SPECIAL FREE PREVIEW: BOOK ONE

ALEX CROSS GETS MARRIED—AND KYLE CRAIG IS BACK
Cross Fire
Books by James Patterson

FEATURING ALEX CROSS

I, Alex Cross
Alex Cross's Trial (with Richard DiLallo)
Cross Country
Double Cross
Cross
Mary, Mary
London Bridges
The Big Bad Wolf
Four Blind Mice
Violets Are Blue
Roses Are Red
Pop Goes the Weasel
Cat & Mouse
Jack & Jill
Kiss the Girls
Along Came a Spider

A complete list of books by James Patterson is on pages 374–375. For previews of upcoming books by James Patterson and more information about the author, visit www.JamesPatterson.com.
Cross Fire

James Patterson

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK  BOSTON  LONDON
For Scott Cowen, the president of Tulane University and a New Orleans hero, whose inspired leadership and Herculean efforts helped secure a brighter future for both Tulane and New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.
Prologue

FINDERS, KEEPERS
IT HAD BEEN MONTHS since Kyle Craig had killed a man. Once upon a time, he’d been the type who needed everything yesterday, if not sooner. But no more. If years of hellish solitude in ADX Florence in Colorado had taught him nothing else, it was how to wait for what he wanted.

He sat patiently in the foyer of his quarry’s Miami apartment, weapon cradled on his lap, watching the lights of the harbor and biding his time. He was in no particular hurry, enjoying the view, maybe finally learning to enjoy life. He certainly looked relaxed—faded jeans, sandals, a T-shirt that said CONSIDER THIS FAIR WARNING.

At 2:12 a.m., a key sounded in the lock. Kyle immediately rose to his feet and pressed his back against the wall, hanging there as silently as a piece of art.

The man of the hour, Max Siegel, was whistling as he came in. Kyle recognized the melody, an old snatch from his
childhood. It was from *Peter and the Wolf*. The strings section—Peter’s hunting theme. Ironically enough.

He waited for Mr. Siegel to close the door behind him and take a few more steps into the still-dark apartment. Then Kyle leveled his red laser site and squeezed the trigger. “Hello, Mr. Siegel,” he said. “Good to meet you.”

A stream of electrically charged saline solution hit Siegel squarely in the back, carrying fifty thousand volts with it. He grunted between clenched teeth. His shoulders seized up just before his body went completely rigid, and he fell like a tree to the floor.

Kyle didn’t hesitate for a second. He quickly slipped a nylon cord across Siegel’s throat, wound it around three times, and started to drag him in a small circle to sop up the saline solution on the floor, then yanked him straight through the apartment toward the master bath in the back. Siegel was too weak to struggle. Whatever effort he could muster was spent on the cord itself, trying not to be strangled.

“Don’t fight me,” Kyle said finally. “There’s no point in it.”

In the bathroom, Kyle lifted him into the oversize tub and tied off the ends of the cord to one of the chrome fixtures. It wasn’t necessary, physically speaking, but it kept Siegel’s head up where Kyle could see his face.

“You probably don’t even know about these, do you?” he said, holding up the strange gun he’d carried in. “I know you’ve been underground awhile, but trust me, they’re going to be huge.”

The thing looked like a Super Soaker, which it kind of was. Regular Tasers could go for thirty seconds at best. This baby could run and run, thanks to a two-gallon wearable water pack strapped to his back.
“What… do you want?” Siegel finally choked out in response to the madness.

Kyle withdrew a small Canon digital camera from his pocket and started taking pictures. Full face, left profile, right profile.

“I know who you are, Agent Siegel. Let’s start there, okay?”

A look of confusion crossed the man’s face. Then fear. “Oh God, this is some kind of horrible mistake. My name is Ivan Schimmel!”

“No,” Kyle said, snapping away—brow, nose, chin. “You’re Max Siegel, and you’re FBI. You’ve been deep undercover for the last twenty-six months. Worked your way up with the Buenez cartel until they trusted you enough to start making shipments.

“Now, while everyone’s watching Colombia, you’re running heroin from Phuket and Bangkok to Miami.”

He lowered the camera and looked Siegel in the eye. “Never mind the moral relativism. It’s all in the name of the big takedown at the end. Isn’t that right, Agent Siegel?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about!” he cried. “Please! Check my wallet!” He’d begun to struggle again, but another dose of voltage put a quick end to that. The electricity went right after the motor and sensory nerves. Siegel’s pain tolerance was irrelevant. And the ammo, such as it was, ran right down the drain into Biscayne Bay.

“I suppose you might be forgiven for not recognizing me,” Kyle went on. “Does the name ‘Kyle Craig’ mean anything to you? Or maybe the Mastermind? That’s what they call me up at the Puzzle Palace in DC. As a matter of fact, I used to work there. Long time ago.”
A flash of recognition came and went in Siegel's eyes, not that Kyle needed any kind of confirmation. His reconnaissance was still flawless.

But this Max Siegel was a pro, too. He wasn't about to stop playing the game now, especially now. “Please,” he blubbered on when he found his voice again, “what is this? Who are you? I don't know what you want.”

“Everything, Max. Every last little thing.”

Kyle took another half dozen pictures and repocketed the camera. “You're actually a victim of your own good work, if that's any consolation. Nobody knows who you are down here, not even the local FBI. That's why I chose you. I selected you out of all the agents working in the United States. You, Max. Can you guess why?”

His voice had changed as he spoke. It was more nasal now, with the same shades of Brooklyn accent that laced the real Max Siegel's speech.

“This will never work! You're insane!” Siegel screamed at him. “You're fucking mad!”

“By some standards, I think that might be true,” Kyle said. “But I'm also the most brilliant son of a bitch you'll ever have the pleasure to know.” Then he pulled the trigger one more time and just let the thing run.

Siegel writhed mutely on the bottom of the tub. Eventually, he began to gag on his own tongue. Kyle watched, carefully noting every detail all the way to the end, studying his subject until there was nothing left to learn.

“Let's hope this works,” he said. “Wouldn't want you to have died for nothing, Mr. Siegel.”
TWENTY-TWO DAYS LATER, a man bearing a striking resemblance to Max Siegel checked out of the Hotel Meliá Habana in the ritzy Miramar section of Havana, Cuba. Medical tourists were as common as pickpockets here; no one looked twice at the broad-shouldered man in the linen suit with bruises around his eyes and gauze over his nose and ears as he came through the lobby.

He signed the bill with a perfectly replicated signature and kept the charges on Max Siegel's brand-new American Express card. The surgeries, however, had been paid for in cash.

From the hotel, he caught a cab across town to Dr. Cruz's office, discreetly tucked into one of the city's endless neoclassic arcades. Inside was a full-service, completely staffed modern clinic that would have made a high-priced plastic surgeon in Miami or Palm Beach proud.

“I have to tell you, Senor Siegel, that I’m quite pleased
with this.” The doctor spoke softly as he removed the last of the bandages. “It is some of the best work I’ve ever done, if I may say so.” His manner was thoughtful but crisp and efficient—very professional. You’d never know he was willing to cut so many ethical corners along with the skin and bones of his clients’ faces.

Dr. Cruz had performed seven separate procedures, something that might have taken months or even a year elsewhere. There was blepharoplasty for the eyelids; a template rhinoplasty for the nose, with a complete elevation of the skin and soft tissue in the nasal pyramid; new MEDPOR implants for more prominent cheekbones and chin; a sliding genioplasty of the jawbone; a little silicone augmentation for the brow; and, as a finishing touch, a nice little cleft in the chin—just like Max Siegel’s.

At the patient’s request, no electronic imaging had been taken before or after the procedures. For the right rate, Dr. Cruz had been more than willing to work from a series of digital blowups in hard copy, no questions asked, no interest in any biophysical detail.

Now, when he held up the large hand mirror for Kyle to see his reflection, the effect was stunning. The implants, especially, were like a miracle of change.

Max—not Kyle—smiled back from the mirror. He felt a slight sting at the corners of his mouth, which didn’t move quite the same way as before. In fact, he didn’t recognize himself at all. It was a total mind fuck, in the best possible way. There had been other disguises in the past, including some very expensive prosthetics that had gotten him out of prison. But they were nothing compared to this.
“How long will the bruising last?” he asked. “And this swelling around my eyes?”

Cruz handed him a folder of aftercare information. “With proper rest, you should be looking completely normal in seven to ten days.”

The remaining changes, he could do for himself—shave and dye his hair down to a dark buzz cut and put in a simple pair of colored contacts. If there was any disappointment at all, it was that Kyle Craig had been so much better looking than Max Siegel.

But screw it. He needed to consider the larger picture here. Next time, he could be Brad Pitt if he wanted to.

He left the clinic in an excellent mood and took another cab straight to José Martí International Airport. From there, he caught a flight back to Miami, with a connection to Washington, DC, that same afternoon. For the main event.

Already, his thoughts had begun to coalesce around one idea: meeting up with his old friend and sometimes partner Alex Cross. Had Alex forgotten the promises Kyle had made to him over the years? That didn’t seem possible. But had Cross grown just a little complacent in the meantime? Maybe so. In any case, the “great” Alex Cross was going to die, and die badly. There would be pain, but even more than that—regret. It would be a finale worth waiting for, no question.

And in the interim, Kyle was going to have some fun. After all, as the new and improved Max Siegel, he knew better than anybody that there was more than one way to take another man’s life.
Book One

SHOOTER READY
ANOTHER MANHOLE COVER had exploded in Georgetown, blowing nearly forty feet in the air. It was a strange little epidemic, as the city’s aging infrastructure reached some kind of critical mass.

Over time, underground wires had frayed and smoldered, filling the space beneath the streets with flammable gas. Ultimately—and more frequently these days—the exposed wires created an electrical arc, lighting a fireball in the sewer and sending another three-hundred-pound iron disk flying up into the air.

This was the weird, scary stuff Denny and Mitch lived for. Every afternoon, they would gather up their papers to sell and hoof it over to the library to check the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) website for wherever rush-hour traffic was at its worst. Logjams were their meat.

Even on an ordinary day, the Key Bridge lived up to its
nickname, the Car Strangled Spanner, but today the M Street
approach was somewhere between a parking lot and a circus.
Denny worked his way up the middle of the traffic, and Mitch
took the outside.

“True Press, only a dollar. Help the homeless.”

“Jesus loves you. Help the homeless?”

They were an odd pair, to look at them—Denny, a six-
feet-something white guy with bad teeth and stubble that
never quite hid his sunken chin, and then Mitch, a brother
with a boyish, dark black face, a husky body that topped out
at five six, and stubby little baby dreads on his head to match.

“This is a perfect metaphor right here, ain't it?” Denny
was saying. They talked to each other over the tops of the
cars—or, rather, Denny talked and Mitch played a sort of
straight man for the customers.

“You got pressure building, way down low where no one's
looking, 'cause it's all just rats and shit down there, and who
cares, right? But then one day—” Denny puffed out his
cheeks and made a sound like a nuclear explosion. “Now you
gotta pay attention, 'cause the rats and shit, they're every-
where, and everyone wants to know why somebody else
didn't do something to stop it. I mean, if that ain't Washing-
ton to a tee, I don't know what the hell is.”

“To a tee, bro. To a P, Q, R, S, tee,” Mitch said, and laughed
at his own dumb joke. His faded shirt read, IRAQ: IF YOU
WEREN'T THERE, SHUT UP! His pants were baggy camos, like
Denny's, only cut off around the calf.

Denny kept his shirt up over his shoulders to show off a
half-decent six-pack. It never hurt to put a little eye candy on
the table, and his face wasn't exactly his strong suit. “It’s the
American way,” he went on, loud enough for anyone with an open window to hear. “Keep doing what you always did, so you keep gettin’ what you always got. Am I right?” he asked a pretty business suit in a BMW. She actually smiled and bought a paper. “God bless you, miss. Now that, Ladies and Gentlemen, is how we do it!”

He continued to fleece the crowd, getting more and more drivers to reach out their windows with cash in hand.

“Yo, Denny.” Mitch chinned at a couple of street cops working their way over from Thirty-fourth. “I don’t think these two are feeling us too much.”

Denny shouted over before the cops could talk first. “Panhandling ain’t illegal, officers. Not outside federal parklands, and last I checked, M Street ain’t no park!”

One of them gestured around at the snarl of traffic, Pepco trucks, and fire department vehicles. “You’re kidding me, right? Let’s go. Clear out.”

“Come on, man, you gonna deny a couple of homeless vets the right to make an honest living?”

“You ever been in Iraq, man?” Mitch added. People were starting to stare.


“Hey, man, just ’cause you got an asshole don’t mean you gotta be one,” Denny said, to a few laughs. He could feel the captive audience coming over to his side.

Suddenly there was some pushing. Mitch didn’t much like to be touched, and the cop who tried went down on his ass between the cars. The other one got a hand on Denny’s shoulder and, like a lightning bolt, Denny knocked it away.
Time to go.

He slid across the hood of a yellow cab and started toward Prospect with Mitch right behind.

“Stop right there!” one of the cops shouted after them.

Mitch kept running, but Denny turned around. There were several cars between Denny and the officers now. “What are you going to do, shoot a homeless vet in the middle of traffic?” Then he spread his arms wide. “Go ahead, man. Take me out. Save the government a few bucks.”

People were honking, and some of them yelled from their cars.

“Give the guy a break, man!”

“Support the troops!”

Denny smiled, gave the officer a crisp salute with his middle finger, and ran to catch up with Mitch. A second later, they were sprinting up Thirty-third Street and were soon out of sight.
Chapter 2

THEY WERE STILL LAUGHING when they got back to Denny’s ancient Suburban, parked in Lot 9 by Lauinger Library on the Georgetown campus.

“That was awesome!” Mitch’s doughy face was shiny with sweat, but he wasn’t even out of breath. He was the type whose muscles looked a lot like fat. “What are you going to do?” he parroted. “Shoot a homeless vet in the middle of traffic?”

“True Press, one dollar,” Denny said. “Lunch at Taco Bell, three dollars. The look on po-po’s face when he knows you got him? Priceless. Wish I had a picture.”

He plucked a bright-orange envelope from under his wiper blade and got in on the driver’s side. The car still smelled of chain-smoked cigarettes and burritos from the night before. Pillows and blankets were bunched up in a ball on one half of the backseat, next to a lawn-and-leaf bag full of returnable cans.
Behind that, under a stack of collapsed cardboard boxes, a few old carpet remnants, and a false plywood bottom, were two Walther PPS nine-millimeter pistols, a semiautomatic M21, and a military-grade M110 sniper rifle. Also a long-range thermal-optical site, a spotting scope, a cleaning kit for the rifles, and several boxes of ammunition, all wrapped up in a large plastic tarp and bundled with several bungee cords.

“You did good back there, Mitchie,” Denny told him. “Real good. Didn’t lose your cool for a second.”

“Nah,” Mitch said, emptying his pockets onto the plastic lunch tray between them. “I won’t lose my cool, Denny. I’m like one of them whatchamacallits. Cucumbers.”

Denny counted out the day’s take. Forty-five—not bad for a short shift. He gave Mitch ten singles and a handful of quarters.

“So what do you think, Denny? Am I ready or what? I think I’m ready.”

Denny sat back and lit one of the half-smoked butts in the ashtray. He handed it to Mitch and then lit another for himself. While he was at it, he lit the orange envelope with the parking ticket inside and dropped it, burning, onto the cement.

“Yeah, Mitch, I think maybe you are ready. The question is, are they ready for us?”

Mitch’s knees started to jackhammer up and down. “When do we start? Tonight? What about tonight? What about it, huh, Denny?”

Denny shrugged and leaned back. “Just enjoy the peace and quiet while you can, ’cause you’re going to be famous as shit soon enough.” He blew a smoke ring, then another, which passed right through the first. “You ready to be famous?”
Mitch was looking out the window at a couple of cute, short-skirted coeds crossing the parking lot. His knees were still bouncing. “I’m ready to start this thing, that’s what.”

“Good boy. And what’s the mission, Mitchie?”

“Clean up this mess in Washington, just like the politicians always say.”

“That’s right. They talk about it—”

“But we gonna do something about it. No doubt. No doubt.”

Denny extended his fist for a bump, then started up the car. He backed out the long way to get a good look at the ladies from behind.

“Speaking of tacos,” he said, and Mitch laughed. “Where you want to eat? We’ve got paper to burn today.”

“Taco Bell, man,” Mitch said without even having to think. Denny pulled hard on the gearshift to get it into drive and took off. “Why am I not surprised?”
Chapter 3

THE LEAD STORY in my life these days was Bree—Brianna Stone, known as the Rock at Metro Police. And, yes, she was all of that—solid, profound, lovely. She’d become a part of my life to the point where I couldn’t imagine it without her anymore. Things hadn’t been this sane and balanced for me in years.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that Homicide at Metro was so quiet lately. As a cop, you can’t help but wonder when that next ton of bricks is going to fall, but in the meantime, Bree and I had an unheard-of two-hour lunch that Thursday afternoon. Usually the only way we see each other during the day is if we’re working the same murder case.

We sat in the back at Ben’s Chili Bowl, under all the signed celeb photos. Ben’s isn’t exactly the world capital of romance, but it is an institution in Washington. The half-smokes alone are worth the trip.
“So you know what they’re calling us around the office these days?” Bree said, halfway through a coffee milk shake. “Breelex.”

“Breelex? Like Brad and Angelina? That’s awful.” She laughed; she couldn’t even keep a straight face at that.

“I’m telling you, cops have no imagination.” “Hmm.” I put a hand lightly on her leg under the table. “With exceptions, of course.”

“Of course.” Any more than that would have to wait, and not just because the bathrooms at Ben’s Chili Bowl were definitely not an option. We did in fact have somewhere important we had to be that day.

After lunch, we strolled hand in hand up U Street to Sharita Williams’s jewelry store. Sharita was an old friend from high school, and she also happened to do outstanding work on antique pieces.

A dozen tiny bells tinkled over our heads as we breezed in the door.

“Well, don’t you two look in love.” Sharita smiled from behind the counter.

“That’s ’cause we are, Sharita,” I said. “And I highly recommend it.”

“Just find me a good man, Alex. I’m in.”

She knew why we were there, and she removed a small black velvet box from under the case. “It came out beautifully,” she said. “I love this piece.”

The ring used to belong to my grandmother, Nana Mama, she of the impossibly small hands. We’d had it resized for Bree. It was a platinum deco setting with three diamonds
across, which struck me as perfect—one for each of the kids. Maybe it’s corny, but it was like that ring represented every-thing Bree and I were committing to. This was a package deal after all, and I felt like the luckiest man in the world.

“Comfortable?” Sharita asked when Bree slipped it on. Neither one could take her eyes off the ring, and I couldn’t take my eyes off Bree.

“Yeah, it’s comfortable,” she said, squeezing my hand. “It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”
I PUT IN a late-afternoon appearance at the Daly Building. This was as good a time as any to catch up on the flood of paperwork that never seemed to stop flowing across my desk.

But when I got to the Major Case Squad room, Chief Perkins was just coming out into the hall with somebody I didn't recognize.

“Alex,” he said. “Good. You'll save me another trip. Walk with us?”

Something was obviously up, and it wasn't good. When the chief wants a meeting, you go to him, not the other way around. I did a one-eighty, and we headed back over to the elevators.

“Alex, meet Jim Heekin. Jim’s the new AD at the Directorate of Intelligence over at the Bureau.”

We shook hands. Heekin said, “I’ve heard a lot about you, Detective Cross. The FBI's loss was MPD's gain when you came back over here.”
“Uh-oh,” I said. “Flattery’s never a good sign.”

We all laughed, but it was also true. A lot of new managers at the Bureau like to shake things up when they start, just to let people know they’re there. The question was, what did Heekin’s new job have to do with me?

Once we were settled in Perkins’s big office, Heekin got a lot more specific.

“Can I assume you’re familiar with our FIGs?” he asked me.

“Field Intelligence Groups,” I said. “I’ve never worked with them directly, but sure.” The FIGs had been created to develop and share intelligence “products” with the law enforcement communities in their respective jurisdictions. On paper, it seemed like a good idea, but some critics saw it as part of the Bureau’s general passing of the buck on domestic criminal investigation after 9/11.

Heekin went on, “As you probably know, the DC group interfaces with all police departments in our area, including MPD. Also NSA, ATF, Secret Service—you name it. We’ve got monthly conference calls and then face time on an as-needed basis, depending on where the action is.”

It was starting to seem like a sales pitch, and I already felt pretty sure I knew what he was selling.

“Generally, police chiefs represent their departments with the FIGs,” he continued with his steady, well-paced speech, “but we’d like you to take over that position for MPD.”

I looked at Perkins, and he shrugged. “What can I say, Alex? I’m just too damn busy.”

“Don’t let him fool you,” Heekin said. “I spoke with the chief here, and with Director Burns at the Bureau before that. Your name was the only one that came up in either meeting.”
“Thank you,” I said. “That’s very nice, but I’m good where I am.”

“Yes, exactly. Major Case Squad’s a perfect fit for this position. If anything, it’s going to make your job easier.”

This wasn’t an offer, I realized, so much as an assignment. When I’d rejoined the force, Perkins had given me just about everything I’d asked for. Now I owed him one, and we both knew it, and he knew that I liked to play fair.

“No title change,” I said. “I’m an investigator first, not some kind of administrator.”

Perkins grinned across his desk. He also looked relieved. “Fine with me. Keeps you in the same pay grade.”

“And my cases take priority over anything else I might have to do?”

“I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” Heekin said, already standing up to go. He shook my hand again at the door. “Congratulations, Detective. You’re moving up in the world.”

Yeah, I thought. Whether I want to or not.
DENNY LED THE WAY, and Mitch followed like the man-child in that old Steinbeck book *Of Mice and Men*. “Right up here, bud. Let's keep it moving.”

The tenth floor was also the top floor. Sheets of plastic hung over sections of two-by-four wall frame, with nothing but raw plywood underfoot. A stack of pallets by the Eighteenth Street windows made a good roosting spot.

Denny unrolled the plastic tarp and spread it on the floor. They dropped their packs. He put a hand on Mitch’s back and pointed to where they’d just come up.

“Primary exit,” he said, then turned ninety degrees to face another door. “Alternate exit.” Mitch nodded once each time. “And if we get separated?”

“Wipe down the weapon, dump it, and meet you back at the car.”

“That’s my man.”
Cross Fire

They’d been over it maybe fifty times, beginning to end. Drilling was the key. Mitch had all kinds of raw talent, but Denny did the thinking for both of them.

“Any questions?” Denny asked. “This is the time to ask them. Later on, it won’t matter worth a damn.”

“Nah,” Mitch said. His voice had gone flat and distant, the way it always did when he was concentrating on something else. He’d already set the M110, fitted with a sound suppressor, on its bipod and was zeroing it out, calibrating the scope.

Denny assembled his own M21 and slung it flat against his back. If everything went according to plan, he’d never have to use it, but it made sense to have a backup. The Walther was also holstered on his thigh.

He used a compass-set diamond blade to cut a perfect two-inch circle in the window, then pulled the section away with a small suction cup. The streetlights outside sent up a glare that made the window act like a mirror from below.

While Mitch got into position, Denny cleaned another small spot just up and to the left, where he could practically look over Mitch’s shoulder and down the rifle barrel. Even their difference in height worked well.

He took his sighting scope out of its case. From here, they had a clear line to the entrance of Taberna del Alabardero. With the scope’s 100x magnification, Denny could practically see the pores on the faces of the people coming and going from the hot-shit restaurant.

“Here, piggy, piggy, piggy,” he whispered. “Hey, Mitch, you know when a pig knows he’s had enough to eat?”

“Nope.”

“When he’s stuffed.”
“Good one,” Mitch said, in the same dead voice as before. He was in his stance now—a slightly freaky looking, ass out, elbows cocked kind of thing, but it worked for him. Once he hit the position, he would not move or look away until it was over.

Denny made his final check. He eyeballed the steam coming from a vent across the way—how it traveled straight up. The air temperature was approximately sixty degrees. Everything was a go.

All they needed now was a target, and that would be arriving real soon.

“You ready to let this genie out of the bottle, Mitchie?” he asked.

“Who’s Jeannie, Denny?”

He chuckled low. Mitch was a beautiful piece of work, he really was. “Just the girl of your dreams, man. The girl of your wildest goddamned dreams.”
Chapter 6

AT AROUND 7:35, a black Lincoln Navigator pulled up in front of Taberna del Alabardero, a hotsy DC eatery for the stars. Two men got out of the back on either side and another emerged from the front, while the driver stayed in the car. All three wore dark suits, with barely distinguishable ties. 

*Banker’s tie,* thought Denny. *Wouldn’t wear one to my own funeral.*

“The two from the backseat. You got it covered?”

“I got it, Denny.”

Everything was dialed in. The scope’s bullet drop compensator would account for the two biggest drags on any bullet—wind, if there was any, and gravity. From this angle, the barrel might be pointing high, but the crosshairs would put Mitch’s eye right where it needed to be.

Denny watched the targets through his own scope. This
James Patterson

was the best seat in the house. Second best anyway. “Shooter ready?”
“Ready.”
“Send it.”

Mitch slowly exhaled, then pulled off two shots in the same number of seconds.

Vapor trails showed in the air. Both men went down—one on the sidewalk and the other flat up against the front door of the restaurant. It was kind of visually spectacular, actually—two perfect head shots to the bases of two skulls.

People were already freaking out in the street. The third man literally dove back into the car, while everyone else ran or ducked and covered their heads.

They didn't need to worry. The mission was over. Mitch had already begun to break down—the man was as fast as a speedway mechanic.

Denny unslung the M21, pulled off the magazine, and started packing. Forty seconds later, they were both on the stairs, double-timing it down to street level.

“Hey, Mitch, you weren't planning on running for elected office, were you?”

Mitch laughed. “Maybe president someday.”

“You did perfect up there. You should be proud.”

“I am proud, Denny. That's two dead crumbums nobody's got to worry about no more.”

“Two dead piggies in the street!”

Mitch squealed, a pretty good imitation of swine, actually, and Denny joined in until their voices echoed up the empty stairwell. Both of them were drunk on how well it had gone. What a rush!
Cross Fire

“And you know who the hero of the story is, right, Mitchie?” he asked.

“Nobody but us, man.”

“Damn straight. We did it ourselves. A couple of real live American heroes!”
Chapter 7

THE SCENE OUTSIDE Taberna del Alabardero was a total zoo when we got there. This was no ordinary hit or rubout. I knew that much without even getting out of the car. The radio had been blaring about a long-distance hit, from a gun-man that nobody had seen, firing shots that nobody had heard.

And then there were the victims. Congressman Victor Vinton was dead, along with Craig Pilkey, a well-known banking lobbyist who had recently dragged both of them into the headlines. These homicides were a scandal wrapped in another scandal. So much for quiet times in Homicide.

Both dead men were the subject of a federal inquiry regarding influence-peddling on behalf of the financial services industry. There were allegations about backroom deals and campaign contributions and all the wrong people getting rich—or richer—while middle-class citizens had continued to lose their homes in record numbers. It wasn't
hard to imagine someone wanting Vinton and Pilkey dead. A lot of people probably did.

Still, motivation wasn’t the first question on my mind right now. It was method. Why the long gun, and how did someone pull this off so effortlessly on a crowded city street?

Both bodies were covered on the sidewalk when my buddy John Sampson and I reached the awning in front of the restaurant. Capitol Police were already there, with FBI on the way. “High profile” means “high pressure” in DC, and you could all but cut with a knife the mounting tension inside that yellow perimeter tape.

We found another of our own, Mark Grieco from Third District, and he briefed us. Given all the noise in the street, we had to shout just to hear one another.

“How many witnesses do we have?” Sampson asked.

“At least a dozen,” Grieco told us. “We’ve got them all corralled inside, each one more freaked out than the last. No visual on the shooter, though.”

“What about the shots?” I asked in Grieco’s ear. “We know where they came from?”

He pointed over my shoulder, up Eighteenth Street. “Way over there—if you can believe it. They’re securing the building now.”

On the north corner of K Street, a couple of blocks away, there was a building under some kind of renovation. Every floor was dark except for the top one, where I could just make out people moving around.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said. “How far is that?”

“Two hundred fifty yards—maybe more,” Grieco guessed. The three of us started jogging in that direction.
“You said these were head shots?” I asked as we went.
“That’s right?”
“Yeah,” Grieco answered grimly. “Dead on, pardon my
pun. Someone knew what the hell he was doing. Hope he’s
not still around somewhere, watching us.”
“Someone with the right equipment, too,” I said. “Consider-
ing the distance.” With a suppressor, the shooter could have
gone completely unnoticed.
I heard Sampson say under his breath, “Damn, I hate this
thing already.”
I looked back over my shoulder. From this level, I couldn’t
even see the restaurant anymore—except for the red-and-
blue lights flashing off the buildings around it.
This whole MO—the distance of the shot, the impossible
angle, the murders themselves (not one perfect hit, but two
in a crowded environment)—was completely audacious. I
think we were meant to be impressed—in a strictly profes-
sional capacity, I was a little stunned.
But I also had a sinking dread in the pit of my stomach.
That ton of bricks I’d been wondering about—it had just
fallen.
Chapter 8

BACK AT HOME, I high-stepped over the second and third porch steps, avoiding the squeak with my long legs. It was just after one thirty in the morning, but the kitchen still smelled like chocolate chip cookies when I came in. They were for Jannie, who had some kind of school function. I gave myself half credit for knowing she had a function but points off for not knowing what it was.

I stole one cookie—delicious, with a hint of cinnamon in the chocolate—and took off my shoes before I snuck upstairs.

In the hall, I could see Ali’s light was still on, and when I looked in, Bree was sleeping next to the bed. He’d been running a slight fever before, and she had dragged in the ancient leather armchair, aka laundry stand, from our room.

A library copy of The Mouse and the Motorcycle was open across her lap.

Ali’s forehead was cool, but he'd kicked off the blankets
James Patterson

in the night. His bear, named Truck, was upside down on the floor. I tucked both of them back in.

When I tried to take the book from Bree, her hand tightened around it.

“And they all lived happily ever after,” I whispered in her ear.

She smiled but didn’t wake up, as if I’d worked my way into a dream of hers. That was a nice place to be, so I slipped my hands under her knees and arms and carried her back to bed with me.

It was tempting to help her out of her pajama bottoms and T-shirt, and everything else while I was at it, but she looked so beautiful and peaceful like that, I didn’t have the heart to change a thing. Instead, I lay down and just watched her sleep for a while. Very nice.

Inevitably, though, my thoughts returned to the case, to what I’d just seen.

It was impossible not to think about those dark days in 2002, the last time we’d witnessed anything like this. The word “sniper” still strikes a bad chord with a lot of people in Washington, myself included. At the same time, there were some scary differences here, considering the skill of this shooter. It all felt more calculated to me, too. And then, thank God, I was asleep. Counting bodies instead of sheep, though.
Chapter 9

NANA MAMA ALREADY had the *Washington Post* spread out on the kitchen table when I came down at 5:30. The case was right there on page one, above the fold: “Sniper Murder Downtown Leaves Two Dead.”

She double-tapped the headline with one bony finger, as if I might miss it.

“I’m not saying anyone, no matter how greedy, deserves to die,” she told me straight-out. “This is absolutely awful. But those two men were no angels, Alex. People are going to take a certain satisfaction from this, and you’re going to have to deal with that.”

“And good morning to you, too.”

I leaned down to kiss her cheek and instinctively put a hand on the mug of tea in front of her. A cold mug means she’s been up for a long time, and this one was cool to the touch. I don’t like to nag, but I do try to make sure she gets
enough rest, particularly since her heart attack. Nana appears to be going strong, but she's still ninety plus.

I poured some coffee into a travel mug and sat down for a quick look at the paper. I always want to know what a killer might be reading about himself. The story was opinionated, and wrong in a few important places. I never pay attention when supposedly smart people write idiotic things—here was another example of news that needed to be ignored.

“It’s just a big shell game anyway,” Nana went on, warming to her subject. “Someone gets caught with a hand in the cookie jar, and we all pretend as though the ones we hear about are the only ones doing anything wrong. You think that congressman was the first and last to ever take a bribe here in Washington?”

I ruffled the paper open to the continuation on page twenty. “An optimistic mind is a terrible thing to waste, Nana.”

“Don't be fresh with me so early in the day,” she said. “Besides, I'm still an optimist, just one who happens to have her eyes wide open.”

“And were they open all night, too?” I said a little hamhandedly. Asking about Nana’s health is like trying to slip vegetables into the kids’ mac and cheese. You have to be sneaky, or you don't get anywhere, and usually you don't get anywhere anyway.

Sure enough, she raised her voice to make it clear that I'd been heard and would be ignored.

“Here's another nugget of wisdom for you. Why is it when we hear about people getting killed in this city, they’re always poor and black, or rich and white? Why is that, Alex?”
“Unfortunately, that’s a longer conversation than I have time for this morning,” I said, and pushed my chair back.

She trailed a hand after me. “Where are you going this early? Let me make you some eggs—and where are you taking that paper?”

“I want to do some digging at the office before my first interview,” I told her. “And why don’t you stick to the entertainment section for a while?”

“Oh, because there’s no racism in Hollywood—is that it? Open your eyes.”

I laughed, kissed her good-bye, and stole one more chocolate chip cookie off the table all at the same time.

“That’s my girl. Have a good day, Nana. Love you!”

“Don’t be condescending, Alex. Love you, too.”
BY MIDMORNING, I was facing down Sid Dammler, one of two senior partners at the L Street lobbying firm of Dammler-Mickelson. Craig Pilkey had been one of their biggest rain-makers, as they’re called in the biz, pulling down eleven million in fees the previous year. One way or another, these people were going to miss him.

So far, the firm’s official comment was that they “had no knowledge” of any wrongdoing among their staff. In the Washington playbook, that’s usually code for covering one’s behind without actually getting backed into a legal corner.

Not that I was prejudiced against Dammler to begin with. That came after forty minutes of waiting in reception, and then another twenty of monosyllabic noncommittal answers from him, with an expression on his face like he’d rather be getting a root canal about now—or maybe like he was getting a root canal about now.
This much, I’d already pulled together on my own: Before joining the staff at D-M, Craig Pilkey, originally from Topeka, Kansas, had spent three two-year terms in Congress, where he’d earned a reputation as the banking industry’s mouthpiece on the Hill. His unofficial nickname had been the “Re-Deregulator,” and he’d sponsored or cosponsored no fewer than fifteen separate bills aimed at extending the scope of lenders’ rights.

According to D-M’s website, Pilkey’s specialty was helping financial service companies “navigate the federal government.” His biggest client by far at the time of his death was a coalition of twelve midsize banks around the country, representing more than seventy billion in total assets. These same companies were the ones whose campaign contributions to the other dead man, Congressman Vinton, had triggered the federal inquiry just under way.

“Why are you telling me all this about Craig and Dammler-Mickelson?” Sid Dammler wanted to know. So far, he hadn’t indicated if any of it was news to him or not.

“Because, with all due respect, I have to imagine that some number of people out there are going to be happy about Craig Pilkey’s death,” I said.

Dammler looked deeply offended. “That’s a disgusting thing to say.”

“Who might have wanted to kill him? Any idea at all? I know there were threats.”

“Nobody. For God’s sake!”

“I find that hard to believe,” I said. “You’re not helping us find his murderer.”

Dammler got to his feet. The red on his face and neck
stood out against the tight white collar of his shirt. “This meeting’s over,” he said.

“Sit down,” I told him. “Please.”

I waited until he was back in his seat.

“I understand that you don’t want to give more airtime to your critics than they’ve already had,” I went on. “You’re a PR firm, I get it. But I’m not a reporter for the Post, Sid. I need to know who Craig Pilkey’s enemies were—and don’t tell me he didn’t have any.”

Dammler leaned way back with his hands behind his head. He looked as if he were waiting to be cuffed.

“I guess you might start with some of the national home-owners associations,” he said finally. “They weren’t exactly fans of Craig’s.” He sighed and looked at his watch. “There’s also the entire consumer lobby, the nut-job bloggers, the anonymous hate mailers. Take your pick. Talk to Ralph Nader while you’re at it.”

I ignored the sarcasm. “Is any of this information tracked in one place?”

“To the extent that it concerns our clients, sure. But you’re going to need a warrant before I even think about putting you in the same room with any of that. It’s private, it’s confidential.”

“I thought you might feel that way,” I said, and laid two sets of paperwork out on the desk between us. “One for files—one for e-mail. I’d like to start with Pilkey’s office. You can lead the way, or I’ll find it myself.”
Dear Fuckstick,

I HOPE YOU’RE satisfied with yourself. Maybe someday you’ll lose YOUR fucking job and YOUR house, and then you’ll have some MOTHERFUCKING CLUE what you’re putting innocent people through out here in the REAL world.

A lot, but not all, of the letters were pretty much like that. I’ll tell you what—when people get really mad, they curse!

The writers were angry, disappointed, threatening, heartbroken, crazy. It ran the gamut. My warrant was good until ten p.m., but I could have spent the whole night reading hate mail in Pilkey’s office.

After a while, I got tired of the slow walk-bys from the staff, so I closed the door and kept sorting.

The mail was from all over the country but especially
from Pilkey’s home state of Kansas. There were stories about homelessness, lost life savings, families who couldn’t stay together—all types of people who had suffered in the financial downturn and placed a whole lot of the blame on K Street and Washington.

The blog entries, at least the ones that D-M tracked, were more radicalized, tending toward the political instead of the personal. One group, the Center for Public Accountability, seemed to lead the charge. They—or, for all I knew, some guy in a basement somewhere—had a regular column called “Fight the Power.” The latest entry was titled “Robbin’ the Hood: Steal from the Poor and Give to the Rich.”

Using free-market principles as their Teflon cover, the members of the Boys & Girls Club of Washington, which is to say the banking lobbyists and our very own elected officials, have crafted one blank check after another for their corporate cronies. Yes, the very people who brought this country’s economy to its knees are still being treated like royalty on Capitol Hill, and guess who’s picking up the tab? These are your tax dollars I’m talking about, your money. In my book, that’s called stealing, and it’s all happening right before our eyes.

Click here to get home addresses and phone numbers for some of DC’s most outrageous robber barons. Give them a call during dinner some night and let them know how you feel. Better yet, wait till they’re not there, then break in and help yourself to some of their hard-earned cash. See how they like it.
Cross Fire

In some ways, the most unexpected thing in Pilkey’s office was the collection he kept of his own press about the scandal. One recent article was still in an unmarked folder on his desk. It was a New York Times op-ed.

Both Pilkey and Vinton are the subject of what will no doubt become yet another long, drawn-out investigation, proving nothing, punishing no one, and accomplishing negative gain when it comes to protecting the people who matter the most — the average joes of the world, just struggling to make ends meet.

So, no surprise, Pilkey had more than his share of haters. This was almost the opposite of no leads. Everything I’d read was just the tip of the iceberg. I flagged anything that mentioned specific threats, but the information was mounting, and the list of suspects was going to be impossibly long.

One thing was clear to me already: we were going to need a bigger team.
DENNY HATED THE SHELTER on Thirteenth Street with a passion that bordered on homicide, and particularly tonight. Lining up on the sidewalk for a bed sucked big-time, especially while the rest of the city went apeshit over their two perfect sniper hits on Eighteenth Street. What a rush! And what a waste of a good night when he and Mitch should have been celebrating.

Of course, it also made more sense than ever to be seen going about their business right now. So that’s what they were doing.

Mitch stuck close as always, shaking his head and jacking his knee up and down the way he did when he got stoked. It made him look just like any of the other basket cases who called this place home, which was fine, so long as the big man kept his mouth shut.

“Don’t talk to no one,” Denny reminded him as they filed
like an army of zombies into the dorm. “Just keep your head down and get some sleep.”

“I won't say nothing, Denny, but I'll tell you what. I'd sure rather be sucking down a little Jim Beam about now.”

“Party starts tomorrow, Mitchie. Promise.”

Denny put Mitch on the bottom bunk for a change and took the top for himself so he could keep an eye on things from the bird's nest.

Sure enough, not long after lights-out, Mitch was back up. Now what?

“Where you going, man?” he whispered.

“Gotta piss. I'll be right back.”

Denny wasn't feeling paranoid exactly—just extra cautious. He sat up and waited a minute, then followed Mitch just to make sure.

It was quiet in the hall. The place used to be a school, and these lockers were originally built to hold little kids’ lunches and book bags and whatnot. Now grown men used them to hold on to everything they owned in the world.

And what a fucked-up world it was! No doubt about that.

When Denny got to the bathroom, he found all the showers running with no one in them. Bad sign. This wasn't good at all.

He came around the corner to where the sinks were and saw that two big guys had Mitch pushed up against a wall. He recognized them right away—Tyrone Peters and Cosmo “the Coz” Lantman. Exactly the type of scumbags who kept decent people sleeping on the street rather than risking a bed in one of these shelters. Mitch's pockets were turned out, and there were still a few quarters on the tile floor around his feet.
“What seems to be the problem here?” Denny said.
“No problem.” Tyrone didn’t even turn around to look at him. “Now get the fuck out!”
“Yeah, I don’t think so.”
Cosmo eyeballed him now and hunkered on over. His hands looked empty, but he was obviously palming something.
“You want in? All right, you’re in.” He put a thumb and forefinger around Denny’s throat and held up a sickle-shaped blade until it was just under his nose. “Let’s see what you got to contribute—”
Denny’s hand clamped down on the asshole’s wrist in a flash and twisted it almost three-sixty, until Cosmo had to double over to keep the arm from snapping in two. From there, it was nothing to stab the Coz with his own blade, three times fast into the ass, and even that was just a warning. The liver would have been just as easy to hit. Already, Cosmo was down and bleeding all over the floor.
Meanwhile, Mitch had gone ballistic. He got his arms around the much bigger Tyrone’s waist and pile-drove him straight into the opposite wall. Tyrone got off two fast jabs—Mitch’s nose exploded with blood—but the asshole left his own jaw wide open. Mitch saw this and drove the heel of his hand straight up into it, until Tyrone went spinning. Just for good measure, Denny grabbed him on the fly and whipped him around once so his face caught some sink on the way down. A few teeth got left behind, and also a thick red smear on the dirty porcelain.
They retrieved Mitch’s cash and took whatever else Tyrone and Cosmo had on them. Then Denny pulled the thugs back into a couple of stalls.
“Punks don’t know who they’re messing with!” Mitch crowed in the hall. His eyes were practically shining, even with blood running down over his lips and onto his shirt.

“Yeah, well, let’s keep it that way,” Denny said. He’d wanted them to be seen at the shelter tonight, but at this point they’d more than accomplished their mission. “You know what? Grab your stuff. Let’s get you that bottle of Jim Beam.”
LIKE A LOT of the law enforcement brotherhood, FBI Case Agent Steven Malinowski was divorced. He lived alone—except when his two daughters visited, every other weekend and one month out of the summer—in a decent-on-the-outside, kind-of-pathetic-on-the-inside little ranch in Hyatts ville, Maryland.

Accordingly, there wasn't much to come home to, and he didn't pull into his driveway until just after eleven thirty that night. His gait, when he got out of his Range Rover, had at least a few beers in it, a shot or two as well, but he wasn't drunk. More like out-with-the-boys tipsy.

“Hey, Malinowski.”

The agent's whole body jerked, and he reached for the holster under his jacket.

“Don't shoot. It's me.” Kyle stepped around the corner of
the garage and into the light of the streetlamp just long enough to give a glimpse of his face. “It’s Max Siegel, Steve.”

Malinowski squinted hard at him in the dark. “Siegel? What in Christ’s . . . ?” He let the flap of his jacket fall back again. “You almost gave me a damn heart attack. What the hell are you doing here? What time is it anyway?”

“Can we talk inside?” Kyle asked. It would have been three years since Malinowski and Siegel had spoken; the voice had to be good but not perfect. “I’ll go around back, okay? Let me in.”

Malinowski looked up and down the street. “Yeah, yeah. Of course.” By the time he let Siegel in through the sliding-glass door to the kitchen, he’d turned off the lights in front and pulled all the shades. There was just the hood light on over the stove.

He dropped his weapon into a kitchen drawer and pulled two longnecks out of the fridge. He offered one to Max.

“Talk to me, Siegel. What’s going on? What are you doing here at this hour?”

Kyle refused the beer. He didn’t want to touch anything he didn’t have to.

“The op’s completely blown,” he said. “I don’t know how, but they found me out. I had no choice but to come in.”

“You look like shit, by the way. Those bruises around your eyes—”

“Should have seen me a week ago. A couple of Arturo Buenez’s boys worked me over pretty good.” Kyle patted the army-green duffel on his back. Inside was the liquid stun gun and water pack, wrapped in a thick blanket. “This was everything I managed to get out with.”
“Why didn’t you signal?” Malinowski asked, and that was the one thing Kyle had never been able to figure out—how Max Siegel was to have made contact with his handler in an emergency.

“I was lucky to get out at all,” he said. “I’ve been lying low in Florida until I could get up here. Fort Myers, Vero Beach, Jacksonville.”

Maybe it was the beer, but Malinowski didn’t seem to notice that Kyle hadn’t actually answered the question he’d been asked. How could he? He didn’t know the answer.

“So, who else should I be talking to?” Kyle asked.
The agent shook his head. “Nobody.”

“Not DEA? Anyone in DC?”

“There’s no one, Siegel. You were out there on your own.” He looked up suddenly. “Why don’t you know that?”

“Give me a break, man. I’m all messed up. Look at me.” Kyle took a step closer to where Malinowski was leaning back against the range. “Seriously, really look at me. What do you see?”

Malinowski smiled sympathetically. “You definitely need some rest, Max. It’s good you’re here.”

The guy didn’t have a clue, did he? This was just too much fun to stop.

“I’ve seen Kyle Craig, Steve.”

“What? Hang on—*the* Kyle Craig?”

Kyle spread his arms and smiled. “*The* Kyle Craig. In the flesh.”

“I don’t understand. How the hell does that figure in…?” It was like watching numbers add up across Malinowski’s face. And just when he seemed to come up with the right
answer, Kyle made his move. His Beretta was out and pressing into Malinowski's chin before the guy even saw it coming.

“Amazing what they can do with plastic surgery these days,” he said.

Malinowski’s half-finished beer clunked to the floor. “What are you talking about? That’s... impossible!”

“I’m 99.99 percent sure that it’s not,” Kyle told him. “Unless I’m imagining all this. Consider it in an honor, Steve. You’re the first and last to know what I look like now. Are you honored?” Malinowski didn’t move, so he pushed the Beretta a little deeper into his face. “Are you?”

Now he nodded. “Say it, please.” “I’m... honored.”

“Good. Now here’s what’s going to happen. We’ll be moving to the back of the house, and you’ll be getting inside that filthy bathtub you never clean.” Kyle patted the duffel on his back again. “Then I’m going to unpack, and you and I are going to talk some more. I need to know some things about Max Siegel.”
Chapter 14

HE WAITED TWO MORE DAYS, spent a few nights around DC, got himself laid at the Princess Hotel. Then Kyle brought Max Siegel in from out of the cold once and for all.

It was an unbelievable thrill, driving Siegel’s newly leased BMW past the familiar guard booth and down into the Hoover Building parking garage. Every security measure in the world, and here they were, waving Mr. Most Wanted himself right into FBI headquarters.

Sweet.

Siegel’s ID got Kyle right up to the fifth floor. They met with him in one of the Strategic Information Operations Center (SIOC) conference rooms overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue—two reps from the Gang and Criminal Enterprise Section, one from the Directorate of Intelligence, and two assistant directors from the main and field offices in DC.

AD Patty Li seemed to be in charge of the meeting. “I
Cross Fire

know this is a stressful time, Agent Siegel, but there’s something you need to know. Your original handler, Steven Malinowski, died two days ago.”

Kyle kept up his professional composure, with just the right amount of emotion. “Oh my God. What happened to Steve?”

“Apparently he dropped dead of a heart attack in the shower at his home.”

“This is unbelievable. I was at his house yesterday. I knocked on his door.” He stopped and ran a hand over his million-dollar face—the master performer in action.

“You were right to contact us directly,” Li said. “Once you’ve made your report and received a full debriefing, I’m putting you on administrative leave—”

“No.” Kyle sat up and looked Li straight in the eye. “Excuse me, but that’s the last thing I need right now. I’m ready to go back to work.”

“You need to acclimate. Sleep in, go to a game, whatever. You’ve been someone else for years, Max. That takes a toll.”

The whole thing was like great food, great sex, and driving 120 with the headlights off all at the same time. Best of all, these Friendly But Ignorant pinheads were eating it up like free doughnuts.

“With all due respect,” he told everyone in the room, “I’d like my record to speak for itself. Give me a fitness-for-duty eval, if that’s what you need to do. Just don’t sideline me. I want to work. Trust me, it’s what I need.”

There were some open glances around the table. One of the drug-squad guys shrugged and closed the personnel file in front of him. This was Li’s call.
“Just for the sake of argument,” she said, “what did you have in mind?”
“I believe I’m up for SSA,” he told her, which was true. “That’s what I want.”
“Supervisory special agent? I see you haven’t lost any of your ambition.”
“I’d also like to stay right here in Washington, ultimately in the field office. I think that’s where I can do the most damage,” he said—just a touch of self-deprecation to keep them on the line.
There would be no promises today, but Kyle could tell he’d pretty much cinched it. And the field-office placement, while not strictly necessary, was a nice bit of gravy.
That facility was over in Judiciary Square, maybe a stone’s throw from the Daly Building. He and Alex could practically string up a couple of tin cans between their offices and play catch-up. How much fun would that be?
Now it was just a matter of time until they met again.
Chapter 15

I OFFERED UP a couple of Washington Nationals tickets to the Fingerprint Examination Section for a fast turnaround with the sniper hits. They got me some results that morning.

A single print had been found on an otherwise freshly cleaned area of glass where the shots had been taken. And, as it turned out, it was a match for two other prints found on-site—one on a stair rail between the building’s eighth and ninth floors, and another on the crash bar of a ground-level steel door that had almost certainly been the shooter’s exit point.

That was all the good news, or at least the interesting news. The bad part was that our print didn’t match any of the tens of millions of samples in the IAFIS database. Our presumed killer had no criminal record to help point the way to his arrest.

So I widened my net. Recently I’d been to Africa and back,
chasing down a mass murderer who called himself the Tiger. As part of the fallout from that case, I’d struck up a pretty good rapport with a guy named Carl Freelander. He was Army CID, embedded with the FBI in Lagos, Nigeria, as part of a Joint Terrorism Task Force. I was hoping Carl could help me cut a few corners with the investigation.

It was late afternoon in Lagos when I caught Carl on his cell.

“Carl, it’s Alex Cross calling from Washington. How about if I ask you my favor first, and we do the chitchat later?”

“Sounds good, Alex, minus the chitchat, if you don’t mind. What can I do for you?” This was one of the reasons I liked Carl; he worked the way I did.

“I’ve got a print on a homicide, two kill shots from two hundred sixty-two yards. The guy obviously had some training, not to mention good equipment, and I’m wondering if maybe there’s a military connection.”

“Let me guess, Alex. You want a red phone into the civil database.”

“Something like that,” I said.

“Yeah, okay. I can run it by CJIS,” he said. “Shouldn’t take too long.”

CJIS stands for Criminal Justice Information Services, a part of the FBI that’s based in Clarksburg, West Virginia. This was one of those loopy situations—calling halfway around the world to access something so close to home, but it wouldn’t be the first time.

Less than two hours later, Carl was back with some discouraging news.

“Your boy’s not U.S. military, Alex. Not FBI or Secret
Service either. And I hope you don't mind, but I ran it through ABIS at Defense while I was at it. He's never been detained by U.S. forces, and he's not a foreign national who's ever had access to one of our bases. I don't know if that helps or not.”

“It gets rid of some of the obvious possibilities anyway. Thanks, Carl. Next time you're in DC—”

“Drinks and all that, sure thing. I look forward to it. Take care, Alex.”

My next call was to Sampson, to share the news, such as it was.

“Don't worry, sugar, we're just getting started,” he told me. “Maybe this print didn't even come from our guy. That crime scene was crawling with our people the other night—and you can bet not everyone was wearing gloves.”

“Yeah,” I said, but a different possibility had already wormed its way to the front of my mind. “John, what if it is the shooter's print, and he wanted us to find it? Maybe it gets him off, knowing we're going to waste our time chasing it down—”

“Oh man, no. No, no, no.” Sampson knew just where I was headed.

“And maybe that gives him exactly the confidence he's looking for—when it comes time to do it all over again.”
Chapter 16

I WAS THERE for Bree outside of Penn Branch when she got off that afternoon. I couldn’t wait to see her, and when she finally came out of the building, it brought a big smile to my face.

“This is a nice surprise,” she said, and gave me a kiss. We’d stopped trying to draw a line around that stuff at work anymore. “To what do I owe the pleasure? This is a treat.”

“No questions,” I said, and opened the car door for her. “I want to show you something.”

I’d been planning this for a while now, and even though work was starting to pile up again, I was too stubborn to give up on my scheme. I drove us along North Capitol Street, over to Michigan, and then to the edge of the Catholic University campus, where I parked.

“Um, Alex?” Bree looked out the windshield—and almost
Cross Fire

straight up. “When we talked about a small wedding, I think I should have been a little more specific.”

The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is one of the ten biggest churches in the world and, for my money, the most beautiful in Washington, maybe in the whole country.

“Not to worry,” I told her. “We're just passing through. Come on.”

“Okay, Alex. I guess.”

The Romanesque-Byzantine architecture inside those walls is almost overwhelming, but it’s unbelievably peaceful in there, too. The soaring arches make you feel tiny, while the million little gold mosaic tiles in the artwork fill every corner with a kind of amber light I’ve never seen anywhere else.

I took Bree’s hand and walked her up one of the side aisles, through the transept, and into the wide area at the back. It’s enclosed from behind with a row of arched stained-glass windows, and open to the whole length of the cathedral at the front.

“Bree, can I see your ring?” I asked her.

“My ring?”

She smiled, a little puzzled, but gave it to me anyway. Then I got down on one knee, and I took her hand again.

“Is this a proposal?” she asked me. “Because I’ve got a little news for you, sweetie. I’m already there.”

“In front of God, then,” I said, and took a breath because I realized suddenly I was a little nervous.

“Bree, I didn’t need you before we met. I thought I was doing okay—I was doing okay. But now… here you are, and
James Patterson

I have to think that’s for a reason.” I hadn’t rehearsed any speech, and it felt like I was stumbling over my words, not to mention the lump in my throat. “You make me believe, Bree. I don’t know if I can explain what that means for someone like me, but I hope you’ll let me spend the rest of my life trying. Brianna Leigh Stone, will you marry me?”

She was still smiling, but I could see her fighting back tears now. Even here, Bree was trying to stay tough.

“You know you’re a little crazy, right?” she said. “You know that?”

“If lovin’ you is wrong,” I whisper-crooned to her, “I don’t want to be right.”

“Okay, okay, anything but the singing,” she said, and we both laughed like a couple of kids cutting up in the library. But it was laughter through tears, for both of us.

Bree knelt down with me, put her hand gently over mine, and slid the engagement ring back onto her finger. When she kissed me lightly on the lips, I felt the warmth, and a quiver, all the way down my spine.

“Alexander Joseph Cross, as many times as you want to ask me, the answer is yes. Always has been, always will be.”
Chapter 17

ROMANTIC FOOL THAT I AM, I wasn't done yet. From Immaculate Conception, I drove us back downtown, where we checked into the Park Hyatt for the night. I had told Nana we wouldn't be home.

After the bellman left us to our suite, Bree looked around and asked, “Alex, how much is this costing?”

I had a chilled bottle of Prosecco waiting, and handed her a glass. “Well, I’m not sure we can still swing college for Damon after this, but the view’s great, isn’t it?”

Then I sat down at the baby grand—absolutely the reason I’d chosen this place—and started to play. I stuck to old standard love songs, things like “Night and Day” and “Someone to Watch Over Me,” each one with a little message for Bree. And, by request, I mostly stayed away from the singing.

She sat next to me on the piano bench, listening and
sipping the wine. “What did I do to deserve all this?” she asked finally.

“Oh, that part’s still coming up,” I said. “Something about taking off all your clothes. Slowly. Piece by piece.”

First, though, we had dinner sent up from Blue Duck Tavern and shared everything—orange and arugula salad, fresh ahi tuna, soft-shell crabs, and a warm-centered chocolate cake for two.

I opened a bottle of Cristal with dessert, and we finished it in the big limestone soaking tub afterward.

“I feel like we’re already on our honeymoon. First a church, and now this,” she said.

“Consider it a preview,” I told her, running a bar of lavender soap up and down her back, then her long legs. “Just a little taste of the future.”

“Mmm, I like the future.” She put her mouth on my shoulder and bit down softly when I abandoned the soap and started using my hands.

Eventually, we spilled right out of the tub and onto the floor. I made a makeshift bearskin rug out of two fluffy hotel robes, and we spent the next few hours trying to get enough of each other.

The first time I brought Bree to climax, her head tilted and her mouth opened soundlessly, while she held on to the small of my back with that amazing strength of hers.

“Closer, Alex. Oh God, closer. Closer!”

It was like nothing could come between us, literally or figuratively. I felt a million miles away from anything but her, and I never wanted that night to end.

But of course it would—*and all too soon.*
Chapter 18

THE HOTEL PHONE RANG at almost exactly twelve o’clock. I’d realize later that it hadn’t been a coincidence. Midnight is also the start of a new day, and the caller meant that, literally.

“Alex Cross,” I answered.

“All this, and romance, too? Tell me, Detective Cross, how do you manage it?”

Kyle Craig’s voice registered like ice water—and just as fast as that, everything changed.

“Kyle,” I said for Bree’s benefit. “How long have you been in Washington?”

She was already sitting up, but as soon as she heard the name, she grabbed her cell out of the nightstand and took it into the bathroom.

“What makes you think I’m in Washington?” Kyle asked me. “You know I’ve got eyes and ears everywhere. I don’t have to be there, to be there.”
“True,” I said, trying hard to keep my voice calm. “But I’m one of your favorite subjects.”

He laughed softly. “I’d like to say you’re flattering yourself, but I can’t. So tell me about the family. How’s Nana Mama doing? The kids?”

They weren’t questions. They were threats, and we both knew it. Families were Kyle’s thing, maybe because his own had been so messed up. In fact, he’d killed both of his parents, on separate occasions. It was everything I could do not to rise to the bait, but I held back my temper.

“Kyle, why are you calling? You never do anything without a good reason.”

“I haven’t seen Damon around,” he went on. “He must still be up at Cushing Academy, yes? That’s due west of Worcester, correct? But Ali! Now there is the definition of a growing boy.”

I gripped the edge of the mattress with my free hand. Having my kids in Kyle Craig’s thoughts was almost more than I could take.

But if there was one thing I knew, it was that idle threats and warnings only added fuel to his fire. He’d always been insanely competitive with me, and I mean that literally. It had been nearly impossible to bring him down the first time.

*How in the hell was I going to do it again?*

“Kyle,” I said as evenly as I could manage, “I’m not going to have this conversation if I don’t know where it’s going. So if you have something to tell me—”

“Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust,” he said. “It’s no big secret, Alex.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“You asked where this is going. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust—the same place everything goes. Of course, some of us get there faster than others, isn't that right? Your first wife, for example, but I can't take credit for that one.”

And then he got his wish—I snapped, lost it.

“Listen to me, you piece of shit! Stay away from us. I swear to God, if you ever—”

“If I what?” he fired back just as forcefully. “Hurt your ridiculous family? Take away your precious fiancée?” His tone had changed on a dime to pure rage. “How dare you talk to me about what's been taken away. What you get to keep! Just how many lives have you taken, Alex? How many families have you shattered with that nine millimeter of yours? You don't even know the meaning of loss—not yet, you fucking hypocrite!”

I'd never heard him go on like this before. In fact, Kyle rarely even cursed. Not the Kyle I'd known.

Was he devolving in some way? Or was this just another one of his carefully timed acts?

“Do you want to know the real difference between us, Alex?” he went on.

“I already know the difference,” I said. “I'm still sane and you're not.”

“The difference is, I'm alive because none of you people have been able to bring me down, and you're alive because I haven't decided to kill you yet. Please tell me that obvious fact hasn't escaped you.”

“I'm not going to kill you, Kyle.” The words were just spilling out of me now. “I'm going to make sure you rot to death, slowly, back in that cell in Colorado where you came from. You're going back.”
“Oh, that reminds me,” he said—and then abruptly hung up. It was pure Kyle, just one more way of saying he'd started this thing and he was going to finish it, his way. Control was like oxygen to him.

Suddenly, Bree was right there, with her arms around me. “I spoke to Nana,” she said. “Everything’s fine, but she knows we're coming home. And I’ve got a squad car headed over there right now.”

I got up and started dressing as fast as I could. My body was shaking with anger, and not just at Kyle.

“I messed up, Bree,” I said. “Bad. I can’t let him get to me like that. I can’t! It’s only going to make things worse.”

If that was possible.
Chapter 19

GODDAMN HIM! For everything.

Kyle had just accomplished exactly what he wanted, which was to inject himself into my life. He had my number, in more ways than one. Now I had no choice but to respond.

An MPD cruiser was in front of the house when we got there, with another uniformed officer in the back by the garage. Sampson was there, too; I’m not even sure who called him, but I was glad he came.

“All cool, sugar, we’re good here,” he said as we came in. He and Nana were hanging out in the kitchen. She’d even managed a ham sandwich and chips for him by then.

“This isn’t over,” I said. It was a struggle to keep my voice down while the kids slept upstairs. “We have to talk about moving the family.”

“Oh, is that so?” Nana said, and the temperature in the room dropped about twenty degrees.
“Nana—”

“Alex, no. Not again. You do what you need to with the children. I, for one, meant it the last time when I said it would be the last time. I’m not moving out of this house, and that’s my final word on the subject.”

Before I could even respond, she decided she wasn’t done after all.

“And another thing. If this Kyle Craig is as good as you say he is, then it doesn’t matter where you put the children. What matters, Detective Cross, is that you protect them where they are.” Her voice was shaking, but her finger was steady as she pointed it right at my face. “Defend your home, Alex. Make it happen! You’re supposed to be good at your job.”

She smacked the table twice with the flat of her hand and leaned back again. My move.

First, I took a breath and counted to ten. Then I asked Bree to start the APB process right away. “Get it out on WALES, all jurisdictions, and then NCIC at the Bureau as soon as we can.” For that, we’d need a warrant number, and Sampson got on the stick to track it down.

I put in my own call to the FBI field office in Denver. Technically, Kyle was their case, since he’d escaped from prison in Colorado.

Over the phone, an Agent Tremblay told me that they had nothing new to report but that he’d be in touch with all mid-Atlantic field offices right away. This was a priority case for them, too, and not just because of the damage Kyle had done to the Bureau’s reputation the first time around. I had a feeling I’d be hearing from Jim Heekin at the Directorate in Washington first thing in the morning.
Meanwhile, I made another call—and woke up my good buddy and sometimes sparring mate Rakeem Powell.

Rakeem had been with the force for fifteen years, and a detective with the 103 for eight. Then, in the same six-month period, he’d gotten married and shot, in that order, and ended up taking early retirement.

No one ever thought Rakeem would leave the department, but then again, no one thought he’d ever settle down either. Now he had his own close-security firm in Silver Spring, and I was about to become a client.

By seven that morning, we had a whole system in place. The kids were covered to and from school by me and Bree, with Sampson as backup. Rakeem’s firm would provide overnight security, front and back, with daytime coverage as needed. They’d also spend the first day working up an assessment of penetrable areas of the house and try to have them wired up before the kids got home.

Nana tried to put her foot down about FBI agents in the yard, but I came out on top of that one. As instructed by her, I was doing whatever I needed to do to make things happen. She and I were barely speaking at this point, and no one was happy about any of it, but this was our reality now.

Life under siege. Kyle Craig was back in our lives.
Chapter 20

AND THEN LIFE does go on, ready or not.

Once I got the kids to school, I made it over to St. Anthony’s in time for my second appointment of the morning, after missing the first. I’d been doing pro bono counseling for the hospital ever since I shut my private practice. These were high-need folks who couldn’t afford even basic mental-health care, so I was glad to do my part. It also helped keep me sharp and on my toes.

Bronson “Pop-Pop” James pimp-walked into my dank little office with the same too-cool-for-school attitude as always. I’d met him when he was eleven; now he was a little older, and more confident in his cynical assessment of the world than ever.

Two of his friends had died since I’d started seeing him, and most of his heroes—street thugs barely older than he was—were already dead, too.
Sometimes I felt as if I were the only one in the world who cared about Bronson, which is not to say he was easy to work with, because he wasn't.

He sat on the vinyl couch across from me, with his jaw pointed at the ceiling, looking at something up there, or probably just ignoring me.

“Anything new since the last time?” I asked.

“Nothin’ I can talk about,” he said. “Man, why you always bringin’ that Starbucks in here?”

I looked at the cup of Tall in my hand. “Why? Do you like coffee?”

“Nah, never touch the stuff. It’s nasty. I like them Frap-puccino shits they sell, though.”

I could see him angling now, like maybe I’d pick him up a treat next time. Get him all sugared up. It was one of those rare flashes where the actual kid showed through the armor he seemed to wear day and night.

“Bronson, when you said it’s nothing you can talk about, does that mean there’s something going on?”

“You deaf? I said, Nothin’. I can. Talk about!”

His leg jerked out, and he punctuated his words with kicks at the little table between us.

Bronson was the type of boy people write psych papers about all the time—the debatably untreatable kind. As far as I’d been able to tell, he had no empathy for other people whatsoever. It’s a basic building block of what could become antisocial personality disorder—Kyle had it, too, in fact—and it made acting out his violent impulses very easy to do. Put another way, it made it very hard for him not to act on them.
James Patterson

But I also knew Bronson's little secret. Inside that street-ready shell of his and behind the mental-health issues was a scared little kid who didn't understand why he felt the way he did most of the time. Pop-Pop had been bouncing around the system since he was a baby, and I thought he deserved a better shake than life had ever given him. That was why I came to see him twice a week.

I tried again. “Bronson, you know these talks of ours are private, right?”

“'Less I'm a danger to myself,” he recited. “Or someone else.” The second point seemed to make him smile. I think he liked the power this conversation gave him.

“Are you a danger to someone else?” I asked. My main concern was gangs. He hadn't shown any tats or noticeable injuries—no burns, bruises, or anything else that looked like an initiation to me. But I also knew that his new foster home was near Valley Avenue, where the Ninth Street and Yuma crews ran, pretty much right on top of each other.

“There's nothin' happenin',” he said with conviction. “Just talkin’.”

“And which crew are you 'just talking' with these days? Ninth Street? Yuma?”

He was starting to lose patience now and trying to stare me down. I let the silence hang, to see if he might answer. Instead, he jumped up and pushed the table aside to get in my face. The change in him was almost instantaneous.

“Don't be grittin' on me in here, man. Get your fuckin' eyes off me!”

Then he took a swing.

It was as if he didn't even know how small he was. I had
to block him and sit him back down by the shoulders. Even then, he tried for me again.

I pushed him onto the couch a second time. “No way, Bronson. Don’t even think about that with me.” I absolutely hated getting physical with him, given his history, but he’d crossed the line. In fact, it didn’t seem to matter to Bronson where the line was. That’s what scared me the most.

This boy was headed over a cliff, and I wasn’t sure I could do anything to stop him.
“COME ON, BRONSON,” I said, and stood up. “Let’s blow this joint.”

“Where we goin’?” he wanted to know. “Juvie Hall? I didn’t hit you, man.”

“No, we’re not going to Juvie,” I said. “Not even close. Let’s go.”

I looked at my watch. We still had about thirty minutes left in the session. Bronson followed me into the hall, probably more out of curiosity than anything else. Usually when we left the room together, I escorted him out to his social worker.

When we got outside and I clicked open the doors to my car, he stopped short again.

“You a perv, Cross? You takin’ me somewhere private or something?”

“Yeah, I’m a perv, Pop-Pop,” I said. “Just get in the car.”
He shrugged and got in. I noticed him running his hand over the leather seat, and his eyes checking out the stereo, but he kept any compliments, or any digs, to himself.

“So what’s the big secret, then?” he said as I pulled out into traffic. “Where the hell we goin’?”

“No secret,” I said. “There’s a Starbucks not far from here. I’m going to buy you one of those Frappuccinos.”

Bronson turned to look out his window, but I caught a little flash of a grin before he did. It wasn’t much, but at least for a few minutes that day, he just might have thought we were on the same side.

“Venti,” he said.

“Yeah, Venti.”
Chapter 22

THE IMBECILES WERE still in charge of the Bureau, or so it seemed. As far as Kyle Craig could tell, no one had even blinked when the freshly debriefed and newly reactivated Agent Siegel got himself assigned to the sniper case in DC. Siegel’s earlier stint in Medellín, Colombia, during their “murder capital of the world” days, was a matter of record, and an impressive calling card at that. They were lucky to have him on this one.

Luckier than they knew—two agents for the price of one! He sat at his new desk in the field office, staring down at the photo ID he’d been issued that very morning. Max Siegel’s mug stared back. He still got a rise just looking at it—still half expected to see the old Kyle whenever he passed by a mirror.

“Must be strange.”

Kyle looked up to see one of the other agents standing
Cross Fire

over the cubicle wall. It was Agent What’shisname, the one everyone called Scooter, of all absurd things—Scooter, with the eager eyes and constant snacking on sugared carbs.

Kyle slid the ID back into his pocket. “Strange?”

“Returning to fieldwork, I mean. After all that time.”

“Miami was fieldwork,” Kyle said, salting his speech with a dash of Siegel’s New Yawk attitude and patois.

“I hear you. Didn’t mean to imply anything,” What’shisname said. Kyle just stared and let the awkwardness hang like a sheet of glass between them. “All right, well . . . you need anything before I head out?”

“From you?” Kyle said.

“Well, yeah.”

“No thanks, Scooter. I’m all set.”

Max Siegel was going to be antisocial. Kyle had decided that before he’d arrived. Let the other agents coo over baby pictures and share microwave popcorn in the break room. The wider the berth they gave him around here, the more he could get done, and the more secure his masquerade.

That’s why he liked after hours so much. He’d already spent most of the previous night right there at the office, sucking up everything there was to know about the Eighteenth Street shooting. Tonight, he focused on crime-scene photos and anything to do with the shooter’s methods. His profile was shaping up nicely.

Certain words kept coming to mind as he worked. “Clean.” “Detached.” “Professional.” There had been no specific calling card from this killer, and none of the “come and get me” gamesmanship you so often saw with these things. It was almost sterile—homicide from 262 yards, which was an
absolute yawn from Kyle's perspective, even if the shock and awe of it, to borrow a phrase from the newspapers, were rather elegantly rendered.

He worked for several hours, even lost track of time, until a ringing phone somewhere broke the silence in the office. Kyle didn't think too much about it, but then his own line went off a minute later.

“Agent Siegel,” he answered, with a smile in his voice, though not on his face.

“This is Jamieson, over in Communications. We just got a homicide report from MPD. Looks like there's been another sniper attack. Up in the Woodley Park area this time.”

Kyle didn't hesitate. He stood up and shrugged on his jacket. “Where am I going?” he said. “Exactly where?”

A few minutes later, he was pulling out of the parking garage and driving on Mass Avenue at around sixty. The sooner he got up there, the sooner he could head off Metro Police, who were no doubt fouling up his crime scene at that very moment.

And more important—*Ladies and Gentlemen, start your engines*—this was the moment he'd been waiting for. With any luck, it was time for Alex Cross and Max Siegel to meet.
Chapter 23

I WAS AT HOME when I got the call about the latest sniper murder near Woodley Park.

“Detective Cross? It’s Sergeant Ed Fleischman from Two D. We’ve got a nasty homicide up here, very possible sniper fire.”

“Who’s the deceased?” I asked.

“Mel Dlouhy, sir. That’s why I called you. He fits right into the mold on your case.”

Dlouhy was currently out on bail but still at the center of what looked to be one of the biggest insider tax scandals in U.S. history. The allegations were that he’d used his position in the District’s IRS office to funnel tens of millions in taxpayer dollars to himself, his family, and his friends, usually through nonprofit children’s charities that didn’t actually exist.

Another sniper incident, and another bad guy right out of the headlines—we had a pattern.
The case had just jumped to a new level, too. I was determined we’d get this right from the very start. If it had to be a circus, I could at least try to make sure it was my circus.

“Where are you?” I asked the sergeant.

“Thirty-second, just off of Cleveland Avenue, sir. You know the area?”

“I do.”

Second District was the only one in the city with zero homicides in the last calendar year. So much for that statistic. I could already feel the neighborhood panic going up.

“Did the fire board get there?”

“Yes, sir. The victim’s confirmed dead.”

“And the house is clear?” I asked.

“We ran a protective sweep, and Mrs. Dlouhy’s with us now. I can ask for consent to search if you want.”

“No. If anyone’s inside, I want them out. Call DC Mobile Crime. They can start photographing, but nobody touches anything until I get there,” I told Sergeant Fleischman. “Do you have any idea where the shots came from yet?”

“Either the backyard, or the neighbor’s place behind that. Nobody’s home over there,” Fleischman told me.

“Okay. Set up a command post on the street—not in the yard, Sergeant. I want officers at the front and back doors, and another at the neighbor’s house. Anyone wants to get into either place, they go through you first—and then the answer is no. Not until I’m on-site. This is an MPD crime scene, and I’m ranking Homicide. You’re going to see FBI, ATF, maybe the chief, too. He lives a lot closer than I do. Tell him to call me in the car if he wants.”

“Anything else, Detective?” Fleischman sounded just a
little overwhelmed. Not that I blamed him. Most 2D officers aren't used to this kind of thing.

“Yeah, talk to your first responders. I don't want any jaw jacking with the press or the neighbors—no one. As far as your guys are concerned, they haven't seen a thing, they don't know a thing. Just keep the whole place locked down tight until I'm there.”

“I'll try,” he said.

“No, Sergeant. You'll just do it. Trust me—we have to keep this thing locked down tight.”
Chapter 24

UNFORTUNATELY THE PRESS was going berserk when I got there. Dozens of cameras were jockeying for an angle on Mel and Nina Dlouhy’s white stone house, either out front at the barriers that Sergeant Ed Fleischman had established, or over on Thirty-first, where a separate detail had been dispatched just to keep people from coming in through the back, which they certainly would do.

Most of the looky-loos on the street, if they weren’t press, were probably wandering up from Cleveland Avenue. The neighbors seemed to have stayed home. I could see silhouettes in the windows up and down the block as I drove in. I signed up with crime-scene attendance and immediately ordered a canvassing detail to start knocking on doors.

Sampson met me at the scene, straight from a faculty thing at Georgetown, where his wife, Billie, taught nursing. “Can’t
say I’m glad this happened,” he told me, “but, shit, how much wine and cheese can a man eat in one lifetime?”

We started in the living room, where the Dlouhys had reportedly been watching an episode of The Closer. The TV was still on, ironically with a live news shot of the house now. “That’s creepy,” said Sampson. “The press like to talk about invasion of privacy—except when they’re doing the invading.”

Mrs. Dlouhy’s initial statement was that she’d heard a tinkle of glass, looked over at the broken window, and only then noticed her husband’s head slumped over with his eyes wide open in the recliner next to hers. I could still hear her crying in the kitchen with one of our counselors, and my heart went out to her some. What a nightmare.

Mel Dlouhy was still sitting in his chair. The single bullet wound in his temple looked relatively clean, with a small blue-black halo around the entry. Sampson pointed to it with the tip of a pen.

“Let’s say he gets shot here,” he said, and raised the pen about six inches to where Dlouhy’s head would have been positioned. “And it comes in”—he drew the pen in an arc until it was pointing at the broken glass—“over there.”

“That’s a downward angle,” I said. The bullet had pierced one of the top panes in a six-over-one window that looked out to the backyard. Without any discussion, we both walked around to the dining room and outside through a pair of French doors.

A brick patio in the back gave way to a long, narrow yard. Two floodlights on the side of the house lit about half the...
space, but it didn’t look like there were any outbuildings or
trees big enough to support someone’s weight.

Beyond that, the rear neighbor’s three-story Tudor was
backlit by the streetlamp on Thirty-first. Two huge oaks domi-
nated that yard, mostly obscured in the shadow of the house.

“You said nobody was home over there?” Sampson asked.
“That right?”

“Out of town, in fact,” I said. “Someone knew exactly
what he was doing. Maybe showing off. Shooter’s got a reputa-
tion to live up to after that first hit.”

“Assuming this is he.”

“It’s he,” I said.

“Excuse me, Detective?” Sergeant Ed Fleischman was
suddenly standing there. I looked down at his hands, to make
sure he was gloved.

“What are you doing back here, Sergeant? There’s plenty
for you to do out front.”

“Two things, sir. We’ve had a couple of neighbors report-
ing strange vehicles.”

“Vehicles, plural?”

Fleischman nodded. “For whatever it’s worth. One old
Buick with New York plates parked up the street off and on
for several days.” He checked the pad in his hand. “And a
large, dark-colored SUV, maybe a Suburban, definitely beat
up. It was out on the street for a few hours late last night.”

This wasn’t the kind of neighborhood where old cars
looked at home, at least not outside of service hours. We’d
have to follow up on both the vehicles right away.

“What was the other thing?” I asked.

“FBI’s here.”
“Tell them to send ERT around to the neighbor’s yard,” I told the sergeant.
“Not ‘them,’ sir. It’s an agent. He asked for you specifically.”
Peering back inside, I could see a tall white guy in a generic Bureau suit. He was leaning over, with his blue-gloved hands on his knees, staring at the hole in Mel Dlouhy’s head.
“Hey!” I called through the broken window. “Why do you need to be in there?”
He either didn’t hear me or didn’t want to.
“What’s his name?” I asked Fleischman.
“Siegel, sir.”
“Hey, Siegel!” I shouted this time, and then I started inside. “Don’t touch anything in there!”
Chapter 25

WHEN ALEX CAME INTO THE ROOM, Kyle stood up and looked right into his eyes. Dead man walking, Kyle thought, and smiled as he extended a hand.


Cross shook Kyle’s hand begrudgingly, but it was still an electric moment, like the tip-off of an NBA game. Here we go, here we go, here we go, now!

“What are you doing in here?” Cross wanted to know.

“I’m just hitting the ground on this one,” Kyle told him.

“No shit. I mean, what specifically do you need on this body?”

It was magnificent—Cross had no idea who he was looking at! The face was flawless, of course. If there was any danger here, it was with Alex’s ears, not his eyes. This was where
the weeks of audio surveillance on Max Siegel in Miami would really start to pay off.

But first he did exactly what Cross wouldn't expect. He turned his back on him and knelt down to look at the entry wound again.

A blue-and-black residue covered the skin around the opening. Some of the man's hair had been sucked inside with the bullet as it broke through the skull. So efficient. So impersonal. He was beginning to like this killer.

“Ballistics,” he said finally, and stood up again. “My money’s on 7.62 by 51 NATO match grade, but not jacketed. And some kind of military training on this shooter.”

“You’ve read the file,” Alex said, not offering any compliment, just noticing. “Yeah, we could definitely use some ballistics support from the Bureau to confirm, but let’s get the ME in here before anything else. In the meantime, I need you to step out.”

Cross couldn’t have been easier to read. Right now, he was hoping a little bluster would tamp down this aggressive new FBI agent, who was no doubt just another overreaching Bureau asshole with an inflated sense of entitlement—kind of like Alex himself had been when he was an agent.

“Listen,” said Kyle, “I’m not going to stress about who gets credit for what on this one. I mean, the U.S. attorney’s going to step in and get all front and center no matter who brings it home, am I right?”

“Siegel, I don’t have time for this right now. I—”

“But make no mistake.” Kyle let the last of Siegel's buddy-buddy smile fade away. “We’ve got two incidents and three
James Patterson

homicides, all inside the District. That's a federal crime. So you can work with us if you like, or you can get the fuck out of the way."

He showed Cross his sweet little encrypted Sigillu, fresh off the line. “One call, and I can make this whole crime scene my own private country club. It's up to you, Detective. What do you want to do?”
IT TOOK ABOUT ten seconds for me to figure out what Max Siegel was all about, and I wasn’t going to have any of it.

“Listen, Siegel, I’m not going to pretend I can keep you off this case any more than you can do the same to me,” I told him. “But let me make one thing very clear here. This is an MPD crime scene. I’m ranking Homicide, and if you want to take that up with the chief, he’s right outside. Meanwhile, if I have to tell you how quickly a room like this can cool, then you shouldn’t be here to begin with.”

No doubt, there would be a full task force after tonight, and I’d probably find myself working with this Bureau jerkoff as we moved forward. But right now was not the best time for pissing contests. By him—or by me.

Sampson came in from the yard, looking at me as if to say, Who is this guy? I made the necessary introductions.

“Agent Siegel and I were just comparing theories,” I said,
trying to lighten things up a little and put us back on track. “He’s got a military take on this, too.”

Right away, Siegel started talking again. “Holding forth” was more like it.

“Military snipers go after high-value targets—officers, not enlisted men,” he said. “The way I see it, that’s what these victims are. Not the bank president but the congressman and the lobbyist who keep him juiced. And not the taxpayer who’s been ripping off Uncle Sam but the other way around.”

“A killer for the common man,” Sampson said.

“With the very best training in the world.” Siegel reached out until he was almost touching the black hole centered one inch above Mel Dlouhy’s left ear. “That kind of accuracy doesn’t lie.”

I listened without saying too much. This guy wanted to lecture, not collaborate, but he was also pretty good at what he did. If there were things he could see here that I couldn’t, then I needed to bite my tongue long enough to find out what they were.

It was just what Nana Mama’s old refrigerator magnet had been telling me to do for as long as I could remember: You find yourself with a lemon—make lemonade.
Chapter 27

THE STREET OUTSIDE the Dlouhy house was filling up slowly and steadily—a thing of beauty. Denny and Mitch hung around the edge of the crowd, not coming too close but close enough to take it in. Given the shitty night they’d had at the shelter after the first hit, Denny figured Mitch could use a little positive exposure.

Either Mel Dlouhy’s body was still inside or they’d snuck the fuck out the back. Cops in jackets and ties kept walking past the living room windows, and you could see that there were brilliant floodlights on behind the house.

Mitch didn’t say much, but Denny could tell he was pumped. The scope of this whole thing was really starting to settle over the big guy. Nah, big kid was more like it.

“Excuse me, Officer. Did they catch the guy?” Denny asked one of the cops around the perimeter—and now he was just showing off for Mitch.
James Patterson

“You'll have to check the paper or TV, sir,” the cop told him. “Honestly, I don't know.”

Denny turned halfway around and spoke low. “You hear that? Sir. Must be a good neighborhood.” Mitch looked off to the side and scratched at his jaw to keep from cracking up too much.

The cop was just about to get on the radio when Denny spoke up again. “Sorry, but I don't suppose you've got a spare ciggie on you?” He held up a blue Bic lighter. People always like to see the homeless guy with his own match, and sure enough the porker reached into his cruiser for a pack of Camel Lights.

“One's fine,” Denny said, making sure Mitch was visible over his shoulder. “We can share.”

The cop took two out of the pack. “What unit were you with?”

Denny looked down at his faded camo jacket. “Third Brigade Combat Team, Fourth Infantry Division, best unit overseas.”

“Second best,” Mitch said. “I was New Jersey Army National Guard, out of Balad.”

In fact, Mitch had never known a uniform, but Denny had drilled him enough that he could fake it a little. People loved vets. It always worked to their advantage.

Denny took the ciggies from the piggy with a friendly nod and handed one over to Mitch. “Word on the street is that this guy might be one of us, the way he's been shooting,” he said.

The cop shrugged in the direction of the sloped front yard.
“Word don't trickle down that hill too quick. You should ask a reporter. I'm just on crowd control.”

“All right, well…” Denny lit his own cigarette, blew smoke, and smiled. “We'll get out of your hair now. God bless you, Officer, and thank you for what you're doing.”
Chapter 28

THE FRIDAY AFTER the Dlouhy shooting was one of those breezy spring days, the kind where you can feel summer coming on the wind, even though it was still jacket weather.

Kyle buttoned his blazer as he turned onto Mississippi Avenue and walked north, blending in with the local color, so to speak. His wig, makeup, and contacts were all perfectly effective, even if they were comically rudimentary. Ever since the surgery on his face, anything less was simply beneath him—if not also a necessary evil.

Likewise, this run-down neighborhood was not a place he’d choose to spend a lovely spring afternoon. It was the kind of locale that kept white liberal guilt alive and well in America, just never enough that anyone actually did something about it.

All of which was neither Kyle’s problem nor his concern right now.
He ambled up the street slowly, making a point of arriving outside the Southeast Community Center just before four thirty. Word was that they were giving out Wizards tickets today, along with the latest “Just Say No” inculcation for the kiddies. Even some of the roughest boys had shown up, and a stream of them came running out through the double glass doors just as Kyle approached the squat redbrick building.

One boy in particular caught his eye. He bypassed the front steps and jumped off a low wall, then stopped to drop the wrapper off a 3 Musketeers bar before continuing up the street.

Kyle followed, close enough to register on the boy’s radar but far enough back that they’d be well out of earshot before anything happened.

A block and a half later, the boy stopped short and turned around quickly. He was still chewing the candy bar, and he spoke around it.

“Man, whatha fuck you comin’ up on me like that?”

He was child-young, but there was nothing resembling fear in those brown doe eyes of his. The sneer on his face was a carbon copy of every other wannabe gangster who trawled these miserable streets for a living.

The boy lifted the hem on his too-long white undershirt and showed a black leather-wrapped hilt of a knife that probably went halfway down his skinny leg. “You got somethin’ to say, punk?” he asked.

Kyle smiled approvingly. “It’s Bronson, right? Or do you prefer Pop-Pop?”

“Who wants to know?” His instincts were good—and he
James Patterson

was just stupid enough. Bronson pulled the knife out a little farther, to show off some steel.

Kyle angled himself away from the street and opened his own jacket. Inside was a compact Beretta pistol, holstered at his side. He took it out and held it by the barrel, with the grip toward the boy.

Little Bronson’s pupils dilated—not with fear but with sudden interest.

“I’ve got a nice job for you, little man, if you’re up to it. You want to earn five hundred dollars?”
The story continues!

CROSS FIRE

By

James Patterson

On sale Monday, November 15, 2010