

**JEFFERY
DEAVER**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**FATAL
INTRUSION**

A NOVEL

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WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**FATAL
INTRUSION**

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Date Night

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**ISABELLA
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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. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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First edition

To the men and women of HSI, who work around the clock and around the globe to keep us safe.

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|

MONDAY

CHAPTER 1

Walter Kemp was not about to let her escape again.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he muttered in a singsong voice.

She couldn’t hear very well, but still he treaded carefully, unwilling to blunder through the dense woods and scare her off. He wanted her calm and unaware until he was good and close, so he had to be stealthy.

And deceptive. He tossed a pebble deep into the lush foliage to further disguise his position.

On the outskirts of San Diego, the secluded park felt far from civilization. And from prying eyes.

“You can’t hide forever,” he whispered. “Not from me.”

Walter, a solid man in his sixties, wasn’t the least stiff or winded by the hunt. He was nearly in the same shape as thirty years ago. A bit less hair, but so what? There were more important things in life.

Like what he was presently up to.

She had slipped away from him, forcing him to spend the past half hour stalking her. When he found her this time, he wouldn’t let her out of his sight until he was finished.

A slight rustle to his left caught his attention. Was that her? He squinted in the direction of the noise.

She peeked out from behind a bush, and his heart hammered with excitement. She was every bit as beautiful as when he had first seen her.

Catching sight of him, she froze. No matter, she couldn’t get away. “I’ve got you now.”

She hadn’t been his first, and she wouldn’t be his last, but she might be the loveliest.

He reached into his vest, thick fingers fumbling over the finely machined metal and plastic. One of the tools of his trade. Slowly, carefully, he raised his hand and took aim. He would have only one chance.

She opened her mouth wide as if to scream.

He pressed the button and held it down. At the rate of thirty shots per second, the Nikon captured ninety images—in stunning forty-five megapixels—of the *Lampropeltis zonata pulchra*, also known as the San Diego mountain kingsnake, before she slithered into the underbrush.

Walter had pictures of several males but had been on the hunt for an elusive female for weeks. Only careful study had allowed him to spot the subtle difference in the subcaudal scales—those under the tail—and the slightly shorter proportion compared to the overall body length that indicated the sex of the reptile.

Unlike with many other species, where the females weren’t as brightly colored as the males, all San Diego mountain kingsnakes sported alternating bands of red, black and yellow

covering their bodies. The vivid display that mimicked a venomous coral snake was an illusion to scare off potential predators. This species was harmless to everything except the small mammals and lizards in its diet.

Mission accomplished, Walter covered the expensive lens and tucked the camera back into his vest. Now unconcerned about making noise, he tramped back to the trail that led to the lot at the park's entrance.

He would much rather be walking in nature than attending yet another ground-breaking ceremony. At first, many years ago, real estate development had been exciting. His life's passion. He had started off with a small loan and slowly parlayed it into an empire.

Things had begun to look different after over three decades in the business, however. He'd reflected on all the formerly wooded acreage he had eviscerated to turn into suburban havens, and he had started changing his practices. Last year he took up the cause of affordable housing and had been working to improve blighted areas of the community that had fallen on hard economic times. He lost money on every project but felt he'd gained back some of his soul. In addition, he could look his only child—an adult son—in the eyes again. If he was blessed with grandchildren, he would be giving them a better world.

Walter made it to the parking lot, thinking about how his son's high school science project more than a decade ago had led them to bond over the study of reptiles and amphibians. They had both volunteered at the local herpetological society, though only Walter remained a member.

He was nearly to his car when a soft clatter drew his attention. He glanced down to see a small white ball roll past his booted feet. Mesmerized, he watched its progress as it rattled along the asphalt and disappeared under his car.

Hurried footsteps pounded up from behind, startling and unnerving him. As he turned, the blade of a heavy-duty shovel crashed down onto his head.

He cried out in shock and pain.

Stumbling, he threw his arms up in an attempt to protect himself, but another devastating blow drove him to his hands and knees. The agony was beyond anything he'd ever felt. It gripped his entire body, dulling his thoughts and slowing his reactions.

Darkness closed in as his sluggish brain tried to make sense of what was happening.

"Why?" he gasped.

Or maybe he just *thought* the word.

Then he pitched forward, as if in slow motion, falling face down onto the oil-stained surface of the deserted parking lot.

He sank deeper into oblivion, unable to lift his leaden arms. He managed to turn his eyes upward. The shovel was about to come down in another vicious arc, and he knew this would be the last blow.

Someone was killing him . . .

An instant before the tool struck and the void engulfed him, Walter Kemp found himself looking not at the face or torso of his attacker, but at the hands, in clear plastic gloves, gripping the shovel firmly.

Specifically, at the bold and carefully inked tattoo of a black widow spider that graced the man's pale inner wrist.

His last image before the world went dark.

Dennison Fallow swung the shovel with all his considerable strength. The satisfying *thwack* of

metal against bone, followed by an ominous crunch, told him his work here was done.

He paused to study his handiwork. Good.

The Push, deep within Fallow's soul, was satisfied.

For now.

The man lying at his feet hunted snakes, but this time he'd been the one hunted. And by a far superior predator—a spider.

Various species of these creatures employed many clever means of ensnaring their prey. Some wove a web and patiently waited for an unsuspecting victim to get caught. Others constructed trapdoors or disguised themselves. Today Fallow had attacked in an ambush, like a wolf spider, among the most aggressive arachnids in the world. They don't bother with webs. Or disguise. They charge their prey like a mountain lion.

He continued to watch Kemp for several minutes, making sure the man's chest had stopped rising and falling. One could never be too careful.

That thought reminded him of the shovel he still gripped tightly. Though he'd worn gloves, he'd make sure he removed all traces of his presence from the handle and the shaft, because he was going to leave it behind at the scene.

After all, how could you tell a story without setting the stage?

||

TUESDAY

CHAPTER 2

Selina took another sip of the aptly named *Zombie Reanimator*, the house specialty at the *Wicked Brew Coffee Shop* across the street from *Montelibre Polytechnic Institute's* Perris campus in Southern California.

She'd been holed up in the corner of the café most of the afternoon, putting the finishing touches on a chemistry thesis due tomorrow. Her professor, who by all accounts had neither a heart nor a soul, wouldn't grant her an extension under any circumstances. According to campus lore, he had failed a student who missed the final exam, despite knowing the young man was in the hospital after a car crash, and had refused to change the grade until the university chancellor intervened.

Although Selina suspected the tale was more campus folklore than fact, she would not test the hypothesis by submitting her paper late.

"That looks pretty intense." The male voice was smooth and deep.

Selina jumped and sat upright. Her startled gaze met the pale-blue eyes of a stranger seated at a nearby table.

"Chemistry," she offered, somewhat flustered by the unexpected interruption. "My thesis is on covalent bonds."

"I prefer biology." He scooted his chair closer. "But the subjects are related. When you think about it, one can't exist without the other."

She estimated him to be in his early thirties, too old to be an undergrad and too young to be a tenured professor. Was he involved in postdoctoral research? She darted a glance at the folded newspaper in his hand, noting a nearly completed crossword puzzle—done in ink and without any errors.

Smart and—she sensed—supremely aware of his abilities. Interesting.

No wedding ring either.

The pressed tan cargo pants and close-fitting shirt were a notch above the jeans, rumpled T-shirts and faded hoodies favored by most of the café's clientele. The shirt was a curious shade—an attention-getting red, a hue only somebody with self-confidence could get away with. His gray tweed sport coat didn't obscure an athletic physique. The navy-blue baseball cap bore no logo, and what hair was visible beneath it was light colored, contrasting with the dark three-day growth that shadowed his lower face. His glasses, with round tortoiseshell frames, were stylish. He wasn't Hollywood-leading-man handsome but had an undefinable appeal.

He glanced at her tote bag. "Any chance you have a pen I can borrow?" He held up the paper. "Naturally mine went dry just before I was done."

Rather than carrying around the ubiquitous backpack seen everywhere on campus, Selina favored a worn gray shoulder bag. Instead of a hundred zippered—and irritating—slots, the tote had one giant compartment that held everything, including her laptop.

“Sure.” She picked up the bag and opened it wide to peer inside before plunging her hand deep into its dark recesses. “Got to be one somewhere in this black hole.”

He smiled.

Engrossed in digging through the student-related detritus at the bottom, she didn’t realize he had moved closer until his warm breath fanned the side of her face. She snapped her head up to see that he too was examining the contents of her bag.

She straightened, subtly pulling the tote closer. “I’ll find it.”

He raised his hands, palms out, in a disarming gesture. “Hey, sorry. Just trying to help.”

The boyish grin seemed genuine. Was she being paranoid? Her fingers clasped a long, cylindrical object, and she pulled it out.

“It’s a plastic cheapie,” she said. “You can keep it.”

His smile widened. “Much appreciated.”

He took the pen from her outstretched hand and turned to the puzzle. “Seven-letter word for wide-bodied tree.” Speaking only to himself, not her. “Sequoia.” He gave a half smile of satisfaction, jotted the answer and stood. Tucking the newspaper under his arm, he turned toward the door. “Good luck with your . . . bonds,” he said over his shoulder.

And then he was gone, pushing his way outside to the sidewalk.

Selina set the tote back on the chair beside her, still thinking about the brief encounter. He had seemed friendly, then ended their exchange abruptly. Had he been about to ask her out before she got possessive about her bag? He wasn’t bad looking and seemed intelligent and polite.

And he was single.

Probably.

Then she glanced up and saw him standing outside, looking back at the café. Their eyes met, his narrowing a fraction. Still smiling, he inclined his head briefly and walked away.

Turning back to her schoolwork, she reflected that however appealing he was, the chance of a date would have come in at somewhere south of zero. One look at the small black-and-red tattoo on the inside of his wrist had made the decision for her.

Spiders had always creped her out.

CHAPTER 3

Special Agent Carmen Sanchez could not acquire a good head shot through the grimy window.

Her .40-caliber SIG Sauer P229R pistol was up to the task—as was she—but the pane of glass would deflect the hollow-point slug enough to send the round who knew where, potentially wounding or killing one of the hostages.

“I know what you’re thinking, Sanchez,” the California Highway Patrol lieutenant said through the transmitter bud in her ear. “And you’d damned well better not do it.” A brief pause followed. “Those shots are for snipers with spotters and big-ass long guns.”

But the sniper and spotter and rifle weren’t in place yet, and the hostages were in danger *now*. Jason Powell was currently holed up inside a ramshackle minicomound in the town of Ario, located in the Mojave Desert. He was backed into a corner, desperate, armed and mentally unstable.

Carmen had arrived at the scene less than ten minutes earlier. She’d pinned her long black hair up to keep her field-to-target view unobstructed and surveyed the area carefully.

Normally an agent with the Department of Homeland Security would not be among the first to arrive at a standoff in the middle of nowhere, but she had been on Powell’s trail for two days when the call for assistance came out from the Ario police chief that he’d been spotted here. She’d made a beeline, beating the cavalry by half an hour and doing her own recon.

The California Highway Patrol was just setting up, and Lieutenant Kevin Albright, who headed the Mojave-area office, had taken charge of the scene as the incident commander. Carmen, however, was a DHS special agent assigned to Homeland Security Investigations. A federal HSI agent did not fall under Lieutenant Albright’s command, a fact that seemed to be causing him serious heartburn.

“And you’re too close,” Albright added, his sharp words carrying through her earbud. “Powell has a shitload of iron in there. M4s, Glocks, SIGs. You go down, I’ve got to risk my people to drag you out.”

Albright and several CHP troopers had established a command post about two hundred feet back. The lieutenant was surveying the scene—and Carmen herself—through expensive binoculars.

She had been the one to advise the Ario police chief, Gregory Smits, about Powell and his armory before taking up a forward position behind a crumbling concrete wall fifty feet from the compound. Apparently Smits had briefed Albright when he arrived, and now the lieutenant was regurgitating the very intel she had already provided.

“And a case of C-4, Semtex and some other high explosives,” Carmen said. “This guy’s a genius with IEDs.”

Exactly her earlier words to Smits, which he had undoubtedly used in briefing Albright.

Her comment, blunting the man’s know-it-all attitude, was met with a few choice

expletives, and she knew he had gotten her point.

“I’ll maintain position until your SWAT team is in place, Lieutenant,” she added. “But if I see a way to end this before then, I’m going to take it.”

She weathered a barrage of threats from Albright that included everything from filing a formal complaint with the DHS Secretary to throwing her in jail.

Unfazed, Carmen ignored the diatribe and continued to study the compound, noting every square inch within sight. When Albright ran out of steam, she picked up her narrative as if he hadn’t spoken: “And tell the tac team Powell loves to use fishing line for his booby traps. Nearly invisible. As for bargaining, the negotiators should know he has a history of faking surrender before an attack. One of his favorite tricks.”

There was a long silence. She imagined Albright deciding she may have useful intel after all and that he should pass along the information to the teams before they engaged.

“What else can you tell us?” Albright’s tone had grown distinctly less hostile.

“Powell’s a conspiracy theorist and a recluse. He used to be on meds, a lot of them, but he became anti-pharma. Now he’s also anti-technology, anti-capitalist and anti-government too. Last week he planted a bomb at the corporate headquarters of a tech company in Glendale, protesting one of its acquisitions. Negotiators tried to talk him down, but he kept ranting about Big Tech forming a cabal to control the world.”

“We received a DHS bulletin about an unknown subject protesting a merger, but I didn’t hear about any bangs.”

“That’s because the robots managed to cut the blue wire or the yellow wire, or whatever, in time,” she said. “But Powell got away while they were rendering safe.”

“Why the hell am I just hearing about this now?” Albright had gone back to hostile, which seemed to be his default setting. “His name and face should have been plastered on a nationwide APB.”

“We didn’t have his name yet. He was just a DomTerr unsub. Powell’s been living off the grid and restricting himself to the dark web for years. He wasn’t in any face-rec or DNA databases, and it took us until this morning to ID him.”

“You have eyes on the hostages?” Albright asked.

“Hard to see through the window, but it looks like a man and woman. Both appear to be White and in their forties. Scared but unharmed.”

“Hold on a sec,” Albright said. He carried on a one-sided conversation through what would be his phone. He returned to Carmen. “Okay. We just got a call—a married couple fitting that description was carjacked just north of Glendale yesterday.” He paused. “I can’t make any vehicles. You?”

She scanned. “No.”

“He ditched their wheels somewhere nearby and forced them to walk here. Man, in this heat.”

A shout from inside the building ended their discussion. Squinting, Carmen saw the male hostage on his feet and moving forward, arms lifted, railing against their captor, Powell. With surprising speed, Powell spun his assault rifle and smashed the stock into the man’s ribs. He collapsed out of her line of vision, but she could see Powell shoulder the weapon and train the barrel downward, evidently pointing at the man. The imminent threat—and the woman’s wail of terror splitting the air—spurred Carmen to act. With no viable target through the window, she decided to take a chance on the plan that had been forming in her mind.

She stood.