Tick
Tock
BOOKS BY JAMES PATTERSON

Featuring Michael Bennett

Tick Tock (with Michael Ledwidge)
Worst Case (with Michael Ledwidge)
Run for Your Life (with Michael Ledwidge)
Step on a Crack (with Michael Ledwidge)

A complete list of books by James Patterson is at the back of the book. For previews of forthcoming books by James Patterson and more information about the author, visit www.jamespatterson.com.
In loving memory of Thomas Ledwidge
— M.L.
Prologue

SEXY BEAST
LIKE THE LUXURY CO-OPS and five-star French eateries located in Manhattan’s Silk Stocking District, Benchley East Side Parking was outrageously exclusive. Tucked side by side and bumper to bumper within its four temperature-controlled underground levels beneath East 77th Street were several vintage Porsches, a handful of Ferraris, even a pair of his-and-hers Lamborghini.

The out-of-the-box midnight blue SL550 Mercedes convertible that squealed out of its car elevator at three minutes past noon that Saturday seemed tailor-fit to the high-rent neighborhood.

So did the lean forty-something waiting by the garage’s office when the sleek Merc stopped on a dime out front.

With his salt-and-pepper Beckham buzz cut, pressed khakis, silk navy golf shirt, and deep golden tan that suggested even deeper pockets, it was hard to tell if the car or its driver was being described by the purring Merc’s vanity plate:
“With this heat, I figured you’d want the top down, as usual, Mr. Berger,” the smiling half-Hispanic, half-Asian garage attendant said as he bounced out and held open the wood-inlaid door. “Have a good one, now.”

“Thanks, Tommy,” Berger said, deftly slipping the man a five as he slid behind the luxury sports car’s iconic three-pronged steering wheel. “I’ll give it a shot.”

The fine leather seat slammed luxuriously into Berger’s back as he launched the convertible with a high-torque snarl down East 77th Street and out onto Fifth Avenue. The crisp, almost sweet smell of Central Park’s pin oaks and dogwoods fused harmoniously with the scent of the hand-stitched leather. At 59th Street, the park’s treetops gave way to the ornate fairy-tale facade of the Plaza Hotel. Moments later, along both sides of the upscale boulevard, glittering signs began to flick past like a Vanity Fair magazine come to life: Tiffanys, Chanel, Zegna, Pucci, Fendi, Louis Vuitton. Outside the stores, swarms of summer Saturday tourists took pictures and stood gaping as if they were having trouble believing they were standing in the very center of the capital of the world.

But the world’s most expensive avenue might as well have been a dirt road through a shit kicker’s cornfield as far as Berger was concerned. Behind the mirrored lenses of his Persol aviators, he kept his gray eyes locked level and forward, his mind blank.
It was his one true talent. In his life, every victory had come down to singleness of purpose, his ability to focus, to leave out everything but the matter at hand.

Even so, he felt his pulse skitter when he finally arrived at his destination, the New York Public Library’s main branch on the west side of Fifth Avenue between 41st and 42nd Streets. In fact, as he slowed, he felt his adrenaline surge, and his heart begin to beat almost painfully in time with the car’s indicator.

Even Olivier had stage fright, he reminded himself as he carefully turned onto East 43rd Street. Jack Dempsey. Elvis Presley. All men felt fear. The distinction of great and worthy men like him was the ability to manage it, to act despite the fact that it was breathing down their necks.

By the time he tucked the Merc into a parking spot in front of a Carvel ice-cream truck half a block farther east, he felt somewhat better. To ground himself completely, he patiently watched the hardtop hum into place over his head, precise, symmetrical, a glorious harmony of moving parts. By the time it locked itself down, his fear was still there but he knew he could man it.

Move it, Mr. Berger, he thought. Now or never.

He lifted the heavy laptop bag from the passenger-seat foot well and opened the door.

Now it was.
Two

PASSING UNDER THE GRAND BEAUX ARTS arched portico and through the revolving door of the library, Berger immediately noticed that the steely-eyed ex-cop who usually worked the front hall on Saturdays wasn’t there. Instead, there was a young summer-hire slouch in an ill-fitting blazer. Even better. The bored-looking bridge-and-tunneler waved Berger through before he could even lift a finger to his bag’s zipper.

The hushed Rose Reading Room on the third floor was about the size of a professional soccer field. It was rimmed with ten-foot-high caramel-colored wooden shelves and lit by brass rococo chandeliers that hung down from its fifty-one-foot-high, mural-painted coffered ceiling. Berger stepped past table after long table of very serious-looking thirty- and forty-somethings, earbuds snug in their ears as they stared intently at laptop screens. Graduate students
and ardent self-improvers. No Hamptons this summer weekend for this studious bunch.

He found a seat at the last table along the north wall, with his back to the door of the Rare Book Division of the Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room. He pretended to play Sudoku on his nifty new iPhone until the only other person at the study table, a pregnant Asian woman in a Juicy tracksuit, got up twenty minutes later.

As she waddled away, Mr. Berger took one last deep breath and slowly released it.

Then he slipped on a pair of rubber surgical gloves under the table and slid the bomb out of the laptop bag.

It looked exactly like an Apple MacBook seventeen-inch laptop except that there was a hollowed-out space where the keyboard, mouse pad, and computer guts had once been. In their place now sat two kilograms of T4, the Italian version of the plastic explosive RDX. On top of the pale vanilla-colored plastic explosive sat another two-inch-thick layer of barbed stainless-steel roofing nails, like a double helping of silver sprinkles on the devil’s ice-cream cone.

There was a gel-like adhesive already attached to the device’s bottom. He pressed the bomb firmly down in front of him, gluing it securely to the library desk.

The detonator cap had already been inserted into the explosive and now merely awaited the final connection to an electrical charge, which would occur when someone discovered the laptop and made the mistake of opening
the cover. Tied just inside the cover with a snug lanyard knot made of fishing line was a mercury switch, an ingenious little thermometer-like glass tube that was used in vending-machine alarms. When the lid was closed, you could play Frisbee with the IED. Once the lid rose two inches, however, the liquid mercury would spill to the switch’s bottom, cover its electrical leads, and initiate instant detonation.

Mr. Berger imagined the bomb’s massive shockwave ripping through the crowded Rose Reading Room, blowing apart everything and everyone within forty feet and sending a killing wall of shrapnel in every direction at four times the speed of sound.

He peeled off his gloves and stood with the now-empty laptop bag, careful not to touch anything. He crossed the room and stepped quickly out the exit without looking back.

It was begun, he thought with a feeling of magnificent relief as he found the marble stairs. From here on in, it would be all about timing. A race against the clock, so to speak.

*On your mark.*

*Get set.*

“Blow,” Mr. Berger whispered happily to himself, and began to take the stairs down two at a time.
Book One

DOWN BY THE SEA
“UNDER THE BOARDWALK, down by the sea,” I crooned in a high voice, really getting into it with my eyes closed. “On a blanket with my ten big fat babies is where I’ll be.”

It seemed to me like an appropriate song for walking along a sandy dirt road beside the blue-gray Atlantic. Unfortunately, I was the only one who thought so. A split second later, a fusillade of groans and boos and Bronx cheers sailed back from all ten of my kids.

Still I bowed, displaying my trademark grace under pressure. Never let them see you sweat, even on summer vacation, which is really hard when you think about it.

My name is Mike Bennett, and as far as I know, I’m still the only cop in the NYPD living in his own private TLC show. Some of my more jovial coworkers like to call me Detective Mike Plus Ten. It’s actually Detective Mike Plus Eleven if you include my grandfather Seamus. Which I do, since he’s more incorrigible than all my kids put together.
It was the beginning of week two of my humongous family’s much-needed vacation out in Breezy Point, Queens, and I was definitely in full goof-off mode. The eighteen-hundred-square-foot saltbox out here on the “Irish Riviera,” as all the cops and firemen who summer here call it, had been in my mom’s family, the Murphys, for a generation. It was more crowded than a rabbit’s warren, but it was also nonstop swimming and hot dogs and board games, and beer and bonfires at night.

No e-mail. No electronics. No modern implements of any kind except for the temperamental A/C and a saltwater-rusted bicycle. I watched as Chrissy, the baby of the bunch, chased a tern, or maybe it was a piping plover, on the shoulder of the road.

The Bennett summer White House was open for business.

Time was flying, but I was making the most of it. As usual. For a single father of double-digit kids, making the most of things pretty much went without saying.

“If you guys don’t like the Drifters, how about a little Otis Redding?” I called up to everyone. “All together now. ‘Sitting on the Dock of the Bay’ on three.”

“Is that any example to them, Mike? We need to pick it up or we’ll be late,” Mary Catherine chided me in her brogue.

I forgot to mention Mary Catherine. I’m probably the only cop in the NYPD with an Irish nanny as well. Actually with what I pay her, she is more like a selfless angel of
mercy. I bet they’ll name a Catholic school after her before long, Blessed Mary Catherine, patron saint of wiseacre cops and domestic chaos.

And as always, the young, attractive lass was right. We were on our way to St. Edmund’s on Oceanside Avenue for five-o’clock mass. Vacation was no excuse for missing mass, especially for us, since my grandfather Seamus, in addition to being a comedian, was a late-to-the-cloth priest.

What else? Did I mention all my kids were adopted? Two of them are black, two Hispanic, one Asian, and the rest Caucasian. Typical our family is not.

“Would ya look at that?” Seamus said, standing on the sandy steps of St. Edmund’s and tapping his watch when we finally arrived. “It must be the twelve apostles. Of course not. They’d be on time for mass. Get in here, heathens, before I forget that I’m not a man of violence.”

“Sorry, Father,” Chrissy said, a sentiment that was repeated eleven more times in rough ascending order by Shawna, Trent, Fiona, Bridget, Eddie, Ricky, Jane, Brian, Juliana, my eldest, Mary Catherine, and last, but not least, yours truly.

Seamus put a hand on my elbow as I was fruitlessly searching for a pew that would seat a family of twelve.

“Just to let you know, I’m offering mass for Maeve today,” he said.

Maeve was my late wife, the woman who put together my ragtag wonderful family before falling to ovarian cancer a few years later. I still woke up some mornings, reaching
out for a moment before my brutal shitty aha moment that I was alone.

I smiled and nodded as I patted Seamus’s wrinkled cheek.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Monsignor,” I said as the organ started.
Chapter 2

THE SERVICE WAS QUICK but quite nice. Especially the part where we prayed for Maeve. I’m not in line to become pope anytime soon, but I like mass. It’s calming, restorative. A moment to review where you’ve gone wrong over the past week and maybe think about getting things back on track.

Call it Irish psychotherapy.
Therapy for this Irish psycho, anyway.

All in all, I came back out into the sun feeling pretty calm and upbeat. Which lasted about as long as it took the holy water I blessed myself with to dry.

“Get him! Hit him harder! Yeah, boyyyyyzzz!” some kid was yelling.

There was some commotion alongside the church. Through the departing crowd and cars, I saw about half a dozen kids squaring off in the parking lot.

“Look out, Eddie!” someone yelled.
*That was one of my kids!*

I rushed into the brawl, with my oldest son, Brian, at my heels. There was a pile of kids swinging and kicking on the sun-bleached asphalt. I started grabbing shirt collars, yanking kids away, putting my NYPD riot police training to good use.

I found my son Eddie at the bottom of the scrum, red-faced and near tears.

“You want some more, bitch? Come and get it!” one of the kids who’d been kicking my son yelled as he lurched forward. Eddie, our resident bookworm, was ten. The tall, pudgy kid with the Mets cap askew looked at least fourteen.

“Back it up!” I yelled at the earringed punk with a lot of cop in my voice. More in my eyes.

Eddie, tears gone, just angry now, thumbed some blood from a nostril.

“What happened?” I said.

“That jerk called Trent something bad, Dad.”

“What?”

“An Irish jig.”

I turned and glared at the big kid with the even bigger mouth. Trent was even younger than Eddie, an innocent seven-year-old kid who happened to be black. I really felt like knocking the fat kid’s hat back straight with a slap. Instead, I quickly thought of another idea.

“In that case,” I said, staring at the delinquent, “kick his ass.”
“My pleasure,” Eddie said, trying to lunge from my grip.

“No, not you, Eddie. Brian’s not doing anything.”

Brian, six foot one and on the Fordham Prep JV football team, smiled as he stepped forward.

At the very last second, I placed a palm on his chest. Violence never solved anything. At least when there were witnesses around. Twenty or thirty loyal St. Edmund’s parishioners had stopped to watch the proceedings.

“What’s your name?” I said as I walked over and personally got in the kid’s face.

“Flaherty,” the kid said with a stupid little smile.

“That’s Gaelic for dumb-ass,” Juliana said by my shoulder.

“What’s your problem, Flaherty?” I said.

“Who has a problem?” Flaherty said. “Maybe it’s you guys. Maybe the Point isn’t your cup of tea. Maybe you should bring your rainbow-coalition family out to the Hamptons. You know, Puff Daddy? That crowd?”

I took a deep breath and released it even more slowly. This kid was getting on my nerves. Even though he was just a teen, my somewhat cleansed soul was wrestling valiantly not to commit the sin of wrath.

“I’m going to tell you this one time, Flaherty. Stay away from my kids or I’m going to give you a free ride in my police car.”

“Wow, you’re a cop. I’m scared,” Flaherty said. “This is the Point. I know more cops than you do, old man.”
I stepped in closer to him, close enough to head butt, anyway.

“Do any of them work at Spofford?” I said in his ear. Spofford was New York’s infamous juvy hall. By his swallow, I thought I’d finally gotten through.

“Whatever,” Flaherty said, walking away.

Why me? I thought, turning away from the stunned crowd of churchgoers. You never saw this kind of crap on TLC. And what the hell did he mean by old man?

“Eddie?” I said as I started leading my gang back along the hot, sandy road toward the promised land of our saltbox.

“Yes, Dad?”

“Stay away from that kid.”

“Brian?” I said a few seconds later.

“Yeah, Pop?”

“Keep an eye on that kid.”
Chapter 3

AN HOUR LATER, I was out on the back deck of my ancestral home, working the ancestral grill full-tilt boogie. Dogs on the warming rack. Cheese slices waiting to be applied to the rows of sizzling, freshly ground burgers. Blue smoke in my face, ice-cold bottle of Spaten lager in my hand. We were so close to the water, I could actually hear the rhythmic roll-and-crash of saltwater dropping onto hard-packed sand.

If I leaned back on the creaky rail of the deck and turned to my left, I was actually able to see the Atlantic two blocks to the east. If I turned to the right, to the other side of Jamaica Bay, I could see the sun starting its long descent toward the skyline of Manhattan, where I worked. I hadn’t had to look in that direction for over a week now and was praying that it stayed that way until the first of August.

No doubt about it. My world was a fine place and worth fighting for. Maybe not in church parking lots, but still.
I heard something on XM Radio behind me. It was the eighties song “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears. I laughed as I remembered dancing to it with Maeve at our wedding. I cranked it. You better believe I was preoccupied with 1985. No Internet. Spiky, gelled hair. Weird Al Yankovic. John Hughes movies. If they build a real hot-tub time machine, I’m going back.

“Bet’s to you, Padre,” I heard Trent say behind me.

Inside at the kitchen table, a tense game of Irish Riviera Hold ’em was under way. A lot of candy had been trading hands all evening.

“All right, hit me,” Seamus said.

“Grandpa, this isn’t blackjack,” Fiona complained with a giggle.

“Go fish?” Seamus tried.

I thought about what my new young friend Flaherty had said about my multicultural family. It was funny how wrong people got it. My family wasn’t a Hollywood social experiment. Our gang had come from my cop cases and from my departed wife Maeve’s work as a trauma nurse at Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx. Our children were the survivors of the most horrible circumstances New York City had to offer. Drug addiction, poverty, suicide. Maeve and I were both from big families, but we weren’t able to have kids. So we took them in one by one by one. It was as simple and crazy as that.

I turned as Trent opened the sliders to the deck.

I was prepping my father-son sit-down about racist
Tick Tock
dumb-asses when I saw that he was holding something. It was my work cell, and it was vibrating. I threw a panicked glance back toward the Manhattan skyline. I knew it. Things had been too good for too long, not to mention way too quiet.

“Answer it,” I finally said to him, pissed.

“Bennett,” Trent said in a deep voice. “Gimme a crime scene.”

“Wise guy,” I said, snatching the phone out of his hand.

“That wasn’t me,” I said, turning down the radio. “And you can keep the crime scene.”

“Wish I could,” my new boss, Inspector Miriam Schwartz, said.

I closed my eyes. Idiot! I knew we should have gone to the Grand Canyon.

“I’m on vacation,” I protested.

“We both are, but this is big, Mike. Homeland Security big. Just got off the phone with Manhattan Borough Command. Someone left one hell of a bomb at the main branch of the New York Public Library.”

I almost dropped the phone as a pulse of cold crackled down my spine and the backs of my legs. My stomach churned as memories of working down at the World Trade Center pit after 9/11 began to flash before my eyes. Fear, sorrow, useless anger, the end-of-the-world stench of scorched metal in my clothes, in the palms of my hands. Screw that, I thought. Not again. Please.

“A bomb?” I said slowly. “Is it armed?”
“No, thank God. It’s disarmed. But it’s ‘sophisticated as shit,’ to quote Paul Cell from Bomb Squad. There was a note with it.”

“I hate fucking notes. Was it a sorry one?” I said.

“No such luck, Mike,” Miriam said. “It said, ‘This wasn’t supposed to go boom, but the next one will.’ Something like that. The commissioner wants Major Case on this. I need my major player. That’s you, Mickey.”

“Mickey just left,” I groaned. “This is Donald. Can I take a message?”

“They’re waiting on you, Mike,” my boss urged.

“Yeah, who isn’t?” I said, dropping the spatula as my burgers burned.
A DAY OR TWO AFTER 9/11, a dramatic photograph of a firetruck crossing the Brooklyn Bridge on its way to the burning Twin Towers was splashed across the front page of the *Daily News*. It’s an incredible shot, even before you learn that every fireman on the truck, Ladder 118, ended up dying in the subsequent collapse.

As I rolled my beat-up Suburban along the same route under the famous bridge’s arches back into the city toward my date with a bomb on 42nd Street, for some strange reason, I couldn’t stop thinking of that picture.

I skipped the backed-up FDR Drive and took the side streets, St. James to the Bowery to Park Avenue South. Half a block west of Grand Central Terminal, wooden NYPD sawhorses had been set up, cordonning off 42nd Street in both directions. Behind the yellow tape, a crowd of summering Asian and European tourists stood front-row-center, cameras aloft, taking in some action.
After I badged my way through the outer perimeter, I parked behind a Seventeenth Precinct radio car half a block south of 42nd Street. As I was getting out, I spotted a shiny new blue Crown Vic and a couple of tall and neat-looking guys in JTTF polo shirts sitting on its hood, talking on their cell phones.

I doubted they were here to play polo. Calling in the Joint Terrorism Task Force Feds at the slightest hint of the T word was standard operating procedure in our jittery post 9/11 metropolis. The Feds didn’t seem too impressed with me or my gold shield as I walked past them. I knew I should have put a jacket on over my Hawaiian shirt.

When I arrived at the corner diagonal to the library, I could see more barricades far down 42nd Street at Sixth Avenue and three blocks in both directions up and down Fifth Avenue. The silence and lack of traffic on what was usually one of the busiest intersections on earth was zombie-movie eerie.

“¿Sarge, qué pasa?” I said, showing my bling to the Hispanic female uniform at the inner perimeter’s aluminum gate.

“Seems like some skell forgot his overdue books so he returned a booby-trapped bomb to the library instead,” she said as I signed into her crime scene logbook. “We got the place evacked, including Bryant Park. The Bomb Nuts are inside. Midtown North Squad took a bus of witnesses and staff back to the precinct, but I heard it ain’t looking too good.”
Tick Tock

Among the library’s columns and fountains, I passed nervous-looking Midtown North Task Force and Seventeenth Precinct uniforms. Some of the cops were holding what appeared to be radar guns but were really radiation detectors. An unmarked van geared with god knew what kind of testing equipment was parked at the curb.

At the front entrance of the library, a redheaded guy in a white marshmallow-man Tyvek suit was walking out with a yellow Lab on a leash. The Labrador wasn’t a seeing-eye dog, I knew, but an EDC, an explosive-detecting canine. I loved dogs, just not at crime scenes. A dog at a crime scene means bombs or dead bodies, and I wasn’t particularly jazzed about seeing either one.

Ain’t looking too good seemed like the midsummer evening’s theme, I thought as I climbed the stairs between the two giant stone lions.
A BIG BALD GUY with a twirly black mustache and tactical blue fatigues met me beneath the landmark building’s massive portico. With his mustache, Paul Cell bore a striking resemblance to the guy on the Bomb Squad’s logo patch, depicting a devil-may-care Red Baron–looking guy riding a bomb in front of the skyline of Manhattan.

“We got the parked cars and street furniture sniffed, so I’m pretty sure there aren’t any secondary devices,” Cell said. “Think about it. Draw in the first responders with a decoy. That’s what I’d do. Look at all these windows. Some jihadist could be behind any one of them right now with his finger on the button, watching us, aching for that glorious thump and flash of holy light.”

“Christ, Paul, please,” I said, clutching my chest. “I skipped my Lipitor this morning.”

Cell and his guys were the world’s elite in bomb handling, as tight and quick and efficient as an NHL team.
Tick Tock

More so probably since the penalty box on this squad was made of pine. All cops are crazy, but these guys took the cake.

“Fine, fine. You ready to see the main attraction?” Cell said, ushering me through the library door with a gracious wave of his hand.

“No, but let’s do it, anyway,” I said, taking a breath.

We passed another half dozen even more nervous-looking cops as we crossed the library’s monster marble entry hall to a flight of stone stairs. More bomb techs were helping their buddy out of the green astronaut-like Kevlar bomb suit in the ostentatious wood-paneled rotunda on the third floor. Another guy was putting away the four-wheeler wireless robot and the X-ray equipment.

“Uh, won’t we need that stuff?” I said.

Cell shook his head.

“We already deactivated the device. Actually, we didn’t have to. It wasn’t meant to go off. Here, I’ll show you.”

I reluctantly followed him into the cavernous reading room. The space resembled a ballroom and was even more impressive than the entry hall, with its massive arched windows, chandeliers, and nineteenth-century indoor football field of books. The last library table in the northern end zone of the elaborate room was covered by a thick orange Kevlar bomb-suppression blanket. I felt my pulse triple and my hands clench involuntarily as Cell lifted it off.

In the center of the table was what looked like a white
laptop. Then I saw the nails and wires and claylike plastic explosive where the keyboard should have been, and shivered.

On the screen, the chilling and redundant words *I AM A BOMB* flashed on and off before the scrolling message:

**THIS WASN’T SUPPOSED TO GO BOOM, BUT THE NEXT ONE WILL. I SWEAR IT ON POOR LAWRENCE’S EYES.**

“This guy has style,” Cell said, looking almost admiringly at the bomb. “It’s basically like a Claymore mine. Two K’s of plastic behind all these nails, one huge mother of a shotgun shell. All wired to a nifty motion-sensitive mercury switch, only the second one I’ve ever seen. He even glued it to the desk so someone would have to open it and spill the mercury.”

“How…interactive of him,” I said, shaking my head.

By far, my least favorite part of the message was the ominous reference to the next one. I was afraid of that. It looked like somebody wanted to play a little game with the NYPD. Considering I was on vacation, unless it was beach ball, I really wasn’t that interested in games.

“He used a real light touch with a soldering gun to wire it up to the battery. He must know computers as well, because even though the hard drive is missing, he was able to program his little greeting card through the computer’s firmware internal operating system.”
“Why didn’t it go off?” I said.

“He cut one of the wires and capped both ends in order for it not to go off, thank God. Security guy said the room was packed, like it is every Saturday. This would have killed a dozen people easily, Mike. Maybe two dozen. The blast wave itself from this much plastic could collapse a house.”

We stared silently at the scrolling message.

“It almost sounds like a poem, doesn’t it?” Cell said.

“Yeah,” I said, taking out my BlackBerry and speed-dialing my boss. “I’ve even seen the style before. It’s called psychotic pentameter.”

“Tell me what we got, Mike,” Miriam said a moment later.

“Miriam,” I said, staring at the flashing I AM A BOMB. “What we got here is a problem.”
THE ALEXANDER HOTEL just off Madison on 44th was understaffed, overpriced, and excessively seedy. All the grim, peeling walls, off-white towels, and pot smoke and piss stench $175 a night could buy.

Sitting cross-legged on the desk that he’d moved in front of his top-floor room’s window, Berger slowly panned his camera across the columns and entablatures of the landmark marble library seventeen stories below.

The $11,000 Nikkor super-zoom lens attached to his 35-millimeter digital camera could make faces distinguishable at up to a mile. At a block and a half, with the incredibly vivid magnification, Berger could see the sweat droplets on the first responders’ nervous faces.

Beside him on the desk was a laptop, a digital stopwatch, and a legal tablet filled with the neat shorthand notes he’d been taking for the past several hours. Evacuation procedures. Response times. He’d left the window
open so that he could hear the sirens, immerse himself in the confusion on the street.

He was meticulously photographing the equipment inside the open back door of the Bomb Squad van when someone Knocked on the door. Freaking, Berger swung immediately off the desk. He lifted something off the bed as he passed. It was a futuristic-looking Austrian Steyr AUG submachine gun, all thirty 5.56 NATO rounds already cocked, locked, and ready to rock.

“Yes?” Berger said as he lifted the assault rifle to his shoulder.

“No?” the voice said. There was a pause. A long one. In his mind, Berger saw a SWAT cop in a ski mask applying a breaching charge on the door. Berger eyed down the barrel, muscles bunching on his wiry forearms, finger hovering over the trigger, heart stopped, waiting.

“Oh, shit—er, I mean, sugar,” the hotel worker said finally. “My mistake. It’s an eleven, not a seventeen. So sorry, sir. I can’t read my own handwriting. Sorry to have bothered you.”

More than you’ll ever know, Berger thought, rubbing
the tension out of the bridge of his nose. He waited until he heard the double roll of the elevator door down the outside hall before he lowered the gunstock off his shoulder.

A man was standing talking to the Bomb Squad chief down on the library’s pavilion when Berger arrived back to the zoom lens. After clicking a close-up shot with the camera, he smiled as he examined the looming face on the screen.

It was him. Finally. Detective Michael Bennett. New York’s quote unquote finest had arrived at last.

The feeling of satisfaction that hummed through Berger was almost the same as the psychic glee he got when he’d perfectly anticipated a countermove in a game of chess.

Berger grinned as he squinted through the viewfinder, watching Bennett. He knew all about him, his high-profile NYPD career, his Oprah-ready family. Berger shot a glance over at the rifle on the bed. From this distance, he could easily put a tight grouping into the cop with the suppressed rifle. Blow him to pieces, splatter them all over the marble columns and steps.

Wouldn’t that stir the pot? Berger thought, taking his eyes off the gun. All in due time. Stick to the plan. Stay with the mission.

“Stay tuned, my friends,” Berger said, allowing himself a brief smile as he clicked another shot of the clueless cops. “There’s much more where this came from. In Lawrence’s honor.”
Chapter 7

I DIDN’T HAVE A CARE in the world as I fought the Saturday-night gridlock on the BQE back to Breezy Point. No, wait a second. That’s what I was wishing were true. My real mood was closer to depressed and deeply disturbed after my face time with the sophisticated booby-trapped bomb and cryptic e-note.

Cell and his crew had ended up cutting off the entire library tabletop to transport the bomb out to their range in the Bronx. A quick call to Midtown North revealed that no one in the library or its staff had noticed anyone or anything particularly out of the ordinary.

With the absence of security cameras at the location, we were left with basically nada, except for one extremely sophisticated improvised explosive device and a seemingly violent nut’s promise to deliver more. To add insult to injury, a briefing about the incident had been called for the morning down at One Police Plaza, my presence required.
I hate seemingly violent nuts, I thought as I got on the Belt Parkway. Especially ones who really seem to know what they’re doing.

Even though it was ten and way past everyone’s bedtime, all the windows of the beach house were lit as I parked the SUV and came up our sandy path. I could hear my kids inside laughing as Seamus held court. It sounded like a game of Pictionary, the old codger’s favorite. He was a born ham.

I went around back and grabbed a couple of beers to wind down with on the porch. When I came back, I spotted a good-looking blonde sitting on the steps.

Hey, wait a second, I thought after my double-take. That’s not just a good-looking blonde, that’s my au pair, Mary Catherine.

“Psst,” I called to her, waving the Spatens temptingly from the shadows. “Come on. Run before someone sees.”

We crossed the two blocks to the beach and walked out on the dunes, drinking, taking our time. We made a left and headed north toward a firemen’s bar nearby called the Sugar Bowl that we’d been to a couple of nights after the kids had gone to sleep.

If you haven’t guessed by now, my relationship with Mary Catherine was more than merely professional. Not that much more, but who knew where it was heading? Not me, that was for sure. Mary Catherine was a nice-looking female. I, of course, was a handsome gentleman. We were both hetero. Add vacation and cramped quarters,
and trouble was bound to happen. At least, that’s what I was kind of hoping.

“How’s the thesis coming?” I said as we walked along the beach.

In addition to being the Bennett nanny, Mary Catherine had an art history degree from Trinity College in Dublin and was now in the midst of getting her master’s from Columbia. Which made her as smart and sophisticated as she was pretty and kind. She was truly a special person. Why she insisted on hanging around all of us remained a mystery that even I hadn’t been able to crack.

“Slowly,” she said.

“What’s the summer course again?”

“Architectural history,” she said.

I drew a massive blank. Dead air.

“How about those Yanks?” I tried.

As we approached the loud, crowded bar, Mary Catherine stopped.

“Let’s keep going, Mike. It’s so nice out,” she said, hooking a right and walking across some more dunes and sea grass down toward the Atlantic.

I liked the sound of that. No dead air this time.

“If you insist,” I said.

We were strolling beside the rumbling waves at the shoreline when she dropped her beer. We went to grab it at the same time and bonked heads as the surf splattered around our ankles.

“Are you okay?” I said, holding her by her shoulders.
We were so close our chins were almost touching. For one delicious second, we looked into each other’s eyes.

That’s when she kissed me. Softly, sweetly. I put my arms around her waist and pulled her toward me. She was lighter than I thought she would be, softer, so delicate. After a minute as we continued to slowly kiss, I felt her warm hands tremble against the back of my neck.

“Are you okay, Mary?” I whispered. “Are you cold?”

“Wait. Yes. I mean, no. I mean, I’m sorry, Mike,” she said, suddenly breaking away.

In the faint light from the bar’s neon signs, I watched her cross the beach at a fast walk that turned into a jog. Rooted to the wet sand, feeling about fifteen emotions at once, I noticed my hands were also trembling a little now. She passed the bar at a sprint, heading back toward the house.

“Sorry?” I said to myself as I rubbed my hot and sore head by the water. “That’s the best thing to happen to me all day. Maybe even all year.”
AFTER THAT CASANOVA MOMENT, instead of heading straight home, I decided to stop in at the Sugar Bowl to apply something cold to my wounded—What? Heart? Ego? I couldn’t decide. I sipped a crisp Heineken as I watched the Mets lose to the Cubs at Citi Field. It seemed like there was an epidemic of striking out all over Queens tonight.

As I drowned my sorrows, I thought about what had just happened between me and Mary C. Or to be more precise, I lamented what hadn’t happened.

Because I had to admit, it had been a nice kiss. Tender and sweet and surprisingly sensual. I definitely would have liked to stay down there along the water line with her, perhaps reconstructing an outer-borough version of that famous beach make-out scene in From Here to Eternity. Instead, she’d run like it was a scene from Jaws.

“Hey, you’re cute,” said a young dark-haired woman
next to the pool table as I was coming out of the men’s room five minutes later.

I stopped in my tracks and took in the attractive thirty-something’s barely-there tank and tight shorts, her slightly drunk-looking cute face, the Tinker Bell tattoo on her left ankle. I couldn’t remember the last time a tipsy young woman with a Disney tattoo had hit on me. Probably because it had never happened before. My summer hookup radar was going like gangbusters. Maybe the night wasn’t such a bust after all.

But before I could come up with a snappy, charming response, the text jingle sounded from my cell.

I glanced at it. It was from Mary Catherine. Of course it was. Now she wants to connect? I thought, thumbing the message open.

Sorry I freaked on you, Mike. Putting the kids to bed. Left the back door open.


I opened my mouth to explain myself but then closed it as I realized Tinker Bell actually was right. What was I doing? I wasn’t some barhopping kid anymore. I definitely wasn’t Peter Pan. I was more like the old lady who lived in a shoe. Someone had to be the grown-up, and unfortunately that someone was me.

I dropped a five on the bar on my way out.

I came in through the cottage’s back door ten minutes
later. I tiptoed through what we called “the dorm,” the big, rambling family room where all the boys slept on pull-out couches and air mattresses. They were all asleep, sun-burned, exhausted, and dreaming happy midsummer-night dreams after another day of all the beachside heaven the tri-state area would allow.

My baby, Chrissy, giggled in her sleep as I kissed her good night in the girls’ tiny, crowded bedroom next door. I looked at the massive pile of seashells on the table. At least someone was still having a good time.

As I was heading to my own bunk, I saw Mary Catherine through the crack of an open door. With her eyes closed, she looked ethereal, otherworldly, serene as a cemetery angel.

I tore my eyes away and forced myself to continue down the hallway before I succumbed to the urge to go in and kiss her good night, too.
IT SEEMED LIKE I’D JUST FALLEN ASLEEP when my eyes shot open in the dark, my heart racing. Confused, I lifted my cell phone off the bedside table to see if its ringing was what woke me up. That’s when I heard glass breaking.

“Dad!” one of the kids called from down the hall.

It was coming from the dorm. I jumped out of bed and began turning on lights as I ran.

Beside Ricky’s bed by the bay window, there was broken glass and a chunk of concrete. I ran to the window, then ducked as a beer bottle ricocheted off the glassless frame and whizzed past my ear.

I could see a small car parked in front of the house with its lights off. Two or three people were in it.

“You suck, Bennett!” called a voice. “Get out of the Point while you still can!”

On the wings of hate, I flew out of the room toward the
front door. I was past pissed, more like enraged. Those bastards could have hurt or killed one of my kids. In bare feet, wearing just my boxer shorts, I ran out the front door, picking up an aluminum baseball bat from the porch as I ran.

The car’s engine raced as I hit the street. Its tires barked as the car peeled out. I could hear teenage kids inside laughing and yelling. Instead of trying to get the plate, like the trained law enforcement professional I was, I went another route. I hauled back and threw the bat as hard as I could at the car’s taillights. It clinked across the empty asphalt as they rounded the corner.

I ran to the corner, but there was no sign of them. They’d gotten away. I was absolutely wide awake as I stood there in the dark. My adrenaline was definitely pumping. I didn’t care how old Flaherty was. No one messes with my kids. I really felt like killing someone.

Brian came up behind me as I was retrieving the bat.

“Was that the Flaherty kid, Dad?” he said. “Had to be, right?”

“I didn’t see any faces, but it’s a pretty safe assumption,” I said.

“I asked around about him, Dad. They say he’s bad news. Actually, his whole family is crazy. He has five brothers, each one badder than the next. They even have a pit bull. Someone said they’re Westies, Dad.”

I thought about that. The Westies were what was left of the Irish mafia, latent thugs and gangsters who still ran
some rackets on the West Side of Manhattan. One of their signature moves was dismembering bodies. And we’d apparently just gotten into a feud with them?

Brian looked at me, worried.

I put an arm around his shoulders.

“Look at me, Brian,” I said, indicating my lack of attire. “Do I look sane to you? In the meantime, try to stay away from them. I’ll take care of it.”

I wasn’t sure how, but I kept that to myself.

Everyone, and I mean everyone, was awake and on the porch as we came back.

Some joker from the cottage across the street gave a cat-calling whistle out the window at my shirtless bod as I stepped up the stairs.

“Daddy, get in here!” Chrissy commanded. “You can’t walk around in just your underpants.”

“You’re right, Chrissy,” I said, actually managing a smile. “Daddy forgot.”
Chapter 10

I LEFT FOR WORK early the next morning. Which, if you're vacationing in the ass end of Queens and want to avoid the traffic back into the city, means being in the car by a bleary-eyed five thirty.

I hadn't gotten much sleep thanks to the late-night cinder-block delivery from the Breezy Point welcoming committee. My guys were pretty shaken up, and though I didn't want to admit it, so was I. The kid Flaherty really did seem kind of crazy, and I, more than most, knew what crazy people were capable of.

After the incident, I had called the local One Hundredth Precinct, or the 1-0-0 in cop parlance, who'd sent over a radio car about half an hour later. We'd filled out a report, but from the shift commander's ho-hum expression, I didn't get the impression that finding the culprits was too high on his night's priority list. So much for professional courtesy. The best we could do was have a guy
come fix the window later today and hope that was the end of it.

I checked my BlackBerry in the driveway before leaving and learned that the morning’s case meeting locale had been changed from NYPD’s One Police Plaza headquarters to the fancy new NYPD Counterterrorism Bureau on the Brooklyn/Queens border. Though I was glad I didn’t have to drive as far, I didn’t like how quickly the case was escalating. My dwindling hopes of salvaging the remainder of my vacation seemed to be diminishing at an increasingly rapid clip.

As I was coming in, Miriam suggested we meet for breakfast at a diner near the Counterterrorism HQ beforehand to get on the same page. I arrived first and scored us a window booth overlooking an expansive junkyard vista.

A muted Channel Two news story about the bomb threat was playing on the TV behind the counter. An overhead shot of the cop-covered public library was followed by another one of a pretty female reporter standing by a police barricade.

A truck driver in the adjacent booth glared at me as I loudly groaned into my white porcelain cup. I knew this was coming. Media heat meant heat on the mayor, which I knew through bitter experience would roll quickly in one direction—downhill, straight at me.

About ten minutes later, I watched from the window as my boss, Miriam, got out of her Honda. Stylish and ath-
letic and irritatingly serene, Miriam looked more like a hot upscale soccer mom than a razor-sharp city cop.

Despite the fact that she had ordered me back from my vacay, I still liked my feisty new boss. Running the Major Case Squad, the Delta Force of the NYPD, was a near-impossible job. Not only was Miriam’s head constantly on the chopping block with high-profile cases, but she had the added challenge of having to garner the respect and loyalty of the department’s most elite detectives, who were often prima-donnas.

 Somehow Miriam, a former air force pilot, managed to pull it off with wily intelligence, humor, and tact. She also backed her people unconditionally and took absolutely no one’s shit. Including mine, unfortunately.

“What’s the story, morning glory?” my boss said as she sat down.

“Let’s see. Hmm. Today’s headline, I guess, is ‘Vacationing Cop Gets Screwed,’ ” I said.

“Hey, I feel you, dawg. I was up in Cape Cod, sipping a fuzzy navel when they called me.”

“Who’s was it? Anyone I know?” I said

“A gentlewoman never tells,” she said with a sly wink.

“Anyway, hope your shoes are shined. Sander Flaum from Intel is going to be at this powwow, as well as the counter-terrorism chief, Ciardi, and a gaggle of nervous Feds. You’re today’s featured speaker, so don’t let them trip you up.”

“Wait a second. Back up,” I said. “I’m primary detective on the case? So now I’m on vacation when? Nights?”
“Ah, Mike,” Miriam said as the waitress poured her a coffee. “You Irish have such a way with words. Yeats, Joyce, and now you.”

“For a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn, you’re not too bad at throwing the blarney around when you have to,” I said. “Seriously, two chiefs? Why all the heavies on a Sunday?”

“The lab came back on the explosive. It’s T-four from Europe—from Italy apparently. You know how squirrelly the commissioner gets about anything remotely terrorist-related.”

The new commissioner, Ken Rodin, was a pugnacious, old-school former beat cop who still wore a .38 in an ankle holster above his Italian wingtips. With crime down in the city, his primary directive—some said his obsession—was to prevent another terrorist act during his watch. Which wasn’t as paranoid as it might sound, considering NYC was still terrorist organizations’ Top of the Pops, so to speak.

“Though it’s still far from conclusive that this is a terrorist thing, we have to go through the DEFCON One motions for the time being. There’s been smoke coming out of my BlackBerry all night.”

“Is McGirth going to be there?”

Tom McGinnis, or McGirth, as he was more casually known due to his not-so-girlish figure, was the department’s chief of detectives, Miriam’s boss and perhaps the most egregious power-hungry ballbuster in the NYPD.
Tick Tock

Miriam rolled her eyes in affirmation.

“What’s up with bullshit internal politics?” I said. “What happened to the commissioner’s pep talk last month about how the mayor wanted a new role for Major Case? ‘Kick ass, no politics, just results?’ Ring a bell?”

“Yeah, well, the mayor and the commish aren’t going to be at the meeting, unfortunately,” Miriam said. “It’s our sorry lot to deal with the department’s evil henchmen. Why am I saying we? It’s your job, Mike, since you’re the briefing DT.”

“Well, lucky old me,” I said, sipping my coffee as the sun crested over the crushed cars outside the window.
Chapter 11

THE NYPD’S COUNTERTERRORISM BUREAU was extremely impressive. Outside, it looked like a faceless office building in the middle of a crappy industrial neighborhood. Inside, it looked like the set of 24.

There were electronic maps, intense-looking cops at glass desks, and more flat-screen TVs than in the new Yankee Stadium. Walking through the center behind my boss, I felt disappointed that we hadn’t been able to enter through a trick manhole and down a slide, like James Bond or Perry the Platypus.

I began to realize why there was so much heat on the library threat. The last thing the commissioner wanted was to have his big, new, expensive initiative to protect the city fail in some capacity.

The meeting was held in a glass fishbowl conference room next to something called the Global Intelligence Room. I immediately spotted the assistant commissioner
and the Counterterrorism chief. Though they wore similar golfing attire, their physical contrast was pretty comical. Flaum was tall and thin, while Ciardi was short and stocky. Rocky and Bullwinkle, I thought. Laurel and Hardy.

Unfortunately, I also spotted Miriam’s boss, McGirth, who, with his puffy, pasty face, looked like a not-so-cute reincarnation of Tammany Hall’s Boss Tweed. Beside him were Cell from the Bomb Squad and the two superfit Feds who had been at the library the day before. Intelligence briefings about the most recent terrorist bombings across the globe were stacked at the center of the long table. I took one as I found a seat.

“Why don’t you start with what you’ve got, Mike?” Miriam said the second my ass hit the cushion.

“Uh, sure,” I said, giving her a dirty look as I stood back up. “Basically, sometime yesterday afternoon, a bomb was left in the main reading room at the main branch of the New York City Public Library. It looked like a Macintosh laptop wired to plastic explosives. It was a sophisticated device, capable of killing dozens of people. A cryptic electronic note left on the laptop stated that the device wasn’t intended to go off, but the next one would, sworn ‘on poor Lawrence’s eyes,’ whatever that means. There were no witnesses, as far as we can tell at this point.”

“Jesus Christ. On whose eyes? Lawrence of Arabia’s?” said Chief McGinnis, making a spectacle of himself as usual.

“Who found the device?” asked Flaum, the tall, professorial-looking Intel head.
“An NYU student pointed out the unattended laptop to a security guard,” Cell said, jumping in. “The guard opened it, saw the message, ordered an evac, and called us.”

“Don’t they have a security check there?” Ciardi said.

“Yeah, some summer kid checks bags,” I said, looking at my notes. “But that’s just so people don’t steal books. Patrons can take laptops in. He said that white Apple laptops are all he sees every day.”

“What about security cameras?” said the stocky Counterterrorism chief.

“Deactivated due to a huge ongoing reno,” I said.

“Any threats from your end that might be relevant to this, Ted?” Assistant Commissioner Sander Flaum asked the senior FBI rep.

The taller of the two Feds shook his head.

“Chatter hasn’t increased,” he said. “Though Hezbollah likes to use plastic.”

Hezbollah? I thought. That was crazy. Or was it?

“You always seem to be in the middle of this kind of crap, Bennett,” the chops-busting chief of detectives, McGinnis, said. “What’s your professional opinion?”

“Actually, my gut says it’s a lone nut,” I said. “If it were Hezbollah, why not just set it off? An attention-seeking nut with some particularly dangerous mechanical skills seems to be a better fit.”

There was a lot of grumbling. The idea that the bomb might not be terrorism wasn’t a particularly popular one.
After all, if it was just a lone, sick freak, then why were we all here?

“What about the explosive?” the Intel chief said. “It’s from overseas. Maybe the whole nutcase note thing is just window dressing in order to get us off balance. Are nuts usually this organized?”

“You’d be surprised,” Miriam said.

“If there aren’t any objections, I say we keep it in Major Case until further notice,” said the Counterterrorism head as he glanced impatiently around the table.

I was thinking about voicing an objection of my own about how I was supposed to be on vacation, until Miriam gave me a look.

“And try to keep your face from appearing on TV, huh, Bennett? This is a confidential case,” McGirth said as I was leaving. “I know how hard you find that at times.”

I was opening my mouth to return a pithy comment when Miriam appeared at my back and ushered me out.
Chapter 12

WITH THAT BUREAUCRATIC HURDLE painfully tripped over, we headed back to Manhattan. Sunday or no Sunday, we needed to go to our squad room on the eleventh floor of One Police Plaza in order to put together a Major Case Squad task force on the Lawrence Bomber Case, as we were now calling it.

I followed Miriam’s Honda through Queens and over the 59th Street Bridge. Beyond the windshield, Manhattan’s countless windows seemed to stare at me through the bridge’s rusty girders. The thought that somebody behind one of them might be right now meticulously plotting to blow up his fellow human beings was not a comforting one. Especially as I hurried across the rattletrap bridge.

I received a text on my smartphone as we arrived downtown and snuck in through the back door of HQ.

It was from Emily Parker, an FBI agent I’d worked with on my last case. We’d stayed close since the investigation,
so I knew Emily worked a desk at the Bureau’s VICAP, Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, which dealt with cheerful things like homicides, sexual assaults, and unidentified human remains.

Just heard about ur performance at NYCT Blue. Don’t u love working weekends? U the primary on the Library Bomb thing?

Talk about a security leak, I thought. How the hell had she found out about our secret meeting this fast on a Sunday? One of her fellow FBI agents at the meeting must have told her, I surmised. She wouldn’t actually go out with one of those organic-food-eating geeks, would she?

The fact was, Emily was an attractive lady to whom I’d become quite attached. Not quite firmly enough for my liking, but I did get to sample her lipstick in the back of a taxi after the case’s conclusion. I remembered its taste fondly. Very fondly, in fact.

Thinking about it, I suddenly remembered the kiss I’d shared with Mary Catherine on the moonlit beach the night before. That was pretty good, too, come to think of it. Being single was fun, though confusing at times.

Affirmative, I thumbed. Mike Bennett, Chief of the Library Cops.

LOL, she hit me back as I was getting into the elevator. I heard ur leaning toward a single actor. U need something to bounce, don’t forget ur cousins down here at Quantico.

Kissing cousins, I thought.
“You coming or what, text boy?” my boss, Miriam, said as the elevator door opened on eleven. “You’re worse than my twelve-year-old.”
“Coming, Mother,” I said, tucking away my phone before it got confiscated.
BERGER’S HAIR WAS STILL wet from his shower as he drove his blue Mercedes eastbound out of Manhattan on the Cross Bronx Expressway. Spotting a seagull on the top rail of an exhaust-blackened overpass, he consulted the satellite navigation system screen on the convertible’s polished wood dash. Not yet noon and he was almost there. He was running just the way he liked to, ahead of schedule.

He sipped at a container of black coffee and then slid it back into the cup holder before putting on his turn indicator and easing onto the exit ramp for I-95 North. Minutes later, he pulled off at exit eleven in the northbound lane toward the Pelham section of the Bronx. He drove around for ten minutes before he stopped on a deserted strip of Baychester Avenue.

He sat and stared out at the vista of urban blight. Massive weeds known as ghetto palm trees commanded the cracks in the stained cement sidewalk beside him. In the
distance beyond them were buildings, block upon block of massive, ugly brick apartment buildings.

The cluster of decrepit high-rises was called Co-op City. From what he’d read, it was the largest single residential development in the United States. Built on a swampy landfill in the 1960s, it was supposed to be the progressive answer to New York City’s middle-class housing problem. Instead, like most unfortunate progressive solutions, it had quickly become the problem.

Berger wondered what the urban wasteland had looked like in December of 1975. Worse, he decided with a shake of his head.

Enough nonsense, he thought as he drained his cup. He closed his eyes and cleared his mind of everything but the job at hand. He took several slow, deep breaths like an actor waiting backstage.

He was still sitting there doing his breathing exercises when the kitted-out pearl gray Denali SUV that he was waiting for passed and pulled over a couple of hundred feet ahead.

“What have we here?” Berger said to himself as a young Hispanic woman got out of the truck. Berger lifted a pair of binoculars off the seat beside him and quickly focused. She was about fifteen or sixteen. She was wearing oversize Nicole Richie glasses, a lot of makeup, a scandalously slight yellow bikini top, and denim shorts that were definitely not mother-approved.

Berger flipped open the manila folder that the binocs
had been sitting on. He glanced at the photograph of the
girl whose name was Aida Morales. It was her, Berger
decided. Target confirmed.

The Denali pulled away from the curb, and the girl
started walking down the sidewalk toward where Berger
sat in the parked car. Berger held back a smile. He couldn’t
have set up his blind better in a dream.

He quickly checked himself in the rearview mirror. He
was already wearing the clothes, baggy brown polyester
slacks and an even baggier white shirt, butterfly collar but-
toned to the neck. He’d padded the shirt with a wadded-up
laundry bag to make himself look heavier.

When she arrived at the turn for her building’s back
entrance, he took out the curly black wig from the paper
bag beside him and put it on. He checked himself in the
mirror, adjusting the shaggy wig until he was satisfied.

She was halfway down the back alley of her building
with her all-but-naked back to him when he started run-
ning and yelling.

“Excuse me, miss. Excuse me. Excuse me!” he cried.
She stopped. She did a double take when she saw the
wig. But by then he was too close, and it was too late.

Berger pulled the knife from the sheath at his back. It
was a shining machete-like military survival knife with a
nine-inch blade. Rambo would have been proud.

“Yell and I’ll carve your fucking eyes out of your skull,”
he said as he bunched her bathing suit top at her back like
puppet strings. He hauled her the quick twenty steps to
the loading dock by the building's rear even faster than he had visualized. He dragged her into the space between the dock's truck-size garbage compacter and the wall. A little plastic chair sat in the space next to the dock. It was probably where the building's janitor fucked off, he thought.

"Here, have a seat. Get comfy," Berger said, sitting her down on it hard.

Instead of taping her mouth as he had planned, he decided to go ahead and start stabbing her. The garbage stench and the buzzing of the flies were too much for him.

The first quick thrust was to her right shoulder. She screamed behind his cupped hand and looked up at the windows and back terraces of her twenty-story building for help. But there were just humming, dripping air conditioners and blank, empty panes of glass. They were all alone.

She screamed two more times as Berger removed the knife with a slight tug and then thrust it forward into her left shoulder. She started to weep silently as her blood dripped to the nasty, stained cement.

"There, see?" he said, patting her on the cheek with his free bloody hand. "It's not so bad, right? Almost done, baby. In a minute, we'll both be out of this stinking hole. You're doing so fine."
STILL AT MY DESK LATE SUNDAY AFTERNOON, I’d spent the last two hours scouring the NYPD and FBI data-
bases for any open cases involving the name Lawrence. Though there were quite a few, not one of them seemed to
have anything to do with explosives or serial bombings. My eyes felt like blown fuses after I’d sifted through case
after irrelevant case.

I glanced up from my computer at the cartoon on the wall of my cubicle, where two cops were arresting a guy
next to a dead Pillsbury Doughboy. “His fingerprints match the one on the victim’s belly,” one of the cops was saying.

If only I could catch a slam dunk like that, I thought, groaning as I rubbed my tired, nonsmiling Irish eyes with
the heels of my hands.

Scattered around the bullpen behind me, half a dozen other Major Case detectives were running down the
lead on the European explosive and questioning potential
witnesses and library staff. So far, just like me, they had compiled exactly squat. Without witnesses or likely suspects to connect to the disturbing incident, I was betting it was going to stay that way. At least until our unknown subject struck again. Which was about as depressing as it was gut-churning.

It was getting dark when I finally clocked out and drove back to the Point. Fortunately, most of the traffic was in the opposite lane, heading back into the city from Long Island, so I made decent time for a change.

My gang had quite a surprise for me as it turned out. It started innocently enough. Trent was sitting by himself in the otherwise empty family room when I opened the front door.

“Hey, buddy. Where is everyone?”

“Finally,” Trent said, putting down the deck of Uno cards he was playing with. He lifted up my swim trunks sitting on the couch beside him and tossed them at me.

He stood and folded his arms.

“You need to put these on and follow me,” he said cryptically.

“Where?” I said.

“No questions,” Trent said.

My family was nuttier than I was, I thought, after I got changed and let Trent lead me down the two blocks toward the dark beach. Down toward the water’s edge, I saw a crowd beside a bonfire. The Black Eyed Peas song “I Gotta Feeling” was blasting.
“Surprise!” everyone yelled as I stepped toward them. I staggered over, unable to believe it. All my guys were there. They’d brought out the grill, and I could smell ribs smoking. A tub of ice and drinks and a tray of s’mores sat on a blanket. A Bennett beach party was in full swing.

“What the heck is this? It isn’t my birthday.”

“Since you couldn’t be here for a day at the beach,” Mary Catherine said, stepping out of the shadows and handing me a gigantic Day-Glo blue plastic margarita glass, “we thought you might like a night at it. It was all the kids’ idea.”

“Wow,” I said.

“We love you, Dad,” Jane said, dropping a plastic lei around my neck and giving me a kiss. “Is that so surprising?”

“Oh, yes, Daddy Waddy. We wuv you so much,” said Ricky, tossing a soaking-wet Nerf football at my head. I even managed to catch it without spilling a drop of booze.

After a few more stress-killing margaritas and laughter from watching Seamus dance to “Wipe Out,” I was ready for the water. I gathered everyone up and drew a line in the sand with the heel of my bare foot.

“Okay. On your mark, get set…”

They were already bolting, the little cheating stinkers. I hit the ocean a second behind them. I collided with the water face-first, a nail bomb of salt and cold exploding through my skull. Damn, I needed this. My familia was awesome. I was so lucky. We all were.
I let the water knock me silly, then got up and threw someone small who smelled like a s’more up onto my shoulders and waited for the next dark wave. Everyone was screaming and laughing.

I stared up at the night sky, freezing and having an absolute panic. There was a roar, and another wave came straight at us. We howled as if to scare it away, but it was having none of it. It kept on coming.

“Hold on tight!” I screamed as tiny sticky fingers dug into my hair.
Chapter 15

IT WAS DARK WHEN Berger pulled the Mercedes under the cold, garish lights of a BP gas station at Tenth Avenue and 36th Street back in Manhattan.

He’d bagged his bloody clothes and changed back into jeans and a T-shirt immediately after the stabbing. Directly from the scene, he’d driven over the Throggs Neck Bridge, where he’d tossed everything, including the knife and the wig. For the past several hours, he’d been driving around the five boroughs, winding down, blowing off steam, and, as always, thinking and planning. He actually did some of his best thinking behind the wheel.

He’d pulled over now not just to fill his tank, but because his braced left knee was starting its all-too-familiar whine. Hey, greetings from down here, big guy, his knee seemed to say. Remember me? Iraq, RPG, the piece of shattered rebar that burned through me, cooking all my muscles, ligaments, nerves, and blood vessels into tomato soup? Yeah, well, I’m sorry to bring
it up, but I’m starting to hurt like a bitch down here, bud, and was just wondering what you were planning to do about it?

Gritting his teeth at the pain, Berger popped the gas cap and dragged himself up and out of the car, rubbing his leg. He dry-swallowed a Percocet, or “Vitamin P,” as he liked to call it, as he filled the tank.

Twenty minutes later, he was piloting the convertible uptown near Columbia University in the Morningside Heights neighborhood. He went west and found meandering Riverside Drive, perhaps the coolest street in Manhattan. He passed Grant’s Tomb, all lit up, its bright white Greek columns and rotunda pale against the indigo summer night sky.

He smiled as he cruised Riverside Drive’s elegant curves. He had a lot to smile about. Beautiful architecture on his right, dark water on his left, Percocet in his bloodstream. He started blowing some red lights just for the heck of it, cutting people off, putting Stuttgart’s latest V8 incarnation through its paces.

He really couldn’t get enough of his new $100,000 toy. Its brute propulsion off the line. How low it squatted in the serpentine curves. Like Oscar Wilde said, “I have the simplest tastes. I am always satisfied with the best,” he thought.

Tired of screwing around, Berger picked it up. Slaloming taxis, he hit the esplanade at 125th doing a suicidal eighty. When he spotted the full moon over the Hudson, he actually howled at it.

Then he thought of something.
Tick Tock

Why not?

He suddenly sat up on the seat and drove with his feet the way Jack Nicholson did in a movie he saw once.

Wind in his face, holy madness roaring through his skull, Berger sat high up above the windshield, his bare feet on the wheel, arms folded like a genie riding a magic carpet. A woman in a car he flew past started honking her horn. He honked back. With his foot.

Nicholson wished he had balls as big as mine, Berger thought.

He really did feel good. Alive for the first time in years. Which was ironic, since he’d probably be as dead as old Ulysses S. back there in a week’s time.

All in Lawrence’s honor, of course.

Berger howled again as he dropped back down into his seat and pounded the sports car’s German-engineered accelerator into its German-engineered floor.
Chapter 16

A SILVER BENTLEY ARNAGE with a Union Jack bumper sticker pulled away from the hunter green awning as Berger came hobbling up 77th Street with the cane he kept in the Merc’s trunk.

Did the Bentley belong to landed gentry? he thought. The Windsors visiting from Buckingham Palace? Of course not. It was Jonathan Brickman from 7A, the biggest WASP-aspiring Jew since Ralph “Lifshitz” Lauren.

Berger was only joking. He actually liked Brickman. He’d sat on the board when they reviewed the businessman’s co-op application. He had the trifecta of impeccable creds, Jonathan did. Princeton, Harvard, Goldman Sachs. His financials were mind-boggling even for the Silk Stocking District.

Jonathan was a pleasant fellow, too. Amiable, self-deprecating, handsome, and crisp in his bespoke Savile Row pinstripe. The only thing the gentleman financier
had left to do was get a *Times* wedding announcement for his debutante daughter so he could die and go to heaven, or maybe Greenwich.

Berger even liked Brickman’s Anglophile Ralph Lauren yearnings. What wasn’t to like about Ralph Lauren’s *Great Gatsby*–like idealized aristocratic world, filled with beautiful homes and clothes and furnishings and people? Brickman was attempting to become brighter, happier, better. In a word, more. What could be more triumphant and life-affirming than that?

When Berger entered the bird’s-eye maple-paneled lobby, he saw the Sunday doorman packed down with Brickman’s Coach leather bags. His name was Tony. Or at least that was what he said it was. His real name was probably Artan or Besnik or Zug, he figured, given the Croatian twang in his voice.

Welcome to New York, Berger thought with a grin, where Albanians want to be Italians, Jews want to be WASPs, and the mayor wants to be emperor for life.

“Mr. Berger, yes, please,” Tony said. “If you give me a moment, I’ll press the elevator door button for you.”

He was actually serious. Literally lifting a finger was considered quite gauche by some of the building’s more obnoxious residents.

“I got this one, Tony,” Berger said, actually pressing the button himself to open it. “Call it an early Christmas tip.”

On the top floor, the mahogany-paneled elevator opened
onto a high coffered-ceiling hallway. The single door at the end of it led to Berger’s penthouse.

Brickman had actually made a discreet and quite handsome offer for it several years before. But some things, like seven thousand multilevel square feet overlooking Central Park, even a billionaire’s money couldn’t buy.

As he always did once inside the front door, Berger paused with reverence before the two items in the foyer. To the left on a built-in marble shelf sat a dark-lacquer jug of Vienna porcelain, a near flawless example of Louis XV–style chinoiserie. On the right was Salvador Dali’s devastating Basket of Bread, the masterpiece that he painted just before being expelled from Madrid’s Academia de San Fernando for truthfully telling the faculty that they lacked the authority to judge him.

Standing before them, Berger felt the beauty and sanctuary of his home descend upon him like a balm. Some would say the old, dark apartment could probably use a remod, but he wouldn’t touch a thing. The veneer of the paneled dusty hallways made him feel like he was living inside an Old Master’s painting.

This place had been built at a time when there was still a natural aristocracy, respect for rank and privilege and passion and talent. An urge to ascend. There were ghosts here. Ghosts of great men and women. Great ambitions. He felt them welcome him home.

He decided to draw himself a bath. And what a bath it was, he thought, entering his favorite room. Inside the
four-hundred-square-foot vault of Tyrolean marble sat a small swimming pool of a sunken tub. On its right stood a baronial fireplace big enough to roast an ox on a spit. On its left, a wall of French doors opened onto the highest of the sprawling apartment’s many balconies.

Berger particularly loved being in here in the winter-time. When there was snow on the balcony, he’d open the doors and have the fire roaring as he lay covered in bubbles, looking out at the lights.

He opened the doors before he disrobed and lowered himself slowly into the hot bath.

He floated on his back, resting while staring out at the city lights, yellow and white, across the dark sea of trees.

Tomorrow he would be “kickin’ it up to levels unknown,” to borrow the words of some obnoxious Food Network chef. This weekend was nothing compared with what people would wake up to tomorrow morning.

Tomorrow was going to be one hell of a day.
WAY PAST ALL OUR BEDTIMES and loving it, the kids and I were soaked to the skin and shivering around the bonfire. I heard Seamus clear his throat to tell one of his famous ghost stories.

I remembered them from when I was a kid. Run-of-the-mill ghost stories were for pansies. Seamus’s tales were H. P. Lovecraft–inspired yarns about fish creatures so horrifying, just the sight of them made people go insane. I mean, anyone can scare a little child. Few can introduce them to cosmic horror.

“Make it a PG tale, huh, Padre?” I said, taking him aside. “I don’t want the kids to have nightmares. Or me, either.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll water it down, ya party pooper,” Seamus grumbled.

“Mike?” Mary Catherine whispered to me. “Would you help me get some more soda?”
Tick Tock

She didn’t even make a pretense of heading toward the house. We walked north along the dark beach parallel to the waterline. Mary Catherine was wearing a new white-cotton sheer summer dress I’d never seen before. Over the past two weeks, she’d become quite brown, which made her blue eyes pop even paler and prettier than usual. She turned those eyes on me and held them there as we walked, an adorably nervous look on her fine-boned face.

“Mike,” she said as I followed her on our mystical soda quest.

“Yes, Mary?”

“I have a confession to make,” she said, stopping by an empty lifeguard chair. “This party wasn’t the kids’ idea. It was mine.”

“I’ll forgive you on one condition,” I said, suddenly holding her shoulders.

There were no head butts this time or hesitating. We kissed.

“This is crazy. What the hell are we doing?” Mary Catherine said when we came up for air.

“Looking for soda?” I said.

Mary Catherine smiled and gave me a playful kick in the shin. Then we climbed up into the lifeguard chair and started kissing again.

We went at it for quite some time, holding each other, warm against the cold. I didn’t want to stop, even with the skeeters biting the crap out of my back, but after a while we climbed back down.
We headed back to the party, but everyone was gone and the fire was out.

“Oh, no. We’re so busted,” Mary Catherine said.

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll be lucky and Seamus’s fish monsters got them,” I tried.

I knew we were in trouble when I saw Shawna and Chrissy on the front porch.

“They’re coming. They’re coming. They’re not dead,” they chanted, running back into the house.

“Oh, yes, we are,” Mary Catherine said under her breath.

“Now, where could the two of you have been for the last eon?” Seamus said with a stupid all-too-knowing grin on his face.

“Yeah, Dad,” Jane said. “Where’d you go to get the soda? The Bronx?”

“There was, uh, none left, so I tried, I mean, we, uh, went to the store.”

“But it was closed, and we walked back,” Mary Catherine finished quickly.

“But there’s a case of Coke right here,” Eddie said from the kitchen.

“That can’t be. I must have missed it,” I said.

“In the fridge?” Eddie said.

“Enough questions,” I said. “I’m the cop here and the dad, in fact. One more question and it’s everyone straight to bed.”

I saw Seamus open his mouth.

“With spankings,” I added, pointing at him as everybody burst into giggles.

“Mike and Mary sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” they regaled us. Seamus was by far the loudest.

“First comes love, then comes marriage,” they said, making a circle and dancing around us like evil elves. “Then comes Mary with a baby carriage.”

“You’re all dead, you know that,” I said, red-faced and unable to contain my laughter. “As doornails.”
IT WAS ALREADY HOT at seven fifteen in the morning when Berger downshifted the massive Budget rental box truck with a roar and pulled over onto Lexington Avenue near 42nd Street. Even this early on Monday morning, people in office clothes were spilling out of Grand Central Terminal like rats from a burning ship.

He threw the massive truck into park and climbed out, leaving it running. He was wearing a Yankees cap backward, cutoff jeans, construction boots, and yellowish-green cheap CVS shades. A wifebeater and a gold chain with a massive head of Christ topped off his outer-borough truck-driver look.

He made a showy display of dropping the back gate and rattling up the steel shutter before wheeling out the hand truck. On it were three thick plastic-strapped bundles of New York Times newspapers. He rolled them to the truck’s hydraulic ramp and started it humming down.
Tick Tock

Weaving around morning commuters on the sidewalk, he quickly navigated the hand truck into the massive train station. Inside, hundreds of people were crisscrossing through the cathedral-like space, running like kids playing musical chairs to get into place before the Stock Exchange’s golden opening bell.

A pudgy antiterror cop strapping an M16 yawned as Berger rolled right on past him. He dropped his bundles by a crowded stationery store called Latest Edition that adjoined the main waiting room. The short, mahogany-colored Asian guy behind the counter came out of the store with a puzzled look on his face as Berger spun the hand truck around with a squeal.

“More Times?” the little brown guy said. “This is a mistake. I already got my delivery.”

“Wha’?” Berger said, throwing up his arms. “You gotta be f——ing kiddin’ me. I should be finished my deliveries already. Central just called and said to drop these off. Let me call these jag-offs back. Left my cell phone in the truck. I’ll be back in a second.”

The Asian guy shook his head at the chest-high stack as Berger quickly rolled the hand truck away.

As Berger passed the antiterror cop on his way out, he went into his pocket and slid ballistic ear protectors into his ears. Then he turned into the long Lexington Avenue Corridor exit, took the cell phone from his pocket, and dialed the number for the trigger in the massive paper-wrapped bomb he’d just planted.
He winced as fifty pounds of plastic explosive detonated with an eardrum-splitting *ba-bam!* Ten feet from the exit door, a chunk of cream-colored marble the size of a pizza slid past him like a shuffleboard disk. A man’s briefcase followed. A cloud of dust and hot smoke followed him out the door into the street.

Outside on Lexington, cars had stopped. On the sidewalk, people were turned toward the station’s entrance, arrested in place like figures in a model-train display. The hand truck clattered over as Berger rolled it off the curb. Passing the rear of the truck he’d parked, he crossed the street and turned the corner of 43rd Street, walking quickly with his head down, the iPhone still in his hand.

When he was halfway up the block, he took a breath and dialed the other mobile phone trigger.

The one attached to the incendiary device in the cab of the truck.

Someone screamed. When he glanced over his shoulder, a pillar of thick black smoke was billowing up between the office towers.

Instead of creating just a distracting blazing truck, he’d seriously thought about filling the rear of the truck with diesel-soaked ammonium nitrate, like the Oklahoma City bomber did, but in the end he’d decided against it.

He chucked the hat and the glasses and the Christ head, feeling unsure for a moment, shaking his head.

All in due time, he thought.

He glanced back at the ink black pinwheeling mush-
room cloud sailing into the July morning sky as he hit Third Avenue and started walking uptown. The first sirens started in the distance.

He hadn’t crossed the line this time, Berger knew. He’d just erased it.
I GOT UP EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. In the pre-dawn gray, I threw on some flip-flops and biked over to a deli a couple of blocks north of our beach bungalow. After I bought a dozen and a half Kaiser rolls and two pounds of bacon, I sat with a cup of coffee on a beat-up picnic table in the deli’s still-dark parking lot, gazing out at the beach.

As the sun came up over the ocean, it reminded me of the summer I was seventeen. A buddy and I pulled a Jack Kerouac and hitchhiked down to the Jersey Shore to visit a girl that he knew. My friend cut out with the girl, and I ended up sleeping on the beach. Waking alone to the sound of gulls, I was depressed at first, but then I turned to the water and sat there, wide-eyed and frozen, overwhelmed for the first time by what a flat-out miracle this world could be.

I smiled as I remembered being with Mary Catherine last night. No wonder I was thinking about my teen years,
Tick Tock

I thought, finishing the dregs of my Green Mountain French vanilla. After last night, I certainly felt like I was seventeen all over again. I was definitely acting like a kid. Not a bad thing, by any stretch in my book. I highly recommend it.

Seamus was on the porch waiting for me when I got back. I could tell by the bloodless look on his face that something was very wrong. He had my phone in his hand for some reason. I screeched to a stop and dropped the bike as I bolted up the stairs.

“No! What is it is it? One of the kids?”

Seamus shook his head.

“The kids are fine, Michael,” he said with a surreal calm.

_Michael?_

Shit, this was bad. The last time I remembered him using my Christian name was the morning I buried my wife.

I noticed that the radio was on in the house behind him. A lot of silence between the announcer's halting words. Seamus handed me my vibrating phone. There were fourteen messages from my boss.

“Bennett,” I said into it as I watched Seamus close his eyes and bless himself.

“Oh, Mike,” my boss, Miriam, said. “You're not going to believe this. A bomb just went off in Grand Central Terminal. Four people are dead. Dozens more wounded. A cop is dead, too, Mike.”
I looked up at the pink-and-blue-marbled sky, then at Seamus, then finally down at the sandy porch floorboards. My morning’s peaceful Deepak Chopra contemplation session was officially over. The big bad world had come back to get my attention like another chunk of cinder block right through my bay window.

“On my way,” I said, shaking my head. “Give me an hour.”
Chapter 20

INBOUND MANHATTAN TRAFFIC WAS lighter than usual due to the heart-stopping news. I’d taken my unmarked Impala home the day before, and as I got on the LIE, I buried the pin of its speedometer, flashers and siren cranked.

Keeping off the crowded police-band radio, I had my iPod turned up as far as it would go, and blasted the Stones’ “Gimme Shelter.” Gritty, insane seventies rock seemed extremely appropriate theme music for the world coming apart at its seams.

The Anti-Terror Unit in full force had already set up a checkpoint at the 59th Street Bridge. Instead of stopping, I killed some cones as I put the Imp on the shoulder and took out my ID and tinned the rookie at the barricade at around forty. There were two more checkpoints, one at 50th and Third, and the final one at 45th and Lex. Sirens screaming in my ears, I parked behind an ambulance and got out.
Behind steel pedestrian barricades to the south, dozens of firefighters and cops were running around in all directions. I walked to take my place among them, shaking my head.

When I arrived at the corner and saw the flame-gutted box truck, I just stood gaping.

I spotted Bomb Squad chief Cell through a debris-covered lobby. It looked like a cave-in had happened. One of the fire chiefs at the blast site’s command center made me put on some Tyvek and a full-face air mask before letting me through.

“Guess our friend wasn’t lying about the next one,” Cell said. “Looks like the same plastique that we found at the library.”

He smiled, but I could see the frozen rage in his eyes. He was angry. We all were. Even through the filters of the mask, I could smell death. Death and concrete dust and scorched metal.

There was no predicting what would happen next.
Chapter 21

THE REST OF THE DAY was as hellacious as any in my career. Later that morning, I helped an EMT dig out the body of an old, tiny homeless man who’d been buried under the collapsed Grand Central Lexington Avenue Corridor. When I went to grab his leg to put him in the body bag, I almost collapsed when his leg separated freely from his body. In fact, all of his limbs had been dismembered by the bomb’s shock wave. We had to bag him in parts like a quartered chicken.

If that wasn’t stressful enough, I spent the afternoon in the on-site morgue with the medical examiner, compiling a list of the dead. The morgue was set up in the Campbell Apartment, an upscale cocktail bar and lounge, and there was something very wrong about seeing covered bodies laid out in rows under a sparkling chandelier.

The worst part was when the slain police officer was brought in. In a private ceremony, the waiting family
members were handed his personal effects. Hearing the sobbing moans, I had to get out of there. I walked out and headed down one of Grand Central’s deserted tracks. I peered into the darkness at its end for a few minutes, tears stinging in my eyes. Then I wiped my eyes, walked back, and got back to work.

I met Miriam that afternoon at the Emergency Operations trailer set up by the main entrance of Grand Central on 42nd Street. I spotted a horde of media cordoned off on the south side of the street by the overpass behind barricades. National this time. Global newsies would be showing up pretty soon to get their goddamn sound bites from this hellhole.

“We got Verizon pulling recs of the nearest cell sites to see if it was a mobile trigger,” Miriam said to me. “The rest of our guys are getting the security tapes from the nearest stores up and down the block. Preliminary witnesses said a large box truck pulled up around seven. A homeless guy sleeping in the ATM alcove in the bank across the street said he looked out and saw a guy pushing a hand truck with something on it before the first explosion.”

Miriam paused, staring at me funny, before she pulled me closer.

“Not only that, Mike. You need to know this. A letter came to the squad this morning. It was addressed to you. I had them X-ray it before they opened it. It was a typed message. It had today’s date along with two words: For Lawrence.”
Tick Tock

I closed my eyes, the hair standing up on the back of my neck.

Addressed to me?

“For Lawrence?” I said. “What the hell? I mean, give me a break. This is insane. There’s no rationale, no demand for ransom. Why was it addressed to me?”

Miriam shrugged as Intelligence chief Flaum came out of the trailer.

“ATF is flying in their guys as we speak to help identify the explosive,” he said. “You still think we have a single actor, Mike? Could that be possible? One person caused all this?”

Before I could answer, the mayor came out of the trailer, flanked by the police and fire commissioners.

“Good morning, everyone,” the mayor said into a microphone. “I’m sorry to have to address you all on this sad, sad day in our city’s history,” he said.

Not as sorry as I am, I thought, blinking at the packs of popping flash bulbs.

Around four o’clock, I was at Bellevue Hospital, having just interviewed an old Chinese woman who’d lost one of her eyes in the blast, when my cell rang.

“Mike, I hate to tell you this,” Mary Catherine said. “With everything going on, I know it’s not the right time, but—”

“What, Mary?” I barked.

“Everyone’s okay, but we’re at the hospital. St. John’s Episcopal.”
I put down the phone for a minute. I took a breath. Another hospital? Another problem? This was getting ridiculous.

“Tell me what happened.”

“It’s Eddie and Ricky. They got into a fight with that Flaherty kid. Ricky got the worst of it, five stitches in his chin, but he’s fine. Really. They both are. Please don’t worry. How is it down there? You must be going through hell.”

“It’s not that bad,” I lied. “I’m actually leaving now. I’m on my way.”
ANGRY, DIRTY, AND EMOTIONALLY HOLLOW, I parked in my driveway and sat for a moment. I smelled my hands. I'd scrubbed them at the hospital, but they still smelled like burnt metal and death. I poured another squirt of Purell into them and rubbed until they hurt. Then I stumbled out and up the porch steps and through the front door.

The dining-room table was packed full with my family having dinner. It was silent as a graveyard as I came through the kitchen door. I stepped down to the end of the table and checked out Ricky’s chin and Eddie’s shiner.

While I was carrying out the dead, some sick kid had savagely beaten up my ten- and eleven-year-old sons. This was my sanctuary, and even this was under siege. Nowhere was safe anymore.

“What happened, guys?”
“We were just playing basketball at the court by the beach,” Ricky said.

“Then that Flaherty kid came with his older friends,” Eddie jumped in. “They took the ball, and when we tried to get it back, they started punching.”

“Okay, guys. I know you’re upset, but we’re going to have to try to get through this the best we can,” I said with a strained smile. “The good news is that everyone is going to be okay, right?”

“You call this okay?” Juliana said, pointing at Ricky’s chin. She made Eddie open his mouth to show me his chipped tooth.

“Dad, you’re a cop. Can’t you just arrest this punk?” Jane wanted to know.

“It’s not that simple,” I said, my voice calm, and a convincing fake smile plastered on my face. “There’s witnesses and police reports and other adult stuff you guys shouldn’t worry about. I’ll take care of this. Now, until then, I want everyone to lay low. Stick around the house. Maybe stay away from the beach for a few days.”

“A few days? But this is our vacation,” Brian said.

“Yeah, our beach vacation,” Trent chimed in.

“Now, now, children. Your, uh, father knows best,” Seamus said, sensing how I was about to snap. “We need to be Christian about this. We need to turn the other cheek.”

“Yeah,” Brian said, “so the next time we get socked, the first stitches don’t get reopened.”

Brian was right. We were getting our asses kicked, and
I was too drained to come up with some good bullshit to bluff them that everything was fine.

That’s when Bridget started crying from the other end of the table, followed almost simultaneously by her twin, Fiona.

“I want to go home,” Fiona said.

“I don’t like it here anymore,” Bridget added. “I don’t want Ricky and Eddie to be hurt, Daddy. Let’s go to Aunt Suzie’s for the rest of our vacation.” Aunt Suzie lived in Montgomery, New York, where she and Uncle Jerry owned a mind-blowingly fabulous restaurant called Back Yard Bistro. We had vacationed at nearby Orange Lake the previous summer.

“Girls, look at me. No one’s going to get hurt again, and we can still have fun. I really will take care of this. I promise.”

They smiled. Small smiles, but smiles nonetheless.

I couldn’t let them down, I thought. No excuses. New York City under attack or not.

I’d have to think of something. But what?
Chapter 23

IT WAS DARK WHEN Berger crossed the Whitestone Bridge. He buzzed up the hardtop as he pulled the Mercedes convertible off 678 onto Northern Boulevard in Flushing, Queens.

Traffic, crummy airports, an even crumlier baseball team. Was there anything that didn’t suck about Queens?

He slowly cruised around the grid of streets, trying not to get lost. It wasn’t easy with all the small, tidy houses and low apartment buildings set in neat, boring rows everywhere he looked. Thank God for the car’s navigation system.

After five minutes, he finally stopped and pulled over behind a parked handicap bus near a wooded service road alongside the Cross Island Parkway. He turned the Merc’s engine off but left the radio on. He listened to a talk show for a bit, then found a soothing Brahms concerto.

When it was over, he sat silently in the darkness. Just
sitting there waiting was torture when there was still so much to do. He'd seriously debated contracting this part out, but in the end he had decided against it. Every small thing was part of the effort, he reminded himself. Even Michelangelo, when painting the Sistine Chapel, built the scaffolds himself and mixed his own paint.

It was almost half an hour later when a new Volvo Crossover passed him and turned off the road onto the secluded lover's lane that ran up the wooded hill alongside an electrical tower cutout.

He waited ten minutes to let them get going. Then he slipped on his trusty surgical gloves, got out his new black, curly wig, and grabbed the sack.

Fireflies flickered among the weeds and wildflowers as he stepped up the muggy deserted stretch of service road. It could have been upstate Vermont but for the massive electrical pylon that looked like an ugly, sloppy black stitch across the face of midnight blue sky at the top of the hill.

Even though the parked Volvo's lights were off, Berger caught a lot of motion behind the station wagon's steamed windows as he approached. If the Volvo's a rockin', don't come a knockin', Berger thought, taking the heavy gun out of the paper sack.

He arrived at the passenger-side window and tapped the snub-nosed chunky .44 Bulldog against the glass.

*Clink, clink.*

“Knock, knock,” he said.
They were both in the lowered passenger bucket seat. The young lady saw him first over the guy’s shoulder. She was pretty, a creamy-skinned redhead.

Berger took a few steps back in the darkness as she started to scream.

As the man struggled to pull up his pants, Berger walked around the rear of the car to the driver’s side and got ready. The Weaver shooting stance he adopted was textbook, two hands extended, elbows firm but not locked, weight evenly distributed on the balls of his feet. When the guy finally sat up, the Bulldog was leveled exactly at his ear.

The two huge booms and enormous recoil of the powerful gun were quite surprising after the light, smooth trigger pull. The driver-side window blew in. So did most of the horny middle-aged guy’s head. The girl in the passenger seat was splattered with blood and brain matter, and her sobbing scream rose in pitch.

With the elbow of his shirtsleeve, Berger wiped cordite and sweat out of his eyes. He lowered the heavy revolver and calmly walked around the front of the car back to the passenger side. In situations like this, you had to stay focused, slow everything down. The woman was trying to climb over her dead lover when he arrived at the other side of the car. Berger took up position again and waited until she turned.

Two more dynamite-detonating booms sounded out as he grouped two .44 Bulldog rounds into her pale forehead.
Then there was silence, Berger thought, listening. *And it was good.*

Recoil tingling his fingers, Berger dropped the gun back into the paper sack and retrieved the envelope from his pocket.

He flicked the envelope through the shattered window. There was something typed across the front of it.  

**MICHAEL BENNETT NYPD**

Humming the concerto he’d just been listening to, Berger tugged at a rubber glove with his teeth as he hurried back down the hill toward his car.
“GOING OUT FOR ICE CREAM,” I said, getting up from the game of Trivial Pursuit that we started playing after dinner. Mary Catherine gave me a quizzical look as I was leaving. Her concern only seemed to increase when I gave her a thumbs-up on the way out the screen door.

But instead of getting ice cream, I hopped into the Impala and called into my squad to get the address for the Flaherty family in Breezy Point. Was that a little crazy? It was. But then again, so was I by that point.

Their house was on the Rockaway Inlet side of the Point about ten blocks away. I drove straight there.

They really did have a pit bull chained in their front yard. It went mad as I stepped out of my car and made my way up the rickety steps.

It wasn’t madder than me, though. I actually smiled at it. After today and everything that I had seen, I was in a man-bites-dog sort of mood.
Tick Tock

I pounded on the door.
“Oh, this better be good,” said the bald guy who answered it.

The guy was big. He was also shirtless and in damn good shape, I could see: huge bowling-ball shoulders, six-pack abs, prison-yard pumped. There was another man, just as big and mean-looking and covered in tattoos, standing behind him.

I should have been cautious then. I knew a violent criminal mobster asshole when I saw one. But I guess I was through giving a shit for the day.

“You Flaherty?” I said.
“Yeah. Who the fuck are you?”
“My name’s Bennett. You have a kid?”
“I got five of ‘em. At least. Which one we talkin’ about here?”

“Fat, freckles, about fourteen. Did I say fat?”
“You talking about my Seany? What’s up?”
“Yeah, well, your Seany split my eleven-year-old’s chin open today is what’s up,” I said, staring into Flaherty’s soulless doll’s eyes. “He had to go to the hospital.”

“That can’t be right,” the man said, stone-faced. He smiled coldly. “We went fishing today. All day. It was sweet. Got some blues. Hey, Billy, remember when Sean caught that blowfish today?”

“Oh, yeah,” the thug behind him said with a guffaw. “Blowfish. That was the puffy balloon thing, right? That shit was funny.”

“I do have a gun,” I said with a grin. “You want me to show it to you?”

I really did feel like showing it to him. In fact, I actually felt like giving him a taste of my Glock.

“I know what they look like, but thanks, anyway,” Flaherty said, cold as ice. “If you don’t mind, though, I’d like to get back to the ballgame. Mets might even win one for a change. Have a nice night, Officer.”

That’s when he slammed the door in my face. I felt like kicking it in. The pit was in a frenzy. So was I. But even in my stress-induced hysteria, I knew that wasn’t a good idea. I chose to retreat.

An empty Miller High Life can landed beside me as I was coming down the steps.

Young Flaherty himself waved to me from the rattletrap’s second-story window.

“Gee, Officer, I apologize. Must have slipped out of my hand.”

Even over the dog’s apoplexy, I heard raucous laughter from inside.

Death all day and ridicule for dessert. What a day. I crushed the can and hit the stairs before I could take my gun out.
RETURNING TO THE HOUSE with a full head of steam, I decided I needed some alone time. Wanting to make it both relaxing and constructive, I opted for doing what any angry, overworked cop in my situation would do. Inside the garage, I tossed down some old newspaper on a work-bench and began field-stripping my Glock 21.

For half an hour, I went to town, cleaning the barrel and slide until everything was ship shape and shining like a brand-new penny. I’m not proud to admit that as I went through the motions meticulously, some un-Christian thoughts went through my mind concerning certain Breezy Point residents. As I reloaded the semiauto’s magazine and slapped it home with a well-oiled snick, I made a mental note to set up a confession the next time I saw Seamus.

I discovered a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label on a shelf behind a bolt-filled coffee can as I was cleaning up. One of my cousins must have left it there after his own
Clark W. Griswold family vacation fiasco, no doubt. I drummed my fingers on the workbench as I eyed the half-full bottle.

Why not just get drunk and let the world go straight to hell? I certainly had a good excuse. Several, in fact.

As I stood there weakly and wearily pondering the Scotch bottle, beyond the front door of the garage I heard steps on the porch and the doorbell ring.

“Hey, is Juliana around?” a voice called out.

The voice belonged to Joe Somebody-or-other, some tall, friendly nonpsychotic high-school kid from up the block who kept coming around because he had a crush on Juliana.

“Hey, Joe,” I overheard Juliana say a second later.

“Do you and Brian and the guys want to play roundup again?” the sly Breezy Point Romeo wanted to know.

“Can't tonight, Joe, but I'll text you tomorrow, okay?” Juliana said curtly before letting the door close in his face with a bang.

That was odd, I thought, heading outside and up the porch steps after Joe left. I knew my daughter had a bit of a crush on the lad as well. What was up?

I figured it out when I saw Juliana through the new front window. She was sitting on the couch, laughing, painting Bridget's toenails as Fiona and Shawna and Chrissy waited their turns. I spotted Jane sitting in the recliner with cucumber slices over her eyes.

I stood there shaking my head, amazed. Juliana knew
Tick Tock

how upset this whole Flaherty thing had made her little sisters, so she had scratched her plans in order to comfort them with some sister spa time. While I was itching to crack the seal on a bottle of booze, Juliana was stepping in, stepping up.

“Let’s have a hand for father of the year, Mike Bennett,” I mumbled as I plopped myself down on the front porch swing. I was still there when Mary Catherine came out. She frowned at my sad, self-pitying ass as she sat down beside me.

“And how are the Flahertys?” she asked.

I looked at her, about to deny my visit to the neighbors. Then I cracked a tiny smile.

“Bad news, Mary,” I said, looking off down the sandy lane. “Which is about par for the course lately, isn’t it? For this vacation. This city. This planet.”

She wisely went back inside and left me alone with my black mood. When my work phone rang a half hour later with my boss’s cell number on the display, I seriously thought about throwing it as hard as I could off the porch. Maybe taking a couple of potshots at it before it landed, my own personal Breezy Point clay shoot.

Then I remembered what my son Trent had said two days before. Who was I kidding? Vacations were for real people. I was a cop.

“This is Bennett,” I said into the phone with a grim smile. “Gimme a crime scene.”

“Coming right up,” Miriam said.
AS I DROVE THROUGH Queens twenty minutes later, I thought about a documentary I once saw on cable about the annual NYPD Finest versus the FDNY Bravest football game.

At halftime with the score tied, the firemen’s locker room was about what you’d expect: upbeat, healthy-looking players and coaches encouraging one another. The NYPD locker room, on the other hand, was about as cheerful as the visitor’s room at Rikers. In place of a traditional pep talk, red-faced, raging cops opted for screaming horrendous obscenities at one another and punching the lockers like violent mental patients.

No doubt about it, we’re a funny bunch. Not funny ha-ha, either, I thought as I arrived at the latest atrocity, a murder scene along an industrial service road in Flushing.

I was a little fuzzy as to why I, of all people, needed to come to this godforsaken place in the middle of the night
when I was already up to my eyeballs in the bombing case. But I was pretty sure I was about to find out.

Beside an electrical pylon at the top of the access road, half a dozen detectives and uniforms were taking pictures and kicking through the weeds, accompanied by police-band radio chatter. In the far distance behind them, cars continued zipping by on the lit-up Whitestone and Throgs Neck Bridges. With the red-and-blue police strobes skipping through the trees, there was something bucolic, almost peaceful, about the whole scene.

Too bad peace wasn’t my business. Definitely not tonight.

A short, immaculately dressed Filipino detective from the 109th Precinct pulled off a surgical glove and introduced himself to me as Andy Hunt while I was signing the homicide scene log. The death scene Hunt guided me to was a new Volvo Crossover with a nice tan-leather interior.

Formerly nice, I corrected myself as I stepped up to the driver’s-side open door and saw the ruined bodies.

A middle-aged man and a younger woman leaned shoulder-to-shoulder in the center of the car, both shot twice in the head with a large-caliber gun. Green beads of shattered auto glass covered both bodies. I waved away a fly, staring at the horrible constellation of dried blood spray stuck to the dash.

“The male victim is one Eugene Keating. He was a professor at Hofstra, taught International Energy Policy, whatever the hell that is,” Detective Hunt said, tossing his
Tiffany Blue silk tie over his shoulder to protect it as he leaned in over the victims.

“The redhead is Karen Lang, one of his graduate students. Maybe they were testing the carbon output on this electrical cutout, but I have my doubts, considering her panties on the floor there. What really sucks is that Keating has two kids and his pregnant professor wife is due for a C-section in two days. Guess she’ll have to call a cab to the hospital now, huh?”

“I don’t understand, though,” I said, resisting the urge to pull down the poor female victim’s bunched-up T-shirt. “Why does anyone think this twofer has something to do with today’s bombing?”

Hunt gave me an extra-grim look. Then he moved the light onto something white that was sitting in the dead man’s lap. It was an envelope with something typed across the front of it.

I squatted down to get a better look. You’re not supposed to let the job get inside you, but I have to admit that when I read my name on the envelope, I absolutely panicked. I froze from head to toe as if someone had just pressed an invisible gun to my head.

After a few minutes, I shrugged off my heebie-jeebies and decided to go ahead and open it. With thoughts of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, dancing in my head, I retrieved the envelope with the pliers of Hunt’s multi-tool. I borrowed a folding knife from one of the uniforms and slit the envelope open on the hood of the nearest cruiser.
Tick Tock

If I thought opening the letter was a hair-raising experience, it couldn’t hold a candle to what it said on the plain sheet of white paper inside.

Dear Detective Michael Bennett:

I am deeply hurt by your calling me a woman hater. I am not. But I am a monster.

I am the Son of Sam.
The story continues!

TICK TOCK

by

James Patterson

On sale Monday, January 24, 2011