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“What a ride! *A Cross to Kill* explodes with action (right from the beginning!) and has an even better story to tell. Andrew brings each scene alive with amazing detail.”

ROB THOMAS, founder and CEO of Igniter Media

“Let’s hope we all now get to follow John Cross from book to book and movie to movie. What a thrill to imagine carrying Christ into every kind of job and seeing the impact it has in this page-turning story. Get to know Cross. Get to know Huff. I think we’re going to be spending a lot of time with them both.”

RANDY HAHN, senior pastor of The Heights Baptist Church, Virginia

A CROSS TO KILL

SHEPHERD SUSPENSE NOVELS

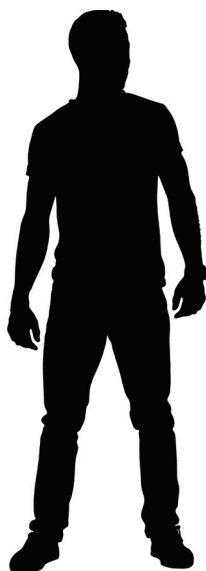
A Cross to Kill

Cross Shadow

Right Cross

A SHEPHERD SUSPENSE NOVEL • #1

A CROSS TO KILL



ANDREW HUFF

 Kregel
Publications

A Cross to Kill

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CHAPTER ONE

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE would witness the murder of Christine Lewis, and not one of them could do anything to stop it.

Greasy hands forced her into a chair. An orange jumpsuit pulled tight against her body. The fabric hid months of abuse at the hands of her captors. She choked back tears as slick hands tugged her blond hair behind her ears and lifted her chin. Thin fingers slid a trail of grime down her neck.

“Head up. Straight ahead.”

She obeyed without argument and stared into the dead black eye of the camera a few feet in front of her. Weary and broken, Christine’s former existence as a courageous, perhaps brazen, reporter standing in the middle of Jordanian rioters only a few months ago hung as a mere shadow in her mind. Life before her kidnapping seemed a dream. Now she only submitted to her captors’ commands, resistance no longer a choice.

She was going to die.

With her peripheral vision, Christine examined the half dozen or so masked terrorists gathered to witness the event, each nearly identical to the others: nameless soldiers clad in faded military attire and cradling an assault weapon. The *shemaghs* wound around each head disguised any features, save eye color. At the beginning of her captivity, Christine had studied each passing face for a sympathetic glance, but as the inevitable approached, she’d lost all hope of salvation.

Months had passed—she still wasn’t sure of the exact length of

time—since they'd grabbed her from the streets of Amman. The riots she'd covered for the North American Broadcasting Channel turned out to be a smoke screen to the more illicit practices of the Alliance of Islamic Military, or AIM. While the public protested the government in the streets, AIM picked off key policymakers in the shadows. She sat in the front row of the real conflict, prison bars gagging her words of warning to the world.

Replaying faint memories, Christine scoffed at her ineptness. She'd been preoccupied with crafting a headline to drive the political conversation back home: "Demonstrators in Jordan Support Current US Policy" or some such nonsense. She could understand, even affirm, her kidnapping if there'd been a real scoop in her hands. Instead, she was just another sideshow attraction in AIM's shell game.

The executioner barked orders in Arabic, and the hooded figure behind the camera pressed a button. A red light pulsed above the lens. More orders were given, and a thumb jutted upward, signaling the start of the show. The favorite new trend of militant radicals across the globe? Beheading journalists on live camera. And the stream of her execution just went active to anyone with an Internet connection.

The executioner pressed the cold blade of his knife against the small of her back and produced a ripple of goose bumps down both arms. He raised his free hand and pointed a finger toward the camera with vigor. The *shemagh* wrapped around his chin muffled his speech, but in clear English he forced his words through the cloth.

"Mr. President, we are outraged by your insolence toward the Islamic Alliance and your refusal to cooperate with the leaders of our military. We warned you about your unity with our enemies and your support of the continued bombing of our communities. As a result of your actions, we have no choice but to retaliate with the life of another American citizen. If you insist on holding a blade to the neck of our country, we must hold a blade to the neck of your people."

The executioner slipped the knife from behind Christine and waved it near her neck. A soft gasp escaped her lips as the tip brushed against her skin.

“And now, I send my warning out to any country wishing to take the side of the American president and go to war against our people. This is what we will do to any who brings harm against us.”

One of the men watching from behind the camera took a step forward and thrust a sheet of paper into Christine’s hand. He grunted in Arabic and prodded the paper with his index finger.

Christine gripped the sheet with both hands, her chipped and stained fingernails pressing through the paper and pinching her palms. Emotion beaten from her over the past month bubbled deep in her heart like a spring discovered in the desert. A script would be her last words. Fitting, given her chosen profession.

“My name is Christine Elisabeth Lewis,” she said, staring more into the camera than at the print. “I am thirty-one years old and a reporter with NABC. I am guilty of crimes against the Islamic Alliance and of allegiance with the war criminal Jefferson Gray, the president of the United States. Mr. President, it is because of your actions against the people of the Islamic Alliance that I must pay for my crimes. To all those who would support you and your illegal activities against this people, I say this . . .”

Christine’s voice trailed, her eyes locked on the camera. The men behind the camera tensed at her unplanned pause. She released her grip on the paper, and it fluttered to the ground at her feet. “Mom, Dad,” Christine said. “I love you. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Tears stung the corners of her mouth as she spoke.

The executioner slapped her cheek. Christine shrieked, life returning to her abused spirit. She raised a hand on instinct to defend her cheek from a second blow. Her murderer knocked the hand away, grabbed a clump of her hair, and pulled her head back to expose her neck.

“President Gray, we demand justice!” the executioner yelled. He placed the knife on Christine’s neck. She closed her eyes and considered crying out to God.

It’d been too long. There wouldn’t be a reply.

A loud pop startled her, then a swarm of bees buzzed in her ear. She

opened her eyes. Her heart pounded against her chest as her adrenaline refused to wane. The knife gone, her executioner stood next to her, shaking his limbs as if trying to fling them from his body. A black disc with glowing tentacles of electricity clawed at his chest. Christine watched in horror, expecting his body to explode any second.

It didn't explode. The black disc released its victim, and he slumped to the ground, unconscious. Christine turned to find the armed soldiers behind the camera just as confused. But then she spotted him: one of the guards in the back of the room held a black alien-looking handgun. A faint wisp of smoke snaked its way out of the barrel.

Along with Christine, the other men realized the presence of the intruder, and it took only seconds for chaos to erupt in the tiny room. Her mouth agape, Christine watched the gunman aim the pistol at the nearest soldier to his right and pull the trigger. A second disc exploded from the gun and latched itself to the man's shoulder. He screamed in agony and fell to the ground, wrapped in the powerful embrace of an electric shock.

Soldiers raised their automatic weapons. With the pistol in his hand, the gunman whipped one of the militants, stunning him. In a blur of movement, the attacker shoved two men together. A rifle discharged, the noise ricocheting off every wall in the room.

Christine cupped her ears and ducked. Her brain screamed *run*, but her muscles refused to cooperate. She sat frozen in the chair, watching the melee. Fists connected with chins and boots with kneecaps.

She counted three men on the floor. A fourth raised his rifle. The black barrel pointed at the attacker's head. Christine caught her breath. A valiant effort to stay her execution, but now it was over. Her savior would be shot, then her in turn. A sob worked its way up her throat as the terrorist pulled the trigger.

A rapid succession of clicking sounds announced the ammo clip was empty. An Arabic oath preceded a frantic attempt to reload. The attacker leapt over an unconscious body, grabbed the rifle, and shoved it into the man's nose.

Movement caught her attention. The executioner clutched at his

chest. He pulled the black disc away as it protested with a blast of sparks. He tossed it aside, then crawled across the floor to the knife. He jumped to his feet. Fire blazed from his dark eyes. He drew the knife back, ready to plunge it into her.

Christine screamed. The knife plummeted toward the bulging arteries in her neck. The distinct pop of a weapon discharge reverberated around the room. She felt the weight of the chair give way beneath her. A burst of debris from one of its legs showered her foot. The chair fell forward, taking Christine with it. She slammed face first into the concrete floor. Blood erupted from her nostrils.

A rush of wind from above ruffled her jumpsuit. The mysterious gunman collided with the executioner, and they crashed into a stack of barrels and wood scraps. Christine twisted her head on the floor to watch, but the dizziness from the impact clouded her eyes. The two distorted figures grappled until one gave the final blow and stood victorious over the other.

Christine's vision returned, and she pushed off the bloodstained floor. Hands grabbed her shoulders from behind and pulled her to a sitting position. The masked gunman knelt and cradled her head in his strong hands. He pulled the *shemagh* from his face, and Christine gasped at the sympathetic hazel eyes of an American man staring back at her.

He unwrapped the *shemagh* from around his short-cropped hair and used it to wipe the blood from her mouth. "Sorry about the nose," he said. "My name's John. We've got to go."

Questions beat against her forehead, but she could only think to respond, "Go?"

"Yeah," he said. "Home."

Christine couldn't stop herself from laughing and crying at the same time. She died. No, she was supposed to be dead. Why was this strange man with a firm chin talking about home? And yet she believed him; somehow, she knew he would get her home.

"Christine," he said.

"You know my name," she replied. Why wouldn't her mouth close all the way?

John repeated the command, this time with vigor. "We have to go."

The power in his voice brought Christine's mind back into focus. She stood and took one last look about the room before John grabbed her by the hand and led her to the exit. Bodies were strewn about the place, subtle groans the only clues her captors lay unconscious and not lifeless.

John led her through the door and down a dark hallway. He put his hand to his ear and started talking. "Control, this is Shepherd. I have the asset in hand, and we are en route."

Christine imagined the mechanical voice inside John's ear responding with operational vocabulary in kind.

"Copy," he responded and pulled his finger from his ear. He glanced over his shoulder at Christine. "Don't worry. Our ride will be here any second."

A set of wooden stairs greeted them at the end of the hallway. Warm rays of sunlight peeked through boards nailed against the windows of the staircase, and dust swirled in a violent dance within the light. They made it halfway up when a door near the top of the staircase swung open and the largest creature of a man Christine had ever seen stepped through. She gasped. Muscle wrapped around muscle, and between tattoos were scars and abrasions. One of his eyes appeared hazier than the other, which only added to the terror of his visage. He opened his mouth and roared his disapproval.

John made an immediate reversal in direction, pulling Christine close behind. "Not that way," he said.

They picked up speed as the drum of heavy boots marching down-stairs chased behind. Christine looked back long enough to catch a glimpse of the big, hazy-eyed man reaching the bottom of the stairs, a handful of his friends on his heels. He roared again, but to Christine's ears it sounded like a bell being rung.

They ran through door after door. John never broke stride as he used an elbow to bully them open. Her legs felt like soft noodles, but newfound determination encouraged her to try to match his speed. He kept a tight grip on Christine's hand, and energy seemed to flow from his hand to hers, giving her a boost despite months of incarceration.

They descended another flight of stairs and burst through one last door into an abyss of blinding white light. Christine choked at the blast of hot air. A sour smell invaded her nose, and the chaotic noise of street vendors and playful children bombarded her from all directions. They were on the street and still running.

Christine's vision returned, to little avail. Their pace disoriented her. She focused on John and noticed his hand digging into his ear canal. She tuned her own ears to sift through the street noise and find his voice.

“. . . compromised. Moving north on Al Nasira.” He pulled her in tighter behind him as they squeezed through a crowd of tourists. “Copy that. We’re on our way.”

John's pace slowed, and Christine finally gained her bearings. Vendors surrounded them as they walked through a small roadside market. None of the merchants hawking their wares paid mind to her disheveled appearance as they presented scarf after purse and promised the finest quality in exchange for the lowest charge.

Christine winced as she pulled air through her broken nostrils. She rubbed her sleeve against the caked blood on her upper lip. Still wet. As she inhaled with her mouth, the beat of her heart normalized. She felt a strange sense of security in the bustle of the market. She imagined if they were to be attacked now, the peddlers would come to their rescue, determined to protect the prospect of a good sale. A comforting fantasy.

They passed with relative ease through the crowd packed into the small market. Christine's feeling of safety waned, and she looked over her shoulder, longing to return to the shelter of the chaos.

She shouldn't have looked.

The horrible man with a hazy eye stood a full head above a couple bargaining with a trader near the back of the market. His good eye locked on to her. Christine cried out and collided with John's back. He stood motionless at an intersection as blurred streaks of buses and cars sped by.

“John!” She grabbed his forearm and spun him around.

His eyes widened as he made eye contact with their pursuer. The hectic activity of the market faded away, and Christine believed she could hear nothing but their breathing.

The commotion of the street corner came booming back into her ears. A horn blared as a car zoomed by. The hazy-eyed man made wild gestures in their direction, and a wave of brawny, menacing thugs exploded from behind him, running through the market, shoving tourists into vendors, and turning up carts of merchandise.

John squeezed Christine's hand tighter and pulled her into the street. A moped came close to shaving his chest, but he didn't lose a step. They crossed the intersection, dodging car after truck after motorcycle. The prospect of being taken a second time only heightened Christine's doubt of surviving this real-life game of *Frogger*.

Just when she thought they would be smeared across the roadway, John's boots landed on the sidewalk. He kept running. She glanced over her shoulder to see the men trying to follow their path through traffic. One of the men misjudged the speed of a car, and it struck him. He rolled across the car's hood and cracked the windshield before sliding to the ground. His compatriots ignored his mishap and maintained pursuit.

John ducked into an alley and led Christine up a flight of narrow stairs. They emerged from between the buildings on a street resembling the one they'd just left. Their hands were still locked, and Christine matched John's speed down the road. She welcomed the adrenaline, thankful for the active lifestyle she'd enjoyed before her imprisonment. If she knew where they were headed, she even felt like she could take the lead and beat him to the tape. Freedom proved to be a better energy boost than three shots of espresso.

They approached another intersection, and John slowed.

"Where are we going?" Christine asked.

"Our extraction point," he replied.

"Where is that?"

John shouted over the backfiring of a passing truck. "About three clicks northwest."

“Really? They couldn’t get any closer?”

“Yeah, well, nothing seems to be going my way today.” He didn’t sound happy.

Their route through the intersection cleared, and they started across. Christine took another look over her shoulder and couldn’t spot any of the men in pursuit. She turned back in time to spy an approaching vehicle out of her peripheral vision. A black mass of metal and rubber tore down the road, intent on flattening them to the pavement.

Christine took the only second available to react. She pulled free from John’s hand and shoved him in the back. He stumbled forward. She jumped backward and tumbled to the road. The SUV braked and its tires squealed. It came to a stop, separating Christine and her liberator.

As she pushed herself off the ground, Christine searched for any sign the car had missed John, but a pair of dusty khaki pants leaping from the open passenger door of the SUV blocked her view. Someone grabbed her under both armpits and lifted her off her feet.

“Let go of me!” She wriggled against the vice grip and dug her heels into the pavement. Pulling an arm free, she threw her elbow behind her head, hoping to connect with a vital organ.

He didn’t yield, and rough hands forced her into the back seat of the SUV. She lashed out once more with her hands and feet, but the door slammed shut. The smell of burning tires flooded the interior as the driver pressed down on the gas pedal.

Christine yanked at the handle, but her door wouldn’t budge. She turned to try the opposite door and screamed. The man with the hazy eye sat next to her. He stared out the back window and growled in Arabic to the other men in the car. She didn’t speak Arabic but knew a few phrases and slang words thanks to cheerful guides during her reports. And the horrible man used an unpleasant word she knew.

More than once.

Christine turned in her seat and looked out the back window. In the distance, a motorist yelled at another man who appeared to be in the process of stealing the motorist’s motorcycle. The theft couldn’t be

prevented, and the new owner of the motorcycle sped off in pursuit of the SUV.

The SUV took a sharp turn and threw Christine against the man beside her. He shoved her away and continued yelling at his companions. The driver mashed his fingers against the armrest of his door. All the windows slid downward, and wind whipped the interior. The torrent caught Christine's hair in a furious dance. The man in the passenger seat climbed halfway out his window, brandishing a semi-automatic weapon.

Instinct told Christine to cover her ears and close her eyes. The force of the weapon vibrated through the speeding vehicle. Ignoring her instincts, she opened her eyes and peeked over the back seat to witness John's demise.

The motorcycle weaved through traffic as bullets ricocheted off the street. The high speed of the SUV threw the gunman's aim. Familiar streets faded in the background as the driver took them on a route away from where John had led her—away from their rendezvous point.

John needed her help. Christine searched the car frantically. Leather seats, headrests, a sunroof. Nothing useful. She glanced outside and spotted the barrel of the gun sitting right outside her window. Within reach.

She took a deep breath, let the tilting of the vehicle shift her sideways, and kicked her foot out of the window as hard as she could. Her shoe connected with the barrel just as the man pulled the trigger again.

He managed to hold on to the gun, but it carried him in an arc away from his bead on John. The gun still fired, strafing parked cars and building windows. A bullet bounced off the pavement and back into the car, tearing through the gunman's shoulder before exiting through the roof. Blood stained the upholstery, and he cried out in shock.

The man with the hazy eye barked more obscenities at his men and lunged at Christine.

It was her destiny to die today.

CHAPTER TWO

CURRENT EVENTS DIDN'T line up with how John Cross had planned his morning to go. He tightened his fist around the handgrips of the motorcycle. The rubber pads popped under the pressure. Bullets zipped through the air around him, but foremost on his mind was what he would tell Al when he got home.

"That's it," he would say. "I'm not doing this anymore."

His imagination took him no further as his focus turned back to the SUV dead ahead. The man hanging out of the passenger window left evidence of his poor marksmanship on parked cars and street signs along the sidewalk. With perfect conditions, the chances of him hitting the motorcycle were still low. Cross didn't have to maneuver much to evade a fatal wound and closed the gap between himself and the car.

A shoed foot popped out of the open window of the SUV and kicked the barrel of the gun. Cross snorted. "Nice." He leaned into the gas pedal. The motorcycle took off with a burst of energy.

He veered to the left of the vehicle and saw a struggle in the back seat. The gunman in the front grabbed at his shoulder. Fresh blood splatter covered the interior. An opening for Cross to make his move.

He pulled the motorcycle alongside the back driver's-side window. He slowed to match the SUV's speed. In the back seat, Christine clawed at the big man's hands clutching her neck. With the motorcycle as close to the car as he dared, Cross planted on the footrests, squeezed his thighs against the chassis, and thrust his upper body through the window.

He wrapped his arms around the big man's head. A spit-fueled exclamation soaked Cross's forearms. He pulled as hard as he could and leaned backward. The man's body obliged and his upper torso followed Cross out the window. Fleshy knuckles filled Cross's vision. He ducked as the big man swiped. With his other hand, the man grabbed a seat belt, and they both jerked to a stop.

Cross used his body weight to keep the motorcycle under him and parallel to the car while squeezing tighter around the big man's head. The man clawed at Cross's arms but couldn't wrench himself free.

Advantage: Cross.

Now what to do with it?

Cross yanked harder, but the man proved to be too big to follow him completely through the window. A barrage of car horns alerted Cross to a busy intersection ahead. He needed another option, fast. "Christine!" he yelled.

She stilled the coughing from the attempted strangulation and made eye contact with him.

"Jump!" He didn't have to explain further. She made for the open window on her side of the car, but the driver turned and grabbed at her jumpsuit. He jerked the steering wheel, and the SUV banked into the motorcycle. Cross used his free hand to match and prevent his leg from being crushed.

The big man took hold of Cross's arm and dug his fingers through to the bone. Cross gritted his teeth and tightened his muscles around the man's throat. Nails threatened to break skin. Sweat beaded on Cross's forehead. His arm burned, and he wondered if the man was strong enough to crush it with just his fist.

The driver reached between the seats. Releasing his choke hold on the big man, Cross dropped free from the car, slammed his foot on the brake, and slid behind the SUV. The driver leaned out the window and fired a handgun in a random pattern at the spot the motorcycle had previously occupied.

The SUV and motorcycle drove through the intersection in tandem. The SUV clipped a sedan crossing its path, spraying sharp metal

bits into the air. Cross gassed the motorcycle to avoid a collision with a food truck. Brakes screeched and steel crunched. The flow of traffic came to a disastrous halt.

The SUV picked up its pace, and the gap between the two vehicles grew. Cross clenched his jaw. The chariot reserved for Christine waited in the opposite direction, and it wouldn't wait for long. He didn't have to look at his watch to know their window was rapidly closing.

More gunfire popped, from behind. He glanced over his shoulder to see another black SUV bearing down on him.

Great. Could anything else go wrong today?

More bullets missed. What was with the amateur marksmen? Still, he couldn't push his luck. Cross pushed the motorcycle harder and leaned in close to the chassis to make himself a smaller target.

He recognized a landmark in the distance and felt fortunate he had visited the city before. They were moving southeast. That meant Al Urdon, a major Amman highway, was coming up. New plan: secure Christine before they reached the intersection and use the road to his advantage. The pit trying to gnaw at his stomach gave up. He let himself believe it would be enough to reach the extraction in time.

Crowded streets made evasive maneuvers tricky. The SUV behind him gained ground and seemed to inspire the gunman's aim. A bullet ricocheted off a nearby car and sliced a few hairs off Cross's ear.

His hands ached from gripping the handlebars. With each passing moment, the options narrowed. Even if he could intercept the vehicle, getting Christine out would be impossible. He imagined making the rendezvous and organizing a second attempt. No. She'd be dead by then. God in heaven, help.

Focusing ahead, Cross noticed a tow truck on the side of the road just beyond the lead SUV. The truck's flatbed trailer tilted backward, scraping the ground, its owner taking a break from prepping a van for loading to wipe his brow. A stranded motorist watched with arms folded.

There was no way it would work, but Cross added one more prayer and pressed the gas. The motorcycle groaned as it mustered more speed. He shot past the lead SUV and veered toward the trailer.

The front wheel bounced as it cleared the bottom of the trailer. He pushed his body lower to balance the motorcycle. At the last second, he turned the grips and directed the motorcycle back toward the road.

Both wheels lifted off the flatbed, and the motorcycle flew into the air. The black roof of the SUV passed underneath. Cross let go and let himself slip off the seat. He slammed into the roof with so much force it buckled beneath his weight. The rear wheel of the motorcycle just missed his head and skimmed off the side of the SUV.

The motorcycle rotated in midair and smashed into the pavement beside them. Its parts littered the street corner. The second SUV swerved to dodge the shrapnel.

Cross made a grab at the roof to find a handhold as the vehicle rocked back and forth. His hand slipped across the glass of the sunroof, and on instinct he snatched it back. A geyser of glass exploded upward as a parade of bullets tore through.

He rolled too far and slipped off the side of the car. His fingers found a lip of the roof and clamped down, stopping his fatal drop, and Cross found himself staring through the open window at the wounded thug in the passenger seat.

The thug's mouth fell open, and his eyes bulged. He blinked and yelled something indiscernible at the driver. Cross recognized the flash of a black muzzle and let go of the lip of the roof as the driver fired.

His fingers found the window frame on his way to the road, and he grabbed tight. Searing pain shot through his knees as his boots slammed down and were dragged against the rushing pavement. Sweat coated his palms. His grip on the window slipped.

A woman screamed. Christine? His ears ached, and his eyes blurred. That was it. He was going to be roadkill.

Not the finale he preferred. At a break in the gunfire, Cross forced air through his mouth, and his adrenaline surged. He pulled himself up from the side of the door and into view in the window.

Cross grabbed the wounded man's better arm and pulled him through the window, blocking the driver's aim. Arabic oaths filled the

air around them. Cross used the man's upper body as leverage for his own and hoisted himself off the unforgiving roadway.

In one motion, he grabbed the lip of the roof, stepped on the man's chest, and somersaulted back onto the roof of the vehicle. He let out a yelp as he came crashing down through the hole in the damaged sunroof and landed on the center console.

The shouting stopped. Cross and the driver met each other's eyes. Cross offered an aloof grin, then crushed the man's nose with his fist. The car swerved across the road as the driver threw both his hands into the air in a failed attempt to block the punch.

Cross shoved his elbow into the face of the wounded man. He twisted his feet off the seatback and kicked the driver's knee. The wounded man recovered and wrapped his bleeding arm around Cross's neck.

His lungs were denied air, and his brain felt like it would pop. He caught a flash in the rearview mirror and watched Christine kick against the big man next to her as she grabbed at the wounded man's face. He shrieked as she used her fingernails on his eyes.

The fleshy noose relaxed, freeing Cross's larynx. "The door!" he yelled.

Christine lunged for the handle to the passenger-side door just as Cross kicked against the driver and pushed his own body against his seatmate.

The door popped open, and the wounded man tumbled out of the car and slammed into the ground. Cross fell out of the car right behind him, but Christine grabbed his shirt and stopped his momentum. He flinched as the man's body rolled to a stop in the middle of the street.

He turned back to Christine to express his gratitude just as the big man sitting next to her in the back grabbed for her hair. "Look out!" Cross yelled.

Too late. Her head snapped back, and she let go of Cross's shirt. Cross snatched the loose seat belt and pulled himself back into the car. The driver corrected the car's drift and leveled the black eye of his handgun between Cross's eyes.

Before the driver could fire, Cross grabbed his wrist and twisted the barrel away. The man's finger squeezed the trigger. The bullet ricocheted off the frame of the car into the back seat. Cross heard a scream through the ringing in his ears.

Oh no.

His grip relaxed as he turned to the back seat, fearing the worst. Christine showed no signs of injury. The big man, on the other hand, grabbed at his ear. Blood seeped through his fingers and down the back of his hand.

A flash of movement caught Cross's eye, and he turned back to the driver in time to see the flat side of the gun about to connect with the soft side of his face. The barrel gouged Cross on the lip, and in retaliation he squeezed the man's wrist tighter and slammed the gun back into the man's own forehead.

Stunned, the driver took his foot off the gas pedal, and the car slowed. Cross leaned forward and pressed the driver's body between his own and the door. He grabbed for the handle and pulled. The door flew open, and the driver shrieked as he tumbled out and slammed into the rushing pavement. Cross slid into the driver's seat. Using the door to correct his momentum, he pulled it shut, grabbed the steering wheel, and hit the gas.

The big man in the back seat opened his own door and jumped free of the SUV. Cross checked his side mirror to see the big man roll to a stop on the shoulder of the road.

"Where did he go?" Christine yelled over the burst of wind through the open door.

"I guess he didn't like his odds without his friends," Cross replied.

Christine stretched across the seat and shut the door. Cross slowed the vehicle to a cruising speed and gained his bearings. He spotted the exit for Al Urdon whisking by. They missed it. "Hold on!" he shouted. He slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel at the same time. The car drifted one hundred and eighty degrees, its tires smoked, and it hopped a median as it sped back in the opposite direction.

They passed the big man standing on the side of the road, still hold-

ing his ear, then the driver grabbing at his ribs in agony. Just ahead, the other SUV barreled toward them.

Cross reached into the back and pushed Christine to the floorboard. "Get down!" He ducked behind the dash just as the other SUV passed and unleashed a barrage of gunfire. Bullets decimated the windshield.

The gunfire ceased, and Cross popped back up in time to see the exit for the Al Urdon highway. He banked the SUV hard, missed an oncoming bus, and took the exit at top speed.

Christine jumped from the back into the passenger seat. "Are we going to make it?"

"I don't know." They were already minutes behind schedule, and there was no telling how much traffic they would find on Al Urdon.

They pulled onto Al Urdon to find it busy but moving. Cross guided the SUV around taxis, mopeds, and delivery trucks. He refrained from braking as much as possible, but a van switched lanes and caused him to back off his speed.

"Your lip," Christine said, leaning in to inspect.

He could still do it. After a year (or was it more?), his mind still pressed through pain signals during an operation to remain focused and clear. He let the throbbing rage and tasted blood on his tongue.

He sensed a finger waving near his lip.

"Looks like you're leaving with a little memento," Christine said.

It must be quite the gash. He took his eyes off the road to check out the injury in the rearview mirror. He didn't see the bloody lip, only the other black SUV driving straight into them.

On instinct, he hit the brakes, and the two cars collided. The impact threw him and Christine forward, then jerked them back into their seats.

Cross shook his head to clear the dizziness in his eyes and glanced back. The big man with the hazy eye glared back at him from the driver's seat, his passengers armed to the teeth.

The surprise of the rear-ender bought them only a moment, but Cross didn't need more. He gunned the engine, and they took off as automatic weapons appeared out the windows of the SUV.

Gunfire rained down on them from behind. Christine covered her head with her hands. Cross stayed as low as he could and still see over the dash. A hailstorm. That was what it sounded like. A loud, deadly hailstorm.

Traffic ahead parted like the Red Sea. Cross increased his speed. The men increased their barrage. A sharp turn in the road granted them a reprieve from the bullet storm. Cross fought with the steering wheel to keep the car upright.

The road straightened, and he glanced back. The other SUV slowed for the curve, and the firing ceased, the gunmen reserving their ammunition.

“Those guys are really starting to annoy me,” he admitted aloud.

“Annoy you,” Christine said. Cross sensed sarcasm in her tone. “That’s all?”

“Open the glove box.”

Christine obliged and snorted when a gun fell out of the glove box into her lap.

“I need you to check and see if it’s loaded.”

Before Cross could offer instruction, Christine ejected the magazine and counted the rounds. She snapped it back in, then grabbed the slide and examined the chamber.

“You’ve got a full mag with one racked.” She handed the butt of the gun to him.

Cross looked at her, dumbfounded. “All right. You’ve impressed me.”

“I’m just ready to get out of here.”

Cross hesitated, then took the gun from her. It felt familiar and foreign in his hand at the same time. He sensed the tremble of emotion building in his limbs. His fingers ached as he forced them to hold steady. He took three deep breaths and tightened his grip on the handle.

If he wasn’t careful, what he would do next would change everything.