

BILL CLINTON — AND — JAMES PATTERSON

AMERICA HAS
A POWERFUL
NEW
PRESIDENT

... AND HER
HUSBAND'S
ON TRIAL FOR
MURDER



THE FIRST
GENTLEMAN

THE FIRST GENTLEMAN

A Thriller

BILL
CLINTON
— AND —
JAMES
PATTERSON



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY



ALFRED A. KNOPF

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

PROLOGUE

PRESIDENT WRIGHT ADMINISTRATION

YEAR THREE: SEPTEMBER

1



Brentwood, New Hampshire

Cole Wright is sitting in the rear seat of a black up-armored Chevy Suburban, one of three in a convoy speeding its way down Route 125 in the Seacoast Region of New Hampshire.

Two dark green state police cruisers, lights flashing, are leading this no-frills motorcade, scaled down for the occasion. The presidential limousine—the Beast—is back at the airport, along with the Secret Service counterassault team, support personnel, news media vans, and a fully equipped ambulance.

Three years after the election, Cole still gets pumped from seeing traffic part like magic, even though he's well aware that it's for the convenience and safety of the woman sitting beside him—his wife, Madeline Parson Wright, the president of the United States.

He's just the First Gentleman.

A light drizzle spatters against the bulletproof windows. The agent accelerates to seventy along the two-lane highway.

"Two minutes out," says Burton Pearce, the president's chief of staff. Pearce perches in a rear-facing jump seat across from the First Couple. He's pale and serious, wearing one of his many identical gray suits. "The Gray Ghost," staffers call him. The president nods without looking up.

Cole glances over to see the CONFIDENTIAL stamps on the pages Maddy is reading as the convoy hums along. He knows those pages represent the biggest political gamble of her administration—of *any*

administration. She should be in the Oval Office working the phones and twisting arms, but instead she's here with him. A powerful personal show of support.

Maddy puts her briefing packet aside. Cole takes her hand and squeezes it.

She squeezes back. "Don't worry," she says. "After all we've been through together, we can get through this too."

The Suburban slows down to make a hard turn behind the police escort. Now the convoy is moving at just forty miles per hour. On both sides of the route, locals hold up crude hand-painted placards.

WE BELIEVE IN YOU, COLE!

STAY STRONG, COLE!

KEEP MOVING, COLE!

He looks out through the tinted side window. Almost game time. He can feel his muscles twitching, his focus narrowing, just like in his days as a tight end for New England—before the blown knee forced him out. He remembers how the tension in the Patriots locker room would build and build almost to the breaking point until the team ran out into the light, and when the cheers of the crowd washed over him, he'd think, *Yeah, we're okay. We've got this.*

But today?

Today he's not so sure.

The redbrick facade of the Rockingham County courthouse comes into view. The road is lined with police barricades holding back hundreds—maybe *thousands*—of onlookers. Up here, some of the signs have a different tone.

SCUM!

MONSTER!

JUSTICE FOR SUZANNE!

"Don't worry about these people," says Maddy. "They don't know what they're talking about."

"I don't care about the people on the road," says Cole. "I'm worried about the twelve people waiting for me inside."

As the Suburban slows to a crawl, two women jump out in front and unspool a long banner.

CONVICT COLE WRIGHT! SEND HIM STRAIGHT TO HELL!

Thanks for the kind wishes, Cole thinks.

2



A thousand demonstrators, media people, and curious locals are crowded into the rain-slick parking lot. The convoy is passing through the tall evergreens flanking the pavement leading up to the courthouse when I realize I left my umbrella in my car. Too late.

Rockingham County has never drawn security like this. Uniforms representing every law enforcement department in New Hampshire—from local cops to Fish and Game—are patrolling the courthouse steps. On the roof there's a detail of men and women in tactical gear and black baseball caps carrying sniper rifles. They're not even trying to hide. That's the job of their colleagues, posted in places nobody can see.

I hear someone calling my name: "Brea Cooke? That you?"

I look at the crowd. Mostly white. No surprise; the Granite State is around 89 percent Caucasian. It's a situation I got used to as a Black student at Dartmouth, about two hours north. Let's just say it's not unusual for me to stand out around here.

I turn around. "Ron Reynolds!"

Ron is a friendly face from the old days when he and my partner, Garrett Wilson, both reported for the *Boston Globe*. He's wearing his standard outfit—tan overcoat, khaki pants, and a tweed cap. His big press pass is dangling around his neck.

I give him a quick hug. "Guess we both forgot our umbrellas."

A guy in a thick camo jacket jostles by us and flicks a finger at Ron's press pass. "Fake news!" the guy shouts. Ron ignores him.

"So why are you here?" I ask. "You could be in one of those gyms right now, dry and toasty. Probably getting a better view than this."

"I get paid to get wet," says Ron. "Even if nothing happens."

But something is happening. I've been waiting for this day a long time. I see flashing lights coming up the drive. Two state police cars and three big black SUVs.

"It's them!"

The lights are getting closer. I'm in the middle of the crowd, but suddenly I feel as alone as I've ever felt in my life.

I close my eyes for a second. My mind whispers, *Garrett*.

I blink hard. Not now! I need to focus. Capture this scene for my book. *Our* book. The one Garrett and I were working on together. Until he...

Ron points to the courthouse steps. "See the podium and the camera stands up there?"

I nod. "What about them?"

"All for show. No way the Secret Service allows the president and First Gent to go through the front entrance."

"The crowd won't appreciate being tricked like that."

"You're right," says Ron. "They came to witness history."

So did I.

The first time in history that a president's spouse is going on trial for murder.

3



The convoy crawls toward the entrance as cops push the crowds back. Inside the six-ton Suburban in the middle, Cole rubs his hands together nervously. Pearce leans forward in his jump seat and says, "The county sheriffs, state troopers, and Secret Service have carved out a path so we can go around to the rear of the courthouse. By the time the crowd and the press catch on, we'll be inside and out of sight."

Hidden away, Cole thinks. "No," he says quietly. "That's not going to happen."

Pearce blinks. "Excuse me?"

"I said no. Going in through the rear of the courthouse signals that I'm guilty, that I have something to hide. Screw that. I'm going to run the ball straight through the line of scrimmage."

The Suburban moves toward the driveway turnoff. Pearce is getting testy. "Cole, plans have been in place for days. Best to arrive via the rear from both a safety and PR viewpoint."

But Cole is firm. "We go through the front door. That's final." He turns to his wife. "Maddy, will you say a few words on the courthouse steps?"

It's a big ask. Maddy doesn't need to tell him the source of the tension in her eyes. The conflict between being his loving partner while serving as POTUS, leader of the free world, is etched on her face.

Maddy looks at her chief of staff. "Cole is right, Burton. We go through the front entrance, heads held high."

"But, ma'am, we're just about there. Arrangements have been

made.”

Cole sees Maddy shift into commander-in-chief mode. Cool. Crisp. Decisive. “You’ve got a phone,” she says. “Make new arrangements.”