

“In the tradition of Ted Dekker and Frank Peretti, *Cross Shadow* is a strong, taut thriller that retains a Christian sense of optimism and hope while acknowledging the existence of great evil in the world. Huff raises the stakes on every page all the way through the white-knuckle finale—like watching an action movie through the written word.”

KYLE MANN, editor in chief of *The Babylon Bee* and author of *How to Be a Perfect Christian*

“Andrew Huff’s writing is as fast-paced and tight as his enticing story lines. Masterfully balancing a well-developed plot with a cast of characters you feel like you’ve known forever, Huff creates one page-turner after another in his Shepherd Suspense trilogy. He may be a new author, but his talented word-spinning is anything but novice and will linger long in the reader’s subconscious.”

BETSY ST. AMANT HADDOX, author of *All’s Fair in Love and Cupcakes*

Praise for *A Cross to Kill*
A Shepherd Suspense Novel #1

“An action-packed nail-biter from beginning to end, filled with enough twists and turns to put *24* and Jack Bauer to shame! I couldn’t put it down. Many thanks to Andrew for hours of entertainment and frantic page turning.”

LYNETTE EASON, best-selling, award-winning author of the Blue Justice series

“A fast-paced novel that drew me into the adventure from the opening pages. The characters wrestle with faith, forgiveness, and redemption in a gripping plotline packed with suspense, action, and danger.”

GLENN KREIDER, author of *God with Us*

“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

SHEPHERD SUSPENSE NOVELS

A Cross to Kill

Cross Shadow

Right Cross

A SHEPHERD SUSPENSE NOVEL • #2

CROSS SHADOW



ANDREW HUFF



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

Cross Shadow

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CHAPTER ONE

A BRISK WIND prompted Christine Lewis to draw her coat tighter as she exited the headquarters of the North American Broadcasting Channel and joined the herd of New York City natives and tourists mingling in the open-air plaza out front. Pushing past a group of senior citizens organizing a photo op in front of the network gift shop, she picked up her pace and trotted through the Forty-Ninth Street crosswalk just as time expired on the pedestrian signal.

The plaza access street between Forty-Ninth and Forty-Eighth offered a quaint block length of traffic-free asphalt perfect for a pleasant lunchtime stroll, but her meeting with her cameraman, Mike, had run over and she didn't want to miss the next B Sixth Avenue Express car arriving in six minutes. His excitement over covering a Russian tanker detained by the coast guard did nothing to distract her from her impending clandestine meeting.

Even as she marched toward the intersection, she couldn't help but imagine any number of scenarios of how her resignation would impact the network. With Mike as an exception, most of her coworkers wouldn't care. Her boss, Steven Jacobs, would be furious, but when wasn't he when things didn't go his way?

Janeen would want to come with her, but Christine didn't expect United News Network to accept terms that included full-time jobs for best friends. Still, maybe the door would open. Someday. A pit formed in her stomach as she pictured Janeen's reaction to the news

of Christine's departure. She pushed the emotional farewell from her mind and searched for a happier face to picture.

John.

But he wasn't alone. She couldn't think about her budding romance with John without also thinking about Lori Johnson, her "second mother." Lori hadn't insisted Christine call her Mom. Yet. Christine laughed to herself as she imagined the impending demand.

The corners of her lips sank as she recalled the last time she'd been able to travel to Virginia to see them. How long had it been? A week? No, longer.

Three.

How had she let it go so long? Christine pulled her hand from her jacket pocket, the phone secure in her grip. As she rounded the corner onto Forty-Eighth, she swiped the screen and quickly found John's contact in video chat. It didn't take long for the call to be accepted, and after a quick pause to load, the handsome, gentle face of John Cross appeared.

"Hey," he said with a smile.

"Hi." She copied his expression and allowed herself to enjoy the richness of his hazel eyes and the symmetry of his features. "Your hair's gotten a little longer than you usually wear it."

"Yeah. I haven't been able to get to the barber." He ran his fingers through the waves of hair falling behind his ear. "Are you headed there now?"

"Yeah, on Forty-Eighth, about to the station."

"I'm glad you called. I've been praying all morning."

Christine smiled more broadly. These were the moments she treasured the past few months, however brief their sparse interactions tended to be. They'd argued many times over who bore the responsibility for the lack of communication. It was mostly hers, though she acknowledged the 24/7 nature of ministry that also pulled John's attention away from their relationship. His thoughts always seemed to be elsewhere, even when they were together.

"Where are you?" Hearing about his day always helped make the distance seem shorter.

“St. Francis Hospital. Nick called this morning. Bri’s in delivery right now.”

“Oh my goodness!” Christine held a hand to her mouth. “That’s early. I hope everything is OK.”

“So far it looks like the little guy is just eager to come. Nick’s with her. I’ve just been in the waiting room . . . with both sets of new grandparents.”

“That sounds . . . fun?”

John winked and lowered his voice. “Let’s just say I’ll have some great stories for my sermons. How do you feel?”

“Good, I guess? I don’t know how I should feel about the most important interview of my life.”

“You’re going to do great. Why wouldn’t the biggest name in cable news want Christine Lewis on their team? They should’ve offered you anchor eight months ago.”

Rounding up, that made the hundredth time for the same compliment. And she doubted him every time he said it. Just because he thought she deserved the opportunity didn’t mean anyone else did. They pursued her, sure, but in this business one wrong conversation could spell doom.

The piercing blare of a truck horn caught her attention, and Christine looked up to see the driver expressing his disagreement with the poor decision-making of a small sedan. She also noticed a larger-than-usual mob of pedestrians heading down the steps to the express subway station at Sixth Avenue and Forty-Eighth.

“John, I’ve got to go. Looks like the platform’s going to be busy, and I don’t want to miss my train.”

“Call me after, if you can. Love you.”

She hated the hesitation she felt before she replied, “Love you too.” The video call ended, and she buried her phone back in her jacket pocket as she stepped into the line of people taking the stairs down.

They’d both used the “L” word too soon in her opinion, though it came easy in the early weeks of their dating relationship. Life-threatening situations tended to enhance the lure of romantic

attachment. After the novelty wore off, it was apparent they'd rushed into a handful of the trappings of dating they both normally eschewed.

It left them in an awkward place where they knew what the other would do in a life-threatening situation but not what kind of movie they each preferred. Not that she wanted a normal dating relationship. A date with an ex-CIA officer tended to be anything but boring and predictable. Instead of movies or shopping, they drank coffee in between self-defense and surveillance lessons. But still.

She pushed her thoughts on the subject out of her mind and used one of John's techniques to direct her senses on the chaotic scene in front of her.

During her morning commutes prior to dating John, Christine never paid mind to her surroundings. But now, she saw a detailed map of the station in her mind. Down the stairs, veer left, straight to the turnstiles, a quick left, then right, down another flight of stairs to the platform.

With the layout pictured in her brain, she used her eyes and ears to surveil the crowd for possible obstacles. She weaved through the masses with the grace of a ballet dancer, avoiding a large family digging through pockets for fare passes, a small gathering of pedestrians admiring a busker drumming on empty rain barrels, and a lady with blue hair balancing an assortment of handbags in one hand and a cat carrier in the other.

Exactly why she rarely carried a bag anymore. Too much to deal with when trying to move fast.

She made it to the platform just as the B train rolled to a stop. She chose the car farthest from the front and moved in sync with the rest of the crowd as they boarded.

As she settled into a hard orange plastic seat near the car's center, the train pulled away from the platform. Christine checked her watch.

Right on time.

For the train as well as the crushing anxiety. The past eight months might as well have been eight years in the ever-changing landscape of national news. The attempted detonation of a chemical bomb in

Washington, DC, was old news the second a juicier political scandal was exposed. Which overhyped crisis of the moment was it? Christine couldn't recall.

Probably an "imminent threat to our democracy." She imagined esteemed NABC anchor Daniel Meyers saying those exact words to open his nightly news program, though in her opinion it was more tabloid than news. Funny how experiencing a real imminent threat made political posturing feel partisan and petty.

Her dissatisfaction with her job at NABC refused to wane. She'd suppressed her feelings for months, but she'd gained clarity in a discussion with her Bible study leader, Park Han, a few Sunday nights ago. The feisty woman's voice whispered in a shadowy corner of Christine's mind: "God's will can be seen in the pushes and pulls. You're feeling the push. Now all you need is the pull."

He pulled, all right.

In addition to the replay of her conversation with Park, she heard John's well-meaning compliments, Janeen's fictitious sorrow, and a dozen possible outcomes of her meeting with producers at the United News Network. She pressed her hand into her chest to slow the incessant beating.

Stop!

Christine drew slow, deep breaths and concentrated on the car's passengers. If she didn't occupy her ride with mental exercises, she'd only think of the many ways she was certain to bomb the interview. She scanned the crowded car to pick out interesting subjects.

Across from her sat a young adult female, Asian features, dressed in chic leggings and boots, her head buried in her phone.

An African American male, slightly younger, with long hair and baggy clothes, braced himself upright against a stanchion connecting the floor to the ceiling. Even though his eyes were closed, he grinned from ear to ear as he subtly air-drummed to whatever was piped into his bulky but fashionable headphones.

She scanned the remaining passengers, noting small details, until her eyes settled on a young adult male at the front end of the car. A

drop of sweat left a shiny trail of moisture down the side of his face. He licked his lips more than once and kept his eyes on the floor.

Christine sat straighter and studied him. His complexion was dark, but more from a tan than ethnicity; his frayed hair retreated from his forehead; and he wore a large faded-blue jacket. His left knee trembled, and he kept trying to bury his hands farther than they could go into the jacket's pockets.

The jacket. His thin neck looked silly protruding from it. He was more of a medium build, in contrast to the extra-large size of the jacket. His abdomen, though, filled it out.

He fit a profile—she just didn't remember which one. And yet it nagged at her. She knew she'd heard those characteristics in connection to something before. She recalled everything John taught her. Nothing. She dug further, before John, before the kidnapping. But not much before. During her time as a foreign correspondent. Time she spent with . . .

The explosive ordnance disposal unit stationed in Kirkuk, Iraq.

Christine forced back an audible gasp. She took more deep breaths to ease the increased fluttering in her chest. Her planned route to the UNN building faded into the dark recesses of her mind as she considered her startling new reality: a suicide bomber rode the 11:54 B Sixth Avenue Express heading deep into New York City.

CHAPTER TWO

MAYBE HE WASN'T a suicide bomber. She was just being paranoid. The stress of the interview plus residual trauma from her kidnapping and subsequent involvement in the attempted terror attack in DC. Her imagination just needed the right stimuli.

Christine closed her eyes and breathed through the rising anxiety. Controlled breathing, another of John's techniques he'd introduced to her to help when the panic attacks set in. She imagined him beside her. What would he think?

Her eyes snapped open. He'd want to get a closer look. Time was short with three scheduled stops between her starting point and final destination. As if it read her mind, the train slowed as it pulled up to the Bryant Park platform.

What if he got off? She would have to follow. No choice. Christine pretended to examine the transit map tacked to the wall of the car so she could monitor the man's movements without raising alarm.

A handful of the passengers readied their exit. The man shifted in his chair but remained seated. More sweat trickled down his temple. He pulled his hand out of his pocket to look at something, but before Christine could identify what it was, an elderly lady shuffled by, obscuring her view.

The train came to a full stop, and the doors slid open. The exiting group of commuters swapped places with another group of similar size boarding the train. Christine's person of interest avoided eye contact

with the new passengers, though that would be as true of any other New Yorker as it would be of a suicide bomber suspect.

The distinct chime of the loudspeaker announced the imminent closing of the doors. They slid shut, the noise of the busy platform now muffled. Christine managed two more deep breaths before the train climbed slowly, agonizingly, to cruising speed.

Christine noted the time on her watch. Only a couple of minutes between Bryant Park and Herald Square, the next scheduled stop. Not nearly enough time to make a move, but each stop meant a potential escape for her suspected bomber.

It had to be now.

She stood to her feet, the rough sketch of a plan drawing itself together in her mind. If she could see what the man was holding in his pocket. Or maybe get him to stand up. She walked toward the front of the car, careful to avoid the swinging hands of the young man still air-drumming.

Did he flinch? His eyes remained locked on the floor, but he might've noticed her in his peripheral vision. She was committed to the plan now.

Whatever it was.

As she inched closer, the man straightened and finally took his eyes off the floor. He stared straight ahead, through the vagrant asleep against the glass window, and seemed fixated on the black tunnel walls speeding by. His knee stopped trembling. His thin neck still glistened.

Christine reached out her hand as if ready to open the door to the gangway. The car jostled on the tracks, and she let her body go limp.

She fell toward the man, but he quickly stood and angled away from her. With no choice, Christine crashed against the bench and tumbled onto the floor at his feet. She heard footfalls running to her side, but she lay still with her nose pressed into the cold metal.

“Ma’am, are you OK?”

Large hands wrapped around her forearms and lifted, then rotated her upper body with ease. As she turned, she saw the sweaty man’s boots stepping away from her. At the last second, she caught a glimpse of what she feared: a bundle of wires tucked just underneath the man’s coat.

“Ma’am, can you hear me?”

Her suspected bomber crossed the car and sat down next to the unconscious drifter. Christine ignored the good Samaritan helping her up and, feigning a groggy mental state, kept the jacket within her field of view.

“Ma’am?”

The sweaty man averted his eyes from the scene for a moment and checked on the contents of his jacket pocket, awarding Christine a fleeting view of the final piece of evidence she needed. He only pulled the shiny object out of his pocket enough to check its status, then it disappeared.

The detonator.

Suicide bomber confirmed.

“Miss, are you OK?”

Christine rolled her head back and finally opened her eyes wide enough to identify her concerned rescuer. The heavyset, clean-shaven man in the puffy green jacket waved his large hand over her face.

“Can you see me?” he belted over the rumble of the train on the tracks.

Christine mumbled and fluttered her eyelids for maximum effect. “I’m all right. I just”—she swallowed a nonexistent lump in her throat—“I just got lightheaded.”

“Can you stand? Try to get off the floor and into a chair maybe?”

“I’m sorry. I’ll get off the floor.” She made a show of trying to rise on her own, until she finally let the man help her to her feet. Still pretending to be disoriented, she insisted they move away from the front of the car to her original seat.

The man helped her sit and continued to cradle her arm as he sat down next to her. “That was some spill,” he said, his New York accent every bit as heavy as he was. “Are you OK? What happened?”

“I guess I didn’t get enough sleep last night and had too much coffee this morning. I wasn’t feeling great in this car, so I thought the next car might move less, I guess.” She didn’t want to lie, but she didn’t want to panic the other passengers either.

“How do you feel now? Still lightheaded?”

The man was polite *and* thorough.

“I’m fine, really. It’s passing. And I’m getting off soon.”

The jostle of the train subsided, and ambient light filled the car as it exchanged the darkness of the tunnel for the open platform of Herald Square Station. The voice on the loudspeaker confirmed the stop and instructed passengers to stand clear of the doors.

“Is this your stop?”

Christine strained her neck to see if the man in the blue jacket had joined the handful of riders starting for the exit. He remained seated in his new spot, knee trembling again, his focus now on the platform.

Christine kept him in her peripheral vision as she scanned the crowd gathering to fill the train.

“Ma’am, is this your stop?”

She stole a quick glance at her phone as she replied, “I’m sorry?”

No signal.

Her companion moved his head into her view and enunciated his words. “Is this where you need to get off? I can help you out if you need to.”

The doors slid open, and the masses pushed through each other.

“Oh, no, this isn’t my stop. You don’t have to help. I’m fine. Really.”

The man grunted and furrowed his brow. “See, that’s where you’re wrong. I might not technically be on the clock, but helping you is exactly what I’m paid to do, ma’am.”

Christine turned her full attention to the man. “Excuse me?”

The activity in the car settled as the chimes rang again and the doors slid shut.

Grinning, the man opened his puffy green jacket, and the overhead fluorescent tube glinted off the golden badge affixed neatly beside the black holster resting on his belt. “Detective Peter Rabinoff, NYPD, at your service. I’d like to make sure you don’t fall again on your way out, if you don’t mind.”

The train rocked as it started again into the tunnel, and Christine nearly fell onto the floor once more.

Rabinoff closed his jacket and zipped it halfway up. He squinted as his grin faded. "Hey, don't I know you from somewhere?"

Christine grabbed his forearm firmly and stared into his eyes. "Listen to me. Whatever you do, don't react to anything I'm about to say. I wasn't lightheaded before. I pretended to be to get a look at the man in the blue jacket."

Rabinoff's poker face wasn't perfect, but sufficient.

"I noticed him when I boarded the train. Something didn't seem right. I saw wires hanging underneath his jacket, and he's got some sort of device in one of his pockets. I think he's wearing explosives."

Keeping his eyes trained on hers, Rabinoff leaned back into his chair and studied her face. After a few seconds, he turned his head.

Christine expelled air through her mouth and tightened her grip on his forearm. He stopped turning as she gave him a subtle shake of her head.

He waved her off and shifted in his seat to face toward the opposite side of the car. Suddenly, he laughed out loud. Christine dropped her gaze as he turned his head fully and looked down the length of the car.

Any second now and the blast would claim them.

Rabinoff turned to her as his laughter subsided and he took a deep breath. "OK, Miss Whoever You Are, ignoring the obvious fact that you've been watching too many spy movies, the man seems distressed. I can get why you thought something might be wrong. Either he just stepped out of the shower before he hopped on or he's soon to run out of any sweat he might have left."

Christine nodded. "See, I . . ."

"Are you certain you saw what you saw?"

She caught the reflection of the back of the bomber's head in the glass of the window behind Rabinoff. She held her gaze for a moment, then made firm eye contact with the detective. "Yes."

Rabinoff took a deep breath. "All right."

"What are we going to do?"

"*We* aren't going to do anything."

"But the train's about to stop again. What if he gets off?"

"I didn't say *I* wasn't going to do anything." Rabinoff adjusted his jacket, took a deep breath, then stood. He walked toward the front of the car and then, to Christine's surprise, disappeared through the door to the gangway.

What just happened? In her mind's eye, she'd witnessed Rabinoff confronting the man in the blue jacket and requesting compliance with an examination of what he wore around his waist. Her prayer for the man's submission to authority faded from her heart as she studied the door to the gangway with gritted teeth.

He'd left her. He'd left them all. And for all she knew, the bomber would detonate before Rabinoff returned.

If he ever intended to.

Christine returned to her breathing exercises to quell the anxiety building in her chest. Rabinoff wasn't just plan A—he was the only plan.

A distorted voice echoed from the loudspeaker overhead, announcing the train's imminent arrival at Herald Square. Christine prayed fervently as they slowed to a stop next to the platform.

A smaller crowd greeted the train, an answer to her prayer, and several of her fellow riders positioned themselves near the exit. Just before the doors could open, Christine saw a transit employee directing a family down the platform toward a different car.

She prayed harder.

The doors opened, and half the passengers in the car made their way onto the platform and toward the station exits. Incredibly, no one on the platform chose her car, for which she offered a quick prayer of thanks.

Chimes accompanied the doors as they slid to a close. Her only recourse was to wait for the man to leave the car and head above ground. Then she could call the police, presuming he still had some distance to travel before his intended target.

How long until the next stop? Christine checked her watch, but suddenly realized they weren't moving. She scanned the platform outside but didn't see a single person. No one else seemed to notice.

Except him.

The man in the blue jacket was shaking and sweating even more as his eyes danced frantically from the windows to his fellow passengers. Christine avoided making eye contact with him and pretended to pick at a fingernail.

The train didn't budge. The air in the car felt warmer. The air-drummer opened his eyes and dropped his hands. He frowned at the loudspeaker and said, "Any day now."

The door to the gangway opened, startling everyone in the car. Rabinoff stepped through, his green puffy jacket unzipped. The door closed behind him, and he held his hands open.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "There's no cause for alarm, but I'd like to ask that everyone remain seated." In slow motion, he lowered his left hand toward the man in the blue jacket and shifted his right toward his right hip. "Sir," he said calmly, "I'm Detective Rabinoff with the New York Police Department. There's no need to be scared. I'm not here to hurt you. I'd just like to ask you a few questions."

The man in the blue jacket, his eyes bulging and his mouth open, hyperventilated as he jumped from his seat and backed away from Rabinoff.

Without rising, Christine edged forward in her seat. Air-drummer pressed himself against the exit doors. The others stared blankly at the scene. The homeless man snorted.

Rabinoff's right hand slipped over the butt of his gun. "Sir, everything is fine. Please just show me what you have under your jacket. There's no need for either of us to do anything rash."

The man's jacket collar was soaked in sweat. He trembled as he came to a stop in the middle of the car. Facing Rabinoff, he pulled his hand from his jacket pocket, revealing a metal cylinder with a red switch at its peak. Wires snaked out from the bottom of his fist and disappeared into his sleeve. With his free hand, he unzipped the jacket and let the two sides part.

He wore a black vest underneath. A row of white blocks encircled

his abdomen, interconnected wires poking out from beneath each one.

The smartphone girl gasped.

Air-drummer swore and backed away from the middle of the car, but a sudden jerk of the bomber's head stopped him in his tracks.

"Everybody stay calm," Rabinoff ordered. "Don't move." The gun remained holstered, his hand resting just above it. "Listen, pal, I don't know why you chose to do this, but just consider where you are and what you're planning on doing. Whatever else you think this is about, I can tell you right now this isn't going to accomplish anything."

What was he doing? That didn't seem the right way to talk down a suicide bomber. Christine held her breath as Rabinoff took a single short step to close the distance between him and the bomber.

"All you're going to do is kill a bunch of innocent people. Then they'll talk about you on the news for a few weeks, then poof. Gone. You'll never be remembered. You'll get a poorly written online encyclopedia article about your meaningless life."

Definitely not an approved negotiation tactic.

Rabinoff took another step. The bomber's thumb twitched against the trigger. He darted his eyes between the detective and the others. His breathing slowed.

"You might have noticed I haven't pulled out my weapon. That's because there's no reason to. Bomb beats gun. I'm a quick draw, but I'm not that quick. So it's on you. I'm willing to work with you on whatever will help end this with all of us leaving this car intact." Rabinoff nodded as if to prompt the bomber to respond.

A deafening silence filled the car. Christine heard the man's sweat drops slapping against the metal floor.

She searched her memory for anything John had taught her that might help Rabinoff subdue the man without activating the vest. Disarming live bombs had never come up in conversation. He mostly instructed her in self-defense.

Like what to do if someone forcefully grabbed her.

Suddenly, it came to her. Once she saw it, she pushed everything

else away and directed her mind, just as he'd taught her, until only it remained. The moment. Her one opportunity.

Christine trained her eyes on the trigger in the man's fist. She estimated the distance between them. John had drilled her until he'd approved of her speed and strength, but the gap she would need to make up caused her to doubt her ability to intervene.

Pray.

She had been.

Harder.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spied Rabinoff's foot lifting off the floor. The bomber straightened. Christine teetered on the lip of her chair.

As Rabinoff lifted his foot to take another step, the bomber stepped backward, parallel to her.

She readied herself, her eyes locked on the red switch. Rabinoff was saying something, but her brain refused the signals sent from her eardrums. A bead of sweat formed on her temple.

The thumb relaxed.

Christine leapt from her chair, grabbed the man's thumb with her left hand and his wrist with her right. Just as John had instructed, she pulled backward on the thumb as hard as she could. The bone broke like a twig.

The man screamed. Rabinoff cursed.

With his thumb still pinned, Christine shoved down on his wrist with her other hand. The man fell to his knees. He opened his hand, and the detonator dropped free, dangling from his jacket sleeve by the wires running underneath.

Rabinoff appeared next to her, his weapon drawn and pointed in the bomber's face. "Stay down!" he barked at the man, then let loose a flurry of expletives in Christine's direction. "What are you, crazy? What if that hadn't worked?"

"Get it off him!"

"We might set it off. Bomb squad is on its way."

The bomber spat an insulting word through his gritted teeth.

Rabinoff pressed the barrel of his gun even closer into the man's face. "Don't move a muscle, or I swear I'll blow you away." He drew a few breaths, then kept his eyes trained on the bomber as he said to Christine, "Nice moves."

The door to the car suddenly slid open, startling the air-drummer and causing him to nearly fall out of the train. A uniformed police officer entered, his weapon drawn. "On your right," he announced as he took brisk steps into the car and next to Rabinoff.

The detective never broke his gaze as he replied, "I've got an armed incendiary device being worn by the suspect. Relieve the lady, please."

The officer rushed to Christine's side and, after holstering his weapon, wrapped his muscular arm around the bomber's and motioned for her to release her grip. She obeyed, stood up, and backed away from the men.

As she drew a deep breath, she watched the passengers flee out the wide-open doorway onto the platform. Air-drummer, smartphone girl, even the homeless man. All five sprinted toward the station exit.

Five. Plus Christine and the bomber. Seven.

That wasn't right. It was eight. Eight passengers when Rabinoff returned. How did she miss one?

Christine scanned the car and the platform outside and concluded she'd imagined the eighth person, when she turned around and saw the back door of the car standing wide open. A dark shadow jogged down into the black abyss of the tunnel.

Handler.

That was what the explosive ordnance disposal men called a suicide bomber's companion, the person responsible for making sure the bomber went through with the plan. Christine remembered two men and a woman sitting near the back. The woman was the last to flee the car. That meant it was one of the men.

"Detective," she called out, still watching the shadow run. "I think he had a friend. And the friend is getting away."

"I'm kind of busy right now."

Christine drew a deep breath and clenched her fists. She turned to

take one last look at Rabinoff. He shifted his eyes from the sight on his pistol to Christine and back.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Christine turned away from him and rushed through the door. She took a leap from the train and hit the ground running.

CHAPTER THREE

A HANDFUL OF square yellow and blue lights spaced yards apart gave off the bare minimum of light needed for Christine's eyes to adjust to the darkness of the tunnel. The blob jogging before her appeared only a shade less black than the void beyond it.

The man moved fast, and Christine struggled to keep up. The wrong step and she'd break an ankle against the uneven metal track.

The bomber's handler wouldn't be armed with explosives, but that didn't necessarily mean he was unarmed. His job was to accompany the suicide bomber to the target and ensure a successful detonation.

If he'd been on the train, why didn't the handler intervene and stop Rabinoff? Christine couldn't think of any reason other than the train car had not been the intended target. But that possibility just begged additional questions.

Since when did suicide bombers care about *not* blowing people up?

Christine strained to examine the obscure path. Rails no wider than her foot ran parallel above uneven concrete. A third rail hugged the left side of the track nearest the wall, and she knew enough about the subway system to know that was the one with the electrical current. She stuck to a wider path just under the rail to her right, praying that no construction errors left holes for her to step in.

When she looked up, her heart jumped as she strained to catch a glimpse of the handler escaping down the tunnel. Did he know that she was behind him? Sound traveled well in the tunnels, but her

footfalls competed with the rumble of a passing train in a parallel tube.

A sudden muffled crash echoed off the slick curved walls, followed by a low-toned grunt. She pushed herself faster down the lane and finally spotted the blob pushing himself up off the ground twenty or so yards ahead of her.

The ambient noise stilled, and the clap of Christine's boots against the concrete announced her presence. The handler took off in a full run. Ignoring the warning signals in her brain, Christine locked her eyes on his shape and pushed herself to pick up the pace.

The trek from Herald Square to Forty-Second Street–Bryant Park followed one of the shorter train routes on the Sixth Avenue Express. The light from the platform spilled into the tunnel as the gap again widened between Christine and her quarry.

The outline of the man grew more distinct, as did the rumble in the ground underneath her. A different rumble from a passing train. This one shook the rails on either side of her.

The 11:54 out of Rockefeller Center.

Christine didn't need a better motivation to catch up to the handler. Her calves ached as she pumped her legs. Up ahead, the Bryant Park platform shone bright, like a beacon warning her of impending danger.

The man reached the platform and lunged onto it as the twin headlights of the approaching subway train rounded a corner ahead and bored down the track at full speed.

Christine's foot slipped, forcing her to slow or risk tripping onto the track. Once she found her balance again, she ran as fast as she could.

Several people screamed, barely audible over the screeching brakes as the operator fought to bring the train to a quicker stop than usual. But subway trains weren't easy to halt.

The train was nearly on top of her. Its bright headlights blinded her just as she took the final two steps to the platform edge. Closing her eyes, she pushed down on the tiled floor of the platform with her palms and used the leverage to launch her body up and forward.

She rolled across the tile just as the train screeched to a halt right where she'd stood on the track. Her hands stopped her momentum, with her stomach against the floor.

Another scream distracted her from the anxiety of near death. She jolted upright on her hands and knees and looked up to see the man shoving an older woman aside as he fought his way through the crowd toward the exit staircase.

As she jumped to her feet in pursuit, she took note of the man's short-cropped hair, olive skin, and weathered tan barn coat. He bounded up the stairs with his back to her, making it impossible to see his face.

She elbowed her way through the crowd and up the stairs behind him. She'd lose him for good if she lost track of him in the mass of commuters. All the work she'd put in on the treadmill at the gym better pay off.

He sprinted up the two flights of stairs, through the bank of turnstiles, and up the staircase toward the exit, but the bustle of the station kept him from gaining speed. Just as he ascended the stairs leading up and out, a toddler playing with a stroller stepped in Christine's path.

She collided with the stroller and sent it and the diaper bag it was holding sprawling across the floor. The toddler's mother reached for him and shouted "Silas!" as she pulled him to her.

Without hesitating, Christine stepped over the stroller and kept running toward the stairs. The light grew brighter but a shade bluer as she charged up the staircase and exited the station. In seconds she emerged from underneath the city and onto Forty-Second Street, Bryant Park behind a row of trees to her right.

Christine scanned the crowded sidewalk for any sign of the handler. She turned to search the opposite side of the street, when she saw the short-cropped hair and tan coat of the man as he walked the perimeter of the park.

She walked fast and wove her way down the busy sidewalk. The cold air and cloudy sky didn't keep the locals and tourists away from the park. Though busy, the foot traffic on the sidewalk did little to calm Christine's fear of discovery. She tucked her chin down, puffed

the collar of her jacket as much as she could, and angled her face to the ground without losing sight of her quarry.

She dug her hands into her pockets to grab her phone. A quick call to the police, with detailed information on the man's whereabouts, and he'd be in custody before he reached the end of the block.

Her heart fell. Her pockets were empty. She pictured her phone resting comfortably on top of the hard bucket seat of the train, right where she'd left it after deciding to break the bomber's thumb.

No phone. No backup. She needed to come up with a plan, or he'd get away.

They walked in tandem for only a minute before the man glanced over his shoulder. He spotted her and took off in a full sprint down the sidewalk. Christine groaned as she too burst into a run, dodging annoyed pedestrians out for a leisurely midday stroll.

The blossoming trees in the park gave way to the four-story, yellow-brick facade of the New York Public Library Main Branch. Just ahead, the handler shoved an unsuspecting male with a heavy backpack out of his way as he rounded the brick wall lining the perimeter of the building's grounds and took the stairs to the Forty-Second Street entrance.

Christine lost sight of him for a split second, then spotted him at the top of the stairs as she passed the end of the brick wall. He stood still and stared at her down the barrel of a gun. She jumped behind the wall just as he fired.

Three gunshots rang out. The bullets struck a platter resting on top of the wall just above Christine's head. She ducked under her arms as bits of concrete pelted her from above. People screamed as they scattered in all directions.

More screams emanated from the library as, Christine presumed, the man fled inside. She peeked from around the wall and, with the man nowhere in sight, proceeded to take off up the stairs, when a strong hand grabbed her from behind and pulled her back.

"Hey!" she shouted, balling her fist and raising it in the air.

"What are you going to do, hit me?" Rabinoff was all business. He held his gun high and refused to let Christine break from his grasp.

“Detective!” She dropped her fist and stared at him. “How?” she blurted.

Rabinoff held tighter to Christine. “I told you not to think about it.”

“He just went inside. And he has a gun.”

“We’re going to take it from here.”

“We?”

From every direction, police officers clad in classic NYPD navy blue descended on their position and rushed the library steps. Radios cackled with chatter concerning an active shooter.

Rabinoff tugged on Christine’s arm. “We’ll handle this. You head down Forty-Second to the squad cars cordoning off the block, and wait for me there. *Now.*” He added extra emphasis to his final word and urged Christine away from the scene.

She obliged, confident the city’s finest were now in control of the situation. With her head low, she started down the sidewalk. More police raced by as pedestrians continued to evacuate.

Right as she reached the corner of the building where it met a terrace overlooking the park, she heard gunshots against a pane of glass on the rear of the library. A young girl screamed.

Christine raced up the stairs to check for injured bystanders. People fled from the simple iron tables and chairs on her right and down into the park. To her left, the more elegant umbrella-covered tables and chairs of the Bryant Park Café sat empty.

Halfway down the side of the building, a figure burst through a second-story window and crashed into one of the umbrellas, showering the café in shards of glass.

Christine recognized the tan coat.

The man righted himself and hobbled away from the café. Rabinoff appeared in the window frame, pointing his gun and shouting obscenities.

Christine ran to intercept the man. As she closed the gap with him, she grabbed one of the iron chairs and spun 360 degrees. She released her hold, and the chair launched from her hands.

The chair struck the man and sent him sprawling across the floor of

the terrace. Christine froze, unsure of what to do following her unexpected success at stopping the man in his tracks.

The pause was all he needed. The handler jumped to his feet and aimed his gun at her.

In the second prior to the gunshot, Christine felt something unique. Before she'd met John, facing certain death frightened her. But now, with the prospect once again presented before her, Christine was at peace.

Death did not scare her. It was powerless.

The piercing explosions of the gun sliced the air in rapid succession as every last round was expelled from the clip.

The handler's body convulsed with each hit until he tumbled over and hit the ground facedown, dead.

Christine's eyes widened even farther, and her mouth fell open. She turned and found Rabinoff standing among the broken debris of an umbrella, table, and chairs. He kept the weapon aimed in the direction of the handler as he stepped to her side.

"It's OK. You're OK." He used the full length of his arm to pull her away from the body as NYPD officers rushed across the terrace to confirm the shooter had been neutralized. Christine and Rabinoff walked down the steps and onto the now vacant sidewalk.

Christine finally breathed. Once they were at an acceptable distance, Rabinoff lowered his gun, dropped his arm, and turned to face her.

"I knew I knew you from somewhere," he said. "You're that reporter. The one who was rescued from kidnappers overseas last year, right? Christine—"

She stuck out her hand as she finished his words. "Lewis. Nice to meet you, Detective Peter Rabinoff."

Rabinoff shook her hand and his head. "You must have a knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Comes with the journalistic territory, I guess."

"Oh." Rabinoff reached into the pocket of his jacket. "I almost forgot. You left this on the train." He pulled out her phone and extended it toward her.

Christine took it. “That would’ve come in handy about five minutes ago.”

A pair of officers approached them as Rabinoff said, “Well, I hate to break it to you, but you’re going to have to come in for a statement. I hope you didn’t have any plans.”

The interview. Christine swiped her phone open and checked her notifications.

Two missed calls from UNN.

And fifteen missed calls from John.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOHN CROSS STARED at the black screen, a cascade of thoughts spilling from his mind. His training, though rusty, was too ingrained. He imagined every possible scenario, evaluated every possible outcome. The details were scant. The rampant speculation on the news plus the near absence of communication from Christine left holes he felt too eager to fill with absurd plots even Hollywood would turn down.

What did he know? There'd been a suicide bomber arrested on the subway. A shootout occurred at the New York Public Library. And Christine was in the middle of it all. No more, no less.

He opened the phone for the third time in the span of as many minutes, his messages app already queued. Nothing new, but he again read what she'd sent.

I'm OK. I have to make a statement to the NYPD, then I'll call. Don't worry. I'm safe. I'll call as soon as I can.

The police wouldn't have stopped her from making a phone call, but he imagined he was a notch or two down the list. She'd call her mother, then her father, just to ensure they wouldn't worry should her name come up on the news.

By then they'd be ready for her. He knew they'd be thorough, and he hated them for it. All he could do was wait.

And pray.

He stopped pacing the carpet in front of the altar and plopped onto the front right pew of the Rural Grove Baptist Church sanctuary. The

television news broadcast that had interrupted a game show rerun in the waiting room at Memorial Regional Medical Center replayed in his mind.

“Breaking news out of New York City,” the polished anchorman had said, coming out of a network alert graphic. “Details are just beginning to come in about an attempted suicide bombing on board a subway car. New York City police were able to intervene and prevent what could’ve been a violent, tragic event. Here’s what we know at this hour . . .”

At that point, Cross had half listened to the report, half waited for the call to connect with Christine’s phone. In between the ringing and dialing, he’d absorbed the scant information from the broadcast: a single suicide bomber, NYPD intervened, the bomb disarmed, one suspect in custody, reports of another suspect being pursued on foot.

The incoming update of shots fired at the library had prompted Cross’s exit from the hospital. Nick and Bri’s families had understood and wished him prayerful farewells.

He now pictured each of them in his mind and prayed for hope and blessing. Then he thought of Nick and Bri and spent twice as long asking for health for mother and baby.

His prayers transitioned to Christine, her family, even himself. His former life with the Central Intelligence Agency had left him desensitized to tragedy and chaos—that was, until Jesus woke within him a long-ignored yearning for justice and restoration. He prayed for well-being, for God’s spirit of peace, for strength and confidence in the midst of uncertainty.

And the terrorist? What about him? Cross grumbled under his breath at the prodding of his heart to offer supplication on the man’s behalf. He closed his eyes and pushed the temptation to refuse from his mind. Then, out loud, he prayed for the bomber.

A sharp, musical tone blared from his phone’s speaker, startling him. He snatched it from the pew seat and answered without looking at the screen.

“Christine,” he said as he stood.

“No, John. I’m sorry. It’s Gary,” the head deacon and volunteer worship director of the church replied in his deep but smooth voice.

“Gary, yes, it’s fine. I didn’t look at the number. I’ve been waiting for her to call.”

“Deb texted me when she saw the news. That’s why I was calling. I didn’t know if, well, if you’d heard from Christine. I know it’s a big city, but . . .” His words trailed, dread and hope mixing in the silence left behind.

Cross hesitated with his reply, the involuntary desire to lie lingering in his heart even after being forced to confess his past deeds to the congregation. He glanced at the pulpit, the image of Yunus Anar holding him at knifepoint as clear as if it were happening again. The echo of men, women, and children stifling their cries haunted him every night.

He cleared his throat, banished the images, and enunciated his words. “I believe Christine was involved, yes, but she’s texted me and let me know she’s OK. She’s with the police right now. They’re taking a statement. Unfortunately, that’s all I know.”

“Are you still at the hospital?”

“No, I left after I couldn’t get ahold of her. I don’t know why. I guess I just thought I needed to go somewhere. Do something. I’m at the church. I’ve been praying.”

“Me too. Praying, that is.”

Cross took a deep breath. “Thanks” was all he could offer in return. There was a brief pause, then Gary said, “I bet it’s hard.”

“What is?”

“Not being there.”

“Actually, Christine’s pretty good at taking care of herself. She’s been through a lot, but I’ve never met anyone with as strong a spirit.”

“Oh yeah, I believe it. But I meant . . .” The line went silent again.

Cross adjusted the position of the phone against his ear. Before he could double-check the screen to see if the call had dropped, Gary’s voice came back.

“Never mind. How are the Potters?”

Strange. It was unlike Gary to refrain from speaking his mind. Cross could recall any number of deacon meetings where the sandy-haired baby boomer spoke a lot of truth with just enough grace. And yet there was no lack of respect for Cross, for Gary's words were always measured and never malicious.

"They're great," Cross said. "Nick's dad texted and let me know the delivery went well and the baby is healthy, all things considered. They'll be in the NICU for a few days just to make sure."

"What was Bri, thirty-seven weeks?"

"Thirty-five. She's doing well too."

"That's great news."

Another moment of silence. Gary was holding back. Cross just didn't know why. "Gary, is there something on your mind?" he prodded.

"Nothing. Just thinking it'd be great if you could get out to New York." No dead air this time. "Let's make it a point to grab lunch soon. No particular reason, just to check in."

Cross was sure there was a reason, but he didn't feel like interrogating his friend. With his luck, Christine's call would interrupt them right as Gary was ready to confess.

"All right," he said. "We'll get lunch soon. I promise."

"Give Christine our love when she calls. I'll see you on Sunday."

"I will. Thanks, Gary."

Cross dropped the phone from his ear and imagined what concern Gary might bring over an informal lunch meeting. A flood of possible scenarios tore through his mind. Rural Grove Baptist, with its small contingent of faithful agrarian attenders, was the only evangelical church context Cross knew. Yet in his meticulous research concerning ministerial responsibilities, there was no shortage of chapters in leadership books and articles on pastoral blogs detailing the darker side of church management.

Taking a cue from those harrowing tales, Cross made it a point as the de facto head of the congregation to focus much less on implementing structural changes and much more on serving and caring for the individual members day in and day out. He didn't have much of

an opinion on the administration in any case. The weekly pressure of delivering a sermon consumed all the confidence he could muster.

Perhaps that was the issue. What little progress he had made with his online theological classes prior to the events in DC remained stagnant now that he divided his time between Virginia and New York. He regretted the pause in his training but hadn't considered the ramifications of a season away from the rigor of coursework. Until today.

That could be it. Or something else. He searched his mind for an image or sound from the past few months that might reveal a possible blemish in his ministerial record worthy of a reprimanding lunch appointment. His ability to remember minute details served him in both his former and current life. The possibility remained that his interpretation of an encounter with a congregant or a statement from the pulpit differed from what another might assume.

Cross frowned. If he were honest with himself, it was probably both an encounter and a theological error in a sermon. The latter he could have avoided, had he furthered his religious education.

The ring from his phone shook him loose from the deep dive into his thoughts. How long had it been ringing? He glanced at the screen and immediately swiped to answer as he brought it to his ear.

"Thank God," he said. "I know you already said it, but are you OK?"

He heard a subtle chuckle followed by Christine's static-filled voice. "I'm fine. Really. I just finished giving my statement, but I'm still at the precinct."

Cross winced at the poor connection. She ignored his advice to switch carriers despite the obvious lack of consistent coverage. Brand loyalty, or some other excuse.

"I'm having a little trouble hearing you."

"Is that better?" she asked after a brief rustling of the phone on her end.

"Yes." It wasn't.

"I know you've got a lot of questions, and I want to tell you everything. It'll have to be tonight. I'm sure you can guess, but the network's

already sent a car. They're eager to dominate the afternoon with all the insider information."

"I believe it. I'm just glad you're not hurt. Is there anything I can do?"

"Actually, yes, there is." Christine paused. "I just got off the phone with Dad."

The only image Cross called to mind of Christine's father was a literal picture he'd seen one night over coffee as she regaled him with stories from her childhood. Her parents separated when she was young, and her father moved to Springfield, Missouri, but they'd maintained as strong of a relationship through the years as they could despite the distance. As a teen, she'd even spent a summer with him, her stepmother, and her stepbrother.

Cross visualized the photo of a young Christine with a broad smile crossing arms with her dad, Charles was his name, and her younger stepbrother. What was his name again? Paul? Cross shook his head. He always remembered the small details. Always.

The thought of his intelligence skills atrophying bothered him. Maybe there was something he'd done to warrant discipline from Gary, and he just didn't remember it.

"John?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm here. You were saying you spoke to Charles?"

"He called, obviously. Saw it on the news. I couldn't take the call, so he left a message. It's been a while since we last talked. And, well, I . . . I can't even believe I'm going to say this. But, well . . ."

She stammered. Shaken. It was unsettling. She wasn't like this. Cross held his breath.

"It's Philip."

The stepbrother. That was his name.

"He's been arrested. In Texas." She paused, then Cross detected an audible gulp. "For murder."