

The House of **CROSS**

**JAMES
PATTERSON**



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk
global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Century 2024
Published in Penguin Books 2025
001

Copyright © James Patterson, 2024
Extract from *Return of the Spider* copyright © James Patterson 2025

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.

Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes
freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for
purchasing an authorised edition of this book and for respecting intellectual
property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by
any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling

Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose
of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-529-15992-9

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



The House of **CROSS**

PROLOGUE

Potomac, Maryland

MARGARET BLEVINS LOVED HER morning runs. They allowed her time alone, which kept her even-keeled in a beyond-hectic life.

That mid-December morning, the fifty-two-year-old mother of three teenagers followed her normal three-and-a-half-mile route as she ran by headlamp light in the predawn, trying to keep her mind free of thoughts, lost in the delicious feeling of her leg and back muscles warming and firing at the fastest pace in weeks.

For a moment, she regretted slipping out to run without informing her security team. But they always slowed her down, were always fussing, and, my God, she'd been running this route for more than fourteen years, a full thirteen and a half years before she became a U.S. Supreme Court justice.

Justice Blevins felt good enough to pick up the pace a little. And for the first time in a long while, she felt loose and good doing it.

Where's this coming from? Blevins wondered as she approached the entrance to a trail through Watts Branch Park off Lloyd

Road. She checked her watch and saw she was three minutes ahead of her usual time.

She glanced up at the sky, already lightening, and felt great, at one with the run.

Still, at the trailhead, she slowed and adjusted the beam of her headlamp so she could better see the bridle path that wound off into the trees.

Blevins bounced into the park on the balls of her feet, amazed again at how good she felt, and trotted into the dawn thinking that there was a particular beauty to the woods in winter, especially this piece of woods. It was a mix of pine and oak and birch, her favorite. There was a stand of birch trees down by the creek that ran through the park.

She realized she was a little early and took a loop that added a few minutes to her run. She could see well enough that she shut off the headlamp, casting the woods in grays and shadows at first. But as Blevins's eyes adjusted, the scene grew lighter, filled with deeper contrasts—the tree trunks against the barest skiff of snow on the leaves, the barren crowns against a sky turning rose.

As she'd hoped, the first rays of sunshine were hitting those white birches in the creek bottom when she turned off the loop trail. The air was crisp as she puffed her way toward a tight stand of young hemlock trees growing amid the birches and marking the entrance to a little footbridge that spanned the creek and led to a park bench on the far side. She liked to stretch there before she walked home, part of her cooldown routine.

Blevins could see her breath in the chill air and the sparkle of frost on the birches, and she felt as if all were right in the world as she grabbed the handrails and took two steps up onto the footbridge. She heard an odd noise, a soft thud, coming from that tight group of hemlocks and felt like the side of her head had been slapped.

She felt it most in her ear, hard and painful. She immediately got dizzy and lost her balance.

For a moment, she thought she was going to black out and go down but she held tight to the footbridge railing and did not. After several seconds, the pain in her ear disappeared, the dizziness faded, and her eyes could focus again.

She got her balance back and was able to walk the rest of the way across the little bridge to the bench, although she felt nauseated from the effort. But then the wave of nausea passed too.

Blevins decided not to stretch and, feeling slightly disoriented, started walking home. She knew the trails by heart but got puzzled at two places where side paths met her route.

Once she had them straightened out, however, she found herself thinking more clearly and wondering what had just happened to her.

Was that really a noise back there? Or did I just suffer some kind of attack like Dad? Transient ischemic attacks, that's what Dad's doctor called them. Is that what just happened to me? Aren't I too young?

By the time she left the woods and reached the cul-de-sac where she lived in a large Colonial home set back from the road, she felt absolutely fine and decided not to tell her husband, Philip. She had a lot on her plate the next few days and could not afford the time to listen to all the mumbo-jumbo from the doctors and undergo all the tests they'd want to do.

I'm fine, she told herself as she went through the door. *Margaret Blevins is just fine.*

CHAPTER

1

Independence Mountains, Northern Nevada

COMING DOWN THE ALPINE road in a wheelchair-adapted van with Massachusetts handicap plates, Malcomb felt groggy, still heavy-headed from the drugs, but also anxious and sweaty.

He glanced in his rearview and caught a glimpse of big sections of the dirt road winding along the rim of a canyon that fell away to his left.

Not back there yet, Malcomb thought hazily. But he's coming for you. Expect nothing less now.

He was afraid then and checked the van's large operating screen. He saw on the active navigator that he was on a U.S. Forest Service road, heading north and downhill toward a flat ribbon of highway far in the distance. He glanced right at the little metal wallet and the iPhone on the passenger seat and cursed when he saw no bars on the screen.

Then he checked the gas gauge and was shocked to see he had

less than a quarter tank. *That son of a bitch! He wants to limit how far I can go. But screw him. I can make that highway wherever I am. I know I can.*

The road got very steep and twisty just ahead. Unsure of the controls, Malcomb squeezed the handbrake on the steering wheel, glanced in the rearview again, and headed into the first curve. Still nothing behind him.

He made it down through back-to-back S-curves just as snowflakes began to fall from the leaden sky. He hit a short straight, squeezed the gas control, and didn't look at the rearview again until he had to use the brakes to enter another corkscrew.

This time he caught a glimpse of them exiting the upper part of the S, a half mile back.

The blue Taboe, he thought, trying to breathe, trying to stay calm, trying to tell himself he could make it to the highway.

But with only a quarter of a tank? And what happens after I get there? Will I have cell service? Will anyone believe the story I have to tell?

Malcomb heard a thumping sound. He looked in the rearview and almost lost it. *They've got the helicopter!*

He looked at the cell phone screen again, saw one bar.

"Tor message, Siri," he said. "Voice."

"Tor activated," Siri said. "Recipient?"

"Cross," he said, glancing again in the rearview but not seeing the chopper. "Alex Cross."

"Start message on the beep."

"Dr. Cross," Malcomb said as he reached the third and final series of S-curves. "There's a good chance I will not survive. There are things I want to tell you so that you may bring to justice those responsible for my death. First, you know me as—"

The thumping came again, louder this time. Panicked, he accelerated into the first turn of the last S. He came around the

apex of the turn, and to his shock the Bell Jet Ranger helicopter rose up out of the depths of the canyon to his left.

The blue and white chopper hovered in the falling snow. The man in the copilot's seat wore headphones and sunglasses, but he was without a doubt Malcomb's double.

Then the tail of the bird drifted. There was a man in a harness tethered to the interior roof hanging out the side, one foot on the strut, shouldering a military-style rifle.

Malcomb did the only thing he could think of and squeezed the gas control. The van went shooting out of the first curve in that final S and grazed the canyon wall with the passenger-side door, sending a shower of sparks into the falling snow.

He glanced at the sideview, saw the helicopter turning to follow him. He shouted, "They're coming for me, Cross. You know my brother, but—"

The helicopter roared up behind him as he reached the last tight turn in the road. He ducked a little, looked in the sideview, and saw the bird coming fast, the gunman hanging out of it.

As he came out of the turn, he saw the road ahead was blocked by a big dump truck with a snowplow. Without thinking, he slammed on the brakes and tugged hard left on the wheel.

The van smashed into the guardrail going fifty-plus. The bumper caught the rail and hung up on it, causing the rear of the van to catapult up and over.

Malcomb screamed and caught an upside-down image of the bumper tearing free of the rail. The helicopter came into view as the van fell. It caromed off the side of the cliff, plunged another two hundred feet, and hit a pile of rocks.

The gas tank exploded. The wreckage began to burn.

Back up on the cliff, a woman wearing a tan sheriff's uniform and a heavy coat came out from behind the snowplow; she was

followed by an older guy in coveralls. They went to the edge and looked down at the van burning, sending black smoke up through the snow.

“Didn’t expect that,” the plow driver said. “But it’ll work.”

The deputy nodded, picked up her radio, clicked the mic button, and looked up at the helicopter swinging away.

“That went easier than we thought, sir,” she said. “And the new snow won’t hurt our cause none.”

CHAPTER

2

Washington, DC

AT SIX P.M. ON a mid-December day, Emma Franklin hurried out of the elevator and down a long hall in the basement of the Prettyman U.S. Court House. The tall forty-six-year-old carried a purse and a leather briefcase and wore a long gray puffy coat over her navy-blue pantsuit.

Franklin pushed through the door into the annex garage and was relieved to see her ride waiting. The driver, a tall redhead in her late thirties, jumped out of the Cadillac town car.

“Good evening, Judge Franklin,” she said, coming around to open the rear passenger door.

Franklin smiled. “How are you, Agnes?”

“Outstanding, ma’am. And you?”

“Just peachy,” the judge said. She climbed in and put her attaché case and purse on the seat beside her.

Agnes closed the door, got in the driver's seat, and turned on the car. "I don't hear that expression — 'just peachy' — too often."

Franklin laughed. "It was something my grandmother used to say."

Agnes put the car in gear and drove to the exit. "She lived in Georgia, ma'am?"

"Valdosta," Franklin said. "Pretty place."

"Had to be warmer than here," the driver said, pulling by the guard shack and out onto C Street. Snow had begun to fall.

"I heard it's going to be sixteen degrees tonight," the judge said, and involuntarily shuddered. "Older I get, the more I can't stand the cold."

"I hear you," Agnes said. She took a right on Third Street and headed south. "Days like today, I'm thinking Miami."

"I'll be there for Christmas."

"Lucky you."

"My brother bought a place and invited my sisters and their families and me."

"That's nice for you. First year after and all."

Franklin smiled sadly and nodded. "How's the divorce going, Agnes?"

"I keep telling myself I can see the finish line."

Judge Franklin looked out the window at the Christmas displays, her mind flickering with memories of the prior December, walking at night in Alexandria, admiring the lights with her late husband, Paul. *What a difference a year makes.*

"What do you think of Sue Winter's pick for attorney general?" Agnes asked.

Franklin turned, happy for the distraction and change of subject. "She made a solid choice in Malone. Impeccable record when he was U.S. attorney in Phoenix."

"I was surprised she didn't pick a woman," Agnes said.

The judge shrugged. "Sue's from Arizona and worked with Malone. And State and Defense have already gone to women."

"I say load the entire cabinet with women. The more the merrier."

Franklin chuckled. "I like the way you think."

As they crossed the Fourteenth Street Bridge, the driver asked, "Are you going to the inauguration?"

"Absolutely. Wouldn't miss it."

"What about the inaugural balls?"

Franklin looked out the window at the inky darkness of the river. "I haven't decided if I'm ready for that yet."

"Understandable, ma'am."

The judge nodded and looked at her left hand, wondering when the time would be right to take off her wedding band. It had been almost nine months now.

They drove on in silence.

Ten minutes later, Agnes turned onto Franklin's quiet street in Alexandria.

In the headlights' glare, through the snowflakes, she saw a powerfully built, short-haired blond woman running down the sidewalk in a warm-up suit with a reflective vest, a neck gaiter, a fleece headband low over orange-lens safety glasses to block the snow, and one of those hydration backpacks. As they passed her, Franklin saw she wore a headlamp as well.

Agnes pulled into the drive of Franklin's bungalow. "Home again, home again."

Franklin looked at her dark house, said, "Jiggety-jig."

Agnes left the headlights on, came around the back of the car, and opened the door. "Same time in the morning, Judge?"

"Fifteen minutes earlier, please," Franklin said, climbing out with her briefcase and purse.

“Judge Franklin!”

Both the judge and the driver turned to see the blond runner on the sidewalk just a few yards away, her headlamp aimed down and between them. She was squared off in a horse stance, gripping a pistol with a suppressor with both hands. She said something, though Franklin did not catch the words.

“Why are—” Franklin managed before the woman shot her twice, once between the eyes, once over her right eyebrow.

Agnes spun, tried to run. The woman shot her twice between the shoulder blades, then bent over and retrieved the knapsack and the four shell casings from the sidewalk. She stuffed the casings and the gun in the little pack, zipped it up, put it on. She pushed hard against the left side of her neck, felt it crack, and jogged away.

CHAPTER

3

I WAS HOME, FINISHING the dishes, when Ned Mahoney called.

Mahoney was the supervising special agent in charge of an elite FBI unit that worked high-profile investigations. I was a consultant to that unit, focusing on criminal psychology.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“We’re not going to Boston in the morning, Alex.”

“C’mon.” I groaned. “This is the third time we’ve postponed going up there.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve caught a major one. Judge Emma Franklin, only Black woman on the DC Court of Appeals, and her driver were gunned down in Franklin’s driveway in Alexandria about an hour ago. The acting director wants us on it pronto.”

Aaron Gleason, the prior FBI director, had died of a massive

stroke two days after the election. The lame-duck president had named Marcia Hamilton, a former U.S. attorney for Chicago, as acting director until the incoming president took office.

"Jesus. Text me the address. I'm on my way."

I hung up and turned around to see my wife, Bree, standing there with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face. "On your way where? And you'd better say Boston."

I held up both palms. "This is out of my control."

"This is the third time we've put it off!"

"A District Court of Appeals judge, Emma Franklin, was just gunned down in her driveway and the FBI director wants us there," I said.

Bree softened. "Franklin? Didn't her husband die recently in a plane he was piloting?"

I nodded. "Got into wind shear and went down in the Chesapeake last spring."

"This is going to set the city even more on edge than it already is with the inauguration coming up."

Before I could reply, my phone buzzed, alerting me to the text.

"Go," Bree said. "Maybe we'll get to Boston before the inauguration."

"We can only hope," I said, giving her a kiss. "Don't wait up."

"Maybe," she said, and kissed me back.

I left the kitchen and went through the dining room and down the hall, past the front room where Nana Mama, my ninety-something grandmother, was on the couch watching a documentary on rock and roll drummers. My daughter, Jannie, eighteen, a freshman at Howard University, was home after finals and sitting on the couch with her laptop. Ali, my youngest, was on the floor studying a math textbook.

Nana Mama looked over and saw me. "You ever watch this? I

guess I never knew how influential Ringo was to generations of drummers.”

“Sounds like a good one, but duty calls,” I said.

My grandmother frowned. “I thought you were going to Boston in the morning.”

“Not anymore,” I said.

“Bundle up, Dad,” Jannie said. “Gonna be freezing tonight.”

“I heard that,” I said. I went to the front hall closet and took out a down jacket, a hat, gloves, and my credentials, then retrieved my pistol in its holster from the lockbox there.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up and parked by an Alexandria police cruiser. A length of yellow tape had been stretched across the road to seal off the crime scene. Despite the cold, there were neighbors out on their porches up and down the street.

Ned Mahoney, a fireplug of a man in his late forties wearing an FBI windbreaker over a heavy jacket, was on the sidewalk in front of the bungalow looking at the bodies. Judge Franklin was on her back, slack-jawed, one bullet hole between her open eyes, another above her right eyebrow. Her briefcase and purse lay beside her.

The driver, who had been identified as thirty-seven-year-old Agnes Pearson of Bowie, Maryland, was sprawled facedown on the driveway, two bullet holes through the back of her black wool overcoat.

The car was still running.

“Pretty sharp shooting even at close range,” Mahoney said.

“Double tapper,” I said. “Casings?”

Mahoney shook his head. “Looks total pro to me.”

“Me too,” I said. “Who found her?”

“Cop said the lady across the street saw them lying here when she took her dog for a walk. I haven’t talked to her yet.”

I looked over and saw an older woman dressed for a blizzard sitting on her front porch and smoking a cigarette, a small dog in her lap.

After a criminalist arrived and photographed the scene, we shut the town car off, put on gloves, and went through the judge's purse. We found her wallet, credit cards, two hundred in cash, her cell phone, and the keys to her house.

The briefcase was unlocked. In it was a laptop, legal briefs relating to a case she was hearing, and four tickets to a Miami Heat home game against the LA Lakers on December 23.

"I think we can safely assume they weren't killed as part of a robbery," Mahoney said. "I'm going to go through the car."

"I'll talk to the lady with the dog."

The little black-and-brown shorthair dachshund wore a Christmas sweater and was snuggled in the lap of the smoker. He growled when he saw me approach.

"Hush now, Bernie," the woman said.

"I'm Alex Cross," I said. "I work with the FBI."

"Eileen Dawson," she said, then coughed. "And I know exactly where I'd start if I were investigating this."

"Where's that?"

"George Washington University Law School," she said. "Professor Willa Whelan. She hated Emma's guts, made all sorts of threats against her at a fundraiser at the Hilton not two weeks ago."

"How do you know that?"

"I was an eyewitness."

CHAPTER

4

THE ALARM ON MY phone went off at eight thirty the next morning. I'd gotten home around two. I forced myself out of bed and into the shower.

I was in the bathroom shaving when Bree came in, carrying coffee and the *Washington Post* and looking as frustrated as I'd ever seen her.

"I can't believe it," she said. "I knew we should have gone to Boston two weeks ago when we had momentum."

"What's going on?"

"He's dead."

"Who's dead?"

"Malcomb."

"C'mon!"

She showed me the headline on the front page of the paper's business section:

Reclusive Billionaire Dies in Nevada Accident

Beneath it was a picture of Ryan Malcomb, dead at the age of forty-eight. He'd founded Paladin, a data-mining company based in suburban Boston that did contract work for federal security and law enforcement agencies, including the NSA, the CIA, and the FBI.

I flashed on Malcomb, whom I'd met on several occasions, seeing him in his wheelchair explaining how his remarkable proprietary algorithms were able to sort through stupefyingly large amounts of raw data and home in on specific subjects.

"Read it to me," I said, rinsing my face.

Malcomb, the story said, had been on a sabbatical of sorts for the prior two months and had crashed his van on a remote mountain road during a snowstorm.

A graduate of MIT, Malcomb had been stricken with muscular dystrophy as a teenager, which put him in a wheelchair much of the time. He had been traveling alone around the West in a van adapted for his use, looking for ranch land to buy, and had apparently lost control of the vehicle in the remote Independence Mountains, northwest of Elko, Nevada.

Elko County sheriff's investigators said Malcomb had skidded on a notoriously bad turn and hit the guardrail; the vehicle flipped into a canyon and caught fire.

"The van's VIN and the handicap plates identified the vehicle as Malcomb's, and the billionaire's Massachusetts driver's license survived the fire in a metal wallet," Bree read. "The Elko medical examiner will take DNA samples of the remains found and

seek dental records to confirm the identity of the billionaire, as the crash victim's body was burned beyond recognition.'

"According to an Elko real estate agent, who asked not to be named because of a nondisclosure agreement with Malcomb, the day before, the entrepreneur had visited a ranch at the top of the same canyon he died in.'"

I shut off the water. "What's the company saying?"

Bree read, "'Steven Vance, the CEO of Paladin, said he and the rest of the company's four hundred employees were in shock. He added that Ryan was their visionary and that without him, there would've been no Paladin.'" Bree stopped, turned the page. "Vance also said, 'This loss is enormous. He is irreplaceable.'"

She tossed the paper onto the counter. "So that's the end of the story. M is dead. He got away with all of it."

"We still can't say Malcomb was M," I said.

"Of course he was. Who else could have run something like Maestro? Like Sampson always said, it had to be someone who had access to all sorts of law enforcement and national security files. No one had more access than Malcomb."

John Sampson, my best friend and former partner when I worked full-time at DC Metro, had taken his young daughter, Willow, to Disney World for the week. And it was true that John had been the first to suggest that Maestro must have access to top secret files. That had led to our early suspicions about the vigilante group, which was headed by a mysterious character who called himself M.

At times, M had helped us, sending us leads on various investigations. At other times, he had hindered and taunted us. And he had tried to have me and Sampson killed when we were on a wilderness rafting trip in Montana.

In the wake of that trip, Bree, who used to be DC Metro's chief

of detectives, had become obsessed with finding M and taking down Maestro.

“There’s more evidence right in that article that Malcomb was M,” she said. “He started his sabbatical two months ago, which was about the time I began suspecting him.”

That was also true. Prior to that rafting trip, M and Maestro had been involved in the killing of U.S. drug agents and the leaders of a Mexican drug cartel that had corrupted them. More recently Maestro had been behind the murders of several pedophiles and a famous fashion designer who had been involved in human trafficking. Evidence we’d gathered during those investigations had led Bree to the conclusion that M was Ryan Malcomb.

“The FBI still has to look into him,” Bree said. “We need to know for certain that he was M. Or I do, anyway.”

“Good luck,” I said, heading to the closet. “I don’t think Ned’s going to get a whole lot of traction with that idea now that Malcomb is dead and a federal judge has been murdered in a professional hit. I mean, with the inauguration coming up, this murder puts us all in the hot seat.”

CHAPTER

5

AS I'D PREDICTED, AS soon as Mahoney learned that Ryan Malcomb was dead, he decided to hold off on a deep dive into the late billionaire and his company.

"I spoke with Director Hamilton earlier," Ned told me in the car after he picked me up at home. "Franklin's case is our top priority."

"Agreed," I said. "Hard to believe Malcomb's dead, though."

"Yeah. What's a guy in a wheelchair doing up on a mountain road alone in a snowstorm, even if he's driving a handicap van?"

"The *Post* article said he was interested in buying property up there," I said. "The Independence Mountain range is mostly U.S. Forest Service land, but evidently there's a big landlocked place up there he wanted."

“All the billionaires are buying up big ranches out west. I read a piece about it in the *Wall Street Journal*. They’re all looking for hard assets.”

“Good to know for when I make a billion. Where are we going, by the way?”

“DC Metro headquarters. I contacted them first thing. They’re pulling together footage of Franklin’s car between the courthouse and her home.”

“How do they know the route?”

“Pearson, the driver, was running Waze on her phone, which was still active and linked by a USB cable to the car’s onboard computer when we arrived on the scene. We know exactly how they went to Alexandria.”

Quinn Davis, a Metro PD sergeant who specialized in video surveillance, met us in the lobby, and took us to a control room where a team of eight people were monitoring cameras all over the nation’s capital.

“We’ve got your car all the way into Alexandria,” Davis said. “No CCTV cameras in the judge’s neighborhood, though.”

“We’ll take what we can get,” Mahoney said.

Davis called up the footage. We watched the Cadillac sedan leave the courthouse parking annex, take a right on C Street, then another right onto Third. South of Pennsylvania Avenue, Third was blocked off for construction, and Pearson started driving side roads, angling west toward Fourteenth Street and the bridge to Northern Virginia.

When the town car was crossing Seventh on Madison Drive, Mahoney said, “Stop. Back it up. There.”

Davis froze the footage on the town car as it sat at the traffic light. You could see Agnes Pearson clearly in the streetlamp glow.

“See the gray Dodge Durango, three cars back?” Mahoney

said. "It's been following her three cars back and turn for turn the entire time."

"Good catch," Davis said, typing. "Let's slightly expand the time frame to include our Dodge Durango."

A few minutes later, she stopped typing, and the footage of the Cadillac town car continued along with the Durango, which stayed three or four cars back on Fourteenth Street, across the bridge, and down the George Washington Memorial Parkway to Alexandria. But when Pearson left the parkway at West Abingdon Drive, the gray Dodge SUV drove on.

"We lose the town car just ahead here," Davis said, and froze the picture.

I looked at the time stamp on the video and did the math in my head.

"We lost them at six twenty-two p.m.," I said. "It could not have taken more than three minutes for them to reach Franklin's house. Can we get cell transmissions around this time? See if there was a call from that Dodge to the killer?"

"Maybe," Mahoney said. "I'll try." His cell phone buzzed with a text. He looked at it, said, "Well, this is good."

"What's that?"

"Alexandria police canvassed the neighborhood first thing this morning. They got footage from several doorbell cameras. They've got the shooter."

"That definitely helps," I said.

"Have them send it here," Davis said, and gave him her secure email address.

"Meanwhile, can you reverse the footage?" I asked. "See if we can get a good look at the Durango's license plate?"

While Mahoney contacted the Alexandria police, Davis rolled the footage we had backward. We quickly determined by the

black lettering on a reflective white background that the plate was from Maryland. But the plate lights were dim at best. All we could make out was 9-*UU*.

Before Davis could check the Maryland DMV, the video from the Alexandria police came in. She loaded it and hit Play, and we were suddenly looking out at Judge Franklin's street from a house on the corner.

At 6:24:50 p.m., a blond woman wearing a reflective vest, headlamp, neck gaiter, safety glasses, and a small hydration pack ran by. Seconds later, at 6:24:58, the Cadillac rolled past the camera.

The footage cut to a second doorbell camera, more wide-angled than the first, positioned catty-corner to and west of Franklin's house. At 6:25:10, the Cadillac pulled into the drive at the far right of the frame. Pearson exited the car and went around the back to open Franklin's door. At 6:25:16, as Pearson passed the trunk, the runner appeared and cut diagonally across the street.

"Pack is off and in her left hand," I said.

When she hit the sidewalk, Mahoney said, "She's got a gun."

We saw the whole thing. The killer dropped the pack beside her on the sidewalk and adopted a classic combat-shooting stance, both hands on the suppressed pistol, squared off to the target and slightly crouched. She said something that caused the judge and her driver to turn, shot Franklin twice in the face and Pearson twice in the back as she tried to escape.

Then she calmly picked up the pack and her spent shells, put the gun with the shells in the pack, and put the pack back on. With her left hand, she pushed against her neck as if to crack it and jogged off at 6:25:28.

The footage ended.

"We don't know where she came from or went afterward?" I asked.

“That’s all they’ve sent us so far,” Mahoney said.

“It’s phenomenal. Just wish we could see her face without the glasses, headband, and neck gaiter. Do me a favor, Sergeant Davis?”

“Sure, Dr. Cross, anything.”

“Google ‘Professor Willa Whelan, George Washington University Law School.’”

Davis did and up popped a picture of a pretty blond woman in her forties, very fit, who was lecturing a group of students in an amphitheater. Below was a link to a faculty bio. The sergeant clicked on it and I read that, like Emma Franklin, Whelan had attended Harvard Law School; they had been in the same class. After graduation, Whelan had done a clerkship with a judge in the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, worked ten years as an assistant U.S. attorney in Little Rock, then joined the faculty of GW.

I read all the way to the bottom and smiled at the last line, which I read to the others: “‘And in her free time, Professor Whelan enjoys running and competitive shooting.’”

CHAPTER

6

BREE SAT ALONE IN the kitchen, staring at her laptop, reading more coverage of Ryan Malcomb's death, which was not as extensive as she would have expected, given that his personal wealth was in excess of four billion dollars.

She kept picking up the remote control and changing the channel on the small TV in the kitchen from one financial-news network to another. All of them were giving Malcomb's death airtime, and the reports all told the same story: a brilliant young man with physical challenges who had managed to build a powerful, ultra-secretive tech company, only to die looking for a ranch in the American West.

Bree knew Mahoney thought getting involved in Malcomb's death would be a waste of time. But she couldn't shake the feeling that they did not have the entire story.

After leaving DC Metro, Bree had been almost immediately hired by the Bluestone Group, an international investigative and security firm based in Arlington, Virginia. She no longer had the apparatus and clout of law enforcement behind her, but the move had given her the freedom to pursue leads wherever they took her.

She searched for real estate agents in Elko, Nevada, and took out her phone. On the second ring of Bree's first call, a woman picked up. "High Desert Realty," she said in a nasal voice. "Regina Everly speaking."

"Hi, Regina. I'm Bree Stone with the Bluestone Group here in Washington, DC. We have been hired to independently look into the death of Ryan Malcomb and I am trying to find the real estate agent who signed the nondisclosure agreement with him."

There was a long pause before Everly answered. In a much quieter voice, she said, "You did not hear this from me, but that would be CeCe Butler over at Nevada Ranch and Land Company."

"Regina, if I'm ever looking for real estate in Elko, you'll be the first person I call."

"Why, thank you, Ms. Stone," she said, and hung up.

Bree found the number for the Nevada Ranch and Land Company, called, and asked for CeCe Butler. Bree was told Butler wasn't in at the moment, so she left a vague message asking her to call back.

She figured it was probably common knowledge in Elko that Butler was the real estate agent who had helped Malcomb, which meant reporters knew. Bree feared the woman might not return the call, but to her surprise, twenty minutes later, she did.

"This is CeCe Butler," she said. "You're not a reporter, are you?"

"No, ma'am," Bree said. "I work for a private investigative firm

out of Washington, DC. We look into stuff all over the world for our clients.”

“Who hired you to look into Malcomb’s death?”

“That, I am not at liberty to say,” Bree said, knowing she was walking a fine line between truth and fiction.

“Uh-huh,” Butler said. “I suppose the nondisclosure agreement I signed doesn’t matter anymore, but I don’t know what I can tell you that I haven’t told the police already. He contacted me about a month ago. We went back and forth on a couple of ranches, big, big properties. But he liked the look of the Double T Ranch in the Independence Mountains, so we arranged to go see it.”

Bree said, “You drove up in his van?”

“No. We flew there from Elko in a helicopter he rented and piloted.”

“I didn’t know he was a helicopter pilot.”

“Had trouble getting in and out of it, but he was excellent once he was seated.”

Bree asked the woman what Malcomb had thought of the ranch. Butler said they’d flown all over it, and he’d loved certain aspects, like the high alpine meadows and timber. “But he was concerned it had been overgrazed,” Butler added.

“By the current owners? Who are they?” Bree said.

“A big beef conglomerate, own cattle ranches all over the world.”

“Why were they selling?”

“Who knows?” Butler said. “They probably couldn’t use it as a write-down anymore. That’s what usually happens. People come in, hold the land for ten, fifteen years, run cattle hard, take all the depreciation they can, then sell at a profit to wannabe gentlemen ranchers like Malcomb.”

“He went back up in his van,” Bree said. “Why?”

“Honestly, I have no idea,” Butler said. “He sure did not tell me he was going up there alone. I would have told him it was a bad idea in a vehicle like his with tough weather on the horizon. Patty Rogers said it was because he was from back east. You know, oblivious to the dangers out here.”

“Who’s Patty Rogers?”

“Elko County sheriff’s deputy. She was first on the scene.”

Bree thanked the real estate agent and hung up. She called the Elko sheriff’s office and asked for Deputy Rogers.

A few minutes later, a woman with a hoarse voice said, “This is Patty Rogers. How can I help you?”

Bree identified herself as the former DC chief of detectives, named her current employer, and again implied that Bluestone had been hired to look into Ryan Malcomb’s death.

“There’s nothing to look into,” the deputy said firmly. “He was an inexperienced driver on a road that is difficult on the best of days. There was two inches of wet snow on the ground, and black ice from a freeze-thaw we had about a week ago. It’s a tragedy, but he was in over his head and he paid for it.”

“I heard he was up there the day before in a helicopter that he flew himself.”

“True. With Mr. Malcomb’s physical issues and the kind of terrain involved, it’s not surprising that he wanted to view the site from the air. He would have been unable to see large pieces of the ranch otherwise because there was deep snow on the ground at higher elevations.”

“How long after the car crash was he down in the canyon before he was found?”

“Not long at all,” Rogers replied. “A guy from our county roads department was driving a dump truck and backhoe up

there to put in a culvert, and he spotted the smoke. He radioed it in. I responded. End of story. Now I need to go. I have to be on patrol in five."

"You've been so helpful, Deputy Rogers," Bree said. "Two more questions?"

She sighed. "Go on."

"Is there a ranch manager?"

"They're between managers, evidently. A caretaker lives up there during the winter, but he was visiting his ailing mother in Denver."

"And, last question, who are the ranch owners? I heard it's a beef conglomerate."

"Correct. O Casado Cattle Company. They're out of Brazil. They've owned the ranch a little over ten years."

Something about that struck Bree as odd, but she couldn't figure out what. "You've been very helpful."

"My pleasure. Can I ask who your clients are?"

Bree felt she had to give the woman something, so she said the first thing that came to mind. "Insurance company."

"Makes sense," the deputy said. "Good to know. Have a nice day, Ms. Stone."

"You too, Deputy Rogers."

They hung up. Bree went over her notes of the conversation, beginning to end, and kept coming back to the ranch owners.

O Casado. A Brazilian beef conglomerate.

She couldn't shake the sense that there was something important there, and then she saw it. With her pen, she circled the words *Brazilian beef* and added three exclamation points.