

## Chapter 1

### *Seth Mathias*

It's funny the things that I remembered afterwards. I knew what time the nightmare began, as if that had any relevance. Time didn't matter to the guy that they killed. He had run out of it. And I doubt that it mattered to the girl they tried to rape and murder. To her, time probably stood still. The time was meaningless – it was dark, and that's all that mattered.

I went back later and figured the time out because my watch ticked on my bureau at home, not on my wrist here at the lake. I wanted to avoid the structure of time, the mechanics it required, the restrictions it imposed. Peace and solitude were the recipe, and the ingredients didn't include time. Darkness was in the mix, and I lay alone, folded in it, trying to achieve sensory deprivation.

**Excerpt from *The Law of the Pack*, a new thriller by John Darrin.**

I felt no breeze, but the leaves rustled anyway, each tiny wave harmonizing with the million others around it, creating the slightest whisper. It was a slender, placid sound, nature's white noise. Then the other sound, the one that I thought I imagined, intensified, and before long I knew a car made it, coming closer on the remote lake access road, coming fast. As it neared, and the volume increased, it became clear that two cars raced this way, each with a distinct sound as its speed cycled up and down. I turned toward the source of the disturbance, and watched the driver of the first car careen into the parking lot like he didn't know it dead-ended. Apparently mistaking the path to the lake for the road, the driver discovered his mistake when his little car tried to vault the timbers that surrounded the lot.

I scrambled to my left, away from the path of the car, and dove into the sparsely forested picnic area, behind one of the pine trees. The second car turned out to be a van, and it slipped and slid to a stop right behind the first. The first driver bolted for the lake before the van even came to a complete stop.

Someone burst from the driver's side door of the van like a stuntman being jerked by unseen cables. Someone else came from the back, and they took off after the first guy. They caught him on the beach and tackled him and hit him with something that made a dull, disparaging sound. Something like the sound when Letterman drops a melon off a ten-story building onto the pavement. The sound said loud and clear, "He's dead."

That scared me liquid. My body turned to yogurt, making me feel as if I had suddenly become an invertebrate, with no bones and muscle to hold me together, and I might leak out of my clothes. I have seen enough news stories, and I have a good enough imagination to know that I didn't want to be involved in this.

And I wouldn't have been, except for her.

**Excerpt from *The Law of the Pack*, a new thriller by John Darrin.**

Three more somebodies, presumably from the van, cut open the convertible top of the small car and dragged her out through the opening without a struggle or a scream. Maybe they did that to be dramatic, or maybe the doors were locked, or jammed from the impact. Anyway, it got my attention.

“Fuck, man. She alive?” one of them asked.

“Lemme check.”

“Her tits ain’t gonna tell you nothin’, man.” The first voice again.

“Yeah? Just checkin’ for a heartbeat.” Then, “Ow! Goddam bitch bit me!”

“Guess she’s alive.”

A third voice joined the discussion. “Both you assholes knock it off and take her over there.” He seemed to be in charge.

‘Over there’ was the picnic area where I hid, some pine trees shading a half-dozen of those one-piece wooden tables, and the same number of grills attached to stout posts, all ready for the tourists who would be coming here when the spring vacation season started in several weeks. My hiding spot, even behind the tree, felt exposed, and I squirmed deeper into the pine needles.

The scene is lodged in my memory, as vivid as a color. I saw it strongly backlit by the van’s lights, and with little definition, almost like shadow theater. Behind me, the lake stretched far enough to conceal the curvature of the shoreline, and the beach varied in depth, evolving from a sand surrogate to a tough, stiff grass, and then to a scrub pine forest. The shoreline rose gradually, and once into the forest, the land climbed a bit more steeply, and the size and density of the trees grew more imposing.

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To make it even more surreal, I saw a mind-enhanced image, not the real thing. Like one of those satellite photographs sharpened by sophisticated software, my imagination filled in all the gaps between the fragments that I actually could see, forming a perfect, if not completely accurate, image.

The modest parking area ended the road like a lollipop on a stick. The path from the lot to the beach, restricted to foot traffic by the aforementioned timbers, provided access to the water. These seemed to work, and the small car trashed itself pretty good testing them. It probably had more value now as a parts depot than as transportation.

My own car, hidden by the forest, was parked in the smaller, overflow area some 200 feet back up the road where I had left it, locked for no reason other than habit because the aging fabric of its convertible top wouldn't stop a determined squirrel. By my rough estimate, they would catch me and kill me about halfway there, so I decided to stay put.

The first two somebodies crouched over their dead body almost directly to my right, with their backs toward me. Except for the dead body, of course, and it didn't really matter anymore which way he faced. To my left front, a somebody held the girl from each side, and the third faced her, standing back, assessing and appraising, like he was going to paint their picture.

When this lead somebody finally moved, he raised his right hand and I could see that it held a very big knife. A three-syllable knife: bi-ii-ig. He held it like a teacher might hold a pointer during a geography lesson, in his closed fist with the tip pointed up, ready to identify Ethiopia on a wall map or something. He stepped closer, and slowly, deliberately, stuck the knife in her stomach. Not into in, but enough in that the tip must have felt remarkably present to her, maybe even breaking the skin.

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She reacted, twisting and trying to push herself back against the force of the two arm-holders, and spoke for the first time, yelping, “Goddam it! Why are you doing this?”

I don’t know what she expected for an answer, it seemed quite clear to me.

“You know why, you fuckin’ bitch. Don’t fuck with me. I *will* cut you.” I could almost see the sneer, that mind-enhancement thing again.

“Let go of me, you assholes. I swear to God I’ll kill you all!” As empty a threat as I have ever heard.

The leader turned his upper body to his left and aimed his chin over his shoulder, facing almost directly at me, and yelled, “JD! Luther! Get up here!”

Engrossed in the action, I had forgotten the other two, like they were yesterday. It took me a second to realize I was neither JD nor Luther, and I suppressed my overwhelming desire to run. They dropped whatever they were doing, something repulsive no doubt, something that I didn’t ever want to know about, and responded to his command.

They came somewhat toward me to get back, and for the first time that I can recall, I really hoped I looked like that piece of flotsam that my father said I did back in college. They passed within two body lengths of me, and if they had looked my way, they would have had just enough bodies to measure it.

The leader said, “Grab her legs and hold her still.” And after a second: “Her legs, JD, you fuckin’ perv.” I couldn’t see where this JD had grabbed, but I could guess.

“Yeah, perv, wait your turn.” The others joined the conversation.

“Fuck you, man. You wait. I’m next.”

The lead somebody put an end to the debate. “Shut up, all of you. No ones nuthin unless I say so. Got it?”

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They did, giving her a chance to speak. “Don’t do this. I won’t tell anyone,” she almost begged. Then, recovering some of her bravado, “Just don’t do this. You’ll regret it, I promise.”

“I’ll regret it! What the fuck are you talkin’ about? You’re the one’s gonna have regrets. You’re the one’s gonna wish you never laid eyes on that guy. Or anything else.” To his little gang, he said, “Hold her down on that table.”

Clamped to the table at each corner by a somebody, she squirmed and struggled, but stopped when he began to repeat the procedure, the knife to the abdomen, sharp side up, tip to her skin. He ran the knife up the middle of her torso, right along the button line of her blouse. As the blade found each button, it severed its hold on the cloth, opening her shirt and exposing her for more commentary.

“Darlin’, you forget your bra? Or did you let that asshole take it off? Maybe I should go circumslice him and bring you back a little toy. Prob’ly a very little toy.” His gang all seemed to know what circumslice meant, and got a good laugh out of it. It *was* a pretty vivid mangling of the word.

By now, I didn’t need to watch any more to know that this would play out with multiple rapes and another dead body. These guys were obviously sociopaths, and while I had read news stories and fiction about such people, this was my first actual encounter with them. At least that I was aware of. Who knows how many sociopaths I unwittingly encountered? Several bosses come to mind.

I couldn’t figure out how to change this end result. I watched, fascinated and engrossed by the scene, like it was some alien form of entertainment. Kabuki, or something. But kabuki doesn’t want to make you throw up. Or piss in your pants. I suppressed both of these urges.

**Excerpt from *The Law of the Pack*, a new thriller by John Darrin.**

Yet on another level, I tried to figure out how to intervene, how to respond to my moral imperative to not allow this. But the more I tried to make myself concentrate on the problem, the more I ended up concentrating on the concentration. This paradox ultimately provided the plan that I so urgently needed.

While I agonized over this dilemma, frustrated with helplessness, the lead somebody proceeded with his work. Her shirt had been completely opened, and instead of the conventional technique of sliding the sleeves off her arms, he used a one-time-only method, slicing each sleeve from cuff to collar, until it fell off like an unpinned diaper. He must have thought she wouldn't need it anymore.

She was naked from the waist up, as helpless as if she slept in an incubator, still held at each corner, and it had gotten very quiet. She didn't scream or whimper, and the somebodies had also grown silent, now apparently intent on her nakedness. It was like turning down the volume during the horror movie to lessen the fear, and I had my first constructive idea.

At forty-one, I was no longer a young man, and even though I take some care of myself, the probability of my successfully dealing with five renegade somebodies was real only in my most preposterous fantasies. Even if I had been a young man, even if I had been young triplets, there was no chance of anything except a futile gesture. I needed time to think, to plan, to gain some advantage, for the Marines to arrive. Anything! Slow down events, divert them.

Of course! Get them involved in something of more immediate concern than recreational rape. At the same time this idea catalyzed, another track of my mind focused on escape plans. How to get to my car, how to ward off pursuit, how to avoid the same fate as the driver of the other small car. The conjunction of these thoughts formed an image in my mind, a picture of the van exploding, everyone running every which way. Bedlam. Escape. Rescue?

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It was a glorious idea; turn the van into a Molotov cocktail on wheels. A wick, a gas tank, a match, a boom.

*A match!* I thought. *Oh, shit!* The tee shirt from my pack would make a fine wick, but I didn't smoke anymore, so I carried no fire-making apparatus. And I had left my cooking gear in the car. I could only hope that I could find a match in the van, or maybe on the dead guy abandoned to my right.

Now I had a plan: blow up the van, grab the damsel, and escape in the dark. Get to my car, drive off. It sounded simple and effective.

Even under the circumstances I recognized the obvious flaws. Flaw one: a match. Flaw two: the van was positioned between the damsel and my car, so we could not run directly there; we would have to take a longer, more circuitous route through the woods and around the parking lot. Flaw three: vans do not spontaneously explode. The somebodies might be suspicious, even alert, rather than confused and distracted. Flaw four – and perhaps the major one – I actually had to do something other than try to be a homo-chameleon on the beach.

If I were to somehow graph the level of courage that I have displayed at any point in my life, with the horizontal axis representing the passage of time from birth until now, and the vertical axis representing courage on some bravery scale, it would be a nice flat line, with an occasional small spike, either up or down.

The spikes would illustrate those occasions when I displayed some professional courage, going against convention. Or social courage, telling the racist jerk in the grandstands to shut up. Or personal courage, holding my family together over the three years of my wife's illness and death. Conversely, they would descend for those gutless times when I let someone else take the blame, or left the right thing unsaid, or descended into self-pity in the year since she died.

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Basically, the routine courage and cowardice found in all of us, every day, to some degree or another.

But track across my courage line to this moment, and it spikes off the chart. In short, I did the bravest and most courageous thing I have done before or since.

I moved.