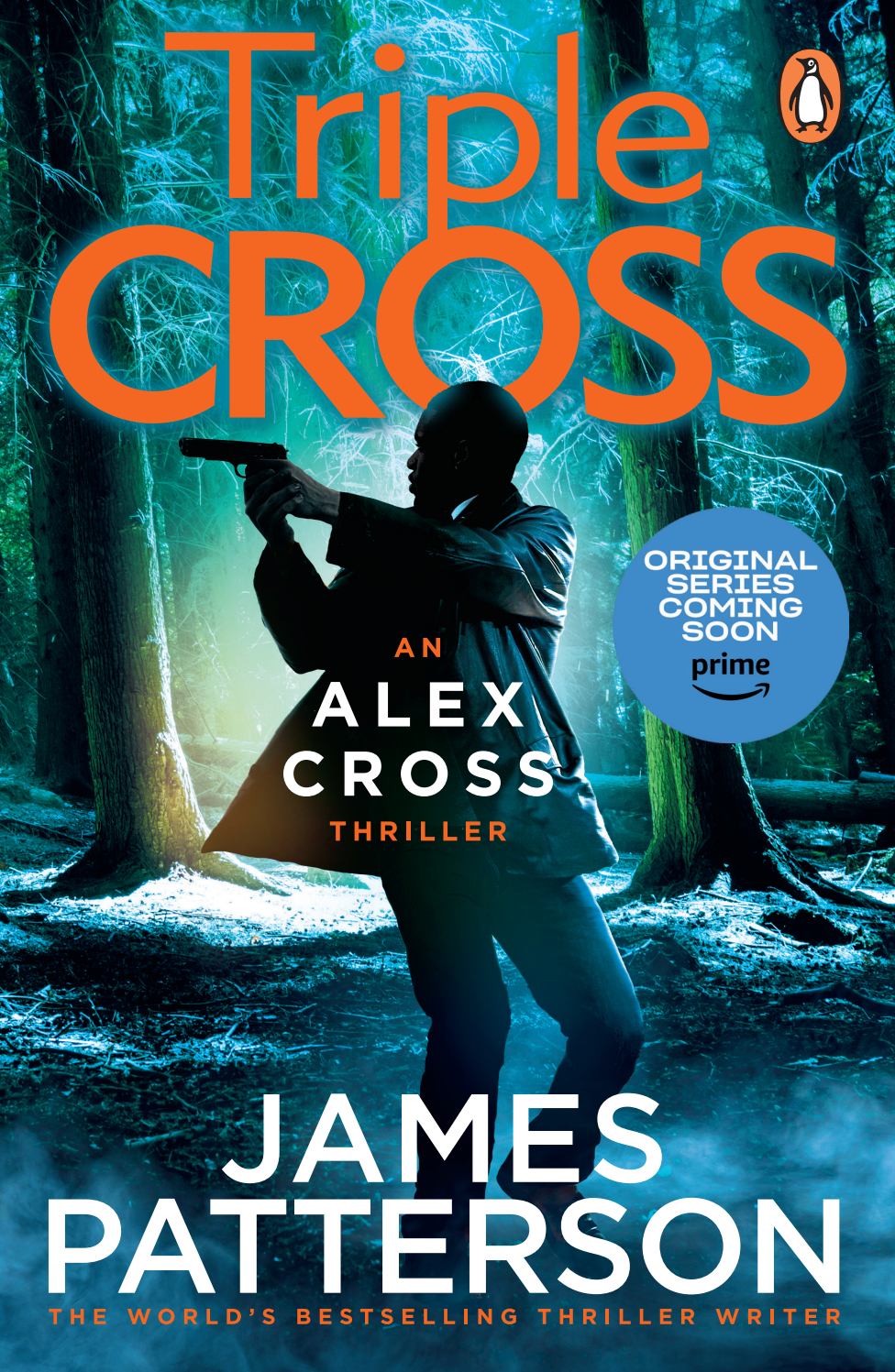
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WHO IS ALEX CROSS?

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

Alex Cross is 6 foot 3 inches (190cm), and weighs 196 lbs (89 kg). He is African American, with an athletic build.

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FAMILY HISTORY:

Cross was raised by his grandmother, Regina Cross Hope - known as Nana Mama - following the death of his mother and his father's subsequent descent into alcoholism. He moved to D.C. from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to live with Nana Mama when he was ten.

RELATIONSHIP HISTORY:

Cross was previously married to Maria, mother to his children Damon and Janelle, however she was tragically killed in a drive-by shooting. Cross has another son, Alex Jr., with Christine Johnson.

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EDUCATION:

Cross has a PhD in psychology from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, with a special concentration in the field of abnormal psychology and forensic psychology.

EMPLOYMENT:

Cross works as a psychologist in a private practice, based in his home. He also consults for the Major Case Squad of the Metro Police Department, where he previously worked as a psychologist for the Homicide and Major Crimes team.

PROFILE

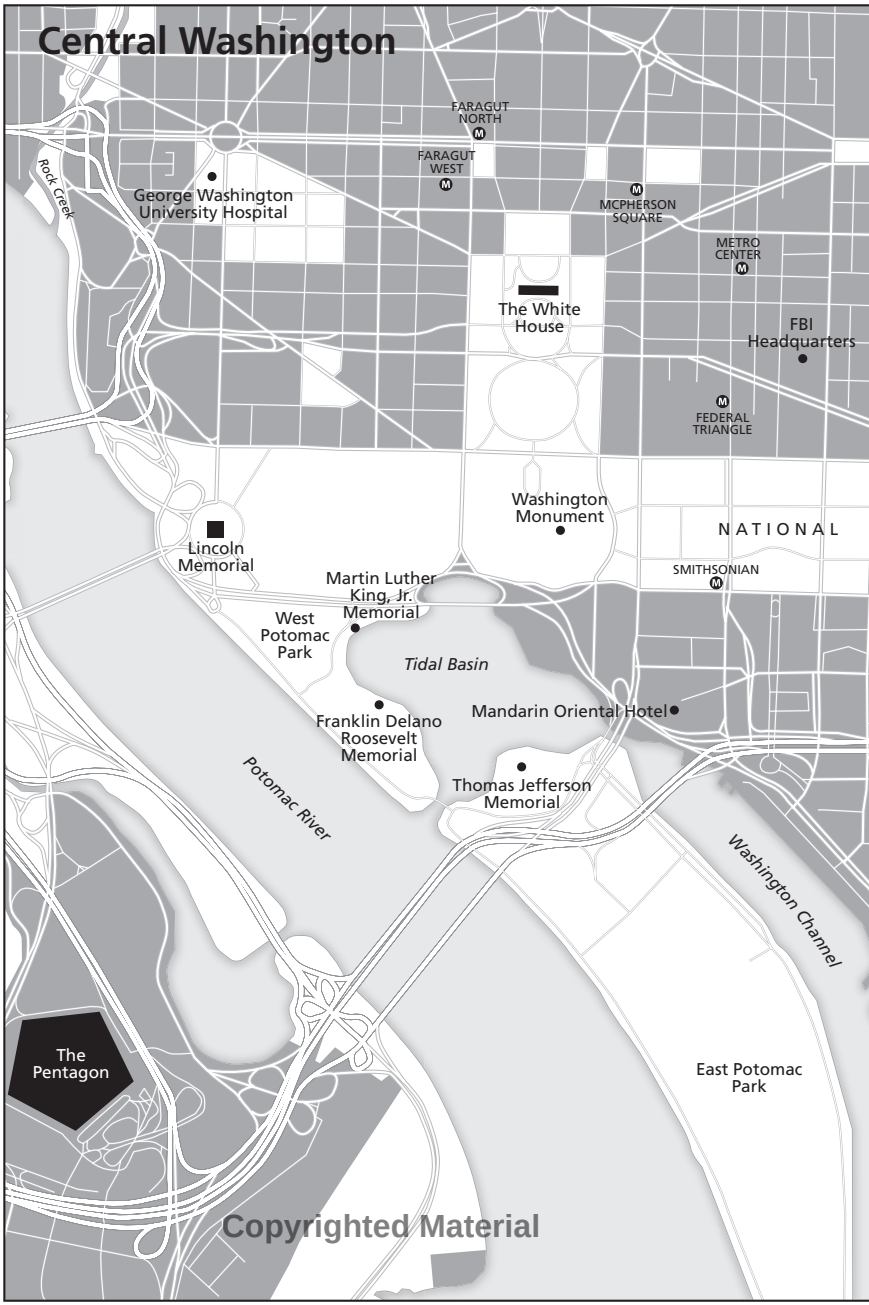
A loving father, Cross is never happier than when spending time with his family. He is also a dedicated member of his community and often volunteers at his local parish and soup kitchen. When not working in the practice or consulting for MPD, he enjoys playing classical music on the piano, reading, and teaching his children how to box.

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ONE

SUZANNE LIU LIVED FOR days like this, days when her world seemed like a great game and the sweet smell of opportunity and cash hung in the air like lavender and sage.

In her late thirties, stylishly dressed, attractive, and very tall, Liu arrived at work in Lower Manhattan two hours before her crucial first appointment. She opened the door to a corner office with dramatic views of the Hudson River, stepped inside, shut the door, and paused a moment to take it all in.

On the inner wall to Liu's left hung her diploma from Yale and a photograph of herself playing Lady Macbeth in her first and only year in the graduate program at that university's fabled drama school. She did not give them a glance.

Her attention was drawn instead to the wall to her immediate right and three framed jackets of books by mega-bestselling nonfiction writer Thomas Tull.

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Liu took a step closer to the framed jacket of Tull's most recent work, *Doctor's Orders,* which had been on the bestseller list for sixty-three weeks and showed no sign of fading anytime soon.

Liu studied Tull's author photo, and despite herself, she felt her breath and heart quicken. God, he was handsome and photogenic. His charisma seemed to jump out at you.

In his early forties, with chiseled facial features and built like a brick, Tull sported an unruly shock of sandy-brown hair. He also had piercing gray-blue eyes and a smile so easy and dazzling, it had played a big part in attracting female readers. Tull's natural good looks tended to disarm people, and Liu could not afford to be disarmed.

Not today. Not with so much at stake. My entire career, really.

That last thought almost triggered a panic attack, so Liu went quickly to her desk and put down her purse, her grande latte, and the canvas bag she used to carry manuscripts. She sat and forced herself to close her eyes and breathe deeply.

After fifteen minutes of meditating, Liu had calmed enough to focus on her intention for how the day would go.

"I made Thomas Tull," she muttered to herself. "He's mine. Tull is still mine. And no one is taking him from me."

Liu said it five times before opening her eyes and smiling. This *was* her day. She could feel it in her bones.

She took out a legal pad, and for the next hour, the editor in chief of Alabaster Publishing sipped her latte and wrote out four negotiating scenarios, every one of them involving a ridiculous number. That was what it was going to take, wasn't it? A ridiculous number. Liu was sure of that. There was no way around a ridiculous number, given Tull's repeated monstrous successes. And he'd made it clear he would entertain other offers.

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How could he not?

At eight fifteen, Bill Hardaway, the founder and publisher of Alabaster, knocked on her door and entered.

"Ready for battle?" Hardaway asked as he took a seat opposite her.

"Always, Bill," Liu said. "When have I not been a fighter?"

"Just don't bankrupt us, Suzanne."

Hardaway was in his early fifties and people tended to underestimate him because he dressed like a stodgy college professor. But while other publishing firms crashed and burned around him, he had managed to build a thriving company. Hardaway had a keen understanding of what books could touch a nerve and reach blockbuster status, but he also ran a tight ship when it came to expenses.

"What's our top number?" she asked.

Hardaway shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. But we can't afford to lose him."

"We won't, Bill," she said. "I promise you that."

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TWO

BILL HARDAWAY STOOD UP. "I'm holding you to that promise, Suzanne. Sorry I can't be here for all the horse-trading. Cynthia's got tests and I need to be there."

Hardaway's third wife was carrying twins. She was in her second trimester, and the pregnancy was considered high risk.

"Of course, Bill," Liu said. "And don't worry. I've got everything under control. You just do what you need to do, and we'll celebrate with champagne when you get back."

Hardaway left and she tried to return her focus to her legal pad. Fifteen minutes later, Liu was interrupted by another knock at the door.

Thomas Tull stuck his head in and threw a thousand-watt smile at her. "How's my favorite editor?" he asked in a teasing voice.

Feeling a little rattled, Liu got to her feet. "You're forty minutes early, Thomas."

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"Because I knew you'd be here already, and as you might imagine, my day's full as well," Tull said. He came over to her, took her hands, and blew a Euro-kiss past each cheek. "You look stunning as always, Suzanne."

Liu tried to ignore the little thrill that went through her and said, "And you're looking better than ever. How often do you bleach those teeth?"

He grinned. "No need. Good genes."

"Something to drink?" she asked as they both sat down.

"I'm fine," he said. "Bill going to join us?"

"Cynthia's going in for tests. He left me to deal with you."

Tull laughed. "Okay, then. As soon as we finish here, I'll e-mail you a detailed proposal for the next book. But it's about the Family Man murders going on down in the Washington, DC, area."

Liu had heard of them, of course. Who hadn't? "You on the inside?" she asked.

"I will be shortly," he said. "I've already been down there several times doing research. Every time I leave, I wonder why. The story's gotten hold of me, Suzanne, and you know what that means."

She did. Tull favored total immersion in his subjects. When he got into that kind of all-encompassing state, he came up with a remarkable story, the kind that few readers ever forgot.

"I do," Liu said. "I've been with you all the way, haven't I?"

"Not all the way," he said.

"No one else would give you an offer on *Electric,* Thomas."

He chuckled. "Look who benefited from one of the all-time-lowball advances."

"We all benefited," Liu said, shifting in her chair. "As I remember, you bought a Tesla with the first royalties. The fact remains that we stepped up. We made you."

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Tull's good cheer faded. "*I* made me, Suzanne. You and Bill helped. And I'm forever grateful. But your offer has to reflect the market and the interest in my work. I'll expect your best offer for world rights by five."

"World rights?" she said. "Best offer?"

"No negotiations; I want it to be clean," he said, getting to his feet. "I want a home and a partner and clear income for the next few years. And I want it to be simple."

"This is simple, and you've got a partner," she said, feeling anxious as she followed him to the door.

"We'll see," he said, blowing a kiss past each cheek again. "May the best editor and publishing house win. And remember, this isn't personal. It's business. I love you and Bill no matter what."

"Of course," she said, putting on a brave smile. "Good luck."

Tull grinned and walked off, looking at his phone. "I'm sending you that proposal now. I'd read it soon if I were you," he called over his shoulder.

"Right away," she said and hurried to her desk.

An hour later, Liu shook her head in admiration and a little awe. How did Tull always manage to find the powerful angle? How did he get so many people to speak to him? Even the people with something to lose!

Her cell rang.

"Sorry I didn't call earlier," Hardaway said. "Cynthia's been admitted and the wing she's in at Lenox Hill has zero service."

"Admitted? I thought she was just getting some tests."

"She was until she started bleeding." The publisher sighed. "Right there in the ob-gyn's office. It's touch and go."

"Oh God," Liu said. "I'm so sorry, Bill. I'm praying for her and you."

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"I'll take the prayers," he said. "How was Tull?"

"Smug," she said. "But he has a right to be. The proposal is dynamite, blockbuster material as strong as the others. Maybe stronger."

"I wish we could clone him," he said and then paused. "Hold on."

The editor waited, tapping her pencil, looking at her legal pad and her negotiating strategies. They would have to be adjusted in light of—

"Suzanne, I have to go," Bill said. "It's not good."

"I'm sorry, Bill," she said. "But I need some guidance here. He wants—"

"I trust you," he said. "Make your best call and keep him in the fold."

He hung up.

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THREE

AT SIX THAT EVENING, Liu kicked off her heels and began pacing again.

She'd been doing it off and on since sending Tull Alabaster's formal offer, which she'd made without Hardaway's final approval because she hadn't heard from the publisher since that morning.

Even her texts had gone unanswered.

It's a good offer, the editor thought, ignoring the beautiful sunset over the Hudson. *No, it's a great offer for world rights. And we made him.* I *made him. Rescued him when there were no other offers. He'll take that into account, won't he?*

An hour passed. It was dark. She could hear other employees calling it a day and leaving.

Liu looked at Tull's framed book covers once again: *Electric, Noon in Berlin, Doctor's Orders.*

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Every one of them had sold millions of copies, even *Electric,* which he'd written while an older undergraduate student at Harvard after a stint as a military police investigator with the Marines and NCIS.

"I was the only one who saw your talent back then," Liu whispered to Tull's most recent author photo. "You owe me, Thomas. You owe me big-time. And it's a great offer. No one will be more generous than me. You know that. I've given you everything, haven't I? You know I—"

Her cell phone buzzed. She walked over, saw a message from Tull.

"You're mine, Thomas," she said, opening the text.

Liu's stomach began to drop even before he'd stated it plainly.

"No," she whispered. "That's not right."

Anger surged up through her and she punched in Tull's number. The call went straight to voice mail. "Call me," she said. "You've got to allow me some time to counter. I can't—"

The line went dead. The editor stared at her phone, her anger turning to the kind of rage only a scorned woman knows.

"No, no, no," she said, punching in the number again. The line disconnected after one ring.

Liu grabbed her coat and shoes. "This is not happening! You are not ghosting me, Thomas Tull! You owe me!"

The editor charged out her door and down the hall, muttering, "He's at the Ritz. Thomas always stays at the Ritz. He'll be at the bar and—"

Glass shattered. A voice roared in pain from the office on the opposite corner of the building, near the elevators.

Liu stopped and stared; she heard choking noises coming through the open door. She hurried over and saw Hardaway sitting at his desk, hunched over and sobbing.

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"Bill?" she said, the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach growing. "What's happened?"

The publisher looked up at her, ruin in his face and rheumy eyes. "They're gone," he said hoarsely. "Both stillborn."

"No," she moaned, stepping into his office. "You must be crushed. Cynthia?"

"In shock," he said. "We're both in shock. It was our last chance to have kids and…she's sedated. I want to be."

Liu swallowed. "Bill, I know this isn't the time to talk about the offer I made."

Hardaway stared at her blankly. "How much?"

"It doesn't matter," Liu said. "He didn't take it."

He blinked. "Tell me that's not true."

"He took a higher offer. One book. Eleven point two million for world rights."

"Eleven point two?" the publisher said, sounding stunned. "Well, that's…why didn't you offer twelve?"

"Twelve million?" she said angrily. "We'd have to sell almost a million and a half copies in hardcover to make that—"

"So what?" Hardaway snapped, red-faced. He got to his feet. "You should have counteroffered it."

"There were no counteroffers heard, Bill," she said. "His terms. Make the best offer by five, that's it, winner takes all. I tried to tell you that this morning and—"

"What was your best offer?"

"Ten."

"Ten?" he shouted and then shot her a disgusted look. "Were you trying to insult him? Drive him out? The man who made your career and this house? The man you still have—"

"No, I don't," Liu shouted back, cutting him off. "And *we*

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made *him,* Bill. Not the other way around. I thought ten million was insanely generous. I thought—"

"You thought wrong," Hardaway roared. "You lost the golden goose on the worst day of my life, Suzanne! For that, you're fired!"

"Fired?" she said, shocked into a whisper. "Bill, you can't—"

"I just did," he said coldly. "Get your things and clear out. I need new blood in here before everything around me dies."

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CHAPTER

1

A WALL OF RHODODENDRON bushes prevented anyone in the neighborhood from seeing the interior of the compound: a rambling white Cape with dark green shutters and a four-bay carriage house set on three landscaped acres.

Though it was dark now, the killer the media had recently dubbed "the Family Man" knew everything beyond the rhododendrons was picture-perfect. The lawns were lush and cut so precisely, they looked like green jigsaw-puzzle pieces set amid flower gardens ablaze with spring glory and color.

The sprinkler system goes on at four, Family Man thought, glancing at the phone. Two a.m. *More than enough time.*

With latex-gloved hands, the killer started the book-size Ozonics ozone machine attached to a belt, tugged up the hood of the black hazmat suit, and donned a respirator mask and

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night-vision goggles. Family Man padded across one piece of jigsaw lawn to a walkway and the junction box of the alarm system.

It was disabled in six minutes.

Around the back, by the pool, the killer went to a bulkhead. It opened on well-oiled hinges.

The Schlage dead bolt on the basement door was no match for the technician's skills. It turned in under a minute.

After two careful steps, then three, Family Man halted inside and listened a moment before peering around the basement. The floor was bare. The wall cubbies and shelves, however, were filled with artifacts of a suburban family, stacked and organized like a Martha Stewart dream.

The killer started up the stairs, knowing that on the other side of the door lay a short hall and the kitchen. And a dog, an aging Labrador retriever named Mike.

At the door, Family Man reached through a Velcro slit in the hazmat suit, took out a baggie containing a cheese-and-anchovy ball, opened the door, tossed in the bait, and closed the door with a loud click.

The killer stood there, taking slow breaths with long pauses and listening to the sound of dog nails clicking on hardwood floors. The ozone machine purred, destroying all human odor.

Mike snuffled at the door, clicked over, and slurped down the treat.

Fifteen minutes later, Family Man eased open the door and stepped into the main house, hearing the loud ticking of the grandfather clock in the front hall and the snoring of the dog lying just a few feet away. Swinging the night-vision goggles around, the killer took in the particulars of the kitchen.

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Huge stainless-steel Coldspot fridge and freezer. Six-burner Aga stove. Double sink on the prep island. Copper pots hanging from the ceiling. Italian espresso machine.

These details counted, didn't they? Of course they did. They were the essence of it all.

Satisfied that things were going according to plan, Family Man shrugged off a small pack, retrieved a pistol, and began the evening's real work.

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CHAPTER

2

THE PISTOL, A GLOCK, was chambered in .40 caliber and fitted with a sound suppressor. Family Man liked the balance it gave the weapon.

The master suite, which lay beyond the kitchen and the great room, was so neat it looked like a crew of maids had just finished cleaning. The leather furniture was showroom new. The rows of books on the shelves appeared unread.

It could be a stage set, the killer thought, easing open another door to reveal an anteroom and a huge walk-in closet.

To the right of the anteroom lay the bathroom. Beyond a pocket door to the left, Family Man knew, Roger and Sue Carpenter were deep asleep, aided by the hissing of a white-noise app.

The couple didn't hear the pocket door sliding back or the Family Man slipping across the carpet to the right side of a

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four-poster bed. Mr. Carpenter, an attorney with boyish good looks, lay on his back with his forearm across his eyes, which made things easier.

Once, long ago, the killer had heard a Navy SEAL commander describe the perfect up-close execution with the word *canoe*. It meant shooting someone high in the head so that the bullet left the shape of a canoe bottom as it passed through the top of the skull.

Family Man canoed Carpenter through the forehead. His wife stirred at the thud of the silenced shot.

By the time the killer got around the bed to a WASPish-looking blonde in her thirties, she was half awake, her eyes open but puzzled.

"Roger?" she asked sleepily.

"Shhh," Family Man said and shot her from two feet away.

She died instantly, but blood splashed off the headboard and spattered the upper chest and arms of the killer's hazmat suit. A few drops hit the night-vision goggles.

Family Man plucked a tissue from the box beside the dead housewife and dabbed at the goggles until the view was clear again. The tissue fell on the bloody pillow next to Mrs. Carpenter.

The killer slid the pocket door back into place, walked through the great room and kitchen, stepped over the snoring Mike, and found the door to the mother-in-law apartment.

Pearl Naylor, Mrs. Carpenter's mother, was a light sleeper and spry for seventy-eight. She rolled in bed and almost got her bony finger on the light switch, which would have sent blinding light through the goggles and might have changed the course of the night.

But before the old woman could flip the switch, Family Man

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shot her through the upper left side of her skull. She sagged off the bed, her legs caught in the sheets and blankets.

A few moments later, the killer exited Mrs. Naylor's apartment and paused a moment before climbing the stairs.

Despite the Family Man's training and experience, children were always the hardest.

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CHAPTER

3

MY NAME IS ALEX CROSS. I am an investigative consultant for the Washington, DC, Metro Police, where I was a homicide detective for many years, and for the FBI, where I was once a member of the Bureau's Behavioral Science Unit, the team that hunts serial killers and other bringers of doom and mayhem.

I felt like I was tracking one of those dark beings when I got out of my car in a swank neighborhood in Chevy Chase, Maryland, not far from the nation's capital. Blue lights flashed on two state police cruisers blocking the road.

John Sampson pulled in behind me in an unmarked squad car. A first-rate detective in Metro PD homicide, Sampson was also my oldest friend.

"I thought this was over," he said.

"Dreams dashed," I replied.

An FBI forensics van arrived before we even got to the yellow

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tape and the cruisers. A hundred yards ahead, two more cruisers were parked, lights flashing, cutting off traffic from that direction. Beyond them, the first satellite-news van was pulling in.

"And the games begin again," Sampson said.

"This is the sickest game I've ever heard of," I said angrily, showing my identification to the troopers.

Once we were beyond the police barrier, Sampson said, "We know numbers?"

I shook my head. "The maid saw the grandmother and backed out."

A short man in his mid-forties with sandy hair and wearing a blue FBI windbreaker came down the driveway toward us.

"You been inside?" Sampson asked.

"Waiting for you," said Ned Mahoney, FBI special agent in charge. "You're the only ones who've been to all the earlier crime scenes, and I wanted your eyes on the place first. See if Family Man has finally made a mistake."

"Hope springs eternal," I said. We walked up the driveway and saw a white Porsche Cayenne in one bay of the carriage house and a red Corvette in another.

"Big money?" Sampson said.

"The whole neighborhood is big money," Mahoney said.

"What's the maid's story?" I asked.

Mahoney said she'd arrived at six a.m., her normal time, and came in through the kitchen door to find the family dog whining. After feeding the dog, she went into the mother-in-law's apartment, also her routine.

"The maid saw grandma and got so upset, she had chest pain and couldn't breathe after she called 911," Ned said. "She's in the ER with a uniformed officer now."

We put on hazmat suits, blue booties, latex gloves, surgical

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masks, and hairnets so as not to contaminate the house with our own DNA.

The assassin the media had dubbed "the Family Man" had attacked twice before in the DC area, and twice before, we and a great team of forensic investigators had scoured the crime scenes top to bottom and did not come up with a single strand of DNA that did not belong to the victims or their immediate families or friends.

There had been no unidentified fingerprints either. And no footprints. No alarms triggered. No signs of tinkering at the locks. And the killer had left no witnesses and no suspicious footage of any kind on the security cameras in the surrounding areas.

Mahoney adjusted his mask and said, "Let's go catch the perfect killer."

"There's no such thing," I said.

"I don't know, Alex," Sampson said. "He hasn't thrown a ball off the plate yet."

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CHAPTER

4

I HAD GROWN TO hate entering the Family Man's crime scenes.

In my line of work, it was normal to come upon a murdered adult. It was all too common to encounter multiple victims. And while it was always shocking and disheartening to face slain children, it wasn't unusual.

But it was almost unheard of to find three and sometimes four generations of a single family murdered, one after another, in the same house over the course of the same night. So far, the killer had given no reason, left no note, offered no insight whatsoever into his mind.

It enraged me and everyone else assigned to the case. Indeed, as we went into the house, I could see grim anger in the faces of every agent, detective, and forensics expert on hand.

Who shoots old people and children like that? With no emotion? And why? Goddamn it, why?

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I had never seen anything like this case. The killings were all cold, technical, no signs of passion or obsession.

The seven newest victims—Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter, Granny Pearl, twelve-year-old twins Alice and Mary, nine-year-old Nick, and five-year-old Alan—had all been executed the same way the others had: shot at close range through the upper part of the skull.

Seeing the victims angered me even more, especially the kids, particularly the boys. Nick was a year younger than my son Ali, and Nick's younger brother, Alan, had cerebral palsy. Mahoney and Sampson were equally shocked.

"What kind of sick, unfeeling bastard executes a special-needs kid?" Ned said.

"Or the grandmother of a special-needs kid?" Sampson said.

Those questions spun in my mind as I tried to suppress my anger and see the crime scene on its own and in relation to the others.

"A careful, sick, unfeeling bastard," I replied. "I think he did it bottom to top—mom and dad first, grandma second, the four kids last."

"Makes sense," Mahoney said. "Biggest threats first."

I nodded. "And he polices his brass as he goes."

Sampson said, "The more I think about the lack of DNA evidence in the other cases and probably here, the more I figure he's got to be dressed like us."

"You mean in PPE?" I said.

"It's the only explanation I can come up with," he said. "I mean, we're seeing no signs of recent cleaning up here."

Mahoney said, "The maid says Mrs. Carpenter was a neat freak, so we might not know if he cleaned anything."

"PPE, I'm telling you," Sampson said. "Gloves plus gown plus hairnet plus mask plus eye protection equals no DNA."

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"I think we should operate on that assumption until proven otherwise," I said. "And I need to get out of this gear for a bit. I'm getting claustrophobic."

"Let's take a break," Mahoney said. "Get forensics in here."

We left by the back door and stood by the pool stripping off our protective equipment, feeling renewed outrage at these deaths and a little defeated by the lack of evidence around them.

"However he's dressed, he's a pro," I said. "Gotta be."

"Hundred percent trained assassin," Mahoney said, nodding.

"I agree," Sampson said. "If he were an ordinary sicko, he might have done it in a different way each time and then hung around to play a little. This guy is on a mission, in and out. Absolutely ruthless. I mean, again, who shoots a special-needs kid?"

"Someone who's getting his own needs met," Ned said as he waved to a crew of FBI techs waiting to enter the house.

I said, "Sure, but what needs? What does he get out of this? He's certainly not doing it for jollies."

Sampson shrugged. "Money? Power? Revenge?"

"Maybe," I said. "But there were no connections whatsoever between the Hodges family and the Landau family, and I doubt the Carpenter family will break that pattern. What links them? How does he choose his victims? What's his motivation? We're no closer to knowing that than we were a year ago when these killings started."

"Then we need to work harder," Sampson said, looking down the driveway at a growing crowd of neighbors across the street. "Go back to basics. Pound some shoe leather until something gives."

"I'm with you," I said. "Let's go."

Mahoney said, "I'm staying put. Let me know what the locals say."

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We walked down the driveway and across the street to the police tape, behind which about twenty people were gathered. The media was being kept off to the left.

Sampson and I knew several of the reporters, and they began shouting at us. But we ignored them, split up, and tried to talk to the neighbors, who were upset and firing more questions at us than we were at them.

When we informed them that the entire Carpenter family was gone, several of the women broke down sobbing. Carrie Baldwin, who lived up the street and claimed she and Sue Carpenter had been BFFs, almost fainted in her husband's arms when we confirmed that Alan had also been murdered in cold blood.

"Our son's going to be devastated," Carrie said when she'd calmed down enough to talk. "Stuart has special needs too. They…they were the best of pals."

"Any reason someone would target the family for murder like this?" I asked.

"Sue was a saint," Carrie said, genuinely bewildered. "When my Stuart was born, she was the first one who reached out. She was always like that, looking out for others. People loved that family, all of them."

Baldwin's husband, Max, tilted his head and said, "Well, for the most part."

I looked at him. He was dressed for a tennis outing. "How's that?"

"Roger was a high-dollar divorce attorney," Max said. "Super-nice dude here at home, but he had a reputation for tearing husbands' throats out in family court."

"Max!" his wife said. "Don't speak ill of the dead!"

"Hey, it's true, Carrie," Max said. "Two guys in my office?

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Their ex-wives hired Roger. They said dealing with him was like being examined by an angry proctologist."

"What?" his wife said.

"Think about it a little, Carrie," Max said. He turned to me. "You want a list of suspects? Start looking at all the poor bastards Carpenter took to the cleaners."

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CHAPTER

5

THE WEATHER COULD NOT have been more perfect for a mid-April evening: temperature in the mid-seventies, low humidity. My wife, Bree Stone, and I decided to sit out on the front porch until dinner.

Bree used to be the chief of detectives for Metro PD and now worked for a private security company. Along with Sampson and Mahoney, Bree was who I went to when I was trying to figure out a case or when I wanted a different perspective on things.

After I'd described the investigation's initial findings, Bree said, "It's a little extreme to kill an entire family because of a lousy divorce settlement, don't you think?"

"More than extreme," I said. "And my gut says that's not the motive for these killings. There's no link that I know of to a bad divorce or divorce attorney in the Hodges or the Landau

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cases. Hodges was a petroleum lobbyist. Landau was a pilot for Delta."

"What about the wives?" Bree asked.

"Mrs. Carpenter was evidently devoted to her children and did volunteer work, a pillar of the community. Mrs. Hodges taught school in Falls Church. Mrs. Landau was a CPA in DC. If there's a common link, I'm not seeing it."

From behind the blooming vines that shielded one end of the porch, a voice called out, "Maybe it's their kids, Dad."

Bree moaned her displeasure.

"Ali?" I said, crossing my arms.

My youngest came around where we could see him. Smiling, his dirty hands chopping the air, he said, "Think about it! They probably went to the same summer camp or had swimming lessons together, or maybe they were in the same Sunday school. I'm telling you, it's the kids."

Bree, who did not approve of Ali's obsessive interest in our cases, said, "How long have you been eavesdropping, young man?"

Ali's face fell. "I wasn't eavesdropping."

"What would you call it?" I asked.

"Weeding Nana Mama's herb garden like she asked me to?"

I looked at Bree, who sighed.

I said, "You know the cases we work on are confidential."

Ali nodded. "I'm not telling anyone anything."

"That's not really the point, pal," I said. "I'd be in a heap of trouble if it got out at the Bureau or inside Metro that I shared information about an ongoing case with a ten-year-old, even one as sharp as you."

He frowned. "I'm almost eleven. And you're saying I shouldn't weed for Nana?"

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