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KISS THE GIRLS

In 1993, James Patterson wrote *Along Came a Spider*, which introduced the world to Alex Cross, a young detective working out of Washington, DC. Since then, every Alex Cross thriller has been an international bestseller. *Kiss the Girls* is the second novel in this extraordinary series.

James Patterson is the author of other bestselling series, including the Women's Murder Club, Michael Bennett and Private novels. James has donated millions in grants to independent bookshops and has been the most borrowed adult author in UK libraries for the past fourteen years in a row. He lives in Florida with his family.

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Why everyone loves James Patterson and Alex Cross

'It's no mystery why James Patterson is the world's most popular thriller writer. Simply put: **nobody does it better**.'
Jeffery Deaver

'No one gets this big without **amazing natural storytelling** talent – which is what Jim has, in spades. The Alex Cross series proves it.'
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'James Patterson is **The Boss**. End of.'
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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.

RECORDED - 105
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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

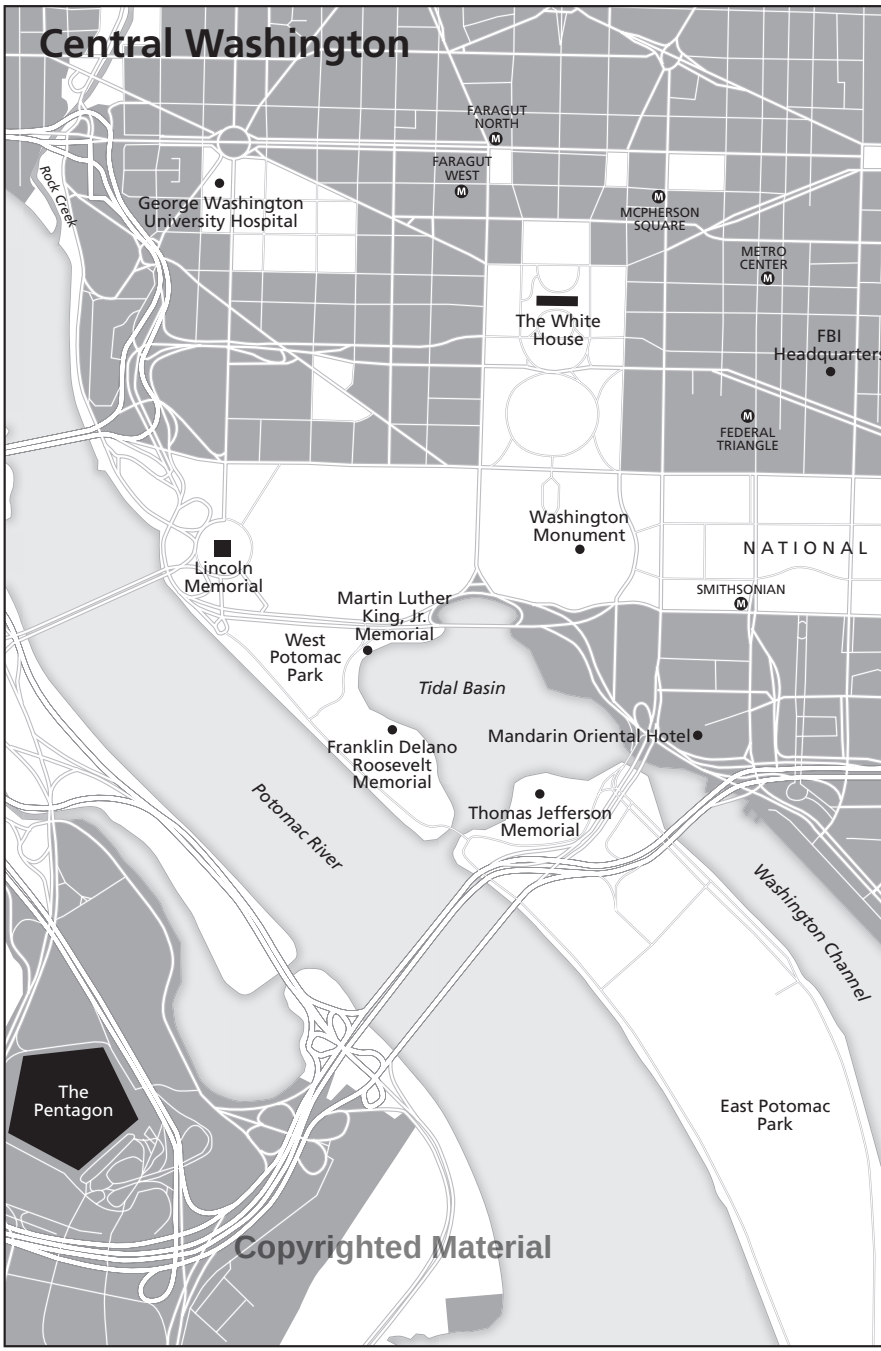
A loving father, Cross is never happier than when spending time with his family. He is also a dedicated member of his community and often volunteers at his local parish and soup kitchen. When not working in the practice or consulting for MPD, he enjoys playing classical music on the piano, reading, and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

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KISS THE GIRLS



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PROLOGUE

PERFECT CRIMES

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Casanova

Boca Raton, Florida, June 1975

FOR THREE weeks, the young killer actually lived *inside the walls* of an extraordinary fifteen-room beach house.

He could hear the whispery Atlantic surf outside, but he was never tempted to look out at the ocean or the private white-sand beach that stretched to three hundred feet or more along the shore. There was too much to explore, to study, to accomplish, from his hiding place inside the dazzling Mediterranean-revival-style house in Boca. His pulse hadn't stopped hammering for days.

Four people lived in the huge house: Michael and Hannah Pierce and their two daughters. The killer spied on the family in the most intimate ways, and at their most intimate moments. He loved all the little things about the Pierces, especially Hannah's delicate seashell collection and the fun fleet of teak sailboats that hung from the ceiling in one of the guest rooms.

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He watched the elder daughter, Coty, day *and* night. She attended St. Andrews High School with him. She was stunning. No girl in school was as beautiful or as smart as Coty. He was also keeping his eye on Karrie Pierce. She was only thirteen, but already a budding fox.

Although he was more than six feet tall, he easily fit into the air-conditioning ducts of the house. He was wire thin and hadn't started to fill out yet. The killer was handsome in an Eastern preppy way.

Stashed in his hiding place were a handful of dirty novels, highly erotic books he had found during fevered shopping trips to Miami. He had become addicted to *The Story of O*, *School Girls in Paris*, and *Voluptuous Initiations*. He also kept a Smith and Wesson revolver in the walls with him.

He went in and out of the house through a casement window in the cellar that had a broken latch. Sometimes he even slept down there, behind an old, gently purring Westinghouse refrigerator, where the Pierces kept extra beer and soda pop for their gala parties, which often ended with a bonfire on the beach.

Truth be told, he was feeling a little extra weird that night in June, but nothing to worry about. No problems.

Earlier in the evening, he had handpainted his body in bright streaks and splashes of cherry red, orange, and cadmium yellow. He *was* a warrior; a hunter.

He huddled with his chrome-plated .22-caliber revolver, flashlight, and grope-books in the ceiling over Coty's bedroom. Right on top of her, so to speak.

Tonight was the night of nights. The beginning of everything that really mattered in his life.

He settled in and began to reread favorite passages from

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School Girls in Paris. His pocket flashlight cast a dim light on the pages. The book was definitely a major turn-on, but also a big yuk. It was about a "respectable" French lawyer who paid a buxom headmistress to let him spend nights inside a hotsy-totsy boarding school for girls. The story was filled with the hokiest language: "his silver-tipped ferrule," "his faithless truncheon," "he gamahuched the ever-willing schoolgirls."

After a while he got tired of reading, and peeked at his wristwatch. It was time now, almost 3:00 A.M. His hands were shaking as he put the book aside and peered through the cross-hatching of the grill.

He could barely catch his breath as he watched Coty in bed. The very real adventure was now before him. Just as he had imagined it.

He savored a thought: *My real life is about to begin. Am I really going to do this? Yes, I am! . . .*

He was *definitely* living in the walls of the Pierce beach house. Soon that nightmarish, eerie fact would dominate the front page of every major newspaper throughout the United States. He could hardly wait to read the *Boca Raton News*.

THE BOY IN THE WALLS!

THE KILLER WHO ACTUALLY LIVED IN THE WALLS OF A FAMILY'S HOUSE!

A STARK-RAVING HOMICIDAL MANIAC COULD BE LIVING IN YOUR HOUSE!

Coty Pierce was sleeping like the most beautiful little girl. She had on an oversized University of Miami Hurricanes T-shirt, but it had moved up and he could see the pink silk bikini panties underneath.

She slept on her back, one sunbrowned leg crossed over the other. Her pouty mouth was just slightly open, forming the

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tiniest *o*, and she looked all innocence and light from his vantage point.

She was almost a full-grown woman now. He'd watched her preen in front of the wall mirror just a few hours before. Watched her take off her pink lacy push-up bra. Watched her as she stared at her perfect breasts.

Coty was unbearably haughty and *untouchable.* Tonight he was going to change all that. He was going to take her.

Carefully, silently, he removed the metal grill in the ceiling. Then he crawled out of the wall and down into Coty's sky-blue-and-pink bedroom. His chest felt constricted, and his breathing was quick and labored. One minute he felt hot, the next he was shivering and cold.

Two small plastic trash bags covered his feet and were secured around his ankles, and he wore the light blue rubber gloves that the Pierces' maid used for housecleaning.

He felt like a sleek Ninja warrior and looked like Terror itself with his naked handpainted body. The perfect crime. He loved the feeling.

Could this be a dream? No, he *knew* it wasn't a dream. This was the real deal. He was actually going to do this! He took a deep breath and felt a burning inside his lungs.

For a brief moment, he studied the peaceful young girl he'd admired so many times at St. Andrews. Then he quietly slipped into bed with the one-and-only Coty Pierce.

He took off a rubber glove and gently caressed her perfect, sun-bronzed skin. He pretended that he was smoothing coconut-scented suntan oil all over Coty. He was rock-hard already.

Her long blond hair was sunbleached and felt as soft as rabbit's fur. It was thick and beautiful and smelled forest-clean, like balsam. *Yes, dreams do come true.*

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Coty suddenly popped open her eyes. They were shiny emerald green gems, and they looked like priceless jewels from Harry Winston's in Boca.

She breathlessly said his name—the name she knew him by at school. But he had given himself a new name; he'd *named* himself, recreated himself.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped. "How did you get in?"

"Surprise, surprise. I'm *Casanova*," he whispered against her ear. His pulse was racing off the charts. "I chose you from all the beautiful girls in Boca Raton, in all of Florida. Aren't you pleased?"

Coty started to scream. "Shush now," he said, and smothered her small lovely mouth with his own. With a loving kiss.

He also kissed Hannah Pierce on that unforgettable evening of mayhem and murder in Boca Raton.

Shortly after, he kissed thirteen-year-old Karrie.

Before he was finished for the night, he knew that he really was Casanova—the world's greatest lover.

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The Gentleman Caller

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, May 1981

HE WAS the perfect *Gentleman*. Always a *Gentleman*. Always unobtrusive and polite.

He thought about that as he listened to the two lovers talking in sibilant whispers as they strolled near University Lake. It was all so dreamily romantic. It was so right for him.

"Is this a good idea, or is this too dumb for words?" he heard Tom Hutchinson ask Roe Tierney.

They were maneuvering into a teal blue rowboat that was gently rocking alongside a long dock on the lake. Tom and Roe were going to "borrow" the boat for a few hours. Sneaky college mischief.

"My great-granddaddy says drifting downstream in a rowboat doesn't count against your life span," Roe said. "It's a great idea, Tommy. Let's go for it."

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Tom Hutchinson started to laugh. "What if you do other things in said boat?" he asked.

"Well, if that includes aerobics of any sort, it might actually extend your life span." Roe's skirt rustled against her smooth thighs as she crossed her legs.

"Then stealing off in these nice people's boat for a moonlight ride is a good idea," said Tom.

"*Great* idea." Roe held her ground. "The best. Let's do it."

As their rowboat left the dock, the Gentleman slipped into the water. He made no sound. He listened to every word, every movement, and every nuance of the lovers' fascinating courting ritual.

There was almost a full moon, and it looked serene and beautiful to Tom and Roe as they slowly paddled out into the glistening lake. Earlier in the evening they had gone out for a romantic dinner in Chapel Hill, and they were both dressed to the hilt. Roe had on a pleated black skirt, a cream-colored silk blouse, silver shell earrings, and her roommate's dress pearls. Perfect boating attire.

The Gentleman's best guess was that Tom Hutchinson didn't even own the gray suit that he had on. Tom came from Pennsylvania. He was an auto mechanic's son who had made it to captain of the Duke football team, and had also managed to keep a grade index bordering on 4.0.

Roe and Tom were the "golden couple." It was just about the only thing that students from Duke and the nearby University of North Carolina could agree on. The "scandal" of Duke's football captain dating Carolina's Azalea Queen made the romance even spicier.

They fumbled with uncooperative buttons and zippers as they slowly drifted on the lake. Roe would up wearing only

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her earrings and the borrowed dress pearls. Tom had on his white shirt, but it was open all the way, making a kind of tent as he went inside Roe. Under the moon's watchful eye, they began to make love.

Their bodies moved smoothly as the boat rocked gently and playfully. Roe made tiny moaning sounds, which intermingled with a chorus of cicadas playing shrilly in the distance.

The Gentleman felt a column of rage welling up inside him. His dark side was bursting through: the brutal, repressed animal, the modern-day werewolf.

Suddenly, Tom Hutchinson flopped out of Roe Tierney with a tiny *thup.* Something powerful was pulling him out of the boat. Before he hit the water, Roe heard him yell. It was a strange noise that sounded like *yaaagghh.*

Tom swallowed lake water and gagged violently. There was a terrible pain and stinging in his throat, localized pain, but very intense and frightening.

Then, whatever powerful force had pulled him backwards into the lake suddenly released him. The choking pressure left him. Just like that. He was being set free.

His large strong hands, quarterback hands, went up to his throat and touched something warm. Blood was gushing out of his throat and spreading through the lake water. A terrible fear, a feeling close to panic, gripped him.

Horrified, he felt his throat again and found the knife embedded there. *Oh, Jesus God,* he thought, *I've been stabbed. I'm going to die at the bottom of this lake, and I don't even know why.*

In the rocking, drifting rowboat, meanwhile, Roe Tierney was too confused and shocked even to scream.

Her heart was pounding so rapidly and fiercely, she could

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hardly breathe. She stood up in the boat frantically searching for some sign of Tom.

This must be a sick joke, she thought. *I will never go out with Tom Hutchinson again. Never marry him. Never in a million years. This is not funny.* She was freezing, and she began to grope for her clothes in the bottom of the boat.

Swiftly, close to the boat, someone or something burst out of the black-looking water. It felt like an explosion under the lake.

Roe saw a head bobbing above the surface. Definitely a man's head . . . but it wasn't Tom Hutchinson.

"I didn't mean to scare you." The Gentleman spoke softly, almost conversationally. "Don't be alarmed," he whispered as he reached for the gunwale of the rocking boat. "We're old friends. To be perfectly honest, I've watched you for over two years."

Suddenly Roe started to scream as if there were no tomorrow.

For Roe Tierney, there wasn't.

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PART ONE

SCOOTCHIE CROSS

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Chapter 1

Washington, D.C., April 1994

I WAS on the sun porch of our house on Fifth Street when it all began. It was "pouring down rain" as my little girl Janelle likes to say, and the porch was a fine place to be. My grandmother had once taught me a prayer that I never forgot: "*Thank you for everything just the way it is.*" It seemed right that day—almost.

Stuck up on the porch wall was a Gary Larson *Far Side* cartoon. It showed the "Butlers of the World" annual banquet. One of the butlers had been murdered. A knife was in his chest right up to the hilt. A detective on the scene said, "God, Collings, I hate to start a Monday with a case like this." The cartoon was there to remind me there was more to life than my job as a homicide detective in D.C. A two-year-old drawing of Damon's tacked up next to the cartoon was inscribed: *"For the best Daddy ever."* That was another reminder.

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I played Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith tunes on our aging piano. The blues was having its sneaky-sad way with me lately. I'd been thinking about Jezzie Flanagan. I could see her beautiful, haunting face sometimes, when I stared off into the distance. I tried not to stare off into the distance too much.

My two kids, Damon and Janelle, were sitting on the trusty, if slightly rickety, piano bench beside me. Janelle had her small arm wrapped across my back as far as it would stretch, which was about one-third of the way.

She had a bag of Gummi Bears in her free hand. As always, she shared with her friends. I was slow-sucking a red Gummi.

She and Damon were whistling along with my piano playing, though for Jannie, whistling is more like spitting to a certain preestablished rhythm. A battered copy of *Green Eggs and Ham* sat on top of the piano, vibrating to the beat.

Both Jannie and Damon knew I was having some trouble in my life lately, for the past few months, anyway. They were trying to cheer me up. We were playing and whistling the blues, soul, and a little fusion, but we were also laughing and carrying on, as children like us will.

I loved these times with my kids more than I loved all the rest of my life put together, and I had been spending more and more time with them. The Kodak pictures of children always remind me that my babies will be seven and five years old only one time. I didn't plan to miss any of it.

We were interrupted by the sound of heavy footsteps running up the wooden stairs of our back porch. Then the doorbell rang: one, two, three tinny rings. Whoever was out there was in a big hurry.

"Ding-dong the witch is dead," Damon offered his

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inspirational thought for the moment. He was wearing wrap-around shades, his impression of a cool dude. He *was* a cool little dude, actually.

"No, the witch isn't," countered Jannie. I'd recently noticed that she had become a staunch defender of her gender.

"It might not be news about the witch," I said, with just the right timing and delivery. The kids laughed. They get most of my jokes, which is a frightening thought.

Someone began to pound insistently against the door frame, and my name was shouted in a plaintive and alarming way. *Goddammit, leave us be. We don't need anything plaintive or alarming in our lives right now.*

"Dr. Cross, please come! Please! Dr. Cross," the loud shouts continued. I didn't recognize the woman's voice, but privacy doesn't seem to count when your first name is Doctor.

I held the kids down, my hands fastened onto the tops of their small heads. "I'm Dr. Cross, not you two. Just keep on humming and hold my place. I'll be right back."

"I'll be back!" said Damon in his best Terminator voice. I smiled at his joke. He is a second-grade wiseguy already.

I hurried to the back door, grabbing my service revolver on the way. This can be a bad neighborhood even for a cop, which I am. I peered out through the foggy and grimy windowpanes to see who was on our porch steps.

I recognized the young woman. She lived in the Langley projects. Rita Washington was a twenty-three-year-old pipe-head who prowled our streets like a gray ghost. Rita was smart, nice enough, but impressionable and weak. She had taken a very bad turn in her life, lost her looks, and now was probably doomed.

I opened the door and felt a cold, wet gust of wind slap

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against my face. There was a lot of blood on Rita's hands and wrists and on the front of her green fake-leather carcoat.

"Rita, what in hell happened to you?" I asked. I guessed that she'd been gut-shot or stabbed over some drugs.

"Please, please come with me." Rita Washington started to cough and sob at the same time. "It little Marcus Daniels," she said, and cried even louder. "He been stabbed! It be real bad! He call your name. He ask for you, Dr. Cross."

"You stay there, kids! I'll be right back!" I shouted over Rita Washington's hysterical cries. "Nana, please watch the kids!" I yelled even louder. "Nana, I have to go out!" I grabbed my coat and followed Rita Washington into the cold, teeming rain.

I tried not to step on the bright red blood dripping like wet paint all over our porch steps.

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Chapter 2

I RAN as fast as I could down Fifth Street. I could feel my heart going *whump, whump, whump*, and I was sweating profusely in spite of the nasty, steady, cold spring rain. Blood was pounding furiously in my head. Every muscle and tendon in my body was straining, and my stomach clenched real hard.

I held eleven-year-old Marcus Daniels in my arms, clutched tightly against my chest. The little boy was bleeding badly. Rita Washington had found Marcus on the oily, darkened stairway leading to the basement in his building and had taken me to his crumpled body.

I ran like the wind, crying inside, holding it back as I've been taught to do on The Job and most everywhere else.

People who don't normally stare at much in Southeast were staring at me as I rumbled forward like a ten-axle semi on the loose in the inner city.

I outpaced gypsy cabs, shouting at everybody to get out of

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my way. I passed ghost store after ghost store boarded up with dark, rotting plywood that was scrawled with graffiti.

I ran over broken glass and rubble, Irish Rose bottles, and occasional dismal patches of weeds and loose dirt. This was our neighborhood; our share in The Dream; our capital.

I remembered a saying I'd heard about D.C.: *"Stoop down and you'll get stepped on, stand tall and you'll be shot at."*

As I ran, poor Marcus was throwing off blood like a soaking-wet puppy dog shedding water. My neck and arms were on fire, and my muscles continued to strain.

"Hold on, baby," I said to the little boy. "Hold on, baby," I prayed.

Halfway there, Marcus cried out in a tiny voice, "Doctor Alex, man."

That was all he said to me. I knew why. I knew a lot about little Marcus.

I raced up the steep, freshly paved asphalt drive of St. Anthony's Hospital. "St. Tony's Spaghetti House" as it's sometimes called in the projects. An EMS ambulance rolled past me, heading toward L Street.

The driver wore a Chicago Bulls cap pulled sideways, its brim pointing strangely in my direction. Loud rap music blared from the van, and it must have been deafening inside. The driver and medic didn't stop, didn't seem to consider stopping. Life in Southeast goes like that sometimes. You can't stop for every murder or mugging that you come across on your daily rounds.

I knew my way to St. Anthony's emergency room. I'd been there too many times. I shouldered open the familiar swinging glass door. It was stenciled EMERGENCY, but the letters were peeling away and there were nail scratches on the glass.

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"We're here, Marcus. We're at the hospital," I whispered to the little boy, but he didn't hear me. He was unconscious now.

"I need some help here! *People, I need help with this boy!*" I shouted.

The Pizza Hut delivery man would have gotten more attention. A bored-looking security guard glanced my way and gave me his practiced, flat-faced stare. A shabby stretcher clattered loudly down the halls of medicine.

I saw nurses I knew. Annie Bell Waters and Tanya Heywood, in particular.

"Bring him right here." Annie Waters quickly cleared a way once she sized up the situation. She didn't ask me any questions as she pushed other hospital workers and the walking wounded out of our path.

We sailed past the reception desk, with SIGN IN HERE in English, Spanish, and Korean. I smelled hospital antiseptic on everything.

"Tried to cut his throat with a gravity knife. I think he nicked the carotid artery," I said as we rushed down a crowded, puke-green corridor that was thick with faded signs: X-RAY, TRAUMA, CASHIER.

We finally located a room about the size of a clothes closet. The young-looking doctor who rushed in told me to leave.

"The boy's eleven years old," I said. "I'm staying right here. Both his wrists are cut. It's a suicide attempt. Hold on, baby," I whispered to Marcus. "Just hold on, baby."

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Chapter 3

CLICK! CASANOVA popped the trunk latch of his car and peered into the wide, shiny-wet eyes staring out at him. *What a pity. What a waste,* he thought as he looked down at her.

"Peekaboo," he said. "I see you." He had fallen out of love with the twenty-two-year-old college student tied up in the trunk. He was also angry at her. She had disobeyed the rules. She'd ruined the fantasy du jour.

"You look like absolute hell," he said. "Relatively speaking, of course."

The young woman was gagged with wet cloths and couldn't answer back, but she glared at him. Her dark-brown eyes showed fear and pain, but he could still see the stubbornness and spunk there.

He took out his black carrying bag first, then he roughly lifted her one hundred twelve pounds out of the car. He made no effort to be gentle at this point.

"You're welcome," he said as he put her down. "Forgotten

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our manners, have we?" Her legs were shaky and she almost fell, but Casanova held her up easily with one hand.

She had on dark green Wake Forest University running shorts, a white tank top, and brand-new Nike cross-training shoes. She was a typical spoiled college brat, he knew, but achingly beautiful. Her slender ankles were bound with a leather thong that stretched about two and a half feet. Her hands were tied behind her back, also with a leather thong.

"You can just walk ahead of me. Go straight unless I tell you otherwise. Now *walk*," he ordered. "Move those long, lovely gams. Hut, hut, hut."

They started through the dense woods that got even thicker as they moved slowly along. Thicker and darker. Creepier and creepier. He swung his black bag as if he were a child carrying a lunch box. He loved the dark woods. Always had.

Casanova was tall and athletic, well built, and good-looking. He knew that he could have many women, but not the way he wanted them. Not like this.

"I asked you to listen, didn't I? You wouldn't listen." He spoke in a soft, detached voice. "I told you the house rules. But you wanted to be a wiseass. So be a wiseass. Reap the rewards."

As the young woman struggled ahead she became increasingly afraid, close to panic. The woods were even denser now, and the low-hanging branches clawed at her bare arms, leaving long scratches. She knew her captor's name: Casanova. He fancied himself a great lover, and in fact he could maintain an erection longer than any man she had ever known. He had always seemed rational and in control of himself, but she knew he *had to be* crazy. He certainly could act sane on occasion, though. Once you accepted a single premise of his, something

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he had said to her several times: *"Man was born to hunt . . . women."*

He had given her the rules of his house. He had clearly warned her to behave. She just hadn't listened. She'd been willful and stupid and had made a huge, tactical mistake.

She tried not to think of what he was going to do to her out here in these bewildering Twilight Zone–type woods. It would surely give her a heart attack. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her break down and cry.

If only he would ungag her. Her mouth was dry, and she was thirsty beyond belief. Perhaps she could actually talk her way out of this—of whatever it was that he had planned.

She stopped walking and turned to face him. It was draw-a-line-in-the-sand time.

"You want to stop here? That's fine with me. I'm not going to let you talk, though. No last words, dear heart. No reprieve from the governor. You blew it big time. If we stop here, you *may not like it.* If you want to walk some more, that's fine, too. I just love these woods, don't you?"

She had to talk to him, get through to him somehow. Ask him *why.* Maybe appeal to his intelligence. She tried to say his name, but only muffled sounds made it through the damp gag.

He was self-assured and even calmer than usual. He walked with a cocky swagger. "I don't understand a word you're saying. Anyway, it wouldn't change a thing even if I did."

He had on one of the weird masks that he always wore. This one was actually called a death mask, he'd told her, and it was used to reconstruct faces, usually at hospitals and morgues.

The skin color of the death mask was almost perfect and the detail was frighteningly realistic. The face he'd chosen was young and handsome, an all-American type. She wondered

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what he really looked like. Who in hell was he? Why did he wear masks?

She would escape somehow, she told herself. Then she would get him locked up for a thousand years. No death penalty—let him suffer.

"If that's your choice, fine," he said, and he suddenly kicked her feet out from under her. She fell down hard on her back. "You die right here."

He slid a needle out of the well-worn black medical bag he'd brought with him. He brandished it like a tiny sword. Let her see it.

"This needle is called a Tubex," he said. "It's preloaded with thiopental sodium, which is a barbiturate. Does barbiturate-sounding things." He squeezed out a thin squirt of the brown liquid. It looked like iced tea, and it was not something she wanted injected into her veins.

"*What does it do? What are you doing to me?"* she screamed into the tight gag. *"Please take this gag out of my mouth."*

She was covered with sweat, and her breathing was labored. Her whole body felt stiff, anesthetized and numb. Why was he giving her a barbiturate?

"If I do this wrong, you'll die right now," he told her. "So *don't move*."

She shook her head affirmatively. She was trying so hard to let him know that she could be good; she could be so very good. *Please don't kill me,* she silently pleaded. *Don't do this.*

He pricked a vein in the crook of her elbow, and she could feel the painful pinch there.

"I don't want to leave any unsightly bruises," he whispered. "It won't take long. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, *five, you, are, so, beautiful,* zero. All finished."

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She was crying now. She couldn't help it. The tears were streaming down her cheeks. He was crazy. She squeezed her eyes shut, couldn't look at him anymore. *Please, God, don't let me die like this,* she prayed. *Not all alone out here.*

The drug acted quickly, almost immediately. She felt warm all over, warm and sleepy. She went limp.

He took off her tank top and began to fondle her breasts, like a juggler with several balls. There was nothing she could do to stop him.

He arranged her legs as if she were his art, his human sculpture, stretching the leather thong as far as it would go. He felt down between her legs. The sudden thrust made her open her eyes, and she stared up at the horrible mask. His eyes stared back at her. They were blank and emotionless, yet strangely penetrating.

He entered her, and she felt a jolt like a very powerful electric shock running through her body. He was very hard, fully aroused already. He was probing inside her as she was dying from the barbiturate. He was watching her die. That's what this was all about.

Her body wriggled, bolted, shook. As weak as she was, she tried to scream. *No, please, please, please. Don't do this to me.*

Mercifully, blackness came over her.

She didn't know how long she'd been unconscious. Didn't care. She woke up and she was still alive.

She started to cry, and the muffled sounds coming through the gag were agonizing. Tears ran down her cheeks. She realized how much she wanted to live.

She noticed that she'd been moved. Her arms were behind her and tied around a tree. Her legs were crossed and bound,

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and she was still tightly gagged. He had taken off her clothes. She didn't see her clothes anywhere.

He was still there!

"I don't really care if you scream," he said. "There's absolutely nobody to hear you out here." His eyes gleamed out of the lifelike mask. "I just don't want you to scare away the hungry birds and animals." He glanced briefly at her truly beautiful body. "Too bad you disobeyed me, broke the rules," he said.

He took off the mask and let her see his face for the first time. He fixed the image of her face in his mind. Then he bent down and kissed her on the lips.

Kiss the girls.

Finally, he walked away.

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Chapter 4

MOST OF my rage had been spent on the furious footrace to St. Anthony's with Marcus Daniels cradled in my arms. The adrenaline rush was gone now, but I felt an unnatural weariness.

The emergency-room waiting area was noise and frustrated confusion. Babies crying, parents wailing out their grief, the PA incessantly paging doctors. A bleeding man kept muttering, "Ho shit, ho shit."

I could still *see* the beautiful, sad eyes of Marcus Daniels. I could still *hear* his soft voice.

At a little past six-thirty that night, my partner in crime arrived unexpectedly at the hospital. Something about that struck me as wrong, but I let it pass for now.

John Sampson and I have been best friends since we were both ten years old and running these same streets in D.C. Southeast. Somehow, we survived without having our throats slashed. I drifted into abnormal psychology, and eventually

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got a doctorate at Johns Hopkins. Sampson went into the army. In some strange and mysterious manner, we both ended up working together on the D.C. police force.

I was sitting on a sheetless gurney parked outside the Trauma Room. Next to me was the "crash cart" they had used for Marcus. Rubber tourniquets hung like streamers from the black handles of the cart.

"How's the boy?" Sampson asked. He knew about Marcus already. Somehow, he always knew. The rain was running down his black poncho in little streams, but he didn't seem to care.

I sadly shook my head. I was still feeling wasted. "Don't know yet. They won't tell me anything. Doctor wanted to know if I was next of kin. They took him to Trauma. He cut himself real bad. So what brings you to happy hour?"

Sampson shrugged his way out of his poncho, and flopped down beside me on the straining gurney. Under the poncho, he had on one of his typical street-detective outfits: silver-and-red Nike sweatsuit, matching high-topped sneakers, thin gold bracelets, signet rings. His street look was intact.

"Where's your gold tooth?" I managed a smile. "You need a gold tooth to complete your fly ensemble. At least a gold star on one tooth. Maybe some corn braids?"

Sampson snorted out a laugh. "I heard. I came," he said offhandedly about his appearance at St. Anthony's. "You okay? You look like the last of the big, bad bull elephants."

"Little boy tried to kill himself. Sweet little boy, like Damon. Eleven years old."

"Want me to run over to their crack crib? Shoot the boy's parents?" Sampson asked. His eyes were obsidian-hard.

"We'll do it later," I said.

I was probably in the mood. The positive news was that the

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parents of Marcus Daniels lived together; the bad part was that they kept the boy and his four sisters in the crack house they ran near the Langley Terrace projects. The ages of the children ranged from five to twelve, and all the kids worked in the business. They were "runners."

"What *are* you doing here?" I asked him for the second time. "You didn't just happen to show up here at St. A's. What's up?"

Sampson tapped out a cigarette from a pack of Camels. He used only one hand. Very cool. He lit up. Doctors and nurses were everywhere.

I snatched the cigarette away and crushed it under my black Converse sneaker sole, near the hole in the big toe.

"Feel better now?" Sampson eyed me. Then he gave me a broad grin showing his large white teeth. The skit was over. Sampson had worked his magic on me, and it *was* magic, including the cigarette trick. I was feeling better. Skits work. Actually, I felt as if I'd just been hugged by about a half-dozen close relatives and both my kids. Sampson is my best friend for a reason. He can push my buttons better than anybody.

"Here comes the angel of mercy," he said, pointing down the long, chaotic corridor.

Annie Waters was walking toward us with her hands thrust deeply into the pockets of her hospital coat. She had a tight look on her face, but she always does.

"I'm real sorry, Alex. The boy didn't make it. I think he was nearly gone when you got him here. Probably living on all that hope you carry bottled up inside you."

Powerful images and visceral sensations of carrying Marcus along Fifth and L streets flashed before me. I imagined the hospital death sheet covering Marcus. It's such a small sheet that they use for children.

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"The boy was my patient. He adopted me this spring." I told the two of them what had me so wild and crazed and suddenly depressed.

"Can I get you something, Alex?" said Annie Waters. She had a concerned look on her face.

I shook my head. I had to talk, had to get this out right now.

"Marcus found out I gave help at St. A's, talked to people sometimes. He started coming by the trailer afternoons. Once I passed his tests, he talked about his life at the crack house. Everybody he knew in his life was a junkie. Junkie came by my house today . . . Rita Washington. Not Marcus's mother, not his father. The boy tried to slit his own throat, slit his wrists. Just eleven years old."

My eyes were wet. A little boy dies, somebody should cry. The psychologist for an eleven-year-old suicide victim ought to mourn. I thought so, anyway.

Sampson finally stood up and put his long arm gently on my shoulder. He was six feet nine again. "Let's head on home, Alex," he said. "C'mon, my man. Time to go."

I went in and looked at Marcus for the last time.

I held his lifeless little hand and thought about the talks the two of us had, the ineffable sadness always in his brown eyes. I remembered a wise, beautiful African proverb: *"It takes a whole village to raise a good child."*

Finally, Sampson came and took me away from the boy, took me home.

Where it got much worse.

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Chapter 5

I DIDN'T like what I saw at home. A lot of cars were crowded helter-skelter around my house. It's a white shingle A-frame; it looks like anybody's house. Most of the cars appeared familiar; they were cars of friends and family members.

Sampson pulled in behind a dented ten-year-old Toyota that belonged to the wife of my late brother Aaron. Cilla Cross was a good friend. She was tough and smart. I had ended up liking her more than my brother. What was Cilla doing here?

"What *the hell* is going on at the house?" I asked Sampson again. I was starting to get a little concerned.

"Invite me in for a cold beer," he said as he pulled the key from the ignition. "Least you can do."

Sampson was already up and out of the car. He moves like a slick winter wind when he wants to. "Let's go inside, Alex."

I had the car door open, but I was still sitting inside. "I live here. I'll go in when I feel like it." I didn't feel like it suddenly.

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A sheen of cold sweat was on the back of my neck. Detective paranoia? Maybe, maybe not.

"Don't be difficult," Sampson called back over his shoulder, "for once in your life."

A long icy shiver ran through my body. I took a deep breath. The thought of the human monster I had recently helped put away still gave me nightmares. I deeply feared he would escape one day. The mass killer and kidnapper had already been to Fifth Street once.

What in hell was going on inside my house?

Sampson didn't knock on the front door, or ring the bell, which dangled on red-and-blue wires. He just waltzed inside as if he lived there. Same as it's always been. *Mi casa es su casa.* I followed him into my own house.

My boy, Damon, streaked into Sampson's outstretched arms, and John scooped up my son as if he were made of air. Jannie came skating toward me, calling me "Big Daddy" as she ran. She was already in her slipper-sock pajamas, smelling of fresh talcum after her bath. My little lady.

Something was wrong in her big brown eyes. The look on her face froze me.

"What is it, my honeybunch?" I asked as I nuzzled against Jannie's smooth, warm cheek. The two of us nuzzle a lot. "What's wrong? Tell your Daddy all your troubles and woes."

In the living room I could see three of my aunts, my two sisters-in-law, my one living brother, Charles. My aunts had been crying; their faces were all puffy and red. So had my sister-in-law Cilla, and she isn't one to get weepy without a good reason.

The room had the unnatural, claustrophobic look of a wake. *Somebody has died,* I thought. *Somebody we all love has*

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died. But everybody I love seemed to be there, present and accounted for.

Nana Mama, my grandmother, was serving coffee, iced tea, and also cold chicken pieces, which no one seemed to be eating. Nana lives on Fifth Street with me and the kids. In her own mind, she's raising the three of us.

Nana had shrunk to around five feet by her eightieth year. She is still the most impressive person I know in our nation's capital, and I know most of them—the Reagans, the Bush people, and now the Clintons.

My grandmother was dry-eyed as she did her serving. I have rarely seen her cry, though she is a tremendously warm and caring person. She just doesn't cry anymore. She says she doesn't have that much of life left, and she won't waste it on tears.

I finally walked into the living room and asked the question that was beating against the inside of my head. "It's nice to see everyone—Charles, Cilla, Aunt Tia—*but would someone please tell me what's going on here?*"

They all stared at me.

I still had Jannie cradled in my arms. Sampson had Damon tucked like a hairy football under his massive right arm.

Nana spoke for the assembled group. Her almost inaudible words sent the sharpest pain right through me.

"It's Naomi," she said quietly. "Scootchie is missing, Alex." Then Nana Mama started to weep for the first time in years.

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Chapter 6

CASANOVA SCREAMED, and the loud sound coming from deep inside his throat turned into a raspy howl.

He was crashing through the deep woods, thinking about the girl he had abandoned back there. The horror of what he had done. *Again*.

Part of him wanted to go back for the girl—*save her*—an act of mercy.

He was experiencing spasms of guilt now, and he began to run faster and faster. His thick neck and chest were covered with perspiration. He felt weak, and his legs were rubbery and undependable.

He was fully conscious of what he had done. He just couldn't stop himself.

Anyway, it was better this way. She had seen his face. It was stupid of him to think she would ever be able to understand him. He had seen the fear and loathing in her eyes.

If only she'd listened when he'd tried to talk to her. After all,

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he was different from other mass killers—*he could feel everything* he did. He could feel love . . . and suffer loss . . . and . . .

He angrily swept away the death mask. It was all her fault. He would have to change personas now. He needed to stop being Casanova.

He needed to be *himself*. His pitiful other self.

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Chapter 7

IT'S NAOMI. Scootchie is missing, Alex.

We held the most intense Cross family emergency conference in our kitchen, where they've always been held. Nana made more coffee, and also herbal tea for herself. I put the kids to bed first. Then I cracked open a bottle of Black Jack and poured stiff drinks of whiskey all around.

I learned that my twenty-two-year-old niece had been missing in North Carolina for four days. The police down there had waited that long to contact our family in Washington. As a policeman, I found that hard to understand. Two days was pretty standard in missing-person cases. Four days made no sense.

Naomi Cross was a law student at Duke University. She'd made Law Review and was near the top of her class. She was the pride of everyone in our family, including myself. We had a nickname for her that went back to when she was three or four years old. *Scootchie*. She always used to "scootch" up close to everybody when she was little. She loved to "scootch," and

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hug, and *be* hugged. After my brother Aaron died, I helped Cilla to raise her. It wasn't hard—she was always sweet and funny, cooperative, and so very smart.

Scootchie was missing. In North Carolina. Four days now.

"I talked to a detective named Ruskin," Sampson told the group in the kitchen. He was trying not to act like a street cop, but he couldn't help it. He was on the case now. Flat-faced and serious. The Sampson stare.

"Detective Ruskin sounded knowledgeable about Naomi's disappearance. Seemed like a straight-ahead cop on the phone. Something strange, though. Told me that a law-school friend of Naomi's reported her missing. Her name's Mary Ellen Klouk."

I had met Naomi's friend. She was a future lawyer, from Garden City, Long Island. Naomi had brought Mary Ellen home to Washington a couple of times. We'd gone to hear Handel's *Messiah* together one Christmas at the Kennedy Center.

Sampson took off his dark glasses, and kept them off, which is rare for him. Naomi was his favorite, and he was as shook up as the rest of us. She called Sampson "His Grimness," and "Darth One," and he loved it when she teased him.

"Why didn't this Detective Ruskin call us before now? Why didn't those university people call me?" my sister-in-law asked. Cilla is forty-one. She has allowed herself to grow to ample proportions. I doubted that she was five feet four, but she had to be close to two hundred pounds. She'd told me that she didn't want to be attractive to men anymore.

"Don't know the answer to that yet," Sampson told Cilla and the rest of us. "They told Mary Ellen Klouk *not* to call us."

"What exactly did Detective Ruskin have to say about the delay?" I asked Sampson.

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"Detective said there were extenuating circumstances. He wouldn't elaborate for me, persuasive as I can be."

"You tell him we could have the conversation in person?"

Sampson nodded slowly. "Uh-huh. He said the result would be the same. I told him I doubted that. He said okay. Man seemed to have no fears."

"Black man?" Nana asked. She is a racist, and proud of it. She says she's too old to be socially or politically correct. She doesn't so much dislike white people as distrust them.

"No, but I don't think that's the problem, Nana. Something else is going on." Sampson looked across the kitchen table at me. "I don't think he *could* talk."

"FBI?" I asked. It was the obvious guess when things get overly secretive. The FBI understands better than Bell Atlantic, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* that information is power.

"That could be the problem. Ruskin wouldn't admit it on the phone."

"I better talk to him," I said. "In person would probably be best, don't you think?"

"*I* think that would be good, Alex." Cilla spoke up from her end of the table.

"Maybe I'll tag along," Sampson said, grinning like the predatory wolf that he is.

There were sage nods and at least one hallelujah in the overcrowded kitchen. Cilla came around the table and hugged me tight. My sister-in-law was shaking like a big, spreading tree in a storm.

Sampson and I were going South. We were going to bring back Scootchie.

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Chapter 8

I HAD to tell Damon and Jannie about their "Auntie Scootch," which is what the kids have always called her. My kids sensed something bad had happened. They knew it, just as they somehow know my most secret and vulnerable places. They had refused to go to sleep until I came and talked to them.

"Where's Auntie Scootch at? What happened to her?" Damon demanded as soon as I entered the kids' bedroom. He had heard enough to understand that Naomi was in some kind of terrible trouble.

I have a need always to tell the kids the truth, if it's possible. I'm committed to truth-telling between us. But every once in a while, it is so hard to do.

"We haven't heard from Aunt Naomi in a few days," I began. "That's why everybody is worried tonight, and why they came over to our house," I said.

I went on. "Daddy's on the case now. I'm going to do my

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