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First Family

Written by David Baldacci

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David Baldacci

first family

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P R O L O G U E

HER FOOTSTEPS were unhurried. Down the street, making one left, a two-block straightaway, and then a slight right. There was a pause at one intersection, a longer stop at another. Just from habit, really. The radar in her head showed no danger and her pace picked up. There were people around though the hour was late, but they never saw her. She seemed to ease by like a breeze, felt but never seen.

The three-story cinderblock building was right where it had always been, stuck between a high-rise on the left and a concrete shell on the right. There was security of course, but it was basic, not the best. A typical package, it would slow down a journeyman for a few minutes, a pro for much less.

She selected a window in the back of the building instead of breaking in the front door. These entry points were almost never wired. She popped the swivel latch, slid up the window, and wriggled through. The motion detector was handled with ease; she was humming as she did it. Yet it was a nervous hum. She was getting close to it, what she was here for.

And it scared the hell out of the lady. Not that she would ever admit that.

The file cabinet was locked. She cracked a smile.

You're really making me work here, Horatio.

Five seconds later the drawer slid open. Her fingers skimmed over the file tabs. Alphabetical. Which left her smack in the middle of the pack, something she'd never considered herself to be. Her fingers stopped skipping and curled around the file. It was a thick one; she'd never doubted it would be. She obviously wasn't a mere

ten-page head case. A lot more trees had fallen because of her. She pulled it free and glanced at the copier on the worktable.

Okay, here we go.

Horatio Barnes was her shrink, her mind guru. He'd convinced her to enter a psych hospital a while back. The only mystery that voluntary incarceration had solved was one that did not involve her problems at all. Later, good old Horatio had hypnotized her, taking her back to her childhood, as any shrink worth his sheepskin invariably does. The session apparently had revealed many things. The only problem was that Horatio had decided not to fill her in on what she'd told him. She was here to correct that little oversight.

She slid the pages in the feeder and hit the button. One by one the events of her life whooshed through the heart of the Xerox machine. As each fresh piece of paper was catapulted into the catch bin her heart rate seemed to increase by the same single-digit measure.

She put the original file back in the drawer, popped a rubber band around her copy, and held it in both hands. Constituting only a few pounds, its weight still threatened to sink her right through the floor. Out the same way her boots made a clunking sound as they kissed asphalt. She walked calmly back to her SUV, a breeze again, invisible. Nightlife going on all around here; they never saw her.

She climbed in her ride, revved the engine. She was ready to go. Her hands played over the steering wheel. She wanted to drive, always loved to rip her eight cylinders down some new road to where she didn't know. Yet looking through the windshield, she didn't want new, she desperately wanted things to be the way they were.

She glanced at the file; saw the name on the first page.

Michelle Maxwell.

For a moment it didn't seem to be her. In those pages was someone else's life, secrets, torments. Issues. The dreaded word. It seemed so innocuous. Issues. Everyone had issues. Yet those six letters had always seemed to define her, breaking her down into some simple formula that still no one seemed capable of understanding.

The SUV idled, kicking carbon into an atmosphere already bloated with it. A few raindrops smacked her windshield. She could see people start to pick up their step as they sensed the approaching

downpour. A minute later, it hit. She felt the wind buffet her sturdy SUV. A spear of lightning was followed by a long burp of thunder. The storm's intensity forecast its brevity. Such violence could not be sustained for long; it used up too much energy far too fast.

She couldn't help herself. She cut the engine, picked up the pages, ripped off the rubber band, and started to read. General info came first. Birth date, gender, education, and employment. She turned the page. And then another. Nothing she didn't know already, not surprising considering this was all about her.

On the fifth page of typed notes, her hands began to tremble. The heading was "Childhood—Tennessee." She swallowed once and then again, but couldn't clear the dryness. She coughed and then hacked, but that only made it worse. The swells of saliva had solidified in her mouth, just like they had when she'd nearly killed herself on the water rowing to an Olympic silver medal that meant less and less to her with each passing day.

She grabbed a bottle of G2 and poured it down her throat, some of it spilling on the seat and the pages. She cursed, scrubbed at the paper, trying to dry it. And then it tore, nearly in half. This made tears creep to her eyes, she was not sure why. She pulled the rent paper close to her face though her eyesight was perfect. Perfect, but she still couldn't read the script. She looked out the windshield and couldn't see anything there either, so hard was the fall of rain. The streets were empty now, the people having scattered at the first bite of water bent nearly horizontal by the wind.

She looked back at the pages but there was nothing there either. The words were there of course, but she couldn't see them.

"You can do this, Michelle. You can handle this." Her words were low, sounded forced, hollow.

She refocused.

"Childhood, Tennessee," she began. She was six years old again and living in Tennessee with her mother and father. Her dad was a police officer on the way up; her mom, was, well, her mom. Her four older brothers had grown and gone. It was just little Michelle left at home. With them.

She was doing fine now. The words were clear, her memories also

crystallizing, as she crept back to that isolated wedge of personal history. When she turned the page and her gaze flickered over the date on the top it was as though the lightning outside had somehow grounded right into her. A billion volts of pain, a shriek of anguish you could actually see, and feel, as it pierced her.

She looked out the window, she didn't know why. The streets were still empty; the rain now racing to earth so hard the drops seemed to be connected, like trillions of strings of beads.

Yet as she squinted through the downpour she saw that the streets weren't empty. The tall man stood there, no umbrella, no overcoat. He was soaked right through, his shirt and pants melted to his skin. He stared at her and she did the same right back. There was not fear or hatred or sympathy in his look as he eyed her through the walls of water. It was, she finally concluded, an underlying sadness that easily matched her own despair.

She turned the key, put the SUV in drive, and hit the gas. As she raced past, she glanced at him as another thrust of lightning cracked and briefly made night into day. Both their images seemed solidified in that blast of energy, each of their gazes frozen onto the other.

Sean King never attempted to speak and didn't try to stop her as she roared by. He just stood there, his waterlogged hair in his face, yet his eyes as big and invasive as ever she'd seen them. They frightened her. They seemed to want to pull her soul right out of her.

An instant later he was gone as she turned the corner and slowed. Her window came down. The bundle of pages was hurled out, landing squarely in a Dumpster.

A moment later her SUV was lost in the punishing face of the storm.

CHAPTER

I

BIRTHDAY BALLOONS and submachine guns. Elegant forks digging into creamy goodies while toughened fingers coiled around curved metal trigger guards. Gleeful laughter as gifts were unwrapped floated into the air alongside the menacing *thump-thump* of an arriving chopper's downward prop wash.

The facility was officially designated by the Defense Department as Naval Support Facility Thurmont, yet most Americans knew it as Camp David. Under either name, it was not a typical venue for a preteen's birthday party. A former recreation camp built by the WPA during the Great Depression, it was turned into the presidential retreat and named the U.S.S. Shangri-La by FDR, because it was essentially replacing the presidential yacht. It had acquired its current and far less exotic moniker from Dwight Eisenhower, who named it after his grandson.

The hundred-and-thirty-acre property was rustic and had many outdoor pursuits, including tennis courts, hiking trails, and exactly one practice hole for presidential golfers. The birthday party was in the bowling center. A dozen kids were in attendance along with appropriate chaperones. They were all understandably excited about being on hallowed ground where the likes of Kennedy and Reagan had trod.

The chief chaperone and planner of the event was Jane Cox. It was a role she was accustomed to because Jane Cox was married to Dan Cox, also known as "Wolfman," which made her the First Lady of the United States. It was a role she handled with charm, dignity, and the necessary elements of both humor and cunning.

While it was true that the president of the United States was the world's ultimate juggler of tasks, it was also a fact that the First Lady, traditionally, was no slouch in that department either.

For the record, she bowled a ninety-seven without gutter bumpers while wearing patriotic red, white, and blue bowling shoes. She clamped her shoulder-length brown hair back into a ponytail and carried out the cake herself. She led the singing of "Happy Birthday" for her niece, Willa Dutton. Willa was small for her age, with dark hair. She was a bit shy but immensely bright and wonderfully engaging when one got to know her. Though she would never admit it publicly of course, Willa was Jane's favorite niece.

The First Lady didn't eat any cake; Jane was watching her figure since the rest of the country, and indeed the world, was too. She'd put on a few pounds since entering the White House. And a few pounds after that on the hell-on-a-plane they called the reelection campaign her husband was currently engaged in. She was five-eight in flats, tall enough that her clothes hung well on her. Her husband was an inch shy of six feet and thus she never wore heels high enough to make him look shorter by comparison. Perception did matter and people liked their leaders taller and more robust than the rest of the population.

Her face was in decent shape, she thought, as she snatched a look in a mirror. It held the marks and creases of a woman who'd given birth multiple times and endured many political races. No human being could emerge unblemished after that. Whatever frailty you possessed the other side would find and stick a crowbar in to lever every useful scrap out. The press still referred to her as attractive. Some went out on a limb and described her as possessing movie-star good looks. Maybe once, she knew, but not anymore. She was definitely in the "character actress" stage of her career now. Still, she had progressed a long way from the days when firm cheekbones and a firmer backside were high on her list of priorities.

As the party continued, Jane would occasionally glance out the window as serious-looking Marines marched by on patrol, weapons at the ready. The Secret Service had of course traveled up here with her, but the Navy officially ran Camp David. Thus all person-

nel, from the carpenters to the groundskeepers, were sailors. And the bulk of the security duties fell to the permanent barracks of Marines deployed here. In truth, Camp David was better protected than 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, though you wouldn't find many who would admit that on the record.

Security wasn't uppermost in Jane's mind as she watched in delight while Willa blew out the dozen candles on her two-tier cake and then helped hand out slices. Jane moved forward and hugged Willa's mother, Pam Dutton, who was tall and thin with curly red hair.

"She looks happy, doesn't she?" said Jane to Pam.

"Always happy around her aunt Jane," replied Pam, patting her sister-in-law's back affectionately. As the two women stepped apart Pam said, "I can't thank you enough for letting us have the party here. I know it's not, well, it's not the norm, what with Dan, I mean the president not even being here."

Not being a blood relation, Pam still found it uncomfortable calling her brother-in-law by his first name, whereas the president's siblings, and Jane herself, often called him Danny.

Jane smiled. "The law provides for joint ownership of all federal property between the president and the First Lady. And just so you know, I still balance our personal checkbook. Danny's not that good with numbers."

Pam said, "It was still very thoughtful." She looked at her daughter. "Next year she's a teenager. My oldest a teenager, hard to believe."

Pam had three children. Willa, John, who was ten, and Colleen, seven. Jane also had three children, but all of them were older. The youngest was a nineteen-year-old son in college and her daughter was a nurse at a hospital in Atlanta. In between was another young man still trying to figure out what to do with his life.

The Coxes had had their family early. Jane was still only forty-eight while her husband had just celebrated his fiftieth.

Jane said, "Based on my own experience, boys will mess with your heart and girls with your head."

"I'm not sure my head's ready for Willa."

"Keep the lines of communication open. Know who her friends

are. *Gently* insert yourself into everything that's going on around her but pick your battles cautiously. Sometimes she'll pull back. That's only natural, but once you've laid the ground rules it'll be okay. She's very intelligent. She'll get it pretty quickly. She'll be glad of the interest."

"Sounds like good advice, Jane. I can always count on you."

"I'm sorry Tuck couldn't make it."

"He's supposed to be back tomorrow. You *know* your brother."

She shot an anxious glance at Pam. "It'll be okay. Trust me."

"Sure, right," the woman said quietly, her gaze on happy Willa.

As Pam walked off, Jane focused on Willa. The girl was a curious mix of maturity coupled with frequent flashes of the preteen she still was. She could write better than some adults and discourse on subjects that would befuddle many folks far her senior. And she possessed a curiosity about things that was not limited to issues common to her age group. Yet if one watched her, one would see that she giggled impulsively, used "like" and "wow" liberally, and was just starting to discover boys with impulses of both disgust and attraction typical of the preadolescent girl. That reaction to the opposite sex would not change much when Willa became an adult, Jane well knew. Except the stakes would be far higher.

The party ended, goodbyes said. Jane Cox stepped on board the chopper. It wasn't designated as Marine One because the president wasn't riding on it. Today, it was strictly ferrying the B-team, Jane knew. And that was perfectly fine with her. In private, she and her husband were equals. In public, she walked the obligatory two steps behind.

She strapped in and the door was swung shut and secured by a uniformed Marine. Four stoic Secret Service agents shared the ride with her. They lifted off and a few moments later she was staring down at Camp David, or the "Birdcage," as the Secret Service had code-named the retreat, where it was cradled in the Catoctin Mountain Park. The chopper turned south and thirty minutes from now she would land safely on the lawn of the White House.

In her hand she held a note that Willa had given her before they'd left the party. It was a thank-you letter. She smiled. It was not un-

usual that Willa already had one prepared. The note was written in a mature voice and said all the right things. Indeed, some of Jane's staff could have taken a page from her young niece's etiquette handbook.

Jane folded the letter and put it away. The rest of the day and night would not be nearly as pleasant. Official duty called. The life of a First Lady, she had quickly learned, was one of a frenzied perpetual motion machine buffered often by bursts of tedium.

The chopper's skids touched grass. Since the president wasn't on board there was little fanfare as she made her way to the White House. Her husband was in his working office near the ceremonial oval one. She had made few demands on him when she'd agreed to stand by him in his run for the nation's highest office. One of them was that she could enter his inner sanctum without announcement, without being on the official visitor's list.

"I'm not a visitor," she'd told him at the time. "I'm your wife."

She approached the president's "body man," officially known as the Special Assistant to the President. He was at that moment looking through the peephole in the door to the Oval Office prior to going in and breaking up a meeting that was running behind. He was the person charged with keeping her husband on schedule and functioning at maximum efficiency. He did so by rising before dawn and devoting every moment of his waking life to whatever the man needed, often by anticipating these needs even before the president. In any place other than the White House, Jane thought, the "body man" would be simply called a wife.

"Get 'em out, Jay, because I'm coming in," she told him. He moved with alacrity to do just this. He had never once "peeped" her. And never would if he wanted to keep his job.

She spent a few minutes with the president and told him about the birthday party, before going to their living quarters to freshen up and change her clothes for a reception she was hosting. As darkness fell a few hours later she returned to her "official" home, tugged off her shoes, and drank a much-needed cup of hot tea.

Twenty miles away, newly twelve-year-old Willa Dutton screamed.