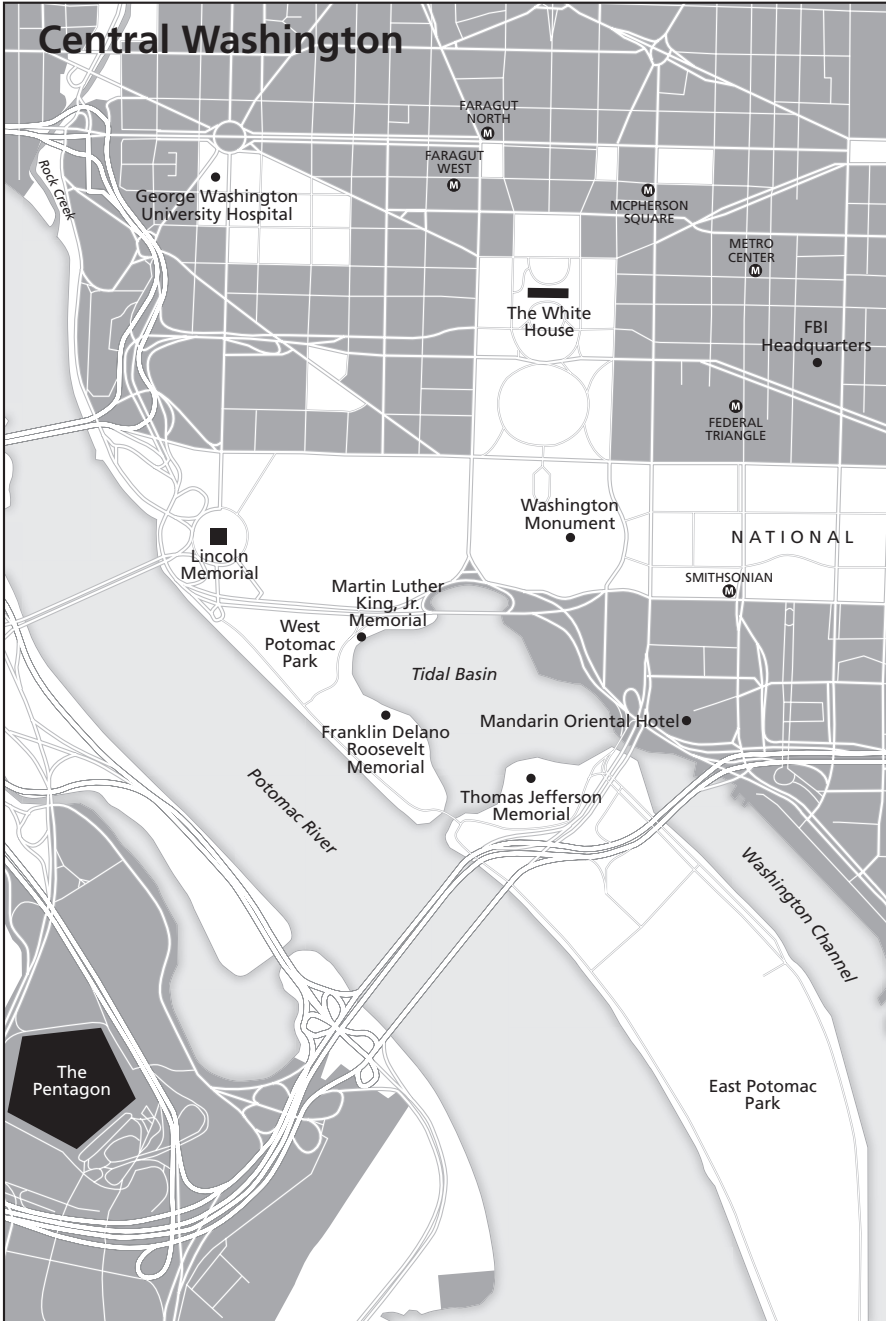
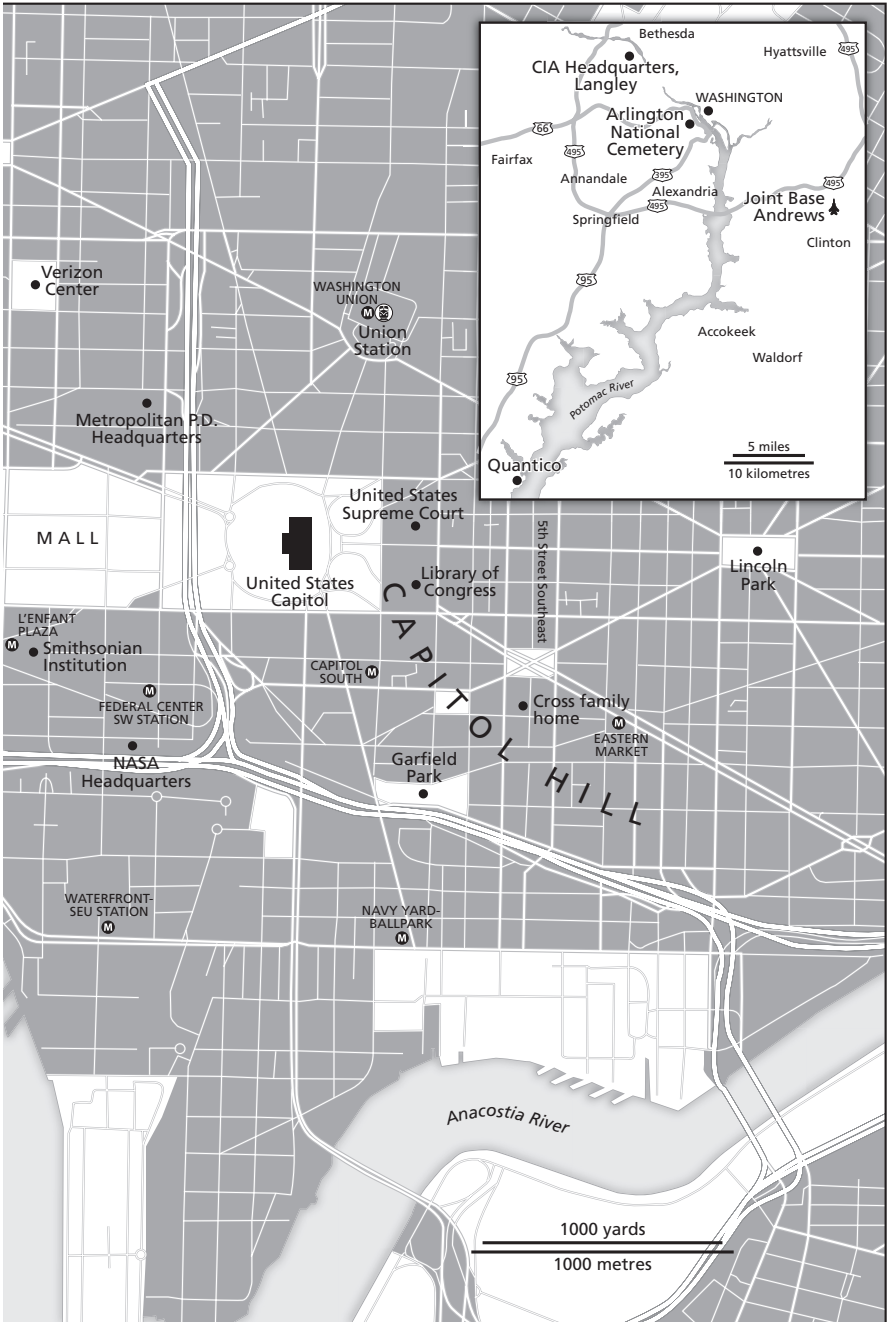


Central Washington





Verizon Center

Metropolitan P.D. Headquarters

WASHINGTON UNION
Union Station

United States Supreme Court

MALL

United States Capitol

Library of Congress

Lincoln Park

L'ENFANT PLAZA
Smithsonian Institution

FEDERAL CENTER SW STATION

NASA Headquarters

CAPITOL SOUTH

Garfield Park

Cross family home

EASTERN MARKET

WATERFRONT-SEU STATION

NAVY YARD-BALLPARK

Anacostia River

1000 yards

1000 metres

5 miles

10 kilometres

ONE

THE REAR DOOR to St. Anthony's church had been left open. *Exactly as I had been promised.* John Sampson and I eased in through the dimly lit sacristy, the room where the priests dressed for services and where they stored the altar wine, the hymnals, and the vestments.

"Sugar, I hope we don't have to shoot some dude in a church," Sampson said in a stage whisper. "Your Nana'd be predicting me for a slot in the fire."

"Especially if you pulled the trigger in church tonight."

"Not funny, Alex."

"Who's laughing, John? If you shot someone in a church on Christmas Eve and I didn't stop

James Patterson

you, Nana Mama would be signing *me* up for a slot right next to you in the big burn.”

We made our way along a short, narrow hallway that led to the darkened apse and the altar itself. We stayed in the hall, looking out. Except for some flickering votives, some dim overheads, and a hanging candle near the altar table, there was no light in the church.

There couldn't have been more than three or four people in the place. An old woman clicking her rosary beads, a homeless guy napping in the front pew, an older man reading a prayer book and muttering curses. I carefully checked out each of them.

Then a young girl in a fur coat, a coat way too fancy for St. Anthony's, barged out of the confessional box on the near side of the church. She was sobbing into a long striped scarf. The priest came out after her. Father Harris placed his hand on her shoulder and led her to a pew, knelt by her.

The padre was a very nice guy, and a very good priest, the kind of man you did favors for if you could.

I looked around at the sparse wreaths that dec-

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

orated the church. I'd been attending St. Anthony's since I was ten years old and I couldn't remember the place ever seeming so bare at Christmas. In fact, the church looked depressing.

I waited until I was sure all the worshippers had their heads down, and then I walked quickly along the front of the altar and knelt at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the carved oak pulpit. The Man Mountain stayed on the sacristy side and knelt among the bright red poinsettia plants, the lectern and the chairs used by the priest and altar boys between him and the pews.

A moment later, the girl nodded and left. Father Harris paused, glanced toward our positions, and then went out a side door.

Except for steam ticking in the registers, St. Anthony's fell quiet. Kneeling there with my back to the crucifix high on the rear wall felt odd and somehow wrong. Then again, the entire thing felt strange. I don't think I'd been at an altar in more than thirty-five years. Not since I had been at that very altar making my confirmation, when I was twelve.

That day, the bishop prayed over us as we were being confirmed, saying, "Fill them with

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Your spirit of fear, O Lord.” It’s a prayer that I have always found peculiar because as a rule, I see God as a source of courage and direction, not fear. But I’m not a priest, and so, as Sampson likes to say, what do I know?

We held our positions, in any case, and waited, knowing we had only an hour to pull this off. At six, the priests and friars from the priory next door would come to prepare the church for Midnight Mass. At six, this little stakeout would be over and I’d be going home for a well deserved holiday with my family.

I have been called cynical more than once in my life. In my line of work, it’s often tough to be positive or idealistic about much of anything. But as the minutes passed inside St. Anthony’s, I smelled the incense and the fir boughs and watched the votive candles flickering near the manger scene, and I remembered coming here on Christmases past. There was a sameness to the place, a calm sense of the unchanging that got to me.

I felt my muscles relax, and my mind slowed to things that were important, like humbleness and gratitude, which Nana Mama always said

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

were the keys to a long, satisfying life. Seeing how my grandmother was in her nineties and going strong, I tried hard to listen closely when she said stuff like that. Kneeling there behind the pulpit, I ignored the terrible things I'd seen in the year almost gone by and thanked my Lord and Savior for all the blessings I'd received. My wife. My grandmother. My children. My friends. My job. My life.

And as I did, I felt less cynical, humbled by my good fortune. My life was very good. Maybe not perfect, but very good. And not many people get to say that in this day and age, especially at this time of year.

Maybe Nana Mama was right. I needed to come to church more—

A whisper punctured the darkness. Sampson among the poinsettias: “Is this what they mean when they say they’re using a cop as a plant?”

I just shook my head. Nothing like a bad pun to help pass the time on a church stakeout. I heard a clatter and looked around the pulpit. The older lady had dropped her rosary beads. She reached over, got them back from the pew in front of her. Then I saw someone come out from

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the confessional booth next to the one where the woman in the fur coat had been.

He was a young guy, and he was a big guy. He slouched slowly up the center aisle, as if deep in prayer, moving toward the main doors.

This had to be our man.

I signaled Sampson, and the two of us moved forward quickly, eased over the rail into the nave, and began walking up the side aisles, one of us on each side. We kept our right hands in our coats, fingers resting on our guns.

The guy in question stepped out of the church proper into the foyer and stopped at the holy water font. He dipped his left hand in and held it there. A left hand in holy water is a big no-no. *Right hand only*. And the font's no place to keep your fingers more than a second.

Then I saw what I had half expected to. With his left hand still in the holy water font, he shook his right arm, and a pry bar slid out of the sleeve of his coat.

Anticipating that he'd look around before attacking the parish donation and Franciscan charities boxes, I stopped with a pillar between us.

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

The second I heard metal on metal, I snapped my fingers, got up my gun, and moved to meet and greet the man of the year who'd returned to rip off the poor. In church. On Christmas Eve.

TWO

FATHER HARRIS FLIPPED a switch back in the sacristy. Every light in St. Anthony's went on. The man of the year bolted, carrying the crowbar like it was the baton in a relay race. He shouldered his way through the front door and bounded down the steps as the first snowflakes of the year began to fall.

Sampson and I were right behind him, and we were almost on top of the perp before he reached the corner. I got to him first and hammered him with my fist between the shoulder blades. He sprawled hard on the sidewalk. Sampson put a knee on his back and cuffed him. It was done in less than a minute.

I rolled him over, looked at my partner, and

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

said, “John, say merry Christmas to our old friend Latrell Lewis.”

“It is Lewis! Holy shit!” said Sampson, and then, remembering he was still very close to the church, he added, “Sorry about that.”

Latrell Lewis and I had had some unpleasant history together. It'd started five years ago when he was a fifteen-year-old bag messenger for one of the second-tier Columbia Heights gangs. Street name Lit-Lat, the punk was arrogant enough to try going out on his own and then stupid enough to get picked up by Sampson and me the first week he was flying solo. Next time we took him in, Latrell ended up in a lovely spot in the Maryland countryside, Jessup Correctional Institution, for an eighteen-month swing.

“I'd assumed you were a caged man, Lit-Lat,” I said to him.

“Maybe you should learn to count—or buy yourself a calendar, Cross.”

We pulled Lewis up off the sidewalk. He was jittery, not just from nerves but from cocaine or heroin or whatever drug he was buying with church money. I really didn't care. I'm a psychologist, but I was in no mood to

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make a diagnosis and give the man some pro bono counseling.

“Come on. It’s Christmas Eve. Show a brother a little heart,” Lewis said.

“Yeah, we will,” I answered. “We’ll show you as much heart as you showed the church and the folks who need that money for food and shelter.”

Then we hustled him down the sidewalk toward an unmarked squad car. The wind picked up. The temperature was dropping. You could tell a real winter storm was coming on Christmas Eve.

“C’mon, man. Don’t put me in no police car.” Latrell moaned. “That’d be sad stuff for the holidays, man. I needed that cash to buy my kid a present. I’m poor, man.”

I looked up at the white sky. Then I looked down at this punk junkie and said, “You don’t have a kid. You wouldn’t be poor if you quit your habit. But it is Christmas, and I don’t want you to be sad, Latrell.”

He looked up at me, hope all over his face. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll tell you what. On the way to the

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

station, we'll all sing Christmas carols, and you get to pick the first one.”

“And for your sake, it better be ‘Silent Night,’” Sampson said, shoving him in the backseat and slamming the door.

Book One

MERRY CHRISTMAS, ALEX

Chapter 1

THEY SAY IT'S good luck if it snows on Christmas Eve. I didn't usually buy into that kind of folk wisdom, but if it turned out to be true, well, this was looking like it'd be one of the best Christmases ever. A nor'easter was churning its way up the Carolinas at the same time as a cold front was diving south out of Ontario, all the makings for a monster storm along the Eastern Seaboard.

Sampson and I brought Lewis in and booked him. Since there were no arraignments scheduled until the day after tomorrow, it looked like the man of the year would be waiting for Santa in a holding cell this Yuletide season.

It was nearly eight by the time we finished up the paperwork and left.

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“Merry Christmas, Alex,” Sampson said outside.

“You too, John. Feel like stopping by for a holiday beverage tomorrow?”

“I’ll check with my scheduler,” Sampson said.

I took a cab home. As the taxi moved through DC, I looked out at the decorations glowing everywhere. The pace of the snow hadn’t increased much yet, but the size of the flakes had. They were each about the diameter of a quarter, and thick, making the city look the way it does in those snow globes tourists buy at Union Station and the airports.

By the time I reached our house on Fifth Street in Southeast, it was close to eight thirty. The air smelled of pecan pie. Bree and the kids were busy finishing trimming the tree, which was in the alcove by the window at the front of the house. And of course, the official sergeant-of-all-holidays, Nana Mama, was supervising every little task on her to-do list.

“Don’t put two green ornaments right next to each other, Damon. Show some style when you decorate a tree,” she scolded with all the authority of the vice principal she’d once been.

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

Bree was hooking a faded crayon drawing of the Three Wise Men up on one of the branches. According to legend, I had made that ornament when I was in kindergarten, and Nana always dragged it out on Christmas.

“Well, look who’s come in from the snow-storm,” Bree said, and she walked over and gave me a kiss on the lips. “Hello, sweetheart.”

Nana decided not to look in my direction. All she said was, “Is there a faint possibility, Alex, that you might spend a few minutes of the holiday season with your family? Or are we asking too much?”

I should have had the wisdom to say nothing to Nana, to just give her a Christmas kiss, but I’ll never learn. She pushes my buttons like nobody else on this earth.

“Thanks for the guilt! All wrapped up in a bow for Christmas,” I said, dispensing hugs to my daughter, Jannie; my son Damon, who was home on winter break from prep school; and then Ava, the foster child Nana had recently brought under our roof.

“You’re getting a dose of sense, fool,” Nana Mama snapped.

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“Nana, this morning, when I got that jingle from Father Harris, he told me that *you* were the one who suggested he call me to help catch the poor-box thief,” I said. “*Which I did.*”

“Father Harris said that?” Nana asked.

“He did. He said that he hated to pester me on Christmas Eve, but you told him it would be no bother. Wouldn’t take any time at all for your grandson to solve the case of the poor-box pilferer.”

“Humph,” she said, shaking her head. “Imagine a priest making up something like that. Father Harris of all people. Then again, you never know.” She reached in a box, turned to Ava. “Here you go, sweet thing. Put this porcelain Baby Jesus on a low branch, so if it falls, it doesn’t fall far.”

“So you’re saying that Father Harris lied to me on Christmas Eve, Nana?”

She scowled, squinted at me. “I’m saying it’s a pitiful state of the world when a man can’t be with his family on Christmas Eve. Even a high-and-mighty homicide detective such as yourself needs to be home with his loved ones the night before Jesus’s birthday.”

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

Everyone was chuckling at Nana giving me such a hard time. I was holding back a smile myself. So was she.

“Kind of sucks Ali’s not here,” Jannie said, speaking of my six-year-old son.

“It does,” I replied. “But his mom celebrates Christmas too.”

Bree said, “I’ll be right back,” and left the room. I had to admit that the tree looked pretty great against the snowy picture window. Then Bree reappeared with a big glass bowl of homemade eggnog, another Christmas Eve tradition in our house.

The eggnog had big globs of nutmeg-sprinkled real whipped cream in it, so rich and sweet, each cupful would probably register a couple thousand calories. She set the bowl beside a plate of shortbread cookies that also probably registered a couple thousand calories each. But, hey, it was the Christmas season. I helped myself to two rounds of both. Damon got a Christmas-music station up on Pandora, whatever that was, and old Nat King Cole was crooning that all our troubles would soon be out of sight. Even though Nana wouldn’t let up about me working on

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Christmas Eve, it was looking like it'd be a warm, wonderful night.

When the song switched to Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You," Jannie and Ava and Bree started dancing. Damon began telling me about an incredible true story he was reading at school, about Teddy Roosevelt going up the Amazon River with his son.

Then my cell phone rang.

Not even Mariah's transcendent voice could stop that sound from sucking the joy right out of the room.

I hung my head, avoided eye contact, went into the hall, and answered. It was deputy chief of police Allen Chivers. "Am I interrupting Christmas Eve?"

"Yup," I said.

"Hate doing this, Alex. But we've got a bad one. The kind of thing that only you seem able to handle."

I listened another full minute, leaning my head against the wall, knowing just how silent the house had gone. "Okay," I said. "I'll get there." I clicked off, went back. Nana rolled her eyes. The kids looked away from me

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

with here-we-go-again expressions on their faces.

Bree shook her head and said, “Well, there it is, then. Merry Christmas, Alex Cross.”

Chapter 2

AS I DROVE through the almost-deserted DC streets, the snow that had looked so beautiful an hour ago now seemed downright ugly. It was depressing to leave my house and family, and I didn't blame them for being angry and upset with me. Hell, *I* was angry and upset with me. And with my job.

Goddamn it, I thought. There was only one person in the world who should work on Christmas Eve. And he wore a goofy red suit and drank way too much fattening eggnog topped with nutmeg and real whipped cream. Damn it, and damn Santa too.

As I was driving into Georgetown on Pennsylvania Ave., the snow really began to fall.

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

A bus in front of me hit the brakes in a half inch of slush. I skidded and almost rear-ended it. Goddamned DC public-works folks were home with their families. Let the plows wait, right?

My windshield wipers were icing up as I looked for the address on Thirtieth Street in Northwest, a neighborhood in the city that was completely the opposite of mine. This was the land of milk and honey, and power and money, and the trophy homes to prove it.

Number 1314 was a beautiful limestone town house lit up like the White House Christmas tree. But I quickly saw that most of the lighting effects came from police cars, flashlights, floodlights, and TV-camera lights. I parked, opened the door, looked down at the slush, and cursed.

I had left home so quickly and in such a pissed-off state that I hadn't had the sense to bring along a pair of snow boots. As I slogged toward the crime scene tape, my ankles got cold, and little chunks of ice and wet snow wormed their way into my shoes.

I showed my badge to the patrolman working the barrier, ducked the tape, and started toward the two MPD vans parked on the front lawn of a

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Georgian brick mansion across the street. A car door on my side of the street opened. A middle-aged man in a green ski parka and a red ski hat got out and walked right up to me. He pulled off his gloves and held out a puffy red hand.

“You’re Alex Cross, aren’t you?” he said.

I thought I knew most cops in DC, but this one with the sea of freckles and bits of wavy red hair sneaking out from under his ski hat was new to me.

“I am,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Detective Tom McGoey. Six whole days with the MPD. Originally from Staten Island.”

“Happy holidays, Detective. Welcome to Washington. I got just a brief summary from Deputy Chief Chivers. You want to tell me all of it?”

“God-awful Christmas gift for you. And me.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I already figured that much. Let’s hear the gory details.”

Chapter 3

WE GOT IN his car, and McGoey turned the heater on high and fleshed out the story for me. I soon realized that it clearly *was* a god-awful situation, one with the potential to turn into a full-scale tragedy.

The beautiful town house used to belong to Henry Fowler, a top-flight attorney who'd fallen on hard times. Fowler's ex-wife, Diana, now owned the home and lived there with her new husband, Dr. Barry Nicholson, and her three children: eleven-year-old twins, Jeremy and Chloe, and six-year-old son, Trey.

"Henry Fowler's got them all in there," McGoey said. "He's armed to the teeth and said he is fully prepared to die tonight."

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“It’s a wonderful life,” I said.

“And it only gets better,” the detective said. “Melissa Brandywine’s in there too.” He gestured down the street to another, similar townhome. “She’s the neighbor, wife of Congressman Michael Brandywine of Colorado.”

“The chief told me,” I grumbled; then I closed my eyes and rubbed at my temple. “Where’s he? Brandywine?”

“At Vail with his two kids, waiting for her to come join them for their ski vacation. She was supposed to fly out this afternoon but made the mistake of bringing Diana a box of homemade cookies before she left.”

Funny what a nice small-town gesture can get you in DC.

“He giving you a reason? Fowler?”

“He’s only spoken to us once, and that wasn’t part of the conversation,” McGoey said. “We wouldn’t have known anything if Mrs. Brandywine hadn’t used the toilet and texted her husband about what was going on inside.”

“The congressman was the first to report it?”

“Yeah, really lit a torch under everyone’s ass.”

Mentally I began to compartmentalize, to

Merry Christmas, Alex Cross

push aside all my frustration at having to leave my family on Christmas Eve and focus on the task at hand. “Tell me about Fowler. His divorce. Whatever I should know.”

“Headquarters isn’t exactly loaded up with personnel tonight, so we’re still waiting on most of the background check. But we know the Fowlers divorced two years ago. She filed, found the new hubby within two months, or maybe before, and moved on. Fowler not so much, evidently.”

“Any idea what Fowler’s got for weapons?”

“Oh yeah,” McGoey said, going to his notebook. “He gave us the breakdown the one time he picked up the phone.”

Fowler claimed to have two Glock 19s. The Glock 19 is the standard-issue service weapon of the MPD, which means I carry a 19. The good thing about a 19 is that it holds nineteen rounds. The bad thing about a 19 is that it holds nineteen rounds. Fowler said he also had two twelve-gauge pump shotguns, two AR-15 rifles, and multiple magazines and boxes of ammunition for each weapon.

Two of everything. What was that all about?

James Patterson

I wrote it all in my notebook, jotted down *Long lead time*, and drew an arrow to the list.

“That everything?” I asked.

“Far as we know. Well, except for the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

I frowned and said, “Didn’t know PB and Js were deadly weapons.”

“Only to someone like Fowler’s youngest kid,” McGoey said. “Peanut allergy. One bite and he’ll have about ten minutes to live.”

Chapter 4

AN IN-FAMILY HOSTAGE situation is, in my opinion, the hands-down, no-argument worst kind of situation any police officer will ever face. I learned this a long time ago, when I was fourteen, to be exact. A freebaser named Willie Gonzalez took his family hostage down the street from where Nana Mama and I were living. After Gonzalez shot his pregnant wife, his two young daughters, and then himself, I saw one of the police officers who'd been negotiating with him. The poor cop was sitting in his car crying and drinking from an open pint of Jack Daniel's.

I've had the misfortune to be part of a dozen or so of these kinds of details in my career, a few

James Patterson

times as lead negotiator, more often as a psychological consultant. There's a broad spectrum of things that can happen when you're a cop: You might have to sharpshoot a terrorist. Or meticulously unravel a kidnapping. Or even outfox a serial killer or two. Any of these situations can mess you up psychologically.

But dealing with someone holding family members hostage is like trying to stop a Mack truck carrying a full load of insanity. Usually the person with the gun—more often than not, it's an obsessive, substance-abusing male, like Willie Gonzalez—is so far gone he doesn't give a damn about his hostages, or his future. He blames them for something. He blames himself for something. He can't get his facts straight or see the truth of his circumstances. It's a lose-lose situation all the way around.

As for hostage negotiators, well, we are usually smart and well trained, but we rarely pull off the heroics you see in movies. Have I ever seen the abductor listen to the negotiator and then throw down his weapon and come out with his hands up? Sure, about as often as I've seen the Redskins win the Super Bowl. Two or