



FAMILY MONEY

A THRILLER

CHAD ZUNKER

AUTHOR OF *THE TRACKER*

PRAISE FOR CHAD ZUNKER

An Equal Justice

HARPER LEE PRIZE FOR LEGAL FICTION FINALIST

“A deftly crafted legal thriller of a novel by an author with a genuine knack for a reader-engaging narrative storytelling style.”

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A THRILLER

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 THOMAS & MERCER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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*To Doug, my father-in-law,
for your unwavering faith in me.*

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No Lies, Ever

ONE

The first thing that struck me as odd when my father-in-law was abducted right in front of me was the calm look on his face. Joe did not appear to be shocked when three young Mexican men suddenly jumped out of a run-down gray minivan and grabbed him in the middle of a small village eight miles outside of Matamoros. He did not yell out to me, “Alex! Help!” Instead, Joe just kind of stared at me with a resigned expression from across the crowded outdoor marketplace as they began yanking him backward toward the vehicle.

Yes, he fought them—at first. Joe did not go easy. His lean arms thrashed against their pulling. My father-in-law was in great shape for being in his late fifties. He still played a lot of golf and tennis. Joe had no trouble keeping up with me on our runs together on the downtown trail back in Austin. But he was no match for these muscle-bound men who wore dirty T-shirts, jeans, and boots. They looked more like day laborers than organized criminals. Two of the men secured Joe by the arms. When the biggest of the group grabbed his legs and lifted, the struggle was basically over.

With a heavy sack of groceries clutched in my arms, I hesitated a moment, squinting across the vendor tables against the blinding glare of the late-afternoon sun. What the hell was happening? Were these men really dragging my father-in-law away? I flashed on the conversation I’d had with Taylor—Joe’s only daughter and my wife—about a month ago when we’d first talked about taking this trip. Taylor had been concerned about bringing our whole family down here to assist at an orphanage. She’d read so many horror stories about kidnappings and other violent crime on this side of the border. My wife always researched everything to death and then usually focused on worst-case scenarios. It drove me crazy. I tended to be the simple idealist. I had assured her we would be perfectly safe. We would only be twenty miles south of the border. We wouldn’t even be spending the

night inside Mexico; instead, we'd stay at a Holiday Inn in Brownsville and cross over the border each day.

I'd had a friend who'd recently brought his own family down to the orphanage and said it was a wonderful experience, especially for his kids. This had also been true for us thus far. Our young daughters, Olivia and Nicole, had loved being with the other children this week. For the past five days, they'd done hundreds of crafts together, played games, put on plays, and kicked the soccer ball around for countless hours. I'd never seen my girls smile so much. While the kids played, Taylor, Joe, my mother-in-law, Carol, and I had rolled up our sleeves to put fresh coats of bright paint on dingy walls of various bedrooms inside the old two-story building. Joe and I had left the orphanage an hour ago to drive over to the nearest village and buy groceries for dinner tonight, as we'd done several times the past week. My mother-in-law wanted to make a special vegetable-and-beef stew for all the kids. An old family recipe from her grandmother. My kids would usually devour it.

Everything about this trip had been a dream—until now.

I cursed, dropped the sack of groceries, ran toward the van. Unlike Joe, I was already in full-on panic. I weaved around other outdoor shoppers, who all turned to stare at the frantically sprinting thirty-two-year-old white man wearing a paint-stained orange Texas Longhorns T-shirt, tan cargo shorts, and flip-flops. A small boy pulling a rusty red wagon suddenly stepped out in front of me. I tried to leap clean over him, but the toe of my flip-flop caught the wagon's edge. I toppled face-first onto the ground.

Scrambling to my feet, I ran forward again while spitting clumps of dirt from my mouth. The men now had Joe fully inside the minivan. Again, my father-in-law held my gaze. Staring directly at me through the open door, he mouthed something.

I'm sorry.

Was that what Joe had just said to me? Why would he say that?

One of the men pulled a black hood completely over his head. I felt my stomach twist at the sight. Then another guy yanked the minivan door shut. I reached the vehicle just as the tires began to spin and kick pebbles of gravel up into the air. I grabbed the outside door handle, yanked on it several times, but it wouldn't budge. Pounding on the side of the minivan, I began yelling, "Wait! Please stop! I can pay you. *Dinero!* I'll pay right now!"

But the driver of the minivan only sped up. I ran alongside it for maybe fifty feet before it was going too fast for me to keep up. I tried to jump onto the back of the vehicle but couldn't find anything to grab. I lost my balance, fell onto the dirt road, and rolled several times, my flip-flops flying off my feet in different directions.

Again, I pushed myself up, looked all around for another way to stop this nightmare from happening. My Chevy Tahoe was parked on the other side of the marketplace. By the time I got back to it, the minivan would be long gone. I needed help ASAP. I glanced over at a host of pensive faces staring back at me. A lot of villagers were milling about and watching things unfold. None of them looked shocked by what had just happened.

I ran straight up to an older man wearing coveralls with a gray beard. "Please help me! *Policía! Policía!* Please!"

He nodded. "Sí, sí."

He snapped his fingers at a teenager who was standing next to him. The kid punched on his cell phone, lifted it to his mouth, and began speaking rapidly in Spanish. I didn't know enough of the language to understand what all he was saying, but I hoped he was talking to the police.

The teenager hung up, looked at me. "*Diez minutos.*"

"What?"

"*Policía. Diez minutos.*"

"Ten minutes?" I snapped.

I knew enough Spanish to understand that. I'd practiced the basics with Nicole and Olivia leading up to the trip. I wanted them to be able to communicate on some level with the kids at the orphanage. For a five-year-old and a seven-year-old, they had a knack for grasping the language. Both of them were really smart girls. They got that from their mother.

I again thought of Taylor, felt my chest tighten up. Ten minutes was a lifetime. I couldn't just stand there and wait for the police. I spun around, stared back at the crowd of onlookers in the marketplace behind me. Could any of them help me? Did anyone know these men who had grabbed Joe?

"*Habla inglés?*" I began repeating, going from person to person.

All I got back were blank stares and shaking heads. Did no one here really know how to speak English? Most looked like poor people who'd probably never traveled too far away from this village. But then I noticed one Mexican man near the back of the crowd who stood out from the others. Clean-shaven with slicked-back black hair, he was probably my age

and wore a nice gray suit with a white dress shirt unbuttoned to midchest. I doubted he was a local villager. Maybe he could help me.

I made a move in his direction. When I did, he immediately turned and slipped away into the crowd. I quickly lost sight of him. I cursed again, stepped back into the dirt road, stared off into the distance. All I could see now were big clouds of dust circling up under the blazing heat of the sun. I fell to my knees on the dirt. My hands were trembling. I kept seeing that black hood being forced over my father-in-law's head.

Joe was gone. I couldn't stop it.

What would I tell my mother-in-law?

What would I say to my kids?

How could I even face Taylor?

God, please.

TWO

I paced in a furious circle right in the spot where my father-in-law had been grabbed and had a hard time catching my breath. My heart was racing. I kept reliving every detail of the abduction like a horror film looped in my mind. Who were those guys? Why had they chosen Joe? And why had he not looked as panicked about it as I had? I knew my father-in-law to be cool under pressure, but this was not the simple stress of him making an argument in a courtroom trial. This might be life and death.

I checked the time on my phone. About five minutes had passed since the minivan had disappeared, but it felt like forever. Where were the damn police already? The village was only eight miles outside of Matamoros. It shouldn't take someone ten minutes to get over here. A few concerned bystanders continued to stare at me with tight faces, but most others just went back to business as usual in the marketplace. Did they see this kind of thing all the time?

A barefoot young girl of probably nine wearing a yellow sundress walked up to me and held out her hand. I looked down and noticed a familiar-looking cell phone in her tiny fingers. I recognized it right away as Joe's phone. It must've fallen from his pocket in the struggle. The phone had a white case with *Papa* printed on it, the name surrounded by pink-and-purple butterflies. Olivia had designed it using one of those online gift stores and had given it to Joe as a birthday present last year. I remembered laughing out loud. It wasn't exactly the manliest-looking phone case. But my father-in-law told her it was the best birthday gift ever and didn't hesitate to place it on his phone. Joe adored his two grandkids and would do anything to make them happy. He would regularly play day spa with them and let them do his hair, nails, and makeup. He would even participate in their cute little plays and wear whatever costumes they dreamed up for him. Joe's whole life was his family.

I took the phone from the girl. "*Gracias.*"

She gave me a small smile and ran off.

My own phone buzzed. I held it up and saw a text from Taylor.

Hey, babe, what's your ETA? Getting hungry around here.

I felt my throat catch. How should I respond? I couldn't tell her about this over the phone. I had to be there with her in person.

A second text arrived from Taylor. A heart emoji along with a photo of our girls playing dress-up with three similar-age girls from the orphanage. Olivia and Nicole had insisted on bringing an entire duffel bag filled with their Disney Princess outfits. They'd made good use out of them this week. I had a feeling we'd be leaving the costumes behind for the kids at the orphanage and buying all new ones when we got back to Austin.

Looking at Taylor's second text nearly brought me to my knees again. I had talked her into coming here. I had created this nightmare. One she didn't even know about yet. I already felt my heart breaking at having to tell her this news. If we didn't get Joe back, would she ever forgive me? Would I ever forgive myself? How had this happened? Just a few hours earlier, we were the happiest family you could find anywhere, splashing around together in the hotel pool. The day had started perfectly, but then everything had unraveled on me so fast.

"We really need to go, Alex," Taylor had said to me that morning, frowning while she stared down at me in the water from the edge of the hotel pool. "I told them we'd be there by ten."

Taylor and I had been together sixteen years—ten married—and she still took my breath away. Even while wearing plain jeans, running shoes, a simple white T-shirt, her brunette hair in a ponytail, and very little makeup.

"Come on, Mom!" shouted Olivia. "Five more minutes!"

"Please, Mom, please!" echoed Nicole.

Both girls were splashing around in the shallow end of the pool next to me in their cute pink-and-purple matching swimsuits.

"Yeah, Mom, don't be such a party pooper." This came from Joe, who was also in the pool with us. We'd been taking turns throwing the girls as high as we could and watching them shriek with absolute joy.

"Don't encourage them, Dad," Taylor said, rolling her eyes.

"Where's the fun in that?" he replied with a wide smile.

We'd had the hotel pool to ourselves. It wasn't much. This wasn't a luxury resort. But we were making the most of it.

"We have time, babe," I said to Taylor, wading over closer to her.

"But we have to pick up paint supplies, remember?"

"That's true."

I heard more squeals from behind me, turned. Joe had launched Nicole into the air again, and she'd done a little cannonball into the water. She'd been working on perfecting her cannonballs in our pool back in Austin. She was so proud of them, even though her tiny splash barely rippled more than a couple of feet.

She popped up out of the water, the biggest smile on her face. "How was that, Papa? Was that even bigger than last time?"

Joe's eyes lit up. "It was huge!"

"My turn! My turn!" yelled Olivia, swimming over to Joe.

My mother-in-law walked out to the pool area toward us. Carol was tan and trim with short brown hair. She played tennis in a senior league three times a week. She and Joe had been married thirty-two years. They'd wanted more kids, but Joe told me complications during Taylor's birth had prevented that. So our family of four was all they had. Our lives were completely wrapped up in theirs, too. My in-laws lived only two blocks over from us. While most sons-in-law might be wary of living so close to their in-laws, I welcomed it. Joe was a mentor to me in every way. Carol was of great help to Taylor with the kids. She was readily available without being overly intrusive. And my girls adored Papa and Nanny, as they liked to be called.

Carol stood next to Taylor, crossed her arms. "What's going on out here?"

"Dad's being a troublemaker again," Taylor said.

"Of course he is. Joe, we really need to get moving, honey."

"All right, all right," Joe relented. "Sorry, girls, playtime is over."

Joe climbed the pool steps, found his towel on a patio chair, and began drying off. Carol walked over to the steps and helped the girls out while I searched the bottom of the pool for their swim toys. I collected them all, moved back to the side of the pool, and held them up for Taylor. She reached down and grabbed them with both hands. When she did, I quickly slipped my right hand around and clutched her wrist. A small grin touched my lips. Taylor's green eyes flashed on mine.

“Don’t . . . you . . . dare,” she warned me, trying to pull back.

But I didn’t let go. My grin began to spread.

“Alex!” she said.

This caught the attention of our girls. “Do it, Daddy! Do it!”

I saw a hint of a smile on Taylor’s face. I knew this was the permission I needed. So I yanked her all the way forward on top of me into the pool. Coming up out of the water, Taylor tried to frown but couldn’t stop herself from smiling. The girls were exploding with laughter on the patio. There was nothing better than hearing unbridled glee coming out of both of our angels.

The next thing I knew, Joe had scooped up Carol in both arms and was running toward the pool with my screeching mother-in-law. They both splashed into the water right next to us. Then Olivia and Nicole jumped back into the pool right behind them, and soon we were all laughing so hard, our stomachs hurt.

Taylor gave me a kiss. “Babe, I’m so glad you talked me into coming on this trip. It really has been a wonderful week for all of us.”

“Thanks for trusting me.”

The last thing I’d said to her this morning in the pool now felt like a dagger jabbing hard into my ribs. Thankfully, I spotted a blue Ford truck with *Policía—Matamoros* on the side finally pull up to the marketplace. A uniformed officer probably in his forties with a crew cut and a thick mustache got out. I hurried over to him.

“Please tell me you speak English,” I said.

He nodded. “Yes. And you are?”

“Alex Mahan.”

“Officer Sanchez. But call me Raul. Tell me what happened, Alex.”

“My father-in-law and I were shopping here in the village when some men grabbed him. We’ve been helping out over at a nearby orphanage this week—Casa de Esperanza.”

“I know it well. The director, Esther, is a friend.”

“Well, I was standing over there when I looked back and spotted three guys jump out of a van, pull Joe into the vehicle, and speed off. I ran after the minivan but couldn’t stop them.” I pointed. “They took off that way.”

Raul squinted down the road. “You are from the States?”

“Yes, Austin.”