

# CHAPTER 1

“Can you two keep it down out there?!” Stephen shouted into the night sky. He slammed the sliding window above the kitchen sink shut, causing it to shudder violently in its frame. It was late and his two Rottweilers were driving him insane. They were usually the first ones planted on the couch after dinner, but in an out-of-character twist the two had insisted on being let outside tonight. They had squealed and scratched at the back door: there was no choice but to set them free or risk having to do extensive repairs in the morning. Since then, the pair had been barking incessantly and the sound was beginning to reverberate in Stephen’s skull. Through the glass, he could see the animals’ faded outlines. They were running around like rabid beasts. He wondered what had gotten into normally docile and lazy pair.

What Stephen was also unaware of was the fact that, before the night was through, he would be dead.

He looked down at his hands. His palms felt leathery and coarse after a good twenty minutes battling the crusted, burnt edges of tonight’s lasagna dish in the soapy water. A few lackluster scrubs later, he decided to dump it back in to let it soak overnight and commenced feeling around the bottom of the sink for cutlery – his absolute nemesis in the process of washing up. He cursed under his breath and a chill of disgust ran through him as morsels of food and grease brushed past his fingers, like little creatures lurking in the deep. There was a time when he had more patience for performing mundane tasks at the end of a long day, but lately his twenty-eight-year haul of swinging the courtroom gavel had begun to feel like it was deliberately dragging his exhausted soul to the depths of perdition. And it was showing. Patience wasn’t

only a virtue – it was also a critically endangered species in the wilderness that was Judge Stephen Thatcher’s mind. Retirement was only three months away but for a man at the end of his professional rope, it might as well have been three years. It was all he thought of and it couldn’t come soon enough.

“They’re probably just after that squirrel again.” Stella’s velvety voice came from the living room around the corner. She was perched on the sofa where she could habitually be found after supper, hidden behind her horn-rimmed glasses and a Dean Koontz novel. “No bother, Hun,” she continued. “Why don’t you come and sit down?”

She had always been the coolant to his fire, ever since that fateful summer day when their paths crossed on Harvard University’s main campus. They had been close to graduating and were astounded that they had never met before. Both were natives of the same suburb in Toronto and had traversed the grounds of Harvard in a parallel fashion for at least three years. They had walked through corresponding hallways, sat through identical lectures, and frequented the same cafeteria, all without fate ever arranging even a glance between them. That was until they reached for the same empty seat in the Widener Library just across from the Tercentenary Theatre early one Wednesday morning. The connection had been instant, and the pair ended up spending all afternoon and most of that night comparing notes and discussing politics, the law and love in a coffee shop across the road. Several dates in quick succession ensued and here they were, forty-one years, three children and six grandchildren later. They had accomplished much together, both personally and career-wise, and were looking forward to easing into a version of their lives that they had built from the ground up and could now enjoy to the very fullest.

Stephen gladly accepted his wife’s offer and dried his hands on the towel hanging from the edge of the sink. Just then, a flicker of movement caught his eye through the kitchen window. He peered through, almost pressing his face up to the glass. His eyes squinted as he saw what

appeared to be a round, red shape floating next to the Silver Maple tree in the distance. The lighting outside was dim and hazy, so he reached for the exterior light switch, flicked it and returned his gaze towards the window, studying the scene.

Nothing.

*Must've been one of the mutts*, he thought as he snuffed the light and strolled into the living room. He gave Stella a peck on the cheek and flopped into his chocolate brown La-Z-Boy recliner, making it creak and moan. It was worn out and almost as old as he was, but he refused to give it up, much to his wife's protestation. She had the record player on and was humming along to Bill Withers paying tribute to "Grandma's Hands" in his smooth baritone. The judge unfolded the newspaper next to his steaming coffee mug and scanned the front-page articles. A famous tech magnate was getting divorced and the Russian President was unleashing yet another feeble attempt at PR work. Neither of these stories surprised him. Stephen grunted and flipped to the sports pages.

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One a murky night in an affluent neighborhood a white van pulled up to the corner of a quiet street. It had blacked out windows and the faded decal on the sides read *Frank's Motor Repairs*. The van's engine and headlights were turned off, abruptly ending the flow of steam exiting the exhaust. Then the driver's side door opened and a male figure wearing dark clothing and a red ski mask exited. He mounted the sidewalk, crossed the front lawn of a large Swiss-style house and hopped over the six-foot perimeter wall that divided the front and backyards without making a single sound. He skirted his way around the house then advanced through the back garden, negotiating a scattering of toys on the perfectly manicured grass: a girl's pink bicycle

with white ribbons bursting from the handlebars, several dolls dressed in the same purple cheerleader outfits and a plastic replica of an M-16 Assault rifle with a bright red muzzle that had a sticker attached reading *RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD*. Frost had begun to form on the abandoned playthings giving them an odd glistening appearance in the faint moonlight.

The figure made his way to the rear of the lawn and approached the wall that bordered the backyard of the adjoining property. He could hear dogs barking and howling. Big ones and by the sounds of their footfall, they were getting closer. He boosted himself off a small nearby chair, mounted the wall and drew a handgun and a silencer from his pocket. He then proceeded to join the two together with the fluency of an expert hand. The dogs were right below him now, growling and snarling with strings of saliva flying from their exposed teeth. They jumped up repeatedly, snapping at the dark figure on the wall, but he was just out of reach.

Then, four muffled sounds rang into the night. The two canines went quiet.

The figure glanced around to see if the abrupt end to the noise had drawn interest. When he was satisfied that it hadn't, he dropped down onto the soft soil next to his kills. Twenty meters ahead of him was a sizable colonial style house with wooden shutters, a deck crowded with outdoor furniture and a flat, round barbeque pit made from cast iron. A weathered tire swing was hanging from the lowest branch of a nearby tree, gently ebbing and flowing in the cool winter breeze.

In the center of the stately home was a large window, revealing an older man elbow deep in the kitchen sink. The dark-clad figure cocked his weapon and stepped forward through the garden, crushing bright yellow dahlias under his boot heels.

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Stephen stood in front of the bathroom mirror carefully attempting to remove one of his contact lenses when a blood-curdling scream came from the kitchen.

“Stella!” he yelled as he ran down the hallway in his boxer shorts, his gown flowing behind him like a cape. As he made the turn into the kitchen doorway, he caught a glimpse of the butt of a gun smashing into his face. The blow shorted out his eyesight and sent a sharp pain from the bridge of his nose to the back of his head. The judge went down, crashing straight through a scanty two-seater table in the middle of the room where he’d had this breakfast nearly every morning for the last twenty years. His ears rang as he moaned and rubbed his eyes to get a semblance of vision back. Footsteps approached from an unknown direction. Trying to get a look at his attacker, Stephen swung his head from side to side. Warm blood ran into his eyes from a gash right between his eyebrows. He blinked ferociously and wiped at his face but only muddled images of a dark figure standing next to him came through.

“Where is she?!” Stephen screamed and blood-tinged saliva sprayed from his mouth.

The figure loomed over him, grabbed his hair, jerked his head backwards and landed a punch on his right cheek. Stephen heard a cracking noise coming from inside his head and he caught a whiff of the leather glove the figure was wearing. It smelled of sweat and damp animal hide. A few seconds passed before he partially regained his sight. He spotted a paring knife on the floor that used to reside on the destroyed breakfast table. Gathering all his might, he lunged for it. The knife found its way into his left hand and he spun around on the floor, landing flat on his back. The figure brought a heavy foot down onto Stephen’s shoulder in an effort to stop him from using the knife, but his arm sprung free, and he reached up, jamming the small blade squarely into the attacker’s upper thigh.

A stifled cry came from the figure’s ski mask, and he recoiled backwards, losing his footing and landing with his back against the refrigerator door. Stephen jumped up and ran at full tilt, heading towards the cabinet behind the mahogany cocktail bar in the corner of the living room.

It was where his Remington was kept. His heart was pounding through his chest, and he could hear his lungs heaving and throat wheezing from swallowing blood. Once ducked behind the bar he flung the small door open to reveal a black gun safe with an electronic keypad. His hands trembled uncontrollably, and after a third attempt the little red light next to the numbers went green and the safe door clicked ajar, opening just enough to see the gleam from the barrel of the revolver inside. He wiped blood from his face, retrieved the gun and checked if it was loaded. The back of six unspent bullet casings greeted him and he felt a miniscule sense of control return to his psyche.

The house was silent aside from his own breathing and the monotonous tick-tick-tick coming from the antique grandfather clock in the hallway. With the gun in a tremoring death grip, Stephen slowly emerged from behind the countertop. The room was dark and through his blood-misted vision he could barely discern anything beyond the outlines of the objects he was looking at. Across the living room was a beam of light emanating from the kitchen doorway. Stephen stayed low and forced himself to put one foot in front of the other. He knew he had to find Stella. She hadn't been in the kitchen during the half-a-second glimpse he got before he was sucker-punched.

*Maybe she got out already, ran across the road to Richard and Deedee's and called the cops, he thought. Fuckin' better be.*

Stephen moved toward the kitchen entrance. He leaned around the corner and saw the smashed table, blood on the floor and a large dent in the bottom door of the fridge where the attacker had landed. There was no sign of Stella or the dark figure. He turned left and headed back down the hallway toward the bedrooms, planting his feet as lightly as possible on the thick, wool carpet. On a small dressing table which usually housed their keys and cell phones, his fingers fumbled around on the surface, hoping and praying to all manner of deities that he

would find either his or Stella's phone. His prayers went unanswered – the man in the mask must have taken them.

“Stephen!” Stella, from the main bedroom. Her voice was shrill and it raised the hair on the back of his neck. “Run, Stephen! Don't come in here pl—”

He heard the sound of something hard connecting with a soft object and it chilled the judge's veins as his wife was silenced by force. A combination of panic and rage that he had never felt before gripped his insides and twisted them into a barbed entanglement of horror. He held the Remington at arm's length and charged into the bedroom but was stopped in his tracks by the sight before him. Stella was lying down on the bed, shivering, with tears streaming down her bruised face which was contorted in fear. The dark figure with the red ski mask stood next to her, facing Stephen with the silencer of his firearm pressed closely to Stella's temple. For a moment, they just stood there, staring at each other. Stephen's quivering hand was sweating around the revolver's handle, but he knew there was nothing he could do. The dark figure reached out to the judge with his free hand, palm upwards and flicked his fingers in a “hand it over” gesture. The judge grit his teeth and pulled the hammer back on his gun. But the figure shoved the front end of his weapon harder onto Stella's temple, making her head bob unnaturally. She let out a desperate sob. “Just go, Stephen!” she screamed through her tears.

But he couldn't. The message was clear.

The figure walked over and snatched the gun from his hand. After securing it to his waistband, he shoved the judge onto the bed next to his wife. They embraced, crying and exchanging repeated “I love you's”. The figure walked over to the foot of the bed and stared at the couple in silence. Stephen looked up at him, raised a pleading hand and said, “Please ... *Please* ... Just let her go.”

The dark figure raised his weapon and pulled the trigger six times.