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**THE NEW
ALEX CROSS
THRILLER**

THE CHASE IS ON—IS ALEX CROSS
THE HUNTER OR THE HUNTED?

CROSS
COUNTRY

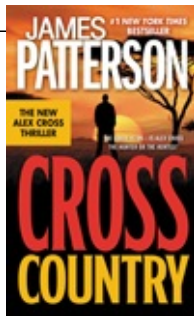
Cross Country

James Patterson



Little, Brown and Company

New York Boston London



[**Begin Reading**](#)

[A Preview of *I, Alex Cross*](#)

[A Preview of *Alex Cross, Run*](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by James Patterson](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For Jill and Avie Glazer

HOME INVASION

GEORGETOWN, WASHINGTON, DC

The surname of the family was Cox, the father a very successful trial lawyer, but the target was the mother, Ellie Randall Cox. The timing was right now, tonight, just minutes away. The payday was excellent, couldn't be better.

The six-foot-six, two-hundred-fifty-pound killer known as "the Tiger" had given out guns to his team—also a gram of cocaine to share, and the only instruction they would need tonight: *The mother is mine. Kill the rest.*

His secondary mission was to scare the American meddlers. He knew how they felt about home invasions, and their precious families, and murders in cold blood. They had so many rules for how life ought to be conducted. The secret to beating them was to break all their silly, sacred rules.

He settled down to watch the house from the street. Wood blinds in the first-floor windows drew horizontal lines across the family members as they moved around inside, unaware of the murderous forces gathered outside.

The boys waited restlessly at the Tiger's side, and he waited for *instinct* to tell him it was time to move on the house.

"Now," he said, "we go!"

Then, with only the slightest bend and whack of the knees, he began to run, breaking out of the camouflaging shadow of an evergreen, his strides almost too fast to count.

A single, powerful leap and he was up on the stoop of the house. Next came three splintering blows to the front door. It seemed to explode open, and they were inside, the kill team, all five of them.

The boys, none older than seventeen, streamed in around him, firing Berettas into the living room ceiling, waving crude hunting knives, shouting orders that were hard to understand because their English was not at the level of the Tiger's.

The children of the house screamed like little piglets; their lawyer father leapt up and tried to shield them with his flabby, overfed body.

"You are pitiful!" the Tiger shouted at him. "You can't even protect your family in your own house."

Soon enough, three family members were corralled against the living room mantel, which was covered with birthday cards addressed to "Momma" and "My Darling Ellie" and "Sweetness and Light."

The leader nudged the youngest of his boys forward, the one who had chosen the name Nike and who had a contagious sense of humor. "Just do it," the Tiger said.

The boy was eleven years old and fearless as a crocodile in a muddy river. He raised a pistol much larger than his own hand and fired it into the shivering father's forehead.

The other boys howled their approval, shooting off rounds in all directions, overturning antique furniture, breaking mirrors and windows. The Cox children were weeping and holding one another.

One particularly scary, blank-faced boy in a Houston Rockets jersey emptied his magazine into the wide-screen television, then reloaded. "Rock da house!" he shouted.

THE MOTHER, “DARLING ELLIE,” “Sweetness and Light,” finally came running and screaming down the stairs for her *Akata* babies.

“Leave them out of this!” she yelled at the tall and very muscular leader. “I know who you are!”

“Of course you do, Mother,” said the Tiger as he smiled at the tall, matronly woman. He had no desire to harm her really. This was just a job to him. A high-paying one, *important to somebody here in Washington*.

The two children scrambled to get to their mother, and it became an absurd game of cat and mouse. His boys shot holes in the sofa as the wheezing American young ones squeezed behind it.

When they emerged on the other side, the Tiger was there to pluck the squealing son off the floor with one hand. The young girl in the *Rugrats* pajamas was a little more clever and ran up the stairs, showing little pink heels at every step.

“Go, baby!” her mother yelled. “Get out a window! Run! Keep running!”

“Won’t happen,” said the Tiger. “No one gets away from here tonight, Mother.”

“Don’t do this!” she begged. “Let them go! They’re just children!”

“You know who I am,” he said to her. “So you know how this will end. You knew all along. Look at what you brought on yourself and on your family. You did this to them.”

LATE TO THE PARTY

Chapter 1

THE HARDEST MYSTERIES to solve are the ones you come to near the end, because there isn't enough evidence, not enough to unravel, unless somehow you can go all the way back to the beginning—rewind and replay everything.

I was riding in the lap of comfort and civility, my year-old Mercedes. I was thinking about how odd it was to be going to a murder scene now. And then I was there, leaving my vehicle, and feeling conflicted about going over to the dark side again.

Was I getting too soft for this? I wondered for an instant, then let it go. I wasn't soft. If anything, was still too hard, too unyielding, too uncompromising.

Then I was thinking that there was something particularly terrifying about random, senseless murder, and that's what this appeared to be, that's what everyone thought anyway. It's what I was told when the call came to the house.

"It's rough in there, Dr. Cross. Five vics. It's an entire family."

"Yeah, I know it is. That's what they said."

One of the first responders, a young officer I know named Michael Fescocoe, met me on the sidewalk at the murder scene in Georgetown, not far from the university where I'd gone as an undergrad and which I remembered fondly for all sorts of reasons, but mostly because Georgetown had taken a chance on me.

The patrolman was visibly shaken. No surprise there. Metro didn't call me in special at eleven o'clock on a Sunday night for run-of-the-mill homicides.

"What have we got so far?" I said to Fescocoe and flashed my badge at a patrolman seemingly guarding an oak tree. Then I ducked under the bright yellow tape in front of the house. Beautiful house, a three-story Colonial on Cambridge Place, a well-heeled single block just south of Montrose Park.

Neighbors and looky-loos crowded the sidewalk—but they stayed at a safe distance in their pajamas and robes, keeping up their white-collar reserve.

"Family of five, all of them dead," Fescocoe repeated himself. "The name's Cox. Father, Reeve. Mother, Eleanor. Son, James. All on the first floor. Daughters, Nicole and Clara, on the third. There's blood everywhere. Looks like they were shot first. Then cut up pretty bad and piled into groupings."

Piled. I sure didn't like the sound of that. Not inside this lovely home. Not anywhere.

"Senior officers on site? Who caught it?" I asked.

"Detective Stone is upstairs. She's the one asked me to page you. ME's still on the way. Probably a couple of them. Christ, what a night."

"You've got that right."

Bree Stone was a bright star with the Violent Crimes branch, and one of the few detectives I went out of my way to partner with, pun intended, since she and I were a couple and had been for more than a year now.

"Let Detective Stone know that I'm here," I said. "I'm going to start downstairs and work my way up to where she is."

"Will do, sir. I'm on it."

Fescocoe stuck with me up the porch steps and past an ALS tech working on the demolished front

door and threshold.

~~“Forced entry, of course,” Fescoc went on. He blushed, probably because he’d stated the obvious~~
“Plus, there’s a hatch open to the roof on the third floor. Looks like they might have left that way.”

“They?”

“I’d say so—based on the amount of damage, whatever the hell happened in there. Never seen anything like it, sir. Listen, if there’s anything else you need—”

“I’ll let you know. Thank you. It’s better if I do this alone. I concentrate better.”

My reputation seems to attract hungry cops on big cases, which can have its advantages. Right now, though, I wanted to take in this scene for myself. Given the grim, steely-eyed look on the face of every tech I’d seen coming from the back of the house, I knew this was going to get harder in a hurry.

Turns out I didn’t know the half of it. The murder of this family was much worse than I’d thought.

Much, much worse.

Chapter 2

THEY WANTED TO scare somebody, I was thinking as I entered a brightly lit, warmly decorated alcove. *But who? Not these dead people. Not this poor family that had been slaughtered for God only knew what reason.*

The first floor told a grim and foreboding story that delineated the murder. Nearly every piece of furniture in the living and dining rooms had been either turned over or destroyed—or both. There were gaping holes punched in the walls, along with dozens of smaller ones. An antique glass chandelier lay scattered in splinters and shards all over a brightly colored Oriental rug.

The crime scene made no sense and, worse, had no direct precedent in my experience as a homicide detective.

A bullet-riddled Chesterfield couch and settee had been pushed up against the wall to make room in front of the fireplace. This was where the first three bodies were *piled*.

While it's safe to say that I've seen some horrendous shit in the line of duty, this scene, the monstrosity of it, stopped me instantly.

As promised, the stacked victims were the father, mother, and son on top, all lying faceup. There were blood streaks and stains on the nearby walls, furniture, and ceiling, and a pool had formed around the bodies. These poor people had been attacked with sharp cutting instruments of some sort, and there had been amputations.

"Jesus, Jesus," I muttered under my breath. It was a prayer, or a curse on the killers, or more likely both.

One of the printing techs answered under his breath, "Amen."

Neither of us was looking at the other, though. This was the kind of homicide scene you just gutted your way through, trying to get out of the house with a minute piece of your sanity intact.

The blood patterns around the room suggested the family members had been attacked separately, then dragged together in the middle.

Something had fueled whatever savage rage brought these killers to this and I agreed with Fescoco that there had been several killers. But what exactly had happened? What was the cause of the massacre? Drugs? Ritual? Psychosis?

Group psychosis?

I stashed the random thoughts to consider at another time. *Methods first, motive later.*

I slowly circled the bodies and parts, picking my way around the pools of blood, stepping on dry parquet where I could. There didn't seem to be any cohesion to the cutting, or the killing for that matter.

The son's throat was slit; the father had a bullet wound to the forehead; and the mother's head was turned away at an unnatural angle, as if her neck had been broken.

I went full circle to see the mother's face. The angle was such that she seemed to be looking right up at me, almost hopeful, as if I could still save her.

I leaned in for a closer look at her and all of a sudden felt dizzy. My legs went weak. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Oh no! Oh my God, no!

I stepped back blindly, my foot hit a slick spot, and I fell. As I went down, I reached to break my

fall. My gloved hand smeared deep red across the floor.

~~*Ellie Randall's blood. Not Cox—Randall!*~~

I knew her—at least I once had.

Long, long ago, Ellie had been my girlfriend when we'd been students at Georgetown. She had probably been my first love.

And now Ellie had been murdered, along with her family.

Chapter 3

ONE OF THE printing techs moved to help me, but I got myself up quickly. I wondered if maybe I was in shock about Ellie. “No harm. I’m fine. What’s the name here again?” I asked the tech.

“Cox, sir. Reeve, Eleanor, and James are the victims in the living room.”

Eleanor Cox. That was right; I remembered now. I stared down at Ellie, my heart racing out of control, tears starting at the corners of my eyes. She had been Ellie *Randall* when I met her, a smart, attractive history major looking for antiapartheid signatures from Georgetown University students. Definitely not someone whose story would end like this.

“Need anything?” Fescue was back and he was hovering.

“Just . . . get me a garbage bag or something,” I told him. “Please. Thank you.”

I peeled off my Windbreaker and tried to wipe myself with it, then stuck the coat in the bag Fescue brought me. I needed to keep moving and to get out of this room, at least for now.

I headed toward the stairs and found Bree just coming down.

“Alex? Jesus, what happened to you?” she asked.

I knew if I started to explain, I wouldn’t be able to finish. “We’ll talk about it later, okay?” I said. “What’s going on upstairs?”

She looked at me strangely but didn’t push it. “More of the same. Bad stuff. Third floor, Alex. Two more kids. I think they were trying to hide from the killers, but it didn’t work.”

A photo flash ghosted the stairwell as we climbed. Everything seemed hallucinogenic and unreal to me. I was outside the scene, watching myself stumble through it. *Ellie had been murdered*. I tried again but couldn’t process the thought.

“No blood on the stairs, or in the hall,” I noticed, trying to focus on evidence, trying to do the job. It was freezing cold, with a hatch door open overhead. November third, and the forecast was for single-digit temperatures overnight. Even the weather had gone a little crazy.

“Alex?”

Bree was waiting up ahead, standing at the doorway to a room on the third floor. She didn’t move as I approached. “You sure you’re okay to be here?” she asked, speaking low so the others wouldn’t hear.

I nodded and peered into the room.

Behind Bree, the two little girls’ bodies were crisscrossed on an oval rag rug. A white canopy bed was broken into pieces, collapsed in on itself as if someone had jumped too hard on it.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “I need to see what happened here. I need to begin to understand what it all means. *Like who the hell was jumping on that bed?*”

Chapter 4

BUT I DIDN'T even *begin* to understand the horrible murders of five family members. Not that night anyway. I was as baffled as everybody else about the possible motivation of the killers.

What made the mystery even deeper was something that happened about an hour after I got to the crime scene. Two officers from the CIA showed up. They looked around, then left. *What was the CIA doing there?*

It was a little after three thirty in the morning when Bree and I finally got back home to Fifth Street. In the stillness of my house, I could hear Ali's little-boy snores wafting down from upstairs. Reassuring and comforting sounds, to be sure.

Nana Mama had left the hood light on over the stove, and she'd Saran Wrapped a plate of the last four hermit cookies from dessert. We took them upstairs, along with glasses and a half-full bottle of wine.

Two hours later I was still awake and still messed up in the head. Bree finally sat up and turned on the light. She found me sitting on the edge of the bed. I could feel the warmth of her body against my back, her breath on my neck.

"You sleep at all?" she asked.

That wasn't really what she wanted to know.

"I knew the mother, Bree. We went to Georgetown together. This couldn't have happened to her. Shouldn't have, anyway."

She breathed in sharply at my revelation. "I'm so sorry, Alex. Why didn't you say so?"

I shrugged, then sighed. "I'm not even sure if I can talk about it now," I said.

She hugged me. "It's okay. No need to talk. Unless you want to, Alex. I'm here."

"We were best friends, Bree. We were a couple for a year. I know it was a long time ago, but . . ." I trailed off. But *what?* But—it hadn't just been kid stuff, either. "I loved her for a while, Bree. I'm blown away right now."

"You want to get off the case?"

"No." I'd already asked myself the same question, and the answer had come just as quickly.

"I can get Sampson or somebody else from Violent Crimes to cover. We'll keep you up to the second—"

"Bree, I can't let go of this one."

"This one?" She ran a hand softly up and down my arm. "As compared to . . . what, Alex?"

I took a deep breath. I knew where Bree was going with this. "It's not about Maria, if that's what you mean." My wife, Maria, had been gunned down when our kids were small. I'd managed to close the case only recently. There had been years of torture and guilt before that. But Maria had been my wife, the love of my life at the time. Ellie was something else. I wasn't confusing the two. I didn't think so anyway.

"Okay," she said, stroking my back, soothing me. "Tell me what I can do."

I folded us both under the covers. "Just lie here with me," I said. "That's all I need for now."

"You got it."

And soon, wrapped in Bree's arms, I went off to sleep—for a whole two hours.

Chapter 5

“I SPY, WITH my little eye, a *pink* newspaper,” said Bree.

“Over there!” Ali was quick to spot it. “I see it! It *is* pink. What kind of crazy newspaper is that?”

To my family’s surprise and delight, I hadn’t left for work at some obscene hour the morning after. I found Ellie and her family dead in their home. Today, I wanted to walk the kids to school. Actually, I wanted to do it most every day, but sometimes I couldn’t, and sometimes I didn’t. But today I needed lots of fresh air in my life. And smiles. And Ali’s giggles.

Jannie was in her last year at Sojourner Truth, all ready for high school, while Ali was just starting out in the school world. It seemed very circle-of-life to me that morning, with Ellie’s family gone in a blink, and my own kids coming up strong.

I put on my best cheerful dad face and tried to set aside the gruesome images of last night. “Who’s next?”

“I’ve got one,” Jannie said. She turned a canary-eating grin on Bree and me. “I spy, with my little eye, a POSSLQ.”

“What’s a *possel-cue*?” Ali wanted to know. He was already looking around, moving his head like a bobblehead doll’s, trying to spot it, whatever *it* was.

Jannie practically sang out the answer. “P, O, S, S, L, Q. Person of the opposite sex, sharing living quarters.” She whispered the word *sex* in our direction, presumably to safeguard her little brother’s innocence. No matter, I could feel myself blushing slightly.

Bree tagged Jannie’s shoulder. “Where exactly did you pick that one up?”

“Cherise J. She says her mom says you two are, you know, living in sin.”

I exchanged a look with Bree over the top of Jannie’s head. I guessed this was bound to come up in some way or another sooner or later. Bree and I had been together for more than a year now, and she’d spent a good amount of time at the house on Fifth Street. Part of the reason was that the kids loved having her around. Part was that I did.

“I think maybe you and Cherise J. need to find something else to talk about,” I told her. “You think?”

“Oh, it’s okay, Daddy. I told Cherise her mom needs to get over herself. I mean, even Nana Mama’s down with it, and her picture’s in the dictionary under ‘old-fashioned,’ right?”

“You wouldn’t have any idea what’s in a dictionary,” I said.

But Bree and I had stopped trying to be politically correct with Jannie, and we just let ourselves laugh. Jannie had that “crossroads” thing going on these days; she was right at the intersection of girl and woman.

“What’s so funny?” Ali asked. “Somebody tell me. What is it?”

I scooped him up off the sidewalk and onto my shoulders for the last half block of our walk to school. “I’ll tell you in about five years.”

“I know anyway,” he said. “You and Bree love each other. Everybody knows. No big deal. It’s a good thing.”

“Yes it is,” I said and kissed his cheek.

We dropped him at the school’s east entrance, where the rest of his class of minicuties were lining up outside. Jannie called to him through the fence. “See you later, alligator! Love you.”

“In a while, crocodile! Love you back.”

~~With their older brother, Damon, off at prep school in Massachusetts, these two had grown closer than ever lately. On weekend nights, Ali often slept on an air mattress at the foot of his sister’s bed, in what he called his “nest.”~~

We left Jannie at the opposite side of the school building, where all the older kids were streaming in. She gave us both hugs good-bye, and I held on a little longer than usual. “I love you, sweetie. There’s nothing more special to me than you and your brothers.”

Jannie couldn’t help but look around to make sure no one had heard. “Me too, Daddy,” she said. Then, almost in the same breath, “Cherise! Wait up!”

As soon as Jannie was gone, Bree took my arm in hers. “So what was that?” she said. “‘Everybody knows you and Bree love each other’?”

I shrugged and smiled. “What do I know? That’s the big rumor going around, anyway.”

I gave her a kiss.

And because that worked out so well, I gave her another.

Chapter 6

BY NINE A.M. I was all kissed out and getting ready to enter a most unpleasant multiple-homicide briefing at the Daly Building. It was being held in the large conference room right across from my office. Handy, anyway. Every available D-1 and D-2, and a contingent from Second District, which covered most of Georgetown, would be there.

I still couldn't get it in my head that Ellie was the victim. *One of the victims.*

The ME's Office had sent over a representative in the person of Dr. Paula Cook, a bright investigator who had the personality of tapioca pudding. The corners of Dr. Cook's mouth actually twitched when we shook hands. I think it was an attempted smile, so I smiled back. "Thanks for coming, Paula. We need you on this one."

"Worst I've seen," she said, "in fourteen years. All those kids, the parents. Turns my stomach. Senseless."

We had picked up a stack of crime scene photos on the way in, and now Paula and I pinned some of them up in the situation room. I made sure they were all 11 × 14s. I wanted everyone to feel some of what had happened last night in Georgetown, the way I still did.

"This might be an isolated incident," I stood in front and told the assembled group a few minutes later. "But I'm not going to assume it is. The more we understand, the more prepared we'll be if this happens again. It might not be an isolated incident." I figured some of the more jaded homicide detectives wouldn't agree; they'd be thinking I'd worked one too many serial cases. I didn't much care what they thought at that point.

For the first fifteen minutes or so, I ran through the primary facts of the case for those who hadn't been there the night before. Then I turned it over to Paula. She bounced up and talked us through the photos on the wall.

"The cutting styles indicate a variety of weapons, strength, and ability," she said, using a red laser pointer to highlight the slashes, punctures, and severing that had been done to the Cox family.

"At least one blade had a serrated edge. One was unusually large—possibly a machete. The amputations, wherever they occurred, were never done cleanly. Rather, they were the result of repetitive trauma."

A detective named Monk Jeffries asked a pretty good question from the front row. "You think they were practicing? Had never done this before?"

"I couldn't say," Paula told him. "Wouldn't surprise me."

"Yeah," I put in. "It's like they were practicing, Monk." I had my own opinion about the murders. "There's something very *young* about this crime scene."

"As in inexperienced?" Jeffries asked.

"No. Just *young*. I'm talking about the cutting, the broken bed, the vandalism in general. Also the fact that this was probably done by a group of five or more. That's a big group of intruders. When I intersect all those factors, I get a few possibilities: gang, cult, OC. In that order."

"Gang?" another D-1 asked from the back. "You ever see gang violence like this massacre?"

"I've never seen violence like this, period," I said.

"I've got twenty bucks on OC. Any takers?" It was Lou Copeland, a competent but thoroughly obnoxious D-1 with Major Case Squad. A few of his cronies laughed.

Not me. I threw my clipboard across the room. It struck the wall and fell onto the tile. That wasn't like me, so it made an impression.

The room was quiet. I walked over to pick up my notes. I saw Bree and Sampson exchange a look I didn't like. They weren't sure that I could handle this.

Bree took it from there, and she started handing out assignments. We needed people reconvening in the Cambridge Place neighborhood, riding the lab for fast turnaround, and calling in any chits we had on the street for information about last night.

"We need your best work on this one," Bree told the group. "And we want some answers by the end of the day."

"What about—?"

"Dismissed!"

Everyone looked around. It was Sampson who'd spoken.

"You all have any more questions, you can reach Stone or Cross on their cells. Meanwhile, we've got a buttload of fieldwork to do. This is a major case. So get started! Let's hit it, and hit it hard."

Chapter 7

THE TIGER WAS the tallest and strongest of ten well-muscled black men racing up and down a weathered asphalt basketball court at Carter Park in Petway. He understood that he wasn't a skillful shooter or dribbler, but he rebounded like a pro and defended the basket fiercely, and he hated to lose more than anything. In his world, *you lose, you die*.

The player he guarded called himself "Buckwheat" and the Tiger had heard that the nickname had something to do with an old TV series in America that sometimes made fun of black kids.

Buckwheat either didn't mind the name, or he'd gotten used to it. He was fast on the basketball court and a steady shooter. He was also a trash-talker, as were most of the young players in DC. The Tiger had picked up the game in London instantly while he was at university, but there wasn't much trash-talking in England.

"You talk a good game, but you're going to lose," the Tiger finally said as he and his opponent ran up the court, shoulder to shoulder. Buckwheat turned off a screen and took a bounce pass in the left corner. He proceeded to bury a long, perfectly arced jump shot even though the Tiger bumped him hard after the release.

"Fuckin' ape," the other man yelled as the two of them ran back the other way.

"You think so?"

"Oh hell, I know so. 'Nother minute, you be the big monkey watchin' on the sideline!"

The Tiger laughed but said nothing more. He scored on a rebound, and then Buckwheat's team raced the ball up the court on a fast break.

Buckwheat caught a pass in full stride and brought it hard to the hoop. He had a step on the Tiger and called out, "Game!" even before he went up for the winning dunk.

He was airborne, graceful and athletic, when the Tiger hit him with all his force and weight. He took the six-foot-three man down, drove him into the metal pole supporting the basket. The man lay sprawled on the asphalt with blood streaming from his face.

"*Game!*" shouted the Tiger and raised both arms high over his head. He loved to play basketball—what great fun it was to beat these loudmouthed *African Americans* who didn't know anything about the real world.

On the sidelines, his boys cheered as if he were Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant rolled into one. He wasn't any of that, he knew. He didn't want to be like Mike or Kobe. He was much better.

He decided life and death on a daily basis.

He walked off the court, and a man came up to him. This particular man couldn't have been more out of place, since he wore a gray suit and he was white.

"Ghedi Ahmed," said the white devil. "You know who he is?"

The Tiger nodded. "I know who he *used* to be."

"Make an example of him."

"And his family."

"Of course," said the white devil. "His family too."

Chapter 8

I PUT IN a call for help to my friend Avie Glazer, who headed up the Gang Intervention Project in the Third District. I told Avie why it was important to me.

“ ’Course I’ll help. You know me, Alex. I’m more tapped into *La Mara R, Vatos Locos*, Northwest gangs. But you can come over here and ask around Seventeenth and R if you want. See if anybody’s tuned in.”

“Any way you could meet us?” I asked him. “I’ll owe you one. Buy you a beer.”

“Which makes it how many total? Favors *and* beers?”

That was his way of saying yes, though. Bree and I met Avie at a shitty little pool hall called Forty-Four. The owner told us that was how old he was when he opened the place. Avie already knew the story but listened politely anyway.

“Seemed like as good a name as any,” the owner said. His *what-ev* attitude struck me as that of a long-term stoner. For sure, he wasn’t making his nut on billiards and sodas. His name was Jaime Ramirez, and Avie Glazer had advised me to give him room and a little respect.

“You know anything about the murders in Georgetown last night?” I asked Ramirez after we’d chitchatted some. “Multiple perps?”

“That was some awful shit,” he said, leaning on the bottom half of a Dutch door, a brown cigarette held between stubby fingers and tilted at the same angle as his body.

He chinned up at the television in the corner. “Channel Four’s all I get in here, Detective.”

“How about any new games opening up?” Bree asked. “Players we might not have heard about? Somebody who would wipe a family out?”

“Hard to keep up,” Ramirez said and shrugged. That’s when Glazer gave him a look. “But yeah, matter of fact, there has been some talk.”

His dark eyes flicked almost involuntarily past me and Bree. “Africans,” he said to Avie.

“African American?” I asked. “Or—”

“African African.” He turned back to Avie. “Yo, Toto, I’m gonna get something for this? Or this freebie?”

Avie Glazer looked at me first and then at Ramirez. “Let’s say I owe you one.”

“What kind of African?” I asked.

He shrugged and blew out air. “How’m I supposed to know that? Black-guys-from-Africa kind of African.”

“English speaking?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “But I never spoke to them. Sounds like they’re into a little bit of everything. You know, four-H club? Hits, ho’s, heroin, and heists. This ain’t your graffiti-and-skip-party kind of gang.”

He opened a glass-fronted cooler and took out a can of Coke. “Anyone thirsty? Two dollars.”

“I’ll take one,” Glazer said. He cupped a couple of bills into Ramirez’s hand, and they didn’t look like singles.

Then Glazer turned to me. “And I *will* collect from you too. Count on it.”

“Africans,” Ramirez repeated as we headed toward the door, “*from Africa.*”

Chapter 9

THIS WAS THE last place I wanted to be in DC, or probably anyplace else.

So unbelievably sad, and eerie, and tragic. So many memories rising to the surface for me.

Ellie's office was up on the second floor of the house in Georgetown. It was as tidy and meticulously organized as I remembered her being back when we thought we might love each other.

A copy of Sidney Poitier's *The Measure of a Man* was open on the arm of an easy chair. I'd liked the autobiography and remembered that Ellie and I had similar tastes in books, music, and politics.

The shades were all drawn to exactly the same height. The desk held an iMac, a phone, an appointment book, and a few family photos in silver frames. The room felt strange compared with the downstairs of the house, which had been ransacked by the killers last night.

I started with Ellie's appointment book and then went on to the desk drawers. I wasn't sure yet what I was looking for, only that I'd had to come back here with a clearer head than I'd had last night.

I booted up Ellie's computer and went into her e-mail—checking the in-box, sent items, and deleted folders, working backward in time. I was trying to get as close as possible to the moment of the murders. Had Ellie known the killers?

The first thing to catch my attention was a note from an editor at Georgetown University Press. It concerned her completion schedule for “the new book.”

Ellie had a new book coming out? I knew she was on the history faculty at Georgetown, but I didn't know much more than that. We had seen each other at a few charity events during the past fifteen years or so, but that was about it. She was married, I wasn't for much of that time, and that fact can sometimes cut down contact and communication.

I ran her name through Amazon and Barnes & Noble and found three book titles. Each had something to do with African sociopolitics. The most recent one, *Critical Juncture*, had been published four years ago.

So where was the new book? Was there a partial manuscript I could read?

I swiveled around to look over the floor-to-ceiling bookcases that took up two entire walls of the office. Ellie had hundreds of volumes here, mixed in with a collection of awards and citations.

Kids' artwork and framed photos covered the rest of the space.

Then all of a sudden *I was looking at a picture of myself.*

Chapter 10

IT WAS AN old snapshot from our college days. I remembered the time as soon as I saw it. Ellie and I were sitting on a blanket on the National Mall. We had just finished finals. I had a summer internship lined up at Sibley Memorial, and I was falling in love for the first time. Ellie told me that she was too. In the photograph, we were smiling and hugging one another, and it looked as if we could be that way forever.

Now here I was in her house, responsible for Ellie in a way I never could have imagined.

I let myself stare nostalgically at the picture for a few more seconds, then forced myself to move on, to come back to the present mess.

It didn't take long to find three hundred typed pages of a manuscript titled *Deathtrip*. The subtitle on the title page read *Crime as a Way of Life, of Doing Business, in Central Africa*.

A copy of a plane ticket had been inserted in the manuscript. The ticket was round-trip from Washington to Lagos, Nigeria. Ellie had returned from there two weeks ago.

I looked through the index at the back of the manuscript and found a listing for "Violence, African Style," and a subhead, "Family Massacre."

I turned to the relevant manuscript page and read: "There are gang leaders for hire all through Nigeria and especially in Sudan. These brutal men and their groups—*often made up of boys as young as ten*—have an unlimited appetite for violence and sadism. A favorite target is entire families, since that spreads both news and fear the farthest. Families are massacred in their huts and shacks, and even boiled in oil, a trademark of a few of the worst gang leaders."

I decided to take the partial manuscript with me to get it copied. I wanted to read everything that Ellie had written.

Was this what had gotten her killed—her book?

Next, I stared for a long time at a striking, poignant picture of Ellie, her husband, and their three beautiful children.

All dead now.

Murdered right here in their home. At least they hadn't been boiled in oil.

I took one more look at the photo of the two of us on the National Mall. Young and in love, or whatever it was that we were feeling.

"Ellie, I'll do what I can for you and your family. I promise you that."

I left the house, thinking, *What did you find in Africa?*

Did somebody follow you back?

Chapter 11

EVERYBODY THERE KNEW there was trouble, but no one knew what kind or how bad it was.

A dark green panel van had screeched to a stop in front of a low-level mosque in Washington called Masjid Al-Shura. More than one hundred fifty peaceful congregants were crowding the sidewalk in front.

Even so, the very moment Ghedi Ahmed saw the gunmen scrambling out of the van, saw their gray hoodies, their black face masks and jaunty sunglasses, he knew they had come for him. *They were just boys—the Tiger’s boys.*

The first gunshots were aimed into the sky. Just warnings. Men and women screamed, and some scurried back into the mosque.

Others flattened themselves on the sidewalk, shielding their children’s bodies as best they could.

His hands held high, Ghedi Ahmed made his decision and moved away from his family. *Better to die alone than to take them with me,* he was thinking, shaking like a leaf now.

He hadn’t gotten far when he heard his wife, Aziza, scream, and he realized what a terrible mistake he’d made. “Ghedi! Ghedi!” He turned as the wild boys carried, then threw, Aziza into the waiting van. And then—his children! They were taking the children, too! All four of them were hustled into the van.

Ghedi reversed direction quickly, and now he was screaming, more loudly than anyone in the crowd, even more than Aziza.

A courageous man from the congregation took a swing at one of the kidnappers. The boy yelled, “Dog!” and shot the man in the face. Then he fired again, where the man lay spread-eagled and already dying on the sidewalk.

Another bullet took down an elderly woman just as Ghedi pushed past her.

The next shot found his leg, and running became falling. Then two of the boys snatched him up off the ground and threw him into the van with his family.

“The children! Not our children!” sobbed Aziza.

“Where are you taking us?” Ghedi screamed at the kidnappers. “Where?”

“To Allah,” came the answer from the driver, the Tiger himself.

Chapter 12

THE MYSTERY WAS deepening and getting worse each day, but much of Washington didn't seem to care, probably because this one happened in Southeast, and only black people were killed.

Lorton Landfill is the final destination for much of Washington's garbage. It is two hundred and fifty acres of foul and disgusting refuse, so we were fortunate the bodies had been found at all. I drove the Mercedes in through valleys of trash that rose thirty feet high on either side. I continued on to where the response team was parked around an orange-and-white DC sanitation truck. The gauze masks they'd provided Bree and me at the gate didn't do much against the nauseating smell.

"A drive in the country, Alex. This is so romantic," Bree said as we plunged forward through the muck. She was good at keeping things upbeat, no matter what the circumstances.

"I'm always thinking of new things for us to do."

"You've outdone yourself this time. Trust me on that."

I finally spotted Sampson talking to the truck's driver as we got out of the car. Behind the two of them and a ribbon of crime scene tape, I could see yellow sheets covering the six bodies where they had been found.

Two parents and four more kids here. That made four adults and seven children in just the past few days.

Sampson walked over to brief us. "Garbage truck started on the empty streets this morning and made stops all over midtown. Forty-one Dumpsters at eighteen locations, some of them as close as a few blocks from the mosque. That's a shitload of follow-up work for us."

"Any other good news?" I asked him.

"So far, only the bodies have been found. *No word on the heads.*" We hadn't released *that* so far to the press: All six of the victims had been decapitated.

"I love my job, I love my job," Bree said quietly. "I can't wait to get to work in the morning."

I asked Sampson where the father's body was, and we started there. When I pulled back the sheet the sight was horrific, but I didn't need an ME to tell me that the cutting was much cleaner this time. There were no extraneous wounds: no bullet holes, no slashes, no punctures. Plus, the lower body had been burned badly.

Senseless murders, but probably not random, I was thinking.

But what did the Ahmed killings have to do with Ellie and her family?

"We've got some similarities and some real differences here," Sampson told us. "Two families taken out suddenly. Multiple perps. But one behind closed doors, the other outside a mosque. Heavy cutting in both cases."

"But different cutting," Bree said. "And if the heads don't turn up—"

"Something tells me they won't," I said.

"Then, maybe we're talking about trophies, keepsakes."

"Or proof of purchase," I said.

They both looked at me. "Maybe this one was business, and the other was personal. Also, CNBC just broke a story that Ghedi Ahmed was the brother of Erasto Ahmed, who's Al Qaeda, operating out of Somalia."

"Al Qaeda?" Bree whispered and looked momentarily stumped. "Al Qaeda, Alex?"

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