

Excerpt from *The New Bowers Thriller Series*

Kill Notice

MARTA
SPROUT



FORGED IN FIRE

*If one face in a crowd were that of a killer, you'd look into his eyes and a switch deep inside would click as he drew near.
Call it gut instinct or intuition. It would warn you.
Or would it?*

IT BEGINS...

DEVIN WALKER KNEW what he'd seen would stick in his mind for a long while to come. Like something dark and oppressive. Foreign and disturbing. No doubt about it. Something bad was coming.

On that day, he'd been well paid for a West Virginia high school boy. His mission had been to stack hay in a rancher's barn and to remove the accumulated leaves from the basement's window wells around the man's house. By the time Devin finished bagging the debris, the sun hung low on the horizon and the air had grown chilly. Dusk cast a pall of gray over the dry grass and dormant bushes.

Through one of the newly washed basement windows, a flicker of orange caught his eye.

He lay flat on his belly and peered inside where a dark-haired boy about ten years of age sat on the bare concrete floor, nearly naked. The kid's knees were drawn up to his chin and his arms were wrapped tightly around his long, spindly legs.

A furnace, with its access door hanging wide open, stood a few feet away from the boy and almost directly below the corner window.

Dressed only in a pair of ragged, stained briefs, the kid stared at the dancing orange flames as if daydreaming.

He shifted on the hard floor. His spine tracked down his narrow back like a string of mountain ridges between prominent ribs that looked more like a skeleton than the torso of a living, breathing child.

Devin swallowed hard at the sight of the dark purple bruises covering the child's body and his boyish face.

No little kid should look like that.

Wishing that the dim, bare bulb hanging from the ceiling were brighter, Devin cocked his head and tried to get a better view.

In profile, the face Devin saw appeared soft and smooth the way children are at that age.

As if the boy's mind were miles away, his small mouth pulled into a tight slit and his big eyes remained locked on the fire.

Devin felt for the kid as a meager patch of warm light from the furnace washed over the boy's body. Sadly, the cheery glow of the flames seemed the only cozy spot in the entire dreary basement.

As if mesmerized, the boy sat very still.

Heavy footsteps clomping across the main floor broke the silence. The door to the basement banged open with a loud *smack*.

The kid blinked. His shoulders tensed.

"I know you're down there." The big rancher's voice boomed down the stairs loud enough for Devin to hear.

The boy's eyes continued to focus on the rectangle of roaring orange flames. Both hands reached up as if to embrace the heat emanating from the access door.

"I know what you did, goddammit," the big man yelled. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. The damned dog is better house-

broke than you. There ain't no call for someone your age to be wettin' his bed. Ya hear me? There's something wrong with you, boy."

Devin couldn't see the rancher, but he knew his voice and could hear the sound of his steel-toed boots kicking at something solid like a doorframe.

"Son-of-a-bitch. I'm gonna hang your piss-soaked skivvies on a post at the bus stop for everyone to see."

As the man stomped away, the boy searched the floor, picked up a pocketknife, and poked at something next to him.

When Devin shifted to get a better angle, he saw a flashlight and a modest pile of what appeared to be small toys. They were hard to make out in the shadows.

The boy's elbow methodically moved back and forth as if he were sawing on something.

Curious as to what the kid was doing, Devin pulled himself closer until his nose nearly touched the glass.

The boy held up the head of an action figure. He inspected it closely in the shimmering light and twisted the head onto the end of a stick. Like a marshmallow on a skewer, he carefully poked the head into the crackling fire. As it burned, he sat on his feet and rotated the stick and watched the plastic melt away.

Clomping footsteps returned to the basement door. "Boy! Git your worthless ass up here. Pronto. You ain't goin' to bed until those damned sheets are clean."

By now, the plastic head was no more than smoke.

The boy pulled the smoldering stick out of the furnace and dropped it on top of other charred twigs scattered over the floor. He used pliers to close the access door.

The rancher grunted. "Don't make me come down there. You know what I'll do."

The kid repositioned his flashlight.

"Ya got two minutes to get your ass up here."

The beam of light fell upon his pile of toys.

Devin couldn't help but stare. One at a time, the boy jabbed the tip of the knife into the dismembered parts of action figures and dropped

each into a bright red lunchbox decorated with colorful cartoon characters.

“Ya got one more minute.” The big man cleared his throat. “You’re just like your good-for-nothin’ mama. Glad she’s gone. Yes I am. She shoulda taken you with her.”

The boy methodically tucked something else, something nasty and gnarled, into the lunchbox.

Devin twisted his shoulders and craned his neck trying to see. His chest tightened.

The yellow circle of light from the flashlight fell upon knots of brown fur, tiny legs that were stiff and curled, and small heads covered in something crusted and reddish brown.

He felt the bump in his pulse the moment his brain made the connection. The boy’s toys were the mutilated bodies of dead rodents. Their condition made it hard to identify the species, but Devin figured they were probably field mice.

Or what was left of them.

The hair went up on his neck. A queasy feeling swirled in his stomach. His eyes opened wider.

Like watching a train wreck, it was both terrifying and spellbinding.

Devin’s breath had steamed up the window. With the cuff of his flannel shirt, he wiped the moisture away in time to watch the kid pick up his last toy. A kind of glee lit up every corner of the kid’s face. His eyes sparkled in the ambient light.

By one ear, the boy dangled before his eyes the severed head of a cat.

MESSAGE MURDER

THREE HUNDRED MILES away and twenty-five years later, it was early morning and still dark outside when the knock came.

In that one second, D.C. homicide detective Kate Bowers knew her entire world had shifted.

She stopped in the middle of a set of pushups and listened. With sweat dripping from her face, she quietly stood and rubbed the goosebumps on her arms.

No doubt. The worst kind of evil had found her.

She tried to calm her breathing. No longer could she deny that a psychopath had her in his sights.

She also knew someone else had died.

Bowers held her .40-caliber Glock 22 with both hands. In bare feet, she silently rushed around the stacks of U-Haul boxes in her new apartment. Armed with a full magazine, she braced her back against the wall next to the front door and strained to hear any sounds outside. She heard nothing.

Bowers swallowed hard and eased open the door.

Cautiously, she scanned the walkway before leaving cover. Creeping outside, she stood in the shadows a few feet from her door. The

concrete felt cool and hard under her toes and balls of her feet. Her head jerked as something moved.

A white cat scampered away. Other than that, nothing stirred. Not a person. Not a blade of grass.

As she turned to face her front door, she knew what she would find. There at her exact eye level hung one small button taped to her door.

Soon she'd get another call about another body.

BATTLEFIELD

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THAT BUTTON hammered through Bowers' mind as she watched a fellow detective taking notes. A CSI tech methodically documented and collected the button taped to her front door.

After they had left, she hit the shower and began dressing for work, which was no easy task. Most of her clothes, or at least the clean ones, were still in boxes.

She put down the box cutter. *Why does the thing you need always have to be in the last place you look?*

Moments later as she secured her belt and badge, Bowers glanced at the pile of mail next to her laptop. Knowing it contained bills, she felt a twinge of guilt, but there was no time to deal with that. She pulled her brown hair into a ponytail and left the mail untouched.

Until recently, she'd been working hard and enjoying a few days off here and there until a killer had decided to step up his game by leaving buttons on her door. Now it seemed that her days were exclusively filled with work.

She had moved to a new apartment with the intention of disappearing from this madman's sights. Instead, the unfamiliar spaces had left her disorganized and feeling more vulnerable than before.

In the kitchen, the fridge was nearly empty, except for bottled water, a beer, one mummified lime, and a cup of yogurt. She ate the yogurt. After eating MRE's for almost an entire deployment, she wasn't picky, except about her coffee.

She left to find a Starbucks.

While locking the front door, she glanced at the black fingerprint powder smudged all over the surface. *That'll impress my new neighbors.*

She jiggled the doorknob to make sure it was locked. Work demanded that she stay focused, but today she felt scattered as if she'd walked into a room and forgotten why she'd come there.

Maybe an extra shot of espresso in her morning coffee would help. *Then again, maybe not.*

Bowers stepped onto the walkway and saw two big brown eyes peering at her from under a red cowboy hat. The neighbor's eight-year-old hid behind the trunk of a sapling, seemingly unaware that the tree wasn't big enough to cover him.

"Pee-kew. Pee-kew," he said with his hands pointing at her in the shape of an imaginary pistol. "Bam. Bam. Hold it right there."

Bowers enjoyed the kid's stern expression, which seemed an amusing contrast to his Toy Story hat, camo pajamas, and Superman slippers.

"Morning Trevor," she said. "Come here a second." As Bowers knelt, the boy wandered over, still without smiling.

"Summer Fi," he said with conviction.

Bowers was puzzled until she remembered the boy's dad was a marine.

"You mean Semper Fi?"

"Yeah," he said with a slight frown.

"You know what that means?" she asked.

"Sure. It means I'm a tough guy."

Bowers bit back a smile.

Her vest had flopped open and the boy's eyes were locked on her badge.

"I want to have a badge and be cool like you someday."

Bowers wasn't sure she wanted anyone to be like her.

“Let me show you something.” She turned the boy around by the shoulders so that she could kneel behind him.

“Aim,” she said.

He did.

Bowers put her arms around him and covered his small hands with hers as if teaching someone to shoot. The kid smelled of bubble gum and peanut butter.

“Brace your wrists,” she said, “and keep your elbows up.” She leveled his imaginary finger-gun at the tree, quickly shifted her aim to a bush, and finally pointed at the grass. The boy’s stance showed he took this as serious business.

“Always aim at the ground or a tin can,” she said. “Never at a person or a car or a building. Okay?”

He twisted to look at her. “But... If you don’t shoot ‘em, how da ya catch the bad guys?”

“Mostly,” she said, “you use your training.” She pointed to his head. “Ya gotta use what’s up here, be smart.”

The boy smiled just as his mom darted out of the apartment nextdoor to Bowers’ unit.

“Trevor, get back in here!” the mother shouted. “What are you doing?”

Bowers stood. “He’s just playing.” She gave him a high-five.

“He’s a real handful,” the mother said.

The boy ran off pointing at the flowerbeds and sprinkler heads. “Pee-kew. Pee-kew.”

The mother held a baby girl on her hip. “You’re good with kids.” The woman’s blonde hair rode high on her head in a messy bun.

Bowers laughed. “I grew up with younger brothers.”

“I’ve seen you with that gorgeous man in the FBI jacket. You’d make a cute couple. Just saying.”

Bowers’ brows raised.

“I’m sorry,” said the neighbor. “We’ve just met and already I’m playing matchmaker.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Bowers checked the time. “I need to get to work.” Before leaving, she waved to Trevor, who was busy assaulting dandelions.

ANXIOUS TO GET BACK to investigating her latest case, Bowers impatiently stood in line at Starbucks. The button on her door had thrown her off schedule, and she still had one last stop to make before going to the station.

The dense aroma of deeply roasted coffee filled the air. In front of her a trim woman wore a backless shirt that revealed a sports bra, tanned back, and athletic muscles. She leaned into the man next to her, who rested his hand on the bare skin at her waist. Everything about them seemed as relaxed as a hammock strung between two palm trees.

Despite pretending to be patient, Bowers felt anything but at ease. She mulled over the knock on her door, the button, and this morning's conversation with her neighbor. The FBI agent her neighbor had alluded to was Steven B. Riggs, Bowers' ex-lover and best friend. Last year, she'd backed away from their relationship even though they'd been good together. That had never been the problem.

She picked up her drinks and headed to her car. Her phone rang seconds after she'd started the engine. The call came from the nursing home where her uncle lived.

A woman with a soft voice spoke, "He says you're late."

"He's right," said Bowers. "I'm on the way."

"Just so you know, he's developed a cough and is grumpy."

Bowers chuckled. "He's always grumpy."

She ended the call and merged into traffic. Despite her stab at humor, watching him grow old and frail tugged at the things she feared most.

Uncle Marvin had always been her anchor, the strong one who'd listened even when she didn't know what to say. It had been his distinguished career in the Army that had inspired her to join. Neither of her divorced parents had come to her boot camp graduation, but Marvin had shown up in full-dress uniform. He'd also been there when she'd left the Army and needed to sit on his porch and reset. Never saying anything that hadn't needed to be said.

Now she wanted to be there for him.

Up ahead the nursing home came into view. She pulled into a

parking slot and eased out of the car. The three-story building's fresh coat of white paint and bright red geraniums in neatly mulched flowerbeds were a stark contrast to what she knew would be inside.

This was the last stop for those who'd lost their independence. Her stomach knotted. Inside the front door, she balanced the two cups of coffee and took the familiar trek up the elevator to the third floor.

Bowers marched down a hallway that smelled of industrial disinfectant. Long accustomed to military-issue, no-frills accommodations, she never expected a veterans' facility to be any different. But even to her, the polished floors and occasional potted plant did little to bolster any pretense that an institution could feel like home.

Uncle Marvin had never married. After retirement, a stroke had left him with few options. He'd accepted his fate and the nursing home like the consummate soldier he was, saying he didn't want to be a burden. In her mind that took more guts than being on the battlefield.

The clunking of her boot heels echoed in the corridor. Three feet away, his door stood open a crack. She stopped outside.

The unit across the hall appeared newly vacated. Even the plaque that had once displayed the name of Marvin's friend had been removed. All traces of his neighbor had been scrubbed away.

"Shit," Bowers murmured to herself.

Marvin's voice boomed through his door. "I can hear you," he said. "Might as well get on in here and say hello."

When she stepped inside her uncle's room, the big man's green eyes brightened and one bushy brow went up. She set the coffees on a side table within his reach. After giving him a hug, she took a seat next to his wheelchair.

"They feeding you okay?" she asked.

Marvin snorted. "The C-Rats they gave us in Nam were better and that ain't saying much."

Bowers remembered the military's ready-to-eat meals she knew as MREs and Marvin's generation knew as C-Rations.

"Maybe this will help." She slipped a roll of his favorite peppermint Lifesavers into his plaid shirt pocket.

One corner of his mouth curled into a slight grin. "Mightily obliged. Missy." He patted her arm.

He coughed, covering his mouth with the back of his right hand. The left one lay limp in his lap.

They both sat in silence, squinting at the bright sunlight pouring in the window while watching outside at a hawk hovering in an updraft.

She gripped his hand. "I'm sorry about your friend."

"Me too." His barreled chest heaved as he cleared his throat. "You never told me why you moved."

She took a sip of her coffee. "I didn't come here to talk about me."

"Might as well. Things around here are about as exciting as a dissertation on floor wax." He squeezed her arm and let go. His broad hand, which had once crushed beer cans as if they were made of paper, now wore a Band-Aid and age spots.

"Do you remember," she asked, "when we used to sit on your porch?"

"Sure do. I also remember the day you turned ten and went after that bully up the street, who'd been picking on your little brothers. I hauled you home, still swinging."

Bowers laughed and then let her voice fade.

"You okay, Missy?"

"Things are complicated," she said. She couldn't tell him about the button on her door and wasn't sure that she'd put her thoughts together well enough to talk about Riggs.

Marvin waited and listened like he always did.

Bowers watched him. "I understand how to nab a perp or how to 'find the hill, take the hill.' It's everything else that I suck at. I can't cook to save my butt." Bowers stretched the tight muscles in her neck. "The Army was easier."

"You got that right." He peered down at his puffy left hand. "We didn't have time to think about what tomorrow would bring."

She glanced at his still hand. It killed her that there was nothing she could do to protect him from the damage the stroke had done. Helplessness was worse than being shot at.

"So why'd you move?" he asked.

"I needed to be closer to work."

"Bullshit." He grunted and scrubbed his one useful hand across his

grizzled cheeks. "I know of only a few things that would make you turn tail and run. Which one was it?"

She shrugged.

"It's better to face an enemy," he said, "than get shot in the ass while running away."

"My job has risks."

He twisted and stared at her. "As if that's ever stopped you."

She reached for her coffee and hesitated. "I think I've screwed up something important."

"You mean Riggs?"

She nodded. "Each day is filled with uncertainty." She rubbed her palms together. "He hunts down fugitives."

"So do you. Ever wonder how he feels about that?"

"But what if something happens to him and he—"

"Doesn't come back? Now we're gettin' down to pay dirt." A lock of white hair fell to the middle of his forehead. "He or anyone else you care about could be gone today, tomorrow, or maybe three years from now. And you can't stomach that."

He dipped his head as if affirming his suspicions were correct.

Bowers bit at a hangnail. Talking with Marvin was a bit like standing in front of a mirror, naked.

"Have you told this man that you love him?"

Bowers didn't know what to say to that.

"Don't you think he deserves the truth? Let me tell you something, Missy. What if he is gone tomorrow? That would mean you'd missed the opportunity to share whatever time you did have with him. Once he checks out, it's too late."

She cocked her head and glanced at him. "You never married."

"And it was a damn foolish mistake I sorely regret."

Bowers sucked in a deep breath. "Pain in the ass." She felt the weight of his hand on her shoulder. "I came here to cheer you up. Instead, you gave me a swift kick in the pants."

"You're welcome." His one-sided smile returned. "Now, do you have any sugar for that coffee?"

DARK STREETS

AFTER SUNSET the streets of downtown Washington D.C. had become a little cooler. Bowers caught the 9:00 p.m. Metro line toward McPherson Square and held onto a metal handrail inside the train as it rumbled down the tracks.

A few feet from her stood a man in a familiar camouflage uniform. His boots were tightly laced. His hair recently cut.

“You’re Army,” she said to the soldier who carried his folded cap neatly tucked under his belt.

“Yes, ma’am, military police,” he said. “You?”

“I used to be Army. Now I’m a cop.”

“You’ve got that vibe,” he said with a knowing grin.

As the train rocked back and forth, she put a hand in her vest pocket and felt the corner of her phone, which held images of the button left on her door.

So much had happened today that she had little time to reflect on this morning’s conversation with Uncle Marvin. Bowers withdrew her hand from her pocket and reviewed her new case. Three days ago, she’d received another button. Hours later a corpse had been reported. When she’d arrived on scene, the smell of burnt flesh had told her this would be a bad one. She’d been right. The victim had been torched.

Bowers stared blankly at the reflection of the soldier in the dark windows of their fluorescent-lit cocoon as it sped down the Metro tracks.

Today the M.E. had reported finding burns and smoke in the victim's lungs, which meant the man had been breathing when he'd been forced into the trashcan and doused in lighter fluid, seconds before a match brought his life to a writhing end. His charred face hung in her memory.

"Long day?" asked the M.P.

Bowers nodded. "That's an understatement. There's nothing like working homicide in a September heat wave."

"Roger that," said the soldier, who stood as if he were about to face an inspection.

She had once been like him. All squared away.

The train pulled to a stop.

A minute later, she exited the bright Metro station with the need for a cold beer and a few hours of down time before heading home for some sleep.

Up ahead, lively music and the smell of burgers from a local eatery's patio had drawn a crowd of customers. She listened to the beat of drums, clatter of forks, and rumble of conversations. At 15th Street NW, she headed toward The Old Ebbitt Grill to meet Riggs.

Six minutes later, she saw his car sitting triumphantly in a parking spot in front of Ebbitt's entrance. "Lucky bastard." She dug her hands into her vest pockets and quietly chuckled to herself.

Once again, he'd demonstrated his uncanny ability to find parking, which was no small feat in D.C. He was probably waiting at the bar, ready to rub it in.

Blowing off steam with law enforcement personnel, who hung out at the legendary tavern, had become a ritual. Having the best crab cakes in town didn't hurt either.

The din of horns and traffic echoed off the stone buildings. The people around her hurried up and down the tree-lined street with their eyes locked on their phones. They appeared oblivious to the shabby-looking character in a black T-shirt who scanned the crowd as if sizing up those walking by.

When she neared the White House Gift Shop, Bowers heard gasps of alarm. She glanced over her left shoulder and caught sight of the man in the black T-shirt as he raced toward a lone woman with a large purse. Bowers pushed the middle-aged lady out of the way before he could snatch her purse and felt his long arm grab her waist from behind. His other arm came over her shoulder, brandishing a knife in front of her face.

“Hey babe, why you in my business?” asked the man with his mouth next to her ear. His breath left a putrid, boozy odor in the air.

Out of sheer habit, Bowers sized him up as about her height. Six feet. Give or take an inch. Young, but not a teenager. Wiry. Black and desperate.

The sharpened steel glinting inches in front of her face sent a surge of adrenaline through her system.

The woman who’d nearly lost her purse stared at Bowers and ran. A couple of startled tourists clutched their smart phones and selfie sticks and backed away.

Bowers slipped a hand under her vest and flipped off the safety on her hip holster. People were still driving by and coming out of shops. Her pulse pounded in her ears. Even the retreating crowd was within firing range, which meant this was a lousy place to discharge her service pistol.

The Old Ebbitt Grill stood on the opposite corner. At this hour at least a half dozen law enforcement types or more would be inside. They might as well have been in North Dakota for all the good it did.

Keeping an eye on the knife, as if it were the head of a snake, Bowers balanced her weight. Fear was there, but combat mindset had taken hold. “I’ll do you a favor,” she said. “You get one warning. *Back off.* Go home. Now.”

“Pretty lady, you’s gonna do me a favor, all right. See, dis be my dick —” He waved the knife around. “—and I be using it, if you don’t do what I say.”

He took a whiff of her hair. “You be something fine. How ’bout we go have us some fun?”

“I’d rather have nail fungus.”

“Guh,” he said. “Why you hafta say sum-thin’ like dat?”

Up ahead she saw Riggs stick his dark-blond head out of Ebbitt's front door. A few seconds later, he stood on the sidewalk, insistently waving to someone inside.

Her attacker pressed himself against her and flipped the stiletto knife horizontal. She calculated the distance between the thin, sharp blade and her throat.

He was right-handed, which meant the left arm around her torso was his weaker side. Bowers wiped her palms on her pants and took a long steady breath.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

In the time it took for a cabbie to zip past, she locked onto his right wrist with both hands and slammed the back of her head into his nose. She ducked under his arm and drove his hand left until the blade nicked his chest.

"What the—" screamed her attacker, who'd been thrown off balance. "Shit, man."

She continued twisting his arm. The pain must have been fierce as the pressure threatened to dislocate his shoulder. He dropped the knife and crumpled to his knees.

She pulled his arm behind his back. Using her weight as leverage, Bowers forced him to the pavement, face-first. She pinned him to the ground with her knee squarely between his shoulder blades. His boney spine and ribs cradled her shin as she slapped the knife away, well beyond his reach.

He nearly bucked her off until she pulled out her Glock and pressed the muzzle against his temple. "Let me introduce you to *my* dick. Mine against yours any day, hotshot."

Sweat trickled down her back. She glanced around to make sure this guy didn't have a buddy. To her back, she heard Riggs yelling.

Running feet pounded the sidewalk. Three familiar faces surrounded her with their weapons drawn on the perpetrator.

"Get this crazy bitch off me, man."

Riggs knelt down, secured the knife, and eyed her attacker. "What do we have here?"

The perp stared up at the three men as if he couldn't believe his own eyes. "Who the hell be you?"

Riggs chuckled. “The woman who just handed you your ass is a homicide detective.” He cocked his head. “Boy, did you pick the wrong person to mess with.”

“No shit.”

Her attacker tried to push himself up, but Bowers leaned forward, deliberately putting more weight between his shoulder blades.

She gave him enough room to breathe, but made it nearly impossible for him to move. “Choose carefully,” she said. “I don’t give second warnings.”

The suspect hesitated.

Riggs stowed his weapon. “To answer your question, I’m special agent Steven Riggs. FBI.” He nodded to the tall, black man next to him. “My colleague is also FBI. And that fellow—” Riggs pointed to a Hispanic man with big shoulders. “He’s her boss.”

“Damn,” said the perp as he pressed his forehead against the pavement.

Bowers holstered her pistol, cuffed the subject, and pulled him to his feet. The man wobbled slightly. He still stank, but at least he wasn’t resisting.

She studied his dark eyes and the beads of sweat dotting his upper lip. “Here’s how this works,” she said while watching him closely. “You assault me, and I will take your ass down. Show respect, and I’ll treat you with respect. Your call.”

“Ain’t no cop gonna show me respect.”

“Try me,” Bowers said while her sergeant patted down the subject.

The man moaned as his phone and wallet were removed from his pockets. “Hey. I gotta call my bro. How is I gonna do dat?”

Bowers pulled out her phone. “What’s his number?”

The man frowned and gave her the information.

She tapped it in and held the phone to his face.

“Leon, dis is Reggie. I been busted. What? I jumped dis woman ’n’ she turned out to be a cop. Shit man, I know.”

Bowers almost felt sorry for the guy. She hadn’t expected Reggie to be dumb enough to confess in front of two cops and two FBI agents and give away the number of an associate. She glanced at her boss and

the other two men, who were holding back smiles and trying not to laugh.

When the call was over, Bowers handed her phone to her boss and took her assailant by the arm.

“Reggie,” she said. “What the hell were you thinking?” She pointed at the Treasury Building across the street. “Do you have any clue where we are? The White House is within spitting distance. There are more cops per square foot right here than any other place on the planet, and *this* is where you decide to jump somebody? Seriously?”

Reggie grunted. “Papa G gots it all tied-up on the Southeast side. Where else am I supposed-ta go?”

“You might try honest work,” she said.

Reggie shrugged his boney shoulders.

She grabbed his jaw and held up her flashlight. A quick sobriety test showed that this guy’s dilated eyes were jumping all over the place. Reggie was clearly hammered. That explained a few things.

Bowers groaned. “Reggie, you just cost me a hard-earned night off and tons of extra paperwork.” She wanted to sit down and not have to think about anything for a couple of hours. That was now out of the question.

Her boss, Sergeant Charles Mitchell, caught Reggie when he stumbled backward. “I’ve got this one. Maybe a night in the bullpen will help him reconsider his ways. I’ll take him in.”

“Mitch, are you sure?” asked Bowers.

As two units with strobes and wailing sirens pulled up, Mitch, who’d been unusually helpful, flashed her his trademark smile and handed her phone back.

“Gotta keep our arrest record up,” he said. “Go enjoy your night off. Have your report on my desk tomorrow.”

She nodded toward Reggie. “After he sleeps it off, get this man some food and a toothbrush.”

SPECIAL AGENT Steven B. Riggs sat at the end of Old Ebbitt Grill’s mahogany bar and listened to the cheers and heckling over Bowers’

takedown. She pretty much ignored it. A beefy guy with a red mustache sidled up next to her. "Bowers, you are my kind of woman." The man waved to the bartender. "Get this lady a drink on me."

Riggs could see Bowers' discomfort with the praise. She hesitated and then accepted the beer. "Thanks, Fred, but the perp was drunk on his ass. My seventy-year-old uncle could've taken him down."

She shrugged off the hooyahs. To others she might seem invincible, but Riggs could see her hands had a residual tremor from the adrenaline. He hadn't realized he was staring until she'd finished off most of her beer and turned toward him.

He blinked and glanced up at one of Teddy Roosevelt's hunting trophies hanging overhead.

As much as he loved this place and the bartenders who knew him on sight, he had no doubt that it was Bowers who kept him coming back. It was neutral ground, where they could relax away from work. He raised his bottle of Heineken, took a long draw, and let the icy bite wash down his gullet.

After the assault, he'd returned to the bar with Bowers. She'd conceded victory over his parking prowess and congratulated him with a hug. Her face had brushed against his five o'clock shadow and left him with a thirst no beer could quench.

He popped out of his thoughts and glanced up to find her gazing into empty space. She flashed him a smile, but he knew she had something on her mind by the way the dimple at the corner of her mouth puckered while she toyed with her nearly empty bottle of Modelo Negra.

"Your sarge cut you some slack back there," he said, trying to get her to talk. "Maybe he likes you."

"No. He likes taking credit." Bowers bit at a hangnail. "Don't get me wrong, I greatly appreciate not having to do a booking tonight."

Riggs took another sip of his beer. "But?"

"Mitch can't help poking his nose into all of our cases. The guy is a pain in the ass."

Riggs signaled the bartender, who brought her another beer. "Maybe he is just particular about things getting done right."

"Maybe." She tapped her bottle to his. "Next time, I'm buying."

He watched her tuck a long strand of brown hair behind one ear and secure it with a bobby pin. Her shirt was scuffed with street grime. Riggs found himself hung up at her fitted trousers. Even for Bowers, the tie-dyed fabric and provocative cut were over the edge.

He pointed to her pants. "I see your taste in clothing hasn't changed. I thought CID detectives wanted their investigators to blend in."

"Most of my clothes are still in boxes. Besides, who's going to suspect I'm a cop in these?" She slapped her thigh. Her athletic legs extended from the edge of the stool all the way to the floor.

He glanced up to see her hazel eyes focused on him.

"This is nice," she said, bumping her knee into his thigh. "So is the beer."

Riggs grunted and rocked in his seat. So many things about Bowers worried him. For one, there was her time in the Army that she wasn't inclined to talk about. For another, he'd been sorely disappointed when she'd ended things between them. He'd had his share of women, including an ex-wife, but Bowers had been the first one who'd ever walked away from him.

He swallowed another sip of beer along with his ego.

She seemed tired. He knew Bowers had moved into a new apartment north of Rock Creek Park and closer to the Metro PD on Georgia.

"How's your new place?" he asked while studying her face. Something had changed.

She shrugged. "It's fine."

"Then what's eating at you?"

She tapped on her phone and put it on the bar in front of him. "He's back."

The screen showed a close-up image of a fancy gold button embedded with tiny rhinestones.

Riggs sat up straight. "When did you get this?"

"This morning." She showed him another picture. "As you can see, changing my address didn't help. He found me anyway."

"But you've only been there four days." Riggs zoomed in and studied the pictures. "This asshole is stalking you."

MARTA SPROUT

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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For information contact: info@deepbluepublishing.com

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