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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NASH FALLS

A THRILLER

POLICE LINE
DO NOT CROSS

POLICE LINE
DO NOT CROSS

POLICE LINE
DO NOT CROSS

**DAVID
BALDACCI**

Nash Falls

MACMILLAN

To the memory of Art Collin, you will always remain in our hearts

CONTENTS

- [CHAPTER 1](#)
- [CHAPTER 2](#)
- [CHAPTER 3](#)
- [CHAPTER 4](#)
- [CHAPTER 5](#)
- [CHAPTER 6](#)
- [CHAPTER 7](#)
- [CHAPTER 8](#)
- [CHAPTER 9](#)
- [CHAPTER 10](#)
- [CHAPTER 11](#)
- [CHAPTER 12](#)
- [CHAPTER 13](#)
- [CHAPTER 14](#)
- [CHAPTER 15](#)
- [CHAPTER 16](#)
- [CHAPTER 17](#)
- [CHAPTER 18](#)
- [CHAPTER 19](#)
- [CHAPTER 20](#)
- [CHAPTER 21](#)
- [CHAPTER 22](#)
- [CHAPTER 23](#)
- [CHAPTER 24](#)
- [CHAPTER 25](#)
- [CHAPTER 26](#)
- [CHAPTER 27](#)
- [CHAPTER 28](#)
- [CHAPTER 29](#)
- [CHAPTER 30](#)

[CHAPTER 31](#)
[CHAPTER 32](#)
[CHAPTER 33](#)
[CHAPTER 34](#)
[CHAPTER 35](#)
[CHAPTER 36](#)
[CHAPTER 37](#)
[CHAPTER 38](#)
[CHAPTER 39](#)
[CHAPTER 40](#)
[CHAPTER 41](#)
[CHAPTER 42](#)
[CHAPTER 43](#)
[CHAPTER 44](#)
[CHAPTER 45](#)
[CHAPTER 46](#)
[CHAPTER 47](#)
[CHAPTER 48](#)
[CHAPTER 49](#)
[CHAPTER 50](#)
[CHAPTER 51](#)
[CHAPTER 52](#)
[CHAPTER 53](#)
[CHAPTER 54](#)
[CHAPTER 55](#)
[CHAPTER 56](#)
[CHAPTER 57](#)
[CHAPTER 58](#)
[CHAPTER 59](#)
[CHAPTER 60](#)
[CHAPTER 61](#)
[CHAPTER 62](#)
[CHAPTER 63](#)
[CHAPTER 64](#)
[CHAPTER 65](#)
[CHAPTER 66](#)

[CHAPTER 67](#)
[CHAPTER 68](#)
[CHAPTER 69](#)
[CHAPTER 70](#)
[CHAPTER 71](#)
[CHAPTER 72](#)
[CHAPTER 73](#)
[CHAPTER 74](#)
[CHAPTER 75](#)
[CHAPTER 76](#)
[CHAPTER 77](#)
[CHAPTER 78](#)
[CHAPTER 79](#)
[CHAPTER 80](#)
[CHAPTER 81](#)
[CHAPTER 82](#)
[CHAPTER 83](#)
[CHAPTER 84](#)
[CHAPTER 85](#)

CHAPTER

I

WALTER NASH DID NOT WANT to attend the funeral. Who wanted to bury their father, even if the two were not close? Yet when he had been a little boy the pair had experienced many wonderful times together, the stuff of Hallmark movies and greeting cards.

Then, as the years crept by, Nash had the misfortune of becoming someone that his tough-as-nails, take-no-prisoners Vietnam veteran father had been unable to respect, or apparently even like. After that, his father, Tiberius—universally referred to as Ty—had led his life and Nash his, and the two never saw one another for the most part, although they resided in the same town: his father in an ordinary cluster of old homes, Nash behind a security gate that kept out all others, including probably those who lived in the ordinary cluster of old homes.

Nash worked on his tie while he appraised himself in the mirror. Forty years old, a stitch over six feet three and lanky, but too thin with a bony, undeveloped chest and lackluster shoulders, and stick arms and legs; he'd never focused on muscling up. Unless you were an athlete, soldier, cop, or bouncer, what was the point? His brown hair was still thick and wavy, although graying slightly at the temples.

He and his wife, Judith, and their nineteen-year-old daughter, Maggie, lived in a sprawling nine-thousand-square-foot, two-story, stone-and-stucco house with a finely appointed finished lower level, and a total of five bedrooms and seven bathrooms for just the trio of them. There was also a three-car sideload garage, with his big

burgundy Range Rover, Judith's silver Mercedes-Benz S-Class sedan, and Maggie's forest-green BMW convertible occupying the bays. The property was completed by a large, landscaped backyard anchored by an in-ground pool with iridescent tiles.

Maggie had been a college pregnancy, compelling Walter and Judith to hasten down to the local courthouse to say their wedding vows with a judge they did not know, and in the absence of both their families. A true honeymoon had never followed. They'd purchased a condo instead. It made far more sense, Nash had decided. For him honeymoons were simply very expensive photo album fillers. He had later sold the condo and paid off both their college loans with the profits.

Nash was a senior executive VP at Sybaritic Investments. He had risen to that title after years of hundred-hour weeks and brief or no vacations, and living at thirty-five thousand feet as he went from one state or country to the next, crunching numbers, analyzing business opportunities, negotiating terms, and putting together complicated deals that required legions of lawyers and mounds of paper, and a cool hand while under enormous pressure.

All of his hard work and sacrifice had paid off. He now earned a seven-figure salary plus substantial bonuses.

Although he adored them both, Nash was not overly close to his wife or daughter; it was simply not in his nature to be particularly intimate with anyone. They did not seem put off by his aloofness. Indeed, his wife and daughter welcomed him on those occasions when he did join in.

The truth was he had never made friends easily. An introvert, he was proficient and talented with numbers and moving money from here to there, and assembling business prospects together in ways that were visionary and value enhancing. He could articulate all sorts of substantive and meaningful things having to do with such tasks, and also be a motivating and fair leader with his team. However, in truth, he preferred to be alone.

He had had one friend, though, one that he missed terribly to this day. He was a labradoodle named Charly. They'd gotten him from a breeder when Maggie was four. A year ago, as age and illness had

robbed the senior dog of any quality of life, they'd had to put Charly down. Nash had become so disoriented and breathless during the procedure that he had thought he was having either a panic attack or a heart attack.

Did that make me pathetic? Shedding tears for a dog when I didn't come close to that level of grief for my father's passing? Yes, it probably did.

Yet, in Nash's defense, Charly had demanded nothing of his owner other than the ability, time, and space to adore him. And Nash's father? Well, the man had done pretty much the opposite of that, much to his only child's continued bewilderment.

Nash did take pride in providing his small family with a prosperous living. Judith had gone to college to study to become a teacher. However, with the pregnancy they had decided that she would stay home with Maggie. But now that their daughter was grown, Judith had talked about getting her teaching certificate and maybe starting out as a substitute teacher before seeing if she wanted to go full-time. Whether it was teaching or something else, Nash supported her a hundred percent.

A lovely, tall, and athletic woman, she kept fit and healthy, optimistic and energetic. She liked to garden, and was an excellent cook. She had been an attentive and hands-on mother to Maggie, volunteering liberally at school, being a member of the PTA, and also being steadily active in neighborhood functions, all while Nash was in London, Singapore, or Doha negotiating and closing yet another deal.

He knew he couldn't have done what he did without her support. Nash had always considered theirs a true partnership. Judith had also been a game participant in all the corporate functions and other duties expected of spouses whose significant others were climbing what could be a very slippery business ladder.

A weekly cleaning crew looked after the house, and they had people to maintain the pool and yard. Judith also went on fun trips each year with her girlfriends. He and Judith occasionally went away on their own, or with Maggie, and when they did, it was always quite pleasant. Their sex life was right where it should be, he thought, for

people of their age with two decades of marriage and a child behind them.

He had sensibly started Maggie's college fund on the very day she had been born, but his daughter had decided to take a gap year after graduating from high school. She had been accepted at a handful of quality universities. However, Maggie had recently informed her parents that she wasn't even certain that she wanted to go the college route.

She had started to make noises about becoming an *influencer* and a *creator* on social media and using some of her college funds to do that. Nash knew that she spent a lot of time in her room on her computer, like most people her age. She also had a sophisticated digital camera and an expensive Yeti microphone along with some editing equipment. He could hear noises coming from her room at odd hours.

He did not mind helping his daughter realize her dreams. She was full of positive spirit, and was also tall, like both her parents, and lovely, having taken after her mother in that regard. However, the parade of boyfriends that had come through their home during her high school years! They had run the gamut from cocky jocks to awkward nerds, and even some well-past-college men whom Maggie had met in ways she had never fully explained. Nash had sent the older gents away using his executive voice to let them see the potential liability of dating someone so much younger than themselves.

So if this influencer thing was partly a popularity contest, then Maggie might have a shot. But he also didn't want to support her to such an extent that she ended up incapable of supporting herself. Relying on others was not a good idea.

Before their falling out his father had once told him: "You rise or fall on your own, sonny boy. Then you have no one to blame or thank except yourself."

This made Nash think of the titular head of his company, its CEO, Everett Temple, who was five years younger than Nash. His lofty position was due entirely to his father, Barton Temple, who had

founded Sybaritic and many other companies over the decades. Everett was worth at least \$200 million, again solely due to daddy.

And Everett, who insisted on being called Rhett, thought himself the very smartest person in the room, because to see himself as anything less would be akin to confessing that his “success” had nothing to do with him. At least that’s what Nash conjectured, and he doubted he was wrong. Because very often Nash *was* the smartest person in the room, even if he never intimated that he was.

I surround myself with people just as smart or even smarter than me. That way, they collectively make me look brilliant.

But who knew what tomorrow would bring?

C H A P T E R

2

AS NASH FINISHED GETTING READY, he thought about his mother and the breast cancer that had taken her five years before. And long before Nash had been born, Agent Orange in Vietnam had gotten its miserable clutches into his father, filling the man with carcinogens that had, for decades, wreaked havoc on his once powerful body.

His father's first wife had killed herself for reasons that had never been explained to Nash. He had married Nash's mother when he'd been thirty-seven and they'd had Nash a year later. As an Army brat Nash didn't have to move around much, because by the time he had come along his father was navigating the downhill portion of his enlisted ride to a full military pension. They had come here when Nash had turned three, and he had been here ever since, except for when Nash had left to attend college.

When Nash was a child, he and his father had spent a great deal of time together, doing things that fathers and sons normally did. Years in Little League baseball where, due to his clumsiness brought on by growing too much too fast, Nash played outfield and his father called out advice nonstop, or else screamed at the coaches, the ump, and other parents, sometimes throwing fists as well as insults. They had gone canoeing a few times and camped out once, but not for long as poison sumac waylaid Nash and nearly sent him to the hospital. By the time he was thirteen his father had taught him how to shoot like a pro and handle firearms exceptionally well. Nash, though, had absolutely refused to go hunting with his father. He could never see himself killing another living thing.

They also attended sporting events together where his father sucked down beers and Nash a soda. His father was the sort of fan who shouted and gesticulated no matter how well or poorly his team was performing. During these times Nash ate a hot dog and cheesy fries, and thought of other things. For the most part those times had been good; his father had been a fun, willing participant in the important moments of a little boy's life.

As a child Nash had attended his father's military retirement ceremony. He had experienced great pride during the ceremony as he watched his father in his full military regalia, his chest brimming with hard-earned ribbons and medals, being celebrated by other brave, tough, and strong men.

He'd also seen, when they would go to the beach on vacation, the permanent wounds grafted onto his father from his combat days. He had felt proud of his dad and sorry for him at the same time, that he'd had to go through that and suffer so.

These blissful times had ended when Nash had opted to play tennis instead of the manly sport of high school football. It had been for a simple reason: While already over six feet at age fourteen, Nash was very thin and underdeveloped, and he didn't want to get his head knocked off. Playing a sport that could damage your brain for the rest of your life, for no compensation in return, had never struck him as a productive or intelligent use of his time.

His father, who Nash knew had been a football legend back in Mississippi, had completely changed toward his son after Nash had made his decision not to pursue football. There were no more fun times. No more father-son outings. There was only a wall between the two that Nash had never really understood because he couldn't believe something so frivolous as choosing one sport over another could have such drastic and inane consequences.

Then high school was done, college had begun, and then Nash had married, become a dad at a young age, graduated with high honors with a degree in business, and begun forging his identity as a husband, father, and businessman extraordinaire.

His widowed father, who had lived only eight miles away, in the same little vinyl-sided house in a hardscrabble neighborhood where

Nash had grown up, had not spoken to his son right up until the day he had died. He hadn't even allowed Nash to come to hospice to say his goodbyes. He had never even told his son he had been taken to hospice. In fact, Nash had only heard of his father's death from the man's elderly neighbor.

So today was here and goodbyes would be made, and then what exactly?

His black dress shoes polished, his hair combed, and his slender jaw set as firm as he could manage, he walked out the door to join his family. Then they would drive off to pay final respects to a man who, for decades, had not respected his son in the least.

He was actually looking forward to tomorrow coming as quickly as possible. Then it would just be another day at the office where he could be reasonably sure of what to expect, for Nash was a man who, for the most part, loathed surprises.

And another day of his predictable life left on earth would be checked off to be followed by another day that was pretty much a facsimile of its predecessor.

Or so Walter Nash thought.