

CHAPTER 1

Tuesday, May 6, 6:30 am

WE HAVE YOUR GRANDDAUGHTER. Here's what you need to do.

Thomas T. Thomas III reviewed the language. Again. He closed the phone without hitting send. Yet.

He stared through high-powered binoculars from atop the wooded knoll. As always, the girl hit one perfect shot after another.

Cassie Webber. Age 11. He'd been tailing her for three months. It seemed longer.

She was chaperoned everywhere she went. Two-a-day practices before and after school. Her dad drove her in the morning. He watched her empty bucket after bucket and then dropped her off at school. Her mom picked her up after school, ferried her back to the practice range, and brought her home after daughter and coach finished. Mom and daughter sometimes ran errands on the

way, but always together. Even on the occasional weekend outing to the mall or the movies, the girl was constantly in the company of family or friends. *Having someone hovering over me all day would have driven me batshit.*

His childhood had been different. When Thomas was her age, he walked to school on his own. And he lived a lot farther away than the girl. His daddy had never let his driver chauffeur him around. Wasn't about to spoil him. *Spare the rod, spoil the child. Didn't spoil me that way either.*

He kept telling himself patience was the key. But his confidence was waning. And then, suddenly, he'd caught a break. The girl's routine had changed.

She started walking the few blocks between school and practice on her own. Dad dropped her off at morning practice and Mom met her at afternoon practice instead of school. Only a ten minute walk each way, but that was all the opening he needed.

Everything was finally in place. He would be able to make amends. He would not let them down.

This time.

She completed her morning regimen, unaware of Thomas's eyes trained on her from his tree-lined vantage point. No doubt about it, he thought to himself. She was incredibly good. Driven. Determined.

And pretty.

Very pretty.

He relieved himself, thinking about her. A long time . . . coming. *Haha!* As the girl disappeared into the locker room, he trekked back down the hill, and climbed into the passenger side of the van.

He returned the binoculars to their case. He removed the cell from his pocket, and checked the pending text one more time.

Moments later, the girl emerged from the locker room, golf bag exchanged for the backpack over her shoulders. She ambled down the winding pathway, waved to the uniformed watchman standing next to the guardhouse, and crossed through the buzzing security gate. She headed off to school.

Without taking his eyes off her, Thomas barked at the man sitting next to him. "Go."

CHAPTER 2

Tuesday, May 6, 7:00 am

ELOISE BROOKS STARED at Cyrus and shook her head. After more than 50 years of marriage, she understood everything about him there was to understand. Still: “I take the time to make you a nice breakfast. The least you could do is eat it while it’s hot.”

She held the warm cup of tea in both hands. “And can’t you talk to me, Cyrus? Why do you treat me like I’m not here? Like I’m some kind of a potted plant.”

Cyrus moved the eggs around on his plate. Speared a bite of fruit, swallowed it, but showed no visible pleasure in it. “I’m eating. What do you want to talk about? You think the couple cut from *Dancing With The Stars* last night deserved to be sent packing?”

“Should have got the hook weeks ago. You dance better than he does. Even with your two left feet.”

He didn't answer. She knew why. "What're you thinking about? Esposito? Whether 50,000 is enough? Your two left feet?"

"All of the above."

She gazed at him but said nothing. Notwithstanding his apparent disinterest in the plate of food in front of him, his appetite—and his imagination—were never-ending. He loved upbeat music and dancing. And sports. He couldn't carry a tune or dance a lick. Except for an occasional round of golf, his sports these days were mostly played out in front of the television. But that didn't stop him from daydreaming. He danced like Fred Astaire. He sang and played guitar and harmonica like Bob Dylan. He moved around a tennis court like Roger Federer.

However, Eloise knew his real passion in life was the law. He had enjoyed a distinguished legal career, first as a trial lawyer and then as a D.C. Superior Court judge. Now retired from the bench, writing and teaching, and occasionally trying a case that got his hackles up, when it came to the law, those who knew Cyrus Brooks knew he was second to none. Amazing how sometimes he exuded that—with confidence bordering on arrogance—but at other times did not. More so since Frank Lotello had been shot, and barely survived.

Brooks sat there fidgeting restlessly with the newspaper. Eloise reached over and put her hand on his. "You'll be great, Cyrus. I need to walk Ryder and get dressed, so we can drive into Court together. Please make sure Maccabee's dishes have enough water and dry cat snacks."

Arguments in the case were scheduled to commence in barely two hours. The chance to appear before the United States

Supreme Court was rare, even for Brooks, but to do it in a landmark case that could permanently change the U.S. political landscape was unparalleled.

When they were first married, Eloise often attended Cyrus's court appearances, both to show her support and because the judicial process was new to her. Now long accustomed to Cyrus's legal adventures, Eloise was a less frequent visitor to the courtroom. Given the importance of this case, she told Cyrus the night before that she planned to attend.

He looked up absently with a gentle, distant smile, still fixed in some far-off place, no doubt grateful for her efforts to distract him, and bolster his confidence. "Macc's snacks? Sure."

CHAPTER 3

Tuesday, May 6, 7:20 am

CASSIE LEFT THE PRACTICE RANGE, looking momentarily at the clock on her phone. School began at eight. She had plenty of time.

She strolled along the familiar middle-class neighborhood route to school, sticking to the tree-hugged, concrete sidewalk. Well-kept houses on modest-sized manicured lots, one after another, adorned both sides of the paved street that divided the opposing sidewalks.

Mouthing the words to the song streaming through her earbuds, she made a mental note of a few questions from her morning practice to ask Coach Bob that afternoon.

Using her ever present designer sunglasses—a gift from her grandparents—to block the sun's glare, Cassie texted her best friend Madison:

RONALD S. BARAK

Hey, BFF, meet u in cafeteria in 10. Out after 1st period to watch ur mom & my poppy in S Ct—how dope is that? 2 excited 4 words!

As she hit “Send,” she was startled by the sound of screeching tires. She looked up from her phone and saw a van skid to the curb a few houses ahead of her. A man in a hoodie jumped out and charged straight at her.

She froze for an instant, but then spun and raced back in the direction of the clubhouse. “Help! Help!! Someone help me!!!”

As she ran, she looked all around. No one. She saw no one. The guard kiosk was in sight, but still over a block away. *Does he want to hurt me? Why? Why me?*

Hearing the man gaining on her, she tried to speed up. *If I can just get close enough to the gatehouse for someone to help me.* She glanced back, shrieking at the top of her lungs, just as the man lunged. He knocked her to the ground, shattering her glasses in the process. “What do you want?! Leave me alone! Get off me!!!”

She saw him grappling with a large syringe. “No!” She screamed even louder, clawing and kicking him savagely—until she felt the sharp stab in the back of her neck. Then nothing.