

An Excerpt from...

# Island of Bones

MARTA  
SPROUT





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## FIRST RULE: NEVER PANC

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**S**WIMMING IN THE OCEAN WASN'T THE ISSUE: the big hands holding her under water were the problem.

With her back pinned to the bottom in the shallow waters near shore, Kate Bowers struggled against the weight of the man on top of her. Her mask and snorkel were torn from her face. Inches away, a shimmering sheet of light danced above her. Beyond that—air. Barely out of reach.

If only she could break the surface.

The mindset she knew from combat kicked in.

Straddling her, the man rammed his knees into either side of her torso. She caught a blurry glimpse of a pale face ringed in short dark hair looming above her as he unbuckled his belt.

*Son of a bitch.*

When she felt his calloused fingers glide over her bare skin and slip inside her bikini bottom, she bit down hard on the large hand over her mouth. He yanked both hands away. From underwater, his yelp sounded muffled and distorted, like a recording played at half speed. The tang of saltwater and blood filled her mouth.

Bowers deflected his blows, which came in punishing waves. Water churned each time he slammed her against the shells, rocks, and

broken pieces of rebar and concrete on the bottom. Grappling for leverage, she wished she'd worn a wetsuit and dive knife instead of this stupid bikini.

*Second Rule: NEVER GIVE IN.*

The man, who outweighed her by a good eighty pounds, shoved down harder, causing bubbles to escape from her nose and race toward the surface. In the turbulence, wisps of her brown hair swirled in front of her eyes.

As he tugged at her bikini bottom, his barrel chest cast a shadow over her face. She landed a few solid punches, but they only dialed up his aggression.

While her lungs ached for air, he kept his chin and shoulders above water.

Critical seconds ticked away. Her blows grew more frantic as he pulled her bikini bottom to her ankles and slipped it off.

The rumbling of a boat motor distracted him long enough for her to poke her head up for a quick gasp of air.

He shoved her down again, driving the bottom's jagged debris into her bare flesh.

*Enough of this crap.*

Lack of oxygen sapped her strength, as he clamped both hands around the base of her neck and smiled down at her.

He thrust his knees between her thighs. With her wide open and vulnerable, he unzipped his fly and exposed himself.

*Oh, hell no.*

The vision of obliterating his junk with a 12-gauge shotgun spurred her resolve.

She braced her heels against the seabed's rubble for balance and felt for anything sharp. She found a short section of rebar with a jagged point.

Using her remaining strength, she jabbed the sharp end at his exposed crotch. His screams rose to a squeal as he used both hands to cover himself. When he pulled away, she thrust her hips up, throwing him off.

Bowers rolled up onto one knee and gasped when she broke the surface.

“Say your prayers,” said the tall man as he swung his arms wildly. Something fell from his wrist as he slipped on the algae-covered stones and tumbled to her right with a splash.

“Shit,” he howled, as he cupped his bleeding crotch with one hand and reached out with his other to grab her.

She snatched a softball-sized rock from the bottom and stood ready with it in one hand and the rebar in the other.

“Back off,” she ordered in a hoarse voice, “or I will end this.”

He lunged. Anticipating the attack, she drove her fist forward with all the force she could marshal. The rock protruding from her fist landed in the middle of the man’s face. That knocked him on his ass. Dazed and wincing in pain, he struggled to stand.

Bowers sucked in more air.

Blood poured from his nose. Pure rage blazed in his dark eyes as he dropped to his knees.

He waved her off with one hand, but then tried to grab her again. She went at him with both fists, bludgeoning him with the rock and stabbing him with the rebar until she’d pummeled every trace of fury from his face.

He lurched away and fell.

Bowers watched his faltering attempt to steady himself. Mission one had been to get him off her long enough to escape. Now the soldier in her wanted to finish it.

Her muscles quivering from fatigue and the pain and shock in his expression told her they were both spent.

Still on guard, every flicker of movement riveted her attention as she watched him grimacing. Her ragged breathing rumbled like jet engines in her ears. The churned water smelled of rotting sea grass.

The man rolled away and lumbered to his feet. Blood-tinted water dripped from his blue T-shirt. While pulling up his shorts, he stumbled a few steps, reminding her of a boxer on the ropes.

Beyond the swim platform, a narrow strip of beach lay between her and the hotel where a woman stood on the second-floor landing. When she pulled out her phone, Bowers crouched to conceal her naked hips below the surface.

The woman shouted at the attacker, “Hey asshole, I took your

picture and called the cops.” The man’s neck flushed, as he fumbled to stuff his joystick back into his pants.

At the sound of a barking dog, he did an about-face. A sleek white fishing boat glided into view in the cobalt waters of the channel.

The boat driver pointed at her attacker. “Hey, you!”

The golden retriever onboard danced in circles. His bark rose to a frenzied pitch.

Her attacker screamed, “Mind your own business, asshole.” He then sloshed his way toward a gray skiff nestled in the shadows of the dark-green mangroves where the roots dipped into the water like huge red straws. As bystanders gathered, a cluster of egrets screeched. Their white wings beat the air as they retreated to higher branches.

Under a clear blue sky, the white hull of the fishing boat gleamed in Key West’s early morning sun. The occupants appeared to be a dark-haired man with a short ponytail and his dog. As if attached by an invisible thread, their heads oscillated in unison between her and her assailant who hurried to make his getaway.

Four feet to her left, Bowers spotted her blue bikini bottom floating on the surface. She nabbed the suit and slipped it on while keeping a wary eye on her attacker. He hoisted himself onboard his skiff. After a few tries, the engine sputtered and he fled toward deeper waters.

As he headed west, her fingers let go of the rock and rebar. The rock hit the water with a *ker-plop*.

On shore, people from the hotel gathered on the beach only a few yards from a row of white lounge chairs where she’d left a towel and her bag. The scene had every element of a tropical postcard with the additional novelty of Key West’s free-roaming chickens.

The man in the boat called out in a stilted voice. “Hey, the driver of this here rig wants to know if you’re okay?”

Bowers paused to consider his odd speech pattern. She waved him off. “Yeah, I’ll be all right. Thanks.”

The air tasted sweet, but the adrenaline dump left her drained.

The ingested saltwater made her queasy. Like clashing cymbals, a cascade of relief and regret collided in her thoughts.

Part of her wished she'd crushed her attacker's skull with the rock or driven the rebar through a femoral artery.

Goosebumps rose on her arms as a breeze swept over her wet skin. This was her first time in Key West and a long way from Washington, D.C. and the killers she'd put in jail.

She couldn't help but wonder: Was this a chance encounter with a local rapist or someone she'd arrested who'd hired a hitman to send her a message?

The last faint whine from her attacker's outboard faded into the distance and was replaced by the chatter of the bystanders. Being the object of their gawking left her feeling starkly alone. Even the strange man in the fishing boat hadn't taken his eyes off her.

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HENRY EDGED HIS BOAT forward and hesitated like a cat circling a snake.

The woman in the bikini had walloped that boy pretty good. Mindful of the shallow depth, he eased in as close as he dared.

"Lady, you all right?" He grunted a few times and dropped the engines into reverse to back-up a bit.

"Yeah. Thanks." She nodded west. "You know that guy?"

He thought for a second as the *blub-blub* of his finely tuned engines burbled. "Don't rightly think he's familiar."

His eyes went wide when the woman stood and stared right at him. She was pretty, all right. Real tall. It fascinated him how her wet brown hair flowed so smoothly over her neck and the top of her shoulders. If it weren't for her staring at him, he'd still be checking her out.

He quickly glanced away. "No ma'am. Don't reckon the driver of this here boat knows him at all."

Henry thought about the skiff. "Buddy, I wonder if that fella had something to do with them missing girls?"

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## KILLER SMILE

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**T**HE SHOCK OF THE ASSAULT clung to Bowers, as the gentle aqua-green sea swirled around her hips. The water felt cool against her fingertips.

Her assailant's behavior haunted her. The way he had smiled when he tried to strangle her confirmed one grim reality: he took pleasure in causing pain. He'd fantasized about it and had done this before.

As a homicide detective, she knew people like him were the most dangerous of all.

She remembered the tear-drop tattoo he wore under his left eye. Such tattoos were worn to boast of killing and warn others that he wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

The assault had caused more than bruises. Her wounds stung. There wasn't anything she could do about being alone and injured but being vulnerable and unarmed was something she wouldn't tolerate for long.

At the weathered dock that extended from the beach into the water, she slogged up the aluminum swim ladder. Her legs felt heavy as she hurried past her swim fins lying in the sun.

Ignoring the pain and her waterlogged ears, she stepped down onto

dry sand and strode toward her lounge chair, trying to ignore the murmuring crowd.

Bowers glanced up at the lady on the second-floor landing, then took a seat. She pulled her navy-blue beach tote within easy reach.

To her left, bystanders continued to gather in the shade at the back of the hotel. Some appeared anxious, while three or four took to the beach as if oblivious to what had just happened. A little boy squealed with delight. His blond hair glinted in the sunlight as he ran for a beach ball before being scooped up by his concerned father.

Despite the welcomed warmth from the sun, the coldness of her skin seemed to penetrate her marrow. She scanned the secluded area surrounded by the mangroves where she'd been attacked. To her left a beautiful ribbon of beach stretched along the coast. The sight of sunbathers enjoying a normal day made the reality of nearly drowning hit home.

It seemed ironic that she'd come here to take a break from police work and the violence inflicted on the innocent.

She shivered. Goosebumps rose over her torso.

Down the beach, teenagers played in the surf. To the sound of their giggling and shouts, Bowers assessed the stinging scrapes and bruises on her forearms. She wrapped her arms around her sides where a fibrous scar splattered like dried paint over the ribs on her left side. She brushed sand off her hip where a fresh scar from a gunshot wound was still an angry red. Until recently, she'd hidden her scars and rarely spoke of them.

Her new bikini symbolized a shift. Maybe not full acceptance of the scars, but close enough. This morning's assault slapped that sideways. The aqua-blue bikini with the tiny palm tree on the hip no longer flew like a banner of victory over her past. Instead, it left her feeling cold and exposed.

Bowers wrapped the towel around her shoulders and pulled out her cellphone. The time read 8:25 a.m. Riggs—the person she trusted most—would understand, but she hesitated to call. He wouldn't take the news of her assault well.

She buried her head in her hands and her feet in the coarse sand.

Saltwater dripped from her hair and pooled around her toes, mingling with the bright-red blood from the cut on her foot.

She glanced up at the channel where the man in the skiff had disappeared. Bowers smirked. “You think you’ve escaped. You have no idea what is coming for you, asshole.”

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## ROUGH DAY

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FBI SPECIAL AGENT STEVEN B. RIGGS took a sip of his coffee and scrolled through his phone, wishing for some sleep, wishing Bowers would call, and wishing their informant would bring in a new lead. Anyone of those would do.

Riggs knew he would never forget their last case together and that moment when he'd taken a bullet for Bowers. He'd do it again in a heartbeat. Life without her wasn't nearly as interesting.

Riggs exhaled loudly. Perhaps when she returned to D.C., he could talk her into joining the FBI. They needed people like her.

He leaned back into the worn cushions of his desk chair, where yesterday had bled into today.

His phone buzzed. The caller ID read: Kory. His friend in the Secret Service rarely called this early. They typically met after work with other law enforcement types at a local landmark known as The Old Ebbitt Grill.

"Hey Kory, what's shaken?" asked Riggs.

Kory's tone had the raw sound of a guy who'd recently been in a jam. "Can you meet me later?" Riggs exhaled loudly.

"Sure," said Riggs. "Rough day?"

"Last night, Roadrunner went off-grid."

“Again?” asked Riggs.

The president’s headstrong daughter Lauren, a.k.a. Roadrunner, had developed a habit of ditching her security detail to hang out with her high school buddies. It wasn’t the first time her shenanigans had put Kory under the gun.

Riggs checked the time. “You find her?”

“Yeah, but Redwood wasn’t pleased.”

Riggs understood the codename for the president. “What do you need?”

“Cold beer. Chew the fat. Your place?” he asked with a sarcastic snicker. “And maybe a ride home or a place on your couch, if I get too fucked-up to drive.”

Riggs didn’t completely buy Kory’s story. He still sounded as if he had more on his mind than last night’s kid-recovery mission.

“No problem,” said Riggs. “Come over when you get off. It’s my turn to get the pizza.”

A few minutes later, Riggs flipped through a pile of reports on his desk until his phone buzzed with a call from Bowers.

The instant he heard her voice his relief did a nosedive. “What’s wrong?”

“Been through worse,” she said.

A prickle ran up his neck. “What happened?”

He heard only breathing.

“Talk to me,” he said, trying his damndest to avoid making it sound like an order.

“The drive down went okay. It’s been uneventful until I was assaulted.”

*Shit.* “When?”

“Ten minutes ago. On the beach.”

He pulled out a notepad. “You okay? What the hell happened?”

Horrible images careened through his mind along with a grim checklist: *How badly is she hurt? Who’s the scumbag who did this?* Most of all he wanted to know if she were still in danger.

“Riggs, he tried to rape me.”

His hand clenched into a fist around his Zebra pen. Everything in him hated asking, “Did he—”

“No. I played skewer-the-sausage with a broken piece of rebar. That shocked the hell out of him.”

Riggs bit his lip. At some point, they'd probably laugh about her vigorous response but not today.

It didn't surprise him that Bowers would be that resourceful. He'd witnessed her uncanny ability to fight back with startling force.

“I should've seen him coming.”

Riggs heard the exasperation in her voice. “Who is this bastard?”

“Don't know.” She sounded spent. Whenever Kate Bowers put aside her cop voice and allowed her softer side to show, it always caught his attention. “You sure you're not hurt?”

“I'm a little sore.”

His mouth went dry.

“And a little cut up, but I'm okay. You know me. I'll be all right.”

For the next few seconds he heard only a faint siren in the background.

“Riggs?”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you,” she said in that voice that turned his insides to mush.

He glanced at his car keys laying on the corner of his desk. He chose his words carefully, knowing anything that smacked of handling her wouldn't fly.

“Listen, why don't you come back?”

Silence.

“Or,” he said, “do you know anyone there you can stay with?”

She coughed. “An Army buddy used to live here, but I haven't talked to him since leaving Iraq.”

The sound of sirens grew louder.

“Listen, the cops have arrived. I've gotta go.”

“Wait.” He'd seen her like this before. “What's your plan?”

“Rent a jet ski and blow off some steam.”

He didn't buy it. The Bowers he knew wouldn't go sightseeing after an event like that. He knew exactly what she would do. “You're going after him. Aren't you?”

“What? You want pictures of the body?”

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## AMPED UP

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**E**VEN ARMED WITH A KNIFE, Bowers felt naked as the warbling sirens raced closer.

The two-story hotel with its sunny yellow color and cottage-like design seemed at odds with the horror she'd just experienced. The ads had touted its secluded beach and sparkling blue pool as a peaceful, private place to unwind.

A couple had joined the woman on the second-floor landing. Together they continued gawking.

*So much for privacy.*

Five bystanders had moved closer to the pale-green fence around the pool. An older fellow in a Key West ballcap approached her. "My name's Jeb. I saw what happened. I hope you're all right." He handed her a bottle of water. "Is there someone I can call for you, miss?"

"No, sir, but thank you."

The sirens were cut. Moments later, a patrol officer in a rumpled uniform marched toward her. He kicked sand at a reddish-brown hen who cackled and scampered away.

"Is this the incident they called about?" he asked Jeb without giving him a chance to answer. "Stand over there. Now."

Bowers frowned at the young cop. Jeb glanced at her with obvious concern and backed away.

She studied the young officer. His shoulders tensed. Beads of sweat dotted his hairline. The soldier in her mistrusted anyone in unpolished boots.

Maybe a rookie, trying too hard? *All swag and no experience. Lovely.*

Right behind him came another patrol officer, who strolled over the sand with purpose, all six-foot-five of him. With biceps the size of a man's thigh, he still managed to graciously step aside for a young mother with two small boys.

Once again, the edgy cop yelled at the older man. "I said, go over there!"

Bowers put both hands on her knees and rose slowly to her feet.

The cop's head snapped around to glare at her. "Did I give you permission to stand?"

She calmly folded her arms and stared back. When she reached for her bottle of water, the officer flipped out his baton and smacked the lounge chair's blue cushion, narrowly missing her fingers. She heard and felt the *thwack* and pulled her hand away.

*Pal, you missed the classes on de-escalation.*

"Hands up," he shouted, ready to strike again.

She straightened to her full height, knowing that at five-eleven she had at least three inches on this clown.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Bowers."

He gripped the baton so tightly his knuckles blanched.

"You always threaten victims?" she asked in a deliberately calm voice. "Sounds pretty back-ass-wards to me." Bowers held her arms out and her palms open, hoping he'd see the defensive wounds.

"I said, hands up and keep your mouth shut." He brought one leg back. Classic stance of a man ready for a fight.

*You need to dial it down, son.*

Bowers slowly raised her arms in compliance.

Bystanders murmured among themselves. The woman on the landing took pictures with her phone. *Great. That'll end up on social media.*

The twitchy cop held his baton ready.

“Vega. Take it easy,” said the other officer. “Ma’am, do you need medical assistance? You look pretty banged up.”

*At least one of them paid attention at the academy.*

“I’m just swell, officer,” she said. “Since arriving here twelve hours ago I’ve been attacked by a scumbag who tried to rape and drown me and then—as if that wasn’t bad enough—one of Key West’s finest shows up and threatens me with his baton. I’m surprised he didn’t pull out his 9mm Glock.” Bowers put her hands on her hips. “It’s shaping up to be a great vacation so far, don’t you think?”

The tall officer’s mouth dropped open as if to speak, but only a sigh escaped.

Still keeping Vega’s baton in her peripheral view, she confronted the short man with a direct, eye-to-eye challenge.

“Drop the towel,” he ordered.

“What do you think I’m going to do? Snap you to death?”

Vega glared at her. “You armed?”

His coarse black hair glistened in the sun. Even freshly shaven, he appeared to have a five-o’clock shadow.

Bowers dropped the towel from her shoulders onto the lounge chair. “There’s a pocketknife in my bag.”

“Do you have a gun?” he yelled.

She glanced down at her bikini and bit back a smirk. “Sure,” she said as she swiveled in a circle. “I’ve got a .308-suppressed sniper rifle in my bathing suit bottom and a couple of Uzis in my top.” She stopped and stared down at Vega who took a step back.

“For real, man?” she said. “I couldn’t hide a tampon in this suit.”

Vega’s smoldering expression darkened. Yet, something about him appeared desperate. Maybe even lost.

*Time for a different strategy.*

“Look, officer, I’m no threat to you. All I want is to cover up so pictures of me aren’t all-over social media. Besides, I’m injured and cold. May I please have my towel?”

The tall cop with tightly cropped, blond hair, barked at his partner. “Put the baton away.”

*Now we know who’s in charge.*

“Ma’am, I’m Officer Brian Cooper,” he said while eyeing her closely. “Everyone calls me Coop.”

He handed her the towel. The man’s confidence implied time on the job. “Your name, again?” he asked.

“Kate Bowers. Everyone calls me Bowers.”

He watched her wrap the towel around her torso. “Tell me what happened.”

“Sure,” she said, reaching for the bottle of water. She stopped when Robocop twitched.

Coop stepped between them and handed her the water.

Bowers washed the taste of salt and blood out of her mouth and gulped down a few swallows.

“Thanks,” she said. “I came out this morning to enjoy the sunrise and try out my new mask and snorkel.”

Coop’s eyes scanned her lounge chair and a small table where she’d left her sunglasses and a half-empty cup of coffee. He nodded to her bag on the sand.

“That’s mine.” Before he even asked, she said, “The knife is in the outer pocket and my Glock and Non-Resident Firearm License is in my room.”

He set her bag out of reach and pulled a small notepad from his pocket. “Where’s your gear?”

“Fins are on the dock. I lost my mask and snorkel in the scuffle.” She gestured toward the water.

“Where did this happened?” asked Coop. He followed her along the shore. Vega remained behind, haphazardly hanging yellow tape between the palm trees.

She showed Coop the swim ladder. “I went in here.” While he took photos of the streaks of smeared blood from her cut heel, she continued to explain what had happened.

“As I watched a baby barracuda, I heard splashing. When I felt a hand grab my ankle, I flipped onto my back and the fight was on.”

She pointed at the dense mangroves. “His skiff was tied up over there.”

Eighty feet away, boats big and small traveled the channel.

“You didn’t hear him coming?” asked Coop.

“Officer,” said Bowers, “if I had looked up every time I heard a boat, my mask would never have gotten wet.”

Coop scanned the dock. “Why are your fins dry?”

“Too shallow to use them,” she said, “I didn’t want to stir up the bottom. Makes it impossible to see anything.”

Coop continued taking notes. “You’re a guest at this hotel?”

“Yes sir,” she said. “My room is on the second floor.”

A moment later, he appeared to be studying her.

Coop toyed with his pen. “How do you know the man who attacked you?”

“I don’t.” She rewrapped the towel around her hips and tucked a corner snugly into place.

Coop glanced over the edge of his notebook at her bare belly and went back to taking notes.

“What did he look like?” asked Coop as he kept a respectable distance.

Bowers gave him a full description. “He also had a tear drop tattoo below his left eye.”

Coop frowned as if the description bothered him.

Twenty-five feet from them, the hen herded her chicks well away from Vega as he wandered along the shoreline.

Before returning to his notes, Coop glanced at his partner. “No offense,” said Coop, “but most of the women I know would be pretty emotional after an experience like that. You sound unusually calm.”

Using a corner of the towel, she carefully brushed sand off the cuts on her arm. “Anyone who says they don’t feel fear is either lying or a psychopath. But then you know that, don’t you, officer?”

A flicker of a smile crossed his lips and his intense blue eyes homed in on her. “You know weapons and you have a few battle scars, one of which is recent. I don’t run across that every day.”

“I used to hunt down assholes for a living.”

He glanced away and smirked. “Come on. Seriously?”

It wasn’t the first time a guy had underestimated her. “I was a homicide detective,” she said. “The job comes with risks.”

“Where?”

“Metro PD in Washington, D.C. Army before that.”

“What was your MOS?”

“31 Bravo.”

“Military Police?” Coop’s brows went up. “Wow.”

Behind him, Vega squinted at the water.

Coop still seemed hung up on her job skills. “Why didn’t you tell us you were a cop?”

“Wyatt Earp over there didn’t exactly give me an opportunity.”

Jeb, the older gentleman with the ballcap, marched toward them. “Officer.”

“Can I help you, sir?” asked Coop.

Jeb cleared his throat and puffed up his narrow chest. The man pointed at Vega with a pale hand. “That young fella over there is your partner?”

Coop’s head cocked slightly. “Yes, sir.”

“Well,” said Jeb. “I apologize for havin’ to tell ya this, but your partner’s a dick.” The old man nodded as if to punctuate his point. “Thought you should know.”

“Sir,” said Coop, “I’m sorry to hear that. Can you tell me—”

Without another word, Jeb marched away with his head held high. Coop went back to his notepad.

Bowers chuckled. “The assailant wore a stainless-steel bracelet, but it wasn’t on his wrist when he left.”

Coop stopped writing. Like the tattoo, the bracelet also seemed to bother him.

“Coop. Get over here,” shouted Vega. “I got something.”

Bowers followed Coop to where Vega pointed at the water.

“Check this out,” he said with a smart-assed grin.

Bowers studied the lapping waves. Three feet from the beach, winks of sunlight sparkled on the surface. During a lull in the wave action, she saw what he’d found.

There among the rocks lay the remains of a partially skeletonized human hand.



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## MARTA SPROUT

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That I write thrillers is no surprise for those who know me. When not writing, I love skiing big mountains, scuba diving, and snorkeling with 40' whale sharks.

I teach at the police academy and have done training scenarios with SWAT. In addition to the pursuit of an accurate and credible story, the bond I have with law enforcement, military, and firefighters comes from a deep respect for those who put themselves in harm's way to protect total strangers. For me, being an advocate for others came as a result of one incident that rocked my world. As a teen, I drove to Hollywood long before sunrise. After becoming hopelessly lost, I parked near a driveway in a gated community to read a map. Arriving home later that night, I spotted that driveway on the news. It was Sharon Tate's home. I'd been there just before the bodies were discovered. Today, writing thrillers gives us all a safe way to unravel why some are violent, to honor victims and bravery, and to wonder what you or I would do in the shoes of a hero.

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