for us to coordinate our schedules, but it was just the opposite most of the time.

So I had some idea, but nothing really specific, about what might be coming.

“Alex, you stay put,” said Ali. He’d started

calling me Alex lately, which I thought was all right but for some reason gave Nana the creeps.

Bree said she'd keep an eye on me and stayed back while everyone else snuck off to the kitchen.

"The plot thickens," I muttered.

"Even as we speak," said Bree with a smile and a wink. "Just the way you like it."

She was on the couch, across from where I sat in one of the old club chairs. Bree always looked good, but I preferred her like this, casual and comfortable in jeans and bare feet. Her eyes started on the floor and worked their way up to mine.

"Come here often?" she asked.

"Once in a while, yeah. You?"

She sipped her beer and casually cocked her head. "Want to get out of here?"

"Sure thing." I jerked my thumb toward the kitchen door. "Just as soon as I get rid of those pesky, um—"

"Beloved family members?"

I couldn't help thinking that this birthday was getting better and better. Now I had two big surprises coming up.

Make that three.

The phone rang in the hall. It was our home line, not my cell, which everyone knew to use for work. I also had a pager up on the dresser where I could hear it. So it seemed safe to go ahead and answer. I even thought it might be some friendly soul calling to wish me a happy birthday, or at the very worst, someone trying to sell me a satellite dish.

Will I ever learn? Probably not in this lifetime.

Chapter 2

“ALEX, IT’S DAVIES. I’m sorry to bother you at home.” Ramon Davies was superintendent of detectives with Metro, and also my boss, and he was on the line.

“It’s my birthday. Who died?” I asked. I was ticked off, mostly at myself for answering the phone in the first place.

“Caroline Cross,” he said, and my heart nearly stopped. At that very moment, the kitchen door swung open and the family came out singing. Nana had an elaborate pink-and-red birthday cake on a tray, with an American Airlines travel folio clipped on top.

“Happy Birthday to you...”

Bree held up a hand to quiet them. My posture

and my face must have said something. They all stopped right where they were. The joyful singing ended almost midnote. My family remembered whose birthday this was: *Detective Alex Cross's*.

Caroline was my niece, my brother's only daughter. I hadn't seen her in twenty years; not since just after Blake died. That would have made her twenty-four now.

At the time of her death.

The floor under my feet felt like it was gone. Part of me wanted to call Davies a liar. The other part, the cop, spoke up. "Where is she now?"

"I just got off the phone with Virginia State Police. The remains are at the ME's office in Richmond. I'm sorry, Alex. I hate to be the one to tell you this."

"Remains?" I muttered. It was such a cold word, but I appreciated Davies not over-handling me. I walked out of the room, sorry I'd said even that much in front of my family.

"Are we talking homicide here? I assume that we are."

"I'm afraid so."

"What happened?" My heart was thudding dangerously. I almost didn't want to know.

“I don’t have a lot of details,” he told me, in a way that instantly gave me a hint—*he was holding something back*.

“Ramon, what’s going on here? Tell me. What do you know about Caroline?”

“Just take one thing at a time, Alex. If you leave now, you can probably be there in about two hours. I’ll ask for one of the responding officers to meet you.”

“I’m on my way.”

“And Alex?”

I’d almost hung up the phone, my mind in splinters. “What is it?”

“I don’t think you should go alone.”

Chapter 3

RUNNING HARD, AND using my siren most of the way, it took less than an hour and a half to get down to Richmond.

The Department of Forensic Science was housed in a new building on Marshall Street. Davies had arranged for Detective George Trumbull from the State Police CI Bureau to meet us there—Bree and me.

“The car’s been towed to our lot up at division headquarters on Route One,” Trumbull told us. “Otherwise, everything’s here. The remains are downstairs in the morgue. All the obvious evidentiary material is in the lab on this level.”

There was that terrible word again. *Remains*.

“What did you bag?” Bree asked him.

“Troopers found some women’s clothing and a small black purse wrapped in a mover’s blanket in the trunk. Here. I pulled this to show you.”

He handed me a Rhode Island driver’s license in a plastic sleeve. The only thing I recognized at first was Caroline’s name. The girl in the photo looked quite beautiful to me, like a dancer, with her hair pulled back from her face and a high forehead. And the big eyes—I remembered those, too.

Eyes as big as the sky. That’s what my older brother Blake had always said. I could see him now, rocking her on the old porch glider on Fifth Street and laughing every time she blinked up at him. He was in love with that baby girl. We all were. Sweet Caroline.

Now both of them were gone. My brother to drugs. And Caroline? What had happened to her?

I handed the driver’s license back to Detective Trumbull and asked him to point us toward the investigating ME’s office. If I was going to get through this at all, I had to keep moving.

The medical examiner, Dr. Amy Carbondale, met us downstairs. When we shook hands, hers was still a little cool from the latex gloves she’d

been wearing. She seemed awfully young for this kind of work, maybe early thirties, and a little unsure of what to do with me, what to say.

“Dr. Cross, I’ve followed your work. I’m very, very sorry for your loss,” she said in a near whisper that carried sympathy and respect.

“If you could just give me the facts of the case, I’d appreciate it,” I told her.

She adjusted her glasses, silver wire rims, working up to it. “Based on the samples I took, there was apparently a ninety-six percent morselization of the body. A few digits did survive, and we were able to get a print match to the name on the license that was found.”

“Excuse me—*morselization*?” I’d never heard the word before in my life.

To her credit, Dr. Carbondale looked me right in the eye. “There’s every reason to believe a grinder of some sort was used—likely a wood chipper.”

Her words took my breath away. I felt them in my chest. *A wood chipper?* Then I was thinking: *Why keep her clothes and driver’s license?* As proof of Caroline’s identity? A souvenir for the killer?

Dr. Carbondale was still talking. “I’ll do a full

tox screen, run a DNA profile, and of course we'll sieve for bullet fragments or other metals, but actual cause of death is going to be hard to prove here, if not impossible."

"Where is she?" I asked, just trying to focus. *Where were Caroline's remains?*

"Dr. Cross, are you sure right now is the time—"

"He's sure," Bree said. She knew what I needed, and she gestured toward the lab. "Let's get on with it. Please, Doctor. We're all professionals here."

We followed Dr. Carbondale through two sets of swinging doors into an examination room that resembled a bunker. It had a gray concrete floor and a high tiled ceiling, mounted with cameras and umbrella lights. There were the usual sinks and stainless steel everywhere, and a single white body bag on one of the narrow silver tables.

Right away, I could see something was very strange. Wrong. *Both.*

The body bag bulged in the middle and lay flat against the table at the ends. I was dreading this in a way I couldn't have imagined beforehand.

The remains.

Dr. Carbondale stood across from us and pulled back the zipper. “The heat sealing is ours,” she said. “I closed it back up after my initial exam earlier.”

Inside the body bag *there was a second bag*. This one looked like some kind of industrial plastic. It was a frosted white translucent material, just clear enough to show the color of meat and blood and bone inside.

I felt like my mind shut down for a few seconds, which was as long as I could deny what I was seeing. It was a dead person in that bag but not a body.

Caroline but not Caroline.

Chapter 4

THE DRIVE BACK to Washington was like a bad dream that might never end. When Bree and I finally got home, the house was starkly quiet and still. I thought about waking Nana, but the fact that she didn't get up on her own told me she was out cold and needed the rest. All of this bad news could wait until later in the morning.

My birthday cake sat untouched in the refrigerator, and someone had left the American Airlines folio on the counter. I glanced at it long enough to see two tickets for Saint John, an island I'd always wanted to visit in the Caribbean. It didn't matter; all of that was on hold now. Everything was. I felt as though I was moving in slow motion; certain details had an eerie clarity.

“You have got to go to bed.” Bree took me by the hand and led me out of the kitchen. “If for no other reason than so you can think clearly about this tomorrow.”

“You mean today,” I said.

“I mean tomorrow. After you rest.”

I noticed she hadn’t said *sleep*. We dragged ourselves upstairs, took off our clothes, and fell into bed. Bree held my hand and wouldn’t let go.

An hour or so later, I was still staring at the ceiling, hung up on the question that had been dogging me ever since we left Richmond: Why?

Why had this happened? Why to Caroline?

Why a goddamn wood chipper? Why remains instead of a body?

As a detective, I should have been thinking about the physical evidence and where it could lead me, but I didn’t exactly feel like a detective, lying there in the dark. I felt like an uncle, and a brother.

In a way, we’d lost Caroline once before. After Blake died, her mother didn’t want anything more to do with the family. She’d moved away without so much as a parting word. Phone numbers were changed. Birthday presents were

returned. At the time, it seemed like the saddest possible thing, but since then, I'd learned—over and over—what a staggering capacity the world has for misery and self-inflicted wounds.

Somewhere around four thirty, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. My heart and mind were not to be eased.

Bree's voice stopped me. "Where are you going? It's still night."

"I don't know, Bree," I said. "Maybe the office. Try and get something done. You should go back to sleep."

"I haven't been asleep." She sat up behind me and put her arms around my shoulders. "You're not alone on this. Whatever's happening to you is happening to me."

I let my head hang and just listened to her soothing voice. She was right—we were in this together. It had been like that ever since we'd met, and that was a good thing.

"I'm going to do anything it takes for you and for this whole family to get through this," she said. "And tomorrow, you and I are going to go out there and we're going to start to find out who did this terrible thing. You hear me?"

For the first time since Davies's phone call, I felt a warm spot in my chest—nothing like happiness or even relief, but gratitude, anyway. Something to be glad for. I'd lived most of my life without Bree, and now I couldn't imagine how.

"How did I find you?" I asked her. "How did I get so lucky?"

"It's not luck." She held on to me even tighter. "It's love, Alex."

Chapter 5

IT SEEMED BOTH appropriate and ironic to Gabriel Reese that this odd, almost unprecedented middle-of-the-night meeting take place in a building originally built for the State, Navy, and War Departments. Reese lived by a deep sense of the historic in everything he did. Washington, you could say, was in his blood, in his family's blood for three generations.

The vice president himself had called Reese, sounding more than a little tense, and Walter Tillman had run two Fortune 100 companies, so he knew a thing or two about pressure. He hadn't given details, just told Reese to be at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, *now*. Technically, this was the VP's ceremonial office,

the same one where veeps from Johnson through Cheney had welcomed leaders from every quadrant of the globe.

More apt and to the point, it was away from the West Wing and whatever eyes and ears this secret meeting was clearly designed to avoid.

The doors to the inner office were closed when Reese got there. Dan Cormorant, head of the White House's Secret Service detail, was stationed outside with two other agents farther down the hall in either direction.

Reese let himself in. Cormorant followed and closed the heavy wood doors behind them.

"Sir?" said Reese.

Vice President Tillman stood with his back to them at the far end of the room. A row of windows reflected the glow of half-lit globes on an elaborate gasolier overhead, a reproduction. Several glass-encased ship models gave a more specific reference to the building's history. This office had been General Pershing's during World War Two.

Tillman turned and spoke. "We've got a situation, Gabe. Come and sit down. This is not good. Hard to imagine how it could be much worse."

Chapter 6

AGENT CORMORANT WALKED forward and took a standing position next to the vice president. It was an odd move, and Reese's gut tightened another notch. He was chief of staff—there was very little that the Secret Service should know about ahead of him. But they clearly did in this case. What in the name of God had happened? To whom had it happened?

The vice president nodded for Cormorant to go ahead and speak.

“Thank you, sir. Gabe, keeping what I'm about to tell you to yourself probably constitutes a felony. You need to know that before I—”

“Just spit it out, Dan.”

Gabe Reese liked Cormorant well enough, just