



## A REASON FOR DYING

### Chapter 1

Washington D.C.

November 28, 2001

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*There are over one hundred-eighty species of chameleons in the animal kingdom. They survive by camouflage; approaching by stealth to destroy their prey, then melt into their surroundings before becoming prey themselves. There are chameleons in the world of humans as well. Using the same tactics for different reasons.*

The '67 Mustang rumbled through the dark maze of streets that made up Washington D.C. as if on auto-pilot, while Laura Daniels' mind pondered another crappy day. It had been nothing but a string of crappy days since arriving in D.C. a couple of months ago. The Mustang jerked to a halt between the white lines it called home and the big engine shuddered to a stop, letting out a sigh as it gulped a last gasp of air through its grimy carburetor.

Laura gathered her things and trounced up the stairs to her Forest Heights apartment. As she turned the key in the deadbolt, the concerns about her day vanished. The click and familiar resistance were missing. Her mind shot back eighteen hours to when she left for work. *Did she forget to lock the door?* A forty-caliber Sig Sauer P-229 handgun appeared from beneath her lightweight jacket as she crouched to set the computer case on the hallway floor.

With the door pulled toward her to take the pressure off the latch, she turned the handle. A shake of her head evicted strands of short, blond hair from her face so she could peer through the thin opening; a near-full moon and streetlamps providing just enough light. The place looked trashed. Kitchen cabinet doors hung open displaying empty shelves. Dishes, pots and pans cluttered the counter. The trashcan in the corner of the room lay on its side spilling papers, open mail, and Chinese food cartons on the porcelain tile.

She pushed the door open and edged into the studio apartment. With gun extended, all five-foot four of her was taut and ready for anything. A circle of blue-white light swept the bedroom, both arms working in unison; gun hand supported by flashlight hand. Cosmetics were strewn about on the top of a small vanity near the bed with several bottles lying on the worn carpet. The closet door stood open and clothes were everywhere, except on hangers. File folders and papers covered the bed while the bedspread, quilt and sheet lay wadded in a heap on the floor.

“Well damn, everything's right where I left it.”

She let out a long sigh as her shoulders relaxed and her gun dropped to her side. A quick flip of the switch on the wall illuminated Laura's life as Assistant Special Agent in Charge assigned to the Bioterrorism Division of the FBI. At just thirty-two, Laura Daniels was a youthful veteran, rising rapidly in the Bureau using her street-smart savvy,

relentless work ethic and sheer grit. The depletion of manpower now assigned to 9/11, thrust Laura into the spotlight as the lead agent on the anthrax letter investigation. Her first big case and she was nowhere; no leads, no solid evidence, no nothing. Just seven letters written in a childlike manner, several grams of refined anthrax and five dead bodies—hopeless, just like her apartment. Like her life.

After retrieving her computer case from the dark hallway, she went to the small round dinette table and pushed aside this morning's mostly empty cereal bowl with a few Honey Nut Cheerios still floating like tiny life preservers in a shallow pond of skim milk. She carefully placed her pistol on the table and began her ritual of removing her shield, holster, cell phone and whatever else happened to be in her pockets where she could remember to reload everything in the morning before running out of the door.

She picked up the cereal bowl, dumped the souring milk and soggy O's in the corner of the sink, and stacked the bowl on the five other dirty ones. Looking in the empty cabinet, she concluded that she needed one more place setting to make it through the week.

"Susie Homemaker" was not her thing. She had been kicked out of her college dorm and when she tried to get her deposit back, the Residence Advisor said they were using the money to fumigate the place. In college, her excuse was schoolwork, now it was just work.

"Oh my Lord, I need a break...and a maid," she muttered, rubbing her throbbing temples. With last night's Lean Cuisine tray in the trash, she booted her computer and tied into the secured FBI network. Her mind wanted to shut down, but the investigation prevented sleep from refreshing her. With the case files open, the words on the screen ran together. Every lead a dead-end. Everyone makes mistakes, and these bastards were no different. Why the hell couldn't she catch a break and find one; just one.

Holding the "ctrl" and "alt" keys, she pressed the delete key and secured the laptop in the standby mode. She extracted her personal cell phone from her small purse and scrolled down the pathetically short list of names. She hesitated for a moment; began to flip the phone shut; then pushed the talk button.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end was deep and strong.

"Dad? It's Laura."

"Hey Squirt, what are you doing calling so late? It must be one in the morning there."

"Yeah, it's late but I couldn't sleep."

"How's Shelby doing?"

"Not good, Dad. I don't think she's got long to live."

"Damn. How many miles?"

"I don't know. A hundred-seventy something. It's costing me a small fortune. I don't think it's going to see two-hundred thousand miles."

"Don't let her get away from you. Remember, I want her back."

"Okay, Dad."

"So how's my big shot agent doing these days? Anything you can talk about? Or would you have to kill me?"

"I'd have to kill you." The corners of her mouth curled up slightly as her father's reassuring voice brought a small wave of comfort with it. A warmth that quickly faded. "Dad...I'm...I'm ready to quit this thing. I think...I'm in over my head." Her eyes began to burn from the salt of gathering tears.

"Bullshit, Laura!"

The abrupt comment scared the tears back into her eyes. "Dad—"

"Squirt. We had this discussion when you signed up. You knew it wasn't going to be easy. You need to suck it up and buckle down. I don't know what you're working on, but I'm betting people's lives are at stake, or our freedom."

"Dad, listen—"

“No. You listen, Squirt.” The voice on the other end became louder and more forceful. “I didn’t raise no quitter. You’ve never quit at anything. I may not have been the best father for you while you were young, but I’m damn well not going to let you throw your career down the drain because you feel sorry for yourself. I’m not going to let you wallow in self-pity and then hate yourself for blowing your life.”

Laura choked back the tears the same way she always did when her father directed his booming voice at her. She could see the deep lines in his forehead scowling at her through the receiver. “You’re right Dad. I guess I just need some sleep.”

“Laura?”

“Yes, Dad?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

“Your mother would be proud...your mother is proud.”

A loud buzz caught her attention. The secure cell phone on the table vibrated, dancing across the cheap wood veneer.

“I have to go Dad; I have a call I have to take. Thanks for the pep talk.” She flipped one phone shut and picked up the other. “Daniels,” she spoke into the receiver.

“Laura, it’s Mike.”

“Mike, what’s up?” Thoughts of sleep vanished. Mike Johnson, Special Agent in Charge of the Bioterrorism Division, didn’t call to chat about the weather—especially at this time of night.

“A new lead—Trenton, New Jersey. Emergency response received a nine-one-one call earlier this evening. It sounds like a young girl. She says she was forced to write letters and address envelopes. Some of the things she said couldn’t have been known without inside knowledge. She gave an address to an apartment where they took her.”

“Oh my God.” A surge of adrenaline snapped her mind into overdrive.

“I’m downloading the call to your case file. Get to the terminal at Reagan National. I have agents from the Newark Field Office heading that way.”

“Mike, we can’t let the locals interfere.” She banged at the keyboard of her laptop to upload the file.

“Trenton PD has been directed to hang back a half mile.”

“Good. I’m on my way.”

Tires screeched as the faded blue 1967 Mustang GT roared to a halt at the FBI terminal at Reagan National Airport. The throaty exhaust revved, clanked, and ran-on before finally going silent. At the same time, the driver’s door groaned in protest as Laura flung it open. With her computer case and overnight bag over her shoulder, she ran for the sleek Falcon 50EX waiting on the apron. The high-pitched whine of the engines and odor of jet fuel assaulted her senses as she approached the extended staircase. Within minutes, the small jet hurtled into the dark sky toward Trenton Mercer Airport.

Laura flipped open the Compaq laptop and pulled up the audio record of the nine-one-one call. Fitting a set of headphones from her computer case over her ears, she centered the cursor over the play button and clicked.

Static filled the headphones, and then an adult female voice. “Nine-one-one emergency response. What is the nature of your emergency?” Laura adjusted the volume to seal out the drone of the jet engines.

Ten seconds of static and then a voice sounding like a young girl. “They took me from school and made me write things.”

“What was that? What is your name, please?” the operator asked.

“I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“Honey, are you in trouble now? Are you all right?”

“Yes...I mean they didn’t do things to me.”

“That’s good, my name is Kerri, Kerri Lambert, what’s your name?”

“No...they said they would hurt my momma if I told.”

“Where are you now?”

“At a phone, near a gas station.”

“Where is the gas station? Do you know a street name? Can you see a name on the gas station?”

The clicking in the background must have come from the computer keyboard as the operator sent a dispatch to nearby police officers.

“They took me from school and made me write things on the antrax letters. Bad things, I think.”

“Honey, who took you? What school do you go to?”

“They took me to a room. I saw the numbers. They didn’t know I could see, but I did. One...five...five...A...Lincoln Street.” Background noise interfered with the legibility of the recording. Judging by her voice and the way she pronounced the numbers, African-American? Maybe eight to ten years old?

“One-five-five-A Lincoln Street?” The operator’s voice seemed to remain calm, but Laura could detect the edge of stress creeping in.

“They made me write bad things, like...‘death to America’... ‘death to Israel’...‘Allah is great’. They made me put addresses on envel...ten...of the..., I count... I think some went to important people, uh...sentator.” The recording cut in and out as background noise drowned out her weak voice.

“Are you there? Honey you need to speak up, I can’t hear you very well. Stay where you are, the police will be there shortly.”

There was a burst of static and the recording ended.

Laura listened to the recording over and over, taking notes, trying to focus on the voices, then the background noise, then trying to determine the stress level in the girl’s voice.

A loud thump and rush of wind noise announced their final approach to Trenton Airport. The intercom cackled, “Fasten your seatbelt.” Several minutes later, the jet taxied to a private terminal where a white Ford Taurus waited with two men inside.

Laura trotted down the steps and approached the men, both wearing midnight blue Agency jackets.

The taller man stepped forward. “Agent Daniels?”

“Yes.” She extended her hand. “And you are?”

“I’m Agent Taylor and this is Agent Aras.” He pumped her hand once with a vice-like grip. Taylor’s closely trimmed brown hair revealed a receding hairline. His pocked complexion accentuated narrow, squinting eyes, with thin lips that seemed incapable of a smile. Aras displayed a large set of white teeth that shone from the middle of his dark face. His only hair surrounded thick lips in a tightly trimmed goatee.

“Good to meet you. How far is the apartment?”

“About fifteen minutes from here,” Aras said. “I have surveillance and assault gear in the trunk. Our Evidence Response Team and mobile lab is about an hour out.”

“Great. Can you tell me about this apartment?” Laura asked.

“It’s part of an old row of buildings recently purchased by a real estate company,” Aras answered. “They plan on

rehabbing it, but it's been vacant for about a year."

The car raced along the empty streets of Trenton toward the suburb of Franklin Park. The setting quickly turned from industrial to lower middle-class to semi-ghetto. Taylor brought the Taurus to a stop on Lincoln Highway just past Henderson Street.

"The apartments are right over there," Taylor said. "That row of old brick buildings. 155A is on the back corner, bottom floor."

Aras handed Laura a pair of night vision binoculars. The dark street turned ghostly green and black as she squinted to focus her vision. Several steps led to a small porch, slightly wider than the door. The amplified view revealed a crooked, weathered sign with the address; 155-A Lincoln Street.

"Crap! The windows are boarded up. Do you have infrared?" she asked.

"In the trunk—and directional mics," Aras said.

A few minutes later, Laura pulled on a lightweight, dark blue FBI Gore-tex coat and watched a small screen while Aras aimed an infrared thermal imaging gun at the building. Taylor donned a pair of headphones and aimed an ultra-sensitive directional microphone.

"I'm reading several hotspots in the building. One is definitely a person. The others are static and appear to be smaller, and hotter than body temperature," Laura whispered, her warm breath vaporizing in the cold night air. Fuzzy warm reds and yellows and blocky cool greens and blues danced around the small screen.

"I'm not picking up any voices, but there is definitely movement," Taylor added.

Laura reached in her coat, pulled out her gun and started toward the old building.

"Daniels, what the hell do you think you're doing?" Taylor whispered loudly.

"I'm going in. I'm not letting these bastards slip away."

"Agent Daniels." Taylor grabbed Laura by the arm, his stubby thick fingers digging into her coat. "You can't do that. It's against protocol. If there is anthrax in there, you'll be endangering yourself and others. We'll keep the place under observation and wait for environmental suits and backup."

Laura spun, yanking free of Taylor's grasp, her eyes glaring. "Taylor, who the hell do you think you're talking to? I'm in charge here. We're going in. Need I remind you what these terrorists have done in the past several months?"

Aras retrieved two M-4 Carbines from the trunk and held one out to Taylor.

"Aras, are you crazy? What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm helping Agent Daniels and following orders. My brother was killed at the Pentagon. I don't give a flying fuck about protocol right now."

Taylor reluctantly took the automatic assault weapon and watched Aras retrieve a backpack and three sets of body armor from the trunk. His eyes swept over Laura's thin figure. "Agent Daniels, I assume you're a small?"

She nodded, smiling briefly, took the black vest, removed her coat and pulled it over her head. After cinching it up using the Velcro strips on the sides, she headed to the old brick building in a crouched trot.

Concealed behind a battered, rust-gutted pick-up truck across the street from 155-A, she scanned the front entrance, peering around the side of the building. The cloud-covered pre-dawn sky cast no light or shadows. Steam wafted from the nearby sewer lid carrying a stench that curdled her stomach. The night vision goggles revealed no cameras or security.

"Taylor, take the back. Remember, we want them alive. Aras, blow the lock with the C-4 and I'll toss in the flash-bang. You take the right side of the room."

After creeping up the brick steps to the door, Laura tried the doorknob and, finding it locked, nodded at Aras to place a small amount of plastic explosive around the strike plate. While Aras attached the detonator, Laura pulled the pin on the flash-bang canister and both agents crouched on either side of the front entrance. Aras lifted three fingers, and counted down. A small muffled pop, and the door swung open.

Laura tossed in the small grenade-like device and both agents closed their eyes and shoved their fingers in their ears. Following the explosion, they entered, weapons ready, eyes sweeping the room looking for movement. Aras yelled with a deep voice, "FBI, drop your weapon and come out!"

The dimly lit room was filled with pharmaceutical boxes and lab equipment. The air, still thick with the odor of cordite from the flash-bang, smelled of solvents. Plastic bags of white powder sat on a table in the corner of the room. As Aras crept toward the dark back room, Laura spotted a slight movement. She saw the muzzle flash of a weapon an instant before the report hit her ears. Aras spun around and hit the floor face down.

Diving behind an old stuffed chair, she trained her concentration on the doorway. A small dark figure appeared with a gun extended. "Got you, asshole," she muttered squeezed off a round, leveled the gun from the recoil and fired again. The first bullet entered the man's thigh causing him to fall backward and scream in pain. The second bullet missed its mark and pierced a can of toluene, then struck the iron radiator behind it. The spark from the radiator ignited the extremely flammable solvent, rupturing the can, spraying a fiery rain over the wounded suspect.

The man screamed in anguish as his long stringy dreadlocks flashed, and solvent saturated clothing erupted in flames. The smell of singed hair and burnt flesh followed a wall of heat that pushed Laura back away. She stared helplessly as the dark man thrashed wildly on the floor—flames blistering and consuming his flesh. The back door banged open and Taylor raced in.

"Taylor!" she screamed. "Get one of the fire extinguishers in the corner. I can't reach them. We can't let him die."

The deafening screams rang in her ears as the man burned in front of her, thrashing against the wooden floor. A loud whoosh and cool rush of carbon dioxide licked at her face as the flickering flames died out.

"Don't you die you fucking bastard," she screamed.