

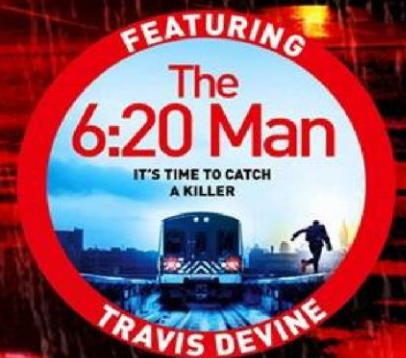
'Baldacci is the master'
Jeffrey Archer

DAVID BALDACC

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

The Edge

HE'S CLOSER THAN
YOU THINK...



**DAVID
BALDACCI**

The Edge

MACMILLAN

*To the memory of Lee Calligaro, a man who taught me a lot, and
the finest trial lawyer I've ever known*

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CHAPTER

1

PASSENGER TRAIN TRAVEL WAS NOT known to be particularly dangerous, especially in Europe where the machines soared like the wind on rigorously sculpted rails that translated to silky smooth rides. There were many departures a day between Geneva and Milan operated by several railway companies; one could travel early in the morning or later at night. The trains ran at a maximum speed of two hundred kilometers per hour, while their passengers napped, worked, binged shows on streaming platforms, or ate and drank in considerable comfort. This particular ride was a bullet-nosed silver Astoro tilt train operated by Trenitalia. None of the hundred-plus passengers was contemplating dying today.

Except for one.

As far as Travis Devine was concerned this ride was fraught with peril of the kind that would not send you to a hospital, but rather a half dozen feet into the cold earth. The source of the danger had nothing to do with the train. It had been ferreted out by his well-honed situational awareness, which had led him to conclude that his life was in imminent jeopardy.

The trip from Geneva to Milan contained beautiful scenery: the soaring, snow-capped Swiss Alps, the lush, verdant valleys, immaculate, aromatic vineyards, two pristine lakes, and the quaint, picturesque villages of Europe ladled in between the two venerable cities. Devine cared nothing about this as he sat in his first-class seat upholstered in brown leather staring at seemingly nothing, while actually taking in everything inside the train car. And there was a lot to observe.

Devine checked his watch. On some trains this trip could take five hours and a quarter, but he was on an express ride that would do it in just under four. He had ninety minutes of that trip left, and maybe that same number of ticks to live. Devine would have preferred a packed train car, but his tight escape from Geneva had not allowed for any latitude on the travel time, and this early in the morning there were only three other passengers in the first-class car. The attendants had already been through checking tickets. Despite this being first class, food was not served at the seat, but there was a dining car between the first-and second-class sections. The attendants were now off

somewhere else as the train had settled into the second half of its journey south.

Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie. It was how the former U.S. Army Ranger Devine referred to the three other passengers. Two men, one woman. Not passengers, at least not to him.

Adversaries. Bogies. The enemy.

The men were sitting together in seats facing each other, forward of Devine's position, near the front of the car. The woman was on the other side of the aisle, two up from him. She looked like a student. Textbooks stacked high, a bulky rucksack in a storage rack behind her; she was drawing something in a sketchbook. But Devine had been fooled by people posing as students before.

The men wore thick overcoats against the climate just outside the slender train windows. Overcoats that could hide a lot.

Devine had gotten up and gone to the bathroom twice now, but only once to relieve himself; the other was solely for recon. He had also gotten some food in the dining car and brought it back to his seat. Each time after returning, Devine had glanced at his gear bag, which was behind him on a luggage rack.

And the third time he saw what he thought he would.

On his phone he brought up his train's journey, saw its exact route, its progression, and most critically its timing. Of particular note was the Simplon Tunnel, which they would enter after passing through the Swiss town of Brig. When they exited the tunnel they would be in Italy. The article he was now reading said that the tunnel was twelve miles long and would take the train eight minutes to pass through. The tunnel had opened in 1906 and had given its name to perhaps the most famous train in the world, the Simplon-Orient-Express.

Devine wasn't interested in the history; he was focused on the tunnel.

He texted a high-priority message to an interested party and then checked his watch.

He had caught Alpha and Bravo staring at him, at different times, but he had made no reaction. These were known, in Devine's world, as *target* glances. Charlie, who was wearing a Madrid Real ballcap, had never looked at him, but she had surreptitiously eyed the two men while getting something from her bag. Her movements were mildly tensed, even robotic, he'd observed. She was trying overly hard to appear normal, which was causing her anxiety. Stress activated the sympathetic nervous system, the flight-fight-or-freeze part of the body that present-day humankind could thank its cavemen ancestors for. Fear did things to a body physiologically.

The mind could screw with you in ways you could hardly imagine. In trying to save you, its stressor signals could actually kill you with a heart attack or render you incapable of saving yourself. Or, in his case, blow a plan to kill someone right out of the water, and give the potential victim a chance to survive.

Devine analyzed the situation exactly as he had been trained to do, every contingency, every weak point. The men had never removed their overcoats even though the climate inside was quite comfortable. In fact, Devine had taken his parka off because he had felt warm.

Keeping their hands in their pockets, in particular, was an informed tell of malevolent intent, because hands were a necessary accompaniment to a primary weapon, usually a gun. And they had target-glanced Devine not once but twice. Finally, they had never left their seats as far as he could tell. There were no food or drink containers at their tables. That completed the Rule of Three for Devine. A trio of behavior patterns that were out of the ordinary meant you needed to come up with a plan if you wanted to walk away under your own power.

Well, I've got at least four warning signs here, because of what I saw on my gear bag, so I need to get my shit together.

Devine checked his watch once more and then eyed his bag. After he'd gone to the dining car he'd come back to find that the zipper was three teeth above where he had left it; and, in just the right light, he had seen the whorls of a thumbprint on the pull tab, a thumbprint that was assuredly not his. There was nothing in his bag other than clothes and a toiletry kit; otherwise, he never would have left it unguarded. He was also kicking himself for not bringing a gun with him on this trip, but that would have been problematic for a number of reasons.

At the border station of Domodossola a contingent of the Swiss Guard boarded to do a customs check. Devine was asked if he had anything to declare and how much cash he had on his person, and he had to show his passport. He watched carefully without seeming to as they asked the same of the other three passengers. He couldn't see the passports of the two men, but the woman's appeared to be a post-Brexit UK blue and gold, which mimicked the original colors that had been in place on British passports since 1921.

Later, he eyed the window as the train began slowing. They pulled into the town of Brig. No one got on in first class, and no one got off, except for the Swiss Guard contingent. For a moment Devine thought about exiting the train, too, or telling them of his concerns with the other passengers. However, he had his plan now and he was sticking to it. And he wasn't

trusting anyone right now, not even the Swiss Guard. The opponents he was battling had the resources to buy pretty much anyone and anything.

And these foes of his had great incentive to wish Devine harm. Working on behalf of the United States, Devine had helped foil a ballsy attempt by some powerful if unscrupulous interests to promote global unrest for pure profit, with the added kicker of overthrowing several governments hostile to the players behind this scheme. It seemed as long as people lusted for wealth and power, this crap would just keep happening. And one day they might just succeed in taking over the world, thought Devine.

The train glided away from the station. The two attendants came through, and then, seeing no new passengers, or anything that needed their attention, other than Devine handing one of them the trash from his meal, they left through the opposite end of the train car to do whatever attendants did when their official work was done.

The train speed was posted on a digital screen attached to the bulkhead at the front of the car. Devine watched it rise to 180 kilometers an hour before it started to drop. He did the mile-to-kilometer calculation in his head to arrive at the length of time the train would be in the Simplon Tunnel.

Twelve miles is nineteen kilometers. Doing that in eight minutes would mean a constant speed of... right.

He looked at the screen again. One hundred and sixty kilometers...one fifty-three...one forty-two point...

He put on his parka and rose just as the train entered the tunnel; now the only real illumination came from the interior car lights. Devine strode up the aisle to the toilet in the connecting vestibule. As he passed the woman he glanced down at what she was drawing in charcoal.

Okay, that makes sense. And it's nice to have at least partial confirmation. But the real proof is about to come, and it will be unequivocal.

Devine started to combat-breathe: inhale for a four count, hold for four, exhale for four, and hold for four. Repeat. This would stop his sympathetic nervous system from kicking on, wiping out his peripheral vision, blowing to shit his fine motor skills, and turning him into a big dumb animal just waiting to be killed. He would die one day just like everyone else, but it would never happen like that.

He passed by Alpha and Bravo, neither of whom looked at him. The automatic doors slid open with a hydraulic sigh, and Devine entered the vestibule. The toilet was off to the right, just out of eyeline of the passengers.

A few moments later the toilet door opened and a few moments later it closed.

The big men rose as though tied together by string and headed after Devine.

As they walked they screwed suppressor cans onto the muzzles of overkill German-made machine pistols pulled from their overcoat pockets. They reached the vestibule, where they could hear water running, and someone talking inside the toilet. They took aim and fired right through the flimsy toilet door. The sounds of the suppressed rounds were covered by the enhanced roar of the train going through the tunnel, which was why they had waited until now to do the deed. They shot in tight patterns, high to low and in between, followed by crisscrossed streams; they were fields of fire that left no room for survival in the confined space. With sixty rounds total, death of the target was guaranteed.

While Bravo covered him, Alpha nudged open the wrecked door, just to make sure, since their kill contract required it, along with an iPhone pic of the corpse texted to their employer.

However, all he saw was an empty toilet with the water tap wedged on. And a phone on the floor and leaning against the wall next to the toilet; a podcast was playing on the device.

At that moment the door to the storage closet opposite the toilet swung open and caught Bravo at the right temple.

Having let them empty out their weapons, Devine was now the predator. Where each man stood Devine's goal was to claim that ground. And the only way to do that was to go *through* them.

Devine opened his campaign with twin-thumb eye gouges that blinded Bravo. Devine next formed a V with his hand, the thumb on one side and the four fingers on the other, and slammed the hard groove of the flesh between them against the man's throat, collapsing his trachea. This was followed by twin crushing elbow strikes to the right side of the cervical spine that snapped two of the man's vertebrae, cutting off his brain from the rest of his body. He dropped to the floor out of the fight and also out of life. This continuous, fluid movement had taken all of four seconds.

Devine next trapped a stunned Alpha and his machine pistol against the doorjamb of the toilet as the man tried to slap in a fresh mag. Devine made the gun fall from his hand by wrenching it downward and then to the side past the joint's limits with cartilage-cracking torque. Alpha should have already reloaded and attempted to shoot Devine, but the man's breathing was ragged as his adrenal glands flooded his bloodstream with cortisol, fouling his mind-body connection. His pupils went from two millimeters to nine in less than a breath; his peripheral vision was completely blown. Devine already knew he was going to win this fight, because none of that

was happening to him. His cognitive, and hence his fighting, skills were operating fine.

Alpha awkwardly swung at Devine and caught him a glancing blow on the jaw. It was not hard enough to do any real damage, and the panicked man had forced himself off balance with the move. Two punishing elbow slams to the exposed right kidney dropped Alpha to his knees. Devine grabbed him by the collar and flung him headfirst against the train wall once and then again. The desperate man, perhaps sensing his own imminent death, pulled a knife and spun around, and the blade slashed against Devine's arm. But his aim was shaky and thus off, and Devine's thick parka took most of the damage.

Okay, time to end this. And him.

Devine broke the man's grip on the knife and it clattered to the floor. He then slapped the man's right ear with such force, the eardrum burst. The man seized up, presenting his face directly to Devine, who used a palm strike on his nose, hitting him once and then again with the cup of his hand, releasing all the kinetic energy from his brawny arm, shoulder, broad back, and thrust hip. This streamlined attack delivered massive torque that propelled the nose's brittlely sharp cartilage straight into Alpha's soft brain tissue. He dropped to the floor face first. Just to be certain, Devine reached down and broke the man's neck in the exact way the U.S. Army had taught him.

Devine dragged both dead men and their weapons into the toilet, turned off the water, retrieved his phone, and wedged the shot-riddled door shut.

Fighting wasn't just knowing certain techniques, although that was important; it was mostly an evolved state of mind. Without that, enhanced hand-to-hand combat skills meant squat because you would be too cowed to employ them. And the very concept of *self-defense* was a losing proposition, pretty much conceding the field and making you a victim in waiting. You didn't defend, you attacked. You didn't stop someone from hurting or killing you. *You hurt or you killed. Them.*

Rubbing his bruised jaw and gingerly touching his cut arm, which he instinctively knew wasn't that serious, he reentered the train car to see Charlie staring at him.

"What happened?" she exclaimed, her eyes agog. "What was that noise?"

All right, thought Devine, this is where the rubber meets the road.

As he walked toward her Devine glanced for a moment in the train window, which reflected the interior because they were still in the Simplon Tunnel for at least another few minutes. He saw what he needed to see.

He shrugged. "Two guys. Real mess in the toilet. Going to be quite a cleanup."

“My goodness. Is there anything I can do?”

Her neck muscles were now relaxed, he noted, pupils normal, breathing the same. She was a cut above the deceased goons back there.

Devine stopped next to her, looked down at the drawing, and said, “Yeah, you could explain why you’ve been sitting here for over two hours working away and you haven’t added a damn thing to your sketch.”

She half rose and swung the long-bladed knife up from her lap, but Devine had already seen the weapon in the window reflection. He didn’t waste any time on a defensive block. He simply clocked her in the jaw, lifting her far smaller body off the floor and knocking her against the wall. She slumped down into unconsciousness from the force of his blow and her collision with the wall. Devine momentarily pondered whether to finish the job. But she was young and might repent of her evil ways. He took the knife, slid her ballcap down, draped her hair around her slender shoulders, and propped her up against her seat as though she were merely napping.

He grabbed his gear bag and walked into the dining car, and then through the second-class carriages until he reached the last car, where he slipped her knife into a trash receptacle. The train cleared the tunnel, and when it slowed and stopped at Stresa, the last station before Milan, Devine got off. The text he had sent earlier paid dividends when the black sedan picked him up. The driver would take Devine the rest of the way to Milan. There he would catch a flight back to the United States, where another mission surely awaited.

As he glanced back at the train, Devine wondered whether he had made a mistake in allowing the woman to live.

The answer wouldn’t be long in coming.

CHAPTER

2

SITTING IN A TACKY OFFICE in a 1960s-era strip mall in Annandale, Virginia, Emerson Campbell was not a happy man.

He was a retired Army two-star and, like Travis Devine, Ranger tabbed and scrolled, meaning he had graduated from Ranger School and then been accepted into the elite Seventy-Fifth Ranger Regiment, the Army's most prestigious and demanding special ops force. His gunmetal-gray, closely cropped hair and weathered, grim features spoke of a lifetime of discipline and heightened professionalism. And, perhaps most tellingly, all the shit he had seen fighting on behalf of his country through a number of wars and also under-the-radar operations the public would never know about.

Devine sat on the other side of the desk and took in the man who, several months before, had recruited him to serve in the Office of Special Projects under the massive bureaucratic dome of Homeland Security.

Special Projects, thought Devine. *It sounds like we plan office parties and cotillions.*

"It's a shitshow, Devine. The Italian and Swiss governments have filed official complaints. Two dead guys in a shot-up train toilet between their countries. Not a good optic."

"It's a better optic than *one* dead guy, meaning me. IDs on the corpses?"

Campbell shrugged. "Kazakhstan muscle, no more, no less. They've killed at least twenty people. All wired funds upon proof of the kill, no traceable interaction with whoever hired them. No way to dig beyond that, which is the whole point."

"Glad I denied them the twenty-first. And the woman?"

"There was no woman found there," said Campbell. "She must have recovered and high-tailed it out of there."

"CCTV?"

"Working on it, though the Italians and Swiss are not exactly too cooperative right now."

Devine shook his head. *Knew I should have taken her out. But she was unconscious and no threat to me.*

He caught Campbell studying him. "I know it was a hard call, Devine.

Don't know what I would have done."

"Well, I gave you a description. Maybe your people can run her down."

"Now, let's focus on your new mission."

"I don't get a couple days off?" said Devine, only half-jokingly.

"You can rest when you're dead."

"Yeah, that's what they told me in the Army, too."

Campbell said, "I emailed you the briefing doc. Pull it up."

Devine opened the attachment to the email on his phone and gazed at the photo of a lovely woman in her late thirties with smooth, pale skin, blond hair, and deep-set, intelligent eyes that seemed to shimmer with unsettling intensity in the midst of all the fine pixels.

Campbell said, "That's Jennifer Silkwel. You heard of the Silkwells?"

"No, but I'm sure I'll learn everything about them before this is over."

"Curtis Silkwel was the senior U.S. senator from Maine. His greatgreat-grandfather made several fortunes, shipping, fishing, real estate, agriculture. All of that wealth is now mostly gone. They have the old homestead in Maine, but that's about it."

"He *was* a senator?"

"He resigned during his third term. Alzheimer's, which has gotten progressively worse. He was treated at Walter Reed before it became clear there was nothing that could be done. He's currently at a private facility in Virginia awaiting the end."

"He was treated at Walter Reed because he was a senator?"

"No, because he was a soldier. He retired from the Marines as a one-star before jumping into politics, getting married, and having a family." Campbell shot Devine a scrutinizing glance. "Full disclosure, Curt is one of my best friends. We fought together in Vietnam. He saved my life twice."

"Okay."

"So this is personal for me, Devine."

"Yes, sir."

"His wife, Clare, divorced him right after he won his last reelection. Between you and me, I think she could see what was coming and decided to bail. So much for 'in sickness and in health.'"

"Where is she now?"

"Already remarried to some rich guy in DC who isn't worthy of polishing Curt's combat boots."

"So, the case?" prompted Devine, wanting to push Campbell off the personal edge and back onto the mission-driven one.

“Go to page five of your briefing. Jennifer is the eldest daughter of Curtis and Clare. She worked for CIA, mostly in field operations, though she once served as a liaison to the White House for Central Intelligence. She was a quick climber and incredibly talented, and she will be sorely missed.”

Devine scanned page five. “What happened to her?”

“Someone killed her, four days ago. Up in Maine where she was visiting her old hometown.” The man’s voice cracked before he finished speaking.

Devine lifted his gaze. Campbell’s face was flushed and his bottom lip was trembling.

“I held her in my arms when she was a baby. I was her damn *godfather*.” He swiped tears away and, composed, he continued. “Curt got started late on his family. He was nearly forty when Jenny was born. Clare was a lot younger. She was still in college when they got married.”

“They have any leads on who might have killed her?”

“None that we know of.”

“And our interest?”

“Jenny Silkwell was a valuable asset of this country. She was privy to many of our most precious national secrets. We need to know if her death was connected to that, and whether anyone was able to gain any information that would jeopardize our interests. Her personal laptop has been found at her home, and her government-issued phone was there as well. But her CIA laptop was not found at her office or her home, and neither was her personal phone. The geolocators on the devices have been switched off. That’s normally the case for people like Jenny, unless she’s in an operational area where orders or logistics require she keep them on. The data is mostly cloud based now, but she might have something on her hard drive or on her phone that is sensitive. And we don’t want anyone using her devices to backdoor into our clouds.”

“So I’m heading to where she was killed in Maine?”

“Yes. Putnam, Maine. But not yet. I want you to talk to Clare first in DC. She may know something helpful. *Then* you head to Maine. The details of Jenny’s death are contained in your briefing book, pages eight through ten.”

Devine read quickly, but comprehensively, just as the Army had trained him. In combat, time was not on your side. But neither was skipping over something in a briefing that might prove catastrophic later.

“The shooter didn’t police their brass?”

“Right. And, technically, the casing was polymer, not brass.”

Devine looked surprised because he was. “A *polymer* casing?”

“Yes. It expands and then contracts in the chamber immediately. Brass just expands, as you well know. Less degradation on the equipment, because the polymer insulates the heat from the chamber.”

“And less heat and friction reduces choke rate,” said Devine, referring to the hesitation of the weapon in firing due to those factors.

“The Army’s been slowly moving away from brass. Hell, they’ve been wedded to it since before the Spanish-American War, so it’s about damn time. And the Marines are testing polymer casings for their .50-cal. M2 machine gun. And the Brits are looking at polymer too, for their 5.56 mm rounds.”

“A good thing, too. Brass adds a lot of weight to your gear pack.”

“That’s why they’re making the switch. What with smartphones and handheld computers and more weaponry and optics, the Army carry load is up to about a hundred pounds now for each soldier. Switching from brass to polymer is a cost-effective way of lightening the load. For the Marines, a forty-eight-box pallet of the .50-cal. in polymer weighs nearly seven hundred pounds less than brass. And there’s even the possibility of 3Dprinting repair parts in the field because the casings are recyclable.”

As he’d been speaking Devine had continued to read. He looked up. “It was a .300 Norma mag round.” “Yes,” replied Campbell.

“And the head stamp shows it’s a U.S. military round.”

“Army snipers and special ops guys chamber the Norma in the Barrett MK22 rifle.”

Devine nodded. “They switched from the 6.5 Creedmoor round *after* I mustered out. But does the Army already use polymer casings for the .300 Norma?”

“No, Devine. There are tests being run at various Army facilities across the country chambering the Norma and other ordnance with a *polymer* casing, but it has not been officially deployed. You know how that goes. Army needs to shoot a shit ton of it under every conceivable combat environment before it has any chance of getting approved for mass deployment.”

“Who’s the manufacturer?”

“Warwick Arsenal. A small firm out of Georgia.”

“So, the question becomes: How did a still-in-testing .300 Norma polymer round produced by a firm in Georgia end up at a crime scene in Maine?”

Campbell said, “We’ve spoken with the people at Warwick. They have checked and rechecked their inventory and found nothing amiss. But to me that’s meaningless because they’ve shipped hundreds of thousands of these

rounds to Army facilities throughout the country, with hundreds of personnel taking part in the testing. There is no way that every single round can be accounted for. Proverbial needle in a haystack.”

“So someone could have pocketed the polymer casing and given it to someone and then it goes through various hands and ends up being used to kill Jenny Silkwell. Was it important she was shot with that particular bullet? Did she have any involvement with its development?”

“None. And I have no idea if the use of that particular bullet is significant or not. That’s your job to find out during your investigation. By the way, the local cops are also working the case. You’ll have to team with them.”

“And why would they team with me?”

Campbell took from his desk drawer what looked like a black leather wallet and slid it across. “Here’s why.”

Devine opened what turned out to be a cred pack, complete with shiny badge, and examined it. He looked up in surprise. “I’m a special investigator with Homeland Security? Seriously?”

“Your cover is rock-solid.”

“Only I’m not a trained investigator.”

Campbell gave Devine a drill sergeant death stare. “Don’t sell yourself short. You carried on investigations in the Middle East in addition to your combat duties. And you did a pretty damn good job of sleuthing back in New York on the Brad Cowl case. And you’ve done stellar work with the other assignments I’ve given you. Now, you are to find out who killed Jenny and why. And determine if any of our national security interests have been compromised. And find her laptop and phone.” “Well, that sounds simple enough,” said Devine dryly.

“Rise to the challenge, soldier,” retorted Campbell.

“Why don’t the feds have a joint op platoon of agents on this? Central Intelligence goes scorched earth when one of its own goes down. And the FBI, too.”

“CIA has no jurisdiction on American soil. And if we deploy an army of FBI the press will start to pry and word will get out. Then our enemies could see us as weakened and themselves emboldened. Jenny Silkwell might very well have been killed because of something having absolutely nothing to do with her status with CIA. If so, we want to go in stealth and stay that way if the facts on the ground allow. So right now you, Devine, *are* the ‘army.’”

“And if my ‘rock-solid’ cover gets blown?”

“We never heard of you.”

CHAPTER

3

A LIGHT DRIZZLE WAS FALLING AS Devine pulled through the open gates of Clare Robards's mansion in Kalorama in northwest DC. It was one of the most expensive areas in the capital city, with the median price of a home well north of seven figures. *Kalorama*, Devine had learned, was Greek for "beautiful view." And it *was* beautiful, if one had the hefty entrance fee.

Embassy Row was on nearby Massachusetts Avenue, and the Dutch and French ambassadors' official residences were in the vicinity, along with thirty foreign embassies. Jeff Bezos also had a home nearby that he had laid out twenty-three million for, and then bought the place next door for another five mil. Billionaires apparently needed a lot of room, or else a healthy buffer from the merely rich, Devine thought.

At that level it's just Monopoly money anyway.

The Robards's mansion was substantial, made of stone and large rustic timbers with small windows and cone-topped metal turrets. The property had wide, sloping lawns, and mature trees and plantings. No money spared and no detail overlooked to create a display of subdued, old money wealth that judiciously managed not to overwhelm with inflated grandiosity.

He had phoned ahead, so the well-dressed professional-looking woman who answered the door led Devine directly down a long marble-floored hall to a set of imposing solid oak doors.

She knocked and a woman's cultured voice from inside the room said authoritatively, "Come in."

And so Devine stepped into, perhaps, the Lioness's Den.

Clare Robards was perched regally on a settee in a room that was lined with shelves, which were, in turn, filled with leatherbound books. Against one wall a small bar was set up. Was it his imagination or did Robards's gaze slide toward it?

The lady's light green dress was exquisitely tailored to her thin, petite frame. She had allowed her shoulder-length hair to turn an elegant white.

She fiddled with a strand of small lustrous pearls and looked everywhere except at Devine. The woman was clearly uncomfortable with his presence

here. She wore little makeup, and the dark circles under her reddened eyes spoke of long bouts of crying.

Maybe she thinks if she ignores me, her eldest daughter wouldn't be dead.

“Ms. Robards, I’m Travis Devine with Homeland Security.” “Yes, I know, Mr. Devine,” she said in a low voice. “Please sit.” She finally looked at him—resignedly, Devine concluded.

“Would you like something hot to drink? It’s quite chilly today.” “No thank you, I’m fine.” He settled into a wingchair opposite her.

“And I’m very sorry for your loss.”

She twitched at his words, and closed her eyes for a moment. “We all thought Jenny was indomitable, a survivor. She had survived...much, until this ugly, ugly business.”

“She had a stellar career, and a brilliant future in serving her country.”

“That goddamned job cost my daughter her life,” she barked. Then she quickly let the regal mask slide back down over her features. “I’m sorry,” she said in a hushed voice.

“No reason to be.” He glanced around. “Is your husband here?”

“Vernon is in Thailand, at least I think so. Business,” she added with a touch of bitterness. “Apparently, for some people business and making money trumps all, even the *murder* of one’s stepdaughter.” She glanced at her lap and let her fingers intertwine as though she suddenly felt the need to hold on to herself. “It’s funny, Mr. Devine.”

“What is?”

“When I married Curt, he was already a war hero. This big strong marine that no enemy could defeat. And he was gone all the time, too. Not to make money, but to serve his country, like Jenny did. He survived that. And then he got into politics. Worked his way up and eventually ran for the Senate and won. And he was gone all the time, again, not for the money but to serve. And here’s the funny thing.” She paused and seemed to collect herself, running her fingers delicately along her expensive pearls. “The funny thing is, for the people left behind, the motivation doesn’t matter. The result is the same: one is alone.”

“I can see that.”

She looked around at the tastefully decorated room in the luxurious mansion in the pricey, sought-after neighborhood with beautiful views. “And in case you’re wondering, as so many have, no, the grass is not always greener.”

“I understand that Jenny was not in full agreement with the divorce?” he said quietly.