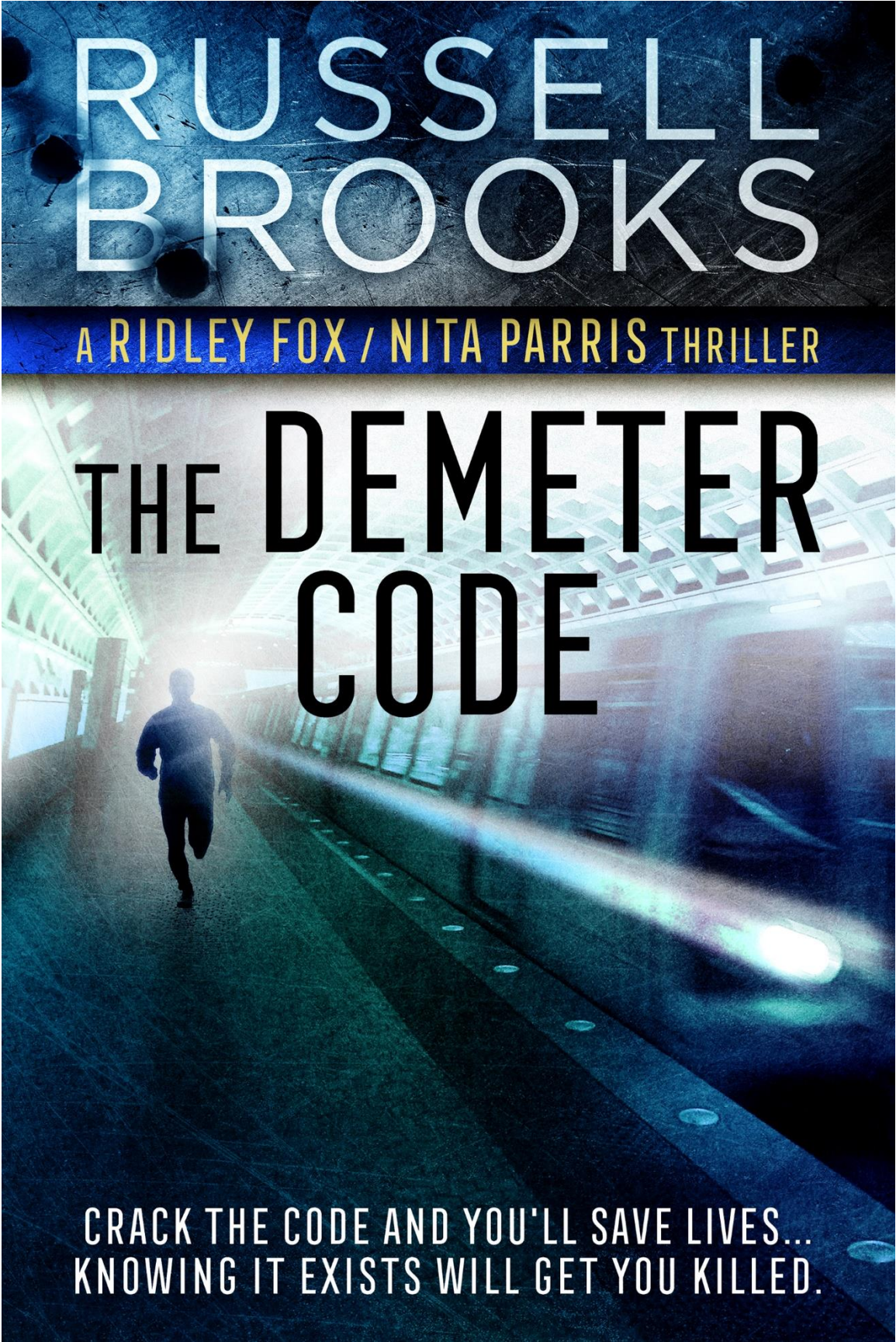


The poster features a dark, textured background at the top with the author's name in large white letters. Below this is a blue banner with the text 'A RIDLEY FOX / NITA PARRIS THRILLER' in yellow. The main title is in large black letters over a background image of a person running on a train platform next to a blurred train. At the bottom, a tagline is written in white.

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THE DEMETER
CODE

CRACK THE CODE AND YOU'LL SAVE LIVES...
KNOWING IT EXISTS WILL GET YOU KILLED.

THE DEMETER CODE
By Russell Brooks
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Chapter 1

The Hooper-Adams Hotel, 16th Street, Washington, DC. 1:36 PM, Friday.

“Watch where you’re going, dammit,” snapped the woman.

Doctor Nita Parris had bumped the woman’s shoulder as she passed through the revolving door, rushing from the street into the hotel lobby.

Parris turned halfway around, raising an open palm. “Sorry.” But she wasn’t. The woman had the audacity to blame her. *She* was the one texting on her mobile while walking, and in a crowded room on top of that. Her teenage self would’ve cussed her out rudely, or even slapped the phone out of her hand. Not the typical behavior of a woman with a PhD in biochemistry and microbiology. She could hear her aunt being vexed and breaking out the Barbadian accent. “*Why yuh gunnah stoop to she level for? You better than dat.*”

Those were the days when Parris was quick-tempered and got into a lot of fights—and won them. Even some of the boys didn’t dare trouble her. She’d proven repeatedly that she could stand her ground with them, and even out-sprint them. When she’d wound up in the headmaster’s office—which had been frequently—he’d always ranted on about how bright a future she had, considering that she was one of the school’s top students. He’d pointed out that with her aptitudes she ought to be setting an example.

But that was the past. She wouldn’t stoop to the level of some self-absorbed socialite. Especially when her asset was eight floors above, fearing for his life.

Despite having spent the last five years living in the DC area, she had never been inside any of its hotels—even for an op. To anyone else in the lobby who happened to notice her, she was probably just another twenty-something black woman.

She wore a navy blue pantsuit with a cool belt that looped through silver-toned grommets, a pair of low-heeled Blahniks, and a bumblebee-shaped brooch, pinned below the mandarin-style collar, on the left side. Her black, shiny hair—not too long, just enough to reach the base of her neck—was tied back in a ponytail. Observers would likely think that she was either a guest, there on business, or a lawyer meeting a client. Either one was fine by her.

Parris scanned the lobby on her way to the elevators. Aside from catching the occasional whiff of perfume or aftershave, she spotted two Wall-Street types, laughing over a beer, through the doorway of the hotel restaurant. On the opposite side, two children were chasing each other around their suitcases while their parents addressed the receptionist. She then passed an Asian family, speaking Mandarin, followed by an elderly Italian couple. She couldn't speak the languages, but she recognized a few words.

One man stood out from the others. He was to her left, leaning sideways against the adjacent wall. His profile screamed *gym-nut*, wearing jeans and an unzipped windbreaker to show off his pectorals. All he appeared to care about was what was on his iPhone. Either that, or, seeing that he had a clear view of the elevators, he was keeping an eye on who went in and out.

She didn't stare at him, or anyone else, because of the potential that any given person in the lobby could be part of a surveillance team. She spotted a decorative mirror on a support beam, a few feet away. She walked past it, turning her head toward the mirror as though she happened to spot it by chance. She stepped back to look at herself. To the casual observer, it would appear as though she was fixing her hair, but she was buying time. She straightened the brooch while she watched Gym Boy.

One mistake she'd seen from fellow agents in the past, while doing counter-surveillance training, was that once they lost a tail, they settled into their comfort zone—a position ripe with a false sense of security, never thinking there might be a second, or even third, pair of eyes on them.

Parris knew a lot about being in a non-surveillance comfort zone. While she had done her tradecraft training, she'd wound up with two stinging paint-gun blasts—one to the chest and one to the

side, above her hip. Not a mistake she'd made again. After all, she was used to being a perfectionist. It's also what got her recruited into the CIA as a weapons analyst before becoming a field agent.

Parris licked her fingertip and ran it across both eyebrows. "Dewan, you see me yet?"

"I got you." Dewan Douglas—her newest tech support—answered through her earpiece. He would've hacked into the hotel's closed-circuit television long before she arrived—playing big brother from his safe haven at Langley, Virginia. It helped, but it wasn't perfect. There were always spots the CCTV was blind to, and a professional would've been smart enough to hang out in those areas to avoid being seen.

Parris brushed a strand of hair from her jacket sleeve. "Gym fanatic at seven o'clock."

"I saw him," Dewan replied. "He arrived there with some chick, who's now on her way down from their suite. They've been guests for the past four days, so I wouldn't worry about him."

She trusted that Dewan would've used face-recognition software, to locate and identify Gym Boy through the hotel's CCTV archives, and cross-referenced it with the hotel's guest list.

She headed for the elevator, grabbing her cell phone from her belt, "Timothy?"

"Who...who's this?"

"You know who it is. I'm on my way up."

"Are you armed? Because I know they're going to be coming for me with some very big guns."

He must be scared shitless. "You're going to have to calm down and let us worry about who may be coming after you." Parris pressed the elevator button. One of the six doors opened but it was already going down. She did a quick once-over of the three people who walked out. Nothing suspicious.

“How can you tell me to calm down?” Timothy Weyland still spoke at warp-speed. “You’re not the one they’re trying to kill.”

Parris sighed as she hit the elevator button two more times, as though that would make it arrive faster. “Stay in your room. I’m coming to get you. Got it?”

There was a brief pause on the other end. “Y-y-yeah.”

An elevator’s door opened with a *ping*, and Parris got in, then hit the eighth-floor button, followed by the close-doors button—hoping that they would shut before anyone else could enter. Yes, it was easier for her to say what she’d said to Weyland than it was for him to live it, but what was she supposed to tell him? All she cared about at the moment was getting him away from this hotel and handing him over to the FBI, who’d take him to one of their safe-houses.

The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. Parris checked both directions as she stepped out. “You still there?”

“I’m here,” Weyland answered.

“Good, I’m almost there.”

She headed to her right, where the hall connected with another in a *T*. Footsteps echoed toward her, followed by Weyland popping out from around the corner. He wore horn-rimmed glasses, a knapsack, and a Green Lantern shirt under his unzipped windbreaker.

Oh for the love of...

There were so many curse words that she wanted to shout out right now. She’d told him to stay in his room—for several good reasons. The main one being that the floor had not yet been cleared of potential hostiles.

Weyland had inadvertently made himself an easy target. He was supposed to have met her at Union Station two hours before, only to stand her up.

She'd had a team search his apartment and monitor the police bandwidths. Nothing. When Parris had called him on his cell all she got were messages telling her that the number was no longer in service—which only worried her more. Fortunately, Weyland had made contact with her, letting her know his whereabouts.

He pointed behind Parris as he approached. “Are we taking the elevator or the—”

An electrical surge shot through Parris's nerves as she grabbed him by the front of his jacket and threw him against the wall—putting her weight behind her forearm to pin him. “Listen to me, because I won't repeat myself. When I tell you to wait—whether it's at Union Station or in your hotel suite—it's not a request. You got that?”

His lower lip trembled as the blood rushed from his cheeks. Weyland rapidly nodded.

That was too easy for her tastes. Parris pushed harder against him, watching his face go paler. “Are you sure?”

He nodded with his mouth agape. “Yes, I understand. It won't happen again. I swear.”

“Good.” She released him. “I hope you didn't shit your drawers.” Parris checked their flanks before she looked back at Weyland, who took a deep breath and straightened his glasses.

She grabbed his arm. “Come.”

He nearly dropped his knapsack after being yanked so ruggedly. He was five feet nine, had unkempt, sand-colored hair, and weighed roughly a hundred sixty pounds when Parris first met him. But right now, he appeared to have lost ten to fifteen pounds. It was as though he hadn't eaten well for the

past several days. She wouldn't be surprised if *that*'s what set off his employer's radar. It was his employer whom she had recruited him to spy on—thus putting a hit on him.

There was a *ping* from the elevator and the chambermaid exited with her laundry cart. She was around the same age as Parris, standing about at five feet eight. Although her movements weren't suspicious, Parris still had every reason to be paranoid. In situations such as this, hyper-vigilance was often a life saver. For instance, the laundry cart was the ideal place to hide a firearm with a suppressor.

The maid knocked on the first door. "Housekeeping."

"Dewan," whispered Parris as she kept walking. She slid her hand behind her and under her jacket to the Springfield EMP in her hip holster.

"Go ahead," Dewan answered.

"Is there anyone registered in room ten fifteen?"

"Timothy's the only person on that floor."

They were less than forty yards away as the maid reached inside the laundry cart, then swung a firearm in Parris's direction.

She drew first, sidestepped in front of Weyland, then disengaged the thumb safety, took aim, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet caught the would-be assassin in between her eye and left ear—throwing her into the wall before she slumped to the floor.

Parris turned to see Weyland ducking, with both hands covering his ears.

"You okay?" Parris asked.

The shock was all over his face as he breathed rapidly, nodding a few seconds later.

She scanned both ends of the hall. "Stay close."

She ran to the woman, keeping her sidearm pointed toward her target. She noticed her weapon. It was an HK USP Tactical with suppressor—not a bad choice for this situation. It was both small and light.

Parris kicked it away, out of habit, even though the threat had been eliminated. She turned at the sound of running and saw her asset bolting in the opposite direction.

“Weyland,” Parris yelled, holstering her weapon and taking off after him. Being a former NCAA champion sprinter, she closed the gap quickly.

He skidded as he made his way around the corner at the T-junction, heading to the emergency stairs.

“Weyland, stop,” Parris yelled again after she rounded the corner. But he didn’t listen. Poor guy, probably never saw someone get shot before, and right in front of him too. And now he was in a state of *fight or flight*.

“Parris, you’ve got to stop him now,” Dewan cried out as Weyland was less than twenty yards from the emergency exit. Her heart skipped a beat when a tall, bulky man wearing a waist-length jacket exited the staircase and collided with Weyland. She saw an object fall from the man’s hand. It was a sidearm.

“Weyland, move.” She quickly drew her EMP and took aim. But Weyland tried to beat the would-be assassin to the gun. He was successful, but the bigger and stronger hitman grabbed Weyland’s hands and aimed the gun upward, the two men struggling as they fought for control of the weapon.

Shit, I told you to move.

The gun swung in Parris’s direction and a shot fired. She ducked into a roll as plaster and dust rained down on her. She shook it off and aimed at the man, who easily outmatched Weyland in size—being at least six feet one and likely weighing in around two hundred and twenty pounds.

The man kept Weyland between them, making it next to impossible for her to take a clean shot. The two of them were on their knees as a second bullet struck the wall to the left, between them and Parris. For a split moment, the sidearm was pointed away and she had her opening, she had to take it—situations such as these rarely gave second chances.

Parris holstered her sidearm and charged, her goal, to knock both of them over. But as she was closing in, the assassin elbowed Weyland in his jaw and knocked him to the floor. Parris watched for a moment, when the hitman got up and then turned to her, but she already dove and tackled him. She hoped she had caused him to tear his anterior cruciate ligament. Once that was torn, not only would the assassin have a lot of difficulty walking, but he'd be in a shitload of pain. The man went down with her, but she didn't hear him scream in agony as she'd hoped. However, he lost the gun.

Good enough for her.

She made a quick draw of her EMP and went to aim it, only to have it slapped out of her hand, sending it sliding across the carpet in front of Timothy. That's when Parris saw her asset on all fours, crawling for it.

The assassin leaped forward and caught Weyland's legs, holding him down. Although he kicked and thrashed, it was useless, as the hitman had him pinned down too well.

Looking behind her, Parris saw the assassin's gun. She reached over, grabbed it, then spun around and pointed it at him. "Hey!"

The assassin turned to her, his eyes widening when he noticed his own gun aiming at him.

Parris squeezed the trigger—which to her surprise and horror—jammed. She tried forcing it, but it wouldn't fire. She slapped the magazine, racked the slide, then got back on her target, squeezing again. Still nothing.

Shit!

The killer turned away and crawled over Weyland to reach for Parris's weapon—no time to think, only react. She dropped the sidearm and charged the assailant, leaping over Weyland into a jump side-kick, just as their attacker swung the EMP around. The kick knocked his arm to the side—making his shot go wide and, subsequently, knocking the gun out of his hand. She landed in front of him and followed through with a knuckle blow to his throat.

He gagged and his head dropped as he stumbled back.

Parris seized the moment to put her full weight behind the side-kick, executing it right into his chest, sending him flying through the emergency exit door.

Unfortunately it also resulted in him kicking her EMP into the stairwell with him. Parris charged through the doorway while it was still open. She couldn't leave to chance that he'd get her gun. If luck was on her side her attacker would've fallen down the stairs, but it wasn't. He had caught himself with the aid of the wall that separated the upper and lower side of the staircase, and he was eyeing something on the floor.

The EMP.

She raced toward it, but he surprised her with a foot-sweep—catching her by the side of her ankles and sending her crashing to the floor. She heard the gun scrape across the concrete as he snatched it from the floor beside her. When she flipped herself over, she was looking into the barrel of her own gun, a sinister grin not far behind it.

There was a crash as the emergency exit door flew open, banging against the concrete wall. Weyland was hollering through it as he threw himself onto the hitman.

Holy shit. The nerd was having an adrenalin rush.

The collision sent them both into the dividing wall between the staircases, causing the sidearm to go flying, and in the midst of the melee, it was kicked down the steps. Weyland's attempt lasted less than three seconds, as he was thrown face-first into the wall, then dropped to the floor, landing on his back.

That was more than enough time for Parris to get up, but not before a large set of hands grabbed her by the collar, pulling her downward, where she was then kneed in her stomach. The blow forced the air out of her, sending her into a daze as she fell backward. After she landed, the attacker put the full force of his substantial weight on her chest, pressing down as his hands wrapped around her neck.

Instinctively, she grabbed at the monstrous grip, fighting for even one ounce of air, but with no luck. Most of the air in her lungs had been expelled from the knee to her gut and she felt an increasing burning in her lungs. Having landed on her back, she was fighting in the worst position she could be—rather than landing her own punches, she was expending her energy trying to get up while defending herself. It didn't help that this guy was both larger and physically stronger than her.

She did the only thing she could, lashing out, aiming for his eyes, but only connecting with his chin. She went back to trying to pry his hands from around her neck, but he was too strong, and she was losing her strength.

She kicked out hard, trying to plant the soles of her feet against the wall in order to push herself back. If she could do it, it may just be enough to make him lose his balance and grip, at least temporarily. But it didn't work, as she sputtered, not even with enough force to get a drop of spittle out.

Her brooch.

She released one of his wrists and felt around the left lapel of her jacket until she touched the brooch. She yanked it out, exposing the jagged tip, bringing it up underneath one of his hands, slashing at his wrist, hoping to sever an artery. In her clumsy haste she couldn't determine how deep the cut was, but he yelped like a wounded pig, and that was assurance enough.

As he shifted backward, Parris used those critical seconds to drive the sharp edge of the brooch into his other hand—the only area within reach that was exposed. This cut wasn't as careless. This time the needle went deep and she felt it connect with resistance—maybe a bone or tendon—causing him to grunt and roll off her, grabbing his wrist.

Air.

She needed lots of it, more than what was in this unventilated stairwell. Her stomach, lower chest, and neck were on fire, but she could take the pain. What mattered now was sucking in as much oxygen as she could, while forcing herself to get up. Parris needed to be on her feet, even if she was still weak, she had to have both feet on the floor. She was in no shape to continue fighting this behemoth in hand-to-hand combat while lying prone. Even with his injured wrists, she wasn't sure she could win that fight.

But she could beat him to the EMP. She stumbled forward, to head down the stairs, when she felt something catch her ankle—causing her to fall toward the edge.

The EMP was right in front of her, on the landing below. She could still do this. She still had a chance.

Grabbing the edge of the railing, she heaved herself forward on her stomach and slid down the steps—each edge cutting into her chest and stomach, sending more jolts of pain. She couldn't give a shit about that. The gun was the priority.

Just as she was nearing the landing she heard footsteps running behind her, but gravity and momentum were on her side. The steps became louder, and she could swear she felt the killer on her heels, but Parris crashed onto the landing, grabbing the EMP as she rolled over onto her back. Throwing both arms upward, she squeezed the trigger in rapid succession.

Four bullets tore into the man's chest, leaving a bloody mess in their wake. Parris rolled to the side as the killer's body went limp, slumped sideways into the wall, then tumbled headfirst, crashing beside her.

She looked at his hand and saw that the brooch still protruded from it, while blood poured out from under both wrists. He lay on his stomach with his head facing her, his glass-like eyes reflecting a dead stare—absolute emptiness.

As she regained her composure, Parris was still gasping for air. A buzz coursed through her arms and legs—the good old adrenaline surge from being in a near-death situation.

Rolling onto her knees, she huffed and puffed a few times, then got to her feet, bending at the waist, grasping her knees for support—still holding the EMP. She gave the bastard one last look before she stood upright, walked over, and bent down to remove the brooch from his bloody wrist. As she did, she felt a draft in the seat and crotch area of her pants, then reached behind to feel the spot.

Shit. Another pantsuit ruined. Another she may have to throw away.

It wouldn't be so bad if there were more black people designing pantsuits, or, at least, a fashion designer who knew how to compliment a black woman's physique.

A loud coughing from up the stairs caused Parris to swing and aim her EMP in that direction. "You okay, Weyland?"

"Nita?" he wheezed.

Parris stepped around the assailant and saw Weyland at the top of the stairs. At first, he leaned against the wall, holding the metal banister, then he made his way down—one step at a time.

She holstered the EMP as she went up to help him. He had a black eye, some facial bruises, and looked as though he was about to collapse.

“Hang on there, Geronimo,” she said as she caught him. Parris then turned around, draping Weyland’s arm around her to help support his weight. She felt for her earpiece. Luckily, she didn’t lose it during the fight. She spoke into it. “Dewan?”

“Yeah, Doc.”

“Are the stairs clear?”

“Yes, an extraction team’s on its way. ETA is three minutes, but you’ll have to hurry. The DC police are on their way.”

Dewan was right. She did have to hurry—the last thing she needed was to be arrested. That type of exposure would jeopardize the op, exposing both her and Weyland.

“How’s the asset?” asked Dewan.

She and Weyland rounded the corner of the next landing. “He’s hanging in there, but he’ll need medical attention.”

“Can both of you make it to the delivery entrance in the basement?”

Parris coughed. “I don’t think we have a choice.”

Fortunately, Weyland was close to Parris’s height, which helped her support him as they made their way downstairs.

As they neared the basement floor, she could still feel the ghost-like grip of the attacker’s hands around her neck. She wanted to reach up and rub her throat, but her hands were full—she shook it off instead.

Moments later they exited into the alley and into the crisp autumn air, where two intelligence officers, dressed as EMTs, waited behind an ambulance. They helped Parris and Weyland into the back of it. The engine was still running, so once the doors were closed, the driver sped off with the sirens blaring.

Weyland whimpered as he was helped onto a gurney. “They tried to kill me. Why did I ever do this?” He continued with his rant until one of the agents injected him with, what Parris assumed, was a sedative. He soon fell asleep.

The other agent grabbed a first-aid kit and knelt down in front of her, examining her face before he tended to the cut above her left eye. “Jesus. He got you good.”

Parris looked him in the eye. “So what. I got him better.”

Chapter 2

Sentinel Road, Rockford, Illinois. 6:17 PM, Friday.

Aubrey Lee Collins had serious doubts whether he'd get away with what he had done. For the past week he'd been popping Kaopectate pills, but his stomach problems persisted. He had cleared all of his debts with the money he'd made from selling company secrets, and still had a lot left over. The idea of seeing a shrink came to mind, only for him to second-guess that thought a moment later.

Quit beating yourself up. You did what you had to do, for Tina and your future child. Anyone would've done the same thing had they been in your shoes.

Standing outside the front door to his cottage, Collins glanced up and down his street—focusing on his neighbors' homes. Surely, some of them had to be keeping up appearances too. He wasn't the only person to have made a bad investment here and there, although, his had nearly bankrupted him and his wife, Tina. For the past eight months he'd managed to keep their financial problems hidden from her. It was better off that she didn't know, considering that she was almost eight months pregnant.

Besides, banks and other financial firms were known to be careless with their clients' money. When *they* made mistakes, it was always the little guy who suffered and the ones who screwed up rarely even got a slap on the wrist. He thought of AIG, back in 2008. Those fuckers should've gone under. But no, the government bailed them out instead. Who was there to bail him out? What the fuck?

Then there was his employer, Sementem, and its executives. They weren't saints either. They'd been involved in illegal practices for years, pissing off three-quarters of the planet. Yet the company was never held accountable for any of their crimes. Collins couldn't recall any top execs spending a day in jail. In the end, it all came down to who had the deepest pockets. So, when Collins stole company secrets—ones that sent the company's profits through the stratosphere—and sold them to some European guy, who was willing to pay him two hundred thousand dollars for them, he didn't hesitate.

Come to think of it, he should've asked for more—like half a million. Then again, he wasn't in a position to bargain. These guys were pros. They did their research and knew about his problems. That's how they knew that he'd be their best target. But it didn't matter anymore. This was *his* bail-out, one that would cover the balance he owed on the house and then some.

So why did he feel like shit? He sighed and let himself in his house. What's done was done. It was time to move on.

He flicked on the switch, but the lights didn't turn on.

Why's it so dark in here? Maybe Tina is asleep.

Collins walked to the next light switch down the hall. He flicked it on, then off, then on again. This one didn't work either.

"Tina?" A few seconds went by and still no answer. *Where are you?*

He put down his briefcase, took off his shoes, hung his coat, then walked to the kitchen. He'd walked through there in the dark hundreds of times, enough to know where to step without a second thought. He and Tina had purchased this single-family cottage nearly two years before, and he'd never tripped over anything.

He grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and just as he was about to close the door, he realized that the inner light didn't turn on either.

Oh come on. Not a freaking blackout.

Collins pushed the door as he walked away from the fridge. It slapped shut as he opened the beer can, then took a swig. Tina would have a hissy-fit if she caught him drinking before dinner. He was about to head back the way he came, when he caught a glimpse of light from behind the curtains by the back window.

Oh come on. He walked to the back porch door and parted the curtains slightly to see his neighbors' houses. On the other side of the fence, he could clearly see Pete and Janet Morrison moving back and forth between the stove and the kitchen table, while their son—what was his name again?—played on his Sony PlayStation in the other room.

Son-of-a-bitch!

They had power. He glanced up and down the street. So did all the other houses.

Something wasn't right.

He didn't drive through a blackened street on his way home, he was sure of that. Collins returned to the front and went outside, feeling the cool evening breeze. He looked up and down his street. Lights were on everywhere, so why not in his home? He'd paid that with all the other bills he'd caught up on, so it couldn't be a disconnection.

He closed the door and turned around, smiling. Of course. It was a prank. He looked around him, as if he thought someone might pop up from behind a wall or the sofa and shout *surprise*.

"All right, joke's over. You got me." What was the occasion, though? It wasn't his birthday. Not their wedding anniversary.

No one answered him.

He could go check the circuit breaker in the garage, but decided to call Tina first. She was rarely a foot away from her mobile. Collins grabbed his phone from his belt clip, scrolled through the list of contacts and tapped the screen on Tina's name. There was a ringing on the other end, followed by a musical ringtone upstairs a second later.

Killing Me Softly? The Fugees? That wasn't the ringtone she'd programmed for his number.

The thought of her lying on the floor, unconscious, popped into mind. His heart pounded as he ran up the stairs—two steps at a time—following the music to the master bedroom. He came to an abrupt stop at the bedroom doorway as he grabbed onto both sides of the threshold.

Collins swallowed hard. He could see now why Tina hadn't answered him.

The room was lit with a few candles and, near the foot of the bed, Tina sat, bound to one of two dining room chairs—gagged, eyes wide and overflowing with tears.

A dark-suited, bald man, with a very distinct mole on his left cheek, stood beside her, pressing the barrel of a firearm against her head. "Mister Collins."

Collins switched his eyes from his wife to the window. The sound of the man's voice was rich and full of British swagger, with a texture that could likely charm the panties off a woman, but it burned in Collins' chest as though he'd downed a glass of over-proof whiskey.

Collins leaned away slightly, his foot sliding backward across the carpet.

Away from the candlelight, another man had been shrouded in the darkness, his appearance obscured. This was likely intentional, at least judging by the suit he wore, which was as dark as midnight, with the exception of the moon-colored tie. As the man approached him slowly, his Gucci belt buckle glistened in the candlelight. The same light now brightened one side of his head, exposing a strong, solid face with flawless ebony skin, sturdy cheekbones, and full lips. His hair was in locks—not long and wild, but short and static, yet still infused with a reggae flair. But it was the one eye that wasn't obscured by the shadows that got to him the most. Its penetrating nature made him feel that his mind was being probed. *Shit.* This man—whoever he was—knew of his vices.

"Don't leave so soon," said Short-Locks.

It was then that Collins noticed that he had backed almost two feet away from where he'd stood. He stopped, and, as Short-Locks slowly closed the distance between them, Collins felt himself shrinking.

This guy was built. He wasn't bulky, but more of a Jamie Foxx type—only much younger. Then again, when it came to African-Americans, Collins was never good at guessing their age. “Black Don't Crack” was a joke he often heard from his African-American friends—and for good reason.

“Your wife was wondering when you'd arrive.”

Short-Locks then placed a hand on Tina's shoulder. She closed her eyes tightly, crying louder from behind the gag.

“I hope you don't mind that we kept her company.”

Collins looked back at Tina, then at Baldy, and then to the man with the short locks—who he assumed was Baldy's superior. His breath shortened as he fought for the words. “Who...who are you? What do you want with us?”

Collins saw the whiteness of Short-Locks' teeth as he smiled while cupping his hands. “Don't be coy. You know why we're here.”

Shit. He knew.

Short-Locks then turned to Tina. “On the other hand, I can accept that maybe she might not know about your mounting debts, the late payments on your home, the bank threatening to repossess, over and over again. You have a stable job with a stable income, but it wasn't enough, was it? You needed more.” He ran his fingers through Tina's black hair. “Especially since Tina will give birth within the next few weeks.”

Collins' mouth hung open as Tina closed her eyes and cried louder. Short-Locks placed one hand on the back of her neck while putting an index finger to his lips as he looked down at her. “*Shhh.*”

Collins' back tightened, hearing the man draw out the *Shhh* very slowly. Silent at first, but then gradually louder, with a silent finish.

Short-Locks turned to him. "Did you honestly think that you could steal from a restricted network of files and no one would notice?"

Oh God. They do know. Collins swallowed hard. "Listen, my wife doesn't have anything to do with this. It's me. I'll do anything. Just don't hurt her."

"Will you? I'm curious. Is it the love that you have for your wife of three years that's motivating you?" He put a hand on Collins' shoulder as he gestured toward Tina's stomach. "Or is it for your unborn child?"

He didn't know how to answer. He was afraid to say that it was both. The man's grip on his shoulder tightened as he forced Collins to walk with him to the empty chair beside Tina.

"Have a seat."

He had no alternative. He obeyed the command.

"We're going to play a simple game, with simple rules. All you need to do is answer truthfully and you'll be fine. Any questions?"

Collins looked up at him and shook his head.

"Excellent. Two hundred thousand dollars was deposited into your HSBC bank account in Bermuda, in exchange for an item you stole from Sementem. Who paid you?"

Collins saw how Tina looked at him with big eyes. She had stopped crying.

Short-Locks turned to her too. "Oh yes, you heard right. Your husband was paid to steal from his employer." He then turned to Collins. "The lengths one will go when one's broke."

Short-Locks leaned over to his ear. “So, let’s have it. Who’s your buyer?”

The heat of the man’s breath on the side of his face made his lower back tighten, to the point it conjured pain from a pre-existing back injury. Collins looked at Tina, pleading his apology with his eyes, hoping she understood. He had a suspicion that any answer he gave this man wouldn’t be the right one. “I...I...I don’t know his real name,” he stuttered. “I only know him as France.”

“France?” said Short-Locks. “Your buyer’s a woman?”

“N-n-no, it’s a man,” Collins stuttered. “H-h-he spoke with some funny European accent.”

Short-Locks scrunched up his face. “Funny accent? I’m insulted. We could bloody well say the same about you Americans.”

A tear ran down Collins’ cheek. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to insult you. I mean, I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“Shhh!” Again, he dragged it out.

Collins hushed, save for the loud breathing through his nostrils that he couldn’t help.

Short-Locks walked away from him appearing to be deep in thought. He then spun around as though a light bulb had appeared over his head.

“Ah.” Short-Locks took out an Android smartphone, tapped it a few times, then approached Collins with it, holding it up in front of his face. “You mean, Franz Müller, correct?”

Collins glanced at the picture and nodded quickly with wide eyes. “That’s him.”

Short-Locks patted Collins once on the shoulder. “Good. Now I’m going to ask you the same question again, and you’re going to tell me who was your buyer. And you’re going to pronounce his name properly.”

Collins made a face as he looked at Short-Locks. *Is this guy kidding? He already knows who the buyer is. I just confirmed who he was for Christ's sake.*

“Say his name!” Short-Locks yelled, causing Collins’ heart rate to skip a beat.

“It’s Franz. His name is Franz Müller. I swear I don’t know anything more about him.” Collins closed his eyes tight to stop the tears from flowing as he heard Tina’s muffled sobs again.

Short-Locks smiled. “There, there. Don’t you see how easy this game is? It’s much better when you don’t murder your pronunciations of foreign words. It’s so barbaric.”

Collins didn’t wait for him to ask the same question twice. He just nodded. “Is that all?”

“You dare break the rules of the game by asking *me* a question?”

“I’m sorry,” sobbed Collins.

“Shhh.” Short-Locks tapped his lips, thinking. He then turned to Baldy, seeming to have just noticed something. “I doubt she’s going anywhere, so you can lower your weapon. By the way, go turn on the power.”

The henchman lowered his sidearm from Tina’s face and left the room.

Short-Locks grabbed the television remote off the chest of drawers when he heard Baldy coming back up the stairs. He then turned on the wall-mounted high-definition television in front of the bed. He flipped through the channels, stopping on a station which played orchestral music. He raised the volume to the point that the rumbling timpani drums vibrated the windowpanes and rattled the furniture. He then tossed the remote on the bed, grabbed Tina’s arm, and pulled her out of the chair.

“Shall we?” He began to dance a waltz with Tina. She seemed to resist, but he appeared to be hurting her in order to make her dance with him.

What the hell? This man's a lunatic. I gave him what he wanted, why couldn't he and his partner just leave?

He didn't dare say this out loud, but decided to raise his hand to catch his attention. Short-Locks noticed it, pulled Tina closer to him and spun her around to make her face Collins.

"Yes?" Short-Locks said loudly.

"I played your game. I gave you what you asked. What more do you want from me?"

"Nothing more," Short-Locks yelled. "You played well."

Collins' eyes widened. He couldn't believe what he just heard. "Does that mean you'll let us go?"

Short-Locks turned Tina back around to face him, then shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"What? But you said I won."

"No, I didn't." Short-Locks resumed dancing with Tina. "I said that you played well. You see, the loser of this game was already predetermined. That's why I'll always win."

He shoved Tina onto the bed. She landed on her back and he pulled out a sidearm from a concealed holster, and fired a round into her head and another into her stomach.

Collins screamed as he saw the blood-stained feathers of the pillow fly above his wife's body. His screams left him ignorant to Short-Locks jerking him out of his chair. Before he realized it, he was lying next to his wife, soaked in her blood as the assassin forced the gun into his hand with his finger on the trigger, forcing it into his mouth, gagging his scream. Collins fought back but couldn't match Short-Locks' strength—who didn't show any sign of strain or effort in his eyes.

"Shhh."

It was the last thing he heard before the trigger was squeezed.

Chapter 3

Bar Le Griffon, Place du Maréchal-Foch, Montauban, France. 3:05 PM, Saturday.

Ridley Fox took a swig from his bottle of Heineken as he watched Manchester United score another goal against FC Barcelona. There weren't any loud cheers or cantankerous groans around him from rowdy, boisterous European football fans. After all, Eurosport was only showing the plays of the week.

At the moment, there was very little action around him—as the only company Fox had were two men shooting pool, a waitress, a man sitting four barstools away, and the owner, who was presumably in his office in the back. Although they all looked harmless, at the right price they could be a threat. Fox knew the game all too well, which was why he wouldn't allow himself to get too inebriated.

He had taken on several different identities and many different faces in the past. At this moment he was David Conlon, the mercenary whose last hit ended with a drug lord and a handful of his associates' body parts floating off the shores of Cartagena.

Originally, the CIA's goal was for Fox to recruit Conlon. That plan fell through, leaving Fox with no other option but to take him out. He not only got his ass chewed up by his superior, General Paul Downing, but also from the new Director of Central Intelligence, DCI Sue Ellen Merrick.

For the CIA, a killer was an asset. For Fox, and anyone else who'd been a SEAL, or in his case a former Joint Task Force 2 Warrant Officer—JTF2, Canada's SEALs—it was hard to negotiate when you were about to be killed. Actually, the general understood, considering his military history. As for Merrick, forget it.

Replacing Conlon wouldn't be difficult. After all, Fox was fluent in twelve languages and was also a skilled impersonator. And the fact that very few people saw his real face only helped. His natural hair color was dark auburn and he was normally clean shaven. But for the past several weeks he'd let a full beard grow an inch, dyed it black with specks of gray—which was close to Conlon's last known appearance. Presently, he wore slightly used cross-trainers, an old pair of loose-fitting jeans, a thick black windbreaker, and a concealed Glock 19. It was pretty cool for this day, near the end of November—only 44 Fahrenheit.

Taking on someone else's identity was so common for Fox that it had become second nature. Ever since the CIA had recruited him, after the JTF2 no longer had any use for him, he'd lived the life of a ghost. He'd lost count of the number of people he had been over the years. Whenever he needed fake travel documents, cash, a sidearm, access to a local safe-house, it would all be provided for him. Items he'd need while in the field would come to him in the form of a dead drop.

Now, as Conlon, he'd get among the inner circle of Monzer Alghafari—a notorious Syrian-born arms dealer and a royal pain in the ass to the US, and to most European authorities. Like others, such as Alghafari, they always did business with bigger fish. One of his clients was known to be a former CIA informer-turned-terrorist, Faouzi al-Umari. This guy had earned his spot as America's most wanted terrorist for the bombings of two American Embassies—in Egypt and Morocco, respectively. He'd also claimed responsibility for the bombing of a cruise line. His supplier, Alghafari, was such a thorn in America's side that he was even wanted by the DEA's Special Operations Division since the late 1980s.

Back then, they once had what they thought was a solid case against him for smuggling drugs into New York. The case was thrown out when some key witnesses suddenly *disappeared*. It wasn't until Congress passed the Patriot Act after 9/11—a bill that would give law enforcement agencies more power to arrest anyone suspected to be related to terrorist activities—that the DEA thought of performing a sting operation against him that would land his ass in jail.

But where men like Alghafari attracted powerful friends who hated the west, he also attracted enemies, such as the CIA. Fox's superiors managed to convince the DEA to hold off on going after Alghafari, at least until Umari was either captured or killed. Once that was done, Fox would pass any additional intel on Alghafari to the DEA to help them nail him.

Gaining Alghafari's trust was another complicated matter. His inner circle was tight, including friends within the Centro Nacional de Inteligencia—Spain's national intelligence service—who provided him with protection in exchange for intel. Becoming friends with him wasn't going to be easy.

To America's advantage, a Greek national by the name of Costas Viglakis was already in their custody, and he was well acquainted with Alghafari. For the past several months a DEA agent cozied up to Viglakis and eventually became friends with him. When Viglakis was comfortable with him, the DEA agent began bringing him traditional Greek meals. Viglakis couldn't resist the Kefthetes, the Pork Souvlaki, or even Youvetsi. He even brought him Melomakaronas—the honey walnut cookies—that were a favorite around Christmas.

Eventually they struck a deal that his prison sentence would be commuted in exchange for him meeting with Alghafari, and then recommending Conlon to him. The whole operation took a year to set up. To their delight, Alghafari eventually took the bait. From what Viglakis told the DEA, Alghafari was interested in having Conlon do *little things* for him.

Fox took another sip of his Heineken, and after he put it down, he couldn't help but stare at it while wondering when he'd be contacted. He doubted that Alghafari would leave his palace-like mansion in Marbella to meet him here. One of his associates would most likely do so instead. And even though it came with the job, he hated waiting on others.

To those around him, Fox was simply focusing on the Heineken bottle, but from where he sat he had a partial view of the front door—watching who came and left—and the rest of the bar. If anyone

thought that they could jump him, they'd be limping away—assuming he afforded them the chance to do so.

The man who sat four barstools away began to be of concern. He had checked his cell phone three times in the past two minutes. After the last time, he'd texted something. Fox also noticed that he had two beers, while barely watching the television, and he wasn't speaking to anyone. He doubted that the man—if he was involved in some form of ambush—would be directly participating, with two beers in his system. He'd be too busy taking a piss that he'd end up messing up the timing of a planned hit. However, he may be a watchman for a hit.

Although Fox never once stared in his direction, he caught the man stealing glances at him at least five times. Whatever he was up to, Fox would let him make the first move.

There was a jingling at the doorway, and another man entered. The other guy looked over his shoulder, and a smile came to his face. He slid off his barstool and went to the man with outstretched arms. "Jacques."

They exchanged hugs and then left together. Old friends? A gay couple? Who knew? Who cared? One less person for Fox to be concerned about. There were now three people left in the bar, plus the owner in the back.

Just as the door was about to click shut, it was pushed back open by another man. The two men at the pool table simultaneously looked at him. The way that he walked was the first thing Fox noticed—he appeared to be favoring his right leg. However subtle, it was enough for Fox to guess that it may have resulted from a previous injury.

When the man called Jacques had entered, the two men at the pool table didn't pay him any attention. It wasn't the same for this guy, though. Within moments of him entering, Fox caught them both glancing at him, and then briefly at each other, before returning to their game.

That was a bright flapping red flag.

These three men were acquainted. But how?

Fox didn't care. All he knew was that the men at the pool table hadn't come to this establishment play a game of billiards.

The new arrival sat down adjacent to Fox, where he rudely called out to the waitress to bring him a beer. He wore a thin wool coat, had a small crop of brown hair on his head, and a thick moustache.

Again, Fox kept facing the TV while surreptitiously watching the patron, who Fox knew was watching him too.

The waitress came by and placed a beer in front of the man. "*Aimeriez-vous d'autres choses?*" she asked him.

He answered her with a shake of the head and a back-handed wave.

Fox saw the corner of her lips curl into a sneer before she walked away. He felt like telling the jerk to at least thank her. He would've done so a long time ago. Back in his early high school days, when he was a scrawny, one-hundred-and-twenty-pound weakling, he would often be taunted and bullied by the older kids. They picked on him because he could never fight back. Actually, he had tried, only to get his ass kicked for it.

His best friend at the time, Mark, could only be there for moral support, being that he suffered from cerebral palsy and relied on crutches. Mark was actually better in all of his classes than Fox had been, and he would often help him with his homework. In return, Fox would take the hits for him whenever the smart-ass kids came around. He couldn't fight them, and Fox knew that it was dangerous what he did, but Mark was the only real friend he had.

The jerk who sat adjacent to Fox reminded him of those older kids. He just wasn't dressed as well—with probably more ego than common sense.

The man nodded once at Fox. *“T'es nouveau ici?”*

He'd asked if Fox was new there, but he ignored the question. He'd expected the man to start off that way—by calling out to him. And he'd persist in doing so until Fox acknowledged his presence.

The man slapped the counter twice with an open palm. *“Toi-là. Je te parles.”*

Fox took out his Android and pretended to check it, then put it away to watch the television, which was showing a dish soap commercial.

The man slid off his barstool, took his beer, and made his way toward Fox as the waitress disappeared through a door behind the counter. He already knew that there was a baseball bat hidden beside the cash register. If a fight was about to happen, she must have known that the bat wouldn't be much use. Unless she left to go warn her boss, so that he could return with a sawed-off shotgun. Then again, keeping a firearm hidden beside the cash register would've been more ideal. Which could mean that the owner probably anticipated that bullets would be flying.

Fox had underestimated Alghafari's connections. Someone must have tipped him off as to Fox not being the real David Conlon, and this was how the favor was being returned. An entire twelve-month op gone to waste. He could escape through the back, but who knew what, or who, may be waiting for him. Getting out through the front was the simplest and smartest route. Moustache Man and the pool players might attempt to block him. Aside from their billiard cues, they most likely had their sidearms duct taped underneath the table.

Moustache Man now stood so close to Fox that he could smell the onion on his breath.

“T’es sourd?” asked the man. Again he was ignored. But he decided to push his luck, and reached for Fox’s beer bottle.

The former JTF2 operative snatched his wrist, jamming his thumb deep into the space between the radius and the ulna. Fox stood, looking at Moustache Man, watching the pain spilling from the man’s eyes as he grunted.

A beer bottle, if mishandled, was a weapon. To Fox, this was enough indication that this asshole had just initiated a confrontation.

The man’s body twisted as Fox wrenched his arm behind his back and bent him over the counter. Then he grabbed his beer bottle with his free hand and clocked it over the back of the man’s head before releasing him. He slid off the counter to the floor, like a badly placed tablecloth.

Fox quickly drew his G19 while swinging around to face the two billiard players, just as one of them was moving to reach under the table. Their eyes met for a split second before Fox squeezed the trigger—striking him in the shoulder. The guy went down, knocking over a table. Fox then aimed the G19 at the other, who, on seeing he was bested, had the smarts to back away from the table with his hands held up high.

Fox stepped away from the counter as he kept his eyes on the pool player. *“Reculez, les mains derrière la tête.”*

The man did as he was told and placed his hands behind his head as Fox approached. When his legs were no longer hidden by the billiard table, Fox shot him in the left kneecap. The man hit the floor, screaming, while clutching his knee, unleashing a series French curse words.

Sure, he was unarmed, but if he had backup on the way, neutralizing him now was the smartest option.