

chapter one

Winter rode into Richmond on the chattering breath of the Atlantic. Each year the season blew itself into existence. The ancient elms crystallized and frost crunched the birches into lace doilies. On this particular December morning, with a bright sun overhead, I drove out New Market Road past fields that glistened like crushed diamonds. For this moment, my hometown looked cryogenically frozen, preserved for future generations to discover Richmond's wide river, verdant soils, and the plantation lifestyle forged through generations—gone tragically, humanly awry.

But the reverie was shattered by two elephants. Carved from white granite, they stood on either side of a black asphalt driveway with a steel sign naming the property: Rapland.

The scene of the crime.

I turned down the asphalt driveway. It was a long drive, rolling over fenced fields where satiny horses were grazing, their breath quick clouds that evaporated in the sun. At the other end, an old plantation house faced the James River. The historic clapboards were painted polo white, the copper cupola green from exposure. But pink stucco additions rose starkly on either side, modern additions with plate-glass windows that stared down on the historic middle and made it look priggish and stuffy, like a dusty repository for outdated books.

A muscular man stepped from the guardhouse as my car

came around the driveway's final curve. His thighs were wide and carried him in a twisting, muscle-bound stride. In his right hand he held an assault rifle.

I stopped my car behind the gray Bentley parked in the driveway and reached under my blazer, placing my right hand on my Glock. With my left, I opened the car door six inches, preparing to use it as a shield if necessary. The man stood beside my car. He wore mirrored aviator sunglasses. In the reflection, I saw myself, my old white car, and the new pink additions to the house.

"Agent Raleigh Harmon with the FBI," I said. "We got a call this morning."

"I need to see the ID."

My right hand remained on the Glock. I lifted my credentials with my left. He stared at the picture with the Bureau's blue-and-gold insignia and then flicked his chin, indicating I could put them away.

"What're you carrying?" he asked.

"Pardon?"

"It's a .45, isn't it?"

I gave him my official smile—the smile of an armed public servant. "The phone call we received this morning sounded urgent," I said.

"We can get to that after we play show-and-tell." He popped gum between his white teeth, a brisk scent of spearmint filling the air. "If you're not carrying a .45, then it's a nine."

"Nine millimeter?"

"Yeah."

"Wrong. It's a forty. The game's officially over. Who's in charge around here?"

He strode back to the guardhouse, slid open the pocket door, and picked up the telephone. "The Feds are here," he said into the receiver. "And the G-man? It's a girl."

The historic part of the house smelled pungent, like clove cigarettes smoked after a spicy meal, and another guard greeted me at the front door. He wore combat fatigues and a three-carat diamond stud in each ear. When he extended his hand, it was three times the size of mine. I saw a .45 in his hip holster.

“I’m Sid,” he said. “You want to talk to RPM? He’s upstairs. Top of the steps, turn right, walk down the hall.”

I counted twenty-two steps, the exotic wood shining like polished onyx. At the top of the stairs, I turned right and crossed a landing decorated with framed records—seven gold, eight platinum. At the end of the landing, the last door was open.

The famous rap musician and producer known as RPM was sitting in a green leather chair, a cello balanced between his long legs. Eyes closed, he bowed the strings, caressing a slow largo that sounded grieving and nocturnal. His fingers pressed the board as if staunching a deep wound. For his sake, and mine, I did not want to break the music. I stood in the doorway, listening until the piece descended to its final note, the lowest G on the scale.

When he opened his eyes, he looked startled.

“Pardon me,” I said. “I didn’t want to interrupt. Raleigh Harmon, FBI.”

“You’re the FBI agent?” His voice had a quiet tone, in a deep register.

I nodded. “‘Sarabande’?” I gave him my card.

“Yes. Bach’s my favorite,” he said. He pivoted the cello on its spike, resting it on the chair. Sharp creases in his slacks extended his lean physique, making him appear even taller than the six-foot-three I was guessing.

“Did my guards give you a difficult time downstairs?” he asked.

“Only the one outside.” I smiled.

“My apologies. They’re on high alert after what happened last night.”

“After what happened last night,” I said, “no apologies are necessary.”

He nodded. “Would you like to see where they burned the cross?”



The cross had burned the back lawn like a branded emblem. The main beam seared twelve feet, four inches. The intersecting beam scorched almost five feet of grass.

Releasing my aluminum tape measure, then letting it rattle closed, I wrote the numbers in my notebook and took several photographs. RPM stood to the side, quietly watching as I snapped on latex gloves, kneeled, and pinched the soil. It smelled of soot and scorched minerals, like a doused campfire. But I pinched another sample and waved it back and forth under my nose, detecting something else. It smelled bitter and acidic.

Hate didn’t have a smell, I told myself. But maybe I was wrong.

“I suppose this is one way of telling me to get out of the neighborhood,” he said.

I glanced over my shoulder. He wore sunglasses now but I could see his long eyelashes, the almond shape of his dark eyes, the face seen on countless magazine covers. I found it difficult to look at him and not remember he was among the fifty most beautiful people.

“What time did this happen?” I asked.

“The sheriff wrote down that information last night,” he said.

“Our investigation will run separate from the sheriff’s. I need to get the information from you directly.”

He drew a deep breath, nodding. “Yes, I understand.”

But he didn’t respond further, and I knew fresh wounds

required time. Kneeling again to my work, I reached into a black nylon satchel and removed a sterilized paint can. I wiped down my pocketknife with an alcohol swab and popped the paint can's lid. With a sterilized garden trowel, I dug into the scorched cross and deposited a large section inside the can, pressing the round top in place, hammering it shut with the trowel's handle, making sure all the volatile compounds were sealed inside.

When I turned to look at the famous man again, the rising sun had drawn a bright aureole around his head. It was as if nature was saluting his celebrity. But like most famous people, he let fame perform his introductions. A Southern girl, I wondered how to address him. He was known in the music industry as RPM, but that sounded odd, particularly for the elegant gentleman standing before me. I preferred formal titles—Mr., Miss, and Mrs.

But seriously: Mr. RPM?

Deciding to avoid the issue, I took out my notebook.

"I was playing music in the house." He stared down at the river that rolled like a long shiver to the Chesapeake Bay. "There was a sudden flash of light in the window. I thought perhaps it was lightning. But it grew brighter and brighter. I walked over and saw flames shooting from the ground." He paused. "And I saw that the fire was in the shape of a cross."

"Did you see anything else?"

"Such as people?" He shook his head. "I called 911 and ran outside. My bodyguard and I threw buckets of water from the kitchen—"

"Just the two of you?"

"Yes. I have children in the house. I didn't want to scare them."

"And your bodyguard . . ."

"Sid. You met him on the way in."

Right. The man at the front door. I wrote his name in my notebook. "Sid's last name is?"

"Dog."

"Pardon?"

He smiled apologetically. "The spelling is even worse. D-a-w-g. Seeing Eye Dawg, otherwise known as Sid."

"Okay."

His smile grew. The teeth were so straight and white, they were spellbinding. "Welcome to the world of rap music, Miss Harmon. Linguistically speaking, it won't make much sense. You'll have to bear with us. It is 'Miss,' isn't it?"

"Yes. Was Sid nearby when you saw the flames? Is that how he heard you calling?"

"Excellent question. The sheriff didn't ask about that. I feel better already. My house is equipped with an intercom system. I don't like to raise my voice, ever. Sid was in the theater, watching a movie with his lady friend. With no windows in the theater, he couldn't see the fire. I reached him by intercom."

"How many people were here last night?"

"Sid and Cujo, the other guard you met outside."

I let Cujo's name go. For now.

"There's a cook and a maid," he continued, "who are like family. And the rest are my actual family. My wife, some of her extended relatives, and our children." He smiled again. "I grew up an only child. I'm enjoying the full house I missed back then."

"And none of them saw the fire?"

"Correct. The fire began right after 11 p.m. The women and children were in bed, so was the help. When the fire truck finally arrived, the sirens drew everyone out of bed. But by then Sid and I had put out the fire. We told the children there was some misunderstanding; the women took them back to bed. I would tell you to talk to them, but you'll need a translator."

I looked up from my notes. “What do they speak?”

“African,” he said. “More specifically, a tribal dialect from Liberia.”

I flipped through my notebook. “When you called the FBI this morning, you said the sheriff’s department was . . .”

“Lackadaisical,” he said. “This is a cross burning. Somebody trespassed onto my property and set fire to a cross. You see how close it was to my house. It could have burned the place down—which might be the whole point of this hateful exercise. I complained to the sheriff, but he acted as if this was a friendly barbecue. For all I know he’s covering up for these history fanatics.”

Since “history fanatic” described most of Richmond, I asked, “Could you be more specific?”

“That historic preservation committee, those people living along the river. They’ve complained about my remodel for years. My home improvements undermine the plantation’s authentic history, they say. Perhaps they decided to just burn us down.”

I made more notes following his statement and said, “If you don’t mind, for the official paperwork, I’ll need your legal name.”

“Robert Paul Masters. When I started in the music business thirty years ago, I decided to use my initials: RPM. Marvelous stage name. Albums were called RPMs. For revolutions per minute?”

“I grew up with CDs.”

“Ancient history.” He sighed. “How long?”

“Pardon?”

“How long until we find out who did this?”

“Hate crimes are a priority with the FBI,” I said, sounding like the official investigator. “The evidence will get fast-tracked by the lab.”

He smiled. “Miss Harmon, please. You do not have to spare my feelings. How long? I can handle the truth.”

8 | the clouds roll away

The truth? Cross burnings were nocturnal acts of bitterness, popping up in rural areas where physical distance separated neighbors and allegiances snaked back generations, particularly in the South. Figuring out who burned this cross would be like unraveling a Gordian knot glued down with hate.

But it seemed cruel to tell him, no matter how politely he insisted. The weight of last night was still on him.

So I gave him another truth, one I could be sure of.

“I will stay on this case until we know who’s behind it,” I said.
“You have my word.”

chapter two

I headed west from Rapland and just before Battlefield Park, turned down an oyster-shell drive. The fractured calciferous layers glowed like broken pearls and led to a plantation dating back to a 1662 land grant from King Charles II. The plantation prospered until its slaves were freed, until carpetbaggers and federal soldiers carried away everything that wasn't nailed down. When the Depression hit, snakes slithered through the rotting pine floors and the French wallpaper hung like discarded bandages from the walls. It took a Yankee to save the place. James Flynn drove south from New Jersey in 1948, bearing a self-made fortune in the commodities of necessity—sugar, corn, bootleg—and the curse of so many Irishmen, falling for underdogs. Flynn spent years restoring the grand house and eventually Belle Grove returned to the small coterie of historic plantations along the James River.

His granddaughter ran the place these days, and when I walked around to the back of the main house, Flynn Wellington was in the glass conservatory, scooping soil into gilded pots. The air was moist and tasted of trapped chlorophyll. To either side, wooden pallets displayed poinsettias with burgundy leaves lush as crushed velvet.

“Why, Raleigh, how nice to see you.” Flynn lifted both hands, her cotton gloves smothered with black soil. “I’d give you

a hug but you'd be picking dirt off your clothes the rest of the day.”

Flynn and I had been classmates at St. Catherine's School and were acquainted through her mother's penultimate husband. There were five husbands in all. Number four was an attorney my father liked—there weren't many—and on sweltering August afternoons, we would drive out to Belle Grove so the adults could sit on the wraparound porch drinking iced beverages while Flynn and I swam in the river.

“I heard y'all moved to Oregon,” she said.

“Washington. It was only temporary.”

“I can't imagine leaving Virginia.” She picked up the spade, folding the soil again. Her blonde hair bounced with the motion. “How is your mother?”

She pronounced it the Old Dominion way, *muh-thah*.

“Fine, thanks. Yours?”

“She moved to Florida with what's-his-name. What can I do for you, Raleigh?”

“Last night somebody burned a cross at Rapland.”

“Please. ‘Rapland’ sounds like a theme park. You know very well the name of that plantation is Laurel.”

Yes, I knew. I knew all kinds of things. By junior high I could recite long passages of internecine gossip about families who traced their heritage to the House of Burgesses, but I only had one foot in that world. David Harmon married my mother when I was five years old. To this day, I couldn't trace my paternal heritage back one generation to my birth father. Not that I needed to: David Harmon was every girl's dream dad.

“The gentleman who owns Rapland thinks you're trying to run him off his property. Is that true?”

“Are you implying something?”

“I'm not implying, Flynn. I'm asking flat out.”

“He’s ruining that place,” she said. “I don’t want him there. I’ve never said otherwise. I’ve been saying it since he moved in four years ago.”

The fine bones in her neck looked as brittle as glass rods. The pretty girl I once knew was lost to hard work. Several years ago, to keep up with expenses, Flynn and her husband had turned Belle Grove into a bed-and-breakfast.

“Flynn, there were people in the house. Children. The flames were burning ten feet from the door.”

She dropped the gardening tool, wiping the back of her wrist across her forehead. “It’s been awhile since you’ve been out this way, Raleigh, so let me explain it to you. My guests pay good money to stay here. They want a romantic retreat. They expect a visit with the historic past. We were doing fine until that rapper took over Laurel. Ever since, it’s been rap music blaring down-river, party boats up and down the water. How do you think that’s affected my business? Is this something I can call the FBI about?”

“That fire could have burned the place down.”

“Good.”

“Excuse me?”

“Good,” she repeated. “Then maybe he’ll leave and somebody could rebuild Laurel. Somebody who will treat that beautiful property with the dignity it deserves.”

I leveled my gaze. “Flynn, I want you to answer truthfully. Did you have anything to do with burning that cross?”

She picked up the tool, waving it. “Look around. Do you see what I’m doing? I don’t have time to terrorize anybody. I’m working. But we’re old friends, so let me be very clear: when that guy goes back to Hollywood, or New York, or wherever he came from, I’m throwing the biggest party Richmond has seen since Antietam.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“Oh, you’re invited.”

“I’ll pass.”

Her blue eyes flashed with indignation. “Here you come to Belle Grove and insinuate—”

“Flynn?”

We both turned.

At the back of the conservatory, where fanned banana palms brushed the peaked glass roof, the stalks parted to reveal a man walking toward us from the door to the house. He looked familiar in some distant way, somebody I’d met but couldn’t place again.

“Oh, Stuart.” Flynn pulled off her gloves. “Time got away from me. I’ve got everything ready. It’s all in the parlor room.”

He wore tan chinos and a blue cashmere V-neck, his face more hard than rugged and capped by blond hair shaved to the scalp. He turned to me.

“This is Stuart Morgan,” said Flynn with perfunctory politeness. “Stuart, Raleigh Harmon. Raleigh was just leaving.”

I shook his hand. He gave an automatic sort of smile.

“Raleigh was just leaving,” Flynn repeated.

Just for that, I took out my card and held it out to her. After staring at it for a long moment, she accepted it with a noble sort of weariness. I walked down the aisle, feeling their silence behind me, and stepped outside. A man wearing an I ♥ NY sweatshirt and jeans sat in a rocking chair on the front porch. He smoked a cigarette and flicked ash on the floor.

I drove down the oyster-shell road. A column of walnut trees reached for the blue sky like ancient black hands. It was mesmerizing land and I sympathized with Flynn’s devotion to it. But as I pulled onto Williamsburg Road, heading back to town, I wondered about the past’s magnetic hold. Flynn clung to her history like someone afraid of perishing, someone drowning who succeeds only in taking the saving grace down with her.

But most of all I wondered about her statement and the question it left hanging in the conservatory's moist air.

She did not have time to terrorize an unwelcome neighbor, she said.

And if she did . . . ?