

THE WORLDWIDE BESTSELLER

PATRICIA
CORNWELL

A SCARPETTA NOVEL

A photograph of a dark, narrow tunnel with tracks on the floor. A bright light emanates from the far end of the tunnel, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the tracks and the rough, rocky walls. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and suspenseful.

UNNATURAL
DEATH

In 1990, **Patricia Cornwell** sold her first novel, *Postmortem*, while working at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Richmond, Virginia. An auspicious debut, it went on to win the Edgar, Creasey, Anthony, and Macavity Awards, as well as the French Prix du Roman d'Aventures—the first book ever to claim all these distinctions in a single year. Growing into an international phenomenon, the Scarpetta series won Cornwell the Sherlock Award for best detective created by an American author, the Gold Dagger Award, the RBA Thriller Award, and the Medal of Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters for her contributions to literary and artistic development.

Today, Cornwell's novels and iconic characters are known around the world. Beyond the Scarpetta series, Cornwell has written the definitive nonfiction account of Jack the Ripper's identity, cookbooks, a children's book, a biography of Ruth Graham, and three other fictional series based on the characters Win Garano, Andy Brazil, and Captain Callie Chase. Cornwell continues exploring the latest space-age technologies and threats relevant to contemporary life. Her interests range from the morgue to artificial intelligence and include visits to Interpol, the Pentagon, the U.S. Secret Service, and NASA. Cornwell was born in Miami. She grew up in Montreat, North Carolina, and now lives and works in Boston.

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**PATRICIA
CORNWELL
UNNATURAL
DEATH**



Little, Brown

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*To Staci—
You make everything possible.*

“WAS I, THEN, A MONSTER,
A BLOT UPON THE EARTH,
FROM WHICH ALL MEN FLED
AND WHOM ALL MEN DISOWNED?”

—MARY SHELLEY, *FRANKENSTEIN* (1818)

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CHAPTER 1

STEP OFF THE ELEVATOR on the morgue level, the air foul beneath a cloying patina of deodorizer. A stuttering fluorescent light is enough to cause vertigo, the white tile floor blood-dripped and dirty. Cinder block walls are scuffed and smudged, the red biohazard trash cans overflowing.

It's a few minutes past nine A.M., November first, and yesterday was the deadliest Halloween on record in Northern Virginia. People were busy killing themselves and others, the weather dangerously stormy. I left my Alexandria office late and was back before daylight. We're far from caught up, and I'd be inside the autopsy suite right now if I hadn't been summoned to a scene that promises to be a nightmare.

Two campers have been killed near an abandoned gold mine sixty miles southwest of here. The primitive wilderness of Buckingham Run isn't a place people hike or visit, and I've looked up information about it, getting a better idea what to expect. Virginia's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner hasn't had a case from there in its eighty-some-year history. That doesn't mean there haven't been fatalities no one knows about.

Buckingham Run isn't mapped or accessible by motorized ground transportation, and I wouldn't dare try it on foot. Thousands of acres are riddled with mineshafts and tunnels, among other life-threatening hazards that include contamination by poisons. There's no telling what might live in vast forestland that's been relatively untouched by humans since before the American Civil War.

It goes without saying there are large wild animals, perhaps some that people wouldn't imagine, and I'm not talking about only bears. Images flash nonstop from videos that Pete Marino has been sending since he arrived at the scene. *The nude female body impaled by hiking poles floating in a lake reflecting fall colors. The campsite scattered near the entrance of the abandoned gold mine, DANGER and GO AWAY barely legible on centuries-old warning signs.*

Marino filmed with his phone while shining a light down a mineshaft,

illuminating a body caught in collapsed wooden scaffolding, the bloody face staring up blindly. I can hear Marino's booted feet moving through loose rocks and grit. I see his light painting over rusty iron rails ... An ore cart shrouded in spiderwebs ... Then he's exclaiming "*Holy shit,*" the light stopping on a bare footprint that seems to have been left by a giant ...

Leaving the building. I send a text to Marino's satellite phone.

A former homicide detective I've worked with most of my career, he's my forensic operations specialist. Several hours ago, he was airlifted to the scene with Secret Service investigators. Marino is getting an overview before I show up and is excited by *the find of a lifetime*, as he puts it. I'm not sharing his positive sentiments about evidence that's sensational and likely fake. Any way I look at it, we could have a real mess on our hands.

If you want me to bring anything else tell me now. Typing with my thumbs, I push through the ladies' room door.

I feel for the wall switch, turning on the light inside a closet-size space with a sink, a toilet and a plastic chair with uneven legs. By now I'm programmed not to pass up a chance to use the facilities. In the early days I might have been the only female except for maybe the victim. At death scenes I don't get to borrow the bathroom, and where I'm going doesn't have one.

While I'm washing up with institutional soap, my computer-assisted *smart* ring alerts me that Marino is answering my texts to him. Drying my hands with cheap paper towels, I unlock my phone.

Bring bolt cutters, he's written back, and I've already thought of it.

All set. Anything else? I answer.

A snakebite kit.

Don't have.

There's one in my truck.

They don't work, I reply, and we've been through this countless times since I've known him.

Better than nothing.

They're not.

What if someone gets bit? He adds the emoji of a coiled snake.

I answer with the emojis of a helicopter and a hospital before tucking my phone in a pocket. Reapplying lip balm, I brush on mineral sunblock, spritzing myself but good with insect repellent. I pick up my Kevlar briefcase, a birthday gift from my Secret Service agent niece, Lucy Farinelli. Looping the strap over my shoulder, I'm confronted by my reflection in the mirror.

It's as bad as I expected after days of little sleep, eating on the run and

too much coffee. When Lucy notified me about the two victims inside Buckingham Run, she said to dress for extreme conditions. The tactical cargo pants and shirt, the boots I'm wearing wouldn't be flattering on most women. I'm no exception. I text Lucy that I'll meet her outside. First, I need to chat with Henry Addams, I tell her, and she'll understand why.

The funeral director is on his way here to pick up a body from an unrelated case, an alleged suicide from yesterday. I texted him that we need to talk when he gets here. He doesn't know what's happened inside Buckingham Run. Nothing has been on the news yet. But he'll realize something is going on or I wouldn't have communicated that I'm waiting for him.

As I follow the corridor, observation windows on either side offer remnants of recent horrors. Air-drying in the evidence room are the bloody clown costumes donned by two ex-cons who picked the wrong home to invade last night. The Bozos (as they're being called) got a trick rather than a treat when they were greeted with a shotgun.

Sneakers with laces tied in double bows were left in the road at the scene of a pedestrian hit-and-run. A shattered wrist-watch shows that time stopped at nine p.m. for the victim of an armed robbery in a retirement home parking lot. The paper strip from a fortune cookie reads, *Your luck is about to change*, and it did when a woman fell off her deer stand.

Inside the CT room's scanner, images on monitors are of a fractured skull. The decomp autopsy room's door is closed, the red light illuminated. Inside is the badly decomposed body of a possible drowning in the Potomac River, the victim last seen fishing almost a week ago.

I'm walking past a supply closet when Fabian Etienne emerges from it. He's holding a box of exam gloves as if he just happened to be in the area, and I know his ploys.

* * *

"Hey! Doctor Scarpetta!" Fabian's voice interrupts my grim preoccupations. "Wait up!" Flashing me one of his big smiles, he's been watching the cameras, waiting for me to head out of the building.

Fabian intends to have another go at me in hopes I might change my mind, and I understand his frustration. I also am keenly aware that he craves drama and is *easily bored and underutilized*, as he puts it. When he was growing up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, he was earning money giving swamp tours by the time he could drive a car.

His father is a coroner, and Fabian grew up in a *deadly environment*, he

often quips. He's not afraid of much, and there's no type of case he wouldn't handle given the opportunity. But he can't be involved with Buckingham Run for a lot of reasons. The Secret Service wouldn't allow Fabian at the scene, and I'm not to discuss the details with him or anyone unauthorized. More to the point, I need him here.

"I've helped Lucy haul everything out to the chopper, and she let me look inside the cockpit." His Louisiana accent is more New York than Southern. "OMG, that thing is *sick*. She says it can go more than two hundred miles an hour. And mini-machine guns can be swivel-mounted. Plus, it can see through fog. You sure I can't come with you, Doctor Scarpetta? I promise I'll be helpful."

His straight black hair would be halfway down his back were it not pinned up under a surgical cap, black with a skull pattern. Black scrubs show off his goth tattoos and a lean body that's whippet strong and fast. People find him sexy. *Dreamy* is what my secretary, Shannon, says, describing him as a combination of Cher and Harry Styles.

"I've never been in a chopper, certainly nothing like that thing in our parking lot. It's smoking hot and straight out of *The Avengers*," Fabian says excitedly. "If you bring me with you, I know you won't regret it."

"I'm not running the investigation or calling the shots." I repeat what I've told him several times now.

"You're in charge of the bodies," he says. "Seems like you could have anyone help that you decide."

"Access to the scene is extremely restricted for safety and other reasons. The priority should be that you help where most needed," I reply with patience I'm not feeling. "We're short-staffed and overwhelmed by cases, Fabian. That's the biggest reason why you're staying here. I can't have you and Marino at the scene with me ..."

"So much for on-the-job training," Fabian says. When he gives me one of his wounded looks, I feel like a bad mentor, and that's his intention.

"I'm sorry you're disappointed." I find myself apologizing to him often these days, because he doesn't take no for an answer.

I don't like being put in the position of denying him what he wants and inevitably sparking a drama. My forensic psychologist husband says that subconsciously Fabian sets me up to be the idealized and overly involved mother who's the root of his troubles. We have a parent-child relationship with oedipal overtones, according to Benton. All I know is Fabian can be a holy terror when he doesn't get his way.

"It's important I have some idea of what to expect," he's saying. "Everything's so hush-hush, like something really bizarre is going on. I

asked Lucy a few very basic questions and she wouldn't say anything except two people are dead inside Buckingham Run. And obviously, the Secret Service has taken over the investigation. That right there tells me plenty. Whatever's going on must be a really big deal."

"There's not much known yet and it's unwise to speculate." I won't get into this with him. "I need you to look after things here during Marino's and my absence. The semi-trailer needs deconning and setting up. I know the Secret Service is in charge and will be bringing in special equipment. We have to abide by their protocols. And everything must be ready for us when we return with the bodies."

"Why does *he* get to be there instead of me?" Fabian says, and I hope the day comes when he and Marino get along.

After Lucy located the victims, her first call after me wasn't going to be Fabian. She's known Marino most of her life. Lucy told him to meet her at the Secret Service hangar outside of Washington, D.C., in southern Maryland. From there Lucy flew him to the scene as the sun was coming up. He's my boots on the ground until I arrive, and in Fabian's mind that was like winning the lottery.

"I'm the one who needs the experience." He continues making his argument in the corridor. "Marino grabs all the good cases, leaving me to take care of chicken shit that doesn't teach me anything new."

"Gathering the proper equipment and supplies for a complicated scene isn't chicken shit," I reply. "If I get there and don't have what we need, it could be catastrophic."

"As my mom keeps reminding me, this isn't what I *signed up for*." Fabian is fond of making quote marks in the air. "I'm supposed to be *an investigator, not a grip or a gofer*." More air quotes. "Doctor Reddy pretty much gave me free rein, which is why I took the job to begin with. Not that I'm sorry he's gone. But I don't get to do half of what I used to."

I didn't hire Fabian. My predecessor, the former chief medical examiner, did, and that's unfortunate. Elvin Reddy ran the Virginia M.E. system into the ground and would do the same to me given the opportunity. We worked together briefly when both of us were getting started and have an unpleasant history. At first, I couldn't be sure about Fabian or anybody else working here.

Loyalty hasn't been a given, and it's been tricky knowing who to trust. But I don't want to be unfair. Innocent until proven guilty is the way it's supposed to work, and I can't afford for Fabian to quit. We're down to three death investigators, including Marino. The other one is part-time on the way to retired. As much as Fabian may get on my nerves now and

then, I know he's talented. I feel a responsibility toward him and a certain fondness.

"I have plenty that you can help me with as long as you abide by my instructions," I reply. "There are always investigations that need following up on."

"That's what I want to do." His mood is instantly brighter. "Finding out the important details that tell the story is my special sauce. That's why I was such a damn good P.A.," he adds modestly about his start as a physician's assistant. "I'd find out details from the patients that the docs would never imagine. Stuff that was a game changer in terms of a diagnosis. Like my dad's always saying, the big thing is *listening* ..." Air quotes again.

"We'll have to finish talking about this later, Fabian ..."

"You know, *hear* what someone's saying to you and pay attention. But you know how rare that is ...?"

"I certainly do, and I've got to go."

I can see on a wall-mounted video monitor that Henry Addams has pulled up to our security gate. He'll be driving into the vehicle bay any minute.

"Addams Family is here to pick up Nan Romero, the suspected suicide from yesterday morning." I indicate what's on the monitor.

"I'll take care of it." Fabian is in much better spirits. "By the way, that's a weird one. I don't know what Doctor Schlaefer's said to you."

"We've not had a spare moment to talk," I answer.

"The painter's tape bothers me," Fabian volunteers as he walks with me. "I can't imagine anyone wrapping their lower face like that. Especially a woman."

"I expect Investigator Fruge to be calling with further information," I reply. "I'm sure she knows we'll be pending the cause and manner of death until we get the toxicology results."

Fabian heads back toward the elevator as I continue along the corridor. It begins and ends like a morbid conundrum, the receiving area the first and last stop in my sad medical clinic. No appointments are required, our services free to the public. Death doesn't care who you are, everybody treated equally. With rare exception the only thing our patients have in common is they never thought they'd be here.

When bodies arrive, they're rolled in through a pedestrian door and weighed on the floor scale. They're measured with an old-style measuring rod and assigned case numbers before waiting their turn inside the refrigerator. Names are handwritten in what I call the Book of the Dead,

the large black logbook chained to the chipped Formica shelf outside the security office window.

On the other side of the bulletproof glass Wyatt Earle's khaki uniform jacket is draped over the back of his chair. The remains of takeout food are on his desk, and propped in a corner is the aluminum baseball bat he borrows from the anatomical division where bodies donated to science are stored and eventually cremated.

We have no choice but to pulverize large pieces of bones; otherwise they won't fit inside the cremains boxes returned to loved ones. Wyatt carries the bat while making his rounds after hours. Unlike me, he's more afraid of the dead than the living.

CHAPTER 2

WYATT IS INSIDE THE vehicle bay, the massive garage door retracting loudly. The silver Cadillac Landau hearse glides in, and he walks toward it as I watch on the security monitor.

The driver's window lowers, and Henry Addams is behind the wheel, the two of them chatting cordially like always. The closed-circuit TV (CCTV) microphones pick up exchanges about business and the weather. The two of them ask about each other's families, and it's the first I've heard that Henry's wife requires full-time nursing care. She doesn't live at home anymore.

The last time I saw Henry was about a month ago, and he didn't mention it. But I thought he seemed tired and preoccupied. I've known for a while that Megan isn't well but had no idea how bad it had gotten. He drives inside as Wyatt puts on his uniform baseball cap and sunglasses. He strides through the huge square opening and into the bright morning.

A curious crowd has gathered outside to gawk at the ominous black helicopter my niece, Lucy, flies for the U.S. Secret Service. Code-named the Doomsday Bird, it's surrounded by traffic cones and sitting quietly in a distant corner of the parking lot as she loads the back cabin. I'm making sure we have special personal protective equipment (PPE) necessary when there's a risk of exposure to toxic chemicals, and unknown animals and organisms.

"Golly Moses ... !" A metal stretcher bumps and clangs as Henry struggles to slide it out of the back of his hearse. He mutters euphemisms in his lilting Virginia accent and seems unusually aggravated. "Oh, for crummy sake ... !"

An app on my phone accesses my office's CCTV security system, and I turn off the cameras inside the bay. A section of the video monitor blacks out, Henry vanishing from view. Next, I send Wyatt a note making sure he's aware that it's me doing the tampering. He's familiar with my routine when I need a cone of silence.

Copy that, Chief, he texts me back. About 30 people out here. I'm keeping my eye on things.

Nobody gets any closer.

He answers with a thumbs-up emoji. *Already getting complaints as expected, he informs me. The devil herself.*

It's assumed that Maggie Cutbush is going to stir up trouble given the chance. When I replaced Elvin Reddy as chief medical examiner, I inherited his secretary, suffering with her my first two years on the job. Not so long ago, both of them were fired and repurposed as so often happens in government. Maggie no longer works for me but remains an unwanted presence like a phantom pain or a haunting.

What I'm about to confront inside Buckingham Run promises to cause the very sort of stink she wants. In fact, it's already happening. That's why she's started her complaints about the helicopter before I've so much as left the building. She knows I'll hear about it. She'd like nothing better than to get under my skin, to interfere with my concentration.

Do not engage. I'll handle later, I let Wyatt know.

I walk out the door, and our vehicle bay is the size of a small hangar. On wooden pallets are cleansers, bleach, biocides, cases of PPE. There are gallon jugs of formaldehyde and embalming fluid marked with skull-and-crossbones warning labels. Walls and floors are sealed with epoxy resin, and easy to hose down. But that's not happened in recent memory, as busy as we are.

The concrete ramp is marred by blood drips and wheel tracks dried reddish black. Flies crawl and alight on trash cans. Sparrows dart about, and that's not uncommon when the bay door is left open, as it is right now. I can see more people wandering into the parking lot, Shannon Park among them. She's wearing an emerald-green dress that looks 1970s.

Her bucket hat is just as old, and she'll be holding on to it soon enough when Lucy and I take off. A former court reporter, my recently hired secretary is a world-class snoop skilled at getting people to talk. Knowing her, she's gathering intelligence, possibly taking notes. I wouldn't put it past her to record conversations of those around her. She's done it before.

"God bless America ... !" Henry has pinched his thumb on the stretcher, not noticing me yet.

"Good morning, Henry!" I call out as I reach the bottom of the ramp.

"Oh!" He looks up, startled. "Hello, Kay! Please excuse my manners." He's unusually flustered. "I'm so busy making a mess, I didn't notice you come out of the building."

"Are you hurt?" I ask as I reach him.

“A blood blister. I’ll live.”

“If not, you’re in the right place.”

“With all due respect, I don’t want you as my doctor.” He smiles, but his eyes are distracted and dull.

Tall and distinguished, with pewter-gray hair and a thin mustache, Henry is dapper in a black suit and Scottish tartan vest. In his lapel is a rosebud with a sprig of baby’s breath. He’s thin and seems bone weary, his demeanor shadowed by sadness.

“What have you been up to besides not eating enough?” It’s my way of asking about his personal life. “It looks like I might have to make a house call with some of my lasagna. I believe you’re also partial to my cannelloni and panzanella salad.”

Since moving back to Virginia three years ago, I’ve dropped off food to him before when his wife wasn’t doing well. But I had no idea her dementia had progressed this rapidly.

“Well, if you must know,” he says with a drawn-out sigh, “I’ve had to move Megan to a place in Fairfax.” He goes on to tell me the name of the memory care center and how long she’s been there. “It had been coming on for the last few years, as you know, Kay. But it’s taken a dramatic turn in recent months compounded by her having a stroke.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“She can’t walk or eat on her own and doesn’t know me anymore.”

“Not much is harder.”

“I go to visit every day. She thinks I work there.” His eyes are touched by tears for an instant.

“Biology can be cruel.”

“A couple of weeks ago Megan started wearing another patient’s wedding ring. She thinks she’s married to him. And has been all her life.” He clears his throat.

“Are you taking care of yourself, Henry?”

“You’re right, I could do better about eating.” He tugs the stretcher some more with uncharacteristic impatience.

“Here. Let me help you.”

I lean inside the open tailgate, and he’s managed to wedge a side-rail against the hearse’s faux suede headliner. He’s a shade away from ripping it.

“This is so gosh darn frustrating, excuse my salty language.” He moves out of the way, wiping his eyes. “But nothing’s more aggravating than getting somewhere and finding your equipment is undependable. That’s one thing I’ve never tolerated. As swamped as we’ve been, we’re down to