

*A continuation of the Davenport series, **Black Dawn** picks up where **Black Tide** left off, with Tom Spears tracking his wife's kidnapper from Washington State, to New York, and then to the rugged Debar Mountain Range. It's here a whole new mystery unravels, which further diminishes his chances of survival.*

BLACK DAWN

by Brett Diffley

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The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a graveyard at night. In the foreground, a hand is shown holding a heart-shaped pendant on a thin chain. The moon is visible in the sky, partially obscured by clouds, casting a soft glow over the scene. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

BLACK DAWN

BOOK FOUR OF THE DAVENPORT SERIES

**"HEART POUNDING
ENTERTAINMENT!"**

BRETT DIFFLEY

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-63492-548-8

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-63492-549-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2017

First Edition

Words from the author

There's a difference between reading a good action-adventure, and feeling it. If you feel it, you get totally immersed in the story and its characters—feeling the joy and sorrow. As a writer, this is important not only for the entertainment value, but also in the challenge itself. Can I take the reader away? Make them part of the story? Can I hold their hand and take them on an emotional journey? This is the goal of most books, to varying degrees. Simply put, a good storyline, and its characters are like the layers of an onion, peeling back with each turn of the page. If the book is good, it will lure the reader into wanting more, and therefor continually draw them towards the proverbial center of the onion. This is the definition of a good thriller—and the making of a good rollercoaster ride. To accomplish this requires being graphic. This is how I write.

If you are a first time reader to the Davenport Series, I'm envious of you. It's an action adventure series like no other, leaving you thrilled and entertained with each turn of the page. However, I encourage you to start with book one—**Perfect Plan**—to understand the dynamics of the evolving storyline, the multiple plotlines, and more importantly the characters, who you will both love and hate. With that being said, each characters backstory, detailed and descriptive in book one, will be greatly reduced by book five—**Safe Passage**.

I think a writer needs to evolve with the reader. Plots are rarely one dimensional in real life, so in keeping up and challenging the reader, my stories are generally multifaceted. Now my question to you...Do you stop after peeling that first layer? If not...enjoy the ride!

PROLOGUE

The mid-day sidewalk traffic bustled at the intersection of New York's Broadway and Liberty streets. Shoppers came and went from numerous store fronts and offices located in the surrounding downtown skyscrapers. A man watched them, and the flow of bumper to bumper traffic. He was a heavily bearded man in a rumpled torn trench coat and high necked cotton sweater. His name was Tom Spears. A gentle looking man, he sat at the base of the twenty-four-story Westinghouse Building between the entryway and Bank of America. Dressed to blend into the ubiquitous city street-life, he wore a dirty grey-knit beanie on his head, and even dirtier military-green surplus pants. He was seen, and yet unseen.

Without lifting his gaze, Tom thanked a passerby for dropping a quarter into an open violin case between his knees. For most he was nondescript, unnoticed, even as they stepped around his outstretched legs or tripped over his worn-out shoes; bound in duct tape at the toes. But his shoddy, unsavory, appearance was only an illusion. With his head tilted forward, his long disheveled hair masking his keen eyes, he was alert and aware, and continually scrutinizing his surroundings. A horn honked as a yellow cab stopped in front of the building. The back door flew open, and a leggy blond in heels and a short tan skirt exited. She bent over and handed the driver some money through the passenger window. As the taxi merged back into traffic, she straightened, smoothed her skirt, and approached the doorman. "Hi, Henry."

"Hi, Mrs. Averton," he replied with a smile and opened the door.

"Has Frank been in yet?" she asked. "The once-a-month meeting is today and I wanted to get in early."

"No, ma'am," he replied holding the big glass door open, and letting her pass by. "You're the first."

Tom listened closely. In a few short hours as a vagrant, he already knew a great deal about the comings and goings of the building. For instance, Henry the doorman was approaching his sixtieth birthday, a widower, and single. He was also lactose intolerant, a recovering alcoholic, and had a dog name Beau. As for

Michelle Averton, she was a single thirty-six-year-old successful attorney with an office on the uppermost floor, and not by coincidence, on the same floor as Frank Manatone, the crime boss for all of New York.

It was a floor and building Tom knew well. After all, years ago he'd been employed by the Manatone family himself, and at one time had been part of the protection detail for Frank Manatone himself. The other two men at the time were Mike Rauls and Micky Trevor. Tom sighed heavily with thoughts of his dead friends. The two had disappeared over a month ago—two weeks before his wife Tanya had been taken.

The pain of his wife being gone came back in a wave of agonizing anguish. Like a wrecking ball in his brain, he took a shuddering breath. *She was gone forever, it wasn't a dream.*

But it was a dream, a nightmare of the worst kind. The questions soon followed, repetitive and merciless, without reprieve. *Could he have done anything different? Could he have saved her? Would things have turned out differently had he taken her out of that room right away...*

For six days Tom had tracked her through a GPS chip hidden in her locket. Made of solid gold, he had given her the special gift shortly after they were married. Hand crafted and uniquely designed, the special gift had cost him a small fortune. But the price meant nothing to him. The value was not only in his complete and undying love for her, but also for her peace of mind. Having been abducted as a child, used as a sex slave, and forced to live for more than ten years as a human slave was part of easing any remaining fears. But that was only part of it. The pragmatist in him was the other. As a liaison for Crude Technologies, and dealing primarily with foreign diplomats in various countries, she was exposed and vulnerable. Probably more for him, the gift was a comforting gesture, and his lone requirement at the time was that she never take it off. It was the only time in their entire relationship he'd asked her for anything. And when he'd explained why, she never did.

Unknown by her captors at the time, this had allowed him to close on her position as they headed east from Washington State,

zigzagging across the United States. It was a good thing too, because at that point he still had no idea who had taken her or why. All he had to go on was a glowing dot on a lap top map. Then on the evening of the sixth day, the vehicle had finally stopped just outside of New York City, and when it did, he not only found those answers...but his wife.

Guilt struck him like a dagger twisted into his heart, and if he could go back to that moment two weeks ago, he would've never...ever...left her side...

Chapter 1

Darkness

Tanya Demitry-Spears stood in the middle of the dimly lit room. It was small and cool, with the hint of dampness, and without any source of heat. But at least she wasn't tied up anymore. She rubbed her wrists where the strap had reddened the skin. She was still in her two piece grey suit she'd been forced to put on; the arms and slacks soiled from being in the cargo van.

How many hours had it been since she arrived? She massaged her tired grey eyes with dirty fingers. She couldn't even be sure how many days it had been since she was taken.

Only now was the blurriness of the trip beginning to fade. After being taken from her home in the dead of night, she'd been put in the windowless van, drugged, and thrown onto a slim foam mat on the floor. Most of the way she had slept. The only time they'd stopped was to go to the bathroom, and that was usually only for a minute, relieving themselves beside the idling rig.

She remembered thinking how organized her abductor was too. His every action, his every move, from abduction to getting here, had been careful, methodical, and planned out. Nothing had been left to chance, including stopping at any public areas. Food and water had been in a large ice-filled cooler, and there was enough for a week or more. Even getting gas had been all but eliminated. Except for the last day, he had used the twenty fuel-filled gas cans that had been loaded into the back of the van beforehand. But while sharing the van's confined space for those days, she did manage to get some occasional information along the way...albeit very little.

On two separate occasions during the long journey, she had woken to hear her abductor talking on a cellphone—a disposable cellphone with the freshly opened packaging thrown on the floor by his seat. At the time, it had been difficult for her to stay focused, to fight the need to go back to sleep, and eavesdrop on the conversation. Both times, she had only managed to stay awake for fleeting seconds, but she did learn he was returning to somewhere...and in the last conversation she heard him say New York. She couldn't know

whether that was the state or the city, but apparently...in either case...New York had something to do with where they were going.

Then late last night they'd finally arrived, and after putting a white canvas bag over her head, he had calmly guided her through several doors, down the stairs, and put her into this room. Before leaving, he'd once again removed the bag, freed her hands, and given her a blanket. It was also the only time he'd spoken after being taken—two words to be exact; “get comfortable.”

The words had been soft spoken and without malice, but Tanya still had the right to know what was going on. A few hours later he'd returned, bringing her a plate of food, and telling her of the security measures in place. These included cameras throughout the complex, and glass-break sensors, which he told her about after breaking numerous lightbulbs in the hall outside her locked door. More telling, and even chilling, was the food he'd brought. “Her favorite,” he had said. “Your eggs are over easy the way you like them. I also know you prefer sausage over bacon, and milk over juice.” That's when she learned the abduction hadn't been random, and true fear had struck her. In fact, the man had been studying her, and if she hadn't already been sitting, her knees would have buckled. This meant, at the very least, he'd been following her—them; she and Tom. He also told her that he meant her no harm, and that her abduction had been planned for more than six months with no detail being overlooked. But she still didn't know why, and when he left, he had taken her shoes, saying he would answer her questions when he returned. That had been several hours ago. She held her breath to calm herself, wrapping her arms tightly across her chest. She felt so alone, and the air, stagnant and suffocating, wasn't helping.

She glanced around the small cement room that had become her cell.

There were no windows, and the only light, ebbing and flickering inconsistently like powered by a generator, came from a single glowing bulb on the ceiling. In the corner was a small steel framed bed, without bedding, the mattress grey and stained. Next to it, on the floor, was a five gallon bucket with a lid, and a roll of toilet paper. On the bed was the old wool blanket that he had supplied. She picked

it up, snap-shook-it once and wrapped it tight around her shoulders. Even though it smelled of storage, and the red-woolen fabric felt rough on her face, the warmth was instantly comforting. But it did little to dispel her heightened emotions.

Like the suffocating effects of an avalanche, her chest welled and then constricted, leaving her with the urge to cry. It came from the loneliness that settled on her like a recurring weight on her soul. *Don't cry. It'll be okay. It's not the same. It's not!* But the distant memories of being taken from her Odessa home in the Ukraine, abruptly struck her in an explosion of emotions like a giant wave into a cliff face.

She sat on the bed, slid back against the wall, and wrapped her arms tightly around her knees.

The abduction had been long ago, but the clarity remained. Taken at the tender age of seven, she'd been quickly smuggled out of the country, and months later forced to become a sex slave for the Akmalit brothers in rooms much like this one. For years she lived like this, at the mercy of her capturers, repeatedly raped, beaten, and starved; rarely being allowed to see the light of day, much less leave the cell she was in at the time.

She wiped away the single tear that rolled down her cheek. Such was her life back then.

The company was Corporate Affairs—a worldwide conglomerate that made millions legally, and billions illegally in the slave market. The owners were the Akmalit brothers, and between the two of them, they turned their slave marketing trade into a prolific global network; unknown legally, but renowned illegally. It was Kalam Akmalit's sharp mind that drove Corporate Affairs forward both financially, and in flexibility. Every move he made was careful and measured. On paper it was a legitimate company with several hubs around the world, making its money by showing other corporations how to hide theirs. Not by coincidence, their global reach also gave them unlimited access to what motivated the company most; children, to be bought, used and sold at their discretion.

Secrecy was the key to this success, and it was Kalam's brother, Kalib, who continually added abductees to the corporation's

commodities. Like his brother, this was *his* forte. From the processing teams that found the targets, to the laid out design and implementation, he took every aspect into account down to the smallest details, such as looks, background, and even the family's resources if their child disappeared. It all mattered.

Once a plan was instigated, another team took care of the abductions and subsequent accidents. Some abductions were as simple as a van grab, but others were so cleverly thought out it took weeks to coordinate. And because the ruse was orchestrated to point towards accidents or runaways, the disappearances never came back to them; no trace of foul play, and no evidence for police to go on. The rest was semantics and big money, putting them into the system and becoming a commodity people paid for. This had been the only life Tanya had ever known.

But the bondage didn't stop there. In fact, it was only the first phase in a Corporate Affairs' system that had been—if nothing else—the quintessence of efficiency; the system coordinated and continually adapting as children grew into adults. The next phase; as young adults they were processed into the labor force as working slaves. From servants, to physical labor, this was their destiny. Even planned pregnancies were thought out, where babies were sold at a very high price to adoption companies. Then the mothers became members for life, because of threats to them or to their child. It kept most in line, and the money rolling in for the company.

So at age twenty-two she'd outlived her usefulness as a sex slave, and was sent to a breeding farm, where ten months later she gave birth to a baby girl—a healthy baby girl who was taken shortly after birth. Then the threats to her newborn began, and she was sent into forced labor, working at Savory's Spa as a masseuse for the next seven years of her life. But the “accidental” death of a man named Frank Teeds at the spa wasn't to be overlooked; it happened while she was on duty, and she became expendable. So she was sent to Texas, and chained in a basement for her final days on earth. But her circumstances soon changed, thanks to two strangers; Reed Davenport, and her future husband, Tom Spears. The two had been at the center of her rescue, and also the unraveling of Corporate Affairs.

Then there was the most damaging of all, the loss of her daughter. It was the final piece of a never ending nightmare from her past. A convulsive sob shook her, threatening her resolve. *Her child, her beautiful child, taken away.* But even this wasn't to be the true pinnacle of her loss. That came later with the dashed dream of the two of them being reunited again.

To that point of her life she'd held out hope, living each day with only one goal, and one reason to live; to be with her daughter again. But this she found out was just a lie, and only after meeting Tom had she learned her daughter's unimaginable fate.

It came at a time while he was searching for another abducted girl aboard the container ship *San Paulo*. And it was there—a chance encounter—that Tom had briefly met her brown eyed little girl. She was locked in a container with other children that were being secretly shipped to New York. Tom had tried to intervene, but it wasn't to be because of a hurricane that was ravaging the decks—a storm that ultimately sent the ship to the bottom.

She thought about her husband. Long before they were even a couple, and shortly after their escape from the basement, this had been the first time he'd spoken of it. They were in the hospital recovering from various injuries when he'd approached her, and summoned the courage to tell her what he believed to be true: that he'd seen her cloned image...in the form of a little girl imprisoned in a container, which ultimately went over the side during a hurricane. Tanya still remembered the plagued, distraught, look on Tom's face and also his conviction when he told her the truth about her daughter. The devastation in his eyes could only be matched by his tormented heart. She would never forget that torn man, a stranger weeping in front of her, tortured by a portion of the past that wasn't even his to bear. To this very day, it was a suffocating pain that cleaved his soul. He did his best to keep it hidden, but it left him drenched at night in nightmarish sweats knowing he hadn't saved her—the daughter that neither of them had had the opportunity to know.

She'd often thought about his words, the story of her daughter's final days; *the truth*, he called it. For better or worse, it was the only image that remained for Tanya: "The container was pitch black,"

he'd begun, "except for the flashes of lightening as the hurricane lashed out. It was only after I turned on my flashlight that a small face appeared in its beam—a child no more than seven with big brown uncertain eyes and thick brown hair..." He'd stopped then to look at her. "Your hair... and your eyes..." he'd clarified, his shaky voice confirming.

"She was something though," he'd continued. "Even with the tear troughs that ran down her cheeks, she was a vision of loveliness—of strength in a world full of chaos. She was squatting next to me; not smiling, but she wasn't afraid either." His lip had quivered, but he'd forced a smile. "At seven, she was probably the person in charge, and reassuring the others..."

There was much more to his story, but this was all her motherly instincts could take. So instead, she focused on the words she held most dear. *She wasn't afraid.*

With that, she stood abruptly, wiping her sorrow on her sleeve, and spoke out loud. "Now it's my turn—my little angel—to be brave."

"Be brave," she repeated again, now thinking about Tom. Optimism touched her, and she wasn't near as afraid, versus before, when she was held in the Akmalits basement, waiting to be tortured and killed. It was Tom; her source of strength, the stout ship in any stormy sea. He would come for her, and that certainty fed her resolve.

She closed her eyes and reverently touched the small gold locket around her neck. It was a gift presented by Tom after their wedding. Made from pure gold, the polished surface was curved, embedded with two hearts intersecting, and inside each were their initials—the first with the initial of her maiden name with a D, the second with an S for Spears. And inside the small compartment was a flat polished plate with an inscription; *Forever.*

His lone requirement at the time of the gift, was that she never take it off. It was the only time in their entire relationship he'd asked her for anything. And when he'd explained why, she never did. She now gripped it like her life depended on it.

She heard a distant sound and her eyes flared open. It was the hollow drum of footfalls coming down the steel steps, the opening and closing of a door, and finally the crunching of glass as he walked down the hall to her door. Remaining on the bed, she cringed at the abrupt sound of a key being placed in the lock. A heartbeat later, the doorknob turned and the big steel door swung open, squeaking on seldom used hinges. The man who had brought her here, stood before her once again. He wore jeans and a brown windbreaker over a white button-down cotton shirt. Behind him was the darkened corridor which disappeared left and right, the walls cement just like her cell. In one hand, he held a tray of food, and in the other a folding chair.

She studied him. He was middle aged, hair close cropped and grey, his eyes the darkest blue. His physique was toned, muscular, and he walked with purpose. A handsome man even now, with high cheekbones and a square jawline.

“Once again, I apologize for the crude treatment.” His words were confident without rancor. “It’s unfortunate, but I hope some more hot food will appease a little of that discomfort.” As he stepped inside, the smell of cigarettes filled the room. It was a reeking smell, and she vaguely recalled the wafting smoke that continuously floated around the interior of the van.

After flipping open the chair, he removed the old tray, setting it on the floor, and put the new one on the bed. On it was a burger and fries; the hamburger, minus pickles and onions the way she liked it. “Thank you for eating something,” he began, looking at what remained of the eggs and hash browns on the paper plate. “You’ll need your strength in the coming days.” His face relaxed into a smile, and he pointed at the chair. “May I sit?”

He was asking her permission? She nodded warily, and brushed back a strand of hair from the disheveled bun on her head.

He sat facing her. “Please excuse my indulgences, I’ve been looking forward to meeting you...talking to you. This situation is very unique, and I find myself captivated by both you and your husband.”

Being in close proximity, she could smell the faint odor of coffee on his breath above the pungent odor of cigarettes on his clothing.

“Who are you, and why am I here?” she asked firmly. “There must be some mistake.”

“Of course,” he replied, nodding. “But there is no mistake. Your husband, and his past is why you’re here. So I’ll enlighten you on your situation.”

His non-confrontational tone caught her by surprise. She nodded toward the tray, masking her uncertainty in a favorable tone. “Thank you for your kindness...”

He held up a hand to stop her. “My name is Bishop Styles, and I’m many things, but not an animal...and your thanks is meaningless to me,” he said calmly, but with fervor. “I study, gather, and absorb. This is what I do. Each time I’m here, I learn even more about you. It’s in my nature, not to mention, my line of work to constantly evaluate and store useful information.” His brow furrowed slightly, but his tone remained nonchalant. “So let’s be clear, don’t let my appearance, or perceived *kindness* fool you. I’m a very bad man Mrs. Spears, and have done more evil in my short existence than a lifetime of twenty.”

His words were revealing, more than cavalier. Not brazen but confident.

“From the assassination of one, to the killing of many, I strive for perfection—the challenge, the elevating of talent. Like a math professor dissects an equation, I learn a person’s strengths and weaknesses, equating the probability of success and then instigating a plan. Sometimes this requires brute force, with little time needed to prepare. Other times a softer, more subtle approach is needed, but I can tell you, the volumes of preparation remain the same.” He leaned forward on his elbows, his eyes focused.

She felt even more uneasy. His penetrating stare was almost like he could see right through her, so to gain separation, she moved to the furthest corner of the bed with the blanket still held tightly around her.

“Before enlightening you on why you’re here, let me educate you further about me and my world. It will help you broaden your scope of who you’re dealing with, eliminating any further misleading illusions you might have.

“To be blunt,” he began, “I’m a professional killer. My world begins with a contract, and ends with the fulfillment of that contract. These vary in many ways from the amount of upfront money, to the method; from small to the more elaborate that require certain stipulations. A perfect example of *elaborate* happened last year, in which I was hired to kill one man. Unfortunately, due to stipulations, many more people had to die to accomplish this.” He lapsed into silence, before continuing, “Do you remember Malaysian flight 340?”

She nodded without speaking. Of course she remembered the tragic accident. It was all over the news for months with various speculative reports from terrorism, to an in-air catastrophe—even a hijacking by the crew was mentioned. But nothing was ever substantiated because the plane was never found.

“The plan went flawlessly,” he continued. “At 30,000 feet the pilot, distraught from his marriage being on the rocks, began a chain of events that would eventually lead to its disappearance.” He nodded, his face impassive. “This is my world, Mrs. Spears, much like yours is my world now.”

I’m his world? Is that what he just said? She tried to blink away her concern. And what did any of this have to do with Tom? Riveted to his words, she was still trying to understand why she was here—in the same room—with a professional killer.

“This is just one example to let you know that I won’t hesitate to kill you.” His face softened. “You should also know that you’re not my intended victim, but much like the rest of the people on the plane, you could become expendable.”

Oh no. If it wasn’t her, then it must be Tom he was after. He was the target!

The understanding struck her like a thundering punch to the midsection, and suddenly she couldn’t breathe. She wanted to scream...*Why? Why was this happening?* She held her composure in check, and fought the dreadful thoughts now going through her brain as he continued speaking—speaking like he wanted to explain his reasoning’s.

“In regards to the plane, the family that hired me made it quite clear; it was to look like an accident, his body unrecoverable, with no connection back to the family.” He shook his head slowly. “You could never guess, or appreciate the enormity of accomplishing just one of these conditions, much less three.” His voice faded, his look becoming distant.

Tanya noticed his pause and the subtle flicker...of something...in his blue eyes. For an instant he wasn't as calculating, like something much less threatening was trying to emerge.

“The information gathered,” he continued, “requires tireless research, much like what I've learned about you and your life, because knowing the person is half the battle. This particular contract was for a man named Jimmy Tsang—a Chinese immigrant and a land developer with ties to both the Chinese mob, and an unscrupulous government. But in the end, neither had anything to do with his death. That came solely from his own family. Their reason? A last will and testament was being drawn up, and upon his death, his considerable wealth was going to be dispersed well beyond the immediate family. They couldn't have that. So they examined the verbiage in the new documents for weakness, and found what they were looking for in a clause under Abduction for Ransom. As fate would have it, this stipulation was added by Jimmy Tsang himself to keep the new parties beyond the family from being overeager; to keep them honest. But he should've looked much closer to home. Simply stated, if Mr. Tsang were to disappear for any reason, and the body unrecoverable, the final declaration would become null and void. Should this happen, and by Chinese law, the entire wealth would revert back to the immediate family.

“So after months of research, while monitoring Mr. Tsang, his lifestyle and his continuous overseas trips, I made my first move towards an airline accident, surveying carriers to find the perfect crew—the breakdown meticulous.

“Months later it was finally time to approach a captain I liked for the job, and when I did, I also knew everything about his life as well, his family, and even the name of his dog. I found his weakness *in that knowledge*. In this case, it was his wife's infidelities; something

he had no knowledge of at the time. So I supplied him with photos—graphic photos—that left little to the imagination.” His face remained neutral, his words matter-of-fact, monotone, showing neither pity nor bravado.

“For the next three weeks I waited for the right moment, letting his shock ferment into anger. Then we struck a deal; although not the one I had foreseen. When I offered a trade to kill his wife, in exchange for the enlistment of his services, he spurned me. He said something about his Chinese heritage, and that her dishonor was his alone to carry—his burden, not hers.” He cocked his head curiously. “Although, even now, *that honor* seemed a bit askew to me because of his willingness to kill several hundred, instead of just his wife. But be that as it may, the outcome would have still been the same, and we came up with another version of the plan—this one involving an off-shore account set up for his children. Dispersed in small increments after a two year period, this would thereby negate any provable fault or liability towards the captain, leaving only endless speculation surrounding a terrible tragedy.

“So on March 9, 2014 the Malaysian flight took off, and somewhere over the China Sea, the captain made a two-minute call to his wife—a final requirement of his, which I arranged through an untraceable phone. Records would later show he made the call to someone, but nothing to substantiate or indicate a suicide was in the making.

“As to what was said in the conversation, I have no idea. But shortly afterwards he turned off the transponder, pulled the fuse for the oxygen masks, and killed the other two crewmen in rapid succession with a four round derringer I supplied—a weapon the captain simply walked through security. Then he cracked the cockpit door and put a bullet through the front glass, instantly depressurizing the aircraft.” He shrugged. “Whether he had time in the ongoing rush of air to use the last bullet on himself, I can’t be sure, but it was obviously immaterial. With the rapid decompression, and with no oxygen masks deployed for either the passengers or crew, unconsciousness happened in less than thirty seconds—death in under two minutes. But what I couldn’t have foreseen, and learned

afterwards, is the Boeing 777 relies heavily on autopilot because it's so difficult to fly. So when the decompression occurred, the rest of the emergency equipment went online, dropping the jet in a rapid descent that would've been reminiscent of coming down the world largest rollercoaster at three hundred miles an hour.

"Three minutes later the auto pilot leveled out at two thousand feet, but by then it was too late. With no one left to make a course change, the autopilot resumed a preset track, sending the jet over the Indian Ocean, and four hours later it ran out of fuel and crashed—never to be seen or heard from again." He shrugged. "Contract fulfilled; two hundred and thirty nine people—men, women, and children—killed for the sake of stipulations made for one man." He sighed somberly. "It wasn't something I wanted to do, but it changes little. I'm a killer, just like your husband once was..."

Their eyes met, and she saw the change occurring again, indistinct, rising from the depths of his dark eyes like a shadowy image rising from the bottom of a darkened pool. Was it regret...empathy...or a simple understanding of the evil he'd done?

"In many ways I'm envious of your husband. He found a way out of this violent life, and more importantly kept what was left of his compassion. It's important. This is a life that continuously erodes at that fabric. With me, it's an intoxicating rush to dissect the problem, and come up with the perfect plan in any scenario. But much like the day after a hard night of drinking, it comes with the consequential hangover. This is where that erosion starts; small at first but growing with age. Early on, I believed I could block it out. But you can't, the death consumes you a piece at a time—a death at a time. Your husband knew it, and walked away. And in doing this, regained some of the person that was lost after the death of his family."

She did little to hide the disparaging information he had of their lives that now obviously included Tom's previous family. It wasn't surprising considering everything she'd learned about flight 370. *That was the point, wasn't it? To show her that he was prepared and organized, even down to the intimate details of Tom's past?*

But as a devoted wife, in a loving relationship, she had her own grasp of Tom's past. In fact, he was very forthcoming, wanting no

surprises between them. If she asked, he told her—good or bad—even the ugly secrets from his dark background. This also included a conversation they had about another chance meeting with her. One that had two strangers—she and Tom—passing in a hallway at Savory Spa shortly before Frank Teeds died. Unaware at the time, she only vaguely recalled passing a large man dressed in a maintenance uniform, but Tom had revealed it to her, letting her decide who he really was. Her decision had taken less than a heartbeat...the blink of an eye...and decisively faster than a flash of an energized lightning bolt. She remembered it fondly because that malevolent past wasn't the man she knew and loved with all her heart. He wasn't a killer *by this man's* standards, and unlike him, wouldn't have intentionally killed hundreds of people. It wasn't in him, and that was displayed and replayed over and over, night after night, in his inability to save the children inside the container. No, the past was the past, and much like hers, it was better left alone.

A defusing smile crossed his lips when he noticed her defiant stare. “Yes, I even know all about that fateful night that forever changed his life. It was a sad situation, his life set on a new path when his wife and precious child were killed by the hand of a drunk driver.”

She watched him as he spoke; puzzled. *It was a sad situation?* He was a contradiction of emotions, showing brief flashes of empathy in-between long bouts of controlled, and unemotional dialogue. Case in point. She watched him revert back again; measured... detached...but respectful.

“Several months later, he took that new path. After killing those responsible, he started a new life in New York; the same people who coincidentally have me hunting him now. But instead of finding pity in a bottle, or some other addiction to help cloud the past, he found a different conduit in shutting down the painful memory. Killing became his life, and soon his deadly reputation grew. Seldom seen, and never caught, Tom Spears became an enigma, and the man known as the Shadow—the killer of men—was born.”

A charismatic glint appeared in his blue eyes, and he sat back, slapping his knees in a lighthearted demeanor, his tone upbeat. “I met

him once you know—your husband. It was long ago in New York, when his reputation as *an elite* was at its peak.” His words were complimentary, and he smiled. “He was eating breakfast at some no-name restaurant when I walked up, introduced myself, and asked if I could join him.” He grinned. “You should have seen the look on his face; a combination of surprise...caution...and curiosity. In the end though, caution won out, and he gripped the small pistol between his legs that much tighter.” He shook his head, his eyes bright and glowing with the memory. “It was a natural reaction of course, and I understood completely.” His face flushed in amusement. “He actually kept me standing in the aisle until I explained the visit was only a courtesy; to let him know I was going to be doing some work in his back yard so-to-speak. Then after an awkward moment of silence, he begrudgingly allowed me to join him. We only chatted for a few minutes, but I found him to be intelligent, articulate, and with good instincts. Of course, all this was a given, considering his proven success; even if it was unconventional.”

He nodded, still smiling. “Did he ever tell you about his contracts? Or the stipulations he, himself attached?” He laughed out loud, a sound rich and full of life like two close friends sharing a touching moment.

But this wasn't with friends and the lighthearted—suddenly friendly—demeanor seemed out of character to Tanya. *Or did it?* She wondered. *Was this the person he once was...the consequences of erosion he talked about?* She believed it was, and the coping mechanism he'd spoken of wasn't booze for him either, his addiction was the cigarettes. That was now obvious. Adding to this knowledge, she realized he was inspired by Tom, and now gripped with indecision, trying not to care...to remain detached...but losing emotional ground. *Is this why he wanted to talk...possibly to make amends. But for what?*

To keep from being drawn in, Tanya forced herself to look away from his friendly eyes. She needed no reminder that he was a killer, and that she remained a prisoner. But even this had caught her off guard.

He seemed not to notice her unease and continued talking, his words becoming charismatic like his alter ego had been found. “*His stipulations* were to limit any killing to what he perceived as pure-evil. That meant no unfaithful husbands or wives, or even the junior executive wanting to become a *senior executive* by dispatching a workmate.” His warm smile lingered like swirling bubbles on a slow-moving pool. “I mean, hells bells, those two alone would cut my *lucrative* business in half.”

It became clear to her that he related to her husband—admired him. Relief touched her, now thinking Tom wasn’t the target... *Was he? Or was it just hope?* She wanted to ask, but she was fearful of his answer.

He became quiet for a moment before speaking again. “Honestly, the more I studied your husband the more I liked him.” His eyes showed sincerity, and he spoke with candor. “I find he’s a rarity in so many ways—a killer, but also a difference maker; deadly, but also compassionate. I also think his past wasn’t a liability. In retrospect, I believe it was an attribute, because it was always about the two drunks that had killed his family. Those two men—a father and son—had made a mockery of the flawed court system and his past life. So in his own way, he was cleansing his soul, while giving purpose to his life.

“Then another course changing event occurred when a man name John Wilks hired him to find his daughter, which he did, and that led to you.” He paused, his manner engaging, but his eyes becoming clouded.

She saw it again, even before he spoke. The change back to the cold, calculating, and culpable personality, was as vivid as flipping a light switch.

“So to answer the question as to why you are here: years before that same John Wilks had hired your husband to kill a lowlife by the name of Frank Teeds—a loan shark who was squeezing John for a debt incurred by his gambling brother. Unfortunately, Frank Teeds was the cousin of Frank Manatone, crime boss for the Manatone family in New York, and also my present employer. Making the situation even worse, it appears Tom did the killing while being

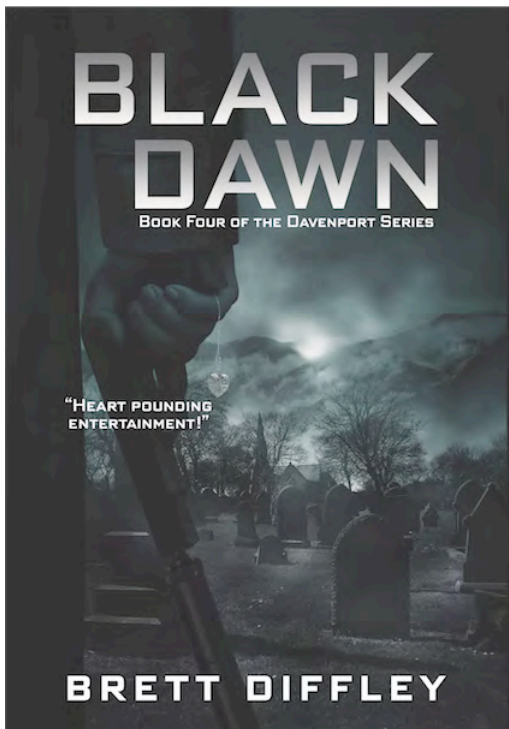
employed by that same syndicate. Now I've been paid to right that wrong." He gave her a lingering look like he was pondering his next words. "Remember the stipulations I told you about?" He didn't wait for a response and continued. "Like the Malaysian flight, one variable can change everything. This is the case now. In regards to you, a stipulation was made that before killing him, you are to die in front of your husband—a tradeoff; a family member for a family member."

She couldn't breathe, her hands became rigid, bunching the blanket over her chin.

He stood, folding the chair. "But like I said, the two of you captivate me because your lives are relative to my own. So this has changed," he reassured. "I will deal with the ramifications of not hurting you later, but your husband is a different story. As you've figured out, I know everything there is to know about him; his strengths and weaknesses. In short, you're here because that's you. Both in strength and weakness, you're his undying love, his eternal flame, the woman that took him from his violent world, and healed the wounds that came from the death of his previous family. So he'll come, and if there's one thing I've learned about him, no apocalyptic event—seismic or climactic—is going to change this." He shrugged. "And there lies his weakness." He spoke with confidence, his words becoming direct. "When he does, I'm going to put a bullet between his eyes."

He turned before closing the door. "But for what it's worth, I can honestly tell you, I'll take no joy, or satisfaction in killing Tom Spears."

One last flash.



*A continuation of the Davenport series, **Black Dawn** picks up where **Black Tide** left off, with Tom Spears tracking his wife's kidnapper from Washington State, to New York, and then to the rugged Debar Mountain Range. It's here a whole new mystery unravels, which further diminishes his chances of survival.*

BLACK DAWN

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