DON'T BLINK

& HOWARD ROUGHAN

SPECIAL FREE PREVIEW:
BOOK ONE
Don’t Blink
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Don’t Blink

A NOVEL BY

James Patterson

AND

Howard Roughan

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK  BOSTON  LONDON
For Isabel Morris Patterson. —J.P.

To Elaine Glass, one of the bravest I know. —H.R.
Prologue

IN THE WINK OF
A BLINK OF AN EYE
LOMBARDO’S STEAKHOUSE ON Manhattan’s tony Upper East Side was justly famous for two things, two specialties of the house. The first was its double-thick, artery-clogging forty-six-ounce porterhouse, the mere sight of which could give a vegan an apoplectic seizure.

The second claim to fame was its clientele.

Simply put, Lombardo’s Steakhouse was paparazzi heaven. From A-list actors to all-star pro athletes, CEOs to supermodels, rap stars to poet laureates—anyone who was anyone could be spotted at Lombardo’s, whether they were brokering deals or just looking and acting fabulous.

Zagat, the ubiquitous red bible of dining guides, said it best: “Get ready to rub elbows and egos with the jet set, because Lombardo’s is definitely the place to see and be seen.”

Unless you were Bruno Torenzi, that is.

He was the man who was about to make Lombardo’s
Steakhouse renowned for something else. Something terrible, just unbelievably awful.

And no one seemed to notice him . . . until it was too late . . .

until the deed was almost done.

Of course, that was the idea, wasn't it? In his black three-button Ermenegildo Zegna suit and dark-tinted sunglasses, Bruno Torenzi could have been anybody. He could have been everybody.

Besides, it was lunch. Broad daylight, for Christ's sake.

For something this sick and depraved to go down, you would have at least thought nighttime. Hell, make that a full moon with a chorus of howling wolves.

“Can I help you, sir?” inquired the hostess, Tiffany, the one person who did manage to notice Torenzi if only because it was her job. She was a young and stunning blonde from the Midwest, with perfect porcelain skin, who could turn more heads than a chiropractor.

But it was as if she didn't even exist.

Torenzi didn't stop, didn't even glance her way when she spoke to him. He just waltzed right by her, cool as a cabana.

Screw it, thought the busy hostess, letting him go. The restaurant was packed as always, and he certainly looked like he belonged. There were other customers arriving, getting in her face as only New Yorkers can. Surely this guy was meeting up with someone who was already seated.

She was right about that much.

Table chatter, clanking silverware, the iconic jazz of John Coltrane filtering down from the recessed ceiling speakers— they all combined to fill the mahogany-paneled dining room
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of Lombardo’s with a continuous loop of the most pleasant sort of white noise.

Torenzi heard none of it.

He’d been hired because of his discipline, his unyielding focus. In his mind there was only one other person in the busy restaurant. Just one.

Thirty feet . . .

Torenzi had spotted the table in the far right corner. A special table, no doubt about that. For a very special customer.

Twenty feet . . .

He cut sharply over to another aisle, the heels of his black wingtips clicking against the polished wood floor like a metronome in three-quarter time.

Ten feet . . .

Torenzi leveled his stare on the bald and unabashedly overweight man seated alone with his back to the wall. The picture he’d been handed could stay tucked in his pocket. There was no need to double-check the image.

This was him, for sure. Vincent Marcozza.

The man who had less than a minute to live.
VINCENT MARCOZZA—WEIGHING in at three hundred pounds plus—glanced up from what remained of his blood-rare porterhouse steak, stuffed baked potato, and gaudy portion of onion strings. Even sitting still the guy looked woefully out of breath and very close to a coronary.

“Can I help you?” asked Marcozza, seemingly polite. His raised-on-the-streets-of-Brooklyn tone, however, suggested otherwise. It was more like, Hey, pal, what the hell are you staring at? I'm eating here.

Torenzi stood motionless, measuring the important man. He took his sweet time answering. Finally, in a thick Italian accent he announced, “I have a message from Eddie.”

This amused Marcozza for some reason. His pasty complexion spiked red as he laughed, his neck fat jiggling like a Jell-O mold. “A message from Eddie, huh? Hell, I should've known. You look like one of Eddie's guys.”
He lifted the napkin from his lap, wiping the oily cow juice from the corners of his mouth. “So what is it, boy? Spit it out.”

Torenzi glanced to his left and right as if to point out how close the nearby tables were. They were too close. Capisce?

Marcozza nodded. Then he motioned his uninvited lunch visitor forward. “For my ears only, huh?” he said before breaking into another neck-jiggling laugh. “This oughta be good. It’s a joke, right? Let’s hear it.”

Over by the far wall a waiter stood on tiptoe on a chair, erasing the Chilean sea bass special from a large chalkboard. Hustling by him, a busboy and his gray bucket carried the remains of a table for four. And at the bar, a waitress loaded up her tray with a glass of pinot noir, a vodka tonic, and two dry martinis with almond-stuffed olives.

Torenzi stepped slowly to Marcozza’s side. Placing his left hand firmly on the table, he unclenched his right fist, which was tucked neatly behind his back. The cold steel handle of a scalpel fell promptly and rather gracefully from his sleeve.

Then, leaning in, Torenzi whispered three words, and only three. “Justice is blind.”

Marcozza squinted. Then he frowned. He was about to ask what the hell that was supposed to mean.

But he never got the chance.
Three

IN A HELLISH BLUR, Bruno Torenzi whipped his arm around, plunging the scalpel deep into the puffy fold above Marcozza's left eye. With a good butcher's precision and hard speed, he cut clockwise around the orbital socket. Three, six, nine, midnight… The blade moved so fast, the blood didn't have time to bleed.

“ARRRGH!” was a pretty good approximation of the sound Marcozza made.

He screamed in agony as the entire restaurant turned. Now everyone noticed Bruno Torenzi. He was the one carving the eye out of that fat man's face—like a pumpkin!

“ARRRRRRGH!”

Torenzi was outweighed by over a hundred pounds but it didn't matter. He'd positioned himself perfectly, his rigid choke hold keeping Marcozza's head dead still while the rest
of his body violently jerked and thrashed. What was premeditated murder if not calculated leverage?

*Squish!*

Scooped out like a melon ball, Marcozza’s left eye fell to the white linen tablecloth and rolled to a stop.

Next came the right eye. *Slice, slice, slice...* Beautiful handiwork, to be sure.

But the right eye didn’t pop out like the left one. Instead, it dangled, held by the stubborn red vessel of the optic nerve.

Torenzi smiled and flicked his wrist. He was almost finished here, so hold the applause.

*Snip!*

Marcozza’s right eye, with a gooey tail of flesh and vein, careened off the bread plate and fell to the floor.

Blood, finally catching up to the moment, now gushed from Marcozza’s empty eye sockets. In medical terms, his ophthalmic artery had been severed from his internal carotid artery, the high-pressure main line to the brain. In layman’s terms, it was just a god-awful, horrifying, and disgusting mess.

A few tables away, a woman wearing everything Chanel fainted, passing out cold, while another threw up all over her tiramisu.

As for Torenzi, he simply tucked the scalpel into the breast pocket of his Zegna suit before heading toward the kitchen to exit through the back door — back into broad daylight.

But before he did, he leaned down again to repeat his message into Marcozza’s chubby ear as he lay hunched over the table dying a slow, mean death.

*“Justice is blind.”*
Part One

A JOB TO DIE FOR
THE WORDS I will never be able to forget were “Hold on tight, because this is going to be one hairy ride.” In point of fact, those words not only described the next several minutes, but the next several days of my life.

I had been lying fast asleep under nothing but the high, bright stars of an African night sky with only a frayed, moth-eaten mat separating me from some of the poorest dirt on the planet when suddenly my eyes popped open and my heart immediately skipped a beat. Make that a couple of beats.

Holy shit! Is that what I think it is?
Gunfire?

The answer to my question came the very next second as Dr. Alan Cole raced over to me in the darkness and grabbed my arm, shaking me hard. We’d been sleeping outside because our pup tents were like saunas.
“Wake up, Nick. Get up! Now!” he said. “We’re being attacked. I’m serious, man.”

I shot straight up and turned to him as the sound of more gunfire echoed in the air. *Pop! Pop! Pop!*

It was getting closer. Whoever was shooting—they were getting closer. And moving quickly.

“Janjaweed—that’s who it is, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Alan. “I was afraid this could happen. Word got around that we’re here.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Follow me,” he said with a wave of his flashlight. “Quickly, Nick. Keep moving.”

I grabbed my pillow—otherwise known as my knapsack. From the corner of my eye I spotted one of my notepads over by the stack of crates that had been functioning as my desk. I took one step toward it when Alan grabbed my arm again, this time to hold me back.

“There’s no time, Nick. We’ve got to get the hell out of here,” he warned. “Otherwise, we’re both dead. And that’s after they torture us.”

*Well, when you put it like that…*

Lickety-split, I fell in line behind Alan as we raced past the few shanties of plywood and corrugated metal that were used as operating rooms at this makeshift hospital on the outskirts of the Zalingei district of Sudan. It dawned on me how in control the doctor seemed, even now. He wasn’t screaming or shouting.

Meanwhile, that’s all I wanted to do.

*For crying out loud, Nick, what’s with you and the death wish? Did you really have to take this assignment? You knew*
this part of Darfur was still too dangerous for journalists! Even Courtney said so when she offered you the assignment.

But that was the whole point of the article I was writing—the reason I knew I had to be here and see it with my own eyes. This part of Darfur was still too dangerous for doctors as well. Obviously. But that didn't stop Dr. Alan Cole from coming here, did it? No. The acclaimed thoracic surgeon had left his wife and two beautiful kids back in Maryland to be here for four months with the Humanitarian Relief Corps to save the lives of Sudanese civilians who would otherwise suffer and die without medical care.

Now I was relying on Alan Cole to save my life, too.

*Pop! Pop-pop-pop-pop! Pop-pop-pop-pop!*

I kept running behind him and the hazy glow of his flashlight, ignoring the sting against my bare feet as I stepped on the sharp rocks and spiny twigs that littered the ground.

Up ahead I could see some movement: the two female Sudanese nurses who worked full-time in the hospital. One was starting up a rickety old Jeep that Alan had pointed out to me when I'd first arrived days earlier.

He'd called it the “getaway car.” I thought he was joking. *Ha! Ha! Ha! Think again, Nick.*

“Get in!” Alan told me as we reached the Jeep. The nurse in the driver's seat jumped out to let him take over the wheel.

As I practically hurled myself into the shotgun seat I waited for the two nurses to climb in the back. They didn't.

Instead they both whispered the same thing to us. *“Salaam alaikum.”*

I'd already learned what that meant. *Peace be with you.* But I was confused. “Aren't they coming with us?” I asked Alan.
“No,” he said, jerking the creaky gearshift out of park. “The Janjaweed don't want them. They want us. Americans. Foreigners. We're interfering here.”

With that, he quickly thanked the nurses, telling the two he hoped to see them soon. “Wa alaikum salaam,” he added. *And peace upon you.*

Then Alan hit the gas like a sledgehammer, plastering me against the back of my seat.

“Hold on tight,” he told me over the rattle and roar of the engine, “because this is going to be one hairy ride.”
Chapter 2

A BLAST OF the hot desert air nearly burned my face as we hit the road, or at least what passed for the road in this godforsaken part of the world. There was no pavement, only a beaten track of dirt that was now flying off our tires as we fishtailed back and forth with Alan doing his damnedest to avoid the occasional citrus tree that had managed to survive the wretched heat and droughtlike conditions here.

Did I mention we had our headlights off? Welcome to the Ray Charles Grand Prix.

“How we doing?” Alan shouted at the top of his voice. “Do they see us? Can you see them?”

He and I were a mere foot apart from each other, but we still had to shout to be heard. I swear, a fighter jet breaking the sound barrier was quieter than this Jeep’s engine.

“See us? How can they not hear us?” I shouted back. “I don’t see anybody yet.”
I'd done a good bit of homework on the Janjaweed before arriving from the States. They were the proxy militia of the Arab Muslims in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, and had long been fighting and killing the African Muslims in the countryside over, among other things, land allocation. The bloodshed had been relentless and mainly one-sided. Hence, the genocide we keep hearing about.

But reading articles and a few books on the Janjaweed from the comfort of my couch in Manhattan was one thing. This was entirely another affair.

I turned to look over my shoulder, the cloud of dirt and dust flying in our wake making it hard to see anything. That's when I felt the air split open around me as a bullet whizzed by my ear. Jesus Christ, that was close.

“Faster, Alan!” I said. “We've got to go faster! You can go faster, can't you?”

Alan gave me a quick nod, his eyes squinting as he struggled to see through the darkness and flying dirt.

As for me, I contemplated my premature death at thirty-three by counting the unchecked boxes on my life’s to-do list. Winning a Pulitzer. Learning how to play the saxophone. Driving an Enzo Ferrari along the Pacific Coast Highway.

Oh yeah, and finally having the balls to tell a certain woman back home that I loved her more than I had previously cared to admit—even to myself.

What could I say that one of my half-dozen favorite authors, John Steinbeck, hadn't already figured out? Something about the best-laid plans of mice and men often going awry?

But hold on!
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Speaking of plans, the doctor at the wheel apparently had one of his own. “We need something heavy!” declared Alan. 

Heavy? “Like what?” I asked him.

“I don’t know. Check in the back—the cargo area,” he said, handing me his flashlight. “And stay low! I don’t want losing you on my conscience.”

“No, I don’t want that either, Alan!”

Like an added exclamation point, a bullet ricocheted off the metal roll bar. Ping!

“Make that real low!” Alan added.

I grabbed the thick rubber handle of the flashlight, quickly snaking my way into the cramped quarters of the backseat. Peering into the cargo area I spotted nothing but a few empty water bottles bouncing around like jumping beans.

I was about to tell Alan the bad news when I caught the reflection of something shiny strapped to the side, near the spare tire. It was a lug wrench. Yes!

But was it heavy enough? I had no idea, since I didn’t know what it was needed for.

I handed it up to Alan, who gave it a shake as if weighing it in his hands. “Good enough,” he said. Then he flipped on the Jeep’s headlights. “Now hold the wheel steady for me, all right? Very steady, Nick!”

I climbed back into the shotgun seat, reaching over for the steering wheel as Alan lifted his left foot and yanked off his running shoe. I could just make out the swoosh of the Nike label.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

Right back? Where the hell are you going, doc?

What are you doing now?

Don’t leave me, buddy.
Chapter 3

ALAN DOVE BENEATH the steering wheel, the lug wrench held like a baton in one hand, his running shoe in the other.

I tried to see what he was doing. Of course, what I should’ve been doing was paying attention to what he asked me to do—hold the wheel steady.

Oh, shit! Look out! Look out!

The Jeep suddenly swerved, the two left tires leaping a foot off the ground and nearly flipping us over. I could hear Alan’s head slam against the driver’s-side door as I struggled to straighten the wheel. Ouch!

“Sorry, Alan!” I shouted. “You okay?”

“Yeah, but throw me some light down here. I dropped the damn wrench.”

“Sorry, man.”

“No, you’re doing fine. Just hold that steering wheel steady!”
I flipped the flashlight back on for him. The wrench had fallen behind the brake pedal. With his right foot still on the gas, Alan scooped up the tool and shoved it into his shoe. I still had no idea what he was doing.

Then it hit me.

Alan was weighing down the gas pedal, wasn’t he?

Sure enough, as I traded glances between him and the road, I saw Alan replace his foot with his weighted-down shoe. Using the laces like stitches, he looped them around the pedal, quickly tying them tight as he could under the circumstances.

Just as fast he came back up and yanked the belt from his pants, securing the steering wheel to a steel rod beneath his seat.

We were officially on cruise control.

Now what?

Only I didn’t really need to ask that question and get an answer. I just didn’t want to believe what was happening.

“Are you ready?” Alan asked. “You better be. We’re out of here!”

“You’re kidding me!”

“No, I’m dead serious. You see that boulder up ahead on the right? There’s an embankment right after it,” he said.

“How do you know that?”

“I was a Boy Scout, Nick. Always prepared. All we have to do is tuck and roll and they’ll never see us! Trust me.”

I aimed the flashlight at the speedometer. We were pushing the needle at eighty miles an hour. What’s that, doc? Tuck and roll?

But there was no time to discuss or argue; that boulder
and the embankment were a few seconds away. With another bullet whizzing by us, I took a deep breath and told Alan all he needed to hear.

“Fuckin’ A, let’s do it!”

I grabbed my knapsack and turned to grab the roll bar. Ping! went another bullet. And another: Ping! And then dozens of pops and pings.

Gnashing my teeth to build my nerve, I could taste the swirling dirt deep in my mouth. In my four years at Northwestern as a journalism major, not once did I take a class called Tuck and Roll. Wish I had. Would have been much more useful than some of the things I learned about grammar and ethics.

_Geronimo_!

I jumped into the darkness, then slammed into the soil. Only it didn’t feel like soil. It felt like concrete, the pain shooting through my body like an exploding bomb.

I wanted to scream. _Don’t scream, Nick! They’ll hear you_!

So much for my tucking skills. As for the rolling, I immediately had that down pat—as in, down and down and down the embankment. When I finally stopped, dizzy to the point of vomiting, I turned and looked up.

Continuing in hot pursuit of our Jeep was another Jeep of trigger-happy Janjaweed, surely thinking that they were closer than ever to killing a couple of troublemaking Americans. They’d catch on soon enough—maybe another mile or two—but by then Alan and I would be like two needles in a haystack in the dead of night. They’d never find us. At least I hoped that was the case.
“You okay?” came Alan’s voice. He was maybe ten feet away from me.

“Yeah,” I said. “You?”

“Never better, man.”

I saw a familiar glow coming from Alan’s hand. It was an iridium satellite phone. I had the same one somewhere on me.

“Who are you calling?” I asked.

“Domino’s Pizza,” he joked. “You like pepperoni?”

I laughed. Never did a laugh feel so good.

“No, I’m calling for backup,” he said. “It’s time you and I got the hell out of Dodge. A dead surgeon and reporter won’t do much for world peace and all that good stuff we care so much about, huh, Nick?”
Chapter 4

BRUISED, BATTERED, BANGED UP—but most important, alive—Alan and I were airlifted at daybreak by a UN World Food Programme plane to Khartoum. The good doctor decided he'd stay a few more days there in the Sudanese capital to help out at another hospital. What a guy—and I sincerely mean that.

“You're welcome to come with me,” he offered, half joking. “I need a muse.”

I smiled. “Nah, I think I’ve had enough wilderness adventure for a while. I think I have more than enough good material to write my article, Alan.”

“Don’t make me out as a hero,” he warned. “I’m not.”

“I just write what I see, Alan. If that sounds heroic to some people, so be it.”

With that, I thanked him for the twentieth time for saving my life. “Salaam alaikum,” I added.
He shook my hand. “And peace upon you,” he replied. Too bad that wouldn’t be the case, though. Nosiree.

By that afternoon, I was on a four-hour flight over the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to the United Arab Emirates and the city of Dubai, home of the world’s first cloned camel. The place is surreal, if you’ve never been. If you have, you know what I’m talking about. A few years back, I spent a week there visiting all its “tourist attractions” for a piece I called “Disneyland on Drugs.” Needless to say, the Dubai tourism board wasn’t too keen on the title, but what did they expect? Their take on Space Mountain is an actual indoor ski mountain, Ski Dubai. Then there’s the man-made archipelago of three hundred islands created in the shape of a world map stretching thirty-five miles wide. It’s a small world after all, indeed.

But I was only passing through this time. In fact, after a quick nap at the adjacent Dubai International Hotel—one of the cleanest places you’ll ever stay that charges by the hour—I was back on a plane en route to Paris to interview one of the European directors of the Humanitarian Relief Corps, my final bit of research for the article I was working on.

At least, I thought I was on my way to Paris.

While I was literally on line to board the flight, I felt the vibration of my iridium phone. My editor, Courtney, was calling from New York.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Alive,” I answered. It was definitely the word of the day. I quickly told her the story of my Mad Max escape from the Janjaweed militia. She almost couldn’t believe it. Hell, I still couldn’t either.
“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked. “You sound a little nonplussed—for you.”

“All things considered, yes, I’m fine. I even learned something very important—I’m mortal. I’m really, really mortal.”

“So where are you off to now?”

“Paris,” I said.

“Paris?”

“Oui.”

“Je crois que non,” said Courtney.

Now, I only had one year of French back at St. Patrick’s High School in Newburgh, New York, but I was pretty sure she’d just said, “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” I asked.

It was a good question—timely, too, because I was only two people away from handing over my boarding pass and heading to Paris, which is probably my favorite city in the world. Except for the people, of course. Not all of them—just the snogs.

“You need to come home,” said Courtney.

“Why? What’s up?”

“Something good, Nick. Something really good. You’re going to love this one.”

That was enough to get me to take a half step out of line. Courtney Sheppard had a few notable vices, but hyperbole wasn’t one of them.

“Okay,” I said. “So blow me away.”

And sure enough, that’s exactly what Courtney did. She almost knocked me right out of my shoes.
LET ME TIP my hand here—I know it’s semiridiculous, but I am a huge baseball fan, have been since I was a little kid back in the Hudson Valley, throwing apples at tree trunks for practice.

To continue with the narrative, though. I cupped the phone tight against my ear trying to hear every word as best I could. The airport was absolutely swarming, with most of the noise coming from the next gate over, where there were a hundred men gathered, all with neatly trimmed black beards and crisp white flowing robes, otherwise known as dishdashas.

Then there was me.

A shock of sandy-brown hair on top of my six-foot-one frame dressed in a faded pair of jeans and an even more faded polo shirt. I couldn’t stand out more if I were Gene Simmons wearing full Kiss makeup and reading the Koran out loud.
Courtney drew a deep breath. “You remember Dwayne Robinson?” she asked. Of course I did and she knew it.

“You mean, the same Dwayne Robinson who cost the Yankees—my Yankees—the World Series? That crazy bastard? That total enigma?”

“Ten years ago and you still hold a nasty grudge? You are nuts about baseball, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely. It could be a hundred years and I’d still never forget . . . or forgive.” I bristled.

What can I say? I’ve been a die-hard fan of the Bronx Bombers ever since my father drove us down from Newburgh and took me to my first game when I was five. We sat in the upper deck, about three miles from the field, but I didn’t care. Ever since then I’ve just about bled Yankee pinstripes. And yes, I know it’s nuts.

“On second thought, maybe this is a bad idea,” said Courtney. “Go to Paris, Nick.”

“What do you mean by that? What are you getting at? Why are you pushing me off to Paris now?”

She milked it for a few seconds. “He wants to do an interview with you.”

I had this bizarre feeling that that’s what she was going to say, but I was still surprised to hear it. Very surprised. Dwayne Robinson had been the J. D. Salinger of the baseball world ever since he got banned from the game in spectacular fashion. His last statement to the working press was “I’ll never talk to any of you again.” For the past decade, he’d been true to his word.

Lucky for me, things change. This was huge. This would be the story of my career so far. It was also a dream come true.
“Courtney, you miracle worker, how’d you get him to agree to an interview?” I asked.

“I wish I could take some of the credit,” she said. “Instead I just answered the phone. I got a call from Robinson’s agent yesterday.”

“The guy still has an agent? That’s amazing in itself.”

“I know, go figure. Maybe they’re hoping he’ll be reinstated. Maybe that’s it, what he wants to talk to you about.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath,” I said. “He’s well into his thirties by now. Hasn’t pitched in years.”

“Still, that would explain his wanting to do the interview, right? He comes clean, sets the story straight… It would be his first step toward a comeback,” she said. “Maybe not on the mound, but at least in the public eye, his legacy.”

“Yeah, so far it’s worked wonders for Pete Rose,” I joked. “Still, if that’s the case, wouldn’t he do a television interview?”

The words were barely out of my mouth when I had the answer. Dwayne Robinson, the “Great Black Hope from Harlem” and onetime ace southpaw of the Yankees pitching staff, suffered from, among many things, acute social anxiety disorder. Although he could take the mound and pitch brilliantly before fifty-five thousand screaming fans, he could barely carry on a conversation one-on-one. Especially in front of a camera.

“I forgot one thing,” I said. “The guy was like a walking advertisement for Paxil.”

“Bingo,” said Courtney. “In fact, Robinson’s agent told me that he’s afraid his client might change his mind. That’s why he’s already set up a lunch for you two, Nick. You and Dwayne, Dwayne and you. Cozy, huh?”
“When?” I asked, beginning to get more than a little
excited about this.
“Tomorrow,” she said. “Lombardo’s, twelve thirty.”
“Courtney, I’m in Dubai.”
“Hopefully not for long, Nick. You have an important
lunch tomorrow. In New York.”
As if on cue the gate attendant approached me. He looked
just like Niles Crane from the show Frasier. Weird. “Excuse
me, sir, will you be joining us to Paris?” he asked with a slight
smirk. “The gate is closing right now.”
I looked around. Everyone was on the plane already.
Everyone but me, that is.
“Nick, are you there?” asked Courtney. “I need to know if
you can do this. Tell me you’re in.”
Now it was my turn to milk it for a few seconds.
playing silly games.”
“Oh, I’m in,” I said finally. “I’m in.”
Way over my head, as I’d find out.
“I never had a doubt,” said Courtney. “You bleed Yankee
pinstripes, isn’t that right, Nick?”
Chapter 6

TWO FLIGHTS, eight time zones, and twenty exceedingly long hours later, I was finally wheels down at JFK at a little before eleven the next morning. Walking off the plane I felt like a zombie. I probably looked and smelled like one, too.

There was only one message waiting for me as I ditched the satellite phone for my iPhone. It was Courtney, of course.

“Lombardo’s. Twelve thirty,” she reminded me. “And don’t be late! This is the big one, Nick. You’ll probably get a book deal out of it. And a film. So don’t blow it, guy.”

*Thanks, boss…*

There are a couple of things I think you need to know about Courtney Sheppard at this point. First, at the relatively young age of thirty-four, she’s the editor in chief of *Citizen* magazine—the same magazine that in only two short years of existence has defied the odds and done what so many other upstarts will never do. *Turn a profit.*
On the heels of editor stints at both Vanity Fair and The Atlantic, Courtney made a formula for success at Citizen by taking those two magazines’ seemingly divergent sensibilities and combining them into one. Smart move. But then again, she’s a smart woman.

A very pretty one, too. And not particularly impressed with her looks, either.

Which brings me to another thing you need to know about Courtney Sheppard. On second thought, we’ll get to that information a little later.

From Kennedy Airport I caught a cab to my apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. I live mostly out of my suitcase, and that’s a good thing because my apartment isn’t all that much bigger than one.

Clearly I’m not in journalism for the money. Who—besides maybe Thomas Friedman of the Times—is? I don’t mean that Friedman doesn’t love what he does, merely that he makes a lot of change doing it.

Anyway, when I was eleven years old I saw the movie All the President’s Men with my parents. My father loved it because he despised Richard Nixon. Like Pavlov’s dog, he would always blurt out “That crook!” at the mere mention of Nixon’s name.

My mother was gung ho on the movie as well, but I’m pretty sure her motivation was a crush on Robert Redford. And maybe the young Dustin Hoffman, too?

My parents had no real intention of having me tag along. I was supposed to stay home under the evil eye of my older sister, Kate. Instead, I smooth-talked them into taking me. “Who knows, maybe I’ll grow up and be a famous news
reporter one day,” I said, pleading my case. “I could be another Woodward, another Bernstein.”

Of course, that was a ripe load of bull. I was only in it for the bucket of popcorn, a Mountain Dew, and maybe some Raisinets if my dad was in a chipper mood.

But as I sat there in the theater munching and slurping away, something amazing happened. Magical, almost. Up on the screen were two young guys who were on the biggest treasure hunt of their lives, only they were searching for something more valuable than gold or diamonds, or even the Ark of the Covenant. I was only eleven but I got it—and till this day I’ve never wanted to let go.

*They were searching for the truth.*

So even after two flights, eight time zones, and twenty exceedingly long hours, I couldn’t wait to travel a few miles more. I quickly grabbed a hot, then cold, shower and changed into some clean clothes.

Then it was out the door and back into a cab heading down to 67th Street and Third Avenue.

At twelve thirty on the dot, I walked into Lombardo’s Steakhouse ready to meet one of the best pitchers and most confounding puzzles ever to play the game of baseball.

And if I handled everything just right, I’d have the story that a hundred other writers around New York would kill for. *Dwayne Robinson, what really happened that night you were supposed to pitch the seventh game of the World Series? Why didn’t you show up at the ballpark? How could you break so many hearts, including my own?*
Chapter 7

“JUST ONE SECOND, SIR,” I was told after giving the hostess at Lombardo’s my name. “I’ll be right back to help you. One second.”

As she disappeared into the dining room, I leaned forward over her podium to catch a glimpse of the reservation book. When you eat out as much as I do, you get pretty good at reading your name upside down.

Sure enough, there was “Robinson/Daniels” on a line for twelve thirty. After it was a star.

The star treatment, perhaps? Not for me, of course. Maybe for Citizen magazine?

Seconds later, the hostess returned. “We have a nice quiet table reserved for you, Mr. Daniels. Follow me.”

If you insist.

She happened to be a very pretty blonde, and as my father’s
father, Charles Daniels, used to say right up until his dying day, “If there’s one thing I have a weakness for, it’s pretty blondes. That’s followed very closely by pretty brunettes and pretty redheads.”

We arrived at a table along the back wall. “What’s your name?” I asked, sitting down.

“Tiffany,” she answered.

“Like the pretty blue box?”

She smiled, her eyes shining like gems. “Exactly.”

That was for you, Grandpa Charles. Hope you were watching and getting a laugh.

Tiffany turned, leaving me on my own—and that's how I remained for the next ten minutes. Then twenty. Then half an hour. What was this all about?

Thankfully, of all the restaurants in which to be stuck waiting for someone, Lombardo’s Steakhouse ranked near the top, thanks to its truly sublime people watching. It was easy to pass the time counting the Botoxed foreheads or, for the truly cynical, playing Hollywood Hamlet with the tabloid celebrities sprinkled in the mix.

Rehab or not rehab? That is the question.

I guess that’s why I had been a little surprised that Dwayne Robinson would agree to meet me here, let alone be the one to actually choose the place.

Sure, he was as famous as they come in the world of sports. Or maybe infamous was a better word these days. But even way back when he was the toast of New York—make that America—he never would’ve eaten at Lombardo’s. That’s how bad his anxiety disorder was.
James Patterson

So maybe he’s cured now. Maybe that’s one of the hooks of this interview, that he’s “going public” in more ways than one.
Or maybe not.
As I glanced at my watch again, I wondered if perhaps nothing had changed about him and my flying halfway around the planet with barely a minute to spare was all for naught. Dwayne Robinson was now an hour late.
What’s the deal? Where the hell is he? What an asshole this guy is.
I rang Courtney, who called me right back after getting in touch with his agent. The agent was equally as baffled, especially since he had confirmed the interview with Dwayne earlier in the morning. Now he couldn’t reach him.
“I’m so sorry, Nick,” said Courtney.
“You and me both. Well, at least Robinson hasn’t lost anything over the years. He’s still a no-show. What a chump.”
After another fifteen minutes, I finally gave up waiting. Dwayne Robinson was officially MIA — just like when he was scheduled to pitch that seventh and deciding game of the World Series and flat-out disappeared.
All of a sudden I felt like the kid who confronted Shoeless Joe Jackson on the steps of the Chicago courthouse during the Black Sox scandal of 1919.
Say it ain’t so, Dwayne.
Say it ain’t so…
But… it was so.
And Robinson wasn’t the chump — that would be me.
CALL ME LAZY AND SHIFTLESS, but on the heels of being chased by a gang of bloodthirsty, trigger-happy militiamen, leaping from a speeding Jeep, and flying a gazillion miles for a career-making interview that didn’t happen, I decided to play hooky the next day. I didn’t trek into my office at Citizen magazine nor did I plan to work out of my apartment, something I do from time to time with decent results.

Instead I spent the morning in bed relaxing with some coffee (cream, no sugar), the New York Times (Sports section first, then Arts, then News in Review), and one of my favorite Elvis Costello albums (My Aim Is True).

And by records I mean, literally, the record. Nothing against CDs and MP3s, but I’ve yet to hear anything that quite captures the pure sound of a needle against vinyl. So yeah, I’m afraid I’m one of those people, a purist who still swears by his LP collection.
Anyway, at a little past noon I finally ventured out to my go-to neighborhood eatery, the Sunrise Diner, a few blocks south of my apartment. I was just being served my lunch (cheese omelet, sausage, black coffee) when Courtney called.

“Where are you?” she asked in a near panic.

“About to bite into a delish-looking omelet at the Sunrise.”

“Don’t!” she said. “Step away from those eggs!”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because you’re already late.”

For what?

I had no idea what she was talking about. Then it suddenly clicked without her saying another word. “You’re kidding me,” I said.

“No, I’m not. I just got a call from his agent. Dwayne Robinson is sitting inside Lombardo’s at this very moment waiting for you.”

“He thought our lunch was today?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t exactly hang around for the excuse,” said Courtney. At least I thought that’s what she said. I was already clicking off the phone.

“Check, please!”

“Is anything wrong with the omelet, Nick? I’ll get you another one, honey.”

“No, no, it looks great, Rosa. I just have to run. Sorry.”

Luckily I had my shoulder bag with me—the same beat-up brown leather bag I’ve had since I graduated from Northwestern. Tucked inside as always was the one thing I absolutely needed to conduct the interview: my tape recorder. It’s actually a “digital voice recorder,” but thanks to that pur-
Don’t Blink

ist streak in me I’ve yet to get comfortable calling it that. Probably never will.

Bolting out of the Sunrise, I snagged a cab heading south and offered the driver five dollars for every red light he ignored. Eight minutes and twenty-five dollars later, we were screeching to a halt in front of Lombardo’s.

For the second day in a row, I was walking into the same bustling steakhouse for lunch. As my favorite Yankee catcher, Yogi Berra, said, “It’s déjà vu all over again.”

Fittingly, the same hostess — “Tiffany, right?” — was there to greet me. She took the leather jacket I was wearing and led me to the same quiet table in the back.

And there he was, in the flesh. Dwayne Robinson. The legend. The fallen legend. And definitely the greatest sports mystery ever.

“I’d just about given up on you,” he said.

Right back atcha, buddy.
Chapter 9

I HONESTLY DIDN’T know what to expect next as I sat down across from him. I knew my job was to be objective, but sometimes it’s pretty hard, if not impossible, to completely shut off your feelings. There had been a time I had revered Dwayne Robinson, but that was ages ago. Now he was just some guy who had squandered an amazing Hall of Fame talent, and if anything, I resented him for it.

Maybe that's why I was so stunned at my reaction to the man now.

After just one look into his eyes, the same eyes that used to stare down opposing batters without an ounce of fear, I could feel only one thing for him: sorry as hell. Because all I could see in those eyes now was fear.

Cue Paul McCartney and the Beatles: *I'm not half the man I used to be.*
“What are you drinking?” I asked, eyeing the three knuckles’ worth of what appeared to be whiskey in front of him.


“Sounds good to me.”

Rumors of Dwayne Robinson’s drug use had begun by his third year of twenty-win seasons in the majors. Mind you, this was back when the worry wasn’t all about performance-enhancing drugs. Supposedly, he was doing cocaine and sometimes heroin. Ironically, when you shoot those two together it’s called a “speedball.”

But if the persistent rumors were true, the two-time Cy Young Award winner wasn’t letting it affect his performance on the field. And whatever erratic behavior he displayed elsewhere was explained away by his social anxiety disorder.

Then came the famous “Break-In.”

With the World Series between the Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers tied at three games apiece, Dwayne was scheduled to take the mound in the Bronx for the decisive game seven. He had already won two games in the series, allowing only a single run. In other words, he seemed unhittable and therefore unbeatable.

Only this time, he never showed up for the game.

He disappeared for something over seventy-two hours. Hell, it would’ve been longer had the super in his Manhattan luxury high-rise—a die-hard Yankees fan, no less—not used his master key to enter the star’s penthouse apartment. Inside he found Dwayne Robinson lying naked on the floor, barely conscious. According to insider stories the irate super actually kicked the star a couple of times.
From a hospital bed at Mt. Sinai, Dwayne told the police that two men had forced their way into his apartment and drugged him, probably to increase their odds on a huge bet they’d made on the game. So that’s why his blood tested positive for a near-lethal dose of heroin. Because of the “Break-In.”

Naturally, it became one of the biggest stories in sports—no, make that one of the biggest news stories, period. After Watergate, it was the second most famous break-in in history, I quipped at the time, writing for Esquire.

Of course, the difference was that Watergate had actually happened.

While Dwayne Robinson had his supporters, the prevailing sentiment was that he was lying—that no matter how vehemently he denied it, the ugly truth was that he had overdosed on his own.

The fact that the two thugs—whose descriptions he provided to the police—were never found didn’t exactly bolster his case.

Within a year, Robinson was banned for life from the game of baseball. His wife left him, taking their two young children and eventually winning full custody of them. If you thought about it, and I did, it was the worst bad dream imaginable. Everything he lived for was gone. It had all disappeared. Just like him.

Until now. This very moment. The first interview in a decade.

I reached down and slid my tape recorder out of the brown leather bag on the floor. Placing it in the center of the table, I hit record. My hand was actually shaking a little.
“So how’s this work?” asked Dwayne cautiously as he leaned forward in his white button-down shirt, his enormous elbows settling gently on our table. “Where do you want me to begin?”

That part was easy.

What really happened that night, Dwayne? After all these years, are you finally ready to tell a different story? The real story? Solve the mystery for us. Solve it for me.

But before I could ask my first question, I heard a horrific scream, one of the most wretched, guttural, god-awful sounds I’d ever heard.

And it was coming from the next table over. We couldn’t have been any closer.
Chapter 10

MY HEAD SNAPPED sharply to the left, my eyes tracing the horrible sound to its source. As soon as I saw what was happening, I wished that I hadn’t. But it was too late and I couldn’t turn away. I couldn’t do anything, actually. It was over so fast, I couldn’t even get out of my chair to help.

Two men.
One knife.
Both eyes!

A chorus of shouts and screams flooded the restaurant as the man wielding the knife let go of the other man’s head, the blood spouting from his eye sockets as he collapsed onto the table. A little spark was triggered in the back of my brain. I know him. I recognize him.

Not the man with the knife, not the killer. He didn’t look familiar; he didn’t even look human.

He moved lightning fast—and yet there wasn’t a trace of
emotion coming from him. He coolly tucked away the knife in his jacket, then bent down to whisper something in his victim's ear.

I couldn't hear it... but he definitely whispered in the dying man's ear.

For the first time, I glanced over at Dwayne, who looked exactly as I felt. In complete shock. I could tell he hadn't heard the killer's whisper either.

What came next, though, everyone in Lombardo's clearly heard.

The killer began walking toward the door to the kitchen when a man behind him shouted, “Freeze!”

I turned to see two men with guns drawn. Cops? If they were, they were out of uniform.

“I said, freeze!” the one repeated.

From twenty feet away they had the killer dead in their sights. At least that's the way it looked.

Plates, silverware, and entire tables went crashing as people scrambled for their lives to get out of the way of whatever might happen next.

The killer stopped, turning to the two men and their guns. Sunglasses blocked his eyes.

He said nothing. He barely moved.

“Put your hands up slowly!” the second man barked. They certainly sounded like cops.

The killer just smiled. It was a sick, twisted grin that seemed tailor-made to the crime he'd just committed. His hands, however, remained at his sides.

“Put your fuckin' hands up!” came the second warning.

My eyes pinballed back and forth between the killer and
the two men. It was a standoff so far. But something had to give. Or someone. And everything, including the barrels of two guns, was pointing at the killer.

Suddenly his hands jolted up, but not before first taking a detour. As fast as you can say Travis Bickle, the killer reached into his jacket, removing two guns of his own.

*You talkin’ to me? Are you talkin’ to me?*

*Who the fuck do you think you’re talkin’ to?*

Dwayne’s reflexes were still there, and he dove to the floor. I was right behind him, closing my eyes as sheer pandemonium broke out above our heads. There were countless gunshots. People screaming.

*People dying.*

Finally, when it all stopped, when all I could hear were the horrified sobs and gasps of everyone down on the floor around me, I opened my eyes again.

And I nearly threw up.

There, in a pool of blood on the polished hardwood floor of the restaurant, was one freshly carved-out eyeball staring up at me.
Chapter 11

MY LEGS WERE rubbery and my stomach rolled as I slowly stood, gazing at a sea of overturned tables and chairs, smashed plates, scattered silverware and food. Shocked and bewildered, everyone was asking everyone else the same question.

“Are you okay?”

The answers were quickly drowned out by the piercing sound of sirens. I barely had time to grab my tape recorder as the New York police descended on the restaurant, blocking off all the exits and corraling us like sheep in the bar area.

Soon, everyone was asking a different question.

“Haven’t we been through enough already?”

A few ambitious cops fanned out among us, quickly trying to get as much information as they could before turning the investigation over to the detectives. What they didn’t want to get in return was lip and blowback from a high-class clientele that just wanted to get the hell out of there.
“Tough shit,” I actually overheard one officer say to some red-faced stuffed shirt complaining that he had to be at an important board meeting all the way downtown.

The officer’s anger made all the more sense as word got around fast that the two men who confronted the killer had indeed been off-duty cops. Their precinct, the nineteenth, was nearby and they had been grabbing a quick beer and hamburger at the bar after working the graveyard shift together.

Now they were dead.

How could that be? I had been there—and it almost hadn’t seemed possible. They had had the guy covered like white on rice!

Clearly the killer knew what he was doing, and that was the King Kong of understatements. As fast as lightning he’d taken down two of New York City’s finest, and not with lucky shots, either. I’m talking about dead center to their foreheads, twice over. The cops never knew what hit them.

Then—poof!—the killer was gone. He had apparently escaped unscathed through the kitchen and out a back door.

All told, he left behind three dead, four wounded, and dozens who were really, really shaken up about what they had just—unfortunately—witnessed.

Few more so than Dwayne Robinson, who now stood by my side. I almost felt like his bodyguard at this point. Or his sports agent. Someone there to take care of him.

“Here, drink this,” I said, handing him some Johnnie Walker Black that I grabbed from behind the bar. Technically, I was looting. Officially, I didn’t care.
“Thanks,” Dwayne mumbled, reaching for the glass. That’s when I saw that his hands were trembling badly. *Is there a Valium in the house?*

Or maybe it was his anxiety disorder kicking in. He had that look, like the restaurant walls were caving in on him. *Better make that two Valium . . .*

It didn’t help matters that people were beginning to recognize him. You didn’t need any poker skills, though, to read his body language. It basically screamed, *Back off!*

Unfortunately, one idiot couldn’t help himself. He walked right past Donald Trump, Orlando Bloom, and Elisabeth Hasselbeck, heading straight for us.

“Hey, aren’t you Dwayne Robinson?” he asked, removing a slip of paper from inside his suit jacket. “Do you think maybe you could sign—"

“Now’s not really a good time,” I interrupted.

The guy turned to me, raising his tweezed eyebrows. He looked like a real slickster, maybe from Madison Avenue. “Who are you?” he asked.

Good question. Who was I to Dwayne Robinson at this moment? But the answer seemed to come easily. “I’m a friend of his,” I answered. Then I channeled my best tough-guy imitation. “And like I said, *now’s not really a good time.*"

I must have been convincing enough, because the guy backed off. He even mumbled, “Sorry.”

“Thanks,” Dwayne said again.

“You’re welcome. So what brings you here?” I said, and grinned so he’d know I was trying a joke to ease the tension. Not a good joke, just a joke.

Dwayne took a big gulp of the Johnnie Walker and finally
managed to find his voice. “Man, I don’t know if I can do this,” he said. “How long do you think they’ll keep us here?”

It was another very good question. I was about to tell him I had no idea when some guy with a badge hooked to his belt stood on a chair and introduced himself as Detective Mark Ford. That was followed by a bit of good news, if you could call it that. He and his partner wanted to take statements from people according to how close they had been sitting to the initial murder.

“We’ll do this table by table,” he said. “As soon as you’re done, you can go.”

I glanced over at Dwayne, expecting him to be relieved at the news. We’d be among the first to be interviewed.

Except Dwayne wasn’t there. He wasn’t anywhere. He’d just up and disappeared.

Gone.

Again.
IT TOOK ANOTHER two hours before I finally got out of Lombardo’s. While I was being interviewed by one of the detectives, I kept waiting to be asked about Dwayne’s disappearance. The question never came. That probably explained how he was able to escape Lombardo’s undetected — there were just too many people for the police to control, too much commotion. It was truly a mob scene.

A prophetic choice of words, as I’d soon discover.

Anyway, the last thing I felt like doing later that night was go to a party, but Courtney wouldn’t take no for an answer, not even under the circumstances.

“You’re coming, and that’s that. You promised me,” she told me over the phone. “Besides, you need to get your mind off what happened today. Compartmentalize, Nick. Just stuff it into a box for a little while.”
I had to chuckle. Compartmentalize? Stuff it into a box? That was Courtney at her best. And worst, I guess.

Since I first met her ten years ago at the National Magazine Awards banquet, I've yet to meet anyone who could— for lack of a better word—*compartmentalize* better than she could. Like any normal person she was shocked and horrified to hear what had happened at Lombardo's that afternoon. But she was also a born and bred New Yorker and knew the importance of being able to get on with your life, no matter what had happened to you.

It wasn't just talk with Courtney, either. Her younger brother had worked in the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Ninety-seventh floor. And she had really loved him, too.

So at eight o'clock I walked into the white marble splendor that was Astor Hall in the New York Public Library. The party was a benefit for New York Smarts, a citywide tutoring program for grade-school students. Courtney was one of its board members and had purchased a table for ten on behalf of *Citizen* magazine. Good for her. Even better for the kids. A thousand dollars a plate can buy a lot of tutoring.

“There you are!” I heard over my shoulder. Courtney had found me where you can always find me at these types of events: the bar. “And I see you've discovered the house Scotch,” she said.

Indeed I had. It was a Laphroaig 15 Year Old, which happened to be my personal favorite. Courtney obviously had some pull with the event's liquor committee.

“Thank you,” I said, tipping my glass. “I definitely needed this.”
“You’re welcome. Just try to leave a little for the other guests, if you can,” she said, deadpanning.

“Okay, but just a little.”

Courtney helped herself to one of the flutes of champagne that were being passed around. “Well, so much for being able to take your mind off today,” she said.

“So why do you say that?”

“Because Lombardo’s is the talk of the party, Nick. Hell, it’s the talk of the city.”

I was hardly surprised.

The front page of the *New York Post*’s late edition had screamed, “DEATH DU JOUR!” Meanwhile, the local and cable news networks were having a field day. By the time they hit the airwaves with live feeds outside of Lombardo’s, they were able to report the identity of the first victim—the guy sitting next to Dwayne and me.

I could’ve sworn I knew him, and I was right.

His name was Vincent Marcozza, and he was the longtime lawyer—excuse me, *consigliere*—for reputed Brooklyn mob boss Eddie “The Prince” Pinero.

“Everyone’s convinced today was payback,” said Courtney. I nodded. “I guess.”

Eddie “The Prince” Pinero had been convicted the week before on criminal usury charges, otherwise known as loan-sharking at an interest rate that would make even your credit card company blush.

The case was the first time Vincent Marcozza—a legal heavyweight, in every sense of the word—had failed to spring his biggest client. But hey, even Bruce Cutler didn’t win every time on behalf of John Gotti.
But Marcozza’s performance in the trial had been heavily criticized by legal pundits. They said he’d been uncharacteristically sloppy and at times seemed ill prepared. As Jeffrey Toobin told Anderson Cooper on CNN, “Marcozza really took his eyes off the ball this time.”

“His eyes, huh?”

Courtney raised her champagne glass. Then she gave me that big blue-eyed wink of hers. “So here’s to you, Nick.”

“For starters, being alive,” I asked. “Me? For what?”

“For starters, being alive,” she said. “I had no idea you were such a magnet for danger these days. A girl could really get in trouble hanging around you.”

We clinked glasses, but what followed could only be described as an awkward silence between us. It was all due to the subtext of what she’d just said.

Which brings me back to the second thing you need to know about Courtney Sheppard. I owe you that one, remember?
Chapter 13

THE PROBLEM BETWEEN us was as clear as the ten-carat diamond on her finger.

Courtney was engaged.

And not just to anybody, but to Thomas Ferramore, one of the wealthiest guys in New York. We’re talking loaded here. Super megabucks. A one-man stimulus package, if you will.

Ferramore owned commercial real estate, lots of it. He owned an airline. He owned over a dozen radio stations. Two soccer teams.

Oh yeah, and he owned Citizen magazine.

After their yearlong “whirlwind courtship” that rivaled the likes of Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and Brangelina for boldfaced mentions in the gossip pages, the two of them were scheduled to be married this fall at the ultraposh San Sebastian Hotel here in the city. You guessed it. Ferramore owned that, too.
The whole thing promised to be the don’t-miss social event of the season. A real storybook wedding. Problem was, there’d been an unexpected chapter written. Only two people knew about it, and Thomas Ferramore wasn’t one of them.

The night before I left for Darfur, Courtney and I had slept together.

We immediately agreed that it was a one-time thing, a complete lapse in judgment due to our close working relationship over the years. And our friendship, platonic up until then. Sometimes histrionic, often hilarious.

“We can’t pretend it didn’t happen, nor do I want to,” she said the morning after. “But we have to act like it didn’t happen, Nick, okay? And that’s that.”

Compartmentalizing again.

But I suspected it wouldn’t be as easy as “that’s that.”

Sure enough, after her little toast to me, “it” was suddenly the big white elephant in the big white marble room of Astor Hall. We couldn’t ignore it, not until we at least had discussed it some more. As much as we might have tried, there was no way to stuff that elephant into a box.

More important, I didn’t want to. For better or worse, Courtney needed to know how I felt about her, and maybe it had taken getting shot at in Africa for me to fully understand that.

So I took a swig of my Laphroaig 15 Year Old Scotch, followed by a deep breath. Here goes, well, everything, I was thinking.

I turned to her. She was wearing a long black dress with a jewel neckline, her auburn hair elegantly pulled back behind her ears. Beautiful—and so, so sweet.
“Courtney, there's something I need to—”
“Uh-oh,” she interrupted.

_Uh-oh?_

But she wasn't reading tea leaves. This had nothing to do with what I was about to say to her. Instead, Courtney was peering over my right shoulder. She'd seen someone, hadn't she?

“We've got big trouble at twelve o'clock,” she announced.
“HELLO, NICK,” I heard coming up behind me.

I turned to see Brenda Evans, the very blond, very attractive on-air stock market analyst for WFN — the World Financial Network — based here in New York. Her nickname, mainly among men, was the “Bull and Bear Babe.” I, however, knew Brenda by a different moniker.

My ex-girlfriend.

“Hello, Brenda,” I said. Those two words were the first I’d spoken to her since she’d broken up with me a little less than a year ago. My next five words were a complete lie. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too, Nick,” she said. She was probably lying through those brilliantly white teeth of hers, but I couldn’t be sure. That’s how good she was.

As Brenda and Courtney quickly exchanged air kisses and pretended they liked each other, I realized Brenda wasn’t
alone. With her was David Sorren, the all-powerful Manhattan district attorney, not to mention one of People magazine’s “25 Most Eligible Bachelors.”

“Hi,” he said to me, not waiting for Brenda to introduce us. “I’m David Sorren.”

“Of course you are,” I said jokingly. Jeez, he had shiny white teeth, too.

Beyond the cover of People, I’d seen him on the news at least a hundred times, usually standing on the steps of the Manhattan Criminal Courthouse touting the latest conviction of some bad guy. Now, with any luck, Sorren would be a complete prick in person so I could immediately hate him.

“And you’re Nick Daniels,” he said as we shook hands firmly. “I’m a big fan of your writing. In fact, I think you got robbed last year on the Pulitzer.”

So much for hating the guy.

“Well, as we runners-up say, it was an honor just to be nominated. But thanks,” I said.

“Don’t let him fool you—he cried for three days straight,” said Courtney, chiming in with one of her patented wise-cracks. She began to introduce herself, but it was another case of someone who needed no introduction.

“Yes, hello, Courtney,” said Sorren, giving her the extra-friendly two-handed grasp direct from the Bill Clinton playbook. “I’ve been wanting to meet you for quite some time. I’m glad our paths have finally crossed.”

Courtney wasn’t born yesterday.

“You’re not just saying that so Citizen magazine will run a big puff piece on you after you announce your candidacy for mayor next week, right?” she said.
Sorren wasn’t born yesterday, either.
“Of course I am. Let me know if it works,” he answered with a wink. “In the meantime, congratulations on your recent engagement. Is Mr. Ferramore here?”
“No, he’s actually traveling on business,” said Courtney. “He’s in Europe. Home next week.”
Brenda promptly took back the reins of the conversation, another thing she was always good at.
“So, Nick, I understand you had quite the eventful afternoon,” she said. “That must have been terrible. I’m sorry you had to see it.”
I was about to ask how she knew I had been at Lombardo’s when I remembered that this was Brenda Evans, the dogged reporter. Her sources extended well beyond her Wall Street turf.
“Yes. It was terrible,” I said. “I’m sorry I was there, too.” I didn’t really have anything more I wanted to add. Thankfully, Courtney saved me. She turned to Sorren and instantly made like the investigative reporter she used to be.
“David, I’m sure you’ve heard all the speculation about Eddie Pinero being responsible for Marcozza’s murder, right?” she asked. “What’s your take on it?”
As leading questions went, this one was a major gimme. Sorren, like a young Rudy Giuliani—albeit better looking and with a full head of thick hair straight out of a men’s shampoo commercial—had made cleaning up organized crime one of his highest priorities as Manhattan DA.
“At this point,” said Sorren, “most of my thoughts are with the families of those two officers who were gunned down.” He paused and drew a deep breath. “That said, I can assure...
you of this: We'll nail whoever committed those murders. And if it turns out that Pinero was connected, I'll be swinging the hammer on him myself, and I'll be swinging it hard."

Whoa. Easy there, Popeye…

I could see the veins in Sorren's neck pop through his skin as he finished that last sentence. It was more than mere conviction. It bordered on vengeance.

It also brought the conversation to a screeching halt. All that remained were the obligatory parting pleasantries. So good to see you again…Yes, we really should try to get together sometime…Blah, blah, blah…

And that was that.

I was done talking to Brenda and her new boyfriend for the evening. At least, that's what I thought.
“SO, WHAT WERE you and I saying before we were inter-
rupted by Blond Ambition?” asked Courtney when we were
alone again. “You were about to tell me something, no? So
tell me, Nick.”

Yes. Yes, I was. But timing is . . . um . . . uh . . . everything,
and the moment for that heartfelt declaration had come and
gone. Along with my having the guts to say the actual words
to her.

All the more reason why I suddenly didn’t feel like stick-
ing around at the benefit.

“I guess it’s jet lag,” I explained to Courtney. “I need to
catch up on some sleep. You okay with that . . . boss?”

She probably knew I was making an excuse to leave, but she
also knew the only reason I had come in the first place was
because she’d asked. Plus, I’d had a rough couple of days, right?

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” she said, giving me a sweet kiss on
the cheek. “As soon as possible we’ve got to get you back together with Dwayne Robinson. We need that interview, Nick.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. I definitely wanted this story as much as she did.

A minute or so later I was on the steps outside the New York Public Library—smack between its two landmark lion sculptures, Patience and Fortitude—when I heard someone call out my name.

I turned to see David Sorren catching up to me. He was jogging, actually.

“You got a second?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

Sorren reached into his jacket, removing a pack of Marlboro Lights. I was surprised to see that he smoked, if only because of his widely known political ambition. Gallup poll: candidate + cigarettes = less trustworthy. Obama didn’t go on the patch just for health reasons.

“You want one?” he offered.

“No, thanks.”

“Yeah, I know, bad habit. Don’t tell the press,” he said, lighting up. “Wait a minute, you are the press."

I smiled. “I’ll consider this off the record. Besides, I’m not much for petty crap.”

“Good, because I actually have a favor to ask you.” Sorren slid the pack of Marlboro Lights back into his jacket. When I saw his hand again, he was holding something else.

“Here,” he said. “Go ahead, take it.”

It was his business card. I looked at it as if to ask, What’s this for?
“Now’s not the time, but I was hoping the two of us could maybe talk on Monday about what you witnessed at Lombardo’s,” he said. “I shouldn’t be saying this to you, but I’m convinced Eddie Pinero was behind it. Now I have to figure out some way to prove it. Believe it or not, I am torn up about those two detectives.”

“I understand,” I said, taking the card. “I’ll give you a call Monday.”

“Great—I appreciate it. Because if it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to bring that cocksucker Pinero down for good.”

I nodded. I mean, I think I nodded. Tell you the truth, I was still pretty taken aback by the district attorney’s intensity. He wanted Pinero bad. Really bad.

Sorren firmly shook my hand again and was halfway back up the steps when he turned around.

“Hey, one other thing,” he said. “Brenda told me that the two of you used to be a couple.” He let go with a slight chuckle and shake of the head. “Small world, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Small world.”

Maybe a little too small.
CUE THE NIGHTMARES.

I knew I’d have trouble sleeping that night. There wasn’t enough warm milk and Ambien in the world. As soon as I closed my eyes, it was as if I were back in Lombardo’s, living it all over again in a continuous loop. I could hear the screams, the chorus of terror that ripped through the restaurant. I could see the shine of the scalpel in the killer’s hand, the dark plum color of the blood that was suddenly spurting everywhere.

At one point it was even my eyes being carved out.

Finally, I raised the white flag.

I got out of bed and into the chair behind my desk. If I couldn’t sleep, maybe I could at least get some writing done.

Perhaps that was the only silver lining in my missing the interview with Dwayne Robinson—I could put all my focus into the piece on Dr. Alan Cole and his work in Darfur with the Humanitarian Relief Corps. First things first, I needed to
sort through the hours’ worth of recordings I had made with him, taking careful notes to string together an outline. *Note to any kids reading this: outline—always!*

The reality is, the longer I do this, the more I understand that there are no shortcuts in journalism. At least not any worth taking.

So I flipped on my laptop and grabbed my tape recorder. I was about to hit the rewind button when my hand suddenly froze. I realized something.

In the horror of those moments at Lombardo’s, as well as in the haze and commotion of the aftermath on the killing floor, I’d forgotten that I had already been recording when Vincent Marcozza and those cops were murdered.

I didn't get my interview with Dwayne Robinson.

But what *did* I get?

Part of me almost didn’t want to know. After tossing and turning half the night, I didn't particularly want to relive the murders yet again.

But how could I not?

Taking a deep breath first, I braced myself for what I knew was coming. Once more, I’d hear Marcozza crying out in agony. I’d hear the shots that had brought down the two detectives.

But before all of that, there had been something else, something I couldn't believe as I listened to the tape recording now.

Holy shit.

*This changes everything.*
MY HEART WAS pounding as I played the tape back three times just to make sure. *Am I really hearing this? Did he really say that?*

Yes. Yes, he did.

It was the voice of the killer before he committed three murders in cold blood. He was speaking to Marcozza, telling him something, something I wasn't supposed to hear, something I shouldn't have been listening to now.

“I have a message from Eddie.”

My recorder had barely picked it up and the Italian accent wasn’t helping, but there it was—creepy, ominous, and beyond a reasonable doubt.

*Evidence.*

There was no other Eddie it could be, not since Vincent Marcozza had worked for Eddie Pinero. The speculation around town was nearly unanimous—Pinero had ordered
the hit. Now, word for word, it was more than just speculation.

“I have a message from Eddie.”

The killer delivered it, all right. I listened to his words once, twice, three times.

Then I pushed back from my desk, the wheels of my chair carrying me nearly all the way to my bed. On the bench by the footboard were the trousers to the suit I’d worn to the benefit at the public library. I dug through the pockets looking for the business card David Sorren had handed me. I hadn’t lost it, had I?

No. There it was, along with my money clip, a half-eaten roll of Cryst-O-Mint Life Savers, and two pieces of Trident bubble gum.

Right below Sorren’s office number was another number for his cell. I looked up, checking the clock on my bedside table. It was almost three a.m.

*Don’t be crazy, Nick. You can’t call Sorren now. Wait until morning.*

On the fourth ring he answered.
“HELLO?”

“David, it’s Nick Daniels,” I said. “Sorry to call so late.”

It took him a few seconds to respond. “Oh… hey, Nick,” he said in a whisper. “What’s up? Is everything okay?”

I knew why he was whispering. He wasn’t alone. Sure enough, I heard another whisper in the background.

“Nick Daniels? At this hour?”

It was Brenda.

*Don’t sweat it,* I felt like telling him. *You’re in bed with my ex-girlfriend. I get it. You weren’t playing Boggle.*

Instead, I pretended I hadn’t heard her and quickly explained why I was calling him in the middle of the night. I’m pretty sure the sound I heard next was his shooting up in bed like a nuclear missile.

“Are you serious?” he asked.
“Dead serious,” I answered. “I just listened to the tape several times.”

I expected his next question to be a breathless Can you play it for me over the phone? Or maybe even How fast can you meet me?

Who cared what time it was? This was the guy who only hours before had looked me straight in the face and declared, “If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to bring that cocksucker Pinero down.”

Thanks to my tape recorder, I was all but doing it for him. I had what he desperately wanted and needed to drop the hammer on the biggest mobster in New York.

That’s why I was so surprised by what David Sorren said next.
Chapter 19

I WALKED INTO the Nineteenth Precinct on East 67th Street at a little after nine the next morning and was greeted by Detective Mark Ford, who led me back to his desk. It sat in the middle of a slew of other desks, in a large open area that reminded me of every police drama I’d ever seen on television, albeit without the ridiculous “extras” of gum-chewing hookers in fishnet stockings and belligerent drunks handcuffed to benches.

Then again, maybe Saturday mornings were just a little slow around here in the real world.

“Have a seat,” Detective Ford told me, pointing to a metal chair that rode sidecar to a file cabinet.

“Thanks,” I said. My butt was still hanging in the air, though, when he cut straight to the chase.

“So, do you have it?” he asked. “Did you bring it with you, Mr. Daniels?”
What, no small talk first? No chitchatting?

Of course not. From the moment Detective Ford had taken my statement at Lombardo’s, I knew that everything about this guy was direct and to the point. His short, cropped gray hair. His rolled-up sleeves. The way his sentences were all about finding the quickest route to either a period or a question mark.

“Yeah, I have it,” I said. “But there’s something I want to talk to you about first. Something I need to know.”

Oh, great, said his expression. It was as if I’d just told him some god-awful, horrible news, such as the TV show Cop Rock was returning to the air. All Detective Ford wanted to do was listen to the recording, and here I was telling him, Not so fast.

Just like David Sorren had told me.

As happy as the Manhattan DA had been to learn about my recording, he didn’t want to hear it himself. At least not yet. Not until certain “protocols” had been met, he had explained.

“I can’t be seen playing detective, you know what I mean?” he told me.

I did. Even though that’s precisely what he had been doing with me on the steps of the New York Public Library.

So now here I was, sitting in front of Detective Ford, following protocol. There was just one problem.

“So what is it? Tell me,” said Detective Ford. “What do you need to know?”

I cleared my throat. Twice, actually. “It’s just that… well, I’m a little concerned about—”

He cut me off with a raised palm. “Let me guess—you're
scared shitless that Eddie Pinero will want to carve your eyes out, too? That it?”

Maybe “scared shitless” was a touch extreme, but I wasn't about to quibble over semantics. I just would've preferred to slip the recording to David Sorren as an anonymous source and then get far, far away from this murder case, police protocols, and anything else that might eventually pop up.

“Will Eddie Pinero know I’m the guy supplying this?” I asked. “Seriously, detective. I'd like a straight answer.”

Ford quickly folded his arms. “Here's the deal. For the time being, Pinero can’t even know this recording exists. If it is what you say it is, then the first time he'll hear it will be after he's indicted.” He shrugged. “Now, can he find out that you're the Good Samaritan who came forward with it? Sure. I won't bullshit you on that. Will he want to kill you because of it? I highly doubt it. Killing you would serve no purpose. How could it?”

I nodded as Detective Ford leaned back, the legs to his chair squeaking loudly as they scraped against the linoleum floor. If I had to guess, that had been the most uninterrupted string of sentences the guy had put together in a long, long time.

“If killing me would serve no purpose, then what was the purpose of killing Vincent Marcozza?” I asked. “It would seem to be no different—simple revenge.”

I stared at the detective, waiting for him to alleviate my fears, to give me some great and compelling explanation as to why I had nothing to worry about. But that clearly wasn't his style.

“Look, Mr. Daniels, it's like this,” he said. “Eddie Pinero is
a sick and twisted motherfucker who kills with little provocation and even less remorse. Personally, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Then again, Vincent Marcozza probably thought the same thing. So it's your call. Now, are you going to give me the recording or not?"
“OH MAN, oh man, oh man.”

Dwayne Robinson sat alone in the darkness of his tiny one-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. The place was barely furnished, almost as empty as the bottle of Johnny Walker Black tipped over by his feet.

He was mumbling to himself, thinking that he missed his kids so much, it felt as if his heart had been carved out of his chest. For years now their mother had Kisha and Jamal out in California, as far away from him as possible. But even if they lived next door he knew he’d probably be too ashamed to see them. He hadn’t paid child support for over a year. The last time he did, the check bounced, and he was ashamed about that, too.

There was nothing more to hock. His two Cy Young awards were long gone. So were the old Yankee jerseys. On
Ebay, the highest bid for one of his signed baseballs was $18.50. His rookie baseball card had no bids at all.

Again, the phone rang.

It had been ringing all afternoon and into the night. Not once did he answer or even check the caller ID. He didn't need to; he knew who it was.

He was sure that writer, Nick Daniels, was a decent guy, and that's what made it worse. Dwayne pleaded with himself, just call him back and tell him you're okay.

Just lie, like you always do.

But he couldn't even do that much. He was too scared. The same fearless pitcher who chose to stay here in New York, even after letting the entire city down, was too scared to talk to some writer.

All he could do was close his eyes and let the darkest of dark thoughts creep into his mind like shadows across the outfield and around the monuments at Yankee Stadium.

Never having to open his eyes again. Not ever. That would be good.

“Goddamn it!” he yelled, swinging his huge clenched fist through the darkness. But the invisible demons were always out of reach.

His eyes popped open as he stood, turned on the light, and began pacing the floor. His fear had turned to rage, the alcohol coursing through his blood no longer dulling the pain. Instead, it was greasing the wheels. Every muscle, every nerve ending, fired at once as he lunged for the empty bottle of Johnnie Walker, scooping it up while cocking his arm.

This would be no curveball.
This was a ninety-eight-mile-an-hour fastball aimed right at the bare wall before him.

*Smash!*

Shards and splinters of jagged glass scattered across the apartment as he fell hopelessly back into his chair, sobbing into both hands.

Dwayne knew one thing for sure.

He couldn't keep his secret any longer.

He had to talk to that damn reporter, what's his name—Nick Daniels.
Chapter 21

AFTER RETURNING HOME from the Nineteenth Precinct, where Detective Ford had sweet-talked me into handing over my recording from Lombardo’s under the threat of a subpoena, I spent the rest of my day alternating between calls to Dwayne Robinson and contemplating life on the run from Eddie Pinero.

*On the plus side, an extended stint in the Witness Protection Program would make for one hell of an article.*

I could only pray I was overreacting about Pinero and what he might do to me.

As for getting through to Dwayne Robinson, well, that was getting damn frustrating—and I don’t give up easily. Especially not on a story as big as this one could be.

Courtney had given me Dwayne’s home number, courtesy of his agent, but if Dwayne was home he sure wasn’t picking up. The guy didn’t even have an answering machine, so I
Don’t Blink

couldn’t leave a message, something like Call me, you self-centered son of a bitch. It’s time to grow up, Dwayne.

I just kept trying and trying every hour on the hour for the rest of the day. Half the night, too.

I’d like to tell you I had big plans for that evening as a certified, very eligible bachelor living in Manhattan, but I hadn’t expected to be home for the weekend, let alone in the country. There were friends I could call but I wasn’t really in the mood to do anything.

As for the one person who maybe could’ve changed my mind about that, she was with her fiancé. Unfortunately, I happened to know that the future Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ferramore were guests of the mayor and fellow billionaire Mike Bloomberg at his home on the Upper East Side. Clearly my invitation had gotten lost in the mail.

So instead I ordered in a Hawaiian pizza, popped open a Heineken, and watched some TV. Flipping around the dial, I sampled a few minutes of Larry King and his suspenders, followed by the local ten o’clock news.

Then I landed on the ultimate of ironies.

Staring back at me beneath the brim of his cap pulled tight above those intense, fearless eyes I remembered was none other than Dwayne Robinson. The channel was ESPN Classic, rebroadcasting the game that had first put Dwayne on the map—a twenty-strikeout gem against the Oakland As on a very hot August night ten years ago.

Given my fruitless attempts that day to reach Robinson, I was tempted to switch the channel if only out of spite. I couldn’t, though. It truly was a classic game, and no matter how many times I’ve seen it, I always have to watch some of it again.
Apparently, I wasn’t alone.
Out of the blue, the phone rang next to me on the couch.
“Private caller,” read the ID.
“Hello?” I answered.
There was no response, but I could tell someone was there, and it was more than just a gut feeling. *Through the phone I could hear the same game I was watching.*
“Dwayne?” I asked. “That you?”
It was my first thought. I mean, if I ever struck out twenty people, I’d be watching a replay of the game, too. Every chance I got!
But if it was Robinson he wasn’t answering.
I tried again. “That was an amazing night for you against Oakland. One for the history books. You’ll never forget it, right?”
After another silence there finally came a voice. *His voice.*
“Yes,” said Dwayne. “It was a special night. Almost seems like it wasn’t really me. Or that *this* isn’t me. I’m not exactly sure, Mr. Daniels.”
I drew a deep breath and exhaled. “It’s good to hear from you,” I said. “I was a little worried.”
“Yeah, I know you were trying to call. I’m sorry I—”
“No apologies necessary. I wanted to make sure you were all right, that’s all. You are all right, aren’t you?”
He sure didn’t sound like it. I could tell he’d been drinking—or doing something—but he wasn’t slurring his words. He sounded more depressed than drunk.
He left my question hanging.
“Dwayne, you still there?” I asked.
“I’m here.” He paused. It felt like a lifetime. “Listen, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”
“Sure. Absolutely,” I said. “Just tell me where.”
“Not now. Tomorrow.”

No, not tomorrow, right now! I wanted to yell.

This was no longer about finishing a sports interview, that much was pretty clear. There was something else going on. What the hell was it?

“Where are you now, Dwayne? Are you home? I can be there in ten minutes.”

“No, I’m tired, Nick. A little wasted, to tell the truth. I need to get some sleep.”

“But—”

“We’ll do it tomorrow. I promise. Believe me, I can keep a promise.”

I wanted to keep pressing, hopefully change his mind. Instead, I pulled back.

“Okay, how about we meet for breakfast?”

“I’ve got something to do in the morning. Let’s meet for lunch again,” he said.

We didn’t exactly have a great track record with lunches, but I didn’t want to point that out now.

“Sounds good, but on one condition,” I said.

“What’s that? What’s your condition for the interview?” he asked, and chuckled lightly.

It was simple, and it made all the sense in the world. “I choose the restaurant this time.”
Chapter 22

IT WAS A little before noon when I walked into Jimmy D's Pub three blocks south of my apartment. Any self-respecting writer has a local bar that doubles as his second home. I read that in Pete Hamill's memoir, so it must be true, right?

A couple of doors from Jimmy's I gave a buck to a panhandler I know named Reuben. Reuben's a homeless man, nearly blind, unemployable. A quirk of mine is that I leave the house every morning with ten singles. I give them out on the streets until they're gone. My father used to do the same thing with five singles when we would visit New York together. He didn't think it was a big deal, and neither do I.

"Hey, Nick," I heard from behind the bar as I grabbed a stool inside Jimmy's. It wasn't quite a chorus of people shouting "Norm!" on Cheers, but it was welcome just the same.

"Hey, Jimmy."

Jimmy Dowd was the owner as well as his own daytime
bartender. He poured a mean shot and could draw a clean pint of Guinness. I had no idea how his mixed drinks were because I’d never had one, let alone seen him make any. Jimmy’s was a pub for those who had only one decision to make with their liquor: straight up or on the rocks?

But I was holding off on either. At least until Dwayne Robinson arrived for our meeting.

Jimmy nodded when I told him as much, and the two of us chatted for a few minutes about the Yankees’ upcoming series against the Red Sox at Fenway. “We’ll take two of three,” predicted Jimmy. “As long as we pitch around Big Papi. Slumping or not, he always kills us!”

There were a lot of reasons why I liked hanging out at Jimmy D’s, not the least of which was Jimmy himself. He was a Vietnam vet who had made some money in stocks and decided to fulfill his lifelong dream of owning a pub. There was also the fact that three years ago Jimmy had saved my life one night. But that’s a story for another time.

The story now was Dwayne Robinson. I checked my watch—he was due any minute. Knowing that Jimmy, a Bronx native, shared the same passion for the Bombers that I did, I told him who I was waiting on.

“No shit, really?” he said, tossing back his head of jet-black hair with a surprised look. Then he summed up an entire city’s feeling with four words. “He broke my heart.”

We started comparing favorite Dwayne Robinson pitching performances. With lots to choose from, it wasn’t long before I lost track of the time.

“When was he supposed to meet you?” Jimmy finally asked, glancing at his watch.
“Noon,” I answered, doing the same. 

Shit! It was twelve thirty. Here we go again!

I reached for my cell phone and dialed Robinson’s apartment. By the sixth ring I was about to hang up. That’s when I heard the beep of an incoming call. I hit the flash button to switch over to the other line, not bothering to check caller ID. I was sure it was Dwayne.

It was Courtney.

I dispensed with “Hello” and cut to the chase, my frustration leading the way like a bulldozer. “He didn’t show,” I said.

“Dwayne Robinson screwed me again.”

“I know,” said Courtney.

I know?

“Are you near a television?” she asked.

I motioned for Jimmy to turn on the TV.

“What channel?” I asked her.

“Take your pick,” Courtney said. “I’m watching ESPN.”

She didn’t say another word.
“ESPN!” I SHOUTED to Jimmy.

He punched the remote, the picture came up, and within a few seconds my heart sank down into the floorboards.

A reporter was talking, the street scene behind him not giving too much away. I could see a cop car, a bunch of people milling about.

But it was all summed up on the bottom of the screen in plain English.

DWAYNE ROBINSON IS DEAD.

The reporter was rambling on, but it was as if I’d gone deaf. Jimmy said something to me and I couldn’t process his words, either. I just kept staring at the TV screen in shock, getting numb all over.

The picture changed as a few words from the reporter finally began to sift into my ears.
Jump . . . building . . . apparent suicide . . . mystery man . . . now mystery death.

I snapped out of it to watch the TV screen fill with the shaky image from what looked like a handheld recorder. There was a hardwood floor—a hallway—and the pink slippers of the woman running with the camera. She was heading for a sliding-glass door off her living room.

Word for word, I could hear the reporter's voice-over.

“What you’re about to see is dramatic home video shot by one of Dwayne Robinson’s neighbors right after she apparently heard the crash outside her apartment window. I must warn our viewing audience that this footage is very unsettling.”

The handheld camera finally stopped jumping around, the focus tightening from blurry to clear. Dwayne's neighbor was shooting from her terrace high above the street below.

Dwayne Robinson’s six-foot-four body was sprawled face-down on the roof of a white van, the impact creating a crater of twisted and bent metal around him.

I went partially deaf again as the shot returned to the reporter standing on what was clearly the same street where Dwayne had lived.

And died.

“Guess he’s not coming,” Jimmy muttered, sounding as shaken up as I felt. “The poor son of a bitch. He blew us off again, huh, Nick.”
BRUNO TORENZI OPENED the door to his room at the San Sebastian Hotel overlooking Central Park and gave a head-to-toe gaze at the five-foot-ten-inch blonde standing before him in the hallway. She was wearing a shiny red cocktail dress with matching high heels and strands of gold jewelry.

“What’s your name?” he asked. “Your real name?”

“Anastasia,” she answered. Her Russian accent was almost as thick as his Italian. “What’s your real name?”

Torenzi ignored the question and simply turned around, walking back inside.

“Nice to meet you,” the blonde said, closing the door behind her. “I’ll call you Sebastian, then. Like the hotel?”

“I get the joke,” Bruno Torenzi called back to the girl.

Torenzi’s preference was for Italian girls, but the ones on this side of the Atlantic were like eating at the Olive Garden: you would never mistake the experience for a home-cooked
meal. As for the American girls, they talked too much about themselves. And the Asians were too skinny for him, nothing to grab on to.

Thank God for the Russian girls. Or Polish, or Greek, for that matter.

“Take your clothes off,” said Torenzi, grabbing a beer from the minibar. There was no offer of anything for the girl.

“First things first,” she shot back. “Sebastian.”

“Sure,” he mumbled, walking over to an open black duffel bag perched on a round table in the corner. He pulled out a stack of cash. “Two thousand, right?” he asked, removing the rubber band holding the wad together.

“Not including gratuity,” said Anastasia, hoping the Italian man, the apparently rich Italian man, didn’t know the rules of the game.

Torenzi peeled off twenty crisp one-hundred-dollar bills and stuck out his hand. “I wasn’t born yesterday… Anastasia.”

She took the two thousand and thought that would be good—for a start.

Then she nuzzled up to his ear while sliding her hand down to the crotch of his black trousers. Nice material, Italian-made. “You know what Anastasia means?” she whispered through lips painted cherry red. “Means ‘flower of resurrection.’”

Torenzi took a swig of his beer. “Excellent. Now take off your clothes,” he repeated. “Forget about the history lessons.”

The big guy liked to be the boss and he was hardly the first, thought Anastasia as she reached for the zipper run-
ning down the back of her dress. *Let him enjoy it while he still can.*

The former governor of New York notwithstanding, most men know that two thousand dollars was a pretty good price to pay for a call girl. Meaning she better be pretty and she better be good.

Anastasia didn’t disappoint. As the cocktail dress slipped off her shoulders, her blue eyes and high cheekbones became all but an afterthought to the rest of her. There was no bra, no panties underneath the dress. Just all-natural, gravity-defying talent and beauty.

“You know what, Sebastian,” she purred. “I like you.”

Torenzi finally laughed and then he unbuttoned his dress shirt. When it came off, along with his white undershirt, Anastasia couldn’t help but stare. He was solid muscle, chiseled to perfection. But that wasn’t all.

“My God, what happened to you, honey?” she asked. She couldn’t help herself.

The better question would’ve been what had’t happened to Bruno Torenzi. His left shoulder and arm were riddled with the scars of a shotgun blast—black tarlike circles the size of nickels and quarters. Count them all up and you had a buck fifty in change.

His other shoulder bore the scar of a severe burn, a six-inch patch of leathery skin that had the texture of beef jerky left out to bake in the sun for a month.

There was more. On one side of his stomach were two stab wounds, the scars bubbled up from the flesh. Very hard to look at.
Torenzi glanced down at himself but said nothing. Certainly no explanation. All he did was remove his trousers and underwear and climb onto the bed.

Anastasia didn’t press it. As it was, she was beginning to feel sorry for the guy.

“Oh, I get it,” she said playfully, the back of her hand gently brushing across the curve of her breasts. “You’re one of those. A real tough guy, right?”

She had no idea.

Neither did the two men just now stepping off the elevator, heading for the hotel room. Her partners.

For a year, the three of them had had the perfect scam going, but they had overlooked one thing this time.

Even contract killers get horny sometimes.
Chapter 25

THE BELOVA BROTHERS, Viktor and Dmitry, pumped up on adrenaline and blow, arrived at room 1204 of the San Sebastian. They eyed the plush hallway around them to make sure they were alone.

“Our father wouldn't approve,” said Dmitry. He always said that before they did a job. Always.

“Fuck him,” said Viktor, who thought he was sounding more American every day. “Fuck our father, Dmitry.”

A dozen or so times before, they had stood outside expensive hotel rooms all over Manhattan, breathing fast to the point of panting while flipping off the safety switches on their Yarygin PYa semiautomatic pistols. The Yarygin’s seventeen-round double-column, single-feed magazine was a major reason why it was the standard Russian military-issue sidearm. But for Viktor and Dmitry it was the ultrasleek stainless-steel
barrel that they loved. It felt sturdier than the old-school Makarov pistol, more reliable.

Not that they had ever had to pull the trigger during one of these jobs.

That was the beauty and the brilliance of the scam. Most of the time they caught their victims with their pants down.

More important, the johns were always too embarrassed to go to the police afterward.

These were men of some means, usually high-level executives traveling on business. They had reputations to protect. They had wives and children. Whatever was stolen from them wasn’t worth looking an NYPD detective in the eye and explaining, “I just got swindled by a prostitute and her two partners.”

And all it had taken was an ad in the back of 212 Magazine promising the highest-quality escort for the discerning gentleman. “From Russia with Love” read the headline.

It was good enough to entice somewhere around twelve men to date—not that Viktor and Dmitry were keeping track. They were too busy counting the laptops, gold Rolexes, Kiton suits, and cold hard cash.

The brothers traded quick nods. Everything was good. Anastasia had placed the swath of tape over the lock chamber, same as always. All they had to do was turn the handle and they could stroll right in—no muss, no fuss.

But where was the fun in that?

Instead, the two of them burst into the room like a couple of class 5 hurricanes. They immediately spotted Bruno Torenzi lying buck naked above the covers.

“Don’t move, motherfucker!” barked Viktor, taking advan-
Don’t Blink

tage of one of the design features of New York’s better hotels: thick walls.

Torenzi’s confusion lasted only a second. He eyed Anastasia standing at the end of the bed. She confirmed what he already knew. It was a setup; she was the bait and he was today’s sucker.

Sure enough, she started to put her dress back on. “Duffel bag,” she announced. “Jackpot.”

Dmitry’s eyes moved off Torenzi and he walked over to the black duffel bag on the table in the corner. His smile grew as wide as Red Square at the sight of the cash inside.

Then the smile disappeared. It was gone. Totally gone. “What the hell is this?”
Chapter 26

DMITRY REACHED DOWN into the duffel bag. He removed a gray rectangular block of C-4 explosive. A detonator wire was hanging from one end like a mouse’s tail. Next he pulled out an absolute beast of a handgun, the Model 500 Smith & Wesson Magnum. A box of .50-caliber cartridges followed. This was one serious duffel bag.

Dmitry’s eyes narrowed to a suspicious squint as he looked back over at Torenzi. It was as if he’d just seen the second image in one of those optical illusion drawings.

This guy was naked, with the shiny barrels of two guns aimed directly at him. But he was completely calm and under control. Not a trace of fear.

Who is this guy? Is he connected? And why is it suddenly fucking hot in this room?

Dmitry pulled at the baby-blue silk shirt now sticking to his chest. “Do you work for somebody?” he asked.
Torenzi stared straight back, taking his time to answer. “Not your business.”

Dmitry jerked his head at the duffel bag. “What are you doing with this stuff?”

“Not your business.”

“I’m making it my business!” he snapped. “I say again, what are you doing with this stuff? You better talk to me.”

Torenzi continued to stare at Dmitry, only now he was silent. Then he actually smiled and scratched his balls.

Suddenly Viktor lunged forward, jamming the barrel of his Yarygin into the john’s cheek.

“You think this is funny? Some kind of joke? My brother asked you a question!” he yelled.

But Torenzi didn’t even look at Viktor. His eyes remained focused on Dmitry, over by the table. There was something else in the duffel bag—a box the Russian hadn’t discovered yet.

Viktor pulled back the hammer on his Yarygin. “Hey, I’m talking to you. You deaf?”

“For Christ’s sake, answer him!” chimed in Anastasia. She was practically pleading with the Italian. “These guys aren’t fucking around.”

Neither was Bruno Torenzi.

Faster than Viktor’s trigger finger, Torenzi swung his hand and knocked away the barrel of the Yarygin pressed against his face. With his other hand he reached underneath the goose-down pillow behind him. He pulled out a Bersa Thunder .380 pistol.

The other box in the duffel bag was the extra ammo for it. Not that it was needed right now.

Bruno Torenzi’s first shot caught Dmitry Belova high in
the chest. The second split his forehead between the eyes. Only then did Viktor Belova’s reflexes kick in. He tried to muscle his gun back toward Torenzi, but it was no use. Torenzi was too strong, too quick, too good at what he did.

He pumped three rounds into Viktor’s stomach, causing the Russian to fall backwards onto the carpet. As he lay faceup and spilling blood, Torenzi stood and lodged his gun into Viktor’s open mouth. The blast sent his brains shooting out from his skull in a perfect circle.

It was a bad day for the Belova brothers.

Now the only sound in the room was Anastasia crying like a little girl.

She had fallen to her knees, the red cocktail dress still unzipped in the back, hanging off her shoulders. She wanted to run for the door but couldn’t. She was in shock, paralyzed, scared to death that she would be next.

“Get on the bed!” Torenzi ordered. “Take off that god-damn red dress.”

“Please,” she begged, her blond hair covering her face and tears. “Please, don’t…” But then she shrugged off the dress. She climbed onto the bed.

“Now, where were we?” said Torenzi. “By the way, Anastasia, my name is Bruno. That is my real name.”

Hearing that, the girl began to cry even harder. She knew what he meant.

“That’s right. You know my name. You know what I look like,” he whispered. “You might as well enjoy your last time in the sack.”
Chapter 27

DWAYNE ROBINSON’S unspeakably sad funeral unfolded under a rain so heavy that had it been a baseball game, it would’ve surely been postponed. There was no church service. Instead, we all gathered graveside with a nondenominational minister at the sprawling Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, final resting place for Joseph Pulitzer, Miles Davis, and Fiorello La Guardia among so many others.

The turnout was sparse, although bigger than I thought it might be. Many of Dwayne’s ex-teammates were actually there—former Yankees and heroes of mine, whom on any other day I would’ve been thrilled to see in person.

Just not on this day.

Also on hand was Dwayne’s ex-wife, who had left him the same week that he’d been banned from baseball. She was a former Miss Delaware. Alongside her were their two children, now approaching their teens. I remembered reading
that she had petitioned for full custody of them during the divorce and won without much of a fight from Dwayne. For a man unaccustomed to losing on the mound, once off it he had clearly known when he'd been beat.

“Let us pray,” said the minister at the front of Dwayne’s mahogany casket.

Hanging toward the back, hunched under an umbrella like everyone else, I felt strange being there. Technically, I’d only met Dwayne once. Then again, I was one of the last people to speak to him.

Maybe even the very last. Who knew?

Certainly not anyone standing around me. As the service broke, the chatter was all about the “man they once knew.” It was as if the poor soul who had reportedly jumped to his death from the terrace of his high-rise apartment had been a complete stranger to just about everyone at his funeral.

“Once he was banned from the game, it’s as if Dwayne stopped living,” I overhead someone say.

Now he’d just made it official.

What wasn’t official yet was the autopsy, but in the intense media frenzy following Dwayne’s death, a leaked toxicology report showed he was high on heroin. Space-shuttle high. That probably explained why he hadn’t left behind a suicide note.

One mystery down, perhaps.
Another still unresolved.
What the hell had Dwayne wanted to tell me?
Weirdly, I felt as though I was also hiding some kind of secret. Courtney was the only other person who knew about
the late phone call Dwayne had made to me the night he killed himself.

But as secrets go, mine was minor league. Dwayne's was a whole lot bigger, and he'd just taken it to the grave.

I walked back to my car, an old Saab 9000 Turbo — my one “extravagance,” if you can call it that, in a city dominated by subways, taxis, and crosswalks.

Closing up my umbrella and sliding behind the wheel, I kept replaying that last conversation with Dwayne in my head. I wondered if I was overlooking something, if there was an important clue I wasn’t catching.

Nothing came to mind yet. Or maybe my memory was a poor substitute for a tape recorder. What I wouldn't give to have a recording of that last phone call with him.

I was about to turn the key in the ignition when my phone rang.

I glanced at the caller ID.

Now, I'm not a big believer in the notion that nothing happens by accident, but for sheer timing this was stretching the boundaries of coincidence. It was spooky, actually.

The caller ID said “Lombardo’s Steakhouse.”
The story continues!

DON’T BLINK

By

James Patterson

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