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Prologue

Atlanta, Georgia
March 2002

Detective Patrick Kelly, Tick to his friends, signed out of his precinct and headed to his car, an eight-year-old Saturn with 120,000 miles on it. It purred like a baby when he turned the key. Then it sputtered and died. He'd given it too much gas and flooded the engine. He knew the drill—wait five minutes, try again, and if he was lucky, Lulu would get him home.

Sally, his wife, had named his car Lulu but never told him why. She'd just giggle and say it was a lulu of a car. Sally drove a ten-year-old Honda Civic. The only good thing about owning two old cars was not having to make car payments. Everything was about cutting corners, saving for college for the kids, and doing without.

Tick sighed, leaned back against the headrest, but didn't close his eyes because, if he did, he'd go to sleep. He'd worked a double shift because Joe Rollins had a ruptured appendix, and he'd filled in for him. He couldn't wait to get home to Sally and the kids, take a shower, maybe eat something Sally kept warm for him, and go to sleep with her spooning into his back. When he felt his eyelids start to droop, he turned the key, and, miracle of miracles, Lulu turned over. He was on his way to his family, whom he loved more than anything on earth. He loved them more than he loved his job, and he dearly loved his job. There were days when he hated the job, but the love always won out. He truly believed he made a difference. Where his family was concerned, there was no doubt: He loved them twenty-four/seven, unconditionally.

When he worked the late shift, he always let his thoughts go to his wonderful little family as a way of unwinding on his way home. He'd met Sally in the seventh grade, when she transferred from out of state. He fell in love with her that day when she stood in front of the class, and said, "My name is Sally Pritchard and I'm new today." He'd seen the sparkle of tears in her eyes and knew instinctively that she was afraid. Afraid the kids wouldn't like her, afraid she'd make a mistake, and they'd laugh. He never did figure out where or how he'd known that, he'd just known it. Then, when he found out she had moved one street over from his own street, and they would be walking to school at the same time, he'd almost done cartwheels. Later, Sally said she didn't fall in love with him till they were in the eighth grade. He'd been heartbroken at that news but covered it up well. She loved him, and that was all that mattered.

Married for fifteen years now, and he loved her as much as he did that day in the seventh grade when she introduced herself. He hoped and prayed nightly that his two children would find mates as wonderful as their mother when it was their time.

Sally Pritchard Kelly was the wind beneath his wings. She was the reason he got up in the morning, the reason he was still sane considering the fact that he was a homicide

detective. Because of Sally and the kids, he didn't carry his work home with him. When he walked in the front door of his mortgaged-to-the-hilt house, he was in another world. Worn, comfortable furniture waited for him. Sally always waited at the door for him, a smile on her face and smelling of a summer day. Always. He couldn't remember a single day in all the years they were married that she hadn't greeted him with a smile and a kiss on the lips. A real kiss that said she loved him, missed him, and now things were the way they should be because he was home. There would always be a warm meal in the oven if he was late. Didn't matter how late he was. Sally would curl up on the couch and wait. Sally was the constant in his life.

Prettier than a picture, he always said. He loved the freckles that danced across her nose, loved the crooked eyetooth she refused to have straightened. There wasn't one thing he didn't love about his wife because, in his eyes, she was perfect. At this point in his reverie, even if he was so tired he couldn't think straight, his eyes always misted up. He'd just curl up and die if anything ever happened to his beloved Sally. Well, that wasn't going to happen anytime soon; they had at least another fifty years to look forward to. Both he and Sally came from families where longevity was the rule.

Tick could feel his eyes start to droop again, so he pressed the stereo unit and turned up the volume. His and Sally's favorite song was burned on every inch of the CD, so he could play it over and over. "Mustang Sally." He started to sing along with Wilson Pickett at the top of his lungs, "*Ride, Sally, ride!*"

He was two streets away from where he lived on David Court when he saw the strobe lights shooting upward to the sky. Blue, red, and white just like it was the Fourth of July. But it wasn't the Fourth of July. He knew what the lights meant. Good cop that he was, he knew he was going to have to stop to offer any assistance if needed. Sally, the kids, and sleep would have to wait just a bit longer. He turned off the CD player and turned the corner, and his world came to a screeching halt. He saw the barricade, the yellow tape, the crazy arcing lights, the crowds of people, and too many police cars to count.

All parked in front of *his house*, in the driveway, on the lawn and sidewalk. He slammed on the brakes, threw open the door, and lunged forward. He heard his name being called from all directions, arms trying to reach him, someone trying to tackle him. He plowed ahead, driven by an energy he didn't know he possessed. And then he was in a vise grip, unable to move. The more he fought and struggled, the tighter the hold became. He looked up to see the face of the man holding him and was stunned to see his captain, tears rolling down his cheeks. "Easy, Tick, easy."

Tick ground his teeth together. He had to show respect to the captain. "Did someone rob my house? Where are Sally and the kids? Captain, I asked you a question."

"Tick . . . I . . ."

Rising onto his toes, Tick reared upward, loosening the hold his captain had on his arm. He sprinted forward as fellow officers rushed to prevent him from entering the house. He evaded all of them.

The house was deathly silent. The crime-scene personnel took that moment to stop what they were doing and stare at the man who looked like the wrath of God. "Where are they?"

Someone, he didn't know who it was, pointed to the second floor. Tick took the steps two at a time. It looked to him like there were a hundred people in his small

upstairs. He bolted down the short hall to his bedroom. In his life he'd never seen so much blood. He saw her then, his beloved Sally, lying in the doorway leading to the bathroom. He knew it was her because of her nightgown and robe. And her wedding ring. There was little left to her face. How could that be gone? Those beautiful freckles dancing across her pert little nose were gone. Her throat was a gaping hole. Tick's knees buckled. Strong hands held him upright. "Ride, Sally, ride," he blubbered.

"Get him out of here. Have the ME look at him."

"Where are the kids?"

"Not now, Tick. Please," his captain said.

"Where are my kids?" Tick roared.

"In their room. Tick, please, let us handle this. I'm begging you, don't go there."

"Get the hell away from me . . ."

Tick found them huddled together in the closet, which was full of toys and balls. There was blood everywhere. Too much blood for two tiny little creatures who once carried his life's blood. Now it was a river on a hopscotch-patterned carpet. He wanted to bend down, to scoop up his children, to hold them close, but they wouldn't let him. He wanted to run his hands through his daughter's curly hair, which was just like her mother's, but it was matted with blood, and he couldn't see the curls. He looked at his son and fainted dead away. He felt himself being carried someplace, heard voices he couldn't identify, then he felt something prick his arm. Ride, Sally, riiiide.

*The Governor's Mansion
Tallahassee, Florida
August 2009*

Thurman Lawrence Tyler checked himself in the mirror one last time. He adjusted his Hermès tie, examined the crease on the French cuffs of his custom-made shirt, brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his imported Italian suit, inspected the shine on his shoes, and smoothed a thick white errant hair in place before stepping into the foyer, where Elizabeth waited. At six foot one, he had an athletic build and sharp blue eyes that rarely missed a beat, and she thought her husband still as handsome as the day she had met him. Maybe even more so.

"Thurman, dear, you look as handsome as you did the day of our wedding." Elizabeth Tyler, his wife of forty-six years and right hand of Governor Thurman Lawrence Tyler, looked every bit the elegant wife of a dignitary. Perfectly coiffed blond hair, her grandmother's pearl earrings and necklace glowing next to her porcelain skin. A pale blue Chanel suit brought out the cornflower blue of her eyes. Both were tall, slim, and in excellent physical condition, and they appeared almost perfect as they scrutinized one another.

"And you, my dear, look like the innocent that you were." Thurman studied his wife for a moment longer. She'd aged extremely well, unlike many of her friends. Elizabeth was always careful to protect herself from Florida's punishing sun, never smoked, and rarely drank anything more than an occasional glass of white wine. She played tennis three times a week, had a facial once a week and her hair touched up every third

Thursday of the month. Of course, he wasn't supposed to know this, so he pretended her blond locks were as natural as those of a newborn.

"You're too kind," she replied.

"Nonsense," he responded.

Without another word, he escorted her to the elaborate dining room where they had their breakfast. Each consumed two cups of coffee, his with skim milk and hers black. Both had one-half of a Florida ruby red grapefruit with one slice of homemade dry wheat toast. After they'd consumed their meal, they took their daily doses of vitamins with a bottle of mineral water imported from Switzerland.

Their morning routine was like clockwork and had been since Thurman was elected governor of the fine state of Florida almost eight years ago. With his second term coming to an end, both were preparing for the next step of their career—president of the United States. Yes, it was *their* career because Thurman never made a decision without first consulting his dear wife.

When they finished their meal, the governor went to his office, and Elizabeth went to hers, where she spent the morning going over the menu for an upcoming gala they were hosting. With nothing more on her agenda, she went to the personal living area that connected their offices. Knowing her husband would be occupied for the rest of the day with his lieutenant governor, she placed a phone call to her son, Lawrence. Hanging up after several rings went unanswered, Elizabeth called an old high school friend. They made plans to have lunch soon. Free time was rare, and she decided to take advantage of it and relax with a book. She'd spent her life promoting literacy and was very involved with the public-library system, but never once in all her years of reading had she told anyone of her love of horror novels. Today she planned to read Stephen King's latest.

Settling into a Queen Anne chair next to the window overlooking the garden, Elizabeth spent the next two hours immersed in her novel. Later, when she heard Thurman shouting on the phone to Carlton, she hid her book beneath the chair's cushion and hurried to the door, where she stood silently, listening to her husband's private conversation.

She and Thurman had done everything in their power to see that Lawrence never found out. It would ruin him and his father if the public got wind of this. Elizabeth thought she had done the right thing by keeping him. No, she *had* done the right thing. He was her son, the only child she would ever have. Whatever it took to ensure that he wasn't ruined by her and Thurman's past mistakes, Elizabeth would do it. After all, she was his mother, and if he couldn't count on her, then poor Lawrence had no one.

Every hope and dream they had ever imagined was about to be destroyed. They had worked too long and hard for this moment. Elizabeth refused to allow anyone to ruin the future that was just now within their reach.

She'd made numerous sacrifices throughout her life in order for Thurman and Lawrence to be successful. Now that someone threatened her life's work, she wanted to fight back in anger; but that had never been her way, and she would not start now.

She went to her private office and sat down. She removed a sheet of creamy personalized paper from her desk. Lawrence would have to know this someday. If neither she nor Thurman were around to tell him, then a letter would suffice.

My Dearest Son,

If you're reading this letter then you must know that your father and I are no longer of this earth. There is something I have wanted to tell you since you were a little boy, but the time was never right. Then as you got older I thought it would be a disservice not to tell you, yet I could never find the right time. If you hate me or your father after reading this, know that I will understand and love you in spite of it. The first time I laid eyes on your father, I fell madly in love . . .

Chapter 1

The 1,203 residents of Mango Key never knew what to call *it* or how to refer to it. For the most part, in the beginning, they called it a castle, then they switched up and called it a fortress. As it neared completion, they became puzzled at the high brick wall and the massive iron gates that sparked if they were touched and simply referred to it as *that place* at the end of the island.

The residents didn't know who lived in *that place*, but they speculated that maybe it was some aging film star who didn't want anyone to see their lost looks. Or perhaps it was some drug lord trying to hide out from the law since the only activity seen or heard came late at night.

The residents of Mango Key were simple folks and earned their living selling their mangoes, oranges, and grapefruit to the boats that came into the Key once a week, and they didn't really care about the phantom people who maybe lived or maybe didn't live in *that place*. They had never seen a soul in the light of day since *that place* had been completed five years ago. For the most part, they forgot that it was even there because it didn't affect them in any way.

In truth, there were 1,204 residents of Mango Key, but the additional resident wasn't a native, so the residents more or less ignored Patrick Kelly the same way they ignored *that place*. But that hadn't been the case when he had first arrived on Mango Key.

Even Patrick Kelly, known to old friends as Tick, although those friends were long gone, ignored the place, which was three miles down the beach from where he lived.

The reason he'd ignored the construction was because he was in a drunken stupor for the two years it took to build, and the third year, he was just more or less coming out of his stupor. And the least of his worries was someone building a house, a castle, a fortress, or *that place*. It simply held no interest for him; it was all he could do to get through one day so that he could go to sleep, wake, and struggle through the next. Today, seven years after the fact, he still had no interest in what he considered an abandoned structure he happened to see when he walked the beach, swam, or fished.

It was a beautiful August day on Mango Key. But then most days were beautiful except during hurricane season, and those exceptions usually lasted only a day or so. The sun was startlingly bright, warming Tick's body as he walked out of the ocean. He had his dinner in a net—a fish he couldn't name. Nor did he care if it had a name. He called all fish dinner. A few wild radishes, some equally wild onions, a few mangoes, and maybe an orange, and dinner was ready. A great diet. He'd dropped twenty-five pounds since arriving at Mango Key. He weighed 170 pounds, the same weight he'd carried when he was twenty-eight and in top form. Now pushing the big four-oh, at six foot two, he still carried the weight easily. He was brown as a nut, living in cutoffs and sandals. He couldn't remember the last time he'd worn a shirt. Maybe hurricane season last year, when the temperature dropped to sixty-five degrees.

Patrick Kelly, hobo, derelict, beach bum, drunk, former homicide detective, ex-father, widower, rich best-selling author, and recovering alcoholic.

Tick stopped two hundred feet from the place he'd called home for almost seven years. His abode, that was how he thought of it, had been little more than a lean-to with iffy rusty plumbing and an even rustier generator when he arrived. It had stayed that way for close to three years, until he'd woken up one day and knew that his drinking days had to come to an end or he would die, which had been his purpose all along. But that particular morning, with the sun warming his bloated body, he'd taken his best friend, his only friend, Jack Daniel's, and dumped him in the ocean.

He wasn't sure now, but he thought he'd had the shakes, the crawlies, the hallucinations for a full week before he had shed all the bad toxins from his system. Then he'd reared up like a gladiator and taken a few steps into the land of the living. After which he took a few more steps and headed for the mainland, where he ordered all the lumber and nails he would need to redo his house, which he worked on from sunup to sundown. He'd made two more trips to order furniture, generators, appliances, a new laptop, a printer, scanner, cell phone, and anything else he thought he might need to make his life easier. The renovation took eleven months. He now had a skimpy front porch, with a swing and a chair. He'd christened the finished product with a bottle of apple cider. He'd even given his new abode a name. He called it Tick's Tree House because he'd rebuilt the structure on stilts. He loved it as much as he could love anything these days.

Tick headed up the steps that led to his porch and started to laugh when the parrot who came with the house began to squawk. At least he thought it had come with the house, but with his foggy memory, he couldn't be sure. He couldn't remember if the bird was in residence when he had arrived or if it came later. He marveled at the bird's vocabulary and couldn't remember if he'd taught it to talk or it learned from somewhere else. He called it Bird and had no way of knowing if it was male or female. Bird ruffled his feathers, and said, "You're late."

"Am not."

"Five o'clock."

Tick looked down at his watch. It was four thirty. "It's four thirty. Four thirty means I'm not late." Bird rustled his feathers, then swooped down and perched on Tick's shoulder.

"Five o'clock, time to eat. Five o'clock, time to eat!"

"No, Bird, it is not time to eat. We eat at six o'clock. I tell you that every day."

"Bullshit!"

In spite of himself, Tick burst out laughing. He wondered then for the millionth time who the bird had once belonged to. Obviously someone with a salty tongue. "Go on, Bird, I'll call you when it's time to eat." If anyone from his other life saw him dining with a parrot, they'd lock him up and throw away the key. He even set a place for Bird at the table.

Tick was sucking on a mango, the rich juice dribbling down his chin, when Bird's head tilted to the side. His feathers rustled as he flew out of the minikitchen straight for the front door. The hair on the back of Tick's neck went straight up when the parrot screamed, "Intruder! Intruder!"

Tick slipped off his stool, his bare feet making no sound as he backed up to the small cabinet where he kept his gun. Because he was a cop, he kept the Glock locked and loaded. It felt comforting in his hand. He never got company. *Never*. If one of the

Key residents came around, they always rang the bell out by the oversize palmetto.

Bird was literally bouncing off the walls as he circled the small living room, whose door opened onto the little front porch. “Hey, anyone home besides that crazy bird?”

Tick blinked. He’d know that voice anywhere. It belonged to his twin brother, Pete. He jammed the Glock into the back of his shorts. “Enough, Bird. It’s not an intruder!” The green bird squawked one more time as he settled himself on the back of Tick’s favorite chair. Bird’s eyes were bright as he watched his roommate walk over to the door.

They were the same height, the same muscular build, but there the resemblance ended. Tick was dark haired and dark eyed, thanks to his mother’s Italian heritage. Pete was a redhead with blue eyes, thanks to his father’s Irish heritage. “I was in the neighborhood,” Pete said quietly.

“Bullshit!” Bird squawked.

“That’s my line, Bird. C’mon in, Pete. How’d you find me?” They should be hugging each other, at the very least shaking hands or just doing brotherly things. Instead, they eyed each other warily.

“Nice place,” Pete said, looking around. “That’s a joke, Tick. What, eight hundred square feet?”

“More or less. How’d you find me?” Tick asked a second time. “It’s been, what, almost seven, maybe eight years, and suddenly here you are.”

Pete shuffled his feet. For the first time, Tick saw he was carrying his loafers and was in his bare feet. Maybe that was why they hadn’t shaken hands. Yeah, yeah, that was probably the reason.

“I just got back two weeks ago. Yeah, I know I was supposed to write. You know me.”

Tick motioned to one of the two chairs in the small room. He noticed that Pete favored one leg over the other. “What happened?”

“I got a little busted up on the rodeo circuit. Got a new hip and knee. Met up with this guy from Argentina, and he asked me to go with him to take care of his polo ponies. Seemed like a good idea at the time. Hell, I still think it was the best thing I could have done at the time. The guy paid me ten times what I was worth, gave me incredible bonuses. Everything was free, great lodgings, free food, my own Jeep. I banked every cent of my money.

“Listen, Tick, I didn’t know about Sally and the kids. If I had known, I would have hopped on the first plane I could find. I went to see Andy, and he told me. Jesus, I walked around in a daze for almost a week. He wouldn’t tell me where you were. Good old Andy wouldn’t tell me. I couldn’t believe it. He wouldn’t tell *me*. I threatened him with everything in the book, and I gotta tell you, he’s a hell of a friend and one hell of an attorney; he didn’t give you up, Tick.”

“You’re here!”

Pete squirmed in his chair. He looked down at his shoes as though he wondered why he was still holding them. He bent over, winced, and set them on the floor. “Yeah, I did a little breaking and entering. Jeez, his office is a house on Peachtree. A ten-year-old could pick that lock. I looked in your file and found out you were here. So, here I am, a little late, Tick, but I’m here now. What can I do?”

Tick smiled. “I wish there was something you could do, but there isn’t. I’m okay.

You can go back to Argentina knowing I'm okay and don't need you or anyone else."

Pete leaned forward. "That's not quite true, now is it? You need Andy. I know he takes care of all your finances, I saw it in the files. Seems like you're doing pretty well for an ex-cop turned author. I'm okay with you not needing me, but don't start handing me bullshit, Tick. Jesus, I'm bleeding for Sally and the kids. I know the story, so you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to tell me. I can't go back to Argentina; my boss fell off one of his ponies and got stomped to death. I came back with enough money to go into business for myself. I even brought you a check for that five grand I borrowed from you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled check. He laid it on the small table next to his chair.

"Keep it."

"Nah, it doesn't work like that. I always pay my debts. I found a bar and grill on Peachtree. Pop would have loved it. Andy's checking it out to make sure it's as good as it sounds. I have enough to pay cash and will have quite a bit left over. I have a Realtor looking for some digs for me in the area. And, I'm getting married in six months. I want you to be my best man the way I was yours when . . . you know."

Tick couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "You're getting married! You?"

"Hard to believe, huh? Yeah, I met her in Argentina. She was there on vacation with a few friends. She works for the State Department. Right now she's in England and will be back in six months, then she's quitting. She loves to cook, so we're going to buy the bar and grill together. She's willing to put in half the asking price. So, will you be my best man?"

A burst of panic flooded Tick's whole being. Standing up for his brother would mean he'd have to leave his nest. He had to say something to wipe the awful look off his brother's face. He shrugged. "Six months is a long time down the road." He hated the way his voice sounded, all shaky and squeaky.

Pete nodded as though he understood. "You might not want to hear this, but I'm going to tell you anyway. I went out to the cemetery. I took flowers. Said some prayers, talked to . . . Christ, that was the hardest thing I ever did in my whole life. I sat there on the ground and picked the flowers apart. So I went back and bought some more. They were pretty, Tick. I remembered how Sally had all those rosebushes in the yard. I left a standing order for the flower shop to deliver every Saturday. I wanted to do so much more but, Tick, there wasn't anything else to do. If there's more I can do, tell me, and I'll do it."

Tick bit down on his lower lip. He should have done what Pete did. All those years and no flowers on his family's graves. He should have made arrangements to do what Pete did. Oh, no, it had been more important to put his snoot in a bottle and hide out. All he could think of to say was, "Thanks."

"You gonna talk to me, Tick? Do I have to drag it out of you?"

Tick finally found his tongue. "I'm sure Andy told you all the nitty-gritty details. After the funeral, which I really don't remember, I got in my car and started to drive. I honest to God do not know how I got here. I do know that I was in a stupor for about two and a half years. It's all one big blank. I woke up one morning and knew I was going to die. At first I didn't care. Then I did care. I thought about what Pop told us as kids when we did something wrong. He'd say, 'it's time to straighten up and fly right.' The village people must have taken care of me. I have vague memories of people

standing over me. There always seemed to be food for me to eat. A boat comes once a week with supplies, so I have to assume I somehow made arrangements to get liquor delivered.

“I write books these days. Do you believe that? And, they made movies out of them. Who knew I could do that? Certainly not me.”

Pete waved his arms about. “So, this is it? The end of the road for you? There’s a lot to be said for peace and quiet and tranquillity, but to withdraw so totally, I can’t believe that’s a good thing. Don’t you miss Atlanta and all the action? You had a lot of friends back there on the force. Everyone just said you fell off the face of the earth.”

“I’m content. For now. Things might have turned out differently if they hadn’t caught the punk who killed my family. They gunned him down right outside my house. I would have hunted him down and killed him myself. There’s nothing back there for me now.” His voice was defiant when he said, “I like it here.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Kind of small, though. How about I stay around long enough to help you build another room on to this . . . stilt house? Remember when we helped Pop build a sunroom for Mom? I’m free as the breeze for the next six months. Let me help, Tick. I *need* to do something for you. If you’re writing another book and need to concentrate on that, I can do it on my own. I was always better at the hammer-and-nails thing than you were. Even Pop said so. A nice big room with wall-to-wall windows so you can see the ocean. Maybe a big fancy bathroom. By the way, do you own this place?”

“Yeah. I bought it a few years ago from the village. It’s kind of complicated. Everyone in the village is related. Indian heritage. This Key is the result of some kind of land grant. One of the elders came out here one day, and he had this big stick. He asked me to follow him, and he kept dragging the stick; and then he said everything within the lines was mine. He held out his hand, we shook, and I paid him two thousand dollars. That’s all he wanted. He signed his name on a piece of paper, and I signed mine. End of story.”

All Pete could think of to say was, “Uh-huh.”

Tick remembered that he was a host. “Want a beer?”

Pete’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline. “You drink?”

“A beer now and then. I learned my lesson, I know my limitations. I don’t crave it, if that’s your next question. It’s nice to see you, Pete. I mean that. I guess I wasn’t very hospitable when you showed up. I didn’t quite know what to do. I’ve been running from the past, then, suddenly, there you were, front and center.”

Pete nodded. “No social life, eh?”

Tick laughed. “I guess what you’re asking me is do I miss sex?” He laughed again. “I go into Miami every so often. I bought a cigarette boat. I see a lady there at times. She’s one of those people who knows everything there is to know about computers. It’s what it is. So, do you want that beer or not?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Tick, I do. Having a beer with my brother . . . it doesn’t get any better than that.”

Tick looked at his twin for a long minute. “You’re right, Pete. And yeah, you can stay, and yeah, we can build the room. It will be like old times.”

Pete let his breath out in a loud *swoosh*. “I didn’t bring anything with me. I’ll have to go back to the Keys to get my stuff. You got some old shorts or old clothes? I’m

sweating like a Trojan.”

“I’ll run you down there tomorrow,” Tick said, tossing him a pair of khaki shorts and a threadbare T-shirt. “Bathroom is in there,” he added, pointing to his left. “I’ll get the beer, and we can sit on the porch. It sits two.”

Pete guffawed. “I noticed.”

And then it was like old times, two brothers who actually liked one another, talking about world affairs, women, work, and the weather as they shared a beer.

Then they were on the little porch, Pete on the swing, Tick on the chair, his feet propped up on the banister. “Tell me about the lady you’re going to marry.”

“She’s great, Tick. You’re going to like her. She’s grounded. I know she works for the State Department, but that’s all I know. She doesn’t talk about what she does. I don’t know if it’s need to know or she just isn’t comfortable talking about her job. She must be well paid because she has enough money to invest in our business. Her name is Sadie. Her real name is Serafina. She’s Italian. Mom would have loved her. We call and e-mail. But there are times where she’s off-line for weeks. She never gives me an explanation other than to say, ‘it’s job-related.’ I learned to accept it. I’ve known her for three years. She’s thirty-seven.”

“I’m happy for you, Pete. I mean that.”

“Do you want to talk about *it*?”

“No. It’s not time yet. Maybe that time will never come. What color were the roses you took to the cemetery?”

“Yellow and some pink ones for Emma. Daisies for Ricky. The monument is nice. Andy took care of that. A mother angel and two little ones.” His voice broke, and tears flooded his eyes. He swiped at them with the back of his hand.

Tick cringed. Everyone was doing what he should have done.

“Hey, let’s take a walk on the beach. Show me how much of this glorious paradise is yours.” Pete hopped off the swing and yanked at Tick’s arm, jerking him to his feet. Then they were in each other’s arms, hugging one another and pounding each other on the back.

“Sometimes life out-and-out sucks. It doesn’t mean it won’t ever get better, it just means you have to work harder at making it right. Hey, what about the bird? Do you have to put it in a cage?” Pete asked, hoping to drive the stricken look off his brother’s face.

“When did you get so smart? The bird is a free spirit. He just moved in one day and decided to stay. I don’t even remember what day or year it was. Suddenly, he was just there. We get along just fine, but he’s a tad salty.”

“When I was lying in a hospital doped to the eyeballs for my pain, I had a lot of time to reflect. A lot of time. Hey, I can tell when it’s going to rain within three hours. If my bar and grill goes bellyup, I can probably get a job as a weatherman. You always gotta look at the positive. You got a bed for me, or do I have to sleep on the floor?”

Tick doubled over laughing. “That is an accomplishment. Not to worry, I have one of those blowup beds that come in a sack, and the only reason I have it is Andy keeps saying he’s coming down here. Since he hates to fly, I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

Tick looked up at the star-filled night in time to see a shooting star flash across the sky. He wondered if it was an omen of things to come. A light breeze ruffled his hair

as he strode along. The ocean's warm water lapped at his feet and ankles. It was so soothing, he knew that if he ever left here, he would miss this nightly ritual.

A long time later, Pete said, "What the hell is *that*?" pointing to *that place*. "It looks like something you might see at the gates of hell."

Tick frowned. He hadn't realized they'd walked so far. A full moon rode high in the sky, outlining the enormous building that stood like a dark avenging something or other. "I have no idea. The village people refer to it as *that place* at the end of the beach. As far as I know, it's uninhabited. I never come this far on my nightly walks and usually I go the other way. I've never seen anyone around the place or on the beach, at least I haven't during the day. Though I thought I heard someone crying once, I'm sure it was an animal. At night I think someone comes and goes, not sure why, never really cared to find out. It was being completed when I was just coming out of my drunken stupor. I never really cared enough to inquire, and, besides, who would I ask? I can tell you one thing, it cost a bundle to build. That's for sure."

"Are you sure it's empty?"

"No, but I never see anyone. I hear voices late at night sometimes if I'm out walking. No boats coming in. I'd hear a motorboat. The Coast Guard rips by five or six times a day. Usually the same boat. I can tell by the sound of the engine. And, when they start to approach that thing, they throttle back, so it's my guess they're keeping their eye on it. In order to get there on foot, you have to go past my place. I never see any lights, so I just assume it was built by some drug lord who got caught, and the place just sits there now because everyone is afraid to go near it. No one wants to get caught up in anything drug-related or whatever goes on there during the night."

"What do *you* think, Tick?"

"You know what, Pete, I try not to think about it. I have enough of my own problems without worrying about an empty building and the Coast Guard keeping an eye on it."

"Does anyone check on it?" Pete asked.

"You mean aside from the Coast Guard? Maybe the DEA, the DOJ; hell, maybe ICE has an eye on that thing. Aside from all the drive-bys I've heard, no one else has been poking around, at least to my knowledge. Why are you so curious about an empty building?"

"You live just down the beach from it, Tick. Those drug people shoot first and ask questions later. I would think with your background, you'd be a bit more curious."

"You trying to spook me, Pete?"

"Hell yes, I'm trying to spook you. You need to keep your wits about you. Jesus, there's not a soul to be seen except for you and me. If no one checks on you, you could be shot dead, and no one would know but that damn parrot, and I doubt you've taught him how to call 911."

Tick turned around and started back the way they'd come. "I think we're both tired, and it's time to go to bed. If you like, we can check it out tomorrow in daylight."

"Yeah, let's do that. You're right, it's been a long day."

Chapter 2

Kate Rush stood in the middle of the filthy room as she strained to see outside through the louvered glass windows that were a quarter of the way open, the handles to close them long rusted. Outside, sheets of rain blasted the building in hard-driving whacks of sounds. The palm trees, nearly bent in half from the ninety-mile-an-hour gale-force winds, slapped at the building, adding to the deafening barrage of sound. Visibility was zero. And it was going to be dark soon.

There were few things in life that frightened Kate Rush and, while she wasn't exactly frightened at the moment, she was uneasy. She'd been through a hurricane before and hadn't liked it then. And she sure as hell didn't like it now. Uneasy because the moldy, smelly building was empty of furnishings, her contact was a no-show, and a hurricane was raging just inches from where she stood. There was no place to sit, no place to hide or take cover. She'd been leaning against one of the mildewed walls for over two hours as she waited for her contact to show up. Her hand crept inside her jacket on the left side. The comforting feel of the Sig Sauer *almost* wiped away the uneasy feeling.

Little storm *my ass*, she thought as she remembered Tyler's words when he had called to tell her to meet him. She'd mentioned the word *hurricane*, which he'd pooh-poohed, saying, "We get these little storms all the time. This is Florida. Get used to it, Agent Rush." As if she didn't know this. She'd spent her childhood and teen years living in Florida. Of course, schmuck that he was, he'd probably forgotten that small detail.

So, she'd packed her bags, driven to Phoenix, parked her car in the long-term lot at the airport, and flown to Miami, where she'd rented a car and driven here through a hurricane. The big question was, where in the hell was her handler, the macho Lawrence Tyler, who was to meet her two hours ago? Hopefully in a ditch somewhere, never to surface again. Or, maybe, washed away out to the Gulf, never to surface again. Or stranded on someone's roof fighting for his life from the raging waters, only to be swept away, never to surface again. *Oh, be still my heart.*

Kate hated Lawrence Tyler. All the agents who worked under Lawrence Tyler hated him. If he threw himself a going-away party, no one would attend. Tyler was a sneaky, slick, obnoxious glory hound who used his agents to make a name for himself. He was the show horse, and the rest of them were the workhorses. She knew in her gut this assignment was a payback for the last confrontation she'd had with the nattily dressed special agent. She'd won that round, and Tyler had been transferred from the Phoenix office to Florida. But Tyler had a long arm, he knew how to kiss ass, and he had an all-powerful protector in his father, who just happened to be Florida's governor.

Kate fished around in her go-bag until she found the powerful Maglite she was never without. The bright light didn't help her mood. She shifted from one foot to the other as she listened to the storm outside. She ran the phone call from Tyler over and over in her mind. Tyler had said everything was NTK. Obviously, while he wanted her

here, he wasn't about to tell her why until they were face-to-face. "Need to know, my ass," she muttered for the second time.

The long and short of it was that, for the snitch fee, one weasel had probably whispered something about some drug deal or something else equally rotten that was about to go down into another weasel's ear, who then whispered it into Tyler's ear, who then hit the ground running without checking the details—his usual MO.

As Kate leaned against the wall and listened to the hurricane outside, she wondered why she'd agreed to return to Florida after she'd spent twenty years of her life living elsewhere. She'd been days away from resigning and going to work in the private sector. Her resignation was typed and printed and in her purse. She'd given the DEA twelve years of her life, and because of people like Lawrence Tyler, she wasn't where she wanted to be. That was the bottom line. That, and the money sucked. She could make twice as much as she earned now with less danger to her person in the private sector. She had no social life, and at thirty-eight, her biological clock was ticking faster than she'd like; it was time to make some hard and fast decisions and stick to them.

Yet here she was. One last shot? Her swan song? Maybe one last time to get into Tyler's face? More than likely agreeing to come here was the stupidest thing she'd ever done. Not that she'd had much of a choice. The only way she could have avoided this assignment was to have handed in her resignation. Then again, maybe it was the fact that Tyler had said he might lend her out to the Coast Guard. *Why me?* she'd asked herself a hundred times since leaving Phoenix. She smiled at the thought that maybe Tyler planned on drowning her in the Gulf. An evil smile twisted her lips. He could try. Kate shined the beam of the light onto her wrist. Tyler was five hours late. "Which just goes to prove," she muttered, "if you want the job done and done right, send a woman to do it."

Two hours later, Kate's legs gave out, and she slumped to the floor. Not knowing if there were any rats in the abandoned building, she opted to keep the high-powered flashlight on, knowing she had spare batteries in her go-bag. Eventually, her eyes closed, and she dozed. From time to time she'd jerk to wakefulness to listen to the storm, which gave no indication it was abating. With no sleep the night before and traveling cross-country, she finally drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Hours later, Kate woke to an eerie quiet. Something had wakened her. Her hand immediately went to the gun in her shoulder holster. She looked around at the brilliant sunlight blasting through the louvered windows to see what it was that had pulled her out of her deep sleep. She crab walked, one eye on the doorway and the other on what she could see through the windows. She blinked at the elegant palms that were uprooted and piled in a pyre as though a bonfire were imminent. Crumpled aluminum lawn chairs were scattered over the narrow stretch of beach. A child's skateboard stood upright in the sand. An ice chest, the lid hanging drunkenly from one of the still-standing palmettos, lay on its side. She craned her neck and saw a motorcycle farther down the beach, the front wheel in the water, the back wheel buried in the sand.

Kate wheeled around; the Sig Sauer in her hand was steady, the safety off, when the door opened. Disgust whipped across her face when she saw Lawrence Tyler standing in the doorway. "A little late, aren't you?" she snapped. "Fifteen hours to be exact." Her hand dropped to her side, but she didn't holster her gun.