

JAMES #1 BESTSELLING NOVEL
#1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR!
PATTERSON



"Alex Cross is one of the best and most likable characters in the modern thriller genre." — *San Francisco Examiner*

**ROSES ARE
RED**

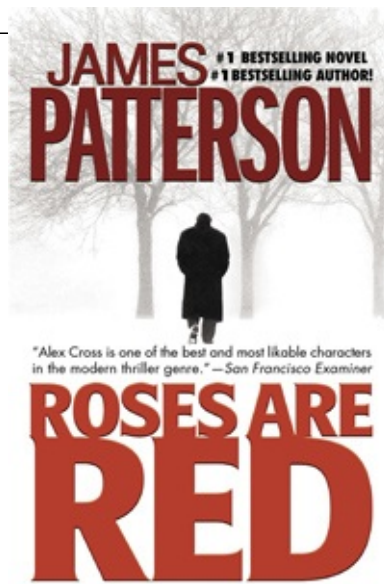
Roses Are Red

James Patterson



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Roses Are Red is for Charles and Isabelle; Lorraine and O. B.; Maryellen and Andrew; Carole, Jimmy, Brigid, and Meredith; Theresa and Rick; Suzie and Jack; Artie, Harriette, Richard, Nancy, Gideon, and Adam—all the families that inspire the Cross family.

ASHES, ASHES

Chapter 1

BRIANNE PARKER didn't look like a bank robber or a murderer—her pleasantly plump baby face fooled everyone. But she knew that she was ready to kill if she had to this morning. She would find out for sure at ten minutes past eight.

The twenty-four-year-old woman wore khakis, a powder blue University of Maryland windbreaker, and scuffed white Nike sneakers. None of the early-morning commuters noticed her as she walked from her dented white Acura to a thick stand of evergreen trees, where she hid.

She was outside the Citibank in Silver Spring, Maryland, just before eight. The branch was scheduled to open in ninety seconds. She knew from her talks with the Mastermind that it was a freestanding bank with two drive-through lanes. It was surrounded by what he called big-box stores: Target, PETsMART, Home Depot, Circuit City.

At eight o'clock on the dot, Brianne approached the bank from her hiding place in the evergreen under a colorful billboard obnoxiously offering McDonald's breakfast to the public. From that angle she couldn't be seen by the female teller who was just opening the glass front door and had momentarily stepped outside.

A few strides from the teller, she slipped on a rubbery President Clinton mask, one of the most popular masks in America and probably the one hardest to trace. She knew the bank teller's name, and she spoke it clearly as she pulled out her gun and pressed it against the small of the woman's back.

"*Inside, Ms. Jeanne Galetta. Then turn around and lock the front door again. We're going to see your boss, Mrs. Buccieri.*"

Her short speech at the entrance to the bank was scripted, word for word, even the pauses. The Mastermind said it was crucial that a bank robbery proceed in a specific order, almost by rote.

"I don't want to kill you, Jeanne. But I will if you don't do everything I say, when I say it. It's *your* turn to talk now, darling. Do you understand what I've just told you so far?"

Jeanne Galetta nodded her head of short brown hair so vigorously that her wire-rimmed glasses nearly fell off. "Yes, I do. Please don't hurt me," she gasped. She was in her late twenties, attractive in a suburban sort of way, but her blue polyester pantsuit and sensible stack-heeled shoes made her look older.

"The manager's office. *Now, Ms. Jeanne. If I'm not out of here in eight minutes, you will die. I'm serious. If I'm not out of here in eight minutes, you and Mrs. Buccieri die. Don't think I won't do it because I'm a woman. I will shoot you both like dogs.*"

Chapter 2

SHE LIKED THIS AURA OF POWER and she really liked the new respect she was suddenly getting at the bank. As she followed the trembling teller past the two Diebold ATMs and then through the meeter-greeter area of the lobby, Brianne thought about the precious seconds she had already taken. The Mastermind had been explicit about the tight schedule for the robbery. He had repeated over and over that everything depended on perfect execution.

Minutes matter Brianne.

Seconds matter Brianne.

It even matters that it's Citibank we've chosen to hit today, Brianne.

The robbery had to be exact, precise, perfect. She *got* it, she *got* it. The Mastermind had planned it on what he called “a numerical scale of 9.9999 out of 10.”

With the heel of her left hand, Brianne shoved the teller into the manager's office. She heard the low hum of a computer coming from inside. Then she saw Betsy Buccieri sitting behind her big executive-style desk.

“You open up your safe every morning at five past eight, so open it for me,” she screamed at the manager, who was wide-eyed with surprise and fear. “*Open it. Now!*”

“I can't open the vault,” Mrs. Buccieri protested. “The vault is automatically opened by a computer signal from the main office in Manhattan. It never happens at the same time.”

The bank robber pointed to her own left ear. She signaled with her finger for Mrs. Betsy Buccieri to listen. To listen to what, though? “*Five, four three, two—*” Brianne said. Then she reached for the phone on the manager's desk. It rang. Perfect timing.

“It's for you,” Brianne said, her voice slightly muffled by the rubbery President Clinton mask. “You listen carefully.”

She handed the phone to Mrs. Buccieri, but she knew the exact words the bank manager would hear, and who the speaker was.

The scariest voice of all for the bank manager to hear was not that of the Mastermind making very real but idle-*sounding* threats, but someone even better. Scarier.

“Betsy, it's Steve. There's a man here in our house. He has a gun pointed at me. He says that unless the woman in your office leaves the bank with the money by eight-ten exactly, Tommy, Anna, and I will be killed.

“It's eight-oh-four.”

The phone line suddenly went dead. Her husband's voice was gone.

“Steve? Steve!” Tears flowed into Betsy Buccieri's eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She stared at the masked woman and couldn't believe this was happening. “Don't hurt them. Please. I'll open the vault for you. I'll do it now. Don't hurt anyone.”

Brianne repeated the message the bank manager had already heard. “Eight-ten exactly. Not one

second later. And no stupid bank tricks. No silent alarms. No dye packs.”

“Follow me. No alarms,” Betsy Buccieri promised. She almost couldn’t think. *Steve, Tommy, Anna.* The names rang loudly in her head.

They arrived at the door of the bank’s Mosler vault. It was 8:05.

“Open the door, Betsy. We are on the clock. We’re losing time. Your family is losing time. Steve, Anna, little Tommy, they could all die.”

It took a little less than two minutes for Betsy Buccieri to get into the vault, which was a polished steel thing of beauty with pistons like a locomotive. Stacks of money were plainly visible on nearly all the shelves—more money than Brianne had ever seen in her life. She snapped open two canvas duffel bags and began filling them with the cash. Mrs. Buccieri and Jeanne Galetta watched her take the money in silence. She liked seeing the fear and respect for her on their faces.

As she’d been instructed to, Brianne counted off the minutes as she filled the duffel bags. “*Eight-oh-seven . . . eight-oh-eight . . .*” Finally, she was finished with her part in the vault.

“I’m locking you both inside the vault. Don’t say one word or I’ll shoot you, then lock your dead bodies up.”

She hoisted the black duffel bags.

“Don’t hurt my husband or my baby,” Betsy Buccieri begged. “We did what you—”

Brianne slammed the heavy metal door on Betsy Buccieri’s desperate plea. She yanked her President Clinton mask from her sweaty face.

She was running *late*. She walked across the lobby, unlocked the front door with plastic-gloved hands, and went outside. She felt like running as fast as she could to her car, but she walked calmly, as if she didn’t have a care in the world on this fine spring morning. She was tempted to pull out her six-shooter and put a hole into the big Egg McShit staring down on her. Yeah, she had an attitude, all right.

When she got to the Acura, she checked her watch: 52 seconds past 8:10. And counting. She was late—but that was the way it was supposed to be. She smiled.

She didn’t call Errol at the Buccieri house where Steve, Tommy, and the nanny, Anna, were being held. She didn’t tell him she had the money and she was safely in the Acura.

She had been told not to by the Mastermind.

The hostages were supposed to die.

Part One

THE ROBBERY-MURDERS

Chapter 3

THERE'S AN OLD SAYING that I've learned to believe in my time as a detective: *Don't think there are no crocodiles because the water is calm.*

The water was certainly lovely and calm that day. My young and irrepressible daughter, Jannie, had Rosie the Cat up on her hind legs and she was holding Rosie's front paws in her hands. She and "*la chatte rouge*" were dancing, as they often did.

"Roses are red, violets are blue," Jannie sang in a sweet, lilting voice. It was a moment and an image I wouldn't forget. Friends, relatives, and neighbors had begun to arrive for the christening party at our house on Fifth Street. I was in a hugely celebratory mood.

Nana Mama had prepared an amazing meal for the special occasion. There was cilantro-marinated shrimp, roasted mussels, fresh ham, Vidalia onions, and summer squash. The aroma of chicken with garlic, pork ribs, and four kinds of homemade bread filled the air. I'd even made my specialty that night, my contribution, a creamy cheesecake with fresh raspberries on top.

One of Nana's refrigerator notes was posted on the door of the GE. It read: "'There is an incredible amount of magic and feistiness in black men that nobody has been able to wipe out. But *everybody has tried.*'—Toni Morrison." I smiled at the magic and feistiness of my eightysomething-year-old grandmother.

This was so good. Jannie, Damon, little Alex, and I were greeting everybody on the front porch as they arrived. Alex was in my arms, and he was a very social little baby. He had happy smiles for everyone, even for my partner, John Sampson, who can scare little kids at first because he's mammoth—and scary.

"The boy obviously likes to party," Sampson observed, and grinned broadly.

Alex grinned right back at Two-John, who is six-nine and about two hundred fifty pounds.

Sampson reached out and took the baby from me. Alex nearly disappeared in his hands, which are the size of catcher's mitts. Then Sampson laughed and began to talk to the baby in total gibberish.

Christine appeared from the kitchen. She joined the three of us. So far, she and Alex Jr. were living apart from us. We hoped they would come join Nana, Damon, Jannie, and me in this house. Just one big family. I wanted Christine as my wife, not just as a girlfriend. I wanted to wake little Alex in the mornings, then put him to sleep at night.

"I'm going to walk around the party with little Alex. Shamelessly use him to pick up pretty women," Sampson said. He walked off with Alex cradled in his arms.

"You think he'll ever get married?" Christine asked.

"Little Alex? The Boy? Sure he will."

"No, your partner in crime, John Sampson. Will *he* ever get married, settle down?" It didn't sound like it bothered her that we weren't.

"I think he will—someday. John had a bad family model. His father walked out when John was

year old—eventually died of an overdose. John’s mother was a drug addict. She lived in Southeast until a couple of years ago. Sampson was practically raised by my Aunt Tia, with help from Nana.”

We watched Sampson cruise the party with little Alex in his arms. He hit on a pretty lady named De Shawn Hawkins, who worked with Christine. “He really *is* using the baby to hit on women,” Christine said in amazement. “De Shawn, be careful,” she called to her friend.

I laughed. “Says what he’s going to do, does what he says.”

The party had started around two in the afternoon. It was still going strong at nine-thirty. I had just sung a duet with Sampson, Joe Tex’s “Skinny Legs and All.” It was a howling success. We got a lot of laughs and playful jeers. Sampson was starting to sing “You’re the First, the Last, My Everything.”

That was when Kyle Craig from the FBI arrived. I should have told everybody to go home—the party was all but over.

Chapter 4

KYLE WAS CARRYING a colorfully wrapped and ribboned present for the baby. And he had balloons! The gifts didn't fool me. Kyle is a good friend, possibly a great cop, but he isn't social and avoids parties as if they were viral diseases.

"Not tonight, Alex," Christine said, and she suddenly looked concerned, maybe even angry. "Don't get involved in some scary, terrible case. Please, Alex, don't do it. Not on the night of the christening."

I knew what she meant, and I took her advice, or warning, to heart. My mood had already darkened.

Goddamn Kyle Craig.

"No, no, and no," I said as I walked up to Kyle. I used my index fingers to make a cross. "Go away."

"I'm real happy to see you, too," Kyle said, and beamed. Then he gave me a hug. "Multiple homicide," he whispered.

"Sorry, call back tomorrow or the next day. This is my night off."

"I know it is, but this is particularly bad, Alex. This one has really struck a nerve."

While he was still holding on to me, Kyle told me he was in Washington only for the night and he badly needed my help. He was feeling a lot of pressure. I told him no again, but he wasn't listening, and we both knew it was part of my job to assist the FBI on important cases here. Also, I owed Kyle a favor or two. A few years back he'd let me into a kidnapping-and-murder case in North Carolina where my niece disappeared from Duke University.

Kyle knew Sampson and a few of my other detective friends. They came over and chatted with him as if this were a social visit. People tend to like Kyle. I do, too—but not now, not tonight. He said he had to peek in on little Alex before we talked business.

Chapter 5

I WENT ALONG WITH KYLE. The two of us stood over the Boy, who was now asleep amid colorful stuffed bears and balls in a port-a-crib in Nana's room. He held on to his favorite bear, which was named Pinky.

"The poor little boy. What a bad, bad break," Kyle whispered as he looked down at Alex. "He looks like you instead of Christine. How are you two doing, anyway?"

"We're settling back into things okay," I said, which wasn't the truth, unfortunately. Christine had been gone from Washington for a year, and since she'd been back, we hadn't done as well as I would have hoped. I missed the intimacy more than I could say. It was killing me. But I wasn't able to tell anyone about it, not even Sampson or Nana.

"Please, Kyle. Just leave me alone for tonight."

"I wish this could wait, Alex. I'm afraid it can't. I'm on my way back to Quantico now. Where can we talk?"

I shook my head and felt anger building up inside. I led him to the sunporch, where I keep an old upright piano that still plays about as well as I do. I sat down on the creaky piano bench and tapped out a few notes of Gershwin's "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off."

Kyle recognized the tune and he grinned. "I am sorry about this."

"Not sorry enough, obviously. Go ahead."

"You heard about the Citibank-branch robbery out in Silver Spring? The murders at the bank manager's house?" he asked. "Manager's husband, their nanny, three-year-old son?"

"How could I *not* hear about it?" I said, and looked away from Kyle. The brutal, senseless murders had saddened me and knotted my stomach when I read about them. The story was all over the papers and TV. Even cops in D.C. were outraged.

"I didn't really understand what I heard so far. What the hell happened at the manager's house? The perps had the money, right? Why did they have to kill the hostages if they had the money? That's what you're here to tell me, right?"

Kyle nodded. "They were *late* getting out of the bank. The explicit order was that the crew member inside had to be out with the money by eight-ten exactly. Alex, the crew member at the bank was *less than a minute late*. Less than a minute! So they murdered the thirty-three-year-old father, the three-year-old boy, and the couple's nanny. The nanny was twenty-five, and she was pregnant. They *executed* the father, the three-year-old, the nanny. You *see* the murder scene, Alex?"

I rolled my shoulders, twisted my neck. I could feel the tension invading my body. I *saw* it, all right. How could they have murdered those people for no reason?

I really wasn't in the mood for police business, though, not even a bad case like this one. "Which brings you out to my house tonight? On my son's christening day?"

"Oh, hell." Kyle suddenly smiled and lightened his tone. "I had to come over to see the promise

child, anyway. Unfortunately, this case is really intense. There's a possibility the crew is from D.C. Even if they're not from Washington, there's still a possibility somebody here might know them, Alex. I need you to look for the killers—*before they do it again*. We have the feeling this isn't a one-shot. Alex, your baby is a beauty, though."

"Yeah, you're a beauty, too," I said to Kyle. "You are truly beyond compare."

"Three-year-old boy, the father, a nanny," Kyle said one more time before he left the party. He was about to go through the door in the sunporch when he turned to me and said, "You're the right person for this. They murdered a family, Alex."

As soon as Kyle was gone, I went looking for Christine. My heart sank. She had taken Alex and left without saying good-bye, without a single word.

Chapter 6

RELUCTANTLY, the Mastermind parked on the street, then walked toward an abandoned project within a stone's throw of the Anacostia River. A full moon cast a cold, hard, bone white light on half a dozen crumbling three-story row houses with open, screenless windows. He wondered if he had the stomach for this. "Into the valley of death," he whispered.

To his further dismay, he found the Parkers' hideout was in the row house farthest from the street. They were ensconced on the third floor. Their lovely little lodging was furnished with a grimy stained mattress and a rusted lawn chair. Greasy wrappings from KFC and Mickey D's were scattered on the floor.

As he entered their room, he held up a couple of oven-warm pizza boxes as well as a brown paper bag. "Chianti and pizza! This is a celebration, isn't it?"

Brianne and Errol were evidently hungry and dug into the pizza pies immediately. They barely greeted him, which he took as disrespect. The Mastermind busied himself pouring Chianti into plastic cups he had brought for the occasion. He passed around the cups and then made a toast.

"To perfect crimes," he said.

"Yeah, right. Perfect crimes." Errol Parker frowned as he took two big sips of Chianti. "If that's what you call what happened in Silver Spring. Three murders that could have been avoided."

"That's what I call it," said the Mastermind. "Absolutely perfect. You'll see."

They ate and drank in silence. The Parkers seemed moody, even defiant. Brianne kept sneaking looks at him. Suddenly, Errol Parker began to rub his throat. He coughed repeatedly. Then he gasped loudly, "*Aaagh! Aaagh!*" His throat and his chest were burning. He couldn't breathe. He tried to stand but he immediately toppled over.

"What is it? What's wrong, Errol? *Errol?*" Brianne asked, alarmed and afraid.

Then she grabbed at her throat, too. It was on fire. So was her chest. She shot up from the mattress. She dropped the cup of wine and held her throat with both hands.

"What the hell is happening? What's happening to us?" she screamed at the Mastermind. "What did you do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he answered in the coldest, most remote voice she had ever heard.

The tenement room seemed to be whirling out of control. Errol went into spasms, then fell to the floor in a seizure. Brianne bit a gash in her tongue. Both of them were still clutching at their throats. They were choking, gagging, unable to breathe. Their faces had taken on a dusky hue.

The Mastermind stood across the room and watched. The paralysis from the poison they had imbibed was progressive and extremely painful. It started with the facial muscles, then moved to the glottis in the back of the throat. The Parkers obviously couldn't swallow. Finally, it affected the respiratory organs. A high enough dose of Anectine led to cardiac arrest.

It took less than fifteen minutes for the two of them to die, as mercilessly as those murdered in

Silver Spring, Maryland. They lay motionless, spread-eagled on the floor. He was quite sure that they were dead, but he checked the vital signs, anyway. Their features were unbearably contorted and their bodies twisted. They looked as if they had fallen from a great height.

“To perfect crimes,” the Mastermind intoned over the grotesquely sprawled bodies.

Chapter 7

I TRIED TO CALL CHRISTINE early the next morning, but she was screening her calls and wouldn't pick up. She'd never done that to me, and it stung. I couldn't get it out of my head as I showered and dressed. Finally, I went to work. I was hurt, but I was also a little angry.

Sampson and I were out on the streets before nine. The more I read and thought about the Citibank robbery in Silver Spring, the more troubled and confused I was about the exact sequence of events. It didn't make sense. Three innocent people had been murdered—*for what reason?* The bank robbers already had their money. What kind of cruel and twisted sickos were they? Why kill father and child and the family's nanny?

It turned out to be a long and consistently frustrating day. Sampson and I were still on the job at nine that night. I tried calling Christine at home again. She still wasn't picking up, or maybe she wasn't there.

I have a couple of tattered black notebooks filled with names of street contacts. Sampson and I had already talked to more than two dozen of the prime ones. That still left plenty for tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. I was pretty well hooked into the case already. Why kill three people at the bank manager's house? Why destroy an innocent family?

"We're dancing around something," Sampson said as we drove through Southeast in my old car. We had just finished talking to a small-time hustler named Nomar Martinez. He knew about the bank robbery in Maryland, but not who did it. The late, great Marvin Gaye was singing on the car radio. I thought of Christine. She didn't want me out here on these streets anymore. She was serious about it. I wasn't sure if I could quit being a detective. I liked my job.

"I had that same feeling with Nomar. Maybe we should have brought his ass in. He was edgy, afraid of something," I said.

"Who's not afraid of something in Southeast?" Sampson asked. "The question remains. Who's gonna talk to us?"

"How about that ugly mutt there?" I said, and pointed toward the street corner we were approaching. "He knows everything happening around here."

"He spotted us," Sampson said. "Shit, there he goes!"

Chapter 8

I SPUN THE STEERING WHEEL hard to my left. The Porsche skidded toward a stop, then hopped the curb with a jolting *thud*. Sampson and I jumped out and started to run after Cedric Montgomery.

“Stop! Police!” I yelled at him.

We shot down a narrow, twisted alley behind the small-time enforcer and all-around tough guy. Montgomery was a source of information, but he wasn’t a snitch. He just knew things. He was in his early twenties; Sampson and I were both a whisker past forty. *We worked out and we were still fast*—at least in our minds.

Montgomery could really move, though. He was a blur up ahead of us.

“He’s just a sprinter, sugar,” Sampson huffed. He was at my side, matching me stride for stride. “We’re good for the long haul.”

“Police!” I yelled again. “Why are you running, Montgomery?”

Sweat was already forming on my neck and back. The perspiration was dripping down from my hair. My eyes were burning. *But I could still run. Couldn’t I?*

“We can take him,” I said. I accelerated, turned up my jets. It was a dare—a challenge to Sampson, a game we’d been playing for years. *Who can? We can.*

We were actually gaining some on Montgomery. He looked back—and couldn’t believe we were right behind him. Two freight trains on his tail, and there was no way for him to get off the track.

“Put it in full gear, sugar!” Sampson said. “Prepare for impact.”

I gave it everything. Sampson and I were still matching steps. We were having our own private footrace, and Montgomery was the finish line.

We both hit him at the same time. He went down like a shocked wide receiver crushed between two very fast linebackers. I was afraid he would never get up again. But Montgomery rolled a few times, moaned, and then looked at us in total amazement.

“Goddamn!” he whispered. That was all he said. Sampson and I took the compliment, then we cuffed him.

Two hours later Montgomery was talking to us at the station house on Third Street. He admitted that he had heard something about the robbery and murders over in Silver Spring. He was willing to trade information if we would look past half a dozen dime bags he had in his possession when we gang-tackled him on the street.

“I know who you lookin’ for,” Montgomery said, and he seemed sure of himself. “But you ain’t gonna like hearin’ who it is.”

He was right—I didn’t like what he told me. Not at all.

Chapter 9

I WASN'T SURE whether I could trust Cedric Montgomery's information, but he'd given me a good hard lead that I had to follow. He was right about one thing: His tip was disturbing to me. One of the people he'd implicated in the robbery was the stepbrother of my late wife, Maria. He'd heard that Errol Parker might have done the bank in Silver Spring.

Sampson and I spent the next day trying to locate Errol, but he wasn't at home or at any of his usual haunts around Southeast. His wife, Brianne, wasn't around, either. No one had seen the Parkers for at least a week.

Around five-thirty I stopped by the Sojourner Truth School to see if Christine was still there. I'd been thinking about her all day. She hadn't answered my calls or returned any messages.

I had met Christine Johnson two years before, and we'd almost gotten married. Then a sad and tragic thing had happened, and I still blamed myself: She was kidnapped by a monster who had committed several murders in Southeast. She had been held as a hostage for nearly a year. *Christine was kidnapped because she was seeing me.* She was missing for a year and believed to be dead. When Christine was found, there was another surprise. She had a baby, our son, Alex. But the abduction had changed her, wounded her in ways she didn't understand, and she couldn't cope with that. I'd tried to help in any way I could. It had been months since we'd been intimate. She kept pushing me farther and farther away. Now Kyle Craig had made it even worse.

Nana usually watched over the baby while Christine was working at the Sojourner Truth School. Then Christine and little Alex went to her apartment in Mitchellville. It was the way she needed it to be.

I entered the school through a metal side door near the gym and heard the familiar sound of basketballs pounding against hardwood and the laughter and joyful screams of kids. I found Christine huddled over the computer in her office. She is the principal at the Sojourner Truth School. Jannie and Damon are students there.

"Alex?" Christine said when she saw me at the door. I read the sign on the wall: *Praise loudly, blame softly.* Was Christine able to do that for me? "I'm almost finished for the day. Just give me another minute or two." At least she didn't seem angry about the other night with Kyle Craig; she didn't tell me to leave.

"I came to walk you home from school. I'll even carry your books," I said, and smiled. "That's all right?"

"I guess so," she said, but she didn't smile back and she still seemed so far away.

Chapter 10

WHEN CHRISTINE WAS READY TO GO, we locked up the school together, then strolled down School Street toward Fifth. True to my word, I carried Christine's briefcase filled with what felt like a dozen books. I tried a little joke. "You didn't say anything about carrying your bowling ball, too."

"I told you the books were heavy. I'm a heavy thinker, you know. Actually, I'm kind of glad you came by tonight," she said.

"Couldn't keep myself away." I told the truth and shamed the devil. I wanted to take Christine's arm, or at least her hand, but I held back. It seemed strange and wrong to be so close and yet so distant from her. I ached to hold her in my arms.

"I want to talk to you about something, Alex," she finally said. She stared into my eyes. I could tell from the look on her face that this probably wasn't good news I was about to hear.

"I was hoping that it wouldn't bother me—your getting on a new murder case. But it does bother me, Alex. It makes me crazy. I worry about you. I worry about the baby. And I worry about my own safety. I can't help it after what happened in Bermuda. I haven't been sleeping since I returned to Washington."

It tore me apart to hear Christine talk like this. I felt terrible about what had happened to her. She had changed so much, though. There didn't seem to be anything I could do to make it better, to help her. I'd been trying for months, but nothing worked. I worried that I wouldn't just lose Christine, but little Alex as well.

"I remember some of the dreams I've had lately. They're so violent, Alex. And they're so real. The other night you were chasing the Weasel again, and he killed you. He stood there calmly and shot you again and again. Then he came and killed the baby and me. I woke up screaming."

I finally took her hand. "Geoffrey Shafer is dead, Christine," I said.

"*You don't know that. Not for sure,*" Christine argued, and pulled her hand away from me. She was angry again.

We walked along the edge of the Anacostia River in silence. After a while she told me about some of her other dreams. I sensed she didn't want me to interpret them. Just to listen. The dreams were all violent—people Christine knew and loved were mutilated and murdered.

Christine finally stopped walking at the corner of Fifth near my house. "Alex, I have to tell you something else. I've been going to a psychiatrist, Dr. Belair, in Mitchellville. He's helping me."

Christine continued to stare into my eyes. "I don't want to see you anymore, Alex. I've thought about this for weeks. I've talked about it with Dr. Belair. You can't change my mind, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't try."

She took her briefcase from me, then she walked away. She didn't let me say a word, but I would have found it hard to speak, anyway. I had seen the truth in her eyes. She didn't love me anymore. What made it so much worse was that I still loved her, and of course, I loved our baby boy.

Chapter 11

I REALLY DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE, so I threw myself into the bank robbery and multiple murder investigation. The newspapers and TV were still filled with sensational stories about the murder father, child, and nanny. The picture of three-year-old Tommy Buccieri seemed to be everywhere. *Does the killer want us to feel outrage?* I wondered.

Sampson and I spent most of one day trying to find Errol and Brianne Parker. The more I followed up on the Parkers with the FBI, the clearer it got that they had probably been robbing small banks in Maryland and Virginia for at least a year. The job at Silver Spring was different. If they had done it, something had happened to change their style; they had become brutal, heartless killers. Why

Sampson and I stopped for lunch at a Boston Market around one in the afternoon. It wasn't our first, or even second choice, but it was handy and the Big Man was hungry, wouldn't be denied. I could have continued on without eating.

"You think the Parkers are off doing another job?" he asked me as we dug into orders of meat loaf, corn, and mashed potatoes.

"If they're the ones who did the bank in Maryland, they're probably hiding out. They know the heat is on. Errol sneaks off to South Carolina sometimes. He's a fisherman. Kyle already has FBI agents on the ground there."

"You ever spend time with Errol?" Sampson wanted to know.

"Family get-togethers mostly, but he only came to a few that I can remember. I went fishing with him once. He was like a little kid as long as we were catching largemouth bass and two- or three-pound catfish. Maria always liked Errol."

Sampson kept eating his meat loaf and double order of mashed potatoes. "You think about Maria much?"

I scrunched down into my seat. I wasn't sure I wanted to talk about this now. "Different things remind me of her. Especially Sundays. We'd sleep until noon sometimes, treat ourselves to a nice brunch. Or visit the duck pond near the river. St. Tony's. Long walks in Garfield Park. It's a sad, confusing thing, John—that she died so young. It especially hurts that I could never solve her murder."

Sampson kept on hounding me with questions. He gets that way sometimes.

"You and Christine are doing all right?"

"No," I finally admitted. But I couldn't quite get out the whole truth. "She can't get over what happened with Geoffrey Shafer. I'm not even sure that the Weasel is dead. We finished here?"

Sampson grinned. "Food, or my cross-examination?"

"Let's go. Let's find Errol and Brianne Parker. Solve the bank robbery. Take the rest of the day off."

Chapter 12

AROUND SEVEN O’CLOCK Sampson and I decided to take a dinner break. We figured we’d be working late, probably past midnight. It was that kind of case. I went home for supper with the kids and Nana Mama.

I ate, and complimented Nana on her cooking, but I didn’t taste much of anything. I was keeping the Christine thing bottled up inside me. Not too bright on my part.

Sampson and I agreed to meet around ten to check out a few night crawlers who would be easier to find after darkness fell. At quarter past ten, we were trolling Southeast again in my car.

Sampson spotted a small-time drug hustler and snitch we knew. Darryl Snow was hanging out with his boys in front of a bar and grill that kept changing its name and now was called Used-To-Be’s.

Sampson and I hopped out of the Porsche and came up fast on Snow. He had nowhere to run. As always, Darryl was a drug-hustler fashion plate: crimson nylon shorts over blue nylon pants, Polo T-shirt, Tommy Hilfiger windbreaker, Oakley shades.

“Hey there, Snowman,” Sampson said in his deep voice. “You’re melting away to nothing.”

Even Snow’s hustler friends laughed. Darryl was around five-eleven, and I doubt he weighed a hundred and twenty pounds with his clothes on, designer labels and all.

“Walk and talk with me, Darryl,” I told him. “This is not open to discussion.”

His head shook like a dashboard doll’s, but he reluctantly went along. “I don’t wanna talk to you Cross.”

“Errol and Brianne Parker,” I said, once we were far enough away from the others.

Darryl looked at me and frowned heavily as his head continued to bob. “You the one was married to his sister or whatever? Why you askin’ me? Why you always prosecutin’ me, man?”

“Errol doesn’t spend a lot of time with the family anymore. He’s too busy robbing banks. Where is he, Darryl? Sampson and I don’t owe you any favors right now. That’s a dicey place to be.”

“I can live with it,” Darryl said, and looked away into the streetlights.

My hand shot out and grabbed some windbreaker and shirt. “No, you can *not*. You know better, Darryl.”

Snow sniffled and cursed under his breath. “I hear Brianne be over the old First Avenue projects Rat-shit buildings on First? I don’t know she still at that place, though. That’s all I got.” He held out his hands, palms up.

Sampson came rolling up behind Snow. “*Boo*,” he said, and Darryl’s sneakered feet almost left the ground.

“Is Darryl being helpful?” he asked me. “Seems a little jumpy.”

“*Are you being helpful?*” I asked Snow.

He whined pathetically. “I told you where Brianne Parker be seen, din’t I? Why don’ you just go over there? Check it out, man. Leave me the hell alone. You two like the *Blair Witch Project* or

somehin'. Scary, man."

~~"Much scarier," said Sampson, and he grinned. "*Blair Witch* is just a movie, Darryl. We're for real."~~

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