

CHAPTER ONE

MESSAGE SENT

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 1993

Benjamin Davis, like Nashville's historic Printer's Alley, was feeling and looking beaten down. At only thirty-eight, he was much younger than the Alley, a landmark for almost two hundred years. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it formed the respectable center of the Christian publishing world, producing Bibles, pamphlets, and the classics. But during Prohibition, a dozen speakeasies sprang up, offering bathtub gin and illegal gambling.

Today the Alley houses the city's sleaziest clubs, where stripper poles have replaced the printing presses. Yet the same turquoise iron archway marks its entrance, and tourists still snap photos of loved ones standing under it. The mouth of the Alley is adjacent to the rear of old Steine's Department Store and the law office of Benjamin Abraham Davis Esquire.

The brick building housing his office was the only respectable edifice left on the Alley. The sign etched in stone above his entrance read "Steine's Department Store: Employees' Entrance Only." Most buildings bore neon signs of naked women, poker hands, or whisky bottles.

The building was empty at 6:00 a.m., and Davis relished the solitude. His daily morning routine afforded him a solid two hours of uninterrupted work. With neither the phones nor his staff to distract him, he could complete his daily dictation, thus freeing the rest of his day for meetings with clients, answering telephone calls, and going to court.

His office occupied the entire eighth floor, which had previously been the shoe department. Oak-framed, calf-high mirrors ran along the bottoms of the corridor walls, and as he glanced down, he noted that his black loafers could use a shine.

Just as he entered his office, the phone rang. When he picked up, he heard heavy breathing and then a click. He was glad it was a wrong number. He needed his morning cup of coffee before having to deal with anyone.

Davis placed his new calfskin briefcase on his secretary Bella's desk. Running his hand over the ultra-soft leather, he admired his gold-embossed initials, BAD. The briefcase was a recent gift from his brother for serving as his best man. It was beautiful, but even better it contained a check for \$50,000 payable to Benjamin Davis.

On his way down the hall, he glanced in the mirror on the back of the kitchen door and frowned at his reflection. He'd gained twenty pounds in the last six months, and his potbelly was becoming more noticeable, despite his tailor's best efforts. Davis shook his head in disgust and wondered what he was doing to himself. The job was stressful, and he coped by eating.

Coffee cup in hand, he sat down at his desk covered with piles of files. He had to get back to the Plainview cases. He glanced at a draft response in the Rosie Malone case and made notes in the margin. Rosie Malone died unnecessarily at Plainview Community Hospital.

A firm knock at the door startled him. The knocking got louder and more persistent as he walked toward the door. "I'm coming. I'm coming." Annoyed by his visitor's impatience and the interruption of his morning's privacy, Davis was prepared to give the visitor a piece of his mind. But he didn't have the chance.

As he opened the door, the butt of a shotgun struck him square in the nose. He heard his nose break, and he felt blood spew from his nostrils. The blow staggered him, and it was all he could do to remain upright.

"What the fuck?" Davis yelled as he tasted blood.

Two men dressed in blue overalls burst in, and Davis knew he would never forget their faces. They looked like a modern-day Laurel and Hardy. Davis couldn't see but sensed the presence of a third man.

The thinner assailant didn't waste time. He smacked Davis across the face with the stock of his gun. The hammers of the shotgun caught flesh, cutting Davis's lips. The flow of blood increased to a spurting gusher. This blow knocked Davis off his feet, and he fell backward over an end table, shattering the new Waterford lamp his parents had given him for his birthday.

For a big man Hardy moved quickly, straddled Davis, and placed two-inch black electrical tape across Davis's mouth. Having his mouth taped and his nose broken made breathing difficult, and Davis slipped to the edge of consciousness. His sandy hair was a bit long for the 1990s, a throwback to the 1970s, and for good measure Hardy grabbed Davis's hair and banged his head on the floor.

Davis's thoughts drifted to the television westerns of his childhood. John Wayne and Clint Eastwood knew how to take a punch. They would have fought back. Davis knew he wasn't the Duke or even Dirty Harry.

He lay on the carpet as Hardy began to kick him. Like a possum, Davis curled into a fetal position, praying for some respite. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the third man leaning against Bella's desk, watching. He couldn't focus on the uninvolved observer because both Laurel and Hardy were now kicking him with their steel-toed boots, cracking his ribs. Then the fat Hardy thug used his heel to stomp on and dislocate Davis's left shoulder.

The thugs began to laugh, taking joy in the pain they were inflicting. Their

laughs were the first sounds the bastards made. Davis was entirely at their mercy, and he was well aware that if they wanted him dead, he could do nothing to stop them. The thought of being completely helpless made Davis dizzy and nauseous at the same time. His mind drifted to his beautiful wife and his two adorable children. He desperately wanted to see them again.

Laurel and Hardy then turned to Bella's desk, grabbed papers, and scattered them around the room. Hardy picked up the calfskin briefcase and used it to strike Davis in the head. On the third blow, the brass lock cut Davis's cheek. As Hardy lifted the case to take another swing, Davis could see his own blood staining his new gift.

I'm no victim of a robbery, thought Davis.

The clang of Bella's file cabinet drawers opening and closing told him that they weren't searching for anything. Davis then understood the reason for this attack. These bastards were sending him a message: get out of Plainview. *Could I have avoided this if I had not met Dr. Laura Patel?*

Davis concentrated on staying alert. He heard something hit the floor next to him. It was his favorite family photo. His wife, Liza, and his two children, eight-year-old Caroline and five-year-old Jake, dressed in ski clothing were smiling up at him. Davis's twelve-year marriage was a solid one, and his wife had gotten used to his long hours and absences from the family—which of course didn't mean that she was happy for him to be gone so much.

The third man strode over and ground his heel onto the picture. As Davis heard the glass and picture frame shatter, he started to cry.

"Life's a very fragile thing," the third man muttered.

The third man bent down, lifting the briefcase. Davis noticed a T-rex dinosaur tattoo with fiery yellow eyes on the man's right forearm. T-rex brought the briefcase down hard, and Davis descended into darkness.