

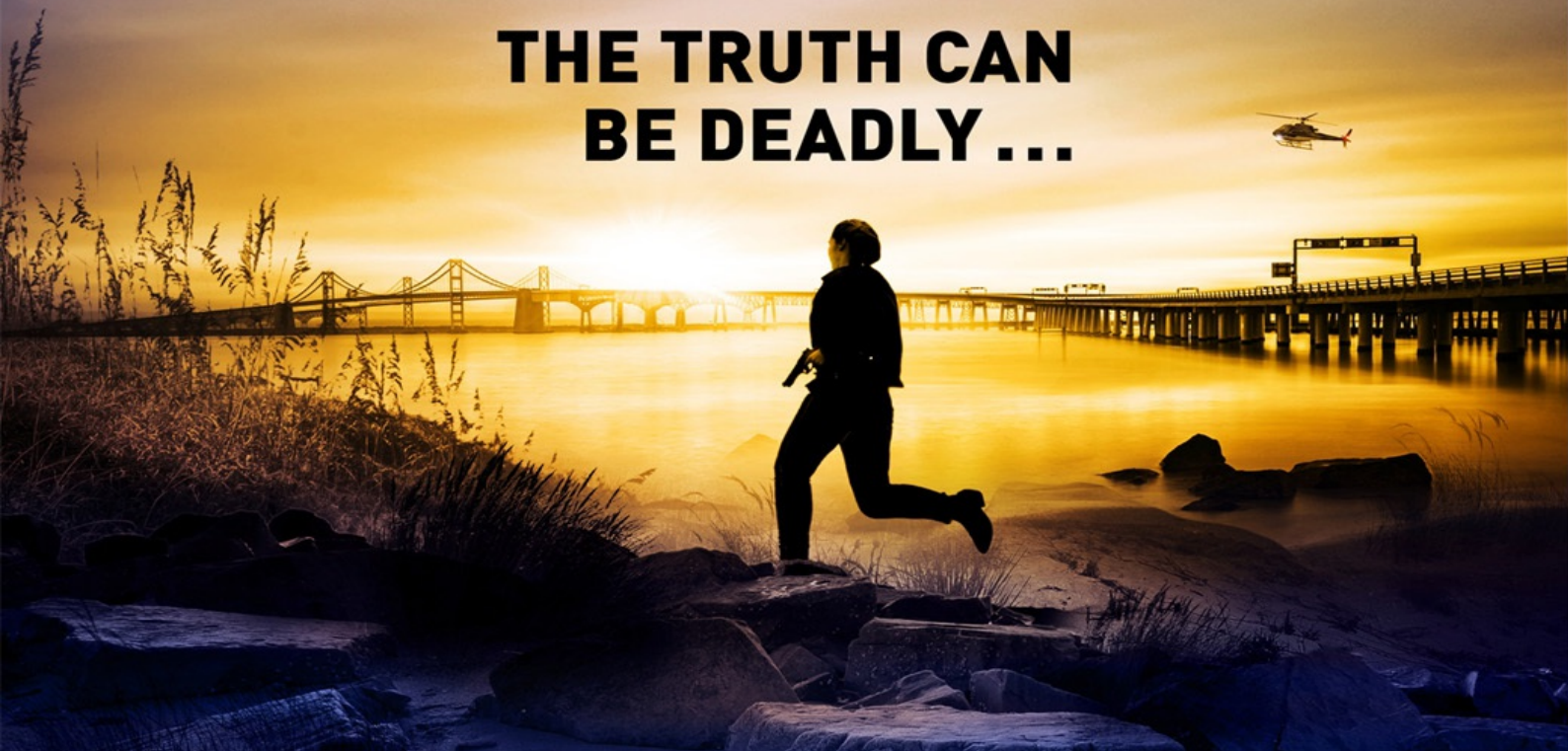
'Baldacci is the master'
Jeffrey Archer

DAVID BALDACCIO

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

Simply Lies

**THE TRUTH CAN
BE DEADLY ...**



**DAVID
BALDACCI**

Simply Lies

MACMILLAN

*To Michelle, for providing the inspiration
for this story—and for a whole lot more*

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1](#)

[CHAPTER 2](#)

[CHAPTER 3](#)

[CHAPTER 4](#)

[CHAPTER 5](#)

[CHAPTER 6](#)

[CHAPTER 7](#)

[CHAPTER 8](#)

[CHAPTER 9](#)

[CHAPTER 10](#)

[CHAPTER 11](#)

[CHAPTER 12](#)

[CHAPTER 13](#)

[CHAPTER 14](#)

[CHAPTER 15](#)

[CHAPTER 16](#)

[CHAPTER 17](#)

[CHAPTER 18](#)

[CHAPTER 19](#)

[CHAPTER 20](#)

[CHAPTER 21](#)

[CHAPTER 22](#)

[CHAPTER 23](#)

[CHAPTER 24](#)

[CHAPTER 25](#)

[CHAPTER 26](#)

[CHAPTER 27](#)

[CHAPTER 28](#)

[CHAPTER 29](#)

[CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)

[CHAPTER 32](#)

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[CHAPTER 39](#)

[CHAPTER 40](#)

[CHAPTER 41](#)

[CHAPTER 42](#)

[CHAPTER 43](#)

[CHAPTER 44](#)

[CHAPTER 45](#)

[CHAPTER 46](#)

[CHAPTER 47](#)

[CHAPTER 48](#)

[CHAPTER 49](#)

[CHAPTER 50](#)

[CHAPTER 51](#)

[CHAPTER 52](#)

[CHAPTER 53](#)

[CHAPTER 54](#)

[CHAPTER 55](#)

[CHAPTER 56](#)

[CHAPTER 57](#)

[CHAPTER 58](#)

[CHAPTER 59](#)

[CHAPTER 60](#)

[CHAPTER 61](#)

[CHAPTER 62](#)

[CHAPTER 63](#)

[CHAPTER 64](#)

[CHAPTER 65](#)

[CHAPTER 66](#)

[CHAPTER 67](#)

[CHAPTER 68](#)

[CHAPTER 69](#)

[CHAPTER 70](#)

[CHAPTER 71](#)

[CHAPTER 72](#)

[CHAPTER 73](#)

[CHAPTER 74](#)

[CHAPTER 75](#)

[CHAPTER 76](#)

[CHAPTER 77](#)

[CHAPTER 78](#)

[CHAPTER 79](#)

[CHAPTER 80](#)

[CHAPTER 81](#)

[CHAPTER 82](#)

[CHAPTER 83](#)

[CHAPTER 84](#)

[CHAPTER 85](#)

[CHAPTER 86](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

CHAPTER

I

MICKEY GIBSON WIPED THE SPIT-UP off Darby's face, and then gave her two-year-old daughter a plastic squeaky ball, hoping that would hold her attention for a bit. The girl sat stoically in her playpen, eyeing the toy like it was neither foe nor friend. Gibson had learned in one of the many child development books she had read that two-year-olds should be able to play and entertain themselves for up to thirty minutes.

Whoever wrote that was on drugs, or else my kids have no future as adults.

She was hoping for simply a five-minute respite, just to finish her phone call.

Gibson hefted her three-year-old son, Tommy, who had been doing his best to use his mom as a jungle gym, and placed him on her thrust-out right hip. It was only eleven in the morning and she was already exhausted.

She said into her headset, "Okay, Zeb, I'm back. Like I said before, the paper trail is pretty clear. There's at least two hundred mill in six different bank accounts, three in Chad, one in Bermuda, and two in Zurich. Larkin must know we're closing in, so he's probably going to try to move that money ASAP, and I may not be able to track it again."

Gibson listened for a few moments as she deftly dodged Tommy's attempts to grab her hair and knock off her headset. Darby threw the ball out of the playpen and hit her mother in the back before starting to wail, then tried to climb to freedom over the playpen rails.

Gibson noted this and went into action. While still holding Tommy, she grabbed the ball off the floor, tossed it up in the air, and deftly caught it behind her back—one of the skills she had developed from her basketball days.

Darby stopped climbing, grinned, and started clapping. "Mommy, Mommy. G-good."

Tommy was also mesmerized by this enough to stop attacking his

mother's hair. "Do it again," he ordered.

Gibson kept repeating this act while she said, "Right, Zeb, I understand. But the fact is I got lucky on some key clicks and ran down a couple tricky leads that paid off, but there's no guarantee that will happen again. The lawyers need to get injunctions filed and put concrete lids on those accounts before he can wire that money out to God knows where. I checked and we can get the assets frozen because all those countries are subject to the usual global banking laws, so Larkin can't grease their skids without severe consequences to their memberships in the international financial community."

Gibson paused for a moment and tossed the ball again so she could remove Tommy's index finger from her right eye. Nimbly catching the ball, she said, "Larkin's probably already regretting not burying those funds deeper, offshoring them in the Cook Islands or laundering them beyond our reach." As she continued to try to control her gyrating son, she added, "I've also already provided the evidentiary trail to the creditors' lead bankruptcy lawyers and they're following up, too. The wire rooms are closed in Zurich and Chad, but they're still running in Bermuda. So you need to hit this hard and you need to hit it fast."

As though he were waiting for Gibson to finish speaking, Tommy threw up all over his mother.

Gibson watched the vomit spiral down the front of her only clean outfit at the moment, with chunks of it landing on her bare feet. As a final touch, the slop soaked into the rug, to join all the previous stains there.

Darby started laughing and pointing. "G-good. T-Tommy."

Gibson looked at her son, whose expression told her all she needed to know. She ran for it and reached the toilet just in time to hold him over the bowl while simultaneously hitting a button on her headset to place the call on mute. Tommy managed somehow to miss the toilet completely and instead puked on the toilet paper holder *and* her pair of slippers. Gibson had left them there earlier after attempting to use the bathroom. Then she'd heard a crash somewhere and found Tommy sitting on the kitchen floor, covered with most of the wet dirt from a potted plant. She'd stripped the boy and thrown his clothes directly into the washing machine. Gibson had wanted to toss him in, too, only she didn't relish a visit from Child Services. But she'd forgotten the slippers. And her urge to pee.

Until now.

She set Tommy down and threw the soiled footwear into the trash can. She washed her face, trying not to look at the gunk that was sliding off her and down into the sink because it was making *her* want to vomit. She dried

off, then she sat on the toilet, holding Tommy, and finished her long overdue urination.

After that, she unmuted the phone. During this whole time Zeb had been chattering away, oblivious to all her domestic drama.

“So, as I was saying, great work. Now go paint the town red tonight, Mick, on the company card, of course. Have a blast. You’ve earned it.”

“Yeah, Zeb, I’ll get all dolled up. Champagne and caviar and a long, slinky dress.”

“Have fun. We all need downtime.”

“Yeah, we do, don’t we?”

“Hey, and next time, let’s do a Zoom call. I like to see my people’s faces.”

Not this people’s face, thought Gibson. *Not now. Not for maybe the next ten years.*

“Right, sounds good.”

She clicked off, flushed the toilet, and looked at her son.

He rubbed his stomach and said solemnly, “Better, Mommy.”

“I bet.”

CHAPTER

2

LATER, WITH THE KIDS DOWN for brief naps, Gibson grabbed a quick shower, unlocked the door of her home office, and hurried inside. She had a cup of peppermint tea in one hand and an oatmeal almond cookie in the other. Her dirty clothes had been replaced with green gym shorts and a T-shirt and ankle socks. Until she did the next load of laundry this was mostly it for clean garments. The slinky dress would definitely have to wait since she didn't have one, or the time to "paint the town red," whatever the hell that meant. And with the tea and cookie, she was holding the mommy version of champagne and caviar.

At least this mommy.

The baby monitor was on the shelf. All she could hear right now was gentle breathing, and a series of small snores that she knew came from Tommy. She let out her own long breath and wondered if their usual one-hour nap timeline would hold today. The one predictable component of motherhood, she had found, was that no two days were ever alike.

Then she glanced at herself in the drab reflection of her twin computer screens.

Gibson was five seven if she stood absolutely erect, which she had never once managed to do since having kids. She figured her right hip was stuck out about four inches further than her left, and she had no idea if it would ever return to its original alignment. She didn't want to even think what her spine looked like. But if it reflected her chronic back pain, it was a real anatomical horror show. She still carried stubborn pounds of baby weight in her hips, buttocks, and belly, and they might be permanent for all she knew. Her dark hair was cut short because who had time to deal with long tresses? Her face was puffy, her skin blotchy—her OB-GYN had blamed postpartum hormone releases—which was something they hadn't covered all that thoroughly in the pregnancy books she'd read. The slender, dynamic athlete she had once been in high school and college was no longer readily apparent.

As a tough, feisty, ball-hawking, elbows-throwing point guard with a wickedly accurate midrange jump shot, impressive passing skills, and great court awareness, she could run all day. Later, first as a crime scene tech and then a street cop and after that a detective, she had won the 10K competition for the entire department six years in a row, besting both the men and the women. The guys had been initially faster than she, but their endurance had petered out around the 5K mark. She had tried not to smile too broadly as she blew past them at that point.

Now the stairs were a bitch.

She'd gone to Temple University in Philly and been coached by the legendary Dawn Staley. Gibson had also been a theater major, and had been cast as the lead in a number of student productions at Temple. People thought she might make it to Broadway one day.

After college she had actually contemplated dabbling in a career on the stage, but quickly found out that half-ass wouldn't cut it, because she would be competing against legions of immensely talented and driven people who were dead certain that Broadway was their destiny.

Gibson had been a computer nerd growing up as well as a serious gamer. She had taken college courses to enhance those skills because with that she knew she would almost always be employable. She had once also had visions of trying out for pro basketball, but quickly realized that she had neither the necessary athleticism nor the true game to play in the WNBA.

She had instead opted to follow in her father's footsteps and joined the police force. He had been thrilled, her mother not so much. She had worked her way up to being a criminal investigator, and then found who she thought had been the love of her life.

His name was Peter Gibson, and he was tall and handsome and gregarious and funny. And, she had come to find out too late, he was also the world's biggest prick. He'd told her that he wanted a large family, but as soon as one baby was out of the oven he had been a changed man, chafing at not being able to go out with his friends, or having his weekends "ruined" by the daddy do list. When she was pregnant with Darby, he had cleaned out their bank accounts and run out on her with his secretary, leaving Gibson with an infant and another baby on the way, and a mortgage and bills that could not be paid on her salary alone.

She had searched for him, but Gibson had vanished so thoroughly that she wondered if he had had some professional help in doing so. She had lost the house and had to leave her job with the force, and then she moved to Williamsburg, Virginia, where her retired parents lived. She had lucked

out by joining ProEye, a global private investigation agency that did most of its sleuthing online. It paid well and allowed her to use her computer skills, and work from home pretty much full-time. And she had her mom and dad as a support group and free childcare.

Gibson was getting back on her feet, but the single-parent thing was a challenge, even with her mother and father nearby. They both had some health issues and were more apt to be twiddling their thumbs in a doctor's waiting room than be available to assist her. But Gibson was making it work because she didn't have a choice, and she loved her kids. Even when they were puking on her.

She now used her computer skills working for ProEye. The company specialized in hunting down the assets of rich delinquents who continued to live notoriously in the lap of luxury while blowing raspberries at both courts and creditors as they hid behind a wall of snarky lawyers, scheming accountants, and PR mudslingers. And there were so many of these monied deadbeats that ProEye and thus Gibson were flooded with work.

Some rich people obviously did not like to pay their debts, as though they were somehow exempt from the obligation. While positions like a car mechanic, grocery store cashier, or warehouse worker were routinely audited by the IRS for a few thousand bucks as low-hanging fruit, the zillionaires scared off the revenue man with their prodigious legal and accounting muscle.

She'd attended one deposition where a billionaire defendant had argued that his businesses created thousands of jobs and *those* people paid taxes, that he had very little actual income since most of his billion-dollar fortune was in stocks—which he got loans against to pay for his extravagant lifestyle, effectively bypassing the tax man—and that he gave to charity. When the counsel for the government had pointed out that that was not a defense to paying no tax at all on his actual taxable income, the billionaire hadn't told him to fuck off. He'd just said, "Wait until *we* officially *make* it the law. It won't be long now." And *then* he'd told the lawyer to fuck off.

Gibson took a sip of tea and a bite of her cookie, put on her headset, and started clicking computer keys. What she did now could never compare to the adrenaline rush of working cases on the street. But life was full of trade-offs. And this was one she had made. For the good of her family, something every mother would understand.

She might eventually find someone else to spend her life with, but right now that did not seem likely at all. Why? Because what Peter Gibson had robbed her most of, and it was a lengthy list, was trust. Trust in men and, even worse, trust in herself.

Gibson prepared to get to work chasing down a rogue businessman who had \$2 billion in assets somewhere, but unfortunately also had \$4 billion in debt. Just another world-class punk fraudster in a sea of them. Twenty years ago there were fewer than five hundred billionaires in the world. Now there were nearly three thousand. That was an enormous amount of wealth creation. For a very select few.

Everybody else, not so much, she mused.

But then her phone rang.

And everything in Mickey Gibson's suburban, single-mom life was about to get blown straight to hell.

3

MS. GIBSON, THIS IS ARLENE ROBINSON from ProEye, I work with Zeb Brown. I know you were on the phone with him earlier.”

“That’s right. Is there a problem getting the funds locked down?”

“No, that’s all going very well. They’re acting on Bermuda, and they’ll get Zurich and Chad done as soon as they open. You did great work as always.”

“Thanks. I don’t believe we’ve spoken before,” said Gibson as she bit into her cookie and took another sip of her tea.

“We haven’t. I’ve been with ProEye for eighteen months, but I was just transferred to Mr. Brown’s division three weeks ago. He’s always spoken highly of you.” Then she chuckled.

“What?” said Gibson.

“He also informed me that he told you to paint the town red tonight or something to that effect, on the company dime, of course.”

“Yeah, he did,” said an amused Gibson.

“I looked you up before I called. You’re a single mom with two little kids, right?”

Now Gibson understood the chuckle.

“That’s right. And just as I was telling Zeb to lock down those accounts my son threw up on me.”

“Well, I’ve got three under the age of five at home, so I can definitely relate. And I knew you weren’t going to be painting anything red unless it’s a room in your house.”

Gibson laughed. “Spoken like a true mom. Where are you operating from?”

“Albany. I was told it was ProEye’s headquarters about ten years ago, before they really took off and went global.”

“That’s right. I’ve been with them for about two years. It’s a good firm.”

“And it lets people work remotely, which is very nice.”

“Yes it is. So, what can I do for you, Ms. Robinson?”

“Please, make it Arlene. Here’s the thing, and it’s a little different but I was told to call and run it past you.”

“Okay,” said Gibson expectantly.

“There’s an old mansion near Smithfield, Virginia, on the James River, that went into foreclosure. That’s why they thought of you, because you’re in the area.”

“Thought of me for what?”

“They want you to go there and take an inventory of the home’s contents. The file says that there’s a house key under a statue of a cat near the front entrance, if you can believe that.”

“This is a little unusual. I usually do my sleuthing on the internet.”

“I know. That’s most of what ProEye does, as you know. But this is what I was told. And they’d like you to go out today if possible. You can talk to Zeb if you want, but I know he’s in a meeting now. And they really wanted to get you out there fast. It sounded to me like there might be a nice field bonus in there for you, too.”

Gibson was thinking that doing a little field work would be a welcome change from staring at a computer screen for the next few hours. And bonuses were always nice. She would have to call her parents and hope they could come over. She had their calendar and she brought it up on her screen. *Okay, they have no doctor appointments today. That’s a miracle.*

“I think I can make that work. What can you tell me about the property and ProEye’s interest?”

“I’ve got the info up on my screen. The mansion was built in the 1920s by a man named Mason Rutherford. He was a robber baron who made his money in railroad, timber, and mining. He owned a mansion in Colorado, a five-story town house in New York, and this place in Virginia. It’s on land where a British Lord built his home; it was later burned down during the Revolutionary War.” She added in a joking manner, “So there might be a ghost or two around.”

“Just what I always wanted to be—a ghost hunter.”

“Rutherford died in 1940 and his wife, Laura, who was much younger than he was, lived there until 1998. She was a hundred when she passed away. And the place had fallen into disrepair. Must have cost a fortune to keep up.”

“And the current owner?” asked Gibson, who was wondering what she was going to wear on this field trip.

“Ah, that’s the notorious Rutger Novak. He bought the place about seven years ago and spent an enormous amount of money undertaking an extensive renovation.”

“Rutger Novak? I definitely know that name.”

“Right. He and ProEye have a history, and not a good one. Forgive me if I’m telling you things you already know, but Novak is German. He was a big international businessman thirty years back, though always on the shady side. Arms dealer, Middle East strongman backer. He worked both sides on pretty much every deal. He had some setbacks over the years, and it looked like he would go quietly into the night with the bucks he had left. But he apparently made some bad decisions that sucked him dry and then he started to borrow heavily, and it turned out the assets pledged as collateral were mostly phony. ProEye chased him years ago on behalf of a whole coterie of clients, and they ended up with egg on their faces and not a dollar to show for their efforts.”

Gibson said, “That part I know very well. It was before my time, but the firm has never forgotten it. It’s part of the company lore. They even tell it to you during orientation as a warning sign against complacency and not going the extra mile.”

“Well, time apparently caught up to Novak. Everything has now gone belly-up in the last couple of months.”

“Is he around or did he hit the road like last time?”

“Vanished, or so the file says. He owes so much his creditors are trying to grab everything they can. This mansion is one of them. That’s why they want you to go there. The firm wants to make amends for what happened last time.”

“You said near Smithfield? Can you be more specific?”

She heard some key clicks. “It’s between a place called Mogarts Beach and Rushmere on something known as Burwell Bay.” Robinson gave her the street address.

“Okay, that gives me some context. The short route includes a ferry, so that would take me about an hour or so and that’s if I hit the boat schedule dead-on. The long route will have me drive south through Newport News, cross the James River Bridge, head to Smithfield, and then it’s about eight miles above that, like making a horseshoe. All told that’s about an hour, too, depending on traffic, so that’s the way I’ll go.”

“See? It pays to have someone who knows the local geography.”

“I’m surprised no one has been there before now.”

“Well, we didn’t know about the property until an hour ago, which is why Zeb didn’t mention it to you earlier. The title was in the name of a shell company. We just punched through that wall. Our clients have documented liens on all of the man’s assets and have filed blanket legal papers allowing access to all his properties. We’re hoping Novak left so

fast he couldn't clean the place out, because our intel is that he loved the finest things in life and that place might be full of them. Paintings, furniture, sculptures—hell, the creditors will take Oriental rugs, silverware, the contents of a wine cellar or a library, whatever. Regardless, they'll be lucky to get a nickel on the dollar.”

“Yes they will. Okay, I'll head out as fast as I can.”

“And the kids?” asked Robinson.

“My next call will be to my parents. They're local.”

“Thank God for local parents. Mine live on the West Coast. And I think that's by design.”

C H A P T E R

4

THE BLACK PANTSUIT WAS SNUG around the hips and tight around the waist with her stomach pooch drooping over it, although the white blouse hung well on her frame. But Gibson was pissed because while the blouse was hers, she'd had to borrow the pantsuit from Dorothy Rogers, her *mother*.

You did birth two kids. You don't snap right back from that. Well, it has been two years since Darby was born, so you're well past snapping-back stage.

Now she regretted the oatmeal almond cookie.

And she had seen the look her mother had given her when she'd come down the stairs in her clothes. No words, just that look—no, that *smirk*. But then her mother did remark, “I just bought that outfit at TJ Maxx. But then I have been working out a lot more *and* watching my diet. It's very important as one gets older, although none of us is getting any younger, right, honey? But for now just button the jacket and no one will notice how tight it is on you. Baby belly can be a real bitch. Took me thirty years to get rid of mine. Many women never do.”

That was about as subtle as her mother ever got. Maybe any mother ever got with her daughter.

Gibson steered her mommy van south down Interstate 64 East, and then worked her way through surface roads to US 17 that sling-shotted her across the burly James River. Next, she turned north, passing through what had once been the hog-slaughtering capital of the world at Smithfield. Her nav system showed it was another seven miles to the remnants of Rutger Novak's shattered empire. The whole journey would be less than fifty miles, but that was a long way in the tightly constricted parameters of this part of coastal Virginia. It was filled with military footprints, underwater tunnels, bridges, the ocean with wide sandy beaches, and the delicate lines of inland waterways that either crept along the earth like capillaries under the skin or gushed across it like fat arteries.

Gibson had thought about calling Zeb Brown back, but she knew he

would be preoccupied with the case she had discussed with him this morning. And she was excited about getting out of the house.

She followed the directions until she turned down a long narrow road that was bracketed on both sides by mature trees that were just starting to bud out in early spring. Gibson reached down and touched the holster riding on her belt. In it was a Beretta eight-shot Nano, which was comparable in size and weight to the Glock 26 she had carried on the police force, and chambered the same ordnance. Its slightly smaller footprint fit her hand well. And the nine-millimeter Luger bullet that blew out of its barrel would stop pretty much whatever it hit.

She had not let her mother see her unlock the combo safe located at the top of her bedroom closet or put the gun in her belt clip. Her mom had never wanted her daughter to be a cop. One in the family was enough, she had often said. However, Gibson had wanted to follow in her father's footsteps. As the oldest child, with two brothers coming in behind her, she had held her uniformed father in awe. But, initially, bowing to the will of her mother, Gibson had joined the force as a forensics tech. That had mollified her mom, since Gibson would show up at the crime scene only *after* all the danger had passed.

When she secretly took and passed the written and physical exams to enter the police academy, her mother had thrown a fit. It wasn't until her father, Rick Rogers, stepped in that she was allowed to pursue her dream. Her old man was proud of her, Gibson knew, though he rarely showed it. Public displays of affection were not in the DNA of the Rogers family. Gibson could count on one hand the number of times her mother had hugged or kissed her. And she could count those times on *one* finger with her father—that was the day of her graduation from the police academy.

He hadn't done it at her wedding, for reasons he had made clear to his daughter prior to Gibson's walking down the aisle.

She turned off the road she was on and started down another. The property was just up ahead on the right.

And maybe I'll find some British ghosts living in the old mansion.

She slowed as she saw the stone monuments on either side of a driveway. The plaque on one of the monuments read: STORMFIELD.

Arlene Robinson hadn't told her the name of the place, not that it mattered.

There was a wrought iron gate but it hung open. Farther down and partially concealed by some overgrown bushes stood a mailbox. She drove up the cobblestone lane and swung around a bend in the road. Revealed was a sprawling old manor house that looked as though it hadn't changed a